The Personal Is Political: Promoting Empathy Through the Exchange of Personal Narratives About Gender Towards Social Change

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Recommended Citation
https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc_etds/2068
THE PERSONAL IS POLITICAL: PROMOTING EMPATHY THROUGH THE EXCHANGE
OF PERSONAL NARRATIVES ABOUT GENDER TOWARDS SOCIAL CHANGE

by

Emily Tobey

A master’s thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York 2017
The Personal Is Political: Promoting Empathy Through The Exchange Of Personal Narratives
About Gender Towards Social Change

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Emily Tobey

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
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By Emily Tobey

Advisor: Jason VanOra

Abstract

This paper explores the potential of personal narrative in promoting empathy-based social change. It begins with the premise that humans are storytelling animals; we use narrative to make sense of the self and the world around us. Moreover, when stories are shared, a kinship is created between storyteller and listener based on the empathic response between the two. After reviewing the literature on both the value of narrative inquiry in psychological research and the science regarding the effect of stories on the brain, I propose a story exchange methodology that I believe could be used to increase empathic understanding around issues of gender. Scholarship on gender suggests that the socially constructed gender binary promotes essentialism and limiting hegemonic norms as well as mythologizing the perceived innate differences that separate us by gender. This paper explores the potential of story exchange to blur or dismantle the gender binary towards realizing a common humanity. Reflecting on the collective evidence presented in this paper, I argue that experiencing someone’s story, through which one can imagine being in the other’s place, has the potential to effect change on an interpersonal and larger scale through increased empathy and understanding.
Acknowledgements

I want to thank my thesis advisor, Professor Jason VanOra, for his support, guidance, encouragement and excellent feedback and advice and for his efficiency and speed in turning around drafts throughout the process! I also thank all of my professors at the Graduate Center for their knowledge, passion and support. Lastly, I want to thank my family, especially my two daughters, Lily and Isabelle, for their encouragement, support and patience throughout my time working on my Master’s degree at the Graduate Center and the especially focused time working on my thesis.
Table of Contents:

Abstract........................................................................................................................................iv
Acknowledgements......................................................................................................................v
Table of Contents..........................................................................................................................vi
List of Figures..................................................................................................................................vii
Author’s Note..................................................................................................................................viii
Introduction: Humans are Storytelling Animals...........................................................................1
I: Narrative Research in the Study of Lives....................................................................................6
II: The Science of Story..................................................................................................................13
III: The Social Construction of Gender........................................................................................20
IV: Gender Narratives in Research...............................................................................................27
V: Why the Binary Persists............................................................................................................31
VI: Story Exchange: Blurring Boundaries and Breaking Down Walls Around Gender..............35
VII: Description of Story Exchange Process................................................................................37
VIII: Conclusion............................................................................................................................42
Bibliography...................................................................................................................................44
List of Figures

Figure 1: The Neural Responses of a Speaker and Listener…………………………17

Figure 2: The Pink and Blue Project………………………………………………23

Figure 3: Moms and Dads, 1965-2011………………………………………………25
Author’s Note

Interspersed throughout this paper are excerpts from online stories about gender. Each story is intended to give the reader a window into an individual’s experience of gender while at the same time revealing the overlapping theme of challenges resulting from the socially constructed gender binary. I would argue that they also illustrate how challenging the gender binary’s strict construction can be the foundation of living an authentic life. Sharing stories is one way to both increase awareness around gender and to blur the gender boundaries which divide people with different life experiences.
Introduction: Humans are Storytelling Animals

“The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story.”
— Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Nigerian author and feminist activist

Story #1 is told by a non-binary individual going through transition from binary gender to not identifying as strictly male or female. This story illustrates the challenge for people not identifying at one end or the other of the gender binary and their feeling that society doesn’t understand their gender identity.

Some days though, I don’t know what to do about being read as male more often than not. I mean, mostly that’s a good thing, I welcome it, I want it to happen. Sometimes, though, I want to scream I am not, I am neither gender, I don’t want a gender – but I remain quiet because I know the world can’t really conceptualize that. The dissonance makes me nauseous and I start to doubt myself, even though I also remember that when I decided to make the first doctor’s appointment I couldn’t stop smiling for the rest of the day and it felt so right to be taking that step. (Micah, Neutrois Nonsense)
**Story #2** is told by an individual assigned female at birth who struggled with the hegemonic expectations of being a girl as she grew up and as she entered young adulthood. She expresses that identifying as a girl made her feel less respected for things like her intelligence and more appreciated for her looks. Through her exploration of gender identity over time, she feels she is now able to be what she calls a “full person” and embrace both typically feminine and typically masculine traits and behaviors in whatever ways she is comfortable. She says, “You can show your boobs. You can play football. You can do whatever you want because it doesn’t really have anything to do with your gender.”

So, when I was little I identified as a tomboy. I played sports, I did karate and I didn’t like anything girly like Barbies . . . because girls were lame, because girls were ditzy and only cared about looks and weren’t smart...And I wanted to be smart. I wanted to be cool. I wanted to be one of the guys . . . I remember when I was in sixth grade and the first time I realized I had sexual attention coming towards me and I hated it. It made me feel gross. It made me feel terrible . . . so I wore really big, baggy, heavy band shirts to cover my boobs and wore big baggy cargo pants and just hung out with the guys and tried to make myself really unattractive. And then when I got older I started meeting girls that were kinda cool...girls who were interesting and were fun and intelligent and different. They were different like me. And they also weren’t blond, ditzy cheerleader girls. They had feelings and ideas and were crude sometimes and I was like whoa, that’s weird...I guess just around me I attract those people because I’m one of those people. And then there were those girls who were cheerleaders and blond and I
had to get to know them too and they were also kinda cool and that was weird. And so I started to think about that...why I was seeing these girls who were lame in a different light . . . and I started to learn a little bit about feminism and structural inequalities and things like microaggressions and how the world put me in a place where I felt it necessary to disassociate myself from my entire gender so that I could be respected. (Desi’s Gender)
Stories have been a part of human culture since before the development of language; human beings used pictures and paintings on cave walls to document stories of their daily lives. Some theories about the root of human language point to narrative function (stories), as the primary way in which Homo sapiens (wise ape) evolved into Homo narrans (storytelling ape), thereby producing the specificity of human language (Victorri). Mark Turner, in his book, *The Literary Mind*, asserts that the functional human need of storytelling is responsible for the differences between human language and animal communication systems (Turner 141, 168). In other words, humans are storytelling creatures. As some would say, stories are in our DNA.

The overall goal of this paper is to explore the possibility of stories, specifically a process called **story exchange**, to increase empathy and understanding between persons from different groups, backgrounds or life experiences. Moreover, I seek to bring forward questions around how story exchanges might counter the socially constructed gender oppositions, or manufactured incompatibilities, between those who identify as men or women, as well as those living inside or outside the traditional gender binary. First, I will provide background information about psychological research which uses personal narratives in the study of lives and how this research counters the essentialist dichotomies and binaries of the human experience, including around gender. This genre of research is a model for how personal stories can reveal deeper and more complex meaning about a person’s life experience toward finding broader knowledge and common ground. Next, I will explore the science of stories and how stories can not only change minds, but change brains as well. To appreciate the power of stories, it is important to understand the neuroplastic ability of the brain and how stories have the capacity to change our neurology and neurochemistry, impacting emotions and behavior. In addition, changes in the brain can make psychological and behavioral changes longer lasting. Together, this research in social and
brain science is the basis for my proposal to use story exchange to blur gender boundaries.

Before defining and describing the story exchange process, and its potential to disrupt gender categories, I will briefly outline the literature concerning the socially constructed nature of these categories, and highlight some examples of the use of gender narratives in psychological research. Finally, I will outline a story exchange proposal which I suggest might help break down differences and division, particularly where gender is concerned.

**Story #3** is told by a gender non-binary individual, assigned female at birth, who is comfortable exploring the fluidity of their gender on the spectrum between binary opposites. They have not had medical intervention and have no plans to, as their goal is not to “change” genders but to be free to be a person living outside of the gender binary.

It was my 5th birthday party and I wanted to wear boys’ swim trunks. It was a slip and slide party. And my mom let me wear them for just a little bit and then I had to get into a two-piece. And it was just...that’s when it really started coming down . . . I started having to assimilate . . . It’s a constant thought in the background these days. It’s in everything that I do. But instead of it being scary, it feels good . . . I don’t fight with my body anymore...that often . . . If I were to have biomedical intervention I would pass pretty quickly, most likely. Give me 6 months and I will just become another white...guy. And um...(takes deep breath)...I...can’t...be that man. (“At What”/Roaming Gender)
I: Narrative Research in The Study of Lives

French theorist Roland Barthes said narrative is “present at all times, in all places, in all societies; indeed, narrative starts with the very history of mankind; there is not, there has never been anywhere, any people without narrative” (Barthes 237). Indeed, stories serve many purposes in modern human society, from entertainment to documenting historical events, from explaining mysterious natural phenomena to imparting lessons and values. Stories can inspire and motivate. They can relay facts or fiction or some combination of the two. Importantly, stories also connect us to each other, allowing us to find common ground. Even in light of the inherent diversity of individual stories, there is the universal of the human condition. We can recognize ourselves in the stories of others.

Personal narratives, or life stories, are unique in their value as an analytical tool; we make sense of ourselves by constructing our narrative over time and we make sense of others by hearing how they narrate their lives. Psychology professor and researcher Dan P. McAdams has written extensively on the subject of narrative psychology and narrative identity. In asserting the primacy of narrative construction in identity development he explains,

. . . the stories we construct to make sense of our lives are fundamentally about our struggle to reconcile who we imagine we were, are, and might be in our heads and bodies with who we were, are, and might be in the social context of family, community, the workplace, ethnicity, religion, gender, social class, and the culture writ large. The self comes to terms with society through narrative identity.

(McAdams 242-243)

Our stories are not only personal but social. We construct stories that are individual to us but the nature of narrative is that we will share those stories with others. Our stories are a way for
us to take what we know or perceive from our embodied experiences and translate that into telling. The meaning and value of our stories depend on sharing them. As psychologist Ruthellen Josselson asserts, “Meaning is not inherent in an act or experience, but constructed through social discourse” (*Interpreting Experience* 32). It is within that social discourse that the teller and listener find common ground in grappling with the complexity of the human condition. In this shared language of narrative, we find where we overlap, who we are in relation to the “other.” Dan McAdams proposes we think of “human beings as storytellers and human lives as stories to be told” (McAdams 243). Sharing our stories enables us to make meaning and as I will propose in this paper, also activates understanding and empathy between the storyteller and the listener.

The idea of story exchange proposed in this paper might be understood as a real-world application of the area of psychological research called narrative inquiry, which highlights the value of stories in the scientific investigation of human behavior. Narrative research and analysis, in personality psychology and in the social sciences generally, is premised on the theory that it is through the personal, recollected stories of individuals, and the meaning they make of themselves through those stories, that we better understand their experience and identity. We can only know so much through knowing a person’s biography: their labels, life events, the “facts” of who they are, without context. As compared to the isolated “facts” of someone’s life, narrative identity is “an individual’s internalized, evolving, and integrative story of the self” (McAdams 242).

Many researchers in the social sciences have come to realize the value of individual stories in constructing theories about human beings and their behavior within a culture. Narrative inquiry is essentially the qualitative complement to the more traditional quantitative research focused on numerical and measurable data. (There are, however, techniques to codify and
Once thought of as subjective, unquantifiable and not generalizable, individual narratives were seen as less valuable than precise, fact-based measurement techniques used in quantitative research. Life stories have proven, however, to be a rich source of information which, taken in the context of time and place, and based on the widely accepted understanding that people make meaning of their lives by constructing a story over a lifetime, can and do provide valuable knowledge for scientists studying human personality and society. As McAdams and other psychology researchers believe, the study of lives is an important element in obtaining a full and dynamic account of human behavior (McAdams 257).

Narrative inquiry looks at a person’s constructed self or selves within the world he or she inhabits, challenging the more traditional research methodology of studying a person as a context-independent individual providing objective data to be statistically documented. It promotes the idea of the narrator as an active participant in the creation of meaning rather than a passive object to be assessed. As Ruthellen Josselson explains, “Narrative research . . . strives to preserve the complexity of what it means to be human and to locate its observations of people and phenomena in society, history and time” (“Narrative Research” 3). In other words, human beings make their meaning through the construction of their story as it has been shaped over time in relationship with their environment and the people in their lives. Narrative inquiry assesses human beings not as islands, but as inseparable from where, when and with whom they live and how those factors co-create who they are.

Researchers using the narrative inquiry method face challenges in extrapolating from individual stories to answer a research question which requires some degree of generalization. Social psychologist Michelle Fine asserts, however, that the type of generalizing one can do with
narrative research is uniquely beneficial to social scientists and to the general public. She calls this provocative generalizability. She believes that the value of narrative inquiry lies in its contestation of “hegemonic and hierarchical assumptions about who is the expert,” and in its insistence on broadening the bases of knowledge to include a wide variety of voices. She doesn’t see this more democratic view of where knowledge lies as a flaw of narrative research. It is in the recognition that diverse viewpoints and life experiences allow us to imagine what might be instead of seeking confirmation of what is that this research provokes the reader or audience to act (Fine 223, 229). Though the stories of individuals might seem to be unrelated and therefore ungeneralizable, if we look for the resonance between these stories and contexts, we will find similarities where there appeared only separation. Narrative research promotes bridging divides by generalizing across lives and contexts and finding common ground.

Narrative inquiry seeks to highlight the personal, unique and contextual nature of people’s lives in addition to preserving each narrator’s singularity and ownership of their story. But to build a knowledge base out of narrative studies, researchers must look for patterns among individuals. “We look for the commonalities and disjunctures that help us go beyond individual studies to larger frameworks of understanding” (Josselson, “Narrative Research” 6). As psychologist Donald Polkinghorne says, “the goal of analysis is to uncover common themes or plots in the data. Analysis is carried out by hermeneutic techniques for noting underlying patterns across examples of stories” (qtd. in Minichiello 39). In other words, analysis is a process of interpreting the text of individual stories in context with each other, looking for where experiences overlap. In addition to the challenge of preserving the integrity of individual lives and their constructed meanings in the process of data analysis and contributing to a broad knowledge repository, narrative research must also contend with the reflexive, relational nature
of life-story collection, in which the meaning derived from the research is made in the interaction between researcher and narrator/participant. Some critiques of narrative research have focused on the subjective nature of the interview, including the pre-existing perspective brought to the interview by the researcher and the interpretive nature of storytelling. But as a postmodern deconstruction of truth and meaning, narrative inquiry makes this complexity the point. As Josselson says, “Narrative research, rooted in interpretive hermeneutics and phenomenology, strives to preserve the complexity of what it means to be human…” She adds, “Certainty may exist in models of the material world, but will never apply to the realm of people. . . We can perhaps best know a field of scholarship when we can engage those areas of tension where multiple facets of understanding intersect, interweave, collide, contradict and show themselves in their shifting and often paradoxical relation to each other” (“Narrative Research” 3, 9-10).

Narrative inquiry privileges the depth and texture of the experienced life and the fluid meaning we continually construct over our lifetimes. It rejects mutually exclusive dichotomies and binaries in favor of the entangled web of human existence. Researchers in the narrative study of lives believe that fully understanding the complexity of human beings is best accomplished through listening to their stories.

How do psychologists extract meaning from stories? While there are multiple techniques and methodologies used in narrative research, none would be successful without the interviewer being able to connect with the participant telling his or her story. Ruthellen Josselson calls this the empathic stance. She writes,

Research becomes a process of overcoming distance rather than creating it, moving what was Other, through our understanding of their independent selfhood and experience, into relation with us. . . recognizing that kinship between self and
other offers opportunity for deeper and more articulated understanding

*(Interpreting Experience 31).*

In narrative research, the relationship and dialogue between the researcher and the narrator/subject is acknowledged and valued as essential in broadening the base of knowledge and of making meaning of people’s lives. Empathy requires the scientist to be open to not being all-knowing or in control. The empathic stance is a way of approaching data that allows for discovery rather than seeks confirmation of hypotheses and that fosters more exhaustive quests for explanation rather than the illusion of finding a preexisting truth. If we listen well, we will unearth what we did not expect. This becomes the paradigm for discovery. (Josselson, *Interpreting Experience* 30)

The empathic stance is grounded in the belief that unforeseen complexities of existence will arise through the research process and that that is advantageous to rather than problematic for the study of lives. Both the empathic stance and the concept of provocative generalizability in narrative research can be valuable models in looking at fostering empathy through the process of story exchange, as both value the unexpected connections found in listening to others.

**Story #4** is told by a woman assigned female at birth who has been working as a firefighter, in a predominantly male field, for about 11 years. She explores assumptions about gender roles at her job and how she has tried to navigate the binary expectations of being a woman in a man’s domain. She specifically mentions the binary-related assumption that a woman has to pick either job or family.
When I finished the [firefighters] academy and got on the line, at first, men would be kind of proper, and you could tell that they were changing their behavior a little bit because I was around, but then um, as they got to know me, they became way more relaxed and everybody was just friends . . . I have had a few instances with older firefighters that were about to retire who kinda thought it would be too hard for women with families to pick, you know it’s either your job or your family. You can’t do both, ya know, they had a real problem with that. But a lot of the younger firefighters...they get it. A lot of them have young families and those roles...the gender roles are blurred so much more that it just doesn’t seem to be a problem [with them]. (Marissa’s Gender)
II: The Science of Story

In addition to psychological research using narrative, neuroscientists have uncovered and advanced new information on how stories are affected by and impact our brains and our bodies. Studies have shown that feelings of empathy and compassion increase in people during and after they hear a compelling story. One study, done using MRI scanning to measure brain, blood and hormonal activity, showed that when participants heard a moving story, they had a visceral reaction, seen in changes in the brain, blood and hormonal levels, and reported strong emotions of compassion for the characters in the story. They also reported feeling moral motivation to change their behavior as a result of hearing the story (Immordino-Yang; Svoboda). Consider the reaction of one of the participants in this study, after hearing a true story about a young Chinese boy who gave a warm cake to his mother even though he was quite hungry:

I’m not very good at verbalizing emotions. But … um … I can almost feel the physical sensations. It’s like there’s a balloon or something just under my sternum, inflating and moving up and out. Which, I don’t know, is my sign of something really touching … And, so, the selflessness of the mother … and then also of the little boy. You know, having these wonderful cakes that he never gets to have, and he still offers them to her [his mother] … and then her turning them down, is … uh … [long pause] It makes me think about my parents, because they provide me with so much and I don’t thank them enough, I don’t think … I know I don’t. So, I should do that. (Immordino-Yang)

As the authors of this study state, “The ability to empathize with another person's psychological and physical circumstances is a foundation of sociality and moral behavior. In most circumstances, empathy is likely to begin with a cognitive appraisal of another's situation, which
leads to the induction of a social emotion” (Immordino-Yang). In other words, experiencing another person’s story has the potential to motivate moral and socially positive actions in one’s own life. I would argue that the story exchange process I am proposing in this paper is a potentially ideal way to foster this motivation.

Another study measured levels of the neurochemical oxytocin in the brains of participants when they watched a video story with a dramatic emotional arc involving sympathetic characters. Oxytocin has been shown in previous studies to increase pro-social behaviors when infused into human brains. When the participants in this study watched the moving videos, the levels of oxytocin in their brains increased. In addition, after watching these videos and experiencing a spike in oxytocin, the participants reported feelings of empathy towards the characters in the video and were motivated by empathy to donate money to a stranger in the experiment. The clear correlation between hearing stories and generosity led to further investigation which found a causal relationship between oxytocin, empathy and the pro-social behavior of charitable giving (Zak).

It is easy to imagine that the psychological and physical responses to hearing or viewing a moving story might impact us by making us feel compassion, empathy or admiration for the characters in the story, at least while the story is being relayed and for a short time thereafter. We have all experienced an emotional response during and after seeing a movie, reading a book or hearing someone tell a powerful story. What is less well-known is that hearing someone’s story can actually change the brain in more lasting ways. In the last few decades, neuroscience has established that the plasticity, or malleability, of the brain goes far beyond what was thought possible. According to studies, our brains have the potential to be molded and rewired from birth until death, negating the long-held belief that the brain is essentially hardwired and not malleable.
beyond initial growth and development early in life. This finding has widespread implications for science, culture, medicine and humanity, generally (Doidge xv-xvi). But how might sharing our stories intersect with neuroplasticity?

Early findings in neuroplasticity proved that neural connections in the brain can be reorganized by repeating physical activities in a non-habitual way. For example, if a stroke compromised the use of someone’s left arm, restricting the use of the normally useful right arm by placing it in a sling or cast and allowing only the use of the compromised arm would eventually allow the remapping of neural circuits to make the left arm compensate for the constrained right arm. The brain would make up for the now useless right arm by firing neurons across synapses which make the left arm useable again. In other words, we can retrain our brains to do what we want them to do by forcing the brain to compensate for a constraint (Doidge 102). But physical retraining of the brain is not the only way that neuroplasticity occurs. As seen below, the brain can be retrained through the use of language/stories.

More recent research in neuroplasticity has revealed that changes in brain matter can occur without any physical intervention; hearing or reading a story, even thinking and imagining have the potential to rewire the brain as well. Researchers at Harvard University conducted an experiment in which one group of people learned a keyboard exercise and practiced it for two hours a day over five days and another group of people just looked at the music and imagined playing the five-finger keyboard exercise, also for two hours a day for five days. The researchers found that the region of the motor cortex devoted to finger movement like that used in piano playing had expanded and taken over surrounding regions of the cortex equally in both groups, whether they had actually played the piano or just imagined playing. “Mental practice resulted in similar reorganization” of the brain, wrote the experiment’s researcher, Alvaro Pascual-Leone.
“This has important implications for health: something as seemingly insubstantial as a thought can affect the very stuff of the brain, altering neuronal connections in a way that can treat mental illness or, perhaps, lead to a greater capacity for empathy and compassion,” says science writer Sharon Begley (Begley). While this study did not address the specific practice of story exchange, studies like the one detailed below have shown that listening to or reading a story activates broad regions of the brain, reconfiguring neural connections in much the same way as imagining playing the piano did in the Harvard study. Researchers have concluded that imagining the protagonist’s experience through story activates not only the areas of the brain associated with language but also the primary sensorimotor brain region, essentially tricking the mind into thinking it is experiencing the same action as the protagonist. New neural connections formed in this way enable us to imagine being in someone else’s shoes by hearing their story. (Bergland) It is that capacity, that ability to empathize with someone else, that is fundamental to bridging divides toward positive social change.

In a study conducted at Emory University, researchers saw neural changes in the areas of the brain associated with receptivity for language and motor sensation on functional MRI scans the morning after participants read parts of a novel. The neural changes had not dissipated 5 days after initial scanning (Berns et al.). The changes in the sensorimotor area suggest that reading a novel can transport the reader into the body of the protagonist. For example, neurons in the brain associated with the physical act of running can be activated just by thinking about running. If neuronal changes in the brain occur during and after reading a novel, the implication would be that hearing a compelling personal story would also have the power to cause similar brain reorganization. "We already knew that good stories can put you in someone else's shoes in a figurative sense. Now we're seeing that something may also be happening biologically,” said the
lead author of the study (Emory Health Sciences). What does biologically stepping into someone’s shoes look like? And what does that have to do with story exchange?

In a very recent study out of Princeton University, neuroscientist Uri Hasson wanted to answer the question: “How exactly do the neuron patterns in one person’s brain that are associated with their particular stories, memories and ideas get transmitted to another person’s brain?” In other words, what exactly happens neurologically when one person is telling a story and another is listening to it. Asking a speaker to relate a real-life story to a listener and using MRI scanning technology on both of the participants, what he found was that the speaker’s and the listener’s brains mirrored each other so that the neural responses to telling and hearing the story locked together and became aligned as if the two people were doing the exact same thing, as in Figure 1, below.

Figure 1: The neural responses of a speaker and listener lock and align when the speaker is telling a story to the listener (Hasson).
Even though speaking and listening are two very different processes, when the meaning of the story was shared between the storyteller and the listener, their brains made a connection; their neural responses were remarkably similar. The listeners were not only stepping into the shoes of the storytellers, but essentially stepping into their brains. One of the conclusions reached after further research was conducted in this study was that communication through dialogue between two people, and the brain connectivity that results, presents an opportunity for heightened mutual understanding. As Hasson says,

Today, too many of us live in echo chambers where we’re exposed to the same perspective day after day. We should all be concerned as a society if we lose our common ground and lose the ability to communicate effectively and share our views with people who are different than us. As a scientist, I’m not sure how to fix this. One starting point might be to go back to having dialogues with each other, where we take turns speaking and listening. Together we hash out ideas and try to come to a mutual understanding. Such conversations, as our experiments show, may result in coupling our brains to other brains, and the people we’re coupled to define who we are — think how you much you change on a daily basis from your interactions and your coupling with the people you encounter (Hasson).

I would assert that story exchanges, wherein two people share their personal experiences with one another, taking turns speaking and listening, would have a similar coupling effect, towards promoting an empathic relationship of mutual understanding.

Taken together, these scientifically substantiated chemical and neural changes in the brain, and their correlation with the emotions of empathy and compassion, resulting from the act
of hearing or reading a story, indicate that sharing personal stories has the potential to increase empathic feelings in listeners/readers. This neuroscience, taken alongside the demonstrated value of stories in the field of narrative inquiry, points to the potential that the sharing of stories has to open a door to empathy-driven social change. After a brief discussion of the gender binary, I will investigate the use of personal narratives and story exchange to deconstruct ingrained personal and cultural difference and to help to realize our common humanity. Specifically, I believe that story exchange has potential as a tool in crossing the gender divide in our culture by blurring the boundaries of the historically intractable gender binary. I believe the concept of story exchange is worth pursuing as we seek to promote understanding, empathy, tolerance and shared humanity around gender.

**Story #5** is told by a woman who was assigned male at birth and has since transitioned with medical intervention to make her body align with her gender identity. She speaks about her experiences coming out to family members and the challenges that presented and her fear of being cast out of her family’s life for not accepting her assigned gender.

> When I came out to my mom that I was transgender, I think I was 13 or 14, and she called the police . . . I remember it as a very dark period. I mean I really didn’t believe that anyone could love someone like me . . . [Later,] I was really torn between being a female role model and being a dad . . . One of the most difficult things for me was I was afraid I wouldn’t be able to be in my granddaughters’ lives . . . You know, I live this every day now. I walk down the street as a woman and I really am at peace with who I am . . . Now I walk in love. (StoryCorps)
III: The Social Construction of Gender

Before exploring whether and how to deconstruct gender categories through story exchange, it is important to understand the most salient points regarding how gender is constructed and why. Gender is one of the primary ways we define ourselves and others in our culture. It is one of the foundations of an individual’s identity. Our modern western society has attached gender to biological sex; according to one’s genitals, every baby is labeled either a boy or a girl at birth, and the accepted ideology has been that one’s external reproductive organs should align with one’s gender identity. This bifurcation between those born anatomically male and those born anatomically female, and the personality and behavioral norms associated with each of those two possible categories is known as the gender binary. Society expects every boy and every girl to perform their gender in hegemonic ways, according to the rules of this binary. Prevailing traits of and behavior for males and females are categorized as masculine or feminine which are mostly perceived as mirror images of one another. Broadly speaking, masculinity is most often categorized by dominance and aggression and femininity by passivity and submission (Devor 39). Despite general acceptance of the important role of “nurture,” or socialization, in identity formation, these traits are seen to begin as natural extensions of biology and evolution based in the reproductive capacity for each sex. Since females, with some exceptions, are the ones with the apparatus, a uterus, to carry a child, it follows that their roles and behavior should be dictated by that capacity, regardless of the reality of individual desires or abilities. In other words, culturally prescribed gender role characteristics reflect the ideological belief that the “nature of the sexes” is grounded in all females wanting to have children (and to be taken care of) and all males being dominant and competitive enough to support and protect them, not to mention the precept of normative heterosexuality created by this ideology. In addition to the
belief in this gender binary, and the biological basis of gender, many people believe our gender identities are also static. Researchers studying the language systems of our North American modern culture found that most people “conceptualize gender as binary and permanent. All persons are either male or female . . . People are believed to be unable to change genders without sex change surgery, and those that do change sex are considered to be both disturbed and exceedingly rare” (Devor 36, 40).

Girls and boys learn about acceptable gender roles and behavior from the adults around them, beginning at birth. As we grow up and construct our gender identities as women and men, our behavior, appearance, and roles are essentially predetermined and policed by the culture in which we live; the social institutions within which we operate, like the family, peer groups, the workplace, places of worship, even the field of medical care, keep us in line with cultural norms. Gender typing and expectations within the gender binary begin even before birth and continue from day one of a baby’s life. Anecdotally, many of us have heard adults exclaim things like, “With that much activity, it must be a boy!” when a baby kicks a lot in utero. Visitors to the hospital in the first few days of infancy might greet parents with comments like, “With that size he’ll grow up to be a football player,” or “She’s just so beautiful and sweet!” Studies have shown that during infancy, parents treat their babies differently based on expectations of each gender. Baby girls get looked at and talked to more by their mothers than do boys and are attended to more quickly when they cry. Boys are encouraged to be independent and explore sooner than girls, with whom parents are more restrictive and protective. In just two examples of many, the following studies verify this differential treatment. In a study of breastfeeding mothers of newborns done while still in the hospital just after birth, researchers found that mothers spent more time breastfeeding baby boys and more time smiling at and talking to baby girls (Thoman
et al. 110-118). In another study, Lewis (119) found that mothers tended to vocalize and look at baby girls more than boys, for whom they provided more physical stimulation. Parents’ early treatment of their babies reflects the entrenched societal expectations of each gender and are reinforced by other adults in their lives and the institutions of which they are a part. As girls and boys get older, they are each rewarded for adhering to social definitions of masculinity and femininity; girls are rewarded for their looks and clothing and for being sweet and boys for physical performance and being active (Kimmel 124). These are, of course, just a few of the differences in the socialization of girls versus boys. Everything from tone of voice parents use with babies, to the types of toys boys and girls are given to play with have been shown to be gendered. An explicit and visually impactful example of the gendered environments of children can be seen in the photographic project by South Korean artist JeongMee Yoon. Called The Pink and Blue Project, the photographs explore gendering of children’s belongings and rooms and what message this sends to both children and those who interact with them. In addition to parents’ binary color choices of toys, clothes and other objects in a child’s room, she explores the choices made by manufacturers as to what types of toys get marketed to girls versus boys; beautification accessories, dolls and baby strollers are seen in the girls’ rooms while action figures, construction tools and weapons are seen in the boys’. (see Figure 2, below)
Figure 2: The Pink and Blue Project by JeongMee Yoon (Yoon)
The social construction of gender identity starts as soon as a baby is born, based almost exclusively on whether they have a penis or a vagina. Taken all together, the messaging children get from conscious and unconscious gender socialization is “that what they may do as well as what they can do, is largely determined and limited by their sex” (Renzetti, Curran 83). Based on studies of the gender construction of children and adults in our culture, it has been well documented that the “normative” and entrenched gender binary resulting from that construction has had large scale implications in the hierarchy of power and in gender relations.

In recent years, gender has become a more amorphous term, complicated by a surge in people exploring their own gender identities and roles within and outside of the historically accepted gender binary. A survey conducted by the LGBTQ activism organization GLADD found that “12% of Millennials identify as transgender or gender non-conforming, meaning they do not identify with the sex they were assigned at birth or their gender expression is different from conventional expectations of masculinity and femininity -- doubling the number of transgender and gender non-conforming people reported by Generation X (6%)” (“Accelerating Acceptance/Young”). Genderqueer people are reframing the possibilities of self-definition and bringing the questioning and troubling of gender into public discourse. More people are identifying as not at one end or the other of the gender binary, but somewhere along the gender spectrum or even completely outside of it. Men and women are more often crossing boundaries of gender expectations in the roles they play, as seen in Figure 3, below (Parker, Wang).
Transgender individuals, who identify as a gender different than what they were assigned at birth, have brought into question whether gender is even related to genitals or biology. Intersex babies, those born with ambiguous genitalia, bring into question how we can so definitively assign gender categories based on what is between a baby’s legs.

But as a society, many of us are uncomfortable confronting gender presentations outside of the accepted binary and hierarchical gender role frameworks. We retreat from uncertainty and experience anxiety and fear when the boundaries and social rules are not clearly drawn. This
discomfort and resulting insistence on the stability of the gender binary manifests in visible and more opaque ways, both around gender identity and gender roles. As seen in the data below, the binary and its boundaries contribute to unequal societal and economic power dynamics, oppositional gender relations, dysphoria and mental health issues, intolerance and even violence when someone is perceived to have crossed the line of gender norms. Recent statistics show that of the 500 companies on the Standard and Poors Index, only 21, or 4.2 percent, are currently headed by a woman CEO, and in 2014, those women made about 77 percent of what the men did for the same jobs (Crockett) About 40 to 50 percent of married couples in the United States divorce (“Marriage and Divorce”). Large percentages of people who identify outside of the gender binary experience anxiety, depression, substance abuse and other high-risk behaviors, social isolation and attempted and successful suicide attempts (“Gender Dysphoria”). Violence against and murder rates of LGBTQ people are much higher than in the general population, especially for transgender women of color (Park and Mykhalyshyn). Lack of knowledge about the complexity and layers of gender identity and how the constructed gender binary impacts individuals and groups has clearly had a deleterious effect on American society.
IV: Gender Narratives in Research

One of the ways that we as a society have become more aware of gender differences is from the work done by narrative researchers. Psychologists have elicited the stories of gender-nonconforming people in studies done with both transgender and intersex individuals. If we look at the knowledge gained from these stories and these studies it becomes clear that personal narratives are valuable in increasing understanding, leading to empathy. Following are some examples of studies using narrative inquiry in which researchers are striving through empathic listening to reframe how marginalized people are defined; in this case, people who stand outside of the traditional gender categories.

In a study published in *International Review of Qualitative Research*, Jason VanOra and Suzanne C. Ouellette seek to challenge existing sociological and clinical literature depicting transgender women as unidimensional and pathological. Utilizing the life story interview, VanOra and Ouellette seek to locate the “authentic selves” and coherent identities of two transgender women through their personal stories. They hope to provide an alternative narrative to the existing literature on transgender lives which focuses on pathology and a singular “transgender phenomena,” but which tells us little about how it actually feels to be transgender. The researchers interviewed two transgender women, both of whom are activists in transgender support systems but have very different backgrounds. While there was some overlap in their experiences as transgender women, for example, both reporting having “always been women,” and both, at one point in their lives, turning to sex work to make money, their stories revealed a multiplicity of identities and experiences, some relating to gender and some not. While a prevailing belief in our culture is that transgender people are on a quest that is solely about gender, these two women told stories of their struggles in and around race, class, employment,
health, activism, and social status, revealing not only their differences from each other but also their individual multiplicities of identity. VanOra and Ouellette believe these stories create awareness about transgender individuals and the communities, groups and larger structures of which they are a part, and also open a door to further research on transgender lives toward social-justice aims. These multidimensional portraits are only possible to achieve through careful and empathic listening (VanOra and Ouellette 89-110). This is a scientific study published in an academic journal, but I would argue that, for people outside of academia, the opportunity to learn about the multifarious lives and identities of these transgender women, women who are marginalized by a culture of othering that which is not understood, would activate empathy and tolerance toward social justice.

In Gender: An Ethnomethodological Approach, Suzanne Kessler and Wendy McKenna use interviews with and correspondence from transgender individuals to explore the role of social construction in gender identity and to argue that the belief that there are two genders, based on physical identifiers, produces the problematic idea of concrete and static gender roles. Although this study was conducted in 1978, before the more recent evolution in our understanding of transgender issues, Kessler and McKenna demonstrate the value of narrative inquiry, and its contestation of knowledge production being best sourced from the “experts” in a field, by listening to people who have constructed their gender in opposition to their biology, the “actual” experts. Rachel, a male to female transgender woman, corresponded with Kessler and McKenna by written letters and phone calls throughout her transition from male to female. In addition to providing a full range of details of Rachel’s experience of “changing” gender, or of physically aligning her body to match her female gender identity, the letters are illustrative of what the authors call a “female gender attribution,” and a “feminine tone,” or as the authors state,
“the content is ‘made sense of’ because the letters are seen as female authored” (Kessler, McKenna 214). In other words, the authors believe that the reader of the letters would likely think that much of what Rachel wrote could have been written by any woman, as opposed to a transitioning woman, in particular. Here, Kessler and McKenna are embracing narrative inquiry’s reflexive methodology in analyzing the tone of Rachel’s letters in the context of what they perceive as a “feminine tone.” Rachel’s narrational tone notwithstanding, over time there is clearly less and less mention in the letters and phone calls of transitioning and more content related to living her life as a woman. Rachel also believes, as evidenced in her words, and unlike some transgender individuals, that a “believable gender presentation does not depend on a denial of its evolution” (215). She clearly states in her letters that she had “once been a male” and is now female. Her self-reflection about her gender and her making sense of who she was and is, is grounded in a recognition that her gender identity and the public perception of it has been an evolution. Lastly, Rachel’s letters show the role other people played in legitimizing her gender identity being a not insignificant factor in her construction of her gender (215-216). The narrative methodology used in this research, including Rachel’s stories and the researchers’ belief in the production of knowledge coming out of the relationship between researcher and participant, and of recognizing the context within which the participant lives and lived, allowed for a depth of understanding of both transgender experiences and of the social construction of gender that other methodologies would not have generated. In spite of what these narrative studies reveal about the validity of gender variations, most people outside of the scientific or academic community are not exposed to these stories. There is still a preponderance of misinformation, lack of understanding, and intolerance around gender differences in our society.
Person to person story exchange has the potential to expand the reach of this information and increase mutual understanding across boundaries.
V: Why the Binary Persists

Why is any disruption or attempted deconstruction of the gender binary threatening to large swaths of the population? Gender is not only personal but is also a social institution. As such, it is one of the major ways that human beings organize their lives. Human society depends on a predictable division of labor, a designated allocation of scarce goods, assigned responsibility for children and others who cannot care for themselves, common values and their systematic transmission to new members, legitimate leadership, music, art, stories, games, and other symbolic productions (Lorber 21).

Although societies vary in how they allocate people to jobs and other responsibilities and privileges, all societies use gender and age as factors. In categorizing people by gender, Western society constructs binary groups with similarities among them and differences between them, and then assigns them roles based on this construction. The gendering of social practices is justified by claiming that gender is based on physiology. In other words, female and male reproductive capabilities are used to dictate what roles women and men play in an organized society. (21)

The gender binary supports and upholds our patriarchal society. Females in a patriarchy are relegated to the home and domestic responsibility, based originally on their reproductive traits. Because they are the sex which has the ability to carry, birth and nurse babies, there has been a biological imperative based on the assumption that all females should be in this role. Males are sent out on the front lines to create and perpetuate rules and laws in the public sphere, where they are seen as best able to protect their families from competitors or adversaries, and to
secure provisions for survival, largely based on their inability to birth babies and their physical strength. Again, the assumption, based on biology and physiology is that all males fit this bill, regardless of individual differences among them. This social imperative, based in biological and physiological differences between the sexes, has been constructed and reinforced as the way to maintain order and stability. In teaching and enforcing gender binary-based divisions of labor, one gender becomes the primary power holders and the other the subordinate keepers of the home. Over time, while some individuals cross gender boundaries, it is believed that the binary foundation of our society must remain intact or the whole social order will come tumbling down (27). When differences between boys and girls and men and women begin to blur, the keepers of the power in our society, namely white men, fear loss of dominance, and work to shore up the binary social script.

This unequal balance of power, and the need to maintain it, comes at great cost for many members of our society. Anyone who is not a heterosexual, white male, or who doesn’t adhere to hegemonic gender boundaries has fewer rights and privileges than those who are and do. In addition to this denial of rights, the “need” by some to maintain the compulsory gender script is associated with opposition and discord between people on different sides of or inside versus outside the gender binary. High divorce rates between men and women, bullying of children and adolescents by their peers, social isolation, domestic violence against women, violence against gender nonconforming people and high rates of depression and suicide attempts are some of the results of attempting to keep the gender status quo intact. While in some ways, white males benefit from this power imbalance and strict binary, I would argue that they too suffer by having to adhere to the constraints of our society’s definition of masculinity. I am interested in exploring how all members of our society would benefit from deconstructing the myth of social order that
is supposedly maintained through the gender binary and our definitions of masculinity and femininity. How might boys and girls, women and men, gender conforming and nonconforming people all thrive and prosper if gender boundaries were blurred? And how can story exchange help foster this?

**Story # 6** is told by a cisgender male speaking about the hegemonic masculine gender roles he felt pressured to conform to from adolescence on into college. Hearing the rape stories of his college girlfriend and then his mother changed his perspective on what it means to “be a man” in our culture and how he needed to reassess his own version of masculinity.

Things changed around middle school. I started to get bullied and made fun of...called a fag, or a pussy or a sissy or a wuss. And that’s when the social pressures really kicked in. I cut my long hair off, changed the way I dressed. I dropped my voice; I don’t even know when my voice naturally broke...I have no idea because I forced it low. I played more sports and joined all the teams. I dated the head cheerleader and distanced myself from people who were less masculine than me . . . School was a training ground for me to learn how to perform masculinity, to perform to be one of the guys . . . when I went to college there was pressure to engage in this hook-up culture. Alcohol was a tool for me to be assertive and aggressive and predatory, to find women to have sex with so that I could go back and impress other men with it . . . There’s an implied sense that women exist for us to have sex with them. They exist for us . . . My sophomore year in college I was in my first long-term, committed relationship and I learned
that she had been raped. And I found out later that my mom had been raped when
she was younger. It was painful to for me to think about that happening to
someone that I really cared about . . . It gave me the opportunity to start thinking
about masculinity in a critical way, trying to become more of a full human being
and less constrained by who I thought I had to be. (The Mask You Live In)
VI: Story Exchange: Blurring Boundaries and Breaking Down Walls Around Gender

In our culture, gender has been constructed as a binary, a foundational and formidable wall, one that divides us as handily as it defines us. Men and women, gender conforming and non-conforming individuals, are set against each other in an either/or, subject/object dynamic. Babies do not start life in competition with one another or in contradiction to one another based on their gender designation. There is no hierarchy of power in the nursery. Gender, as a binary system of distinct opposites, is a social construction of our patriarchal society, one that I would argue benefits no one. I believe if we can break down the walls of gender categorization, we can build a new cultural narrative towards equality and cohesion.

How are walls broken down? How are divisions reconciled and bridges built? I would suggest that a deceptively simple process of exchanging stories, person to person, has the potential to deconstruct the gender binary towards positive social change. There are many ways to share stories. As seen throughout this paper, there are countless stories related to gender currently being shared on the internet, as well as in books, film and essays. Much of what is published and posted however, is meant for and read by people already interested in gender complexity or those looking for support for their own struggles around gender. I am proposing here a specific methodology which would bring people divided by life experience together and potentially change their perspectives through empathy. My belief is that if we stay on one side of a “wall,” with like-minded people whose stories we’ve heard before and whose life experiences mirror our own, our thoughts and opinions become habitual and static and often oppositional to those on the other side. Other people’s stories can yield the material we need for building bridges: new sources of meaning, new ways of seeing. But in modern Western society, storytelling (especially in person) is not a natural or commonplace occurrence between
individuals. We are socialized to appreciate *doing* more than *listening*, achieving more than taking the time to tell and reflect on ours and others’ stories. Attention is placed on agency over communion (Kenyon et al. 34).

The foundation and goal of story exchange is empathy. If we stop and listen deeply, what will shift? The story exchange process harnesses the power of having the opportunity to walk in someone else’s shoes, to see through their eyes and therefore to understand them better. The key to a fully empathic response in this type of story exchange is being tasked with retelling another’s story as if it is yours, in the first person. When one listens to a story deeply enough and becomes its caretaker, the story’s value is perceived differently. By inhabiting the story of another, it becomes your story too. Story exchange systematizes sharing our stories with those with whom we might not ordinarily share. We tend to connect with people whose values and perspectives align with our own. The point of the story exchange is to make that connection with someone whose life experience, whose story, is seemingly at odds with ours.
VII: Description of Story Exchange Process

The story exchange process I am proposing is designed to bring individuals divided by values and life experience around gender together around shared stories through which they can find their common humanity. I have designed the process using a writing technique, Sense Writing, developed by my writing teacher Madelyn Kent and a story exchange philosophy promoted by a non-profit organization called Narrative 4, though Kent does not explore gender or story exchange in her writing classes and Narrative 4 utilizes only oral storytelling, not writing, in its process and has not employed gender as a subject. Thus, I have used aspects of Sense Writing technique and Narrative 4’s story exchanges as starting points for my proposal and created a process founded on the data on narrative inquiry, brain science and the human need for and relationship to stories, presented in this paper.

The exchange takes place within small groups between pairs of individuals, who have been partnered for this exercise. The methodology aims to decrease commonly felt anxiety around writing and telling one’s story and to avoid the inclination to have participants’ stories attempt to represent an entire group or conform to dogma around gender issues. To that end, this process avoids asking participants to simply “tell a story about your gender,” which would likely inhibit the ability to reveal deeper truths by causing unease or trepidation and encouraging use of overly familiar tropes of gender narrative. Instead, I propose using Sense Writing to elicit stories through one’s embodied experience, the genesis of our life stories. The theory of empiricism posits that the origin of all knowledge is sense experience or embodied experience. There is no knowledge nor is there the ability to talk about that knowledge without experience in the physical world (Empiricism). Human experience is always embodied, or processed through the mind and body together, and it is through the body that our lived experience gets translated
through language into our narratives. Sense Writing uses somatic exercises to enable one to access lived experiences through memories and imagination by working with, instead of against, the nervous system. Working with and through the body and the senses, instead of through the rational mind, personal and unique stories will typically emerge with ease. This step in the process is critical, not only for its effectiveness in drawing out unexpected or previously buried details of a life but also because of the vulnerability and humanity that come up through embodied writing and language. In addition, and importantly, gender identity is constructed through and from our embodied experiences and gets expressed in our language, so language is always gendered and embodied. Even stories that are not specifically about gender bear the mark of our embodied gender identity through the language we use. These stories allow connections to be made by not focusing on differences around gender but still necessarily being spoken from one’s gender identity. These exercises will yield slices of stories to be shared between partners prior to the primary story exchange. Then, once this connection has been made and the partners have been immersed in embodied writing, the next phase of the process is begun.

The experiences written about in the first phase of the process will be concrete, following prompts like, “Write about a time you were at the beach.” The specificity of time and place and writing through the senses make the process of creating less fraught; there is no pressure to produce a fully developed and meaningful story. The point of the story is not to “explain” oneself or one’s gender identity to one’s partner, but to tell a story. Again, the embodied experience is tapped into as a way to get one’s overambitious mind “out of the way.” Through writing about seemingly random themes, gender identity appears in nuanced, unforced ways through language about lived experiences. Any experience we write about comes through our gendered body, whether that is our intention or not.
Next, the partners would be asked to write about the more abstract, though thematically relevant concept, gender, utilizing the Sense Writing techniques now familiar to them. While asking the participants to write about a more specifically gender related theme might seem less abstract than previous prompts, gender identity is a much more amorphous and intangible subject to articulate. An example of a writing prompt would be, “When did you first realize you had a gender?” To bring the abstract into the concrete, somatic and writing exercises would be used to hone in on a specific moment in time and place when this might have occurred and to facilitate remembering how this experience was embodied by the individual. For example, a participant might be asked to think about a specific moment in time when they first became aware of their gender, like when their parent would not allow them to wear a boy’s bathing suit at their 5th birthday party because it did not align with the gender they were assigned at birth. They are then guided to write about that scene through their senses, beginning every sentence with one of five sense prompts: I see, I hear, I smell, I taste, I feel (feel kinesthetically). The goal is to start with the smallest, most specific embodied details, after which they will integrate those details into the bigger picture. In this way, the abstract concept of gender is broken down into concrete pieces of experience instead of attempting to begin with the “real story.” Several exercises later, the participants have at least part of a story written, in which their experience of gender identity is uncovered in a way that might not have been accessible to them before.

Once the stories are written, the partners come back together to share with each other (read their story to their partner without interruption) before exchanging their written pages. Each individual takes his or her partner’s story to a quiet spot to read it over again to themselves, several times. They will be asked to become as familiar as they can with the story for the next step: the story exchange.
Participants will read their partner’s story aloud in front of the group, in the first person, as if it is their own story. As much as possible, they are to imagine themselves as the protagonist in the story and to take on the persona of that person while reading it, to take ownership of that story. As stated in Narrative 4’s mission, “The story exchange works on a simple idea: If I can hear your story deeply enough to retell it . . . as if it happened to me – and you can do the same for my story – then we will have seen the world through each other’s eyes” (McCann). This is the foundation of empathy. Once all the stories have been read aloud, the group comes together to reflect on the process and how it affected them. Sitting in a circle, each person will have the opportunity to talk about their experience taking on their partner’s story and how this might have changed their perspective or pre-conceived ideas around gender.

Several outcomes are predicted to be the result of this process. First, the power of simply telling one’s story and being heard, an experience generated by the first exercise, and something many people, marginalized people in particular, have not experienced, is not to be underestimated as both an empowering experience and in germinating openness. It also bears comparison to the reflexivity of narrative inquiry, in which meaning is made through the relationship between the storyteller and listener. As a participant in a Narrative 4 story exchange related, “[It] allowed me to understand in a much deeper way, the story I had been carrying around inside me for 25 years. In the listening, I received my own story from the outside in through the empathic voice of another. It was no longer my story, but a shared story.” In addition, as the previously cited scientific studies have shown, the empathic connection between a storyteller and a listener is not only psychological but biological, based on neuronal mirroring, chemical and hormonal changes and brain plasticity. The second, and perhaps primary outcome is how the experience of putting oneself in someone else’s shoes, specifically someone with
whom you disagree or whom you don’t understand, changes one’s perspective. As informed by narrative inquiry, the dialogic process of telling and listening that happens between two people gives the story meaning. When someone is entrusted with another’s story, there is a particular level of care that is taken to understand it and relate its truth. “...part of the process of transformative empathy is fully taking on another’s story — using the pronoun I, embodying, for a few moments, someone else” (McCann). Following are some statements from story exchange participants that illustrate this key concept:

· “When I listened to Caroline’s story...you don’t comprehend all the little emotions until you’re forced to tell the story [as] a first-hand experience.”

· “It was so important to him and now it was kind of my story too. So it was really important for me to get it right.”

· “Not only are you getting to step into some else’s shoes but you’re getting to take a walk in them.”

· “This method is a stay against abstraction. By using our words, our very breath to tell each other’s stories, we not only acknowledge but honor our common humanity.”

(McCann)

Narrative 4’s process asks participants to retell their partner’s story in their own words, based only on hearing the story told to them. The process I am proposing here takes the exchange a step further in tasking the participant with telling their partner’s written story in that person’s words, using their language, in the first person, to literally “become” that person for a few moments. They are not interpreting the story through their own eyes and language. I would argue that this process, in which one speaks in the voice of the other increases the potential for an empathic response.
VIII: Conclusion

Late 19th and early 20th century Swiss linguist and semiotician Ferdinand de Saussure theorized that units of language have value and meaning through binary opposition; each unit is defined against what it is not. For example, one cannot conceive of “good” without understanding “evil.” This binary opposition of language works under the propensity in Western culture to “organize everything in a hierarchical structure; terms and concepts are related to positives or negatives, with no apparent latitude for deviation.” Examples of binary opposition in our language include: Inside/Outside, Life/Death and Man/Woman (Fogarty). In many binary oppositions, one side of the binary is perceived as dominant over the other. As Simone de Beauvoir wrote in the seminal feminist text The Second Sex, the category “woman” is defined by everything “man” is not. Man is the subject and the universal and woman the object or “other” (Beauvoir, Intro.). The nature of the gender binary and its social implications fits neatly into these definitions. Our society organizes itself in part around gender and the socially constructed and unequal hierarchy of the gender binary.

Over time and in fits and starts, some cracks have surfaced in the integrity of the gender binary, revealing variability and fluidity in both gender identity and gender roles. But, as seen in the data presented in this paper, there is considerable resistance to any deconstruction of this allegedly stabilizing social structure. Those high up on the hierarchical ladder are less than sympathetic to marginalized “others,” who aren’t afforded the privilege or freedom to live in consonance with their authentic selves. While there will probably always be reluctance on the part of some to cede power or authority over the social narrative of our culture, I would argue that the first and necessary step in shifting the narrative away from opposition and division toward humanitarianism, equality and social justice is empathy. Grappling with the experience of
“others” through their stories, seeing through their eyes, in their words, engenders empathy and understanding. It’s hard to dismiss or condemn someone whose story you have held closely, one inside of which you have stepped and walked.

The story exchange proposal I am suggesting is not intended to foster agreement or promote homogeneous thinking, but to realize our common humanity. As evidenced in psychology research and brain science, our stories have the power to connect us across borders, boundaries and differences. If we can imagine ourselves as others we might be able to understand how others locate themselves, both outwardly and internally, as individuals and socially, in this society and in their lives. Humans are creatures of habit. But humans are also storytelling creatures who make meaning through our own and other’s stories. It is this uniquely human quality that gives us the power to empathize and change, to open our hearts and minds to new meaning. I would argue that personal stories are an undervalued and underutilized instrument of social change. As Second Wave feminists discovered in uniting over shared stories in consciousness raising groups, the personal is definitely political.
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