

Summary of Frank Olson's Dissertation  
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Individuals and groups of persons in communities often have difficulties trusting others. This impairs their willingness to work together for the common good of the community. Issues surrounding individualism, ethnicity, economics, geography, and religion create an atmosphere that is conducive to alienation and isolation. As a result, tensions arise that over time fester into, at best, group exclusivity and at worst open bigotry and violence. Within this context there seem to be common threads that both separate persons and may at the same time bring persons together around certain archetypal symbols. These archetypal symbols may be generative but may also incite explosive and destructive behaviors.

This dissertation examines ways to develop a relational community where the social constructionist paradigm is used in narrative action research, to bring persons and groups together to build mutual trust and work for a common good. The study identifies and focuses on archetypal symbols and myths as a catalyst that brings these diverse groups together.

The first chapter explores the researcher's motivation for engaging in the study. Growing up in a segregated society in Houston, Texas and being exposed to bigotry and forced isolation, created in the researcher a thirst to find out about the "other" and to understand how persons thought and felt.

The second chapter presents the process of formation of the problem to be studied in the project and its many facets. It was in this phase that grounded theory strategies began to emerge as a critical part of doing the research. It became apparent that the objective of the study did not warrant an empirical analysis of the project. In the second part of this chapter emerging questions concerning the scope of the study are presented. These

emerging questions helped focus the scope of the study. Consideration was also given to how to identify archetypal symbols and how those symbols might be used to engage persons and develop trust.

The third part of the study discusses the process by which the primary researcher engaged Memorial Drive United Methodist Church, a congregation within the geographical boundaries of the study. This engagement was in collaboration with TMO (The Metropolitan Organization), a community organizing institution dealing with social justice issues. MDUMC is primarily an affluent Anglo American congregation. Its members were politically conservative and the researcher was required to negotiate both the political conservatism as well as the tendency of many of the parishioner to remain in isolation from the greater community. This chapter further explores the challenge of engaging this congregation in relation building that would result in political action.

The next part of the study is entitled “The Challenge.” It explores the challenges that the primary researcher encountered in developing strategies for engaging the community. Those challenges included a discussion of prevalent community biases that impeded community conversations. These included “Why be Relational?”, “Living in the Past”, “Not Having a Binding Community Symbol”, and community stakeholders prejudices. The researcher was also forced to address his own prejudices and ignorance about the enormity of the communities isolation.

The next chapter is entitled “Nature of Narrative Action Research.” It discusses the nature of narrative action research and why that form of research was used over empirical methods. The presentation of narrative action research in dissertation form was problematic with “very little procedural clarity and guidance in the literature” (Bauer & Gaskell, 2000).

There were also shifts in elements and emphasis in the problem statement and hypothesis. This chapter also discusses the emergence of grounded theory strategies and the researchers growing understanding of theory and praxis as the study progressed.

The next section is entitled “The Nature of My Research” and develops the researchers criteria for doing action research in the Spring Branch/Memorial community of Houston, Texas. It focused on defining the community, its demographics, history, trends and how theory informed praxis. This was a critical section because of the researchers difficulty with putting boundaries on the study, both geographically and ethnographically.

A short chapter is introduced next entitled, “Not Knowing, Numinosity and Diversity--The Message of Pentecost.” Being that the researcher comes from a church setting reflections on the mystical qualities of change in groups is explored through the lens of Pentecost. The connection is made between social constructionist methodologies and spiritual connectedness between persons in a common setting, unsure of an unknown outcome.

The next section explores the theoretical framework through the review of literature. Several disciplines are introduced and developed in order to view the study from various perspectives. These included appreciative inquiry, evolutionary psychology, Jungian psychology, and game theory, and provided the conceptual and theoretical framework for the study. These different lens provided multiple points of observation. It also showed how various disciplines might view a situation differently. Often those differing viewpoints create tension if they are viewed as orthodoxy. In this situation an attempt was made to appreciate those various observations in order to create multiple and complimentary views.

A short chapter entitled “Theoretical Model” is included to show the theoretical progression that was followed in the study. The project took many twists and turns and did not always follow a linear path. All contacts and interviews did not bear immediate results. Without this chapter the “Results and Discussion” section would be more difficult to follow.

The following section entitled “The Research Project: Results and Discussion” is the most lengthy and deals with the implementation of the project. Since multiple actions are going on simultaneously with new information being input into the project that was sometimes not germane to the final outcome, this section is not always linear. During the entire study, multiple voices are being identified, interviewed, assimilated, warehoused for future interactions, or being shelved more or less permanently because of lack of relevance to the actions at hand. Some relational contacts were eliminated from the study material for brevity, but others that might not have been highly relevant were included to show the twists and turns community organizing and relation building takes. The reasoning was that for future relation building it was important to build as large a network as possible to be sure that as many voices were being heard and invited to the table. Since a primary emphasis of the study was placed on the impact of archetypal symbols on relation building, special attention was placed on the role of archetypal symbols and their associated myths. Special attention was given to how the sharing of narratives in groups served to deconstruct old myths and create new, more inclusive and empowering myths.

The last chapter presents “Summary Reflections” on the study. It begins by discussing the researchers naiveté concerning the community that he had lived for over forty years. It also discussed the effort to develop an adequate in-group, out-group study that would determine the extent and

the placement of those in-groups and out-groups within the community. The study found that there was in-group, out-group bias within the community but established that other than determining the existence of these biases that it would not serve much purpose in helping to develop a more relational and trusting community. This chapter continued by reflecting on the researchers efforts to engage various groups in the community in dialogue. It also discussed the growth of the researcher as a theoretician exploring various lenses to view the community and the work of community organizing, and the praxis of community organizing with its reflexive impact on the researcher as a grounded theorist. By not being restricted in what could be studied or the techniques that could be used, the researcher was able to learn more about both theory and praxis that would not have been possible if restrictions had been in place. This chapter also viewed the continuing thread of archetypal symbols and their associated myths that were ever present throughout the project and how the use of narrative helped persons deconstruct old myths surrounding these archetypal symbols and with the sharing of these narratives with others, create new myths that led to better understandings of the “other” and enabled groups of persons work for their common good.