The communication of pain and suffering can vary considerably from society to society. This article examines the Sicilian-Canadian "language of distress," in particular the idiom of "nerves." The discussion focuses specifically on how Sicilian-Canadians make use of cultural metaphors to both communicate distress and present a discourse that attempts to structure and frame how significant others interpret and respond to the messages they receive. The researcher argues that metaphor plays an important role in shaping the understanding of experience.

"NERVES"

The Role of Metaphor In the Cultural Framing of Experience

SAM MIGLIORE

THE CONCEPTS OF STRESS AND DISTRESS have received considerable scholarly attention. Yet this attention has not generated a consensus concerning the nature of these phenomena. The concepts remain shrouded in controversy. Recent studies, however, indicate clearly that an understanding of the stress/distress complex must include a consideration of sociocultural factors (Lumsden 1981; Pollock 1988; Vingerhoets and Marcelissen 1988). Ethnographers have contributed to this discussion by examining various aspects of the complex. One current area of research is the study of "nerves" and the *language of distress*.

Nichter (1981) and Parsons (1984; see also Parsons and Wakeley 1991), for example, have argued that people tend to communicate their experience of suffering by means of various culturally appropriate and recognizable idioms of distress. This mode of communication consists of two interrelated phenomena: "the cognitive-verbal expressions of distress, or how people talk about their stressful experiences; and the somatic-behavioral expressions of distress, or the non-verbal manifestations of distress" (Parsons 1984, 72). Together, these two phenomena constitute the language of distress.

Each society (and each sociocultural group within a society) has a set of characteristic idioms through which its members

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can communicate and interpret distress episodes. Researchers have identified a large number of phenomena as idioms of distress; these phenomena range from the general concept of "somatization" (Kleinman 1986, 51; Kleinman and Kleinman 1985) to more culture-specific categories such as "evil eye" or "fright illness" (Good 1977; Good and Good 1982; Migliore 1983, 1990; Nichter 1981). What is important for the current discussion is that scholars agree that we can classify "nerves" as an idiom of distress that appears in a variety of sociocultural contexts (e.g., Davis and Guarnaccia 1989; Davis and Low 1989; Low 1985). People make use of the "nerves" idiom to communicate both personal suffering and social problems. The data I have collected among Sicilian-Canadians residing in southern Ontario, Canada support this position.

This study, although consistent with earlier findings, differs from previous work on "nerves" in an essential way. I do not simply examine how people make use of the nerves idiom metaphorically to communicate personal and social problems. Other researchers have done this successfully in their discussion of various sociocultural groups (e.g., Davis 1989; Dunk 1989; Farias 1991; Guarnaccia 1989; Lock 1989; Low 1989a; Van Schaik 1988). Instead, I take the analysis one step further to examine the rich metaphorical language that underlies and gives meaning to the nerves idiom itself. I concentrate on how Sicilian-Canadians make use of these underlying cultural metaphors to identify their distress as a case of nerves and to provide a context for people to understand their situation. This step, to my knowledge, has not been examined in the social science literature. Yet I contend that it is this initial use of metaphor that provides a basis for understanding the subsequent interrelationship between nerves and the metaphorical communication of personal and social problems.

I see my work as a direct response to Low's (1989b) suggestion that "research on nerves would benefit from a more detailed examination of the term and its implicit meanings" (p. 92). My goal is to unravel a deeper layer of meaning in the Sicilian-Canadian metaphorical language of distress. Stated simply, my aim is to unravel the metaphor within the metaphor. To accom-

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plish this goal, I proceed as follows. First, I discuss the empirical setting of my research and my relationship to the people under study. Second, I establish "nerves" as an idiom of distress and link my work to the findings of other scholars. Finally, I examine the role of metaphor in the communication of distress. I argue that Sicilian-Canadians make use of metaphor to structure and frame how people interpret and respond to the distress messages they receive.

AUTOETHNOGRAPHY: THE FIELDWORK EXPERIENCE

Beginning in 1977, I conducted periodic field research among Sicilian-Canadians residing in the Hamilton-Wentworth region of southern Ontario. Canadian census figures do not distinguish between people from different regions in Italy. Members of this ethnic community, however, have estimated that approximately 20,000 Sicilian-Canadians currently reside in the region and that 95% of these people were either born in, or can trace their ancestry to, Racalmuto, Sicily, Italy.[1] It is this Racalmutese community of Hamilton-Wentworth that is the focus of my study (for a detailed discussion of the community itself, see Migliore 1988, 1991).

I chose to conduct my investigation among members of the Racalmutese community for a variety of reasons. First, I had many personal contacts within the community. I was born in a small town located 15 kilometers from Racalmuto. My mother and her family were Racalmutese. My parents and I emigrated to Canada in 1957 and settled in an area of Hamilton that was populated largely by Racalmutese immigrants. Having grown up in this atmosphere, I felt very much a part of the community. My study, then, involved what scholars have labeled autoethnography (Hayano 1979, 1982), native ethnography (Stephenson and Greer 1981), or native anthropology (Jones 1970; Nakhleh 1979)—that is, an ethnographic study of one's own people.

Second, having conducted previous fieldwork within the community, I had an established basis from which I could proceed to investigate the nerves idiom. My work on the Sicilian-Canadian

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"evil eye" complex (Migliore 1981, 1983) was particularly important in this regard because it touched on various points of relevance for the current study. The evil eye (*mal'uocchiu*) refers to a belief in the ability of the human eye to cause, or at least project, harm when it is directed by certain individuals toward others and their possessions.[2] In that earlier work, I examined the interrelationship between the evil eye and stress, as well as Sicilian-Canadian conceptions of health, illness, and healing. Both "evil eye" and "nerves" represent components of the Sicilian-Canadian language of distress.

One of the primary techniques that I have used over the years to gather data within the community is participant observation. As a Sicilian-Canadian who, until recently, resided in the Hamilton-Wentworth region, I was able to move freely along both kinship and friendship networks to participate in various family and community activities. This technique helped me gain a great deal of background information concerning the community and various aspects of the Sicilian-Canadian "worldview." Through a combination of participant observation and self-reflexive interaction, I also gained an insight into the various ways that the concept of "nerves" can be used in both medical and nonmedical contexts. This insight provided the basis for formulating appropriate questions for the investigation of nerves.

My fieldwork experience also benefited greatly from a relationship I developed with Don Gesualdo, a traditional healer,[3] who I worked with as an apprentice over a period of several years. By participating in a number of healing sessions, I was able to obtain a specialized knowledge of the phenomena "evil eye" and "nerves" and the diagnostic and therapeutic techniques used to assist victims of these complaints. The apprenticeship also placed me in a position where I could discuss the *experience of distress* with individuals who were actually suffering its effects.

In addition to the many Racalmutese I spoke with during the process of participant observation, I informally interviewed 40 individuals about the nature of nerves. This sample was composed of 28 women and 12 men. Four of these individuals were traditional healers who treated a variety of complaints. The

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interviews themselves were unstructured. My primary aim was to ask very general questions and then allow people to discuss what they thought was relevant for an investigation of nerves. In some cases, I also asked them to comment on some of the impressions I had developed about the topic.

I supplemented the interview data by collecting 45 case histories from individuals who had experienced the effects of nerves. On a few occasions I was also fortunate to be at the right place at the right time to witness a number of nerves-related episodes as they developed. These case histories provided the basis for my understanding of how people perceive the experience of nerves, and how the concept of "nerves" was used in specific circumstances. Although the expression of distress might vary from individual to individual, women tended to present their complaints in psychic and somatic terms that focused on the loss of emotional control, whereas men were more likely to present their complaints in terms of physical problems involving muscles and tendons (for a more detailed discussion of gender differences in the expression of nerves, see Migliore 1991). Finally, in some cases, I collected information about certain individuals' life histories. These data provided me with useful background information concerning what people remember about life in Racalmuto, the immigration process, and their experiences in Canada.

As both a Sicilian-Canadian and a researcher who had worked previously within the community, I was well-prepared to begin my investigation of nerves. I had a good understanding of what to expect from people, what types of questions I could and should ask, and what type of research techniques would be appropriate for the study. As a male ethnographer interviewing women of my parents' generation, for example, I had to be careful in how I approached a sensitive, personal topic such as the experience of suffering. In some cases, this meant waiting for the individual to initiate the discussion of specific feelings or social problems. For instance, I could not solicit information concerning marital discord. In other cases, it meant phrasing questions or comments in indirect terms that took into consideration Sicilian conceptions of proper etiquette as well as no-

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tions of honor, shame, and respect. To discuss marital problems, I had to ask questions that would allow my female informants to provide either a hypothetical answer or an answer that dealt with a case involving some unnamed third party. In this way, we could indirectly discuss an issue without actually speaking about it.

The fact that I was able to interview people with whom I had already established a working relationship was a great advantage. It facilitated the acquisition of both general information and case history material. The investigation proceeded without difficulty. In many respects, this dimension of the field experience involved basically the discussion of new material with old friends.[4]

NERVES AND THE LANGUAGE OF DISTRESS

How people identify, explain, or communicate distress often differs considerably from one sociocultural group to another (Migliore 1989, 1991; Pugh 1991; Zborowski 1952, 1969; Zola 1966). Cultural meanings can play a significant role in an individual's attempt to understand particular feelings or sensations and to construct a discourse on suffering that can be presented to significant others. To comprehend this phenomenon, I believe that researchers must examine both the meanings that people attach to specific distress episodes and the techniques they use to convey their experience of suffering.

According to Nichter (1981) and Parsons (1984; see also Parsons and Wakeley 1991), members of a particular group can communicate their distress through various verbal and somatic idioms. These modes of expression represent the culturally acceptable language of distress. Each idiom, for example, operates in two ways. First, it enables individuals to express their personal suffering to others. Second, it ensures that significant others are in a position to recognize and interpret the meanings encoded in the messages they receive. These two factors provide caregivers, including family members, with a basis for taking appropriate action to assist the victim.

One of the primary themes that has emerged from the recent research on nerves is that the phenomenon represents an idiom

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of distress (e.g., Davis and Guarnaccia 1989; Davis and Low 1989; Farias 1991; Lock and Dunk 1987; Low 1985, 1988). Davis and Low (1989), for instance, have defined nerves as "a popular illness category and idiom for emotional and social distress that exhibits similar symptoms in a variety of cultural settings" (p. xi). Given this definition, the nerves idiom can operate at three general but interconnected levels: as an ethnomedical label linked to a wide range of etiological criteria, signs, and symptoms, as well as preventive and therapeutic measures; as a means of communicating psychic and somatic distress; and as a metaphorical means of communicating social problems within the context of a psychic and/or somatic idiom.

My findings tend to support this point of view. The Racalmutese of Hamilton-Wentworth make use of the nerves idiom in precisely these ways. The idiom allows Sicilian-Canadians to identify what they are experiencing, to express their pain and suffering to significant others, and, depending on the situation, to link their suffering to specific interpersonal or social problems (Migliore 1991). *Nierbi* (nerves) and *nirbusu* (nervousness) constitute key elements in the Sicilian-Canadian language of distress. A discussion of the following case histories illustrates this point.

CASE 1: THE AGGRESSIVE NEIGHBOR

I obtained this case history from Signora Z in June 1984. The case involves a disturbing encounter between Signora Z and an aggressive *vicina* (neighbor). Both women are Racalmutese and currently reside in Hamilton, Ontario. Signora Z was approximately 58 years old at the time of the following incident:

> I take care of my daughter's two children while she works. The other day, while I was babysitting, a friend [Mrs. S] phoned in the morning and said she wanted to come over that afternoon. She lives only a couple of blocks away. I told her that I was going out in the afternoon and that she should come over the next day. Then she asked if she could come over later in the day. I again told her it would be better if she came the next day because I was very busy. A few minutes later, my friend phoned again. She

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> asked if it was OK to come over before I went out in the afternoon—she wanted to just come over for a few minutes. I could feel myself getting upset. I told her that I was too busy; I had the children and I had to get lunch ready. I was just too busy that day.
>
> That woman phoned again, just a few minutes later. She said that her husband told her that the next day would be too hot to go out. This was a cool day, so she wanted to come over today. I was very upset. I told her that I would walk over to her place the next day, so that she wouldn't have to go out in the heat.
>
> About 30 minutes later, [Mrs. S] arrived at my home unexpectedly. She brought her granddaughter with her and a pair of pants that she wanted me to fix. I became *nirbusa*—my blood began to boil, my hands were trembling, and I didn't know what to say or do. But even in this state I prepared coffee for her. She stayed for about 15 minutes. All the time that she sat and drank her coffee, I was busy with the kids and preparing lunch. I didn't ask her to stay for lunch, so she left after this short stay.
>
> After [Mrs. S] left, I couldn't calm down. I couldn't stop chattering to my husband. I kept saying that it was a *virgogna* [something shameful] for someone to phone that often and still come over unexpectedly. If I were her, I would have taken the hint and not come over. In fact, I would have avoided the other person until I got an invitation to formally come and visit. But [Mrs. S] is *vinccudda* [one who must always get her way]. She spoiled my day. Everything was rushed and I was upset. But the pants are still sitting there. It's going to be a long time before I fix those pants.

Signora Z experienced *nirbusu* as a temporary emotional disturbance in direct response to the insensitive behavior the neighbor displayed toward her. The neighbor simply refused to take "no" for an answer. This in itself was upsetting; however, the neighbor's actions were even more disturbing for the following interrelated reasons. First, she chose an inopportune moment to arrive unexpectedly. Signora Z was caught completely unprepared to entertain company. She was already upset and anxious to pursue her own endeavors. Signora Z felt that she had gone to great lengths to dissuade the neighbor from making a visit on that particular day. She did not expect the woman to ignore her wishes and to arrive unannounced. Yet the neighbor's arrival placed Signora Z in precisely the situation that she had tried desperately to avoid.

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Second, the neighbor's behavior was culturally and morally inappropriate. From Signora Z's point of view, it represented shameful behavior. The neighbor displayed an explicit lack of respect and concern for Signora Z and her wishes. The woman failed to meet cultural expectations concerning neighborliness. Signora Z, however, was able to maintain her sense of honor by avoiding a confrontation and by providing at least a limited degree of hospitality. She will display her displeasure with the neighbor by taking her time in making the necessary alterations to the trousers.

Taken together, these two factors combine to communicate a particular set of implicit messages. Signora Z interpreted the neighbor's behavior as an indication that the woman is *vinc-cudda*. In other words, the neighbor values her own needs and desires much more than friendship. From a Sicilian-Canadian perspective, friends/neighbors should display mutual respect for one another and, if possible, should assist each other in times of need. A friend or neighbor, however, should not attempt to impose his or her wishes on others. The message that Signora Z received is that the neighbor did not view her as a true friend; instead, the woman made use of friendship and neighborliness as manipulative devices to take advantage of her good nature.

In this particular case, then, a number of interrelated factors combined to create a "stressful situation" capable of precipitating a minor episode of *nirbusu*. Signora Z makes use of the nerves idiom to identify, explain, and communicate her experience of suffering. The account, however, does not simply link nerves to distress; it draws attention to the social origins of that distress. In this sense, the nerves idiom represents both a language for expressing feelings of psychic and somatic distress and a metaphorical device capable of communicating interpersonal tensions and social problems.

CASE 2: THE FRACTURED ANKLE

Signora V, a 64-year-old Racalmutesa, emigrated to Canada with her husband approximately 30 years ago. In 1985, she

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sustained a serious ankle injury. The following account represents my reconstruction of the events that Signora V described to me several months after the incident's occurrence. At her request I did not tape our conversation. This account, unlike the previous case history, should be viewed as a lengthy paraphrasing of Signora V's actual words. My presentation of the account, however, does follow closely the written notes I recorded during the interview:

> I had just finished shopping for groceries when it happened. The night before I didn't sleep well, I was feeling *nirbusa*. It was the *dispiaciri* [sorrow, disappointment] that made me *nirbusa*. My son was sick, and I had a misunderstanding with my daughter. So the next morning I left everyone at home. I said to myself, "They can do whatever they want, I need to get out." But, I didn't eat anything. I went out *adiuni* [on an empty stomach].
>
> I took the bus to the supermarket to buy groceries. When I finished, I called the taxi to take things home. The accident happened while I was helping the driver load the groceries into the trunk. I suddenly found myself on the ground. I'm not sure what happened; I didn't feel anything. I was OK, then suddenly I was on the ground with a sore ankle. Maybe my eyes clouded and I fell. Or, maybe some car was passing by and hit me. I just don't know. I found myself on the ground, and I can't understand it.
>
> I was in pain [*duluri*]. I tried to get up, but I couldn't stand on the ankle. I called the taxi driver for help. I had to motion to him; I couldn't speak. I was in so much pain I had to hold my ankle tight with both hands.
>
> The driver took me home, and he and my husband unloaded the groceries. Then he took us [Signora V and her husband] to the hospital. I was still in great pain when the nurse started asking me questions about what happened. The pain was so intense! I had been helping myself by keeping the ankle warm with my hands and holding it tight. Now the ankle was starting to cool off, and because it was unbound the pain became more intense. I told the nurse that I couldn't see her anymore, and I fainted. My blood pressure was too low. They had to keep monitoring it every 2 or 3 minutes. Maybe they gave me a shot, but I don't know what they did at that point.
>
> The doctors sent me home after 5 days. They used a pin to hold my ankle together. One doctor said they had to reconstruct the ankle because of the damage. I spent the next 4 weeks at

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home with a bandaged ankle. When the doctor saw that there was no poison, I went back to the hospital where they took out the pin and put my leg in a cast. I spent the next 4 weeks with that cast on my leg. I've struggled with this leg, the exercises, and the pain for almost 6 months.

When I was first in the hospital, my husband phoned our relatives to let them know about my problem. At first, my close relatives, my brothers and sisters, came to see me. Later, other relatives and friends made visits. Not everyone came, but I'll remember them.

In the hospital, I didn't experience much pain. They kept giving me pills and injections. Only one nurse wasn't good to me. It was the first night. She pushed me to get up and go to the washroom. I told her that I couldn't get up. I tried to explain that my leg was bandaged and that they hadn't removed the stitches from my leg yet. A person shouldn't move around in that condition. She just insisted. I had to get up. After all that, I couldn't go to the washroom. She had to help me back to bed. But the pain was too much, I fainted on her. So she just threw me on the bed and pushed my leg. It was very painful. I told her I couldn't walk! She told me it was normal to experience pain and that I had to relax. I don't know whether it was because I got upset with her or whether she had holidays, but I didn't see her again. The other nurses were OK.

While I was in the hospital, I started to experience *nirbusu*. I was afraid that I wouldn't be able to walk again. It was only when the cast was removed and I started to exercise the leg that I began to feel better. I was so afraid of ending up in a wheelchair. I remember thinking, "I have a family—how would I be able to do things for them? I wouldn't be able to even get a glass of water for myself. Who would take care of the chores?" I was becoming very *nirbusa*. I was also afraid that the operation wouldn't work, that they would find poison in my leg, that I might lose the leg.

But many things helped me. When they took out the pin, the nurse showed it to me; it was clean, no poison. That made me feel better. Others encouraged me. The doctor told me that in several months I would be walking without any problems. My relatives and friends told me the same thing. They said that I shouldn't worry so much, everything would be OK. They reminded me that I wasn't the first person to suffer a broken limb. I would recover just like those other people did. Many people came to visit me. My sisters helped by doing some of the chores around the house. My husband did a lot of the work, too.

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> I started feeling better once I could move around with crutches or a cane. I could do things for myself and for my family. I got a lot of encouragement from these actions. The therapy also helped.

The account that Signora V related to me involves two instances of *nirbusu*. The first episode occurred the night before the accident. Signora V reveals that family problems caused her to experience *nirbusu* as a minor emotional disturbance. She does not, however, link the accident specifically to *nirbusu*. Instead, the link between the two incidents is left open to interpretation. Signora V does not use the language of distress to cast responsibility onto family members. Yet I suggest that the implication is there and that it may influence family behavior in the future.

The second episode occurred during Signora V's stay in the hospital and persisted for some time after she returned home. As in the first case, the problem manifests itself in the form of an emotional disturbance. Fear and anxiety precipitated the attack of nerves. The *nierbi*, in turn, made it difficult for her to regain control over her emotions. From a Sicilian-Canadian point of view, Signora V was now in a state of disequilibrium. Once an individual succumbs to the initial effects of *nirbusu*, he or she is in a vulnerable position. Unless the disequilibrium process is brought under control, the individual risks severe consequences. Through the idiom of nerves, Signora V reveals the gravity of her predicament to others and focuses their attention directly on the fear and anxiety she is experiencing. She communicates to significant others that she is deeply concerned about the implications the injury may have for her and her family's well-being. She is afraid that she will remain disabled and that this will disrupt her relationship with family members. The language of distress allows Signora V to seek reassurance and support from her extended family. The fact that significant others reacted appropriately signifies that they interpreted the message correctly and provided the necessary assistance. In this case, then, the idiom of distress operated as a successful coping strategy. It enabled Signora V to manage her distress with the assistance of others.

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COMMENTARY

The preceding case histories illustrate how Sicilian-Canadians make use of the language of distress, and the nerves idiom in particular, to communicate their pain and suffering to significant others. The distress itself (whether of psychic or social origin) is communicated through both somatic and verbal modes of expression. The physical sensations signal that the individual is suffering, whereas the verbal cues provide people with a means of identifying and interpreting the vague somatic message(s). *Nierbi* and *nirbusu* represent ethnomedical labels that allow individuals to identify their subjective emotional or illness experience in culturally appropriate terms and thereby elicit the support and assistance they require. The Sicilian-Canadian nerves complex, then, conforms to Davis and Low's (1989) depiction of the phenomenon as both an illness category and an idiom of distress.

METAPHOR AND THE LANGUAGE OF DISTRESS

A number of researchers have examined the metaphorical dimension of the nerves complex. Their work has focused on how people make use of the language of distress metaphorically to communicate frustration, emotional disturbances, interpersonal tensions, and various social, political, and financial problems (e.g., Davis 1983, 1989; DeLaCancela, Guarnaccia, and Carrillo 1986; Finerman 1989; Lock 1991; Lock and Dunk 1987; Low 1989a). Lock (1991), for example, has linked some cases of nerves among Greek woman in Montreal, Quebec to "the immigration experience and to a nostalgia for their lost heritage" (p. 248), whereas Davis (1983, 1989) has discussed nerves in terms of women's concerns about life in outport Newfoundland. In some cases, then, people use the nerves idiom not solely to communicate that they are suffering from a specific illness but also to express feelings of concern and distress over their social situation. They translate social problems into the metaphorical language of psychic and somatic distress. Again, as the follow-

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ing case history indicates, this aspect of the phenomenon is consistent with my findings concerning "nerves" among Sicilian-Canadians.

CASE 3: KINSHIP AND PROPERTY

Mr. and Mrs. D, two elderly Racalmutese, have lived in the Hamilton-Wentworth region for over 40 years. At the time I collected the case history, the couple was having financial difficulties. They were finding it difficult to make ends meet on a fixed pension income. To solve the problem, they attempted to sell their property in Sicily. The response they received from relatives in Racalmuto, however, was very disturbing, as the following comments convey:

> Mrs. D: We asked our relatives in Racalmuto, my sister and her family, to sell our house in Sicily. We are pensioners. It is difficult to live on a pension when you have a large mortgage. We have to sell the house to help ourselves. My sister wrote back that they would try to sell the house for us. But, 6 months went by without any news, not even a letter. I wrote to my sister several times, but there was no response. I finally received a letter from my sister the other day. The mailman brought us a registered letter. I got excited—I expected to find some money or a money order. Instead, I found a letter and some papers to sign. In the letter my sister said that they could not sell the house unless I signed papers giving her control of the property. She also said that, since the Italian law does not allow money out of the country, they would keep the money. If my husband and I ever went to Sicily, they would give us the money. I was very disappointed. *Mi fici siccari lu cori* [it made my heart dry up]. I couldn't believe what was written in the letter. I felt like crying, but I couldn't. I started to shake, to tremble. *Trimava comu un busciarieddu* [I trembled like a stalk of wheat]. I became *nirbusa*. My *nierbi* tightened in my throat. I couldn't cry. I felt like this all day, so I took a "nerve" pill. I'm supposed to take my pills regularly. But it was worse, I started to vomit. The next day I was still very *nirbusa*. I got over my nerves by chattering at my husband. He supported me, and helped me get over it. My stomach started to feel better. If my husband had said something negative or if he blamed me, I would have died. I felt better because I was able to *spuvari* [release emotional tension]. It was

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as if the *gruppu* [knot] in my stomach was untangled. I started to feel more strength in my arms and legs. I felt better. But just telling you this story is making me upset again. I can feel my heart starting to tighten again. My *nierbi* are starting to tighten all over, especially around my heart. The memory is starting to get to me.

[Mr. D then comforted his wife and told her that there was nothing they could do.]

Mr. D: I didn't say very much because she was feeling so bad. But I also felt bad, even though I didn't say anything at the time. I felt as if my heart dried up too, but I kept it in. I got over it by talking with my wife. We both got over it through *spuvari*. If we didn't *spuvari*, we would have had a tangle of nerves in our stomachs. If that tangle is not released, it can cause an ulcer to burst.

As I was about to leave, Mrs. D added the following comment:

I was so upset not only about the house in Sicily and the money but also about the tone of the letter. My sister seemed to suggest that it was my fault, that I should have sent the release form when I first asked them to sell the house. She also asked, didn't I know that they needed money, too, and that they were family?—didn't I care about them?

After a frustrating 6-month wait, Mr. and Mrs. D finally received a response from their relatives in Sicily. The news, however, was far from encouraging. In fact, the message was clear: Mr. and Mrs. D could not expect assistance from the people they had trusted. They would have to find some other way to solve their financial difficulties. The couple experienced a great deal of distress, due to several factors: the negative response, the critical tone of the letter, and the implications of the response for their future well-being. Mr. and Mrs. D expressed, interpreted, and explained this distress in terms of *nirbusu*.

In this account, the language of distress involves two interrelated modes of expression. Mrs. D, for example, communicated her suffering by means of both a somatic and a verbal idiom. The physical symptoms themselves signaled that she was in distress. However, she also expressed this distress through specific verbal cues that identified the problem as a case of

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nerves. Together these two modes of expression allowed Mrs. D to communicate several messages to her husband. First, she indicated that she was greatly disappointed in, and disturbed by, the contents of the letter. Second, she did not expect this type of response from her sister. Third, Mrs. D communicated that she should not be criticized or held responsible for the sister's actions. Criticism would only serve to further disrupt her equilibrium. Fourth, she required Mr. D's support to withstand the effects of *nirbusu.*

Mr. D responded positively to his wife's plea for assistance by providing the emotional support she requested. In fact, through mutual support and understanding, Mr. and Mrs. D were able to help each other cope effectively with the immediate problem. They allowed each other to *spuvari* (release tension) by giving voice to their frustrations. Mrs. D, however, indicated that these measures were insufficient to resolve the underlying problems responsible for precipitating the distress. As long as the couple was in financial difficulty, and they were unable to resolve the conflict with family members in Sicily, she would remain susceptible to *nirbusu.* Mrs. D communicated this message to me by stressing that she was unable to discuss the case without a recurrence of symptoms. The idiom of nerves, then, enabled the couple to not only identify and explain their feelings of distress but also to metaphorically express concern about their future well-being.

COMMUNICATING DISTRESS THROUGH METAPHOR

The ethnographic literature dealing with the metaphorical dimension of nerves has focused exclusively on how people may employ this powerful, culturally recognized symbol of distress to convey social concerns and problems. Scholars have not examined in any detail the specific metaphorical statements that people use to communicate that they are experiencing nerves. Yet it is these statements that reveal the nature of the phenomenon, how people frame others' understanding of the experience, and the messages that victims convey to significant others. The nerves idiom serves as a powerful indicator of

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psychic, somatic, and social troubles because these metaphorical statements allow people to describe their feelings of distress and to draw attention to the personal and social implications of the situation.

The Sicilian-Canadian language of distress includes many metaphorical representations of suffering. Victims of nerves, for example, often communicate their distress by means of various popular phrases or metaphors. In the case of damage to the physical nerves—namely, muscles, tendons, and other connective tissues (Migliore 1991)—individuals can signal discomfort through verbal cues such as *nierbi gravaccati* [entangled nerves], *nierbi agruppati* [knotted nerves], and *spilatura* [perforated nerves].[5] These statements conjure up images of pain, disorder, and impairment of function. In the case of *nirbusu*, the metaphorical representations convey a very different message. Here, people rely on the language of distress to communicate that they are experiencing psychic and somatic effects because they are no longer in control of their emotions. Metaphorical statements that convey this message include *li nierbi mi sbattinu* [the nerves are shaking me], *triemu comu un busciarieddu* [I'm trembling like a stalk of wheat], *mi stannu scutiennu li nierbi* [my nerves are starting to get excited, to shake], and *mi stannu acchianannu li nierbi* [my nerves are starting to rise].

The preceding statements are examples of the verbal component of the language of distress. They represent culturally recognizable and acceptable means of communicating that an individual is experiencing emotional or emotion-related problems. As metaphors, these verbal cues serve to condense and later release a number of emotionally charged images and messages. To illustrate this point and to demonstrate how I personally came to better understand the nerves complex, I have chosen to examine, in detail, the images and messages contained in the phrase *triemu comu un busciarieddu*.

UNRAVELING THE METAPHOR WITHIN THE METAPHOR

My experience as a Sicilian-Canadian child growing up in the Racalmutese district of the Hamilton-Wentworth region exposed

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me to many aspects of the language of distress. I became familiar with phrases such as *triemu comu un busciarieddu* at an early age. As a result, I began the research on nerves with the distinct advantage of knowing that certain popular phrases signify that an individual is upset and experiencing difficulty. In some cases, however, I did not comprehend the precise meaning of the terms that people employed. *Busciarieddu* is one of these terms. It is the type of word that appears in the Sicilian dialect, but I could not locate it in Italian and Italian/English dictionaries. This complicated my efforts to unravel the meaning(s) contained in the metaphor.

By interviewing informants, I was able to gain a gradual understanding of the interrelationship between metaphor and nerves. My informants consistently linked the phrase *triemu comu un busciarieddu* with *nirbusu*. They agreed that this statement refers to emotional distress that involves the physical nerves and manifests itself, at least in part, as a severe trembling sensation. Although this was the type of answer I expected, it did not enhance my understanding of the word *busciarieddu*.

During the initial phase of research, I found it difficult to focus explicitly on terminology. My queries concerning the meaning of *busciarieddu* often elicited teasing and laughter as a response. I was asking questions usually reserved to children. Through persistence, however, I began to obtain the answers I was looking for. *Busciarieddu* refers to "stalks of wheat." One of my more articulate informants discussed the wheat metaphor as follows:

> When you cut the grain, the *spica* [the detached part] is placed into small bundles. This is what we, in local dialect, call the *busciarieddu*. . . . The *busciarieddu* moves with the wind when it is on the plant. The grain is like the sea—it makes the same wave motion as the sea. Therefore, people say "You are making me tremble like a *busciarieddu*" because with the minimum movement of air [laughs], just as the grain sways that's the way all of the person trembles. . . . When the person starts to tremble, it is better to leave everything because he won't be able to accomplish anything. [pause] The person is not able to do anything.

The metaphor is now clear. A victim of nerves trembles uncontrollably like a stalk of wheat in the wind. *Triemu comu un*

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busciarieddu communicates to others that the individual is experiencing a disequilibrium state. The person is no longer in command of his or her emotions and, as a result, is at the mercy of outside forces. As an idiom of distress, the phrase also indicates that significant others are now in a position to either assist or harm the individual. They can help quell the effects of the wind (the factors responsible for precipitating the attack of nerves) by means of kind words and support or, depending on the situation, by a change in behavior. If significant others do not respond positively, the implication is that their behavior will magnify the force of the disturbance. Human beings, like stalks of wheat, are vulnerable to the destructive effects of powerful, unchecked forces. Significant others may not be able to solve the problem but, with support and understanding they can help dampen the negative effects.

I recall being very pleased and satisfied with the information I had collected. At the time, it helped me gain a clearer understanding of the meanings contained in the wheat metaphor. Further questioning, however, confirmed the old adage that "things are not always as they seem." During an interview with an elderly couple, Mr. and Mrs. C, I began to realize that I had not uncovered the complete meaning behind the phrase *triemu comu un busciarieddu*. The statement does not actually refer to "stalks of wheat trembling uncontrollably in the wind." People discussed the *busciarieddu* in these terms to help me understand the phenomenon. I realize now that they were making use of one metaphor to help me understand the metaphor I was investigating.

Busciarieddu is an archaic term that reflects the rural and agrarian background of many of the adult Racalmutese residing in the Hamilton-Wentworth region. The elderly couple, and later others, explained to me that the term is associated with a particular Sicilian custom. Mrs. C described the custom and its relationship to *nirbusu* in the following conversation:

Mrs. C: The *busciarieddu* is a small bundle of wheat stalks that are picked before the grain is mature and hard. You place the bundle over the fire, and with your hands you turn it over and over. You

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keep turning it over and over again. At that moment it trembles, and that's why we say *trema comu un busciarieddu.* It trembles because it is cooking. The nerves also make this movement.

Migliore: Does the phrase refer to the experience of "burning" or to the experience of "trembling"?

Mrs. C: In one way the person trembles, yes, but in another way the person with nerves feels a heat that comes from strong nerves. Sometimes, there are people who experience heat flashes because of nerves. They sweat . . . just like when it is hot out. It may last 5 minutes or 10 minutes, and then the person may calm down all at once. The person says *triemu comu un busciarieddu* to signify that, at that moment, he is trembling and heating up.

Migliore: Does the word *busciarieddu* also refer to the wheat growing in the field?

Mrs. C: *Busciarieddu* is only the bunch that is already picked, that we have in hand. The other is the grain plant. The *busciarieddu* is the part that is roasted like coffee, the part that you put to fire. This is the *brusciarieddu.* It is a *brusciarieddu* at the moment that it trembles as you turn it back and forth to cook it.

Migliore: Is the word *busciarieddu* or *brusciarieddu*?

Mrs. C: The word is *busciarieddu*, but if I call it *brusciarieddu* maybe you'll understand better. [The word *bruscia* means "to burn."]

In the past, then, people collected the tender green stalks of wheat to prepare a special treat. They roasted the ears of grain by rolling and shaking the stalks over hot coals. The shaking motion combined with the heat to separate the wheat from the chaff. At this point the grain was ready for consumption. My informants claim that both young and old considered the *busciarieddu* an appetizing snack.

As a metaphorical representation of distress, the phrase *triemu comu un busciarieddu* conjures up a series of images and messages. First, the metaphor equates the victim with "tender green stalks of wheat." The wheat has not yet developed into a mature hardy plant. This image carries the implication that the person does not have the internal strength to deal effectively with the stressful situation. In other words, he or she is highly susceptible to the effects of *nirbusu.*

Second, the victim, like a stalk of wheat that has been picked and placed in a bundle, is no longer in control of the situation.

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This aspect of the metaphor communicates to significant others that the individual is in a very vulnerable state. It also implies that significant others are now in a position to influence the course of events in either a favorable or an unfavorable direction.

Third, the phrase itself indicates that the victim is suffering from specific somatic effects as a result of emotional distress. Implicitly, however, the person also communicates that significant others are responsible for causing the symptoms. In metaphorical terms, the victim's blood is beginning to boil, and his or her nerves are trembling uncontrollably because someone is shaking the person over hot coals. The victim is experiencing distress in direct response to the words and deeds of others. This is the message that Mrs. D communicates when she uses the metaphor to describe how she felt after receiving the negative reply from relatives in Sicily (see Case 3 above).

Finally, through the language of distress the victim seeks the support and assistance of significant others. The individual(s) responsible for generating the disturbance, however, receives two additional messages. One, if you do not alter your behavior, I may suffer very severe consequences. Two, because the *busciarieddu* is roasted for the purpose of consumption, failure to alter your behavior can only mean that you are intent on deliberately injuring me.

The two wheat metaphors presented above share certain basic similarities. They both communicate that the victim is experiencing distress and that he or she requires immediate assistance. Without the immediate assistance of significant others, the person's emotional distress may escalate and develop into *nirbusu* the folk illness. How others react, then, has a direct bearing on the victim's future well-being. By discussing the *busciarieddu* in terms of "wheat trembling uncontrollably in the wind," my informants helped me gain an understanding of this phenomenon. At the same time, however, the metaphor served as a screen or masking device; it focused my attention on the role of significant others in helping the victim cope with effects generated by unspecified or impersonal forces. The second metaphor clearly implicates human agency. The victim

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communicates that a particular individual(s), not the action of an impersonal force, is responsible for the disturbance. In addition, the victim makes use of the metaphor to suggest that deliberate intent may be a factor in the case. However, because the culprit remains unnamed, significant others can change their behavior without actually accepting or acknowledging responsibility for causing the negative effects.

Among Sicilian-Canadians, the concept of nerves operates as a primary indicator of both physical and psychic trauma. Victims of *nirbusu* communicate this suffering by means of various somatic and verbal modes of expression. The phrase *triemu comu un busciarieddu* represents one example of the verbal component of the nerves idiom. My examination of the metaphorical elements contained in this phrase reveals how Sicilian-Canadians make use of symbolic communication to transmit specific images and messages as part of the language of distress. I propose that these metaphorical representations enable the victim to not only communicate distress but to implicate the social origins of their suffering and convey how significant others should interpret the message(s) they receive.

To be effective in a given context, however, the speaker and listener must share some understanding of the background knowledge concerning these metaphors. The phrase *triemu comu un busciarieddu* cannot convey the message(s) the victim intends if significant others have little or no understanding of the meanings surrounding the word *busciarieddu*. One of the problems that currently exists within the Racalmutese community of Hamilton-Wentworth is that Sicilian-born parents have a communication problem with their Canadian-born or -raised children (Migliore 1991). The young people have not experienced the beliefs and actions involving the consumption of the *busciarieddu*. One Canadian-born individual (M.G.), for example, reacted in this way to my inquiry about the meaning of the term:

> M.G.: What was that? . . . [laughter] *Triemu comu un brusciarieddu* . . . would say to me [laughter] . . . [you have] some good questions today. *Triemu comu un brusciarieddu* would say to me that you are shaking. This is a difficult one to explain because you know,

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ah, you are not shaking from cold, you are shaking like someone who has been burned.

Migliore: Is the word *brusciarieddu* or *busciarieddu*?

M.G.: Well, if it's *busciarieddu* I've got no idea what you are talking about. [laughter]

Migliore: OK, well, if it is *brusciarieddu*, what do you mean "burn"? Can you be more specific?

M.G.: [pause] No. [pause] I don't know anymore . . . .

Migliore: OK, have you ever heard anybody say it, besides me?

M.G.: Yea, I heard my mom say it.

Migliore: What do you think she was trying to say?

M.G.: Well, the same thing as *nierbi* and *nirbusu*, that she was nervous. Not necessarily related to I'm hot or I'm cold or anything like that, but I'm shaking from nerves. Again, almost like saying "I'm at my wit's end," or I'm—something like that. . . . It's hard to translate, ah, hard to translate set of words that are set together, that get lost in the translation. But it's, what I think, it's very much along the lines of saying that, ah, you know, ah, I'm very nervous right now.

For M. G. and many other young people, the term *busciarieddu* has little or no meaning. It cannot convey the rich metaphorical imagery understood by Sicilian-born individuals. It cannot frame their understanding of the distress episode. The young people interpret the phrase as simply a case of nervousness. Their response, therefore, is influenced by a different set of meanings, and it may lead to intergenerational misunderstanding—misunderstandings that may negatively influence the type of support the victim receives. For future research, I suggest that greater emphasis be placed on intergenerational communication and the use of metaphor in cases of nerves.

CONCLUSION

The Sicilian-Canadian nerves complex conforms in many respects to the ideas that scholars have developed to understand *idioms of distress*. Sicilian-Canadians, for example, make use of the nerves idiom to identify, explain, and communicate their suffering to significant others. In addition, the concept

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operates as both an illness category and a metaphorical device that people can use to express a variety of personal and social problems. My aim in the article, however, is to move beyond this level of analysis. I have done this by focusing to a much greater extent than previous writers on the role of metaphor in the Sicilian-Canadian *language of distress*.

Metaphor, simply stated, involves the presentation or discussion of one concept in terms of another (Aristotle 1954, 251). This definition, however, tends to misrepresent the significance of the phenomenon. It implies that metaphor is devoid of cognitive content (see Brown 1977; Ricoeur 1977). According to Ricoeur (1977), this position is untenable: "Metaphor is the rhetorical process by which discourse unleashes the power that certain fictions have to redescribe reality" (p. 7). From this point of view, metaphor plays a significant role in the organization of thought and the creation of meaning.

Recently, Lakoff and his associates (see Johnson 1987; Lakoff 1987; Lakoff and Johnson 1980; Lakoff and Turner 1989) have taken the discussion one step further. Their position is that metaphor not only influences how we perceive reality but that it can also structure how we experience that reality. This is particularly true in the case of feelings and other phenomena that are difficult to comprehend and discuss in concrete terms (Lakoff and Johnson 1980; see also Fernandez 1986; van der Geest and Whyte 1989). Metaphors allow individuals to make use of elements from one conceptual domain to define and redefine the feelings or emotions they are experiencing and thereby make these feelings *concrete*. The concretization of a subjective experience in culturally recognizable and acceptable terms allows the individual to frame and communicate an image of reality that elicits a desired response. It is this "experientialist position" that informs my study of the Sicilian-Canadian nerves complex.

Among Sicilian-Canadians, the use of metaphor in cases of nerves occurs at two primary levels. First, people use the nerves idiom itself as a metaphorical representation to convey that they, or significant others, are experiencing some type of social problem. In the process, however, the social problem takes on

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a new significance. *Nierbi* and *nirbusu* operate as cultural symbols of human suffering. These symbols generate powerful images of physical and emotional distress that frame people's understanding of the social problem. The nerves idiom reveals that the situation has reached a critical level and that it may have potentially dangerous consequences for not only the victim but everyone involved. It is this aspect of the metaphor-nerves interrelationship that researchers have discussed extensively in various sociocultural contexts.

Second, Sicilian-Canadians make use of metaphorical statements, such as *triemu comu un busciarieddu* (I'm trembling like a stalk of wheat), to signify that they are experiencing an episode of nerves. This aspect of the phenomenon has not received adequate attention in the scholarly literature. Yet it is these statements that can inform our understanding of the meanings that people attach to the concept of nerves; how they identify and explain their problem(s), and how the images of distress relate to the social context of the situation. The nerves idiom may reveal the potentially dangerous nature of a social problem, but it is the metaphorical statements that I speak of that transform the idiosyncratic experience of emotion or suffering into the concrete language of distress, and thereby construct a series of messages that frame how significant others view the experience.

By including phrases such as *triemu comu un busciarieddu* in their discourse on suffering, Sicilian-Canadians identify their distress as a case of nerves. At the same time, the individual communicates that he or she requires support and assistance from significant others in a language that is readily recognizable by members of their sociocultural group. The metaphor, however, can be interpreted differently by various people, depending on their relationship to the victim and their role in the social problem. The metaphorical representation of suffering influences how people view the situation and how they respond to it. People, then, attempt to consciously or unconsciously construct an image of reality in an attempt to influence the views and actions of others. To respond appropriately, however, an individual must first recognize the message(s) he or she is receiving. Because many Canadian-born or -raised Racalmutese do

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not understand the meaning behind archaic terms such as the *busciarieddu*, the metaphor is not capable of framing the type of response that parents are seeking. As these accompanying metaphors lose their significance, the power of cultural symbols such as *nierbi* and *nirbusu* also diminish.

My application of ideas borrowed from recent metaphor theory illustrates that there is a need to reevaluate how we study "idioms of distress." Recent studies have focused on specific cultural constructs, such as "nerves" or the "evil eye," and how people use these constructs to generate a variety of meanings. What they often fail to address, however, is the fact that the cultural constructs themselves are presented within a particular metaphorical discourse and that we need to examine this discourse to fully comprehend the phenomenon. In my view, it is these underlying metaphorical representations that provide the clue to how people construct, deconstruct, and reconstruct images that are capable of influencing how people perceive and experience reality.

NOTES

1. It is not unusual to find Italian communities here in North America, which are represented by a high percentage of individuals whose ancestry can be traced to a particular town or province in Italy (see Bianco 1974; Boissevain 1970; Lee 1987; Venturelli 1982).

2. A review of the literature indicates that references to the "evil eye" can be found throughout Europe, North and East Africa, the Middle East, the Indian subcontinent, the Philippines, Latin America, and among various North American immigrant groups (see Dundes 1981; Galt 1982; Ghosh 1983; Gilmore 1982; Herzfeld 1981, 1984; Maloney 1976; Sachs 1983; Siebers 1983; Stephenson 1979).

3. To provide anonymity, I use fictional names to refer to many of my informants. Don Gesualdo is a name I have taken from a novel by Giovanni Verga (1940).

4. My social standing as a highly educated professional has placed me in a position of respect within the community. However, because my informants have been my elders and, in many cases, individuals with whom I have a close kinship relationship, I believe that my enhanced status has not greatly influenced my field research (for a discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of working within one's own ethnic community, see Migliore 1991).

5. Among Sicilian-Canadians, the "nerves" complex involves certain inherent ambiguities. The term *nierbi*, for instance, can refer to a diverse, although interrelated, set

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of phenomena ranging from muscle and sinew to the emotional, and in severe cases illness, state of *nirbusu.*

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