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Family and Community: (Re)Telling Our Own Story

Anne Byrne[1] and Deirdre O'Mahony[2]

Abstract

In this article, the authors explore the consequences of an American 1930s classic anthropological study for a contemporary rural community in the west of Ireland. The contribution of family, kin, and community relations to sustaining a rural way of life was the primary focus of Arensberg and Kimball's study of Irish farm families published as *Family and Community in Ireland*. Through the frame of a collaborative community research project with an artist, sociologist, and the descendents of the families written about, we present an account of a research project based on Kimball's 1930s field diary that provided an opportunity for community members to tell their own story of family and community in the 21st century. Deploying a narrative inquiry approach, the power of local stories to interrupt dominant narratives of family and community is explored.

Keywords

Arensberg and Kimball, family, community, rural, narrative, art, storytelling

The Harvard-Irish Mission in Clare: 1930-2010

In County Clare, family farming is the mainstay of the region but is increasingly combined with off-farm work for economic survival (K. Walshe, 2009). The forces of modernization, expressed in contemporary rural development

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policies, involve a shift away from traditional subsistence farming toward high-value economic production. Recent changes in agricultural practices and policies have exacerbated the social and cultural marginalization of "traditional" farmers (Macken-Walshe, 2009). Despite the decline in family farming, a significant number of farmers continue to follow "nonviable" local-scale farming, based on long attachment to land and place combined with loyalty to forebears who have dedicated their lives to the practices and knowledge of family farming. In the first decades of the past century, the dominance of family farming in Ireland attracted the attention of the American Harvard-Irish Survey (1931-1936; Byrne, Edmondson, & Varley, 1940/2001). Interested in understanding the forces of stability and change in the context of rapidly transforming rural societies, Ireland became one of the first European locations for a "scientific study" of a newly modernizing society. This three-stranded study was composed of an archaeological and physical anthropological survey of the entire island with a social anthropological study of rural communities on the west coast of Ireland. Two American anthropologists, Conrad Arensberg (1910-1997) and Solon Kimball (1909-1982) settled in Clare living among the country people, observing at firsthand, local customs, traditions and religious rituals, farm work, and family relations. Their detailed ethnographic study of the "small" farmer class of rural Clare portrayed a farm family system that was stable, traditional, and regulated by customary relationships despite the strong forces of modernization in 1930s' Ireland. The contribution of family, kin, and community relations to sustaining a rural way of life was the primary focus of their research, published as *The Irish Countryman* (Arensberg, 1937) and *Family and Community in Ireland* (Arensberg & Kimball, 1940/2001, 1968).

Rinnamona was one of the research sites.

> To reach Rynamona [sic] is no easy task, even for horse and car . . . one passes through ragged upland . . . This is Kilnaboy Commons, and its many small fields bear witness to its having been a refuge of the evicted, laboriously cleared of stones . . . Rynamona lies round the lake . . . the farmers are a fairly prosperous lot. Eight of their houses stand in an irregular cluster on the lake shore . . . No one has more than nine cows . . . Rynamona is a closely knit community. Reduplicated bonds of kinship unite all the households. "We are all related one way or another" they describe it. (Arensberg & Kimball, 1968, p. 176)

The farm economy is sustained and maintained by an expectation of the exchange of family labor, resources, and support based on the reciprocal

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obligations of kinship ties. "Cooring"[1] is based on mutual cooperation, "strongest in the realm of farm work. The farm family demands the cooperation of all its members . . . the community makes its valuation of young and old upon that cooperation" (Arensberg & Kimball, 1968, p. 167). Relationships of family, kin, and community were the determinants of continuity and social change. The majority of the Irish population lived in rural areas, with more than half of "occupied persons" engaging in agricultural work. The rearing of cattle was the main productive activity, some for domestic consumption, most for export to the United Kingdom. It was an era of political change as the conflicts of independence and separation from Britain continued to resonate while the institutions of the new Irish state were created. Emigration was a persistent problem, the rate of marriage was low, age of marriage was late with high fertility within marriage, the numbers of people who remained single was a distinctive feature of the Irish population, and the persistent poverty of the rural small holders continued apace (Byrne, 1999).

> The sociology of the Irish rural life and small farm subsistence is largely a matter of the anatomy of two institutions . . . These are the family and rural community. The latter, in turn, cannot be described apart from the former. It is a framework of long-term customary relationships uniting persons beyond their family ties . . . This master system is the framework of social life in the countryside. (Arensberg & Kimball, 1968, pp. 301-303)

Based on "the intensive observation of the minutae of social life," for Arensberg and Kimball, "family" and "community" were powerful explanatory concepts in their analysis of Irish society (see Byrne et al., 1940/2001). Arensberg and Kimball observed that in Clare "the central core of familism is offering strong resistance" to social change, signs of which were already present in the proliferation of nonfarming occupations and commercial activity in rural areas. They argued that the farm family "structure is capable of continued and virile existence in the present, governing the lives of its component individuals and modifying itself to take in new influences" (Arensberg & Kimball, 1968, p. 152). Nonetheless, change would come "and along with it there changes the structure of the community that has been built upon a familistic base" (Arensberg & Kimball, 1968, p. 223).

Living in Rinnamona, Kimball passed his time visiting, talking, interacting with neighbors, observing the seasonal, weekly, and daily round of labor and leisure within the framework of relationship, over a period of 2 years. The "community study method" pioneered in Ireland required that the

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anthropologist live among those whom they studied (Arensberg, 1954). The everyday stories of community members were the "raw data" for what would become the anthropological account. Noticing the priority given to storytelling, Kimball notes in his diary, "When any story comes up while you are walking along the road, everyone stops and the story is finished before you proceed" (S. T. Kimball, field diary, 1932). Storytelling was a mode for self-reflection as well as part of the communal requirement to give an account of themselves and their actions to each other. For the anthropologists, these stories described the personal and social contours of family, community, and work. For example, Kimball recognized the importance of going on "cuaird"[2] (visit) as neighbors gathered in the late winter evenings to play cards, to talk, and consider events of immediate, national, or international concern. The evening gathering of the older men in the community, who discussed agriculture, politics, the regulation of community relations, folklore, and legend, was known as "the Rinnamona Dáil."[3] Dáil members were given "titles" representing their place and status within the group while those lacking titles were less sure of their valuation and standing.

> O'Donoghue is the "judge" in this gathering [see Figure 1] . . . He is regarded as a wise man to whose opinion all must defer . . . his is the central position in the group . . . (O'Halloran) is the "drawer down" . . . He most frequently of all of them brings up points of interest and questions of the day . . . his chief role is to "draw the talk down" to common levels of interest which allow all to take part . . . O'Loughlin is a bachelor . . . he has little to say . . . having no family he can neither coor or work his land to best advantage . . . Roche "the public prosecutor" . . . makes one bring out one's best arguments . . . he tests out the other's mettle . . . and brings out the right and the wrong upon which all can agree . . . the "senator" is a weighty man . . . in a scheme of references, such as this, to past events and traditional precedents, Cullinan's many memories of persons and happenings, slowly and accurately phrases, give weight to the evenings discussions . . . Noonan is a very voluble man. He can be counted on to enliven the gathering with many opinions on all subjects . . . Quin was often silent and contented himself with answering questions. . . . (Arensberg & Kimball, 1968, pp. 177-183)

The strong characterizations of the members of the Rinnamona Dáil continues to have resonance in the locality as does the 1930s anthropological study itself. It is a good example of a text-based dominant narrative of family and community life. Interested in the dynamic between dominant narratives

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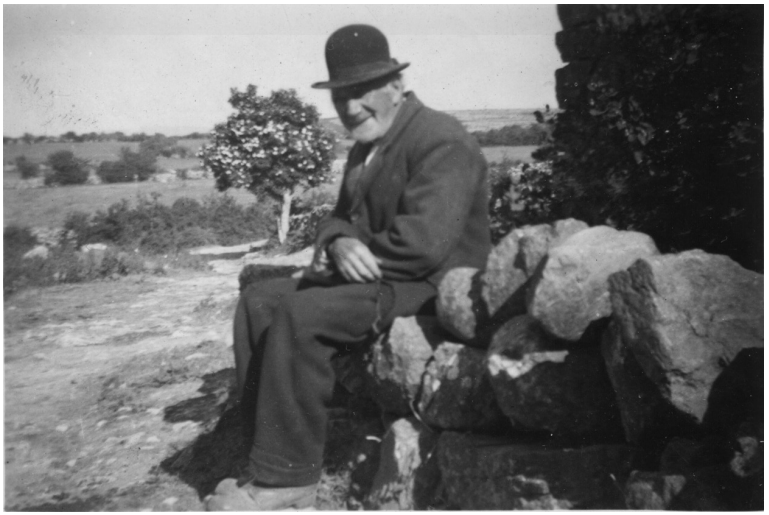

Figure 1. Michael O'Donoghue (The Judge), Rinnamona, ca 1930s
Photo: Rinnamona Research Group, copyright Rinnamona Research Group.

and local stories, we present a research project in which the consequences for the families and descendents of those written about are discussed and how telling own story of family and community is potentially transformative.

On Narrative and Story

Irish society has been shaped by dominant narratives such as nationalism, Catholicism, and familism (Byrne, 1999; Inglis, 2007). Indeed much of Irish history, literature, art, and social science continue to be engaged in a deep interrogation of these dominant narratives and their cultural and personal consequences for society and the individual, for identity and social relations. Narrative inquiry is a vibrant set of multidisciplinary fields encompassing a diversity of theories and methods focused at the very least on the expression, accomplishments, contexts, and products of human communication via the medium of story. For example, Gergen and Gergen (2006) identified two approaches to narrative: either as a cognitive structure through which the world is understood or as a set of discursive actions. Deploying a narrative inquiry frame, the present research focuses on found and generated stories

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relating to family and community life, past and present. Narrative is treated as an accessible mode for understanding social relations and can be used to bring awareness to how structures of power command the communicative resources available to tell the stories of our lives. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) observe the complexity of storytelling in living and reflecting on one's life. "It is in the tellings and retellings that entanglements become acute, for it is here that the temporal and social, cultural horizons are set and re-set" (p. 4).

The interplay of dominant narratives and subject-constructed identity stories and agency also contributes to the frame of narrative inquiry used here (Byrne, 2003). This narrative frame recognizes layers, the effects of time and memory in any telling of a story. It predisposes the researcher to focus on the written and visual texts in which narratives and stories are inscribed. Anthropology has privileged the collection of personal human stories to understand complex social and cultural practices "from below" (Wilson & Donnan, 2006). Crucially, this narrative frame allows a focus on the fragments of a story, partially told or remembered accounts, recognizing incompleteness. After Georgakopoulou (2006) and Bamberg (2006), the term *small stories* is appropriate in this context. Here, small stories also refer to "local" stories told about a particular, event, person, or place assigning them some significance.

Narrative and stories are entangled, but sometimes it is useful to disentangle them. Narratives are evident in visual, textual, and oral accounts but are differentiated from story in that they can be understood as collective and authoritative acts of representation and interpretation. Narrative is more abstract and influential than story, having the capacity to attach meaning and significance to what is culturally important. Story, in contrast, although having narrative characteristics, can be understood as more focused on substantive events and experiences that have been become part of the teller's relational communicative self. The capacity of story to be authoritative, representational, or interpretative operates at a lower level of power than that of narrative. Arguably, narrative is more consequential for human agency than story, and individual attempts to step away from dominant narratives of how to live and who to be can be challenging. In this sense, narratives constrain action, urging the individual to conform to social norms and expectations. Becoming aware of the effects of constraining narratives can be a first step, and more usually one "reacts" to them, often through a refusal to speak or to avoid discussion for fear of repercussions. This relation to narrative is one of rigidity, "stuckness," and silence. Story, though lower down on the power hierarchy, may contain within it the possibility for (at the very least) "interrupting" powerful narratives when

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treated as more than just an incidental telling of an event or experience. Arguably, the power of stories lies in their dynamic, fluid, generative elements, and crucially in the incidental exchange between narrator and listener. Stories revel in detail and repeatability, tying narrator and listener in a momentary relation of immediacy and intimacy. Stories also have the potential to carry the voices, views, arguments, and perceptions of those not usually heard. In this research we investigate the power of small stories to cause a break in the continuity of strong narratives and their capacity to be transformatory for community relations.

Though the status of anthropological accounts has long been a matter of some controversy, they represent a reservoir of recorded observations of how life was lived by predecessors. Although these selective accounts are filtered through the ideological, theoretical, and methodological frames of the authors and fashions of the time, this is little reason to disavow what has been recorded or to dismiss the representation of family and community presented. We acknowledge that research practices that are acquisitive and that position the subject as object are corrosive. The impact of social anthropological investigations and subsequent publications on local communities and their descendants is an issue but one that is rarely addressed (see Kane, 1982). Specifically, the long-term consequences of being written about, of becoming subjects, subjects by proxy, and collective subjects, embedded within an anthropological narrative, are less examined. Little is returned as stories are taken out of a locality, leaving only oral traces and memories of the research and researchers behind. Here, we consider the potential of anthropological accounts of the past to be a resource for the future, particularly in negotiating the challenges of change. We present art and anthropological research as a praxis that gives primacy to local knowers and local knowledges, that values "familiar" expertise, and recognizes the transformative effect of collaborative, creative community engagement with the past (Lather, 1986).

Dominant Narratives

The scholarly legacy of Arensberg and Kimball is evident in the writings and publications on community studies and anthropological methods, providing a rich theoretical and methodological resource for contemporary scholars of social and political change. The strucutural functionalist framework adopted by the American authors at the time was later subject to sustained critique on the grounds that the portrayal of Irish family life was static, romanticized, and conservative, obscuring the dynamics of conflict that one would normally associate with a class-based rural society in which land and its acquisition are

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key (Gibbon, 1973). Conceptualizing "society" as existing along a premodern, modern, and postmodern continuum was also problematic with assumptions that modern societies are more advanced, more developed, and more progressive than premodern forms. The attempt to make generalizations about Irish or European culture based on the Clare ethnography also irked. But some allowance may be given to the theoretical and historical context in which the programme of research was devised. Arensberg and Kimball, interested in social change, were drawn to the concept of society as "system." Arguably, structural functionalism served more as a guide for their investigative methodology, rather than any ideological orientation biasing their analysis toward stability and consensus and away from change and conflict. Evidence from archival material suggests that a second volume was envisaged that would include an analysis of class, conflict, religion, and politics. *Family and Community in Ireland* is regarded as a benchmark, classical study of rural family life that became a baseline of comparison for many subsequent studies and restudies (Byrne et al., 1940/2001). Despite criticisms, scholars considered the in-depth Clare study as the basis for the description for Irish families up to the 1970s (Seward, Stivers, Igoe, Amin, & Cosimo, 2005). Wilson and Donnan (2006) observe that the ethnographic model pioneered by Arensberg and Kimball profoundly affected the analysis of Irish society up to the 1980s as subsequent research sought to confirm, refute, or extend their portrayal of the small farm family. Their work was also significant for the development of an American and a European anthropology. As scholarly narratives, the social anthropology publications of the Harvard-Irish Mission continue to be republished, widely read, and cited across disciplines and genres worldwide.

The Irish Countryman (1937) was widely read in the local community, particularly by the families and friends of those about whom it was written. Copies of the books were sent to Ireland by relatives living in the United States and were ordered from booksellers in Dublin. There was much interest in what the Americans wrote and about whom. Perhaps the anthropologists did not expect the country people to be interested in anthropological interpretation of culture and identity or the meaning ascribed to individual action when interpreting whole societies. The local response in Clare to *The Irish Countryman* and *Family and Community in Ireland* was mixed. People were not made aware that the observations of farm households and family relations would later be published in book form. Arensberg and Kimball identified personal names and place names in their publications as part of their extensive descriptions of people and place. The characterizations, behavior, or family circumstances of individuals were described. Family, relatives, and

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friends of those written about were caught between competing responses of pride, shame, or anger—depending on the anthropological representation of forebears. For some, the characterizations or revelation of the family circumstances or "private lives" of forebears was unexpected and not welcome. The representation of one person or family was significant for all, as family connections extended into community relationships—just as Arensberg and Kimball had described for the same community in the 1930s. In an attempt to limit the harm and manage the anxiety felt by some, a communal silence fell over the event and a "least said sooner mended" approach to the social anthropological study was adopted. As a consequence, over time, people were not reminded that an intensive study of families in the local community had taken place in the 1930s, despite the texts obtaining the status of "classical" anthropological accounts in scholarly debates. Though silent and not spoken about in the public domain, the communal memory of the study and its findings, as well as the visits of the anthropologists to the area, lingered.

The anthropological narrative of the 1930s community has had an impact. Not only does it mark the predecessor community as worthy of special interest and study by American anthropologists but it also offers a standard against which successor community identity, relationships, and behavior can be compared. The anthropological account is habitually referred to by successors when drawing comparisons between then and now. Full-time farming, consuming what was produced on the farm, and strong orientation to the local stand in contrast to present-day rural lifestyles.

> Everyone was at home then on the farms too though, nobody was gone out at work. They were all full-time farmers in the small farms that they had and they were self-sufficient with everything they had, everything home produced, they milked the cow. (Mary, Rinnamona Research Group [RRG], 2008)

Changes are apparent in Irish family relationships or patterns of work in the rural economy; arguably the norm of the deeply patriarchal "intact" family described by Arensberg and Kimball has been replaced by a more egalitarian and diverse family form. Subsistence farmers continue to rely on family labour, as in the 1930s, but more crucially on the off–farm income that is brought home. The importance that Arensberg and Kimball lend to strong family ties provokes comparison with the extent of connectedness in present-day familial relationships. For those who live in the same localities and farms as their ancestors, the recorded observations and portrait of their forebears are personally significant. The stability, visibility, and bondedness

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of family and communal ties and apparent connectivity in the 1930s are of much interest to successors who strive to raise families, live, and work in agricultural communities subject to rapid economic, demographic, and social change. For example, compared with one's father's time, engaging in conversation for its own sake is no longer a matter of common courtesy.

> Because that's something that's died in the present time . . . going back to remember our father's no matter how busy people were they still had time to talk to each other and do the work . . . we are all flying around doing things at 90 miles an hour. (Sean, RRG, 2008)

This is in contrast to the account of the privileging of conversation provided by Arensberg and Kimball.

> No work is too pressing to prevent the countryman from stopping on the road to pass the time of day. In the rural community such personal communication is an indispensable bridge across the social and physical space separating farm from farm. (Arensberg & Kimball, 1940/2001, p. 171)

Concern for the vulnerability of communal solidarity and connectedness is expressed as knowledge of family biographies and histories slip away or knowledge of field names and local history or of traditional agricultural skills become more invisible and less uttered. Clandinin and Huber (2002) observe that

> identity is a storied life composition, a story to live by. Stories to live by are shaped in places and lived in places. They live in actions, in relationships with others, in language, including silences, in gaps and vacancies, in continuities and discontinuities. (p. 162)

Stories to live by can also be found in texts, particularly when those texts feature the people and the places in which one's family has lived for generations.

The anthropological account provides a valued narrative of family and community life, as lived in the past, for the scholar and the general reader—an account that is much debated in scholarly journals and has generated decades of international research on methodological and substantive issues. For generations of local people, the anthropological account is not as easily contested for a number of complex reasons. Not only are there no local, public fora in which such a discussion could take place, the provenance and

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intellectual authority of the account also disencourage any scrutiny by those who are its subjects. The close observation of people's lives was possible because the anthropologists lived in people's homes and accepted the hospitality of the country people, sharing food and work in the domestic and farm space. In addition, much of the substance of the anthropological account is based on the stories told to or overheard by the anthropologists as people went about their daily lives. Telling and listening to stories was a regular activity of family and cultural life. Stories ranged from versions of folk tales to more personally oriented stories of expected standards of behavior, work, or obligation among family and friends. A version of the same story could be told over and over by different tellers but critically the characters in the story were removed either in time or place giving a sense of anonymity to the process.

People in Clare were also also familiar with the activity of "collectors" and were happy to share these kinds of largely anonymous stories with Irish and European folklorists (Lysaght, 2002). Introduced to the region by Irish folklorists, notably Séamus Ó'Duilearga, the anthropologists were not folklorists or collectors of stories as commonly understood. Though interested in the meaning of folkloric tales, the anthropologists were more drawn to the comments of one neighbor about another or stories of the circumstances of a particular family in their study of community interaction. There was some ambiguity in the common perception of the anthropologists' purpose and interests. The anthropologists developed trusting personal relationships with families, engaging in correspondence and making return visits long after the Harvard-Irish Mission left Ireland (Byrne, 2011/12). As part of ethno-anthropological methodology, this also affected the subsequent reception of the anthropological account.

Although the mode of presentation of material texts appears to be stable and fixed, they are read relationally from the point of view, context, and interest of the reader. Written in an open and accessible style, the anthropological account was read as a biography of people and place, but one in which specific forbears were identified, written about, and subjected to public evaluation. As such, it becomes a narrative told by others that has personal significance. One of the consequences was that communal engagement with the text was ambiguous; at a personal and private level there was nowhere to go with concerns about the representations of forbears. These are the same families from whom contemporary farm families living in the area are descended and for whom the anthropological account continues to resonate.

Disciplinary and expert narratives tend to take and are given precedence over personal stories, anecdotes, and even experience as a basis for often

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uncontested and authoritative "truths." Baker (2006) argues that "people's behaviour is ultimately guided by the stories they come to believe about the events in which they are embedded, rather than by their gender, race, colour of skin, or any other attribute" (p. 3). It is remarkably easy to become entangled in somebody else's story, somebody else's representation of our lives. When such an account is also read in a personal register, the impact of the narrative endures across generations.

Rinnamona Research Group: Text and Context

Aware of the various local responses to *The Irish Countryman* (Arensberg, 1937) and *Family and Community in Ireland* (Arensberg & Kimball, 1940/2001, 1968) and familiar with the anthropological field diaries, Byrne (2011/12) struggled with how the collected stories of the rural community could be made available in a sensitive and appropriate way. Kimball's field diary (1931, see Figure 2) is a "social text", recording the 1930s rural community interacting, making judgments, expressing concerns about a variety of topics, including religious practices and rituals, the authority of priest and teacher, women's work in the household, the rules for playing cards, the importance of music and dancing, responses to the threat of tuberculosis, and local comments on national and international politics. The diary as such is "raw data" consisting of stories told or overheard and observations made. Handwritten in pencil on a fading school copybook, it contains the observations of the anthropologist as he listens, records, refraining from judgment as he attempts to catch the words and phrases of the country people.

While noticing the importance of conversation, Kimball records the strategies used to maintain relationships.

> Talking is very important. Old man Roche is deaf and he said "I would rather have lost anything rather than my power of hearing because I can't understand what people are saying . . ." Quin and O'Donoghue were referring to something which someone had done and they objected to it. Quin: "We had to put up with it because we must live with each other gracefully and there's no good in starting trouble." (S. T. Kimball's Field Diary, December 1933)

The RRG was set up early in 2008, consisting of the direct descendents of the families written about in the published works. Most continue to live and farm in the locality and have an enduring connection with the land. Interested in the stories of forebears, they witness social and economic change

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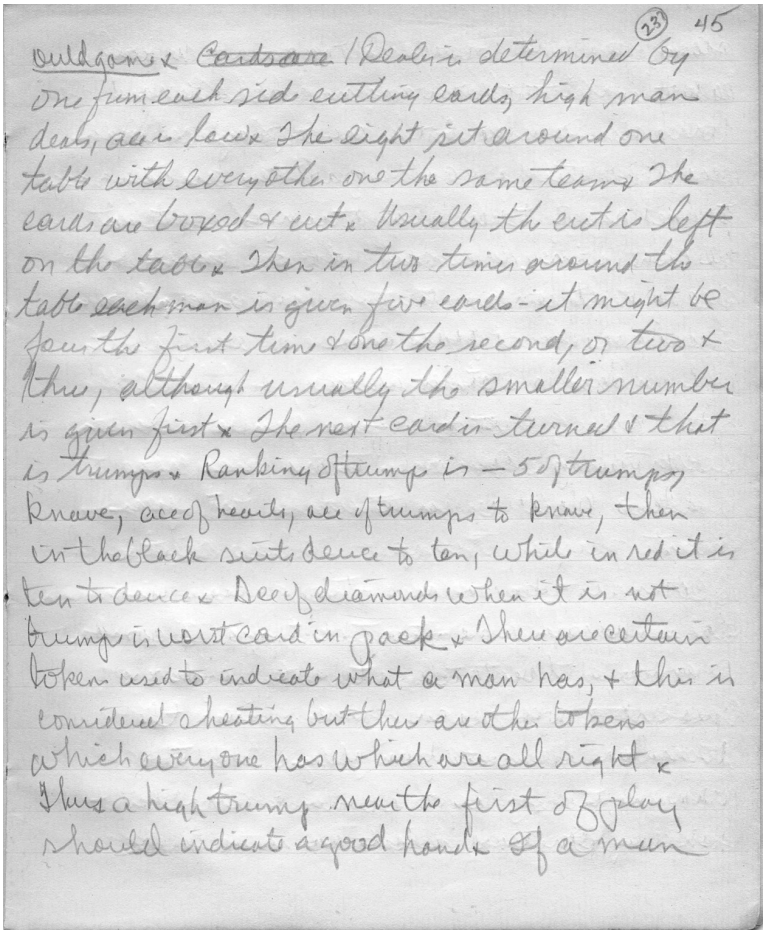

Figure 2. Extract from Solon Kimball's field diary, 1931
Photo: Deirdre O'Mahony, copyright Anne Byrne.

observing the consequences for traditional ways of life and traditional forms of knowldege.

> I suppose our generation, the four of us, have seen the greatest changes in the social fabric of Kilnaboy and Rinnamona. The social change in

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> Ireland, gone from what the (Rinnamona) Dáil saw, the type of farming done, we saw the total change. The advent of Europe (EU), people going out to work, farms, very few into dairy now. The suckler herds never heard of then . . . horsepower has given way to the tractor, silage. We are the last generation to do the trams and pull butts of trams and scuffle the spuds and weed and you know types of farming gone completely. We are the last generation that remember the trashing machine, killing the pig, a lot of the old tradition is gone. (Sean, RRG, 2008)

Concerned with avoiding further offence, the primary aim of the group was to read Kimball's field diary together. The approach required trust between members of the group, a commitment to honest dialogue, and an open work agenda. The group met regularly in a farm household in Rinnamona, the site of the original 1930s fieldwork. The RRG were childhood friends, connecting as adults engaged in a common task tied to common ancestors and place. The spontaneous decision was taken to read the diary aloud, each member taking it in turns to do so. Listening to each other's voices as accounts of predecessors lives were read aloud and combining familiar knowledge of their forebears, new stories of individuals and families began to surface alongside the anthropological account. Potentially sensitive issues were discussed, and memories of predecessors were brought powerfully into the present. The group "corrected" the diary and the published text in instances where names of people and their relationships to each other were inaccurately inscribed. The effect of this communal reading and "correction" of texts was cathartic as group members became active researchers. The household membership of the 1930s community was reconstructed and photographs collected of family members long deceased. This move from speech and text to the visual image evolved out of the process as the group wished to "see," to observe those who had been written about by the anthropologists and those about whom they had heard so many stories growing up in Rinnamona. The "characters" of the anthropological narrative were now to be "seen" for the first time. Family albums were searched, relatives contacted, neighbors visited, requesting photographs of members of the Rinnamona Dáil, such as "The Senator," or "The Public Prosecutor" and his family, or "Oscair," reknowned for his strength and consummate wheelwright manufacturing skills, or photos of family groups, husbands and wives, women and children. As "insider researchers," these images were obtained from and generously offered by friends, neighbors, and relatives—a task which would have been very difficult for any other kind of researcher. A collection of photographic images from the 1930s quickly grew along side documentary sources such as the 1911 Census, folklore from the Schools Manuscripts

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Collection (1937-1938), and the deployment of Ordinance Survey maps to mark and locate the 1930s households of the original study. Plans to photograph the village houses many of which were "cabhails"[4] (ruins) were discussed. Having taken possession of the anthropological narrative and generated own stories, slowly the idea emerged to bring this collected material to a wider audience in the form of a local exhibition. This was the clearly the moment in which the group siezed the anthropological narrative for its own use.

From Private Spaces to Public Places

Coincidentally, O'Mahony began a public art project in a disused rural post office nearby. In reactivating the post office as a public meeting point, her intention was to give physical and metaphorical space for reflection about the future of rural life in a postagricultural landscape. Such a "thinking space" could serve as a counterpoint to public perception and media representation of rural communities in the west of Ireland as either simple, slow, and lacking the intensity of urban life, or as an unspoiled haven and recreation site (O'Brien, 2008; O'Mahony, 2006). The closure of rural post offices throughout Ireland has depleted the number and potential of communal sites of connection, communication, and coincidental exchange.

> The Post Office in rural Ireland is the biggest loss ever particularly for people that are alone and that used to come out on a Friday morning, meet up here, have their chat and go to the shop across the road. That is all gone . . . For a lot of people living on their own that is a great loss. They have nowhere to meet anybody now. (Mary, RRG, 2008)

Reopening the former post office as the "X-PO" (see http://x-po.ie) was an imaginative act, the potential of which was immediately recognized by the community. Taking as a starting point the life of the former postmaster, John Martin "Mattie" Rynne, a much loved, private man, O'Mahony created an installation of his archived books and belongings and a temporary wall drawing of Mattie made from soot taken from the old stove (see Figure 3). In choosing to commemorate the everyday life of the postmaster in such a way, the artist sent a deliberate signal about the privileging of local stories and knowledge. In meeting with the RRG, O'Mahony understood what was needed to support the group. As the group moved from the private intimate space of the domestic household to the public though still familiar space of the old post office, ideas on the imaginative possibilities for local tellers to represent their own stories of family and community were discussed.

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Figure 3. Rinnamona Research Group (RRG) members and artist working in the X-PO, 2008
Photo: Jay Koh, copyright Anne Byrne.

The work of installing the exhibition was a collective effort done to tight time guidelines and at the busiest time in the agricultural year. RRG members did not have any experience of installing an "exhibition" but all were well versed in community development activity, had an extensive community network to draw from, and have a deep knowledge and familiarity with the substance of the exhibition. As the 1930s farm tools and household objects, framed photographs, a digital photo archive of the farm households, the publications, and a computer accessible presentation of the Harvard-Irish Mission and an audio radio program (Owens, 2006) were assembled, the group gained confidence in the exhibition process. Three "books" were made, a photograph album of the Rinnamona households in the 1930s inscribed with the names of the members of each household, an album of school photographs from the 1920s onward, and a book of selected extracts from Kimball's diary on dancing, card playing, Christmas rituals, funeral practices, field names, and superstitions. Kimball's diary was a key component in the exhibition, but it was the individual and family portraits that gave coherence and vitality to

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Figure 4. Successors Meet Predecessors exhibition installation at X-PO, May 2008
Photo: Deirdre O'Mahony, 2008, copyright Deirdre O'Mahony.

the space. The images taken by friends and family were never seen in the public domain. They were taken in moments of celebration, people working together in the fields with their animals, killing a pig, or of a day making hay ricks tightly bound and well-done. The quality varied, some were faded, cropped from group photographs, only fragments available to make the subjects of the texts visible. The priority for the group was the personal content and not the aesthethic quality of the image. This collection grew to more than 200 images of the community, and, as the exhibition progressed, new photographs continued to be brought into the X-PO.

Images were selected for display according to prior knowledge of the Arensberg and Kimball text and crucially according to family ties and relationships as held in memory by group members. Accordingly one wall of the X-PO featured images of the Rinnamona Dáil and of the anthropologist Solon Kimball (see Figure 4). Photos of 16 family groups from the 1930s were arranged around another wall. Re-representing the words of the anthropological text in these carefully and deliberately selected images of the men of the

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Rinnamona Dáil and of the families in the 1930s community was another medium through which the community could reengage with the anthropological account in a shared and public space. One can stand and look back at the visual images; one can see the people as they were remembered and photographed by each other. The exhibition of photographs, found in family albums, was clearly becoming part of a community narrative, a re-representation and alternative to the anthropological account.

The photographs were placed in black oxford frames, individual and family names inscribed under each image by hand. The group worked long into the night to have the exhibition "read" according to their priorities and the three knowledges—local, academic, and artistic—were combined and put to collective use. An alternative representation of the community began to unfold where primacy is given to local family and community relationships, past and present. This is similar to the primacy given to relationships by Arensberg and Kimball but the tellers are now local. They relate a community story "based on the generation of a local consensual knowledge that is only provisionally binding and that is grounded instead at the level of collective interaction" (Kester, 2004, p. 112). Arguably, the group readings of the diary initiated the process of "telling our own story" long sought. However, the collective display of the narrative and visual material in a public space provided an alternative form and context for this to be heard, seen, recognized, acknowledged, and understood. The hierarchical order of narrative to story, outsider to insider representation begins to be unpicked in this movement from the private to the public domain.

Community Works

Though initially taken and looked at for personal and family reasons, presented as a "collection" in the public space of the X-PO, the photographs took on additional meanings. The display of images in the familiar community setting prompted interaction with visitors, and the group drew on their knowledge of family and community past and present, which was continually activated by the flow of visitors and returning visitors.

> Different people had different interests. Some people went to the school photographs, that was their thing, and they went back through people that were in their class at school and all that, and a lot of people have came in as a result of hearing about the photographs being there. Then other people had just interest in the Rinnamona Dáil . . . so there was enough here to keep everyone happy. (Mary, RRG, 2008)

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The immediate effect of the images was to draw in the present-day community, particularly older members, who recalled the living person and shared stories about him or her with research group members who staffed the exhibition on a daily basis for 4 weeks. One of the group recalled, "it was really important for us to be here every day—that's one thing we said, that somebody was here from the group all the time . . . A place to come and meet your neighbors." Stories and memories of the past were offered, stories of hardworking men and women, stories of school, of tricks and games played, of "characters" in the community. The skill at which group members draw stories down was evident as "familiar" knowledge of kin connections, family relationships, and community events are redeployed in a communal and public setting. Some members were natural "interviewers," having spent many evenings of their lives listening and talking to older neighbors and relatives. Knowledge of local relationships and sensitivities allowed stories to flow into the exhibition space through them.

> But nearly all of us had about three-way connections with the families, we weren't just descendants of one person, there was connections, there was a big connection between all the families in Rynamona; they were all related to one another in different ways, in-laws and whatever. (Mary, RRG, 2008)

As friends, neighbors, and relatives visited, they brought with them more stories concerning the 1930s community; memories of individuals and community life of the past were recognized and validated as an important communal resource in this space. The intimate, taken-for-granted knowledge of people and place that is the backdrop of our lives, was now sought after and valued in this context. Once valued, it becomes a conduit of connection and exchange. The exhibition offered another representation of the community to themselves, added to by visitors accompanied by group members as they walked around the exhibits, sat and looked at photos, identifying names and faces, listening as more stories were revealed, adding to the collective store of knowledge about their own place. One visitor commented that

> anthropological studies of that era can often leave a sour taste in the mouth as they patronize the natives, plundering "other" lifestyles for personal academic gain . . . The materials were curated very sensitively in this show and give a humane and authentic representation of the times without presenting people as curiosities. (A. Hayes, X-PO visitor, 2008)

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For those who had a connection to the people and place, meeting with RRG members was doubly meaningful. Not only were their neighbors evidently engaged in a significant piece of collective work on behalf of the community, they were also sharing their knowledge and time with the visitor who shared something in return. Being of mutual use and benefit to each other becomes available once more as a definition of community—a definition based on prior agricultural practices of survival in the recent past, such as "cooring" and "meitheal."[5] Working on the past–present connection in this project had the unanticipated effect of reconnecting neighbor with neighbor in the present moment. Members of the research group also recognized the benefits of collaborative community work.

> If we add it all together . . . there's a lot of stuff I've learned that I wouldn't have learned. (Mary RRG, 2008)

> We all learn as we go along, and we learn from the people that came in. (Francis RRG, 2008)

> Yes but we would never have learned as much had we not got together as a group. (Mary RRG, 2008)

The group added to the story of family and community in Rinnamona in the 1930s by actively hosting and presenting the exhibition based on their subjective, intimate experience without fetishising their knowledge or its public re-presentation. This process epitomizes the idea of co-learning, where interests and expertise are brought to the table, collectively discussed, and exchanged. This understanding is not based on notions of "Other and the Same" but rather of "being-with-one-another," Nancy (1996/2000). Such a "reconquest of a degree of creative autonomy in one particular domain encourages conquests in other domains—the catalyst for a gradual reforging and renewal of humanity's confidence in itself starting at the most miniscule level" (Guattari, 1989, p. 69). The diary project and exhibition provided a context in which to re-tell, re-present, and talk back to the anthropological narrative, the X-PO providing a safe but public space in which to do the work of creating an alternative narrative of community. The public space of the X-PO and the dynamic of the successor group interacting with their community telling their story allowed the deep knowledge of family and farm work, past and present to be heard. In this way, "small stories" disturb dominant narratives. Re-representing their own story began a process of reclamation of the community history from the academic representation of their history,

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leaving their handprint on future re-presentations of the stories of the families and community of Rinnamona.

When asked about the consequences of reading the diaries, "correcting" the anthropological account in term of people's names and marital status and engaging in the month-long exhibition at the X-PO, group members' perceptions of the anthropologists altered. The process "took the harm out of it," as members acknowledged that perhaps the anthropologists did not intend to insult those who had generously agreed to offer the hospitality of their homes for a short while. Members observed that the anthropologists might have been more attentive to how they described people, particularly when these descriptions of their forebears continue to be published worldwide. "Probably sentences maybe could have been phrased better and it mightn't have come across as harsh . . . Probably he didn't realise the thought that he needed to put into it" (Mary, RRG, 2008).

Engagement with the raw data of the diary, listening to stories generated by the group, provoked a dynamic movement in which local knowledges were recognized as having an import in much the same way as the anthropological text. These stories can be validly placed alongside other accounts of family and community. The public display and subsequent mediation of the exhibition by the research group provided the opportunity for face-to-face interaction with visitors and enabled the exhibition to transcend notions of aesthetic representation, recognizing the potential of alternative narratives for community identity and action. Deploying the anthropological narrative for own use has enabled insider researchers to produce an alternative narrative in interaction with others. As such, the strong anthropological narrative is interrupted but not refuted in terms of its core message concerning the importance of familial and communal bonds.

Old Narratives, New Stories?

The research project has demonstrated that academics, artists, and community members can make worthwhile community interventions. Working collaboratively enabled the resources, skills, and competencies of individuals to become available to the group and later to the wider community. The collaborative interaction and the transdisciplinary meeting of the three knowledges of sociologist, artist, and the local combined to collectively tell a narrative of a people and place, rooted in history but connected to contemporary familial and community relationships. Recognizing that local knowledge of place, kinship, and custom could be framed and presented from the perspective of local knowers and made visible within an academic and cultural context has been both emancipatory and transformatory for those involved.

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The X-PO exhibition offered an alternative public account of the anthropological text mediated by the contemporary community's priorities, adjustments, and additions. That which caused hurt to some of the families was not particularly evident to the outsider. What was important was the collective reflexive process that publicly complicated the old anthropological oppositions of an "us-here-and-now versus a them-there-and-then" (Foster, 1996, p. 191). Making evident the contemporary relevance and relationship between local, anthropological, and visual histories allowed space for revision and reflection on meanings of community and relationships in an era of rapid rural change. Stories of the past serve to bind the community together, establish a context to acknowledge difference, and are a resource to stabilize the uncertain present. Uncovering and making visible past networks of social exchange and local knowledge has relevance today as practical applications of that knowledge have the potential to serve as a model for reimagining contemporary rural communities (O'Mahony, 2007b). Deploying the anthropological narrative for communal use has broken a silence. The community is no longer bound by one version of themselves; nor is their own story "removed" from them as in dominant representational practices or narratives. "Telling our own story" is a powerful practice; so too is being publicly seen and heard. From this interactive process, new stories and alternative narratives can grow.

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Notes

1. Cooring: From the word cabhair, to help out, to lend a hand to one's friends and neighbors.
2. Cuaird: To travel around a locality calling in on one's neighbors for a visit.
3. Rinamona Dáil: Reference to the regular gathering of men in a household consulting on local affairs in the community provoking comparison with the authority of Dáil Éireann (the House of Representatives) in the Irish national parliament.
4. Cabhail: Local word used to describe an abandoned or derelict building, usually in ruins.
5. Meitheal: Used to describe cooperative activity by neighbors for neighbors, such as saving hay or gathering in the harvest for example.

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