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Telling the Collective Story: Symbolic Interactionism in Narrative Research

Abstract Recent years have seen tremendous growth of interest in narrative approaches to research in both the social sciences and the humanities. Much of this research focuses on the stories of individuals and how they tell them. This article addresses the contribution of a symbolic interactionist approach to develop the “collective story” (Richardson 1990) through the use of sensitizing concepts. It focuses on research on the experience of widows, widowers, and Iranian Bahá’í refugees to Canada to demonstrate how one can use sensitizing concepts to craft a collective story of members of marginalized populations that sit at the bottom of the “hierarchy of credibility” (Becker 1967).

Keywords Narrative Research; Symbolic Interaction; Sensitizing Concepts; Widowhood; Bahá’í; Marginalized Populations

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I work in a Gerontology Department with two of the best internationally known writers on narrative gerontology. Both work in a theoretical realm and a practice realm (narrative therapy) (e.g., Kenyon, Bohlmeijer, and Randall 2011) rather than a sociological arena. Their approach centers more upon individual life stories and narratives and how to use the process of life-story telling in a therapeutic setting than mine as a sociologist. My first impression of narrative was that it was too individualistic to be useful for a sociologist, that it did not encompass an understanding of community and social forces. It turned out I was wrong. Catherine Kohler Reissman has written about narrative: “[t]o the sociologically oriented ... studying narratives is ... useful for what they reveal about social life-culture ‘speaks itself’ through an individual’s story” (1993:5).

As a symbolic interactionist and student of Howard S. Becker (1967), I have been heavily influenced by the concept of the hierarchy of credibility that acknowledges that there is a tendency to consider that those with higher status have the right to define the situation. I also use the concept of generic social processes (Prus 2005), which suggests that social processes may be consistent across different social settings. These approaches have informed my decision to study members of socially marginalized groups whose voices are often silent and silenced. Hence, I have focused most of my research on widowhood among older people, older women, and Iranian Bahá’í refugees who live in Atlantic Canada.

I would like to start this discussion of telling the collective story with a story of my own. This story starts when a student in my Sociology of Aging class lent me *When Things Get Back to Normal* by M. T. Dohaney (1989). This short book was comprised of the author’s personal journal that she had kept for the first year after her husband’s sudden death following a game of senior hockey. I took the book home and spent two hours engrossed and deeply moved. Having studied with Helena Z. Lopata, the first sociologist to study widowhood (1973; 1979), I had focused on the experiences of widowed persons in a Florida retirement community for my PhD. I already had an interest in widows. The power of this woman’s narrative was striking. The literature on widowhood up to that point tended to be quite dry, and no widow would see herself in it. By the time I had put the book down, I knew that my first post-PhD study would be an analysis of published autobiographical accounts by widows about their experience with losing their husband. In other words, even though in

1993 I did not have the vocabulary to describe it, I had been captured by the widows’ narratives.

People “narrativize particular experiences in their lives, often where there has been a breach between the ideal and the real, self and society” (Reissman 1993:3). These breaches encompass the day-to-day experiences of those who inhabit socially marginalized spaces (Reissman 2001). My analysis of widows’ personal narratives allowed me to study systematically the social meaning, as well as the enormity of the disjuncture and emotional side of becoming a widow. I came to refer to the “breach between the ideal and real self” for new widows as “identity foreclosure” (van den Hoonaard, D. K. 1997):

[i]t is almost as if [the widows’] identity were composed of a pyramid of elements, and their husband’s death has resulted in a bottom block’s being removed – the other elements may still remain, but they need to be reassembled in a new way on a new foundation. It is the recognition of identity foreclosure that has allowed these women to construct a new identity brick by brick. (p. 547)

Further, telling a “collective story” allows one to bring in a more critical understanding. Laurel Richardson explains that a collective story “displays an individual’s story by narrativizing the experiences of the social category to which the individual belongs rather than by telling the particular individual’s story or by simply retelling the cultural story” (1990:25).

In this way, she argues we can “give voice to those whose narratives have been excluded from the public domain and civic discourse ... we convert private problems into public issues, thereby making collective identity, and collective solutions possible” (1990:28).

Since Laurel Richardson introduced the idea of collective stories, researchers across a variety of disciplines have used collective stories to communicate the experiences of individuals who inhabit a variety of social categories. Ayala Alyn (2010) developed a collective story to communicate the experiences of individuals who had undergone trauma in their lives and who identified themselves as resilient. Richard Pringle (2008) used collective stories of men's experience with a rugby union in New Zealand, where rugby is ubiquitous and dominates the formation of masculinities, as a pedagogical tool to communicate to his students the link between masculinities and rugby. Although Richardson conceived of the collective story to address the situation of people in socially marginal positions, Middleton, Anderson, and Banning (2009) developed a collective story of how members of socially dominant groups encountered and were transformed by recognizing their own privilege.

Using the model of a collective story responds to Howard Becker's classic question: "Whose side are we on?" (1967). We are on the side of those who belong to social categories that are marginalized or stigmatized in some way.

One way to make collective stories meaningful is to identify sensitizing concepts within them. Sensitizing concepts are constructs "derived from the research participants' perspective, use their language or expressions [that] sensitize the researcher to possible lines of inquiry" (van den Hoonaard, W. C. 1997:1). In other words, sensitizing concepts help researchers to understand their participants' worldview (van den Hoonaard 2012). The next sections explain a number of sensitizing concepts that I developed to write the collective stories of wid-

ows, widowers, and Iranian Bahá'í refugees to Atlantic Canada.

Sensitizing Concepts in Widow's Narratives

In much of the literature on widows (even today) and in much of their portrayal in the public domain, widows are depicted as sad, lonely, and the victims of life's problems. Their collective story recognizes the challenges they face but also depicts them as creative, resilient, and courageous. The following is a sample of the sensitizing concepts I "found" in my data and developed: "identifying moments," "keeping up appearances," "couples' world," "making do," and "my children have their own lives."

I start with "identifying moments" because it is a sensitizing concept that I adopted from Kathy Charmaz's work on chronic illness. She defines identifying moments as "telling moments filled with new self-images ... telling because they spark sudden realizations [and] reveal hidden images of self" (1991:207). Having read *Good Days, Bad Days*, I immediately recognized the concept of identifying moments in the autobiographical accounts I read for my first study of widows. For example, M. T. Dohaney wrote in her journal:

I was called a widow today. "Sign here" the girl in the office of vital statistics said when I went to pick up a copy of your death certificate ... "Right here. In the block that says widow of the deceased." The word pierced me like a lance and my sharp intake of breath was audible ... Later, as I walked home, I tried to give voice to my new label. Widow! Widow! I mouthed the word over and over and although I could hear it thundering in my head, no sound would leave my lips ... Until two weeks ago, widow

was only a word in the English language. Now it was me... (1989:6-7 as cited in van den Hoonaard 1997)

In interviews with widows, the intensity of the identifying moment is a central part of the narrative:

All of a sudden it occurred to me, "I am a widow." Even though my mail may come to me as Mrs. _____, I am a widow... And it was like all of a sudden I realized it... It hadn't occurred to me...at the time of death or at the funeral... Just all of a sudden, it hit me, "Hey, I am a widow." (van den Hoonaard 2001:37)¹

It hit me so hard, it almost turned me sick for the moment. Somebody said, "You're a widow." And, it almost made me feel sick to my stomach. That was the first time – I had never thought of myself as a widow. (p. 38)

These stories of the discovery of a new identity, the identifying moment, carry a power in the telling that far exceeds a third-person description. Through the shock and sudden recognition described almost like being punched in the stomach, the story demonstrates that being a widow is an unwelcome identity that carries with it stigma and lower status. In fact, most widows say that they dislike the term. Even one of the reviewers of my article entitled "Identity Foreclosure," herself a widow, commented on her discomfort with the term.

As all research has shown, when a woman becomes a widow, she loses many of her friends. The women I interviewed concurred. They also knew that they had lower status as single women and particular responsibilities, one of which was "keeping up appearances." This sensitizing concept refers to widows' understanding that if they want to keep their

¹ All quotations in this section, unless otherwise noted, are from van den Hoonaard (2001).

friends, they have to "be fairly cheerful and upbeat" and not talk about their husbands too much:

Well, you're going to go away from here thinking that I'm fine and I feel fine. Maybe you won't be at the end of the road 'til I'll be weeping, but that's all right. (p. 65)

If I'd have wept and wailed and howled [in my friend's] soup for the last six months...[my husband] would be very upset with me... Very disapproving... ashamed of me. (p. 64)

Part of "keeping up appearances" is conforming to feeling rules by doing the emotion work (Hochschild 1979) necessary to succeed:

I just decided I have to pull myself together, you know, take the bull by the horns. I have always tried to be very cheerful about the whole thing. (van den Hoonaard 2001:65)

The way widows talk about the importance of keeping up appearances communicates their lower status. If they do not succeed, they will lose any friends who did not desert them at the start.

A related sensitizing concept is "couples' world" which refers to the widows' feeling of not fitting into society in a comfortable way. When friends invite them out:

And much as they say, "Well you're welcome to come with us," you always feel like the third person out. (p. 73)

I know that there's always going to be parties...that we used to go to that I'm not going to be included... I tell you, it's a couples' world. (p. 74)

Another aspect of widows' collective story relates to their relationship with money. For most, "making

do” or “getting by” is the concept that captures how they interpret their financial situation either because they are “on a strict budget” or “don’t care about money” (p. 104). This sensitizing concept demonstrates older widows’ reluctance to appear to feel entitled to more than the minimal income many of them receive. They compare themselves favorably to women who do not know how to handle money through narratives of the inability to write a check²:

Like I have a friend whose husband died suddenly, she’d never written a check. She didn’t have a clue... and it was dreadful for her. She had no idea how much money there was available, where it was, and on top of having all the emotional things to deal with is really, really too much. (p.106)

This situation of not being able to write a check came up in many of the stories women told about their friends or acquaintances even though they, themselves, knew how to write checks. It symbolized the relationship (or lack thereof) that women of their generation often had with money while they were married. The reference to not being able to write a check allowed the women to compare themselves positively to women who were not as well prepared. In fact, learning about finances while their husbands were still alive is the most common advice these widows had for other women.

The last sensitizing concept in the widows’ stories is “they have their own lives.” The women used this phrase to describe their place in their children’s lives. It recognizes that although most widows expect their children to be aware of and sensi-

² The interviews took place in the mid 1990s. Today, widows would more likely talk about ATM’s or internet banking. I am currently doing a new study to see how the collective story of older widows has changed in the last 20 years.

tive to their needs, their adult children have “their own lives.” These mothers need to make sure they do not overstep an invisible boundary that would result in invading privacy, crowding, or expecting too much. Several women demonstrated much creativity in establishing a new relationship characterized by reciprocity.

One story of a successful negotiations comes from one of the very few women who go south for the winter. She started by explaining:

And my family, well, they’re just wonderful; they’re friends, as well as family. If I need anything, I only have to make a phone call. And if I don’t want them around, they don’t crowd me. (p. 55)

In return, this woman feels comfortable calling on her children if there’s something she needs help with, but she usually tries to fix things herself. She told the story of installing window blinds. She put up one set of venetian blinds, which took her over an hour to accomplish. Her son came to visit, and she went into another room for just a few minutes, and when she returned, he said:

“Your blind’s up.” He said, “I could have done that the first time, but I knew you wanted to do it.” So he let me try it. (p. 56)

This same woman needed someone to pay her bills while she was in Florida and to keep an eye on her house in the winter. Her daughter pays her bills, and her son checks on her house. She developed a novel system of reciprocity:

Yeah, well, my son is very fond of ice cream, and he can’t get cable [TV]...and he loves TV. So, I fill the freezer downstairs with ice cream, and I know he’ll

be down to watch TV. And he watches the house... He checks to make sure everything’s all right. (p. 56)

This widow’s story of her relationship with her children exemplifies successful negotiations of a reciprocal relationship that protects an older widow’s sense of herself as a competent adult and recognizes that her children have their own lives.

Not all stories are of equal importance. Kenyon and Randall (1997:46-47) have developed the concept of “signature story,” a tale people like to tell about themselves or situations that they like to narrate. Similarly, a collective story may include a signature story. In the study of widows, the signature story communicates challenge, perseverance, and the development of a sense of competence and confidence, all of which characterize the accomplishments of widows and are a central part of their collective story:

Well, there’s one thing, for instance, and it’s so simple...when the hydro goes out on the VCR and the clock...it’s blinking, twelve o’clock, twelve o’clock. I never, now this is so simple, I never adjusted that thing, and I just didn’t even know how to open this little box there... I left it for about...a week, blinking. Well, I put up a book so I wouldn’t see it... Yeah, I put a book up and said [to myself], “I don’t know how to do it.” So, one day, I went downstairs and I took my glasses and I said, “I’m going to fix this thing or it’s going to be unplugged.” So, I sat down and I got the instructions out and I just went step by step and I thought this was a major, oh did a major job. Finally, I got it. And it was just the idea, I had never done it, and I had never even looked at the instructions. And a child, of course, could do it. But, it was a big achievement there. (van den Hoonaard 2012:123)

The collective story of older widows makes visible their lower status, and the sensitizing concepts that

are central to the story highlight that they must “keep up appearances,” adapt to living as a single woman in a “couples’ world,” find pride in “making do” with little money, and accept that their children “have their own lives.” Nonetheless, the collective story also reflects creativity, resilience, and strength that belie the stereotype of older widows as helpless.

Sensitizing Concepts in Widowers’ Narratives

For older men who become widowed, the collective story is different.³ One of the first questions people ask when they find out that I’ve studied both widows and widowers is whether women’s and men’s experiences are very different from one another. And how! When asked to describe in a very general way what it is like to become a widow, many women talked about how they met their husbands and what their marriages were like. They could not tell their story without including information about what was lost, as well as what had happened. In response to a similar question, men often talked about whether or not they wanted to get married again or observed that women are “after them” as widowers.⁴ It is not surprising, then, that the sensitizing concepts that construct widowers’ collective story are different.

The story, for men, revolves around the challenges widowhood presents to their identity as masculine, adult men. I had not expected to approach the widowers’ collective story in terms of masculinity, but

³ Unless otherwise specified, all quotations in this section come from van den Hoonaard (2010).

⁴ In fact, while I was working on the widower study, I was interviewed by Anne Kingston for an article she was writing about widowers for *Maclean’s Magazine* entitled: “The Sexiest Man Alive” (2007).

the theme of being a real man was ubiquitous in the data. Instead of looking at the men's style of interaction as a problem, I used Holstein and Gubrium's (1995) active-interview approach and used the interaction as data. I went back and listened to all the recordings again to be sure that then men were "doing gender" throughout the interviews.⁵ The following is a sample of the sensitizing concepts that emerged from an analysis of the data: "casserole brigade," "nothing fancy," "all downhill from there," "one thing led to another," and "getting out of the house."

The most obvious example is the "casserole brigade" which is comprised of single women who are lonely and seem almost predatory to the men in their attempts to attract a widower to a romantic relationship. This response came from a man who lived in a small town. He was replying to a question about whether or not anything had surprised him as a widower.

Yes, about a month after my wife passed away. [The town I lived in]...is a small village of about 350 people, and I swear, 200 of them are widows – all living alone. So the "casserole brigade" started, and I hate casseroles. So, I had...a commercial freezer full of casseroles... And [they] would start pounding on the door. That kind of frightened me. (p. 95)

In an earlier study, a widow who lived in a Florida retirement community remarked that if you showed up with a casserole while a widower is sitting *shiva*,⁶ it is too early. But, if you wait until *shiva* is over, you will be too late – some other woman will have al-

⁵ For an in-depth discussion of widowers' strategies of self-representation, see van den Hoonaard (2009).

⁶ During this week of confinement from routine duties, the widow or widower allows herself or himself to be cared for by family and close friends (Marcus 2004:216). At the end of the mourning period, the person rejoins society with the new status.

ready gotten the man. Alinde Moore and Dorothy Stratton (2002) report a similar phenomenon, the "casserole ladies" who also turn up in John Bayley's book about his experience as a widower. Bayley, widower of author Iris Murdoch, opens his memoir with: "[n]ow, eat it while it's nice and hot," ordered Margot, putting a lump of casserole on my plate" (2001:3). Bayley (2001) writes about his own sense of being pursued by women as a "fantasy":

[t]here was really no need to feel threatened and disquieted. No doubt widowers' weakness, as it might be called, was a well-known phenomenon in circles which widowers...frequented. They misunderstood the kindness women bestowed on them in their trouble. (p. 45-46)

A telling counterpoint in this collective story is the reaction of the widowers to the question about whether they knew how to cook and clean before their wife died. The concept of "nothing fancy" characterizes their story. Most of the men explained that their cooking was quite simple; they did not know how to make casseroles or desserts. Here, the men used their story to distance themselves from women and their traditional tasks by claiming not to make the very kind of dish that women make when they are in pursuit of men as romantic partners.

Men who could cook often listed masculine dishes, such as steak cooked on a George Foreman Grill, or associated their cooking with masculine activities. This man provided a list of sporting activities as part of his discussion about cooking. The story of cooking steak for other athletes is an important part of the story:

I enjoyed cooking, enjoyed it, really. And yet, despite the fact, and I used to tell a lot of people, you know.

I've played senior hockey; I've played senior basketball; I've played volleyball; I've played softball. Now, of course, I spent nine years coaching hockey at all the provincial levels; I coached baseball, you name it, and got involved with it, and I'd say, "Hey, come on home, I'll cook you a steak." So that to me was enjoyable, it still is enjoyable. (van den Hoonaard 2010:151)

The need to claim their masculinity was also evident in the way the widowers told the story of their wife's death. Notably, the men appear as central actors in these narratives. These stories have a particular trajectory that includes: the woman's hiding or downplaying symptoms, an initial misdiagnosis or minimizing of the ailment on the part of the doctor, a great deal of detail in the descriptions of the wife's symptoms, and a truncated description of what happened after the diagnosis into the phrase "it was all downhill from there."

The men appear as central characters in the stories of what happened when their wife first became ill. For example, this man explained that the doctor initially thought his wife had an allergy. He recounted:

After a time, I didn't think so. And I had a conversation with the doctor... I told him why...because of what I said, he sent her for some X-rays. [Later when his wife had severe headaches] I thought it was connected because they'd found a spot on her lungs... I thought it has spread... So, I talked to the doctor about that. (p. 99)

This type of agentic speech – in which the narrator portrays himself as an independent actor (Kirsi, Hervonen, and Jylhä 2000) – characterized many of the stories the men told of their wife's death (van den Hoonaard, Bennett, and Evans 2012).

In these widowers' narratives, the terminal diagnosis was a singular moment in the story. Once they knew

what was wrong, things simply progressed until their wife died. They summarized this process as "downhill from there." The inevitability of the final outcome stands out as a crucial aspect of the story.

There is a similar lack of details in the stories the Atlantic Canadian widowers who were repartnered told about how they got together with their new wife or permanent girlfriend. In this situation, the sensitizing concept is "one thing led to another." This man from Atlantic Canada told how he met his girlfriend:

And there's this lady next to me, and I asked her how long the boardwalk was... And she was kind of chatty, got talking to her...it sounded like her husband was something like my wife... So, one thing led to another. (p. 36)

Compare his story to this American widower's. In this story, he initially approached his "friend," but then:

After, she decided that she liked me... She came over a lot more than I realized. I didn't mean to make a regular routine of it. I just asked her out once, and before I knew it, here she's coming in like she's my girlfriend... Actually, she pushed herself into it. (p. 98)

As noted in the introduction, narratives often reflect the culture of the teller. This potential is realized in the widowers' stories about developing relationships with women, which reflected strong cultural differences between Atlantic Canadians and big-city, Jewish Americans. The Canadians' stories have a fatalistic flavor captured in the concept, "one thing led to another." The Jewish American stories also involve a lack of agency on the men's part, but, in contrast, they emphasized their friend's assertiveness in establishing a relationship. There were some assertive women in the Canadian widowers' stories,

but in these stories, the men rebuffed or were frightened by the women's forwardness. These differences reflect very different, culturally-based definitions of the situation.

The last sensitizing concept in the widowers' collective story is "getting out of the house." The absence of their wife as a companion was a frequent theme, and being busy was a notable antidote for loneliness and being alone, which the widowers talked about as if they were synonymous. The solution for these widowers was "getting out of the house." This sensitizing concept encompasses how uncomfortable the men felt when they were alone in their house and the imperative to keep busy that is often seen as a panacea to life's problems for older people (Ekerdt 1986).

When the widowers' wife died, the meaning of being at home changed. They found it challenging to spend time in their empty house. For example, one man told the story of the first time he entered his house after his wife's death:

From a home point of view, for the first few months after her death, and particularly the first time I opened the door. I looked in to see if she was playing Solitaire at the table...and she wasn't there. And so, the house was like a big, empty cavern, canyon, cave, anything you want to express is. There was an emptiness there, and I was looking for her, and I couldn't find her. And then, gradually, I accepted the fact... I got this storey and a half house all to myself, and I've got to live with it. (p. 126-127)

This man's alliterative description captures the discomfort of being home alone. The only solution is to "get out of the house."

For the widowers, getting out was also the alternative to wallowing in one's misery. Hence, the mirror image of the concept of getting out is sitting around. The men equated staying home with sitting around, with giving up on life:

I'm not just sitting around the house, moping. It's better to be busy than sitting around doing nothing, sitting around and thinking. Now, I don't sit around, kind of, "What am I going to do with myself?" (p. 127)

According to this widower, having nothing to do is equivalent to not getting out:

[Were there any times that were more difficult than others?] [When] you've got nothing to do... Like an old dog, you go out [to] the road and look up and down the road and say, "Which way am I going to go today?" ... Like I say, you just have to pick up and go somewhere... Just get in the truck, head for town. (p. 128)

Put succinctly:

I go out as frequently as I can... So, what I do is go out – get the hell out of the house. (p. 128)

The importance of "getting out" is related to the men's reluctance to have guests in their home. Their collective story of keeping socially connected by going out suggests that they are not likely to invite guests in:

I rattle around this house like a pea in a box. I get out quite a lot. Try to mix and socialize. (p. 128)

I like to have people around. I hate being alone. That's why I'm gone all the time. (p. 129)

"Getting out" is also a mechanism for informal and unplanned socializing. It reflects many widowers'

reluctance to have too many commitments, freedom and independence are two things that they appreciate about being single. These quotes communicate the spontaneous nature of the men's activities:

We usually call one another up and "Meet you on the river," or something like that. Usually ski up and down the river and go across the road there. Don't have to drive anywhere. Just put on my skis and go. (p. 133)

Like I say, the pool [in the retirement community] is a meeting place. You meet everybody there, eventually. So, if I want...people, I go down to the pool in the morning. If I want to be left alone, I just stay away. (p. 132)

Finally, community events provide opportunities for some widowers to maintain a full social life:

I got to quite a few concerts... Meet friends there... I keep myself busy... Everybody asks me where the church suppers are for the weekend. So, I start looking about Wednesday...and I'll go to a church supper on Saturday... And, you meet a lot of friends there... So, it almost got to the point where people go to the supper and say, "Oh, I wonder if Patrick will be here." (p. 132)

Just as there was a signature story for the collective story of widows, there is also one that communicates the challenge of older widowers to preserve their masculinity. This story involves a widower's attempt to get customer loyalty points from two different stores:

Like I went to [the store]; I knew she used to have [their] credit card. And she had [their customer-loyalty card]. So, I went in one day...to transfer her...points to my name. No way in hell. No, they wanted a copy of her will... They wanted her death certificate... So, that kind of ticked me off... They say, "Well, maybe you kicked her out, and you're trying to take all her

stuff." ... And I said, "Well, does she owe you any money?" They wouldn't tell me that either. So finally, I said to the girl, "Well, I hope she does... You're going to have to find her to get it." And I never heard from them about that. (p. 59)

This and other stories the men recounted have the theme of "winning" that is familiar in stories which portray a man as a "lone hero pitted against the odds" (Coates 2003:196).

The collective story of older widowers illustrates the challenges around masculinity for older men. The sensitizing concepts that fill out the story bring attention to areas that challenge widowers' masculinity, such as lack of control and developing new skills that were traditionally done by women. If there was one statement that sums up the men's collective story, it is: "I was the man."

Iranian Bahá'í Refugees in Atlantic Canada

The last collective story is that of Iranian Bahá'í refugees who settled in Atlantic Canada. The Bahá'í faith originated in Persia (now Iran) in the mid-19th century when a young man, the Báb, announced himself a prophet of God and the Harbinger of a Manifestation of God who would bring in a new era in human history. Baha'u'lláh proclaimed himself to be this messenger and spent the last 39 years of his life as a prisoner and exile.⁷ Bahá'ís have been persecuted in Iran since that time. After the Islamic Revolution of 1979, the persecution became a severe and systematic attempt to strangle the community.

⁷ Bahá'í social teachings include the unity of humanity, the equality of women and men, and the elimination of racial and other prejudices, among others.

The Bahá'í community of Canada has existed for almost 100 years and has about 33,000 members. Many Bahá'í refugees arrived in Canada in the 1980s through a cooperative program between the Government of Canada and the National Bahá'í Community of Canada. Most of the Bahá'ís who came through that program now live in major urban centers, such as Vancouver and Toronto, but a small number have stayed in Atlantic Canada. It is the collective story of that small group, numbering about 200, that this article addresses.

The sensitizing concepts that arose in the newcomers' stories are: "not knowing what to expect," "being treated like family," and "using creativity and hospitality to neutralize blame and overcome prejudice."

The story of settlement in Canada starts with the newcomers' not knowing what to expect. They had no idea how rural Atlantic Canada is:

Yeah, there were no tall buildings. When I came to Canada... I thought we were going to a place like New York...tall buildings, you know. And we flew into Halifax...nothing but trees. (p. 2)⁸

Nonetheless, even though they were unprepared for life in Atlantic Canada, the Canadian Bahá'ís welcomed them like family:

And I remember, Mr. R. told me that, "You go [by train] and meet the gentleman called Bill." And that was it. No last name... So, we were supposed to stay at their home... And, when we came to the train station, the train stopped...all the Bahá'ís were there... Very exciting time... And a few minutes later we were at Bill's sit-

⁸ Unless otherwise noted, all quotations in this section are from van den Hoonaard and van den Hoonaard (2007).

ting there...it was great. We stayed at his house for two months, and that is the time I felt that being a Bahá'í was the most incredible thing in life. (p. 4)

Like members of a family, I had no idea who they were and they didn't have any idea who I was. But, they accepted me with open arms, and we became almost like a family, and being here twenty years... we still feel like a family. (p. 5)

The warm reception from the local Bahá'ís was a contrast to the reception the Persian newcomers received from the broader community. The implicit prejudice they faced made it hard for them to find work or make friends other than Bahá'ís:

It was really hard to get a job. And everybody was fearful, "Is this guy a good guy to work for me and is he going to be able to talk in a [way] that I can understand it? Is he going to drive my customers away?" You know, you're either white, Canadian people or you were not part of them. So, it was kind of hard to break into. (p. 6)

The newcomers chose to avoid taking the rebuffs personally:

You know, it's very obvious [that I was being passed over for promotion]... I don't [take it] personally. If we do...we never improve ourselves. You know, don't get personal... That is life, and I've never been Canadian, even after 100 years... I am [an] immigrant. You know, I have to accept that and do my job. (p. 8)

They explain that, given the circumstances in the world, no one should be blamed for fearing strangers, especially dark-skinned ones:

Not that I blame them because there are so many things going on in the Middle East that you don't know, "Should I trust this guy or not?" (p. 8)

The Bahá'í refugees used hospitality and creativity to address these issues:

They're scared... But, we showed our love, we show all of it, we show all our love, and, "How are you? Good morning." (p. 8)

The collective story includes a combination of creativity and hospitality. Here is a signature story of Persian Bahá'í refugees in Atlantic Canada:

[I heard from a neighbor that] "people think that you have a rifle in your basement, and you are waiting for some good opportunity to attack" ... I said, "No [we don't have such things], you can come and visit us." Later on, they came over and, on purpose, I said, "Okay, I want to give you a tour of my house." You know, let's see the bedroom, and... I take them to the basement, and here is the laundry room, here is the workshop...just show them everything, and now they are very, very friendly. When they have any family problem they come over here, and they ask us to solve their problem. (p. 10)

The collective story of the Iranian Bahá'í newcomers includes the persecution that drove them out of their homeland and tells how they were welcomed to their new homes, the barriers they faced, and their efforts to overcome those barriers. The sensitizing concepts provide an entry to understanding how these immigrants interpreted and dealt with their situation.

Conclusion

This article has focused on three studies to demonstrate how sensitizing concepts can assist us to construct the collective story of groups who are

socially marginalized. In his book, *Working with Sensitizing Concepts*, Will van den Hoonaard (1997) says that sensitizing concepts move us toward more abstract or general theorizing. This article suggests that they can also be the building blocks of a collective story.

Laurel Richardson writes that although a collective story is about a category of people rather than individuals, "the individual response to a well-told collective story is, 'That's *my* story. I am not alone'" (1990:26). She argues that the collective story should be written in language that is accessible to members of the social category it involves (1988) as a means of constructing a "consciousness of kind...a concrete recognition of sociological bondedness [which can] break down isolation [and potentially] alter the system" (Richardson 2000:336).

It appears that the widows' collective story, told in *The Widowed Self* (van den Hoonaard 2001), has met this standard. When an article about my new research on widowhood appeared in the local newspaper, one of the volunteers for the study said that she had read the book, found it very helpful, and wanted to be interviewed for the new study to help other widows.

This article has demonstrated the usefulness of sensitizing concepts in the construction and telling of a collective story. Because sociologists develop these concepts inductively and use the language of research participants to name and formulate them, they have a unique potential to contribute to collective stories that are both powerful and accessible to scholars and members of categories whose story is being told.

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