Constructing personal identities in holiday letters

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──────────── ABSTRACT ────────────

A collection of holiday letters is analyzed using the grounded theory method to generate a matrix of relationships among descriptive categories and conceptual dimensions of this epistolary genre. The final step of the grounded theory protocol analyzes holiday letters as a genre of writing that conveys personal stories set within a bracketed period to achieve ongoing autobiographies. The narratives create positive identities for the writer and his or her intimates, and depict those autobiographies as progressing toward the good and the preferred in the dominant culture. Discussion focuses on the ways in which holiday letters manage the dialectics of contradictions between modernist sensibilities, desires, and selfhood, and the postmodern social conditions in which they are written.

KEY WORDS: holiday letters • identity • relational dialectics

This study began because of a shared curiosity about holiday letters. For many years, each of the authors of this article had received holiday letters from varied sources, and each of us wondered about the motives, intentions, and sense of style of the writers of those letters. Our conversations with friends and colleagues suggested that most people readily recognize this genre of writing, but many seem to disavow the practice of writing

them, their disavowals being based mainly on a perception that holiday letters represent fraudulent sentiment — a pretense of correspondence that purports to be personal when in fact many recipients receive the same letter (see Fruehling & Oldham, 1988). Our curiosity led us to begin collecting holiday letters to learn how this form of letter writing fits with other kinds of polite correspondence, to identify what unique structural elements, if any, holiday letters have in common, and to answer why it is that these letters seem both to irritate readers (Allen, 1990; Walton, 1988) and to enjoy enduring popularity. In short, we wanted to find out what this intuitively identifiable form of writing does for writers and readers and why it is such a distinctive and persistent form of interpersonal communication.

In this article, we first situate holiday letters within research traditions on letter writing and personal narratives, and we identify the structural features of the holiday letter as a cultural product. Next, we give details about our methods for collecting and analyzing holiday letters, including our use of the grounded theory approach to creating data and developing theory. The methods section is followed by a display of our work that categorizes content elements in our corpus of holiday letters. Finally, we discuss the outcomes of our categorization and theory-building efforts within the framework of contemporary identity theory. Personal identity was generated by our analyis as an explanatory principle that grounds holiday letters.

Letter writing and holiday letters

Since ancient times, personal letters have been a key medium for establishing and cultivating interpersonal relationships (L. Kauffman, 1986). As early as the 16th century, scholars made personal letter writing an object of formal study, recognizing the epistolary as an authentic literary genre (Goldsmith, 1989). By the end of the 20th century, the study of epistolary correspondence in the United States had been transformed into a multidisciplinary and highly fragmented enterprise. English, literary studies, and writing programs engage personal letters as a form of polite communication; accordingly, much of the research in those specialties focuses on the function and style of personal letters in novels and other narrative fiction (e.g., Robbins, 1997; Williams, 1989), and on the epistolary productions of literary writers (e.g., Hammer, 1997).

Elsewhere, personal letter writing has been linked to research on narrativity. In folklore studies and anthropology, for example, letters are typically studied as personal narratives that tell traditional stories of a people, locale, or era, or interpose traditional stories into contemporary social contexts (e.g., Clayton, 1994). Recently, folklore studies of personal narratives have applied the techniques of literary criticism to the interpretation of letters and oral stories (e.g., Stahl, 1989). Sociologists, performance, and communication scholars, and researchers from many other disciplines have made personal narrative a central principle in the study of interpersonal relationships (e.g., Bochner, 1994; Richardson, 1995). As Kristin Langellier observed, 'If narrative was at one time the province of literary study, the

personal narrative as a communication phenomenon crosses disciplinary boundaries everywhere and every which way' (1989, p. 243).

In spite of this broad interest in personal narrative and the long tradition of research on letter writing, however, scholars have paid scant attention to the analysis of structure or genre in personal letters, and almost none to holiday letters. Textbooks on letter writing tend to focus on writing for business and other public transactions (e.g., Baugh, Fryar, & Thomas, 1994) and on letters for formal social situations, taking a prescriptive approach to structure, style, and genre (e.g., Baugh, 1991). Most style manuals and guidebooks do not even mention holiday letters (see Meyer, 1983; Venolia, 1982). In the rare instance when holiday letters are discussed in textbooks, it is with passing interest and is typically accompanied by disclaimers and cautions about its use (see Fruehling & Oldham, 1988). Holiday letters appear occasionally in the popular press, in some cases being treated as a vulgar practice (It's In The Mail, 1996) and in others as an entertaining form of expedient correspondence (Allen, 1990; Walton, 1988).

The almost total absence of holiday letters in academic studies and the recognition of the genre in popular discourse, together with the frequent attribution of vulgarity, mark holiday letters as a relative newcomer to epistolary correspondence. The duplication and distribution techniques and the mass audience recipients are two defining characteristics of the genre. In general, the holiday letter is a form of personal correspondence in which the same letter is sent to multiple recipients in widely diverse locations, typically around holiday time each year. Indeed, because the genre relies on mass duplication and distribution technologies, it could only have developed when and where inexpensive reproduction mechanisms and a highly efficient mail delivery service are available. This defining quality means that, even in the most advanced technological societies, holiday letters have been possible only within roughly the last 50 years.

At least four other features mark holiday letters as a distinctive epistolary genre. Firstly, holiday letters do not discuss anything specific about the recipients and often do not even name the addressees. Because of the wide variety of recipients for each letter, persons who often are not connected in the same social network, a writer's commentary on the events or concerns of a recipient's life situation would be inappropriate because it would be uninterpretable by other recipients. When addressees are named, it usually occurs when the name is inserted, often in handwriting, into the salutation or as a postscript. As such, holiday letters are one-way correspondence, more akin to celebratory announcements, news reports, and advertisements than to the reciprocal intimate exchanges of information and commentary that typify most other personal correspondence. In this way, holiday letters hybridize the genres of personal correspondence and journalistic publications.

Secondly, and related to their dynamic similarity with newsletters and newspapers, holiday letters are periodicals, updates issued at a specific time of year, most often at the Christmas/Hannukah holidays, but also in some rare instances at Thanksgiving or New Year. Because they are sent repeti-

tively at a particular time of year, they bracket a time-frame for reporting the news about the writer, the writer's immediate family, and frequently other members of the writer's household, such as pets. That time-frame is characteristically a year, and it often coincides with the calendar year. The bracketing and ordering of the writer's experiences and the reporting and valuing of those experiences from the writer's point of view in a one-way telling combine to identify holiday letters as a genre of personal narrative (Langellier, 1989). Thus, their function can be viewed principally as a storytelling device.

Thirdly, this genre predominantly contains news about the sender; it is not centrally about conveying fond wishes or festive expressions of celebration at holiday time, although those might be the ostensible reasons for the writing. Typically, when holiday letters contain expressions of well-wishing appropriate to the season, the sentiment is appended as an opening or closing to a much larger main body of personal news. As such, the letters are not a direct substitute for holiday cards, because they are highly particularized in their unidirectional telling of the writer's story.

Fourthly, holiday letters display distinctive voice modalities. Unlike most personal letters, in which the writer is self-identified and uses the first person narrative voice, the authorial voice in holiday letters is often agentless, as if an omniscient narrator is writing, and often names each member of the family in turn, although it is logically apparent that one of them is the writer. Alternatively, the authorial voice may change from one member of the family or household to the voice of a different member, in most cases telling not about oneself but about the others. Internal stylistic evidence — in our collection, more than half the letters do not identify the writer by name — suggests to us that most holiday letters, regardless of shifting voice, are written by a sole author.

In sum, holiday letters are mass-produced correspondence sent to widely divergent and geographically dispersed recipients on an annual basis for the ostensive purpose of conveying holiday wishes, but always containing mainly stories about the personal life of the writers. What those personal narratives are and what they might communicate about the correspondents' views on relationships and society are the core concerns of this study.

Methods

Data construction

Our collection of holiday letters was constructed in two phases. When the project started, the second author solicited letters from friends, colleagues and family members to analyze for a graduate course in qualitative research methods taught by the first author. Fifty letters were collected in this manner. Subsequently, the project was made the topic of a feature article in the Christmas Eve edition of a daily newspaper that serves two contiguous counties in the inland Northwest. The newspaper article included contact information that indicated where volunteers could send their holiday letters to the researchers. Readers responded by contributing an additional 78 letters, which

expanded our collection to 128 letters from 64 sources. Within the collection is a set of 12 letters from one family that covers the years 1971 and 1975 to 1985. In addition, the collection includes two other sets of letters covering a decade each. In this way, we acquired both cross-sectional and longitudinal material. One of the decade sets of letters was contributed by their writer. All the rest of the letters we collected were contributed by persons who did not write them — people donated letters they had received from others.

Our mode of collection might entail a possibility of selection bias; there could be commonalities linking the volunteers who gave us their letters, or linking the writers, that may call into question our interpretations. Some of the sources of the letters and some of the letter writers are undoubtedly in the same professional, family, or friendship networks, or are linked by common travel destinations, educational experiences, work interaction or other personal activities. In contrast, although most of the persons who submitted letters to us were from the Northwest, the letter writers were dispersed across all regions of the United States and the two westernmost provinces of Canada. Moreover, the number of letters studied was large enough to ensure that we included many unrelated social or professional networks, and internal evidence in the letters indicated that the writers were of highly varied demographic types, occupations, and life situations; present in the collection are administrators, scientists, salespersons, educators, clerks, food service workers, artists, lawyers, health care professionals, students, farmers, retirees, and many others.

The most obvious life situation our holiday letter writers had in common was their family status. Only 11 of the 64 writers were unmarried at the time they composed their letters. Thirteen writers were married with no children, and the remaining 40 writers were married with children. With the exception of two writers who identified themselves as being of Hispanic heritage, there was no evidence about racial or ethnic origins among the writers.

Coding steps

Following the grounded theory protocol (Strauss, 1987; Strauss & Corbin, 1990), we examined each letter for identifiable units of meaning (clauses, sentences, or larger expressive units) and coded them into conceptual categories. As Langellier (1989) points out, the unit of analysis must be consonant with the conceptualization of the type of narrative under investigation. We bracketed text in terms of topic phenomena, attempting to conceptualize topics in the 'open coding,' rather than describing or summarizing phenomena (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 64). In this way, we generated codable units or 'tokens.' As a check on the original coding decisions, a second, naïve coder performed open coding on a randomly selected sample of letters representing over 5% of the data (seven letters with 125 tokens, from a total of 1944 tokens). Because the coding was performed on coder-selected tokens that were assigned to constructed categories, we computed the intercoder frequency of agreement using Perrault and Leigh's (1989) formula, which yielded a reliability score of .81. Reliability checks of this sort are not traditional in interpretive analyses (Kirk & Miller, 1986); however, we believed that testing a sample of the coding can strengthen our conviction that the final object for interpretation we created through the coding procedure (i.e., the conditional matrix) is materially grounded in the 'raw data' of the letters (see Luborsky, 1994).

This open coding process yielded preliminary topic categories, which were based on our intuitive bracketing of discourse data, grouping similar selections

into categories and labeling the categories. Categories, Strauss and Corbin (1990, p. 67) note, 'have to be analytically developed by the researcher.' The open coding categories were then recoded in the process Strauss (1987) calls 'axial coding.' The axial coding step employs the constant comparison method, working back and forth between the categories already established and the raw data, and between deduction and induction, to develop new, more inclusive semantic categories that encompass links among the first wave of open coded categories. Except as discussed in the following section, no identified unit of discourse was recorded in multiple categories in either the open coding or axial coding stages. Axial coding further refines and systematically integrates previously generated topic categories into a limited set of 'notional' categories, or integrated sets of topics, and internally validates the integration by linking them conceptually. The final coding process, 'selective coding,' identifies one or a few core categories and develops a central descriptive narrative of the phenomenon under study, relating it to the rest of the set of notional categories.

As the three coding steps were being accomplished, we wrote extensive analytic commentaries as field notes, created diagrams of possible relationships, and identified instances in which writers explicitly theorized their writing activity, overtly talked about holiday letters, or labeled their letters (with what Strauss and Corbin call '*in vivo* codes'). In addition, as part of the axial coding step we developed a conditional matrix of relationships among identified notional categories and corresponding conceptual dimensions, which we used to identify themes and to build our interpretation of the holiday letters.

Results

We organized the following discussion around our progressive refinement of coding categories in order to display the basis for the interpretive process we used. Synchronic reliability in qualitative research can be fostered by revealing the raw materials on which interpretive judgments are made: As Kirk and Miller note, '... reliability in qualitative observation revolves around detailing the relevant context of observation' (Kirk & Miller, 1986, p. 52). Accordingly, we display our coding categories in Figure 1, in their entirety; and we include representative excerpts from the corpus of letters and a portion of our analytic field notes to illustrate the details of our coding process. A collateral reason for including excerpts is to convey the authenticity of feeling and palpable pathos these narratives conveyed to us.

Open coding
After reading all the letters through at least twice, we bracketed each meaning unit (often a clause, a drawing, or a photograph, more often a sentence or two, occasionally a paragraph, and in one instance an entire letter) and labeled it according to its apparent functional nature as a unit of communication. The open coding task of labeling responds to the following implicit questions: What appears to be the meaningfully cohesive topic unit? What does this unit of discourse describe or what is the subject described as doing? What is the underlying principle of this expression?

The open coding categories and their frequency of occurrence are displayed in Figure 1. For each of the 80 categories we show an illustrative example from one of the letters. These illustrations are taken from the raw data; the only

FIGURE 1
Open Coding Categories

Category number and description	*Example*	*Tokens in category*
1. Use of in-group language or specialized vocabulary; reference to arcane knowledge	"We chanced upon a covey of seven tomten. (Two linguistic notes: first, they referred to themselves as a 'covey.' Second, 'tomten' (singular, 'tomte') is Swedish for elves.)" [Letter #92]	3
2. Description of especially enjoyable experience; great fun	"He continually pushes himself to the limit (and us) to have as much fun as he possibly can, a true '**fun hog**.'" [#50]	63
3. Reference to extraordinary work effort or work demands	"Was a working dynamo — couldn't keep enough jobs ahead of him!" [#120]	3
4. Relates connections to celebrity or drops name of celebrity	"Alas, Patty did not get mentioned in humorist Dave Barry's newspaper column this year …" [#98]	2
5. Mention of experience in cultural arts — fine arts museums, opera, ballet, symphony, etc.	"She is also showing quite an interest in ballet." [#51]	19
6. Story of childrens' clever actions	"One night with a mysterious smirk on his face, he chirped, 'Hey, Papa, guess what! You're a real NERD (an effective pause) yeah, a *Never-E*nding-*R*adical-*D*ude.'" [#114]	3
7. Explicit statement of pride in family member	"He did an excellent job defending his thesis on December 3. I am really proud of him." [#28]	2
8. Adventures described as exciting or especially interesting	"THE GREAT ALASKA ADVENTURE" [Heading of section in letter #79]	34
9. You (reader) would be amazed by my (writer) religious experience	"My prayer every day is that each of us in every family, will choose to allow Him to demonstrate His wonderful love and power, and that He will give each a miracle or two for us to base our faith upon, if that is our need — as it was mine." [#120]	3
10. Photograph or drawing in which family life or family member is the core subject represented	[Entire page of wedding photographs.] [#110]	19
11. Apology for letter being untimely	"Due to a little understood phenomenon of physics, the holiday season came early in 1991, leaving our reporters unprepared for the Christmas rush. Therefore, you may receive your issue of the Gazette a little later than usual this year." [#56]	16

Category number and description	Example	Tokens in category
12. Apology for using holiday letter genre	"Please excuse a mass produced letter." [#2]	11
13. Expression of keeping busy or leading a hectic life	"It's been a very busy season for our family" [#17]	53
14. Mention of time passing or time time lost	"Wow! Where did 1993 go?!? Seems like it was just. . . ." [#18]	61
15. Statement about person's age or aging	"Celebrating Angela's 11th birthday at a bowling party — our big girl getting bigger (Oh, Daaad!)" [#18]	59
16. Description of child's status in school	"Stella, who will become a teenager in May, is now in the 7th grade in JCRS." [#1]	73
17. Statement about child growing up fast	"Alice is turning into a young lady right before our eyes!" [#67]	4
18. Description of athletic achievement of family member	"She played varsity soccer and was the leading scorer in the league." [#25]	37
19. Description of artistic achievement of family member	"Maura's paintings and photos have won several ribbons in local art shows during the year." [#76]	30
20. Description of academic or intellectual achievement of family member	"Brad should be finished with his Ph.D. in less than two years and Lynn will get her master's and then continue for her Ph.D." [#102]	59
21. Description of work achievement of family member	"In August, Kaerri set up her own business as an international marketing and sales consultant, KRR Consulting, and she's been working steadily ever since." [#46]	23
22. Description of writer/adult family member athletic achievement	"Shot a career 2-under 70 this season, tho' didn't get that much flogging in." [#4]	38
23. Description of writer/adult family member artistic/hobby achievement	"Our latest interest is feeding quail and pheasants. Hal bought some wheat at $3/ bushel. We now have about 60–75 quail and one group of 17 pheasant hens." [#64]	42
24. Description of writer/adult family member academic/intellectual achievement	"Denny finished his Master's thesis and program in August" [#95]	19
25. Description of writer/adult family member work/professional award or achievement	"Greta was presented with the Award of Distinction at the Albuquerque Archeological Society annual banquet." [#20]	39
26. Mention of writer/adult family member's work/professional activity	"Hank is busy with his psychology residency at the University of Missouri Medical Center /VA Hospital." [#97]	87

Category number and description	Example	Tokens in category
27. Mention of children's membership in groups	"Bridget and Caroline enjoyed a girl scout day camp in P.T." [#18]	13
28. Mention of adult membership in groups	"On a much more humble level, we have started our Tuesday night group back and it's a delight to be playing sixes indoors once again." [#34]	19
29. Mention of adults struggling with responsibilities	"Some challenges we have overcome, some we have just 'hung in' — survived [—] and others we struggle with." [#63]	42
30. Story of marriage/wedding	"Kelly (now fully recovered, God be thanked) and B. J. Williams, a Portland attorney, were married here in St. Paul's Church." [#110]	12
31. Story of a new home	"We sold our little house on Mayfield St. in July and are now renting an older house in town with lots of room." [#73]	4
32. News of adoptions/births/pregnancies in family	"A couple weeks after we got home, I discovered I was pregnant with #4! Due date was November 10. That's why I got nauseous on the airplane to Hawaii!!" [#16]	19
33. News of anniversaries in family	"For our 45th wedding anniversary we drove to Cannon Beach hotel on the Oregon coast." [#86]	8
34. News of cataclysmic event	"After the first session of the meetings the earthquake struck the area, and did much damage elsewhere, but only minor damage to the Airport Hilton." [#79]	3
35. News of family member's new job	"Kirk & family moved to Chicago … appointed VP for Taco Bell franchisee." [#48]	12
36. News of family relocation	"We were surprised how much Los Angeles had changed (a clue should have been returning to LA from New Hampshire during the riots). Nevertheless, we moved back home to California with high hopes." [#29]	13
37. Reference to divorce/separation in family	"Gerry and I separated in the spring, and are both currently back in Ashville. Our divorce will be finalized any day." [#21]	3
38. News of death in family	"Bud's dad died peacefully in his sleep just before Christmas '91. His mom is adjusting well." [#8]	12

Category number and description	Example	Tokens in category
39. Reference to personal disability	"The eye operation was traumatic and was not successful. Marty's eye has healed, but attempt to make an artificial new tear duct failed. [#80]	5
40. News of retirement in family	"Jack's official university retirement date of July 31 was the latest roadblock in a long series of administrative hurdles encountered since last May as he has tried to sign on for his retirement stipends." [#77]	2
41. Story of successful interpersonal encounter/relationship	"My social life is happily zipping along. Although it was difficult to move halfway around the world on my own, the AF has presented me with many friendship and dating opportunities, and I have taken advantage of those opportunities!" [#24]	8
42. Description of connections with family, friends and others	"Bill's father, brother et al. will be joining us from the East to reunite the Beck clan for their first Christmas together in fifteen years." [#27]	86
43. Statement of disconnection, regret, nostalgia missing others	"We missed seeing you in Idaho over Thanksgiving this year." [#60]	26
44. Description of how writer/family have solved a problem	"Picture us somewhere uncertain in central California, darkness, a dusty parking lot with smelly diesel trucks, behind a small run-down cafe, two crying children with wet pants and dirty diapers, two worn-out and potty-stop parents, stray cats on top of the garbage dumpsters warily eyeing us, and the cooks staring out of the back door trying to see what the fuss was. We gave up and found the nearest motel." [#68]	28
45. Story of good luck	"Summer found me in the hospital — diagnosis, diverticulosis. Guess it was time for a much needed rest. I feel fortunate to have not needed surgery, and I am working hard at taking better care of myself physically, emotionally, and spiritually." [#72]	15
46. Story of bad luck	"Phil, Sally and I went camping in Oregon in April. Actually, we spent all but one night in motels because it was so cold and rainy. The one night we camped out, it snowed on us." [#69]	12

Category number and description	Example	Tokens in category
47. Descriptions of natural phenomena, weather	"The Northwest hardly seems the drought disaster area it was declared less than a year ago; rain and snow have been nearly constant compainions for many weeks." [#84]	82
48. Reference to family member's good character	"Zeke had an adjustment starting first grade this year but has a great teacher and it wasn't long before he was giving it his all. He is amazing himself and us by learning so quickly to read and write interesting stories." [#67]	10
49. Expression of family stability	"We're all pretty much the same as usual."	2
50. Description of family ritual or traditional activity	"This is the way of Christmas past . . . ." [A detailed description of how family celebrates the holiday follows] "That's how it was. Exactly." [#90]	47
51. Critical statements about others; a put-down	"But the new Dean is a research metallurgist who has little interest in maintaining the tradtition of field orientation that Wyoming has been known for over the past 35 years." [#78]	4
52. Indication of intergenerational differences or strife	"This year he developed an acute case of S.T.S. (Sudden Teen Syndrome). Before this fall I didn't realize . . . that the victim is unaware of any differences except those attributable to the parent." [#114]	3
53. Statement about religious belief	"All must stand before the judgment seat of Christ. And then He will come — the Savior of all who receive Him and believe Him." [#119]	14
54. Statement of health advice	"Let's look at a few nutrition basics to strive toward from day to day." [#120]	2
55. Description of writer's/family's ambitions/hopes	"If all goes well with potty-training, we hope that she can go to a great school called Edgewater for pre-kindergarten and kindergarten." [#29]	32
56. Description of specific plans	"Steve and I are planning a ten day trip to Texas in January." [#11]	42
57. Reference to writer's/family's material possessions	"We did get Gail a new computerized Bernina sewing machine this year." [#43]	61
58. Expession of affection for family or family member	"It's great to know we are loved, and we know we love them [children and grandchildren]." [#64]	15

Category number and description	Example	Tokens in category
59. Invitation to readers to visit writer	"Please drop us a note, or better yet, come visit!" [#47]	21
60. Report of others' travels to visit writer	"Brenda ventured from Payson, Utah to … our our basement for a semester." [#59]	32
61. Report of writer's travel experience	"January through March saw me traveling to San Francisco with dad and Grandmother Martin … ." [#89]	91
62. Report of other family member's travel experience	"Sally returned to Florida with her grandparents Smith for a wonderful tour of Disney World." [#5]	37
63. Expression of blessing on reader	"We wish all of you good fortune." [#12]	66
64. Indication of power relationship in family	"He also reminds me that I started all of this with the rock tumbler. (If you know Sam well, you're just shaking your head right now, aren't you?) [#7]	3
65. Attempt to use humor	" … have quit waiting for Godot (as one stops looking for the eye glasses that are parked on one's nose). [#4]	66
66. Expression of writer's job trouble or unfulfilling job	"My job at the corporation became very difficult. Morale was low and the company required everyone to cut their hours to 32 hours per week." [#28]	10
67. Expression of writer's troubling or unfulfilling personal situation	"Joanie and I have survived some pretty rocky roads with each other this year." [#114]	1
68. Reference to adult family member's health problem or injury	"Cooper spent most of the summer dodging the 'widow-maker'. After surgery and therapy he seems to be doing well at this time." [#3]	21
69. Refererence to child's problem socially while in school	"Charles, 25, is the only offspring currently at home . . . returned ready to resume some college education. Charles has acknowledged a drug and alcohol (beer) dependency that he needed help shedding.… He, too, is out of work, hoping to resume work with the county road department early in the new year." [#8]	1
70. Reference to family member's work problem	"She manages to keep herself afloat financially, but like most young people without college training (and some with), she has very little left over." [#8]	1

Category number and description	Example	Tokens in category
71. Reference to other family member's health problem	"Mei-ling has had a few health problems, but only one has been serious. She also has some orthopedic birth defects, so we make periodic trips to the Children's Hospital in Chicago." [#23]	9
72. Mitigations of bad news	"Suzie is still basically missing although she has called some of the family off and on this year. I am thankful someone has heard from her." [#103]	36
73. Writer's positive self-description	[cartoon drawings of writer/artist as smiling, muscular cowboy on horseback and as proudly successful angler — [#48]	4
74. Writer's negative self-description	"People seldom take notice of him [writer refers to portrait of himself]. He is just an everyday, common, routine, ordinary type of guy with a personality like day-old bread who teaches math in room 108." [#112]	2
75. Writer's positive description of other family member	"Her eyes are beautiful blue like Ann's . . . . She has the greatest 'billy goat' laugh and loves everyone." [#68]	27
76. Writer's negative description of other family member	"Her independent, strong-willed personality continues to be a strength for her and a trial for us." [#67]	2
77. Description of home locale	"We feel fortunate to have our place on the hill where the coyotes howl, the elk bugle, and the deer feel secure enough to eat the fruit trees." [#19]	27
78. Description of vacation	"June came at last, and we drove down to Lake Powell towing the boat on a trailer... all of us spent 11 days boat-camping and exploring. As usual we saw only a small part of the great lake, but it was a very relaxing and successful vacation for everyone." [#85]	31
79. Explicit expression of values	"I can't figure out if that is a good thing that life is moving so fast, I'm just hoping that we were able to saver every moment to its fullest or what will it all mean?" [#34]	26
80. Indication of changed economic status	"After two years of part-time private work in counseling, I made the decision to accept a 50% cut in time and salary at the medical center."	11

changes we made were to disguise the identity of persons by using different personal and place names.

Most text tokens seemed comparatively easy to bracket, categorize, and label in the open coding step. Natural disasters, childrens' academic achievements, and references to being very busy are this sort of token. For example:

The good news is that we had earthquake insurance. The bad news is that we needed it. It began with a jolt — a severe one on January 17 at 4:31 a.m. [letter 10]

Laurie graduated from a Jr. College with an Associate Degree in training as a Medical Assistant. [letter 64]

We all seem to have kept busy over the year. [letter 84]

Nonetheless, while nearly all units of discourse could be assigned exclusively to a named category, a few were vivid, but almost defied naming. Three reasons contributed to the difficulty in naming such tokens. First, they might seem to lie ambiguously between already established categories. This was the case for one of the two expressions in open coding category 4:

Alas, Patty did not get mentioned in humorist Dave Barry's newspaper column this year, not for lack of trying, but did receive 3 postcards from him commenting on items sent [letter 98].

This text could have been interpreted as primarily a bad luck story (category 46), an attempt at humor (65), a demonstration of Patty's pluck (44), or an interesting experience (9). Following a principle of critical language analysis (Faircloth, 1989), we examined the discoursal context in which the token was embedded to aid our interpretation. This approach convinced us in this instance to establish a new category, one we called 'Association with celebrity/ Name drop.' Alternatively, as in the case of six other similar tokens, we coded to multiple categories if the unit in question could clearly be interpreted as having multiple primary functions.

A second source of difficulty in the open coding was bracketing the discourse unit. In some rare cases, interesting details of a narrative suggested a small unit, while the entire letter comprised a cohesive story with a focal point. For example, letter 113 is an extended narrative about tensions within the family, a play in two acts titled 'Of Ceramic Families and Broken Dreams' that drives home the explicit lesson that all's well that ends well and it ends well because this family has the virtuous character and blessedness to make it so. It ends with:

… Then something happened. At one moment we were angry, tired, rushed — and complaining that everything was backfiring. The next moment we were relaxed, happy, contented — and enjoying the splendor of an unplanned adventure. Carrie placed her hand in mine as we watched … speechless … almost breathless … the spectacular beauty of God's creation. We didn't get home until 1:30 A.M. that night, but it didn't matter. The rest of the trip had a rare, almost magical glow about it. We told stories about funny things we see each other do in our sleep, quoted lines from Star Trek re-runs, and laughed when we found out that Claire thought 'peer pressure' was that place on your back like a funny bone that makes you jump when a boy pokes you.

The beach vacation — the live nativity scene — two different events, but I believe it

was the same lesson. I remember the laughter from the back seat of our '76 Cadillac with the dead battery, and I remember voices coming from the back seat of other cars shouting through the Christmas eve fog, 'Keep it up!' or 'We've never seen a live nativity before!' or 'God bless!'

We handled the dilemma of nested units by coding all the units we could identify in our reading of the text. Hence, some larger units of text were coded as well as smaller units within those larger units. In the case of 'Of Ceramic Families . . .' we bracketed sentences and paragraphs and dramatic episodes, as well as the entire seven page narrative.

A third source of coding problems involved interpreting graphics. Many holiday letters contain hand-drawn images, computer-generated icons, or photographs. The difficulty lies in deciding what in the images was salient to the authors and, hence, would be interpretable by us as tokens. In some instances, images carried instructions: a photo of one letter writer's spouse standing beside a huge stone head had the caption, 'Claude met this ancient god-like figure in eastern Turkey (Nemrut Dag), high up the mountain,' indexing an exotic adventure. In most cases, however, we had to read the graphic images as interpretable texts according to contemporary visual literacy theorists (e.g., Messaris, 1994) and photo-interpretation theorists (Barrett, 1996).

Axial coding
The original open coding step generated 80 categories of concepts with a total of 1944 coded tokens. In a first wave of axial coding, we collapsed the 80 categories into 13 more encompassing topic categories. This was done by proposing relationships among categories, then consulting instances of the categories in the letters and constructing a logic of association before deciding whether to join them or not. In applying this rough metric, we followed Strauss and Corbin's 'paradigm model' for linking previously established categories (1990, pp. 99–106); this approach identifies related phenomena, causal conditions, contexts, facilitating or restraining conditions, action/interactional strategies and consequences of actions. We tracked these logics of association by connecting categories in a hand-drawn line diagram. The 13 categories that resulted from the axial coding step and the open coding categories associated with each are displayed in Figure 2.

The resultant 13 categories were then interrogated by posing a series of problem statements and responding to the problem statements with an analytic narrative that probed the relationships among the reduced categories. This interrogation was done to further collapse the categories and derive a master narrative of the holiday letters genre. Following is an excerpt from this step in the interpretive analysis, showing one probe and some of the associated analytic narrative.

Problem #4: What is the relationship between Positive News and Bad News?
Much of the content of the letters is news of events, personal possessions, changes in status of in-group members' lives, and activities; some of the news reported is positive, some negative. Often we detect evidence that the whole story behind bad news items is not being told forthrightly (divorce is hinted at but is not mentioned explicitly, as in #76; organizational problems are merely suggested, as in #64 & #76; interpersonal problems are written as objective news reportage, as in #120b: "My son Louie receives our correspondence at his Beaverton Oregon motel, The Tamarisk"). In fact, when bad news is reported, it *always* seems mitigated in some way, so that the teller appears

FIGURE 2
Categories Resulting from Axial Coding

1 ***POSITIVE EXPERIENCE/ADVENTURE*** (278 tokens):
   2) fun experience/great time/I-we enjoyed (63)
   4) celebrity experience/name drop (2)
   5) cultural activities (19)
   8) exciting adventure (34)
   9) you'd be amazed at what I experienced (3)
   61) writer/we traveled (91)
   62) family member traveled (37)
   78) vacation (31)

2 ***HECTIC/BUSY LIFE*** (75 tokens):
   3) we work(ed) so hard (3)
   13) keep busy, hectic life (53)
   29) adult struggle w/ responsibilities (19)

3 ***I/WE HAVE ACHIEVED*** (379 tokens):
   6) clever offspring (3)
   7) proud of family member (2)
   18) fam. member achvmt — athletic (37)
   19) fam. member achvmt — artistic (30)
   20) fam. member achvmt — acad/intellectual (59)
   21) fam. member achvmt — work (23)
   22) writer/adult achvmt — athletic (38)
   23) writer/adult achvmt — artistic/hobby (42)
   24) writer/adult achvmt — acad/intellectual (19)
   25) writer/adult award — work/professional (39)
   26) writer/adult activity — work/professional (87)

4 ***PORTRAITS*** (83 tokens):
   1) ingroup language/arcane knowledge (3)
   10) photo/drawing of family (19)
   64) who is boss? (3)
   73) description, self — positive (4)
   75) description, other — positive (27)
   77) description of home locale (27)

5 ***TIME*** (244 tokens):
   14) time passes/has passed (61)
   15) ages and aging (59)
   16) kids' school status (73)
   17) kids grow up fast (4)
   50) tradition/our ritual (47)

6 ***INTERPERSONAL CONNECTEDNESS*** (286 tokens):
   27) membership in groups, kids (13)
   28) membership in groups, adults/writer (19)
   41) interpersonal success (8)
   42) connected to fam., friends, others (86)
   43) disconnections/regrets/missing other/nostalgia (26)
   58) affection for family member(s) (15)
   59) invite reader to visit (21)
   60) others traveled to writer (32)
   63) bless reader/wish reader well (66)

7   ***POSITIVE NEWS*** (170 tokens):
    30) marriage (12)
    31) new home (4)
    32) birth/adoption/pregnancy (15)
    33) anniversary (8)
    35) new job (12)
    36) family relocation (13)
    40) retirement (2)
    44) how I/we've solved problem (28)
    45) good luck story (15)
    57) possessions/what we own (61)

8   ***BAD NEWS*** (152 tokens):
    11) apology, late/no letter (16)
    12) apology, type of correspondence (11)
    34) cataclysmic event (3)
    37) divorce/separation (3)
    38) death in family (12)
    39) disability in family (5)
    46) bad luck story (12)
    51) criticize others/put down (4)
    52) intergenerational strife/differences (4)
    66) troubling/unfulfilling job (10)
    67) troubling/unfulfilling life situation (1)
    68) health problem/injury, adult/writer (21)
    69) problem, kids in school (1)
    70) problem, fam. member, work (1)
    71) problem, fam. member, health (9)
    72) obvious mitigations of bad news (35)
    74) description of self, negative (2)
    76) description of other, negative (2)

9   ***NATURE/WEATHER*** (82 tokens)

10   ***MORAL CHARACTER*** (84 tokens):
    48) evidence of our good character/good deed (10)
    49) we are stable (1)
    53) religious beliefs (14)
    54) health advice (1)
    55) ambitions/hopes (32)
    79) expression of values (26)

11   ***SPECIFIC PLANS*** (42 tokens)

12   ***ATTEMPT AT HUMOR*** (58 tokens)

13   ***CHANGE OF/ECONOMIC STATUS*** (11 tokens)

(Open coding subcategories are numbered at the left; numbers in parentheses indicate total number of tokens in the data)

blameless or as a victim or sufferer, rather than as a cause or as being responsible for it. Many cases of bad news reporting concerns deaths of loved ones or their health crises: In these cases, the bad news event is a normal, if not timely, aspect to everyday life, one all of us can be expected one day to experience, and the writer (and in-group members) accordingly is to be understood as a person who deserves compassion, com-

miseration, or pity, possibly even admiration. The rhetorical positioning of bad news items as bad luck concerning events that could happen to any one of us or simply as a matter of an untimely occurrence of the dreaded inevitable — plus the ubiquitous mitigation of impact and the absence of culpability by the source — all make bad news items to seem as if they enhance the stature of the writer: They are life's adverse adventures suffered, endured, coped with by good people who rise to the occasion of duress and go on. . . .

The probe of Positive News and Bad News continues in our working notes for another two pages and concludes with the observation that all reports of bad news are mitigated in ways that create a subtext of portraying the writer or writer's in-group as positive characters responding appropriately to events that are expectable, culturally shared experiences. Thus, we collapsed these categories into a new, more inclusive category of Mundane News.

Other axial coding interrogations similarly focused on the rest of the consolidated categories. We questioned the role of humor attempts, the place of weather and references to nature in the narratives, the possible linkages between 'Hectic/Busy Life', and other categories, and the meaning of time references in the letters. This procedure yielded six final notional categories: Achievement, Adventure, Interpersonal Linkages, Moral Character, Mundane News, and Time.

Achievement. Achievement includes tokens that refer to writer's or family group member's athletic, academic, work, artistic, or community accomplishments or awards. Following is an example:

> *Connie is still dancing her jazz and ballet. She turned 12 in March and won two more trophies at the Northwest Dance Dimensions. She and her partner won First Place Jazz Duo and Third Place Best of Show.* (letter 16)

Adventure. Adventure includes tokens about travel, exciting experiences in everyday life, extremes of weather and natural cataclysms, risks taken, brushes with fame, and unusual cultural experiences. An example of Adventure category is:

> *Enjoying the clarity of autumn we joined two field trips. The first was a glorious 12-mile loop hike over Siyeh Pass in Glacier Park where we saw a grizzly bear! mountain goats, and bighorn sheep. Later we took a car tour of the National Bison Range while the big bulls were in the rut, roaring like lions, stamping the ground, and the antelope were in full mating regalia. Driving through herds of buffalo was an amazing experience. (letter 35)*

Interpersonal linkages. Interpersonal Linkages emerged as a dominant category, both in frequency of tokens and in its significance to the core of the holiday letters' purpose. This category includes tokens about gatherings of family members and friends, expressions of social connection or disconnection, expressions of affection for others, invitations to visit the writer, memberships in social groups, and stories about persons connected in various ways to the writer. Here is a representative example:

> *Jack's family all joined us for a three day celebration. Lori and Stan, as well as Jeri, Don and their 18-month-old son Brad. It was virtually a three day, non-stop 'talk-a-thon,' done with a backdrop of a 21.5 inch snow fall. It was fantastic to get together!* (letter 62)

Moral character. Moral Character is comprised of expressions about good deeds performed by the writer or the writer's loved ones, moral decision-making, religious beliefs, positive values and ambitions, family stability and health advice, and keeping busy as a virtue. Examples include:

> ... *I adopted a cocker spaniel named Amber. She was abandoned, so I took her because I didn't want her put to sleep at the pound.* (letter 71)

> *More than once this year, the thought has occurred to me that I get so involved with my grown-up plans I don't hear the sounds of life clamoring around me from my kids. These lessons of life are too often littered along the wayside of a busy life like so much forgotten debris. When I take the time to pick them up and listen, I learn about life.* (letter 114)

Mundane news. Mundane News includes reference to changes in family status, such as housing, jobs, economic factors, marriages, births and deaths, self- and other-descriptions, good luck and bad luck stories, routine problems, and possessions and purchases. An example of Mundane News is:

> *The Toyota is in tip-top shape and looks like new with so many new body parts.* (letter 56)

Time. The Time category encompasses tokens about time passing, persons aging, children growing up fast, children's grade level in school, reflections on times past, and traditions or rituals. Time tokens include:

> *As you can see by the enclosed photo, our kids are hardly kids anymore.* (letter 1)

> *It's that time of year and it seems to roll around awfully fast.* (letter 34)

With the identification of these six notional categories, our final step in axial coding was to link them at 'the dimensional level' (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 110). Dimensionality is the locating of attributes of a phenomenon along some qualitative continuum. By reconsulting the data we derived two dimensions that ran through all six notional categories; the tokens in all of the categories expressed multifaceted connectedness in a dynamic dialectic with aspects of personal distinctiveness. Accordingly, we labeled these two pervasive conceptual themes (Luborsky, 1994) ***connectedness*** and ***distinctiveness***. We use these noun forms with careful purpose, because what is thematic appears not to be merely the types of connection per se, but the underlying theme of being connected, and not merely the types of distinction, but the more fundamental, aggregated demonstrations of being distinctive within a mutually known scheme of distinctions, both forms being nested within and organized by the overarching narratives of writers' lives.

Connectedness and distinctiveness are not dualistic qualitative dimensions of the data; instead, they are mutually defining and coextensive elements within a dynamic of individuals' life stories. These dimensions display the interactive opposition of Baxter and Montgomery's (1996) relational dialectics and are especially resonant with Altman's transactional view of individuality and commonality (Altman & Gauvain, 1981, p. 310). The transactional–dialectical perspective on contradictions such as connectedness and distinctiveness sees these dimensions not as oppositions or polarities, but as acting in reciprocal frameworks, each providing the dynamic ground for the other. Thus, persons

are connected with others only insofar as they can otherwise express individual agency; and they achieve distinction only to the extent that their actions have evaluative grounds in commonly held standards of worth, probity, style, and so forth. A conditional matrix constructed as the intersection of these dimensions with each final notional category is depicted in Figure 3.

Perhaps the more implicit of the two qualitative dimensions is that of connectedness. Writers routinely portray themselves as being actively linked in bonds of affection with family members, friends, collegial and business associates, popular culture figures, and various social groups. Strong personal connections, again grounded in affectional ties, between writers and places, including hometowns, the homestead, state or region, and between writers and nature (particularly the out-of-doors, animals, weather, and wilderness) also are repeatedly evident. In addition, writers use multiple strategies to connect themselves as writer in the here-and-now with their past selves as personages in a cohesive, ongoing autobiography. Self-descriptions or self-attributions that are consistent with self-comments in previous years convey continuity of personhood; occasionally writers call upon readers' familiarity with the writer's character and life, as in 'Many of you knew me back when I was just a "scared kid"' (letter 127), 'you know me, I always wait til the end' (letter 59) or 'being me, I couldn't live without ...' (letter 38). References to progress in careers, descriptions of changes in relationships, and expressions of changing values (e.g., 'Maintaining contact with friends and loved ones becomes increasingly important as we become "age-challenged"' [letter 128]) map writers' connections to their previous renditions of self-identities. In addition, accounts for explaining uncharacteristic decisions and actions, such as divorces or radical changes in employment, are typically grounded in, and made sensible by, connection with the writer's life history.

Connectedness also infuses the Mundane News category through portrayals of the bonds between writer and objects, actions, and places. Connectedness here is of a broader type, linking writers with readers as co-participants in a shared culture. Writers construct lives in the same everyday world their readers

FIGURE 3
Conditional Matrix of Dimensional Themes and Notional Categories

| Final notional categories | Dimensional themes | |
	Connectedness	Distinctiveness
ADVENTURE	Personal ties with nature & place	Unique, exotic experience; individual vigor
ACHIEVEMENT	Reliance on social norms & standards shared within culture	Examples of personal success & success of family members
INTERPERSONAL LINKAGES	Systematic bonds with persons	Portrayal of personal network as special individuals
MUNDANE NEWS	Systematic bonds with place & objects	Details about events, objects of everyday life
MORAL CHARACTER	Reliance on standards of 'The Good'	Instances of personal valor & moral decisions and actions
TIME	Framing of history, reliance on ritual; flow of autobiographies	Personal dates, ages, sequenced activities

live in, and narratives about taking children shopping at WalMart, attending a grandchild's wedding, burying the recently deceased family pet, fixing up the old family car, and so on resonate with the quotidian experience of socialized members of the culture.

Similarly, narrative elements that portray or comment on writers' moral character display connectedness through the writers' participation in commonly shared standards of moral probity. Certainly, our bracketing and interpretation of tokens as indexing moral character presuppose a shared standard of the good among writers and readers of these letters; however, in many cases writers indicated their own reflexive stances on moral standards by textual frameworks that include phrases such as 'As happens with us all' (letter 107) and 'With proper parental embarrassment' (letter 113), and sentences such as 'Why is every parent amazed at this?' (letter 115). In addition, some writers framed their portrayals of moral character within '*in vivo* codes,' for example, 'I would like to send you this special letter about freedom' (letter 116). Perhaps more to the point, the researchers' status as natives of the culture in which these expressions are used facilitates our interpretations of their intentions, forces, and effects; as Faircloth (1989, 1992) argues, interpretation is a product of what is 'in' the text and what is 'in' the interpreter as 'members resources.'

Connectedness is also conveyed through temporal references, descriptions of rituals, and narrative elements that create historical contexts for the letters' storytelling. As documents whose express purpose is to tell the news for the year just past (and in some cases to forecast events for the coming year), holiday letters are generically anchored in time and structurally oriented to bracketed experience in an ongoing rendition of lives. Temporal connections are established by the telling of persons' ages, grades in school, number of years individuals have been living in a locale, wedding anniversaries, and so on. In addition, time is routinely formulated as passing, being used up by or enclosing experience. Writers express connectedness in time by punctuating its flow with bracketed experience or remarking on its passage, as well as characterizing experience as rituals or repetitive experiences.

The conceptual theme of distinctiveness identifies what is unique or special about the writer and those close to the writer, such as family members, while it consigns the writer to a 'social space' in virtue of pre-existing standards of style and taste generated through connectedness (see Bourdieu, 1984, especially pp. 318–371). Distinctiveness is created by telling exciting stories of success in school, business, social life, the arts, or other enterprises, such that the writer is portrayed as being, within his or her own social milieu, culturally knowledgeable or prominent. It also is conveyed by portrayals of the writer in heroic acts, exotic experiences, or especially vigorous adventures, often involving foreign travel or strenuous athletic activities. In some cases, distinctiveness is achieved by association with distinguished others, including celebrities and family members of uncommon accomplishments (e.g., 'Eleanor, using her pen name [gives name], has just had an autograph party ... promoting her first mystery novel [names novel and publisher]. Today we saw a positive review of it in the Sunday *N.Y.T.* Wow! Wow! Her second book in the ... series has been accepted. The third is all but done' [letter 86]. Distinctiveness is created in mundane news through portrayals of the specific contexts, events, possessions, relationships, and other aspects of news. For example, writers convey particulars about their traditional vacation spots ('we opened the little vacation cabin on Pend Oreille

Lake' [letter 78]), their pets ('Clio, the neurotic wonder cat' letter 56]), their homes ('we had to cut down the big tree in front of the house' [letter 61]), thereby endowing their lives with uniqueness and specificity. Richly evident throughout the data is the use of the definite article rather than indefinite articles or pronouns: '... *the* big tree in front of *the* house' (not '... *a* big tree in front of *our* house'), as if singling it out as a unique object and positioning the reader as someone intimate enough to know about it already.

In similar ways, writers' moral declarations display the simultaneous pairing of distinctiveness with connectedness by portraying particularized personal valor, moral judgment, or wisdom. For example: 'There are cranberries to clean, pumpkin pies to bake, leaves to rake, gutters to attend, and tests to grade. Let us then be up and doing, still achieving, still pursuing!' (letter 91); and 'Each day we are reminded of how much joy we feel when we look at our son and share in his accomplishments, from the smallest task to the largest milestones' (letter 50). Particularly in terms of moral character, the relationship between distinctiveness and connectedness is managed by the implicit assumption of cultural standards for virtuous action, so that in telling of one's distinctive behavior the writer both confirms connections with the reader while at the same time elevates the teller of, or agent in, the story to a special status as moral decision maker and actor.

Finally, temporal distinctiveness is achieved through particularities of time in biographies and the portrayal of traditions that are special or unique to the writer. Typical of writers' expressions of traditions are: 'We spent a week on the Oregon Coast again this year' (letter 19); 'Each year for our Christmas party the members of our art association paint pictures according to a quote' (letter 52); 'Our annual trip to the Sierras in California will be extra special this year' (letter 73).

Selective coding

The final operation in grounded theory is to identify the core category or categories, explicate the story line of the phenomenon under study, and validate and refine interpretations by further consultation of the data. It is difficult to argue that any one notional category is more central to understanding the significance of holiday letters than any of the others; nonetheless, Time, Mundane News, Adventure, and Achievement can be interpreted as contextualizations of portrayals of the writers' moral character and interpersonal efficacy. From this viewpoint, the core category is best seen as an amalgam of self-portrayals (and portrayals of those intimately linked with the author's self), both in instances of relational action and in displays of the self as moral being.

The main story line of writing and sending holiday letters at this point is the following: *holiday letters convey personal stories set within a bracketed period to achieve ongoing autobiographies, such that a positive identity for the writer and his or her intimates is created through depicting the writer's life (and intimates' lives) as progressing toward the good and the preferred in the dominant culture.* Holiday letters are thus articulations and rearticulations of identities, and our observation of the pervasiveness of self-construals in the letters asks that extant theories of personal identity be examined to see if they are consistent with these identity constructions. Therefore, in the following section we move our interpretive analysis from the conceptual and notional categories to the implications of the story line of holiday letters for theorizing identity in interpersonal relationships.

Discussion: Identity theories and holiday letters

Communication scholars have recently shown a widespread interest in personal identity as an explanatory concept and as a substantive topic for investigation. Nonetheless, little agreement exists on how to conceptualize identity or on how it is related to communication phenomena. We are not arguing that agreement should or can exist on theorizing identity, but we point out that identity is appropriated for widely diverse theoretical projects. Some scholars (e.g., Hecht & Ribeau, 1987) treat identity as an attribute of individuals that is relatively stable, enduring, and unitary. This view essentializes the psychology of individuals and foregrounds what Hecht (1993) in a later, integrative move calls the 'personal frame,' or identity as self-concept and self-attributions, within a more encompassing deployment of multiple frames for identity. A social–psychological conception of identity is exemplified in the extensive project of Giles and his associates (e.g., Giles, Coupland, & Coupland, 1991; Giles & Johnson, 1989; Giles & Smith, 1979). Ethnolinguistic identity theory posits intergroup relations as boundary phenomena and intragroup interaction as resource for the maintenance of identity. Others (e.g., Collier & Thomas, 1988; Hecht, Collier, & Ribeau, 1993) conceive identity within the symbolic interactionist tradition, situating it in multiple theoretical and practical frames as communicative codes that are observable in interaction. This view foregrounds process and meaning, while positing communication as being equivalent to identity, both as theoretical object and as process. A structurationist approach (Scott, Corman, & Cheney, 1998) theorizes identity as the structural rules and resources knowledgeable agents use in their identifications with an array of institutional and interpersonal phenomena. In this view, identity is an aspect of social structure and identification is the system of *in vivo* interactions. Here identity is taken as a sort of self-knowledge that is drawn on during interaction and in turn is modified by the person's experience of interaction. Thus, identity might inhere in memory, insititutional roles, group norms, or even occupational values, all of which are shaped reciprocally by the interactional process of identification.

These four views, while presenting divergent foci, assumptions, purposes, and conceptual refinements, nonetheless broadly represent modernist approaches to identity theory. Each emphasizes the autonomous individual as a knowledgeable agent who acts on the basis of having a known self. Persons, in interaction with their social and physical environments, construct internally consistent (though in many views, multilayered and situationally contingent) and relatively durable understandings of the self; and one's identity, while mutable and laminated as a construction, *is* the self, across time and across situations.

This unitary and stable idea of identity is challenged by postmodern views. Recently, some scholars (e.g. Grodin, 1996; Turkle, 1995) have theorized identity as a tracking of the self, when the self is a shifting signifier of cultural experience. In this view, identity is a postmodern project of appropriating materials from a destabilized array of media images and

other communicative interactions. Gergen argues that we have entered an era of intense fragmentation of social bonds and unprecedented assaults on the stability of meanings. In this era, he writes, 'the very concept of personal essenses is thrown into doubt. Selves as possessors of real and identifiable characteristics — such as rationality, emotion, inspiration, and will — are dismantled' (Gergen, 1991, p. 7). The postmodern condition is signaled by an erosion of confidence in truth, objectivity, and essence, and by a celebration of multivocality and an acceptance of images and illusions as stand-ins for reality. Postmodern identity, according to McNamee, is 'an emergent by-product' of interaction that changes from moment to moment as the context demands (McNamee, 1996, p. 149). Hence, identity has become in postmodernist views a conversational prop. In essence, the postmodern view of identity is one of ongoing struggle over meanings assigned to persons, actions, belongings, and relationships. The self is a project always in progress, emergent, partial, transient, inconsistent. An extreme view of the postmodern perspective characterizes it as 'deconstructing the ideology of subjectivity and denouncing the vague charms of interiority. [Postmodernist theorists] are announcing the death of man, while we experience it firsthand' (Jacques, 1991, p. 16).

In view of these various constructions of identity, we are faced with at least two concerns. First is a concern for the authenticity of the self. A satisfying theory of identity not only accounts for individuals' behaviors in social and institutional contexts, but also accounts for well-being, which we see as a necessary blend of the individual's psychological stability and cultural adaptation. Our second concern is with the implications of identity theories for the establishment and continuance of interpersonal relationships. If the self is only an opportunistic, strategically mutable, and transient guise, not only is selfhood a fraudulent idea, but so also are interpersonal bonds of affection and commitment. Such nihilism, Lyotard (1997) cautions, turns authentic relationships into aestheticized representations of themselves. We look to our data and its grounded theory to comment on these concerns.

Identity and authentic selves

Admittedly, our data tell us only what writers want readers to believe about their autobiographies; they cannot tell us what the first-order experience of writers' lives is like — that subjectivity is ultimately inaccessible. However, to the extent that the sentiments and stories expressed in holiday letters are authentic and written with audience expectations in mind, we may examine them for indications of selfhood and for evidence of what is valued by writers and readers as comprising a virtuous and respectable life. As Charles Taylor points out, identity connects individuals with action (as traces of agency) and with other persons, reflecting the qualitative basis for evaluating one's self: 'A self can never be described without reference to those who surround it' (Taylor, 1989, p. 35).

As such, Taylor argues, identity orients toward the good and thus always has a strong moral basis. From the modernist perspective, the individual is

assumed to have a self whose identity is durable and consistent, and is displayed (and [re]constructed) in actions; hence, persons are morally accountable to others for their behavior, based on standards of virtue in common circulation. In the postmodern view, the locus of moral accountability is elusive, because identity is assumed to be destabilized, chimerical, and 'saturated' (Gergen, 1991) with mediated messages. Without an anchor in identity, the postmodern person, as Lyotard argues, lives according to a 'fable [that] is unaware of good and evil. As for truth and falsehood, they are determined according to what is operational or not at the time judgment is made' (1997, p. 100).

Evidence of well-being, then, will include both portrayals of the self as consistent in character, motives, temperament, and so forth, and portrayals of the self in relation to cultural standards of probity and virtue. Our study produces a holiday letter writer who claims a specific character, self-ascribes specific motives, and depicts a mode of being over the duration of at least a year. That depiction both contextualizes identity and is contextualized by established selfhood. Writers are so consistent in their portrayals of respectability and normalcy that even negative matters, like a child's problems with alcohol addiction, are framed as opportunities to test one's character or as triumphal episodes in a family's life. Moreover, we are struck by the coherence of the narratives, both across writers and within the autobiographies of individuals. By displaying a trajectory of personhood through time and activity and through its network of connections among persons, places, objects, and values, each letter constructs historical and social contexts for an individual's personal identity that resonate with readers' sense of story logic, personal experience, and cultural values, or what Fisher(1987) calls 'narrative rationality' and 'narrative fidelity.'

This coherence of the narratives is strikingly relevant to the question of identity theories, both in the sense that depictions of the writers' lives cohere within a more encompassing narrative of social life based on cultural standards for the good and the desireable, and in the longitudinal sense, whereby individuals' lives are portrayed as internally consistent over time. The dialectical tensions between the narrative details and the biographies they construct, between individual identities constructed through narratives and the cultural narratives that contextualize them, indeed between connectedness and distinctiveness, are 'points of inseparability between personal selves and cultural forms … channeled through communicative contradictions' (Maines, 1989: 192). We see the holiday letters as material points of inseparability, collapsing 'the micro and macro orders into meso orders … of ongoing interpretive processes and multiple overlapping contextualizations' (Maines, 1989: 193).

Identity and interpersonal relationships

Rawlins (1989) notes that 'individual and negotiated choices regarding marriage, children, career, civic involvement, and leisure reflect and influence self-conceptions and begin to articulate networks of human relationships within which one's values and priorities are continuously enacted' (p.

185). Rawlins's prescient conclusion anticipated our findings and gives us a vocabulary for discussing them. Holiday letters both send news of and account for those choices; accordingly, they contribute to the articulation of relationships that carry individuals' values and priorities. In constructing the narrative laminations of individuals' lives, letter writers both *encapsulate* themselves in existing relationships and identities and *transform* themselves and their relationships. Rawlins theorizes the *dialectics of encapsulation* as the reconstitution of a system along its major dimension, strengthening it and revalidating it by subsuming its minor dimensions. Encapsulation is contrasted to the *dialectics of transcendence and tranformation*, by which Rawlins refers to the reconstitution of a system in a true synthesis of equally influential and contradictory dimensions. In the case of holiday letters, our major theme of connectedness contributes to encapsulation by articulating the historical bonds of affection between writers and their worlds and between writers and their readers. At the same time, the other theme of distinctiveness interjects new information into identity narratives, challenging their stability and differentiating individuals. In this reciprocal set of processes, relationships configure individuals and individuals reconfigure their relationships.

Writers of holiday letters knowingly create connectedness and distinctiveness, as evidenced by the uniformly consistent content themes in the letters. Yet they also signal an awareness of their need to manage the tension between the two dimensions. The cyclical, ritualistic pattern of sending holiday letters at a particular time of year, a pattern that is repeated year after year, conveys an insistence both on reaffirmation of identity and, simultaneously, on extending the narrative line of autobiographies and their relevant relationships.

This dynamic working out of tensions between continuity of relationships, as promoted by the encapsulation dialectics, and the transcendent transformation of relationships directed by the synthesis of old identities and new information is perhaps the core interpersonal process. It is the moving line of struggle over authenticity and selfhood, guided by cultural forms and standards (Maines, 1989). We see the management of this contradiction between encapsulation and transformation as a communicative achievement. This achievement is evident in the more microlevel contradictions in relationships managed by holiday letters: emotional closeness versus physical separation, positive personal character versus bad news and negative circumstances, pride versus humility, the traditional versus the innovative. In this sense, holiday letters, as a material form of interpersonal communication, manage the dialectic of dialectics, are the point of contiguity between connectedness and distinctiveness and thus between encapsulation and transformation. We draw a parallel between the dialectics of encapsulation and the modernist view of identity, each reflecting and capturing the ideas of stability, continuity, and substantiveness; likewise we draw a parallel between the dialectics of transformation and the postmodernist view, each embracing and emphasizing fragmentation, indetermination, and dialogic 'becoming' (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996, p. 47).

The final story line of holiday letters, then, is that they are instruments for working out the dialectics of contradictions between modernist sensibilities, desires and selfhood and the postmodern social conditions in which they are written. This working out results in the construction of seemingly stable, authentic, rational, and moral relationships and personal identities but which ultimately are, as Baxter and Montgomery (1992) conclude, dialogic constructions in an endless social production of meanings.

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