

Narrative Approaches to Understanding and Responding to Conflict

Sarah Federman*

Abstract

While stories have circulated for millennia and constitute the very fabric of life in society, narrative as an optic for understanding and engaging with conflict emerged in the field of conflict resolution only in the past few decades, and has already amassed an array of significant contributions (Bar-Tal and Salomon, 2006; Cobb, 2013; Grigorian and Kaufman, 2007; Kellett, 2001; Lara, 2007; Nelson, 2001; Rotberg, 2006; Winslade and Monk, 2000). They encompass several spheres of action. Narrative analysis provides a means to locate individual and communal meaning in their discourse and to pinpoint conflicts in their world views that threaten their identity and agency. Further, it helps explain how marginalized people remain marginalized. Narrative interventions allow for conflict transformation, helping people to renegotiate their social positions and reclaim lost agency stemming from marginalized positions. Narrative evaluation highlights the flexibility of that model to measure change through a detection of discursive shifts over time. This article provides an overview of narrative approaches to conflict, answering: (a) What is narrative and what is its potential as a tool for understanding and responding to conflict? (b) How might we conduct a narrative analysis of a conflict? (c) From this analysis, how might we then construct narrative interventions and programme evaluations?

Keywords: narrative, conflict resolution, development, assessment, evaluation.

One way to understand cycles of violence and protracted conflict is to visualize them as a broken narrative. A people's story is marginalized or, worse, destroyed by the dominant culture, and by this act, meaning, identity, and a place in history are lost. This is the deeper challenge of peacebuilding: How to reconstitute, or re-story, the narrative and thereby restore people's place in history.

–John Paul Lederach (2005: 146)

* Sarah Federman is an Assistant Professor at the University of Baltimore in the department of Negotiations and Conflict Management. Federman completed her doctorate at George Mason University's School for Conflict Analysis and Resolution where she studied the role of the French National Railways (SNCF) in the Holocaust and the on-going conflict in the United States over whether the company has done enough to make amends. She used narrative and ethnographic methods to construct a narrative landscape of the conflict over time and to better understand the social construction of victim-perpetrator binaries. Federman began this research as a masters student at the American University of Paris.

1 What Is Narrative and What Do We Know about It?

Through narrative, we tell both what we believe to be true and what we know to be false. Through narratives, we construct our understanding of ourselves and even create the physical world (Law, 2000). Narratives have shown themselves to be powerful social forces that formulate identities and constrain as well as guide actions. Cultural and familial stories affect how we make sense of the world and our role within it; they provide a moral framework that evaluates action. However, we think of our stories as our own, and rarely understand how inexorably bound they are to the social and political (Law, 2000). The stories we tell position ourselves relative to our social environment. Larger stories about right/wrong, acceptable/unacceptable and significant/insignificant control how we experience and how we express ourselves and allow others to express themselves. When certain narratives (stories, perspectives) dominate, other experiences (marginalized or contradicted by those dominant stories) become marginalized, oppressed or suppressed, leading to both latent and overt conflict. Marginalization can erupt and express itself in the form of crime, protests, boycotts, uprisings and socio-political movements (such as Black Lives Matter, Gay Pride, etc.). Delgado describes marginalized groups as out-groups whose identity defines the boundaries of the mainstream, and “whose voice and perspective – whose consciousness – has been suppressed, devalued and abnormalized” (Delgado, 1989: 2412). Vibrant societies seek to ensure that the narratives of these groups circulate as openly as the narratives of the dominant culture. But this diversity is infrequent in conflictive societies, where the constraints placed on marginalized narratives perpetuate power differentials and create barriers for a co-constructed future.

Example: Marginalization in U.S. Politics

President Obama’s victory speech for his second term did not directly address the 49 per cent of the U.S. voters who did *not* vote for him. By not acknowledging these citizens directly, he missed an opportunity to unite the country. Romney voters became “the losers” while Obama celebrated with those who helped him win. This had ramifications for the 2016 election; Donald Trump connected strongly with these unacknowledged voters to secure his win. A narrative analysis of this speech would identify multiple missed opportunities for his second term as well as future elections.

2 Narrative for Conflict Resolution and Development

Rooted originally in semiotics and in literary theory, the field of narrative analysis as a lens to understand and intervene in conflict development, conflict analysis and conflict resolution is relatively new. Its prehistory and early history were nourished by the foundational contributions of semiotics, literary theory. During the 1970s–1980s, attention to narrative was mostly focused on “folk story-telling” (Livo and Rietz, 1986; Polanyi, 1985). By the late 1980s–early 90s, narrative

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theory exploded, providing frameworks for both methods of analysis and for practice (Brenneis, 1988; Bruner, 1990; Cobb, 2013 Delgado, 1989; Lara, 2007; Nelson, 2001; Senehi, 2002). Narrative approaches to conflict analysis and resolution became relevant as they acknowledge that communities function so long as they have a means to negotiate and renegotiate meaning and identity in a way that provides new avenues for conflict transformation.

This article makes the case for the power of narrative approaches to conflict analysis and conflict management at all levels – individual, familial, institutional, inter-agencies, inter-government, and broadly speaking, socio-political. Regardless of the type of conflict, leaving problematic narratives intact will eventually upend any results achieved in mediation, negotiation or community dialogues. For this reason, narrative transformations constitute a key towards the creation of lasting change. In other words, changing actions long-term requires changing the stories that prompt or justify those actions. Without acknowledging how stories circulate, who controls their circulation and who remains excluded in these stories, projects will struggle to sustain themselves and conflicts will resurface. Narrative approaches make the unavoidably complex web of storylines visible and provide a guide to practitioner's interventions.

Narrative approaches provide a way to understand how stories function in communities and how to intervene when destructive stories circulate.

From this perspective, dominant narratives are those that reflect and sustain beliefs that make up the cultural norms, such as notions of right and wrong and social roles. Counterstories challenge those dominant beliefs. Narrative practitioners' interventions aim at increasing the textures and complexity (and potential contradictions) of dominant narratives as well as making them open to counterstories, old and new. The ability of those counterstories to be heard and legitimized is a key indicator of the narrative health of a community.

3 Narrative Analysis

Narrative analysis refers to the exploratory process that works to identify and locate conflict narratives. An awareness and understanding of what Bruner (1990) called the environment's narrative architecture provides the foundation for effective planning of ethical interventions that support and foster development. In turn, conflict narratives – narratives at the core of conflictive situations unveiled by a keen narrative analysis – characteristically suffer from oversimplified characters and plots, with storylines that work mainly to legitimize the self and delegitimize others, thus increasing polarization (Cobb, 2006).

Example: Narrative Approach to a Development Project

In a small Brazilian town, the following two dominant narratives have been found to circulate, distilled from an analysis of conversations with multiple voices of its inhabitants:

*Without the sugar industry, we have nothing.
Anyone who works in sugar is a hero in our community.*

The first narrative tells us about the perceived importance of sugarcane. It also suggests that other industries might be undervalued and the community may not be seeking ways to diversify. The second statement tells us about the status of sugarcane workers, suggesting that those who depart from the trade will experience a lower status in society. This too may discourage diversification.

If a development project seeks to help the local economy to diversify, it must destabilize these dominant stories. Narrative interventions could include strategies that elevate, in the eyes of the community, the benefits of other crops or industries. Reframing how a town sees itself will be vital if diversified development efforts are to be sustainable. Embedding and elaborating new stories, helping people describe their town and their own interests differently while helping those in charge of the diversified development project to engage with the community's needs, rather than creating confrontative discourses, will be a vital component of any lasting intervention.

In the example above, traditional assessments methods might overlook the powerful identity connection the community has to sugar. Narrative helps reveal the identity connections and stories that keep people situated as they are and perceive change as threatening to their identity. Even adding, for instance, corn cultivation in adjacent fields to a town that believes it is "a sugar town" may prove conflict-ridden. Helping people change how they see themselves and their community will help them be more resilient and adaptable, moving forward. Before discussing how to shift such identities, this article first considers tools for narrative analysis.

Structural, functional and *poststructural* narrative analysis tools draw from the fields of linguistics, philosophy, literary theory and sociology. The *structural* approach examines the actual components of a narrative (plots, characters, roles, etc.). The *functional* approach explores how narratives are performed in social and political contexts. The *poststructural* approach considers how narratives create identity, requires reflexivity on the part of the researcher and considers this analysis as germane to intervention. In a poststructural approach, the conflict is not simply represented by the narratives: the narrative is considered, in fact, the locus of the conflict. These three modes of analysis will be discussed in detail in the sections that follow, to then deal with a description of narrative interventions

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and as a tool for evaluation. For more about how to collect narratives, see Shkedi (2004).¹

4 Structural Analysis

Bruner claims humans simply have a predisposition to “organize experience into a narrative form, into plot structures and the rest.” (1990: 45) The most common forms of structural analysis are Labovian (Labov and Waletzky, 1997), genre (Bruner, 1991), narrative grammar (Greimas, 1971), scenario analysis (Blum, 2005) and actant analysis (Greimas, 1971). All these approaches seek to deconstruct narratives, and then, classify them. *Labovian analysis* breaks up narratives into analytic units to be examined. Chatman (1975), Mishler (1995), Brenneis (1988) and Hardy (2008) all apply narrative to the field of conflict resolution and advocate for the classification of narratives into genres, storylines and other typologies. However, when the work of these authors is analyzed, an interesting transition can be noted – there is a movement from narrative theory applied to linguistics and literary or historical analysis, as is the case with Chatman’s work, into that theory applied to conflict resolution, such as in the work of Brenneis and Hardy.

Blum’s (2005) scenario analysis can be useful for cases where we might want to construct and consider possible futures. This can be conducted at the track I or track II level, either with high-level officials or with the community.

Actantial analysis (Greimas, 1971) offers a systematic way to breakdown the “who, what, when, where, why” of narratives and is especially helpful when deconstructing cultural myths. This can often be a first step towards a more complex analysis. Louis Hébert’s (2006), “Tools for Text and Image Analysis: An Introduction to Applied Semiotics,” introduces Greimas’ the six actants used in conflict analysis.

1 Shkedi discusses various forms of narrative surveys that can be done in the field with the understanding that there are certain “data” that must be collected in narrative form, “the richness of human events and thought cannot be expressed in definitions, statements of fact, or abstract propositions. It can only be demonstrated or evoked through story” (2004: 90). Shkedi provides different methods through which stories can be collected (collective case study, case survey, meta-ethnography, narrative survey); each approach attempts to overcome the limitations of the other. Shkedi favours the narrative survey, which uses the interview as the main mode of data collection followed by an extensive process of categorization of each narrative.

- 1 Subject
 - a Who/what are the narratives discussing?
- 2 Objective/ goal
 - a What is the goal of this narrative?
- 3 Adjuvants/helper
 - a Who helps voice the narrative?
- 4 Receiver
 - a Who is meant to receive the narrative?
- 5 Sender
 - a Who is sending out the narrative?
- 6 Opponents/Traitors
 - a Who challenges the narrative?

Structural analyses help us identify the narrative components and how narratives circulate, but cannot answer questions about *how* such narratives come into being, the social dynamics between players or the locations of meaning making. Functional analysis helps speak to these limitations.

5 Functional Analysis

Functional approaches explore the dynamics between people, providing tools for the understanding of dominant and marginalized narratives.² More than structural approaches, functional methods look for *where* meaning is constructed. Functional analysis looks at storylines, speech acts and positioning (e.g. how people place themselves morally or socially in relation to one another). These analyses help us understand how the society functions, how certain narratives come to be the status quo and what forces keep them dominant.

Some functional approaches encourage analysts to make the distinction between collective stories and personal stories. Of course, the person can never be wholly separated from culture; the two are inextricably linked. Individuals are, in part, constituted by the environments in which they were raised and operate, and will tend to perpetuate these environments and norms. Yet, this does not mean there is no self separate from the culture. Through functional analysis, we can explore how individual expressions become subsumed by dominant stories. For example, individual stories tend to be influenced by hegemonic discourse on collective suffering, regardless of how far removed they may be from the individu-

- 2 The functional approach to narrative assessment looks not at components of the narrative nor even the plot as much as the social and psychological contexts and functions of narrative; in other words, at how narratives function, and how and where they are produced in a culture (Mishler, 1995). For example, to what extent is any autobiography always structured by class and context (Steinmetz, 1992)? From this perspective, "language does not simply neutrally represent pure reality but is always imbued with culturally located meanings" (Winslade, 2003: XX). Again, herein lies the critique of structuralism, because language cannot represent reality neutrally. Only distilling narratives to their component parts can provide a sliver of the insight available through different analytical approaches. Further, the social constructionists' stance in narrative analysis illuminates how power moves through discourse.

als' experience of suffering (Coulter-Smith, 2000), and even how conflictive those two levels – the individual's and the collective's spheres – may be (Steinmetz, 1992). As individual narratives are not fully determined by collective stories, detecting where the spaces exist between these stories can help develop interventions that promote individual agency in relation to problematic collective stories.

Harre and Lagenhove's (1991) *positioning theory*, derived from the field of social psychology, offers a means of analyzing the rights, duties and obligations people have in their society. They examine how what people say and do are understood and evaluated, based on what others in their social category say and do. Conducting a functional analysis using positioning theory, Harre claims positions also come in twos: if one person is positioned as the teacher, for example, another must be a student. As positioning always places people relative to one another, the way in which they are positioned relative to each other will constrain some narratives and augment others.

In turn, Bruner challenges Ricoeur (1980) when he argues that people follow their cultural roles regardless of their innate disposition or conscious discernment, "People are expected to behave situationally whatever their 'roles,' or whether they are introverted or extraverted, whatever their scores on MMPI or whatever their politics. As Barker put it, when people go into the post-office, they behave 'post-office'" (Bruner, 1990: 48). Winslade's (2009) discussion of discursive positioning addresses how people position and are socially positioned at the moment of speech acts.

In sum, functional analysis includes the identification of:

- the various storylines;
- positions of the actors relative to the storylines;
- the linguistic performances undertaken in the telling.³

Example: A Study of a Small Group of Rebellious Adolescents

Archakis and Tzanne (2005), studying a small group of mischievous "counter-culture" adolescents in Greece, analyze how they "delegitimize established figures of power and authority in order to legitimate their own group and present a positive image of themselves." These authors' functional analysis show how these youngsters were constructing their identities based on their resistance to authority figures. While it is not abnormal for young people to create identities relative to, and contrasting with, existing power structures, positioning theory provides a lens to enrich an understanding of the tie between their core stories and their counter-characters' and opens the field to potential interventions if conflicts escalate.

Functional approaches help us understand how people situate themselves relative to one another, including as "the other" the norms of their community. This approach's weak point relates to its origins in logical positivism, as it locates the

3 The combination of "incompatible" storylines and positions (the first two points above) contribute to what are known as intractable conflicts.

researcher as outside the observed system, avoiding reflexivity and downplaying cultural differences. Poststructural approaches – discussed in the next two sections, where “Analysis” and “Interventions” are dealt with separately (if not questionably!) for purposes of clarity – speak to this limitation.

6 Poststructural Analysis

Poststructural approaches see narrative beyond a means of recounting social reality or even giving it meaning. These approaches consider “personal narrative as central to the development of a sense of one’s self, of an identity” (Mishler, 1995: 108). In regards to data collection, in poststructuralist approaches, narratives are not something to be simply extracted and recorded in some mythical pure form: Narratives are co-created in conversation. Therefore, the collection and analyses are as political as the narratives themselves. Issues of power, marginalization and dominant/counter narratives must all be considered both within the community as well as in the space between the researcher or practitioner and the community being studied.

The three forms of analyses discussed above (structural, functional and post-structural) provide a variety of starting points for researchers interested in understanding the role of narrative in conflict. These approaches can be used together or separately at different points within the research process. A structural analysis, for example, could be performed before fieldwork to help identify the conflict parties. A functional analysis can be performed to understand the relations between these parties and a poststructural analysis can consider the researcher’s role in the co-creation of the data. While analyses and intervention are inseparable in the poststructural approach, for clarity’s sake, the next section considers intervention as distinct from analysis.

7 Narrative Intervention

Because narrative approaches view conflict as the manifestation of identity struggles, interventions entail identity transformations (Cobb, 2010). Poststructural narrative interventions operate from the premise that identity is malleable, continuously evolving and co-constructed in interaction. Problematic identities can be internalized and victims can perpetuate their own victimization.

Example: A Member of the Dalit Caste

For example, if someone in India from the Dalit caste (the “untouchables”) believes they have no worth and nothing to contribute, they may never break out of the “untouchable” identity. Any development project aimed at empowering this individual will fail unless the person can also rewrite the story of his/her identity. Through narrative intervention, even the most problematic identity can be changed.

Practitioners conduct interventions as consultants in conflicts, and via coaching, mediation, in public forums and via workshops in which they work with participants to create better-formed stories about themselves and each other as well as the conflict as defined. Some of the technologies used within these forums are fishbowl interviewing,⁴ World Cafés (Brown, 2005) and scenario-building (Ricigliano, 2015). All forums and formats seek to include marginalized perspectives and co-create a richer understanding of the past and of each other. The process also helps participants develop the kind of critical intelligence needed to improve relationships and decrease present and future conflicts. Practitioners must work carefully with groups to elaborate new identities and storylines in a way that does not deepen conflicts or create new ones.

Narrative interventions promote positive peace not only by addressing protracted conflicts, but also, by upending latent conflicts and dynamics left unaddressed in more traditional mediation and dialogue processes, dynamics that wreak havoc on many well-intentioned traditional conflict approaches. In fact, unless marginalized groups can recreate their identity and relocate themselves in relation to their community, conflicts tend to resurface. Hence, silenced perspectives must be voiced or they lead to latent, potentially violent conflicts (Scarry, 1987). In a successful intervention, previously conflictive stories about the self and others transform into stories that promote agency, adaptability and resilience for all members. These healthy stories resist binary constructions and polarized thinking (good/evil, loving/cruel, victim/perpetrator). These new resilient narratives which lack the language of blame (“it is their fault”) and negative attributes (“they are just cruel people”). People and groups will be ascribed with many traits. Problems will be framed as the result of complicated patterns of interactions, norms and pressures, not simply the result of the failure of one individual or group. After successful narrative interventions, participants will be able to speak about an interrelated whole, complicated by time and interdependence.

Because of space limitations, this article can only nod to several overlapping approaches to narrative intervention: constructive storytelling (Senehi, 2002, drawing on John Paul Lederach’s work on imagination for peacebuilding), narrative mapping (White, 2007), re-storying identity (Nelson, 2001) and the creation of counterstories (Delgado, 1989).

Constructive storytelling – the process that is informed by postmodern narrative models – does not mean storytelling in the folk sense. In this context, storytelling means crafting narratives about ourselves, situations and collective experiences in a way that promotes resilience and addresses latent as well as overt conflict.

Nelson (2001) points to complex fictional novels as a means of developing this imagination. Fictional novels offer examples of others living in complex environments and finding their way forward. Through the process of engaging with fiction, individuals can engage more deeply with the complexities of life and more fully imagine possibilities for themselves.

4 For an example of fishbowl questions, see: <<http://slitoolkit.ohchr.org/data/downloads/fishbowl.pdf>>.

One way to help practitioners to construct a more robust story is through White's (2007) narrative mapping approach. These landscape maps locate conflict parties and marginalized voices. When participants in a mediation process co-create these maps, they more clearly see the web of narratives operating and their location within these webs. Then, they can more easily go about the work of identity transformation. Nelson (2001), using an example of a group of nurses who wanted to improve the way doctors in their hospital perceived and treated them, shows how once the map of social positions is made visible, new counterstories can be created. She writes about the nurses having "damaged identities" vis-à-vis the doctors and how they worked together, successfully, to transform that identity in a way that elevated their status and improved the functioning of the hospital, through pragmatically developing counterstories to the existing circulating "official stories" about nurse roles and abilities. The nurses' counterstories eventually transformed how doctors saw them. Their daily reality was changed.

Delgado (1989), an early proponent of inserting or amplifying counterstories which challenge the dominant narrative, asserts that this approach "can open new windows into reality, showing us that there are possibilities for life other than the ones we live" (p. 2415). Mishler (1995) offers another example of identity transformation. He observes how Alcoholics Anonymous members transition from identities as alcoholics to non-drinkers and recovering alcoholics, a transformation of self-concept that is key to the programme's ongoing success.

Hardy's (2008) narrative intervention approach uses coaching to help individuals transform their conflicts at a story level. She helps people shift their stories from melodrama into tragedy. In melodramatic stories, the protagonist/storyteller sees herself solely as a victim, intent on convincing any listener of their version of the story. When operating within a melodramatic framing (think soap operas), characters remain passive ultimately – things happen to them – crippling their own agency. In tragedies, the narrator or main character has agency, may navigate a complex web of relations, power dynamics, social norms, and at times, difficult political realities, makes decisions and lives with their consequences. The narrative intervention helps making these complexities visible and highlights the ability of the individual to make decisions within these contexts. In Hardy's approach, transforming the identity of the narrator is less important than shifting her relationship to her circumstances.

Narrative mediation builds on the strength of the format of traditional forms of mediation (Curle, 1986), but shifts its focus. In Winslade's (2003) narrative mediation technique, supporting individual interests is secondary to creating an environment in which respect and equality allow for the formation of an alternative story and repositioning of the individual in that "new" context. To make room for alternative story versions, he (as other authors, cf. Cobb, 2010) favours a conversational technique developed by White and Epston (1990), called externalization. Externalization moves the conflict outside of the self, and in collective work, outside of the relationships. Treating the conflict as something external helps preserve the good relations and sidestep blame. Relationship becomes the focus, not outcome. This differs from some traditional forms of mediation that seek to preserve the relationship by first coming to an agreement. By starting

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with the relationships, the process has the potential to not only resolve the present concern, but also, prevent future conflicts. Whether working via mediation, coaching, and workshops, those conducting narrative interventions aim at making visible the problematic stories in circulation. Then, the stories become the problem, rather than the individuals or the “other.” When conflict participants co-construct these stories, they are more likely to uphold and perpetuate them, leading to lasting outcomes. These new stories tend to represent a more complex world and a greater level of interconnectedness between the parties.

Example: Working-Class Formation

In his research on working-class formation, Steinmetz (1992) found that the elaboration of coherent narratives created greater class cohesion if stories of class were constantly included. In other words, healthier narratives recognize connections to one another. If, however, individual or collective identity remains exclusionary or isolated, narratives will be less able to work to reduce conflict.

The conflict field has paid increasing attention to the ethics of intervention (Barry, 2002; Goodhand, 2000). Practitioners increasingly ask themselves, “Who am I to come as an outsider and involve myself in your conflict?” The justification for community outsiders to intervene is that the narrative webs in which conflict parties live limit their ability to see beyond their present reality. What people can imagine for themselves and those in their lives is limited by what they have seen, and is being reinforced by similar stories circulating in their world. Narrative practitioners, in turn, confront the complex task of unpacking their own stories about the conflict as is informed by *their* culture and world views.

Example. Creating a Shared History: Israel & Palestine School Textbook Project

Adwan and Bar-On (2004) explored a narrative approach to the project aimed at contributing to build peace in Israel and Palestine. Understanding that deep-seated conflicts can shift slowly and over large periods of time, they focused on modest goals. They worked with Israelis and Palestinian school teachers to co-create a school history textbook. As Adwan and Bar-On mention, during “periods of war and conflict, societies and nations tend to develop their own narratives, which from their perspective become the only true and morally superior narrative. These narratives devalue and even dehumanize their enemy’s right for a narrative” (2004: 514). In turn, these views become formalized in textbooks that seed those problematic narratives into the next generation. These authors worked with the schoolteachers to create “a school booklet that contains two narratives” (p. 516). The booklet aimed to help students learn to understand and respect history both from their own and from the Other’s perspective. Adwan and Bar-On believe that part of the success of their project was due to having actual texts as a product

of their work, something material that teachers could integrate into their classes. This approach applies specifically to conflicts centered around history and memory.

8 Evaluation

Narrative can also be used as a tool for project evaluation, as a progressive shift in narratives with positive markers such as reduction of marginalization, increasing of complexity, incorporation of previously silenced voices and counter-narratives and a dominance of zero-sum logic.

Example: Australian Agricultural Programme Evaluation

Dart and Davies (2003) conducted a narrative evaluation of agricultural programmes in Australia. This evaluation added a story collection to the existing quantitative measurements. Programme evaluators interviewed 134 farmers involved in a dairy farming improvement project, focusing on questions of “most significant changes.” The stories were collected using a standard format and circulated among the funders as part of the overall evaluation. The benefit was that the farmers, funders and the programme implementation team developed an increasingly shared vision not only of the ongoing results, but of the very goals of the programme. Changes in strategy, when needed, were more easily developed collaboratively and implemented, aided by this opening of communication lines. Staff morale improved in the process of telling the stories, and success stories helped evaluators and funders see where progress was being made even when quantitative results may not have yet reflected those changes. In fact, farmer success stories guided the direction of the next funding cycle. In the view of those authors, the approach they followed enriched, and was enriched by, quantitative approaches.

Cobb (2006) created a “turning point” model for evaluation that relies on narrative transformations (discourse shifts) over time along a sequence of stages

- 1 Delegitimizing Self
- 2 Moderate Legitimacy for Self and Other
- 3 Reconstruction of Shared History
- 4 Construction of Shared Future
- 5 Reflection on Shared Values

In Stage 1, the individual or group questions their previous assumptions of the infallibility of their own position as exclusively good and unquestionably justified. In Stage 2, each party in the conflict begins to envision components of legitimacy in the other’s construction of the conflict narrative, in addition to relative legitimacy in the components of their own narrative. In Stage 3, the formerly opposed parties construct their past as a shared one, rather than as two mutually isolated narratives. In Stage 4, the acknowledgement of shared history creates the basis from which a shared future can be constructed. The notion of a *shared* future is

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critical, as it counters the frequently damaging assumption that their life would improve if the other party could simply be eliminated, translated into social exclusion policies when not of genocidal ideologies and practices. In Stage 5, the parties conjointly root their commonality by reaffirming explicitly their shared values as a result of a joint mindful exploration.

Evaluators tracing these narrative shifts over time will also assess whether or not individuals enact agency and are aware of that capacity, whether they count on tools to improve their situation in other conflict situations and if they enact new ways of viewing their prior counterpart, the Other.

9 Conclusion

The narrative lens, emerging and evolving from the fields of linguistics and poetics, finds itself quite at home in the field of conflict resolution and development. It provides a powerful novel approach to understand conflict, conduct research, intervene and measure the effectiveness of interventions. Because narrative approaches operate at a story level, the lens proves comfortably adaptable to different cultural contexts. Because of its ability to navigate the politics of stories and unveil both “official” and dissenting, marginalized voices, and bring to the surface stories of oppression and of suppression, creating narrative dialogic spaces adds a liberating quality to conflict resolution, cementing changes through the creation of shared futures.

Narrative theory offers a plethora of ways to understand and analyze conflicts. To that end, this article introduced structural, functional and poststructural approaches that may be used when working with individual parties or conjointly at different stages within a mediation project. For those interested in narrative interventions, I have introduced elements and tools specifically related to narrative mediation, coaching and workshops with strong potentials for promoting lasting change. While the formats may differ, narrative interventions share the goal of developing more encompassing stories that deconstruct and challenge the conflict while the parties recognize themselves and the other more richly in stories that are both transformed *and* transformative. Evaluation methods from this tradition can also be used to complement quantitative approaches by matching statistical indicators with discursive shifts, and also used to inform evaluators about the relative vulnerability of various groups and anticipate future violent outbreaks or community upsets.

Whereas traditional conflict resolution approaches focus on results (meeting needs, speaking to interests) to preserve relations and stave off violence, narrative approaches promotes a narrative ecology to create a community – including parties previously in conflict or even confrontation – that is more adaptable and with enhanced critical skills and resilience. Parties previously engaged in conflicts emerge from the process politically and ethically enriched and newly integrated into a larger, safer community. And, not less important, these transformative experiences also enrich, recursively, the world view of those professionals who facilitate the process of narrative interventions.

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