



Collaborating Across Differences to Reduce Authoritarianism: A Literature Review

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About Civic Futures

Civic Futures is a philanthropic initiative co-founded by the Funders Initiative for Civil Society (FICS) and the Fund for Global Human Rights (FGHR) to mobilize the funding community working across multiple issue areas to push back against the overreach of national security and counter-terrorism powers, increasingly used by governments around the world to harm civic space.

About The Horizons Project

The Horizons Project is an organizing platform focused on strengthening relationships and collaboration between the social justice, peacebuilding, and democracy communities in the US and globally.



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Statement of the Problem

Polarization, violent conflict, fractures, and divisions across and within societies are on the rise globally. Marginalized groups bear the consequences of structural inequalities which are compounded by closing civic spaces and increasing politicization of issues. Even as various groups push for social change, resentment, anger, and uncertainty can be harnessed by politicians for short-term political interests and for consolidation of power. Resistance to these issues can backfire by further dividing societies, as complex issues are distilled into slogans, in an effort to win elections, entrenching policies and institutions that keep the powerful in place, maintaining the status quo. Social media and technology further drive these trends by amplifying divisive conversations, erasing nuance, complexity, and civility. The result is societies and communities which are at war with each other---conversation, deliberation and discussion become less possible, obscuring the deep issues of social and economic injustices that perpetuate marginalization.

These dynamics create fertile ground for the backsliding of democratic norms and rise of authoritarianism leading to the decline of democracies around the world¹ (Repucci & Slipowitz, 2022). These trends materialize in different ways, sometimes through coercive measures and violence and in other cases, democracy is itself threatened from within through the dissolution of core norms and practices (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2019). The strategies that undermine democracy, often referred to as the “authoritarian” or “security playbook” include, for example, “targeting vulnerable communities,” “corrupting elections,” “stoking violence,” “politicizing independent institutions,” “spreading disinformation,” “aggrandizing executive power,” and “squashing dissent.”² In order to create a justification for an expression of strong state power and use of security policies and practices, the ‘security playbook’ is used in authoritarian and democratic states alike, employing narratives of threat and fear through presenting crisis, sowing divisions via hate speech and “Othering” to erode the trust of citizens in one another and in the democratic system.

But as resistance to authoritarian practices continues to persist, there is a cacophony of initiatives, groups, and grassroots social movements that are working on issues that support protection of democratic norms and institutions, as well as redressing marginalization, reducing the rise of authoritarianism, and fostering respect for human rights. At the same time, the diversity and difference of the values and norms of actors, within the social change

¹ V-Dem Institute. Democracy Report 2022 - Autocratization Changing Nature?, https://v-dem.net/media/publications/dr_2022.pdf

² This list of practices in the “authoritarian playbook” is from Protect Democracy’s “The Authoritarian Playbook: A Media Guide” at <https://protectdemocracy.org/project/the-authoritarian-playbook-media/>

ecosystem, presents a challenge for broad collaboration and for the coordinated effort that is required to turn the tide of rising trends of authoritarianism. In the current divisive and politicized climate, these efforts for change that should benefit everyone are also further driving fractures within societies as simplified narratives are constructed in a way that threaten people's identities, categorizing them into 'us' and 'them,' creating a backlash instead of joint efforts for change. Such dynamics among social change actors threaten to further strengthen authoritarian processes, which thrive on divisions.

Collaboration, while challenging to groups struggling to advance their causes, is critical to sustainable social change and to create a shift away from divisions that stall out collaboration. For any or all of these efforts to challenge the rising authoritarian trends, there is a need for participation and engagement of *all* the people that governments are intended to serve. And while "a thousand points of light" is certainly helpful, disaggregated and uncoordinated efforts to support democracy may not add up to sustainable social change but instead deepen divisions.

"...collaboration is a storytelling process, involving the telling, retelling, and evolution of the narratives that form the foundation of people's sense of their projects and how these projects relate to others' projects and the broader context."

Expanding our knowledge about collaboration across groups is critical for democratic practice and sustainable social change. It requires expertise in the processes of engagement---how to support groups to come together, to negotiate meaning, to make sense together. As there can be no central authority that requires collaboration, it must emerge in the relational spaces where people get to know each other, the work they are doing, and the context for that work, as well as the story about why they are doing that work. From this perspective, collaboration is a storytelling process, involving the telling, retelling, and evolution of the narratives that form the foundation of people's sense of their projects and how these projects relate to others' projects and the broader context.

To help explore this challenge from a narrative perspective, The Horizons Project and Civic Futures funded a research project, entitled Narrative Engagement Across Difference (NEAD), that aims to take an ecosystem approach to deep narrative engagement that includes inter-movement organizing, together with bridge-building approaches to other constituencies to bring about innovation and foster collaboration. As part of this project, research was conducted focused on the research question: *What are the practices that support groups to come together to collaborate across differences to reduce authoritarianism?*

Methodology

To address this question, the research team designed a literature review across 14 domains of literature that included the following topics: Radicalization, Securitization, Polarization, Futures Thinking, Conflict Resolution, Social Norms, Social Movements, Brain and Behavior, Radicals and Reformers, Trauma, Decision Science, Systems, Narrative and Social Media/AI. This review

was intended to capture the nature of the practices that were supportive of fostering collaborations between diverse groups/across difference, to reduce authoritarianism. Based on the review of over 200 selected articles and books in the database, the researchers coded 95 practices derived from the findings of the literature, which were then clustered, inductively, into 11 categories. Finally, to move towards the objective of the project to develop the narrative competencies that would support collaboration across groups working to reduce authoritarianism, the research team, drawing on narrative theory, grouped the practice clusters into three core narrative competencies: *narrative power*, *narrative legitimacy*, and *narrative complexity*, aligned with the core features of narrative structure and narrative dynamics.

Why Narrative?

Why “narrative”?³ The social world is a place where people make sense together. Indeed, this “sense” emerges from interactions where people draw on narratives they have inherited from family, and the broader culture. These narratives provide the pathways for engagement of the Self with Others; indeed, narrative provide the architecture for meaning making. As *homo narrans*, we use stories to account for ourselves, to build community, to make sense of our history, and to plan our futures, as well as to fight or collaborate with others. Narratives shape our lives, our identities, our relationships, as well as our social institutions. When we story ourselves and *are storied by others* in our network as contributing to collaboration, this is not only affirming, but enables us to feel confident in how we are engaging others. Not only have our relationships improved, but so has our sense of self, as an agent in the world that can make and execute plans.

Narrative architecture is composed of three core mutually reinforcing structures: the characters, the plot line (the events that are strung together to form the logic of the action), and the values---the moral terms that are used to make judgements about the “good” and “bad;” “democracy,” for example (in western culture) is good, or “authoritarianism” is bad. The words that are used to make these judgements comprise a value system and are central to the meaning-making process. The events that are named in the story form the descriptions of history, the actions in the present, and the future. Those that stormed the capital on Jan 6th, in the US, told a story with a plot line that there had been illegal voting, that then the election was stolen, and they had to stop the certification of the electoral votes to protect democracy. Together, the components of this architecture, the characters, the plot, and the values, function to reinforce each other, producing narrative “closure.” This is a property of all narratives, those you might agree with and those with which you disagree. A plot reinforces the way characters are described, which reinforces the values embedded within the story; these three components function as a closed system that seals itself off from alternative interpretation as we make meaning of the world.

“This is why we are always so certain of our own narratives that make perfect sense to us, and easily and readily delegitimize those we disagree with – who become “Other” in our minds.”

³ We use both the terms “narrative” and “story” even though “narrative” refers to story that has a moral point whereas a story is just a sequence of events Abbott, *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*.

This is why we are always so certain of our own narratives that make perfect sense to us, and easily and readily delegitimize those we disagree with – who become “Other” in our minds.

However, we do not make up most of these narratives by ourselves. We inherit them from our culture. “Women should be able to choose their own husbands” is a widely held value in the West, but women who come from cultures where parents choose their husbands, may report being as happy in their marriages as women in the West. The narratives we live by give structure to what we notice around us, who we choose for friends, how we live, the work we do, etc. This does not mean people are too weak to change their narratives or do not have agency, but rather that narratives structure our interactions with the world and give definition to what makes sense to us. Deep-seated stories impose themselves; they are powerful. While it is the case that people tell stories, it is also the case that people get caught up in stories as well.

Because of this power, there is an exploding interest in narrative, on the part of social movements and social change actors working to reduce authoritarianism. In this struggle to support democratic norms, activists, change agents, and their allies are working to harness narrative power to shape their messages and their stories, to influence others, whether those “Others” be authoritarian regimes, political processes within democratic states, or transboundary groups working to build global democratic norms that favor participation, human rights, and social justice. These actors are using narrative as a tool for social change, designing strategic narratives aimed at “winning” a particular battle, winning hearts and minds, winning elections, winning legal arguments, and winning policy choices. Some are deploying narrative as a weapon against their opponents, some are using narrative to engage stakeholders, hoping to increase participation, some are using narrative as a market segmentation tool, to build a message that resonates with a given segment, as they “sell” their ideology. While many of these narrative strategies are intended to “influence” and persuade, narrative is less often deployed as a strategy to build real partnerships where all have an opportunity to speak and be heard, to shape meaning, and thereby, shape action. Narrative is a tool, certainly, but it is also a practice, one that can foster conflict or collaboration. “Conflict” here refers not to different “interests” that people may have on an issue, but to the way in which people, once delegitimized, or “Othered,” struggle to have their voices heard, and therefore will struggle for legitimacy. Conflict narratives that cause people to feel delegitimized, also cause them to feel that they do not belong, that they do not matter, and/or that they are not material.

“Narrative is a tool, certainly, but it is also a practice, one that can foster conflict or collaboration.”

While all stories are important, because all storytellers should be valued, not all narratives are equivalent in terms of producing harm or affirming life in the context of building collaboration to reduce authoritarianism. Some narratives position people as good (the speaker) or bad (their Other). And the consequences of this positioning matters. Those that are delegitimized, framed as having bad characteristics and/or bad intentions, will struggle to change the narrative terrain on which they stand. They can try to deny, excuse, or justify their actions, if they are negatively positioned, but these tactics often do not work---people that are delegitimized struggle to be heard, to matter, or to materialize themselves as a legitimate person, precisely because being legitimate is the key to belonging or inclusion, as well as to

access to resources. Those that already have access to resources can use them to reframe or even silence those that delegitimize them. The narrative playing field is definitely not level, as people with power and privilege can often re-legitimize themselves, as they can afford to ignore or silence those that would delegitimize them.

Narrative legitimacy, being described as a good person, is critically important to collaboration because people will participate, contribute, and work through differences if they are framed as legitimate by others. After 9/11, it was difficult to be a Muslim in the US, as they were openly and persistently delegitimized, framed as dangerous others. Racism itself is a narrative that frames people of color as “less than” whites, as “dangerous” etc. “Othering” people, making them an Other, not just different but dangerous, is routinely used as an authoritarian tactic to sow division in society; but this “othering” tactic can often be used by social change actors to differentiate themselves from each other, and from their Others, and in this process, can reduce opportunities for building positive connections and collaborating with those Others.

Narrative power, from this perspective, is mightier than the sword because of its sway over people’s sensemaking and actions. It is visible in the values that are used, to evaluate action, and to make moral judgements. The people that get to set those values in place, have authority to stack the deck against their Others. With respect to racism, for example, for far too long police and government agencies in the US have been able to set the values in place which led to mass incarceration for people of color, by describing them a criminal, as dangerous. In some cases, it is not just that some people set the narrative values in place, and the rest of us have to navigate them, but there are some narratives that have very simplistic value systems that disable us from seeing nuance or tolerating uncertainty. For example, the conspiracy narratives that fomented the January 6th storming of the Capital, fostered certainty---people who elaborated and circulated these stories had certainty that the election had been stolen, and like people captured by cults, there was no room for alternative narratives.

While some narratives describe the world in a way that justifies, prescribes, or denies violence, alternatively, some narratives foster relationships where people describe each other as complex human beings, setting a foundation for the development of trust and collaboration, if not friendship. Some narratives describe history as a cautionary tale that inoculates against revenge and supports reconciliation, while other narratives commemorate racism and justify colonialism. Still other narratives enable us to appreciate the sacred values of others, even if ours are different, while other narratives identify the values that must be stamped out through the death of the people that dare to speak those stories. The narratives that describe people as human beings being human, that favor reconciliation over revenge and learn about the sacred values of others, exhibit narrative complexity. These narratives describe others (or Others) as legitimate; they story events in ways that lead people to take responsibility for problems, rather than externalizing responsibility; and they expand the value systems we use to judge ourselves and Others, enriching the moral frameworks we use to make judgements. Narrative complexity is essential to collaboration.

Clearly some narratives are more likely to foster collaboration, and some more likely to generate conflict and perpetuate oppression. This project was conceptualized as a “narrative” project to understand the practices that enable people to make sense (sense-make) *with*, not

for others. And it is for this reason that the project took aim at illuminating the narrative competencies that were *implied* by this inquiry into what supports groups to work collaboratively across differences to reduce authoritarianism.

Core Narrative Competencies: Defining Terms

Here, for this research, we differentiate the narratives that would support collaboration across differences from those that would reduce it along three central narrative competencies: legitimacy, power, and complexity. Each of these competencies is critically important to narrative engagement as they regulate and determine the nature of interaction between people (legitimacy), the dynamics of relations in the narrative landscape (power), and the capacity of narrative, any narrative to evolve and change (complexity).

All three of these are central to the project of supporting collaboration between groups to reduce authoritarianism. As people form groups, they are bringing their own personal, subjective, and even unconscious stories about “authoritarianism,” and “democracy,” “collaboration.” These stories anchor personal experience and are embedded in widely accepted cultural assumptions (democracy secures our freedom, for example), adding yet another layer of complexity to the goal of collaborating. At the group level, all groups have their narrative about themselves, and within that group there will be fissures, disagreements, and perhaps competition over goals and objectives, as well as methods. Narratives that are already in play - at individual and group levels - are often resonating with cultural norms and sacred values, anchored by those norms and values. From this perspective, we can begin to see the complexity of what is involved, at the narrative level, in building collaborations across differences. The narrative competencies described below enable us to examine the challenges and opportunities associated to collaborating across differences, opening new ways not only to understand collaboration from a narrative lens, but also to actually deploy the set of practices, associated with these competencies, that can support the development of collaboration.

Power: Narrative power is the power to dominate a given narrative landscape. A dominant narrative is one that is widely used by people to make sense of issues. It defines “the problem” in a specific way, and then offers a “solution.” Both the problem frame as well as the solution sets anchor how people understand their role and delimits their courses of action. Dominant narratives - those that are widely used and most often unquestioned - provide the basis for sensemaking in a given culture; they restrict or police what is acceptable to say and do. Whoever is delegitimized by a given dominant narrative may have a damaged identity, if not trauma.

“Ironically, countering dominant narratives only makes dominant narratives stronger, as they either counter the counternarrative, or re-deploy it to their purposes, or ignore it.”

Once delegitimized, people often struggle to re-story themselves, by “countering” a dominant narrative, reciprocally delegitimizing their Other “*you have tried to block minorities’ access to voting,*” or denying the core plot line, “*police brutality did not occur,*” or contesting the values

that are used to judge action, *"it was not an insurrection---we were protecting democracy!"* However, "countering" does not lead to changes in dominant narratives as the latter simply absorbs the countering narrative's attributes to maintain their centrality. Ironically, countering dominant narratives only makes dominant narratives stronger, as they either counter the counternarrative, or re-deploy it to their purposes, or ignore it.

For example, in some cultures it may be taken for granted that women are better caretakers, and it is obvious that society benefits when women stay home to raise their children. Feminist groups may want to counter this narrative by demanding that women have choices, showing successful working women or telling stories of the difference women have made outside of the home; often demonizing those that advocate for traditional family-values (their "Other.") Those that support the "traditional family values" narrative will focus instead on statistics that cherry-pick negative impacts on children's development or that show an increase in divorce rates as women enter the work force, so that the story's focus will reinforce their cultural beliefs.

Understanding narrative power and engaging it intentionally is central to the project of building collaboration, as groups need to be able to understand the role of dominant narratives in their own projects, and how they relate to other groups in that narrative landscape. Dominant narratives are inevitably problematic in terms of building collaboration, as they all too often are based on excluding, denigrating, or denying an "Other" that, within the dominant narrative, are responsible for the problem. From this perspective it is critically important for a group to "stand under" (understand) their own dominant narratives about the problem and solutions, to see how they inadvertently strengthen the very narrative they hope to change, by denying it, refuting it, or challenging it. As we shall see, in the discussion of the findings associated with narrative power, the best way to unseat or undermine the power of a dominant narrative is to increase the complexity of the narrative landscape, by adding new stories with new texture and dimensions, developed from reflection on our own stories, as well as inclusion of new voices and perspectives. Simply struggling for legitimacy by countering a dominant narrative does little to change how the delegitimized are positioned.

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How people position themselves and others in the stories that they tell has critical import for the broader set of narrative dynamics. These narrative dynamics are often overlooked, but they are essential for tracing how narratives not only set up how people position each other but how their narratives are positioned, in turn, within the broader narrative landscape. While, for instance, groups in the US may come together to work to reduce authoritarianism, there are both geographic locations, as well as social media sites, where authoritarian narratives proliferate, and are dominant (such as "othering" immigrants). That is to say, in any given context, some narratives are more dominant than others, they have more currency or are given more validity. These dominant narratives make it possible for meaning to be made in particular ways in order that the storytellers be legitimized (for example politicians who scapegoat immigrants and who paint themselves as "strong on crime and border security.") Surfacing these dynamics highlights the power relationships in a given context because as some narratives have more legitimacy than others, it means that the speaker of those narratives also

gains more legitimacy. In an ideal world, all people have legitimacy, however, it is in that struggle for legitimacy that we can witness how power operates.

Understanding narrative power is a core competency, as it provides a frame for analysis and intervention pertaining to how movements, coalitions, and groups come together across difference in ways that acknowledge that, in these spaces, difference is often grounded in relationships of inequality---and this needs to be surfaced. Recognizing that people come from different cultures, backgrounds, and lived experiences is only part of the equation. But simply exploring differences does not necessarily address the politics of those differences. We can have many conversations about the differences between being a white person and a person of color, but those differences are only the doorway into understanding, for the reality is that these differences also have values attached to them and those values have consequences for how people experience their identities and how they are viewed by society. Therefore, identity differences cannot solely be viewed as points of difference, otherwise it overlooks the consequences of difference that are rooted in dimensions of power and inequity, where narratives position some people as better than others. From this perspective differences alone do not advance our understanding, but it is those differences which affect legitimacy and access to resources that matter.

Because difference is often discussed extant to power relationships it obscures people's understanding of their own positionality, as privileged or marginalized, and leads to blind spots as to their own assumptions about the world and their own viewpoints, making it difficult to have a nuanced understanding of their own social location---how they are positioned, morally, within a given narrative. The narrative dynamics of a system are particularly pertinent to this analysis of positionality, via an analysis, for example, of which stories are privileged, and which cannot be told, as well as, who gets positioned as legitimate within those stories. This narrative positioning happens within the context of a world that is rife with dominant narratives that provide shared meaning and a cohesive understanding of a given culture and dictate what is right and wrong, and therefore what is subnormal, or "less than." Given that these dominant narratives are often hidden in plain sight because they set the parameters around what can and cannot be said and by whom in a given narrative landscape, it is critical to examine and surface potential tensions, precisely because dominant narratives and their dynamics have material consequences---people live, or die, people can vote or they can't, people get citizenship or are deported. Dominant narratives often "naturalize" a way of seeing the world ("*we need to return to a time when America was great*"), reducing the possibility that we will question or challenge the dominant narrative's underlying assumptions.

To give an example of this, in narratives of immigration in the United States as mentioned, some groups deploy a dominant narrative that positions "immigrants" as invaders, job-stealers, and criminals. Immigrants, in this sense, are not just seen as different, they are positioned as less-than, sub-human, and a threat. This can be seen in many cases around the world. Telling this kind of story leads to policies that would aim to stop an "invasion," to limit access to jobs, and to increase criminalization of immigrants. This occurs whether or not one is a friend to immigrants, disagrees with their positioning as "less than," or believes that these kinds of actions are unfair. The dominant narrative can function to subsume counternarratives and "writes itself" into everyday conversations that instantiate those meanings in policies and institutionalized practices. The power of a dominant narrative lies in the way it aligns itself

with core sacred values, such as “freedom” or “democracy” which makes it easy for people to be swept up in it. One such classic example in the US is “opportunities come to those who work hard” ---this story resonates with historic Calvinist influences but upon scrutiny, we can see the connection between opportunity and privilege---it is not hard work, that increases opportunity, but the connections in networks of privilege. Additionally, these meanings can be internalized by those who are positioned negatively or “othered” and they might develop what Hilda Nelson (2001) calls an “infiltrated consciousness.” Here, people start to believe the stories that are told about them, whether consciously or not, damaging their self-conception and self-worth, which in turn diminishes agency and autonomy. It also reduces access to resources and limits opportunities. For example, women may swim upstream against the tide of gender narratives that equate asking for a raise, with being ungrateful, or pushy. Kids that perform poorly in school may internalize narratives that they are not smart or capable. There are serious material consequences of a damaging narrative, and they demonstrate how narrative power operates in a web of meaning that is at the same time global and local, culturally grounded, and locally enacted.

This same principle is key for understanding how narrative power operates in the process of coalition building and throughout a social movement’s evolution. However, while the example of migrants is one that may appear obvious, how narrative power shows up in coalition and a movement’s stories might not be as obvious. Often people are not able to recognize the stories that they are caught up in because they have been part of them for so long and are so committed to them that they have become invisible, like a fish not recognizing they are swimming in water. According to the literature from this study, coming to understand such dynamics is critically important and

requires a set of practices that involve different levels of analysis and critical reflection that can excavate the surface, taken-for-granted assumptions, and bring to light the ways in which coalitions and groups might accidentally or even purposefully tell de-legitimizing or alienating narratives. There are always blind

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spots, and it takes time and appropriate practices to engage meaningfully in understanding how narrative power operates in ways that structure and organize how people are positioned in relation to each other, making it more likely that people can not only learn together, but can do so within narratives where they are positively positioned.

Legitimacy: Narrative legitimacy pertains to whether people are described in the narrative as “good” or “bad.” Their social location as “good” or “bad” reflects how they are positioned by Self and Others, on a moral landscape where there are values used to judge action, “being kind” or “working hard” or “listening to others” or “being strong,” for example. People might position themselves as “strong” while others position them as “unable to listen.” For the speakers, they value strength, and position themselves as legitimate within their own narrative, while their Others, position them as delegitimate, strident and difficult to work with. Narratives are where people struggle to position themselves as legitimate, as appropriate within the value systems

that are in use. When they are delegitimized, people withdraw from the relationship, or escalate, in an effort to force their Other to stop the denigration. Conflict is all too often the result. When people are legitimized, they open themselves to reflection, consider alternatives to their own perspectives, and can develop collaborative relations, as well as engage others in ways that build trust and deepen relational connections. The competency of narrative legitimacy is essential as people will refuse to collaborate unless or until they are legitimized.

From a narrative perspective, we are constantly, discursively positioning ourselves and others in conversations. A position in conversation assigns certain personal attributes as well as rights and duties. One's legitimacy also comes with positioning oneself in a certain moral order that gives you moral rights to take action. At the same time, others can be delegitimized - positioned in a way that not only prescribes them negative attributes but also sets limits on what they can and cannot do. For example, someone positioned as 'unreliable' in a team will be excluded from overseeing emergency protocols, and someone positioned as 'stupid' is denied a chance of making a contribution in projects requiring intellectual horsepower. Once established, positioning makes it difficult for those groups and individuals to take actions for which they are not seen as able or worthy.

While positioning is a constant process, it becomes more salient in contentious contexts. In conflict narratives, speakers position themselves and others in storylines in a way that legitimizes and justifies themselves, while delegitimizing the other and assigning them negative attributes. The social impact of positioning depends on the positions of individuals and groups and these rights and duties are not always equally distributed. Sometimes, positions occur naturally and emerge out of conversations and social context, but it can also be initiated intentionally. To follow an example from immigration explained above, in a dispute over resources in a given community that is racially and ethnically diverse, positioning of any group as "immigrants" can automatically characterize them as not belonging and therefore not worthy of access to resources as outsiders.

Narrative legitimacy, as a competency, reveals how positions are constantly negotiated and contested through locating people as good or bad, who are then seen as moral actors with value or are dehumanized. These processes are also not always intentional and can produce unintended consequences. For example, when making a speech on behalf of a party, a party leader does not only position himself vis-à-vis the competing political party, but also in the stories about the statehood, nation, and a future. Such stories not only position groups vis-à-vis other groups but can contribute to maintaining power relations. In other words, shifting the way groups are characterized and positioned in narratives can have implications for creating more equitable relations, as well as more effective collaborative processes. The competency of narrative legitimacy highlights the dynamic process of positioning and its sometimes-unintended consequences for the way various actors, in a given system are able to position and see themselves, their allies, as well as their Others, as legitimate. It has implications for the way the relationships and collaboration are constructed and managed among diverse groups in coalitions.

Complexity: In the process of developing collaboration, narrative complexity supports the development and evolution of the narratives told at two levels----the level of groups' stories

about themselves and their members, as well as the level of the narratives circulating in narrative landscapes, as the broader cultural and social context.

At the first level, the level of the stories in groups, told by group members, narratives can be simplified such that the characters become archetypal good and bad guys. The plot of these simplified stories may not offer many details about “what happened” but highlight three or so events that are critical, that are used to explain outcomes. Likewise, the values of a simplified narrative are binary---a person is either honest, or a liar, intelligent or stupid, criminal or law-abiding. Groups, just like individuals, can use and embrace simplified stories that help them sharpen and clarify their positions, but these stories drain out the details that might show characters as both good *and* bad, describe a more detailed set of events that contributed to the outcome, or build out the value systems that are used to make moral judgements---stories can valorize “law and order” *and* recognize the need for exceptions, for humane judgement. These more complex stories increase the humanity of the stories we tell---people are neither perfect nor are they evil; the course of events in a story can be thick enough to see into the ways that people contributed to the creation of the very problems they are trying to solve, and the values espoused in complex narratives can be multiple and overlapping.

For example, if we use the immigration example, we can see that the narratives told about immigrants are all too often *not* complex---immigrants are portrayed as criminals, endangering Americans and/or trying to jump onto the welfare train at the expense of American taxpayers. Immigrants deserve to be put into detention centers, even if it means separating them from their children. In this simplified narrative the characters are good (law abiding taxpayers), or bad (immigrants); the plot is simple---immigrants sneak into the country to game the system and enact crimes; and the values that are central to this story are “law-abiding” and “law-breaking.” As groups try to work together to address immigration, they would need to begin to build a broader, more complex narrative that includes the contribution of immigrants to US history, culture, and economy.

“In terms of narrative complexity, a more diverse landscape enables multiple narratives to circulate and flourish.”

The more complex history would introduce the immigrant backstories which would contextualize the immigrants’ efforts to gain entry to the US. And the narrative values of these more complex narratives need to include the love that parents have for their children, the need for laws that are fair, where immigrants have rights and fulfill their responsibilities. These more complex narratives have elements that could be valued by liberal and conservative groups, but the simplified narratives would only balkanize groups. As groups come together, they can listen, appreciate, and elaborate more complex descriptions about the people, the events, and the values that anchor immigration stories and open the door to collaboration.

Narrative complexity can also be a feature of the set of narratives circulating in the landscape of narratives about an issue. In the case of immigration, there are largely, in the US, balkanized immigration narratives---those on the right are simplified stories that underline “law and order” while those on the left might underline the economic and social drivers for immigration, the contribution of immigrants to American society, and highlight the need for pathways to citizenship. The complexity of the narrative landscape refers here to the *diversity* of the

landscape. In a less diverse landscape, there are fewer stories in circulation, and the dominant narratives rule. There are many states in the US now where the dominant narrative in the landscape about immigration is one about criminals that need to be deported or borders that need to be securitized, and there are few alternative narratives. However, in sanctuary cities, there may be a more diverse narrative landscape where the “law and order” narrative is side by side with the “sanctuary” narratives, or the stories that highlight the contributions that immigrants make to society. In terms of narrative complexity, a more diverse landscape enables multiple narratives to circulate and flourish.

Changing narratives is hard, and the challenges are many. At the level of a given group’s narrative, their story, like all stories, can operate as a closed system, where the plot, the characters and the values reinforce each other. When a narrative is challenged (when

“...efforts to “seed” narratives in a given population rarely lead to change in the narrative landscape, as real change comes from within a group with trusted narrators.”

characters are delegitimized for example), the narrative develops so as to maintain homeostasis, preserving itself, as a system. For a narrative to change, new events have to be introduced into the plot line, characters must be described not only positively, but with more nuance, and the value systems people use to judge action become more varied, more diverse. Further, these changes must be elaborated and adopted by other people, widening its circulation-- efforts to “seed” narratives in a given population rarely lead to change in the narrative landscape, as real change comes from within a group with trusted narrators. Narrative complexity, rather than narrative simplicity, is foundational to the development of collaboration as it creates a more open, and diverse landscape where new narratives can be told, elaborated, and adopted.

Together, narrative power, narrative legitimacy, and narrative complexity are three core competencies that enable people to navigate their and Other’s positionality in the stories they are telling, as well as the stories being told by Others. They also enable groups to collaboratively negotiate their relation to dominant narratives, to strategically, and systematically reduce the power of the stories that undermine collaboration. And finally, they have real time practical implications for how to change narratives and support their evolution, to foster collaboration, and institutionalize norms that would anchor it.

Findings

In the section that follows, we review the practices, derived from the research, that support groups to collaborate toward the reduction of authoritarianism. Having identified 11 core practices that are central to the development of collaboration across differences to reduce authoritarianism, we clustered these 11 practices as pertinent to the three core competencies: narrative power, narrative legitimacy, and narrative complexity. We discuss each of these practices within the core narrative competencies and address the implications for the development of collaboration.

Narrative Power

Drawing on the fourteen fields of analysis for this study, four main clusters of practices emerged under the frame of Narrative Power.

1. Engaging in Critical Reflective Practice
2. Power Analysis
3. Mapping Narrative Landscapes
4. Engaging Beyond Ideology

Engaging in Critical Reflective Practice: How do dominant narratives operate? What work do they do in the narrative landscape? How does engaging in critical reflective practice serve groups to challenge and excavate the unquestioned way dominant narratives order the world? The research shows that it is essential that groups coming together across difference engage in critical reflective practice in order to answer these questions and to understand the diversity of narratives that exist, and their attached morals and values that lead to particular practices and actions (Cobb et al., 2019; Minson & Dorison, 2022; Newton, 2017). This also pertains to the use of strategic narrative to engage third party actors that understand the way that official narratives are working to shape the narrative landscape (Rogerson et al., 2013).

Practices in the narrative power cluster provide recommendations for how to identify the dominant narratives that may be characterizing movements and shaping their processes for building coalitions. However, because such narratives are often taken for granted or even unnoticed, it is essential to first critically reflect on what the stories are that drive people to action and their implications (Pouncil & Sanders, 2022). Beamish and Leubbers (2009) demonstrate that to successfully ally, cross movement coalitions must often reconcile distinctive, sometimes competing explanations, as well as remedies for the social problems they jointly seek to stem. As a consequence, cross-movement coalitions can be freighted with relations of power that increase the potential for intergroup conflict because issues that are taken for granted within movements must be defended and explained in cross-movement contexts. Context is critically important in considering these relationships, especially in the face of authoritarianism (Chen & Moss, 2018). Hoominfar (2021) emphasizes that often times dominating Western paradigms for building movements fail to consider the specifics of contexts which can result in exclusionary processes. While Wibben (2011) cautions that an unexamined dominant narrative such as securitization could leave out important stories of everyday people, making it oversimplified. Milojevic and Inayatullah (2015) suggest specific narrative approaches to building futures that are relevant for coalition building and social movement work such as, how to identify and examine underlying assumptions, understanding self and others at a deeper level through use of stories and metaphors, and how framing determines strategies. Understanding assumptions embedded in stories and reframing them can support coalition building to discover stories that block collaboration or contribute to polarization.

“Understanding assumptions embedded in stories and reframing them, can support coalition building to discover stories that block collaboration or contribute to polarization.”

This kind of critical reflection provides a methodology for building cognitive complexity, which is said to be essential in order to develop more complex narratives about other groups and can lead to an increased openness. This draws from the claim that less cognitive complexity makes people more susceptible to ideological thinking (Zmigrod, 2021). Zmigrod and Tsakiris (2021) suggest that in order to address metacognitive skills, groups need to address neural sensitivity to uncertainty, help to create existential meaning for people, and discuss how frustrations can be addressed. Critical reflection can address areas of underdeveloped cognitive reasoning that stems from simplified narratives

that can make people more susceptible to being reactionary and not having a sense of their own role in a set of circumstances.

Kugler and Coleman (2020) affirm this approach arguing that in order to build coalitions across difference and avoid conflicts, complex information needs to be presented to groups and cautions against framing conflicts in morally simplistic terms. Indeed, in an effort to clarify their position, and advance their activism, groups can unwittingly simplify their narrative about the problems they are addressing and their contribution to its solution.

“...in an effort to clarify their position, and advance their activism, groups can unwittingly simplify their narrative about the problems they are addressing and their contribution to its solution.”

Interrogating reflective questions such as, “what is our positionality vis-à-vis the movement space and the people with whom we want to collaborate?” (Roe, 2004), would increase people’s ability to be inclusive because it would call attention to hidden privileges or inequities not always apparent (Carrie & Menkel-Meadow, 2022; Beamish & Leubbers, 2009; Burgmann, 2018; Ellifsen, 2018). Likewise, it also pushes people to challenge themselves to take on the perspectives of their “Other” and to interrogate how their stories position them (Girgis et al., 2018; Plummer, 2020; Koch, 2017; Yilmaz & Erturk, 2021). Popitz (2017) urges people to get closer to one another and their issues, especially because as movements grow and diversify, it increases the likelihood that cleavages will form (Zajak & Haunss, 2020). Indeed, as Pouncil and Sanders (2022) argue, it is critical to examine histories, practices, values of social identity in the formation of groups, Simas et al. (2020) argue that perspective-taking helps to mitigate some of the limitations of empathy while Warner et al. (2020) argue that it can reduce polarization. Gower et al. (2019) suggest this is best achieved through unstructured conversation. The “Other” is the person or group within a narrative that the storyteller positions negatively, as delegitimate. For example, in this project, “authoritarian systems” are the Other that are negatively positioned---those who prop up that system are trying to reduce voting, regulate women’s bodies, and/or reduce rights and freedoms for LGBTQ populations, for example. Given that peoples’ “Other” is generally characterized overly simplistically and, even worse, is at times dehumanized, it is critical to examine the implications for such a positioning and how it might negatively affect desired outcomes. Reflexive practices which encourage agency, individual diverse perspectives, multiplicity of opinions that dilutes groupthink and collective/unexamined acceptance of ideas, can mitigate this (Brown et al., 2022). Collective spaces to examine these types of questions are valuable for understanding how power is constructed through the narratives that are being told and how that might either advance or hinder the goals of coalition building and movements. One study, for example, explores how people use

what is called, in the Narrative Policy Framework, the “devil/angel” shift. Analysis shows that groups who construct themselves as losing in a given policy struggle will frame the Other as “devil” and focus on their terrible traits, actions, or intentions, while groups that construct themselves as winning or representing the status quo focus on constructing themselves as angels and detail their significant contributions to the social good (Uldanov et al., 2021; Chang & Koebele, 2020). This has import for the focus on fostering collaboration, as groups would do well to avoid falling into narratives that excoriate the Other (devil) and instead accent the positive aspects of their own work, and their contributions to address the problem. The focus on the devil Other often just reproduces the dominant narrative that the group is trying to counter, often unsuccessfully.

Power Analysis: Critically reflecting on the narratives that predominate in a movement space illuminates that there are some narratives that are privileged over others, therefore leading to marginalization dynamics within and across groups. There are many dangers to the dominance and marginalization produced in a landscape; inclusion can be a causality that results from a group’s marginalizing narratives. Critical reflective practice provides a framework for analyzing power differences that emerge from dominant and marginalized narrative dynamics which can be seen in the struggle for voice and legitimacy. For example, the dominant narrative on immigration along the US border may be silencing and marginalizing the voices of immigrants. Critical reflection on these dynamics can not only support strategic intervention to include immigrant voices, but also increases the possibility for building more inclusive narratives that reduce marginalization (Montgomery & Baglioni, 2022; Tropp et al., 2021). One condition of marginalization is the lack of inclusion of people’s histories into the stories that we tell about them, specifically in relationship to colonial histories, which accounts for overly simplistic narrative characterizations of groups. We clearly see this in the US, in the narratives about immigrants---their histories, traumas are excluded, and even their role as “parent,” “father,” or “mother” is denied, in the face of their role as “illegal immigrant.” This aspect of power analysis is recommended in the literature and posits that in order to do bridging work and collaborate with historically marginalized groups within and across coalitions/movements there needs to be recognition as to how colonial histories shape identities, needs, and approaches that have otherwise been less visible (Praeger, 2015; Christopher, 2021; Marin & Shkreli, 2019). Therefore, it is not only about incorporating those stories into the movement spaces, but about examining dominant and usually Western understandings, assumptions about how coalitions are built and how movements operate and how those movements may inadvertently sideline non-Western approaches. Hoominfar (2021), discusses the propensity of movements to operate within their own predominant Western paradigms and cautions groups to examine their processes to avoid getting caught in their own dominant narratives. In fact, this particular study emphasizes that unless movements acknowledge power asymmetries and take strides to address inequalities within and across networks, that the coalition will not coalesce. This furthers the assertion that building coalitions across difference needs to have a power analysis as part of the strategy if it wants to succeed. This analysis would involve identifying the dominant and marginalized narratives that are part of the landscape, also noting what stories

“The focus on the devil Other often just reproduces the dominant narrative that the group is trying to counter, often unsuccessfully.”

are excluded. This can be critically important in the context of security narratives (Yilmaz et al., 2021) and in building trusting relationships in coalitions (Romano et al., 2020). Not only does attention to these power dynamics create the possibility for inclusion but in so doing they create more complex narratives about people who may historically be absent or marginalized from narratives, inoculating against Nelson's "infiltrated consciousness"---people adopt the delegitimizing stories told by others, infiltrating how they see themselves. And like most instances where power and privilege are explored, it is often the case that dominant narratives are adopted by leaders and those in power not because they are power hungry, but because they make sense to leaders. Stepping back, to reflect on our own stories is often difficult precisely because it is hard to see how our own stories are, at some level, "stock stories" (Bell, 2020)---stories that are widely accepted in the culture.

Mapping Narrative Landscapes: Generating a comprehensive understanding of the dominant narratives, the marginalized narratives, and how they operate in a given context is critical to having a fuller picture of how the parts connect to the whole. It is not only the narratives within and across movements that need to be made visible and known, but to understand how those narratives interact with, intersect with or otherwise ignore the much larger contexts in which they are embedded. This can aid in the reduction of polarization (Turner & Smaldino, 2018) and increase the complexity in stories (Ortega Alvarado et al., 2021) toward understanding how different narratives impact a system (Von Foerster, 1984). This can include the analysis of the digital coalition spaces. (Vlavo, 2017). Engaging in a robust process of narrative mapping provides a process which can be made into a visual representation of narrative dynamics, within and across networks, and in relationship to those considered outside of the networks. This process increases the possibilities for collaboration, for creating language that resonates across networks (Smith et al., 2021; Laursen et al., 2016), which can reveal linkages across networks that might either already present or constructed, in time. Discovering unusual

connections within the network is difficult if focusing too heavily on ideological synchronicity or overall narrative sameness, and this highlights the benefits of narrative mapping. A collaboration between climate scientists and local ecosystem managers in Hawaii involved in knowledge production and research agenda building, spent a lot of time with communities, living in these ecosystems, and they created new language together and linked points of networks which may not normally have been working together (Laursen,

et al. 2016). The point here is that it is the diversity of perspectives, not their unity, which sets groups up for successful collaboration. This point has tremendous implications for groups working to reduce authoritarianism; this finding implies that the ideological foundation of the group is less pertinent to collaboration than learning about each other, building relationships, and developing respect for the different experiences and perspectives within a group.

“...like most instances where power and privilege are explored, it is often the case that dominant narratives are adopted by leaders and those in power not because they are power hungry, but because they make sense to leaders. Stepping back, to reflect on our own stories is often difficult precisely because it is hard to see how our own stories are, at some level, “stock stories”

Narrative mapping not only reveals where there might be unlikely overlap between differing groups, but it might also reveal where there might be fractures in narratives that otherwise seem impenetrable. This refers to the cohesive and tightly operating nature of dominant narratives which are difficult to transform, and this can make conversations across difference impossible and collaboration difficult. One specific case of this is suggested by Bray (2019) who points out that in authoritarian regimes it might be possible to find people and spaces, especially elites, who waver from the norm. In this case, archival mapping of narratives of Communist Party in Czechoslovakia examined narratives of the elites that helped suppress protests showed fractures within ruling elites (Bray, 2019). This is an example where mapping allows for identifying a fracture in a cohesive authoritarian narrative. It can also raise awareness for how people are likely to use any given participatory process to their own ends, which may not be aligned with the goals of the organizing entity, but rather self-serving the needs of the convenor (Teets, 2021)

There are ways to map narrative landscapes that are small scale and large scale. Poletta (1998) suggests engaging in an inquiry about itself and its partners and allies; but this inquiry should also attend to how the group is situated within a narrative landscape of the entire movement landscape. This would include not only the narratives that emerge within a movement, but the narratives within which they are situated and the narratives that compel their actions. For example, Black Lives Matter is a movement that has its own narratives, and these stories support the movement to navigate how it responds and reacts to the entire narrative landscape. This navigation, in turn, is built on their understanding of the dynamics of their narrative landscape. Narrative mapping provides a platform for engaging in critical reflective practice, and power analysis, making it both a tool and an intervention. (Poletta, 1998). A primary example that emerged in the literature is the tension around the narratives of securitization and the need to understand how security narratives operate. Securitization is described in the literature as a discursive move that allows for the consolidation of power and the maintenance of the status quo by introducing an existential threat that requires extraordinary measures to overcome.

Although the security narrative is applicable to democratic contexts (the existential threat justifying circumventing the regular democratic norms and practices), it is also widely used in authoritarian settings.

Maintenance of status quo by security narratives inherently reproduces marginalization because it privileges and justifies certain forms of power. Mapping the landscape of security narratives and how they operate can reveal how these narratives structure and order power relations as well as have implications for policy, positioning people and politicians. The reflective practice of asking whose security the narrative is positioning as central (usually the state's or a dominant group's) can bring awareness of the privileging within a security narrative and open opportunities for an alternative perspective on security (Wibben, 2011; Sheikh et al., 2016; Aggestam, 2015; Cobb et al., 2019; Chang, 2021).

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Engaging Beyond Ideology: While common sense may tell us that ideological birds of a feather should flock together, the research shows that working to build coalitions using

ideology is a problem for a host of reasons. Ideology is a coherent system of ideas that relies on few general assumptions, through repeated patterns, which people routinely choose. The main reason behind ideology is to offer ideas for the purpose of change or where conformity exists. As such it functions as a category of dominant narrative whose shorthand over-simplifies the complexity of peoples' beliefs in their day-to-day realities. Ideology is, by definition, abstract, yet the work of any collaboration is grounded in daily practices, anchored in lived experiences. So, it is not likely to function as a tool to span differences in a way that is enriching, due to its abstract and coherent narrative character, it is likely to oversimplify rather than excavate diverse experiences (Huang, 2016; Carvallo, 2022; Polletta & Jasper, 2001; Fominaya, 2010; Ferguson & McAuley, 2020; Kurowska et al., 2018).

Literature also demonstrates that all too often, ideology is the focus for determining how to engage people in coalition building and movement work to deter them from developing radical perspectives. However, an interesting and surprising finding in the research emphasizes that shifting the focus away from reliance on ideologic motivations and formulating approaches that are grounded more on prosocial behaviors – actions that benefit society and perspective taking – understanding perspectives of others is more effective in building collaboration across differences. Such approaches get around the idea of fixed perspectives and belief systems of the groups – a simplified, cohesive story about them – encouraging a better quality of engagement across difference. This is one of the cautionary tales told by the literature. One of the ways to do this is to make sure that people's identities are framed in relationship to the contexts in which they are embedded rather than making assumptions that identity is grounded solely in a particular belief system. This requires understanding people within their contexts and experiences as determinants/contributors to their political and social preferences. For example, a pro-choice woman in a community whose livelihood is supported by the oil industry and whose local government has failed to provide any support during difficult economic times, may vote for a Republican candidate who supports the oil industry, because of economic dependency (practicality) rather than out of ideological beliefs, as it is often assumed.

“Ideology is, by definition, abstract, yet the work of any collaboration is grounded in daily practices, anchored in lived experiences.”

There are two especially critical studies that demonstrate how people in more repressive environments successfully engage in broad-based movements without focusing on ideology. One important study looks at a genre of "virtual testimony" named as such for cyber-petitioners in China wanting to safely get the attention of allies without being condemned by the government (Huang, 2016). This article uses Critical Narrative Analysis, specializing in the connections between power and hegemony and personal narratives, to understand the linguistic strategies that have had success in generating alliances to bring grievances to the government. The author offers that this kind of testimony can address "narrative inequality"- the inequality in access to linguistic-communicative resources needed to construct narratives (Blommaert, 2001; Huang, 2016). This kind of narrative analysis allows people to share their experiences and grievances without tying up their testimonies in the dominant narrative or their ideological underpinnings, thus making a different kind of alliance-building possible. It illustrates that collaboration and understanding can be achieved through sharing lived

experiences without being 'detected' and therefore appropriated by the dominant narrative. The key is to highlight very practical real-world, lived experiences. This allows for avoiding or going around the tensions and triggers of the language a dominant narrative can bring up in contested and repressive contexts, while being able to focus on the core issues people care about most.

In another key example, The Milk Tea Alliance (Dednam, 2021) is a pan-Asian group of activists that work online, and in the streets, to resist authoritarian regimes, trolling them on social media, and organizing in-person protests. These activists have come together using the cultural reference "milk tea" to create an alliance that crosses nations in Asia. Using this hashtag, their activism is anchored in a cultural practice, and not any one political party, and given that milk tea is different in different nations and regions, it is a frame that supports the diversity of perspectives of any and all of those active within the movement. It is this cultural, rather than ideological frame that reflects the diversity of the alliance, and its open door to any allies to come together using milk tea as an emoji for pro-democracy.⁴

In summary, understanding narrative power dynamics is essential for the work of engaging groups across difference. The stories people tell in their coalitions and in their daily lives have import for their relationships with others. As the research demonstrates, groups are unlikely to collaborate if power is not addressed as part of relationship-building strategies, therefore limiting the possibilities for and efficacy of democratic practices. Taken together, critical reflective practice, exploring power, narrative mapping, and engaging beyond ideology provide a framework and set of actions for engaging across difference in coalitions by addressing tensions and conflicts as well as building stronger connections through raising the legitimacy of multiple value systems, perspectives, and beliefs, anchored in lived experience.

Narrative Legitimacy

Narrative legitimacy is a core competence as it is key to understanding the dynamics of how groups and individuals position themselves and others within networks, coalitions, and the world at large and what implications it has for collaboration across difference. The practices derived from the research findings have been organized into three clusters under this competence:

1. Intra-coalition Diversity
2. Intersectional Collective Identities
3. Network-based Coalitions

⁴ See the article: "Milk Tea Alliance" Twitter creates an emoji for pro-democracy activists (2021) at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-56676144>

Intra-coalition Diversity: The practices in this cluster are concerned with how diversity within coalitions creates a dynamic that either fosters collaboration or hinders it. From a narrative lens, diversity has implications for creating better conditions for elaboration of narratives - a process that enriches and develops narratives incorporating complexity and multiplicity of views. At the same time, diversity within coalitions triggers and can be hindered by groups' struggle for legitimacy - by the way they position themselves and others. Findings from this cluster lay out the dynamics and suggested practices for addressing these challenges.

Diversity of experience, identities, geographic scope, and expertise of work in social movement coalitions is enriching and beneficial as it not only broadens participation but also brings more varied and wide perspectives on issues resulting in mutually enriching relationships and different strategies for action (Daphi et al., 2022; Fishman, 2014; Foster-Fishman et al., 2001; McCammon et al., 2015). For example, research shows, that transnational and cross-sectoral coalitions are able to strengthen domestic coalitions by weakening local identity group claims and offering broader perspectives which connect local issues to globalized discourses (Daphi et al., 2022). Diversity is also at the heart of democratic practice. In contrast, homogenous groups with shared identities, where contestations are limited or absent, are in danger of becoming closed and 'stuck' in their narratives because the stories are reiterated and accepted and taken for granted therefore precluding possibility of uncertainty (Boettke & Thompson, 2019).

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Coalitions formed around homogeneity of either identities or interests can inevitably become 'permanent winning coalitions' establishing new hierarchies and power relationships within themselves and restricting possibility of members to leave as they increase stability, gain power, and advance their interests (ibid). While this appears to make 'winning' easier, research shows that it can have negative implications for upholding democratic decision-making, as it limits possibility of uncertainty, as well as opportunities of individuals to shift in their identities. Such permanent 'winning' by one group in the long run increases the probability of conflict and violence, as 'losing' groups can eventually abandon the struggle within democratic means and either leave the process or succumb to violence. To counter this, diversity offers the opportunity for uncertainty, and new choices as well as for enriching, better quality conversations and elaboration of narratives that can open new options and avenues for action.

As desirable as it is, diversity within coalitions can initiate a dynamic where difference sets up a process of struggle for legitimacy between all actors, causing tensions and conflict. In contested contexts, this means that as groups position themselves in a coalition or vis-à-vis particular issues - as legitimate to take certain action, they can intentionally or unintentionally position others in a way that can be delegitimizing. For example, such positioning might occur when various groups compete for resources or engage in advocacy for an aspect of a larger cause with a particular perspective. In addition, given the difficulty of conditions faced by many

coalition members, and limited resources for regular interaction, conflict and tension can arise not only from the differences but from the lack of trust and communication. Literature shows that intentional, deliberate effort and special skills in coming together and managing this diversity is crucial for successful collaboration (Menkel-Meadow, 2022; Boettke & Thompson, 2019; Gower et al., 2019; Romano et al., 2020; Coskun, 2008; Vaughn, 2021; Popitz, 2017; Foster-Fishman et al., 2001; McKenna et al., 2018). Increased competencies in conflict resolution skills to be able to facilitate processes and

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conversations that reinforce mutual legitimacy among coalition members is highlighted in literature (Foster-Fishman et al., 2001; Beamish & Leubbers, 2009). It is important to note that from a narrative lens, legitimacy is not increased simply by coming together and sharing perspectives but is dependent on the quality of the conversations and the stories elaborated together which have to be legitimizing. In other words, not only diverse membership but the quality of participation of the groups in coalitions is critical for successful collaboration across difference.

Structured facilitated engagements can play an important role in facilitating dialogues that contribute to the success of collaboration across difference (Gower et al., 2019; Romano et al., 2020; Fishkin et al., 2021). For example, a large study of reflective structured dialogues – type of dialogues that encourage listening, reflection, and thoughtful speaking in order to shift stuck conversations – was successful in improving discussions on contentious topics and fostering collaboration (Gower et al., 2019, 212). These require engaging in critical reflection that brings awareness to power relations and engagement and elaboration with respect for difference rather than push for shared narratives or identities, a topic that is further elaborated in the next section (Gower et al., 2019; Romano et al., 2020; Fishkin et al., 2021). In another example, the facilitation work done by Romano, Linnemeier, and Allen (2020) in an Appalachian community of environmental activists composed of a diverse group of actors, revealed during the workshop that lack of regular communication, as well as existing power imbalances and marginalization in the network, contributed to the loss of trust, fractured relationships, and emerging feeling of disconnect with various groups vying for their own interests. The facilitated workshop was helpful in surfacing these and leading to both learning of each other in the activist network and engaging in discussions about the network as a whole – connectedness that was highlighted as very important by the activists (Romano et al., 2020). From a narrative perspective, interactions such as in this example can be legitimizing because they create spaces where the power imbalances can be made visible, the members of activist networks can hear and share their experiences in a legitimating way that brings forward their contributions to the work. At the same time, facilitators acknowledged that facilitating dialogue within networks without thorough preparation can also lead to reinforcing ‘blind spots’ as successful outcomes often depend on facilitators being able to

understand issues and power dynamics well and be able to build trust with participants. (Romano et al., 2020, p. 295).

Accommodating difference within coalitions means opportunities to connect on specific, limited issues but participate as part of a larger diverse group – a democratic space, a civil society where people are positioned and are storied, by others, as legitimate. Research shows that when coalitions uphold values of interaction among

diverse groups creating cross-boundary ties, these engagements foster collaboration and conversation in a way that connect local issues to globalized discourses for more successful advocacy and action. For example, the study of networks in Portugal and Spain found that the linkages and interactions between workers and intellectuals in various networks which were engaged in advocacy for local issues were more successful than other towns where such linkages and interactions with cross-boundary ties did not happen (Fishman, 2014). These interactions which were an ongoing part of the network practice, allowed for interaction of different types of groups in these countries enabling greater success through connecting local issues to globalized discourses, therefore enriching narratives of the networks. This study shows that one of the key factors for success was the culture and the values of the network where political institutions and other network members valued the diversity and interactions and encouraged it rather than instrumentalizing it for outcomes.

“...one of the key factors for success was the culture and the values of the network where political institutions and other network members valued the diversity and interactions and encouraged it rather than instrumentalizing it for outcomes.”

These approaches are legitimizing as they allow those groups' participation in coalitions around issues of importance with legitimacy of their own identities and jointly elaborate network narratives– without having to succumb to shared narratives or identities, a topic addressed in the next cluster of practices.

Intersectional Collective Identities: This cluster of practices is concerned with issues of identity and the dynamics that are set off when forming collective identities, an issue relevant in the context of group collaboration. The research findings across multiple domains show that identities, as well as the values people are assigned within those identities in narratives are central elements in driving conflict, division, and lack of collaboration. Marginalization within coalitions and group collaborations resulting from struggle for legitimacy can get in the way of groups to fully participate and collaborate effectively while harnessing the richness of their experience (Ishimaru, 2014). Practices in this cluster, therefore, suggest ways of understanding and supporting legitimacy of identities that can foster collaboration across difference.

One consistent finding across literature domains is the need to move away from developing collective shared identities when collaborating within coalitions. Literature reviewed in this study speaks to this issue from various standpoints highlighting that it is difficult and can be counterproductive to get a collective identity given that alliances and coalitions are made of very diverse groups (Teixeira & Motta, 2020). From the perspective of narrative legitimacy– an

effort to construct a narrative of shared identity is a process that aims to consolidate a story of a group while positioning it with a set of attributes and responsibilities. However, this process or re-storying can be simplifying – and can struggle to reflect the richness of identities in a given group, unintentionally resulting in people feeling not recognized, threatened, and subsequently delegitimized (ibid).

Research shows that positioning of identities under the same identity umbrella results in individuals and groups becoming more defensive, facilitates strengthening of the ingroup identities and can lead to radicalization and polarization making collaboration difficult. (Sheikh et al., 2016; Luttig, 2017).

“...practices in this area suggest avoiding countering the ‘sacred values’ and instead better understanding and signaling respect when possible.”

For example, in a large study combining field and experimental methods with a group of Moroccans and Spaniards showed that those who had strong belonging and kin relationships with their ingroups when questioned in a way that threatened their identity, displayed willingness to go to extremes including making costly sacrifices and resorting to violence in order to defend their in-group and sacred values (ibid). Although experiential, this study illuminates the interaction between belonging and threats to identity, warning us that these dynamics can produce stronger ingroup identity and willingness to engage in a conflict, which in turn will create obstacles for engaging across difference. A move towards ‘shared’ identity as a process of coalition building without a process of validating and legitimizing existing identities can feel delegitimizing, especially at earlier stages of collaboration (Rumelili, 2015). This can be especially relevant when groups engaging in coalitions are marginalized and experiencing threats to their identities already. Sameness here can feel like a threat.

This dynamic is also at play when dealing with ‘sacred values’ – values held by a group which are of such significance that they preclude any comparisons, contestation, trade-offs, or any intersecting with normal values. Sacred values according to findings are one of the drivers of group consolidation and motivators for collective action (Argo & Jassin, 2021; Atran, 2021; Decety et al., 2018; Renstrom et al., 2022). Because of the nature of these values, which are non-negotiable – any threats to them, the literature warns us, can lead to negative response to outgroups and facilitate dehumanization (Decety et al., 2018). Radicalization literature also highlights the importance of the sense of ‘belonging’ to a community as another determinant for action and strengthening in-group dynamics while isolation, lack of trust and being seen (by self and others) as separate from the community, can lead to radicalization and polarization (Atran, 2021).

Sacred values, identities, and the desire to belong to a community can be strong motivators for mobilization but also present challenges for organizing across difference. They have implications not only for collaboration across difference within coalitions but also how strong in-group identities can affect possibilities of engaging with out-groups and create further divisions. From a narrative perspective, respecting difference in values and identities while casting a broader and more elastic group and identity boundary in coalitions can be both legitimizing and maintain openings for engaging across group boundaries. Therefore, practices

in this area suggest avoiding countering the 'sacred values' and instead better understanding and signaling respect when possible.

Radicalization studies suggest reframing and reinterpreting when engaging with the sacred values and Atran (2021) brings examples of Islamic religious leaders working with extremist youth in their communities to jointly consider and reinterpret the meanings of religious texts and therefore their own actions (Argo & Jassin, 2021; Atran, 2021).

Described findings highlight the importance of legitimizing practices in order to circumvent the challenges as well as the dangers that can emerge from a strategy of shared identities in collaboration across difference. Instead, coalitions should be imagined more broadly when defining group identity in order to allow for accommodating diversity. For example, rather than vying for collective identities, a discursive process of framing that bridges across social inequalities to build intersectional solidarities can be more effective in building coalition identity and resources (Teixeira & Motta, 2020). Examining the women's movement in Brazil and drawing on feminist theory, one study argues that intersectional inequalities such as class, gender, ethnicity, race, and sexuality may affect coalition partners differently and therefore one single identity or class interest should not be prioritized. Instead, the diversity of these inequalities can be drawn upon for collaborating in coalitions (Teixeira & Motta, 2020, 144). The study uses the example of a coalition *Marcha das Margaridas* in Brazil, which developed a coalitional identity and in the process was able to include a variety of different groups who could enter and leave the coalition thus becoming a dynamic alliance, instead of simply placing itself in the intersection of gender and class which would have restricted opportunities for joining.

According to findings, maintaining diversity, heterogeneity, and flexibility of identities in coalitions can help bring together groups with diverse identities and values without threatening them and is more effective than shared beliefs and ideology (Fominaya, 2010). Studies of collective identity argue that in a movement with flexible, elastic identity, that recognizes itself as a network through its interaction with the context, it is the conflict with the context and not the shared interests that provides the basis for a group's solidarity (Fominaya, 2010; Melucci, 1995). This implies that groups with different group identities (religious, gender, political) can come together for a collective action on an issue while not completely agreeing on ideology and beliefs. (Fominaya, 2010, 395). Since identities can interact with a wide range of factors including interests, ideology, rituals, values, and practice among others. The flexibility of coalition identity can enable an increased collaboration across difference by pulling in more actors. In addition, group identities are not static and often shift over time and depending on circumstance. For example, in the context of collaboration between radical vs. moderate groups within coalitions, findings also highlight the importance of flexibility in categorizing groups as radical or moderate, as groups change their positions in response to context (Bosi, 2006). The study in Northern Ireland, shows how the Civil Rights Movement Network changed its frames of messaging and political opportunities from its emergence in 1920s with adopting reformist,

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then anti-system and finally sectarian frames based on the opportunities provided by the political social context until the 1970s when it became a militant movement (Bosi, 2006). This example though spanning several decades demonstrates a dynamic that can take place within shorter periods of time and shows how social movements adapt and react through radicalizing or moderating their actions based on threats and opportunities presented by the context. This requires us to continuously engage and reflect with different parts of the movements which might be moving in radical or reformist positions with regards to the context as well as allows for broader diversity of groups to become part of the coalitions with the ability to go through transformations.

Diverse agendas and dynamism brought to coalition by these groups also benefit movements at different times and/or provide mutual benefits (Rowe & Carroll, 2014). When radicals follow a maximalist agenda, this allows for moderates to appear and negotiate for more moderate gains. In addition, more radical actions can raise awareness about issues of concern benefiting movements (Rowe & Carroll, 2014, 5). For example, in the Occupy Wall Street movement, one study argues, radical flanks contributed to the transformation and growth of the movement by insisting on radically democratic general assembly process for decision-making, practicing militant non-violence, and refusing to make demands in order not to legitimize those to whom demands would have been addressed (ibid).

In summary, this cluster of practices shows that identity, sacred values, and belonging to a group is often at the heart of contestations for legitimacy and drivers of conflict and polarization. Strategic implications from a narrative legitimacy competence lens are then two-fold – 1) constructing coalitions in a way that allows for flexibility and dynamism of identities of collaborating groups and 2) fostering practices which support legitimacy of identities.

Network-based Coalitions: This cluster of practices derived from the research suggests that particular ways of positioning ourselves and others within coalitions can foster or hinder legitimacy across difference while accommodating diversity. With critical reflection on power relations, findings under this cluster propose that more horizontal, network-based relationships can enrich narrative complexity for collaboration and joint action.

“Engaging networks with indirect ties rather than through formal organizational membership will increase the likelihood of coalition success as it will bridge multiple factions through various hubs of networks.”

The way that relationships and collaboration are constructed and managed among diverse groups in network-based coalitions has implications on how various actors in the system are able to position themselves and others as legitimate. Horizontal, network-based relationships have broad focus and include multiple issues and membership can be based on “indirect ties” which are the “weak ties” that exist between people who have indirect, rather than direct social connections. These indirect ties accommodate differences and give a social network tensile strength, because of higher tolerance levels (Van Dyke & Amos, 2017). Engaging networks with indirect ties rather than through formal organizational membership will increase the likelihood of coalition success as it will bridge multiple factions

through various hubs of networks. (Satoh et al., 2022). The social context of a loose, broad network is more conducive to creating relationships where diverse groups can see themselves as legitimate contributors. In this way, accommodation of multiple agendas reduces perception of identity threat and the struggle for legitimacy among groups.

Not only are network-based coalitions able to reach more organizations and groups, they also can maintain less hierarchical relationships preventing marginalization and fostering legitimacy of all participants, a practice that makes them more effective and more conducive to creating inclusion, better collaboration, and adaptive decision making (Satoh et al., 2022; Sharma-Wallace et al., 2018; Bess, 2015; Laursen et al., 2018). For example, findings show that fostering asymmetric collaborations between nascent and more-developed organizations in coalitions is mutually legitimizing as it builds skills, facilitates innovation, and brings reputational gain (Hogenhuis et al., 2016; Ackerman, et al., 2017). Another narrative competency that supports legitimacy is finding the balance of conformity versus diversity in network coalitions. Research on social norms shows that people who value social conformity can be deterred by issues that are narrowly defined as they threaten to destabilize the reiterated narrative of a group valuing social cohesion (Feldman, 2003). A suggested practice here then is to create broad definitions for coalition that positions different groups as legitimate in a network system. From a narrative legitimacy perspective tension between conformity and diversity is located not in people's personalities but takes places as a process of negotiation between identities, values, and positions offered in coalitions, anchored in their narratives.

“...a critical narrative competence is a practice of creating norms of mutual accountability across political divides which can be upheld over time and across political changes.”

Diverse, horizontal networks require concerted efforts for successful collaboration. Knowing the network and actively participating in 'knitting' the network is a key narrative competency that improves reflexivity, a practice of knowing your place and role in the network and connectivity (Krebs & Holley, 2006; Ketonen-Oks, 2018; Schweitzer et al., 2020). The practice of network weaving (an iterative process of knowing and knitting the network) can help to build the resilience of social networks and connect people across social divisions (Ketonen-Oks, 2018). This practice also helps actors in the network to jointly experience and define capacities in the network and avenues for innovation, as well as locate tensions and solve problems (ibid). Findings also point to the role emotions can play in practices of collaboration where sharing stories of lived experiences and feelings, help network members establish a collective emotional state overcoming resistance and contributing to better understanding. (Schweitzer et al., 2020) Finally, a critical narrative competence is a practice of creating norms of mutual accountability across political divides which can be upheld over time and across political changes. In the highly polarized social context of today, with dominant narratives positioning groups against each other – democratic norms have become enmeshed with partisan politics. For example, a large study in Germany, argued following dynamics of opposition that when their party was in power the elites did not protest violation of the democratic norms demonstrating the role of biases based on affective polarization (Kinzette, 2021). Disentangling the two and developing mutual accountability for democratic norms can create legitimacy as groups come together across difference to maintain commitment to the very norms that make difference possible.

A network-based modality of collaboration is legitimizing by virtue that it allows for groups to tell stories of themselves, hear others and jointly construct a story of the network. If adopted as an ongoing practice this becomes a narrative practice/competence that continuously facilitates legitimacy and contributes to collaboration. (Krebs & Holley, 2006). Knowing yourself and others in a network is a set of practices that allows for ongoing balancing of diversity and conformity, of watching out for power relations and marginalization – dimensions of positionality that can produce fractures and conflict.

The three clusters of practices under the competency of narrative legitimacy highlight the dynamics where strengthening ‘in-group’ identities and developing animosity towards others contributes to ignoring or denying the other group’s sense of legitimacy, which then leads to conflict. Clusters of practices under this competence suggest building diversity, developing intersectional, flexible identities when collaborating in groups and embedding collaboration in horizontal, network-based coalitions as ways of developing and maintaining legitimacy for all participants. The learning and practices from this cluster apply not only to groups that come together for a unifying cause but are true for engagements across differences and fractures that divide communities and societies today.

“These categories of identities and characteristics and values assigned to them are ‘locked in place’ by dominant narratives in which we get caught, often limiting our own abilities to position ourselves and others differently.”

It is important to note that narrative legitimacy is not a call for ‘let’s get along’ or for practices that predicate recognition of identities based on common goals. Research across domains shows that identity dynamics requires attention to the issues of legitimacy, in other words, critically reflecting on how the work towards change can be done without delegitimizing, marginalizing, and silencing those with whom we have critical disagreements. Most importantly, narrative legitimacy competence is about recognizing not only our own acts of positioning ourselves and others, but also how the existing dominant narratives give order to this struggle, constructing ‘us’ and ‘them’ and categories of identities (feminist, transgender rights activist, democrat, republican, conservative, liberal, etc.) in a way that predicates how we end up engaging with each other. These categories of identities and characteristics and values assigned to them are ‘locked in place’ by dominant narratives in which we get caught, often limiting our own abilities to position ourselves and others differently. Narrative competences need not demand of us to become part of ‘shared’ or ‘collective’ identities but must support processes where individuals and groups can become aware of the roles and values within the narratives, in which they are caught (Cleven & Saul, 2021; Menkel-Meadow, 2022; Friend & Malhotra, 2019). An example of such narrative capture is a study of radical groups in Western Europe. The researchers studied opposing radical groups - Muslim and right-wing Christian, who position each other as the enemy and source of troubles for their countries while reacting to each other and ‘co-radicalizing.’ The in-depth interviews revealed that radicalization could not be explained by their cultural, religious, and political differences but were embedded identically for both groups in social, economic, political deprivation. This study demonstrates how dominant narratives about Other can place blame on them and obscure the condition of marginalization.

Narrative Complexity

The practices that were identified as contributing to both the diversity of the narrative landscape *and* the complexity of the narratives that are in circulation, enable groups to deepen their understanding of their own stories, communicate via richer narratives, and address the pain that groups have, across political perspectives. The literature review revealed 5 core clusters of practices that contribute to creating more complex narratives, supporting the emergence of critical reflection and relational knowledge---what we need to know about Others to work well with them:

1. Exploring Moral Foundations
2. Social Media
3. Tailoring Narratives
4. Developing Visions/Futures Thinking
5. Addressing Trauma

Exploring Moral Foundations: This cluster of practices all relate to the processes and outcomes associated with the exploration of the moral foundations of both groups' decisions as well as their processes. Here "moral foundations" refers to the values that people use to anchor their judgements about self/other. Some groups may have their moral foundation anchored on the values of "equality" and "fairness" where other groups ground themselves on values related to "hard work" and "personal responsibility." Some groups may be so "busy" with their activism, that they have not taken the time to deeply explore their core values. This cluster of practices is about the important and positive role that this exploration can play in fostering collaboration across groups. For example, the literature suggests that it is better to foster intuitive logics (emotions) for decision-making, rather than rational logics, as groups are happier with positive outcomes that are based on intuitive logics (Mansbridge & Martin, 2015; Juliano, 2022).

However, given the potentially negative impact of making decisions that are completely emotionally based, the process of discussing and exploring the values that undergird those emotions supports deliberative negotiation or mediation, critical to the development of collaboration. For example, as conflicts emerge within or across groups that are collaborating, the research is suggesting it is better to explore core values than to

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just use an "interest-based" approach to problem-solving. Exploring our own sacred values, with Others, can increase the richness of any negotiation. Further, while we might wish that arguments could be won and authoritarian strategies defeated by the use of logical arguments based on "facts," the research recognizes that facts need to be translated and interpreted (Itten, 2018; Home & Bauer, 2022), as their meaning depends on the experience and positionality of people. While we might wish that we could settle our differences by using "facts" we can quickly realize that those facts are denied, delegitimized by Others who prefer their own facts, that support their own position. The research addresses the importance of stakeholders participating jointly in data collection and "fact-finding" as this process allows people to make

sense, together, of the meaning of those “facts.” Groups should engage stakeholders, as well as other groups in their network in discussions of the meaning of “facts.” For example, there could be multiple interpretations of facts related to incarceration rates, immigration flows, or climate change; listening to people make sense of (their) facts can open a pathway to understanding what is important to them, and why (underlying values). Often this could be done in a way that allows groups to signal respect for the people’s sacred values, which inevitably are foundational to their perspectives and interpretations of those facts (Atran, 2021; Renström et al., 2022). These discussions of sacred values give groups and their partners opportunity to reflect, to make sense together of what is important to them and why, supporting intergroup contact interventions, and empowering members of disadvantaged groups (Lin & Telzer, 2018; Kurowska & Reshetnikov, 2018; Côté, 2016). And finally, the research shows that it is important to translate broad values, like “sustainability” to more concrete, short-term goals. This can be done in intragroup work as well as intergroup work, supporting the development of conversations about moral issues and translating them into concrete actions, together. Elaborating and exploring the moral foundation of groups, of their interpretations, and their actions contributes to build narrative complexity, as values, a core component of narrative, are discussed, elaborated, and diversified. For example, as people share and discuss their values, new terms can appear----“liberty” may get connected or entangled with a conversation about “safety” as we cannot be safe unless we consider that liberty accents individual rights, but we also need to build rules and systems that promote the collective well-being.

“...and when values are more complex, narrative complexity increases, opening the narratives, as well as the narrative landscape to new options, diverse perspectives, and alternative actions.”

In most cases, during Covid, arguments about vaccines most often did not explore the moral foundations of the two main perspectives. Pro-vaccine people argued for collective safety through vaccines while anti-vaccine people argued for personal liberty. The point here, exemplifying the findings in the literature, is that these “discussions” were debates, not conversations – they were intended to win arguments, not explore sacred values. Had we structured opportunities for this, it could have, according to the literature, increased the narrative complexity, and when values are more complex, narrative complexity increases, opening the narratives, as well as the narrative landscape to new options, diverse perspectives, and alternative actions. This, in turn, would effectively constitute the development of the relational knowledge and understanding needed to build collaboration across social movements.

Social Media: The literature review of social media reveals a multitude of practices that foster narrative complexity. Generally, social media can be a place for the creation and development of new relations, diversifying the networks where stories are told, as well as the stories themselves. However, all too often it is a place where stock stories, culturally archetypal narratives, circulate. These are stories that everyone knows, not via their details, but because they follow a form that is so recognizable. For example, Hollywood has trained us to recognize the difference between a romance and an action movie. But we also see stock stories in national events, like a school shooting; we know all too well the stock stories associated to school shooting---the parents tell stories of loss, the school tells stories about

their safety drills, the police tell stories about the investigations, gun control advocates argue for the regulation of automatic weapons, and the NRA send their prayers to the parents who lost children. These are stock stories precisely because we already know them. However, different stock stories resonate with different groups who have cultural affiliation with a given stock story. The literature suggests that culturally archetypal narratives resonate with people and are more likely to generate shared attitudes (Page, 2018; Shiller, 2019). While this could appear to be helpful in terms of building collective agendas, it may work against critical reflection and relational knowledge, reducing the diversity and reinforcing dominant narratives. For example, after a school shooting those groups in favor of gun control have long ceased to listen or try to understand the gun rights advocates, and likewise, the gun rights groups dismiss and deny the experience and the arguments of the gun control groups. The dominant narratives of each group resonate within their group but reduce their understanding of and emotional connection to their Others. The ability to collaborate is thus harmed by the use of these stock stories that deafen us to the perspectives of others.

Social media is clearly a place to fight digital repression through public shaming of authoritarians, developing momentum for boycotts, sanctions and other pressure campaigns (Page, 2018). And the research shows that anger, rather than enthusiasm, builds online support for an opposition movement in a repressive environment (Young, 2021). In the short term, anger may increase the “likes” or increase participation in or affiliation to a movement, but in the long term, this research suggests that anger can balkanize people, damaging democratic pluralism and making collaboration difficult if not impossible. Using anger to mobilize can also devolve into competing dominant narratives that simplify the situation. Clearly some circumstances require simplicity, in terms of moral clarity such as the death of George Floyd---

but all too often this simplicity can forestall the conversations that support critical reflection--- what we need to know about “the Other” to do things with them. What do we need to know about the police, and their experiences, to support the training that would work to reduce racism and change the relation between the police and African Americans in the US? While some would argue that their own moral clarity precludes any effort to

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connect, or understand people “on the other side”---“there are just bad people (in authoritarian regimes for example) and they have to be excised, avoided, or controlled,” this position about their Other, anchored by anger, generates narratives that will alienate groups that may want to collaborate on specific issues or policies, but will be disinclined to do so, because they have a relationship with people in that authoritarian system. Using anger to build support may reduce the connections a group could build with others who will not, due to the anger and moral indignation, participate in “outrage.” In this way, the more moderate groups drop out.

The research suggests that it is the sharing of lived experience that draws people in and builds narrative complexity via the use of virtual testimonies, where people share their grievances, rooted in stories from their daily lives (Huang, 2016). The circulation of these stories across

sub-networks---a segmented subset of a larger network, fosters the transfer of “tacit knowledge”---the things we know from our experiences---and increases trust *across* subnetworks. For example, the parents of Sandy Hook Elementary School, the scene of a school shooting in 2012 where 20 children and 4 teachers died, are a subnetwork of parents of elementary children in Newtown, Connecticut. As a group these parents had “tacit knowledge” about what it was like to lose a child to a school shooting, based on their experiences. When they shared this knowledge with others, in this case across local, regional, national, and international networks, their stories transferred their knowledge across these networks, changing (some) policies and procedures. So, it is not the abstract, principled, logical arguments that lead to narrative complexity online, but rather the circulation of stories of lived experience, shared across sub-networks.

We know that contagious narratives---stories that are likely to be shared, circulated and adopted as the basis for our logics of action, are those that draw on stock stories that, in turn, draw on culturally known scripts and are overlaid by an “us vs them” narrative (Shiller, 2019), but we need to consider whether contagion, the circulation and adoption of a story, supports the development of the relational knowledge that undergirds collaboration. The research team would argue that narrative contagion and the development of relational knowledge are not the same, and that social media is better used as a tool for sharing lived experience as it is this practice that diversifies networks and develops narrative complexity. In other words, from a narrative perspective, it is better to use social media for increasing the diversity of speakers, and the complexity of the stories that are in circulation, drawing on lived experience, rather than mobilizing via the use of anger.

Tailoring Narratives: Narrative complexity can be generated through a set of practices involving telling stories that are tailored, strategically, for a specific audience, for specific purposes. When struggling against an authoritarian regime, for example, it is helpful to frame problems in terms of a social drama, as the authoritarian state will likely describe events in terms of law and order (Liang, 2021). A “social drama” here refers to a story frame that the general public could engage in, precisely because it draws people into the human condition---a broken heart, the loss of a child, the underdog that wins despite all odds. Research shows that social dramas draw in the general public (to a story of righteous revenge) and in that process, the “law and order” story of the state is decentered. Social dramas accent what happens to people while state narratives are more often accenting principles such as “loyalty” or “law and order.” This would be important for groups who are working to decenter the narratives of an authoritarian state, as they could use social dramas to highlight tales of human experience that cannot be structured or organized by an authoritarian state.

“...we need to consider whether contagion, the circulation and adoption of a story, supports the development of the relational knowledge that undergirds collaboration.”

The research also shows that social media can reconfigure death and mourning, as people share diverse experiences; the power of these stories lies in their transgressive moments where the social rules about the privacy of mourning are upended. In these moments,

mourning exceeds the boundaries of the private sphere and is shared, reshared, across public networks (Giaxoglou, 2020; Day, 2004). This connects to another narrative complexity competency - to tell place-based narratives, where people from that place use their voices to tell the stories that matter to them, rather than being storied by others, as in the case where regimes describe the needs of “rural people” rather than the people describing their own needs, based on their experiences. Place-based stories will always increase our collective understanding of each other, building relational knowledge (Howarth, 2021) and building narrative complexity.

Perhaps the more important finding that has import for narrative complexity relates to the common knowledge that collaboration requires the creation of a *shared narrative*. Contrary to that folk wisdom, this research shows that “narrative proximity” referring to the proximity of a given narrative to a dominant narrative, determines how people vote in elections, not the party’s platform (Shenhav, et al, 2014). This has import for understanding how to design or tailor narratives to have proximity, not overlap, with dominant narratives. In other words, it is not the “shared narrative” that is the foundation for a coalition, but the degree of proximity of the coalition members to a dominant narrative.

“Narrative proximity” can be understood as having a connection to a dominant narrative *without being the same* as the dominant narrative. For example, there is a dominant narrative that voting rights are critically important to democracy and that legislation that restricts voting rights is wrong. A narrative that describes how hard it is to get to polling stations during work hours has proximity to the dominant narrative, even though they are not the same. One can imagine that the dominant narrative would have multiple categories of the kinds of voting restrictions which should be addressed, but the particular nature of this narrative (work hours restricting voting) gives it affinity to the dominant narrative, without being the same as the dominant narrative. Technically, a given narrative could share a core value (being able to vote) while having different plot lines (descriptions of what happened) or different characters involved. For the voting rights advocate, people that advocate restrictive voting legislation are the problem, where in the “local” narrative the boss that will not give workers time off to vote is the problem. Developing proximate narratives that intersect but do not try to duplicate a dominant narrative can thicken the narrative landscape, adding new characters, plot lines and core values. This could expand the ability of a group to find and build collaborations with new partners. In this example, it might be possible for voting rights advocates to partner with business to help employees get to the polls and local Chambers of Commerce could give awards to businesses with policies that help get out the vote. But this would only be possible because of the proximity that the employee’s narrative has to the dominant narrative, opening up options for new, and even unlikely collaborations.

Building narrative proximity instead of the “shared narrative” could enable groups to strategically use dominant narratives as a way to incorporate new details, and experiences, legitimizing a new narrative in the process, precisely as it is proximate to the dominant narrative. As proximate narratives are not the same as a dominant narrative, proximate narratives would support the presence of more detail in the narrative landscape, expanding its complexity, broadening the narrative terrain of a given issue, increasing the space for

collaboration. In general, the research shows that as authoritarianism shrinks the complexity of the stories in circulation, in an effort to reduce dissent and increase social cohesion, *increasing* the circulation of stories of lived experience, framed as social dramas, sharing their losses and grievances, is an effective way to increase the diversity and complexity of the narrative landscape.

Developing Visions/Futures

Thinking: The literature on futures

thinking expands our understanding of the practices associated to the core competency, narrative complexity. It shows that long-term utopian thinking increases people's intention to participate in collective action and encourages higher level cognitive thinking, as well as hope (Badaan et al., 2020). Additionally, the positive framing of messages (positive stories about the future) often can expand the category of "we," altering the boundaries of the in-group, and making the "we" more inclusive (Ćosić et al., 2018). This is a very powerful strategy for developing collaborative relations, as it constitutes, or creates the relational knowledge needed to do things with others. Designing processes where people can move back and forth between their short-term perspectives and their mid or long-term collective or global scenarios, helps to develop the skill to think beyond the limits of themselves, and their current circumstances (Levrini et al., 2021). These kinds of future workshops can change the narrative landscape within groups, as well as across groups, as they collaborate on the creation of future narratives. These kinds of practices support the core competency of narrative complexity and would enhance critical reflection and the development of relational knowledge to support collaboration.

"Building narrative proximity instead of the "shared narrative" could enable groups to strategically use dominant narratives as a way to incorporate new details, and experiences, legitimizing a new narrative in the process, precisely as it is proximate to the dominant narrative."

"Designing processes where people can move back and forth between their short-term perspectives and their mid or long-term collective or global scenarios, helps to develop the skill to think beyond the limits of themselves, and their current circumstances."

Addressing Trauma: Groups that are

working to support democracy and reduce authoritarianism are inevitably dealing with trauma. Stories of suffering are part of the fabric of social movements working for social change. Reviewing the literature on trauma healing that relates to the research question, we find several practices important to narrative complexity. First, it is important to consider trauma as a collective process, in language, not just as a phenomenon inside the head of an individual (the PTSD model). This collective process is a narrative process (Alexander, 2012) that has four parts: the description of the victim, the nature of their suffering, the carrier group that tells, retells, and circulates the story of this victim, and a description of the impact of this story on the broader collective (Crawford, 2014). Defining trauma healing as a narrative process enables people, individuals and groups, to tell their stories of suffering in ways that connect to other networks and subnetworks, diversifying and deepening the collective understanding about what happened, to that person, and to all the others that have been impacted.

"Commemorative activism" is one such practice. It involves the telling of stories of suffering, in

public, often at the very sites where a colonial or racist history is commemorated, such as statues that celebrate the Confederacy in the south of the US, or sites of violence that were ignored or erased by the powers that be.

Commemorative activism is consistent with this narrative approach as a way to address violent histories (Inwood & Alderman, 2016). Telling trauma stories can foster reconciliation and is a practice widely used in peace education (John, 2021) and supports the development of self-esteem (Denham, 2008) when those stories of suffering are affirmed and elaborated by others. The research addresses the importance of narratives that focus on trauma *response* rather than those that just name the violence (or harm), as the focus on the trauma response transmits resilience strategies. Collective self-care and care for victims involves the critical examination of histories, practices, and values associated both to the production of trauma, as well as healing from it. Done as a collective, groups become sensitized to trauma experiences, and learn, through storytelling how to navigate suffering, but also how to work to remedy the conditions which lead to it (Santos, 2020). This kind of awareness has also been referred to as “radical care” which supports victims of structural violence to trace the impact of that violence on their lives, and then strategize how they want to engage the systems, those structures, differently (Ginwright, 2010).

This process of radical care avoids the emergence of competition between victims, as the facilitator’s story need not be included as they work to enable others to story the impact of structural violence on their lives. When there is no “outsider witness”---someone whose job it is to witness people’s pain, competition can emerge between groups relative to their victimization. Vollhardt (2015) has studied the issues related to inclusive and exclusive victim consciousness, noting that while the former enables groups to support each other to detail the nature of their suffering, the latter foster competition over the legitimacy of a given group’s suffering, especially relative to the perpetrators. This research points to the need for conversational spaces that are framed as spaces to explore and elaborate on the experience of victimization, with an inclusive framing perhaps requiring the presence of a facilitator.

However, being framed as a victim without assenting to, or participating in that description, usurps the voices of people, and is, at some level, an act of violence, and the opposite of inclusive victim consciousness. The literature warns of the narratives of authoritarian regimes that frame the public as traumatized and in need of a strong state to take care of them (Toomey, 2018). An effective strategy against this would be to ensure the public is storied as victimized, but resilient, able to respond responsibly, and effectively, to their suffering. In addition research shows it is better to foster stories of resilience, favoring tragic narratives where characters learn and grow, instead of melodramatic stories where victims who face villains are saved by the father figure (Hardy, 2008). Re-storying narratives written by an authoritarian state is a way to construct the people as having the ability to be active agents in their own lives. For example, after 9/11 in the US, President Bush promised that the government would keep the people safe, and while indeed the public had been victimized by terrorists, neither the public nor the officials were encouraged to consider the US policies that might have contributed to create the animosity and hatred that led to the attacks. Instead, the US and its citizens were framed as innocent victims who needed the protection of the mighty forces of the US military. And the opportunity to reflect on the history of US policies in the Muslim world was lost. Re-storying this history, publicizing it, circulating it, calling for Congressional hearings, might not have been possible at that time, given the public’s fear and

the government's paternal response, but the US had over 20 years of war following 9/11 which would have been enough time to open spaces to tell a different story, not only about the resilience of the American people after 9/11 but about the problematic foreign policies that positioned the US as a target for terrorism. In this example, America could be re-storied as both resilient and responsible.

Any re-storying practice raises the question as to who is telling the story, who gets to speak, for whom, to whom, and who designs the spaces where new stories can be told. There is research on the use of the "outsider witness" that enable people in "definitional ceremonies" and radio talk shows, to tell their stories of suffering by taking multiple viewpoints, enabling the speaker to gain some distance between themselves, and the story they are telling, and gain perspective on how they have been often without spaces to tell their stories in public (Porto & Romano, 2017; Denborough, 2008). Such public spaces can include podcasts that can, ironically, provide a safe place for learning from individuals about how they have responded to traumatic events and suffering (Diebold et al., 2020). These practices support the inclusion of pain and suffering, into the collective consciousness, and provide very critical understanding about what happens to people and how they manage to grow from the experience. In this way trauma stories bring people together, break down ideological barriers, and can provide the emotional connections needed both to understand the Other, but also to work across differences. In this way, trauma healing is a central feature of narrative complexity, for it enables powerful stories to cross networks. But it is also useful to support cross group collaboration, as each and every group can reflect on the nature of the trauma that the group members have suffered, as well as the stakeholders with whom they work. Trauma thus is a kind of story that when told in a rich manner, as a complex narrative, can generate new links and connections within and across groups, increasing the complexity of the narrative landscape, and enabling collaboration across differences.

However, this research also addresses the way that violence can destroy narrative itself, making it difficult, if not impossible for people to tell a story that makes sense of violence (Langer, 1993). Why was their child who was a member of a creative writing group at school taken and disappeared? Why was a grandmother killed, randomly, while standing in a line to get on a train headed for a death camp? Why are children shot and killed in their first-grade classroom? How could the US who supports individual rights, waterboard prisoners in Guantanamo Bay? Who would cut off the breasts of women or make children kill their parents? There are some acts of violence that seem to break narrative itself. Indeed, narrative is a structure, a framework, which has a beginning, middle and an end, and it has a moral point. The characters in the story have intentions, motivations, and goals. But sometimes, Langer argues, the violence is so terrible, that it just cannot be put into that framework—it cannot be tamed through language. Victims of terrible violence cannot put events into sequences, they cannot account for the intentions or motivation of perpetrators---the events cannot be storied. The logic that would be required to link the events together defies sensemaking, or the characters cannot be described, or the values, beyond pure evil, are unknowable. In these cases, simply working to bring the stories of grief and mourning into the public sphere, into the collective narrative repertoire, the stock of stories that populate the collective consciousness, provides some containment to the violence, which is not only healing for the people directly involved, but for the broader "community" as indeed we are all impacted by this violence. We, as the community, need to do what Girard (1979) describes as gathering over the body of the victim, making sense of what happened, deliberating over the moral values needed to evaluate

what happened, and setting the policies and practices in place to protect against this violence for the future.

To summarize, practices that expand narrative complexity support the development of collaboration by enabling people to reflect on the moral foundations of the groups, tailor narratives strategically, support futures thinking, circulate narrative across social networks using social media, and address trauma. Collectively, these practices thicken the stories in circulation, and enable people to learn about and negotiate differences with others, developing the relational knowledge that is core to collaboration for pro-democracy/anti-authoritarian social change.

Discussion and Cautionary Tales

The rich set of practices, associated to the core competencies, do provide a basis for anchoring the centrality of narrative to the project of collaboration across differences to reduce authoritarianism. However, there are several cautionary tales that emerge from this research, as well.

The Other: First, the research shows that people need to be positioned as legitimate and that Othering reduces engagement, foments conflict and polarization. In the context of struggling against authoritarianism, there is also an Other at its core – “authoritarian systems.” This Othering may make sense for those who are trying to forge alliances to turn the tide of authoritarianism, creating clear moral boundaries, more simplistic stories, in the process. There is a danger in using generalizing frames that can group a large category of people as “authoritarian”, combining those (sectoral leaders) who need to be held responsible for their actions with people who can get labeled as authoritarian, due to their political and/or voting preferences (as discussed earlier in this report). Those that would not agree with that delegitimizing frame will be unlikely to participate, as they could feel themselves Othered. This can be problematic when the goal is to build collaboration across differences and support strengthening democracy through strengthening alliances. The research shows that peoples’ participation is contingent on their being framed as legitimate, and that it is critically important to reflect on the nature of the dominant narratives that anchor our work, and in this case, the dominant narrative that defines who and what actions are considered “authoritarian.” Within a system that is called “authoritarian” there are leaders, figures, that are storied as not only representing the system, but fueling its growth. Likewise, the Othering that is within many of the groups is justified by the mandate “Polarize to Organize” ---Othering appears to contribute to narrative contagion (Shiller, 2019) and mobilize the public to action. However, the research suggests that while this approach to social change may mobilize target groups, it is unlikely to increase the diversity of the base and may even function as a litmus test for who gets to be inside, who is the frenemy and who is the enemy. Furthermore, it is important to consider that authoritarianism functions as an exclusionary discourse, and this discourse can be used by both liberal and conservative groups (Conway et al., 2021; McCoy & Somer, 2021). These considerations on Othering as part of struggle against authoritarianism have implications for considering how to model narrative complexity and develop collaboration, while modeling the kind of critical reflection that the research itself advocates.

Negative Emotions: The second cautionary tale involves the research finding that shows that negative emotion, as well as “us vs them” frames, support narrative contagion, increasing the story’s circulation. This has implications for strategic communication practices and suggests that social movements should use these tactics to promote their narrative. However, narrative circulation may not be equivalent to meaning making, the kind that favors the development of relationships. It may in fact reduce the complexity of identity, requiring folks to choose, rather than explore moral frameworks that are embedded in circulating narratives. It may also reduce the complexity of the narrative landscape as the same narratives are circulated actively throughout networks instead of allowing for meaningful conversations, elaboration of narratives and emergence of complexity and collaboration. For example, an environmentalist group circulating a narrative about a policy affecting climate change in particular communities opposed to said policy, instead of organizing discussions and engaging in conversations with the community members, misses an opportunity to learn, enrich the existing narratives and formulate new stories for change. For democracy to flourish, we need a plethora of ideas, frameworks, and storylines, as a basis for negotiating our collective futures. Narrative contagion, from this perspective, is a pitiful stand-in for a complex narrative landscape, which in turn, manages to undermine dominant narratives that try and delimit what we can do, who we can love, or with whom we can collaborate. If we are to set our sights on supporting democracy, we need these complex narrative landscapes.


Shared Narratives: A third, and very important cautionary tale is about the dominant narrative *within* conflict resolution and peacebuilding, the concept of a “shared narrative.” A shared narrative is understood as the antidote to conflict and polarization. The assumption is that if we share a narrative, we have shared attitudes, and then we can share action and work together. None of the research in this review

points to shared narrative as the foundation for group collaboration across differences. Rather than building a “shared” narrative, most of the research points to diversity of experiences, shared as personal stories,

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elaborated in private and public spaces, as *the* critical feature for building connection, trust, understanding, relationships, and collaboration. In other words, it is the diversity, the outright cacophony of stories, based on lived experience, that functions as the pathway to collaboration, and the glue to bring, if not hold, us together. It is not ideology that forms the canopy for collaboration, but the presence of and persistent effort to critically reflect on our own actions, our moral foundations, our relations to others, the context in which we relate, that enable us, in the end, to come together with our differences.

It is the exploration of these differences that creates the complexity that gives everyone more room to maneuver. It is the expansion of differences, not their consolidation, that provides the foundation for democracy, as well as the collaboration needed to protect it. While some have argued that the social construction of a shared threat provides the foundation for the



anti-authoritarian social movement, the research shows that any move to create “shared narratives” necessarily sidelines diversity and simplifies the narrative landscape. While the “threat” may indeed mobilize people and generate more narrative contagion, threats highlight polarization and reduce learning, across a narrative landscape. The “exhausted middle” drops out, as the voices of those at poles take over. When this happens, stories of lived experience will be crowded out, again, reducing the complexity of the narrative landscape. While people may decide that the risks of “shared threats” may be outweighed by the risk to democracy, the research suggests some reflection on these risks would be important.

Implications for Strategic Narrative Practice

There are several critical take-aways or lessons learned from this research, pertinent to the development of a strategic narrative practice that could foster collaboration to support democracy. First, it is important to work to increase the complexity of the narrative landscape, to escape the centrifugal force of dominant narratives that simplify and aggregate differences. The findings from this research detail a number of ways to do that, including diversifying the storytellers, focusing on lived experiences that are anchored in real places, and contexts, and addressing the trauma of those that have suffered the effects of marginalization. Second, it also suggests that it is essential to avoid delegitimizing Others, as this functions to exclude Others and polarize the narrative landscape. On the contrary, supporting the legitimacy of people’s narratives not by agreeing with them, but by supporting their critical reflection on their values, their history, their role in conflicts, enables learning and the development of critical reflection. Collaboration across differences is born in the process of this critical reflection, which, according to Dewey, functions to reduce certainty and support learning; critical reflection is the star chamber for the birth of new stories to be added to the mix of stories that make up social movements. Institutionalizing critical reflective practice by creating the funding networks to support it would, according to the findings in this research, provide the space for learning, creating the conditions for collaboration across differences, anchoring democratic norms.

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