# Narrative Change Components

## Stories, Narratives, Mindsets, Paradigms, and Culture as Part of Cultural and Systems Change

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# Introduction

While the strategic use of narrative change has become increasingly widespread, the underlying mechanisms by which narrative change is important for social change remain unclear. Why narrative change, and for what ultimate purpose? How does narrative change relate to systems change? **This working paper delves into the building blocks or components of narrative change, including stories, narratives, mindsets, paradigms, and culture, and examines their interrelationship as part of cultural and systems change.**

Narratives shape how people perceive and understand the world around them, and they provide meaning and a lens through which to interpret issues, causes, and events in the lives of individuals and in communities. Narratives play a crucial role in shaping individuals' perceptions and understanding of the world. They serve as an interpretive lens, providing meaning and context for various issues, causes, and events in people's lives. By shifting the narrative, there is the potential for change agents, including grassroots organizers, policy advocates, and funders, to influence how individuals and communities comprehend their environment and their place in it, highlighting the underlying power of storytelling for social change.

Narratives are not neutral constructs. They often emerge from and reinforce existing power dynamics and systems, reflecting cultural mindsets and worldviews that reinforce the beliefs, norms, and values held by the majority and often of the ruling elite. This relationship between narratives and power structures underscores the significant role of narratives in shaping and reinforcing existing social systems and constructs.

When narratives emerge from and/or resonate strongly with individuals and communities, they can become catalysts for action. In some cases, this mobilization can lead to movements that result in lasting social change.

The following tables explore the complex and interconnected relationship between stories, narratives, mindsets, paradigms, and culture.

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# The Interrelationship Between Stories, Narratives, Mindsets, Paradigms, and Culture

| | STORIES | NARRATIVES | MINDSETS | PARADIGMS | CULTURE |
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| **DEFINITION** | Stories have or imply a beginning, a middle, and an end and involve characters, setting, and plot: something happens to someone somewhere. | Narratives are patterns of stories that are held by individuals or groups and contain beliefs about the way the world works. They can be harmful, beneficial, or both. | Mindsets are deep, assumed patterns of thinking that shape how we make sense of the world and what we do that can alternately normalize or problematize aspects of the existing social order (FrameWorks 2020).<br><br>This is analogous with how some in the narrative change field describe meta- or deep narratives. For example, The California Endowment defines deep narratives as "the unquestioned 'truths' that have been normalized by society and feel like common sense, but can uphold systemic oppression" (Lynn and Kathlene 2020). | Paradigms are patterned ways of representing or modeling reality, especially including explicit theories about the world (e.g., scientific theories). Paradigms are typically conceived as explicit theories about the world rather than tacit sets of assumptions. Also, the notion of scientific paradigms assumes a single dominant paradigm at any given time that is replaced when a better paradigm arises. By contrast, there are multiple mindsets for any topic (FrameWorks 2020).<br><br>Worldviews encompass ways of thinking that shape all aspects of how someone makes sense of the world. Worldviews, which are closely related to mindsets, are singular. A person has a worldview—whereas a person can move between multiple, sometimes conflicting mindsets. Moreover, worldviews are used to make sense of all parts of life, whereas mindsets apply to particular aspects of life. Worldviews can be understood as constellations or sets of mindsets that hang together (FrameWorks 2020). | Culture refers to the prevailing beliefs, values, and norms about fundamental aspects of a society (Putnam 2020).<br><br>Culture can also refer to the set of customs and practices (including storytelling and artmaking) that contain, transmit, or express ideas, values, habits, and behaviors between individuals and groups (The Culture Group). |

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| **METAPHOR** | Stories are like individual stars. | Constellations are composed of groups of stars that seem to form a figure or pattern (e.g. The Big Dipper, Orion). Narratives are like constellations, or groups of stars that form a shape or pattern. | A galaxy is a cluster of stars, planets, and other objects held together by gravity. A mindset is like a single galaxy. Instead of stars, planets, and other objects held together by gravity, there may be stories, narratives, and deeply held beliefs that shape mindsets and hold them together. | A galaxy may be alone, or it may be in a large group of galaxies called a supercluster. A paradigm is like a supercluster of galaxies. | Universe - there are billions of galaxies in the universe. The universe encompasses every single thing in existence. Culture is the overall container in which stories, narratives, mindsets, and paradigms exist. |
| **PURPOSE/ROLE** | Stories are an essential part of how we think, feel, remember, imagine, and relate to others (Narrative Arts). We often use stories to process, understand, and assign meaning to experiences in our daily lives (Reinsborough and Canning 2010). | Narratives shape how people perceive and understand the world around them, and they provide meaning and a lens through which to interpret issues, causes, and events in the lives of individuals. | Mindsets shape individuals' reality and can therefore impact outcomes. A mindset is the unique lens through which people see the world, and it encompasses assumptions and expectations that people have about their lives and the situations that arise. They serve the purpose of distilling complex worldviews into digestible information and then set expectations based on that information. Mindsets can impact outcomes by determining the way people think, feel, and respond to some situations (Stanford Report 2021). | The shared idea or worldview in the minds of society constitute that society's paradigm, or its deepest set of beliefs about how the world works (Donella Meadows).<br><br>Paradigms could be seen as meta- or deep cultural mindsets at a societal level. | Cultural values, beliefs, and norms play an important role in shaping societies and influencing individual behavior. They often serve as the basis for social order and cohesion within a particular group or society (Edwards 2024). |

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| **POTENTIAL FOR SOCIAL CHANGE** | Storytelling can provide the impetus for organizing. People may respond to stories or contest them, and they may build solidarity by sharing their own stories (Narrative Arts). | Changing the narrative could influence how individuals understand the world and their place in it and, as a result, narratives are powerful. They are also products of power as they often reflect a prevailing societal worldview and reinforce the beliefs, values, and norms of the majority. When narratives resonate at an individual or collective level, they can motivate action and, in some cases, lead to social change. | Mindset shifts can enable different forms of social change—behavior change, policy change, institutional change, and structural change. Mindsets matter because they shape our behavior and decisions. Shifting mindsets can lead to different personal and political behavior and decisions (FrameWorks 2020). | Paradigms are the sources of systems. From these "shared social agreements about the nature of reality" come system goals, information flows, and" everything else about systems" (Donella Meadows). | Cultural change is part of social change. The result of cultural change can be the creation of new social structures and systems (Stevenson 2021). |
| **DEFINING CHANGE** | "The currency of story is not truth, but meaning" (Reinsborough and Canning 2010). Change, in the context of stories, is to challenge or contest in the realm of meaning. | Narrative change is a change in the narratives that circulate within public discourse: either in the set of narratives in circulation (i.e., which narratives are used), or in their relative prevalence (i.e., which narratives are used more or less frequently), or both. (FrameWorks 2020). | Mindsets can shift in multiple ways. They can become more or less dominant over time. The boundaries of a mindset can also stretch as people apply existing ways of thinking to make sense of new realities. For example, mindsets about marriage have expanded to encompass same-sex marriage (FrameWorks 2020). | A paradigm shift entails a radical, periodic change in a prevailing societal worldview. It involves a reassessment of deep existing assumptions and beliefs and the adoption of a new paradigm. If a societal worldview can be understood as a constellation of mindsets that hang together, then it is plausible that if you change mindsets deeply enough, or if you change enough related mindsets, the prevailing societal worldview can be shifted. | Cultural change denotes the way a society is changed by taking on new cultural traits, behavioral patterns, and social norms (Stevenson 2021). |

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| **DURABILITY AND/OR RESISTANCE TO CHANGE** | Stories often serve to normalize the status quo and reinforce a dominant perspective or worldview. People may have internalized dominant-culture stories to the extent that they may not be able to hear social change messages or stories (Reinsborough and Canning 2010). | Once a narrative becomes established, it can be difficult to shift. There is a general tendency for humans to justify existing systems and resist change (Stanford Social Innovation Review). Additionally, those in power may resist narrative change as narratives often reflect a prevailing societal worldview and reinforce the beliefs, values, and norms of the majority. | Individual mindsets can be changed. By challenging themselves with new experiences and perspectives, individuals can form new neural connections, or mindsets, at any point in life. For example, with a fixed mindset, you can change your mindset by learning and consciously choosing to believe that your characteristics are not predetermined and that you can continue to grow over time (Stanford).<br><br>Cultural mindsets are highly durable. They emerge from and are tied to cultural and social practices and institutions with deep historical roots. At the same time, in moments of social upheaval, mindsets can be pushed into flux and become destabilized, leading to fairly rapid changes in thinking (FrameWorks 2020). | Paradigms can be harder to change than anything else about a system. In a single individual, a paradigm shift and a new way of seeing can happen in an instant. Societies, however, "resist challenges to their paradigm harder than they resist anything else" (Donella Meadows). | A defining feature of culture is its tendency to resist change or to change only incrementally (Stephenson 2023). |

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| HOW CHANGE HAPPENS | Stories can be vehicles to communicate meaning and emotions, build community, and stir people to action (Narrative Arts).<br><br>One way in which stories can drive systems change is by enabling individuals to change how they see themselves, their communities, and the broader context (Integration and Implementation Insights 2023). | Fink and Yolles (2012) describe the cycle of narrative change in four modes. Mode 1 is a relatively stable state for paradigms and their narratives. In Mode 2, questions emerge. If stories are labeled as inaccurate or irrelevant, tensions increase and reach a critical state in which meanings are contested. The paradigm and its stories move away from a state of equilibrium. In Mode 3, different types of stories merge, and emergent groups may challenge prevailing paradigms and their framings. At the Trifurcation stage, paradigms diverge into three paths: (1) new paradigms may arise; (2) some paradigms may decline and die; (3) other paradigms may be reborn with adaptations and changes. In Mode 4, transformation-narratives aligned with new paradigms are defined with a new vision and goals. Narrative Change (Mode 4): Out of this process, new narratives that align with new paradigms may emerge, and others may change along with adapted paradigms. | Mindset shifts happen as a confluence of factors that can involve a mix of intentional strategies and unintentional circumstances. While strategic action can contribute to shifts, the way that mindset shifts progress is, to some degree, unpredictable and depends on factors outside of advocates' and activists' control. Effective strategy requires recognizing when there are— and when there are not—real opportunities to shift mindsets. Mindset shifts become more likely when social and economic changes undermine existing ways of thinking, and they become less likely when people's economic or social interests actively conflict with possible new mindsets. If underlying social or economic realities shift in ways that make existing ways of thinking invalid, this can lead to changes in thinking. Dramatic events can pose an opportunity for activists by suddenly highlighting the inadequacy of an existing mindset or bringing to the fore simmering tensions (FrameWorks 2020). | A paradigm shift involves a significant change in how individuals or groups perceive reality or a specific subject matter. Paradigm shifts are often met with resistance from those who adhere to the old paradigm. They can lead to radical transformations in thinking, practices, and outcomes. A paradigm shift requires a critical reevaluation of established assumptions, beliefs, and methods. Paradigm shifts often provoke debates and conflicts between proponents of the old and new paradigms. They can be incremental, with minor changes, or radical, leading to a complete overhaul of existing paradigms. Visionaries and pioneering thinkers often play a central role in promoting and championing paradigm shifts. | Societal beliefs, norms, and values can swing back and forth like a pendulum from one end to the other. However, this pendulum does not swing by itself. It is often pushed one way or another by social actors, including leaders and often by grassroots activists (Putnam 2020).<br><br>Cultural change can also happen when societies come into contact other societies, either through war or mass migration, or through the diffusion of innovation (Stevenson 2021). |

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| **CHANGE STRATEGIES** | To develop a storytelling strategy, identify your goal and objectives. Then figure out your target audiences and how to reach them. An effective story is one that activates your target audiences (Narrative Arts). | Narrative change strategy is the practice of spreading stories that disrupt or counter harmful narratives and establish or reinforce beneficial ones. In order to work, these stories must take us on an arc from where we are today to a better future, revealing a new way the world can and should work. (LMS & Harmony Labs).<br><br>Change makers need to find ways to expose the status quo and make visible the narratives that perpetuate unequal power dynamics that lead to inequitable outcomes (Davidson 2022). | A mindset shift strategy is most appropriate for broad social change efforts. It often depends on factors outside of strategists' control. Because of this, mindset shifts are realistic for some issues but not others. Shifting mindsets can yield significant potential benefits, but it can take decades. Finding and recognizing the common mindsets that run across specific policy change efforts creates opportunities for strategic partnerships. The work should focus on changing the mindsets of the public, not policymakers. Mindset shifts that spread widely are more likely to generate fundamental social change (FrameWorks 2020). | Paradigms are the sources of systems. From these "shared social agreements about the nature of reality" come system goals, information flows, and" everything else about systems" (Donella Meadows). | Culture change strategy is a long-term, multi-layered approach designed — over time — to use stories and other immersive narrative experiences to create shifts in how people think, feel, and behave in the world (Bridgit Antoinette Evans). |

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| **ADDITIONAL INSIGHTS** | In order to achieve lasting systemic change, we need to shift the underlying stories that help people make sense of the world (Davidson 2022). | Pop Culture Collab and the Convergence Partnership propose a strategy of narrative immersion and saturation. The premise is that such a strategy may lead to a higher likelihood of narrative change when a large-scale disruptive event occurs or when many people in a society are experiencing the same cultural moment at the same time. Building narrative networks and a narrative infrastructure over time will place those engaged in narrative change work in a better position to take advantage of and build on instances or situations when established narratives are disrupted, meanings are contested, and different perspectives, stories, and paradigms emerge. | Mindset shifts can lead to behavior change through changed attitudes and changes in social norms. However, changes in mindset are only one route to behavior change. Mindset shifts can also affect policy. Changes in policymakers' mindsets can lead them to make different decisions, and changes in public mindsets can create pressures on policymakers that lead them to make different decisions. When mindsets begin to shift, it not only creates space for changes to particular policies, but opens the door for challenges to established institutions and social structures (FrameWorks 2020). | The highest leverage point is to transcend paradigms, realizing that they are constructs, and that no paradigm fully represents reality. Staying flexible and unattached to any one societal worldview is powerful and freeing. The idea that no paradigm, including the one that shapes our own worldview, is "true" allows you to choose whatever paradigm will help to achieve your purpose (Donella Meadows). | Systems change does not happen in a vacuum. Changing the system will require an intentional effort to shift the prevailing beliefs, norms, and values within a society. |

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| EXAMPLES | Rags to riches story about someone who was poor when they were young and later became rich and successful. | Bootstraps narrative - someone who assumes personal responsibility, works hard, and has strong core values can accomplish anything. | Deservingness: Deserving vs. undeserving.<br><br>Individualism: Focus on individuals and their rights, independence, and self-reliance.<br><br>Zero sum/scarcity: If someone else gains, I lose. | Neoliberalism is an ideology and a form of capitalism characterized by a consumerist, free-market world. It is rooted in values such as competitiveness and self-interest, and it advocates for a reduction in the size and scope of government. Neoliberalism's premise is that free markets can regulate themselves, and that government is an incompetent force that intrudes on the efficiency of the market. Proponents of neoliberalism believe that people get what they deserve in terms of market outcomes, and that redistribution creates the wrong incentives by punishing winners in the economy (or "job creators") and rewarding the economy's losers (or people who are seen as a drain on the system). | A neoliberalist culture in which public and private protections (i.e. a safety net) have eroded and families have been left to fend for themselves amid exploding costs for housing, education, health care, and child care. |

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# Reflections

While narrative change practitioners often conflate stories, narratives, mindsets, and paradigms, we see them as related but distinct concepts. There is a progression in which stories are the smallest building blocks whereas culture is the overall container in which stories, narratives, mindsets, and paradigms exist.

We lay out the progression from stories to paradigms and eventually culture:

**Stories** are an essential part of how we process, understand, and interpret our life experiences.

**Narratives** are sets or patterns of stories that contain beliefs about the way the world works. They provide meaning and a lens through which to interpret issues, causes, and life events.

**Mindsets** could be seen as meta- or deep narratives. They are deep, assumed patterns of thinking that shape how we make sense of the world.

**Paradigms** could be viewed as constellations or sets of mindsets that hang together, or as meta- or deep cultural mindsets at a societal level.

**Culture** refers to the prevailing beliefs, values, and norms within a society.

A paradigm shift entails a radical change in a prevailing societal worldview, and it is a pathway to cultural change, in which there is a broad shift in the core beliefs, values, and norms within a society.

Cultural values, beliefs, and norms play an important role in shaping societies and influencing individual behavior. They often serve as the basis for social order and cohesion within a society. Thus, cultural change is an essential part of social change, and cultural change can result in the creation of new social structures and systems.

Systems change does not occur in a vacuum. It occurs within the context of a society's culture. To change inequitable systems, there also needs to be a shift in people's understanding of the world and their place in it. Transforming systems over the long term will require changing hearts and minds. This work lies in the realm of

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meaning and involves targeted and coordinated efforts to build a narrative infrastructure to shift large-scale societal beliefs, norms, and values and to utilize and take advantage of windows of opportunity to shift narratives, mindsets, and paradigms when they occur. It is important to recognize, however, that people are not puppets. To see individuals only as victims of systems or as swayable members of target audiences is to take away their agency.

This work represents our initial thinking, and there will be more to come.

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