RECOLLECTING FAMILY STORIES:
NARRATIVE CONSTRUCTION AND MEANING
IN ADULTHOOD

By

CLAUDIA D. COLLINS

B.A., University of British Columbia, 1982

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Department of **Counselling Psychology**

The University of British Columbia
Vancouver, Canada

Date **September 20/1995**
ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to investigate the relationship between family stories and lives. A family story is defined as a story, tale, or anecdote told orally within a family about family members or family events. Within this study, family stories were examined as second hand tales that a person heard recounted by others. An exploratory case study design was employed to understand the experience and meaning of family stories within the lives of three adult co-researchers who were over the age of 30. Unstructured in-depth interviews designed to elicit prominent family stories were conducted. The stories were audiotaped, transcribed, and analyzed for similarities, contrasts, and complementarities of character, plot, and theme. A hermeneutical framework was then used to examine and interpret the meaning behind the stories.

Validation interviews were conducted with each co-researcher to verify the family story meanings and to explore the impact of these themes in the co-researcher’s life. The interview material was then rendered into a narrative account, describing each person’s family storytelling experiences and related themes of meaning from their own lives. A comparative analysis of the three narrative accounts was conducted to uncover structural and thematic commonalities.

The study confirmed the significance of prominent family stories as narrative constructions which offer guidelines for living. A strong convergence was found between family story themes and integral themes from the person’s own life story. The results suggest that the family story experience resembles the following structure. Life before the stories was marked by the theme of receptivity resulting from meaning impoverishment. The family story experience itself was characterized by powerful
identification (positive or negative) with the stories, which offered significant meaning and interpretive potential to the person. Life after the stories was marked by clarity, guidance and vision, or an integration of the story meanings into lives.

Family stories were found to resemble early recollections, in that they serve as metaphors which reflect the personal orientation of the individual. A model for incorporating family stories into a counselling setting (following comparable techniques for working with early recollections) was proposed.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT .................................................................................................................. ii
TABLE OF CONTENTS ................................................................................................. iv
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ............................................................................................... vi
DEDICATION ................................................................................................................ viii

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION ..................................................................................... 1
  Introduction to the Problem ....................................................................................... 1
  Definitions ................................................................................................................. 5
  Research Questions ................................................................................................ 6
  Assumptions ............................................................................................................ 7
  Research Design ..................................................................................................... 7
  Personal Reflections ................................................................................................ 9

CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE .......................................................... 10
  The Family As Interpretive System ......................................................................... 10
    The family theme .................................................................................................. 13
    The family storytelling process ............................................................................. 15
  Family Mythology and the Relationship to Family Stories .................................... 18
  Family Stories: Empirical Research and Conceptual Ideas .................................... 21
    Impact in adulthood of remembered family stories ........................................... 29
    In the absence of family stories .......................................................................... 34
  Narrative as a Paradigm for Understanding Lives .................................................. 35
    Themes of meaning in lives ................................................................................. 38
    Social construction theory ................................................................................... 40
  The Use of Family Stories in Counselling, Education, and Within the Family .... 41
    Stories and counselling ....................................................................................... 41
    Family stories in educational settings .................................................................. 46
    Families accessing their own stories .................................................................... 48
  Summary .................................................................................................................. 49

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY ............................................................................... 52
  Research Design ..................................................................................................... 52
  Researcher as instrument ....................................................................................... 57
  Procedures .............................................................................................................. 58
  Co-researchers ....................................................................................................... 60
    Criteria for selection ............................................................................................ 60
  Research Interviews ............................................................................................... 61
    Screening interview ............................................................................................... 61
    Family stories interview ....................................................................................... 62
TABLE OF CONTENTS, CONTINUED:

| Elaboration interview | 65 |
| Ethical Concerns | 67 |
| Case Study Accounts: The Family Story Experience | 67 |
| Interpretive Comments and Comparative Analysis | 68 |

CHAPTER IV: RESULTS: MACA'S STORY ................................. 72
  Interpretive Comments .............................................. 89
    Story interpretation ............................................. 90
    Story comparison ................................................ 93
    Integrating the co-researcher's life experiences with the family
    stories ............................................................ 94

CHAPTER V: RESULTS: ELLEN'S STORY .................................. 103
  Interpretive Comments .............................................. 121
    Story interpretation ............................................. 121
    Story comparison ................................................ 125
    Integrating the co-researcher's life experiences with the family
    stories ............................................................ 126

CHAPTER VI: RESULTS: JOHN'S STORY ................................. 134
  Interpretive Comments .............................................. 159
    Story interpretation ............................................. 160
    Story comparison ................................................ 166
    Integrating the co-researcher's life experiences with the family
    stories ............................................................ 170

CHAPTER VIII: COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION .......... 180
  The Research Experience: Storyteller/Listener Interface .......... 180
  Narrative Accounts: Contrast and Convergence .................... 191
    Life before the family stories: Receptivity .................... 196
    The family story experience: Identification and impact .......... 200
    Life after the family stories: Clarity, guidance, vision .......... 205
    Summary .......................................................... 212
  Implications for Practice ......................................... 215
  Limitations ......................................................... 227
  Implications for Future Research .................................. 229
  Summary ............................................................ 230

REFERENCES .......................................................... 233

APPENDIX A: LETTER OF INITIAL CONTACT ......................... 241
APPENDIX B: CONSENT FORM ........................................ 242
APPENDIX C: SUMMARY OF RESEARCH THEMES ...................... 244
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DEDICATION

For the child that is coming,
and the stories we will share
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

"We all come from the past, and children ought to know what it was that went into their making, to know that life is a braided cord of humanity stretching up from time long gone, and that it cannot be defined by the span of a single journey from diaper to shroud" (Baker, 1982, p. 35)

Introduction to the Problem

There is a universality to stories. From the beginning of time, in all cultures, stories have been used to pass on wisdom, information, and culture itself. In our everyday lives we tell and hear hundreds of stories on a daily basis. The stories that we choose to tell are very revealing of who we are because story is an essential way in which we construct experience and life. Story, then, is embedded in our very existence.

A group of children who participated in a project where they were taught storytelling were asked "what would happen if there were no stories in the world?" They gave the following responses: "People would die of seriousness"; "When you went to bed at night it would be boring, because your head would be blank" and "There wouldn't be a world, because stories made the world" (Chicago Journal, May 26, 1982, cited in Pellowski, 1987, p. 3). These children, in their wisdom, were capturing the fundamental nature of story to our existence as human beings.

Stories are magical and powerful. According to Bettelheim (1975) fairy tales enchant children more than any other form of children's literature. He posited that this is because a fairy tale engages all aspects of the child's personality, including the conscious, preconscious, and unconscious. Fairy tales explore universal human problems and
existential dilemmas, thus they offer the child the possibility to resolve fundamental difficulties.

Stories emerge from the narrative as opposed to the logico-scientific realm (Bruner, 1986). Thus stories are a wonderful tool for accessing and exploring "mythic rather than discursive thought" (McNiff, 1981, p. 87). Stories connect with deeper parts of ourselves. Stories engage at the level of imagination and feeling; they seep under our skin and enliven our views of the world.

Of particular relevance for the present study is the narrative paradigm, which posits that our lives may be conceptualized as stories (McAdams, 1988; Sarbin, 1989), and that we use narrative and narration to delineate, embody and give content to the self (Kerby, 1991). Narrative theorists have suggested that we construct meaning in our lives through story:

- telling our stories allows us to compile our personal mythology, and the collection of stories we have compiled is to some extent who we are, what we have to say about the world, and tells the world the state of our mental health (Schank, 1990, p. 44).

Human beings are "repositories of stories" (Schank, 1990, p. 40) and the stories that comprise our individual collections have the potential to be both informative and transformative in our lives (Morissette, 1993, p. 9).

Family stories comprise a particular genre of stories that were the focus of the present study. Researchers have identified family storytelling as one process component of the family interpretive system (Jensen Leichter, 1985; Ochs & Taylor, 1992). In families, storytelling is often happening as part of the normal shared conversation.
(Pellowski, 1987), yet at the same time important messages are also being conveyed via the stories (Stone, 1988). It appears that from generation to generation certain stories are remembered while others are forgotten and die out (Martin, Hagestad, & Diedrick, 1988). Every family has its own unique tales, however researchers have identified common story types across families that include courtship, birth, death, transition, and hero stories (Stone, 1988; Zeitlin, Kotkin, & Cutting-Baker, 1982). The early research on family stories focused almost exclusively on story typology and categorization according to content themes. Frequently family stories have been confused with or used interchangeably with family mythology.

More recently, researchers have begun to examine the function and purpose that family stories serve within the family to communicate values and expectations (Black, 1991; Stone, 1988; Zeitlin et al., 1982). The stories of a family may carry the current and historical affective themes of that family (Sherman, 1990). Family stories appear to articulate rules for behavior of family members; as such, they serve a socialization function in the family (Byng-Hall, 1979). As well, family stories have been found to provide an essential orientation for family members: stories clarify important elements of family and individual identity and they articulate the family position within the larger world (Stone, 1988).

Our current understanding of family stories suffers from a paucity of empirically grounded research and consistent data. To date few controlled studies related to the phenomenon of family stories have been conducted (Black, 1991; Esborg, 1991; Martin et al., 1988; Sherman, 1990, Wisch, 1990). The limited research on family stories suffers from methodological weaknesses. Additional empirical studies have contributed
to our understanding of the phenomenon (Stone, 1988; Zeitlin et al., 1982) but are not rigorous in design.

The early research tended to separate the family stories themselves from the fabric of the subject’s lives. This approach decontextualizes both the stories and the individual’s sense of meaning. Clearly there is a need for empirically grounded research that will extend and deepen our understanding of the meaning of family stories within the life context of the adult who has retained the stories.

Of relevance to this study is the fact that little research has been conducted specifically on the subject of the influence of family stories in adulthood. Yet the counselling literature is replete with clinical and anecdotal examples which suggest a strong relationship between stories and lives. While Epstein (1979) demonstrated the dramatic impact of family stories upon children of Holocaust survivors, and Stone (1988) found that her interviewees were able to reflect upon the meaning of their family stories in adulthood, such studies have not been rigorous in design and offer anecdotal evidence only.

Furthermore, while the literature attests to the power of story in general as a therapeutic modality, no empirical studies were located which describe the use of family stories in counselling. There is a need, therefore, for research which articulates the practical uses of family stories in counselling.

An assumption of this study was that family stories are remembered for a reason, because they are significant in some way. Research suggests that remembered family stories appear to become part of the individual’s story repository. A premise of this study, therefore, was that as they are retold, family stories are reconstructed in a way
that conveys meaning about the present storyteller as well as the family history. Family stories, therefore, may serve as narrative constructions that illuminate self identity (Kerby, 1991).

If family stories are reconstructed by the person in the present, then what do the stories convey about that individual? Also, if family stories are viewed as micronarratives that comprise one part of a person's personal narrative, then how do remembered stories relate to each other as a collection? The existing research on family stories has not adequately addressed these questions. Consequently, the problem explored in this study was: What is the relationship of family stories to each other and how do these stories influence and motivate people?

An effort was made to collect the most prominent family stories recalled by the co-researcher. The object was not to collect all the stories ever told within a particular family. Instead the focus of the study was upon the most significant stories for the individual. A central premise of this research was that the co-researcher will know which stories are the most central and important. This study differs from all existing family stories research, where stories have been elicited according to specific content categories.

Definitions

Family — "A group of related people living in the same house; all of a person's relatives" (Gage Canadian Dictionary, 1973, p. 421).

Story — "An account of some happening or group of happenings. . . either true or made-up, intended to interest the reader or hearer" (Gage Canadian Dictionary, 1973, p. 1091). "A story is also an interpretation, a way of explaining the meaning of what happened to readers [or] listeners (McCall, 1989, p. 40). Stories have common characteristics,
including plot or time sequence, description or setting, characterization, and point of view (McCall, 1989).

(Within the present study, story and narrative have been used interchangeably and are taken to share the same meaning).

Family Story — A story, tale or anecdote told orally within a family about family members or family events. Stories may be told only once, or may be repeated often. Stories may be passed down through several generations, or they may not survive beyond one generation. Story content may be positive or negative. A family story is a second hand tale that a person heard recounted by others.

Research Questions

A central question that organized the study was: "What is the relationship and significance of family stories?" This question may be judged by the extent to which the meanings inherent to a collection of prominent family stories fits one to the other. That is, do the stories cohere in some way? Although family stories may not exactly resemble each other in form, style, or content, they may show related themes, characters, and plotlines. The question of relationship and significance, therefore, may be judged according to whether or not consistent meanings are found to derive from a collection of stories.

A second important and related question was: "Do family stories form a coherent ground for themes of meaning in living?" If family stories do indicate consistency in terms of meaning and theme, then how do these meanings relate to the life of the person who has remembered the stories? This question was answered by
attempting to discover whether or not there was convergence of family story themes and themes of meaning within the lives of the co-researchers.

The rationale for these questions follows from the research literature where the interrelationship of family stories has not been adequately explored. As well, the questions derive from the lack of life context as it relates to family stories in the existing literature.

The purpose of the study, therefore, was to explore the relationship of family stories and their meaning in adulthood for the storyteller.

**Assumptions**

There are several underlying assumptions which have contributed to the conceptualization of the present research. First, I assumed that family stories are significant and are remembered for a reason. I anticipated that a collection of significant family stories will have some interrelationship. Following from this is the assumption that family stories will have an influence in adult lives. Another assumption which informed the present study is that memory is unreliable and the veracity of a person's prominent family stories does not matter. Instead, I assumed that each person tailors or reconstructs their family stories, using memory selectively, to suit their present life circumstances.

**Research Design**

The present study employed a qualitative approach designed to investigate the relationship between the co-researchers' life experiences and the family stories they recounted. Kirk and Miller (1986) defined qualitative research as "a particular tradition in social science that fundamentally depends on watching people in their own territory
and interacting with them in their own language, on their own terms" (p.9). Qualitative research is indicated when the situation to be studied is complex, when little is known about it, and when the perspective of the individual is desired. All of these criteria applied to the present research on family stories.

This study employed a multiple case study design. Case study designs are particularly well-suited when "‘how’ or ‘why’ questions are being posed, when the investigator has little control over events, and when the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within some real-life context (Yin, 1984, p. 13). The present study met all of these criteria.

The present study was exploratory in nature, seeking to expand and broaden an understanding of the meaning and relationship of family stories. A characteristic of qualitative research is that "each situation is defined as unique and thus is less amenable to generalization" (Krefting, 1990, p. 216). An attempt was not made, therefore, to generalize to other populations, but instead to provide a rich and descriptive understanding of the phenomenon. This is consistent with the aims of an exploratory study.

Another feature of the research design was the incorporation of a hermeneutical framework to understand the meaning behind the stories. Hermeneutics centres upon an examination and interpretation of text and requires that the textual critic (researcher) seek to be aware of his or her own point of view from which he or she critiques and perceives.
Personal Reflections

The inspiration for this research came from my own family storytelling experiences (within my family of origin). While my parents were not frequent storytellers, the stories they did share have remained with me over the years. My story repertoire includes secret tales, stories of stoic ancestors, and inspiring rescue stories. I have always remembered these stories; they remain as vivid today as when I first received them as a child. Then, just before I conceived of the idea for this research topic, I attended a family reunion. My mother decided at that time to share a very powerful story with me concerning my grandfather’s death and the family circumstances before and after this event. I was amazed by my own responses to this story, and I found the story has had reverberations ever since within my own life. This experience is what inspired me to think about the impact of family stories in our lives as adults. The genesis of this research, therefore, grew out of my own powerful experiences with family stories.
"A story was a gift to remember the teller by when he or she was gone. My grandmother was a great storyteller. Sixty years later, if I tell a story told to me by her, I can still see her sitting by the fire, putting a little tobacco in her pipe." (Duncan Williamson, Scottish storyteller, quoted in Georgia Straight, March 24-31, 1995).

The purpose of this literature review was to critically examine current knowledge regarding family stories. Discussion of prevalent notions of the family as interpretive system will precede examination of empirical research and conceptual ideas related to family stories. The relationship between family mythology and family stories will be clarified. Social constructionism and narrative theories will be summarized as they provide a relevant theoretical grounding for the present study. Finally, the use of family stories in therapeutic, educational, and family settings will be reviewed.

**The Family As Interpretive System**

Any examination of the phenomenon of family stories would be incomplete without mention of the social and cultural context from which the stories emerge — namely the family. The family has been described as a psychosocial organization likened to a bounded universe (Hess & Handel, 1985). Others have conceptualized the family as political institution (Ochs & Taylor, 1992), micro-society (Berg, 1985), or educator (Jensen Leichter, 1985). Within the family therapy literature, the family has been described as a system where the members constitute "an emotional unit or network of interlocking relationships best understood from an historical or transgenerational
perspective" (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 1991, p. 324). Although the descriptions of the family may vary, researchers do agree that the family is an organized group which exerts an influence upon its members.

According to L’Abate (1994), behaviour in families is multilayered. At the observable, surface level, families present a social facade or impression, while a deeper phenotypical level reflects family functions and interactions that occur in the privacy of the home. These two layers of family behaviour represent the descriptive level. The explanatory level is not observable but may be inferred from what is observable. This consists of the genotypical sublevel, or the internal construction of how the family sees itself, while the historical sublevel reflects generational, intergenerational, individual, dyadic, and familial events from the past that may influence present family functioning.

Similarly, Laing (1969) described the powerful influence that family exerts over individuals when he asserted that we each carry two sets of families inside of us. One is the family of origin as we have experienced it; the second he called the internalized family. This internalized family acts as a "dramatic template" (p. 15) to link its' members and influence behaviour. Laing likened the multigenerational influences of family to hypnosis, where parents have already been hypnotized by their parents to bring their children up in certain ways. Yet the influences of the past are often not conscious. As Laing stated, "We are acting parts in a play that we have never read and never seen, whose plot we don’t know, whose existence we can glimpse, but whose beginning and end are beyond our present imagination and conception" (p. 87).

Researchers have considered the ways in which the family system continues to exert an influence over members in adulthood (Chusid & Cochran, 1989; MacGregor &
In order to explore the association between family of origin and relationships in the workplace, MacGregor and Cochran (1989) conducted ten case studies using a Q-sort and interviews. They discovered that in all cases, participants tended to re-enact family dramas within the realm of the workplace. Strong relationships between family members and co-workers were found. For example, a strong positive Q-sort correlation may point to a coworker who is exactly like a favourite aunt. Strong negative correlations may suggest that a co-worker represents the ideal father that the participant never had. These work dramatizations were found to be as unique and diverse as the individual. Some participants resolved old family issues through work, while others attempted to heal family differences. Some recreated in the workplace the family they never had, while others sought to duplicate the same harmonious family environment that they had once experienced.

In a related study, Chusid & Cochran (1989) investigated the meaning of career change as it relates to family roles and dramas. Ten case studies were conducted, also using Q sorts and interviews. The results confirmed that occupational roles reflected earlier family dramas or family themes that were still emerging. Career change was found to represent either a shift to an alternate family drama, an extension of the existing family drama to a new environment, or the merging of dramatic themes. Career change appeared to be an attempt to live a more meaningful drama.

Of note in both of these studies is the impact that results had on participants. The clarification of meaning brought insight and new awareness, suggesting the enactment of family dramas through work is not explicitly understood by the individual.
The psychological literature has documented the role that the family plays as an interpretive system, structuring experience for its members (Hess & Handel, 1985; Jensen Leichter, 1985). Reiss (1981) described the family as an information processing unit. L’Abate (1994) stressed that a critical component of family assessment is understanding how and what kind of information is allowed in the family, and how this information is processed and eventually expressed. In a related study, Wright and Nagy (1992) observed that in families faced with a life threatening illness, a co-evolved ecology of beliefs helped family members to define cognitions, emotions, and behaviours to help them cope with the illness.

Congruent with research that suggests the family is an information managing and processing system, Jensen Leichter (1985) proposed a conceptual model of the family as ‘educator.’ The four broad process components which comprise familial educational interaction include: a) language interaction, b) the organization of activity in time and space, c) memory as an interactive process, d) the processes of evaluation and labelling, and e) the process of educational mediation. Often these processes are not overt and may occur at the margins of awareness. Of relevance to the present study is the fact that language and memory interaction are two essential processes representing the domains from which family stories emerge. Others (Byng Hall, 1988; Imber-Black, 1988) have also identified the family’s inner language (stories, metaphors, jokes, rituals) as a critical resource area to be drawn upon in working with and understanding families.

The family theme. Many researchers would agree that one of the central functions of the family as a group is to develop a shared understanding of itself and the world. This shared family vision has been given various names in the literature including
family paradigm, (Reiss, 1981) family theme, (Berg, 1985; Hess & Handel, 1985) and the family code (Fiese & Sameroff, 1989). Hess and Handel (1985) identified the interactions structured around the family theme and the establishment of congruence of individual and family images as two of five essential processes which characterize the psychosocial organization and interaction of nuclear families. The family theme has been described as the family’s implicit direction, the sense that people have of ‘who we are’ and ‘what we do about it’ (Hess & Handel, 1985). Family themes or paradigms are therefore central to the family interpretive system because they function as a shared coding system that helps family members to make sense of reality.

The family theme has been proposed as a valuable unit for analysis of family life (Hess & Handel, 1985). Described as a mold that influences and shapes family behaviour, the theme also expresses interpersonal involvement and the family orientation to the outside world. Finally, the family theme arises from and has consequences for all family members. Berg (1985) emphasized that the subjective nature of family themes is generally not perceived by the family, thus they are viewed as reality by family members. However, as children reach adolescence, family themes may begin to conflict with their perceptions of the world outside the family.

In discussing the family theme, Berg (1985) stressed the interpretive framework provided by the theme. Berg has developed three family typologies which illustrate and account for the interpretive functions of different family themes. The opaque family maintains its boundaries by polarizing the world into ‘we’ and ‘they’ in an attempt to shut out meanings that are in opposition to those adhered to by the family. The transparent family, in contrast, offers no interpretive meanings to its members. In effect the message
is, 'we are they' 'they are we.' The translucent family uses its interpretive processes to maintain family themes by explaining their compatibility with the outside world.

Within the field of pediatric psychology, Fiese and Sameroff (1989) proposed a transactional model to explain the bidirectional interactions that occur between children and families. They suggested that the family interpretive system arises from the family code, a regulatory system that includes family paradigms, family stories, and family rituals. The authors stressed the powerful impact that family stories can have on the family and child’s perceptions of health problems.

**The family storytelling process.** Jensen Leichter (1985) suggested that within the family, memory is an interactive process where family members trigger and reinforce the recall of certain memories. The author submitted that the role of family stories and myths in relation to the social process of memory bears special attention. Thus, family storytelling may serve as a unique process component of the family interpretive system, and is suggested as a fruitful area for further study.

Thompson (1993) argued that sociologists have virtually ignored the intergenerational family transmission process, of which storytelling is a key component.

Family stories are the grist of social description, the raw material for both history and social change; but we need to listen to them more attentively than that. They are also the symbolic coinage of exchange between the generations, of family transmission. . . . the way in which they are told, the stories and images which are chosen and put together, and the matters on which silence is kept provide part of the mental map of family members . . . (p. 36).
Family storytelling comprises one form of family ritual, defined by Wolin and Bennett as "a symbolic form of communication that, owing to the satisfaction that family members experience through its repetition, is acted out in a systematic fashion over time" (1984, p. 401). Rituals enhance the family identity or collective sense of itself. By examining a family's rituals, one can enter the "core culture" (p. 402) of the family. Rituals transmit values, beliefs, and history. Reiss (1981) proposed that ritual is a primary mechanism utilized by families to preserve the family paradigm.

Family rituals serve five main purposes (Imber-Black & Roberts, 1992). Rituals shape and explain relationship patterns, mark transitions, serve a healing function, convey beliefs and important meanings, and celebrate continuity and change within the family. These are notable in that they echo the functions that family stories have been found to serve within the family (Stone, 1988; Zeitlin et al., 1982).

There has been little empirical research on the family storytelling process, with the exception of two studies (Esborg, 1991; Ochs & Taylor, 1992). Ochs and Taylor studied 100 family dinner narratives (stories and reports) in 7 two-parent families with children. The researchers concluded that family co-narratives, far from being benign conversations, tend to reinforce power structures and roles. These exchanges provided the opportunity for family members to "expose, pass judgment on and, where problematic, sanction some particular family member's thoughts, actions or feelings" (p. 302). Consequently, the researchers conceptualized the family as a political institution, where conversational interactions articulate power and control structures.

In a related study, Esborg (1991) proposed that studying family storytelling as an interactive process could illuminate the family's interpretive constructs. Family stories
were viewed as bounded phenomena which would illustrate the relationships among behavior, meaning, and memory. The researcher posited that deep and often hidden family regulatory structures such as family identity and temperament will also be illuminated by examining the storytelling process.

Esborg collected 84 narratives from 45 non-clinical two-parent families with teenaged children. Families were asked to tell stories about stressful events they had actually experienced. Four composite measures that reflect the family storytelling process were derived and a speculative model developed to explain the relationship of these dimensions. The recursive dimensions included: family involvement (investment and vitality demonstrated in storytelling), compelling story (story richness, coherence and detail), clarity of the family image (clear problem-solving style and values), and family/listener interaction.

This research has several implications. Esborg has demonstrated that the family interpretive system does appear to be conveyed via family storytelling. It would seem possible that the story dimensions contribute to which stories are remembered over time by individual family members. Apparently the most compelling, rich, and coherent family stories will also be created where there is strong family involvement (or a strong investment in storytelling). A compelling story and strong family involvement also appear to result in a clearer family image being conveyed. That is, family values and problem-solving style will be clearly demonstrated. The forth dimension, family/listener interaction, logically makes sense. Storytelling is enhanced where there is an audience.

Byng-Hall (1988) provided an intriguing perspective upon the dynamic nature of family storytelling: "What neither narrator nor audience are usually aware of . . . is that
[stories] are continually being re-edited by altering the meta communication or reshaping the content in order to build up a story that fits present family attitudes" (p. 169). In other words, the family storytelling encounter appears to represent a rich process component of the family interpretive system, where meaning is being continually expressed and reshaped.

Family Mythology and the Relationship to Family Stories

The term "family mythology" (Ferreira, 1977) grew out of research on family interactions and decision-making. A family myth is defined as "A series of fairly well integrated beliefs shared by all family members, concerning each other and their mutual positions in the family life, beliefs that go unchallenged by everyone involved in spite of the reality distortions which they may conspicuously imply" (p. 457). The family myth is the inner image that the family ascribes to; it is not the way the family appears to the outside world. In fact, to the outside observer, the family myth may appear unrealistic and irrational.

Ferreira cited the following example of a family myth:

In Family A, the husband has to drive the wife wherever she may need to go, oftentimes to the detriment of his business activities, since she does not know how to drive a car, nor does she care to learn. Although this pattern has been in operation since they were married some sixteen years ago, she explains it in terms of not being ‘mechanically inclined,’ a statement which the husband immediately endorses and corroborates (1977, p. 51).

In this example, the family myth which states that the wife is not mechanically inclined, provides an explanation for the established interactional patterns in the relationship.
Ferreira determined that myths serve a homeostatic, defensive function within the family and become focal points around which families organize themselves. A striking feature of the early research on family myths was the emphasis upon pathologic families.

Many researchers have expanded upon the original view of family mythology. Bagarozzi and Anderson (1982) referred to the family mythologic system as a symbolic system of meaning, while Byng-Hall defined family myths as "a complex set of self perceptions and stories which give the family its sense of identity" (1987, p. 177). The family mythological process is now thought to encompass three levels of complexity, including the analogical nature of behavior in families, the use of metaphors to represent aspects of family relationships, and the interrelationship of family and cultural mythologies (Bagarozzi & Anderson, 1982).

The antecedent factors which contribute to the formation of the family's current mythological system were identified by Bagarozzi and Anderson (1982) as: 1) the individual family history of each spouse, 2) the history of the couple before the birth of the first child and, 3) the history of the family after the birth of children.

Family myths appear to have many functions, one of which is to support important role images in the family (Byng Hall, 1973). Families have three kinds of role images: "ideal-self images", the behaviour towards which each member strives or pressures others to adopt; "consensus role images", the roles that the family group agrees each member occupies, and "repudiated images" which consists of hidden, denied or masked roles (p. 240). A family myth is like a drama which is agreed upon by all members and which hides another drama, namely the repudiated family scene. The function of myths therefore, is "to hold from awareness each member's own repudiated, because feared or
taboo, inner potential roles; and to help restrain members from enacting those roles overtly" (p. 245).

The literature on family mythology has been primarily conceptual rather than empirical. Ferreira suggested this is because family mythology is difficult to measure (cited in Byng-Hall, 1973). As well, family mythology has primarily been studied in terms of pathology, which ignores the functional, healthy purposes that myths may serve.

The literature has not clearly articulated the place of family stories within the family mythological system. Byng-Hall (1979) has suggested that family stories are told to support consensus images that are contained within the family mythology. Byng-Hall delineated four story components of mythology which include: family yarns or tales, fables or lies, family legends, and family secrets. O'Flaherty (cited in Parry, 1991) clarified the relationship between story and myth when she stated "a story is a narrative that says something happens — not all stories are myths but all myths are stories" (p. 17).

Family mythology, therefore, encompasses the stories, metaphors, symbols and rituals that are unique to the individual family (Anderson & Bagarozzi, 1983). There appears to be much overlap in the literature between family stories and family mythology. Many authors use these terms interchangeably (Anderson & Bagarozzi, 1983; Stone, 1988) with the exception of Byng-Hall (1979) who attempted to differentiate between family mythology (as shared false beliefs about the present) and family legends (stories from the past). Family legends are told to support consensus role images that may comprise the family mythology. For the purposes of clarity, the present research drew upon Byng Hall's conceptualization of family stories (fables, lies, tales, yarns, legends
and secrets) as the story components of family mythology. It was not assumed that family stories are congruent with family mythology. In fact, an assumption of the present study was that family stories may or may not contain or convey a family myth. Fiese and Sameroff (1989) suggested that family stories which become distorted and no longer contain a grain of truth are in fact family myths.

**Family Stories: Empirical Research and Conceptual Ideas**

Thompson (1988) described the important role that oral history played within pre-literate societies. Because writing did not yet exist, oral history was the only means for capturing history. Everything had to be remembered and then passed on, from crafts and skills, to the path of the seasons, to business transactions. Memory was a central process, as was storytelling. However, once the written word came to be relied upon (approximately 3,000 years ago) the role of oral history shifted. Today "memory is demoted from the status of public authority to that of a private aid" (p. 26). It is now the written document which captures history and ensures transmission. Personal reminiscence and private family traditions, however, are seldom committed to paper because people often do not consider them important enough to others to put into writing. Today, family stories and reminiscences constitute the strongest form of oral history, a form which is still very much alive.

The individual anecdote and the family history or saga have been identified by folklorists and anthropologists as literary genres common to oral history (Thompson, 1988). However, the literature indicates that neither have been systematically analyzed. Instead, the contemporary study of oral history has tended to focus upon personal reminiscences and life stories as a way to comprehend phenomena as diverse as poverty,
labour history, unemployment, class consciousness, political history, the Holocaust, military history, urban social history, family history, women's history, and minorities, to name a few (Thompson, 1988). Thompson also identified a need for more research into the ways in which a story is learned because there is variance amongst different social groups and localities.

An extensive review of the literature located very few empirical studies related to the phenomenon of family stories (Black, 1990; Esborg, 1991; Martin, Hagestad & Diedrick, 1988; Sherman, 1990; Wisch, 1988). Two large-scale projects have been conducted which greatly illuminate the topic of family stories but are not rigorous in design (Stone, 1988; Zeitlin et al., 1982). As well, many writers have contributed ideas which are conceptual rather than empirical in nature. The relative absence of controlled studies on family stories is surprising given the prevalence of family stories heard in clinical settings (Fiese & Sameroff, 1989; Freeman, 1991) and given the enthusiasm that most families have for storytelling (Stone, 1988; Zeitlin et al., 1982).

The various studies of family stories have operationalized this construct in a similar manner. Zeitlin et al. (1982) defined family stories as "any incident retold by one family member about another over a period of years" (p. 10), while Stone (1988) suggested that "almost any bit of lore about a family member, living or dead qualifies as a family story — as long as it’s significant, as long as it has worked its way into the family canon to be told and retold" (p. 5). Byng-Hall (1988) used the term "family legend" which he defined as "those colored and often colorful stories that are told time and time again — in contrast to other information about the family’s past, which fades away" (p. 169). Black (1990) provided a more detailed operational definition:
A family story is a story, fable, tale, or an anecdote about a relative, past or present, that is told to convey meaning, entertain or inform family members or friends and to understand about the person, family or the situation. Stories can be passed on to future generations, they can be positive or negative in content (p. 9). Constant retelling appears to be a significant feature of the existing definitions of family stories.

Folklorists have identified family storytelling as a common pastime which comprises a vital part of the family folklore (Zeitlin et al., 1982). Storytelling in families has been described as ritualized behaviour (Fiese & Sameroff, 1989; Parry, 1991) that serves to convey important elements of family culture. Family stories are distillations of experience; profound and important values and expectations are often being conveyed through the vehicle of a story (Stone, 1988). Family stories however, are also biased — they represent a particular point of view that emerges from the family emotional field (Morissette, 1993).

Several writers draw a distinction between healthy and destructive kinds of family stories (Parry, 1991; Stone, 1988). Parry suggested that family stories which "include, embrace, celebrate and, when necessary, grieve for the family and its members as a body" (1991, p. 19) create an essential rejuvenating effect for all family members. These stories convey an important sense of belonging and identity. By contrast, family stories that scapegoat, deride, or convey gossip about family members do not offer the possibility for renewal. These negative stories often provide a sense of identity, but one that is constraining. (Stone, 1988).
Byng-Hall (1979) suggested that there are two ways in which families use history in a dysfunctional manner. First, some families use history so that the present is seen as replicating the past. The family stories that will be told, therefore, will confirm the replicative script within the family. Secondly, some families seek to eradicate history and therefore would be reluctant to tell family stories at all.

Family stories, according to Byng-Hall, tend to articulate rules for behaviour that family members may look to when confronted by an unresolved dilemma. The story will suggest different solutions to the dilemma so that the individual may choose either a replicative script, similar to that contained in the story, or the individual may behave differently from the story resulting in a corrective script (p. 133).

Byng-Hall described family stories as legends or "moral tales which convey rules and obligations of family life" (1987, p. 177). He suggested that legends are molded by the narrator and therefore serve as here and now rather than historical phenomena. The legend serves to encapsulate history and is retold because it conveys the illusion of alternatives around an unresolved family dilemma. Often these stories are cautionary tales which suggest the peril in choosing a certain solution. Byng-Hall has suggested that once the conflict between the themes is resolved, the story will likely die out.

The first controlled study of family stories emerged from the field of folklore (Zeitlin et al., 1982). As part of the Smithsonian Institute's Folklore Project, over 2,000 people were interviewed and invited to tell their family stories. In terms of methodology, this study demonstrated that family stories are readily accessible to an interviewer from outside the family system. In fact, many interviewees noted that it was easier to tell family stories to a non-family member.
Once the collected stories were transcribed and classified by motif, the researchers determined that there were two major classes of stories collected: character and transition principle stories. Character principle stories included tales that describe character traits or pinpoint family traditions, while transition principle stories included tales that mark upheavals and changes in the family life cycle or history.

This research led to the development of a broad-based classification of family stories according to theme. The collection of stories featured the following common content themes: family characters, migrations, lost fortunes, courtships, family feuds, and supernatural happenings. The researchers concluded that common story types will appear across families, although each family will personalize their stories to suit the unique family identity. This study also highlighted the inherent fascination that families have for storytelling.

As an extension of the Zeitlin et al. (1982) research, Stone (1988) collected family stories and categorized them according to the functions they serve within the family. This research explicated the purposes or intentions behind family stories. Stone found that *family identity stories* depicted ideal attributes, messages about ethnicity, rules about family loyalty, or prescriptions about love and marriage. *Worldview stories* explained the family position within the larger world and may suggest themes of revenge, survival, racial stereotypes, enemies or money. Finally, *individual identity stories* emphasized certain values, attributes or actions demonstrated by the individual which the family values. Common motifs include the birth of children, gender identity, and ancestors as role models.
In a study of 56 families (Martin et al., 1988), researchers investigated generational differences in reporting family stories, main story characters and themes, and the longevity of stories. Few differences were found between parents and grandparents in terms of number and type of family stories told and the main characters featured. Stories tended to centre upon personal (micro) rather than historical (macro) events. Within the stories males dominated (particularly grandfathers) as the central character or hero. The prevalence of socially desirable stories was noted. Apparently interviewees were less willing to tell family stories that depicted evil or negative characters. Finally, family stories appeared to originate from the next generation to the storyteller. The researchers concluded that family stories do not have a temporal longevity beyond one or two generations.

There are methodological concerns with this research. The interviewers were 57 students of a family development class who interviewed their own same-sex parent and grandparent. Little information is provided about training for the students, duration of the interviews, or the nature of their relationships with family members. The potential for variability of the data is great, making replication almost impossible. An additional weakness is the fact that the interviews were not audiotaped.

Family stories have been conceptualized as windows into the family affective domain. Sherman (1990) proposed that family stories are a way to access the family’s current and past emotional themes. In a pilot study, 8 families were selected who had a two year old child. A multigenerational interview and genogram were used with each of the parents. Parents were asked to relate family identity stories and those stories parents heard about themselves as children. Sherman found that "the emotional themes of the
stories parents told about themselves as children in many instances appeared to parallel in striking fashion emerging themes in their child's relationship patterns" (p. 256). The author concluded that an absence of family stories about the parent as a child appeared to correspond to that parent having difficulties relating to his or her own child.

There are several methodological weaknesses which warrant scepticism regarding the results of this study. Considerations of confidentiality prevented the researcher from including any of the family stories that were collected. Therefore, the researcher's descriptive statements about the data must be viewed with caution as these statements cannot be substantiated. It is unclear in what ways the emotional themes of the family stories parallel the themes in the child's relationship patterns.

Family stories have also been studied from the perspective of gender (Diedrick, 1986; Diedrick, Black & Martin, 1987) When 169 stories (as reported by 56 families) were analyzed for gender roles and differences in terms of family history, the family stories were found to strongly reflect traditional gender roles (Diedrick, 1986). Women were most often described within the stories in terms of family-oriented themes such as caregiving, while men were frequently described in terms of their work-related activities. Stories had most often been passed down by female family members (usually mothers), supporting other studies that have suggested women often act as "keepers" of family history (Zeitlin et al., 1982).

As an extension of this study, Diedrick et al. (1987) investigated family story descriptions of main characters in terms of efficacy (instrumentality), worth (affiliation, caregiving), and stereotypic/atypic gender-role behaviours. Female story characters were found to be described more often in terms of worthy behaviours, while males were
described in terms of efficacious accomplishment. A surprising result was the discovery that many of the family heroes were described in terms of their unworthy actions. On the other hand, few stories related efficacious failure, which the authors surmised may reflect the importance of the American work ethic and valuing of efficacy.

The empirical research to date has favoured qualitative methodology, with an emphasis on descriptive and exploratory research. Frequently a structured interview format has been used to elicit family stories (Black, 1990; Sherman, 1990; Wisch, 1988). Interview questions ranged from those about family identity stories and stories told about self (Black, 1990; Sherman, 1990) to questions about courtship, love, and birth stories (Black, 1990; Stone, 1988; Zeitlin et al., 1982). In other studies, stories were elicited about specific family ancestors (Black, 1990; Martin et al., 1988; Zeitlin et al., 1982) or historical events that shaped the family (Black, 1990; Zeitlin et al., 1982). In two of the studies, questions were asked about which side of the family had dominated the storytelling traditions (E. Stone, personal communication, November 3, 1993; Zeitlin et al., 1982).

The majority of studies have utilized a genogram to collect family genealogical information and to structure the elicitation of family stories. Wisch (1990) developed a Family Folklore and Mythology Index which utilized 55 open-ended questions to gather family stories. However, as this instrument was developed for the study, the reliability has not been established.

A criticism of the existing research centres upon the methods utilized to elicit the family stories. Structured questions that cover various categories of stories will not necessarily lead to the most personally relevant or meaningful stories being shared.
While structured questions and genograms are useful for eliciting an entire collection of stories, the approach of the present study was to investigate only the most personally relevant stories for the individual.

Much of the family stories research to date has been plagued by methodological weaknesses. There is a need for additional controlled research to expand upon some of the preliminary findings. The early studies have done an adequate job of categorization and elaboration of story type by theme, characterization, and content. The existing empirical and conceptual research does provide an important framework for understanding the range of family story types and the functions they serve within the family. A criticism of previous research is that the family stories have been separated from the lives of those who have retained and retold the stories. Thus the stories alone have become the data, with little or no emphasis upon the impact of the stories within the lives of the people telling those remembered stories. Additional controlled research is warranted to examine other aspects of family stories, particularly in terms of the meaning and significance of family stories in adulthood.

**Impact in adulthood of remembered family stories.** According to Sarbin (1989) stories guide our behaviour. "The choice of action in problematic situations is conditioned by one’s enculturation, that is by the acquisition of stories . . ." (p. 8). Family stories comprise one set of stories which may also guide our actions in adulthood, yet very little research has been conducted in this area.

The clinical literature offers many case examples which support the idea that family stories do have an impact in adulthood. For example,
The therapist noted that Jane, who seemed a caring and loving mother, was physically distant from her two small children, rarely spontaneously hugging or kissing them. At one point Jane remarked that when she was three years old, the age her daughter was now, her mother became ill with tuberculosis. Her mother "cured" at home, and Jane remembered a long period of time when she was not allowed to touch or kiss her mother but had to stand at the door of her mother's bedroom if she wished to see her or talk to her. Her mother, she reminisced at another time, used to tell her many stories. One she remembered in particular was about a great uncle who suffered from tuberculosis. The man travelled the world in search of a cure and, on return from one of these trips, greeted his niece (Jane's mother's aunt) and her baby daughter with kisses. Within one year both the niece and her infant were dead of the dreaded disease (Laird, 1989, pp. 436-437).

Laird provided this clinical example to illustrate the ways in which family stories appear to overlap with life experiences to create meaning for the adult client.

Epstein (1979) is one of the few authors to suggest the relevance of examining the impact of remembered stories in adulthood. Adult children of survivors of the Holocaust were interviewed and asked to speak about their family experiences with the Holocaust. Amongst this particular sub-group, family stories play an especially important role because they become in some cases the only legacies that remain after multiple losses of family members, possessions, and homeland. Particularly striking are the descriptions from adult children of the impact that hearing their parents' stories had upon them as listeners:
What my mother and father had lived through was more compelling to me than anything I had ever read or learned in school, inexhaustibly rich, a mine of stories and choices between good and evil, life and death... I felt as if I carried unwritten plays inside of me, whole casts of characters who were invisible and voiceless, who could only speak through me... The subject was life and how to live it and it was listening at the picnic table that I received the Jewish education which my mother had hoped I would receive in the morning, at Sunday school (p. 167).

Epstein found themes of fear, distrust, danger, guilt, shame, and unhappiness in the lives of the adult children of survivors she interviewed. These themes appeared to have been conveyed through the vehicle of the family stories. In other families, where survivors had been unable to share their painful experiences through stories, the inaccessibility of family stories also appeared to have a devastating impact. Epstein noted that "children of survivors whose parents had sealed off their past responded by sealing off their own" (p. 138).

In a related study, Stone (1988) invited her interviewees to discuss the meaning of their family stories in their current lives. This is one of the few studies which has attempted to explore the relationship between family stories and the person's present life context. As this research was not rigorous in design, the credibility of the findings cannot be properly established. No information is provided about interview question content, the selection process for interviewees, or story analysis procedures. The resulting anecdotal evidence, while fascinating to read, must be applied with caution due to the lack of methodological details.
The most relevant research to the present study is a phenomenological case study that examined the effect of family stories on identity, specifically gender role, self esteem, and social relations in adulthood (Black, 1990). Three adult women were asked to complete a genogram, Family of Origin Scale, and the Tennessee Self Concept Scale. Following this, a semi-structured interview was conducted where family stories were elicited. During a followup interview, the impact of reflecting upon family stories was assessed. Baumeister’s schema of identity was used to analyze gender roles, relationships, and self esteem. Using structural analysis, Black found that family stories do convey family values, rules of conduct, and information about relationships. Stories were found to shape identity, and family members served as role models within the stories.

A feature of the Black study is the fact that the author elicited recollections of actual events as well as family stories that were orally transmitted from other family members. Thus her study had a broader focus than the present study has taken.

The strengths of the study lie in the rich descriptive detail contained within the elicited stories. A clear portrayal of the family histories and family dynamics of the interviewees is provided. A serious criticism of the study is the fact that when interviewees did share powerful family stories, the emphasis was not upon a full and complete exploration of the meaning in the person’s present life. For example, the following story was presented:

It’s [a family story] I like to cover up and not really talk about a lot, it’s not really a very bright one . . . . My father’s mother’s mother was a slave and she undoubtedly was just an extraordinarily beautiful person, just really pretty, and, uh, she wasn’t one that per se worked in the field, she worked in the house and
the guy that she was working for, he raped her and as a consequence, here come my grandfather and so the lineage that I have as far as my great grandfather . . . was white. And for a long time I had a kind of negative feeling about any time that I had to be in subjection to anybody, you know, because I felt that they might, you know, rape me or something, I don’t know why I had that perception but it was, you know, I’ve grown out of it (Black, 1990, p. 97).

Here is a powerful family story and the possibility of meaning that it offers for this person’s life, yet the researcher did not pursue this direction. In her analysis, Black categorized this as a secret story and pointed to the family value of appearance and status (because the ancestor was a house slave). She devoted just two sentences to summarizing the meaning for the interviewee: "Marianne tells the meaning of this story in terms of her own feeling of being ‘in subjection to anybody.’ Her own rule of conduct, stemming from this story seems to be about being cautious and not trusting in certain situations" (p. 75).

This family story and the cryptic comments by the interviewee beg further inquiry. A direct link has been made by the interviewee between the story and her orientation to life. The gaps within the Black study point to the need for further controlled research which places an emphasis on understanding both the stories and the meaning they have in the interviewee’s life. Clearly the existing research has been limited in scope. While anecdotal and clinical evidence suggest there is a relationship between family stories and lives, there is a need for more empirically grounded research to substantiate and expand upon these ideas.
In the absence of family stories. Several authors have examined the impact upon adults of not having a repertoire of family stories to draw from. Laird (1989) referred to the absence of meaningful stories as "unstories" (p. 437). Unstories result from the truncation of the family's languaging of experience in situations involving migration, poverty, despair, and geographic or emotional cutoffs. Similarly, Thompson (1988) discussed the common tendency, whether conscious or unconscious, for memories which are discreditable or dangerous to be buried and not recalled. Shameful secrets also tend not to be shared in story form. "The secretiveness around the most important story, like a communicative disease, contaminates other stories, in a sense placing a quarantine on the family's ability to language its experience" (Laird, 1989, p. 437).

Counsellors working with diverse client populations have identified situations where story impoverishment may have serious consequences. Sedney, Baker, and Gross (1994) suggested that bereaved families who do not create and share stories of their loss "are handicapped in making sense of what happened, in explaining their roles in these events, and in experiencing emotional relief" (p. 291). Hartman (1993) emphasized the importance of adoptees unmasking secrecy and reclaiming adoption stories from their families. Often families may have withheld such stories or provided only cursory details due to feelings of shame. Access to the family stories becomes central to the adoptee's construction of a coherent life story. The fact that adoptees are deprived of the stories from their birth family has also been identified as a major loss.

Burchardt (1993) found that amongst families of Holocaust survivors a mutually protective collusion of silence was created between parents and children that prevented children from hearing many of the family stories. Often for survivor parents, it was
simply not possible to put their experiences into language. Survivors were unable "to pass on an ordered story, which would have violated a fundamental aspect of the personal experience — the all-pervasive chaos which gathered momentum from the moment of the abrupt rupture of the old life following the occupation" (p. 123). This study raised the important question of how one narrates an ordered story from chaos.

In a related transgenerational study, Inowlocki (1993) stated "the only stories that can be told are of resistance or escape. But the heart of their experience cannot be turned into a story for the grandchildren, who must be protected from knowing about the pain and absolute despair, from the complete absence of meaning of the individual, and the collective, suffering" (p. 139). Second generation groups have become popular in England because they offer therapeutic benefits and because of the sense of belonging they offer to members. Such groups appear to create places where some sort of story reconstruction could take place, given the impossibility of storytelling within the family group itself.

The impact of family story impoverishment suggests a relevant area for further research. The existing research is primarily anecdotal and does attest to the importance of this topic. Although story impoverishment was not the primary focus of the present study, the issue of secret or hidden stories was raised by two of the co-researchers.

**Narrative as a Paradigm for Understanding Lives**

Van den Broek and Thurlow (1991) suggested that we understand events and experiences through our cognitive mental representations of those experiences. Mental representations capture "conscious and unconscious beliefs about why events occur, how one event may affect what happens next and what the consequences of possible actions
would be" (p. 259). These mental representations reflect a constructive and interpretive process, and adhere to a narrative structure.

According to Bruner (1986), there are two essential modes of cognitive functioning which result in distinctive ways of constructing reality. The logico-scientific mode is based upon analysis, empirical truth, facts, and causal determination. The narrative mode, in contrast, is based upon story, specifically the construction of a "landscape of action and a landscape of consciousness" that explicates human wants, needs, and goals (Bruner, 1986, p. 14). Sarbin (1989) emphasized that all of life is guided by a narratory principle, and that narrative is the most relevant way to interpret human conduct. Similarly, Kerby (1991) stated that narrative emplotment yields an understanding of human experience which is not amenable to other forms of analysis.

The narrative mode makes experience comprehensible through a subjunctivity that allows the individual to construct his or her own meanings (Bruner, 1986). In hearing or reading a story, we are introduced to a world of possibilities rather than one absolute certainty. Ultimately we create our own text to make sense of the stories we receive. This reconstruction involves the use of imagination as we draw upon our own repertoire of personal experiences.

A number of disciplines have conceptualized narrative as an important structure for understanding lives. The field of psychobiography relies upon "the systematic use of psychological (especially personality) theory to transform a life into a coherent and illuminating life story" (McAdams, 1988, p. 2). The notion of life stories is one that has been gaining popularity in many diverse fields. Tomkins (cited in McAdams, 1988), in explicating his script theory, stated that a "person is like a playwright constructing a
dramatic narrative to make sense of life." Scripts become the unconscious mandates that lie beneath the plots of life stories. Sociologists and anthropologists historically have collected oral life histories, while the life review process has been identified as a valuable resource in working with the elderly (Akeret, 1991). More recently, researchers have become interested in the ways in which individual life stories reflect larger societal and cultural narratives (McAdams, 1988).

In the field of family therapy, there has been a recent paradigm shift away from cybernetics where people and families were viewed as biological or mechanistic systems, towards a perspective that embraces social constructionism, post-modern semantics, narrative, and linguistics (Hoffman, 1990). This trend reflects a movement from an "experiential to a social epistemology" (Gergen, 1985, p. 268). Therapy is now being reconsidered in narrative terms, that is, as a linguistic activity based upon a series of conversations between therapist and client, (Anderson & Goolishian, 1988) where story or text become the central metaphor. The basic premise of narrative therapy is that human beings react to the world through a meaning-making process that consists of creating a story or narrative. Therapy influenced by a narrative paradigm is comprised of "storytelling, story-clarifying, and the effective rewriting of life stories" (Howard, 1989, p. 88) where the role of the therapist is to "in-dwell" in the client's stories.

The new epistemology in the field of family therapy entails a moving away from normative notions of family structure and functioning towards an understanding of the family which emphasizes meaning and unique narrative constructions. Clearly, family and individual stories offer a rich source of meaning.
Narrative therapists use the term deconstruction, a concept that has arisen from literary criticism, to suggest that every story, including those told by clients in therapy, is inherently incomplete and fragmented (Parry, 1991). Deconstruction as a therapeutic stance means inviting the client to consider the ways in which their life stories are inevitably connected with the stories of community, family of origin, ethnic background, and gender roles (Parry, 1991). Epston and White (1988) suggested that in fact people may be recruited into these other stories without realizing the power and influence such stories have over their lives.

**Themes of meaning in lives.** Life stories often cohere around specific themes of meaning. Csikszentmihalyi and Beattie (1979) examined life stories to determine whether or not they demonstrated a noticeable thematic consistency. The life histories of 15 working class and 15 professional males were collected in order to examine the process by which people develop a coherent life theme. A life theme was defined as "an affective and cognitive representation of existential problems which a person wishes to resolve" (p. 48). The life theme forms the basis for the individual's interpretation of and responses to reality. Life themes were found to develop in response to problematic life events in two thirds of respondents in each group.

The structure of life themes was most strongly influenced by the affective and cognitive coding within the family of origin. If the life theme becomes an organizing pattern in lives, then the cognitive attributions within the family would appear to strongly influence the structure of that coping pattern. Furthermore, reading stories or "elaborate storytelling" was found in 12 of the professional families and 4 of the blue collar
families. The authors suggested this is significant because it was through stories that a central existential problem was often clarified.

A related concept to life themes is that of the theme underlying personal myth, as described by Feinstein and Krippner (1988). A personal mythology is defined as "the system of complementary and contradictory personal myths that organizes [one's] sense of reality and guides . . . actions. The theme at the core of a personal myth is a composite, usually built from many sources" (p. 24). The various sources which contribute to the central theme include cultural imagery, family influences, media, daily life experiences, and motivations, to name a few. The development of a personal mythology is an evolutionary process, with the central theme functioning as a template or map. We are constantly revising and adding to our personal mythological systems using the central theme as a framework for experience.

Life themes, or the central theme which underlies a personal mythology usually exist outside of conscious awareness (Csikszentmihalyi & Beattie, 1979; Feinstein & Krippner, 1988). Thus, in everyday interactions, we are guided by these themes without realizing it.

There is an obvious association between lives as narrative constructions and family stories. Keim, Lentine, Keim, and Madanes (1987) view identity as "a mental, abridged anthology of stories, any one of which can be replaced by a story from the total collection" (p. 17). Family stories, then, may be seen to form one component of the personal narrative or life story of the individual. According to Thompson (1993) telling one's own life story requires not only recounting directly remembered experience, but also drawing on information and stories transmitted across the
generations, both about the years too early in childhood to remember, and also further back in time beyond one's own birth. Life stories are thus, in themselves, a form of transmission; but at the same time they often indicate in a broader sense what is passed down in families (p. 13).

Family stories would appear to be one genre of stories that emerge from the narrative domain. Family stories have been described as mental representations of family events and experiences. As we hear these stories, we remember certain elements that stand out. An important premise of the present study was that as we retell our family stories, we are reconstructing them in the present so that they become part of our personal narrative. According to Erikson (cited in McAdams, 1991) a central task of adulthood entails creating a coherent and meaningful "story" of the past which weaves together all facets of experience.

... the adult is able to selectively reconstruct his past in such a way that, step for step, it seems to have planned him, or better, he seems to have planned it. In this sense, psychologically we do choose our parents, our family history, and the history of our kings, heroes, and gods. By making them our own, we manoeuvre ourselves into the inner position of proprietors, or creators (p. 91).

According to Sarbin (1989) we live our lives as if we are actors within our own self created dramas. What guides our "dramatistic performances are the reconstructed plots of narratives heard, seen, and read in the process of enculturation" (p. 194).

**Social construction theory.** Social construction theory is a useful epistemology for understanding the context from which family stories emerge. Social constructionism reflects a paradigm shift in the field of psychology away from logical empiricism where
knowledge is seen to exactly replicate the real world (Gergen, 1985). Instead knowledge is seen to depend on processes endemic to the organism. Social constructionists emphasize social interpretation and the "intersubjective influence of language, family, and culture" (Hoffman, 1990). Within this tradition, our beliefs about the world are posited to be social inventions. In essence, as we move through life, we make meaning and sense of the world through social interactions. According to Anderson and Goolishian (1988) humans may be defined as "language-generating, meaning generating systems engaged in an activity that is intersubjective and recursive" (p. 377).

Family stories may be viewed as reflecting the multiple social influences of language, family, and culture. Family stories convey meanings and messages unique to the particular family, therefore they may be described as socially constructed. Family stories are speech events which incorporate language to communicate meaning. Such stories emerge from and reflect what Gergen (1985) terms the "performative use of language in social affairs" (p. 10). Finally, family stories may be viewed as recursive because they involve a storyteller/listener interaction. Meaning, therefore, arises from a flow of constantly changing narratives. Family stories are one form of shared social narrative from which the individual derives meaning.

The Use of Family Stories in Counselling, Education, and Within the Family

Stories and counselling. Combs and Freedman (1990) outlined four purposes for telling stories in counselling: "1) to pace people's models of the world and current situations; 2) to access emotional states or attitudes; 3) to suggest ideas and 4) to embed suggestions" (p. 164). The authors stressed the importance of listening for words, phrases or stories that appear to be central to a client's history or worldview.
Storytelling is an excellent way to draw out client resources and stories can provide the opportunity for clients to experience a new perceptual position, through identification with certain characters.

Within the field of family therapy, stories have long been used as teaching tales. Bateson’s favourite form of metaphor was story, which he defined as "a little knot or complex of that species of connectedness which we call relevance" (cited in Combs & Freedman, 1990, p. 14). Milton Erikson pioneered work with stories in therapy when he began to use tales from his own life or the lives of his clients. The stories were told as analogues, to model the worldview of the client and to propose solutions or resolutions.

Within the domain of child psychiatry, the technique of mutual storytelling has been used effectively (Roberts, 1994). This process involves the child beginning by telling a story of his or her own creation. Clarifying questions are asked about the story. Next the therapist tells a story that incorporates the child’s story elements while introducing healthier outcomes.

Wallas (1991) uses reparenting stories in counselling adults from dysfunctional families. The stories begin before birth, progress through all the phases of human psychological development, and are told to clients who are hypnotized. Reparenting stories depict the idealized family that the client never experienced. Wallas has noted the tremendous healing, self acceptance, and forgiveness that occurs through the use of such stories. A characteristic of Eriksonian teaching tales, mutual storytelling, and reparenting stories is the emphasis placed upon the counsellor as the person who creates the best or most therapeutic story. The clients receive the stories for use in their healing work.
The family therapy literature has virtually ignored the therapeutic use of family stories (Sedney et al., 1994). In fact, numerous references are made to the therapeutic value of storytelling and ritual, however as mentioned, the emphasis has usually been upon the therapist as storyteller. When the focus has been upon the family's story or mythic repertoire, it has often been upon the dysfunctional nature of such narratives. As Laird (1989) says of family therapists:

Our mission as truthtellers often seems one of puncturing the fantasies of storytellers, surfacing the secrets implicit in the legends, exposing the liars, and exorcising the deadly myths. In the process, not only do we then spoil many a good story for the sake of the truth, but we may also be guilty of spoiling the family story-meanings and folklores for the sake of our own coherences . . . (pp. 442-443).

Clearly the healing and beneficial aspects of utilizing family stories in counselling warrants further investigation. Such exploration needs to focus on the family's inherent storytelling capabilities without the intrusion of the counsellor's stories or techniques.

A few counsellors have briefly alluded to the use of family stories in the work they do. Laird (1989) advocated exploring family stories with women in therapy as part of a co-interpretive process to trace gender messages and their influences upon the present life circumstances of the client. Laird argued that this is particularly important given the fact that family therapy has traditionally overlooked or disqualified women's narratives within the family context.

Proponents of multigenerational family therapy (Freeman, 1992) advocate working with family stories therapeutically as a means for clients to reposition themselves
within their family of origin and current relationships. According to Freeman, people believe the stories they tell are accurate, when in fact "the stories we carry in our heads are symbolic of losses and/or important emotional events that have shaped our thinking about ourselves, our family, and the world around us" (1992, p. 11). Freeman advocates a stance of objective curiosity on the part of the counsellor. If successful, this curiosity in response to family stories will become contagious, encouraging the client to themselves become curious and rethink their family stories.

A component of multigenerational family therapy involves clients doing family history research, meaning family members are interviewed about their life stories. Parents or grandparents may be invited to spend a one hour session telling stories from their lives. The adult client simply listens and does not interact in the session, instead maintaining the more detached position of researcher. Counselling that incorporates work with family stories, therefore, allows clients to rethink the "emotional vectors" (Morissette, 1993, p. 6) that cement a family story firmly in place.

Sherman (1990) proposed that family stories from clinical populations (for example families with a history of child abuse) may show significant patterns in terms of affective themes. He identified this as an untapped area and suggested clinicians could develop "preventive or therapeutic strategies involving reconstruction, or even de novo construction, of family narratives along more adaptive lines" (p. 257).

The importance of counselling as a setting for family story creation has been emphasized (Sedney et al., 1994). For example, facilitating and listening to the stories that bereaved families tell of their loss may enhance family adaptation and mastery. The family story of a loss includes multiple stories because each family member will have
their own version which must be elicited. Retelling the story of a loss serves several important functions including: emotional relief, an explanation or a sense of meaning for the events, family members are united, and children have a place to share their versions of the story.

Family stories of loss may be used in counselling as assessment tools (Sedney et al., 1994). As each family member tells their version of the story the counsellor gains a sense of the dimensions of the loss as well as the individual member’s unique constructions of events and their role in them. The story may itself serve as an intervention. In telling the story, open communication about the events is created which otherwise may be difficult for families to manage. The story may also serve as an indicator of treatment outcome, for example as a family moves through counselling the story may be augmented and changed. Or the family may change the way they tell the story as a result of the therapeutic work. The role of the counsellor is to ask questions to expand the story, clarifying sequence, relationships, and what family members thought and felt about events.

Within the field of pediatric psychology, Fiese and Sameroff (1989) described the powerful impact that family stories can have on the family and child’s perceptions of health problems. Families may spontaneously relate a story of loss following a child’s suicide attempt, or a story of an energetic uncle may emerge following a diagnosis of hyperactivity.

While the literature attests to the power of story as a therapeutic modality, there were no empirical studies located on the topic of family stories and therapy. The existing
literature is primarily conceptual or anecdotal in nature. There is a need for further empirical research to validate the importance of using family stories in therapy.

**Family stories in educational settings.** Family stories have been successfully incorporated within a limited number of educational settings. For example, Shockley (1993) described a family stories project she devised for her grade one students. Each family wrote one of their family stories and contributed this piece to be published in a class book of family tales. The project represented a way to involve the entire family in the reading and writing programs at school, and gave children an opportunity to learn more about their family histories.

Wolfe (1993) argued for the inclusion of family stories into the high school family communication curriculum because the stories serve as "rich pedagogical resources" (p. 2) that illuminate much about the family of origin and their communication patterns. As well, family stories are seen as valuable because they tap the student's "personal literature" (p. 7). Students were asked to listen for family stories in their homes and to tape record any stories which emerged. Alternately, students interviewed a member of an older generation. Next the students were asked to write their family stories, to be included in a Memory Book to be handed down to future generations. Throughout the school year, during discussions on various family-related themes, students were encouraged to share their own family stories.

The Refugee Women's Alliance, located in Seattle, Washington, developed a Family Story Curriculum Project (deBarros, 1991). The purpose of the project was to increase self esteem, cultural adjustment, and language skills of the participants; to create student-generated materials that address family issues and bridge the
cultural and generational gap between newcomers and their American-raised children; to print 5 to 10 stories for classroom use; and to train . . . staff in collecting and using family stories (introduction).

The family stories were collected through a variety of methods from journal writing, to oral history interviews, to the use of story quilts. One of the issues that arose from the project was the question of how the teachers could manage the grief and sadness that often accompanied the refugee students' stories. This points to family stories as a powerful modality for accessing the past, and for eliciting strong emotions.

Family stories of families with disabled children have also been successfully used as part of a training program for early childhood special educators (Marchant & McBride, 1990). Family members were invited into the program as guest speakers to tell their stories. Case studies of family situations and the use of family stories from literature were two other methods employed. Family stories were found to serve as rich resources which enabled students and instructors to make connections between theory and the stories and experiences of real people. As well, hearing family stories sensitized the students to their profession because such stories touch the heart. Finally, family stories were found to challenge underlying assumptions about both clients and professional practice.

The cited literature on the use of family stories in educational settings once again points to their inherent value. There is a need for empirical research to substantiate and expand upon the possible uses of family stories in education. As yet, few educators appear to be making use of this valuable resource.
Families accessing their own stories. Several books have been published which describe how family members can collect (and or record) their own family stories (Rosenbluth, 1990; R. Stone, 1992, 1994). In Vancouver, British Columbia, a company named Links and Legacies can be hired by families to interview and audio or videotape an aging family member as he or she retells significant family stories (V. Rosenbluth, personal communication, May 16, 1994).

Robert Akeret (1991), a psychoanalyst, has developed an Elder Tale Program which is designed to help elders share their family stories at a gathering of family members. Akeret decries the devaluing of elders in our present culture and speaks of the ritual void created by the absence of family storytelling. His Elder Tale Program is designed so that over ten sessions, a person can review the stories of their lives and share them with family members through a somewhat formalized performance process. The sessions start slowly with stories about photographs from youth. Later sessions are designed to elicit more difficult topics such as turning points and untold stories. The appeal of this model is that the person doing the life review selects and shares their own core stories, rather than an interviewer or family member asking questions to elicit the stories.

Akeret discovered that elders participating in the program frequently have powerful dreams that relate to the life review process. Akeret named these dreams Lebenslauf or sweep-of-life dreams because of their powerful associations.

Although the family represents the heart and source of storytelling, the literature reveals a limited amount of information on collecting family stories within the family itself.
Summary

The presence and impact of the family interpretive system has been documented by many researchers. Most seem to agree that the influences of the family upon its members are often invisible or unconscious, and may be organized around a central family theme, code, or paradigm. Family storytelling has been proposed as a ritualized process component of the family interpretive system, which may help to illuminate deep underlying structures around which the family is organized. Family stories appear to emerge from and reflect one aspect of the family interpretive system. Clearly the literature points to a need for additional empirical research to examine family storytelling.

It is surprising that so little research exists on the subject of family storytelling, given that this process appears to be a rich family resource offering tremendous meaning-shaping potential. While the purpose of the present study was not to make an exhaustive study of the family storytelling process itself, the dimensions of the storytelling experience were explored. Specifically, the co-researchers' responses and reactions were elicited as they were considered to comprise a crucial part of the results in terms of the meaning of stories in their adult lives.

The existing literature on family mythology has frequently confused family stories with family myths. Within the present research, the emphasis was placed upon understanding the stories themselves, separating them out from family mythology.

Family stories have been identified as a common genre of oral history, yet there has been little controlled research conducted on the topic of family stories across disciplines. The limited research that has been carried out suffers from methodological weaknesses. The existing studies have offered an important classification of family
stories by theme and content, and have identified the function and purpose that stories serve within the family. However, the relationship amongst a person's collection of prominent family stories themselves has not been adequately explored. More importantly, the gaps in current knowledge surround the crucial issue of the meaning of family stories within the life context of the adult who has retained the stories. The impact and meaning of story impoverishment has also not been extensively studied, in spite of anecdotal evidence which suggests this is an important area for further study.

The assessment and understanding of the interrelationship of family stories as well as the meaning for the co-researchers was integral to the present study. This emphasis extends the findings proposed by the existing research, which has tentatively suggested that there is a strong connection between the family stories we remember and who we are as individuals. As well, within the present study, it was assumed that people intuitively know the most significant stories and that structured questions designed to elicit specific categories of stories would not be necessary. Such focused questioning, in fact, may impede the elicitation of personally meaningful stories.

Social constructionist and narrative paradigms were reviewed as they provide the theoretical underpinnings of the present study. Stories and their inherent meanings are socially constructed. Our lives may be conceptualized using the metaphor of story. The purpose of the present study was to collect family stories, viewing them as a collection or series of micronarratives which reflect the personal orientation of the co-researcher. A second phase of the research involved comparing the family stories with the life experiences of the co-researchers to see whether stories and personal narratives coalesced or diverged in terms of themes of meaning. According to Linde (cited in Laird, 1989) to
understand or interpret a narrative, there are three essential components that must be examined: "the facts of the narrative, what meaning the speaker makes of these facts, and the speaker's world view or belief system, his or her personal paradigm for making sense of the world" (p. 430). Within the present study, an attempt was made to incorporate all three elements, which have not been a feature of previous research.

Finally, the use of family stories in counselling, educational, and family settings was reviewed. The literature reveals a paucity of research detailing the practical uses and applications of family stories. The present research will contribute to the literature by suggesting techniques for utilizing family stories in counselling settings.
"Story is far older than the art and science of psychology, and will always be the elder in the equation no matter how much time passes." (Estes, 1993, p. 19)

Research Design

The purpose of this study was to explore the relationship of family stories and their meaning in adulthood for the individual who has retained the stories. To understand the phenomenon of family stories, an exploratory multiple case study design was employed. Yin (1981) defined a case study as an empirical enquiry that "investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context; when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident; and in which multiple sources of evidence are used" (p. 23). Rosenwald (1988) stated that case study designs contribute "the apt example and the cunning synthesis" (p. 261) to social knowledge.

The multiple case approach is valuable, not because it yields lasting truths in a defined population by drawing inferences from a sample, but because such an approach indicates what may be the case (Rosenwald, 1988). Thus the case study provides clear examples and "emphasizes connections and reversals of meaning rather than causes, functions, or class attributes" (p. 261).

For this study, family stories were investigated as they were and are experienced within their real life context. Two interviews were conducted with each co-researcher. In the first interview, the stories were collected and understood as they were heard in
childhood. During the second interview, an attempt was made to understand the present influence and meaning of family stories in adulthood. This focus was seen to contextualize the family stories within lives as the boundaries between family stories and lives are not discrete and separate.

This study incorporated a narrative framework, which according to Cochran (1990) consists of two components: narrative construction (developing a well-founded story that is faithful to life) and narrative criticism (drawing out the meaning, plot, or explanation embedded in a series of stories). A narrative approach can capture more appropriately than quantitative methods, the complexity and richness of family story experiences. Cochran (1990) suggested that "case study is probably the preferred approach to narrative construction largely because an investigator can gather divergent sources of evidence and rich, compelling detail to support convergence into a narrative description" (p. 79). The present study, therefore, features the development of trustworthy narrative accounts which illuminate the experience and meaning of family stories in the lives of the three co-researchers.

In-depth narrative interviews lend themselves particularly well to the pursuit of meaning, especially in the present study where story and storytelling are central components. The tradition of scientific positivism where objectivity and impartiality are paramount is less likely to elicit the richness and detail that can result from an in-depth interview. Mischler (1986) argued for an interview process that is empowering of co-researchers, where they are treated as equal partners in the research. Narrative interviews become a jointly constructed dialogue between interviewer and co-researcher, implying that the interview context itself must be analyzed.
The hermeneutic interpretive tradition also guided the research process. According to Rajan (1991) "to interpret something is to go beyond it and discover something hidden and not manifest in it" (p.27). In hermeneutics, the domain of inquiry centres upon text (Packer & Addison, 1989). The research process consists of a reading of the text, followed by interpretation and dialogue that emerges from the shared culture that researcher and co-researcher inhabit.

The hermeneutic circle is an image which suggests that complex human phenomena may be understood through consideration of the whole and its respective parts. Within the present research, family stories (parts) were examined in order to broaden an understanding of the life context (whole). As the life context became clearer, so did the meanings of family stories. The research process continually adhered to this circular flow and interplay between family stories and lived experience.

The hermeneutic circle also impacts the positioning of the researcher. The researcher's point of view and the evaluation of explanatory accounts are viewed as being in a constant dialogue, rather than separate.

In order to be proven methodologically sound, a case study must demonstrate credibility by addressing issues of validity and reliability. In exploratory case studies such as the present research, construct validity and reliability become central concerns. Yin (1984) has proposed that these concerns may be addressed through the use of multiple sources of evidence, creating a case study data base, and maintaining a chain of evidence.

Multiple sources of evidence enhance construct validity. Although the present research utilized narrative interviews as the primary source of evidence, multiple
interviews were conducted with each co-researcher in order to expand the pool of data. Secondly, the multiple case study design was utilized in order to provide a greater range of evidence across cases. According to Yin (1984) "the evidence from multiple cases is often considered more compelling, and the overall study is therefore regarded as being more robust" (p. 52).

Lincoln and Guba (1989) refer to the conventional criterion of reliability as dependability, and describe the technique for documenting the process and method decisions of the study as the "dependability audit" (p. 242). Outside reviewers of a study must be able to "judge the decisions that were made, and understand what salient factors in the context led the evaluator to the decisions and interpretations made" (p. 242). For this study, the research supervisor acted as an external observer, reading all phases of the research for coherence and credibility. In addition, as each phase of the research was completed, it was examined by the other two thesis committee members.

The reliability of case studies is improved where a chain of evidence is maintained (Yin, 1984). "The principle is to allow an external observer . . . to follow the derivation of any evidence from initial research questions to ultimate case study conclusions" (p. 102). Within the present study, an effort has been made to provide details which substantiate this chain of evidence. Beginning with the research questions, the evidence includes extensive details extracted from the narrative interviews (data base), case study accounts, and a comparative analysis. The relationship between all phases of the research has been explicitly stated, allowing other researchers to follow and replicate the results. In addition, the role and influence of myself as the researcher has been clearly documented.
Construct validity is strengthened where key informants are encouraged to review the case study report (Yin, 1984). Within the present study, co-researchers read the transcribed family stories to determine whether they were accurate reflections of their stories. As well, during the second interview the researcher verbally presented thematic statements and summaries of the story meanings. This provided an opportunity for the co-researchers to dispute or confirm the interpretive findings.

In addition to issues of construct validity and reliability, a case study design must also attend to the issue of external validity (Yin, 1984). External validity refers to the extent to which a study's findings can be generalized beyond the immediate case study. According to Yin, case studies rely upon analytical rather than statistical generalization, and must not follow a sampling logic. A sampling logic dictates that a small number of subjects is assumed to represent a larger pool of people. Replication logic differs from a sampling logic in that each case is selected to predict similar results (literal replication), or to illustrate contrary results but for predictable reasons (theoretical replication). If the cases turn out as predicted, there is "compelling support for the initial set of propositions" (p. 53). Thus, case studies are "generalizable to theoretical propositions and not to populations or universes" (p. 21).

A crucial step in replication procedures entails the development of a rich, theoretical framework (Yin, 1984). Within the present study, each individual case was viewed initially as a whole case study. From the interpretations that were derived from each individual case, a comparative analysis was conducted which demonstrated a literal replication across cases. The results were then fashioned into a descriptive theoretical framework. This method is in keeping with the aims of exploratory research.
**Researcher as instrument.** An integral part of this study is the use of the researcher as the research tool. Miles and Huberman (1984) cite four criteria for assessing the trustworthiness of the researcher as instrument. These include:

- some familiarity with the phenomenon and the setting under study;
- strong conceptual interests;
- a multidisciplinary approach, as opposed to a narrow grounding or focus in a single discipline; 
- [and] good ‘investigative’ skills, including doggedness, the ability to draw people out, and the ability to ward off premature closure (p. 46).

One of my strengths as a researcher is my interviewing expertise. I worked for two years as an employment counsellor and for four and a half years as a counsellor conducting in-depth volunteer screening interviews for a local non-profit agency serving children. The ability to quickly establish rapport and discuss extremely sensitive and personal information with interviewees was a central component of my work. As well, my current work as a family therapist and my training in Counselling Psychology has extended my interviewing and listening skills. These skills served to enhance the credibility of the present study.

My interest in this research topic has been informed by my present studies in the discipline of Counselling Psychology, but my interest in story and the way story is used to construct and convey meaning began with my undergraduate degree in English Literature. I believe that both disciplines are integral to the present research. As well, my curiosity and interest in family stories and their impact in adulthood is certainly rooted in my early and more recent family storytelling experiences. As a researcher, therefore, I brought a multidisciplinary approach, strong conceptual interests, well-honed
interviewing skills, and personal experience with family stories to the interviews I conducted.

According to Krefting (1990) "a major threat to the truth value of a qualitative study lies in the closeness of the relationship between the investigator and the informants that can develop during the prolonged contact required to establish credibility" (p. 218). Reflexivity has been proposed as a useful strategy to counter the intensive involvement of researcher and co-researcher. The use of a field journal in the present study provided a reflexive strategy to help me remain aware of my own experiences and biases. This consideration of researcher reactions and experiences is also an integral part of the hermeneutic interpretive tradition. The field journal helped to clarify questions and curiosities to be used in the second interview with co-researchers. A second strategy for cross-checking my perceptions and decisions with the research supervisor was employed to monitor personal bias.

**Procedures**

The procedures followed in this study included:

1. Identification of co-researchers.
2. Co-researcher screening interviews.
3. Narrative interviews to elicit family stories and co-researcher experiences with the stories.
4. Recording my reflections, comments, and reactions after each interview in a journal.
5. Transcription of interview audiotapes, making notes in the journal about salient points as well as my own reactions.
6. Immersing myself by reading and re-reading the interview transcript as a whole.

7. Extracting the core family stories from the text of the interview.

8. Analyzing the stories individually to articulate point of view, character development, plotline, and a sense of the flow and interrelationship of beginning, middle and end of the story.

9. Identification of story themes, and from this developing a "principle of living" (Cochran, 1986, p. 82) which suggests the orientation to living or moral of the story.

10. Conducting a cross comparison of all the family stories shared by the co-researcher to determine consistencies or contradictions between the stories.

11. Formulating questions and hunches based on my analysis, personal reactions, and comments from the first interview regarding the possible meaning of the stories in the co-researcher's present life.

12. Examination by the research supervisor of the interpretive analysis for coherence, credibility, and any impositions on my part.

13. Elaboration interviews to present the transcribed stories and my interpretations, inviting comments on any omissions or commissions on my part.

14. Rendering of both interviews into case study accounts, which included interpretive commentary.

15. Conducting a comparative analysis across the three narrative accounts.
Co-researchers

Through word of mouth and a network of contacts, seven potential co-researchers were identified. From these, three people were chosen for participation in the study. The co-researchers included one man (aged 44) and two women (aged 50 and 40). A fourth woman completed the first family stories interview, however it became apparent at that point that she did not meet the criteria for family stories that was used within the present study. Her family stories were in fact her memories of family life, rather than being stories that she recalled hearing and that she had retained.

Criteria for selection. According to Rosenwald (1988), in multiple case studies sample selection should be "guided by the quest for good examples — cases which reveal the inner structure of a social phenomenon" (p. 259). Participants should be selected because they are "candid, fluent, reflective, and different from each other" (p. 260).

A premise of this study was that most adults would be able to recollect key family stories. The most important criteria for participation in the research, therefore, included experience with the phenomenon (family stories) and the ability to clearly articulate those experiences. I selected co-researchers over age 30 who could recall family stories and were able to describe their experiences in English. People over the age of 30 were viewed as being somewhat established in their own lives and at a developmental stage where they would be ready to reflect upon the meaning of stories and family in their lives. Although the literature does indicate gender differences in family storytelling, with women more often acting as keepers of the stories (Langellier & Peterson, 1992; Stone, 1988), the present study did not examine this variable. In order to achieve diversity, the sample consisted of men and women, however the emphasis was upon how the stories made sense in their lives, regardless of gender.
As this was an exploratory study, co-researchers were selected to represent a range of experiences (as much as was possible given the small number of participants). Diversity included gender, age, cultural background, marital status, and the nature of the family storytelling experiences. The co-researcher experiences with their own family stories also showed great variability.

It was anticipated that there would be a benefit to co-researchers who participated in the study. Each person had an opportunity to retell their family stories and gain some insight into their meanings. Pulling apart the many layers of the stories also offers the possibility of reauthoring (Epston & White, 1990) in the present. As Byng-Hall observed "understanding the context in which the story arose and re-editing it within my current family gave me a sense of freedom from its injunctions" (1988, p. 169). At the completion of the study, all of the co-researchers enthusiastically confirmed the benefits that they had derived from participation.

**Research Interviews**

The interviewing process consisted of the screening interview, the family stories interview, and the elaboration interview.

**Screening interview.** The purpose of the screening interview was to determine that the prospective participants met the criteria for inclusion in the study. Potential participants had received a letter which was given to them by one of my contacts. The letter outlined the focus of the study and described the role and responsibilities of the co-researcher (see Appendix A).

The screening interviews were conducted by telephone once potential participants contacted me. The criteria were elaborated and any questions were answered about the
study. I was particularly careful to ensure that people understood the definition of family stories being used for the present study; that is, that these are second hand tales which the person would have heard others recount. Once it was verified that the person would be an appropriate candidate for the study, a time and place for the first interview was arranged. All of the co-researchers chose to be interviewed in their own homes.

**Family stories interview.** The purpose of the family stories interview was to elicit the most prominent family stories recalled by the co-researcher. As well, information was gathered about the setting or context for the storytelling, the co-researcher's responses to the stories, and their feelings about the stories as adults. During this interview, information also emerged about the co-researcher's early life experiences and his or her family background. Co-researchers were encouraged to think of the first interview as past-focused, while the second interview would emphasize the influences of the stories in their adult lives. The first interviews took 2, 1.5, and 2.5 hours, respectively to complete. All interviews were audiotaped in order to facilitate transcription and analysis.

Oakley (cited in Mischler, 1986) has criticized the textbook paradigm of research interviewing as being overly hygienic. An emphasis on objectivity, detachment, and a hierarchical relationship between interviewer and interviewee does not lend itself to rapport and the rich co-creation of meaning. I attempted to create an interview context that was comfortable and non-hierarchical. The interviews began informally with brief conversation aimed to establish a degree of comfort between myself and the co-researcher. I explained the purpose of the study as well as my personal reasons for pursuing this subject. I also shared information about my academic and personal
background, as well as my own family story experiences. This information was brief and served to establish rapport, as well as put the co-researcher at ease.

Each co-researcher read and signed two copies of the consent form (see Appendix B), receiving a copy of the form for his or her records. I then turned on the tape recorder and began the interview proper by reading the definition of family stories to be used within the present study. This was to ensure that the co-researcher understood the particular approach I was taking. The co-researcher was then asked to choose a pseudonym to be used throughout the study. Next, I asked the following focusing question:

As you think about living in your family of origin, which stories stand out in your mind as ones you would retell or think about? These are the stories that for you hold a strong intuitive sense of relevance. What I would like you to do is first simply identify in your mind which stories these would be. You can give each of them a one word code so you will remember them.

Once the repertoire of stories was highlighted in the person's mind, I said "Now I would like you to tell me each of the stories. I am not a family member, so please tell the story so that I really get the point. I hope to gain a sense of the importance of the story to you."

One co-researcher (John) had made notes before our meeting regarding his most prominent stories. Another person (Maca) had one very powerful story which she immediately began to retell. Ellen asked some clarifying questions about my definition of family stories and then proceeded to tell the two stories she had previously identified.
None of the co-researchers seemed to need time to determine what the most prominent stories would be. All appeared clear about exactly which stories they would share.

The interviews were unstructured, which is consistent with the framework that Miles and Huberman (1984) suggested for exploratory studies. Heavily structured instruments designed prior to encounters with co-researchers can blind the researcher to the site and usually are context-stripped. A further rationale for unstructured interviews is that previous research on family stories has tended to rely upon highly structured interview questions designed to elicit categories of stories.

The interviews resembled a conversation, with the co-researcher controlling the flow and direction of the discussion. After each story was told, I assisted the co-researcher to elaborate and extend the details of the story through comments such as "tell me more about that." Silence was used as much as possible to allow the co-researcher full expression before probes were employed. Additional interview questions were asked to draw out and clarify the story content. Throughout, I used basic counselling skills such as active listening, empathy, and open-ended questioning to elicit co-researcher reactions to the stories. I also noted nonverbal communication.

The interviews ended when the family stories and related experiences had been thoroughly explored. The decision to end each interview was mutually determined between myself and the co-researcher. I then asked for feedback about the experience of the first interview. While John appreciated having another person share his enthusiasm and interest in family stories, Maca was struck by how emotional the interview had been for her. Ellen commented that she felt quite comfortable with the process.
As storytelling was a central component of the study, I was particularly interested in noting my own reactions to hearing the family stories. According to Elizabeth Stone (personal communication, November 3, 1993) her own responses to hearing the stories told by the interviewees became an integral part of the interview process. After each interview, I made process notes and recorded my own reactions in a journal. For example, one entry read "July 18, 1994 — The emotionality of this story touches me. I can relate to the pain and sadness she felt for her mother's pain . . . . The story was pulling me into it. I had to resist interpreting and getting into the meaning for her now." This inclusion of researcher reactions is consistent with the hermeneutic approach which emphasizes that "the researcher must not act as if he or she is a value-free researcher who can objectively see things as they ‘really’ are, or as if the ‘data’ collected is, in some way, independent of the person who collects it" (Addison, 1989, p.42).

Elaboration interview. The purpose of the elaboration interview was to allow the co-researcher to discuss the meaning and impact of his or her family stories in adulthood. At the beginning of each interview, I presented the co-researcher with the transcribed family stories so he or she could verify the accuracy. In two cases, a few minor corrections were made in terms of story details. Next, I made the following orienting comments:

The purpose of this second interview is to focus more on your own life. The most important part of this whole process is for me to be clear about what the stories mean to you. For some people family stories convey values, meaning, ways to live life. I am interested in knowing how your own life resembles or is different from the stories. I am interested in understanding how this family story
has influenced you. Or perhaps it hasn’t at all. In talking about your life, I have questions that come from the stories. Let’s start by my asking you what you think these stories mean.

I also informed the co-researcher that I would be presenting interpretive summaries and thematic statements that I had extracted from the family stories. I stressed that it would be important for the person to feel comfortable disagreeing if he or she felt I was incorrect in my story interpretations. During the elaboration interview, I made an effort to allow the co-researcher to fully discuss the meaning of the stories from his/her own perspective before introducing any of my interpretations. I did this so that I would not impose ideas upon the person before gaining a clear sense of the meanings they made of the stories. When I did introduce thematic statements or interpretive comments, I posed them tentatively so that the co-researcher did not feel pressured to agree with my comments. (For example, “I noticed that all of the stories seem to feature characters who go it alone. Do you relate to this in terms of your own life?”)

The elaboration interviews were of a different quality than the family story interviews. These interviews were longer than the first interviews, lasting 2.5, 2, and 3 hours respectively. Having developed rapport through the first interview, during the elaboration interview people appeared more relaxed and comfortable talking about themselves. The co-researchers were fascinated by the connections between the stories and their lives, as they had not really considered this previously. At the conclusion of the interview, each person was asked about the experience of participating in the research. All three stated that they particularly enjoyed the second interview and had gained new insights into themselves.
Ethical Concerns

According to Lock and Spirduso (1993) "whenever investigators enter into the daily lives of others at the level of intrusion required for qualitative study, significant problems of ethics are raised" (p. 115). Some of the measures that were undertaken to address ethical concerns in the present study included the establishment of informed consent and a guarantee of confidentiality to all participants with a clear description provided for the use of direct quotations and family stories. Co-researchers were given the right to withdraw at any time from the research and were able to withdraw their consent to use specific excerpts of the interviews. I endeavoured at all times to be sensitive to the ethics of including co-researchers in review of the data.

Case Study Accounts: The Family Story Experience

After transcribing all of the interviews, the data was rewritten into narrative accounts. Each account was intended to present, in story form, a synthesis of the two interviews. In writing the narrative accounts, several principles were adhered to. First, I attempted to write the events in narrative form so they followed the structure of a story, with a beginning, middle, and end. Events were arranged chronologically, although the co-researchers did not necessarily relate their experiences in this orderly fashion. Each account, therefore, begins in the past with life before the family storytelling experiences, then leads into the stories themselves. The accounts then chronicle life after the stories, concluding in the present with adulthood. As much as possible, the co-researchers' own words were used in the case accounts, although they were altered from the first to the third person. To protect co-researcher confidentiality, the chosen pseudonyms were used throughout. Identifying names of others were also altered.
Addison (1989) has suggested that case study portraits be judged for their "comprehensiveness, comprehensibility, intelligibility, credibility, meaningfulness, significance, and fruitfulness for opening up new possibilities" (p. 55). These criteria guided me in constructing the narrative accounts.

**Interpretive Comments and Comparative Analysis**

The present research adhered to the conceptualization that qualitative data analysis is a "continuous, iterative enterprise" (p. 23) which consists of data reduction, data display and conclusion drawing/verification (Miles & Huberman, 1984). A strength of interpretive research is that it is constantly comparative: the researcher is "always questioning gaps, omissions, inconsistencies, misunderstandings, and not-yet understandings" (Addison, 1989, p. 41). This comparative process guided all stages of data interpretation and analysis.

As previously mentioned, the family stories and the narrative accounts were viewed from a hermeneutic perspective, as texts to be interpreted. The interpretive comments that follow each narrative account, therefore, represent an effort to understand and link the themes and meanings that emerged from the family stories and the co-researcher comments. Interpretive comments allow the unique meanings for each individual to be expressed, so that the important elements in each narrative account are not lost.

The interpretive comments include a description of my responses and reactions as the researcher to each person. I felt this to be important information to include so that the storytelling encounter might be clearly understood. Next, I included family story interpretation which reflects my efforts at understanding the stories after the first
interview with each person. When interpreting the stories, I sought to immerse myself as much as possible within the stories, incorporating the co-researcher's comments to help me understand how they took each tale. Story interpretation was also guided by literary analysis. I attempted to identify setting, plotline, characterization, point of view, and theme. I examined language usage and structure. For each story I then developed a "principle of living" which is "like a proverb drawn from a fable, only a person draws principles from his or her own experiences and those he or she is a spectator of" (Cochran, 1990, p. 82).

From the interpretation of individual stories, it was then necessary to conduct a comparative analysis of each person's collection of family stories. I examined characters, as well as common content and thematic elements across the stories. I attempted to look for the dilemmas and values proposed by the stories, as well as the suggested solutions the stories contained. An important feature of story comparison included an examination of what was clearly missing from the collection of stories, as this seemed to indicate what was not valued by the family or individual.

Essential to the present research design was my belief that I would need to be highly sensitized to the meanings and messages that the stories conveyed individually and collectively, before I could begin to understand their significance in adulthood for the co-researcher.

All of the aforementioned interpretive information was used in the second elaboration interview with each person. This is consistent with the approach advocated by Miles and Huberman (1984), who suggested that "the meanings emerging from the data have to be tested for their plausibility, their sturdiness, their 'confirmability'" (p.
A limitation of interpretive research is the possibility that the results may be based upon the biases and prejudices of the researcher. The proposed verification strategy provided an opportunity to discover errors on the part of the researcher.

After completion of the elaboration interviews, I attempted to weave the content of both interviews into an interpretive commentary that reflected the meaning of the family stories within the individual's own personal narrative or life story. I tried to adhere as closely as possible in my interpretations to the co-researcher's own words and understandings, however I also made explicit those points that appeared clearly to me but may have been less obvious to the co-researcher. As Laing (1969) stated "We can never assume that the people in the situation know what the situation is . . . . The situation has to be discovered" (p. 33) by both insider and outsider. As part of the interpretive commentary, I formulated a familial orientation to living suggested by the stories and the interview content. These were confirmed or disconfirmed by each co-researcher, and served to illuminate the ways in which each person has followed or diverged from the family meanings.

According to Linde, "To understand or interpret a narrative, one must understand the event structure, the evaluative structure, and the explanatory structure" (cited in Laird, 1989, p. 403). The interpretive commentary within the present study has provided a means for understanding all three of these components. The event structure, or family story is one vital component; the evaluative structure or meaning the co-researcher makes of the stories comprises the second component. Finally, the explanatory structure or belief system of the co-researcher was elucidated through the hermeneutic dialogue about
the stories and the co-researcher's own life. This approach placed an emphasis on the importance of the personal and familial context for the meaning of family stories.

All aspects of the interpretive commentary were discussed with and read by the research supervisor, which served to verify that the conclusions I had drawn were accurate and legitimately derived from the interview content. I chose not to share my interpretive comments with the co-researchers, and therefore take full responsibility for any misinterpretations, assumptions, or errors.

The final stage of data analysis consisted of a systematic analysis of the three narrative accounts to identify commonalities in terms of salient features. The following structure emerged. The narrative accounts could be divided into three phases: life before the family stories, the storytelling experience itself, and life after the family stories (including adulthood). Themes were extracted and clustered according to whether they described experiences before, during, or after the family story experience. The results of the data analysis are presented in Chapter 8.
"Stories set the inner life into motion, and this is particularly important where the inner life is frightened, wedged, or cornered. Story greases the hoists and pulleys, it causes adrenaline to surge, shows us the way out, down, or up, and for our trouble, cuts for us fine wide doors in previously blank walls . . . . " (Estes, 1992, p.20)

Maca 50, works as a hairdresser and has one daughter who is 13 years old. When she first heard about my research Maca contacted me immediately, saying she had a very big story to tell and that she was anxious to explore it further. Maca is a very warm and expressive person. As she speaks, her voice is almost musical in its intonations and inflections because English is her second language. This added to the telling of her stories and unfortunately cannot be reproduced on the printed page. The stories are presented verbatim, from Maca's perspective, and are denoted by a contrasting typeface.

Maca was born in a small coastal town in southern Croatia. For the first seven years of her life, Maca lived in a home characterized by love, respect, and compassion. She attributes this to her father, who was a very loving person. There is a reverence to the way Maca speaks of her father: "he was the sweetest, kindest, gentlest man on earth . . . we were lucky to have him." It seemed that the whole family basked in the warmth and comfort of her father's love. Maca remembers the affection her parents shared and
the way her father worshipped her mother, often calling her "my rose." Maca's mother often referred to her husband as a "guardian angel."

Then Maca's father died in 1950 when she was just 7 years old and "all hell broke loose." Her mother was left with no money and was forced to go and work to provide for her children. She went from being the well-respected wife of the former mayor to having to collect wood to sell in order to feed her children. Maca's mother was devastated by the loss of her husband; it was as though her entire world crumbled. "She turned bitter and very depressed and gloomy after his death. The only way she knew how to keep us in line was by hitting us, with whatever happened to be in her hand or with her hand." Maca also experienced emotional abuse, which in many ways was the most painful for her. Her mother's cruel words were worse than any physical blows she received. At the time, Maca did not understand these dramatic changes in her mother's behaviour. She felt she didn't deserve the abusive treatment and found she could not be close to her mother as a child or teenager. As she put it "when I was young and with her I hated her with passion."

Maca often felt confused by her mother's behaviour. For example, she told the story of her first date. She had been instructed by her mother to be home by 10:00 p.m., and was late by half an hour. Her mother reacted by screaming at her and calling her a whore. Maca had no idea why her mother was acting this way. When Maca's sister was 16 their mother saw her speaking to a young man and said "first you get married, then you date him." Her sister was forced to marry at 16, had a daughter at 17, and was divorced by age 20.
Maca’s father would not have allowed any form of abuse; he never laid a finger on his children while he was alive. During the interviews, forgotten memories of Maca’s father resurfaced and she shared these with great animation in her voice. These recollections highlighted experiences of being supported and encouraged by her father. For example, Maca remembered that her father had taught her to swim using a board, or that he buried her and her sister in hot sand at the beach to help cure them of pneumonia. At times as she spoke about him, her voice took on a wistful tone.

After Maca’s father died, her mother reminisced a great deal and shared many stories. Maca heard these stories at age seven or eight. They were more like story fragments, all of which served to exemplify and bring to life her father’s character.

_I remember one story where he saved a young boy’s life from drowning and then became his godfather. So that story kind of stands out in my mind._

This story stands out for Maca because it is an example of the way people felt about her father. She is proud of her father for helping that young boy and likes the fact that he was honoured by the family when he was asked to be a godfather.

_And that’s another story. My father was in the Austro Hungarian army and at one point they had a chance to fight (this was of course beginning of the century) and I remember mother asked him ‘well did you ever kill a person in the war?’ And he said ‘No! I did shoot but I always shot in the air.’ He said ‘I made sure I was in a safe spot, I led my men but I always shot in the air.’ He could never kill a person. Oh ya, and once he saved a woman from a fire and ever since then he couldn’t eat meat because he described that she was so badly burned that it just turned him off meat._

The point of these stories for Maca is the importance of kindness: “we’re not here forever so to be kind and giving and not to hurt others.”
The next story came out towards the end of our second interview together. It was as though Maca had kept this story in reserve, feeling perhaps that she wanted to share the more glowing stories of her father before this one, which carries less positive undertones.

In World War II he was a mayor and when the Germans came through he very diplomatically took them through town, showed them and lied through his teeth about all the men fighting. He said 'oh no, they're all out on the sea on freighters' which wasn't true. He risked his life. Same with Italians, he did the same because we were of Italian background. After the war Partisans accused him of collaboration with the enemy because nothing was destroyed, see they went and destroyed right through but he was very smart and he wrote memoirs about it. And so as a thankyou he never got the old age pension because he was considered a collaborator which is total, total fiction. He never ever did anything but to help people. He died out of sorrow because he was healthy, there was nothing wrong with him, he strictly died out of sorrow and hurt.

It was apparent, as Maca told this story, that she feels deeply for her father to this day. It appears that she experiences both shame and outrage on his behalf.

After her father died, Maca's mother went to city hall to ask for help with feeding her children. She met a young lawyer there and told him the story of her husband being wrongfully accused. The lawyer advised her to sue the government and helped her to write a letter. When she sued the government they responded with an apology note and paid back the pension. Although this was too late for Maca's father, her mother felt very good about taking legal action.

Maca identified one very significant story as the most prominent for her — it is the story of her mother's life. Her mother shared the story with her two daughters when Maca was 12 and her sister was 16. It was as if her mother felt compelled to tell her story when she said to them "now you are old enough, I want you to hear the story I have to tell you." Maca vividly recalls where they sat and how her mother, with great
emotion, began speaking. Maca herself was very tearful as she recounted the story. She spoke for a long time as I sat quietly, feeling awed by the magnitude of the story:

She [mother] started telling us how at a very young age she was an orphan. She lost her mother when she was five and her father when she was ten and so she was brought up by her cousins and aunts and uncles. And in that time where she was growing up it was very, very hard to support a family, little less an orphan. So she was kind of like a child that nobody wanted and felt it too. So she felt the only way to fetch for herself or take care of herself was to speak up and so she always spoke up and became known as a sharp-tongued young lady and wasn’t very much liked for that reason. But she had good qualities, very good qualities too which were I suppose in those days envied. She was the first woman in her village who scrubbed the floors, for instance, or did embroidery that was very distinctive and many things that were unlikely, but she did them. She was also an avid rider — a horseback rider — and she was the only woman riding a horse the way men do because in those days they wore long skirts and you were supposed to ride on the side, women were.

In 1936, she was almost 30 years old and she wasn’t married and she was considered to be an old maid, but she fell in love. His family didn’t like the idea that he married her and so his mother tried very hard to make sure that that doesn’t happen. To make his mother happy he got engaged to another lady and was planning to get married. But in the meantime my mother got pregnant and I mean in 1936 that was a very big deal. So they planned to elope just before his wedding and he came to my mother’s home and wanted to talk with her stepbrother about obtaining some funds for them to elope. Well her brother didn’t know what was going on so he was very cold about it. He said to him ‘well I don’t have any money. I can’t help you. You do what you want to do. I don’t care.’ So I suppose he felt desperate. I think the wedding was supposed to happen on that Christmas day, and Christmas Eve he came to the house, to her brother. He called her to come out but she was afraid to come out for some reason. She knew there was something really wrong going to happen because she knew he had a gun. So he left and the next morning the news came. He went to a family grave and shot himself and left her of course pregnant.

What she did then was travel to Dubrovnik. She stayed with this family who treated her nice and through someone she knew she got a job as a housemaid till she gave birth to a baby boy and the people advised her, as well as one of her brothers . . . (He was the only real brother she had, the rest were step-brothers). He wrote her a letter saying when she asked him what she should do, that the best would be that she gives up this child, and goes back and lives at home. What he really had in mind was if she leaves home she’s giving up her right to properties. In those days that was very important, of course, well I guess now too, so he
wanted to make sure she had her share of the land. So she followed his advice. She gave up the baby, I think just shortly it was born.

I remember when we said ‘well why did you go back to the village?’ She said well, two reasons, one because her only brother expected her to, and second because she was hoping to ask forgiveness from her dead lover’s mother. And my sister said ‘well, did you?’ and she says ya, and that was very, very emotional. Those days they rode horses to do everything and my mother had a horse and she says she went this one day and that picture stays in my mind clearer than anything, (begins to cry) how she described herself on a horse going up a hill and seeing his mother coming down the hill, also on a horse and she says she quickly got off her horse and out of respect when she approached her she said she (sobs) she kneeled down and said ‘forgive me’ and the lady didn’t even stop she just looked over at her and spat at her, and she felt really bad.

She had taken the baby to a city oh some 60 kilometres away where there was a hospital that managed babies who were being adopted and that’s where my father lived. And somebody told him about the story and I guess he remembered this incident and some years later he became a widower, he lost his wife and thought about having either a wife or a homemaker. And because he was a prominent man in this town where I come from, at that time he was the mayor of the town and all his life he was a military person, and well-liked and known, he thought he would just hire a housekeeper. So he spoke to a friend about hiring a housekeeper and sort of remembered this incident and said ‘What ever happened to that woman who had the tragic life?’ And the friend said, ‘well, you know she’s still there, she’s really a sad case.’ He says ‘well let me come and talk to her, maybe she’ll take a job.’ So they went and as soon as he saw her, I guess he was so full of compassion he fell for her and he immediately fell in love with her and proposed to marry her. Well of course that was the best thing that she thought could happen even though she didn’t have any feelings for him. He was 33 years older than her, and that’s another thing, he was amazed at the age she looked. She was much older looking than him actually. So I guess because of the life she had she aged quickly. So he felt he wanted to marry her and wrote her a letter and corresponded with her and it took a little while before she decided but she decided to get married. And so they got married and soon after they got married my sister was born and four years later I was born. And as sad as the story may seem, it was the happiest time of her life. She came from this environment where she was thought of as the worst kind of human being that could exist, of course the worst kind of woman, into this environment where he taught her to be a lady and nobody every called her anything but a lady, Lady Montan. So she was respected and earned respect and so this was the very important part for her, you know somebody to accept her the way she really was cause she wasn’t a bad woman. My father died when I was just seven, but she never considered remarrying because she had this incredible love and respect and feeling for him that she thought nobody could replace. And even the day she died she kept
remembering him and telling little stories about him and saying how she can't wait to see him. In other words, she felt she’ll see him when she died.

Maca believes her mother chose to tell the story "because she was a widow with two daughters and wanted to make sure we didn’t get into trouble and she probably thought this was the best way to warn us." So the story was intended to be a cautionary tale. It was told to instruct and to warn of the dangers that young women could encounter.

Maca remembers sharing her mother’s sadness as she heard the story. Her mother cried as she recounted her story and her daughters cried with her. Maca’s mother cried for days afterwards, but she never spoke of the story again until she was on her deathbed. Subsequently, Maca and her sister had different ways of relating to the story. Maca never felt at ease bringing the story up because she sensed her mother would not want this. However her sister would often bring up pieces of the story when she was arguing with their mother. Thus the story became a weapon used by her sister to hurt their mother. When Maca would hear this she would feel horrible and she remembers often crying.

The story was never mentioned amongst the extended family. Maca asked her aunt about the story when she was 14, but her aunt did not want to elaborate. Maca had the sense that there was family shame around the story, particularly surrounding the pregnancy. Just before our interview, Maca had telephoned an older cousin who lives in Vancouver to go over the details of the story in case she was missing anything. Her cousin also seemed reluctant to discuss the story with Maca, saying "Oh forget it! Why do you want to dwell on an old story?"
Maca believes she is the one in the family who is the most curious about the story. In direct contrast, her sister very much believes that this story is about the past and should be forgotten. Once their mother died (1979), Maca's sister wanted to put the story away and get on with life. But for Maca, the story is still very much alive: "This story, really it's amazing. Every once in a while I think about it and I wonder why? I don't really dwell on it or bring it up but sometimes it just comes up when I think of my mother, it sort of comes up." The story appears to be very important to Maca, and it arises unbidden.

Maca has shared the story two or three times with other people, usually when she meets someone who wants to know more about her. Although Maca has a 13 year old daughter she has not yet shared this family story with her, feeling reluctant to make her daughter feel sad. Recently she shared the story with a man: "And the reason was he was trying to be so definite about certain things how it's black and white and no grey in between and I thought well let me tell you this story, how it could be a sad and a happy story, it doesn't have to be all one."

For Maca, this is the essential point of the story. "She could have been left there and died sad and miserable, but here is one loving person that felt he could give her life and happiness for however long." According to Maca "those years with my father were the most precious years, I mean that's the life she really had . . . and she grew to love him so much that nothing came before him." The message for Maca is that "there's always hope, there's always goodness." She believes this message, imprinted upon her through the vehicle of the stories, gives her strength to live her own life.
There are two vivid points in the story for Maca. The first is the fact that her mother’s lover killed himself. Maca remembers identifying with her mother’s loss, thinking that her mother would feel sad. "Instead she was angry with him, it seemed like she didn’t love him at all. I remember my sister saying ‘oh you were left alone, the poor man!’ And she said ‘no, he wasn’t a poor man he was an uncaring man’, meaning I guess if he could leave her in that condition, alone, she felt he didn’t care."

The other part of the story that is powerful for Maca is the moment on the hillside where her mother prostrates herself in front of her dead lover’s mother and begs forgiveness. "That picture stays in my mind clearer than anything. I guess the thought about forgiveness is very hard for me too. I find forgiving one of the most important things in our lives. If we can’t forgive we have no hope."

When I asked Maca how it felt to share this story with me, she had the following to say: "it’s nice to tell it again in a way, but I haven’t told it with detachment, I’ve told it and felt it . . . where a couple of times that I’ve told it I didn’t cry or feel such emotion." Maca felt puzzled by her reactions and suggested that perhaps the story became more emotional in the telling because of what she is presently going through in her own life.

Although Maca heard the story of her mother’s life when she was 12, it was not until adulthood that she was able to use the story to make sense of her relationship with her mother. Maca was twenty when she left home and moved to Canada. She corresponded with her mother frequently, sending her a portion of every pay cheque. Her mother continually asked her to return to Croatia, feeling her place was with family.
Maca responded by asking why her mother wanted her back if her intention was to mistreat her again. Maca's mother denied that she had ever treated her badly.

Gradually, during those years of correspondence, Maca used the story to help her comprehend that her mother had done the best she could with her children. The story put into perspective the suffering her mother had experienced in her lifetime and the loss she must have felt once her husband died. "One part about that story that's very important for me is how I was able to see my mother the way she really was through the story and forgive her for all the abuse she was carrying on with us." This point was reiterated often throughout both interviews. This is the most important way that Maca has used the story in her adult life — to see and appreciate the forces that shaped her mother and influenced her behaviour towards her children. In fact, she believes this is why the story has stayed with her so clearly.

If Maca had never been told the story, she would not have understood her mother's cruel behaviour. "I would have probably always carried a grudge and think she was a bad mother and she wasn't, she was an excellent mother, she just didn't know any other way." In this sense Maca sees the story as a gift that her mother presented her with. The story allowed her to become closer to her mother through comprehension of the events that shaped her life. The family story offers an essential explanation. By illuminating the details of her mother's life, the story places her mother's abusive behaviour within a larger context.

Maca described conversations she has had over the years with others who experienced abuse in childhood. They are often surprised that Maca can discuss her own painful childhood so calmly. Maca attributes this to the fact that she released the
experiences through understanding why the abuse happened and by forgiving her mother. At the same time, Maca acknowledges that she still struggles with low self esteem as a result of the emotional abuse.

The family stories resurfaced again in 1979 as Maca’s mother was dying. Maca flew to Yugoslavia and spent the last 9 days of her mother’s life with her. Her mother was finally able to say to Maca just before she died "I’m sorry if I hurt you." Maca’s sister was not able to forgive their mother until the day she died. Although her mother experienced great pain due to bone cancer, she was able to forgive everybody, which was an "amazing and incredible" thing for Maca to witness. The only person her mother refused to forgive was her first lover who had committed suicide. As she lay dying, the two names she mentioned most were those of her husband and the lost baby. She anticipated joining her husband once again and she begged the lost boy to forgive her for abandoning him. This was a healing time for Maca and it was after her mother’s death that she made the decision to have a child.

Maca’s mother never forgot the baby she gave away. Apparently a few months after she gave up the baby she checked with the adoption hospital and they told her the baby had died. So she accepted this and neither she nor her husband ever pursued the matter further. Then a few years before her mother died, Maca’s sister asked her mother if she would like her to do some research and find out for certain what happened to the baby. Her mother desperately wanted to know the truth. As fate would have it, the only person who would have known the whereabouts of the child died a few months before her sister began her research. "My sister even found the birth certificate of this child. It was the only one without any markings on it. Usually they would have certain markings
whether it was adopted or dead. It didn’t have any markings so we really don’t know whether we have a brother or not." So this part of the story does not have an ending.

Over the course of both interviews with Maca, several strong themes emerged. As she stated, forgiveness in her own life has been very important. When we discussed some of her father’s obvious qualities such as kindness and not hurting others, Maca stated that neither she nor her sister can understand "wars or hate or all the negatives that humans create." Maca is sure this comes from her father’s influence. In her own life she says "I just don’t find the heart to hate, I don’t care how much hurt I get from any one person, I just don’t have the heart to hate, I just say well, God be with them and show them a better way than that." Maca stated that the two most important values for her in life are acceptance of others and love. Maca acknowledged that her family stories provide strong examples for her of how to be loving, although she had not thought of the stories in this way before.

Maca sees the message in her mother’s story as being about hope. "What happens in one’s life is both good and bad and in this case good outweighed the bad, fortune outweighed misfortune even though my mother had a hard life after father died, but still I think those years with him were so . . . . hope, there’s always hope, there’s always goodness." This is an important theme in her own life: "I always have hope and you never know what tomorrow can bring and the sky is always blue, it’s just the clouds cover it sometimes."

Another theme is that of being an outcast. Maca’s mother begins life as an outcast and then continually re-experiences being on the outside of life, until she finds a sense of belonging with Maca’s father. Maca chuckled as she identified with being an
outcast herself: "I've done my own thing, I didn't follow tradition or footsteps as far as getting married, having lots of kids and staying home. In fact I was the first young girl to leave home for overseas in my town." She definitely sees the resemblance between herself and her mother's story in terms of independence and the strength to be different. Maca had never considered this before the interview.

Maca, in talking about the meaning of the family stories in her own life, shared the stories of the two most significant relationships she has experienced. The first was the story of her 20 year marriage. Maca was 23 when she married. She described herself as being very naive and she didn't realize what she was getting into when she married. She was very generous throughout her marriage although in retrospect she feels she was doing most of the giving. "I had a business, earned money more than he did, took care of a house, holidays, the cooking and cleaning and washing, everything! Everything! All he did was go to work and his paycheque would go to the bank, I never even knew about it nor did I care then and he would come home and put his feet up and read the newspaper."

Maca explained that one of her husband's strategies was to wrongfully accuse her of doing something. This would trouble Maca and she made the connection between this issue and her father being wrongfully accused by the Partisans. Her father was crushed by injustice; this appears to be a sensitive issue for Maca as well.

Once her mother died, Maca decided that she would like to have a child and she hoped this would improve the marriage. Her husband stated that if they had a child she was not to count on him in any way other than financially. So Maca had the baby, sold her business, and stayed home. This was when the marriage turned from bad to worse.
Her husband refused to provide financially and accused her of no longer bringing in the money. Maca felt betrayed, but she was also terrified because her husband began to threaten her. When she talked about leaving him, he told her she would never see her daughter again. Her husband was Iranian and she feared he would take their daughter back to his country. This fear kept her in the marriage for four more years.

Maca begged her husband to go for counselling. They went once and never returned. Her husband insisted that all the problems in the marriage were her fault, not his. Eventually her husband told her that if she returned to Croatia he would pay her money to stay there. Maca was devastated: "I said, my God, I came here for a better life and look what I'm now going back home, why?" But this was the best thing that could have happened. Maca took her baby back to Croatia and was received with open, loving arms by her family. Her daughter was treated like a princess. It was during that trip that Maca decided she was finally able to leave her husband. "I saw him as a stranger. There was something in me died and I couldn't be revived . . . I just had to leave."

Maca now feels sorry for her ex-husband because she sees how much he is missing in life. His relationship with his daughter is not a good one. He often seems too busy to spend time with her. This is painful for Maca to see because the result is that he makes his daughter feel "totally, totally unimportant."

When Maca was asked what was missing in the marriage she said "caring, affection, . . . just basic caring about another human being, putting my needs along with his." Maca provided examples of the ways in which she was caring and generous: "I never came home without a T-bone or New York or the best piece of steak for him. I
bought things every day for him because he liked them, but I never saw him do that, never."

The central story of Maca’s life is another relationship story. It is the story of Peter, who she refers to as her "soul mate." Maca met Peter when she was 18. She was working in a clothing factory in Southern Croatia and Peter came to visit her boss. It was love at first sight: "Talk about chemistry, God, never had it since or before." They began to date. Peter lived in another part of Croatia where he was attending art school. Maca also wanted to be an artist but instead decided to get more practical training as a secretary so she could earn a living. They began writing letters to each other every day and the connection between them was very intense.

During this time, Maca began to feel restless. She wanted more from life and was thinking about going to live with her uncle in Canada. She asked for Peter’s advice and he responded "If you were my sister I’d kick you out of here, go anywhere, do whatever you have to do, as soon as I can I will too." This was the only time the two did not communicate well. Maca believed he didn’t care and simply wanted her out of his life. She was wrong however. Peter urged her to leave because he loved her and wanted the best for her.

So Maca left and came to Canada. Her uncle, however, refused to help Peter come to Canada because Peter was Serbian, while Maca and her family were Croatian. So the two continued to correspond even though they entered other relationships. As Maca described their communication she said they could discuss anything without fear of being judged. "He was like my father, my brother, my son . . . but he was more than that too."
Over the years, Peter had two marriages with two sons; Maca was married for 20 years and had her daughter. The letters flowed between them during this time. Then, after 20 years, they met in 1985 in Croatia. There were all the same feelings and a strong sense of connection; nothing had changed between them. In 1988 Peter called from California saying he was staying with a relative and wanted to come and visit Maca. At the time Maca was suffering from severe sciatica so she discouraged him from coming. She admitted that she was afraid of getting closer to him after all these years.

The two continued their correspondence and often talked by phone. One day Peter said he felt very weak. He saw a doctor who confirmed that he had angina pectoris. Maca was very concerned and spoke for hours on the phone with him. She urged Peter to change his life and to take better care of himself. Peter’s visa expired and he begged Maca to come to the United States to see him. "I said oh I will, I will, I kept saying I will, I will, I will, I never did."

Peter’s health seemed to be improving and he had returned to France. His next letter from France was very brief saying that he didn’t feel well and he would feel better when the weather was sunny. Maca said "I knew something and I kept calling, calling calling and I knew in my heart and I can’t remember the day but I swear one day I had this fear Oh my God is he alive? And the news came that he had died in his sleep and it was just like a bomb." Maca has been very depressed since Peter’s death in May 1994. As she put it "I have lost my soul mate of 32 years."

After Peter’s death, the thought of her responsibilities for her daughter kept Maca going. She said "I thought wow this world is a horrible place, but it’s not, it can’t be or we wouldn’t be here." This is the hope that keeps Maca going.
Loving Peter and being loved by him gave Maca strength. She will hold onto the feeling of joy she experienced in the relationship, the fond memories, the compassion. She has never experienced this in any other relationship with a man.

The one regret Maca has in life is that she did not connect with Peter. "I don’t know what fear kept me from getting closer to that one human being I cared so much about." Maca always thought she was fearless, but she does have many fears. When she really dwells upon her fears around Peter she believes she was terrified that he would leave her and that she would be hurt. She seemed to think that getting any closer would have spoiled the relationship.

A connection that Maca sees between the story of her mother and her own life is the fact that her mother was alone and so are Maca and her sister, both as a result of divorce. However once her father died, Maca’s mother never complained about being on her own. She had no intention of ever having another relationship with a man. Maca is different. She dislikes being alone and would very much like to have a partner to share her life with. The qualities that would be very important for Maca in another relationship would include "somebody kind, considerate, caring, and somebody who would accept (her daughter) as number one, who wouldn’t begrudge her. Somebody secure enough within himself that we could share life." Maca worries that her daughter also seems very solitary and doesn’t seem to need friends. She wonders if the pattern of being alone will repeat for her daughter. This is a very troubling thought.

Maca had never made any connections previously between her family stories and her own life. In her words they were "just stories." Although Maca described herself as a person who is intensely curious about herself, it never occurred to her to go back into
her parents' story for answers about her own life. She does not believe in the popular notion that whatever happens in your life is your parents' fault. She believes that we are born with most of our personality already intact.

It seemed that the research interviews provided Maca with a new way of looking at her own life. When asked to comment upon the experience of participating in the research, Maca had this to say: "Emotional! It's funny I didn't think that bringing up these stories would bring up all the memories and all these feelings, that's amazing, after all these years. [The interviews] made me think of why I do things the way I do, relating to those stories, and how come there are similarities and talking about relationships I can see the resemblance, you know looking for a father figure and not being able to find one, maybe that's what I'm doing."

**Interpretive Comments**

Listening to Maca's family stories was a powerful experience. While the secondary stories about her father created a portrait of his qualities, it was Maca's prominent family story that was gripping. I became immersed in the story, partly because of the events themselves and partly because of the emotion that Maca brought to the storytelling. I was riveted by the sadness and the drama of the tale. Then, when the story evolved into a love story, I felt relief. For the story to begin and end in tragedy would have been too overwhelming. As the listener, I yearned for a hopeful outcome for the central character. I felt relief when the story offered a sense of completion.

At the end of the first interview, Maca showed me her family pictures, which are displayed on a prominent wall in her living room. It was the photograph of her mother
as a young girl that was the most haunting. The black and white photograph depicts a beautiful girl, almost haughty in the way her face challenges the camera and the world.

**Story interpretation.** Maca’s prominent family story is reminiscent of the tale of Cinderella, a poor girl who was badly treated and eventually is discovered by a handsome prince who elevates her to an entirely different life. This is a progressive narrative (Gergen, 1985). The plotline begins with details of the life of an outcast. The story then moves to the middle sequence which features a love story. This portion of the story is dominated by loss. Love turns to pain when her lover commits suicide and leaves her pregnant with no options. Giving up the child for adoption marks yet another defeat. Thus the middle section of the story further emphasizes the central character’s position of outcast. Even when she begs forgiveness this is denied. To be forgiven is to be allowed to put the past to rest. This opportunity is not presented to her. This part of the story seems to carry the following principle of living: even if happiness is encountered it will be destroyed or taken away. Once again you will be left alone.

The narrative structure shifts dramatically towards the end of the story. According to Cochran (1990), "the tension of a story is maintained by the convergence and divergence of two lines of movement, the movement between a beginning and projected end, and the movement between a beginning and actual end. The end is always in doubt" (p. 20). The ending of this family story features a second love story with a happy outcome, which surprises the listener given the life of pain and struggle that has preceded. The story moves from unhappiness and abandonment to love and belonging for the central character. This is what characterizes the story as a progressive narrative. The second love story is markedly different from the first. It is as though Maca’s father
rescues his wife from life as a castaway. The principle of living that may be derived from this part of the story is softer. When you have lost so much and experienced little love, somebody can come along who understands your pain and who will see you for the person you truly are. Under these circumstances you will come alive, discovering a depth of feeling and love that you had never imagined possible. This appears to be the story theme that carries the most importance and emphasis.

This family story captures the essence of what it is to be human. Humanity entails love and loss, cruelty and compassion. Life's experiences can engender feelings of shame and sorrow, or of joy. This is a redemption story. Redeeming is defined as "to convert, carry out, make good, fulfil, set free, rescue, save, make up for, balance, reclaim" (1973, Gage Canadian Dictionary). In this sense, Maca's mother is able to reclaim her self and a life that is worth living. It is through her relationship with her husband that she learns to forgive and accept herself, and subsequently those from her past.

According to Cochran (1990) "a life can be viewed as a complete cycle of experience, beginning in incompletion and moving toward completion" (p. 37). Maca's mother's life story traces this movement beginning with incompletion where she appears to yearn for connection and belonging. Yet, she keeps missing these possibilities and suffers greater disenfranchisement and isolation. Completion comes towards the end of the story once she meets her husband.

Yet there is a sense that for this woman, completion is not stable. Once her husband dies, she reverts to bitterness and isolation again. This results in her physically and emotionally abusing her daughters. It is only at the end of her life that she seems to
be finally at peace. She forgives all those who have hurt her and anticipates joining her beloved husband for perpetuity. Her dying appears to reflect an integration: she offers forgiveness to all those who abandoned and despised her and she makes peace with her daughters.

The secondary family stories serve an important function, elaborating upon Maca’s father’s character. These stories embellish the prominent family story. The four secondary stories may be characterized as rescue stories and all but one follow progressive narrative structures. The stories begin with someone in need of help and end with Maca’s father’s intervention to save the person. The one story which follows a regressive narrative structure (Gergen, 1985) is the collaboration story. Here, the plot begins in a similar manner to the other stories. The people of the town are in need of Maca’s father’s protection. So he lies to save them from persecution by the Germans and the Italians. However this story ends with helping not being valued and honoured. Instead, his actions are misunderstood and he is accused of collaboration with the enemy. Dishonoured, the outcome is that he actually dies from hurt and shame.

The dominant theme from these stories is that helping others is a very important value. From the last story, the theme is expanded to suggest that sometimes helping is not valued and may be misunderstood, or even punished. The theme of redemption becomes an interesting postscript to this story. After Maca’s father’s death, his wife redeems his good name. This is a powerful gesture where the one redeemed is able to reinstatethe honourable reputation of her former redeemer.
**Story comparison.** As a collection, Maca’s family stories show strong internal consistency. Thematically, they are organized around the idea that love and kindness are essential ways to live life. All of the stories show consistent patterns in terms of character development. The story characters may be divided into three groups. There are those who represent goodness, those who are victims, and those who cause harm (representing the opposite of goodness). Maca’s father, across all of the stories, personifies the qualities which are integral to goodness. Maca’s mother is portrayed as a victim of the vicissitudes of life.

The collection of family stories delineates the characteristics of heroism. Maca’s father is heroic in his unfailing kindness and dedication to others. Maca’s mother represents a different kind of heroism. She is heroic in her ability to survive. She does carry on living, in spite of the difficulties she encounters.

As hopeful as the family stories are, they also carry strong undertones of shame. The early part of Maca’s mother’s story is a chronicle of shame: life as an unwanted orphan, her lover’s suicide and the illegitimate baby. To this day, the extended family appears to carry this shame. Maca says she wishes the story never happened; the story is not one that she is proud of.

In the collaboration story, shame predominates. Maca would have been too young to understand the situation as a child, yet she has inherited the story which explains the events. The story is powerful still for Maca. She held it back in our interviews; through the vehicle of the story she appears to have inherited the shame and anger her father experienced.
Integrating the co-researcher’s life experiences with the family stories. An interesting feature of this set of interviews was that Maca had never before considered whether there were any connections between her family stories and her own life. This is similar to what Stone (1988) discovered in her research: family stories appeared to be "absorbed as passively as if they were radiation" (p.199). That is, people had carried the stories over a lifetime, without ever examining them in an active way. The research experience appeared to provide a new way of considering the stories. Maca continually expressed surprise at some of the connections, while at the same time questioning whether there could be any legitimate commonalities.

Maca’s mother’s life story appears to have a strong emotional resonance for Maca. As a teenager, she experienced the sadness and pain of the story. Then as a young adult, the story helped her to empathize with her mother in order to forgive her. In her present life, as Maca has acknowledged, retelling the family story has an added emotional impact because of her recent loss. The story resonates for her; she is not at all detached when she tells it. Maca admitted that she shares her mother’s life story with people who want to get to know her on a deeper level. The story therefore, does seem to be part of her.

It appears that Maca has spent a great deal of time resisting the idea that there could be any connections between her life and her parents’ story. What are the implications of her not seeing the commonalities? It’s as though some deep fear keeps her from identifying too closely with the stories. Yet as the researcher, it became apparent to me that there was a great deal of convergence between the stories and Maca’s
life. This is a consequence of the researcher taking a metaperspective, which Maca cannot do because she is so immersed in both her family stories and her own life.

The repertoire of family stories appears to have both an active and a tacit influence upon Maca’s life. In the past, Maca actively used her mother’s story to make sense of her mother’s past and ultimately to forgive her for the abuse. She appeared to draw from the stories a model of forgiveness that was enacted by her father. Now, Maca continues to use the family stories as tools to help her reconnect with both of her parents. The stories become important ways for Maca to remain close to her father, given that he died when she was quite young. When she retells or remembers her mother’s life story, she re-encounters her mother. Thus the stories remain alive because they help her to bring her parents alive. Unlike her sister, Maca does not want to seal the stories away.

The collection of family stories appears to have a covert influence upon Maca, specifically in the realm of relationships. It was stories of the two significant relationships that she shared from her own life during the interviews. These seemed to converge with her parent’s relationship story. Maca responded to thematic statements based upon her family stories with stories from her own life. For example, the story of Peter emerged after I read her the following principle of living statement: When you have lost so much and experienced little love, somebody can come along who understands your pain and who will see you for the person you truly are. Under these circumstances you will come alive, discovering a depth of feeling and love that you had never imagined possible. Yet when I asked Maca later what prompted her to share this particular story with me, she was unsure. As we reviewed the principle of living from her parents’ love story, she realized this accurately captured her relationship with Peter. Maca also responded to this
statement by saying that it connects with hope in her own life. Hope that her daughter will turn out fine and won’t end up alone. But also hope for herself, that perhaps she’ll find another "soul mate."

As folklorists have identified, courtship stories are the most frequently occurring form of story told in families (Zeitlin et al., 1982). The courtship story traces the origins of the family itself and often contains messages and prescriptions about love and marriage. According to Stone (1988) courtship stories instruct family members about the dimensions of love itself: what to look for, what love should feel like, and how to proceed.

The collection of family stories and the stories from Maca’s own life are relationship stories emphasizing the message that loving, kindness, and compassion are the ways to live life. These qualities make for the ideal relationship. It appears that redemption through a loving relationship is a strong theme, if not a root metaphor (Sarbin, 1986). It was as though her mother, in her story, was on a quest. Early on she encounters one difficulty after another, but eventually she finds love and her quest is over. Just as her mother was redeemed through the love of her husband, so was Maca’s life made richer through her relationship with Peter. As Maca said of her marriage, it was kindness, compassion and being valued that were missing for her. These are the qualities that were most significant in her relationship with Peter.

Redemptive love is proposed, within the stories, as the prescription or antidote to a life that is incomplete. For Maca, this is where hope lies. As she said of her parent’s story, all it took was one loving relationship to make up for her mother’s earlier life. While Maca experienced this to a degree in her relationship with Peter, she is still
waiting to find another who can offer her this redeeming love. As she put it "Maybe subconsciously I'm looking for that person [like my father] that's why I can't settle."

The second relationship theme that stands out is that of loss. Maca's mother lost her lover and then her husband, the one person in the world who had valued and elevated her. Maca, although not married to Peter, has lost her "soul mate." This was the person who knew her better than anybody else, who respected her and was her confidante. Maca sees the connection with the story when she talks about aloneness. Her mother remained alone after her father died; both Maca and her sister are now alone.

Maca's family stories may be conceptualized as presenting a relationship legacy which incorporates messages about redemptive love and the possibility of loss. The legacy may be stated in the form of the following principle of living: No matter how difficult life has been, what can make the difference is a loving relationship, one where you experience being truly seen and valued for who you are. This kind of relationship offers the possibility of transformation. But there are risks involved in this kind of close relationship. The risk is that you may lose the person who has offered you such love, resulting in a depth of pain and grief that is profound.

This legacy appears to influence Maca in terms of her own relationships. She looks to her parents' marriage as a model for a loving relationship. Specifically she would like to find a man like Peter, or her father, who can respect her for the person she is. Yet as powerful as this model is, there is also the fear that once obtained, such love can be lost. Ironically, when Maca says she feared getting closer to Peter because she might lose him, this is ultimately what did happen as a result of his death. She is now experiencing the pain of loss.
As a prescription for relationships, this legacy appears to operate as both inspiration and restraint. If the potent message in the family stories is that you will find deep love but you may lose it, then the question remains as to whether the risk is worth it. This seems to be the dilemma Maca struggles with. The relationship legacy appears to be paralysing her. In some ways, Maca convinces herself that remaining alone is safer: "growing up after the age of seven for myself, maybe I’m used to being alone, maybe I don’t want to be part of anyone’s life. Maybe I just really want to be on my own."

Considering Maca’s own life experiences with loss, it makes sense that she has struggled. She lost her father at age 7 and saw her mother radically altered. In her relationship with her mother, she experienced physical and emotional abuse. Then, at an early age, she heard the story of her mother’s life which featured many losses. The story of Maca’s marriage appears to suggest that relationships are painful and involve giving but never receiving love. Her friendship with Peter was the most loving connection she has ever experienced yet it did not develop into a permanent relationship. Then she lost Peter. Thus both of Maca’s significant relationships with men are characterized by incompletion.

There is considerable parallelism between Maca’s relationship stories and the family story about her mother. Maca’s mother’s story is the story of two love relationships: one painful, the second redemptive. Maca’s two major relationships have been similar. Her marriage was characterized by conflict and her husband’s cruelty. Her relationship with Peter, though not a marriage, offered her the love and validation she was looking for. Maca’s mother found and experienced love, then she lost it when her
husband died. Maca lost the most important person in the world when Peter died. Her
mother remained alone and bitter for the rest of her life; Maca feels very alone now that
Peter has died and she has been struggling with depression. Maca stated in our second
interview that now, more than ever, she understands her mother’s pain after the death of
her husband. She also comprehends her mother’s strength and bravery in being able to
carry on. Maca feels she also has this strength.

The difference between the stories and Maca’s life is that she is not her mother.
She still yearns for a relationship that is as fulfilling as that of her parents’ marriage.
She is not resigned to a life of solitude. This is where the sense of hope that Maca takes
from the family stories is apparent. It seems that her life will remain incomplete until
she finds this relationship.

In addition to a relationship legacy, Maca’s family stories also propose a family
stance towards life. This stance suggests that kindness towards others (goodness) is the
model to adopt in life. Throughout the family stories, this is where the positive emphasis
is placed. Clearly, Maca’s father as a model of these qualities was, and continues to be,
someone she strongly identifies with via the stories. "Well it’s interesting when I think
back remembering my parents, I spent most of my life with my mother, but I most often
think of my father. I remember him more (crying) and wish he was around more."

Her father’s qualities appear to be those that Maca has based her own life upon,
yet she is not consciously aware that she follows his example. Maca stated that she has
tried to live her life by being as good and compassionate as possible. She has a wide
circle of friends, amongst whom she is known as somebody who is generous and kind.
In her marriage, she was the one who was perpetually giving. As she says, "That’s all
there is ... I mean we're going to exit one day. The only thing that counts is the memories, what we leave behind, not material things."

The ability to forgive is proposed as one of the essential dimensions of the family stance. Forgiveness is a strong theme in her mother's story. When she marries Maca's father he forgives her for her difficult past. At the end of her life, Maca's mother is able to forgive everybody. In Maca's own life, the family stories helped her to understand and thus forgive her mother for her abusive behaviour. As she stated "if we can't forgive, what else do we have?"

The family stories suggest, however, that sometimes goodness is not valued, or is misunderstood. This is apparent when Maca's father is accused of collaboration, in spite of being so helpful. Here is a situation where the family stance is directly challenged. According to Stone, (1988) all families tell stories about survival, about some sort of encounter with the enemy which threatens the family. Here, it seems that the importance of goodness as a way to be in the world is what is being threatened. "Whatever or whoever the enemy, the family stories offer an approach to survival, a strategy that seems almost designed to have an application beyond the particular dramatic moment" (p. 136).

The enemy, therefore, is injustice perpetrated by those who seemed blind to this man's goodness and his many wartime contributions. In fact, the story suggests that injustice actually killed Maca's father. Finding himself helpless in the face of such blatant injustice, his stance was to give up. Her mother's story also details the various forms that injustice takes, whether it is suicide or being forced to give up an illegitimate child.
Injustice is a particularly sensitive issue in Maca's life. In interactions with her daughter, she is careful not to wrongly accuse her daughter of anything because she knows how painful this can be. According to Maca "if someone misunderstands and thinks I've done something I haven't done it really bothers me." Her ex-husband was a "specialist" in this. He seemed to take perverse pleasure in accusing her of doing wrong. Maca found this to be terribly upsetting. In her marriage, Maca's kindness did not pay off. She was mistreated and taken advantage of.

If goodness and helping others is the family stance, and injustice the enemy, then what is the proposed solution to injustice? One solution is to give in and give up, as Maca’s father did. Injustice killed him. His wife, however, fights back and challenges the government on her husband’s behalf. In the end, his name is cleared. So another proposed solution to injustice is not giving up and continuing to fight. Maca’s mother’s story details her struggles to keep going, to survive in the face of the many injustices that life presented her with. She did not follow her lover’s path (suicide); instead she kept striving.

As a principle of living, the story themes may be stated as: Helping others and being kind and loving are the ways to live life. There is always hope that good will outweigh bad in life. However, there are those who will at times judge you or misunderstand your actions. When this happens it is important to keep struggling for what is right.

This guideline has influenced Maca. From her father she appears to have adopted the model of loving kindness; from her mother the strength to keep going no matter what. Maca often wonders how she’s made it this far in life: "I really wonder how I ever
get here? Must be something inside me, my father's part, but if this popular myth of how your parents brought you up is true, I would have been in Gochav [psychiatric institution] the way our mother was."

Although her mother serves as a model of strength, Maca sometimes worries about the other side to her mother, namely her abusive behaviour. Maca is concerned that at times she resembles her mother in dealings with her daughter. "I say unfortunately because she was quick in judgement and I tend to do that. As I get older it seems like it's getting worse." Although Maca has always refused to use any physical punishment, her daughter does accuse her of nagging and this is something Maca wants to work on. She asked for a referral for counselling at the end of our interviews. I referred her to an agency which serves families as her request was concerning parenting issues. Counselling may also help to reinforce the strengths that Maca has as a parent and the ways that she is different from her mother.
"All families' story structures have both bright, open spaces and places no one likes to talk about, dark corners no one visits" (Foster, 1993, p. 191).

Ellen, 40, is a single parent. She has a teenaged son and a 6 year old daughter. Ellen is currently employed on a part-time basis as a counsellor with a program that teaches parenting skills for high risk families. Ellen has a matter of fact way of speaking and delivered her family stories in a similar style.

Ellen is the youngest of three daughters. She described life in her family as quite "dead." It was as though there was no room for feelings to be expressed in the family. During her childhood, Ellen remembers neither closeness nor conflict. The family seemed to go through the motions, carrying out routines, but everything real was "pushed beneath the surface."

To illustrate the way that her family submerged anything of importance, Ellen told the story of her cousin coming to stay with the family when Ellen was 10 or 11. Her cousin lived in a small town outside of Vancouver and had come to the city to attend university. One day he borrowed the family car, drove to the Fraser Canyon and
jumped, killing himself. Ellen remembers her parents commenting that he had not returned home and wondering where he was. Then the police came to the house because they had found the body. This alerted Ellen to the fact that something significant had happened. Then Ellen’s uncle, the boy’s father, came to visit and this was more like a tea party.

What strikes Ellen as an adult about this event is the way that her parents responded. Both parents seemed to be devoid of any emotion. They remained calm and didn’t seem to feel "the enormousness" of the situation. They treated the suicide like it was just a little ripple. Nobody explained what had happened to Ellen. She had to put together the pieces and figure it out for herself.

Neither of Ellen’s parents were very good at relating to children. Her father was often away, and her mother suffered from depression. Ellen described herself as a fairly neglected child. "I don’t remember being held or hugged or tucked into bed." Rituals that would be normal in most families, such as bedtime stories, did not exist in her family. Ellen commented "it’s kind of hard for me to know about myself as a child. I don’t have a real clear picture." She does remember that she was incredibly shy.

Ellen has a clearer picture of what it was like being a teenager in her family. She didn’t relate to either of her parents; they simply provided her with food and clothing. "As far as I’m concerned they didn’t parent me when I was a teenager. I lived on my own, I was drinking and doing drugs and not going to school and there were no consequences, there was no connection around anything." Ellen described her relationships with her parents as very cut-off at that time, although her parents probably thought they were doing what parents should do. "When I look back now I see myself as
just floundering around . . . having no connections with my family at all and not being parented, not having anybody to talk to. I didn’t talk about my relationships. I didn’t talk about anything."

Ellen’s family does not have a strong storytelling tradition. She described her family as "close mouthed" and stated that there have been no family storytellers amongst her ancestors. Ellen heard both of her significant family stories when she was a teenager. The following family story was definitely the most powerful one for her. The story is about her father’s two older brothers, Jake and Darren.

Well what happened was that Darren was married (to Rita) and Jake came and stayed with Darren and his wife. This is during the time of the second World War and Darren went off to war and Jake didn’t. Darren came back from the war and Jake and Rita were together and Darren was out. So Darren went off and married somebody else and they lived their lives together and had kids. Jake and Rita had two children and then Jake went off and married somebody else and proceeded to have more children.

A simple enough story as Ellen told it, but the consequences for two generations have been painful. The poignant ending of the story is that the brothers never spoke again. Although this does not appear in the text of the story above, Ellen emphasized it throughout the interview. Clearly for her this is the ending of the story.

Ellen first heard the story when she was 13 or 14, and it was her mother who told the story. The setting for the telling of the story was not clear to Ellen, although she believes that she and her mother were sitting in the kitchen. She has no recollection of what led to the telling of the story but surmises that either she asked a question or her mother decided it was time for her to know. Ellen remembers asking her mother why she had never been told the story previously. Her mother responded "well, you weren’t
old enough to know." Although the setting and reason for telling the story are fuzzy, the tale itself is crystal clear for Ellen.

Ellen believes that her mother told the story to explain why certain family members didn’t get together, but for Ellen the point of the story was that her family was close-mouthed and secretive. The attitude towards the story within Ellen’s nuclear family appears to be one of shame and secrecy. This story was not openly acknowledged in the family even though its impact had rippled throughout the entire extended family.

The story was very significant for Ellen: "it made me start to look and add things together; it was really a beginning point of unraveling . . . family dysfunction."

Previously Ellen had believed that her family was "normal" in every sense of the word. Learning about such dishonesty between two brothers and the resulting divorces shattered the illusion that hers was an ordinary family. As a child, Ellen remembers spending time with each of her uncles and their families separately but never seeing them together. This seemed normal and she never questioned the arrangement until she was told the family story. Hearing the story shocked and angered her. She began to more carefully examine her family and she began questioning: "well what else have you been hiding; what other things have been going on that you haven’t been telling me about?" From this point on, Ellen became aware that there were things going on in the family which she couldn’t see. It was difficult for her to figure out what was happening.

The story is symbolic for Ellen. She says the story illustrates the close-mouthed nature of her family; they don’t communicate or work out problems. Instead, amongst the extended family, tremendous bitterness and anxiety have resulted from the story. Rita
felt angry towards both brothers and refused to allow her children to see their father (Jake). The children, in turn, have carried on the tension and animosity.

For Ellen, the meaning of the story is that "family is important and [the story] was a very good example of how not to be. Very good example because it affected a whole family, it affected many generations." Ellen does not identify with any of the characters in this family story. She feels that everybody mishandled the situation. Ellen does not identify with Rita, who when abandoned cut off the rest of the family, including Ellen’s parents who she had been very close to. Ellen also does not relate to the way the brothers handled things. In Jake’s case he remarried and didn’t see his children again for years. Ellen could never do something like that. Jake also chose not to resolve the relationship with his brother. Darren left to remarry and also did not make the effort to reconnect with his brother. Ellen could "never have left it like that."

The two brothers are now dead. They were not able to reconcile, or in Ellen’s words "there was no family getting together happy ever after." Ellen sees the consequences for the children of the two brothers. "All the important things that have happened in all the kids’ lives the parents have not been there, they have not been able to reconnect." More recently, family get togethers have included everyone so the adult children of the two brothers have had an opportunity to get to know each other. Unfortunately none of them like each other very much. They appear to be carrying on the old animosities.

The story comes to mind fairly often for Ellen, especially when the extended family meets. Recently, the story resurfaced during Ellen’s father’s funeral. The entire extended family was present. Ellen’s teenaged nieces, who have heard the story over the
years, were attempting to retell the story fitting faces to the characters. Ellen found it very comical because her nieces had the story so badly confused. The story was again recounted by the adults present. Ellen believes that the story is still significant and here was an example of it unfolding yet again.

The second family story comes from Ellen's mother's side of the family. Ellen heard this story when she was 15 years old as she and her parents were driving to Vancouver Island after her grandfather's death. The trip was for the purpose of collecting her grandfather's belongings, but instead of going to the home he shared with her grandmother they went to another home. As a result of Ellen's confusion and questioning, the following story emerged from her mother, who was in tears as she recounted it.

_Hope was my mother's piano teacher who actually came and lived with them when she (mother) was a kid (9 years) and that's why she's always hated the piano and music because of this woman that came and became a mistress to her father. I don't know how long she stayed there but she moved into her own place and he had a little house out the back and that was sort of like his place. My grandparents hadn't been speaking for their whole lives to each other, they stayed together, lived in the same house. He sort of supported her, he was not very nice to her. My mom when she was a teenager tended to sort of look after her mom and do things with her, she felt sorry for her._

Ellen remembers feeling surprised by this story. She began to deluge her parents with questions but she was immediately hushed up. Her parents did not want to discuss much about her grandfather's mistress. Clearly the story aroused a great deal of pain for Ellen's mother, and in retrospect Ellen acknowledges that she didn't understand the depth of that pain.

Again, for Ellen, the story explained things she had taken for granted as normal while growing up. For example, her grandparents always visited separately. Ellen had
never thought it odd that they didn't speak to each other at all and seemed to live separate lives while existing together in the same house. She just assumed that they were independent people and that this was how all grandparents behaved. Ellen expressed consternation over their silent relationship: "It was . . . totally shocking that . . . they hadn't been speaking for their whole lives to each other."

Ellen was dumbfounded that this big secret had been going on since her mother was 9 years old and nobody had ever explained it to her! Ellen commented that this story is a mirror of the first and truly indicates the bizarre families that she comes from. The message for her in the story centres upon the secrecy and the pain for both her mother and grandmother.

Ellen has a second reaction to the story and it is laughter! When asked why, she couldn't really clarify the source of the laughter but it appears this may reflect her unique response to secrecy. Rather than accepting the family cloak of shame, she laughs openly, suggesting an orientation to the story which may differ from the other family members. In part, Ellen laughs over the "bizarreness" of the reality of the stories, and in part she appears to be laughing at herself because she was so completely fooled by the guise of normalcy.

In particular, Ellen appears to relate to her grandmother's situation in the story: "her pain and not being able to divorce him and go on to a happier kind of existence. Whether or not that's even true I don't know, but I put that upon her that it must have been pretty difficult." Ellen also considers the impact of this story in terms of parenting. This situation must have influenced her grandmother's parenting of Ellen's mother, which in turn would have affected the way Ellen herself was parented.
Ellen also identifies strongly with her mother's "sadness and aloneness" in the second story. Her mother was just a child, yet she had to live in an oppressive environment where nobody spoke openly and the big secret was everpresent. Ellen believes the aftermath of the story had a big impact upon her mother. "My mom has been a fairly cut-off person in relationships in her life and from fulfilling her life. She tends to be quite isolated."

In fact, when Ellen considers her mother's side of the family, she sees a pattern of disconnection. Her mother has two brothers. Both brother have children who are not at all close to their parents. One of Ellen's uncles was in a logging accident, resulting in brain damage. He now lives in a group home. Ellen's mother has had no contact with her brother because she has been unable to deal with her feelings around his being brain damaged. Ellen's family has had no contact with this man's wife and two children. As Ellen said of the theme of disconnection "we're all just chop chop."

Ellen still has many questions about the second story. Where is Hope? What was she like? What became of her? Ellen has thought about the story often since hearing it. The story "is not something that sinks away." It is still very much alive.

For Ellen, the family stories represent the tip of a very large iceberg. The stories were the end products of complex relationships. "[The stories] are such big mysteries to me and they sort of still feel that way." These family tales have instilled in Ellen a burning curiosity about what shaped her ancestors. What was the story of her grandmother's life? What were her grandparents like when they were young? Did they have a fight which led them to stop talking? What was the relationship like between the two brothers? How did they grow up together? Ellen would love to know more about
the details of the relationships within the family, however she admits "I won't know what they are because people have died and their stories have gone with them, or they wouldn't talk about it anyway." It seems that Ellen is the family member who holds the greatest curiosity and interest in the details of the family relationships.

Ellen has used her family stories as cautionary tales. For her they convey strong messages about how not to live life. She remembers consciously thinking that she would be different; she would never want to replicate the secrecy, lack of communication or cut-offs.

Ellen specifically reacts against the way that children were ignored within the stories. She feels very angry about the way secrecy was used to keep children on the outside. "As a parent . . . you just don’t do things like that to kids, you tell them what’s going on!" Ellen feels strongly that children deserve to be included in family matters, not kept apart from them.

It seems that Ellen has confronted many of the family values represented by these stories. First, she was a curious and questioning child and teenager. Hearing these two stories she determined to ask even more questions in future because clearly there was more to discover. So rather than adhere to the family code of secrecy, Ellen questioned and wanted to talk about things. She has shared both of these stories with friends when discussions turn to family skeletons, indicating an openness and curiosity rather than a need to keep secrets. Clearly Ellen is comfortable talking about herself: "I could say quite a bit about myself and my family without being too bothered about it." Ellen is able to laugh at the second story. She’s not sure why, but there appears to be a part of
her that can't believe the lengths people in her family would go to to avoid dealing with problems.

If Ellen had never heard the family stories she feels that she would still be puzzled by the mystery of her ancestor's behaviour. "Knowing the stories gave me an opportunity to understand why people did what they did." Without the stories, Ellen would not have had an explanation, and she believes she may have unknowingly re-enacted many of the family patterns of disconnection.

Turning to Ellen's own life story, she described the many challenges she has faced. When she was 23, she became pregnant with her son. Although not married at the time, eventually she did marry the father of her child who was an alcoholic. The marriage was full of disappointments. Ellen described her excitement in bringing their baby home from the hospital and her wish that together she and her husband could unwrap their child and admire him together. Instead her husband was out at the bar. Ellen's approach to her husband's alcohol abuse was to try and talk about it. "I wanted to talk about what was going on, I wanted to... know what was happening with him... want[ed] to be honest about how he was feeling, about what was going on with him. That was what felt important at the time."

When the child was 9 months old, Ellen's husband became violent on one occasion. "Just before I left him he hit me and he grabbed me by the arm and he tossed me and I bammed into the wall and that was it for me and I was out of there." Ellen and her husband went for counselling for a brief period because she wanted to resolve things, but this was unsuccessful.
Ellen remembers thinking that she could not handle the end of her marriage in the family style, by either cutting her husband off or retreating into silence. "I . . . didn’t know what to do with all of these feeling I was having. [I] couldn’t cut it off, couldn’t push it under, and if it couldn’t get resolved . . . then I couldn’t stay there and I left."

Ellen went to stay with her parents during this time and "drove her family nuts" with her need to talk and process her experiences. "I can . . . get this picture of it now that I haven’t had before where . . . they’re living their quiet little life and not really discussing things and . . . I’m going to talk about this horrible horrendous big scene that I’m in." Her parents didn’t seem to know what to do with her. This experience emphasized for Ellen the ways that she is different from her family members. She has always felt compelled to deal with difficult situations, while her family strives to ignore whatever is going on.

After the separation, Ellen believed that she would probably have no further contact with her in-laws. "When I first split up with him I expected and I didn’t know at the time why, I expected that his family wouldn’t talk to me. I was so surprised when one sister came over to see me and his mother would phone, and they were all very warm. It took me a while to accept it." In retrospect, Ellen realizes that she anticipated being cut-off, just as those in the family stories had been. It was a surprise to be treated differently by her in-laws.

Ellen discovered that there were things she needed to learn once her son became a toddler. She was fine with providing the physical care for her child, but once her son was a little older, Ellen found she didn’t know how to be in a relationship with him. "As soon as D. started being a person why that’s when I just . . . didn’t know what to
do, . . . I didn’t know how to be." Ellen believes that her own experiences as a child in her family did not teach her about being in relationships. While her parents provided physical care, they didn’t seem to know how to build a loving relationship with Ellen. Her first big fight with her son occurred because he didn’t want to take his coat off when he came indoors and Ellen thought he should. There began to be many struggles where both Ellen and her son would end up in tears. These struggles confused Ellen. "That’s what led me to eventually get some help because I couldn’t figure out what was going on behind these big struggles."

Ellen decided to see a therapist, however this was something nobody in her family had ever done before so there was a tremendous stigma for her in undertaking the work. Therapy helped her begin to understand the world of feelings and provided her with information about her child’s developmental stages and behaviour. Ellen also began to unravel some of her family patterns. Ellen admits that one of her biggest challenges in life has been to try and maintain a good relationship with her son. She definitely believes that cutting him off or using silence would not have been helpful. Presently they have a close relationship.

Ellen lived on her own for a number of years and eventually went back to school. She trained as a teacher, but discovered she didn’t fit very well within the school system. So Ellen asked herself what other skills she had that she could use. "I began to realize that all those years of . . . therapy and workshops and all the stuff I’d done for my own self to change my family patterns, that that was something I could sell." This led Ellen to begin working in the social services field. Eventually she was hired at the parenting program where she has worked for the past four years.
Six years ago Ellen began another relationship and had a second child. This relationship was very conflictual. For Ellen, much of the conflict arose from an inability to communicate about their differences. "I didn’t know how to keep on going in a relationship when I couldn’t resolve something." Her partner would expect that an argument would just stop and then everything would go back to normal. Ellen was not comfortable pretending everything was fine. "I remember thinking to myself how can I go on and . . . make dinner and be chatty and warm and friendly? I don’t know how to do that!"

Ellen remembers experiencing a feeling of betrayal in this relationship. "I really wanted this happy little family, I had really wanted it. I was shocked to find out that he didn’t want to do it the way that I wanted to do it." The theme of the happy family is one that was repeated often throughout the interviews. Over the years, Ellen has developed an expectation for what family should be like that is actually the complete opposite of her own family experiences. She reacted strongly to family life as portrayed in her family stories. "It was so bad, it’s like I’ve got to go totally off the map to make it so different." Ellen remembers looking at the models in the stories and deciding "I’m not going to have my life like that, I’m going to have the Waltons!"

All her life Ellen has yearned for a family experience reminiscent of the Waltons. This yearning feels like a child’s yearning to Ellen. She recognizes that so much was missing from her family of origin and believes that all her life she has been looking for ways to experience family closeness. But in spite of the yearning for closeness, it has always been a struggle for Ellen to remain connected with people. Recently, Ellen ran into her ex-husband’s sister at a shopping mall. Over the years, Ellen has had little
contact with this woman but when they said goodbye, the woman referred to Ellen as "auntie Ellen" in front of her young children. "I just about fell out of my shoes, I couldn't believe it . . . I mean they're all very friendly and warm with me and . . . they're calling me part of their family! And I don't reciprocate."

While Ellen longs for family connection, at the same time she seems to keep her distance from people who might offer her more. She is unsure why she keeps her distance. In part she tells herself it is because these people have different values and lifestyles than she does. Yet Ellen feels guilty for not involving herself more with those who she could be close to. This also applies to her immediate family. Her oldest sister has three teenagers and Ellen blames herself for not being more of a "good aunt." She pictures in her mind the ideal aunt figure who has money and lots of interesting possessions and maintains great relationships with her nieces and nephews, taking them out for dinners and movies.

Ellen sees the discrepancy between her desire for closeness and the reality. She admits that perhaps the Waltons would be too much closeness. "I think I don't know what real is. Maybe I'm living it." Currently, Ellen places herself somewhere in the middle between the Waltons' version of closeness and her own family experiences of distance.

As Ellen emphatically states "I do have relationships with [people]." This is different from her family style. To illustrate the way that she is involved with people, Ellen gave the example of her father-in-law dying. Ellen was there the day he died, sharing in the family grieving. She felt that it was important for her to be there, rather than avoiding the sadness as her family would have done. Ellen also described the
relationship she has formed with a close friend who has children. The two families spend holidays together and have known each other for years. This seems to be one place where Ellen experiences a family kind of closeness. She admits that it has been easier for her to establish closeness in friendships than it has been with her family.

In the area of parenting Ellen has been very dedicated, working hard to put her children first. She admits that she had no role models to follow in terms of parenting, so she has worked hard to invent her own version of parenting. Unlike her own experiences as a child, it seems she has made every effort to be open with her children about their family history. Ellen does not want to have to hide things from her children. She feels strongly that secrecy is not healthy.

Ellen described her father's death a year ago. She wanted to give her children opportunities to be involved. Her daughter was then 5. Ellen asked her daughter if she would like to see her grandfather once he died, feeling that she wouldn't want to deny her daughter this experience. "I didn't want the death to be in any way . . . swept under the carpet, that's what happened in my family is somebody's died and you're told about it later or if you're told about it it's like there's going to be no acknowledgement, there's going to be no service, you don't see the person again, it's just like death means nothing." Ellen's approach to her father's death reflects an essential component of her approach towards life. "I guess that's . . . my way of dealing with life is that I'd rather have it be a bit painful at the moment and let it be real and have a chance to deal with it." Ellen feels angered by secrecy and admitted that she tends to want to preach to people about how dangerous secrets are. There is a sense that Ellen is not afraid to look into the dark places and confront pain.
Yet secrecy has been an issue for Ellen in that she has not told her son what prompted her to leave his father. "I've never told D. that and I've really tossed that around and then it sort of sinks into the back of my head. I mean that really is the one thing that I haven't known how to deal with. You know when he was little you don't tell a 6 or 7 year old that your father beat me. I don’t know how to deal with that, I'm still not sure. I probably could now that it’s come up for me again, I think that maybe it's something I could sit down and tell him in an o.k. way." This appears to be one area where Ellen has replicated the family code of secrecy. She acknowledges that she has not known how to speak of this matter and so has remained silent.

Ellen contrasts herself with her ancestors in the family stories. While her ancestors reacted to betrayal through silence or cutting people off, Ellen has found herself unable to replicate this method of coping. Instead she has had to learn a different approach. "I . . . have a real expectation of honesty . . . and maybe I go too far with that I mean I expect that people say . . . what's going on for them, what they're thinking about." Honesty is something Ellen has to have in her relationships. She taught her daughter at age 4 that if she didn’t feel like talking to somebody that was fine, but it was not o.k. to simply become silent and ignore the other person. Her daughter learned to explain to people that she didn’t feel like talking at that moment. Ellen described her shock when she was visiting her sister 6 years ago and her sister asked her husband a question. He responded by ignoring his wife completely. For Ellen this behaviour would be unacceptable in a relationship, yet her sister seems to put up with it.

Ellen notes that her family stories are not really about love. She believes that her ancestors probably got together for other reasons and this has characterized her own
relationships. "I know D.'s father and I didn't get together because there was this grand love feeling, it was more for me a place of safety but you know that's what I needed, I needed to be cared about, I needed a relationship, I needed a father for my kid. I convinced myself that I loved him."

Ellen has not had good experiences in relationships with men and she worries that she may never find a partner who values openness, honesty, and communication as much as she does. "I don't believe . . . that a male would have the same values as I in this area." So Ellen is left with the yearning for closeness and connection in a relationship but she has little hope that she will ever find it. In both of her previous relationships Ellen risked closeness and ended up being hurt. She says "maybe that's why I'm still alone, because I don't want to risk."

Over the years, Ellen has struggled with feeling like an "alien" within her own family. She has no idea how she ended up being so different. To this day, attending family gatherings is painful because the relationships are so far removed from the way she strives to live her life. She disagrees with the way children are treated, she sees how her married sisters put up with unacceptable behaviour from their husbands.

According to Ellen "it has been a real struggle to be different" from her family members, yet her life is as different as could be. Both of her sisters are in quite traditional marriages. They live in nice homes in the suburbs and stay home with their children. Ellen finds it hard not to compare herself with her two sisters, who seem so apparently "successful." Yet as Ellen admits, unlike her sisters, her energy has not gone into accumulating material possessions.
Ellen has dedicated herself over the years to working on her self. Her goals have been "education, therapy and . . . raising my children." She appears to be the member of the family who is the most introspective. She has been seeking answers to questions such as: Who am I? What am I about? How did my family influence me? How can I be a better parent to my kids?

When asked to comment upon the experience of participating in the research, Ellen said, "there's far more there than I thought when I first talked to you . . . I hadn't looked at this stuff in very much depth . . . I'd looked at it as secrets and cutting off but I just hadn't taken it very much further." Ellen felt surprised that a seemingly insignificant story such as the one about the two brothers could have such an influence upon her. For a long time, the story was not known to her and was never openly discussed, yet she sees that it influenced her in a big way.

In particular, Ellen found it helpful to explore the relationship between her anxiety and guilt over not having closer family connections and the stories. This was an area that she felt she needed to do more thinking about after the interview. Ellen expressed surprise at some of the discoveries she made during the course of the research. The research emphasized just how different Ellen is from her family members. Although she has always felt different, the interviews seemed to give her a framework for understanding in what ways she is different and why that matters. In the past Ellen had already spent considerable time examining her family background, so to discover that there was more she hadn't seen interested her. "It's quite amazing really . . . what you can get from a couple of little stories."
Interpretive Comments

As an interviewee, I found Ellen to be candid and possessed of a dry sense of humour. My initial reactions to Ellen's family stories were telling. I felt that perhaps there was not enough for me to use. I reacted to the brevity, lack of drama, and the bare bones style in which the stories were told. Then I began to feel the undercurrents within the stories. So much of the power and meaning are implied and unspoken. My experience of the stories seemed to mirror Ellen's experiences within her family of origin. Just as she began to realize there was more lurking beneath the surface of the family facade, so I began to feel that these brief stories represented much more than they at first seemed to.

The more Ellen talked about her family, the more excited I became because it all made sense. To Ellen these were powerful stories. The stories are situated in her life and the life of her immediate and extended family. It is only through situating these stories that their importance became evident. As the interviewer I experienced the importance of the stories as the contextual web unfolded.

In my conversation with Ellen, I stated that "through the story as the vehicle I feel like I take a step into people's families." But the story alone does not explain all; in conversation with the co-researcher meaning becomes clear.

Story interpretation. What is noticeable about the first story is its brevity and the lack of any descriptive detail. This is a story that is all plot, with a clear progression from beginning to quite a different end. There is much in the story that is implied and left to the listener's imagination.
It is interesting to note that the point of view from which the story is told is not attached to any one character. This is not Darren's story, from his perspective, nor is it Rita's or Jake's. This contributes to the sense that in the story everybody is involved and everybody loses in some way.

The characters in the story are not developed. The story is told through plot and the actions of each character. The listener has no idea what Rita was like, in fact her character appears to serve more as a foil to illuminate the conflict between the two brothers. All that is known of the two brothers is that one went to war, thus was doing his duty and presumably entrusted his wife to his brother. The second brother, Jake, by implication has done wrong. He has broken a trust and betrayed his brother, however there is no overt development of his character beyond simple actions and implication. The point most strongly emphasized about the characters of the two brothers is their silence and severing of contact at the end of the story.

The beginning point for this family story is with normalcy. Darren is married and his brother comes to live with he and his wife. The middle of the story features a betrayal: Darren goes to war while his brother enters a relationship with his wife. The ending of the story explains that the brothers never speak again and both eventually move on to other relationships.

From beginning to end of the story we have a complete reversal. The story adheres to a regressive narrative pattern (Gergen, 1985). From helping a family member and sticking together in the beginning, the story moves quickly to the severing of family ties. The flow is from connection to disconnection. The middle of the story explains how this could happen. One brother and the wife betrayed the absent brother.
The ending of the story is powerful and seems to suggest several things. There is a sense in the story that while the brothers will never forgive each other, they will get on with life and have other relationships. Things on one level will work out, but on another they will never be resolved or forgotten. The other point seems to be that nobody wins. According to Ellen, Rita to this day remains bitter towards both brothers, the brothers never did mend their differences, and their children interact with bitterness and animosity.

The story resonates with an age old theme, the rupture of a relationship between two brothers. In this sense the story is a tragedy. Ellen did not tell the story as a great romantic love story between Rita and Jake. In fact love was not the emphasis at all. Ironically in the end neither brother ends up with the woman; the real tragedy appears to be the loss of connection between the brothers.

There is plenty of implied pain in this story, but it is all beneath the surface. Another family may have emphasized the sense of grief and loss experienced as a result of the betrayal. Ellen's family story, however, is a story devoid of direct feeling. The listener must add his or her own feeling interpretation.

The principle of living for this family story seems to be: those you trust most (family) can really hurt you and the way to respond is by severing ties. The point is also that the way to respond to hurt and betrayal is not through love, communication, and problem resolution, it is through cut-offs.

The second story is also short and to the point with no extraneous details (other than the metanarration explaining Ellen's mother's lifelong hatred of pianos as a result of the relationship between her father and piano teacher). Again the story illustrates a clear
beginning, middle, and end in terms of plot line. The story begins with a normal enough situation: a family with a 9 year old child hires a teacher to provide piano lessons. This teacher comes to live in their home. The middle of the story is the affair. The child is hurt, as is her mother, when father and the piano teacher have an affair. The end of the story is the ongoing affair and the parents never speaking again but continuing the appearance of a marriage.

There is a remarkable contrast between the beginning and end of the story. Once again, the story follows a regressive narrative structure (Gergen, 1985). The story moves from a family providing an opportunity for their child, to a pretence that all is still normal in the family, when in fact it is not. The charade of normalcy appears to have high costs.

Who is the story really about? Hope seems to be on the outside. The point of view of the story appears to belong to the wife and daughter. The story is not told from the husband's perspective. The listener does not really know what this situation was like for him; we do sense the pain of mother and daughter.

Once again the characters in the story are not fully developed. There is, however, a victim and a wrongdoer. Grandmother is portrayed as the one wronged and grandfather as stubbornly maintaining his lifelong liaison with Hope. Hope is not developed at all other than playing the role of other woman.

The principle of living in this story seems to be: the way to respond to hurt and betrayal is to carry on as though everything were normal while living in angry silence. But all is not normal and there remains a punishing undercurrent: the parents entered a
cold war where they cut each other off without actually divorcing. As a principle of living, the idea of carrying on no matter what would have consequences.

**Story comparison.** The convergence between Ellen’s two significant family stories is striking, especially since they come from both maternal and paternal family histories. Both stories are brief, almost like fragments. Both stories indicate strong thematic parallelism. Each story begins with a normal enough family situation. This normalcy is dramatically altered through marital affairs. Both stories involve the triangles of husband, wife and lover. The roles are parallel between the two stories. Each story contains a victim who is betrayed and wronged. In the first story it is the returning soldier, while in the second it is the wife. Each story also has a person who plays the betrayer. In the first story it is the brother Jake and also the wife, in the second it is grandfather. The underlying message appears clear: relationships can hurt and lead to betrayal and loss.

Both stories end with life carrying on, but it is anything but normal. Beneath the facade of normal family life there remains bitterness, pain and hurt. So there appears to be a value in both families in carrying on, but there will be unfinished business. In my journal I wrote: "In this family, people hold onto things: grudges, resentments, sometimes over a lifetime, or these become a legacy passed on to the next generation."

Both stories suggest that the strategy for dealing with betrayal is through silence and cutting off. The two stories appear to be variations on the same theme. In the first story there is a physical split; in the second story it is a psychological split underlying a facade of normalcy. Maintaining silence appears to be the agreed upon manner for
responding to hurt. The opposite direction would be forgiveness. There is nothing of forgiveness in either story. This does not appear to be the family way.

Secrecy is another feature of both stories which was readily identified by Ellen. Things were truly not what they seemed in either situation. It was the secret contained in the stories that exposed the truth. So there are suggestions that one must accept what one sees as normal and not talk openly about the real story. Ellen used the word "normal" frequently throughout our interviews. Both stories destroyed her notion of normalcy, replacing it with an understanding of dishonesty and secrecy unmasked. It is intriguing that just as silence appears to be the outcome in each story, silence also cloaked Ellen’s nuclear family and prevented these two stories from being freely shared.

There appears to be a large and overarching theme that both of these family stories tap into. It concerns the cost of relationships. It seems that for this family, there is a legacy of shame and betrayal around relationships. The stories suggest that relationships hurt and can lead to great suffering.

**Integrating the co-researcher’s life experiences with the family stories.** Ellen is a person who is very introspective about her family of origin. Therapy, education, having her own children, and teaching parenting skills, have all expanded Ellen’s perspectives on family. In spite of her previous awareness, the research gave Ellen new information about herself as she discovered the many threads that connect her life with her family stories. The research seemed to magnify the ways in which she is different from her family. Prior to the interviews, Ellen had not realized how much she had confronted the family style. The research also helped Ellen to articulate her yearning for family connection and her anxiety when she doesn’t move towards greater connection.
Ellen's family stories are tales of secrecy, specifically featuring extramarital affairs. Sexual secrets are the most common form of secrecy in families (Mason, 1993). According to Imber-Black (1993)

Secrets are systemic phenomena. They are relational, shaping dyads, triangles, hidden alliances, splits, cut-offs, defining boundaries of who is 'in' and who is 'out,' and calibrating closeness and distance in relationships (p. 9).

Ellen's family developed certain agreed upon relational responses to the secrets contained within the stories. First the family seemed to respond with shame and silence. In this sense, the secrets may be described as "toxic secrets" (Imber-Black, 1993, p. 11) which erode relationships and engender debilitating symptoms. Second, it appears that adults in the family were allowed to be in on the secrets, but children were kept out. Imber-Black has discussed the degree of anxiety experienced by both those who are the secret keepers and those who are being kept out of the secrets. Ellen finally heard the stories as a teenager, when it seemed her parents could no longer keep the stories hidden. Her anxiety increased dramatically upon hearing the stories, as evidenced by the language she uses to describe her reactions: "bizarre, shocking, surprising, strange." Ellen certainly sensed her parent's discomfort in telling the stories.

Mason (1993) suggested that it is not so much the secret itself, but rather the family process around the event or experience that determines whether it becomes a secret. In fact, family storying may mediate the impact of the event, preventing it from becoming a secret. "If a family has a relatively open system — that is, its members are free to comment on what happened and pass it on through family stories — the family is less likely to become bound in shame" (p. 31). Unfortunately, Ellen's family did not use
storytelling as a resource to help them deal with the impact of the affairs. In fact, the family could be characterized as story impoverished. The stories that were told either leaked out or were forced to the surface.

Secrecy engenders an experience of shame for family members. Ellen’s family appears to adhere to many of the rules of a shame-bound family (Mason, 1993). The eight rules include: be in control of all behaviour and interactions; always be right and do the right thing; blame yourself or others if something doesn’t go well; deny all feelings, especially vulnerable ones; don’t expect reliability in relationships; don’t bring transactions to resolution; don’t talk openly; and when shameful behavior occurs, disqualify it, deny it, or disguise it.

Ellen’s family stories convey many of these rules. The shameful behaviour took the form of extramarital affairs which the extended family was very good at hiding. The stories feature relationship ruptures that were never resolved. Nobody seemed able to communicate openly about the difficulties they were experiencing. There was no room for feelings, instead all emotion was suppressed. The message about relationships is certainly that they are unreliable and hurtful.

The following familial orientation to living may be derived from Ellen’s family stories: Relationships can hurt. Normalcy and the appearance of normalcy are valued. Secrecy is acceptable. The truth is to be found beneath the surface. Pain is to be covered up and not dealt with. The only acceptable responses to pain are silence and cutting people off. After being hurt, people will carry on but there will always be unfinished business. Nobody wins; there will always be a cost.
Ellen attempted to directly challenge these values as a teenager and as an adult. Hearing the stories opened her eyes to the secrecy and suppression that characterized her family's style. She was astounded by the lengths people had gone to to avoid dealing with their problems. The stories served an essential function; they explained the family way. If Ellen had not heard the stories she would have been denied this very important piece of information. Once the stories were out, Ellen chose to react against what the stories represented. She resolved to live her life differently. Ellen has consciously used her family stories as examples of what not to do in life. This is the most obvious way that Ellen has utilized the stories. For her they offer warnings rather than models for replication.

According to Bauman (1986) "true anecdotes are told to keep us aware of the vulnerability of life as it really is and the capacity of speech both to make this vulnerability apparent and to bring it under control" (p. 77). These two family stories are indeed stories which illustrate vulnerability and pain, as well as a suggested way to manage and respond to such vulnerability. Ellen uses the stories to reinforce her own beliefs that there is another way to live life. The stories do seem to offer her a sense of control. She can pull out the stories and they make clear for her that she needs an alternate vision for her own life.

According to Cochran (1991, p. 28) a "plausible opposite" principle of living may be inferred when a moral ends negatively. Ellen's stories certainly do not contain happy endings. So it may be proposed that the operative principle of living for Ellen could be: when you have opened yourself up to somebody and they hurt or betray you, it is important not to deny the pain or to pretend nothing has happened and carry on.
Communicating and facing the situation openly are the ways to respond. Ellen concurred with this statement, saying that she does adhere to these beliefs in her own life. This statement is compatible with her earlier comment that she'd rather face painful situations and have a chance to try and deal with them. To her, this feels like the best way to handle pain.

As an adult, Ellen has worked hard in relationships to communicate honestly and to resolve difficulties. She refuses to ignore pain and instead seems determined to confront it face on. She maintains relationships with both of her ex-partners who are involved with her children. In therapy she has worked to understand her family history and her own feelings. Again, this is a way of directly confronting the family belief that all vulnerability must be suppressed. As a parent, Ellen has endeavoured to raise her children in a climate of openness, where they are respected and valued as equal members of the family. She has reversed the family pattern where children are overlooked and ignored. With her children, Ellen has refused for the most part to keep secrets. For example, she has openly discussed her ex-husband's alcoholism with her son since he was a small boy. As well, she has made every effort to share family stories with her children. In her work at a parenting program, Ellen helps parents to work through their pain in order to connect more appropriately with their own children.

Ellen’s stance in life, therefore, appears to be the opposite of the stances adopted by her ancestors. She has questioned where others have maintained silence. Ellen is a person who likes to figure things out. She is curious about all aspects of the family history, while the rest of the family seems to want to bury the past. Ellen tells stories where her family suppressed stories. In her relationships she has insisted upon honesty
and communication whereas those in her family cut their feelings off and ignored any relationship troubles. Ellen has worked to resolve relationship difficulties. Her family on the other hand, is more comfortable leaving things unfinished. Ellen struggles to maintain her connections with people while her family has chosen disconnection. Ellen has worked hard on herself, which contradicts the family edict against looking at oneself or one’s pain. Ellen puts her children first. This did not happen in her family or in the stories.

A prominent theme that emerged from the interviews is Ellen’s sense that she is very different from the rest of her family members. All her life she has asked why she is the one who is so different. The research interviews seemed to highlight the ways that she has chosen an alternative path. As a result of choosing to live her life in a different way, there now appears to be no place where she fits or belongs within her extended family. Ellen has refused to be loyal to the family values of secrecy and silence, instead she has had to develop her own unique response to life. Her family is not supportive of her way of doing things. In this sense, being different can at times feel like a curse.

Opting out of the shame bound family system has exacted a high price. Ellen has become an outcast seeking a place where she can belong. At times she feels uncertain about what is right. She seems to doubt her judgement and beliefs because she has nothing to measure them against. Part of the experience of feeling different is her yearning for connection, which she has been seeking all of her life. Yet as much as she wants connection, she also experiences ambivalence about how close to get to people. It is this ambivalence which mirrors her family context. Ellen seems to have absorbed the family discomfort with true intimacy. In both her relationships instead of connection she
experienced conflict and pain. This is one place where her life story and her family stories appear to overlap. Just as Ellen’s family stories do not feature love, her own relationships also seemed devoid of love. Ellen feels her relationships have taught her that she can be hurt. She remains sceptical that she will ever have a loving relationship with a man who values communication and honesty as much as she does.

On a covert level, this is one place where Ellen seems to be replicating some of the family story elements. While she does not want to be like her ancestors were in relationships, she doesn’t seem to know how to have a different kind of relationship, nor does she believe it is possible. Unfortunately, Ellen has had no models to draw upon as examples. If her family stories had been love stories with happy endings, perhaps Ellen would have received a different legacy, one that could guide her rather than constrain her and fill her with hopelessness.

Another place where there is convergence between Ellen’s life and her family stories concerns the significant secret she has kept from her son about his father’s violence. This seems to be one issue that Ellen has been able to ignore, much as her family ignored difficult situations. She has not known how to deal with revealing this painful secret. Once again, she does not have strong models to draw upon who could guide her.

While Ellen’s life has been an example of pioneering efforts to separate herself from her family legacy, she is not completely free from the influence of her family context. In her struggles to define how close she truly wants to be to people, she reflects the family anxiety around not getting too close. When she anticipated that her in-laws would cut her off after her separation, she was viewing the world through the family
lens. In her uncertainty about how and when to tell her son her secret, she echoes some
of the family shame around pain and discussing it. This illustrates that in as much as
Ellen has rejected her family approach to life, she is still in some ways under the
influence.

During the research interviews, Ellen became curious about how she could explore
family stories with adults in the parenting program where she works. Her concern was
that many of these families have histories of abuse and pain. Their family stories would
likely just echo their suffering. I suggested that Ellen think about eliciting stories of
pride so that these parents could have something to grasp onto rather than feel hopeless
about. In retrospect, it seems that Ellen is also lacking stories of pride from her own
family history. In a sense she is creating her own story of pride in the present. Her
children will have many stories to tell of a mother who is courageous in confronting life,
family patterns, and herself.
"The whole hero-life is shown to have been a pageant of marvels with the great central adventure as its culmination" (Campbell, 1943, p. 319).

John, 44, is married and has two children. John is a writer and researcher by profession and this was very much reflected in his style. He speaks precisely and eloquently about family history. Clearly he has given considerable thought to family stories over the years, and he is both curious and introspective about the meaning of family stories in his life.

John was born in Toronto in 1949. His mother had been working on a ship called the Neuronic at the time. "My birth in effect saved my mother's life because if she hadn't been in hospital giving birth to me she would have been on board the ship when it burned and sank and killed practically everybody!" John's father was a married man who refused to have any involvement with the child. The conventions of the day were to put children of single mothers up for adoption, but his mother refused to do this. She had led the life of a drifter, leaving behind a trail of failed businesses from a pet shop in England to a cafe in Uranium City, Saskatchewan. She had also experienced a number
of unhappy relationships. John was her way of proving to the world that she could accomplish something. She felt she could be proud of bringing a new person into the world.

John and his mother roomed with a kind family who took care of John during the day while his mother worked in a parking garage. Then, at night, she had a second job addressing envelopes by hand at home. Consequently John’s mother had very little time to spend with her child, which seemed to suit her. "On the one hand [she was] determined to see that I grew up and became successful, that she did something society would recognize, and at the same time she didn’t want to be the person to do it herself."

John’s earliest memories include those of his mother drinking a bottle a day of hard liquor, so in retrospect he feels it was "a gift . . . that she didn’t try to raise me herself. I think it would have made a real mess of things for her and for me." John’s mother eventually asked the family she roomed with to care for John. The arrangements were that she would pay his room and board; this would free her to go and work on the ships.

John was 6 months old when his mother, who was working at a holiday camp in the Bahamas, decided to swoop into town unannounced and take John to England. At the heart of this impulsive gesture was her desire for John’s grandmother or aunts and uncles to raise him in England. John’s mother felt he would receive a better upbringing overseas. The foster family was devastated but could take no action because they had not officially adopted John. John’s grandmother tentatively agreed to keep him, if his mother would also stay in England. However John’s mother refused and six months later she returned with John to Canada. The foster family was very reluctant to take John back
because they were afraid of being hurt a second time. John's mother promised never to take him away again. This is a story that John pieced together as an adult, but he feels subconsciously this experience of being uprooted must have had an impact upon him.

John had intermittent contact with his mother during the next 11 years of his life. "She was like a kindly aunt who visited three times a year at most, and who brought presents at birthdays and Christmas." Life with his foster family was very comfortable. John never remembers the family lying to him about his mother and he was treated at all times like an equal member of the household.

The family belonged to the working class. John's foster mother had little education and when she did go to work outside of the home, it was doing unskilled labour in a cotton mill. John's foster father also had little education but was an astute businessman. He owned newspaper boxes and developed a thriving business selling the Globe and Mail on the streets of Toronto.

What is notable about the first 12 years of John's life is the absence of stories. He could not recall any stories about family from his years with his foster family, yet he is sure there must have been storytelling going on.

As John thinks back upon his early years, he reflects that the one thing missing was a father figure. He never knew his own father. Then when he was 7, his foster parents divorced. The four children remained with the mother and were forbidden to see the father. John remembers sneaking off to see his foster father and not being able to tell his foster mother.

As a boy, John possessed a love of exploration. "One of my clearest memories of my childhood in Toronto is of looking down a road, any road in the city and I would just
want to go until I got to the end of it. Every road was an invitation to me, that’s how I experienced them, especially small, winding, interesting looking roads. I wasn’t happy being on any street until I had gone to the end of it, til I saw where it led and then I felt comfortable being on it. Until then I felt disoriented, I felt a little out of sorts." It was freedom of movement that he craved. He would roam the city on his bike, watching the trains come and go at Union Station, the ships at the port, or the airplanes at Malton Airport.

When John was 12, his life changed dramatically. His grandmother in England had been watching his development from a distance and decided it was time to send for him. Both his grandmother and mother were concerned that John would not receive a proper upbringing if he remained in Canada with his foster family. "I think they could somehow see that my vision of the possibilities of life were so limited living in a family like that, where I could end up being a car mechanic or I could end up taking over Frank’s paper route. Not that there was something inherently wrong in that but it was somehow that the broader vision was missing, that the world holds more possibilities." John spent the next five years living with his grandmother, and these years shaped his life in a profound manner.

John’s grandmother was determined to teach him "good breeding." She wanted him to adopt an accent that was more reminiscent of the middle class. She showed John how to walk with his head erect, chest forward, eyes making direct contact with the other person. He was educated in the proper behaviour to employ for every social situation and encouraged to dress in a respectable manner.
In Canada, John had done poorly all through elementary school. He had felt destined to always be at the bottom of the class. In England, however, he was fortunate to attend an experimental school where he began to do exceptionally well. He was recognized for being a good communicator and was often selected to be the master of ceremonies for school plays and other events. He was also a member of the debating team and his writing quickly gained the notice of his teachers.

His grandmother dedicated herself to informing John about his history and his place in the family lineage. John remembers his grandmother often saying of his time in Canada that "in that household there was no way that I could possibly know who I came from and where I belonged." John's connection with his grandmother was based upon the tales she told him and he was a very willing listener. "At that point I had no idea who my ancestors were other than my mother and my grandmother, so I was like an open book."

John's grandmother was a "snapshot" storyteller. Her style was to deliver the same brief, encapsulated stories with little variation. She had a wide repertoire of stories and repeated them often over the years. John felt terribly curious about the details of the stories his grandmother told, but he intuitively knew that it would not be right to question the veracity of the stories: "It was as if these were somehow sacred, in the family sense." The message seemed to be "this is the family truth, you're not to question it, you're just to accept it." John feels that perhaps for his grandmother the family stories were fragile and were in danger of being shattered or altered if too many questions were asked.

In retrospect, John is convinced that his grandmother singled him out to be the one to carry on as keeper of the family stories. His grandmother had a son who died in
his forties. This son had commenced some of the family history research before he died. When John arrived in England, full of questions and more than willing to listen endlessly to the stories, his grandmother gladly nurtured this interest.

John had six prominent family stories to share. He began with the following "peak" story which was told shortly after his arrival in England. "When I arrived at her house, one of the first things I noticed was a big sword in a brass scabbard up on the wall above the fireplace. So I asked her if I could look at it and she said yes, lifted it down, and I was amazed at how heavy this was and how someone could actually swing this thing. I pulled it out and there was this beautiful, long, slightly curved blade. I was surprised to find there was grease on it but I guess that was to keep it from rusting. It was very delicately engraved all the way down. I asked her if this was a real sword and she assured me it was real." The story of the sword was then told to John as he held it in his hands.

**Story #1**

*My grandmother said this sword belonged to my great grandfather. He was in the British army and his rank was surgeon major. He was a medical doctor as well as a major. He was born in India under British rule and served there in the army. And the story is that the surgeon major stepped out of his hut onto the porch in the night and found three of his Indian soldiers ready to attack and kill him. And with one swing of the sword he chopped off their three turbaned heads!*

This was a compelling story for a boy of 12. John wanted to know how the beheading would work if the soldiers were of different heights and his grandmother assured him they were all the same size. John recalls feeling surprised by the story and "somewhat in awe of this ancestor who was clearly something of a warrior as well as a
healer." Most of all, he felt curious and intrigued. He remembers wondering "what is it about my ancestors that would lead them into this kind of life?"

His grandmother told this story and others to emphasize a very important point. She was determined to let John know that he came from good family, that his ancestors did things that were important and they were looked up to. In fact, his grandmother often said that education and ancestry are the two things that people can never take away from a person. This story marked the beginning of a burning curiosity about ancestors. John felt as though, for the first time in his life, he was hearing about his real family. He began to incessantly question his grandmother about these ancestors and their exploits.

The story has stayed with John over the years; in fact not a year has passed where he has not thought about it. He has shared the story with many people and has made a point of telling the story to his two children. He has also promised his children that one day he will take them to England to see the sword.

When John ponders the story as an adult, the curiosity is still very much alive. Recently he travelled to England to do further historical and genealogical research into the stories his grandmother told him. He discovered that the context for the sword story must have been the Indian mutiny of 1868 where the Indian soldiers rebelled against the British, resulting in much bloodshed.

John talked about the story giving him a sense of identity. The story represents a fuller picture of who he might be, of what his full potential might be. "The story says that my ancestors were people who served their country, first of all they believed in country, patriotism. I would guess that because the surgeon major was a doctor there
was a certain amount of caregiving involved even as a male, a wish to heal. I certainly
think of myself as a caregiver in the context of raising my own children."

The next story was about John’s grandfather and his exploits while in India.

Story #2

*My grandfather was a superintendent of the British East India Telegraph Company
and his job was to lead a survey team. He had 20 servants and he led this team
across India, laying or directing telegraph cable on poles. The conditions
included living in great heat, putting up with malaria and various diseases,
hacking his way through the jungle, living out of tents, sometimes crossing
deserts. He had to keep the natives in line, resolve their disputes and always be
on his guard. It took years at a time. He was out there seven years at a time
while his children were going to school in England, so they hardly ever saw him.
He was very much on his own.*

John remembers feeling proud when he heard this story because it clearly
described who his grandfather was and what he did in very unusual circumstances in a
somewhat hostile country. The other important detail that John associates with this story
is the fact that his grandfather travelled on clipper ships and steam vessels throughout his
career. John strongly identified with this image of his grandfather: "As a 12 year old I
could imagine myself, that as soon as I was old enough I would travel the world. It was
ships, I had to be at sea, it just triggered something inside of me that said this is right."

John also feels curious about how alone his grandfather truly was while in India.
While it is true that his grandfather didn't see his wife and children for 7 years, John
found an invitation amongst his grandfather's belongings addressed to his grandfather and
a friend. The invitation was to a garden party in India. John wonders whether his
grandfather had affairs while he was living overseas, as there was a fair sized English
expatriate community.
John is also curious about relationships with the Indian people, whether it was always an us and them, master servant relationship or whether men like his grandfather befriended the Indians. These are some of the questions that drive John’s interest in genealogical research.

The next family story is about a distant female relative by the name of Lady Constance Biddulph.

**Story #3**

_There was a Lord and Lady Biddulph and Lady Biddulph’s name was Constance. This was a military family coming back from India and they were coming around through the Bay of Biscay off the west coast of France. She [grandmother] even described the sailing conditions that day. She said that the water was as flat as glass. So whenever I hear about the Bay of Biscay I think of this mirror surface and it doesn’t seem possible to me that there could ever be waves there. And on a day like that, Lady Biddulph was I guess still quite young, in her twenties or something, and she was having a baby. She was giving birth on board ship and there were complications and she died in childbirth. This all happened rather fast but it was a sailing ship and it was becalmed in the Bay of Biscay and they were stuck there, so she died and they buried her at sea, tipped her over, wrapped her up, mummified her, weighted down the thing and tipped her over on a board into the ocean, into this glassy calm surface of the ocean._

John remembers feeling a sense of awe in response to hearing this story. He also said "there’s something romantic about death and burial at sea. I never imagined myself in the position of the father who must have been heartbroken, or the woman herself or the child. I don’t remember feeling at all sad. It was again a kind of storybook sense of wow that really happened to someone that we’re related to."

The point that stands out in the story for John is the burial at sea. As a 12 year old he found this idea to be very exciting. This was the kind of occurrence that he had only read about in books or seen on television. Now it became real for him and it had happened to one of his ancestors!
John’s grandmother told the story to emphasize the connection with nobility. John believes that, being a good storyteller, his grandmother knew the drama of the tale would make it more memorable. The fact that she could claim Lady Biddulph as a relative thrilled her to no end. She even gave John’s mother the middle name of Constance as a way to honour the family connection with a titled person. Ironically, what most impressed John was not the fact that he was related to titled nobility, instead it was the romanticism of the burial at sea that captured him. As an adult, John has tried to look up the Biddulphs in Debrett’s to trace the family connection and to see if there was in fact a burial at sea.

The next story is about John’s grandmother and great grandmother. This story is one of a repertoire of stories about superstition and extra sensory perception. Apparently John’s grandmother was something of a mystic. She would often read John’s palms and make predictions. They would begin most days with her reading their tea leaves. She viewed Mother Shipley, a famous witch and fortune teller from the Middle Ages, as her heroine.

Story #4

*My great grandmother Rosina also had the gift of reading tea leaves and sensing what others were thinking and passed it on to my grandmother. When my grandmother was a young woman she was at that time a nurse or a nursing aid in London. She went back to her mother’s house in Norfolk for the weekend and she and her mother would sleep in the same bed. I guess it was winter and only one room was heated, so they slept in the same bed. She said that her mother, in the middle of the night, would, thinking that my grandmother was asleep would take hold of her little finger and then ask her questions. There was this superstition that if you held the sleeping person’s little finger of their left hand that they could only tell you the truth, they couldn’t lie it was impossible. She said ‘I was awake and I wasn’t going to tell her a thing.’ She was really angry that her mother would try and trick her, would try and use that knowledge deceitfully.*
John formed an impression of his great grandmother as an underhanded kind of person who would resort to trickery. "She was sneaky and a bit deceitful and was not above trickery to try and get the upper hand." His grandmother did not like her mother and told this story to emphasize one of her negative character traits.

The next story further illuminates John’s grandmother’s powers. John heard this story from his grandmother and from other relatives. It remained exactly the same story with no variations no matter who retold it.

Story #5

My grandmother had typhoid fever when she was 16 and nearly died. She says that her experience of that fever was of entering a kind of tunnel with a light at the end and which was lined with people she had known in her life and who were now dead. And they were greeting her and smiling at her and welcoming her and being very friendly. One of them was a young girl, a former school mate, and she’d not seen her for 2 or 3 years. And my grandmother said to the school mate ‘Well what are you doing here? All these other people died, but you’re alive.’ And she said ‘Oh no I’m not. You remember the constant bleeding that I used to have from my ear? Well it finally killed me and here I am.’ So she recovered from the typhoid fever, just barely, and after she was conscious she told her family about this encounter with this girl and they said that this was incredible because in fact that girl had died but there was no way my grandmother could have known about it because she was sick for ages.

John remembers feeling "a bit chilled and uncomfortable" when he heard this story. To him it seemed like venturing into a territory he’d rather avoid. This was outside of his realm of experience and not an area at that time which he wanted to explore.

When John returned to England as an adult, his grandmother told him more stories about her life. The following stands out as the most significant story John heard from his grandmother as an adult.
Story #6

*My grandmother told me she had four children who lived but she also had four other pregnancies that ended in stillbirths or spontaneous abortions. How painful that was and how the doctor warned her husband not to make her pregnant again or he could kill her and how he did anyway. She said that if she had her life to live over again she would never marry a man like that again. He was into his sixties and seventies when the kids were still in school. He was retired and she was looking after him like an elderly father as well as bringing up young children. It sound like it wasn't a marriage filled with love or a lot of mutual admiration. Sounds like it was a lot of toil.*

John believes that his grandmother did not have any conscious intentions in telling this story. She seemed to be full of anger and was using the story to sound off and release some of the rage. But John took the story differently. He thought, "here's a woman near the end of her life telling me her regrets so I'd better pay attention." The story has stuck with him over the years. He has shared the story with other people to emphasize the following point "I'm determined not to regret my life, not to regret even my mistakes but to say I lived my life the way I'm happy and I wouldn't do it differently."

This story helped John to see another side of his grandfather: "an uncaring, 'I'll have my way no matter what even if it puts your life in danger' sort of man." John can't believe his grandfather would not listen to medical advice and would have taken the situation so lightly. It was shocking for him to think about his grandmother being in so much pain and losing so many babies.

The way his grandfather conducted himself within his marriage is the one part of his ancestor that John most definitely does not identify with. "No, I don't relate to the kind of distant father that he clearly was, both distant in physical terms with his first
family and then in his second marriage not taking an active part at all in the child raising, just being this distant authority figure."

When asked why he thought these six family stories were the most important, John said "probably my grandmother told a dozen other stories too, I just don't remember them. I only remember the ones that really tapped into that life theme for me, some sort of core value. I know that when I've stood at the edge of the ocean and felt that tug to explore that touched something deep inside that went beyond words and beyond mere whim or fancy. Just like her stories, they touched that kind of deep place inside."

When asked what commonalities he sees between the stories, John observed "the stories that have to do with my grandfathers and the male line have to do with travel, accomplishment, status, power, the exercise of power, attaining of authority, whereas the ones with the women have to do with the healing, fortune telling you know a much less prominent side, much less socially acceptable side of human endeavours." He also notes that the inference of deceit appears in the story of his great grandmother. In contrast, nothing negative was ever mentioned about his grandfathers, who were always portrayed as noble. John wonders if there was more beneath the surface that his grandmother did not share about these men. He recalls that his grandmother always valued the boys and men of the family over the women.

The family stories offered an organizing framework for John's own experiences. "Although I had some of the wanderlust and I had some of the curiosity they were scattered . . . unfocused. There wasn't really a larger picture in mind . . . it was just
fragments." By sharing the stories with him, John's grandmother helped "to pull the fragments together. [She gave] me a landscape . . . a real terrain that I could explore."

The family stories reignited the wandering spirit that had been present in Canada and had a striking physical impact upon him: "I had this longing, it was coming from somewhere inside of me. I can actually remember a physical feeling, not quite a hollowness just below the solar plexus, but a physical change taking place there. It was as if there was this invisible cord coming out of that part of my body and someone was pulling it." John clearly remembers experiencing this longing when he first heard the family stories.

The family stories provided a larger context, a sense of what might be possible in his life. He believes they gave him permission to pursue what had always been a private dream of adventure. "Here was this realization that those who went before me also did that; they lived it out!" In a sense, hearing the family stories was like opening a treasure chest filled with rich and gleaming possibilities for his own life.

The character that John identifies most strongly with in all of the family stories is his grandfather, the superintendent of the British East India Company. He didn't need to ponder this for long, the identification was immediately there for him. "He worked for the civil service; I worked for the CBC. He travelled as part of his work; I travelled as part of my work. He was involved in communications in an indirect way, laying telegraph cables across the sub-continent and he was actually something of a writer too." Apparently John resembles his grandfather physically, and shares many of the same personality traits.
John admits that from the age of 7 to 12, his life was devoid of male role models. Even once he travelled to England, most of his contact was with his grandmother. He had two English uncles but he rarely saw them. John believes, in retrospect, that the stories of his grandfather and great grandfather provided him with his strongest role models during those years in England. To John, these ancestors were strongly connected to him even though they had been dead for years. "[The stories] resonated with something in me that was looking for something. I do remember thinking a lot about this image of these people on the sailing ships or hacking away through the jungles of India, facing down the mutiny. There were a lot of adventures and to think that it was just my grandparent and great grandparent who did this!"

This appears to be the most important way in which John made use of the family stories. He looked to his male ancestors as role models whom he could be proud of. The stories informed him about his own possibilities in life. They opened him up and allowed him to dream about leading a similar life of adventure and travel. The stories instilled a sense of pride within him about who his descendants were and this reinforced his own latent potential.

If John had never heard the family stories he feels that his life wouldn't be as rich as it is. "Family to me, and I've come to realize it in this last year more than ever, is very important. Bloodlines, heritage, ancestry, the whole realm of connection to others but not just by blood either." John believes we are all part of one large "tribe" and it is very important to maintain the links. "I wonder how strongly I would feel about that if I hadn't heard about these stories. It's hard to imagine that the strength would have all just come from inside somewhere. I think the spark needs to come from outside."
John lived with his grandmother until he was 17. He was tempted to stay longer, but felt his job prospects would be better in Canada. He chose to return by ship rather than airplane so he could have the experience of being on the sea. He returned to Toronto and completed his last year of high school. John decided not to go to university because he didn’t know what he wanted to study. He yearned to travel but had no money, so he resolved to go to work. He took a quick course in radio broadcasting and then mailed 400 resumes to every radio station in Canada. Looking back, John sees that this took "gumption" and he believes he took his inspiration from the family stories and his grandmother’s constant message that he could do whatever he wanted to.

John’s early fascination with stories and storytelling had a big influence upon his interest in journalism. However, John declares that he did not choose journalism consciously. When he thought about working, two values were important. One was travel and the second was independence. Journalism offered him the possibilities of meeting both of these needs, of expressing his "real self." As well as satisfying his wanderlust, journalism would also satisfy his curiosity and desire to learn.

John secured a job in Yarmouth, Nova Scotia. Finding himself in a province he’d never visited before was thrilling. He felt an "overwhelming compulsion" to explore: "The first weekend that I had off I set out first thing early Saturday morning, hitchhiked all the way to Cape Breton. This was almost 400 miles. I got there about 11 o’clock at night, checked into the Y, got up early the next morning and hitchhiked all the way back to Yarmouth."

While working in Yarmouth, John hosted an open line show. One day a woman called who claimed she performed seances and could communicate with the dead. John’s
response was to be open and curious. He arranged to go to a seance and reported about it on the air. John credits his grandmother’s stories with his own "willingness to be open to believing that there’s more to life than we know, that things that have no scientific basis whatsoever still could have some truth to them."

John had another related experience during this period where he visited a woman who did aura balancing. He went through a "remarkable" experience with her where he lay on the floor in front of a group of people. The woman led him on a guided meditation which turned into an inner journey. John felt himself crossing difficult terrain with many obstacles. At one point he climbed to a very bright place and encountered a Jesus-like figure who offered him tablets. Each tablet had a word on it which John would need in his life ahead. He recalls that one of the words was courage. This vision came at a critical time in his life when he was making an important career decision that would affect the next decade of his life.

When John was in his early twenties, he felt an urge to travel in a bigger way as his ancestors had done. He applied to CUSO but was rejected because he didn’t have the desired technical expertise. Then he arranged to sign on with a ship that would be travelling the world for a year doing oceanic research. At the same time, John was offered a job with the CBC. He eventually chose the CBC because he believed it would lead to the same opportunities as a year on the high seas. "That was a conscious choice, it’s not the CBC because it’s a career, it’s CBC because it will enable me to travel and live out those dreams and that’s what I did for 10 years, I took a holiday every year in a different part of the world."

John travelled to such exotic places as the Galapagos Islands, the Amazon jungle, and he camped in the wilds of the Arctic to watch the spring breakup. The only two
continents he did not visit were Antarctica and Africa. When people would ask John why he holidayed in such distant places he could relate it directly to his family stories. He remembers telling people that his ancestors were travellers and wanderers. John believes that in his own life travel has been a lifelong theme. In fact, he moved approximately every two years up until his marriage. He has lived from the east coast to the west coast of Canada and as far north as Yellowknife.

After 10 years, John left the CBC because he was being encouraged to move up the management ladder which was pulling him further and further away from journalism. He faced a great deal of opposition when he announced his intention to resign. Management begged him to stay and deluged him with tempting offers. But a voice inside of John was speaking loudly that he must leave no matter how attractive the promises were. In retrospect, he sees how brave he was to abandon a secure job and begin freelancing at the height of the recession.

John explained that during this period career and travel were going extremely well, but relationships were a struggle. "All through my teens and twenties I was very confused about what I was trying to do in terms of relationships. One or two of the women actually told me that they were utterly confused by me." Being alone was easier for John because he was in control of his own circumstances. Being in a relationship meant relinquishing some of this control, which John found challenging.

John didn’t know himself; he was unsure of whether he wanted casual relationships or something more serious. He had a string of unsuccessful relationships that would last no longer than 2 or 3 months. This was a very unhappy period emotionally for John. He remembers floundering and experiencing great internal
struggle. He relates these experiences to the messages about personal relationships in the family stories, where independence seemed to be valued more strongly than relationships.

After John left the CBC, when he was 29 or 30, he decided to take a year off and live in France. This was a time to think about what he was doing in life and where he was going. During that year, he had a powerful mystical experience which showed him what was missing. John was visiting at the home of a French friend he had met. He was feeling totally isolated because at that time he did not speak French or German, so he could not communicate with his hosts at all. "The last night there I had the most bizarre dream. It started with a ringing in my ear and then I felt myself leaving my body and looking at my body from the ceiling. I was bumping up against the ceiling. It felt so real that I was sure that it was really happening yet as I tried to wake myself it was as if I was tied in or hemmed in. It was as if something in me was desperate to break out, to change utterly."

John described this dream state as "a strange spiritual experience." It was only then that he was able realize that loneliness was the problem. "It was like reaching a crisis of the soul, as if a voice inside was crying out to be heard." John then made a conscious decision to return to Canada to find a partner for life and to have children. His family stories influenced him in terms of how seriously he treated this mystical experience. If it hadn't been for his early experiences with his grandmother, and particularly the story about her near death experience, John feels he might have dismissed his out of body sensation as merely a nightmare.

John returned to Vancouver and shortly thereafter met his future wife. John has been very happily married for the past 14 years. From the beginning, his marriage has
been an equal partnership in terms of child raising, housework, whatever needed to be done. He and his wife agree absolutely on this point and both work hard to keep the lines of communication open. John seems to take great pride in his active involvement as husband and father.

His community of friends and relatives is also a very big part of John's life. There are people across the country and around the world whom he corresponds with. John has actively nurtured these relationships, some of which go back 20 or more years. He is the one family member who keeps all the others in touch. John does not believe that his ancestors did much of this.

Currently, John is dealing with cancer. His illness began in July 1994, with the discovery of a tumour in his leg. Since that time, it has been determined that the cancer has spread throughout his body. John is now devoting himself full time to healing. He enlisted the help of friends and family to paint a second floor room in a deep forest green colour. This is John's healing room, framed by a large south facing window, where he has his books and his music. John spends his days here, writing, reading, and attending to his own healing.

John commented that if he had not felt the family stories research to be relevant to his healing campaign, he would have withdrawn completely from the study. Having cancer has forced him to set priorities in life and exploring more of his family history and stories falls in the top three or four. When asked in what ways he believes an exploration of his family stories would be helpful, he said "On a purely practical level it's good to know about the physical health of my ancestors . . . I've only found one ancestor who died of cancer at about my age. We've seemed to have been a relatively
robust line of people. Also I think on a more philosophical level there's a strength and 
need in me to feel rooted, to feel connected. There’s a real need to pull together with 
living family members and I feel a similar need to get a stronger connection [with] my 
other forbearers as well."

Reencountering his ancestors through the family stories feels like a crucial goal 
for John right now. "It's as if I need that knowledge as a touchstone, for determining 
who I am or for somehow carrying on or giving my life meaning. I guess it's a belief 
that as I discover more, as I satisfy my curiosity more about who these people were, so 
the answer will reveal itself in some way."

Although John’s cancer has reached the incurable stage and the medical profession 
does not provide a very hopeful prognosis, John refuses to accept this as his destiny. He 
views cancer as the biggest challenge he has ever faced in life and he is prepared to do 
everything he can to fight it. John attends a support group for cancer patients and he has 
been interviewing different practitioners, mainstream and alternative, who could help 
him. As well, John has been voraciously reading books about cancer research and 
recovery. He plans to write a book about his experiences that may be of help to other 
cancer patients. He has also enlisted the help of friends and family to an extensive 
degree.

Cancer has highlighted John’s desire to enhance spirituality in his own life. For 
the past year, his family has been attending church, which John has found to be a very 
rich experience. "It’s as if it’s replenishing something that was empty for too long."

John summarized his stance towards cancer in this way: "This is another obstacle 
that if we look at it squarely and get all the help we can and get all the information, we
can get through this." John refuses to resign himself to cancer as happens with some patients. He insists upon viewing it as the ultimate challenge to be overcome. His approach is larger than mere optimism or hopefulness. Instead he describes his stance as "a strength of spirit, there's an inner drive."

In this way, John agreed that he is again drawing upon the model of his grandfather who explored India. His grandfather viewed his work as a challenge. He took charge and saw to the laying of cable, step by step across the difficult terrain of India. John feels this is the same active approach he is taking towards the cancer; he is working towards healing on all possible fronts at once. As well, he sees the connection with his great grandfather's decisive action to behead his traitorous soldiers. After John completed his first radiation treatments he realized that he needed to take charge of his healing. He called a family meeting and told his family what he needed and what he was feeling. He credits this decisive action as critical to his healing.

The other component of John's approach to cancer is acknowledging that ultimately he may need to surrender to it. John admits that he has begun to live each day as though it were his last and he is proud of doing his best with each moment he has. John sees the connections here with Lady Biddulph. "Just like her . . . if things reach a point where the sea (laughing) is becalmed and there's no help in sight I'm trying to be psychologically and otherwise prepared for that as well and to see that not as some great failure but as one possible outcome." At the point where John can no longer fight, he will be accepting of his fate in the same way that he believes Lady Biddulph was.

If cancer does kill John, it is very important for him to be able to say "I lived the way I wanted to." Here he sees the resonance with his grandmother's story of her
marriage. She had regrets; he is determined that he will not arrive on his deathbed saying "I wish I'd done things differently."

John observed that many people he knows appear to have a terror of death. This is different from his own view of death, which he realized during the interviews must have been influenced by his family stories. "It just seems to me that death is part of the cycle of life and is just as real and just as acceptable as being born. I can't fathom that there should be a terror." John feels that the stories may have encouraged him not to fear or run away from the idea of death, but instead to face it as another challenge. In the miscarriage story, his grandmother could have grieved endlessly for her dead babies, been terrified of losing her own life, or turned into a hypochondriac, but she did none of these things. According to John, she refused to wallow in self pity and instead carried on with life. John sees a definite connection between his grandmother's approach and his own attitudes. He is good at resigning himself and sticking it out in a difficult situation.

People have been telling John recently that he is a brave person. Courage is another word which he relates to his own life. Looking back, it took courage not to go to university, to strike out on his own into the unknown world of radio broadcasting. It also took courage to leave his very secure job at CBC. "At every stage when I've come to make a decision it's been a question of bravery, of stepping forward into the unknown. I think that is a reflection of what I heard, the kind of models . . . that were portrayed for me [in the family stories]."

The door to John's healing room has a small oar nailed to it and a sign that says "winnowing fan." John explained that this was inspired by a story from Homer's Odyssey, which a minister at the church had told:
What happens is that Ulysses goes to the underground near the end of his voyages and encounters the seer Tereseus and Tereseus tells him that at the end of his voyages, after he goes home and is reunited with Penelope, he still must undertake one more voyage. But not out to sea like all his other ones, he must go inland and he must carry on his shoulder a well-made oar from one of his ships. He must take with him animals which he has tamed. The animals must go willingly. They are to be sacrificed eventually. He'll know when he's gone far enough inland when he is greeted by a shepherd who has never seen the ocean, who has never seen a ship, who has never tasted salt water and who doesn’t have the first clue what an oar is. And the shepherd will say to him 'what are you doing with that winnowing fan on your shoulder?' And then he’ll know he’s gone far enough and he has to plant the oar in the ground there and he has to sacrifice several animals and then make his way back to his home and then he’ll be ready for the rest of his life and can lead a quiet retirement and die peacefully.

John found this story to be very compelling. It seemed to be exactly the story he needed to hear and he has used it to advise him. John explained that this story is a metaphor for growing old and it explains how to simplify our lives. The winnowing fan is used to separate the wheat from the chaff. But formerly the oar was used to propel Ulysses on his journeys. John believes the point of the story is that what was formerly useful to us in our life in the outer world can also be used in a different context on our inward journey.

The animal sacrifice in the story represents the sacrifice of those abilities and skills that were once useful in the outside world but which have become superfluous. Ulysses was going to live a more introverted and narrower existence but a more whole existence. This is what John aspires to for his life now.

John has his own winnowing fan to serve as a daily reminder: "It really helps because every time I come in and out of here it reminds me of the need [to] keep things simple, discard the unessential and focus only on what’s necessary, which is what’s going to help me get better."
He has shared the story with his relaxation group and many of the people commented on how helpful they found the story to be. John included the story on his Christmas cards. He feels as though the story continues to ripple outwards helping more and more people.

According to John, the healing journey is a mirror of the mythical hero’s journey. John has read all of the Odyssey since he heard the winnowing fan story and he finds that it resonates with his own life. He hopes to read more of Joseph Campbell, who has written extensively about the hero’s metaphoric journey. He looks to the family stories for examples of strength and heroism. As he said of his grandmother: "[She] was optimistic, I think she had to be to survive as long as she did and have the kind of positive spirits and attitude that she got through life with. She had to believe in the hero’s journey. She had to believe that the struggle was worth it." Both the classical heroes and the characters from his family stories offer John "metaphors for the so-called mundane, for taking care of what’s right in front of you."

When asked to comment upon the experience of participating in the research, John said "You’ve pointed out to me some links that I hadn’t yet seen between these early family stories and what I’m going through now and what my life has been like. That’s really useful to me." John stated that he found the second interview to be very therapeutic: "Your pulling together the stories and linking the themes and making connections to the hero’s journey I think is a great help." Given that John is facing a "life crisis" he found the interviews have provided him with vital information about the past which is strongly related to the present. Of all the approaches he is taking to his healing "[this is] the only one that’s made the connection to my life history, to my
ancestors and to the way that I'm embarking on healing myself now." All of this was new information for John. He anticipates being able to use some of the discoveries he has made in the book he is currently writing.

**Interpretive Comments**

The night before I conducted the first interview with John, he telephoned to request a change of location for the interview because of a health problem that limited his mobility. I imagined flu and offered to postpone the interview, but he insisted that he really wanted to proceed. At the end of the call, John informed me that he had just received a diagnosis of a malignant tumour in his leg. Again we discussed a postponement of the interview but John insisted that it was very important for him to be able to tell his family stories and that he believed it would be therapeutic. I had the sense that John felt compelled to tell the stories. Our interview the next day lasted 2 1/2 hours and John did not speak at all about his diagnosis. His leg was propped up on a stool between us as a constant reminder.

By the time I conducted the second interview, 6 months had elapsed and John had received the prognosis that his cancer was incurable. We sat in his forest green healing room. I found John to be in good spirits and he was able to be very candid and honest about his illness.

John was a wonderful interviewee. Our discussion was pervaded by an infectious undertone of excitement. I felt we were co-explorers who shared a common fascination. It was easy to become caught up by his fairy tale-like stories, much in the way that a child would. I was keenly aware of his grandmother's presence as we spoke and the rich
and important relationship they shared. As an adult, John had already done a great deal of thinking about family stories, so his insights and observations were particularly vivid.

**Story interpretation.** The first story (about the surgeon major) is brief and to the point. The most striking feature is the culmination of the story in a single dramatic moment. In the beginning the surgeon major steps outside. It seems that he is expecting all will be normal. The middle of the story represents unexpected danger. The soldiers are ready to kill their leader and the odds are against him. The story ends with the surgeon major taking charge of the situation and using his sword to dispatch the mutineers.

This story represents a progressive narrative structure (Gergen, 1985). Although the story ends with violence and presumably much bloodshed, this is not the emphasis. The ending of the story may be understood as a positive outcome for the central character. The alternative would have been his death. Instead he triumphs and overcomes adversity.

The point of view from which the story is told is clearly that of the surgeon major. The story recounts his experiences and emphasizes his heroism. He is able to think on his feet, act quickly, and take on three adversaries at once! His character is the strong one in the story.

The story characters represent good and evil in their contrast. The surgeon major stands for the force of good, while the three Indians (who have betrayed their leader) have done wrong. Given this unexpected turn of events, the surgeon major must defend himself against evil or perish.
The movement of the story is from surprise to solution. The proposed solution is to jump in and act. The principle of living that is suggested by the story could be: When you encounter the unexpected and the odds are against you, it is important to act decisively to take charge of the situation.

The second story about the superintendent is the portrait of an adventurer and it reads like a classic adventure story. The story provides a description of a life of exploration. Unlike the other stories John told, this story does not follow a linear, sequenced progression through time. There is not a clear sense of a beginning, middle, and end to this story. A common feature of narrative structure is a conflict or problem that must be resolved. This particular story is notable for the absence of a core dilemma. The story may be characterized as a stability narrative (Gergen, 1985) because the plot line remains constant throughout.

The story elaborates the conditions that grandfather lived and worked in. The storyscape consists of a rugged depiction of India. The climate tested him thoroughly through heat and sickness, as he hacked away at the jungle, crossed the desert or travelled by ship. It is suggested that he overcame these obstacles rather than succumbing. As well, we perceive that this man was a leader, responsible for 20 men and for resolving disputes. But his crew could be dangerous, therefore he had to be vigilant and on his guard at all times.

What is also emphasized is the solitary nature of exploring. This man had a family in England that he did not see for 7 years. It is uncertain whether he missed his family and longed to be with them. In fact, the story suggests that grandfather was in his element in the heart of India, while regular life back in England carried on.
principle of living for this story seems to be: Hardship and difficulty can be exciting and challenging.

The third story about Lady Biddulph begins with a journey. The couple are heading home, presumably to England. Lady Biddulph is expecting a child, so there is likely an air of anticipation. In the middle of the story the journey is halted due to a becalmed sea. Lady Biddulph is in labour and there are complications. The story ends with her death and dramatic burial at sea. The flow of the story is from normalcy to crisis to resolution through the burial at sea.

An intriguing feature of this plot line is that essentially it follows a regressive narrative structure (Gergen, 1985). The story begins with a journey and anticipation, but it ends with death. However, for John, the story is a romantic tale with an exotic ending. This suggests the importance of understanding the individual’s responses to a particular story. The story itself could be told differently as a tale of loss and despair, but this is not the emphasis that John gives to the story. The interpretation must take its lead from John’s sense of the story.

The central character in this story is obviously Lady Biddulph. Yet nothing is known about her character. Was she weakly or stubborn, resigned or feisty? All that is known is that she came from nobility, had lived in India, lost a child, and was rather dramatically buried. Lady Biddulph is not a character in control of her destiny. What befalls her is a combination of bad luck and unusual circumstance. In a sense she becomes a heroic figure, not for any of her actions while living but in the manner of her death. Undoubtedly many women of her time died in childbirth, but how many would have been buried at sea?
The setting is strongly developed in this story. It is easy to picture the sailing ship at a standstill in the becalmed Bay of Biscay. The water, flat and still as glass, creates an ominous feeling. It is because of the setting (the calm water) that Lady Biddulph must be buried at sea. Presumably if the ship could have continued on its journey she may have had a different burial.

This is a tragic story. Cochran (1990) described tragedy as a "labouring under imminent downfall" where "in the beginning, the hero is powerful, . . . but slowly becomes ensnared in the webs of fate, from which there is no escape" (pp. 34-35). In tragedy, the main character is a heroic figure but ultimately must accept the path of destiny. The story says: Life can be going along smoothly and you may be full of hope. Then, unexpectedly, everything can change and turn to crisis. When this happens, there is nothing you can do about it. Lady Biddulph had no choice. There was absolutely no action she could take that would save her from her fate. The principle of living for this story may be as follows: When unexpected tragedy befalls you, and nothing can be done to remedy the situation, there is no choice but to accept your fate.

The forth story about grandmother and her mother begins with a normal enough situation: a young woman goes home for the weekend to see her family. Mother and daughter are sleeping together in the only warm room. The middle of the story is about trickery. The mother tries to discover her daughter's secrets as she sleeps. But her daughter is awake and does not cooperate with these tricks, thus no secrets are revealed. This story follows a progressive narrative structure (Gergen, 1985) which leads to the ending where the plot is foiled.
The point of view of the story is that of the daughter. The story recounts her experiences. There are two characters, the mother as trickster and daughter who is angry and resists the trick. The mother is painted as a nasty character, one who stoops to tricks and abuses her special powers to discover what her daughter is up to. The daughter, appears to be asleep, which is a position of vulnerability. She is being taken advantage of by her mother. However she merely feigns sleep and refuses to divulge any information. It is the daughter who actually ends up in charge of the situation.

The principle of living could be: Those close to you may try to trick you or take advantage of your vulnerability. The solution is to resist their efforts through cleverness and by remaining in control at all times.

The fifth family story begins with grandmother’s illness. She is near death. The middle of the story is startling. She encounters the tunnel of the dead and is welcomed to this place. In particular she meets her former school mate. The story ends with her recovery from illness, but more importantly she astounds her family with her knowledge that the school mate had died.

This story traces a journey from the point of view of John’s grandmother. Through illness, the girl descends into another world, the world of the dead. She has an encounter there and then resurfaces to the world of the living. This plotline follows a pattern found in many of the classic myths, a descent to the underworld and an encounter with the dead. This is not a terrifying experience. Indeed, grandmother is welcomed by those she meets and engages in conversation. There is a sense that she is comfortable in this place.
Grandmother's character is developed as a heroic figure. First she does survive the illness, and secondly she survived her journey to the underworld. The story ends with her telling those of this world about her adventure and encounter. She returns with special knowledge which amazes her family. In classic tales, the hero has to undergo some kind of test in order to be able to carry on with life. It appears that John's grandmother has been tested and survived.

Cochran (1990) in describing the quest-myth (as developed by Frye, 1957) states the following: "the hero begins in romance, . . . then encounters catastrophe and descends to an endurance of hell, from which he or she rises triumphantly, restoring a new social arrangement or reconciliation" (p. 36). Grandmother's story may be viewed as a quest-myth. She moves from health into fevered sickness (catastrophe) and a descent into the world of the dead. From this place she rises again, indeed triumphantly bearing news of her encounter. It appears that this character will be changed, endowed with something special for the rest of her life.

The flow of the story is from near death in the beginning to survival in the end. Once again, this story follows a progressive narrative structure. There is a complete contrast marked by the dramatic descent in the middle. What is the relationship of the middle to beginning and end? In this story it seems that the encounter is linked to survival. Instead of dying and joining her former schoolmate, she recovers and returns to this world to tell of her adventure. The principle of living for this story could be: When all seems lost, something unexpected can happen which will test you. If you pass the test you will be endowed with wisdom and strength that will help you to recover that which seemed lost. You will emerge a changed person, stronger than before.
The miscarriage story is again told from grandmother’s point of view. This is a story about the difficulty of life with John’s grandfather. Certainly not a love story, this tale depicts marriage as dangerous to one’s health! John’s grandmother lost four babies and nearly her life because grandfather would not heed medical advice to prevent further pregnancies. The dilemma posed here is about not being in control of a situation because somebody else has the power. The proposed solution is resignation and carrying on.

What does this story say about grandfather? It seems he was in charge and that he did not listen to authority figures. This creates the impression that he would do what he wanted. He appears to be neither sensitive nor helpful. Grandmother is depicted as a toiling victim. Apparently she did not have a choice, grandfather was in charge. There is also an implied toughness to her character. She must be a survivor to lose all of those children and still carry on, taking care of husband and children.

The principle of living for the story seems to be: In relationships you don’t have a choice because somebody else will be in charge, so you must resign yourself to pain and suffering, and strive to make the best of the situation.

**Story comparison.** Beginning with a comparison of the story characters, several observations can be made. In all of the stories the central character must go it alone. There is a sense that others cannot help with the situations these characters encounter. In terms of the qualities depicted for each character, it appears that there are two suggested orientations here. Either a person is strong, in charge, fearless and heroic, or a person is resigned to fate taking its course. There is a polarity between those story characters who act upon life, and those who are acted upon and must accept their destiny. For example, there is a marked contrast between the surgeon major who cuts heads off and
Lady Biddulph who takes no action because there is nothing in the circumstances that she can do! Ultimately perhaps the stories offer variations on the theme of heroism. There appears to be active, agentic heroism, but also a quieter heroism that comes with either accepting one's fate and losing one's life or surviving in a difficult marriage.

It is suggested that heroic characters may have other sides. Two of the stories feature John's grandfather. In one he is the independent explorer conquering a hostile land, while in the second he is in a relationship. These two stories appear to articulate the dimensions and costs of an independent and strong-willed stance. While in the face of gruelling conditions in India these qualities seemed to help him survive, in the context of a relationship it appears that this stance leads to pain and suffering for others. There is an inflexibility to this man. There is no hint of softness or compassion. He appears to dominate all those he encounters. The stories hint at a darker side that is less than heroic.

Half of the family stories feature John's grandmother. This creates a portrait of the kind of person she was. Clearly she was strong and a survivor, having overcome typhoid fever and all the years of her loveless marriage. She was also clever and could outsmart her mother. She had special wisdom and power, resulting from her rather mystical experience with the world of the dead. But she suffered physically and emotionally over her four lost babies.

Three of the stories involve a journey, whether it be across India, a voyage on a sailing ship or to the world of the dead. There is a spirit of adventure and discovery that accompanies these stories. But each journey is also dangerous. The superintendent of the telegraph company faces dangerous conditions, Lady Biddulph does die on her
journey, and grandmother is nearly killed by typhoid fever. There is the possibility that she may not have returned from the dead.

A comparison between all of the family stories indicates convergent messages about how to live life. If we view these stories as symbolic dramatic contexts (Cochran, 1990) then the proposed worldview is characterized by adversity. If adversity is defined as "a condition of unhappiness, misfortune, or distress; an unfavourable or harmful thing or event" (Gage Canadian Dictionary, 1973, p. 18) then these stories appear to outline various kinds of adversity. The sword story depicts betrayal or an unexpected turn of events; the telegraph story describes living conditions that challenge physically. In the story of Lady Biddulph, adversity takes the form of fate; an unexpected medical crisis and unpredictable weather lead to misfortune. In the story of mother and daughter, adversity is described as trickery or deceit, while in the typhoid fever story, adversity involves illness and near death. Finally, in the story of grandmother’s marriage, adversity is the relationship itself where grandfather becomes a selfish and stubborn tyrant who will have his way. Adversity here is also about pain and suffering.

It is interesting to note that four of the stories involve medical crises, suffering, or death. The stories present various perspectives upon death. Killing others can be heroic (surgeon major). Death can be in the hands of fate (Lady Biddulph); near death can be mystical and not to be feared (typhoid fever); and death can be painful (grandmother’s babies). The idea of death is woven into the fabric of the stories without necessarily becoming the focal point or place of emphasis. This seems to convey an attitude of acceptance towards death as something which exists but is not to be feared.
If this collection of family stories depicts adversity in all of its variations as the central dilemma, then what are the proposed solutions suggested by the stories? The combined themes from the stories may be interpreted as follows: When faced with adversity one must go it alone. The following qualities will be important: decisive action, maintaining control at all times, and relying upon your cleverness. Challenging situations will test you and there may be special knowledge that can help you overcome the situation so that ultimately you gain greater wisdom. Sometimes one cannot remain in control and win out over adversity. In these situations you must go with the situation and resign yourself to the path of fate.

Another way to interpret these family stories is to look for that which is missing. There is nothing about love in these stories. The two stories which feature relationships emphasize that relationships are about deceit or the other being cruel and in control. The idea seems to be that it is more comfortable being solitary. But what about receiving and giving love and support? There are times in most lives when this is necessary, yet none of these characters seem to do this.

As a collection, John’s family stories do show strong internal consistency. The stories are not all the same; instead they delineate the elements of life which the family and John appear to value or react against. Four of the stories feature adventures of one sort or another. Adventuring and exploring appear to be strong themes. Related to this, five of the stories feature travel, whether it be to the underworld or a sea voyage.

There are also strong messages about gender in these family stories. Men are the solitary explorers and adventurers; the women on the other hand possess either special
mystical powers or demonstrate how to resign oneself to fate. Neither men nor women are characterized as being very good in relationships.

**Integrating the co-researcher's life experiences with the family stories.** John commented that he noticed a great difference between the first and second interviews. During the first interview, he simply retold his family stories and shared his reactions to them. This was familiar ground, like putting on a well-worn sweater. However, it was the second interview that John found to be very therapeutic, where we explored the layers of the stories to look at meanings and themes related to his own life. This was like unravelling some of the wool in the old sweater to detect individual strands of brilliant colour.

While John has given considerable thought to his family stories over the years, there were connections made during the interview process that were new to him. The research seemed to take his own awareness to a deeper level. As the researcher, I was able to see patterns and themes that John strongly concurred with, but which he hadn’t previously considered.

John’s family stories are romantic and may be characterized as wonder tales. "... Through the wonder tales — which pretend to describe the lives of the legendary heroes ... — symbolic expression is given to the unconscious desires, fears, and tensions that underlie the conscious patterns of human behavior" (Campbell, 1943, p. 256). John acknowledges the strong sense of wonder, awe, and curiosity that these stories have instilled in him, both as a child and as an adult.

John’s family stories may also be characterized as hero stories, a common type of family story (Zeitlin et al., 1982). Family heroes instil in subsequent generations a sense
of pride. John particularly identified with his male kin within the stories. This sense of pride is still tangible when John speaks of his ancestors. According to Stone (1988) "people's choice of a role model stems from what they already have, what they need, and what is available for them to choose from" (p. 209). In terms of family, John had no male role models to draw upon early in life. The need for this connection was strong by the time he arrived in England. What was available to him were the characters within the stories. In these men he saw the same passions and interests that he held: independence, a love of travel and adventure, and bravery. Best of all, these men were family.

The family stories appeared to give John an anchor for the first time in his life. Growing up with a foster family, this had been absent. Their stories were not his; the stories did not have resonance because they weren't about his kin. The tales his grandmother told offered him a sense of rootedness, of connection with family. In fact, the stories helped him to define what family was and how he fit into the scheme of things. Once John began to identify with his male ancestors and to experience himself as part of a line of brave men, this freed him to dream of a future life where he could follow his desires. The family stories grounded him and showed him a future path. They provided him with an education in the possibilities of life. Like signposts, they pointed the way.

During his years in England, John's grandmother was a very influential person in his life. From her he learned to trust in his own abilities and potential; she encouraged John's curiosity. Within the stories, he identified strongly with her, particularly in terms
of not wanting to regret life. In life and in the story of her near death experience, John learned that mystical experiences were possible and credible.

Another way that John actively relates to the family stories is that he has assumed the mantle of the family storyteller. His grandmother groomed him for this position. He is the one who has conducted research and he continues to tell the family stories to his children, hoping to ignite their curiosity for their ancestors. For John, it is important that the stories not be lost; he responds to his role of keeper of the family stories with great dedication.

John has consciously and actively used the story of his grandmother’s marriage as a warning for his own life. The miscarriage story, for John, represents a very clear example of the way not to be in marriage. When he first heard the story and his grandmother vehemently stated if she had her life to live over again she wouldn’t marry a man like John’s grandfather, this had a very big impact. "I remember saying to her at that moment that I’d never want to have to say that about my life and it made a resolve in me not to make the mistakes that she was telling me about." John has remembered the story over the years because it served as a cautionary tale showing the path to be avoided at all costs in terms of relationships. This is the one story which does not offer John a male role model whom he wishes to emulate. As he says of his grandfather "I’m an entirely different person than him in that respect."

John’s ancestors did not seem to place much importance on relationships. As John reiterated, "There’s my grandmother [who] marries a man 30 years older than herself, he dies when she’s still in her forties and she lives on another 50 years on her own. My mother living 80 years on her own never getting married." John’s family
stories emphasize that people live independent lives. John does not respect this stoicism that he sees in his ancestors. "That's the one part of their lives that I don't admire and where I think they lost out on a great deal of the possibility that life has." John has worked very hard to create relationships in his own life where he is involved and connected. As a result, he has been able to rely heavily upon his community of friends and family during his illness.

Covertly, the family stories appear to have shaped John's own responses to adversity throughout his lifetime. The stories are stories of strength. They serve as inspiring metaphors for coping with life's difficulties and challenges. When I commented that John's stance towards cancer seems to reflect a combination of the stances his ancestors adopted in the stories, he said "clearly one of [my grandmother's] goals was to instruct me in the fact that life does present adversity, life is full of obstacles and your ancestors have overcome them and you can overcome. You can still rise above it yourself." John believes himself to be quite skilled at dealing with adversity. He is able to conduct himself in a constructive manner which often leads to resolution. "That seems to be one of my strengths, I see adversity not as an overwhelming obstacle . . . but as a real thing that it's just there and has to be dealt with and then we get on with other things. It's not the end of the world, it's simply there and you deal with it." Even death does not seem to frighten John. It becomes one more obstacle that he will either deal with or accept if he cannot take action.

It was therapeutic for John to reconnect with his ancestor's stances towards adversity, given that he is now struggling with cancer. It had not occurred to John that he was emulating many of the attitudes and stances of those in the stories. Realizing that
he is again following the path of those who came before seemed to be very meaningful for John. During the interviews, he came to see that his family stories can serve as guiding metaphors which can help him in his life now. Once again he has contacted his touchstone, a source of strength and inspiration.

The following familial orientation to living may be derived from John's family stories: Life is an adventure. Adversity is part of life and may take many forms. There are ways to handle adversity, but it must be faced alone. Taking charge, acting decisively, being strong and independent are effective ways to respond to adversity. Be open to unexpected circumstances that can bring a special kind of wisdom. There are circumstances where one cannot take action and must instead accept fate and resign oneself to making the best of the situation. There are those who have come before who can guide you and show you the path. There is strength and comfort to be gained from the example of your ancestors. There are also warnings so you must pay attention not to repeat the same mistakes that your ancestors did.

John concurred with the above statements, with the exception of facing adversity alone. This is where John sees life differently than his ancestors. He is not alone. He very much believes in drawing upon community and family to help him cope with having cancer. Although the above summary was taken directly from the family stories, it appears to parallel John's approach to cancer.

John's life story may be conceptualized as a hero's journey. As Joseph Campbell (1943) says of the hero's journey:

We have not even to risk the adventure alone, for the heroes of all time have gone before us. The labyrinth is thoroughly known. We have only to follow the thread
of the hero path, and where we had thought to find an abomination, we shall find a god. And where we had thought to slay another, we shall slay ourselves. Where we had thought to travel outward, we will come to the centre of our own existence. And where we had thought to be alone, we will be with all the world (p. 123).

The metaphor of the hero seems to be one that John relates to in others, although prior to the interviews he had not consciously applied this to his own life. Yet throughout his own life he does appear to have enacted the hero’s path. Cochran (1990) stated that it is by "enacting a metaphor [that a] person symbolically raises himself or herself from incompleteness" in life.

According to Campbell (1943) the standard path of all mythological heroes is a variation upon the rite of passage: separation-initiation-return.

A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man" (p. 30).

In fairy tales, the heroic action is portrayed as physical, while higher religions depict the deed as moral.

According to Campbell (1943) herohood is predestined. Traditional hero stories often endow the hero with special abilities beginning at birth. In John’s life story, we know that his birth actually saved his mother from death. John stated that it seemed he entered life with a mission. The heroic journey begins with a call to adventure. The early years of John’s life story feature a boy who was impoverished of family connection.
Although his foster family was loving, they could not offer him a sense of rootedness. Then at age 12 he was summoned to England where, through the stories, he was introduced to the world of his ancestors. His ancestors beckoned him into a realm of adventure; he responded to the call with irresistible fascination. This marks a dream-like period in John’s life where he began to realize his true potential. His early role models showed him the dimensions of the hero’s stance in life.

This part of John’s life story is strongly reminiscent of the legend of King Arthur. The young Arthur was brought up in a distant forest by a foster family. His identity as princeling was hidden, even to himself. Arthur thought of himself as a foundling and was grateful to have any semblance of family.

Then, around the age of 12, Arthur was brought by Merlin to the court of his father where he was able to pull the sword out of the stone. His true identity was then revealed. No longer a foundling, he was now the young man who would be the future High King. John’s story mirrors the story of King Arthur where a dramatic transition takes place from being the lost child to one who is bestowed with a special identity.

According to Campbell (1943) "for those who have not refused the call, the first encounter of the hero-journey is with a protective figure (often a little old crone . . .) who provides the adventurer with amulets against the dragon forces he is about to pass" (p. 69). John’s grandmother may be viewed as the crone. She guided his initiation into the stories; she introduced him to her mystical practices. "What such a figure represents is the benign, protecting power of destiny" (71). John’s grandmother undoubtedly helped shape and guide his destiny. As John says of his grandmother and her stories "you need a mentor, you need a guide . . . someone to start you in the direction then you pick it up
from there depending on your strength of will and on how well those stories resonate with you."

Once he left England, John began to enact a life of adventure. John’s life story reads like a modern day chronicle of the hero’s exploits. His yearnings to explore the end of the road, his pattern of moving every 2 years, and his exotic holidays all emulate the models of his grandparent and great grandparent within the family stories. Journalism became the perfect career choice because it allowed John the freedom to travel and to be independent. In a different era, John likely would have joined a military campaign overseas.

When John met the woman who read auras he had a profound vision. Within the vision, he encountered many obstacles that he must move beyond. This represents the road of trials (Campbell, 1943) that the hero must face. During this vision, John had an encounter with a guide, this time a male figure who points the way for him.

The next stage of the hero’s journey is characterized by an experience of being swallowed into the unknown. This represents self-annihilation (Campbell, 1943) where the hero travels inwards to be born again. John travelled to France where he experienced what he termed "a crisis of the soul." In a sense John encountered his particular ogre, in the form of loneliness; what Campbell would call "the unsolved enigma of his own humanity" (p. 121). The solitary life of adventure was not enough. John’s out of body experience showed him that the next path led to relationship and having children. He emerged from this experience reborn in a sense and ready to commit to a loving partnership.
Presently, John finds himself on yet another leg of his life's journey, one where he encounters his own mortality. Cancer would seem to be the modern day equivalent of a dragon or ogre that must be slain. Campbell (1943) described this stage of the journey as the "supreme ordeal" (p. 246); once this ordeal is faced, the hero triumphs and receives a reward of some kind. John has as a powerful model his grandmother's story of her near death experience. His grandmother survived her illness and was made more powerful because of it. In fact, John also has the models of his ancestor's dangerous journeys to look to as he continues on his own dangerous journey.

John equates healing with the hero's journey. He finds that the story of another hero, Ulysses, speaks to him now. Ulysses, on his final journey, turned inwards and simplified his life; this is exactly what John is doing. John is confronting his own inner dragons now: death, pain, suffering, the meaning of his life and spirituality.

The next chapter of John's life story is unfinished. Will he survive this battle and return from his hero's journey to share his wisdom and experience? The wisdom to be gained from this final test is "intrinsically ... an expansion of being (illumination, transfiguration, freedom) " (Campbell, 1943, p. 246). The return from the journey marks a resurrection or rescue where the hero presents his knowledge to the world. The deeds of the hero during the second part of his cycle will be proportionate to the depth of his descent during the first part of the journey. Ultimately, "the adventure of the hero represents the moment in his life when he achieved illumination - the nuclear moment when, while still alive, he found and opened the road to the light beyond the dark walls of our living death" (Campbell, p. 259).
John is at a point in his life where the future is uncertain, yet he is able to say with certainty that he has no regrets about the life he has led. Participating in the research allowed him to reexperience his years with his grandmother. Retelling the family stories brought them to life once more and they have now been incorporated into his present struggle with cancer. John hoped that by going back into the stories the answer would reveal itself. Participating in the research appeared to give him strength and a resolve that he is on the right track. He had not previously thought of his path as the hero's path, nor had he connected his journey with those of his ancestral heroes. He appears to be following those ancestors once again, using their wisdom and his own to face cancer.
"Stories are relatively simple formats that illuminate complex interactional patterns. They locate us in our lives" (Roberts, 1994, p. 21).

This chapter will begin by focusing on the person of the researcher in order to build a sense of the trustworthiness and replicability of the results. An exploration of the positioning of the researcher will emphasize that the interactional nature of the research process provides a fundamental basis for the co-construction of meaning. Once the role of the researcher has been explicated, common ingredients and themes which characterize the interview narratives will be identified through a comparative analysis. Finally, the practical significance of the research results will be discussed by developing a conceptual comparison between family stories and early recollections, and applying these ideas to the counselling setting. Limitations of the present research and implications for future research will also be discussed.

The Research Experience: Storyteller/Listener Interface

A crucial component of the comparative analysis is an examination of the positioning and influence of the researcher, in order to demonstrate that the meanings constructed were not inappropriately influenced by the interaction with co-researchers. Oakley (cited in Mischler, 1986) argued that

the mythology of ‘hygienic’ research with its accompanying mystification of the researcher and the researched as objective instruments of data production be
replaced by the recognition that personal involvement is more than dangerous bias — it is the condition under which people come to know each other and to admit others into their lives" (p. 31).

Mischler (1986) emphasized that narrative analysis must take into account the three critical issues of "structure, meaning, and interactional context" (p. 75). Of the three, the interactional context has been the issue most frequently ignored within research. Mischler conceptualized interviews as "jointly produced discourses" (p. 96) and suggested that the following questions must be considered.

What is the role of the interviewer in how a respondents’ story is told, how it is constructed and developed, and what it means? How do stories told in interviews differ from those told in other contexts, such as naturally occurring conversations? How can the presence and influence of an interviewer be taken into account in the analysis and interpretation of a respondent’s story? (p. 96).

Paterson (1994) asserted that reactivity, defined as "the response of the researcher and the participants to each other during the research process" must be examined as part of the analysis. While the research literature has more commonly discussed the influence that the researcher exerts over participant responses, the influence of participants upon the researcher’s collection of data is equally important to consider. Within the present research, reactivity was explored through the self reflective process of journal writing.

In any storytelling situation, there is an interface created between the storyteller, the listener, the situation, and the point in time during which the story is recounted (Tonkin, 1990). This interface reflects a convergence of unique factors at a specific
moment in time. A limitation of the present research may be that attempts at replication will necessarily involve the creation of a new interface. This is a function of storytelling, where no two stories are the same, and no two storytelling sessions will ever be identical. The underlying point is that "meanings are contextually grounded" (Mischler, 1986, p. 117). If another researcher were to re-interview the co-researchers who participated in this study, conceivably the results could be different because the interface (context) would have changed. This is not to say that the research has no merit because it cannot be replicated. Another researcher would likely be able to detect patterns of meaning between family stories and lives. The point is that the interface needs to be clearly articulated.

Paterson (1994) proposed that the issue of reactivity in research be analyzed according to its' five common contributing sources (as identified by Wiseman, 1987). The first is the emotional valence, or feeling tone that exists during the interview process, which is strongly influenced by the degree of trust that is created. In her review of the literature, Paterson indicated that while some authors feel overidentification with participants hampers interpretation and analysis, other authors advocate involvement that is reciprocal and collaborative. The emotional valence may also describe a clash of values or personalities which leads to negative emotions.

The second source of reactivity is the distribution of power, meaning "the perceptions of either the researcher or the research participant that the other has more or less status or authority than themselves" (Paterson, 1994, p. 305). If the researcher is perceived as having a higher status or authority then the interview may be constrained because the participant may believe the researcher knows how he or she should respond.
As well, the participant may attempt to please the researcher in order to receive approval. The distribution of power is also influenced by the perceptions of the research participant that the researcher is either an insider or outsider to the particular setting or subject being investigated.

The third source of reactivity is the actual goal of the interaction. The goal may be explicit or non-explicit for either or both participant and researcher. If the perceived goals are seen differently by the principals, confusion results. The blurring of roles between researcher and counsellor has also been identified within the qualitative literature as a source of confusion (Paterson, 1994). If a therapeutic relationship develops between researcher and participant then the goals of the study may be compromised.

The forth component relates to the importance of the interaction. If both researcher and participant perceive the research to be significant this will influence the results. Researchers who are bored or disinterested will have an obvious negative impact upon the data collected, just as participants who believe they have nothing significant to offer may omit important material.

Finally, normative or cultural criteria influence reactivity. Trust is strengthened in qualitative research when the researcher is sensitive to cultural and social norms of participants. As well, both principals are influenced by their respective occupational and social roles.

In order to analyze reactive effects in research, the researcher must question if and how each of the five themes influenced the data collection. This strategy provides a means for describing my positioning as researcher in the interaction. I cannot be the
conduit of the storyteller's stories without comprehending my own reactions. I played a critical role and must clearly explain that role.

The philosophical approach that I brought to interviewing is important to explicate. I saw myself as creating a conversational context where I functioned as researcher, counsellor, and receiver of stories. Ultimately the research was designed to create multiple storytelling situations, so I did not believe I could be purely objective and detached from the experience. In fact, I would argue that for stories to be truly heard, we cannot be objective; we must bring our subjectivity to the interaction. The very reason stories have an impact is that they speak to something within the listener. As a counsellor, my style is to be very gentle and supportive. This style was definitely a component of the research interviews. I believe my counselling skills were an asset in the sense that I was able to help people feel at ease. The experience of being heard and understood helped the co-researchers to openly discuss their own lives.

With each of the co-researchers, an intimacy was shared and a closeness developed which I am convinced led to richer results. In terms of the emotional valence, a high degree of trust was established over two in-depth interviews. I found that in each interview, I could identify with the co-researcher's stories and experiences based on my own history. I found this to be an asset during interpretation and analysis rather than a hindrance. At no time, during any of the interviews, was I aware of any emotional tension or conflict between myself and the co-researchers.

In terms of the power dynamics within the research relationships, I took the perspective that the co-researchers were the experts, not me. I encouraged them to guide me through their family stories and related life experiences. I shared with them
appropriate details from my own life because it was important to me that they not feel the process to be totally one-sided. In addition, I believe the co-researchers felt my commitment and interest in the subject, that is, that I was an "insider."

Regarding the goals and purpose of the research, I reiterated the goals several times during each interview in order to keep both the co-researcher and myself focused on our shared purpose. I was careful, during the interview process, not to establish myself as a counsellor to the co-researchers. I believe I was able to successfully use my skills to enhance the research interviews without confusing the co-researchers about our goals.

In approaching the research interviews, I brought a spirit of curiosity. I was tremendously interested in what people had to say, in part fuelled by a lifelong passion for stories and storytelling. I had already spent considerable time examining my own family stories and had discovered there were themes in the stories that echoed within my own life. Consequently I entered the research with an attitude that communicated to the co-researchers that their stories mattered. I believe the three co-researchers were very committed to the research, which tapped into their fascination and curiosity for their family stories. The criterion of importance, therefore, was met by both researcher and co-researchers because all parties involved in the research were committed to the meaningfulness of the study.

In addressing the issue of normative or cultural criteria, I approached each interview with the belief that every family functions like a distinct culture. I strived to remain open to "cultural diversity" across families, rather than having preconceived ideas about what a particular family story meant or reflected about the individual telling it.
Although I am presently working as a family counsellor, I tried not to allow this professional role to intrude upon the research interviews because I believed it would create the ethos of "expert." I was more interested in hearing the co-researchers' ideas than I was in imposing my theories or expertise.

In conceptualizing my role in this research I think of myself as one who was touched by story magic. The stories of the co-researchers moved me in a profound way, with the result that story interpretation did not feel like a difficult task. I used my own awareness and sensitivity to completely immerse myself within the stories, in order to see what they were saying. As a counsellor, I am continually interpreting people's stories and I experience the same fascination in this process as I did during the research process.

The first interview I conducted was with Maca. I was amazed by the expansive story that unfolded. I was also very moved by the pain that the story still carries for Maca. Of the three co-researchers, Maca brought the most emotion to the interview process. Maca's stories touched me; her mother's life story reminded me strongly of my own mother's life story. Therefore I was able to understand her reactions, and the pain she seemed to have inherited via the stories. While re-reading her mother's story aloud one day I began to cry. It was as though the sadness of the story had caught up with me. I felt deeply the tragedy of her mother's life and the solace she found through being loved.

During the second interview, the story of Maca's recent loss was very emotional. I came to see the ways that her mother's story connected to Maca's life story as our discussions unfolded. The challenge presented by these interviews was that Maca herself did not see some of the parallels that I was observing. I did not force these points,
believing that there was probably a reason that she did not identify more closely with the stories.

One of the ways that Maca influenced me is through her physical presence. She is a very gentle and loving woman and this quality pervaded our time together. I also felt the strength of her spirit. These characteristics are difficult to convey in writing, but they were definitely a tangible part of our interviews.

How did I as the researcher influence Maca? I validated and understood her pain and her mother’s pain. I treated the family stories with reverence and respect, as though they were gifts from the past. I endeavoured to create a gentle conversational exchange where safety and a spirit of curiosity were pervasive. Most of all, what I experienced with Maca was compassion. When I began to write about Maca’s life and her family stories, I initially used language that emphasized the sadness and melodrama of the tale. I believe this was a reflection of the ways that the story had touched me emotionally. Input from my research supervisor was invaluable at this point. I began to monitor the way that I described and formed Maca’s narrative account. This self-monitoring was important because the story had touched me so deeply.

During the interviews with John, I felt inspired, excited, and invigorated. His family stories and his passion for them were infectious. The stories themselves were easy to interpret because they offered such clear, strong messages. I became excited as I began to ponder the story themes and the questions I would ask John about his own life. As I came to know more about John’s life, I felt admiration. His struggle with cancer touched me deeply. Instead of seeing him as a victim, I kept seeing his strength and his heroic qualities. I began to see how much his heroic stories touched upon components of
John's own life story. After the second interview with John, I left feeling almost as though I had been blessed with special knowledge, or touched in a spiritual sense. His attitude towards cancer and possible death was inspiring and caused me to think about my own life. I realized that there was much I could learn from John about life and death.

As a researcher, I influenced John in several ways. I echoed his curiosity which dated back to age 12 when he first heard the stories. John commented during the first interview that it was wonderful to have another person so interested in his family stories. Our mutual curiosity created an interview process that was enlivened. Regarding his cancer, I allowed him to say as much or as little as he desired about the situation. I did not want to intrude upon his privacy. When he did speak of his illness and possible death, I tried to be gentle and open to whatever he needed to say.

Ellen's stories in their starkness, surprised me. At times I felt frustrated during the first interview because I wondered if there was enough in her stories to use in the research. But as I began to analyze the stories themselves, I came to realize that although bereft of detail, these stories were very significant for what they expressed about Ellen's family. I entered the second interview curious about what lay beneath the surface of the stories and what was beneath the surface in Ellen's own life. This hunch was an accurate one. I came to see that the stories were cryptic, symbolic constructions which revealed much about Ellen's life. In order to arrive at this perspective, however, I had to trust that the stories were significant in deep ways and I had to allow the process of the interviews to unfold so that we had the time to make connections between the stories and her life.
As a researcher, I sensed a reticence or guardedness in Ellen. Consequently I influenced Ellen by creating a comfortable encounter where anything could be discussed. Sensing there was more beneath the surface, I decided it was important to help Ellen feel that it was possible to discuss anything without fear of strong reactions from me. In other words, I believed that there should be no taboos in the interview process. During the first interview, I asked Ellen what it was like sharing her family stories with someone she had never met before and she said "Well I feel quite comfortable talking about it. I think it's . . . a lot to do with who you are and how you’re responding." Over the course of two interviews, a climate of safety was created which was conducive to exploring her secret stories.

Ellen's stories of disconnection strongly echoed my own family experiences of distance. So I was able to empathize with her yearning for a different kind of family connection, and her experiences as a real outsider within her own family. I believe my ability to identify with Ellen contributed to the intimacy of the interview exchange without inappropriately altering the story of her experiences.

It is like each of the co-researchers gave me a gift, a story or an idea which related to my own life. The parts of their stories that I identified with were the pieces that resonated within my own life. My interpretations of their stories, therefore, cannot help but be influenced by my life experiences.

The research process represented an experience of unfolding. Beginning with the stories, I felt I was led deeper and deeper into the co-researchers' lives. There was a definite advantage to conducting two interviews with each person. This allowed for greater depth and relationship building.
The essential component of the research was the interactive dialogue that was created. It would have felt very inadequate and incomplete to simply collect the family stories and formulate morals for those stories without returning to the person. Instead the dialogic process allowed us to take the stories and understand how they made sense within the context of the co-researchers' lives. The co-researchers' comments that it was the second interview in particular that was therapeutic suggest the importance of the ongoing dialogue.

The end result consists of narrative accounts which are richly grounded in the lives of the people involved. Previous research on family stories has largely ignored this context. What was co-created in the storytelling interface, therefore, was a strong relationship where there was permission to explore, to be open, and to truly understand the meaning of the stories that emerged. This led to the depth of material that was elicited.

To summarize the stance that I adopted as a researcher, I refer to Miller Mair (1989) who has written eloquently about the need to rediscover the poetry and passion of human experience:

What sorts of abilities matter here? Listening with all of you, feeling, being able to formulate and give expression to what is being spoken, felt or shown in a variety of ways; being able and willing to give voice with sensitive pungency (not just accuracy in some literal sense) to what is being said in the living space of both the speaker and the receiver. The finding and creating of means of conjuring into effective reality, speaking it like it is, is important. Being willing to bear the pains and uncertainties of
creative endeavour, rather than follow the set paths of formal testing; attending to and staying with the hints and clues along the way; knowing how to hunt around to find new hints of life in trails that seem to have gone dead; being able to wait and suffer through the lean time; and being able and willing to be given over to the terrible excitement and pain of holding and shaping and giving birth when the feelings and ideas flow (p. 46).

**Narrative Accounts: Contrast and Convergence**

In an effort to understand the meaning of family stories and their influence upon the lives of the co-researchers, a comparative analysis of the narrative accounts was undertaken. There was an anticipated diversity across the narrative accounts which reflects unique family histories and styles, and the individual co-researcher's personalities. Differences across the family stories themselves were also found because the stories emerged from distinct families with very different values and beliefs. As well, the three co-researchers are unique individuals, and had different responses to the stories they heard. Variation across accounts makes the data richer and more interesting.

In the area of family storytelling traditions, notable differences were found. John's family had at it's centre, his grandmother, the family matriarch. She was the designated family storyteller with a vast and rich collection of ancestral tales. Storytelling was woven into the fabric of John's daily life with his grandmother. The stories became a rich and exciting means for John to learn more about his family background.
By contrast, Ellen’s family suffered from story impoverishment, where the stories had been buried underground. There were no storytelling rituals established within the family. As a consequence, Ellen had to dig in order to unearth the stories. Maca’s family also did not appear to have a well-developed storytelling tradition. Although reminisce stories emerged after her father’s death, these did not appear to be part of a strong, ongoing ritual. Maca’s mother’s life story was a secret, which was only talked about once as Maca grew up. To a lesser degree than Ellen, Maca’s family also appeared to be story impoverished.

There are stylistic differences between the family stories themselves. John’s stories are detailed and richly evocative; they are full, fleshy stories. By contrast, Ellen’s family stories are bereft of detail or emotion, giving them an almost skeletal style. Maca’s family stories are of two distinct styles. The stories of her father are tiny vignettes, making one central point. These stories are not overly detailed or developed. In contrast, her mother’s life story is descriptive and heavily detailed. The story seems to go on and on, as it unfolds yet another chapter in her mother’s life.

The content of the family stories varied widely, from courtship stories to heroic tales, to stories of long buried family secrets. It is to be expected that story content would vary, however what the stories represented to the individuals does show intrinsic commonalities.

Roberts (1994), a family therapist, has studied the storytelling context in which stories are received and notes that the way "stories are shared directly influences the meaning making possibilities of the tales" (p. 12). Roberts has identified six story styles
which categorize a family's story sharing approach. These include: rigid, intertwined, distinct/separated, minimal/interrupted, silenced/secret, and evolving.

Within the present research, story styles varied across the narrative accounts. John's grandmother's story style may be described as rigid, where time is frozen and the text of the story becomes well-known by others. The stories are told and re-told as set pieces. Others may easily retell the stories because they have come to know them so thoroughly. A rigid story style is also characterized by one set interpretation of meaning. As John indicated, he was discouraged from questioning the family stories. He sensed that the stories were "sacred" and carried "the family truth," therefore only one version of each story was allowed. His grandmother's single-minded purpose in telling John the stories was to educate him in family values, history and his noble ancestry. These were the interpretations of the stories that were permitted. During the research interviews, John was very clear about the meaning of the family stories from his grandmother's perspective. A consequence of the rigid story style is that it can be difficult for people to apprehend the meaning of the stories in their own lives. This may explain John's difficulty in connecting his family stories with his present life circumstances.

Roberts (1994) suggested that the therapeutic goal for working with rigid stories is to try to facilitate the incorporation into the stories of different perspectives. John has achieved this goal in part through the historical research he has conducted. Alternately, encouraging people to tell their stories from other vantage points may enhance meaning. Assisting people to rework stories so that they include other potential endings can also be helpful.
Ellen’s story style may be characterized as *minimal/interrupted*. Although Ellen’s family stories were secrets, the stories were eventually told when she was a teenager. A *silenced/secret* story style refers to stories that remain submerged and hidden, whereas a *minimal/interrupted* style describes families where stories are inaccessible or have been interrupted due to migrations, moves, losses and/or cut-offs. People from such families have little access to historical time, and there are few details to fill out the stories. As well, it becomes hard to derive meaning from multiple perspectives.

As a consequence of people not talking openly in Ellen’s family, she could not access her relatives to hear more about the stories. Rita is still alive, yet Ellen has never discussed the story with her. Ellen expressed some curiosity about what Hope’s side of the affair story would have been, yet she never pursued this. She asked as many questions as she could about the stories at the time, yet they still feel like "mysteries" to her. A consequence of the *minimal/interrupted* story style is that Ellen is denied information that may help her make meaning in her own life.

The therapeutic task in this case involves the resurrection of stories through contacting other family members, or trying to locate other resources. If stories can not be elaborated through facts, then the person can imagine variations to the story.

Maca’s family story style may be categorized as *distinct/separated*, where stories are not seen as linked at all. Stories may feature similar dilemmas but these are seen as unrelated. The focus remains upon each individual story, preventing access to meaning-making across different contexts. The therapeutic task with such stories entails helping people to see how a story that appears to be quite separate may in fact be resonating with another. In Maca’s case, she sees very little resonance between her family stories and
her own life story in spite of the apparent convergence. She also struggled with seeing that all of her family stories portray her father's attributes of goodness.

The research interview process appeared to be conducive to the creation of an evolving story approach, characterized by the recognition that the stories may offer different meanings at different times in life. With an evolving story style, there is room to formulate new meanings and the details and points that are emphasized change over time. According to Roberts, key family stories must be told and retold over time so that they may be examined from different developmental perspectives. By examining their family stories in greater depth, and in conjunction with their own life stories, the co-researchers were able to "understand . . . what has been given to [them] through the stories in [their] lives, while having an ongoing dialogue about the new stories that are being created" (Roberts, 1994, p. 21).

Although stylistic and individual differences were found across stories and the co-researchers' experiences with the stories, overall the research identified more commonalities than differences. The co-researchers' experiences of their family stories have been rewritten into narrative accounts which can be analyzed for converging themes. According to Cochran (1990) "a story is a story regardless of complexity or length of time" (p. 37). The narrative accounts then, may be conceptualized as stories which have a beginning, middle, and an end. The beginning of the co-researcher's stories reflects life before the family stories emerged. The middle of each account features the family storytelling experiences, predominantly the stories themselves. The end of each account is characterized by life after the stories, and the way the co-researchers have incorporated the stories into their own lives.
A holistic exploration of the three story phases must be undertaken in order for the accounts to make sense. When comparing the co-researchers’ narrative accounts, themes were extracted and clustered according to whether they described experiences before, during or after the family story experience (see Appendix C for Summary of Research Themes).

Life before the family stories: Receptivity. There are several themes that characterize life for the co-researchers before they received the family stories. The themes are interrelated and overlapping, but may be linked by the dominant theme of receptivity. Subordinate themes include: incompletion, encountering an enduring dilemma, and a paucity of meaningful stories.

Life before the family stories for the co-researchers may be characterized by incompletion. In all three lives, something was missing, however the protagonists were not necessarily aware of the gap. Cochran (1990), in discussing the basic ingredients of story structure in lives, found that the beginning of a story often reflects “disequilibrium, an upset, or a disruption” (p. 17) where the protagonist is incomplete in some way. If incompletion defines the beginning of a life story, then the person often strives for completion as the ending to the story.

For Ellen, incompletion consisted of a family life devoid of feeling or communication. Ellen came to believe this emotionally suppressed family environment was normal, that all families operated in a similar manner. She had no idea, during her early years, that her family was so dysfunctional. Ellen also did not realize how neglected she was in terms of love and nurturing.

John’s sense of incompletion arose from the lack of contact with his biological family. His mother had virtually abandoned him, while he never knew his father. His
entire extended family lived in England. Although John was well-loved by his foster family, this did not appear to be enough. What was missing was a sense of his connection to his ancestors. He had no point of reference for his place in the family lineage. John was not living up to his true potential for the first 12 years of his life. He struggled in school and suffered from low self esteem. However at the time he did not realize his life was incomplete. He lived a contented existence with his foster family and enjoyed exploring the city on his bike. This seemed to him to be all that life entailed.

Maca’s early years were notable for the change that occurred in her family once her father died. Maca lost her kind and loving father, to be replaced by an experience of cruelty and abuse perpetrated by her mother. Incompletion for Maca entailed the loss of a loving, doting parent. The result was confusion as Maca struggled to comprehend her mother’s dramatic change in behaviour. Maca was aware of the big change that took place in her family, yet she did not fully understand why her mother behaved as she did.

Another related theme that marks this part of the co-researcher accounts is the fact that all three seem to have encountered an enduring dilemma before they were introduced to the family stories. This dilemma was characterized by suffering and low self esteem. John’s dilemma was one of belonging. Cut off from any relationships with biological family, he had no strong sense of his own identity. His experience of suffering was due to missing a father figure and not feeling rooted. Where was he to fit? How was he to be in the world? He had no sense of a past, and therefore no idea of a possible future for himself. Part of John’s dilemma consisted of a lack of information. He knew nothing of his ancestors and their exploits.
Ellen's dilemma was disconnection and abandonment. She suffered due to emotional neglect, living in a family where love and closeness were so impoverished. Yet in spite of being so disconnected from her family, Ellen's true dilemma was blindness. She suffered from a lack of vision and understanding. She accepted the family way of handling difficulties through non-communication and excluding children from the truth. She believed this was the way that all families behaved. Furthermore, Ellen was forced to figure things out on her own. She was denied information and explanations for what was going on in the family. Thus, early in life, Ellen did not really see and understand the family for what it was.

Maca's dilemma was that she had experienced a loving and peaceful family life and suddenly it vanished. Where her father had supported and encouraged her, creating a feeling of safety and comfort, her mother criticized her as well as physically and emotionally abusing her. Maca suffered terribly as a result of the abuse. Consequently she was plunged into a world that didn't make sense. Her mother's actions seemed crazy because Maca had no context for understanding her behaviour.

These enduring dilemmas encountered by the co-researchers represent "primitive dramas" (Cochran, 1990, p. 45). Such experiences of growing up characterize the childhood period, and arise from family, culture, inherited temperament or other sources. "Whatever the source, singularly or in combination, persons experience a wide range of primitive dramas, any one of which could probably develop into a plot for life" (p. 45). In the lives of the co-researchers, the early dilemmas they faced appeared to represent significant primitive dramas which would influence the events that followed in life. Specifically, these dilemmas and the suffering they entailed established a focusing of
attention in the co-researchers. As a result of what was encountered, and what was missing, they appeared to be ready, waiting and looking for what was to come.

Another feature of the early years of life was the paucity of meaningful stories. Only Maca recalled stories from age 7 or 8, after the death of her father. John recalled no family stories from his years with his foster family, yet he is sure that storytelling had occurred. The stories of this second family did not seem to resonate with John, thus he had no reason to remember them. Ellen could not recall stories before she was a teenager. The paucity of stories meant that the co-researchers had no guidelines for living, nothing to follow or to grasp onto.

The subordinate themes of incompletion, suffering and encountering an enduring dilemma coalesced to create an openness or yearning in each person. Consequently, receptivity characterized their stance in life. They seemed to be consciously, or more probably unconsciously, looking for something, although not aware of what it would be that would fill the gap. Thus each person became sensitized. For example, John described his version of receptivity by saying "I had no idea who my ancestors were, . . . so I was like an open book." According to Cochran (1990)

the gap emerging from incompleteness defines a line of movement, a personal story line. All events, opportunities, situations, and characters gain definition, relevance, and significance to the extent to which they are related to the line of movement (p. 18).

The beginning of each narrative account, therefore, highlights the origins of a certain movement or direction in life.
The family story experience: Identification and impact. The family storytelling experiences seemed to offer the possibility for positive or negative identification with the story elements. In this way, the stories may be seen to have impacted each co-researcher in significant ways. These are the dominant themes which characterize the experience of receiving family stories. Subordinate themes include: curiosity, unique co-researcher story interpretations, emotional resonance, explanation and comprehension, and story fulfilment.

In all three cases, the family storytellers were women. This is congruent with previous research which indicated that women often adopt the role of keepers of the stories (Stone, 1988). For John and Maca, there were no male family members involved, while Ellen recalled that her mother was more apt to tell stories than her father.

A striking commonality is the fact that the co-researchers received their prominent family stories during adolescence, between the ages of 12 and 15. Developmental theorists have identified adolescence as the period in life where tremendous change occurs (Erikson, 1959; McAdams, 1993). At this stage of the life cycle, the search begins for a new self. According to McAdams (1993) "Identity begins to become a problem in life when a person first notices incongruities between who he or she was at one time and who he or she is now" (p. 76). Cognitive development during adolescence leads to questioning of reality. "The adolescent may look at the realities of the present and the past and contrast them with hypothetical possibilities concerning what might have been . . . and what might yet be" (McAdams, 1993, p. 77).

McAdams (1993) characterized adolescence as the period in life where we begin to fashion our own personal myths. "The adolescent mind is an ideological mind" (p.
Ideology centres upon concerns of goodness and truth. The adolescent grapples with the following: "In order to know who I am, I must first decide what I believe to be true and good, false and evil about the world in which I live" (p. 81).

A strong theme which emerged from the co-researcher narratives is curiosity. As adolescents, all three were tremendously curious about the family stories they received. There was a tendency to question the details of the stories. Maca became the one in her family who still, to this day, is the most curious about the stories. John’s curiosity centred upon discovering everything he possibly could about his ancestors. He asked detailed questions of his grandmother concerning the logistics of the stories. His curiosity is still alive as an adult, as evidenced by his avid pursuit of the historical background to the stories. Ellen developed a burning desire to discover more about her ancestors’ relationships.

Upon first hearing the stories in adolescence, the co-researchers brought to the experience their own unique interpretations. In all cases co-researcher interpretations were in direct contrast to the intended interpretations of the family storytellers. John’s grandmother intended to instil a sense of the family connections to nobility. Instead of this meaning, John responded most strongly to the call of adventure and travel within the stories. Where Maca’s mother intended to warn her daughters about the dangers of illicit love, Maca took an entirely different meaning from the tale. For her the message centred upon the important and redeeming qualities of love. Ellen’s mother shared the stories to explain family history, while for Ellen the essential meaning related to the dangers of secrecy and the lack of communication.
At the time that they first heard the stories, the co-researchers described an experience of *emotional resonance* (positive or negative). This was evidenced by the language used to describe their responses to the stories. Ellen shared the following words: "bizarre, shocking, surprising, strange, anger." John's language included: "curiosity, awe, pride, wonder, romance, chilled and uncomfortable." Maca talked about "pride, pain, sadness, curiosity, hope." These were compelling, riveting stories which pulled at the co-researchers, provoking them to feel deeply. This may explain why these particular stories have remained the most prominent for the co-researchers. Significant family stories seem to represent strong emotional attachments.

According to Tonkin (1990), an oral account represents an intersection of speaker, audience, situation, and time. The goal of the speaker to is be listened to. In order to facilitate this goal there are two criteria which must be met. The first is that the accounts must claim to be authoritative, and there are culturally accepted means of gaining this authority. In the case of the co-researchers, the storytellers had an inherent authority in that they were parents and grandparents who had either lived through or received the stories. The second criterion is appropriateness, where the "speaker cues the listener creating a horizon of expectation" (p. 23) from which to interpret the event. Appropriateness within the present study is related to the fact that the particular stories appeared to speak to the individual dilemmas (or "primitive dramas") which each person had faced in childhood.

*Curiosity, emotional resonance, and unique co-researcher story interpretations* overlap to create the superordinate theme of *identification*. Each of the co-researchers experienced *strong identification*, positive or negative, with characters and events in the
family stories. The stories seemed to provide a modality with which the co-researchers could sort out important life concerns, such as what is noble and good, what is right and wrong. In all cases, the stories offered strong role models to emulate or react against. For example, Ellen responded with aversion to the story characters who intentionally hurt others, while she identified closely with the pain of those who had suffered. John was in awe of his male ancestor’s adventures, while he rejected his grandfather’s selfish determination to put his wife’s life at risk. Maca looked with pride upon her father’s loving example, while she responded with anger to those who wrongfully accused her father and judged her mother. Thus in the unique responses that the co-researchers demonstrated upon initially hearing their prominent family stories, an emerging ideological stance may be detected.

As discussed under the interpretive comments, the nature of the identification reveals much about the personal orientation of the co-researcher. John talked about the family stories giving him a fuller sense of his own potential and identity. He could identify with his grandfather’s travels on the clipper ships. Hearing the stories he experienced the romanticism of life as lived by his ancestors. The stories touched that part of him deep within that yearned to explore the world.

Ellen described the strongest negative identification of the three co-researchers. Her stories were very good examples of what not to do in terms of communication and handling conflict. They provided models which she could react against. As well, Ellen identified with her grandmother’s pain, being trapped in a marriage that was empty. She also identified with her mother, being the child in that silent marriage. When Ellen described her mother’s situation she could easily have been referring to her own
childhood: "[she] was just a child, yet she had to live in an oppressive environment where nobody spoke openly." Thus, through her identification, Ellen appeared to bring her own life experiences to her responses to the stories.

Maca identified with the stories of her father because they seem to capture something important that was lost to her at an early age, that is her relationship with a loving parent. These stories give her something to hold onto. Within her mother’s story, Maca identified with her mother being denied forgiveness. Clearly the importance of forgiveness has become a significant part of Maca’s personal orientation.

These particular family stories appeared to evoke such strong identification because the patterns of the stories resonated with the pattern of the dilemma, or primitive drama (Cochran, 1990) each person had faced early in life. Thus the stories offered essential information to the co-researchers. The stories seemed to provide clear explanations, offering answers to important questions and concerns which had been pressing upon each person.

The stories, therefore, led to comprehension. Each person was able to make sense of life in a new way. John had his ancestry explained to him. He was able to fill in the pieces of his own history and to appreciate the characteristics of his forbearers. It was as though John had suddenly been presented with a road map for his own life. Ellen came to clearly understand the family rifts that had occurred and the ways that people had reacted to betrayal. It was like a light had been illuminated for Ellen. Through the stories she gained a clear perspective upon her family for the first time in her life. This created a sense of choice; she did not have to replicate the family way. Maca had her mother’s life revealed to her via the detailed story. This explained her mother’s
behaviour and helped her to comprehend what had shaped her. The stories helped Maca to see her mother as three dimensional, instead of just perceiving her cruel behaviour. In each life, the family stories appear to have provided important contextual information.

In all cases, the co-researchers moved from an experience of story deprivation to *story fulfilment*. The stories, in their simple structure, offered meanings and interpretations that each person could integrate into their own lives. This is the power of story to capture the imagination and the heart, and to "disarm the intellect" (Cochran, lecture, October 1992). According to Bruner, (1986) the narrative mode creates a subjunctivity which allows those receiving stories to create their own unique meanings from the text of the actual story. Thus, within the present research, each of the co-researchers received and reconstructed their family stories to incorporate and speak to their own personal experiences. According to Kerby (1991) the self "is given content, is delineated and embodied primarily in narrative constructions or stories." The stories seemed to imprint guidelines for living that each person retained as they moved into adulthood.

**Life after the family stories: Clarity, guidance, vision.** After hearing the family stories, life for the co-researchers was dramatically altered. The stories seemed to offer clarity, guidance, or a vision of future possibilities to each person. These are the dominant themes which emerge from the co-researcher accounts. Related and overlapping subordinate themes include: *an experience of awakening, a sense of direction, enacting solutions to the dilemma, convergence between enduring personal themes and family story themes, the invisible influence of family stories in the present,* and *family stories as touchstones.*
After hearing the family stories, in all cases there was an *experience of awakening*, where life was perceived differently. John began to dream about a future filled with travel and adventure. Once he heard the family stories he knew this was what his ancestors had done and that he would follow the path as well. Through her family stories, Ellen had the veil lifted from her own eyes. She resolved to question her family members much more in future because she realized that there was more to discover. The family stories seemed to give birth to questioning. Ellen was determined that she would no longer simply accept things at face value. Maca awakened to the fact that her mother’s life story had entailed much more than her happy marriage and her subsequent abusive treatment of her children.

Not seeing things clearly marked the period before the stories, replaced by clarity for each person after the stories had been told. In offering new information, the family stories helped the co-researchers to see what lay ahead in life. John identified the path of the traveller and adventurer as one he would follow in future. He committed himself to this path and began to plan the journeys he would undertake. He also resolved never to regret any of his choices in life and he promised himself that he would not follow his grandfather’s model in relationships. These resolutions have remained with him for all of his adult life.

Ellen became determined that she would never want to live life as her ancestors had, in silence and cut off from one another. This period marked the beginning of her lifelong quest to explore both herself and her family history. The directions that Ellen committed herself to after hearing the family stories have not changed over the years.
There is a sense that Maca’s family stories helped her decide to pursue a path in life that is loving and hopeful. The stories helped her understand her mother, and in understanding she has been able to stop herself from repeating the abusive behaviour with her own child. Maca committed herself to leading a life that is full of goodness.

While the period before the family stories was characterized by an enduring dilemma that each person faced, the period after the stories may be described as enacting a solution to the dilemma. These are the ways that the co-researchers made active use of their family stories. Such movement fits with the story structure discussed by Cochran (1990), where "an end brings to closure what was aroused in the beginning" (p. 19).

John’s dilemma was a lack of anchorage and rootedness, thus the stories gave him a sense of his roots. He began to live life as though guided by his ancestors from the past. He started to excel in school and to take pride in himself. For perhaps the first time in his life he experienced a feeling of belonging, which freed him to carry on with a life of possibilities.

Ellen’s dilemma had been blindness and naivete. The stories provided her with a clear vision of her family. In fully seeing her family, Ellen was no longer blind and began to react against the family ways. Space had been created for her to assess the family and choose a different way to live life.

While Maca’s dilemma before the stories had been confusion, after the stories there was clarity and compassion. The stories explained her mother’s past and eventually this gave Maca room to forgive her mother rather than hate her. This stance allowed Maca to develop an entirely different relationship with her mother than she may have experienced without the stories.
The idea of family stories offering solutions to dilemmas of living is supported by the co-researchers' comments about what life would have been like without access to the stories. Their comments point to the ongoing dilemma that would have remained. Ellen felt that without the stories she would have no explanation for her ancestors' behaviour. She would still be puzzled by the mystery of why they did what they did. Without the stories, which provided her with important knowledge, she may have followed in her ancestors' footsteps. John felt that in the absence of his family stories, his life would not have been as rich and that he would not have received the spark that set him to dreaming. He also believes that he would not value family connections nearly as much. This further emphasizes that the stories gave him a sense of anchorage to family and offered him a taste of the richness of life. Without the gift of her mother’s story, Maca would have carried a grudge forever. She would have been unable to understand and thus forgive her mother. As well, she may have had greater difficulty resolving the issue of her abuse.

In the individual life stances adopted by each co-researcher, strong parallels with the family stories may be drawn. That is, a strong convergence between enduring personal themes and family story themes was found. Maca appeared to adopt her father’s example and set out to live a life where accepting others and love were in the forefront. From her mother, she seemed to follow the path of the outcast, one who was different and went against the grain. John dedicated himself to a life of travel and adventure, and has remained open to mystical or alternative experiences. Ellen put communication first and has demonstrated this in her relationships with partners, with her children, and at work.
The present research suggests that the issues each person is now dealing with in life may be directly linked to themes which emerged from their family stories. Ellen struggles with her ambivalence around closeness and intimacy in relationships. While she yearns for connection, she is also comfortable with a degree of distance. This appears to be an enduring theme of meaning in her life. The theme of distance and disconnection emerged strongly from her family stories. Another issue that Ellen appears to continually face in her life is the feeling that she is different, an outsider. In her insistence upon communication and facing difficult situations, Ellen has reacted against the stories to define a different path in life. But being different is lonely. Ellen doubts that she will ever find a partner who values her approach. This issue again appears to reflect her ambivalence around ever being close to another person.

The biggest challenge in John's present life is cancer. In his approach to cancer, many of the themes that emerged from his family stories are apparent. His determination to face cancer, not as something insurmountable but as a challenge, parallels the attitudes he was exposed to in his family stories. His openness to alternative healing and his calm acceptance of death as a possibility also reflect elements of his family stories.

The issue that Maca struggles with presently, is the loss of Peter. Her biggest regret is not having taken the risk of getting closer to this man she loved so much. Maca seems caught in life between desiring a loving connection with a man, while at the same time experiencing many fears about doing so. Her family stories appear to suggest that a loving relationship is the ultimate ideal in life, but at the same time this love can be lost. Maca, of the three co-researchers, was the one person who seemed the most reluctant to acknowledge the influence of her family stories in her current life. It may be that there
is too much pain and loss in the stories. In order to cope with the pain, perhaps she has needed to keep the stories at a distance. Clearly she has resisted identifying too closely with her mother, yet her mother’s story continues to have a huge impact upon her.

In terms of current life issues, the family stories appear to guide the co-researchers much more than they realize. In this sense, family stories appear to have an invisible influence. This is similar to what Stone (1988) discovered in her research where family stories appeared to be "absorbed as passively as if they were radiation" (p. 199). Maca had never thought about what connections there were between her life story and that of her mother. She appeared to resist the idea that there could be any links. John, had not considered the ways that his family stories continue to influence him in his battle with cancer and in his attitudes towards death. Ellen’s present yearning for a family experience of closeness is directly related to her family stories, where nobody experienced that kind of connection, yet she had never thought about it in this way before.

The invisible influence of family stories appears to be the part of the research where the co-researchers experienced a sense of discovery. They received new information about themselves through examining the ways that the family stories continue to resonate in their lives. Thus it appears that for each co-researcher, exploring their repertoire of family stories helped to articulate essential themes within the person’s present life. The implications for using family stories in this way in counselling practice are exciting and will be discussed in the next section.

Finally, family stories collected for the present study may be conceptualized as touchstones belonging to each co-researcher. John in fact used this metaphor to describe
his relationship to his family stories when he said "It’s as if I need that knowledge [about his ancestors] as a touchstone, for determining who I am." The dictionary defines a touchstone as "a black stone used to test the purity of gold or silver by the color of the streak made on the stone after it is rubbed with the metal" (Gage Canadian Dictionary, 1973, p. 1168). A touchstone, then, is a test of purity or a means to measure whether things are what they should be. Within the present research, the co-researchers used and continue to use their family stories as touchstones to remind them of important values and relationships. These touchstones also reinforce a particular path in life. The touchstone is an apt metaphor because it also captures the magical properties of the stone itself to detect gold. Families stories contain similar magic qualities. In their hidden messages and the way they continue to resonate, they indicate strong messages about life.

A touchstone is an object that one returns to when necessary, when something needs to be tested. In this respect, the co-researchers have kept their family stories alive over a lifetime. A touchstone is not a relic that is sealed away; it must be accessible to have utility. While Maca’s story sometimes arises unbidden, at times she chooses to pull out the story and share it with others to make a point, or to elaborate upon her own history. John has become the family storyteller, passing his tales on to his own children. John also shares the stories with friends to explain positions he has adopted within his own life. As John commented, not a year goes by that he does not think of his family stories. Ellen uncovers her stories as examples of skeletons in her closet, during discussions of family history. Ellen has also insisted upon sharing the stories with her children. The co-researchers, therefore, have a vested interest in keeping their family stories alive so that they may continue to serve as touchstones that remind and reinforce.
It appears that when the co-researchers were asked for their prominent family stories, powerful and significant themes emerged from the stories that are central to their own life stories. According to McAdams (1993) "our favourite stories usually contain those motifs and themes to which we are most strongly attracted as children. These will often reflect those organized desires, conscious or not, that are our strongest motives" (p. 75).

As such, family stories may be conceptualized as metaphors for our own existence (Gordon, 1978). According to Gordon, a good metaphor is isomorphic; to be effective, it must resonate with the person. Cochran (1993) stated that "on the basis of a variety of experiences, a person can seek a metaphor to sum them up, name their outstanding ingredients" (p. 48). Such explicit metaphoring allows one to "grasp the nature of life more definitely" (p. 48). It is in these significant ways, as metaphors for existence, that the co-researchers have consciously and unknowingly made use of their family stories.

**Summary.** Within the present study, the sub-themes which have been articulated are specific to the three co-researchers interviewed. As such, they may not necessarily apply to other individuals and their family story experiences. It is, in fact, the dominant themes that are more general and could be adapted to other contexts. Therefore, to conclude the comparative analysis of narrative accounts, I would like to provide a holistic summary which explains the relationship of these dominant themes.

The most important aspect of life before the stories was *receptivity*. As a result of their unique life experiences (addressed by the sub-themes), people had their attention sharpened. They were ready and receptive. A gap had been defined; something was missing from life. People were poised and waiting because they had been cued by their
own experiences. A different person may have come to this position of readiness as a result of positive experiences early in life. What matters is not so much the specific experiences, but rather the effect these had upon the positioning and readiness of the person. What was missing from life before the stories was both information and meaning. The co-researchers had encountered situations that they could not make sense of or resolve. They were interpretively bereft.

The experience of receptivity opened the door to the family story experiences, characterized by identification and impact. Without the sharpening of attention that had preceded the stories, it is doubtful the stories would have had the same dramatic influence. Through the vehicle of the family stories, people heard something that was important, that spoke to them. It was as though each person carried a viewfinder that was scanning the horizon for the right scene. When the stories emerged, there was clearly a tight fit between the tales and the situations encountered earlier in life. The stories offered rich interpretive potential; suddenly the individual could access these new story resources to help them make sense of life.

In the nature of the identification for each person, it has been demonstrated that there was a strong experience of recognition and connection between the stories and life. Whether people demonstrated this through their emotional responses or through their own meaning-making interpretations of the stories, the impact was apparent. In this sense, receptivity and identification/impact may be seen to be integrally linked. Without the sharp focus that had been aroused early in life, it is doubtful that the stories would have carried such deep significance.
The family stories served as essential catalysts. These teaching stories delivered unique messages to people at the point in life where they were each searching for meaning of a very specific sort. The stories brought about change because they spoke to that place within each person that was yearning for answers.

Life after the family stories was characterized by the dominant themes of clarity, guidance, and vision. Essentially, these themes capture the ways that the co-researchers integrated and synthesized their family stories into their own lives and into their own meaning systems. Once again, this integration is linked to the initial experience of receptivity. People incorporated their family stories into their lives in ways that resolved their earlier dilemmas or life situations. In this sense, closure was brought to the series of events that began with some sort of incompleteness.

As adults, people are able to look back in time, to the family story experiences and add layers of meaning to the stories, based on life as lived since the stories were first shared. Thus the stories continually offer reminders, solutions, and answers to people in their present lives.

Another way of comprehending the flow and interplay of the research themes is to understand the three phases in terms of meaning. The period marked by receptivity was devoid of meaning-making possibilities. John didn't have extended family to draw upon; Ellen did not know the family secrets; Maca could not make any sense of her mother's behaviour. This defined the gap that each felt. Then, during their family story encounters, all three received personally significant stories. The stories brought fulfillment in that they offered new meaning to life as lived. Estes (in an interview with Roberts, 1995) confirmed the nature of this experience when she says "A person's life
can be changed in a moment by any number of things that are very simple. Change is almost always brought through the singular, the plain and the humble. Otherwise, why would *story* (italics added), prayer, and poetry exist?" (p. 30). The period that followed the family stories has entailed an enactment of meaning. The co-researchers have been living out their lives in ways that incorporated the meanings they gleaned from the family stories. This explains why there is convergence between story and personal themes.

The results of the present research provide answers to the central research questions. The coherence and significance of family stories derives from the meanings the stories collectively share. That is, the stories are related to one another in terms of theme, plot, and character development. Secondly, prominent family stories appear to form a coherent ground for themes of meaning in living. These particular family stories resonated because collectively and individually they offered important guidelines for living that spoke to the individuals. Family stories may be described as metaphors which convey important meanings from the individual’s life.

**Implications for Practice**

Conceptualizing family stories as metaphors for lives strongly resembles the work of Alfred Adler on early recollections (Shulman & Mosak, 1988) and suggests techniques to be used within counselling practice. Adler believed that people’s earliest memories were projections which clearly articulated typical ways of coping with life. Early recollections are one component of the person’s life style, defined by Adler as "a singular pattern of thinking, feeling, and acting that is unique to that individual" (cited in Shulman & Mosak, 1988).
While early recollections are direct memories that the individual has, family stories (as defined within the present research) are received second hand. The co-researchers did not participate directly in the events which the stories recount. In spite of this obvious difference, the results of the present research suggest that family stories function in a similar manner to early recollections. Stories, like memories, are projections which reveal motivations and attitudes that may be outside of conscious awareness.

Slavik (1991) emphasized that the individual's typical way of coping with life will influence the "retention, selection, and expression of early memories" (p. 331). The person's current way of coping is understood as justified by early memories, not caused by the events recalled. Family stories may be conceptualized in a similar manner. Such stories appear to reflect the individual's orientation to life, not as caused by the stories; the stories merely justify or help to explain the current orientation.

Shulman and Mosak (1988) identified pertinent issues in interpreting early recollections. First, the length of time during which the early recollection has been remembered contributes to the salience of the memory. The authors report that subjects commonly say of powerful early memories "I've always remembered this." Longevity of remembered stories would also seem important in evaluating family stories. All of the co-researchers had strong memories of their significant family stories. These stories had been remembered for between 25 and 32 years. It appears to be very significant that these particular stories have survived in memory for most of a lifetime.

Shulman and Mosak (1988) have identified the ways that early recollections are formed around significant life changes during childhood. For example, the early
recollection may present a before and after view of life in terms of the change. Or, there
may be an absence of early recollections before the life situation changed. Finally, an
age gap may be observed between the early recollections where an early memory is
retained followed by a lapse of several years then another memory.

In a parallel manner, the results of the present research indicate that for the co-
researchers family stories emerged around periods of significant family and individual
change. As previously mentioned, all three people were in the midst of adolescence, a
time of tremendous personal change and growth. Regarding family changes, Maca’s
stories were shared following her father’s death and in the midst of her mother’s physical
and emotional abuse. John’s life change consisted of his move to another continent
where he began living with biological family for the first time in his life. One of Ellen’s
family stories was shared immediately after her grandfather’s death.

Details in early recollections are considered to be very important (Shulman &
Mosak, 1988) because they typically show the person’s characteristic action patterns.
Family story details also appear to be very significant. Just as facets of an early memory
reflect the individual’s interpretation of that moment in time, the way a person retells a
family story highlights details of significance for the individual. John’s stories are fairy­
tale like and filled with details that provide a rich and evocative sense of the life of
adventure. Ellen’s stories are sparse and devoid of detail. Maca’s story carries a
lifetime of details, one following upon another. What does this suggest about each of
these people? John’s story details suggest the richness and wonder that life had taken on
for him once he arrived in England. This still seems to characterize the way that John
approaches life. Ellen’s stories appear to reflect the sparse and loveless existence she
was living within her family, where information was not openly shared and discussed.

For Maca, the story details convey the momentousness of the tale, suggesting its continued impact upon her.

Congruent with the importance of details in early recollections, the present research has illustrated that the co-researchers highlighted personally salient details within the stories they related. For example, in her mother's story, Maca emphasized the moment on the hillside where her mother begs forgiveness and it is denied. John makes a point of stressing the part in his grandmother's marriage story where she voices her regrets about her relationship. Ellen focuses on the tragic consequences of two brothers never speaking again as she retells her family stories. These details are important to the co-researchers because they appear to reflect strong values and beliefs they carry about their own lives.

Omitted details in early recollections form a special sub-group and must be interpreted carefully. While on the surface early recollections with omitted details appear simple to interpret, often a gap appears where elements of the early recollection do not make sense. Shulman and Mosak cite the following example of an early recollection with omitted detail: "My family and two neighbours were sitting around the dining room table. It was a festive occasion. Everyone smiling, everyone pleased. Father was home" (p. 183). After questioning the client, the story emerged that his father had recently been released from a sanatorium. Because of the family's Christian Science beliefs, such hospitalization was not considered acceptable. This pointed to deep-seated beliefs which the client still carried concerning illness and his family's religious stance.
In terms of omitted detail, family stories and early recollections appear to again be comparable. Ellen's stories are the epitome of omitted detail. She questions what happened, what was said, was there a fight? There is much omitted from the stories, which ultimately reflects the family stance towards life. As has been mentioned in the interpretive comments, a useful way to interpret the family stories was to look for what had been omitted. For example, John's stories were devoid of loving relationships which in turn has been an issue he has struggled with and overcome in his own life. Maca's stories are lacking a permanence. They seem to say that happiness can happen, but then it can vanish. This theme of loss is one that also appears in Maca's life.

Vocational preferences may also be reflected in early recollections (Mosak & Shulman, 1988). For example, physicians will often have early recollections which feature themes of death, illness, or injury. This would be a fascinating area to explore through future research in terms of its application to family stories. Although Maca's profession of hairdressing does not seem to relate in any obvious ways to her family stories, John and Ellen both have occupations which could be connected to their stories. John has become a storyteller himself, in that he is a writer and broadcaster. One of his passions in his work has been conducting historical research and then writing it up in story form so that the lives of real people came across. As mentioned previously, John's occupation also afforded him the opportunity to travel extensively. Ellen's work seems to be an enactment of her values that children matter and that it is vital for people to communicate and face their pain. Her stories feature children who were not parented and adults who were unable to resolve their differences or face their pain. Now she directly facilitates this work with parents and children.
Positional details (that is, the position of the person within the early recollection) are believed to reflect the stance towards life adopted by the person (Shulman & Mosak, 1988). Family stories, by contrast, do not necessarily involve the person adopting a position within the story itself. But another way to examine positional details would be to look for the individual’s positioning in relation to the stories. This may include responses to the family stories and the parts of the stories that people most strongly identify with. For example, Ellen responded to her family stories with shock, anger, and surprise. This reflects a great deal about her approach to the stories and suggests that she may not value that which was contained within the stories.

Shulman and Mosak (1988) suggested that other kinds of details may also serve a predictive function within early recollections. For example, a person who recalls tactile sensations may be particularly sensitive in this way. An emphasis on affective details in an early recollection may reflect a person who is very sensitive to his or her own inner feelings. Such details in family stories would also appear to reflect upon the co-researcher. For example, Maca’s family stories are filled with descriptions of people’s affective experiences. It would be fair to suggest that Maca has a deeply developed affective side, as was apparent during the interviews. She cried during both interviews as a result of sadness for her mother’s story, missing her father’s love, and because of grief over Peter’s death.

If early recollections are viewed as projections, then no trivial or chance early recollections are possible (Mosak & Shulman, 1988). Often when an early recollection appears to describe a trivial event, it is eventually found to explain important people or situations. Memories are never trivial because they are always attached to some aspect of
the present. According to Adler (cited in Slavik, 1991) "... Memories represent a story one repeats to oneself to excuse, to warn, to encourage, to comfort, and generally to keep one concentrated on one's goal in preparing to meet the future according to an already tried and tested style of action" (p. 332).

Family stories are also memories which serve as "maxims and apothegms" (Slavik, 1991, p. 332). Any story may be retained in memory as a significant tale. Through exploration, the impact and importance of remembered family stories emerges. For example, Maca's story about her father saving a boy from drowning is a story fragment which may at first appear trivial. However, when understood within the context of the other stories and Maca's life, we see that the theme of goodness and helping others is essential to Maca's worldview. Whether trivial or dramatic, family stories still reveal much about the individual telling the story. Of particular importance to the present study was the request for the most prominent or intuitively relevant stories. This question seemed to elicit those tales which carried the greatest meaning for the individual. This approach also differentiated the present study from other research which has tended to elicit specific categories of stories.

Mosak and Shulman (1988) describe early recollections as a "creative artistic product of the person, as if they were an autobiography which not only describes events but also the person's creative responses to them" (p. 185). The authors stress that in order to understand this creative product, a sequence of early recollections must be examined. In this way themes emerge which can be compared across recollections. Within the present research, a series of family stories was also examined. This allowed for the comparison of themes, plotlines, and characters. For the co-researchers in the
present study, the family stories did form a cohesive pattern. This pattern was accentuated by having several stories to examine and compare. Understanding prominent family stories as forming a holistic meaning unit, therefore, would be an essential part of working with the stories in a counselling setting.

An important way to elicit meaning from a series of early recollections is to look at points of contrast. For example, three early memories may have the same theme of winning, while the forth memory centres upon losing. The forth recollection further emphasizes the theme that winning is important. Contrasting family stories were also apparent during the present research. For example, John’s story of his grandmother’s marriage stands out as being very different from the rest of his story collection. This story features cruelty, an unhappy marriage, and his grandmother’s lifelong regrets. This is the one story that John does not proudly identify with. He reacts against it and has tried to live his life differently. The story was told as the last of the sequence, a feature that often sets contrasting early recollections apart (Mosak & Shulman, 1988).

Early recollections have been found to have common thematic topics, response themes, and life style elements. Mosak and Shulman (1988) have categorized early recollections according to the prevalent thematic topics they contain. For example, some of these topics include: "nurture, obstacles, affiliation, security, dependency, status, power, morality, sickness, and death" (pp. 193-194).

Previous research on family stories has tended to categorize stories by content rather than theme. A thematic exploration would be an interesting approach for future research. Family stories most certainly contain thematic topics. Within the present research these themes were extracted and then related to the co-researcher’s life. For
example, the theme of travel and adventure is prominent in John’s family stories and this has been what he referred to as a "life theme" in his own life.

A separate element of early recollections includes response themes. "Each response in an early recollection is a response to the particular topical issue in the early recollection . . . . In any idiographic interpretation we shall have to identify both the topic and the unique response the individual selects" (Mosak & Shulman, 1988, p. 195). The same holds true for family story interpretation. The principles of living developed for the stories reflect both a thematic topic and the response within the stories to that particular theme. For example, the principle of living developed for Ellen’s story about the betrayal between the two brothers is: Those you trust most (family) can really hurt you, and the way to respond is by severing ties. Here the thematic component is hurt or betrayal and the behavioral response is severing ties. Mosak and Shulman (1988) assert that the response is actually more important than the thematic topic because it illustrates the creative behaviours utilized by the person to cope. Within the present research, it was necessary to return to the co-researcher with the principles of living to determine whether response themes were replicated or altered within the co-researcher’s life.

The life style element in an early recollection reflects the relationship between the thematic topic and the response, which may be conceptualized as an "if a, then b" relationship. Self concept and worldview are two integral components of the life style, which can be identified within the early recollection. These consist of internal constructs the person has. Self concept is strongly related to worldview, the context in which the self exists. As has been identified by other researchers, (Byng Hall, 1979; Stone, 1988) family stories do appear to reflect the family worldview. The stories convey important
values, beliefs and ideas that characterize the family approach to the world. Self image is also apparent within family stories. The stories highlight the self image of the central story characters. For example, the story of Maca’s father’s false accusation features a man crushed by injustice. Thus his self image is one of goodness, and perpetually helping. To have this questioned and doubted ruined him.

Those who work with early recollections would suggest that the self concept and worldview depicted within the memories directly relates to the individual’s present self concept and worldview. This can not be directly stated in relation to family stories because the characters within the stories are not the co-researchers. Thus a dialogue to determine how similar or dissimilar the person is to those within the stories becomes an integral part of understanding the significance of the family stories. This approach offers a convergence of evidence. For example, the characters in Ellen’s family stories seem to suffer from low self esteem and to believe that life is about betrayal and suffering. The way these people protected themselves was to become silent because they seemed to believe resolution was impossible. It would be dangerous to assume that this reflects Ellen’s self concept and worldview without asking her about her own life. What becomes apparent is that the stories have influenced her, but she has adopted an alternate worldview to that of her family. Her self concept includes honesty, valuing open communication, and facing pain.

Shulman and Mosak (1988) argue that through interpreting the elements of an early recollection we can form a global picture, a Gestalt, which uses the life style elements as a rubric: If this is ‘what I am’ and that is ‘what the world is,’ then such and such is
'what is required.' In this rubric we can see the way that person has construed life (p. 218).

I would argue that the same may be said of family story interpretation. This research has shown that family stories may be incorporated within a counselling setting by adopting the interpretive framework used with early recollections. This includes: the longevity of the remembered story, the significance of details within the stories, the importance of examining a series of family stories to look for contrasts and complementarities, and the fact that no family story is trivial. This study has shown that a series of family stories depicts certain themes and corresponding behavioral responses to those themes. A family worldview is evoked, as well as strong messages about the identity of the characters.

Family stories and early recollections are projections or metaphors which seem to function in a parallel manner. According to Shulman and Mosak (1988) "Early recollections make statements about life and one's place in it, about what is important and what is to be prized, and about what, if anything one can do or must do about the conditions of existence" (p. 220). The same may be proposed for family stories. Not just stories, these are constructions that have much to say about the individual, the family, and the way life is construed.

Slavik (1991) argued that there are multiple benefits to exploring early recollections within the counselling setting. Clients may be able to comprehend their typical patterns of responding to challenging situations and to other people. The procedures for eliciting early recollections as outlined by Slavik are very similar to the procedures employed within the present research. The client is asked to share their earliest memory, whereas the co-researchers were asked to share their most prominent
family stories. The responses must be written down verbatim so as to capture the client's choice of words, details, and nuances of delivery. The family stories were tape recorded and transcribed verbatim. The client is asked for the most vivid component of the early recollection, and for any accompanying feelings. These questions were also asked of the co-researchers. Slavik suggested that the client feelings indicate typical ways of coping, and that the counsellor must never guess at what is vivid or emotional for the client.

A series of early memories is elicited, interpreted individually, and a cohesive summary is formulated which encompasses all of the early recollections. The summary is then presented to the client for discussion and clarification. An important consideration during this discussion is that it be part of a "cooperative, investigative therapy" (Slavik, 1991) where client and counsellor agree upon the summaries. Once the client comes to understand his or her stance towards life, the early recollections can be used in a "re-educative" manner to generate alternatives for living.

These procedures were also followed within this study. A series of significant family stories was elicited, interpreted individually, and a holistic summary was created. The summary was presented to each co-researcher during the second interview, followed by a dialogue centring upon the stories and the co-researcher's present life circumstances. It was not within the scope of the present research to establish a counselling relationship, but the family stories and related information from the co-researchers' lives would certainly have been amenable to a counselling application in the same way that early recollections are used. This process moves beyond the mere recitation of family stories as set pieces, allowing for a deeper exploration of themes of meaning in lives.
The most relevant implication for practice within the present study is the emphasis upon the importance of contextualizing family stories, so that the connections are made with the life experiences of the storyteller. The present research suggests that there is therapeutic value in understanding links, commonalities, and differences between the story themes and the person’s life. This contextual approach has been largely ignored in previous research on family stories.

Furthermore, the value of narrative interviewing as a means for understanding the life context of the person has been demonstrated within the present study. It was through enquiring about life before and after the stories that a context was created in which to understand the person. The counsellor who adheres to a narrative interviewing process must "try to hear and pinpoint not merely the specific content but the underlying and controlling rhythms of [the] personal narrative" (Jahner, 1985, p. 214). People need to tell their personal stories. This in and of itself can be therapeutic. Thus the strength of this research lies in the links that were established between people’s personal narratives and their inherited family stories. Given that this aspect of family stories has virtually been unexplored in the research literature, the study contributes much needed theoretical and practical concepts.

Limitations

There are several limitations to the present study which stem from the case study design employed. A common concern with case studies is the issue of generalizability. The goal of the present research was to explore and understand the phenomenon of family stories and their influence upon themes of meaning in lives. According to Yin (1989) "case studies . . . are generalizable to theoretical propositions and not to populations or
universes" (p. 21). Given that only three people were interviewed for the study, the results can not be applied broadly to other populations. The results, however, do have merit in terms of the theoretical propositions developed.

As mentioned previously, the research context consisted of multiple storytelling interfaces. Attempts at replication of the research, therefore, will necessarily involve different variables which may lead to altered results. An effort has been made to thoroughly articulate my own involvement in the results of the research, so that others may judge the trustworthiness and approach the subject in a way that can be thoroughly replicated.

A related limitation includes the researcher's perspectives. Although I made every effort to reflexively examine my own responses and reactions, and to clearly articulate these, my experiences with and ideas about family stories may have influenced the results in ways that I have not seen or acknowledged.

Another limitation of the research concerns the co-researchers themselves. Perhaps the individual co-researchers were not able to share all aspects of their family story or life experiences. While the co-researchers did appear open and were extremely articulate about their experiences, they may not have revealed certain aspects of their lives to the researcher.

Another potential limitation consists of the fact that the co-researchers belong to the same cohort (all are now between the ages of 40 and 50). This may affect the research findings in that commonalities may reflect cohort effects rather than the family story experiences. The findings, therefore, may not be applicable to people of different ages.
A final limitation of the research relates to the focused nature of the narrative accounts. The purpose of the research was to gather information about the family stories themselves and the context in which they were shared, as well as related experiences from life for each co-researcher. The intention was not to elicit the entire life story of the co-researcher, therefore pertinent information may have been omitted because it did not fall within the scope of the study. Although the links between family stories and underlying life issues were elaborated within the present research, extensive life story interviewing may have contributed even richer information to the accounts.

**Implications for Future Research**

Given that the present study was exploratory in nature and considering the limitations of the study, replication could expand upon or disconfirm the findings. As previously mentioned, a similar study which concentrates upon more in-depth life story interviewing could elicit more richly contextualized results.

There are many other possibilities for future research. A study that included a cross-section of ages would be interesting, in that perhaps family stories have different significance for people of varying ages. An exploration of family stories belonging to members of specific cultural groups would be useful. As story is a universal construct, it would be interesting to discover whether people from other cultures use their family stories in a similar manner to the co-researchers within the present study. Comparing family stories of groups sharing the same characteristics would be another possible research direction. For example, diplomats, refugees, or members of the same vocational group may have similar or perhaps very different kinds of family story themes.
In the area of family counselling, there are many potential ideas for future research. For example, a study to compare the family stories of both members of a couple may suggest ways that their family stories overlap or remain separate in terms of the present family constellation. Research that elicited family stories from several generations of the same family would provide a means to compare the different stories each person retains and to look at collective family values suggested by the stories. Exploring family stories in blended families would help to articulate the ways that this unique family composition impacts family storytelling and meaning-making possibilities for the individual members.

A study which elicited the family stories of counsellor and client could contribute to the literature on the interactional components of the client/counsellor relationship. Examining the family stories of family counsellors or trainees could provide insights into particular themes and issues the professional may need to be aware of in his/her work.

As an extension to some of the conceptual ideas proposed within the present study, research which seeks to elicit both early recollections and family stories would be a fascinating project.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to investigate the relationship between family stories and lives. An exploratory case study design was employed to explore the experience and meaning of family stories within the lives of three adult co-researchers who were over the age of 30. Selection of co-researchers was guided by experience with the phenomenon of family stories and the ability to articulate this experience in English. Unstructured interviews designed to elicit prominent family stories were conducted. The
stories were audiotaped, transcribed, and analyzed for similarities, contrasts, and complementarities of character, plot, and theme. A hermeneutical framework was used to examine and interpret the meaning behind the stories.

A person's repertoire of prominent family stories may be described as forming a coherent narrative. Validation interviews were conducted with each co-researcher to verify the patterns of this narrative and to explore the impact of the patterns in the co-researcher's lives. The interview material was rendered into narrative form, describing the person's family storytelling experiences and related elements from their own lives. A comparative analysis of the three narrative accounts was conducted to uncover structural and thematic commonalities. The family story experience was found to resemble a story structure with a beginning, middle, and end. Life before the stories was marked by the theme of receptivity (or meaning impoverishment), the family story experience was characterized by identification with and the impact of the stories (which offered significant meaning and interpretive potential to the person), while life after the stories was marked by clarity, guidance and vision (or an integration of the story meanings into lives). This study provides a sense of the interrelationship of family stories which has not been adequately addressed in the existing research. More importantly, the study confirms the significance of prominent family stories as narrative constructions which convey integral themes and meanings from the person's own life story. The results serve as a powerful reminder of the importance of listening carefully to the stories people share. When a person recollects his or her prominent family stories, much is revealed about who that person is in the world. The present study contributes to the counselling literature by
suggesting practical ways that family stories could be used by counsellors to facilitate client insight and self awareness.
REFERENCES


Results: Common Themes

**Life Before the Family Stories: Receptivity**

- Incompletion
- Encountering an Enduring Dilemma
- A Paucity of Meaningful Stories

**The Family Story Experience: Identification and Impact**

- Curiosity
- Unique Co-researcher Story Interpretations
- Emotional Resonance
- Explanation/Comprehension
- Story Fulfilment

**Life After the Family Stories: Clarity, Guidance, Vision**

- Experience of Awakening
- Enacting a Solution to the Dilemma
- Strong Convergence Between Enduring Personal Themes and Family Story Themes
- Invisible Influence of Family Stories
- Family Stories as Touchstones