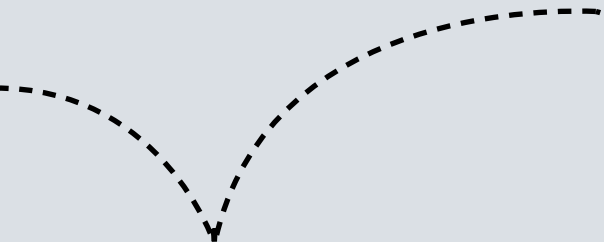


Rhizomatic Telling –Recognising the Mechanism of *Small Stories* in a Community Organisation Process

Jen Yoohyun Lee

136–143

As an unforeseen pandemic disturbs our livelihoods and forces us to change our boundaries, small talks arise and disperse in fleeting moments within and beyond physical perimeters. The notion of singular truth (*metanarrative*: Lyotard 1984) has evidently been overridden in this time. *Small stories* (Bamberg 2004, 2006; Georgakopoulou 2006; 2007) are heavily embedded as part of the trajectory of social interactions. As fragments of talk-in-interactions, they are recontextualised and reaffirmed as narratives along multiple threads of conversations across time. Presented in this article is a microstudy implementing the lens of small stories on communication activities taking place among members of a specific location-based community. This is a part of the ongoing PhD research on bottom-up community organisation through the alignment of community-specific narratives and positioning of socially engaged art practitioners. The microstudy on communal conversations on an instant messaging app looks into how multiple realities are reconfigured by virtue of multiple tellers and modes of telling.



#small stories

#telling

#narrative mechanism

#multiplicity

#community organisation

In its contemporary form, knowledge outshines science because the point of legitimacy is always in flux. Consensus – the mode of legitimation – is variegated depending on the customary knowledge. That is to say, points of understanding and consensus are determined by cultures and contexts. Acknowledged upon the assembly of cultures and contexts, narratives become the quintessential form of customary knowledge (Lyotard 1984). This humanistic mode of knowing and doing focuses on the process that evolves through interactions (Gadamer 1997). The narrative turn of the 1970s and 1980s acknowledged that human subjectivity imposes itself on facts taken to be objective. Nevertheless, studies in the realm of social science involving narratives readily take account of those elicited independently in clinical situations, in which the narrators are provided with the opportunities for reflection and the composed accounting practice. This article takes the perspective of social constructionism that realities are collectively cultivated from interactions between multiple social actors (Fairhurst & Grant 2010). It is also in assent with Michael Bamberg's (2006) perspective that narratives from interview settings are hardly everyday phenomena and that the process of retelling – packaged and performed – lead to inevitable distortions and prematurely settled truths. Stressing the value of evolving decentralised knowledge construction processes, the emergence of narratives in interaction involves acquainting oneself with different others and an affirmation of differences. This provides a context for the reassessment of power dynamics and pluriversal knowledge construction (Escobar 2018).

The idea of narrative as talk-in-interaction (Georgakopoulou 2007) leads to the recognition of small stories in our daily experience, which defy the prematurely fixed overpowering perception supporting and supported by big-scale narratives. Small stories (Bamberg 2006; Georgakopoulou 2006; 2007) are found as part of interactions, that is to say, not freestanding as a self-contained

unit, and readily available for recontextualisation with a sense of immediacy. How do multiple threads of narratives arise, circulate and disperse in our everyday life? How do these influence our understanding and construction of communal identity? What will become visible when everyday communicative interactions are examined through the lens of small stories?

This microstudy looks at a community located in a suburban area of South Korea. This particular community is presently undergoing a shift in identity and a number of individuals deliberately constructed an online platform to connect with all the community members. In order to read how community-specific narratives are formed, an overview was made of a series of communicative interactions taking place on an instant messaging app amongst some 360 members in a period of four months. The study examines how the aspects of communication that are considered mundane and everyday aspects which are not normally regarded as being particularly interesting or tellable, co-articulate strands of narratives and form bottom-up decision-making processes in community organisation. Amongst miscellaneous threads of conversations such as sharing of news, requests for other residents, enquiries and cacophonous discussions, the narrative for the need to re-name the community and how they would like to design the process for change has been co-articulated as a strong continuous thread of discussion across fragments of messages. The community members discussed how the change of community name would help them regain their sense of ownership and self-confidence. Based on the discussion that unfolded through the exchange of messages, the community members have since been coordinating a series of procedures for the residents to submit new name suggestions, organise a committee within the community and re-design multi-level decision-making processes. The decision-making on this matter is currently going through an iterative process.

A partial visualisation of coded messages discloses multiple, yet consistent threads of narratives submerged in streaming messages generated by multiple individuals (Figure 1). Different colours exhibit different narrative threads. Blue represents the narrative thread on re-naming. At this point, what becomes apparent is that the unnoticed small stories in the passing form a rhizomatic structure of temporary consensus within the community. As the study continues to follow the unfolding as well as co-construction of narrative threads composed of small stories, a number of analyses, such as thematic analysis and sentiment analysis, will be conducted to better understand the mechanism of small stories and their social implications for community organisation. The overall goal of this research is to understand the dynamics of narratives, power and knowledge and to apply the lens of small stories to the cultivation of sensitivity for context-specific socially engaged art practice.

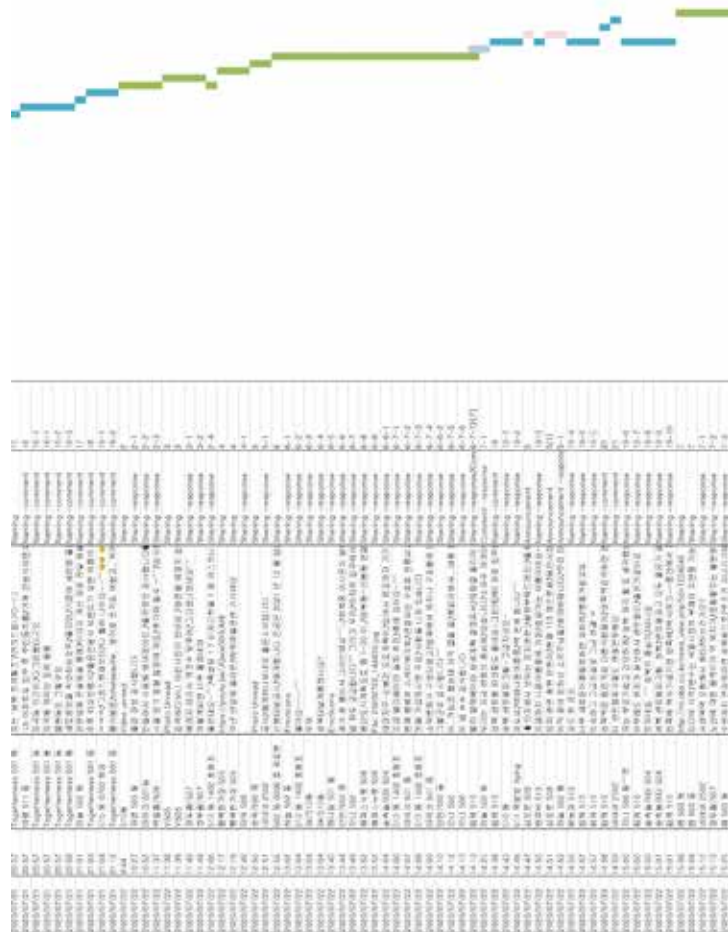
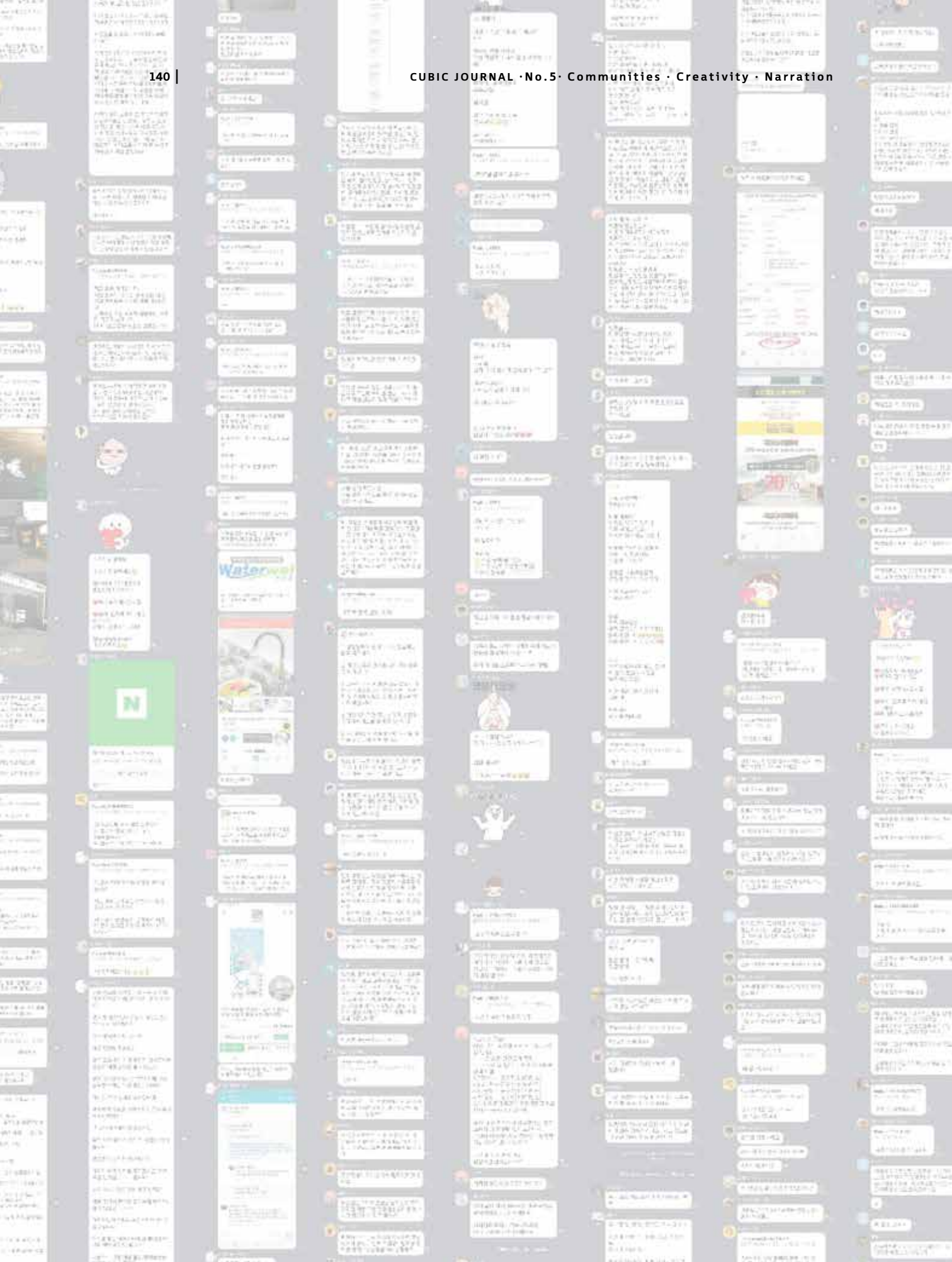


Figure 1: Colour-coded messages disclose multiple yet consistent threads of narratives arising amongst local residents in an instant messaging app. The upper and lower diagrams are different parts along the timeline of the same horizontal diagram. *Source: Jen Yoohyun Lee.*



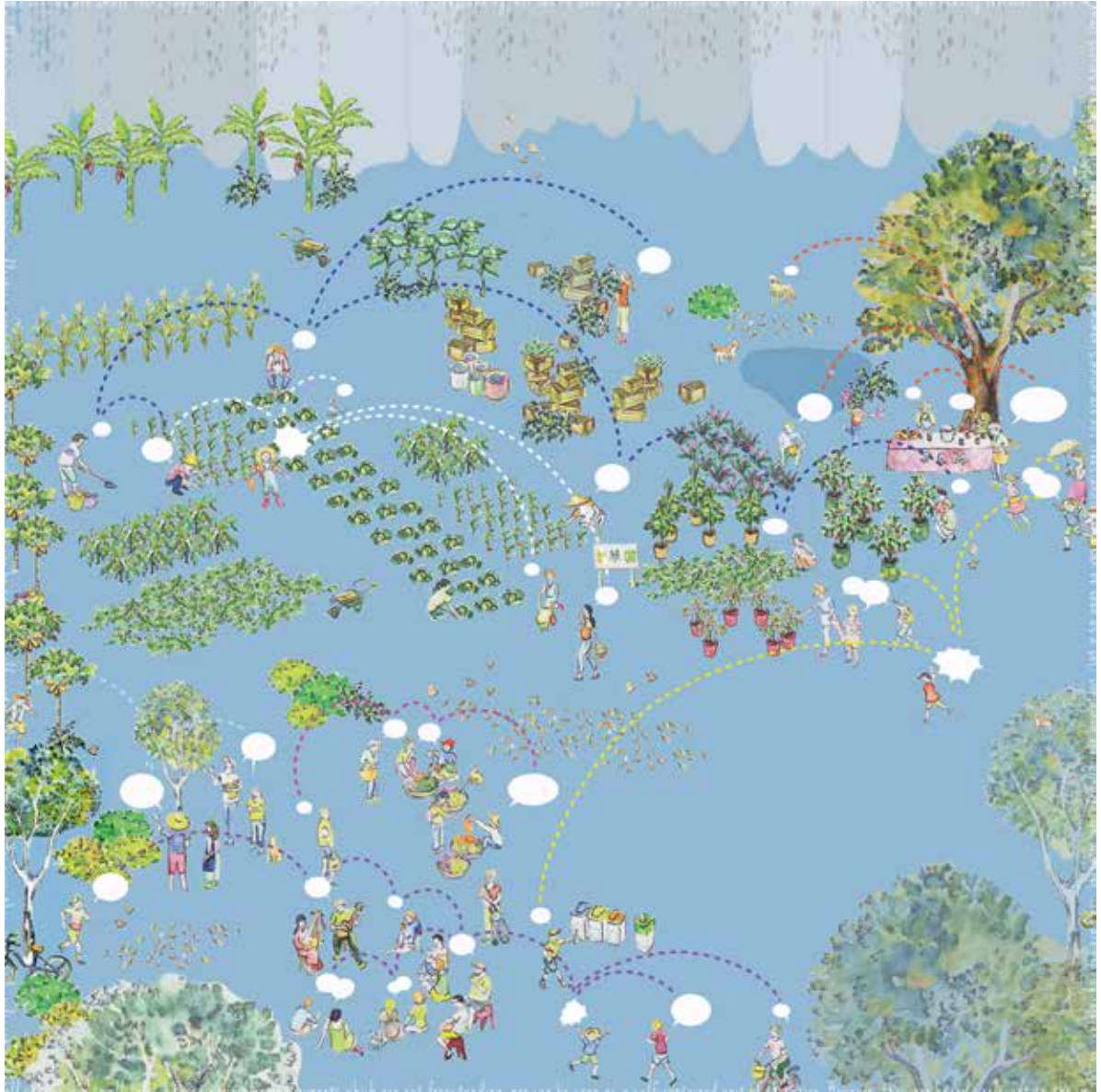


Figure 2 (previous page): Messages exchanged amongst local residents in an instant messaging app. *Source: Jen Yoohyun Lee.*

Figure 3 (top): Conceptual visualisation of small stories dynamics occurring in a location-based community. *Source: Jen Yoohyun Lee.*

Bibliography

Bamberg, Michael. "Stories: Big or Small." In *Narrative Inquiry* 16, no. 1 (2006): pp. 139–147.

Escobar, Arturo. *Designs for the Pluriverse: Radical Interdependence, Autonomy, and the Making of Worlds*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018.

Fairhurst, Gail T., and David Grant. "The Social Construction of Leadership: A Sailing Guide." In *Management Communication Quarterly* 24, no. 2 (2010): pp. 171–210.

Gadamer, Hans-Georg. *Truth and Method*. London; New York, NY: Continuum, 1997.

Georgakopoulou, Alexandra. "Thinking Big with Small Stories in Narrative and Identity Analysis." In *Narrative Inquiry*, 16, no. 1 (2006): pp. 122–130.

Georgakopoulou, Alexandra. *Small Stories, Interaction and Identities*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing, 2007.

Liotard, Jean-François. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984.

Bio

Jen Yoohyun Lee is a PhD candidate at the School of Design, the Hong Kong Polytechnic University. Coming from a background of Fine Arts (BFA, Pratt Institute) and Design and Environment (MA, Goldsmiths College, University of London), her research looks into how better alignment of community-specific narratives and socially engaged art can create a profound iterative cycle for bottom-up community organisation.



#community

