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Ștefan COJOCARU¹, Vered LEVY UNGER²

Abstract

The research discusses partial findings from the “Hero’s Journey” intervention program conducted in Jerusalem from October 2023 to June 2024 across three senior citizen clubs, with 39 women and one man participating. Based on Joseph Campbell’s “Hero’s Journey” model with contemporary adaptations, the 12-session program exposed participants to myths from around the world and their cultures. Participants shared personal stories and created artwork related to the meeting themes. The intervention sought to bring together personal stories and community narratives, using myths and legends to create positive change for individuals and communities. Out of the three parameters the study aimed to influence, the article focuses on two: a sense of belonging and social cohesion. Utilizing quantitative and qualitative data, the article addresses only the quantitative findings, which show a significant change in participants’ sense of belonging and group cohesion.

Keywords: sense of belonging; group cohesion; community art project; Hero’s Journey; myths, personal narrative.

Introduction

The mythology researcher Josef Campbell developed the Hero’s Journey model (1949), a versatile and powerful narrative framework that can be applied across various domains to enhance engagement, meaning, and transformation. Whether in project management, social design, education, therapy, or cultural storytelling, this timeless structure provides a valuable tool for navigating and understanding complex processes and experiences. This article presents partial results from a doctoral intervention program that used this model in a community art project

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designed to enhance belonging and group cohesion among the elderly. Many sociological studies refer to the third and fourth-age populations, where questions of meaning and belonging are raised, making interventions that promote personal and social identity essential.

The “Hero’s Journey” model, demonstrating personal development through a universal mythic structure, allows individuals to see themselves as part of a larger narrative, fostering a sense of belonging and identification with others, provides a “comprehensive mud map for those either seeking or forced to change” (Williams, 2019). By integrating myths and personal storytelling, the program provided a framework for participants to engage with their individual and community identities. The process enabled participants to explore their creative potential while forming meaningful group connections, the hero can integrate the previously hidden and unknown depths of self in the context of interactions with others (Hartman, & Zimmeroff, 2009). Combining art, myths, and storytelling was a powerful tool for improving the sense of belonging and promoting unity.

The underlying hypothesis is that integrating myths with personal and collective experiences can foster personal growth, improve connectedness, and strengthen community cohesion. By accessing the wisdom of traditional cultures, the program aimed to tap into participants’ creative power, fostering a deeper connection to themselves and the group.

The innovation of this program lies in its ability to create a collective Hero’s Journey. Using this model strengthens belonging and group cohesion within a community art project. The underlying hypothesis is that when integrated with personal and collective experiences, myths can foster personal growth, improve self-esteem, and strengthen community cohesion. The program generated a collective resonance that empowers the individual, acknowledging the group’s power to anchor each hero, as the sense of belonging supports and strengthens heroes in all their forms. Simultaneously, building the group through more and more heroes going through the process contributes to its cohesion. The program was held in three Senior Clubs in Jerusalem. Senior clubs are an initiative of the Jerusalem Municipality and are spread throughout the city in many neighborhoods. The clubs offer enrichment and social activities two to three times a week, serving as central meeting places and support systems for many of the elderly women (the majority being women) who attend.

Connectedness and cohesion in Arts and Narrative projects

To provide a broader picture of the sources of inspiration for the intervention program, we will review community art projects for the elderly and narrative projects and programs that utilize the structure of the hero’s journey. Research on community-based art and its impact on social inclusion has shown positive outcomes. Several studies have highlighted the positive effects of art programs in fostering social connections and promoting community cohesion. A study in

Vancouver found that an art program for independent elderly people helped them establish new community connections and fostered social cohesion. A larger-scale study in England with 5,892 participants revealed that 82% linked participatory art to a sense of social connection, primarily through community activities like theater and live performances, highlighting art's role in supporting social and mental health (Moody, & Phinney, 2012; Dadswell *et al.*, 2017).

Relating to the narrative part of the intervention program and the role of personal and cultural narrative as enhancers of connectedness, a Digital Storytelling (DST) project held in Canada is worth mentioning. Digital storytelling allows individuals to connect with their history, traditions, and roots, fostering a sense of belonging and strengthening social ties, especially among older populations whose social engagement opportunities may diminish over time.

A personal and tribal storytelling project using a digital format was conducted with the *Nak'azdli Whut'en* community, a tribe part of the Carrier Nation in Northern British Columbia, Canada. The project "*Lha' hutit'en*," meaning "We work together and help one another," was so named by one of the tribal elders. The project, which got tribal elders and school students, sought to preserve the oral traditions of tribal elders' stories and their wisdom for future generations. This initiative aimed not only to preserve cultural knowledge but also to connect younger generations with the wisdom of the elders. The researchers found that such collaborative efforts helped strengthen community identity and fostered a sense of belonging. By recording and translating the elders' stories, the students became more invested in preserving these narratives and developing a deeper understanding of their cultural heritage. This project highlighted the importance of intergenerational bonds and community-based participatory research in maintaining cultural traditions (Freeman *et al.*, 2020).

In the context of this study, it is noteworthy to refer to other intervention programs that employ a hero's journey concept. Campbell's (1949) structure of myths was influenced by his contemporary, Lévi-Strauss (1955), the functionalist anthropologist, to research in-depth the structure of myths in general and develop the model of the hero's journey, which underlies this study's intervention program.

Although most hero's journey interventions focus on personal development rather than communal, following the model and enhancing its impact by using the arts and narratives makes them extremely valuable for this intervention program. One study based on Campbell's (1949) hero's journey model was conducted in Germany in 2018 with 14 participants. The intervention aimed at personal transformation through theater and Gestalt therapy techniques. The program, constructed by a researcher who also participated in the workshop, aimed to create transformational spaces by promoting peace education and using the hero's journey model to foster interpersonal transformation. The workshop emphasized exploring personal circumstances, recognizing internal struggles, and engaging with artistic elements like masks and costumes, together with guided imagery.

A participatory, art-based activity was utilized as a research method in a development context with marginalized San youth in Southern Africa. Two service design initiatives were carried out: *My Dream World* (2013-2015) and *PARTY* (Participatory Development with Youth, (2015-2019). The *My Dream World* project focused on reaching out to indigenous populations and unemployed young people in South Africa and Namibia. The two intervention programs incorporated the Hero's Journey model by using the tool of storytelling and focusing on personal empowerment through facing challenges. The Hero's Journey helped participants envision new possibilities despite local limitations and circumstances. These initiatives led to the creation of the GRACE model, which highlights grassroots involvement, art, creativity, physical expression, and empowerment.

Hero's Journey for the Elderly, using art and narratives, was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic in Israel and Italy. It is worthwhile to look at art therapy, even though it comes from a different research field. This program, which took place online, combined the creation of digital collages with narrative elements of dignity therapy and aimed to encourage spiritual expression among older adults. The study involved 24 participants, aged 78-92, from Israel and Italy, who created digital collages and shared their experiences and memories during the sessions. The study identified four types of connectedness among participants that were stimulated and expressed during the process: connection with the self, connection with others, as well as with the environment and with the transcendent (Lehner, 2022; Sarantou, Kontio, & Miettinen, 2018; Keisari *et al.*, 2022).

Connectedness with others, which was achieved as well as using methodological tools such as the arts, and more specifically collage-making, which is a valuable tool for helping older adults reflect on their memories and narratives, is among the very few recent studies among the elderly population held in Israel that relate to this study.

Overall, these studies emphasize the potential of community-based art as a tool for enhancing social inclusion, fostering a sense of belonging, and improving cohesion among aging populations. Integrating art with personal and cultural narratives into communities can strengthen social ties, making it a valuable approach to promoting social cohesion and inclusion.

Methodology

Study Aims

- To examine the correlation between adults' group cohesiveness and sense of community and to investigate whether adults' background characteristics contribute to explaining these aspects.
- To examine whether the intervention of community meetings integrating myth and art will have an effect and a durability effect on adults' group cohesiveness and sense of community.

Participants

The current study involves 40 adults (39 females and one male), members of "Senior Clubs" located in Jerusalem's Kiryat Moshe, Beit Hakerem, and Ein Kerem neighborhoods. These adults participated in a program connecting personal narratives with community stories, myths, or legends. The underlying goal of this intervention program was to use myths in helping individuals and communities achieve fulfilling lives. When integrated into adults' private and communal experiences, myths can facilitate processes that foster a sense of belonging and unity within the community. This approach serves as a contemporary tool for accessing the timeless wisdom of traditional cultures and tapping into our own creative potential. Table 1 provides details on the participants' demographic characteristics.

Table 1. Participants background characteristics

Participants characteristics	Values	Frequency (%)
Gender	Male	1 (2.5%)
	Female	39 (97.5%)
Family status	Not in a relationship/married*	17 (42.5%)
	Married or in a relationship	23 (57.5%)
Educational level	High school	9 (22.5%)
	Professional diploma	9 (22.5%)
	B.A.	13 (32.5%)
	M.A. of Ph.D.	9 (22.5%)

Socioeconomic status	Far below the average	2 (5.0%)
	Below the average	4 (10.0%)
	Average	25 (62.5%)
	Above average	9 (22.5%)
	Far above the average	0 (0.0%)
Religiosity level	Secular	6 (15.0%)
	Traditional	15 (37.5%)
	Religious	14 (35.0%)
	Orthodox	5 (12.5%)

Note: *Not in a relationship: 3 indicated that they are single, 2 are divorced and 12 are widowed.

Materials

Group cohesion was assessed using the Group Cohesiveness Questionnaire, which employs the Therapeutic Factors Inventory Scale developed by Lese, & MacNair-Semands (2000). In the current study, Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the nine statements was calculated at .79, indicating good internal consistency.

The Sense of Classroom Community Questionnaire (SCCI), developed and validated by Rovai in 2002, assesses learners' sense of belonging within a learning community. This study substituted the term "learning group" with "program group." The internal consistency of Cronbach's alpha for the 20 statements in this research was calculated at .87. Specifically, for the 10 statements related to the sense of connection to the community, Cronbach's alpha was .75, indicating acceptable internal consistency. For the 10 statements concerning attitudes towards learning within the community, Cronbach's alpha was .82, indicating good internal consistency.

In addition to the questionnaires, four methodological tools were used in constructing the intervention program:

- *The Hero's Journey Model* constructed by Campbell (with adaptations to the population undergoing the program).
- *Mythological multicultural texts* describing the coping of heroes and heroines from different cultures.
- Participants' personal and cultural narratives inspired by the mythological stories.
- *Collage technique* as a visual reflection tool in making personal cards every session.

Results

Before examining the research questions, and considering the limited sample size, Shapiro-Wilk analyses were conducted to determine whether the study measures (group cohesiveness and sense of community) were normally distributed. The results indicated that all study measures followed a normal distribution (*p-values* ranged between .184 and .938). Therefore, parametric analyses were conducted (assuming a normal distribution of the study measures) to investigate the research questions. The results are presented in two sections following the research aims and hypotheses.

Part A: Before the intervention

Q1: The correlation between the adults' group cohesiveness and sense of community before the intervention

Pearson correlation analyses were conducted to examine the correlation between group cohesiveness and a sense of community before the intervention. Table 2 presents the Pearson correlation coefficients between adults' group cohesiveness and sense of community before the intervention.

Table 2. Pearson correlation coefficient between the adults' group cohesiveness and sense of community before intervention (N = 40, df = 38)

Study measure	1	2	3	4
Group cohesiveness (1)	1	.58***	.53***	.52***
Sense of community – Total scale (2)		1	.89***	.92***
Connectedness subscale (3)			1	.64***
Learning subscale (4)				1

*Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$*

As shown in Table 2, significant positive correlations were found between adults' group cohesiveness and their sense of community [$r(38) = .58, p < .001$]. It should be noted that these correlation patterns were observed for both the total score of the questionnaire measuring sense of community and its two subscales: connectedness and learning [$r(38) = .53, p < .001$ and $r(38) = .52, p < .001$, respectively]. These results indicate that as adults report higher group cohesiveness, their sense of community is higher before the intervention and vice versa.

Part B: The intervention effect

This section considers the intervention effect and hypothesizes that adults' group cohesiveness and sense of community will improve during, and after the intervention. In addition, this section considers the intervention durability effect and hypothesizes that adults' group cohesiveness and sense of community will remain stable a month after the intervention and will be greater than before the intervention. To examine these research questions, one-way repeated ANOVA measures were conducted for each study measure to investigate differences in adults' group cohesiveness and sense of community across the four points in time (before, during, after, and one month after the intervention). The independent variable was time, and the dependent variables were adults' group cohesiveness and sense of community. Table 3 presents the means, standard deviations, and F-values for group cohesiveness and sense of community across different time points.

Table 3. Mean, SD, and F-values of the group cohesiveness, sense of community, and sense of self-esteem according to time

	Time point										
	Pre		During		Post		A month after		F-values		
Study measure	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	F	p	η_p^2
Group cohesiveness	5.58	0.68	6.02	0.58	6.29	0.56	6.28	0.72	16.44***	<.001	.30
Sense of community – Total scale	3.70	0.43	3.91	0.43	4.15	0.39	4.04	0.45	13.18***	<.001	.25
Connectedness subscale	3.79	0.44	3.90	0.41	4.13	0.43	4.08	0.48	7.16***	<.001	.16

Learning subscale	3.62	0.51	3.92	0.53	4.16	0.44	4.01	0.55	12.76***	<.001	.25
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Note: *** $p < .001$

Intervention effect

As mentioned, we are first concerned with the effect of community meetings integrating myth and art on enhancing group cohesiveness and a sense of community among adults. As shown in Table 3, time significantly affected adults' group cohesiveness and sense of community (total score and the two subscale scores). Bonferroni's post hoc analysis indicates that adults' group cohesiveness and sense of community (measured by the total score and the learning subscale) increased significantly during the intervention compared to before the intervention ($p < .001$, $p = .002$, and $p < .001$, respectively).

These results indicate significant improvement from the baseline measure (before the intervention) to the midpoint of the intervention. Additionally, adults' group cohesiveness and sense of community (measured by the total score and the learning subscale) continued to increase significantly from the measurement during the intervention to the measurement after the intervention ($p = .006$, $p < .001$, and $p < .001$). Regarding the connectedness subscale of the sense of community questionnaire, improvement from the baseline measure (before the intervention) to the midpoint of the intervention was not significant ($p = .410$). However, improvement in this measure was significant only after the intervention, compared to before the intervention ($p < .001$). This result indicates that the effect of community meetings integrating myth and art was more gradual.

Durability effect of the intervention

As mentioned, the second research question concerns the durability effect of community meetings integrating myth and art on enhancing group cohesiveness and a sense of community among adults. As shown in Table 4, a significant effect of time was found for adults' group cohesiveness and sense of community (total score and the two subscale scores). Bonferroni's post-hoc analysis indicates that adults' group cohesiveness and sense of community (total score and the two subscales) remained stable after one month from the intervention ($p > .05$). These results indicate that adults' group cohesiveness and sense of community did not decrease after one month following the intervention. Additionally, adults' group cohesiveness and sense of community (total score and the two subscale scores) were significantly higher one month after the intervention compared to before the intervention ($p < .001$, $p = .003$, $p = .025$, and $p = .005$, respectively). These

results indicate significant improvement from the baseline measure (before the intervention) to one month after.

Q2: The correlation between the adults' improvement in group cohesiveness and sense of community

To examine whether the improvement in adults' group cohesiveness correlated significantly with changes in their sense of community, Pearson correlation analyses were conducted on the improvement rates. Table 4 presents the Pearson correlation coefficient between the improvement rates in adults' group cohesiveness and sense of community from before to after the intervention.

Table 4. Pearson correlation coefficient between the improvement rates of adults' group cohesiveness and sense of community from before to after the intervention (N = 40, df = 38)

Study measure	1	2	3	4
Group cohesiveness (1)	1	.43**	.46**	.25
Sense of community – Total scale (2)		1	.91***	.83***
Connectedness subscale (3)			1	.52**
Learning subscale (4)				1

*Note: ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$*

As indicated in Table 4, a significant positive correlation was found between the improvement rate in adults' group cohesiveness and the improvement rate in the total sense of community scale, $r(38) = .43, p < .01$. This suggests that adults who showed greater improvement in group cohesiveness also demonstrated greater enhancement in their sense of community, and vice versa. However, while the improvement rate in group cohesiveness was positively correlated with the improvement rate in the connectedness subscale, the correlation between the improvement rate in group cohesiveness and the improvement rate in the learning subscale did not reach significance [$r(38) = .46, p < .01$ and $r(38) = .25, p = .112$, respectively].

Discussion

Art programs in the community, cultural narrative projects, and programs inspired by the Hero's Journey model effectively achieve group cohesion and a sense of community belonging. These two parameters resonate with each other, as cohesion and group formation naturally enhance the sense of belonging. This program uniquely integrates mythology, narratives, and art tools into the Hero's Journey model to make it applicable for community and group empowerment.

The correlation between the sense of belonging and group cohesion reaffirms the findings of community art research among the senior population. The program examines the impact on group parameters while applying the model as a shared developmental framework. The intervention program's findings support the research hypothesis, not only demonstrating a significant improvement in both parameters but also a strong connection between them. As shown in Table 4, participants who exhibited greater improvement in their sense of cohesion were those whose sense of belonging increased, and vice versa.

Regarding the narrative project, it can be stated that although the "hero's journey" intervention program is not digital or multi-aged, and stories are not preserved for the following generations, it has something in common with the storytelling program among Carrier Nation in Canada. The importance of emergent personal stories and cultural content expands, as in many studies, a sense of participants' belonging and group cohesiveness owing to sharing unique stories, as shown in the current study.

Like most projects of its kind, this narrative project focuses on strengthening the tribal-community narrative by utilizing the resources of a specific community. The idea of cross-cultural narrative intervention programs is innovative. However, this narrative project inspired this study, exploring whether it is possible to go beyond the local narrative and foster a sense of belonging and cohesion using mythological resources from diverse cultures. The study's results indicate the program's effectiveness in increasing both parameters.

Furthermore, among the religious and ultra-Orthodox participants in the program, comprising 47.5% (see Table 1), who are typically not exposed to content from other cultures but primarily to Jewish content, the program's structure succeeded in making an impact. It could be argued that perhaps the stories from Jewish culture, the personal narratives shared, or the artistic work that integrated the stories contributed most to this outcome. However, it is impossible to ignore that their initial skepticism dissipated into a willingness to engage in the process and genuine curiosity.

The current study's findings focus on strengthening social connections and group structure. This is in contrast to intervention programs based on the Hero's Journey model, which primarily emphasizes personal development, even within a community project framework. This shift in focus is innovative, offering an alternative approach to community and group development through the model.

Due to the continuation effect and the fact that the impact did not fade after the program's conclusion, a strong group structure was formed, enabling long-term change. The program's effectiveness can be attributed to its foundational elements combined with its duration (three months), which together facilitated the assimilation of the content while strengthening interpersonal connections and group cohesion.

Unlike the hero's journey program held in Germany, which focused on cultivating inner development and personal transformation in participants and whose findings suggested that engaging with archetypes and internal struggles led to greater self-empathy, fostering empathy for others and the world (Lehner, 2022), this program focused on group change. Nevertheless, both programs recognized the importance of the hero's journey as a transformative model and the power of art as a vehicle for change. The approach of using stories, art, and narratives of internal dilemmas seen in the above three Hero's-Heroine intervention programs directly informs the methods of this intervention program, strengthening its potential for creating personal and collective change.

It is quite clear how this model is used to develop abilities and strengths among individuals by allowing for a deeper understanding of abilities, inspirations, and ways of coping. However, the testimony and resonance that the group gives in hearing the narratives, in the connection made possible between them, and in the presence that turns the personal process into something even stronger is important. For in the internal struggle and growth process, even heroes need community.

Conclusion

Within the field of sociological research, this program, like many before it, aims to leverage effective tools for developing communities and individuals. It harnesses the power of art to bring about change in the community sphere and to sow seeds of connection among members of groups, clubs, and communities.

The intervention sought to combine personal stories and community narratives, using myths and legends to create positive change for individuals and communities. The underlying hypothesis that myths, when integrated with personal and collective experiences, can improve a sense of belonging and strengthen community cohesion was proven right. By allowing participants to access the wisdom of traditional cultures, the program aimed to tap into their own creative power, fostering a deeper connection to both themselves and the group.

The innovation introduced by the program lies in the triangular framework of myths, narratives, and art, which, when molded into the Hero's Journey structure, successfully created a significant impact on cohesion and the sense of belonging. The partial results examined in this research indicate the success of the program's structure and content in driving a marked change in both parameters. The integration of art with personal and cultural narratives into communities can strengthen social ties, making it a valuable approach to promoting social cohesion and inclusion, to support the personal changes in social context (Williams, 2019).

There are not many art-based intervention programs for the senior population in Israel. Therefore, this program seeks to contribute to the research knowledge in Israel within the sociological field of community art. Beyond its local contribution,

the program has the potential, through follow-up programs and studies, to create a working model based on myths, narratives, and art that could benefit senior populations worldwide, minority groups, immigrants, refugees, and communities or groups aiming to strengthen their members' sense of belonging and cohesion.

The recommendation is to leverage the unifying and empowering potential encoded in mythological stories and the Hero's Journey model to develop additional community projects for the senior population and beyond.

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