

Narrative change and the Open Society Public Health Program

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1. Introduction

‘Narrative change’ seems to be a trend at present. Within the Open Society Foundations, work on narrative change has either started or received new attention in the Public Health Program (PHP), Human Rights Initiative, the Information Program and US Programs, to name a few. Beyond OSF, the Ford Foundation and the John D and Catherine T MacArthur Foundation are but two other foundations that have undertaken narrative change work. Donors have collaborated to fund narrative change projects through the Thomas Paine Initiative and the Security and Rights Collaborative. Organizations such as Opportunity Agenda, the Frameworks Institute and the New Economics Foundation do it¹. Hardly a conversation or meeting happens without the term ‘narrative change’ being used. However there is always a danger when a term becomes a trend, because it starts to become a short-cut for thinking - a term without precision – where everybody thinks they know what it means, but nobody really does for sure.

Adding to the lack of clarity is the fact that narrative change is happening all the time, with or without us. Stories and narratives form an important part of many advocacy efforts, and narratives may change as a result of any number of activities not explicitly labeled as ‘narrative change’ efforts. For example, by giving a speech at the United Nations or EU, a self-advocate with intellectual disabilities may help change the narrative about people like her; a sex worker who acts as a paralegal to support her peers within the criminal justice system may also shift perceptions about ‘prostitutes’. Unexpected events can also change narratives: the disaster at the Fukushima nuclear facility in Japan following a tsunami dramatically shifted the conversation about nuclear safety. A remark by a stand-up comic can serve as the tipping point to change the narrative about fellow comedian, Bill Cosby. So when we decide to focus on doing narrative change what does that mean, and how does it differ from what everybody else is doing?

It doesn’t help that the terms themselves are not easy to nail down. As Jones and McBeth point out, “narrative remains a mysterious and elusive concept” in policy theory (2010:330). In our conversations we often use ‘narrative change’ interchangeably with terms such as ‘framing’, ‘culture change’, ‘attitude change’.

Some two years ago, the Open Society Public Health Program (PHP) decided to emphasize narrative change work within its strategy, and we therefore needed to be able to define the concept more precisely, to understand what it is and what it is not, why it is important, and how we ‘do’ narrative change. We needed to better articulate how narrative change relates to attitude change, and how it impacts on policy. This paper represents an attempt to answer some of these questions.

¹ More details on some of these projects and additional examples are provided in the appendix.

In this paper I make an attempt to define both ‘narrative’ and ‘narrative change’ and outline reasons it is important. I examine narrative change and its link to attitudes and values. I then turn to the role of narrative in policy change processes, narrative change at the level of culture, and the ways in which policy and culture interact. I go on to outline some of the narrative change methods that we are using within the PHP, and discuss several questions related to risks and ethics.

2. What is Narrative and Narrative Change, and why is it important

It is difficult to find a single understanding of narrative that is comprehensive. Bruner (1991), Frank (2010), Jones & McBeth (2010) and Fisher (1984) all offer partial definitions, from which it is possible to extract some key ideas.

While in common parlance ‘narrative’ is often used interchangeably with ‘story’, for our purposes we need to make a distinction. Thus:

A narrative consists of a collection or body stories of characters, joined in some common problem as fixers (heroes), causes (villains) or the harmed (victims) in a temporal trajectory (plot) leading towards resolution within a particular setting or context (Jones & McBeth 2010; Frank 2010).

These stories together or collectively convey a common worldview or meaning – an interpretation of the world and how it works (Frank 2010; Fisher 1984).

Narratives are reflected within cultural products, such as language and other forms of representation (Bruner, 1991).

Narratives operate at an emotional as well as cognitive level.

Narratives cannot be evaluated or challenged empirically, but according to whether they are coherent and ‘ring true’ (Bruner 1991 and Fisher 1984).

2.1. Why narratives are important

There is a substantial and growing body of research in fields such as psychology, cognitive science, political science and sociology showing that people do not make decisions through a purely rational process, and that emotion and a range of cognitive biases play a hugely important role (See for example Kahneman, Haidt, and Lakoff). This research and its implications are extensively addressed in the 2015 World Development Report, which distils three key insights about human decision-making: that humans think automatically, we think socially and we think with mental models. We can thus understand narratives as powerful, socially constructed mental models that shape our perception and understanding of reality and thus guide individuals’ decision-making and behavior (Bruner 1991; Jones & McBeth 2010:330).

It makes sense that if narratives are important in guiding individual beliefs and decision-making, they would play an important role in policy processes. And indeed, this has been highlighted by a number of scholars and researchers. Narratives play a key role in the negotiation of meaning in the political sphere

– or what Benford and Snow (2000:613) call ‘the politics of signification’. However, while this is something that social movements, the media, and the state are continuously engaged in, it often does not receive as much conscious and strategic attention as other areas of contestation – certainly in the human rights field. We can see this gap in the growing recognition in our field that the conceptual lenses and language that we and our allies have traditionally used to advance our issues, such as the ‘human rights’ frame, seem to be losing ground – with ‘human rights’ being increasingly negatively associated with rights for criminals or migrants (such as in the UK), or with ‘corrupt Western values’. Indeed the International Human Rights Funders Group devoted an entire day during its New York conference in July 2015, to an examination of how we might ‘detoxify’ the human rights ‘brand’. In the conference materials, meeting organizers noted that “Human rights advocacy has lagged behind other movements for social change in developing and deploying new communications strategies designed not simply to influence how people think about issues, but critically how they feel about them.”

Thus, in addition to traditional approaches to advancing and supporting human rights such as monitoring, legal empowerment, strategic litigation, grassroots mobilization and elite advocacy, we need to pay much more explicit attention to narrative strategies in the policy sphere.

We also need to look beyond the policy sphere, however. Within the Open Society Public Health Program, and I suspect across the human rights movement, we constantly feel that while we might win occasional policy battles, these wins are constantly under attack and in danger of being reversed. We win some battles, but we are losing the war. One of the reasons for this is that we are often working against powerful narratives that are embedded in the overarching culture. These shape the way in which problems are identified; they limit the types of solutions that are viewed as acceptable and possible, and determine how certain types and of people are categorized and treated.

3. Narrative change and rationality -- The narrative paradigm

The psychologist Jerome Bruner points out that narratives cannot be changed or countered through rational argument. We cannot judge and assess the acceptability of competing narratives through logic and empirical verification, but must do so on the basis of “narrative necessity”. Thus as activists, or advocates, we need to enter and operate within the world of narrative, and according to its rules.

This may make many people uncomfortable – after all, we are used to calling for ‘evidence-based policy’. We see the changes we promote as being rationally better than the alternative. If we have to abandon rationality, what is left – how are we to ask people to judge between alternatives – or are we left with baseless emotional appeals?

In this respect, the work of the communication scholar, Walter Fisher, is extremely helpful. Fisher argues that “the way in which people explain and/or justify their behavior, whether past or future, has more to do with telling a credible story than it does with producing evidence or constructing a logical argument” (Wikipedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Narrative_paradigm). He juxtaposes two paradigms for understanding human communication and decision-making (Fisher 1984). According to the ‘rational

paradigm', humans are seen as essentially rational, the world is a set of logical puzzles that can be resolved through the application of reason, and human decision-making and communication takes place primarily through argument based on evidence (the rules and format of argument will differ depending on whether the situation is legal, scientific, legislative, and so on).

Fisher believes this paradigm is too limited, however, and cannot account for how most human communication and decision-making takes place. The rational model applies only in specific specialized fields. It does not explain how 'everyday argument' takes place, and in particular it does not account for 'public moral argument' where competing values are at stake. And so in contrast to the rational paradigm, Fisher proposes what he calls a 'narrative paradigm' for understanding human communications.

Under this paradigm, humans are seen as essentially storytellers. Fisher argues that human decision-making and communication takes place through the production and exchange of symbols, signs and 'good reasons' – which are influenced by history, biography, culture and character. The world is a set of competing narratives which we must choose between. However, this is not a random, irrational process. People judge between stories based on two criteria: narrative probability (whether a story is coherent) and narrative fidelity (does the story 'ring true' with the other stories people know to be true in their lives).

The work of sociologist Francesca Polletta illustrates how this process of decision-making happens in practice. In her study of how citizens of New York deliberated in online forums about the future of Lower Manhattan during the summer of 2002, she shows how this often took place through the exchange of stories in which participants conveyed their personal experiences of 9/11 in order to explain and justify their preferences – advancing what Polletta terms 'narrative claims'. (2006:82-108) "For example, one participant wrenchingly described replaying over and over in her mind the televised images of the towers' destruction, then wrote, "A purely personal reason that The Skyline must be restored???" (2006:105)

One of the key contributions of Fisher's Narrative Paradigm, in my view, is that it provides justification for the role of the public in what he calls 'public moral argument' – argument over questions that involve competing values and deal with 'ultimate questions' – "of life and death, of how persons should be defined and treated, of preferred patterns of living" (1984:12). These questions are of concern to the public at large and are not limited to one specialized knowledge community.

Under the rational paradigm, such questions are reduced to technical ones to be decided by experts, and the public are reduced to mere spectators. However, under the narrative paradigm, experts may provide knowledge and counsel but the public must weigh the competing 'stories' and decide. The narrative paradigm gives legitimacy to concerns that are normally dismissed by technical experts – factors such as trust or distrust of decision-makers, fear or hope, individuals' self-conception, values, and their pre-existing stories of how the world works.

Importantly for human rights activists, Fisher points out that in situations where advocates argue from a position of rights, while their opponents advance completely different reasons (such as utility, or

'success' among other possibilities) there is an impasse. The "only way to bridge the gap is by telling stories that do not negate the self-conceptions people hold of themselves," he argues.

4. Narrative change, attitudes and opinions

At the individual level, narrative change focuses on influencing individuals' attitudes/opinions, in order in turn to influence public opinion more broadly. Many researchers distinguish attitudes from opinions by arguing that an attitude is an emotional evaluation of an object, while an opinion is a cognitive – unemotional – evaluation of an object. 'Attitude' is a fundamental concept in social psychology, while 'opinion' is a fundamental concept in political science.

Simply defined, an **attitude** is an expression of favor or disfavor toward a person, place, thing, or event (Wikipedia https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Attitude_%28psychology%29). It therefore has an emotional dimension. However, Bergman argues that since an attitude has to reflect an emotion about *something*, it also has a cognitive component. At the same time, research by cognitive scientists has shown us that any cognitive conception of an object always has an emotional (affective) element. Therefore, the concepts of 'attitude' and 'opinion' are essentially synonymous (Bergman 1998). Attitude change as well as opinion change are areas that have received a great deal of empirical and theoretical attention, and there are several well-known models for how attitude (opinion) change takes place, and acknowledged research instruments for measuring attitudes/opinions and attitude/opinion change.

A **belief** is the state of mind in which a person thinks something to be the case, with or without there being empirical evidence to prove that something is the case with factual certainty.

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Belief>

Values can be defined as broad preferences concerning appropriate courses of action or outcomes. As such, values reflect a person's sense of right and wrong or what "ought" to be. Bergman argues that attitudes are held by individuals, while values are social – which makes them more stable and slower to change.

Narrative change may be aimed at *changing* beliefs and attitudes. This can be seen when, for example, we are working to 'change the narrative' about a particular group of people – such as sex workers, or Roma. By changing the stories told about (or changing the symbolic representation of) a group of people we indeed hope to change beliefs about those people and thus to alter attitudes. Many times we would also hope to change behavior (such as discriminatory treatment in hospitals).

But often individuals hold conflicting attitudes, beliefs and values. Rather than aiming to change them, we may merely seek to *activate* or change the *salience* of particular existing beliefs, attitudes or values relative to others, by changing the mental model through which people approach particular problems. Narrative change techniques often do this through 'framing' - by showing that a particular desired attitude or behavior aligns with the individual's existing beliefs, or by altering the salience of particular values in particular contexts (for example, a person may simultaneously value 'freedom' and 'fairness'.

Messaging to advance a policy restricting the pricing options of pharmaceutical companies will seek to use a narrative that activates the 'fairness' value in the audience, while downplaying questions of 'freedom'.)

As an example of how narratives may prime a particular way of viewing an issue, researchers at Stanford University showed in an experiment that a change in a single metaphor in an article about crime dramatically changed the type of solutions people came up with. Experiment participants who were given an article describing crime as virus (infecting our communities) came up with preventative solutions for crime such as after school programs and preschool, while subjects exposed to a metaphor of crime as a beast (ravaging our communities) proposed punishment-based solutions such as harsher sentences and increased policing. While people were primed by a particular narrative to suggest particular solutions, their attitudes toward crime had not necessarily changed. In fact the experiment found that the metaphor was more influential in predicting participants' responses than their existing political attitudes and beliefs (party affiliation). (Thibodeau & Boroditsky 2011)

In some cases, the aim is not to change attitudes so much as to alter their *strength* or *intensity* by creating a sense of urgency, or by simply showing people that the alternatives they already favor are indeed possible. Changing the narrative might help alter the nature of support for a particular movement by activating existing supporters through showing them that the movement is in line with their existing attitudes, beliefs and values, while sidelining those with opposing attitudes. Or as Benford and Snow put it, narratives simplify and condense aspects of the world "in ways that are 'intended to mobilize potential adherents and constituents, to garner bystander support, and to demobilize antagonists.'" (Snow and Benford 1988 in Benford and Snow 2000).

5. Narrative change and the policy sub-system

Earlier I referred to the importance of narratives in policy processes. However, when narratives are everywhere, when can we say that we are engaged in 'narrative change' as opposed to advocacy for policy change in general? I would argue that 'narrative change' comes into play when we explicitly adopt a change strategy that sees narrative as a core element. So, for instance, approaches to advocacy or policy change that foreground elite engagement are not explicitly concerned with narrative change – such as the 'power elites' approach which focuses on the importance of forging strategic alliances with key decision-makers; or a 'community organizing' approach, that emphasizes community mobilization as a means of shifting the balance of power (Stachowiak 2006).

There are several theories of policy change that do foreground narrative. Very significant for our purposes is the Narrative Policy Framework - a relatively new theory of the policy process. It looks at three levels in which narratives play a role: the *micro* level of the individual and how individuals inform and are informed by narratives; the *meso* level in which groups and advocacy coalitions deploy narratives within the policy subsystem; and the *macro* level in which narratives are embedded in cultures and institutions and shape public policy. (McBeth, Jones and Shanahan 2014). From several case studies that have been done already, interesting findings are starting to emerge about what tactics are

associated with winning sides in policy battles versus losing ones (for example, it seems that advocates who tell stories highlighting heroic protagonists are more successful than advocates who focus on stories that demonize their opponents. McBeth, et al 2015).

While the NPF is unique in placing primary focus on narratives in the policy change process, many other well-established policy change theories (such as the Advocacy Coalition Framework), recognize that narrative strategies and competing framings of issues are important and ever-present aspects of policy advocacy processes.

In addition to being a part of any advocacy process, narrative strategies play a particularly important role with respect to a particular type of policy change, in which there is large-scale change involving a fundamental redefinition or reframing of an issue. This is exemplified in the Punctuated Equilibrium Theory (True, et al 2006) of policy change. The theory posits that political processes are usually stable, with incremental change taking place – but occasionally there is large-scale change or upheaval. According to True, et al (2006), for such major change to take place, three conditions must exist: firstly *an issue must become more salient* – it has to rise from existing within a particular policy sector or sub-system, to the very centre of the political agenda (heightened attention by the public, media and political elites, caused by factors such as major changes in public opinion, striking and compelling new information, or major mobilization). Secondly, *an issue becomes defined differently* – there is significant change in the supporting policy image (understood as a powerful idea or image, involving a mix of empirical information and emotive appeals, which is linked to core values and is the manner in which a policy is characterized or understood by the public). Thirdly, *new actors begin to enter the arena*: “As the issue is redefined, or as new dimensions of the debate become more salient, new actors feel qualified to exert their authority where previously they stayed away.” (2006:8) This also leads to further mobilization and increased public attention – and subsequent major policy revision.

6. Narrative change at the level of Culture

At the macro level, narratives are embedded in culture and in institutions, and through that exert influence over the type and range of policy options that are considered (or not).

There is a scene from the popular television series, *Game of Thrones*, that I like to show people when explaining cultural narratives. Two handmaidens are bathing their queen, the Khalisi, and one talks about the moon being a dragon’s egg. “It is known”, she says. The other says no, the earth is a goddess. “It is known.”

“It is known,” refers to fundamental assumptions by which we interpret and understand the world. As authors such as McLuhan and Vedantam (2010) have pointed out, we are often unaware of these assumptions and it can be very difficult to bring them to awareness since they constitute the very cultural environment in which we live (just as a fish might struggle to be aware of the water it swims in). However, we need to find ways to reveal and challenge these assumptions, as they exert powerful influences on everything we do. In many cases in human rights work, they push against what we are trying to accomplish.

These fundamental assumptions are embedded in stories – in narratives. They get communicated through cultural products, through symbols – language, discourse, metaphors and images.

Culture can interact with policy in complex ways. At times, cultural narratives may change long before policy catches up. An example is same sex marriage in the USA – where recent policy changes have recognized and been made possible by a broad cultural shift over the past 30 years. On the other hand, policy changes may take place ahead of a cultural shift – and may be ineffective or widely attacked as a result. An example is abortion in the US, where *Roe vs Wade* shocked conservatives and mobilized them into a long-term battle to systematically undo the Supreme Court's decision (Baker 2015). There are also occasions when policy changes lead to changes in behavior and to broader cultural shifts – for example, seat-belt laws in the US gained widespread compliance only when people were threatened with fines – but seat belt use has now become a cultural norm.

It is also important to bear in mind that policy is not everything. There are countless instances of policies that have had little influence on how people actually operate in everyday life. Beyond policy, culture influences the categorization and thus the treatment of entire groups of people, and ways of life.

Cultural narratives are intimately tied up with questions of power. Some narrative representations exert dominance over others (Frank 2010), providing what Reinsborough & Canning (2010) refer to as 'control mythologies' that help prop up the status quo."

Thus any organization concerned with human rights, with questions of power and inequality, needs to pay attention to narrative and the way in which it operates. While coercive power of course operates in many ways, through laws and institutions and other physical forms, it is not sufficient to challenge institutions and other manifestations of coercive power if we do not also work to destabilize the control mythologies that provide them with a cloak of legitimacy.

In their work on activism, Reinsborough and Canning talk about various possible points of intervention in a system where action can bring about change (2010). Activists usually intervene at physical points, such as the 'point of production' (a factory for example), 'point of consumption' (consumer boycotts, for instance), 'point of destruction' (environmentalist actions come to mind) or 'point of decision' (such as a legislature). In contrast, narrative change entails engaging at the 'point of assumption'. Unlike the other points of intervention, the point of assumption exists in 'narrative space', not physical space – although actions may take place in physical space.

Stephen Duncombe and Steve Lambert of the Center for Artistic Activism talk about the value of surprise as an artistic tactic to disrupt culturally-based assumptions and open up space to create new ones. Through their trainings and via the website Actipedia.org, (created in collaboration with the Yes Labs) they offer many practical examples (to date, around 1300-1400 entries) of how this can be done. Likewise, the group Beautiful Trouble offers a range of tactics for action at the 'point of assumption'. But beyond such tactics, we need to do further work investigating models for change at the cultural level.

7. The interaction of policy and culture: the case of paradigm shift

The work of Peter Hall (1993) is useful in helping us understand the interaction of cultural and policy change. Hall argues that 'policymakers customarily work within a framework of ideas and standards that specifies not only the goals of policy and the kinds of instruments that can be used to attain them, but also the very nature of the problems they are meant to be addressing.' The 'framework of ideas' that Hall refers to bears a similarity to what we have described as cultural narratives: "Like a Gestalt, this framework is embedded in the very terminology through which policymakers communicate about their work, and it is influential precisely because so much of it is taken for granted and unamenable to scrutiny as a whole." He calls this framework a "policy paradigm".

Hall goes on to argue that there are three orders of policy change. The first level entails changes to the levels or settings of policy instruments – overall goals and instruments remain the same, but policy targets are adjusted. In the second order of change, policy instruments themselves as well as settings are altered – so targets as well as the means of achieving them are changed. First order change is incremental. Second order change displays strategic action.

The third order of change is of a very different nature. It entails a paradigm shift in which targets, instruments and the very hierarchy of goals all change simultaneously. It is marked by "radical changes in the overarching terms of policy discourse". Technical experts play a key role in the first and second order of policy change, and choices within these two levels are made on the basis of 'scientific' arguments. However, when it comes to third order change or paradigm shift, there is no logical or reasonable step that leads from one paradigm to another. Here, as Hall points out, the process is "more sociological than scientific". Power struggles and competition at the level of discourse are key: "the outcome will depend, not only on the arguments of competing factions, but on their positional advantages within a broader institutional framework." Questions of authority become crucial – there is a shift in who is regarded as authoritative on policy matters. The role of technocrats becomes secondary – politicians, civil society and the media all exert influence.

To illustrate his argument, Hall looks at changes in macroeconomic policy in Britain between 1970 and 1989. An example of first order change in British macroeconomic policy during that period is adjustment of the minimum lending rate, while the overall goals and policy instruments remained the same. Examples of second order change were the introduction of a new system of monetary control in 1971 and the movement away from strict targets for monetary growth between 1981 and 1983. Third order change took place when there was a "radical shift" away from Keynesian policy towards a monetarist framework for macroeconomic regulation – and inflation replaced unemployment as the key concern of policymakers. This represented a simultaneous change "in all three components of policy: the instrument settings, the instruments themselves, and the hierarchy of goals behind policy." (1993:279).

In his example, Hall shows how, along with economic developments that the prevailing Keynesian system could not fully predict or explain, a range of other changes happened in the political rather than economic sphere. The most dramatic shift was the election of Margaret Thatcher as prime minister in 1979 – but this was preceded by several other developments, such as the rising influence of the Bank of

England and corresponding decline in the authority of the Treasury, rising influence of American economists over their British counterparts, and intensified debate about economic issues in the media and financial circles – in which conservative politicians were able to present monetarism in terms that had broad public appeal.

Hall's argument that in third order changes, the choices between alternatives cannot be made on the basis of rational arguments but involve a very different kind of shift: a shift in values, and in the very 'terms of political discourse', looks very much like the competition of alternative narratives that Fisher talks about. If we look at this in Fisher's terms – under first and second order change, the rational paradigm applies and decisions are largely in the realm of experts. However, third order change entails public moral argument – it is about values, or "preferred patterns of living." It represents a contest between competing interpretations of the world – between competing stories:

"Politicians, officials, the spokesmen for social interests, and policy experts all operate within the terms of political discourse that are current in the nation at a given time, and the terms of political discourse generally have a specific configuration that lends representative legitimacy to some social interest more than others, delineates the accepted boundaries of state action, associates contemporary political developments with particular interpretations of national history, and defines the context in which many issues will be understood."(1993:289)

8. How does the PHP work on narrative change?

Turning from definitional and theoretical issues to the more practical and applied, the following section presents an outline of some of the major ways in which the Open Society Public Health Program works on narrative change. The three approaches outlined here are not necessarily the only ones possible, nor are they mutually exclusive. They merely represent the major ways in which the PHP is undertaking this work at present.

8.1 Cultural Strategies

8.1.1. Arts and cultural or artistic activism

In 2000, the town of Skoghall in Sweden commissioned New York-based artist and architect Alfredo Jaar, to propose a work of public art. Skoghall is a company town, dominated by a large paper mill. The town was built by the company, Stora-Enso, to house its workforce. Any amenities that existed were provided by the company, and there were no cultural facilities at all. Appalled by this, Jaar proposed to build the town an art museum, constructed entirely out of the wood and paper produced by Stora-Enso. The corporation agreed, and the museum was built. The Mayor officially opened the museum at a large community gathering. Bands played. The citizens of Skoghall then enjoyed the inaugural exhibition which displayed the work of up and coming Swedish artists. 24 hours later, in accordance with Jaar's stipulations, the museum was burnt to the ground. People were outraged at the destruction of this much-needed structure, and angry with Jaar. Some also felt that instead of being burnt, the wood could have been recycled into a children's playground – another huge need.

But Jaar told the citizens of Skoghall to direct their anger elsewhere, and pointed out that the company had vast stores of wood and paper at its disposal. In the end, the people formed a committee to develop a permanent public gallery, and a year later, the townspeople invited Jaar to design a playground for them.

Through his intervention, Jaar had succeeded in changing the narrative the citizens of Skoghall told about themselves. His aim had not been to give the community an art museum, but to awaken a civic sensibility in them, to make them aware of themselves as citizens with agency.

Jaar's work in Skoghall was an example of cultural, artistic or creative activism. There are many examples of such activism around the world, ranging from mayor Antanas Mockus' introduction of mimes to improve traffic safety in Bogota, to 'legislative theatre' staged by Theatre of the Oppressed groups in various places around the world, to the stunts staged by the Yes Men to draw attention to corporate abuses or the need for action on climate change.

As defined by Stephen Duncombe and Steve Lambert of the Center for Artistic Activism, creative activism makes use of "symbols and signs, images and expressions" in order to have an impact in today's "media-saturated, spectacle-savvy world" (<http://artisticactivism.org/services/the-school-for-creative-activism/>). If we are to be engaged in the politics of signification, the 'making of meaning,' then artistic activism is an important approach.

In the US there are several groups who provide training and resources in this area. These include the Center for Story-Based Strategy, Beautiful Trouble, and the Center for Artistic Activism (which the PHP has worked with for several years). These groups are headquartered in the US, but do work in many places across the globe and often have affiliates in other countries.

Narrative power analysis:

If it is to be not only creative or artistic, but also effective activism, then any sort of intervention has to begin with a strategic analysis. In this regard, Reinsborough and Canning (2010) offer a very useful outline for what they call a narrative power analysis. This takes the form of a series of questions that need to be asked and answered, such as, "Which stories define cultural norms? Where did these stories come from? Whose stories were ignored or erased to create these norms? What new stories can we tell to more accurately describe the world we see? And perhaps more urgently, what are the stories that can help create the world we desire?" In order both to understand the existing dominant narrative/s in a particular field and to construct alternative narratives, activists then need to examine a series of elements central to the construction of narratives, such as:

Conflict: What does the story present as the problem? What is at stake?

Characters: Who are the characters? Who are the narrators/messengers? Who are the heroes, the victims, the villains?

Imagery: What imagery and metaphors are central to the story?

Foreshadowing: What outcomes does the story hint at? What sort of future does the story suggest, or what promises does it make about the resolution of the conflict?

Assumptions: What assumptions underlie the story? What does one have to accept as a given in order to see the narrative as true?

Once this analysis has been done, activists can begin to develop a strategy and tactics for undermining the dominant story and putting forward a new one.

Action

Based on the analysis, action entails the undertaking of specific public actions that challenge dominant stories and offer alternatives. Examples of the vast range of possible tactics (and principles underlying these tactics can be found in Reinsborough and Canning's book, as well as in the book (and website of the same name), *Beautiful Trouble* (Boyd 2012). The Center for Artistic Activism and the Yes Labs have jointly set up the Actipedia, which is a user-driven database of thousands of examples of creative actions from all around the world. These are intended as inspiration, not models to copy. As Duncombe and Lambert emphasize in their trainings, there cannot be a template – to be effective, creative actions must be based on, and respond to, the specific cultural context in which they take place.

While much of what creative activism aims to do is to challenge assumptions and reframe issues, the approach is very much based on the idea of activists brainstorming ideas amongst themselves and then carrying them out. Messages and actions are not pre-tested through formal research. While evaluation and adaptation are important elements of the process, this tends to happen through qualitative reflection, analysis and discussion amongst the activists themselves.

The Public Health Program has applied the approaches outlined above in a range of contexts. For example, in late 2015 the PHP supported the Center for Story-Based Strategy to facilitate a narrative power analysis exercise with a coalition of activists working to transform the medical innovation model in Europe. The Center for Artistic Activism has trained PHP grantees in Macedonia (LGBTI), Europe (access to medicines as well as trans activists) and South Africa (sex workers). During one of these trainings, trans activists created a Trans Map of Berlin, highlighting historical sites, places of interest and sites where trans people have been attacked or killed, as part of their plans to observe Trans Day of Remembrance.

Impact

While there are many anecdotal stories of successes²(as well as failures), here seems to be little systematic research into the impact of creative or artistic activism, the conditions under which it is likely to work, and in particular, and the mechanisms by which such action brings about change. The PHP has provided seed funding to a research project aimed at investigating precisely this question.

² For example, Mockus' mimes did succeed in reducing traffic accidents, at least for a time.

It is possible for groups planning creative actions to research their target audiences before and after their interventions in order to evaluate the impact, though this does not seem to be a routine practice.

Cultural and artistic activism can play a role in policy change, particularly for grassroots groups interested in influencing policy narratives. It can also play a role in making visible and challenging narratives at the level of culture (and popular culture in particular).

8.1.2. Popular culture: television, film, social media, comedy, music

Popular culture is a crucial arena for culture-level change. Documentary and fictional films, television series, stand-up comedians, comics and animations and popular music are all powerful conveyers of culture and have been used by a range of organizations to convey particular messages. Recognizing this, in February 2016, with funding from Unbound Philanthropy and the Nathan Cummings Foundation, Liz Manne Strategy released #PopJustice, a series of six volumes examining the role of pop culture in advancing social justice. The group, Hollywood, Health and Society engages with script-writers for television and films to try and influence inclusion of particular storylines. While the PHP has so far not done much work in the popular culture sphere, though this is starting to change. It has from time to time provided small levels of funding for audience engagement for particular documentary films (such as *How to Survive a Plague* and *Fire in the Blood*). In April 2016, the PHP was involved in an OSF-wide collaboration to support civil society mobilization demanding reforms to international drug policy during the UNGASS meeting. This included funding for a pop-up Museum of Drug Policy, which existed for the three days of the UN meeting and included art works, photography, installations and cultural programming.

Personal narrative: Listening and storytelling

In her famous TED talk (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D9lhs241zeg>), author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie warns of the dangers of a single story. She tells of the 'single story' that people in the US tell of Africa, or of Mexicans, and she points out not only that these dominant single narratives limit our ability to understand one another and recognize our common humanity, but that they shape political and policy decisions. She also makes the link between the dominance of a single story and power:

"It is impossible to talk about the single story without talking about power. There is a word, an Igbo word, that I think about whenever I think about the power structures of the world and it is "nkali." It's a noun that loosely translates to "to be greater than another." Like our economic and political worlds, stories too are defined by the principle of nkali: How they are told, who tells them, when they're told, how many stories are told, are really dependent on power. Power is the ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person." To counter this, she highlights the need for a proliferation of stories – each bringing a new and different perspective: "What the Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe calls 'a balance of stories'."

There is a lot of attention on the use of story as a persuasive tool – on use of stories instrumentally in order to reach a specific advocacy goal. The listening and storytelling I am referring to here, however, refers to work that seeks to facilitate storytelling as a way of opening up political space, destabilizing

entrenched power relationships, and giving voice to voices that are usually drowned out, suppressed or simply ignored. People and organizations who do this work in fact tend to emphasize *listening* over telling – they recognize that it is the cultivation and intention of listening that allows stories to be told and that creates space for transformation.

The work of Aspen Baker is an example here – she founded the organization Exhale in order to provide “a caring, nonjudgmental space for women and men to share their feelings about abortion, without choosing sides.” Listening to, and sharing stories are key to this. In her TED talk, Baker discussed her “strong belief in the power of personal narratives – in all their nuance and complexity – to create empathy and ‘shift the conflict to a place of conversation’.”

https://www.ted.com/talks/aspen_baker_a_better_way_to_talk_about_abortion?language=en

The PHP has worked for a number of years with the organization Narativ, who have trained many of the program’s grantees in listening and storytelling skills. In 2015, the PHP worked with Narativ along with several other experts including Dr Rita Charon, the founder of the field of Narrative Medicine, to hold a seminar in Salzburg for doctors and medical students from Romania, Macedonia, Hungary and Serbia. This formed part a project aimed at ‘changing the narrative on Roma in healthcare settings’ in these countries – to transform the way doctors and other healthcare workers talk about and treat Roma patients. Listening and storytelling formed a central, and very powerful, part of the seminar in helping Roma and non-Roma participants understand one another’s perspectives, providing greater insight into the impact of cultural as well as structural factors on the way in which Roma patients interact with the health system, and in equipping the young doctors with some tools for getting past their own assumptions and stereotypes (for example by focusing on concrete details of ‘what happened’, rather than the abstract).

Narrative medicine is the practice by doctors or nurses of eliciting, listening to, and reflecting on the stories patients tell, in order to better understand them and their concerns and to provide better care. Charon’s (2006) approach to narrative medicine is useful and interesting one, not only because it links directly to issues of ethics and the nature of treatment of patients by healthcare staff. Charon’s outline of the three elements of Attention (being present for another – usually a patient -- through listening, acute observation and concentration), Representation (reflection through writing and other means, on what has been heard and observed) and Affiliation (as result of attention and representation authentic connections begin to be built between individuals), provide an important ethos for how to undertake the practice of listening and storytelling as well as a very useful way for understanding how this helps to undermine assumptions and preconceptions and ‘change the narrative’ told about patients, or certain types of patients in medical contexts. This is particularly relevant in the context of the PHP’s work on deinstitutionalization and mental health, and the way in which patients who come from criminalized or marginalized groups are treated within healthcare settings – such as transgender and intersex people, HIV positive women, drug users and sex workers.

Impact

There is a good deal of research into the practice of storytelling in a wide range of social situations – mostly in the form of analysis of how it takes place, rather than in understanding its systemic impact and how it might bring about change. The PHP has funded some initial research into impact of storytelling in advocacy, undertaken by Francesca Polletta at UC Irvine. The question of where and when, and under what conditions storytelling is likely to make a difference is a complex one however, and while it needs further research, any answers are unlikely to be simple.

Personal storytelling of the sort I describe here can be very effective in influencing individual change and transforming relationships at the micro level. They can also be used to open up the policy space, particularly when positions are polarized.

8.2. Metaphor and Cognitive linguistics

This approach is influenced largely by the work of George Lakoff and other cognitive scientists who take a similar perspective. Lakoff is known for his thesis that our socio-political lives are greatly influenced by the metaphors we use to explain complex phenomena, that these metaphors operate at an unconscious level and that unless politicians and activists pay attention to this and are very careful about the metaphors they use, their influence will be very limited. For example, Lakoff (2004) argues that in the US, conservatives and liberals unconsciously make use of fundamentally different metaphors to understand the relationship of the citizen to the state. Conservatives operate from a ‘strict father’ model of the state – where citizens need to be disciplined in order to learn to be independent adults. In contrast, liberals operate from a ‘nurturing parent model’, where the state must operate from compassion and help to keep citizens (children) away from negative influences (such as poverty). Lakoff and followers argue that liberals’ communication efforts often fail because they adopt metaphors that unconsciously reinforce conservative framings of how the world works (for example, the term ‘tax-relief’ carries with it the metaphor of tax as painful, or a burden – a conservative framing).

This approach, with its focus on language and discourse, is more systematic and research-based than the other two I have mentioned. Narrative change work based on cognitive linguistics entails several steps that may vary in detail from practitioner to practitioner, but which generally cover three stages.

The first stage involves an analysis of existing messaging and language used by the various parties in a particular narrative contest, in order to understand the existing narrative terrain. An example would be a content analysis of news coverage of a particular issue over a defined time period. The consultancy group Monitor 360, for example, offers a service to analyze online discussion of an issue, such as common core standards in education, over a particular time, and to identify key influencers driving particular narratives.

Another step entails research into the target audience – to better understand the narratives active in their understanding of the world and of the particular issue at hand. The Frameworks Institute talks

about this as understanding the ‘swamp’ in people’s minds – the existing mish-mash of preconceptions, metaphors, concerns, received wisdom, frames and values that ‘trap’ well-intentioned messages and prevent them from being understood or acted upon.

A third step involves development and testing of messages based on insights gained from the previous research. This is done through use of focus group discussions as well as dial testing (this entails use of hand-held dials that audience members can turn to register positive and negative reactions to a message in real time, and so can reflect reactions to particular sentences, words or phrases).

Examples of organizations doing this work include the Frameworks Institute, Hattaway Communications, Monitor 360. From 2014 to 2016, the PHP worked with independent consultant Anat Schenker-Osorio. She initially undertook an analysis of the language used by advocates and opponents of policy reforms related to the way in which pharmaceuticals are researched, developed and marketed, and provided some initial messaging recommendations to activists. This was followed by a more comprehensive analysis of the predominant frames active in public discourse on this issue, and then a message development exercise, involving focus group and dial testing research.

A limitation of this approach is that it can be expensive, because of the extensive research involved. From a scan of some previous work in this arena, it also seems to be much easier for cognitive linguists to diagnose the problem – to outline why particular language is problematic – than to come up with alternative language and framing that has the desired effect.

Impact:

Because this approach entails a scan of the narrative terrain before undertaking a change intervention, it is possible to return afterwards, to analyze whether any change can be seen in media content, or in the way in which particular groups talk about certain issues. For example, according to Hattaway Communications, following a project funded by the Ford Foundation to influence the language used by advocacy organizations to talk about government action to reduce poverty, they saw a change in the way that members of the government department of health and human services spoke about their poverty alleviation work.

As with the first two approaches, this requires further investigation but this approach is likely to be most useful at the level of policy contestation – for example under the conditions predicted by the Punctuated Equilibrium Theory.

9. Risks and questions

While I believe narrative change to be an important area of work, it is difficult to do and often a long-term undertaking. It can be expensive, and there are several risks in undertaking this work. I turn now to highlighting and discussing some of these.

9.1. It is difficult to determine impact

Since the PHP and our grantees are but small players within large and complex social and political systems, it is never easy to attribute changes to our own efforts. However, this is true of any advocacy effort and does not mean we should not be doing this work. In the past, academic work on narratives and narrative change and their influence in policy processes has been qualitative, requiring detailed analysis and interpretation. This remains important. However, in recent years a new approach, the Narrative Policy Framework, has emerged within the field of strategic policy studies, and has begun to gain respect. This framework applies more quantitative research methods in order to investigate and assess the ways in which narratives impact on policy processes (McBeth et al 2015).

9.2. It is difficult to define success

It is important to remember that narrative change is not an end in itself, but a means to an end. Even when seen as a goal, narrative change is not an end in itself – it is a means to the end of transformed power relationships, and greater social justice and realization of human rights. In any work we undertake it is incumbent upon us to define what the end is, and to outline what we see as success.

At an intermediate level, there are a range of things that narrative change may be able to achieve. Some that I have mentioned during the course of this paper are: to change beliefs and attitudes; to change particular behavior or practices; to alter the nature of support for a particular movement; shift who is regarded as authoritative on a particular policy matter; awaken a civic sensibility; challenge assumptions and reframe issues; change media content; change the media (or social media) conversation; open up political space; achieve a ‘balance of stories’.

9.3. There is no clear body of knowledge on narrative change

Narrative change work draws on a wide range of disciplines, including social psychology, sociology, political science, anthropology, and cognitive science, to name a few. There is thus no definitive body of knowledge to turn to for clarity on what narrative change is or how to do it. Concepts and their definitions vary across the range of disciplines. This can lead to lack of clarity and confusion. There is no single approach to narrative change, and hence there is a need to support a plurality of approaches, some of which may be in tension with one another. This makes the work challenging and risky. We are learning as we go, and in each case, narrative change is an iterative process, requiring many cycles of implementation, reflection and adaptation.

9.4. Narrative change work is contextually and culturally specific

As we undertake this work and (hopefully) achieve successes, there is a risk of attempting to replicating particular interventions in different contexts. We need to constantly bear in mind the lesson that the Center for Artistic Activism teaches participants in its training workshops: ‘these examples will not work here’. Culture, and narratives, are specific and local and must be approached accordingly.

9.5. Narrative change is manipulative and thus in some sense unethical

As I mentioned earlier in this paper, among human rights activists there may be some unease with the idea of narrative change with its connection to attitude change, and the move away from purely rational

and evidence-based communication in favor of a range of and use of sophisticated persuasive techniques, often associated with marketing. It seems somehow manipulative and unethical.

It is important to bear in mind that purely rational and evidence-based communication has its own limitations and is also subject to the cognitive biases that are inherent in any human endeavor. Science itself works within a particular narrative that lays down particular rules, outlines who and who is not a legitimate actor, the types of questions that are deserving of study and what counts as evidence. As I hope the discussion of Fisher's approach has showed, a turn to narrative is about adopting a particular paradigm of communication that works according to specific rules. By operating in a mode of discourse that people in fact use to engage in moral argument every day, narrative techniques can make complex debates accessible to the most diverse parts of society, to non-experts and thus have potential to open the space for increased participation rather than confine discussion to technocrats well versed in policy issues.

Cognitive scientist Anat Shenker-Osorio, who does extensive work on framing and the use of cognitive and linguistic approaches with progressive movements, uses a range of visual aids to illustrate that 'facts never persuaded anyone'. She insists that it would be foolish not to adopt approaches that take into account the realities of how human beings perceive reality and process information. It's not that facts do not matter – but they are not self-evident -- they need help. Shenker-Osorio points out that at any given moment individuals are capable of taking one of a number of perspectives, of seeing the world in a range of ways. Prompts in the environment and the metaphors and language we use all the time, shape the direction our perception takes. Narrative approaches merely seek to do consciously and deliberately what otherwise happens by default. In many cases, because we in the human rights field are unaware of how language and narrative works to shape decision-making, we actively undermine our own cause by adopting language and metaphors that reinforce mental frames favorable to our opponents. Whether we like it or not, are aware of it or not, Benford and Snow point out that "that frames and framing are embedded within social constructionist processes that involve thinking and reasoning by the parties involved." (2000a:57)

Stephen Duncombe in his book *Dream* (2007) argues for the need for activists to learn from the world of advertising and engage in the realm of sign, symbol and spectacle – but to do so ethically. As human rights or social justice activists we should also seek to make assumptions and intentions visible, rather than hide them. Where possible we should seek to open and expand the window of options and alternatives rather than restrict them.

9.6. Politics versus Police

An important question in undertaking narrative change work is whether we are contributing to efforts to replace a particular dominant narrative with a single alternative narrative of our own choosing, or whether our aim is to contribute to efforts to do away with the idea of a dominant narrative altogether, working instead to create a proliferation of competing narratives. If part of what we are doing in challenging dominant narratives is to 'transform power relationships', as indicated in the strategy of the

PHP, then does that entail the creation of a democratic space in which a multiplicity of narratives are able to compete, or does it mean that we work rather to replace one sort of dominance with another?

I believe there is a place for both approaches. In some situations, what we want and need to do is to open up the terrain, unblock a particular static and dysfunctional situation, or undermine stereotypes. An example comes from the work of Aspen Baker who seeks to destabilize the polarized, very black and white abortion debate in the US, and through listening and personal storytelling, to expand the 'gray' area in which there is recognition that people have complex lives, emotions and motivations. It is no accident that Baker emphasizes listening over storytelling – her aim is to create space for people to be heard, rather than to advance a particular narrative.

However, there are times when there is a need to push for a specific change in policy, and it is necessary to make use of the tools of persuasion to do so – to develop an alternative narrative and make use of research in order to advance it. For example, in order to achieve marriage equality in the US, campaigners made a strategic to advance a particular narrative (love is love) over others (such as a narrative about equal rights).

According to Stephen Duncombe, these two alternatives can be likened to the concepts of 'politics' and 'the police', as outlined by the philosopher Jacques Ranciere:

"For Ranciere, politics is the activity of discussion, debate and sometimes dissensus -- what he believes is at the heart of democratic civil society. Policing, on the other hand, is what happens once we -- or a powerful few -- have already agreed on a course of action or ideology. This arena of formal laws and policies, branches of governments and courts is, ironically, thought of as the political sphere, yet is really just the administration -- the policing - of decisions already made."³

But while 'the police' and the advancement of a single alternative narrative may be necessary at times, we do need to remain aware that this carries costs. For example, while marriage equality in the US is a great and important advance, it has meant that those who would prefer to be able to live their lives without buying in to the institution of marriage have been sidelined (in the US, co-habiting couples have far fewer rights than married ones when it comes to questions such as health insurance, immigration and taxation), and we see accounts of increased so-called 'slut-shaming' within the gay community. In her book, Aspen Baker argues that while the decision by abortion activists to adopt the narrative of 'pro-choice' may have brought them a political victory at the time, it represented a decision to appeal to a particularly right-wing and elite value – that of individual choice – and that this had a range of unintended consequences, including the failure to develop a solid progressive grassroots-led movement which could have fought more effectively against the anti-abortion backlash that ensued. As sociologist and narrative expert Arthur Frank warns, "Stories have the capacity to act in ways their tellers did not anticipate." (2010:35). "...stories are tricksters. As often as stories are conscripted to advance some cause, they do that work only for a while and then turn against those who conscripted them."

³ Personal communication

Each of the three approaches to narrative change that I have outlined earlier can be used either in a more expansive way to multiply narratives, or more restrictively to advance a single alternative narrative. For example, storytelling can be and is used frequently to push a particular agenda or narrative – the key element in the use of storytelling to create space for multiple narratives is not only the emphasis placed on listening, but adoption of a particular ethos of mutual care and respect. Similarly, while the more research-based approach cognitive linguistics approach, with its emphasis on message testing, might seem to favour a more narrow, even manipulative application, this is not necessarily the case. For example, much of the work that the Frameworks Institute does is not necessarily to use framing to advance a single particular policy objective, but to prime target audiences to see problems as systemic and thus to think of systemic solutions, as opposed to a frame in which individuals are blamed for problems and solutions focus on individual behavior change (for example, dental hygiene in children seen as the fault of neglectful parents, rather than a problematic health care system).

9.7. The nature of the work

It must be noted that this is work that has to be viewed over the long-term. It is aimed at shaping how people think about and understand particular issues or groups of people over time. It is work that takes place in contested terrain. As Benford and Snow note, “activists are not able to construct and impose on their intended targets any version of reality they would like”, and any effort at framing, or advancing a particular narrative faces challenges such as “counterframing by movement opponents, bystanders and the media; frame disputes within movements; and the dialectic between frames [narratives] and events.” (2000:625)

While these approaches may be familiar to marketers, it is work that is new to us, and to many operating within the human rights field, and we are learning as we go. We will no doubt face many setbacks and dead ends. But it is work that, if successful, has potentially huge impact in transforming the social and cultural context within which much of our other advocacy work takes place.

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