POLARIZATION stop

STORYTELLING AS A METHOD TO COUNTER POLARIZATION

WHY AND HOW

POLARIZATION

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INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION

> **“Empathy and courage won the day where fear, ignorance and injustice previously held sway.”**

These words were written by P.J. Manney[1], referring to the impact of the novel ‘Uncle Tom’s cabin’ by American author Harriet Beecher Stowe, published in 1852. This novel had a profound effect on attitudes toward African Americans and slavery in the U.S., and - according to a likely apocryphal story - made Abraham Lincoln, when he met the writer at the outbreak of the Civil War, say: “So this is the little lady who started this great war.”

Uncle Tom’s cabin is just one example of the powerful effect a story can have on its readers or listeners. Inspired by the (auto)biographies of fugitive and former slaves Beecher Stowe managed to write a novel that made people empathize with the abolitionist cause to such an extent that they became abolitionists themselves.

Not everyone is capable of telling a story like Beecher Stowe could, but we all have our stories and share them as a way to express how we feel, what we think, what we want. After all, humans are narrative species. And capable of learning, for instance of learning how to create and structure a story that expresses personal emotions, a story that might evoke empathy like Uncle Tom’s cabin. In our publication *Polarization, an introduction* we explained how narratives can lead to polarization, to ‘us’ versus ‘them’ situations. We will come back to this succinctly in the first paragraph of this publication. But the opposite is also true. Stories can also evoke empathy and thus bring people closer together, allowing the oppositions to evaporate.

In this publication, we first explain why storytelling - or storysharing - provides tools for a method to counter polarisation. We then describe the method in theory and in practice and illustrate the latter in the annex with some examples from our own practice.

We do not claim that storytelling is the only or the best method to counter polarisation, nor that success is guaranteed. There are all sorts of factors to consider. But in principle, story sharing - especially in live encounters - offers good handles for an intervention that hits the mark.

1. Manney, P.J., (2008). *Empathy in the Time of Technology: How Storytelling is the Key to Empathy.* Journal of Evolution and Technology, Vol. 19 Issue 1, pp 51-61.

1.

WHY USE
STORYTELLING AS A
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1. WHY USE STORYTELLING AS A METHOD TO COUNTER POLARIZATION

In this chapter we will explain why we consider storytelling a good method for interventions that aim to counter polarization. In order to do so we first shortly explain the characteristics of polarization, which we then link to identity and narrative.

POLARIZATION

In our publication 'Polarization, an Introduction' we provided (among other things) a short theoretical introduction of polarization (chapter 1). In this we noted that one of the characteristics of polarization is its link to social identity and peoples' need for categorisation. People tend to classify themselves and others into categories and in terms of group prototypes that reflect belief sets, attitudes, norms, values and behaviours and then identify more with members of their own category (in-group) than with members of other categories (out-group). Individuals with a high group identity tend to incorporate aspects of that group in their self-concepts. And as people tend to like their in-group members more than the out-group members, bias in favour of similar in-group members and bias against out-group members is created, resulting in an 'us' versus 'them' way of thinking and acting. Differently said: People create assumptions and labels to identify the other, but meanwhile are just reinforcing their own identity. By doing so they are inclined to focus on the differences between 'us' and 'them' rather than on the similarities.

We also looked into definitions of polarization from which we learned that polarization is a process and a creation that cannot exist without the interference of mankind. It is a thought construct, based on assumptions of one's own group identity and the identity of the other group. In the process of polarization the dominant and active narrative focuses on the perceived (and often exaggerated) differences and simplistic narratives about the others, neglecting what the 'us' and 'them' might have in common.

According to Brandsma[2] polarization occurs according to three basic laws.

- polarization is a thought construct. We create oppositions in groups of people based on identity characteristics.
- polarization needs fuel; it feeds itself with statements about the identity of opposites.
- polarization is a feeling dynamic. Talking about the identity of the other is rarely factual: Gut feeling beats reason.

For a more detailed description of polarization, its characteristics and definitions, the difference between polarization and conflict and more, please refer to the aforementioned publication, 'Polarization, an Introduction', which can be found on the website

https://www.stop-polarization.eu/.

POLARIZATION AS LINKED TO IDENTITY AND NARRATIVE

Given the aforementioned link between polarization and identity, both individual and social, we have to delve into how identities are formed. Many studies have been, and continue to be conducted to better understand how identities are created. The key word in this process of creating identities turns out to be 'narratives'. According to various theories, thinking and acting in terms of 'us' versus 'them' can be traced back to each opposing group's collective narratives.

SELF NARRATIVES

The concept of 'narrative identity' refers to how our identities are made up of stories that define who we are and who we want to be. The psychologist Dan P. McAdams has been central to the shift towards viewing narrative as a unifying principle of human development and behavior. Inspired by the work of developmental psychologist Erik Erikson, McAdams[3] developed a life story model of identity based on the theory that people construct internal and continually changing self-narratives. Contrary to many, McAdams proposed that people produce a sense of psychological unity and self-understanding by creating self-defining stories that are internalized and continually evolving over the life span. Through sharing our personal experiences with others in countless social interactions we create a sense of ourselves through stories.[4] Narratives and narrative processes play a significant role in both the construction and the continuous maintenance of our identities. Because narratives and stories are social and cultural products, narrative identity is an inherently socio-cultural understanding of identity. People's narrative identities are to a large extent developed through the sharing and listening of stories among their close relations. It has often been pointed out that it is

2. Taken from an interview with Bart Brandsma, Vrij Nederland, 8 January 2019.

3. McAdams, D.P., (1993). *The Stories We Live By.* New York: Guilford Press.

4. Fivush, R., & Zaman, W. (2015). *Gendered narrative voices: Sociocultural and feminist approaches to emerging identity in childhood and adolescence.* The Oxford handbook of identity development, 33-52.

within the family where our journey of constructing our narrative identity begins, where we learn to tell stories. Intergenerational stories and family stories have proven to be critical for understanding the self.[5] In addition to stories told within the family or communities, we also turn to narratives to make sense of our experiences and our position in the world through broader social and cultural frameworks where we will find widely shared cultural stories, histories and master narratives. We tell stories to make sense of our past and our current position, but also to figure out where we are going. The stories we tell ourselves help to guide our actions. When we identify with a certain narrative, the actions that support this narrative are experienced as personally meaningful. Our personal stories encourage us to act in certain ways, and vice-versa; our actions that meaningfully fit into our life story provide support and confirmation of our sense of self and identity.

There is broad scholarly consensus that people solve their 'problems of identity' through creating life stories and that these stories can be helpful in the sense of 'looking back' at our experiences and in structuring our future experiences.[6] Two central aspects of narrative identity are therefore *meaning-making* and *goal-setting*.[7] Individuals engage in meaning-making to understand situations and experiences in their life — be it daily events or larger life events—by determining what is significant in the situation and connecting it to other parts of their life and their life story.

GROUP NARRATIVES

Based on the social identity theory, the self-categorization theory and the similarity-attraction paradigm (see chapter one of our 'Polarization, an Introduction' publication), we know that people tend to classify themselves and others into categories and in terms of group prototypes that reflect belief sets, attitudes, norms, values and behaviors, resulting in-group and out-group formation: 'us' versus 'them'. Propagating those beliefs, norms and values more often than not happens in the form of narratives. The in-group (us) and the out-group (them) each have their collective narratives and these collective narratives play a major role in perpetuating conflicts, leading to severe polarization, as groups tend to negate and deny opponent groups' narrative while emphasizing and justifying their own narrative.[8] As Kelman stresses, the construction of collective narratives leads each side to view the other´s existence as a threat to its own existence, which in turn results in mutual negation and delegitimization of the other side's collective narrative.[10]In order to accept the other as legitimate, parties in conflict have to liberate themselves from self-validation dependent on the negation of the other.

5. Idem

6. Pasupathi, M., & Oldroyd, K. (2015). *Telling and remembering: Complexities in long-term effects of listeners on autobiographical memory.* Applied Cognitive Psychology, 29(6), 835–842.

7. Dings, R. (2018). *Understanding phenomenological differences in how affordances solicit action. An exploration.* Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences, 17(4), 681–699.

8. Bar-Tal, D., Oren, N., Nets-Zehngut, R., (2014). *Sociopsychological analysis of conflict-supporting narratives: A general framework.* Journal of Peace Research. 51 (5).

9. Kelman, H.C., (1999). *The interdependence of Israeli and Palestinian national identities. The role of the other in existential conflicts.* Journal of Social Issues, 55, 581–600.

10. Bar-Tal, D., Hammack, P.L., (2012). *Conflict, delegitization, and violence.* In L. Tropp (Ed.), The Oxford handbook of intergroup conflict (pp. 29–52). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Sagy, Adwan, and Kaplan[11] suggest, based on their evaluation of, a.o., a study of small group encounters between young Israeli and Palestinians, that the acknowledgment of the opponent's collective narrative could be key to building more positive relations between the opposing groups. And they are not the only ones. The game changer might thus be an intervention that will bring about this acknowledgement and legitimization of the 'other' group's collective narrative.

The list of studies conducted on interventions working with narratives that might trigger these goals is long. And quite a few are related to highly polarized situations, like the ones between Palestinians and Israelis, American democrats and republicans or to the situation in Northern Ireland prior to, and after the Good Friday Agreement, signed on 10 April 1998, that ended most of the violence of the ethno-nationalist conflict in Northern Ireland that had prevailed since the late 1960s.[12] The results of most of these studies suggest that the ability of ingroup members to know the other group's collective story, accept it as legitimate, and feel empathy and less anger towards them is a powerful, positive variable in countering polarization.

Research and our own experiences teach us that telling or, better, sharing stories, turns out to be well suited for enhancing that ability to know the other group's collective story, accept it as legitimate, and feel empathy and consequently less anger towards them. Not only because of the obvious link between storytelling and narratives, but more so because storytelling proves to be a good tool to trigger empathy. And empathy seems to be a key necessary step for the acknowledgement and legitimisation of the 'other's' story and thus a precondition for countering polarization. Or, to put it in the words of Manney[13]:

> **"Where no empathy exists, conflict breeds."**

In the next section, we explain how storytelling promotes empathy, after first devoting a few words to empathy.

11. Sagy, S., Adwan, S., Kaplan, A., (2002). *Interpretations of the past and expectations for the future among Israeli and Palestinian Youth.* American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 72, 26-38.

12. Suggestions for further reading: Shifra Sagy (2017) *Can we empathize with the narrative of our enemy? A personal odyssey in studying peace education*, Intercultural Education, 28:6, 485-495, DOI:10.1080/14675986.2017.1390889; Dawson, G. (2014). *Life stories, trauma and the politics of memory in the Irish peace process.* In Memory Ireland: The Famine and the Troubles (Vol. 3, pp. 195-214). (Irish Studies). Syracuse University Press; Graham Dawson, (2019) *Storytelling in 'post-conflict' times: narrative, subjectivity and experience in community-based peacebuilding.* In Afterlives of the Troubles: Life Stories, Culture and Conflict Transformation in Northern Ireland (Manchester: Manchester University Press, forthcoming 2023/24);
Sagy, S., Ben David, Y., et al, *Exploring Ourselves: The Role of Intragroup Dialogue in Promoting Acceptance of Collective Narratives and Willingness Toward Reconciliation,* Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology © 2017 American Psychological Association 2017, Vol. 23, No. 3, 269–277; Little, A. (2012). *Disjunctured narratives: rethinking reconciliation and conflict transformation.* International Political Science Review, 33(1), 82–98.

13. Manney, P.J. (2008). *Empathy in the Time of Technology: How Storytelling is the Key to Empathy.* Journal of Evolution and Technology - Vol. 19 Issue 1 – September 2008 - pgs 51-61.

EMPATHY AND STORYTELLING

The word empathy is a compound of the old Greek 'em' and 'pathos'. The former means 'in' and the latter means 'feeling'. This is a very clear indication of what empathy is: feeling or taking over someone else's feelings. Although the concept of empathy was introduced in the nineteenth century by the German philosopher Theodor Lipps and the word empathy only became part of the English language in 1909,[14] empathy has always been part of our existence. It is, literally spoken, in our DNA, as we can read in the work of Frans de Waal[15], an American/Dutch biologist and Professor at Emory University in Atlanta. He researches the behaviour of primates and observed that they are capable of showing empathy. In his book *A Time for Empathy*, he notes that showing empathy is not a cognitive decision, humans are simply empathic. He illustrates this with, among other things, the behaviour of (young) children. The moment they see someone in grief, their automatic reaction is to offer comfort (see also Ericsson 1950). He encounters the same behaviour in primates. Building on this, he also demonstrates the need for empathy. Without giving and receiving it, our survival is in danger. He underpins this by emphasising the importance of living in groups. The group protects us from dangers from outside, whether these are enemy armies or wild animals. We must continue to like each other - at least within that group - to a certain extent in order to maintain those groups. In order to survive, empathy towards each other is needed. It is the glue between people.

Other than sympathy, which can be explained as ´feeling for someone´, empathy involves ´feeling with someone´. It also differs from compassion, which is a caring concern for another's suffering from a slightly greater distance and often includes a desire to help.

Empathy involves not just feelings, but also thoughts, and it encompasses two people—the person we are feeling for and our own self. We would like to stress here that the understanding of empathy continues to be limited in scope of context, especially within intercultural contexts. Brené Brown[16], one of the few to examine the discourse of empathy actively outside of professional contexts and among intercultural scholars, has devoted over ten years of her academic career toward understanding the human experience of empathy and shame. She characterizes empathy as being on the other side of shame. Where shame results in fear, blame of self or others and disconnection, is empathy cultivated by courage, compassion and connection and therefore the most powerful antidote to shame. Brown identifies four defining characteristics of empathy: being able to see the world as others see it, not judging, understanding another person's feelings, and communicating your understanding of that person's feelings. She defines empathy as a skill, and thus emphasises actively practising giving and receiving empathy.

14. Krznaric, R. *Empathie, een revolutionair boek,* p. 41 and De Waal

15. Waal, F. de, (2009). *The Age of Empathy, Nature' Lessons for a Kinder Society,* Harmony Books, ISBN 978-0-307-40776-4, New York

16. Brown, B. (2018). Research. Retrieved from https://brenebrown.com/the-research

Sharing stories - especially in live encounters - offers good handles to practice empathy.[17] What is it in story sharing that makes us empathize? We - and many others - believe it is the imaginative act of the listener translating the words spoken by the narrator into his or her own thoughts and feelings. In essence, the receiver of the story becomes the co-creator of the story, enabling him or her to see the world through the narrator's eyes and feel his feelings. It is also the recognition that humans share common needs, goals and aspirations and that these are either met or unmet in the story of every life, be it real or fictional. One could also explain it as follows: the narrator takes the listener on a journey and as soon as the two are on this journey together, there is every chance they will find something that connects them emotionally. This is the moment we talk about empathic exchange. In order to understand this, do keep in mind that there is only one place for the story to actually take shape, namely in the listener's head.

Simply put, it is the resonance that shapes the story in the listener's head. The vibration the narrator causes by telling a story - using words and possibly the body, intonation etc. -, also causes a vibration in the receiver of the story. You relate what you receive to images you know. When that happens, it connects feelings and emotions to those images. And though the exact memory of the storyteller and the listener are often far apart, those feelings and emotions often match. At that moment a sense of connection and understanding will be formed. That is what can be called emotional resonance, which is the first step towards empathy.

Also fictional stories that are well constructed and told in a visual way evoke emotional resonance. The fear the seven goats experience when the wolf knocks on their door is felt just as we feel the pride of Simba in The Lion King when he defeats Scar and takes over the leadership to become a good king of animals.

Small and big emotions take people to a different reality than the daily one, one that you base on your own memories and stories/images that shaped you. Triggering the imagination is the key concept in this process.[18]

17 Harari, Y.N., (2014). *Sapiens, A brief History of Humankind*. Harper, ISBN 978-0062316097 (Publication Hebrew version in 2011)

18 Alma, H., (2021). *Het verlangen naar zin, de zoektocht naar resonantie in de wereld*. Uitgeverij Ten Have.

2.

STORYTELLING - THE METHOD

2. STORYTELLING - THE METHOD

In this chapter we will describe how to use storytelling as an intervention to counter polarization. We will do so by first offering insight in some theoretical aspects of, or related to storytelling before we move on to sharing our ideas on how to use storytelling in practice.

THEORY

Narrative structure

Given the role narratives and narrative processes play in the construction and maintenance of our identities (see above), understanding storytelling is not only key to how we feel about ourselves and how we interact with others, but it gives us valuable tools we can use to make change. In the words of Rutledge[19]: "Like the clothesline where we hang our clothes to dry, stories give us a place to attach information in relation to other events, feelings, images and impressions. Narrative structure is how we encode multi sensory experience into memory for later recall. New information is processed and evaluated in relation to the stories we already know. Stories are causal relationships and we use the ones we know to predict outcomes and make assumptions about people and events, from simple interactions to complex relationships."

Pennebaker[20], by examining the narratives of participants in his research, realized that the impact of a story depended on how it was constructed. According to Pennebaker, just having a story is not enough. It is the act of constructing the story that is important. When a storyteller goes through the act of creation, he or she needs to construct explanations and perspectives that fit into a time perspective. This enables new ways of understanding events and emotions. New

19 Rutledge, P., (2016). Everything is Story: Telling Stories and Positive Psychology.In book: Exploring Positive Psychology: The Science of Happiness and Well-Being, Publisher: ABC-Clio.

20 Pennebaker, J.W. and Francis, M.E., (1996). Cognitive, emotional, and language processes in disclosure. Journal of Cognition and Emotion. 10(6): p. 601-626.

perspectives and meanings allow the teller of a story to work on his or her self-narratives. This may take some time, but according to Pennebaker's experience, those who are able to make a coherent story out of the messiness of real life are able to make the experience more manageable cognitively and receive the most psychological benefits. Coherence of a story, Pennebaker explains, "subsumes several features, including structure, use of causal explanations, repetition of themes and appreciation of the listener's perspective.[21]"

Good stories, whether written or told and no matter the genre, fundamentally follow a certain pattern. The Ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle was the first to discern and describe the three act structure: a beginning, a middle and an end. The beginning provides information important to the story, such as time, place and major characters. It also includes an inciting action that introduces the conflict in the story. The middle includes the conflict and the action that causes it and the end the resolution. Joseph Cambell called this basic story pattern "The hero's journey" and identified five elements: a protagonist (or hero), an antagonist (or villain), an inciting action, a conflict and a resolution. It is the conflict that provides the energy to propel the story forward and gives it meaning. Without some element of conflict, there is no purpose to invite emotional engagement. Take, for example, the fairy tale of Little Red Riding Hood (the protagonist). In this tale, her mother asks her to bring a basket with nice things to eat and drink to Granny (inciting action), who is lying ill in bed, and warns her not to stray off the path because there are wolves around. Little Red Riding Hood goes on her way and picks flowers for grandmother along the way. To do so, she goes off the path (the conflict) and encounters the wolf (the antagonist), who wants to know where she is going. When Little Red Riding Hood arrives at her grandmother's house, she finds not grandmother in bed, but the wolf who has eaten grandmother. He also gobbles Little Red Riding Hood. A hunter frees grandmother and Little Red Riding Hood from the wolf's belly and then fills it with stones. When the wolf then wants to drink from the well, he falls into it (the resolution).

Some psychologists, Theodore R. Sarbin being one of them[22], maintain that each person's story is a symbolic representation of actions over time, and, in keeping with Aristotle's view, every life story, like any story, has a beginning, middle and an end.

21 Idem, p. 604.

22 Sarbin, T.R., ed. (1986). Narrative psychology: The storied nature of human conduct. Praeger: New York.

Content: the three domains

Barel, Sagado and others add to this that not only the structure of a story is important. In order to attract the attention of the listener and bring about empathic exchange every (good) story should contain personal, emotional and universal information.[23, 24]

By universal information we mean the domain of the so-called big stories. The stories that give direction, that teach you what is good and evil, how you can best arrange your life, what you should and shouldn't do. This universal information can also be formulated as the factual and/ or ideological information in the story, meaning: the information which has been stripped of all imagination and can be traced back to something that can be established. One can think of a historical story. Due to the fact that a certain event has taken place on a certain date, has been witnessed and written down or recorded by people that were present, such a story belongs to the universal domain (though we are aware of the different perspectives that can colour the facts). The same applies to stories that certain ideological and/or religious groups assume represent a truth. In those stories, the universal domain lies in the story's message that the listener has to learn something.

Universal information hardly sticks if transferred without context. Communicated through a story like a fairy tale, folktale or myth the lesson usually gets through immediately and will be remembered. This is because these stories provide context; information related to the personal and the emotional domains.

The personal domain is touched when a story provides personal information about the main character and its environment. This is not only true for autobiographical stories; also in a fictional story it is important to provide this information. This 'colouring of the story' with personal information allows listeners to create their own images and enables them to process the information they receive in a logical and meaningful way. Because most feelings and emotions are universal, it is in this personal domain where recognition occurs, allowing the listener to sympathize (have sympathy). Within this domain feelings are not aligned yet and therefore the images shared can still create different opinions/thoughts based on different identity threats.

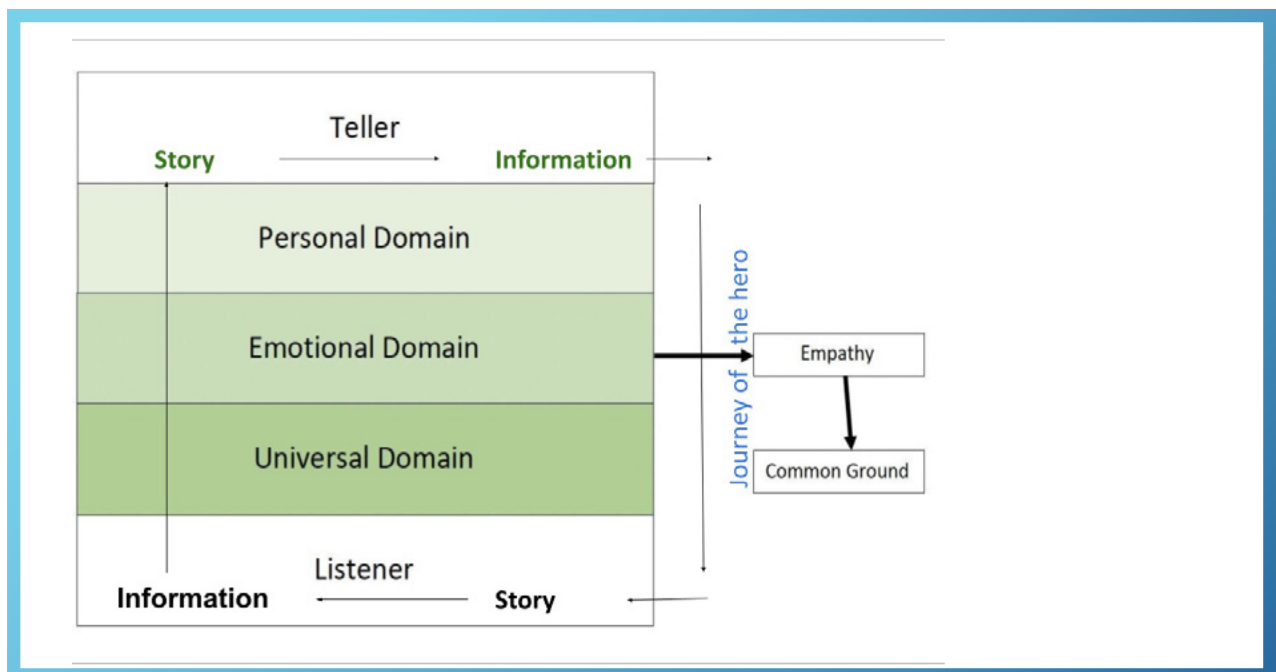
To achieve emotional resonance, an alignment of the recognised feelings and emotions, it is also necessary to touch upon the emotional domain. This domain strengthens personal information with one's own feelings and emotions. In fact, the emotional domain is pivotal in the transmission of a story. It is in this domain that empathy occurs, which enables the narrator and listener(s) to find common ground.

23 Barel, A, (2020). Storytelling en de wereld. Soon available in English, titled: The world is Storytelling.

24 Singhal, A. and Obregon, R,. (1999). Social Uses of Commercial Soap Operas: A Conversation with Miguel Sabido. Journal of Development Communication. 10, 68-77.

25 Losely following Lyotard et al, but also Harari.

Summarising the above information: in order to evoke emotional resonance with the listener, a prerequisite for empathetic exchange, it is important that a story is told in a structured way and contains information that can be linked to the universal, personal and emotional domain. This can be represented schematically as follows:



The listener(s)

Not everybody is capable of good listening, no matter the story. It is obvious to assume that being biased does not help. But if there is polarization, the people you want to get to listen to each other will be biased. And their narratives are often charged with blame, vilification and repudiation, which also can get in the way of good listening. In such cases, then, how is it still possible to gain empathy for each other by sharing stories?

Shifra Sagy[26] covers this question at length in her article "Can we empathize with the narrative of our enemy? A personal odyssey in studying peace education". She argues that one can empathize with the enemy's narrative if one manages to disengage from one's ethnocentric narratives and perceptions and is able to face the emotional challenges of acknowledging narratives that contradict the collective assumptions about the conflict and accept the moral obligation to address one's contribution to it. Having been involved in various mutual reconciliation projects with Palestinians and Israelis she doesn't disguise how complicated this is.

One way to improve the chances of success of such projects seems to lie in the composition of the group one works with. Initially almost all projects aiming at improving relations and encouraging mutual reconciliation between Palestinians and Israelis by using narratives took place in an intergroup setting. Studies that evaluated the effect of such interventions found that it led to

26 Sagy, S., (2017). Can we empathize with the narrative of our enemy? A personal odyssey in studying peace education, Intercultural Education, 28:6,pp. 485-495.

greater acceptance and concession of legitimacy of the Palestinian 'other' by Israelis (e.g. Biton and Salomon)[27], but simultaneously threatened the core elements of their own identity (Ron and Maoz 2013).[28] Also, the awareness of the great conflict that was (and is) going on in the world outside paralysed the participants to come to a deeper understanding of the conflict. In the words of Sagy: "Such dialogue groups, even when they are based on personal stories, cannot ignore the collective identity of the participants which, in turn, mainly addresses the external power relations in the dialogue. The reality outside the dialogue room increases self-defence mechanisms against feelings of shame, guilt or anger."[29] The awareness of the limitations of intergroup encounters led to another approach, that of the intra-group encounters. This approach was tested and evaluated by Ben David, Hameira, Sagy and others in the Encountering the Suffering of the 'Other' (ESO) project.[30] According to their findings, working with intra-groups enables the participants to explore their internal conflicts, and through this, to initiate new thinking and broaden their openness towards the narratives of the other(s). Furthermore, it also provides a safe space to empathize with the 'other' in a way that does not negate one's own identity. Intra-group initiatives by (a.o.) Rosenak, Isaacs, and Leshem-Zinger[31] and Rothman[32] show that encouraging complex thinking about the 'other' within one's own group appears to be of value in dealing with identity threats to the ingroup's collective identity.

As has been done in the ESO project, intra-group encounters can be combined with intergroup encounters. It is suggested though by the researchers involved in this project that the intra-group encounters should be a distinct process and a preparatory phase for one or more intergroup encounters. While the armed conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, like any other armed conflict, is an extreme example of polarization, this suggestion may also be of value for projects in which the groups are less extremely polarised.

27 Biton, Y., and Salomon, G., (2006). *Peace in the Eyes of Israeli and Palestinian Youths: Effects of Collective Narratives and Peace Education Program*. Journal of Peace Research 43: 167–180.

28 Ron, Y., and Maoz, I., (2013). *Dangerous Stories: Encountering Narratives of the Other in the Israeli–Palestinian Conflict*. Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology 19: 281–294

29 Shifra Sagy (2017) Can we empathize with the narrative of our enemy? A personal odyssey in studying peace education, Intercultural Education, 28:6, p. 489.

30 Ben David, Y., Hameiri, B., Benheim, S., Leshem, B., Sarid, A., Sternberg, M., Nadler, A. & Sagy, S., (2016). *Exploring Ourselves Within Intergroup Conflict: The Role of Intragroup Dialogue in Promoting Acceptance of Collective Narratives and Willingness Toward Reconciliation*. Peace and Conflict Journal of Peace Psychology. 23. 269-277.

31 Rosenak, A., Isaacs, A. and Leshem-Zinger, S., (2014). *Human Rights: On the Political, the Dynamicand the Doctrine of Unity Opposites*. In Religion and the Discourse of Human Rights, edited by H. Dagan, S. Lifshitz and Y. Z. Stern, 463–499. Jerusalem: The Israeli Democracy Institute.

32 Rothman, J., (2014). *Reflexive Pedagogy: Teaching and Learning in Peace and Conflict Studies*. Conflict Resolution Quarterly 32: 109–128.

IN PRACTICE

People are narrating creatures. By narrating, we communicate the “feel and texture of our lives”.[33] It is a social and often daily activity, which could also take place in the form of, for example, a conversation between two people. Such dialogue can also create emotional resonance and empathy for the other person. So why do we explicitly pay attention to the construction of someone’s story in our method? We have already mentioned Pennebaker and his realization that just having a story is not enough. It is the act of constructing the story that is important. This may take some time, but those who are able to make a coherent story out of the messiness of real life are able to make the experience more manageable cognitively and receive the most psychological benefits. After many years of being active in the field of so called applied storytelling, the sharing of a story with the aim to bring about personal and social change, we fully endorse Pennebaker’s findings.

An effective integration of storytelling in change processes requires a methodological approach. But be aware, there is no such thing as one methodological approach. The approach may vary depending on the intended purpose, the target group, the duration of the workshop, etc. Nevertheless, we can distinguish some common denominators.

In our methodology, we distinguish five different phases of a workshop. Regardless of the time available, all five phases must be present in the design of your workshop.

These five phases are:

1. Team building
2. Triggering creativity
3. Raising awareness
4. Finding common ground
5. Closing and evaluation

The phases follow each other logically. You could choose to switch phases 2 and 3 if you think this better suits the flow within the group, but we advise against this if you use the game described below to trigger creativity, because by doing so, you take something away from the playful element.

33 Schiff, B. (2012). *The Function of Narrative: Toward a Narrative Psychology of Meaning.* In Narrative works: issues, investigations & interventions 2(1), 33-47, p. 37.

Team building

When the group has been established and you are ready to meet for the first session, consideration should be given to ensuring a 'safe space' is set up within the project. A safe space can look different for different groups and individuals, but broadly it means that there is an understanding that whatever is shared in the space will stay in the space. The understanding could be in the form of a verbal or written agreement with the group. The rules and boundaries are best developed and agreed by the group and facilitator as there is no 'one size fits all' policy that works for every group.

We would like to underline this necessity of creating a safe environment and trust between participants, because a group without limitless confidence in each other will not be able to share stories on a deeper and equal level. A facilitator needs to be aware that meeting the other, and meeting the story of the other, might be considered as a threat to one's own identity. This can evoke strong emotions and resistance, enlarging the gap between the parties and leading to even more diversion and polarization. Mutual trust is therefore imperative for a successful workshop. Team building activities will help to create this and should be part of every workshop. Not only at the beginning, but also between activities that emotionally may require a great deal of the participants in order to have some fun together and relax a bit.

How much attention and time needs to be devoted to creating such a safe environment depends on the composition of the group. Do participants voluntarily participate, because they are interested in the project and willing to invest in its aims? To what extent are the participants polarised? It will help to know the answers to questions like these before you start designing the set-up of the workshop. In this respect, when you know or suspect the opponents to be hostile towards each other, the idea of exploring the 'self' in an intragroup setting before meeting the 'other' (intergroup setting) as described above might be a good strategy. But also then you will need to pay attention and time to creating a safe space by team building activities.

Triggering creativity

Triggering creativity can be considered the first step in creating the stories one is going to share. We are not dealing with structured stories yet; we limit ourselves to triggering memories of experiences, thoughts, feelings. There are several activities one can use to do this. We have added a few examples to the tool box. Within the scope of this Stop Polarization project we have developed a tabletop card game to trigger participants' creativity. The objective of the game is to help the players to focus on narrating their experience rather than stating their opinion. It works both as a training tool and as a way for players to test their ability to communicate through narrative means.

The game involves players taking turns to turn over a card, which shows a picture, a question or the beginning of a sentence. These should be used as input for a short personal narrative. The input the cards provide for the stories is aimed, on the one hand, at triggering the players to narratively express themselves, their perspectives and values and, on the other, at playfully learning more about each other and 'exploring' each other's worlds of experience. The cards are divided into several decks. The input cards in the first decks deal with personal questions devoid of any relationship with the topic of polarization. This level acts not only as an ice-breaker and

an opportunity to find common ground, but also conditions the players into the first step of the process. In the next levels the focus moves slightly towards the 'conflict'. After having played with the first decks of input cards in this stage of the game the players will be able to notice that when they focus on telling a story about their experiences instead of simply stating their opinion, it is much easier to open up and relate to what the other is telling them. The last decks of input cards deal with the polarizing conflict. In this stage the players will have developed an understanding of the fact that their position depends on their own experience, and that this experience is subjective.

The game is based on the view that focusing on telling one's story not only helps the players to better understand the process preceding the adoption of a position, but also lowers the instinctual aggressiveness towards an opposing view and fosters empathy. By encouraging the players with the help of the input cards to tell stories based on personal experiences and perceptions, they will learn to reframe a discussion from "this is a fact" to "this is what I lived through and how I felt". It is easy to deny one's opinion on a matter, but one cannot deny another person's experiences. Even if we may challenge the personal interpretation of the events narrated, one's personal story can not be discredited. A full description of the rules of the game (and the cards) can be found in the tool box.

The effect of triggering memories, feelings, thoughts - whether through our game or otherwise- is often significant. People share information they would probably not have shared in an ordinary conversation with a relative 'stranger'. Often, already in this stage, emotions - varying from extreme happiness to extreme sadness and everything in between - are shared. Sometimes this step alone is enough to really connect the members of the group. This is when they dare to cross a threshold and have the courage to share something personal and experience the feeling of being heard and of having learned something about each other. Consequently, the group dynamics change for the better.

Raising Awareness

In this phase it is all about familiarising participants with the characteristics of a good story as well as with the power of sharing stories. Participants will be made aware of how a story is formed in the listener's mind and of the idea that what is told is not necessarily equal to what is understood. In our experience, it helps participants to tell them about the structure of a story using the hero's journey (see above), illustrated with an example prior to this. This can be the story of Little Red Riding Hood, but of course also another story, as long as the participants are familiar with it. You may choose to also focus on the three domains, but keep the participants in mind. Be aware: too much theoretical information can cause attention to lapse, while you want participants to start actively working on their own stories.

Finding common ground

This stage consists of two components: creating and crafting the story and then sharing it. Creating and crafting a story leads to more depth than just recalling memories. The story becomes a friend who walks along with you for some time. A friend who is sometimes a mentor, but who can be a mirror as well. Working on a story, structuring the personal experiences of which it is composed, will bring about self-reflection and sometimes even an adjustment of those experiences. We recall here Pennebroke's findings, described above: the creation of a narrative requires a construction of explanations and perspectives that fit into a temporal perspective. This enables new ways of understanding events and emotions. New perspectives and meanings enable the narrator of a story to work on his or her self-story. People who are able to make a coherent story out of the messiness of real life are able to make the experience more manageable cognitively and receive the most psychological benefits. We advise facilitators therefore to allow participants sufficient time for the creation of their stories in the design of the workshop. If possible, spread this time for creation over two workshop sessions with a day (or a few days) in between.

Above, in the paragraph on empathy and storytelling, we have described the effect of storysharing on the narrator and the listener in theory. In short: while listening to someone's story, you relate what you hear to your own memories, experiences, emotions and images and thus become the co-constructor of the story. The more the story evokes emotional resonance between narrator and listener, the more likely it is that emphatic exchange will take place, regardless of the differences between their experiences, views, backgrounds and so on. And this empathy opens the door to the recognition that humans share common needs, goals and aspirations and to finding common ground.

The role of the facilitator is limited at this stage of the workshop. However, he or she should be alert to maintaining respect for each other and each other's stories and the emotions that the stories may trigger in participants.

Closing and evaluation

Using evaluation and reflective tools and questions throughout the process is beneficial to the participants to reflect both on the project and their own lives. It is also important for the facilitator to ensure that the quality of his or her practice responds to the needs of the group and it allows to measure the impact of the work. Much evaluation takes place organically through the ongoing conversations, observations and reflections occurring within the sessions. One could also, for instance, finish each session with a 'check out', offering each participant the opportunity to share his or her observations and reflections. Take care to capture this rich, qualitative information. Because success will look different to each project and potentially each participant, take time to consider what you are evaluating, why and how. Standardised questionnaires, for example, can produce useful quantifiable data, but they don't naturally enable a deep level of imaginative thought or complex recollection of events, and can be easily led by the people seeking the information, as opposed to those giving it. So when you use them, consider the questions carefully. Artworks Creative Communities has developed creative evaluation techniques that we can fully recommend.

Guiding principles for facilitators

When it comes to facilitating storytelling workshops aimed at countering polarization, we employ the following guiding principles: to encourage active listening to the others' narrative; to invite the participants to self-reflect and self-question what the 'other's' narrative brings out in oneself. Another meaningful element in the encounter is to observe power mechanisms: What do we know and how do we play a part in social construction? Lastly and probably the most important principle in facilitating a group is to encourage multiple voices within the group.

When working with polarized groups, it is necessary to consider the asymmetric relationship that lies at the root of their conflict, in order to prevent it from hindering the reconciliation that we are after. In this asymmetric relationship the narratives about each other play a major role. They are often at the basis of power relations. Dominant narratives aim at allowing a particular group to maintain a dominant position in a community or society. Marginal narratives help to keep other groups in a subordinate position. It goes without saying that the use of this narrative context depends on, and is part of the system that we as a society maintain together.

Some asymmetric relationships are clearly demonstrable. Think of the relation between parties in armed conflicts. But more often than not confirmation of the asymmetry happens in a very subtle way, sometimes only in the use of certain words or images, and not always consciously. This kind of confirmation can cause a lot of pain in groups that are excluded by the dominant narrative, which then hinders the formation of a common new narrative.

Possible asymmetry in the set-up and design of a storytelling workshop should be avoided as much as possible. Extra awareness is needed, all the more so because you as a facilitator may well have a blind spot, working from your own system of norms and values. Critical self-examination is never a superfluous exercise!

In this regard the language you choose for your workshop can be important. If you are working with two groups that do not speak the same language, it is wise not to choose one of the two, but to work in a third, neutral language. This prevents one of the groups from having an advantage and becoming dominant.

Also the composition of the team of facilitators is an aspect to take into account. When the facilitators belong to one of the opposing groups, this may well lead to a problem in a workshop. We advise you to work with a facilitator who does not belong to one of the groups nor can be associated with one. Another way to tackle this is by working with more facilitators, representing both participating groups. The asset of this is that it may also set a good example for the participants.

Tool box

We have put together a tool box, available online (for free) for anyone interested in activities you can do if you want to use storytelling as a method to counter polarization. This tool box also includes the card game discussed above. The activities are labelled according to the phase(s) of the workshop for which they are intended. The tool box and all information within is available in English, Spanish, Italian, Hungarian, Turkish and Dutch.

SOME EXAMPLES
FROM OUR PRACTICE

SOME EXAMPLES FROM OUR PRACTICE

Storytelling Centre is and has been involved in multiple projects which were aimed at diminishing polarization in specific areas and neighborhoods. The work in Palestine Israel, where the objective was to encourage both Palestinians and Israelis to keep the dialogue going, may have been the most prominent and the most eye-catching, but maybe also the one with the least impact. Not because of its content, but because of the number of participants related to the amount of people involved in the conflict. Only 40 people were trained on a population of over 13 million. And though the participants to the training are still in touch with each other and supporting each other especially in the hard times that missiles are fired to the land of the other, we all notice that the situation there is deteriorating instead of improving. Nonetheless, we are convinced that one should continue organizing projects like these, if only because they may offer some, even the only light in the darkest sides of human existence.

We would like to highlight some other projects that were absolutely more successful. Not to show off, but to learn from these projects which strategies can be applied. So, after describing the cases, we will analyze them and determine the different phases we distinguish in these processes.

Case 1: Storytelling in the Weimarstraat

The Weimarstraat is a street in The Hague where at one hand you will find five coffee shops, in the Dutch sense selling hashish, and on the other hand worried parents: people who bought houses in the street for quite some money and are raising their families in this neighbourhood. The two parties were constantly fighting with each other and talking about each other, but never with each other. A theatre (De Nieuwe Regentes), located in this same street, approached us to try to connect these two parties by using their stories.

For the first session, just after corona hit our societies, we invited people from the different parties to the theatre. We started by asking them to show a picture of the street, which we projected on the wall. We then asked them to tell something about it and to explain why they love the particular place in the street they photographed. Of course, they all shared a story, and almost everybody was praising the good atmosphere in the street. Even the sense of being together was praised a lot.

Then we invited everybody to think about solutions for the problems in the street, but from the perspective of the ´other´. For example, the coffee shop owners were invited to solve the problems from the perspective of a child. And the parents were asked to search for solutions from the perspective of a coffee shop owner.

In the second session we worked around two stories: one of someone from the neighbourhood who was worried about the street, considered it to be filthy and unsafe and believed that some things had to change drastically, especially with regard to the (number of) coffee shops. The other story we used was the story of Samir, one of the coffee shop owners. After a phase in which we helped both to construct their story, they presented their stories to a mixed audience in the theatre. We ended this session with a discussion with the audience and immediately noticed that the talk was completely different, that people started to understand the story of the other.

In the last phase we went into the street to interview several people about their opinion on the street, on living there and on living there together with others. We were not surprised to hear most interviewees say that they love to live in this street and really love the atmosphere. The interviews were turned into a podcast which was published online.

Case 2:
Storytelling in the Molenwijk

The problem we encountered in the Molenwijk in Amsterdam was different from the one in the Weimarstraat. This problem concerned problems between youth and seniors who were afraid of each other. To be more precise: the seniors were (a bit) afraid of the youth. And the youth were slightly on the verge of criminality. Not too serious criminality (yet), but we could imagine that it frightened people who were also living in the neighbourhood. The local library had tried to bring the two parties together by organising a meeting, putting everybody in a circle and saying “hey let's talk about the problems”. This had completely failed to the effect that the gap between the youth and the seniors became bigger. The young people present had the impression that everybody looked at them as the source of all problems and even didn't want to introduce themselves.

The local library, looking for other solutions, involved our Storytelling Centre. We started working with the seniors, for whom we organised three evenings. There was food, we shared stories and gave them several assignments. And we had a lot of fun together.

On the third evening we invited them to create a little story about something naughty they did in their youth. Several weeks later we went to the youth centre with those stories and with the owners of those stories, the seniors. We first had a meal with the youth and the seniors together and then we split them up in little groups, each consisting of seniors and youth, and asked them to share their stories. The seniors started. One woman, over 70 years old, told the story about her running away from home when she was 16. She took a train without paying and the police caught her. They put her in a police cell for one night. When she told this story, one of the young guys immediately reacted. ‘So you were in a police cell as well?’ he said. ‘Me too, only three weeks ago.’ He had done something way worse than just running away from home and travelling without paying, but that's not important. The importance is that there was an immediate connection between the woman and the young boy. And we know now that this woman up to today goes to the youth centre every week to drink a cup of coffee with the young ones present.

What can we learn from these cases?

These two cases have a lot in common. First of all, the sharing of stories was pivotal in both projects. And as you might have concluded already by reading the cases, the importance of finding common ground is the key. You might also have noticed that acknowledging all stories is also very important. To this end it sometimes might be better to start working with an ingroup instead of putting the groups together immediately. This is especially worth considering if the people you will be working with are far apart due to fear, for example, as was the case in the Molenwijk in Amsterdam. Let's look at these two cases in an analytical way and try to decide whether we can distinguish phases in it.

The first phase: preparation of the sharing

As we have already pointed out, reinforcing your own story can be an important part in a process that has to lead to more understanding of each other's story in order to diminish polarization. This is a very important phase. If you don't do this properly, the chances that your project will fail will grow rapidly. The first attempt of the local library in the Amsterdam Molenwijk is a very good example of this. Immediately focusing on the polarization and the conflicting ideas is never good. You have to start in a lighter way, like we did with the seniors in Amsterdam. Fun and food were the main ingredients in the first phase of this project. We ate together, we did lots of activities, we shared nice stories and by doing that we formed the group. Working on the self-esteem of the people is necessary in order for them to meet and open up to the ‘other’. Not talking about the problems at stake was needed to reach the objective of the project: to really connect people who were in conflict before.

In The Hague we had less time. But also there we didn't focus on the problem immediately. We started focusing on what connected the people there instead of what drove them apart. Thanks to our first light and funny approach, people opened up. And also in the next step, the playful element of looking for solutions from another perspective, we managed to create an atmosphere that was not too heavy. People appreciated that while being aware of the serious undertone.

Designing this first phase is paramount. If you do not enable the participants to feel safe and to feel respected, they will not open up and then the rest of your project is doomed to fail. Don't forget to think properly on how to work with in- and outgroups. Putting the two groups together too soon might harm your intention.

The second phase: looking for common ground

In the Weimarstraat looking for common ground was in all of the activities we did. As described, we started by inviting people to present a picture of their favourite place in the street, to tell something about this place and about why they loved this street and his neighbourhood so much. It was surprising, and also funny, to notice that many people mentioned the same qualities of the street: its beauty, the sense of community, the peacefulness. And it didn't matter who was presenting: the coffee shop owners and the worried parents, and those in between, all mentioned sort of the same qualities. The sense of community was mentioned by all people talking. The facilitator highlighted this and said: ‘I read a lot of stories about this street in the papers and it's always about fights and complaints, about the different groups not accepting each other, not respecting each other. And now I'm here with all of you and you all underline the sense of community. How can these two narratives be so different? This observation helped the people present in the theatre to start thinking about their own perspective and that of the other. And certainly after inviting them to take the perspective of the other in an activity, you felt that things were starting to change. People started talking to each other, exchanging phone numbers. And we know that after this meeting the parties started talking with each other. We don’t claim that the problems were solved immediately, but the discussion became constructive and then possible solutions are close.

The second phase in this project supported this first one. Working on specific stories deepened the understanding of the story of the other. We remember being in the theatre venue, listening to the story of a person who is worried and to the story of coffee owner Samir, that someone yelled: “next year we have to make ‘Samir the musical’” and received much acclaim. And not only from people in favour of having a coffee shop around the corner, but from the entire audience. At that moment the level of understanding deepened. When we walked through the streets half a year later to make the podcast, we could tell that things really changed.

In Amsterdam we found this common ground by sharing stories with a common theme: being young. We have all been young, and although we have changed over the years, we still remember the things we did then. Or at least, some of the things. Often people tend to make a big distinction between young and old, youth and seniors. But in the end this distinction is not so big. That was our starting point in looking for common ground in de Molenwijk.

We have experienced that using childhood stories works very well, because they are about a time in which identities are not completely formed yet, when people are still flexible in their ideas. Sharing childhood stories, or stories about the time when we were young, helps to find common ground.

Some final remarks

The sharing of stories might help in coming to solutions. It really supports the growth of mutual understanding and acceptance, which is the base for problem solving. However, it's good to realise that storytelling is not the medicine that will cure everything. Often also other actions need to be put in place to come to constructive solutions. See for example in the Weimarstraat. The fact that people are talking with each other and thinking about solutions with each other is a very positive development. However, the municipality also has a responsibility in solving the problem. With legislation it can move the coffee shops to other places and enable other shops to open in the street. It can also put some regulations in place to arrange the traffic in the street in a better way.

With regard to the project in Amsterdam: years later we met some of the participants. They told us that they were still in touch with the young people in the neighbourhood,that they were still greeting each other and that they experienced way more mutual respect. However, one workshop based on the sharing of stories is not enough. It's just a foundation and its outcomes, the improved relations, need maintenance by organizing other activities. Studies point out that collaboration projects are perfect to anchor the connections made.

IMPRESSUM

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