A Search for Meaning: Recognizing the Potential of Narrative Research in Social Policy-Making Efforts

David M. Frost · Suzanne C. Ouellette

Abstract In recent decades, narrative research has gained increasing prominence in social and health sciences. However, the role that narrative research has played in social policy-making efforts has been small compared to that of quantitative research. This paper highlights the ways in which theoretical stances, questions, methods, and findings from narrative research can be useful in social policy-making arenas. Particular attention is paid to research conducted in the narrative study of lives tradition in psychology, gerontology, and related social sciences. Narrative research that seeks to understand individual lives in all their complexity and in the contexts in which they are lived can be particularly useful in informing sexuality-related policy concerns given the complex nature of sexuality. By focusing on the current policy concern of same-sex relationship recognition, this paper demonstrates that (a) narrative research offers much to the study of social policy and social justice via its ability to illuminate the complex interplay between everyday lived experience and social structures and (b) there is a need to redefine what counts as research evidence in policy-making efforts to be more inclusive of narrative work. In making these arguments, examples of recent narrative research are highlighted regarding their direct relevance to sexuality-related social policy. The paper concludes with suggestions by which researchers and policy makers can productively incorporate narrative research into their work by focusing on the complimentary potential for findings from quantitative and narrative research.

Keywords Narrative research · Social policy · Social sciences · Same-sex relationships · Sexuality

D. M. Frost (✉)
San Francisco State University,
835 Market Street, Suite 516,
San Francisco, CA 94103, USA
e-mail: frost@sfsu.edu

S. C. Ouellette
Doctoral Programs in Social/Personality, Developmental,
and Environmental Psychology at The Graduate School,
City University of New York,
Graduate School and University Center,
365 Fifth Avenue,
New York, NY 10016, USA
e-mail: souellette@gc.cuny.edu

"After spending 25 years of my life fighting for justice for other people, I'm at a point in my life where the only thing that matters is obtaining justice for the woman that I love" (Roth et al. 2007).

These are the words of Laurel Hester, an Ocean County, NJ police detective who was diagnosed with terminal stage 3 lung cancer in 2004. Her last efforts in the short time she had left were to spend as much of it as she could with her partner Stacie and ensure that Stacie would be taken care of after she passed. Laurel succeeded in her stated goal. She obtained justice for her partner and launched significant policy changes that influenced the lives of many other partners in same-sex relationships. She may have been focused up close on a single other life, but she continued to successfully fight for justice for many others until the end. Her case well makes the point that those interested in policy need to pay attention to the kind of work that narrative researchers do.

We open this paper with a brief overview and analysis of Laurel's story in order to set the stage for our argument for the potential for narrative research to play a more prominent role in social policy-making efforts. Next, we highlight one approach to narrative research—the narrative study of lives—and showcase how findings from this approach have relevance and utility in advancing policy

around one specific sexuality-related policy concern: same-sex marriage in the USA. Finally, in efforts to build connections between narrative research and policy efforts, we provide suggestions for various ways in which narrative research can be brought to bear within the social policy-making process.
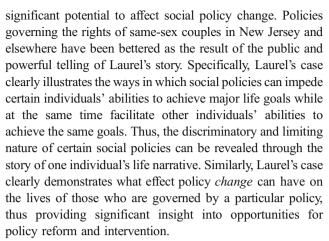
Laurel's Case

Someone in Laurel's situation, having worked 23 years for the Ocean County's prosecutor's office, is typically entitled to leave his/her pension to a spouse in the event of his/her death. The state of New Jersey had passed a resolution that allowed county-level governance to extend pension benefits to same-sex partners should the county Freeholders choose to exercise this option. In Laurel's case, the Ocean County Freeholders refused to allow her pension to pass to her same-sex partner Stacie, citing a justification that doing so would "violate the sanctity of marriage." In addition to her worsening symptoms, Laurel became preoccupied with what might happen to Stacie and the home they had worked so hard to build together after she was gone. Instead of spending her remaining time peacefully with her partner Stacie, Laurel was forced to fight the conservative county officials for the right to take care of her partner in the way any other heterosexual man or woman in a similar situation would have been able to.

After a long fight, amidst a standing ovation, sitting in a wheelchair, with a bald head, wearing a surgical mask and protective gloves, Laurel Hester entered an Emergency Meeting of the Ocean County Freeholders accompanied by her partner Stacie. Absent one member, the Freeholders unanimously voted to approve a resolution to extend pension benefits to same-sex partners. It took a phone call from New Jersey Governor John Corzine directly to one of the Free-holders in order to spark this emergency meeting, but Laurel had completed her last and arguably most important life project: She would be able to continue to provide for her partner Stacie after her death, and Stacie would be able to keep the home they worked so hard to build together. Laurel's story inspired Freeholders in five other counties in New Jersey to exercise the option to extend pension benefits to same-sex partners. Nine months after Laurel's death, the New Jersey Supreme Court ruled that same-sex couples should be extended the same rights as heterosexual couples regardless of the perspectives of particular groups of Freeholders.

A Brief Analysis of Laurel's Case

Stories (i.e., the data with which narrative researchers work)—and the individuals and groups who tell those stories—have

significant potential to affect social policy change. Policies governing the rights of same-sex couples in New Jersey and elsewhere have been bettered as the result of the public and powerful telling of Laurel's story. Specifically, Laurel's case clearly illustrates the ways in which social policies can impede certain individuals' abilities to achieve major life goals while at the same time facilitate other individuals' abilities to achieve the same goals. Thus, the discriminatory and limiting nature of certain social policies can be revealed through the story of one individual's life narrative. Similarly, Laurel's case clearly demonstrates what effect policy *change* can have on the lives of those who are governed by a particular policy, thus providing significant insight into opportunities for policy reform and intervention.

These important pieces of knowledge are not immediately gained through the simple *telling* of Laurel's case. In fact, although one of the goals of narrative research is to give voice to participants through the telling of their stories, the enterprise of narrative research seeks to accomplish much more. In order for stories like these to provoke change, there must be an audience that not only hears the stories but also listens to them in meaningful ways. For example, in the few words of Laurel's with which we opened this paper, she signals a shift in life focus from her 25 years of public service to a focus solely on obtaining justice for her partner. When equipped with the right interpretive tools and perspective, the audience also shifts from hearing a sick police officer trying to pass her pension to her same-sex partner to a larger understanding of how denying same-sex couples the rights conferred to heterosexuals represents a collective injustice that has profound social and deeply personal consequences.

In fact, a systematic analysis of Laurel's story reveals her engagement in a core life project stemming from motives to fight for and achieve both personal and social justice. This life project is simultaneously a product of meaningful elements of her past (e.g., relationship with Stacie, career in public service), current concerns (e.g., personal injustice experienced from freeholders, terminal cancer), and imagined future (e.g., her remaining time with Stacie, her imminent death, and Stacie's future). An analysis of Laurel's story also reveals that by looking deeply at one person's story, researchers can gain critical understandings of the role that contexts (e.g., Ocean County of New Jersey, the freeholders' meeting room) play in the policy-making process. Through narrative, we also gain a nuanced understanding of power relations via the interplay between the Freeholders, the state of New Jersey, and its Governor, all of which hinged on the agency of Laurel to advance her justice-oriented life project despite existing social barriers and her physical condition. To summarize, through our brief analysis of Laurel's story, we reveal the ways in which a systematic approach to narrative research can have the power to reveal the intersections of policy-related

structural limitations along with individual agency via the pursuit of psychologically meaningful life projects.

Making a Case for Narrative Research in the Social Policy-Making Process

For the purposes of our argument, we conceptualize narrative research as distinct within the larger methodological category of qualitative research (e.g., Madill and Gough 2008). Even further, our focus on narrative research refers to research that utilizes stories as data *and* takes a narrative approach to analyzing story data, emphasizing the thematic and storied nature of experience as opposed to content analyzing stories for the frequency of words or codes.

Narrative research gains can be found in many areas of scholarship, including sociology, anthropology, sociology, history, and, to a lesser but growing extent, in psychology. Since the early 1980s, contributors to an increasingly convincing literature on narrative methods demonstrate the effectiveness of these methods to shed light on long-standing puzzles for social scientists. Through narrative research, we have come to observe increasingly relevant phenomena, such as those having to do with individual and group identity construction, and to understand more about large issues such as the influence of both structures and agency in social change. Narrative research has enabled us to meet some of the longstanding promises of interdisciplinary research by providing us with theoretical and methodological tools with which to inquire into individual lives lived in distinctive times and social and cultural spaces.

Also relevant for psychologists, especially those with an interest in policy and policy applications of findings, are the achievements of narrative research in the professions of medicine, law, and education. In these fields, narrative research brings not only greater understanding of human affairs but also better practice through which those affairs can be improved. For example, Rita Charon and her colleagues at the Program in Narrative Medicine at the College of Physicians and Surgeons at Columbia University effectively argue for the many ways that narrative training improves doctors', nurses', and other practitioners' effectiveness of care (Charon 2006). Jerome Bruner, a major founding figure of the study of narrative in psychology, has taken his interests in narratives as a means through which people generally search out and make meaning of lived experience to a particular focus on the practice of law. There, he shows how narrative is the necessary discourse of the law, engaged in by all players—lawyers, clients, judges, jurors, etc. The ongoing telling and recasting of stories are essential to the practice of law (Amsterdam and Bruner 2000).

Given the advances of narrative research in other fields and what we learn from Laurel's case, the fact that narrative psychological research is often marginalized, if not absent, in social policy-making efforts is both curious and troubling. As we stated above, the telling of stories alone is often not sufficient to influence policy in a productive way. Audiences need to be able to listen to individuals' stories in a meaningful way that illustrates their relevance for social policy change. Given audiences of policy makers may often be resistant to change, narrative research stands to play an important role in the policy-making process. Specifically, narrative research has the ability to tell relevant stories while simultaneously providing policy audiences with the ability to listen to and envision responses to individuals' and groups' stories via systematic methods of analysis and interpretation.

Despite the tremendous potential for findings from narrative research in policy arenas, resistance to their role in policy processes is strong. In their discussion of the perception of qualitative research's place in policy work, Murphy and Dingwall (2003) highlight three reasons for the frequent dismissal of qualitative and narrative work: (a) that it is not scientific, (b) that it is indistinguishable from journalism, and (c) that it is agenda-laden instead of motivated by a depoliticized desire for knowledge. Murphy and Dingwall (2003) provide a thorough discounting of these critiques and make the case for the utility of qualitative research in health policy; thus, we do not reiterate this argument here. However, their review likely explains why social policy-making efforts most frequently rely on quantitative research. When policy makers look to the social sciences for evidence to bolster claims for new or reformed policy, they go to research conducted within positivistic empirical paradigms. We mention these critiques of the relevance of qualitative and narrative research in policy science here to set the stage for our attempt to open new doors for narrative research in policy-making efforts. We describe the foundations of narrative research in an effort to demonstrate the multiple and varied ways evidence produced from narrative research can and should have relevance in the creation and revision of social policy.

Narrative research represents—within the context of social science research and policy—the potential of documenting, analyzing, and understanding the stories of individuals and groups affected by a given policy or policies, or their absence. In doing so, narrative research has the potential to illustrate the negative consequences of limiting and discriminatory policy or demonstrate the need for new policies that support the rights of individuals left out of existing policies. Given the power of individual stories illustrated by Laurel's case, the potential usefulness of narrative research in policy-making efforts, which allows for the telling of multiple and collective stories relevant to people's lived experiences of social policies, is tremendous. Narrative research, in its multiple forms, has the potential to
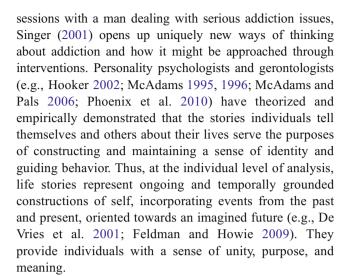
create a worldwide stage for the collective telling of stories, in academic conferences and journals, magnifying their impact on policy within and beyond the local context (Lykes et al. 2003).

In line with the overall goal of this special issue, this paper highlights the usefulness of narrative research in social policy-making efforts. Working from the narrative study of lives tradition grounded in personality psychology and personology[1], we demonstrate how the theoretical stances, questions, and methods of narrative research along with the evidence produced from modes of narrative inquiry position social scientific work within this paradigm to make a more significant contribution to social policy-making efforts than is currently realized. In order to provide tangible examples of our argument, we will focus our discussion of the potential of narrative research in current social policy-making efforts surrounding same-sex marriage recognition in the USA.

The Narrative Study of Lives: A Brief Overview

In personality psychology, personology, gerontology, and related approaches to understanding lived experiences, stories and narratives, usually in the form of life stories, have been posited as the most useful and appropriate ways of understanding whole persons and their struggles/successes within cultural and political contexts (McAdams and Pals 2006; Murray 1938; Ouellette 2008; Ouellette and Frost 2006). McAdams and Pals (2006) note that "the complex interplay between culture and human individuality may be most evident at the level of narrative identity" or life stories. Thus, we contend that life stories and narratives are units of analysis that provide inroads into understanding how individuals' everyday lived experiences shape and are shaped by social policy.

As Singer (2004) has stated, in studying life stories, researchers are studying how people remember and reconstruct life events as they relate to their own understanding of themselves in the context of their lives, thus revealing what "lie(s) at the heart of meaning making" for individuals and their own life experiences (p. 442). Applying a narrative analytical approach to notes from his therapeutic

sessions with a man dealing with serious addiction issues, Singer (2001) opens up uniquely new ways of thinking about addiction and how it might be approached through interventions. Personality psychologists and gerontologists (e.g., Hooker 2002; McAdams 1995, 1996; McAdams and Pals 2006; Phoenix et al. 2010) have theorized and empirically demonstrated that the stories individuals tell themselves and others about their lives serve the purposes of constructing and maintaining a sense of identity and guiding behavior. Thus, at the individual level of analysis, life stories represent ongoing and temporally grounded constructions of self, incorporating events from the past and present, oriented towards an imagined future (e.g., De Vries et al. 2001; Feldman and Howie 2009). They provide individuals with a sense of unity, purpose, and meaning.

Studying life stories also provides the researcher with an understanding of the context in which individuals live their lives and what aspects of that context meaningfully become parts of life stories. For example, taking a personality and social structures perspective (Pettigrew et al. 1997), the investigator discovers how a life story illuminates a person's values and motives (micro-psychological context), the important people in his or her life and their influence on the story (meso-interpersonal context), and influential aspects of larger social/cultural/historical/political structures (macro-sociohistorical context). Thus, the complexities of the relationship between social policies and their impact on the lived experiences of those affected by policies may be most evident within the life story. An individual's life story is structured in ways that reflect aspects of the culture in which he or she lives (Gregg 1998; McAdams 1996; Moore 2010; Watson et al. 2010). By examining one's life narrative, researchers can gain insight into the ways in which cultural factors—such as laws, policies, customs, and expectations—can be integrated with or interrupt one's subjective construction of meaning, self-hood, and identity. For example, in his narrative studies of young people in North Africa, Gregg (2007) reveals how young adult Moroccans have shifting sets of identities that they seek to integrate through their use of culturally specific metaphors, symbols, and story lines for the self. Through a study of their narratives, Gregg shows how they construct their identities and thereby, their personalities, while contending with the specific forms of the volatile struggle between the social and cultural forces of Western-style modernity and those of Muslim tradition. In his hands and that of other narrative researchers, life stories represent a way of understanding persons and their lived environments that move beyond that which can be obtained by focusing on isolated variables. Theirs is a focus on whole persons and how they actively attempt to negotiate relevant aspects of the social, historical, and political environments.

---

[1] Although we focus on one way of doing narrative research (i.e., the personological study of lives), we do not intend to claim that this is the only or best approach to narrative inquiry. Not only are there many varied approaches to narrative research (Andrews et al. 2009), but there are also important debates about key issues between narrative researchers, as is true of other research paradigms. These debates do not, however, undermine our claims regarding the relevance of narrative work in policy-making efforts. Thus, we encourage those in policy-making endeavors to consider the relevance of narrative research in all its forms.

Narrative Research and Social Justice

As Ouellette (2008) notes in her overview of narrative as a tool for critical personality psychologists, narrative allows for an understanding of personality and human individuality alongside social structures that may be oppressive. Inspired by liberation psychology (Martín-Baró 1994) and the study of lives tradition in personality psychology, narrative research has the potential to allow for an analysis of people's values, motives, and strivings within the social contexts that either allow for the actualization and/or oppression of these dimensions of personality (Ouellette 2008). Subjective meanings of values, goals, and identity-related strivings, which are the focus of narrative life studies, become relevant from a social justice perspective. Studying life story narratives of those whose lives are at stake in social policy-making decisions will reveal how those people's strivings and struggles for freedom are shaped by opportunity structures at the social policy level. We now turn to a discussion of the current policies surrounding the rights and legal recognition of same-sex relationships in the USA in order to further demonstrate the utility of narrative research in the making and reform of social policy.

Narrative, Meaning, and Social Policy Surrounding Same-Sex Relationships in the USA

At the time of this writing, the majority of US states and territories do not recognize same-sex marriage or provide equal recognition of heterosexual and same-sex couples. In fact, most have state-level constitutional bans on same-sex marriage. Five states and the District of Columbia allow same-sex marriage, and three states recognize same-sex marriages performed in other states, but do not grant same-sex marriages themselves. At the federal level, there are no legal forms of recognition for same-sex couples, and the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) bans the granting of same-sex marriage at the federal level. California granted same-sex marriages for a brief period, but a 2008 voter-initiated ban (i.e., proposition 8) now prevents the granting of same-sex marriages in the state. This ban has been ruled unconstitutional by a federal district court judge (Perry vs. Schwarzenegger), but this decision is in the process of appeal.

Thus far, research evidence has played a vital and influential role in the advancement of social policy that allows for equal recognition of same-sex and heterosexual couples (Herek 2006). For example, the American Psychological Association (APA) has filed Amicus Briefs in cases questioning the constitutionality of DOMA and the denial of marriage rights to same-sex couples. Social scientists are also called on to serve as expert witnesses in such cases to testify on the extent to which research in their area of expertise provides evidence for a particular policy argument. The briefs and testimonies in favor of equal relationship recognition highlight findings from primarily quantitative research aimed at providing evidence of two central claims: (a) that same-sex and heterosexual couples do not differ from each other on critical indicators of relational and familial functioning (e.g., satisfaction, commitment, conflict, parenting, and the adjustment of children) and (b) that the denial of marriage rights constitutes discrimination, which can lead to damaging consequences for lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) people (e.g., societal exclusion, mental health problems, social stress).

This approach to advocating for and advancing equal rights for same-sex couples has thus far proved useful. For example, pioneering research on minority stress (Meyer 2003) and sexual prejudice (Herek 2007) has played a major role in demonstrating the negative consequences of California's proposition 8, which banned same-sex marriage in the state. However, some have argued that an overreliance on quantitative evidence and a discourse of damage is not without its limitations in attempts to advance the legal recognition of same-sex couples (Kitzinger and Wilkinson 2004). A focus on damage can obscure the view of the politics that are at stake with regard to human rights and the potential for agency in the face of oppression and social injustice.

Along with this critique of the limits to quantitative research evidence in marriage policy, a renewed focus on the stories of the lives of same-sex couples has emerged within community-based educational campaigns. For example, Equality California (EQCA) has used a life-story-based campaign designed to educate California voters on what the lives of same-sex couples are like using both door-to-door peer education campaigns where couples share their stories with neighbors and television commercials highlighting the stories of same-sex couples, what marriages means to them, and the impact of being excluded from marriage policies (EQCA 2010). In this regard, we see the potential for narrative research to provide new and useful evidence that can be used to supplement existing quantitative research findings already in evidence, and bolster story-based community education campaigns, which are often excluded from policy efforts as advocacy work too biased to serve as evidence.

A narrative approach has been theoretically and empirically useful in understanding the lives of LGB individuals, highlighting how cultural, historical, and political concerns shape their experiences of intimacy and romantic relationships (e.g., Cohler and Galatzer-Levy 2000; Cohler and Hammack, 2007; Hammack 2005). For example, Cohler et al. (2002) attempted to contextualize the importance and meaning of intimacy in gay male relationships within a broader discussion of aging in the lives of two gay men in their 70s. This study provides insights into how meanings in

relationships might differ, but that a desire to establish an intimate and lasting connection remains important in shaping the directions that gay men's lives often follow. Their analysis of one participant's experiences in a long-term relationship throughout the course of his life reveals the overarching meaning of his relationship as a means of maintaining order and balance in his life. It is also possible that stories of chaos and turbulent relationships serve the function of making sense of the chaos that can often characterize human relationships. These studies provide some insight into the meaning of interpersonal romantic relationships for LGBs.

Furthermore, Hammack and Cohler (2011) highlight the importance of social and historical shifts in meanings of same-sex desires, which have much to do with the meanings of same-sex relationships for same-sex couples. The fact that marriage rights are even being discussed on the political and legal policy stages is a significant advancement in the sociohistorical context surrounding same-sex relationships in the USA and worldwide. Hammack and Cohler (2011) point out through various life study projects that historicity matters in meanings of same-sex intimacies. Narratives of contemporary LGB youth illustrate strivings for marriage and relationships, and even families, goals that would have been uncommon among LGB individuals who came of age in the 1960s, 1970s, or even 1980s (Hammack and Cohler 2011). Hammack and Cohler's analysis reveals how current improvements in the social and legal treatment of sexual minorities allow for and are related to increased expression of sexual minority identities. By focusing on present circumstances as a product of sociohistorical shifts, their study shows how previous and more restrictive social and legal climates serve to further marginalize and pathologize sexual minority identities and desires, further demonstrating the need for social policy reform to facilitate the relational pursuits of same-sex couples.

By taking a narrative approach to examining the experiences of intimacy in same-sex and heterosexual couples, one can gain a complex understanding of the meanings that individuals ascribe to their relationships and the types of similarities and/or differences in the central themes of relationship narratives that exist between the two groups. For example, Frost (2009) conducted a narrative study of individuals in heterosexual and same-sex relationships to understand similarities and differences in the ways in which individuals construct meanings of intimacy. Following previous quantitative research (Frost 2011b), this narrative approach revealed no substantial differences in the relationship stories that heterosexual and same-sex couples told about important events in their relationships regarding themes of intimacy contained within their event narratives (Frost 2009). However, compared to heterosexuals, members of same-sex couples told stories

about their relationships that more often involved experiences of stigma, prejudice, and discrimination, often stemming from experiences with policy-level discrimination or lack of legal recognition.

To understand the complexities of how members of same-sex couples actively negotiated intimacy and discrimination, Frost (2011a) focused on the narrative strategies that participants used when they told relationship stories that involved themes of intimacy alongside experiences of discrimination. This approach to the narratives revealed that individuals in same-sex couples made meaning of their experiences of discrimination and intimacy via multiple narrative strategies. Some of these strategies reinforced the negative impact of discrimination on intimacy as demonstrated in previous quantitative research (Balsam 2001; Balsam and Szymanski 2005; Frost and Meyer 2009; Meyer and Dean 1998; Rostosky et al. 2009; Todosijevic et al. 2005). As one participant described, society's refusal to accept her relationship with her partner resulted in a "heavy weight" that led to a constant doubting of the potential stability of her relationship over time. However, the use of other narrative strategies allowed individuals in same-sex relationships to cope with, resist, and overcome discrimination in their relationships. For example, one participant told a story about her commitment ceremony which allowed her to achieve the goal of public recognition of her commitment to her partner in spite of their being denied equal marriage rights (Frost 2011a).

Findings from quantitative research—although they are able to address quantitatively generalizable processes central to the average persons' experience (i.e., the nomothetic)—lack the ability to identify the complexity of lived experience that narrative research is able to illuminate (i.e., the idiographic). Specifically, this narrative analysis allows for an understanding of both the oppressive affects that denial of same-sex marriage can have on same-sex couples, while at the same time illustrating how same-sex couples agentically create opportunities that satisfy their desires for marriage-like arrangements despite discriminatory social policy. These findings are in line with other narrative research on prejudice and discrimination experienced by LGB individuals (Meyer and Ouellette 2009; Rothblum et al. 2011), which demonstrates how the oppressive nature of discrimination is not necessarily a unidirectional, top–down process. For example, Meyer and Ouellette (2009) show that LGB men and women experience prejudice and discrimination as stressors, but are able to resist their negative effects by attributing these processes to a fault of society, not of their own. Rothblum et al. (2011) highlight how same-sex couples made meaning of their decisions to seek civil unions in Vermont, the first state to allow such legal recognition for same-sex couples in the USA. They show, among other

things, that seeking a civil union did not provide the same tangible benefits as marriage, but was a meaningful and public way to recognize their commitment to their partners. Furthermore, some couples from states outside of Vermont did not stand to gain any tangible benefits by getting a civil union, but did so as a political act, to make a public statement that same-sex relationships are worthy of legal recognition. Narrative studies, such as these, simultaneously demonstrate the oppressive qualities of social policy—and related discrimination—and individual agency.

Narrative research also has the potential to illustrate what effect social policy *change* may have on LGB lives (Meyer et al. 2011). For example, Meyer et al. (2011) employed narrative methods to investigate what the lives of sexual minority individuals would be like without homophobia, heterosexism, and discrimination. Likely impossible to study with quantitative survey methods, asking about what this experience would look like highlights the need for policy interventions by demonstrating the potential outcomes of policy change and providing interventionists with clear goals. This approach demonstrates the ills of social stigma and restrictive policies that need to be changed (e.g., denial of marriage and adoption rights, exclusion from the military) alongside "positive" effects of stigmatized identities that must be preserved in attempts to eradicate homophobia and heterosexism (e.g., supporting sexual minority communities) (Meyer et al. 2011).

Compared to existing quantitative research on discrimination and same-sex relationships, one unique strength of narrative approaches is their ability to document and understand the "damage" to LGB individuals' lives and relationships caused by discriminatory social policy, as well as the ways in which LGB individuals actively negotiate, resist, and overcome limiting social contexts (Fine 2006; Frost 2011a, c; Meyer et al. 2011). Studies of stigma and discrimination in LGB lives are typically limited by a sole focus on either damage or agency, and most often the former. By privileging an analysis of the meaningful whole of lived experience, narrative research is able to portray the complex relationship between both damage and agency. Doing so provides a critical lens through which to reexamine the findings of existing quantitative research, such as previously demonstrated negative and unidirectional relationship between stigma and intimacy in LGB lives (Balsam 2001; Balsam and Szymanski 2005; Frost and Meyer 2009; Meyer and Dean 1998; Rostosky et al. 2009; Todosijevic et al. 2005). In this regard, narrative evidence produced within this and similar approaches has the potential to provide research evidence that complements the already useful quantitative research evidence, address critiques of a limited focus on damage, and further the advancement of social policy reform by highlighting the need for legal recognition of same-sex couples.

The Role of Narrative Research in Social Policy Making and Reform

Now that we have highlighted the ways in which narrative research can be useful in understanding the complex relationship between policy and everyday lived experience, we now turn to a discussion of the various ways narrative research can be brought to bear within the social policy-making process. As discussed above, we see evidence produced from narrative as being useful in policy-making areas at multiple stages. First, narrative evidence is likely useful in documenting the need for new or reformed social policy. Specifically, findings from narrative research can accomplish making voices heard, telling stories on a large scale, and documenting the discriminatory and limiting nature of current policies before official legal decisions are being contemplated (Lykes et al. 2003). Next, as social science researchers are often called to testify in policy-related court cases, evidence from narrative research could be presented to judges and juries, and factor into legal policy decisions through amicus briefs. Finally, narrative research can be utilized to produce evidence for the impact of policy change, in the form of evaluation and assessment research. However, in order for narrative research to be effectively employed in these stages of policy development and change, several conditions must be addressed. Namely, key stakeholders must (re)define what "counts" as evidence in policy-making efforts, and the audience for policy-relevant narrative research must be expanded.

Redefining What Counts as Research Evidence in the Policy Arena

Typically, when research is brought to bear as evidence in policy-making efforts, particularly in the legal context, it is produced from quantitative methods. Thus, the strongest form of research evidence in advocating for a policy decision is often thought of as coming from empirically valid, reliable, replicable, and statistically sound research findings. We argue that research evidence produced from empirically sound studies is indeed extremely useful in evaluating policy decisions, but it is not the only type of research evidence that can be usefully employed in making the case for new or reformed policy. Evidence from narrative research, given its epistemological grounding in lived experience and social context, can also prove useful in providing justification for policy-making efforts.
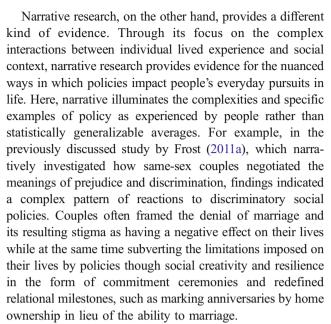
Here, we address the critiques of narrative and qualitative research mentioned in the introduction to this article; namely, that narrative research is not science, and it is too politicized to exist as evidence in policy discussions (Murphy and Dingwall 2003). This critique is partly flawed because the standards of

judging the scientific merit of research in general are built from quantitative positivistic paradigms and are not appropriate to gauge the utility of narrative research in social policy arenas. However, as the frequency and scale with which qualitative and narrative methods are employed in the social sciences increases, the field has witnessed increased attention to research standards designed to promote more systematic approaches within narrative research designs. For example, established guidelines exist for the collection (for a review see Madill and Gough 2008) and interpretation/analysis (e.g., Braun and Clarke 2006; Josselson 2004) of narrative data.

Researchers have further expanded the concepts of validity and generalizability to include forms of validity that are applicable to narrative research (e.g., Fine 2006; Gilgun 2005). This includes redefining expert validity to include participants and community members in addition to researchers as holders of expert status in the research process and reframing generalizability beyond the ability to make sample-to-population conclusions to include provocative generalizability or the ability of research to draw attention to issues of social injustice (Fine 2006). Barreras and Massey further note that the quality of research can also be gauged in terms of its impact validity or "the extent to which research has the *potential* to play an effective role in some form of social and political change or is useful as a tool for advocacy or activism" (Barreras and Massey in press; p. TBD). Research with high impact validity is designed from the ground up to answer research questions with social importance, has an explicit plan for how the research will be employed outside of academia, and is framed strategically by researchers for use within social policy arenas (Barreras and Massey in press). These evolving guidelines for social justice research, including both quantitative and narrative research, are premised on the notion that "good science" and interest in social justice concerns are not mutually exclusive (Barreras and Massey in press; Fine 2006).

Quantitative research is most often focused on statistically generalizable patterns, relationships between variables, and/or group differences on a particular outcome or set of outcomes. The kind of evidence from this type of research allows for useful depictions of the average person's experience of a policy's effects or the ways in which elements of a policy may unfairly impact certain groups while privileging others. For example, Hatzenbuehler et al. (2010) analyzed the mental health impact of state-level passage of same-sex marriage bans during the 2004 and 2005 elections. They found that psychiatric disorders increased among LGB people (and not heterosexuals) living in states that passed marriage bans. Disorders did not increase after the elections in states that did not pass marriage bans. This kind of innovative quantitative study clearly demonstrates the damage that anti-same-sex marriage policies can have on the mental health of LGB individuals.

Narrative research, on the other hand, provides a different kind of evidence. Through its focus on the complex interactions between individual lived experience and social context, narrative research provides evidence for the nuanced ways in which policies impact people's everyday pursuits in life. Here, narrative illuminates the complexities and specific examples of policy as experienced by people rather than statistically generalizable averages. For example, in the previously discussed study by Frost (2011a), which narratively investigated how same-sex couples negotiated the meanings of prejudice and discrimination, findings indicated a complex pattern of reactions to discriminatory social policies. Couples often framed the denial of marriage and its resulting stigma as having a negative effect on their lives while at the same time subverting the limitations imposed on their lives by policies though social creativity and resilience in the form of commitment ceremonies and redefined relational milestones, such as marking anniversaries by home ownership in lieu of the ability to marriage.

Narrative research accomplishes the production of nuanced evidence of policies' effects on people's lives via two unique methodological features, which stem from a focus on personality in context (e.g., Little 2000; McAdams 1995, 1996). First, narrative research relies on stories and narratives as transactional units of analysis, allowing for the placing of individual lives and concerns within the context of proximal and distal environmental and sociocultural factors, such as social policies. Second, stories and narratives are constructivist units of analysis. They allow participants to define their own meaningful life experiences and do not force them to fit their experiences into a predetermined set of variables selected by the researcher. In this regard, life experiences germane to social policy-making decisions emerge naturally from participants to the degree to which they are relevant and connected via their own reflections on their lived experiences and the resulting meaning making processes.

Thus, the epistemological and methodological foundations of narrative research result in the production of research findings that can be usefully employed as evidence within social policy-making endeavors. Although this narrative evidence is different from traditional notions (i.e., quantitative) of what counts as evidence in the policy arena, these differences position narrative evidence as a necessary and useful complement to quantitative research evidence as we discuss below. Before turning to the complementary and synergistic potential of quantitative and narrative research in policy, we next discuss the need to expand who constitutes the audience for the dissemination of narrative research findings within the policy arena.

Part of the work needed to broaden "what counts" as research evidence in social policy-making efforts requires expanding the audience for narrative research within psychology and related social sciences. If key scholars in

the social sciences are resistant to the value of qualitative and narrative paradigms as legitimate forms of social scientific inquiry, it will be all the more difficult to establish the relevance of narrative evidence in policy areas. As Ouellette (2008) has previously highlighted, psychology has a rich history of narrative research, which is central to key discoveries in personality and emotion research and cognitive sciences, to name just a few areas. Current efforts within the field aimed toward aligning psychology with the "hard" sciences have resulted in some loss of this important history and marginalization of narrative research within the discipline. Ouellette (2008) notes that psychologists must revisit these important historical connections between narrative research and more mainstream psychological research in order to create more space for research on narratives-in-context within psychology. Here, we wish to reiterate this call to "recast" the history of psychology as inclusive of key early narrative contributions, which we contend will result in an expanded audience for narrative research within policy arenas as well. Increased audience receptivity in combination with the previously discussed expanded conceptions of validity and generalizability (Barreras and Massey in press; Fine 2006; Gilgun 2005) will undoubtedly further establish narrative research as instrumental to the social policy-making process.

The Complimentary Potential of Quantitative and Narrative Research in Policy Science

Finally, we wish to offer some ways in which policy makers can usefully incorporate evidence from both quantitative and narrative research in various stages of their work. In this paper, we have focused our attention on opening the door for narrative research to enter into policy-making efforts, and now, we will highlight the ways in which narrative research compliments quantitative research in furthering cases for policy making and reform. In doing so, we wish to move beyond the common qualitative versus quantitative debate and make the case for a move toward the combination of qualitative *and* quantitative research in policy-making efforts.

We want to be especially clear that we are not advocating for the privileging of narrative over quantitative evidence (or vice versa). Each type of evidence offers unique and relevant kinds of knowledge and has different abilities to make policy claims. Ideally, there would be greater space for narrative evidence in policy arenas so that the two types of evidence would together provide a more holistic and synergistic perspective on the ways in which policies impact individuals' lives (i.e., a complementary relationship between two types of evidence).

One example of the collective potential of narrative and quantitative evidence in policy arenas can be found in our

work cited above on the role of stigma and minority stress in the lives of same-sex couples (Frost 2011a,b; Frost and Meyer 2009; Frost and Ouellette 2004). Much of the existing research on same-sex couples' experiences of stigma-related stress demonstrates that, on average, stigma has a negative effect on couples' relationship quality and mental health (e.g., Frost and Meyer 2009) and presents barriers to their pursuit of intimacy (Frost 2011b). This quantitative research evidence not only demonstrates the need for policies that address negative effects of stigma but also minimizes the fact that many same-sex couples have healthy and rewarding relationships despite limiting social policies that promote stigma. In fact, same-sex couples and heterosexual couples look strikingly similar across a multitude of measures of relationship quality (Peplau and Fingerhut 2007). If between-group studies fail to demonstrate differences in relationship outcomes between same-sex and heterosexual couples, it makes it hard for researchers to present their evidence in a way that calls for the elimination of discriminatory social policy (cf. Schwartz and Meyer 2010). Although this is seemingly contradictory to the quantitative research findings from within group studies that demonstrate negative links between stigma and relationship quality, findings from narrative research can be paired with existing quantitative findings to provide a more holistic understanding of the role of stigma and same-sex couples' lives through its emphasis on meaning-making processes and the complexity of within-group variability. Specifically, Frost (2011a, c) showed that although the majority of same-sex couples note the negative qualities of stigma in their lives, some are able to exercise aspects of positive marginality (Unger 2000) in their reactions to it, often in ways that reaffirm their commitments to each other. This often took the form of unofficial marriages, commitment ceremonies, or other forms of (symbolic) public recognition, similar to what same-sex marriages look like in those states that allow it. Evidence from both quantitative and narrative research separately demonstrates the universally negative aspects of stigma stemming from discriminatory social policy. Quantitative evidence provides a sense of the generalizable pathways and processes linking policy to diminished outcomes while narrative evidence highlights the complexities inherent to the ways in which couples make sense of and resist stigma's negative effects. Thus, in combination, evidence from the two paradigms makes a stronger collective case for the need for policy change and direct suggestions for individual, social, and legal intervention.

Final Thoughts and Conclusions

This paper opened with the story of Laurel Hester. She fought simultaneously against cancer and discriminatory

social policy that prevented her from achieving her goals of providing for her partner after her death. We showed how Laurel's actions and the attention her story received from the media were successful in creating policy change. Laurel's case was an extreme example of the usefulness of stories and narratives in informing and reforming social policy. For the LGB individuals who pursue equal rights for same-sex relationships, it will take the telling of many more stories to change the discriminatory policies that exist within many countries around the world and, perhaps more importantly, change minds of prejudiced individuals that enact discrimination on a daily basis. Narrative research enables a view and understanding of how individual lives are enmeshed in larger structures; it offers tools to reveal how individuals craft identities and well-being and phenomenological insights to show how systems work to a degree not possible using predominantly quantitative research paradigms.

Narrative research—by privileging stories as important and meaningful units of analysis in policy work and making the stories of groups and individual truly *heard* on local and larger scales—illuminates to an extent not previously achieved the ways LGB individuals struggle with, negotiate, and even overcome persistent limitations and discrimination surrounding their everyday pursuits of intimacy. Researchers and policy makers must continue to work toward the production and effective dissemination of narrative research evidence in order to overcome the barriers preventing narrative work from informing policy. Doing so would undoubtedly further a common agenda of alleviating the negative effects of discriminatory social policy on the lives of same-sex couples.

The legal debate surrounding the rights and recognition of same-sex relationships is just one social policy arena in which evidence from narrative research can be usefully employed. In this paper, our aim was to demonstrate the utility of narrative research for social policy-making efforts, despite existing prejudices regarding the role of qualitative research in policy science (Murphy and Dingwall 2003). Specifically, narrative research, grounded in the narrative study of lives tradition, is uniquely positioned to illustrate the complex and nuanced ways in which policies shape and are shaped by individuals' everyday lived experiences. Thus, narrative research has the potential to synergistically complement quantitative research in the production of evidence needed to bolster social policy-making efforts. In order for the potential of narrative research for policy science to be fully realized, researchers and policy makers must diversify their definitions of what counts as evidence in the policy arena, thereby allowing findings from narrative research to enter into discussions from which they would be otherwise marginalized or excluded.

References

Amsterdam, A. G., & Bruner, J. (2000). *Minding the law*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Andrews, M., Squire, C., & Tamboukou, M. (2009). *Doing narrative research*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Balsam, K. F. (2001). Nowhere to hide: Lesbian battering, homophobia, and minority stress. *Women & Therapy, 23*, 25–37.

Balsam, K. F., & Szymanski, D. M. (2005). Relationship quality and domestic violence in women's same-sex relationships: The role of minority stress. *Psychology of Women Quarterly, 29*, 258–269.

Barreras, R. E., & Massey, S. G. (in press). Introduction. *Journal of Social Issues* (in press).

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*(2), 77–101.

Charon, R. (2006). *Narrative medicine: Honoring the stories of illness*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Cohler, B. J., & Galatzer-Levy, R. M. (2000). *The course of gay and lesbian lives: Social and psychoanalytic perspectives*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Cohler, B. J., & Hammack, P. L. (2007). The psychological world of the gay teenager: Social change, narrative, and 'normality'. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 36*(1), 47–59.

Cohler, B. J., Hostetler, A. J., Weiss, R. S., & Bass, S. A. (2002). *Aging, intimate relationships, and life story among gay men. Challenges of the third age: Meaning and purpose in later life* (pp. 137–160). New York: Oxford University Press.

de Vries, B., Blando, J. A., Southard, P., & Bubeck, C. (2001). The times of our lives. In G. M. Kenyon, P. G. Clark, B. de Vries, G. M. Kenyon, P. G. Clark, & B. de Vries (Eds.), *Narrative gerontology: Theory, research, and practice* (pp. 137–158). New York: Springer.

EQCA (2010). Marriage in California. Retrieved from the Equality California website at http://www.eqca.org/site/pp.asp?c=kuLRJ9MRKrH&b=4026413.

Feldman, S., & Howie, L. (2009). Looking back, looking forward: Reflections on using a life history review tool with older people. *Journal of Applied Gerontology, 28*(5), 621–637.

Fine, M. (2006). Bearing witness: Methods for researching oppression and resistance–a textbook for critical research. *Social Justice Research, 19*(1), 83–108.

Frost, D. M. (2009). Stigma, intimacy, and well-being: A personality and social structures approach. *Doctoral dissertation*, City University of New York, Graduate School and University Center, New York, NY, USA.

Frost, D. M. (2011a). Stigma and intimacy in same-sex relationships: A narrative perspective. *Journal of Family Psychology, 25*, 1–10.

Frost, D. M. (2011b). Similarities and differences in the pursuit of intimacy among sexual minority and heterosexual individuals: A personal projects analysis. *Journal of Social Issues, 67*(2), 282–301.

Frost, D. M. (2011c). Social stigma and its consequences for the socially stigmatized. *Personality and Social Psychology Compass* (in press).

Frost, D. M., & Meyer, I. H. (2009). Internalized homophobia and relationship quality among lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 56*(1), 97–109. doi:10.1037/a0012844.

Frost, D. M., & Ouellette, S. C. (2004). Meaningful voices: How psychologists, speaking as psychologists, can inform social policy. *Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy, 4*(1), 219–226.

Gilgun, J. F. (2005). Qualitative research and family psychology. *Journal of Family Psychology, 19*(1), 40–50.

Gregg, G. S. (1998). Culture, personality, and the multiplicity of identity: Evidence from North African life narratives. *Ethos, 26*(2), 120–152. doi:10.1525/eth.1998.26.2.120.

Gregg, G. (2007). *Culture and identity in a Muslim Society.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Hammack, P. L. (2005). The life course development of human sexual orientation: An integrative paradigm. *Human Development, 48,* 267–290.

Hammack, P. L., & Cohler, B. J. (2011). Narrative, identity, and the politics of exclusion: Social change and the gay and lesbian life course. *Sexuality Research & Social Policy* (in press).

Hatzenbuehler, M. L., McLaughlin, K. A., Keyes, K. M., & Hasin, D. S. (2010). The impact of institutional discrimination on psychiatric disorders in lesbian, gay, and bisexual populations: A prospective study. *American Journal of Public Health, 100*(3), 452–459. doi:10.2105/AJPH.2009.168815.

Herek, G. M. (2006). Legal recognition of same-sex relationships in the United States: A social science perspective. *American Psychologist, 61,* 607–621.

Herek, G. M. (2007). Confronting sexual stigma and prejudice: Theory and practice. *Journal of Social Issues, 63,* 905–925.

Hooker, K. (2002). New directions for research in personality and aging: A comprehensive model for linking level, structures, and processes. *Journal of Research in Personality, 36*(4), 318–334.

Josselson, R. (2004). The hermeneutics of faith and the hermeneutics of suspicion. *Narrative Inquiry, 14,* 1–28.

Kitzinger, C., & Wilkinson, S. (2004). Social advocacy for equal marriage: The politics of 'rights' and the psychology of 'mental health'. *Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy (ASAP), 4,* 173–194.

Little, B. R. (2000). Persons, contexts, and personal projects: Assumptive themes of a methodological transactionalism. In S. Wapner, J. Demick & T. Yamamoto (Eds.), *Theoretical perspectives in environment-behavior research: Underlying assumptions, research problems, and methodologies* (pp. 79–88). Dordrecht, Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers.

Lykes, M. B., Blanche, M. T., & Hamber, B. (2003). Narrating survival and change in Guatemala and South Africa: The politics of representation and a liberatory community psychology. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 31*(1–2), 79–90. doi:10.1023/A:1023074620506.

Madill, A., & Gough, B. (2008). Qualitative research and its place in psychological science. *Psychological Methods, 13*(3), 254–271.

Martín-Baró, I. (1994). In A. Aron & S. Corne (Eds.), *Writings for a liberation psychology.* Cambrigbe: Harvard University Press.

McAdams, D. P. (1995). What do we know when we know a person? *Journal of Personality, 63,* 365–396.

McAdams, D. P. (1996). Personality, modernity, and the storied self: A contemporary framework for studying persons. *Psychological Inquiry, 7,* 295–321.

McAdams, D. P., & Pals, J. L. (2006). A new Big Five: Fundamental principles for an integrative science of personality. *American Psychologist, 61,* 204–217.

Meyer, I. H. (2003). Prejudice, social stress, and mental health in lesbian, gay, and bisexual populations: Conceptual issues and research evidence. *Psychological Bulletin, 129,* 674–697.

Meyer, I. H., & Dean, L. (1998). Internalized homophobia, intimacy, and sexual behavior among gay and bisexual men. Stigma and sexual orientation: Understanding prejudice against lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals. Psychological perspectives on lesbian and gay issues, Vol. 4 (pp. 160–186). Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Meyer, I. H., & Ouellette, S. C. (2009). *Unity and purpose at the intersections of racial/ethnic and sexual identities. The story of sexual identity: Narrative perspectives on the gay and lesbian life course* (pp. 79–106). New York: Oxford University Press.

Meyer, I. H., Ouellette, S.C., Haile, R., & McFarlane, T. A. (2011). "We'd be free": LGB narratives of life without homophobia, racism, or sexism. *Sexuality Research & Social Policy.*

Moore, K. L. (2010). Sexuality and sense of self in later life: Japanese men's and women's reflections on sex and aging. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Gerontology, 25*(2), 149–163.

Murphy, E., & Dingwall, R. (2003). *Qualitative methods and health policy research.* Hawthorne: Walter de Gruyter.

Murray, H. A. (1938). *Explorations in personality.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Ouellette, S. C. (2008). Notes for a critical personality psychology: Making room under the critical psychology umbrella. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass, 2,* 1–20.

Ouellette, S. C., & Frost, D. M. (2006). The possibilities of personality psychology and persons for the study of health. In M. Vollrath (Ed.). *Handbook of personality and health* (pp. 235–255). Chichester: Wiley.

Peplau, L., & Fingerhut, A. (2007). The close relationships of lesbian and gay men. *Annual Review of Psychology, 58,* 405–424.

Pettigrew, T. F., Hogan, R., Johnson, J. A., & Briggs, S. R. (1997). *Personality and social structure: Social psychological contributions. Handbook of personality psychology* (pp. 417–438). San Diego: Academic.

Phoenix, C., Smith, B., & Sparkes, A. C. (2010). Narrative analysis in aging studies: A typology for consideration. *Journal of Aging Studies, 24*(1), 1–11.

Rostosky, S. S., Riggle, E. D. B., Horne, S. G., & Miller, A. D. (2009). Marriage amendments and psychological distress in lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) adults. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 56*(1), 56–66. doi:10.1037/a0013609.

Roth, V., (Producer), Syrett, M. (Producer), & Wade, C. (Director). (2007). Freeheld (motion picture). (available from Lieutenant Films Inc., Brooklyn)

Rothblum, E. D., Balsam, K. F., & Solomon, S. E. (2011). Narratives of same-sex couples who had civil unions in Vermont. *Sexuality Research & Social Policy.*

Schwartz, S., & Meyer, I. H. (2010). Mental health disparities research: The impact of within and between group analyses on tests of social stress hypotheses. *Social Science & Medicine, 70*(8), 1111–1118.

Singer, J. A. (2001). Living in the amber cloud: A life story analysis of a heroin addict. In D. P. McAdams & R. Josselson (Eds.), *Turns in the road: Narrative studies of lives in transition* (pp. 253–277). Washington: American Psychological Association.

Singer, J. (2004). Narrative identity and meaning making across the adult lifespan: An introduction. *Journal of Personality, 72,* 437–459.

Todosijevic, J., Rothblum, E., & Solomon, S. (2005). Relationship satisfaction, affectivity, and gay-specific stressors in same-sex couples joined in civil unions. *Psychology of Women Quarterly, 29*(2), 158–166.

Unger, R. K. (2000). The 1999 SPSSI presidential address: Outsiders inside: Positive marginality and social change. *Journal of Social Issues, 56*(1), 163–179.

Watson, W. K., Bell, N. J., & Stelle, C. (2010). Women narrate later life remarriage: Negotiating the cultural to create the personal. *Journal of Aging Studies, 24*(4), 302–312.