SANDRA J. BALL-ROKEACH
YONG-CHAN KIM
SORIN MATEI

Storytelling Neighborhood
Paths to Belonging in Diverse Urban Environments

This article develops and tests a communication infrastructure model of belonging among dwellers of urban residential environments. The concept of a communication infrastructure—a storytelling system set in its communication action context—is discussed. Storytelling neighborhood, the communication process through which neighborhood discussion transforms people from occupants of a house to members of a neighborhood, is proposed as an essential component of people’s paths to belonging, an attachment to a residential area that is evidenced in everyday exchange behaviors. A multimethod research design is employed to study seven residential areas in Los Angeles through the use of multilingual data collection to discover the relevant factors that determine belonging in new and old immigrant communities. A communication infrastructure model that posits storytelling as an intervening process between structural location and belonging is proposed and tested. Overall, the most important factor in creating belonging was found to be an active and integrated storytelling system that involves residents, community organizations, and local media. The diagnostic potentials of the communication infrastructure approach and the policy implications of the findings are discussed.

In this article, we develop and test a storytelling model of belonging among dwellers of urban residential places in Los Angeles. Of particular concern are the features of a storytelling process that motivate people, individually and
collectively, to engage in those communication behaviors that establish subjective and objective belonging—an attachment to a residential area that is evidenced in everyday exchange behaviors. We focus on urban places because they are conceived in social theory and in the arts to be the most problematic environments for the gestation and sustenance of belonging.

Some Los Angeles storytellers suggest that belonging has never been a strong point (Rechy, 1963; West, 1939). Other observers of contemporary life suggest a more general assault on the social fabric of belonging. Robert Putnam (1995) sees a loss of social capital, “Features of social life—networks, norms, and trust—that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives” (p. 664). Robert Bellah and his colleagues (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1996) argue that the old-time American individualism that once negotiated the personal and the social, or individual interest and moral commitment to civic duty, has given way to a kind of individualism that discourages investment in the collective welfare. Rokeach and Ball-Rokeach (1989) observed changes in American value priorities consistent with Bellah’s and Putnam’s observations; namely, decreases in allegiance to social equality and increases in the priority of personal economic comfort. Other analysts, such as Giddens (1991, 1999) and Thompson (1995), suggest that the importance of place, per se, has changed as a result of new communication technologies.

Our focus on residential areas reveals resistance to claims that place no longer matters. Residential places are where we most sensually experience the conditions of everyday life. Our challenge is to look to the health of people’s communication behavior and their residential communication environments to understand why belonging thrives or withers. In this respect, we hold the optimistic view that people are social animals who do not suffer asocial conditions passively; rather, they adapt by using communication tools to reconstitute a social world in which the “I” and the “we” can survive. We are not adherents of the kind of communitarianism that seeks to resolve “we/I” tensions by making the “I” secondary to the “we.” We endorse ties that bind, but not ties that strangle either cultural difference or classical American individualism. Finally, we regard residential places as part of a much larger fabric of association and identity that merges geographic with other spaces that do not require shared locales (e.g., ethnic, cultural, lifestyle, or professional).

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The Process of Storytelling Neighborhood

At the heart of our present concern is a particular kind of storytelling; namely, storytelling neighborhood or the communication process through which people go from being occupants of a house to being members of a neighborhood. Our conception of this process is informed by storytelling models of public opinion (e.g., Gamson, 1992; Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955; Livingstone & Lunt, 1994; Morley, 1990; Tarde, 1901/1989; Weaver, Zhu, & Willnat, 1992; Wyatt, Katz, & Kim, 2000), community integration (e.g., Fischer, 1975; Fischer et al., 1977; Friedland, 2001 [this issue]; Friedland & McLeod, 1999; Guest & Stamm, 1993; McLeod et al., 1996; Stamm & Guest, 1991), rhetorical action (Fisher, 1989), and collective identity (Anderson, 1991).

We employ the verb form storytelling neighborhood to emphasize the active construction of neighborhoods through discourse. Storytelling is the act of constructing identity through narrative discourse, and storytelling neighborhood is the act of constructing an identity as a member of a residential neighborhood. We envision a process embedded in daily practices that ideally moves from communication of any form, to communication of a general storytelling or narrative form (Fisher, 1989), to storytelling of a specific form—storytelling neighborhood.

Infrastructures that enable communication, period, are fertile milieu for the emergence of storytelling, and generalized storytelling establishes a daily practice basis from which storytelling neighborhood may emerge. The progression from communication to generalized storytelling (e.g., about the weather, a movie, or traffic) to storytelling neighborhood (e.g., gossip, the local school, gang invasion, or homeowner mobilization) is a problematic, not an imminent outcome. For example, in the absence of embedded practices, turning events, or events that heighten salience and manifest an area as having its own identity (e.g., a shared threat or opportunity), are probably necessary to the progression from generalized to specific storytelling about a residential area.

We privilege the storytelling neighborhood process because it is not only a necessary condition for the formation and sustenance of subjective and objective belonging, but it is also the most generative condition. Storytelling neighborhood is the most agentic process in the construction of those precious bonds that gestate coorientation in the form of imagined community (Anderson, 1991) or a sense of “we” (Durkheim, 1995; Rothenbuhler, 1991, 1998), bonds requisite to the formation of interpersonal and collective modes of neighborly association (Fischer, 1982; Freeman, Fararo, Bloomberg, & Sunshine, 1963; Friedland, 2001; Friedland & McLeod, 1999;

The Research Context

The research reported herein is part of a much larger and ongoing examination of communication technology and community (see authors’ note). Los Angeles, the site of the research, is a prototypical 21st century city (Fulton, 1997). Seven major residential areas within 10 miles of the Los Angeles Civic Center are studied from the perspective of the ethnic group that has set the character and tone of the area: East Los Angeles/Mexican origin, Greater Crenshaw/African American, Greater Monterey Park/Chinese origin, Koreatown/Korean origin, Pico Union/Central American origin, South Pasadena/Caucasian (largely Protestant), and the Westside/Caucasian (largely Jewish). These areas were selected for their historical significance (e.g., places of transition or elite residence) and their sociodemographic characteristics (e.g., representation of the largest ethnic groups).

We employ a total communication environment diagnostic research design (see Matei, Ball-Rokeach, Wilson, Gibbs, & Gutierrez Hoyt, in press) that includes six interrelated methods of observation: a telephone survey, community issues and high-digital (Internet connectors) focus groups, grassroots community organization interviews, census of study area media and interviews with the producers of those media, enumeration of the area communication infrastructure, and sociospatial mapping (see Ball-Rokeach, Kim, & Matei, 2001; Kim, 2001; Matei et al., in press; Wilson, 2001; for more detail, see the Metamorphosis Project Technical Report at http://www.metamorph.org). For the present purposes, we draw on selected data from the telephone survey (see the Methods section) supplemented by relevant observations from the community issues focus groups and interviews with producers of local media.

The Conceptual Context: A Nascent Communication Infrastructure Perspective

The larger Metamorphosis Project is oriented by a nascent communication infrastructure perspective that we are progressively explicating through the interplay of concepts and research findings. We limit the present discussion to a brief sketch of the concept of communication infrastructure.
A communication infrastructure is a storytelling system set in its communication action context. Our concept of communication infrastructure builds on the assumptions of media system dependency theory (Ball-Rokeach, 1985, 1988), and goes beyond it to more inclusive consideration of the interplay between interpersonal and mediated storytelling systems and their contexts. As with other infrastructures, communication infrastructures are usually invisible until something happens to impair their functioning (Star & Bowker, in press). For example, when a natural disaster prevents us from making our everyday mediated or interpersonal network connections, we become acutely aware of the communication infrastructure as a precondition of our abilities to attain everyday goals (e.g., Hirschbury, Dillman, & Ball-Rokeach, 1986). Of the two basic components of a communication infrastructure—the communication action context and the multilevel storytelling system—present purposes dictate that we devote more attention to the storytelling system than to the communication action context. We thus begin with a brief overview of what we mean by the communication action context and then turn to a discussion of the storytelling system.

Communication Action Context

We draw the term communication action context from Habermas (1979, 1984), who developed it to capture the importance of the preconditions of rational discourse in the public sphere. Our use of the term differs somewhat in that our aim is to unfold the discourse preconditions for storytelling neighborhood. The communication action context varies along a dimension of openness and closedness. In this case, the boundaries of the context are the boundaries of a residential area as defined by shared conventions (e.g., major cross streets, incorporated area, real estate sections, or geographic labels; see Ball-Rokeach et al., 2000). An open context is one that encourages people to engage each other in communication, whereas a closed context discourages such encounters. Any particular context will have elements of openness and closedness.

Our understanding of the lived communication action context is informed by the observations of participants in our community issues focus groups who told us about the features of their residential environments that enable or constrain their communication behavior (Ball-Rokeach et al., 2000; Matei et al., in press). These features may be gestated by the conditions of other infrastructures, but are distinguishable as daily practices in the proximate communication action context in which our study samples live. Physical, psychological, sociocultural, economic, and technological dimensions were the most frequently identified features. For example, physical features include
how an area is laid out (e.g., streets and freeways) and the relative presence of communication-incipient places or places that bring people together (e.g., parks, quality grocery stores, movie theaters, or libraries). Psychological features concern whether people feel free to engage one another, such as their level of fear or comfort (see Matei, Ball-Rokeach, & Qiu, 2001 [this issue]). Sociocultural features include the degree of class, ethnic, and cultural similarity, and inclinations toward individualism or collectivism. Economic features of the communication action context include the time and resources available to engage in everyday conversation. Finally, technological features include access to communication technologies (e.g., Internet connections) and the nature of the available transportation system (e.g., car-based or mass transit).

The Storytelling System

At the most macro level are city storytelling agents in the form of media, political, religious, and other central institutions or large organizations that have storytelling production and dissemination resources (e.g., mainstream media and agencies or corporations with public information/relations capacities). At the intermediate or meso-level are the smaller and more locally based organizations whose primary goals concern one or another form of linkage in a particular residential area. These include community media and community organizations targeted to residents. Interpersonal networks constitute the third micro tier of the storytelling system.

Distinctions Between Storytelling Levels

Distinctions between macro, meso, and micro agents are not only in terms of their size, but also in terms of their primary storytelling referent and their imagined audience. Macro agents tell stories primarily about the whole city, the nation, and even the world, where the imagined audience is broadly conceived as the population of the city, county, or region. Stories about or set in particular residential areas are told, but they are a secondary concern. Meso agents are more focused on a particular part of the city and, in some cases, on certain residents of that area (e.g., a particular ethnicity, class, gender, or lifestyle group). Although micro agents or networks of neighbors tell stories about many things far from their neighborhoods (Wyatt et al., 2000), they nonetheless carry the most concrete burden of storytelling neighborhood. In other words, the most prevalent instance of stories about the neighborhood told to an imagined audience of neighbors is ideally located in residents' interpersonal networks.
Interactions Between Storytelling Levels

Storytelling at one level affects storytelling at other levels. For example, in our field research we find a positive two-way relationship between residents’ pride in Los Angeles as a city and their neighborhood pride (Ball-Rokeach et al., 2000). Although there are many reasons why people might be proud to live in Los Angeles (e.g., it’s an exciting place with good weather), pride is also a product of macro/micro storytelling. Focus group participants tell us that when media or other agents (e.g., law enforcement agencies) tell only bad stories about their residential areas, it constrains their inclination to tell stories about their neighborhoods. Even more consequential is a state of disconnection between macro and micro storytelling, whereby some neighborhoods are simply ignored in mainstream media (e.g., news and advertising) and in other storytelling institutional sectors (e.g., religious sermons or school board hearings). Those areas that are imagined in macro storytelling and imagined as efficacious neighborhoods have a distinct advantage over those that must create bottom-up processes of storytelling their neighborhoods.

The Ideal Storytelling System

The ideal storytelling system would be broad (from world to neighborhood referents), deep (many stories about all referents), and integrated (strong linkages between macro, meso, and micro storytelling production systems). Of these features, we place particular emphasis on the degree of integration. Although our discussion privileges neighborhood storytelling, we do not suggest that the ideal outcome is for people to commune in their neighborhoods and forget the rest of the world. Civil society is most likely to emerge when there is integration between storytelling systems that imagine cosmopolitan or global referents in a way that is meaningfully connected to local referents. Meaningful connections are not restricted to commonalities or consensual story lines—they also include conflicting stories. In other words, we are not suggesting a master narrative construction; rather, we are suggesting connective tissues in the overall storytelling system wherein multiple narratives are constructed, engaged, and negotiated.

Meso-level storytelling agents play crucial linkage or integration roles in this regard. Although many researchers have noted the peculiar importance of community organizations in the construction of community and civil society (Baumgartner & Walker, 1988; Blau & Schwartz, 1984; Cortes, 1996; Cutler, 1973; Florin & Wandersman, 1990; Galaskiewicz, 1985; Knoke, 1981, 1986, 1990; Lee, Oropesa, & Metc, 1984; McPherson & Rotolo, 1996; Perkins & Brown, 1996; Pilisuk, McAllister, & Rothman, 1996), we conceive of their
importance largely in communication infrastructure terms. By this we mean that we see them as meso-level storytellers that are positioned to play key linkage roles between macro and micro storytellers. Similarly, many have noted the importance of local media in community building (Friedland & McLeod, 1999; Jeffres, Dobos, & Sweeney, 1987; McLeod et al., 1996; Viswanath, Finnegan, Rooney, & Potter, 1990). We see them as meso storytelling systems that also have the potential to play important linkage roles. Community organizations and local media can directly affect the level of neighborhood belonging to the extent that the stories they tell serve as catalysts for micro-level storytelling (e.g., activate neighbors’ storytelling their neighborhoods) or as a bridge between macro and micro storytelling (e.g., getting neighborhood stories into mainstream media or on the agenda of civic decision makers).

Moreover, the degree of integration within the meso storytelling system can be an important infrastructure feature. For example, we find wide variation among our study areas not only with regard to the number and nature of community organizations (Wilson, 2001) and local media, but also with respect to the coorientation of their storytelling. In some areas, local media incorporate the stories produced by community organizations, but only with respect to calendars of events. In other areas, substantive neighborhood stories are told that are generated, at least in part, by community organizations (e.g., health, criminal justice, traffic, or intergroup conflict issues). Although our present focus is on meso storytelling, questions of integration within macro and micro storytelling systems should also be explored (e.g., Is there a shared storytelling issue agenda?).

The Role of the Internet

The various venues offered by Internet modes of storytelling are addressed in the larger Metamorphosis Project research (see Jung, Qiu, & Kim, 2001 [this issue]; Loges & Jung, 2001 [this issue]). The Internet is not included in this analysis because Internet connections did not correlate significantly with levels of belonging. However, in other research reported by Matei and Ball-Rokeach (in press), relevant explorations are made of the links between belonging to residential and to Internet-based communities. Thus, for present purposes, Internet storytelling is not incorporated, but this does not suggest that such storytelling is irrelevant to issues of bridging local and non-place-based communities. Moreover, it can be reasonably anticipated that as Internet storytelling becomes integrated into the larger storytelling system, we will find that it may well become a player in issues of belonging to residential community per se.
The Interplay of Context and Storytelling

The communication action context and the storytelling system are dynamically related. Both are ever evolving, and change in one affects the other (Bates, 1997). For the purposes of this article, the key interplay question is whether the communication action context enables or constrains the storytelling system's potential to turn its multilevel storytelling processes to neighborhood referents and audiences. Due to space constraints and the need to focus on the most directly relevant aspects of the communication infrastructure perspective for questions of belonging, we do not examine the complexities of the interplay between the communication action context and the storytelling system in this article (see Matei et al., 2001).

From Communication Infrastructure to a Model of Belonging

The preceding discussion affords the raw materials for a theoretical model of the process by which people develop subjective and objective belonging to their residential areas. We also draw on relevant research literatures, especially those that concern community and the roles of local media (Finnegan & Viswanath, 1988; Friedland & McLeod, 1999; Jeffres et al., 1987; McLeod et al., 1996; Olien, Donohue, & Tichenor, 1978; Stamm & Guest, 1991; Viswanath et al., 1990), community organizations (Baumgartner & Walker, 1988; Blau & Schwartz, 1984; Cortes, 1996; Cutler, 1973; Florin & Wandersman, 1990; Galaskiewicz, 1985; Knoke, 1981, 1986, 1990; Lee et al., 1984; McPherson & Rotolo, 1996; Perkins & Brown, 1996; Pilisuk et al., 1996), and personal networks (Chavis & Wandersman, 1990; Fischer, 1982; Galaskiewicz, 1979; Laumann & Pappi, 1976; McLeod et al., 1999; McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Sampson, 1988; Skjæveland, Garling, & Maeland, 1996; Weimann, 1994; Wellman, 1979, 1990).

Assumptions

The most basic assumption is that storytelling is an essential part of people’s paths to belonging. Of the two types of storytelling we have discussed, storytelling neighborhood (i.e., reference to a specific residential area and its residents) is more crucial to the process than generalized storytelling (i.e., larger and primarily nonresidential referents and target audiences). Moreover, storytelling neighborhood agents differ with respect to their anticipated impact on belonging.
Of the many generalized storytellers, we focus exclusively on mainstream media as macro storytellers. We focus on mainstream media because we assume that they are the macro agents with which the most people will have a direct connection. This likelihood is increased by the fact that we examine people’s connections to those mainstream media that prior research (Bogart & Orenstein, 1965; Jeffres, Dobos, & Lee, 1988; McLeod et al., 1996; Viswanath et al., 1990) suggests as most implicated in questions of community—newspapers, television, and radio. Moreover, the mainstream media serve as a liaison storytelling agent for other, less directly accessible institutions or large organizations; for example, they connect citizens to political institutions and shoppers to consumer-oriented corporations (Ball-Rokeach, 1985).

At the meso level there are community organizations and local media, and at the micro level there are interpersonal neighbor networks. In the ideal case, these agents would be participating in storytelling neighborhood in a mutually reinforcing manner. In any concrete case, we assume that participation in interpersonal storytelling of neighborhood will be the more powerful predictor of belonging. Interpersonal storytelling positions the individual in more active imagining of community than either connecting to local media or participation in community organizations.

**Structural Variables as Storytelling Conditions**

In more conventional approaches to community, structural variables (e.g., residential tenure, homeownership, or socioeconomic characteristics) are observed to play important roles (Edelstein & Larsen, 1960; Jeffres et al., 1988; Putnam, 2000; Robinson & Wilkinson, 1995; Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997; Stamm, 1985; Westley & Severin, 1964). Given our orientation, we treat structural variables in terms of how they may locate people in storytelling dynamics. We focus particularly on residential tenure and homeownership because they are relatively easy to treat as storytelling conditions and, unlike other structural characteristics of our study area samples (e.g., education, income, age, marital status, and gender), they are consistently and significantly related to belonging. We assume that the longer people have lived in an area, the more opportunity they have had to develop the inclination and the resources to engage in storytelling generally and in storytelling neighborhood in particular. For example, an old timer compared with a newcomer has had more opportunity to establish interpersonal networks and to learn about the local media and organizations that are available in the area. Being a homeowner (as opposed to being a renter) is generally assumed
to heighten people’s motivations to invest in their communities (Finnegan & Viswanath, 1988; Jeffres et al., 1988; Sampson et al., 1997; Stamm, 1985). We assume that part of such investment is a greater motivation to participate in storytelling. For example, homeowners interested in protecting the real estate value of their homes may be more likely to monitor the immediate and larger environment through media connections or interpersonal conversations, and they may be more likely to join organizations that share their interest.

Theoretical Model of Belonging and Hypotheses

The model of storytelling paths to belonging, presented in Figure 1, presents linear flows from structural storytelling conditions through macro, meso, and micro storytelling connections to belonging. The linearity of the model is a matter of convenience, that is, it is a requirement of model testing, not a theoretical position. Our theoretical orientation suggests two-way flows, especially between belonging and micro and meso storytelling.

In Figure 1, we refer to connections to mainstream media, local media, and to community organizations. This choice of words is guided by theoretical considerations that go back to the legacy of media system dependency theory (Ball-Rokeach, 1974, 1985, 1988). Put briefly, we see people and groups as having relationships with different storytelling production systems, relationships that are embedded in their everyday practices of making connections with storytellers that help them attain their personal and collective goals (e.g., understanding, orientation, and play). Importantly, we infer storytelling processes from the scope of people’s connections to different parts of the storytelling system. We assume that the broader the scope of connections, the greater the force of those connections with respect to the process of storytelling the way to belonging. For example, people who are meaningfully connected to several local media, community organizations, or mainstream media are more likely to be influenced by these relatively broad connections than people who are connected narrowly (e.g., to only one of these).

We focus our analyses on five hypotheses.

Hypothesis 1: The effects of structural characteristics (residential tenure and homeownership) on belonging will be indirect through connections to either macro storytelling agents (mainstream media) or meso storytelling agents (community organizations or local media).
This basic hypothesis follows from the argument that structural variables have force through the impetus they give to establish connections to macro and meso storytelling agents.

**Hypothesis 2:** The effects of connections to macro storytelling agents (mainstream media) on belonging will be indirect through connections to local media (a meso-level agent).

Previous research (Wilson, 2001) indicates few connections between mainstream media and community organizations. This is not a surprising outcome, given our previous discussion of the storytelling referent and imagined audience of mainstream media; that is, community organizations work in context of smaller residential area locales than the citywide or larger production contexts of mainstream media. Although local media also have a narrower storytelling focus than mainstream media, we expect some connection between them. People with broad connections to mainstream media are more likely to develop a daily practice of weaving media stories into their lives, a practice that is likely to extend to reading, watching, or listening to local media. Moreover, when mainstream media stories overlap with local concerns, they are likely to encourage broader connections to local media.

**Hypothesis 3:** The effects of connections to meso-level storytelling agents (community organizations and local media) on belonging will be both direct and indirect through micro agents (interpersonal storytelling neighborhood).
This hypothesis draws attention to participation in the two storytelling processes most proximate to belonging. People’s connections to community organization or local media storytelling agents can operate directly to enhance their belonging by heightening the knowledge and salience of neighborhood events or concerns. Connections to these meso storytelling agents also precipitate a carrying forward of these stories through interpersonal storytelling.

Hypothesis 4: Micro storytelling neighborhood (interpersonal discourse) will have the strongest direct effect on belonging.

This hypothesis follows from our previous discussion of the agentic potentials of neighbors talking to neighbors about their neighborhoods.

Hypothesis 5: The more integrated the storytelling system (links between macro, meso, and micro storytelling agents), the higher the level of belonging.

This summary hypothesis reflects the previous discussion of the ideal storytelling system for belonging.

Research Question:
One or Two Models of Belonging

Although we have formulated one storytelling model of belonging, we entertained formulating one for old immigrants and another for new immigrants. Our reasons include prior research findings (Ball-Rokeach et al., 2000) and a concern for the generalizability of past research findings for our culturally diverse study samples. The vast majority of prior research on community has been theorized and conducted in small to mid-sized towns or cities wherein the large majority of residents have lived in the United States for several generations or more—that is, old immigrants (Finnegan & Viswanath, 1988; Jeffres et al., 1988; McLeod et al., 1996; Neuwirth, Salmon, & Neff, 1989; Stamm, 1985; Viswanath et al., 1990). Large urban areas, past and present, are noted for their congregations of old and new immigrants, and Los Angeles is an exemplar of this tradition. The theoretical significance of the distinction between old and new immigrants lies especially in the possibility of differences in the roles played by mainstream and local media in the belonging process.

In classic studies of 1930s and 1940s Chicago that examined media roles in community integration (Janowitz, 1952/1967; Park, 1915, 1929, 1940/1967), immigrant media were found to play important roles in dominant
culture assimilation. Interviews we have conducted with the producers of Los Angeles immigrant media, and especially those targeted to Korean and Chinese immigrants, suggest a strong emphasis on storytelling about the country of origin (Kim, 2001). This is not to suggest that stories geared to helping new immigrants understand how to deal with the various cultural, legal, and political institutions are not part of the mix. It is to suggest that these media may not be storytelling neighborhood to the same extent as their counterparts in old immigrant areas. Accordingly, the oft-noted finding of a positive correlation between strength of connections to local media and community integration (McLeod et al., 1996; McLeod, Scheufele, & Moy, 1999; Rothenbuhler, Mullen, DeLaurel, & Ryu, 1996; Shah, 1998) may reflect a research focus on smaller communities with preponderance of old immigrants. Moreover, the lesser role of mainstream media compared with local media that we have argued thus far may or may not hold in new immigrant areas. Relatively strong connections to mainstream media among new immigrants may reflect a weaker orientation to their country of origin (or stronger orientation to their present environs). Thus, we pose as a research question whether there are sufficient differences in these respects between new and old immigrants to warrant two separate models of belonging.

Research Method

As previously noted, of the multiple and interrelated data sets constructed in the larger Metamorphosis Project, the data employed in this study concern primarily the telephone survey. Observations from community issues focus groups and from interviews with producers of local media are employed to inform survey findings.

The Telephone Survey

Within each of our seven study areas, 250 to 320 households are selected by random digit dialing for participation in a telephone survey administered in the language of choice (Cantonese, English, Korean, Mandarin, and Spanish). Our unusual multilingual data collection procedures afford inclusion of non–English-speaking new immigrants often excluded in survey research.

The response rate was low (31%) when calculated most conservatively by dividing the number of completed interviews by the number of theoretically eligible phone numbers. Despite the fact that the phone interview was relatively long—40 to 47 minutes—the cooperation rate was relatively high (62%). Although there are, of course, sample biases, due to the response rate
they appear to be within the normal ranges for a survey of this complexity (Keeter, Kohut, Groves, & Presser, 2000). Its biases, comparable to those found in studies conducted using far simpler sampling designs, are in the direction of females and higher income, education, and age (Ball-Rokeach et al., 2000).

**Dependent Variable: The Belonging Index**

At the core of the survey is an 8-item measure of subjective and objective belonging. This measure is informed by previous measures of community attachment and involvement (Chavis & Wandersman, 1990; Hui, 1988; McLeod et al., 1996).

Do you **strongly agree**, **agree**, **neither agree nor disagree**, **disagree**, or **strongly disagree** with the following statements (response on a 5-point Likert-type scale):

1. You are interested in knowing what your neighbors are like (55% of respondents **agree** or **strongly agree**).
2. You enjoy meeting and talking with your neighbors (73% of respondents **agree** or **strongly agree**).
3. It’s easy to become friends with your neighbors (67% of respondents **agree** or **strongly agree**).
4. Your neighbors always borrow things from you and your family (32% of respondents **agree** or **strongly agree**).

How many of your neighbors do you know well enough to ask them to (respondent specifies a number):

5. Keep watch on your house or apartment? ($M = 3.5, SD = 5.8$)
6. Ask for a ride? ($M = 3, SD = 5.6$)
7. Talk with them about a personal problem? ($M = 1.4, SD = 2.8$)
8. Ask for their assistance in making a repair? ($M = 1.9, SD = 3.4$)

Cronbach’s alpha of index scalability is .78. To mitigate the effect of positive skew exhibited in the number of neighbor responses, we recoded these with 10 being the maximum possible value. To bring all 8 items to a common metric, the number of neighbor responses were further divided by 2. To recover missing cases due to failure to respond to all 8 items, we replaced missing values with the variable mean score.

The distribution of mean belonging scores is presented in Table 1. Old immigrant study areas (African American and Caucasian) exhibit higher mean levels of belonging than the new immigrant areas, and Latino new
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Note. W = White Caucasian in Westside (Jewish) and South Pasadena (Protestant), B = African American in Crenshaw, L = Latino in East Los Angeles (Mexican origin) and Pico Union (Central American origin), and A = Asian in Koreatown (Korean origin) and Monterey Park (Chinese origin). Residential tenure was measured with the following categories: 1 = less than 1 year, 2 = between 1 and 2 years, 3 = between 2 and 3 years, 4 = between 3 and 5 years, 5 = between 5 and 20 years, 6 = more than 10 years, and 7 = entire life. Homeownership is a dichotomous variable, with 1 = own home and 0 = rent. *p < .05. **p < .01.
immigrant areas evidence higher belonging than Asian new immigrant areas.

**Independent Variables**

Residential tenure is a continuous measure of years of residence in the neighborhood. Homeownership is a dichotomous measure, marking owner status by 1 and renter status by 0.

**Intervening Variables**

Working backward from the variables conceived in the theoretical model to be most to least proximate to belonging (see Figure 1), most proximate is interpersonal discussion about the neighborhood, followed by scope of connections to community organizations and scope of connections to local media, and least proximate is scope of connections to mainstream media.

The intensity of interpersonal discussion about the neighborhood is measured by asking the respondent to indicate, on a scale ranging from 1 (never) to 10 (all the time), “How often do you have discussions with other people about things happening in your neighborhood?” \(M = 4.6, SD = 2.9\).

Assessing scope of connections to community organizations involved a two-step process. Respondents were asked if they belonged to five different types of organizations: (a) sport or recreational; (b) cultural, ethnic, or religious; (c) neighborhood or homeowner; (d) political or educational; and (e) other. Membership in each type was scored as 1, and all responses were summated to form a synthetic variable ranging from 0 to 5. Inspection revealed that many people did not indicate membership in a religious organization, despite the fact that they reported regular church, temple, and so forth attendance. In these cases, we credited a 1 to their scores if they attended a religious service more often than once every few weeks.

Scope of connections to local media was also assessed through a two-step procedure. Local media are either community media targeted to a particular ethnic group or residential area or public/noncommercial media oriented to a study area. First, we examined respondents’ reports to establish whether they had spent any time connected to such local newspapers, radio, or television in the prior week. Second, we added up the number of affirmative connections to create a scope variable that reflects the breadth of their connectedness (range = 0 to 3).

A parallel procedure was employed to assess the scope of connections to mainstream media or relatively large, commercial, and English-language media that are not targeted to any particular ethnic or residential area.
audience. Affirmative responses to being connected to mainstream newspapers, radio, and television were summated to generate a score ranging from 0 to 3.

Supplementary Methods: Community Issues Focus Groups and Interviews With Producers of Local Media

Survey participants who scored 5 or more on the neighborhood discussion scale were invited, at the end of the phone survey, to participate in semistructured focus group discussions. A total of 98 people participated. Two groups were organized for each study area. They were held in the study area and were conducted bilingually as needed. Discussion topics most relevant to present concerns included the nature of their communication action context and the factors within it that enabled or disabled neighborly communication and their sense of community.

A census of local media in each study area was conducted. These range from mom-and-pop to sophisticated commercial operations. The producers or communication officers of these media were interviewed by telephone in the language of their choice. Questions most relevant to present purposes concerned their production goals and their targeted audiences. We sought to determine the extent to which they saw themselves as builders of their residential communities.

Data Analysis

We use structural equation modeling (Bollen, 1989; Jöreskog & Sörbom, 1989) to test the theoretical model presented in Figure 1. The chi-square goodness-of-fit test is the traditional criterion employed to determine acceptance or rejection of the hypothesized model. A good fit is represented by a nonsignificant chi-square value (i.e., there is no gap between the theoretical and the empirical model, between expected and observed relationships). However, chi-square is strongly influenced by sample size and difficult to interpret (Jöreskog & Sörbom, 1989). Thus, researchers are urged to use multiple criteria. The following criteria were used to evaluate how well the proposed model fit the observed correlation matrix (Bentler, 1988): (a) chi-square statistic (nonsignificant), (b) the Bentler-Bonett Normed Fit Index (NFI) (greater than .90), (c) the Non-Normed Fit Index (Non-NFI) (greater than .90), and (d) the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA, less than .05).
The unfolding procedure we employed begins by testing our hypothesized structural model for each of our four area groupings (African American, Caucasian, Latino, and Asian study samples) by using EQS/Windows, a statistical program that tests structural equation models (Bentler, 1995). Second, we conduct Wald tests against hypothesized models of each of these groups. The Wald test checks all the estimated paths and selects those that are not contributing to the fitness of the models. Nonsignificant ($p > .05$) paths were eliminated. We thus obtain four revised structural path models in which all paths are significant.

Research Findings

The correlation matrix of all variables used to test the models is shown in Table 1, along with their respective means and standard deviations. The theoretical model (see Figure 1) is tested first by examining zero-order correlations.

Zero-Order Correlations

Intensity of participation in interpersonal storytelling of the neighborhood, scope of connections to community organizations, and belonging are positively correlated to one another in all four cases. The correlation coefficients among these variables in the four study sample groups are less than 0.6, indicating that they have discriminant validity (Campbell, 1960).

The zero-order correlation results (see Table 1) indicate that the four study groups are located in different media environments. In the old immigrant Caucasian and African American cases, local media connections are positively related to belonging and to two other storytelling variables—connections to community organizations and interpersonal storytelling of the neighborhood. In the new immigrant Asian and Latino groups, connections to local media are generally not significantly related to these other storytelling variables or to belonging—the exception occurring for Latinos where there is a positive relationship between connecting to local media and participation in interpersonal storytelling. Relationships between people’s connections to local media and mainstream media also vary. In the new immigrant Latino and Asian areas, negative relations were observed, whereas positive relations were observed in the old immigrant Caucasian and African American areas. In other words, in the new immigrant areas, local media and mainstream media seem to compete with each other, although they seem to supplement each other in the old immigrant areas.
Independence Versus Hypothesized Model

Relationships between the five types of variables (structural and storytelling) were organized in a structural equation model, whose goodness of fit was assessed using the EQS/Windows statistical package. The analysis starts with an independence model, which assumes that the variables cannot be organized in a model (i.e., are uncorrelated). If this model is rejected (i.e., the variables are not independent of one another), one can then proceed with the hypothetical model, which assumes that there are specific relationships between the variables (i.e., they are correlated). The hypothesized model is presented in Figure 1, where absence of a line connecting variables indicates the lack of a hypothesized direct effect.

Maximum likelihood estimation was employed to estimate all models. The independence model was rejected in all four cases (i.e., in the two new and the two old immigrant study samples). That is, the chi-square difference test indicates significant improvement in fit between the independence model and the hypothesized model (see Figure 1). There are, however, variations across study samples in goodness of fit for the hypothesized model (see Table 2). Specifically, the model fits best in the Caucasian sample ($\chi^2 = 5.92, df = 7, p = ns$, Comparative Fit Index [CFI] = 1.00, Non-NFI = 1.01, NFI = .98, RMSEA = .00), and moderately well in the Latino sample ($\chi^2 = 23.76, df = 7, p < .01$, CFI = .89, Non-NFI = .67, NFI = .86, RMSEA = .07) and the African American sample ($\chi^2 = 26.05, df = 7, p < .01$, CFI = .91, Non-NFI = .73, NFI = .89, RMSEA = .10). The poorest fit is found in the Asian sample ($\chi^2 = 51.07, df = 7, p < .001$, CFI = .81, Non-NFI = .44, NFI = .80, RMSEA = .11).

Tests of Post Hoc Revised Structural Model

Post hoc model modifications were performed in an attempt to develop a more parsimonious model. On the basis of the Wald test, nonsignificant paths were deleted. Table 3 presents the standardized solutions of the path parameters of all the revised models. Table 2 presents the various goodness-of-fit indices. Out of the four revised models, those concerning the Caucasian, African, and Latino samples show a very good model fit, whereas a poor fit is found for the Asian study sample. In these final models, the predictors account for 29% of the variance in belonging in the Caucasian sample, 20% in the African American Sample, 11% in the Latino sample, and 14% in the Asian sample.
Hypothesis 1, that the effects of structural characteristics on belonging will operate indirectly through connections to macro- or meso-level storytelling agents, receives strong support in all but the Asian study areas. The three revised models for Caucasian, African American, and Latino areas (see Figures 2 to 4) show that the two structural location variables—residential tenure and homeownership—have only indirect paths to belonging via connections to mainstream media, local media, or community organizations. For example, in the Caucasian area, residential tenure has a direct effect on the scope of local media connections ($B = .10$), whereas homeownership increases the scope of connections to community organizations ($B = .29$) and mainstream media.
Table 3  
*Parameter Estimates for the Revised Models for Each Sample*

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*Note.* W = White Caucasian in Westside (Jewish) and South Pasadena (Protestant), B = African American in Crenshaw, L = Latino in East Los Angeles (Mexican origin) and Pico Union (Central American origin), and A = Asian in Koreatown (Korean origin) and Monterey Park (Chinese origin).
media ($B = .13$). In the African American case, homeownership has a direct effect on connections to community organizations ($B = .30$); however, residential tenure does not significantly affect any storytelling variable. In the Latino areas, residential tenure increases the scope of organizational participation ($B = .12$), and homeownership increases the scope of mainstream media connections ($B = .09$). Contrary to expectations, homeownership has a depressing effect on the scope of connections to local media ($B = -.16$) in the Latino areas.

The major departure from the expectation that storytelling variables would intervene between structural location and belonging occurs in the Asian study areas (see Figure 5). Here, we find a disconnected or fragmented process wherein homeownership is directly linked only to the scope of mainstream media connections ($B = .09$), and mainstream media connections negatively affect the scope of local media connections ($B = -.13$). Moreover, there is no significant tie between local media connection and meso-level storytelling via connections to community organizations. The implications of this fragmented model will be discussed in the next section of the article.
Hypothesis 2 anticipates that the effects of mainstream media (macro storytelling connections) on belonging will operate indirectly through connections to local media, but not to the other meso-level storytelling agent, connections to community organizations. This hypothesis receives support in the old immigrant study areas where there are significant paths linking mainstream and local media, and no significant links between mainstream media and community organizations (see revised model results in Table 3 or Figures 2 and 3). Mainstream media connections positively affect local media connections in the Caucasian sample ($B = .17$) and the African American sample ($B = .27$). That is, in these study samples, the more individuals are connected to mainstream media forms (television, newspapers, or radio), the more likely they are to be connected to local media and, thus, to belong.

Hypothesis 2 is not supported in the new immigrant study samples. In the Latino sample (see Figure 4), there is no significant relation between mainstream and local media connections. In the Asian sample (see Figure 5), mainstream and local media connections go in opposite directions; the stronger the mainstream media connections, the weaker the local media connection ($B = -.13$).
Although the hypothesized differential mediating roles of community organizations and local media vis à vis mainstream media is not supported in the new immigrant areas, the more general claim that connections to mainstream media do not have direct effects on belonging is supported in all four study samples. Connections to mainstream media have to be mediated by more specific meso neighborhood storytelling variables to lead to neighborhood belonging.

The claim is made in Hypothesis 3 that connections to meso level storytelling agents (community organizations and local media) will have effects on belonging directly and indirectly through intensity of interpersonal storytelling of the neighborhood (micro level). This claim is supported in the old immigrant (African American and Caucasian) study samples where direct and indirect paths are observed, but receives mixed support in the new immigrant study samples. In the Latino study sample, no direct effects of connections to either community organizations or local media on belonging are observed, but indirect effects through intensity of interpersonal neighborhood storytelling are observed. In the Asian study sample, the hypothesis
holds for community organizations where direct and indirect effects occur, but not for local media.

The expectation in Hypothesis 4, that intensity of participation in interpersonal storytelling of the neighborhood would have the strongest direct effects on belonging, is supported in all study areas, both old and new immigrant. The strongest effect is observed in the Caucasian study sample ($B = .50$) and the weakest effect is observed in the African American study sample ($B = .25$), with the new immigrant Latino and Asian samples falling in between ($B = .33$ in both cases).

Hypothesis 5 makes the summary theoretical claim that the more integrated the storytelling system, the higher the level of belonging. This claim translates to the expectation that there will be significant linkages between macro and meso storytelling agents, on one hand, and between meso and micro storytelling agents, on the other hand. In other words, the process envisioned in the storytelling model of belonging is a set of cross-level linkages between increasingly focused storytellers of neighborhood. Inspection of Figures 2 to 5 and of the mean levels of belonging reported in Table 1 suggests support of this hypothesis. All pair-by-pair study sample differences in mean level of belonging are statistically significant.
The highest level of belonging is found in the African American study sample ($M = 20.0$), followed by the Caucasian study sample ($M = 18.6$). In both of these old immigrant study samples, we find an almost perfect storytelling neighborhood pattern. Mainstream media (macro) are linked to local media; there are links between meso-level storytelling agents (local media and community organizations), and meso-level agents are linked to interpersonal storytelling neighborhood (micro).

The third highest level of belonging is found in the Latino study sample ($M = 17.7$). In this instance, the missing link is that between macro- and meso-level storytelling agents. There is no significant link between mainstream media and either local media or community organizations. The anticipated links between meso- and micro-level storytelling does occur—both community organizations and local media are significantly linked to the intensity of interpersonal storytelling.

The lowest level of belonging occurs in the Asian study sample ($M = 15.4$). In this instance, there are two major missing or unpredicted links. There is a negative (rather than a positive) link between mainstream (macro) and local (meso) media, and local media are not connected to interpersonal neighborhood storytelling (micro).

Taken together, there is a pattern of higher levels of belonging, a function of the degree of integration of the storytelling system. That there is the same level of integration in the African American and Caucasian study samples, but a higher level of belonging in the African American case, suggests that other factors are operating. These do not appear to be structural factors, as residential tenure and homeownership are more strongly linked to storytelling variables in the Caucasian than in the African American cases. We return to this issue in the Discussion section.

The answer to our research question—Do we need two separate storytelling models of belonging, one for old and one for new immigrants?—is a qualified yes. The model works very well in the old immigrant study samples, works fairly well in the Latino study sample, and works the least well in the Asian study sample. This suggests that recency of immigration is an important factor, but it also suggests that we need to further distinguish between Latino and Asian new immigrants. We expand on the implications of these findings in the next section of this article.

Discussion and Conclusions

We organize our discussion of the findings by addressing the question, What do we learn and what difference does it make for public policy concerns? The
overarching conclusion we reach from the findings we have presented is that the more integrated the storytelling system, the more likely that urban dwellers will feel that they belong and act accordingly. When people’s environments are rich in storytelling of their residential areas, they breathe it in, being more likely to participate directly with their neighbors in the process of imagining and constructing community. Old immigrants have an advantage in this respect. Relative to new immigrants, they live in more integrated multilevel storytelling environments. There are links between mainstream media (macro storytellers) and local media (meso storytellers) and between the key meso-level storytellers (local media and community organizations), and these meso-level storytellers provoke storytelling neighborhood among residents (micro storytelling).

Although old immigrants have an advantage, there is nonetheless plenty of room for improvement. Probably the greatest community-building payoff would come from interventions to strengthen the neighborhood storytelling links between community organizations and residents and between local media and residents. The first step would be to increase awareness on the part of community organizations and local media of their important roles as generators of neighborhood storytelling among the residents of the areas they serve. Activists, policy makers, and foundations committed to community building could establish working relations with community organizations and local media to maximize their storytelling contributions to belonging.

The need for strengthening of the communication infrastructure of belonging—the storytelling system set in its communication action context—is even more pressing in the new immigrant study areas, and the Asian study areas in particular. The proportion of the study sample that is first-generation immigrants is higher in the Asian study areas (74.0%) than in the Latino study areas (51.2%), a fact that accords with our conclusion that the more recent the arrival of an immigrant group, the more likely it is that a distinct model of belonging will be required. Inspection of the fragmented Asian model suggests that there are major disconnections in the storytelling system that could, and probably should, be addressed by community building activists and policy makers. The (a) negative link between people’s connections to mainstream media and to local media, (b) the absence of a link between connections to local media and connections to community organizations, (c) the absence of a link between local media and neighborhood storytelling, plus (d) the absence of a link between connections to local media and belonging suggest a major problem with the nature of the storytelling being produced by local media. In essence, our suspicion gleaned from interviews
with the producers of these media—that local media are not storytelling the
neighborhood, but are instead directing attention away from the local area to
the country of origin—affords a consistent accounting of our findings.

Inspection of the model for the Latino study areas suggests that this prob-
lem is not as profound there. Connections to local media increase the likeli-
hood of connections to community organizations and participation in inter-
personal storytelling of the neighborhood. The strength of these connections,
however, is weaker than is the case in the old immigrant study areas. More-
over, there are two links present in the old immigrant models that are not
present in the Latino cases—a positive link between mainstream media and
local media and a direct link between connections to local media and belong-
ing. Taken together, the findings from the Asian and the Latino study areas
suggest that the local media play sufficiently different storytelling roles in
new immigrant compared with old immigrant areas that different theoreti-
cal models are necessary.

These findings also suggest something very important for researchers of
urban community: Generalizations from models tested on primarily old
immigrant and largely Caucasian study samples are not warranted. In the
midst of a time of high in-migration, urban researchers and policy makers
need to customize their conceptions of the problem of community to the
nature of the populations at hand. The most pressing need from a
policymaking point of view is for discussion with the producers of local media
not only to point out the problem of their apparent storytelling orientation,
but also to build new relationships that might alleviate the problem. For
example, much stronger relations between mainstream and local media
could be built, and, even more important, much stronger relations between
local media and community organizations could be established. Our findings
suggest real benefits from building these relations, benefits in the form of
more surefooted orientation to the problem of building residential commu-
nity in diverse urban areas.

We should comment, at least briefly, on our findings with regard to the
structural variables that we have treated as important in situating people
motivationally with respect to the storytelling system. In all study areas, res-
idential tenure and home ownership are positively related. This is hardly
surprising. However, of the two, home ownership seems the more important
with regard to connections to mainstream media and to community organiza-
tions. In three of the four cases, home ownership increases the likelihood of
these connections, whereas residential tenure is not linked. Our tentative
observation is that just being in an area for a longer period of time is not a
substitute for motivation that seems to accrue by virtue of home ownership.
Finally, we conclude this article by returning to our earlier discussion of the role of the communication action context in which area storytelling systems are embedded. Adequate examination of the dynamic interactions between these features of the communication infrastructure requires more refined analysis of all seven of the original study areas that we have collapsed, for purposes of this research, into four areas. This will have to await a future article in which we make comparisons between the two Caucasian study areas (the Westside and South Pasadena), the two Latino study areas (East Los Angeles and Pico Union), and the two Asian study areas (Koreatown and Greater Monterey Park). We do, however, have the case of the African American study sample in Greater Crenshaw that can be employed as an example of the potential benefits to be had by capturing the interplay of context and the storytelling system, that is, the larger communication infrastructure and its effects on belonging.

As previously noted, African American residents of Greater Crenshaw evidence the highest level of belonging to their residential area. This fact reveals the vigor of their highly integrated storytelling system. Our study sample reflects the largely lower-to-upper-middle class and moderately well-educated African American population in Greater Crenshaw. We have formed a picture of their everyday communication context on the basis of what we know about this study area from demographic data, their responses to the telephone survey, and observations made by community issues focus group participants. Greater Crenshaw became identified as an African American area with an influx of new residents shortly after the end of World War II (Allen & Turner, 1996). Since the 1980s, there has been a steady in-migration of Latino (mostly Mexican-origin) residents (Navarro, Anderson, Walters, Dove, & Rossum, 1992). The Greater Crenshaw area is stereotypically portrayed by outsiders as a danger zone (see Matei et al., 2001). It also is an area that has had chronic difficulties in developing its economic base, which in everyday life terms means that the services (e.g., grocery and department stores) in the area are often inferior and often more highly priced than in Caucasian areas. This may be why the African American study sample reveals the most knowledge of Greater Los Angeles in that they are the most traveled in and around the city.

All in all, this study area from the perspective of its African American residents presents a challenge when it comes to belonging. What seems to account for residents’ abilities to meet this challenge is the presence of homeowners (47.4%), long-term residents (52.8% of more than 10 years or entire life), many community-building community organizations (see Wilson, 2001), local media that storytell the neighborhood, and people who talk to each
other “over the backyard fence” specifically about their neighborhood. In other words, there are many contextual constraints on communication and storytelling, but these residents overcome those constraints through an integrated storytelling system.

Important sociocultural and psychological contextual factors seem to facilitate this process. On one hand, focus group participants suggest a clear articulation of the area as one where they belong. Others may be afraid of the area, but they, by in large, are not (Matei et al., 2001). The area is their neighborhood, and they know how to engage it. Moreover, there would seem to be a relatively strong collectivist value orientation that promotes interpersonal engagement and storytelling. In an ironic way observed in many ghetto scenarios, historical prejudice against African Americans, including residential segregation and contemporary redlining, seem to have cumulated in a sense of Greater Crenshaw as “our” place, one that “we” care about and therefore talk about. In short, the unique communication infrastructure of this area that is in large part created by its residents’ communicative activities accounts for its high level of belonging.

Notes

1. The main reason for the low response rate is that 39% of the phone numbers called could not be determined for eligibility to participate (by geographic location and ethnicity), despite five callbacks. A full discussion of the response rate can be found in the Metamorphosis study technical report available at http://www.metamorph.org/vault/techreport.zip.

2. As previously noted, defining local media in the complex new and old immigrant environment of Los Angeles is more difficult than in a mid-size old immigrant city. An additional difficulty is establishing a parallel between media targeted to ethnic “minorities” and those targeted to the historically dominant Caucasian population. We included public radio and television as local media in the Caucasian study areas because they are physically located in these areas, the majority of subscribers are Caucasian, and there is programming that is designed to connect especially with these areas.

References


Ball-Rokeach et al. • Storytelling Neighborhood


