Narrative "Braiding" and the Role of Public Officials in Transforming the Public's Conflicts

Sara Cobb, *George Mason University*

Abstract

Deliberative processes should enable public officials to stay connected to the changing needs and interests of the communities for whom and with whom they work. Theoretically, these practices should enable public officials to help citizens negotiate with each other, and with the government, problem-solving in a way that produces timely solutions to the kinds of wicked problems that are critical to governing in the globalized context where media sensationalizes divisions that create the "Us" as different from "Them." Theoretically, these practices should enable public officials to foster a quality of relationships within a community that supports the community to learn about itself, to become a "reflecting community" (Laws, 2010). However, it is all too often the case that these practices enact the form of engagement only, without significantly altering the nature of relationships or the (his)stories that are the "comet tail" of wicked problems. This paper offers a narrative lens on deliberation, describing a practice called "braiding", which would allow public officials to weave together the storylines and the identities that anchor them, creating the conditions for public deliberation that could actually transform the public's conflicts.

Keywords

narrative, community conflicts, leadership, public officials

Authors' Note

Sara Cobb is the Director of the Center for the Study of Narrative and Conflict Resolution School for Conflict Analysis and Resolution at George Mason University.

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Once elected or appointed, public officials engage each other and their public through cycles of strategic planning, information sharing, inquiry, facilitation, deliberation, mediation, and decision-making. They use these modes of engagement to organize and respond effectively to the emerging issues in the public, often within the "storyline" (Hajer, 1997; Hajer & Wagenaar, 2003) or narrative (Roe, 1994, 1989) that is foundational to their political party, and/or to the administrative culture of the organizations where they work (Boje, 2001). But given the nature of the "public" and its issues, these practices may either contribute to the development of community itself such that citizens/residents take ownership of problems, responding to increased inclusivity, and building sustainable solutions, or these practices can exaggerate and deepen the existing fractures within a "community", sharpening identity-based differences, and even radicalizing marginalized groups (Clegg, 1993; Laclau, 2006; Mumby, 1989; Ranciere, 2006a, 2009). From this perspective, much depends on the ways these practices are themselves enacted and how they work.

Theoretically, these practices should enable public officials to stay connected to the changing needs and interests of the communities for whom and with whom they work. Theoretically, these practices should enable public officials to help citizens negotiate with each other, and with the government, problem-solving in a way that produces timely solutions to the kinds of wicked problems that are at the heart of governing in the globalized context, where media sensationalizes divisions that create the "Us" as different from "Them." Theoretically, these practices should enable public officials to foster a quality of relationships within a community that supports the community to learn about itself, to become an "observing community" (Laws, 2010). However, it is all too often the case that these practices enact the *form* of engagement only, without significantly altering the nature of relationships or the (his)stories that are the "comet tail" of

wicked problems; these are problems which are so complex that they are only defined in and through the application of a given solution where there could be multiple solutions (Ritchey, 2011).

Public meetings occur, information is gathered, planning is done, issues are identified and negotiated, or mediated with the trust and the hope that the form itself will generate the quality of engagement which can reduce divisions in the community (Braithwaite & Dryzek, 2000; Button & Mattson, 1999; Cohen, 2005; J. Cohen, 1997; Fleck, 2007; Knight & Johnson, 1994; Laws, 2001; Orlie, 1994; Pelletier, Kraak, McCullum, & Rich, 1999; Rosenberg, 2007; Ryfe, 2002; Sanders, 1997). But form of engagement itself may not help communities learn together and generate new ways to know themselves through dis- and/or re-organizing the divisions across the community.

Public officials can convene deliberative processes where stakeholders debate and/or engage in dialogue, while the divisions in a community can remain, or even strengthen, via what (Conklin, 2005) calls "forces of fragmentation." Fragmentation, in the context of problem-solving, refers to the way that problem-definitions are all too often broken down into parts, yet they exist in a system that defies the summation of the parts. Fragmentation also refers to the way that social networks impacted by the problem are also cut off from each other ideologically, (as in the case of the NRA and pro-gun control in the United States), or geographically, as in the case of those who are impacted by rising seas, living in coastal areas and the climate skeptics who live in cities. But fragmentation is also a process akin to structural violence, where marginalization of groups reduces their access to speaking and being heard - they are interpellated (Law, 2000), responding to a "position call" (Klure, 2010) from the state that identifies them as "less than," if not altogether expendable.

Consider, for example, the public deliberations associated with the immigration debate in Prince William County, Virginia, in 2007-2008, when the community was deliberating, via town hall meetings, on the passage of the resolution which suspended the probable cause standard,

enabling police to stop anyone and ask for documentation of citizenship, in a effort to reduce what one side called "illegal immigration". This was clearly a "wicked problem" for the community, but it had many faces. For some, the problem was about day-laborers gathered at the local 7-Eleven. For others, it had to do with significant changes in the ethnic composition of their neighborhoods. For others, it was about the increase in local gangs. Still others were concerned about schools burdened with English as a Second Language classes. For the immigrants themselves, the problems revolved around, for example, racial and ethnic profiling, the threat of deportation and separation from American-born children, low wages, lack of access to services such as healthcare.

The city council worked to bring "the illegal immigration issue" as the problem frame to a public forum for discussion, a problem frame that reflected only one side in a very complex but highly polarized issue. The public forum itself, however, contributed greatly to polarization, as people harnessed existing, often racist, narratives to make their points, while several hundred un-documented immigrants, unable to enter the building and participate in the public deliberation, demonstrated outside.[i] Not only were the voices of immigrants unheard, but the narratives of citizens speaking in favor of The Resolution were so intense and polarizing, if not violent, that they completely drowned out the voices of those citizens who were opposed to The Resolution. The deliberative process itself was deeply problematic in terms of learning, or effective problem-solving, and ironically it was the police chief who brought new, sound, and ethical arguments into the public sphere - he argued in favor of the repeal of The Resolution, and it was ultimately repealed after a set of studies reviewed the economic and social costs of its implementation. In this case, the deliberative process contributed to *strengthening* the fault lines, that is, the divisions that were deployed in the narratives-in-use within the community. Given that collaboration, as well as violence prevention, requires the fault lines to be addressed by the community itself, public forums for deliberation can fail miserably when they cement, rather than evolve, the way the community makes sense of its problems.

Aware that these fault lines are problematic, municipalities often try to mitigate divisions by providing educational and training programs, promoting conflict resolution training and diversity awareness. While these are important and useful tools for residents and citizens (Zartman, 1995), they find it difficult to reach marginalized communities. Additionally, when a wicked problem emerges, it appears within the network of persons attached to that problem and its related issues and these persons may or may not be attracted to educational and skill building programs. In other words, persons impacted by wicked problems are, at times, not willing or interested in participating in conflict resolution or educational programs for civic engagement. Thus, it can be argued that, regardless of the worth of conflict resolution training programs, municipalities need to engage citizens and residents in a manner better suited to reducing the divisions inherent in the community (Conklin, 2006; Rodriguez, 1998; Shirlow & Murtagh, 2004; Smith, 1996). In other words, conflicts provide opportunities for the community to learn about itself in the course of planning and problem-solving (Laws, 2010). But it remains to be seen how the various modes of engagement available to public officials actually contribute (or don't contribute) to a quality of engagement that allows citizens to explore divisions within their communities in a way that develops relationships and leads to what Dewey called "critical intelligence" (Dewey, 1992). This is the kind of intelligence that supports the community to learn, not only about the issues, but also about itself as a constellation of different perspectives.

The presumption of this paper is that conflict itself *reduces* the capacity of the community to do just that. As the conflict escalates, the fractures, materialized and anchored by "attractors" (meaning nodes) in conflict narratives, are cemented (Cobb, 2013). Narratives reflecting and creating those fractures are progressively radicalized, become increasingly simplistic, and "smooth out" details that are contrary to a given storyline. From this perspective, conflict disables a community's capacity to deliberate, to engage in conversations that enable learning, and to support the evolution of the narrative landscape.

Furthermore, forums for public deliberation are often structured in a manner that leads to further radicalization; public officials presume that Robert's Rules of Order and turn-taking will ensure that all voices can be heard. For this reason public forums are "lightly" facilitated and speaking is presumed to be the material evidence that people can participate in the deliberation.

However, we know that speaking is not co-terminous with participation, precisely because the conflict narrative landscape functions so as to favor the initial speaker, as subsequent oppositional speakers must affirm, qualify, or deny the narratives that were advanced by the first speaker (Cobb & Rifkin, 1991). Additionally, it is often the case that more radical groups eschew public forums, setting themselves outside of the solution space (Cohen, 2005). For these reasons, when speaking is equated with participation, there will be some groups of people who stand outside the process and feel, no matter the volume of their voice, they will *not* be heard, and the evidence is that their narratives, the storylines they advance, may not be elaborated, particularly when they are too busy responding to the accusations of the "other side," via denials, justifications, and excuses (Davis, 2005).

As the public conflict hardens in the public space, public officials all too often take sides, as often the conflict is framed in partisan storylines. We saw this clearly in the recent political conflict in the United States which lead to the government shutdown of 2013. The "deliberations" which took place reproduced the deep partisan divisions between Democrats and Republicans, as senators took to the floor and blamed the other side for the failure to reach an agreement which would fund the government. Democrats accused their Republican counterparts of conducting a "jihad" and the Republicans blamed the Democrats for the failure of the negotiations. The American public watched the mudslinging mostly with disdain; and the Congressional leaders, as well as President Obama, captured by their political parties, not only failed to support the learning of Congress, or the general public, but fueled the divisions in Congress and in the country. It is clear, in light of their participation in the conflict, that these leaders believed they had primary

responsibility *to their party* and secondary responsibility to the governance process itself. In other words, they did not see themselves, as leaders, as obliged to care for the nature of the deliberative space itself, rather than just their political agenda. There was no one who positioned themselves as working to foster the quality of conversation that would support collective learning about the issues, neither the President, nor the Speaker of the House. It was not until the United States was on the brink of default that leaders came together to forge an agreement. While there was a sigh of relief across the country, and the world, there was little learning about the complexity of the issues that each party saw as critical to the conflict. Political parties neither elaborated their values or their Others'; there was no construction of the history of the conflict; there was no exploration of the various roles being played, by leaders, by the poor, by the insurance companies, nor was there discussion of the budget in a manner that would clarify exactly why the Republicans hated the Affordable Health Care Act and what they considered appropriate solutions for the 50 million uninsured. This is an excellent example of the failure of leaders to care for, not just the outcome, but for the deliberative processes itself. And of course, the consequences for the American public were drastic - even though the country was able to avoid a default, the public ended up with a dimished understanding of the issues at stake and the relational capital has been the real victim of the political brinkmanship that terminated in a government shutdowon.

How could we do this better? How could we engage in public policy debates in a manner that would generate the "critical intelligence" that Dewey imagined? The field of deliberative democracy offers both a theory of public deliberation as a process of "reason-giving" that, when coupled with mutual respect, supports the inclusion of multiple pespectives on public issues (Gutmann & Thompson, 2004). However, there is also empirical research that addresses the gap between theory, and practice, highlighting the limits of deliberative process to ensure inclusion (Schouten, Leroy, & Glasbergen, 2012), or the capacity of a given democracy for deliberation (Dryzek, 2009). Moreover, Habermas, along with other theorists (Habermas & Rehg, 2001), has

worked to provide the theoretical foundation for an emancipatory deliberation that enables people to speak, say what they mean, and not destroy relations with others.

> More than any other theorist, Jürgen Habermas is responsible for reviving the idea of deliberation in our time, and giving it a more thoroughly democratic foundation. His deliberative politics is firmly grounded in the idea of popular sovereignty. The fundamental source of legitimacy is the collective judgment of the people. This is to be found not in the expression of an unmediated popular will, but in a disciplined set of practices defined by the deliberative idea. (Gutmann & Thompson, 2004, p. 9)

However, while Habermas did indeed address the need to be able to make normative claims about the quality of deliberation, he ended up arguing that people will become emancipated as they are able to participate in the ideal speech situation, but he does not make clear the process for creating the ideal speech situation itself. For speech is not just speaking, it is also being heard (Ranciere, 2004); being heard is, in turn, a function of how we are positioned in discourse (Harre & Slocum, 2003), and whether we are positioned by others as moral agents, or not (Nelson, 2001). Particularly in the context of conflict, idealized speech situations are not available to marginalized speakers. This paper offers a description of a process, *narrative braiding*, that can be used to ensure that the marginalized can in fact speak and be heard in processes of public deliberation, and their identity can be recognized as mattering, that is how they are positioned and how they position themselves. In so doing, I define a new role for public officials as responsible not only for the content of the policies they advance, but for the quality of the deliberative processes in which they are discussed and debated.

Braiding Narrative Strands: Identity Politics in Public Deliberations

Each identity group is constituted through the narratives it tells about self/other, as well as the stories told *about* it by others (du Toit, 2003; Ross, 2001). Each group therefore has a narrative line, a "strand" that anchors their identity, and provides a cognitive and emotional set of guidelines

for action, within group, and between groups. This narrative strand is the foundational narrative that a group tells about itself. It could be an origin myth, or it could function as a narrative that describes the current challenges for "our" group. Within this strand, the group will position itself as positive, and, in the context of a conflict, it will position others as negative. These strands thus contain the core evaluations that enable people to make sense of existing circumstances, evaluating the situation, the others, and self.

Narrative strands are, by definition, not idiosyncratic to an individual - they are held in and by a group. However, the geography of narrative within an identity group is not uniform - every strand will contain substrands; these substrands share a narrative DNA with the main strand and together they comprise the narrative landscape as a system of narratives (Bernardi, 2012). For example, the Palestinian Territory contains one narrative strand that is a story about the Israelis taking their land and subjecting them to occupation. This narrative strand defines the Palestinians. However, within this strand, there are important substrands: the Hamas and the Palestinian Authority, for example, display differences in the way people position self/other. In any case, while there are narrative substrands, they "belong" to a narrative family, to the main strand of a given narrative identity. Within the narrative landscape, the local and particular stories that people tell about themselves not only fit the broader narrative strand, but they also contribute to the overall coherence of the narrative system. Thus when a Palestinian woman tells a story about being afraid for her sixteen-year-old son, living in the West Bank, that story strengthens the main strand of the Palestinian narrative of the occupation.

In a conflict process, the narrative strands are condensed, shortened, and simplified (Nelson, 2001). This occurs because the dynamic of interaction between conflicting groups is a process of mutual delegitimation, which leads to defense (positive positioning for self and counter delegitimation for Other). Thus the interaction cannot lead to the development of critical intelligence or even discussions of interests - parties to a conflict are working on identity issues

(positioning) to establish a context (legitimacy) in which they can reveal and describe their own interests. From this perspective, negotiation processes, which presume parties can trade interests and explore parameters for "mutual gain" are often problematic: either parties reach an agreement (consensus) based on mutual interests, on top of reciprocally delegitimizing narratives or they do not reach agreement, perhaps due to mutual delegitimation.

However, seen from a narrative perspective, it would be imminently possible to use a negotiation process to explore narrative strands, which would be a way to develop a rich account of narrative identity. Benhabib (1996) has argued that conflict provides an opportunity to explore and emerge what she calls the "Concrete Other;" this "Concrete Other" is not just a representation of a given narrative position, s/he is a specific person, textured and nuanced, and is developed as a particularized version of a narrative strand. Negotiation, which emerges the Concrete Other by exploring the texture and complexity of a person's narrative strand, should function to develop legitimate positions (for and with the Other) that would enable them to focus on the issues at hand, and their interests, specifically. As a narrative practice, a quality negotiation would address the issues of legitimacy either ahead of, or in the course of, the discussion of problem specifics. In this way, the development of a narrative strand is crucial to the discussion of interests in the negotiation process, for it establishes the foundation for legitimacy for one party, by/with the Other.

Narrative strands are developed in conversation through interaction. They contain, as do all narratives: a plot sequence of events with a beginning, a middle, and an end (Booker, 2004); an individual protagonist, and/or a collective protagonist who struggles through adversity, with good intention, to surmount difficulties; antagonist(s) who thwart and block the progress of the protagonist or actively seek to harm the protagonist (Greimas & Porter, 1977); and a value system which constitutes the good and the bad (MacIntyre, 1981). Development of the strand involves asking questions, listening, and reflecting with speakers so that new components of the strand appear. Since the narrative strand is the foundation for identity, it will be articulated to any

"position" people take in a negotiation process. From this perspective, the development of the narrative strand opens up new dimensions for the elaboration of identity in a negotiation process.

"Positions" in negotiation (not to be confused with positions in narratives) are the stand that persons take about what they want as an outcome to a negotiation (Fisher & Ury, 1991; Williams, 1992). It is the solution people are seeking. From a narrative perspective, it is a story about what *should* happen. And the "should" is, in turn, woven into a narrative strand about who "we" are and what we need or deserve. The development of the narrative strand is, at some level, the conversation that explores the foundation from which interests arise as well, since interests provide the logic (or not) for a given position. A conversation that explores interests is a conversation about what people need or deserve and why - it is a narrative strand. For a negotiation to be successful, in the long and short run, interests must be developed interactively, not just reported. This is essentially a process of developing the narrative strand.

Strand development is not necessarily an experience that is easy for any identity group, precisely because this process increases the complexity of the narrative the group has about itself. It is what Emerson has called a "provocation" (Emerson, 1903). Given that conflict processes lay down narrative pathways in which both legitimacy (of Self) and delegitimacy (of the Other) provide an action/interaction roadmap, changes in the identity narrative lead to changes in this roadmap and for a time, people may not know where they are, relationally speaking - strand development may create a *liminal* state in which peoples' narratives about self are altered, but as yet, strange and new, or untried. A liminal phase is a "between state" where people are no longer who they were and not yet who they will become (Hoffman, 1998; Cobb, 1994; Van Gennep, 1960). In this between state, a narrative of self is elaborated differently, but it has not had time to be enacted across multiple conversations, or in different spaces. As such, people are unhinged from a prior identity, without the consolidation of the new narrative, which requires "road-testing" across multiple contexts. This liminal phase can be experienced by groups as destabilizing, but it is

tolerated, if not embraced in play, if their legitimacy is elaborated simultaneously. Winslade and Monk (2008) have described the process of narrative development, documenting the set of practices that are associated. This work is essential not only to the broader field of conflict resolution, but also to the practice of narrative strand development, toward changing the narrative landscape.

Either during, or after the process of strand development, narrative braiding is the process in which conversational partners (public officials, mediators, other parties) elaborate the terms of legitimacy, proposed by a given party, *with* all parties. For example, if the Moroccan community in Amsterdam values itself for its commitment to family, as a component of its narrative strand, that positive position in their narrative must be *woven into the problem description* that is under discussion. The terms for the legitimacy of a speaker are most often proposed as a "position call" - an implied request for the elaboration of the positioning of self/other offered in the narrative (Winslade & Monk, 2000). Position calls are particularly central in the context of a conflict as the conflict is a struggle over the legitimacy of positions in discourse, in the narrative. The "braid" comes about when the terms of legitimacy, offered by each party as a "position call" in their narrative strand, is included in the overall generalized description of the problem, where it came from, what the issues are, the nature of the risks and threats, what people did to try and overcome or sidestep it, why it is a problem, and the hopes and aspirations about what could happen should the problem be resolved or addressed appropriately. *The "braid" is the story about the problem, told collectively, that includes the terms of legitimacy offered by each of the parties to the conflict. It is the set of narrative strands that are inflected, or articulated to each other.* As such, it is very different from "consensus", as in sameness of meaning, but precisely reflects the real meaning of "consensus" as making sense together. The braid retains the particularity of the narrative strands, yet they are wrapped around each other at junctures where the legitimacy of one party touches the terms of the Other's legitimacy.

However, braiding is not a conversational process that is typically done by parties in conflict themselves. As noted earlier, conflict typically involves reciprocal delegitimation of Other and legitimization of Self. Because the conflict dynamic does not support braiding, narrative braiding is an intervention, a disruption of the conflict pattern. As such, it would very likely require either a tightly designed process or a mediator/facilitator. It would also require a two-step process where the strands are developed within a group (intra-party work) and then they are woven together, in the context of a facilitated process, or over time, in a set of sequential conversations. Given that mediators and facilitators are not trained to "braid" (even though a close examination of their process may reveal that they are indeed engaged in a practice like braiding), narrative braiding would require the kinds of training that narrative mediators have today.[ii] However, this is not an obstacle to the process, for indeed, public officials should have training needed to support their role as leaders in the transformation of public conflicts.

Public officials, in their role, have the opportunity, if not the responsibility, for narrative braiding; it can be argued that they have responsibility for public discourse, not because they create or control the discourse, but because the quality of the democracy public depends on the quality of deliberation, which, in turn, depends on the way identity groups, narrative strands, interact. Given that conflict processes inevitably shrink the complexity of narrative strands that, in turn, balkanize conflicts, public officials can play an important role in creating the conditions in which narrative strands can be explored and can come into a new relation, an integrated relation, with each other.

The process of strand development can be done by public officials in routine conversations with citizens, relative to their needs and concerns, elaborating with them the terms of their legitimacy. However, given that there are pockets of marginalized communities, within a given district or region, the development of narrative strands may not be part of "routine conversations" as precisely these marginalized groups do not interact with public officials, except so far as they are they object of either "help" or "control/surveillance." So the first level of activity that public

officials may undertake is to seek out the marginalized members of their district or region and engage them in a conversation in which the values *they* offer, which function to establish their own legitimacy, are elaborated and developed in interaction.

Secondly, as problems or conflicts arise in a region, they will inevitably impact multiple identity groups, multiple narrative strands. As problems arise, officials have the opportunity to begin to interact with all parties, even the marginalized groups, in a manner that elaborates the terms of legitimacy they have offered for themselves, *with* other groups.

The Tajessdief Case[iii] provides an excellent exemplar. This case involves the clash between the Moroccan community in Amsterdam and the white Dutch community. In the shadow of the murder of Theo van Gogh on the streets in Amsterdam in 2004, the Dutch government developed policies and programs intended to integrate the Moroccans living in Amsterdam into Dutch society. However, tensions between these communities remained high. In this context, a Moroccan youth stole a woman's purse from her car, and she ran him down with her car, pinning him to a tree and killing him.

The Moroccan community was up in arms, framing this as yet another instance of violence against them, while the white Dutch community argued that this was the sad outcome of yet another example of the criminal behavior of Moroccan youth. As a result of this death, the Moroccan community wanted to protest the death of a Moroccan youth and negotiated with government officials to organize a march. Framed as "protest" narrative, the march would have worked to position the Moroccan youth as a victim, a semiotic marker for the Moroccan community's narrative of its own marginalization and mistreatment by the Dutch society. The Dutch officials would have been positioned as victimizers, for the marchers' narrative would have pointed to exclusion, prejudice, and separation.

As the possibility of this narrative of victimization appeared, the broader Dutch population

was poised to counter this narrative strand with another: this youth was a criminal, *like other Moroccan youth*. In this context, the permit to march was denied - the public officials wanted to avoid a clash between the Dutch and Moroccan communities on the streets, as indeed there was a potential for violence between what Hajer and Versteeg (2005) refer to as "discourse coalitions." The march would have instantiated, or institutionalized the Moroccan narrative, something that the Dutch society would have strongly resisted because it positioned the Moroccan community as delegitimate. Had the protest march taken place, it would have allowed the voices of the marginalized to appear, but it also would have cemented and exacerbated the existing divisions in the context. From this perspective, the complexity of allowing the voices of the marginalized to be heard emerges - this would always accompany a defensive, if not violent response, from the dominant culture.

The Moroccan community then requested a permit to hold a *silent march*, as a vigil of mourning for the youth that was killed. This permit was granted and this is fascinating. Clearly a march of mourning in and of itself would have given the Moroccan community an opportunity to speak, so the difference that made a difference in the decision to grant a permit was not the frame of "mourning" but that it would be *silent*, avoiding any challenge to the Dutch (state) narrative. The march was held, but no Dutch public officials attended. In this way, they enacted their relative disattention to the experiences of the Moroccan community, confirming the Moroccan community narrative. It was not only a missed opportunity, as the officials could have mourned with the Moroccan community, but it contributed to institutionalizing the divisions between the communities, ensuring that the voices of the Moroccan community would not be spoken in a context where they could not have been otherwise ignored.

Alternatively, the Dutch officials could have contributed to the development of the Moroccan narrative strand by elaborating their narrative strand with them. In this process the public officials might have, for example, discovered that the Muslim community had, as core to their

narrative identity strand, the value of "traditional family" (where the father is the patriarch and the

mother is the caretaker, and the rules of the father are to be obeyed); it would have been possible to

begin to define the problem on the basis of those values,[iv] in a hypothetical statement such as:

"This tragedy is clearly the result of the difficulties the Muslim community has, living in the

Netherlands, to create a context where fathers can guide the youth in their development the way

that they, the father, would intend." This statement recognizes the Moroccan community's

aspiration to retain their values is, for them, both a statement of the problem ("we have not been

able, in this environment, to live according to our values") and a statement of the solution ("the

Moroccan community has the values that, were we able to live them, we could raise our children so

they would not steal"). But as legitimacy of the narrative strand needs to be woven into the

collective problem statement, the public officials would have needed to formulate a problem, in

public, *with the public,* toward a narrative that carried the legitimacy of the Moroccan community,

for example, through the following hypothetical statement:

> This is a tragedy in that the death of any young person is a waste, a loss - this
> young man did not live long enough to learn to live in a manner that his family or
> his community would have wished for him. And this relates, in turn, to the
> multiple levels of mourning - for the death of this young man is a marker, a sign of
> the difficulties of families, like his, who have not been able, in the context of the
> Netherlands, to raise their children the way they would prefer, according to their
> own values. We can, in time, learn from families like these and work with them, to
> create the environments in which their children can grow up and become the
> people their parents hope they can become, because like all parents, from
> everywhere, we want children to grow up to contribute to their families and
> communities, a contribution that might benefit all of us.

This narrative would braid into the problem statement the terms of legitimacy offered by this

imaginary Muslim interlocutor, from their narrative strand. Made public by this imaginary official,

perhaps at the opening of the silent march, this strand could then be elaborated in the press and by

other identity groups who could affirm the Moroccan community's intention to raise their children

well, like all parents, everywhere. This is an example of the process of narrative braiding that

would support all the narrative strands to appear and to enter into relation with each other.

Public officials have an opportunity to engage in narrative braiding in multiple settings, informally and formally; braided summaries, such as the one described above, can be done in informational settings, public meetings of all kinds, administrative planning sessions, as well as media campaigns. These braided narratives can also be the foundation for the development of policies that address all manner of issues, including immigration, the environment, security, housing, homelessness, and so on. In all cases, the statement of the problem, which provides the logic for the policy, should include the terms of legitimacy advanced by all the major narrative strands that comprise the community impacted by that policy. In this way, officials contribute not only to the creation of the narrative strand but also to the reduction of marginalization, since the braiding process itself incorporates the voice of those who have struggled to have their legitimacy adopted and elaborated by Others. In turn, this requires the evolution of narrative from those that produce and reflect conflict dynamics (accusation with denial, excuse, and justification, and counteraccusation) to a story structure that creates a new, more collaborative dynamic, a "better-formed" story.

Braiding for "Better-formed Stories": A Politics for Public Officials

Given that the relation between identity groups is quickly, and rather consistently polarized, in the context of conflict and problem-solving, narrative braiding is both a conflict resolution and a conflict prevention process. By reducing marginality and supporting the participation of all identity groups, this practice of narrative braiding ensures that the decisions made, and the policies formulated, will *disrupt* and *destabilize* the broader cultural narratives that anchor and exacerbate the conflicts between identity groups, altering the narrative landscape in the process. Some public officials who rely on these "us" vs. "them" divisions may themselves feel at a loss, for narrative braiding is not a process of advancing a particular ideology, as indeed, it

presumes that in a good deliberative process, people will be able to develop good solutions to problems. However, other officials may find this practice a natural process of caring for, and protecting, the deliberative space where citizens themselves make decisions and exchange ideas.

Ranciere (2006) has argued that the order of things, within which daily life proceeds at administrative and "everyday" levels, contains and reproduces the exclusion of the marginalized and functions in a way that eliminates their voice. However, voice is a precondition of any deliberative process. Speaking and being heard by others, that is, having critically important aspects of one's narrative elaborated by Others, is clearly a precondition for public participation and deliberation. While Habermas (1984) acknowledges that the quality of the communication is critical to emancipation, that is, linking a normative perspective on communication to a political objective - emancipation (Coles, 1992) - he does not offer an account of the conditions required for the development of voice itself. While Ranciere does offer an account of "politics" as the destabilization of the existing sensibility (aesthetic) or way of making sense, he does little to suggest how this destabilization may occur. Narrative braiding addresses the practical limitations of deliberative practice, by building on the legitimacy of all parties; considering that delegitimacy is the foundation for conflict dynamics as well as marginalization and exclusion, legitimizing parties, *on their own terms*, in the course of building an account of the problem, provides a way to build engagement of marginalized groups. The incorporation of the marginalized as legitimate definitely upends the existing relational field, and modifies the existing sensibility within a deliberative practice.

In the course of legitimizing, a process accomplished in and through the development of the narrative strand, a new, better-formed story is created, altering the structure of the conflict narratives, as well as the accompanying process of interaction. This better-formed story has new subject positions in discourse that are legitimizing to all characters in the story, protagonists and antagonists alike; it also contains a new, multimodal moral framework that bypasses the binary

black and white of the more simplistic conflict narrative. Finally, the plot structure contains more episodes (a more developed temporal framework) and also has more subplots, which contextualize and "thicken" the meaning of the actions in the plot line (Cobb, 2013, 2006, 2003; Sluzki, 1992).

All together, the new character roles, moral values, and episodic components constitute a new narrative structure that is better-formed across several dimensions. First, it constitutes new international patterns that are more inclusive (the marginalized finally have a portion of their narrative elaborated). Secondly, these better-formed stories provide a more complex description of the history, which in turn, opens up new ways of describing present problems and future solutions. Thirdly, this narrative creates collaboration, rather than conflict, providing a foundation for improved relationships and the emergence, over time, of critical intelligence. As noted earlier, critical intelligence is a product of a quality of engagement that supports the democratic process. In this way, better-formed stories are foundational to the pragmatics of democracy itself.

Better-formed stories are themselves a product of narrative braiding which includes first the elaboration of the narrative strand, and then its legitimation in a web of stories about a problem. These two steps can be understood as distinct, and in fact may imply the need for two phases of a negotiation or problem-solving process. In the first phase of elaboration of the strand, the interviewer (either a party to the conflict or a third party) asks a set of questions that build on the framework for legitimacy of the speaker while expanding the complexity of the plot (a thicker history of what happened, a more elaborate description of current events), the complexity of the moral framework (from binary to multimodal) and positing a legitimate position for the antagonist(s).[v] This elaboration generates a more complex narrative, or a better-formed story. The second phase is its elaboration by Others - the antagonists in the stories - and perhaps the broader culture. This is accomplished again by conversations in which the Others, those who were initially positioned as antagonists, elaborate the better-formed story. Because these antagonists have a legitimate role in the new story, they are likely to participate, as long as the value system under

development includes their core values as well, and the history detailed in a more complex narrative incorporates both episodes critical to their strand, *and* a logic for those episodes that retains the group's own legitimacy.

Additionally, the elaboration of a narrative strand, by others, can be supported via media campaign, once it is developed by the core protagonists and antagonists; however, it is critical to differentiate "elaboration" from marketing. The former includes parties in the development of the braid, while the latter offers an already formed braid to the set of actors. Winning the hearts and minds of the public, for example in Iraq, through development projects or media campaigns that positively connote the Coalition Forces does little to build the quality of relationship that would lead to collaboration or critical intelligence. But a deliberative process that, for example, leads to the construction of legitimacy for a group of previously marginalized parties, is generative of a new better-formed story, which leads to new interactional patterns and the development of sustainable agreements and policies.

Thinking of the role of public officials from a logistical perspective, it is important to note that both the elaboration of a narrative strand, with parties to a conflict *and* the process of braiding the strands together are conversational processes. Better-formed stories cannot be created through the kind of planning process, which takes the marginalized as an object, nor can better-formed stories be legislated. While it may make more sense to try and differentiate two phases of any planning process, (1) the elaboration of the strands and (2) their braiding, these processes are also very integrated. The elaboration of narrative strands, with parties, provides an opportunity to begin to pick up the criteria for their legitimacy and anchor the new positions (in the discourse) through a process of braiding them into a set of strands, each one constituting the terms of legitimacy for that identity group.

However, it is perhaps more practical, and more effective, to work on the design of

processes that are explicitly in two phases. Creating an initial phase of strand elaboration would function as an invitation to parties to a conflict and also provide a context for conversation where the risks associated with negotiation are reduced. The braiding can also be done over time, in multiple conversations, without a public process with a stated intention to build a collective account of the problem and its context. Braiding could be done across a set of community actors and agencies, as a way of preparing the ground for a collective deliberation in which all parties not only have a voice but also experience themselves as having a voice in relation to others.

Returning to Habermas, the elaboration and the braiding processes, whether distinct or combined, can be understood as providing the pre-conditions (of voice) that are prerequisite to the process of deliberation, negotiation, mediation, or public planning processes. These conflict resolution processes all require persons to be able to participate, and participation is more than just showing up to a meeting and speaking. From a narrative perspective, participation is a process of being storied by others as legitimate. Participation also requires being a "concrete other" for one's Others. And participation requires speaking into a narrative that already authorizes the voice that is spoken. Narrative braiding, and the process of elaboration which is foundation to it, constitutes the conditions for participation in deliberation, as well as democracy itself. From this perspective, the better-formed story itself enacts legitimate positions (in discourse) for all parties, and is thus central to the politics of identity processes, redressing marginalization.

At the policy level, once people are delegitimized, policies created to "help" them defined them as weak, incompetent, or ignorant. These positions are paternalistic and construct the government as caretakers who define the needs of citizens and then design programs to meet those needs. The problem is that the identity of the people is undermined via negative positioning, on the one hand, and by the absence of any process for the reconstruction of identity (deliberation, negotiation) on the other. While citizens/residents may not struggle against the government's positioning of them, as indeed people are often too busy or overwhelmed with life to participate,

they will none-the-less often vote with their feet, resisting their positions in the government narrative by failing to comply with rules, resenting the imposition, or failing to participate in a manner that would increase their own integration.[vi] But the government can also position citizens/residents as dangerous in which case they develop policies (curfews), deploy technologies ("Mosquitoes").[vii] Thus the way the government can *construct* identity can be seen buried in the policies that it creates in which citizens or residents are positioned as less than legitimate.

Tragically, the government often inadvertently positions groups of citizens or residents as delegitimate *in line with* existing narratives in the dominant culture that take for granted that these groups need help or need to be controlled. These are groups, which the broader culture has storied as incompetent or untrustworthy, and of course all too often they are immigrant groups, strange and Other to the dominant culture. Government can and does from this perspective exacerbate existing identity-based divisions among the public and in this way contributes to maintaining and fostering the very exclusion and marginalization that it seeks to redress. These policy narratives thus carry, like DNA, the delegitimized positions of the marginalized and concretize them into new programs and efforts to address or redress their weaknesses or their bad intentions.

Conclusions

Identity, from a narrative perspective, is not a set of static traits or characteristics but a narrative strand that anchors "us" (as *protagonists*) in relation to "them" (*antagonists*). This strand is all too often formed in a conflict dynamic defined by reciprocal delegitimacy. This reciprocity does not however imply symmetry, for the delegitimizing done by groups with formal power and authority is institutionalized both culturally, organizationally, and legislatively. While the marginalized may continue to delegitimate their Others, (dominant identity groups), they can all too often only materialize their narrative through withdrawal and/or violence. In either case, their participation in deliberation and democratic processes is delimited by the position they occupy in

the narrative of their Others. With one or more identity groups marginalized, dominant groups may attempt to engage the marginalized, or they may attempt to promote their integration through legislation and policy. However, these processes only anchor a relation of helping or control on the part of dominant groups toward the marginal.

Public officials can take on the role of enhancing the participation of all citizens through supporting both the elaboration of each group's narrative strand, as well as through braiding these strands together. This process requires that the conditions for legitimacy offered by each party about their own identity group, be included in the formulation of the problem statement. Thus, as problems are identified, they are described in terms that legitimize the stakeholders involved. From this perspective, braiding is a process by which the conditions for participation are created.

This process does not dilute the uniqueness of any identity group, for the grounds they offer for their own legitimacy are retained and elaborated. Rather, this process is one in which the Concrete Other is materialized by each group, for all groups. This is, in effect, a narrative perspective on integration precisely because the process of braiding creates the conditions for the voice of all parties to be materialized and elaborated. For this reason, public officials are uniquely situated to be the braiding agents. First, they have access to different identity communities, either directly, through their own offices or indirectly, through other public agencies and institutions, and this access enables them to engage in the development of narrative strands. Secondly, they have responsibility to foster the participation of the public in public issues, and narrative braiding supports participation. However, this could dramatically change the role of the public official from one of controlling or helping identity groups to one of supporting the emergence of voice through the creation of better-formed stories *with* different groups. In this light, negotiating identity is a critically important role for public officials, one that gives them more than a ring-side seat for the witnessing the emergence of integration but rather defines their role in the negotiation as a process of narrative braiding that is core to deliberative process, if not democracy itself.

Acknowledgements

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ⁱ See a video that documents the protest and contestation surrounding the passage of The Resolution in Prince William, VA at http://www.9500liberty.com/.

ⁱⁱ See Forester and Laws (2007) for a set of mediator profiles that displays the complexity of their practice, as per their descriptions of that practice. Their research reveals the gap between what mediators do in practice, and how the field of mediation, more broadly describes practice - the complexity of the actual practice exceeds the descriptions of practice,

ⁱⁱⁱ See Laws & Verloo (2010) for an analysis of this conflict in Amsterdam.

ⁱᵛ This is solely based on conjecture by this author and is intended to be an example only.

ᵛ For descriptions of the pragmatics of the emergence of the "better-formed" story see (Sara Cobb, 2006). For descriptions of positive connotation, a type of reframing, see Watzlawick et al. (1967) and Watzlawick et al. (1974). For descriptions of questions that can contribute to the better-formed story formation see White & Epston (1990) and for a description of a process of the narrative evolution in mediation see Winslade & Monk (2008). See Tomm (1985) for an excellent description of "circular questions" which can be used to increase narrative complexity, more generally.

ᵛⁱ It would be most interesting to conduct a narrative analysis of immigrants to the Netherlands to find out how they see themselves positioned by the government and how this sits with them, how they react to it, and how they see the consequences of their being positioned in this way.

[vii] These are mechanical devices that emit a high-pitched noise that is uncomfortable to the human ear, and only perceived by the young. It is deployed in locations in the Netherlands where the government wants to discourage loitering of youth. See

http://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/0,1518,621025,00.html