Editorial Information

This Compendium is an output of the Erasmus+ funded project ‘Common Ground, Common Future’ (CGCF).
It is intended to serve as a source of information and inspiration and as a source of reference for educators, storytelling trainers, community and social workers interested (or involved) in conflict management and polarisation management.

The contributions of the partners to the content of this compendium are based on the most recent and relevant experiences in projects of the partners, and (current) literature of researchers and practitioners in the field.

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Positions taken by the contributors:

**Arjen Barel** (Storytelling Center) – From the perspective of a storytelling practitioner, trainer, teacher and publicist, educated academically in drama and cultural studies, which determines his view. But most of his insights come from working with all kinds of people in the field.

**Peter Frühmann** (Storytelling Center) – from the perspective of socio-ecology, evolution of (human) communication, and specifically the roles, intentions and effects of stories (including fiction) and narratives in personal life and society. “Revel in the power of stories to change the world, but guard against it, too.” (Gottschall, 2012, p. 198).

**Ovidiu Gavrilovici** (Psiterra) - from the perspective of psychology informed by a social constructionist, narrative practice. “As a reaction to positivism, narrative approaches applied in psychology and therapy started in 1989 with the seminal work of Michael White and David Epston, *Narrative means to therapeutic ends*” (Gavrilovici, 2015, p. 25).

**Heidi Dahlsveen** (OsloMet) – from the perspective of a storyteller and teacher of oral storytelling as artistic research.

**THE CGCF ACTIVITIES TOOLKIT**
As a reference, this Compendium supports the **CGCF Toolkit**, which can be found on the project website.

Our societies are never completely peaceful, never completely competitive, never ruled by sheer selfishness, and never perfectly moral.
Frans de Waal (1997)
PREFACE

BEFORE

“A long time ago, before Corona (Covid-19), when we used to go to school...” This is how a seven-year-old starts her stories of the times before 2020. This is how a child perceives and tells about the current crisis, and how it affects her. A crisis that has been instigated by the outbreak of the pandemic. The little girl is in the middle of her personal life story, and it already has a ‘before’. There is no ‘after’ yet.

Crises like a pandemic, a flood, a locust plague, drought, or tsunamis can be precipitators of conflicts (Bugajski, 2011). This compendium was drawn up during the emergence and the further course of the pandemic, and the tensions and conflicts that might result from it were not yet predictable. It reflects what the partners in this knew at the time.

There was almost no issue that did not show opposing parties: citizen vs. government, native vs. immigrant or refugee, environmental activists vs. big business, democrats vs. autocrats, have-nots vs. haves, etc. It was ‘us against them’, an abyss of discord, incomprehension, and irreconcilability. Additionally, the global rise of populism, nationalism and isolationism - all fuelling conflicts and polarisation - seemed to lead to an ever growing (social) disruption and alienation, a growing sense of inequity and injustice, which not only affected individuals and groups, but also nations. Dominating discourses led to a huge gap between the common and shared ‘values’ people claimed to embrace.

The (social) media and their ‘trending topics’ had become the virtual trenches for ‘truth’ versus ‘truth’. Trending topic in one: the climate apocalypse, nuanced-minded Muslims and the biggest liar of all time in the White House. Trending topic in the other: the climate hoax, the caliphate next door and the fairest leader the free west has ever known.

On television, indignation found its ally in conflict-seeking viewing ratings. Talk shows became a stage for those at the extreme ends, with ‘clarifiers’ who ‘consciously or unconsciously fed conflicts’. Books were written about unbridgeable gorges, political parties were founded for the ‘angry unheard’.

Laws against hate, hate speech and discrimination were difficult to enforce and depending on the good will of national justice. European policy recommendations were ‘just’ that and not yet hard obligations.

NOW

‘Freedom’ has acquired a new meaning during the lockdown phases in many countries. ‘Social distancing’ (in fact physical distancing) has added another (emotional) dimension to community and family life. In addition, the threat of contagion is a possible threat to our psychological responses to otherwise ordinary interactions, not in the least fuelled by a bombardment of information through the media and rapidly changing government regulations, in some cases to governing ‘by decree’.

A constant feeling of threat may awaken deeply evolved responses to disease or contagion in the broadest sense of their meaning and lead us to become more conformist, tribalistic or nationalistic.

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2 Wijnberg R. (24-12-2019), We zijn het veel meer eens dan we denken, De Correspondent (in Dutch), http://bit.ly/2W35O0s.
and less accepting of divergence. Our moral judgements become harsher and our social attitudes even more conservative when considering issues such as immigration, sexual freedom, equality, and even free trade.

Thus, what doesn’t seem to have changed are the imputations that now divide groups further: there have to be scapegoats one can blame, and sometimes in one’s own (political and economic) interest. As before the frames are dictated by ‘pushers’ who disinform, accuse ‘the others’, and polarise the discourses. ‘What’ has caused the Covid-19 virus, including all kinds of conspiracy theories, goes ‘viral’: it’s the laboratories, it’s a biological weapon, it’s the 5G transmission masts, and so on. It’s “them” who did it and “it’s not our fault”. Everyone’s got his own ‘right’ narrative.

One can only guess the number of conflicts rising from the current pandemic, or the increase of existing conflicts and polarisation feeding on it. The guesses vary widely: from deglobalisation, nationalism, economic disasters, a greater imbalance between unemployed and employed, between rich and poor, between north and south, to increasing levels of public debt, harsh reforms, an increasing xenophobia even dictatorship. And closer to home: increasing stress and domestic violence.

On the other hand, there are other voices who believe that these might be the times to reflect on the current economic, political and social systems. Who want to have the existing narratives on the table and want to explore what they can tell us about ourselves and what consequences they have for our internal (economic) relationships and the relationship with others. Who believe that the current pandemic crisis is the chance to change systems and system narratives, one story at a time.

AFTER
Narratives and stories play an important part in society. They can make an individual, a community, a value system but - as it seems - they can also bring it down, as polarisation proves occasionally. However, and this may be the ‘silver lining’, history and present times show that mankind is more resilient to the dark side, conflicts, polarisation and crises than many want us to believe.
In her landmark book ‘A Paradise Built in Hell’ author Rebecca Solnit says:
"In the wake of an earthquake, a bombing or a major storm, most people are altruistic, urgently engaged in caring for themselves and those around them, strangers and neighbours as well as friends and loved ones... Decades of meticulous sociological research on behaviour in disasters... have demonstrated this. But belief lags behind, and often the worst behaviour in the wake of a calamity is on the part of those who believe that others will behave savagely and that they themselves are taking defensive measures against barbarism." (Solnit, 2009, p. 2)

In his popular book ‘Sapiens’, historian Yuval Noah Harari (2016) investigates the evolution of mankind and explains, among other things, that one of humankind’s biggest assets is collaboration and cooperation on a large scale - beyond groups, communities and even nations. And Dutch historian Rutger Bregman’s research (2020) concludes that most of mankind is ‘sound’. One of his findings is that 90% of all people come to the rescue when someone else is in danger or in need.

In times of crisis, conflict and polarisation, it may pay to build on these and similar stories for finding the common ground for a common future and a sustainable and safe co-existence.

May 2020,
The CGCF team


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THE PROJECT OBJECTIVES

Most conflicts evolve between two parties: ‘me’ and ‘the other’, or ‘us’ and ‘them’, which can transform into its extreme form - polarisation. Conflict and polarisation and their social and societal consequences are the original and most direct motivation for this project. This project’s objectives are to explore and develop (narrative) strategies and tools to make conflict parties aware of how their values and norms, their view of their world and ‘the other’ were or are shaped, influenced, or manipulated, by stories and narratives, resulting in conflicts and polarisation. And how they themselves might (intentionally or unconsciously) influence others with their stories.

Secondly, we want to make them aware how they can analyse and employ these narratives to oppose manipulation and the resulting hostility. How they can explore alternative new (or counter-) stories themselves through responsible facilitation, and at a certain point together with ‘the others’. In the end, creating a meaningful and sense-making conversation, defusing arguments and hurtful opinions. A chance for mutual understanding, reconciliation, a transformation and change to a better (or new) shared value system.

THIS COMPENDIUM

Conflict and polarisation seem to be a virtually inseparable part of the human condition. Yet, the drivers of conflict but also reconciliation are older than humankind. In the light of all this and our objectives, these are the topics we will address in this compendium:

The evolution and adaptive value of (oral) storytelling; story functions and story structures; the phenomenon of allegory and metaphor; the relationship of narrative and story; the constructive and connective power, but also the destructive power of stories; the genesis of dominant narratives and dominant (societal) discourses. All of which may help to understand the ascent of conflict stories but also the probability of achieving viable counter stories.

The next chapters will illustrate the concepts and models of conflict and polarisation, the phases they go through, the actors and their roles in those, the pitfalls and chances in creating de-escalation, reconciliation, change and transformation. These chapters will draw on the work of authors who have studied conflict and conflict resolution for years and who are expert practitioners. They show us that conflict needs to be handled much more carefully than many governments, conflict managers and many groups of aid workers think. We will acknowledge that most conflicts are 'real', but that polarisation is a pure construct.

Stories - also those at the root of conflicts - reflect or evoke emotions and feelings. That is why in the following chapters we look at many angles (and theories) of emotions, as they are important drivers of behaviour, how we experience (and feel about) ourselves, others and the world as a whole. We will look at their evolutionary benefits and pitfalls by examining their influence on empathy and sympathy and empathic listening; group dynamics; trust, shame and vulnerability; memory; identity- and life narratives; and cultural and contextual sensitivity.

The last chapter will present a number of narrative-and story-sharing approaches that could be employed in different phases of conflict and in varying (cultural) contexts: (participatory) narrative inquiry (including story collecting, analysing, and meaning making), narrative therapy, non-violent communication, and restorative justice. All of these approaches promote guidance and (inter)mediation through facilitation.
In the appendix, we will present cases from literature and the practices of the project partners.

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CHAPTER 1 – STORYTELLING

"In the beginning there was nothing..." That's how many creation myths begin. This is why we will begin with the evolutionary, adaptive value of story and storytelling. From the onset of language, stories shaped how we understand the world, our place in it. We have always used stories to make sense out of our chaotic environment and give meaning to our existence. Moreover, stories offer structure, and help to discover patterns, they show us strategies, or let us explore and try out strategies, they let us express emotions, let us feel empathy, they show us how problems can be solved, and more.

Not everyone is a ‘natural’ or skilful storyteller, sometimes tellers confuse a linear report with ‘storytelling’, which can make the meaning of the story disappear in an impenetrable fog. Thus, sometimes it may be unclear to a listener what the intention of the story was and sometimes the narrator is not even aware with what intention he is telling a 'story'. Therefore, we will elaborate on oral storytelling (and oral history), which is not only one of the oldest performing art forms, but has always played and still plays an important role in daily life. We will explore the impact of the storyteller, the listener and the storytelling context. Therefore, we will look at functions and intentions of stories, and their effects.

We will present the most common story structures and models, especially because some of them are very useful in the analysis of stories. They tell us about crises, actions, change and possible transformations, and thus demonstrate our ability to change and transform: ourselves, (our view of) the world, and our (social) environment. Through millennia story has played and still plays a vital role in civilizations, as a glue for communities. However, as it also can cause conflict, divide and sow hate and resentment, we have to highlight ‘the dark side’ of story, too.

1.1. AN EVOLUTIONARY TALE

Stories are a purely human phenomenon. It starts with how we experience the environment around us: nature and its phenomena, the animal world, our relationship with others – and how we interpret and understand it. All of it is data, and the sheer number of data (and their impact) can be confusing. To master that we need structure. First we made drawings and when we had language and words we were able to verbalize and express our thoughts.

In his book ‘On the Origin of Stories – Evolution, Cognition And Fiction’, Brian Boyd (2009) points to the evolutionary benefits of story, such as identifying (and empathising with) others, understanding behaviour, learning, transferring information and knowledge, giving meaning and sense, and also to our fascination for fiction.

Play is put at the very beginning. Play evolved through the advantages of flexibility; the amount of play in a species correlates with its flexibility of action. Behaviours like escape and pursuit, attack and defence, and social give-and-take can make life-or-death differences. These actions contribute to recognition and assessment of context and thus anticipation and flexibility in acting. Play is highly rewarding (Boyd, 2009, p.92).

Huizinga (1949) had already seconded that in his study ‘Homo Ludens’: “Play is older than culture, for culture, however inadequately defined, always presupposes human society, and animals have not
waited for man to teach them their playing. We can safely assert, even, that human civilization has added no essential feature to the general idea of play.” (Huizinga, 1949, p.7)

In his opinion, in play there is something “at play” which transcends the immediate needs of life and imparts meaning to the action. All play means something, and the very fact that play has a meaning implies a non-materialistic quality in the nature of the thing itself. “Nature gave us play, with its tension, its mirth, and its fun...” (Huizinga, 1949, p. 9).

**Data processing** is another step, especially for data that fall into meaningful arrays from which we can make rich inferences: we call these structures and patterns. Look up to the sky and what do you see? Myriads of stars, at first glance confusing, but when you look longer, you start to see structures. Look at the skins of snakes, they all have scales and colours, but at a certain moment you can distinguish poisonous from harmless ones. We actively pursue patterns, especially those that yield the richest inferences to our minds, in our most valuable information systems, the senses of sight and sound, and in our most crucial domain, social information.

Structure, patterns, repetition, and rhythm. Why are we so fascinated by that and why do we have this need to describe or visualize that if it was not rewarding?

**Art** “...acts like a play (and training) ground for the mind. Like play, it succeeds by engaging and rewarding attention.” (Boyd, 2009, p. 85-87). Cave drawings - figurative and symbolic - probably preceded language and sometimes already showed us images of a hunting, of birth and death. Some images already show comic book-like ‘stories’, and sometimes birth and burial rituals. But art gives us more: it generates a confidence that we can transform the world to suit our own preferences, that we need not accept the given but can work to modify it in ways we choose; and it supplies skills and models we can refine and recombine.

**Mimesis and narrative**: Like humans, animals are able to extract information from their environment (food, danger) and communicate that to others. They also need to understand the changes others (predators, prey, mates, rivals) make to their contexts of action and the consequences. They have an episodic memory (De Waal, 2019), an episodic mind. Donald (1991) suggests humans evolved a mimetic mind, “meaning a set of capacities, controlled by the intention to represent and communicate, and using a range of expressions short of language: pointing, gesture, posture, movement, facial expression, eye contact, and vocal sound.”

*Mimesis*, in its original meaning, is the basic theoretical principle in the creation of art. The word is Greek and means “imitation”, in the sense of “re-presentation” rather than of “copying”. In the context of the evolution of art, language and story, we restrict ourselves at this point to this “simple” definition.

‘Mimesis’ also implying that the intention was accompanied by invention (which Donald sees as central to early mimesis), by which our ancestors engaged in preverbal narrative. In the beginning, it would often have been hit-and-miss (like in the game Charade), but with mimesis something completely new emerged: the effort for mutual understanding led to “A and B reading each other’s minds, directing each other’s attention, influencing each other’s perceptions, mapping the differences and similarities between their experiential worldviews, learning from each other and teaching each other.” (Dor, 2017, p. 48).

**Language** followed. Science is still not unanimous how that started, but there was a moment when we had the words to utter and give names to things, natural phenomena and emotions.

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Dennet (2017) offers some interesting thoughts on language, meaning, and context. He states that our conscience is indebted to language. Language arose because sounds (and after appointing them to our environment and emotions: WORDS) came to us; they did not emerge because we invented them. That growing and still unconscious but more and more useful verbal competence primarily led people to think first about what they were going to say.

Or as Dor (2015) put it: ‘First we invented language. Then language changed us.’ And, as Boyd explains, it changed us individually and socially. It altered our cognition, “our vocal and auditory systems but also our emotions, behaviour, and our relationships to our own experience and to others.” (Boyd, 2017, p. 6). Language made possible that we could imagine experiences of others and take them into account in our own lives and decisions. We started to also look at the world “in order to tell about it.” (Dor, 2015).

**Fiction**

Stories, fuelled by language, enriched our lives by detailed indirect knowledge of other lives, and learning from experiences not our own (Boyd, 2017). From our predisposition for play fictional stories developed, a cognitive playground, which combined event comprehension, memory, imagination, and language. The capacity to invent stories, especially stories that highlight agents as causes of events, led to myth and religion, and other forms of bonding and within-group cooperation. It has also influenced our perception and the ways we react to or try to influence our ‘realities’, the individual, the mutual, and the collective.

Harari (2015) suggests different perceptions of ‘reality’ that might influence our experience, imagination, communication, cooperation and also our predisposition for conflict:

- **Objective reality**: the natural world (e.g. nature, climate, cosmos, laws of physics, other humans...), artefacts (buildings, cars, weapons, computers, cutlery, works of art...)
- **Subjective reality**: Character, identity, the body (e.g. the senses, sensations, illness), emotions (e.g. anger, fear) and feelings, consciousness, curiosity, beliefs, etc. We can add personal accounts / stories to that.
- **Imagined / fictional / inter-subjective reality**: stories, myths, religions, laws, money, corporations, brands, nations, norms, culture, (social) discourses, etc.

There is no doubt that narrative and story had played a vital role in building subsequent civilizations. They helped to invent social systems, and nowadays even re-invented social systems over distance (globally) through digital communication and (digital) exchanges of ideas.

We are the ‘storytelling animal’ (Gottschall, 2013). We love to play with possibilities and find solutions. This is why stories are engaging and also entertaining. We need this ‘play’ to give meaning and sense, to identify and empathise with the protagonists, but also to learn, to teach and to transfer information and knowledge. Storytelling has become a functional part of our nature.
1.2. ORAL STORYTELLING

A story is told. There are several stories happening when one story is being told, the story we listen to, the story about the teller and the story about the listener. If I can listen to your story, we are together. I can take the story in and be moved, I can question its message, but in any case, we will both be present and witness each other’s reactions, and have a conversation.

In one sense, we are all storytellers, but ask a random person on the street if he wants to tell a story: in most cases, you’ll be told, "I can’t tell stories", regardless of education, profession, culture, gender or age. If you insist, you will indeed mostly get a report. Some will abandon it altogether, for a number of reasons.

For example, if you work with different, sometimes vulnerable groups in different communities, you don’t always work with people who immediately have a story up their sleeve just like that (Barel, 2020). Insecurity or shame for different reasons (e.g. low literacy or illiteracy), trauma, or a cynical attitude towards stories (“Fairytales are for children”) can smother telling.

Oral storytelling is normally divided into three categories: Spontaneous conversational storytelling – here the story naturally occurs in a conversation. These stories are often co-constructed by those being present (Lwin, 2019, s. 2). Elicited storytelling – here the stories are facilitated in a more non-spontaneous setting, like an interview or a workshop in storytelling. Formal storytelling – in this setting the stories are told by a trained and/or professional storyteller for an audience who most probably know they will hear a story (Lwin, 2019). What these categories have in common is that oral storytelling is the narration and the transmission of a real or imaginary story in front of a listener.

This is what we hear from practitioners:
Storyteller and coach Limor Shiponi (2014) says that “Storytelling is a dynamic oral act of communication where ideas are shared within a group through a messenger who has the ability to combine text, voice and gesture expression in order to recreate a story in the imagination of his/her listeners which is the only place where the story actually exists.”
She and many others emphasize the oral aspect. Although she does not describe in so many words, she also seems to be referring here to a situation in which interaction exists between the narrator and the listener who are in the same physical space (Barel, 2020).

Storyteller Ben Haggarty (2014): “The storyteller is placed between the world of the story and the world of the audience; in fact, the storyteller is in two worlds at once. The role of a storyteller is therefore one of mediation, translating into words and gesture the information that will help the audience to access the story world in the way the performer intends.”

Barel (2020) adds that “It’s the listener who makes the story, not the storyteller. The narrator only helps the listener.” (p. 7) And note that in all quotes mimesis returns in one way or the other: the intentional (re)creating of worlds or ideas in the other’s mind through words and gesture.

1.2.1. WHAT HAPPENS WHEN WE TELL A STORY

Oral storytelling is described as an intersubjective act in which three parties are active: the storyteller, the story and the listener (Maguire, 2015): someone orally tells a story to others without a script or book as a support, and all are in the same place at the same time.
Let us start with an example by storyteller and story practitioner Katrice Horsley (2016). She emphasizes that the word ‘storytelling’ alone does not really cover the subject, because on its own it does not reveal the distinction between the teller, the story and the listener. It does not say a thing about the (active) role of the listener and the importance of the dialogue between teller and listener. According to her, this is what happens when a story is told, and processed:

1. Storyteller and audience, the storyteller starts the story.
2. The storyteller becomes the story.
3. The audience (each individual) becomes engaged / involved in the story.
4. The audience (each individual and his/her associations and emotions) is part of the story. The individuals in the audience, the teller and the story are connected.
5. The story ends... The story (enriched with all the associations, memories, emotions) is between (and connecting) the teller and the audience.

Now (5) you can work with the story (have a conversation about the story, about its meaning and sense); this will or can elicit other stories (by individuals).

This is the reason why some (Barel, 2020) prefer ‘story sharing’ (stressing reciprocity, interaction, shared experience) to ‘story telling’, which suggest one-way communication.

1.2.2. STORY CONTENT, STORY PRESENTATION

Something extra happens in the contact between people who are in the same room (Barel, 2020): there is interaction, people react to each other, emotions of both the narrator and the listener can be seen and experienced in the here and now. People feel each other’s warmth and maybe even smell each other. This provides an important added value in working with oral stories.

Oral storytelling is multidimensional in the sense that what is active during telling stories is: verbal, vocal and gestures (Lwin, 2019). Story practitioner and author Annette Simmons describes this multidimensionality as follows:

“When you speak, words are less than 15 percent of what listeners ‘hear’. Your listeners receive information from your face, posture, hands, clothes, eye movements, timing, tone, and other unpredictable factors like what clothes you use, who else seems to like or dislike what you have to say, and your haircut. Despite whatever aspirations we may have to be non-judgmental, all human beings are making judgments on every form of stimuli coming into their brains. Your listeners can’t help drawing conclusions about who you are and what your message means to them anymore than you can help sending messages about who you are from every aspect of your being. We may try not to judge a book by its cover—but we do.” (Simmons, 2019, p. 96)
'Once', said the Mock Turtle at last, with a deep sigh, 'I was a real Turtle'. These words were followed by a very long silence [...] Alice was very nearly getting up and saying. 'Thank you, Sir, for your interesting story', but she could not help thinking that there must be more to come. 
Lewis Carroll, Alice in Wonderland

1.2.3. CREATING ENGAGEMENT – THE INTEREST VALUE
What makes a story engaging? First, it must have at least two states, plus an event that leads from the first to the second. A single state, like in the quote above from 'Alice', cannot be a story. Moreover, the transition event from the first to the last state should not be a matter of course. These samples would hardly be acceptable (De Beaugrande):
- It was autumn. Then the season changed, and it was winter. And spring was far behind.
- Socrates was born. He lived and died.

Linguist Robert de Beaugrande (1982/2006) explains that there must be at least two alternatives (and often, there are a great many) for the story plot, defined as a succession of states and events or actions. He also states that the 'Interest Factor' (or 'Interest Value') is crucial for keeping listeners / an audience engaged. To mention two extremes: the public (the viewers, listeners, readers) will accept an entertaining story without a message, but a boring story will send them asleep long before the message even comes close.

For many centuries, the best storytellers and writers make use of the following ‘Interest Factors’: Uncertainty – Exaggeration - Unexpected events - Understandable goals/intentions/feelings of the protagonist - A turning point or turning points: the objective is attainable (victory) or wait a defeat (or certain death) - Identification with the problems of the protagonist - Creativity: using analogies, metaphors, tragedy, comedy, surprises (against expectations) - Discontinuity: interrupted by the eye 'irrelevant' episodes or story in a story (e.g. a frame story - think of Sheherazade’s '1001 nights')

1.3. APPLIED ORAL STORYTELLING

Applied oral storytelling happens when you use formal storytelling in another social context than live oral storytelling performance. Lwin calls this an 'applied storytelling performance' (Lwin, 2019). This could be storytelling in the library or storytelling in school. In this project, applied storytelling uses elements of formal storytelling, like working on a story, working on listening skills, in different social contexts like workshops for teachers, etc.

Applied storytelling can use both personal stories and folk tales, and both can play a powerful role. It's about the journey of a ‘hero’ and the way in which it transmits insight and wisdom. The hero can be the storyteller himself but it could also be a fictional or historical character, or an existing person whom the teller/narrator considers a hero.

Both the personal story and the folk tale can lead to shared feelings. However, in many cases the personal story lends itself better, especially with inexperienced storytellers or participants who do not wish to be trained to become a (professional) storyteller and only want to use their story to get closer to each other or grow as a person (Barel, 2020).

A model
Barel (2020) offers a model for the way a story comes to life for listeners. Every good story touches on three domains: the personal, the emotional and the universal domain.
One domain cannot exist outside the other. A story that is only emotional does not convey insight. A story that only refers to universal values, will not be remembered. A good story touches all domains.

Barel offers an example of an ‘icebreaker’ exercise often applied in workshops or trainings, where people meet each other for the first time. The participants will start with an exchange on the basis of three questions:

1. Where did you get your name? Who gave it to you? - This question opens the personal domain, the domain of the personal environment
2. Are you happy with your name? - The second question touches the emotional domain. The actual personal information that has been shared is becoming charged with emotions and feelings.
3. What is the deeper meaning of your name? - This question opens the domain of the universal stories: the domain in which insights, knowledge and wisdom are transferred.

Yet, the requirements for interaction are not yet sufficient. Barel (2020) offers the following addition:

In this way, the model makes clear how the narrator and the listener can be involved together in the process of sharing a story. The storyteller delivers through of transferring images and using narrative structure information, which is transformed into a story in the listener's imagination. Based on that, the listener responds and sends information to the narrator, who can convert this back into his story. What this model makes clear is that the narrator and the listener are part of one universe. If this is not the case, resonance is not possible.

1.3.1. APPLIED ORAL STORYTELLING IN ADULT EDUCATION AND EMPOWERMENT

As we have mentioned earlier, not everyone is a ‘natural’ storyteller. In fact, imagine working with groups or communities in conflict areas. One could encounter individuals who have little confidence in being able to express themselves for various reasons. It could be that they are low literate or illiterate, they may be insecure or anxious because of their social background or situation, or have a (second) language problem. Becoming aware of what a story is (meaning and sense) and understanding the structure (crisis – action – change - transformation) means a big leap in self-confidence and in communication.
Studies with English-as-second-language learners (Simich-Dudgeon, 1998) revealed that through the use of storytelling activities learners could take advantage of their own experiences and cultural traditions to develop orality – meaning self-confidence through mastery of spoken language - and literacy concepts. Becoming aware of the *structure of a story* can create awareness of *grammar structures* as well (De Beaugrande, 1982/2006, p. 5) and enhance verbal (and telling and understanding) skills and thus the ability to express experiences and emotions.

In a literacy (empowerment) project in Ireland, the researchers (Howard, Logan, 2012) worked with young (low literate and illiterate) men who were stuck in their professional and social development and felt excluded (“Men’s identity and role in society is often defined by their jobs”). They started with oral storytelling exchange improved orality (awareness of language skills) and paved a way to literacy. It led to a substantial grow in self-esteem but also group cohesion, meaning that members appreciated each other’s stories and the growing mutual support in learning. Before that, some of them had turned down trainings and education offered to them because they were ashamed to commit that they could not read or write properly (we could call that an ‘inner conflict’ leading to exclusion). Now they could apply for better jobs or accept or access better education. The mere exchange and analysing of their stories, the retelling of stories not only enriched their (working) vocabulary, it also enhanced their conceptual and contextual learning (sense and meaning, thus also semantics) and social and cultural literacy.

1.3.2. THE NEUROLOGICAL IMPACT OF STORYTELLING

You will from time to time be witness to a PowerPoint presentation, where a proud executive shows you bullets and numbers, assets and turnovers. Listening to data unfortunately does not have the intended impact. Only few areas are activated, and they are certainly not the memory areas. We are not only bored but we also quickly forget. However, when we listen to a story, a lot more happens. Our motoric, sensory and visual are also activated. Try and look around you when a story is told...

![Diagram of brain activation during data vs story](image)

Figure 5: Neurological impact (Frühmann et al., 2016, p. 30-31)

Much recent work shows that the same brain network is activated in memory, imagination and fore-planning, perspective-taking, and social scenarios, and suggests that we flexibly combine elements of episodic memory in order to plan for the future, particularly in social contexts (in Boyd, 2017). Boyd states that it is unlikely that much detail of the many thousands of narratives we encounter throughout would remain vivid in episodic memory. Nevertheless, the *social implications* derived from these narratives, including personality judgments, would enrich semantic memory, and semantic memory turns out to be sufficient to support future-oriented personal judgments and plans.

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5 ‘The Story of Grammars and The Grammars of Stories’. Availability of this article: see ‘Resources’.
1.3.3. ORAL STORYTELLING AND THE ALTERED STATE OF MIND

“Once upon a time, in a country far, far away, there lived a king...”
You might recognize this moment when you hear a story starting like this. Your mind wanders off, you quickly start to imagine that country far away and you ‘see’ the king before you, because you already have a ‘template of a king’ internalized. The teller does not even have to describe him. Your fellow listeners will experience the same sensation, in different countries with different kings, but in the same story. “The simple image I offered as a storyteller was imagined by all those different listeners in their own way.” (Barel, 2020, p. 15)

Sturm (1999) points at the ‘most profound and influential characteristic’ of oral storytelling: the power to get listeners in an altered state of mind, the time when they undergo a change in their experience of reality.
Based on his research (visiting storytelling events and interviewing story listeners), he describes 6 categories (also found in Agosto, 2013) from the listeners’ descriptions of the story-listening trance phenomenon:
1. Realism: the sense that the story environment or characters are real or alive
2. Lack of awareness: of surroundings or other mental processes
3. Engaged receptive channels:
   • visual (both physical watching and mental visualization)
   • auditory (both physical hearing and mental “chatter”)
   • kinaesthetic
   • emotional
4. Control: of the experience by the listener, or someone or something else
5. “Placeness”: the sense that the listener “goes somewhere” (often “into”) another space
6. Time distortion: the sense that subjective time moves at a different speed than objective, clock time. (Sturm, 1999, p. 6.)

1.3.4. ORAL STORYTELLING AND SENSE OF PLACE

Oral storytelling can happen everywhere, on the street, beside the coffee machine in the office, at home, at school, in the pub, a park, etc.. But we should be aware that when we work with oral storytelling the environment counts. We will always have to find a space where participants feel safe, welcome and comfortable. A conference room or a class room (arrangement) can be a ‘story killer’...
It’s important to find the right meeting place for sharing stories.
CHAPTER 2 - STORY QUALITIES AND STORY STRUCTURES

The previous chapter referred to the human need for information processing (grouping, structuring, pattern recognition), which helps to create order in our sometimes confusing and unsettling outer, but also inner world.

There was a moment when we became conscious of mortality, of life and death. ‘Where do we come from? Why do we die? Who controls the forces of nature?’ There came a time when we could consciously connect memories, when memory could explain effects from causes. We also became aware of morality, (power) relationships and ethics (‘Why is he more powerful than I am? Why is he/she hurting me?’) and our personal lives (‘Who am I? Why am I failing?’). These are just a few existential questions out of many more.

Stories and narratives originate from different needs and experiences, but foremost from our need for meaning and sense. Meaning-making is how we construct, understand and make sense of events, relationships and the self.

2.1. STORY QUALITIES

Frankl (1946) stated that the primary motivation of a person is to discover meaning in life. He insisted that meaning could be discovered even in the most tragic experience. People can discover meaning through simply ‘doing’, experiencing values, and experiencing hardship.

According to Postman & Weingartner (1969), meaning-making can also be seen as a metaphor for teaching and learning: “...it stresses a process view of minding (the moulding of the mind), where minding is undergoing a constant change. ‘Meaning-making’ also forces us to focus on the individuality and the uniqueness of the meaning maker... There is no limitation to his/her learning process. He continues to create new meanings.” (Postman & Weingartner, 1969, p. 91).

When we look at the constructive functions and qualities of stories, what comes to mind? When practitioners ask participants to think about in trainings or workshops, they come up with: inspiration, imagination, memory retention, knowledge- and information transfer, connecting people, consolation, healing, entertainment, engagement, (creation of) mutual respect, taking perception (empathy), (creation of) values (value systems), action (initiative), planning, strategy, anticipation (of events, actions), but also eliciting fear, hate, anger, or discrimination.

Looking at the above examples, you will realize that many of the functions of stories can also be interpreted as intentions. One should be aware of that when working with people and their stories. There is almost always an intention when we tell a story, it can be well-intended and, on the other hand, it can be malicious. Sometimes the teller’s intentions can be misinterpreted because – and often with the best intention – he or she gave a story that led the listeners’ interpretation (and meaning making) in the wrong direction (Simmons, 2019). They could become suspicious and/or feel manipulated. For the teller, it might be a good thing to be open or transparent about his true intention. An unexperienced teller could be asked “why” he had chosen this particular story, and that may reveal the intention.

2.2. STORY STRUCTURES

One of the most striking features of story is its structure. Linguist Noam Chomsky showed that all human languages share some basic structural similarities – a universal grammar. So too, some argue, it is with story (Gottschall, 2013, De Beaugrande, 2006). We do not realize it consciously, but as mentioned before, stories seem to answer to our need for organizing data and information into
meaningful structures. We are probably already ‘wired’ for recognizing a story: a story structure is a cultural code we are born into (Livo & Reitz).
There are multiple views of the structure of stories. They all have resemblances.

2.2.1. THE FOLK TALE
The most common and universal structure is the traditional story called *folk tale*.
For the folk tale model, we present version story researcher and -worker Cynthia Kurtz (2014) offers:

![Image of story structure diagram]

Figure 6: The Folk Tale (Frühmann et al., 2006, p. 35)

1. Context – introduction of the setting and characters, explanation of the state of affairs
2. Turning point – the dilemma, crisis or problem or initiating event that starts the story rolling
3. Action – how the people in the story respond to the dilemma or problem, including complications, further difficulties, challenges, things going wrong
4. Reversal / Transformation – finally something happens that induces change and/or transformation
5. Resolution – the outcome of the story (sometimes ‘the moral’ or ‘the learning’)

Crisis, conflict, and trouble are indispensable elements. Stories universally focus on the predicaments of the human condition, they cover many things: love, sex, hate, fear of death, challenges of life; they are also about power: desire to influence (fate or others), or to be able to escape. There is a paradox in fiction that Aristotle already noted (Gottschall, 2013): we are drawn to fiction, because it gives us pleasure. But when we look at what fiction gives us, most exciting stories have ‘unpleasant’ parts. “Hell is story-friendly.” (Gottschall, 2012, p. 52)

That being said, if you look at the figure above you may already think of familiar fairy tales like Cinderella or Jack and the beanstalk, but also the average Hollywood movie. Traditional stories come in many disguises, for instance like folk tales (for instance wonder tales, like Cinderella and Jack and the beanstalk), trickster tales (e.g. The fox Reynard, Till Eulenspiegel), or myths. But most importantly, many personal (life) stories follow the same structure.

The most striking feature of stories is that they always include change (e.g. crisis) and transformation. Something (sometimes terrible) ‘suddenly’ happened and it has to change, or has to go away and become transformed into a preferred situation, a resolution, a new equilibrium, and/or a learning.

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The Hero’s Journey

In some ways, similar to the folk tale, the Hero’s Journey is a “universal model narrative” that has been quite influential. This circular model of the Hero’s Journey is derived from Joseph Campbell’s monomyth (2008, p. 23), ‘The Hero With a Thousand faces’. Many epics (e.g. the Odyssey, Jason and the Argonauts) have been analysed and compared through this model. The structure goes as far back as the times of hunter-gatherer tribes and often starts with a crisis and the journey of the protagonist / hero to solve the crisis, often helped by his perseverance, gods, a mentor of some kind, and others. The monomyth stresses the journey into and through the unknown, which can (in the material sense) be unknown territory but (in a spiritual sense) also be the self. Teaching (and life) stories (e.g., about Buddha, Jesus) often follow the same circular structure.

So, this model offers more: it can be episodic, the hero prevails and returns with a learning that he can also share with others, but can be faced by a new challenge (e.g. Odysseus, Jesus); every episode adds a learning experience that prepares the protagonist for the next challenge. It can be an interesting reflection when individuals look at the cycles their (personal) lives go through: e.g. who have been their mentors, adversaries and helpers? In which (new) phase of their life are they right now? How do they act in the face of this phase?

Tribal stories also work that way: they teach their members how they have survived in ever changing environments and how they can adapt to them. Thus, when working with groups the same reflections can be applied: to communities, organisations, and even to individual parties within a conflict.

In the light of conflict or polarisation, it is interesting to ask people about turning points (there can be more than one) or times when things changed in significant ways in the history of whatever issue they had in mind. Depending on the issue, one could ask about particular turning points, like...
dilemmas, times of despair or joy, times of solidarity or conflict, accidents, surprises and so on (Kurtz, 2013, p. 200). One could ask them what they would change about that story and what would have happened if the story was retold that way (Kurtz, 2013, p. 140). That is the power of the story structure: it offers elements and leverages (e.g. decisive actions) for restructuring and rebuilding.

2.2.2. THE ACTANTIALLY MODEL
The actantial model offers a structure to analyse the action that takes place in a story, whether real or fictional. It was developed in 1966 by semiotician Algirdas Julien Greimas. This model reveals the structural roles typically performed in storytelling. It includes six actants: subject (hero), object of quest, e.g., sender (benefactor who initiates the quest), receiver (beneficiary), helper (of hero, person or tool) and opponent (adversary, villain).

![THE ACTANTIALLY MODEL](image)

Each of these roles fulfils an integral component of the story. Without the contribution of each actant, the story may be incomplete. Thus, an "actant" is not simply a character in a story, but an integral structural element upon which the narrative revolves.

An often-used example is Little Red Riding Hood: the sender/benefactor is Little Red Riding Hood’s mother, the object is the food basket (for grandma), the beneficiary/receiver is grandma, the hero is Little Red Riding Hood, the adversary / villain is the wolf and the helper is the hunter/ lumberjack (depending on the version of the story).

An interesting (and creative) application of the model is ‘perspective taking’: the teller can choose to tell the story from the perspective (and experiences and feelings) of the different actants and even jump from one perspective to the other for ‘interest’s’ and/or communication objective’s sake’. When we look at it, it can be a helpful tool when we work with conflict parties on problems that come from conflict discourses.

“The Mafia laundered the money…”

2.3. ALLEGORY AND METAPHOR
“When it comes to information- and knowledge transfer, do people always ‘understand’ what texts (spoken or written or projected) mean? Sometimes it seems that people deliberately rig (standard) language and make things too complex.
Everyone should be able to understand what ‘relativity’ means or ‘axiomia’ or ‘European Union’ and so on. When working with groups and their stories, there is no need for lengthy academic or literary sentences, no governmental ‘jargon’, but an understandable language that makes use of
imagination, engages, makes sense and gives meaning, insights, and knowledge\cite{fruehmann2016}. **Allegory** and **Metaphor** can be of help when it comes to understand complex or delicate topics, and even to understand each other: they speak the language of story.

The difference between an **allegory** and metaphor is that an allegory uses an entire story to express an idea or teach a lesson. In an allegory, the characters and events in the story act as symbols for ideas for a political or historical situation or ideas about human lives. Its characters actually stand for something larger than what they literally stand for. A famous example is George Orwell’s ‘Animal Farm’, which is an allegory that uses animals to depict the Russian revolution and the pitfalls of the communist ideology. ‘The boy who cried wolf’ instructs us about the consequences of lying: playing practical jokes on your community will cause them to lose their trust in you.

A **metaphor** uses a word or phrase to represent an idea. Metaphors are deeply rooted in our conceptual thinking. Lakoff & Johnson (1980/2003) tried to demonstrate this in their *Cognitive (or Conceptual) Metaphor Theory*: what we say or write are the verbal metaphors, but inside our minds we are busy with the context we are in – the setting, environment, conversations with others, etc.

When we tell stories, we use – unconsciously and consciously – these intrinsic skills. When we are in a conversation, a debate, or an argument, we use more **unconsciously** than consciously words or statements that illustrate the context and our feelings within that context.

![ARGUMENT \leftrightarrow WAR]

**TARGET**

**SOURCE**

Figure 9: After Lakoff & Johnson (2003, Ch. 1-3)

According to Lakoff & Johnson (*ibid.*), a metaphor is the description of an abstract domain (**the target domain**) in terms of a familiar domain – **the source domain**. Both are conceptual domains. For example, life, argument, love, theories, ideas, social organizations and other (abstract) concepts are target domains, while journeys, war, buildings, food, plants and others are source domains. The target domain is the domain that we try to explain (and thus understand) through the use of the source domain.

**Metaphor domains**

The classical example that Lakoff & Johnson (2003) offer is **ARGUMENT \leftrightarrow WAR**. You **attack** someone’s opinion, you feel pushed into **defending** yourself, and your opponent has **all guns blazing**... That’s how we apparently experience it in our culture.

Or take this example: **LOVE < JOURNEY**. Whenever **JOURNEY** is mapped onto **LOVE**, the two domains correspond to each other in a way which enables us to interpret **LOVE** as a **JOURNEY**.

Metaphor – as a cognitive and conceptual skill – can be a powerful tool to stir and inspire imagination. Just to give you an impression, we present the five most often used source domains (there are more) and a few examples to illustrate abstract concepts. You will probably recognize most of them and be able to add some more, also from your own language:

- **The Human Body** - *The head of our organization, A sick joke, a nauseating experience*

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\cite{fruehmann2016} Frühmann P. et al, (2016, p. 50), Raising Strong and Resilient Communities. A narrative and story approach to empower cooperation, cohesion and change in communities through non-formal education. Storybag.
Artefacts – *A puzzling situation, She was an open book, A rollercoaster of emotions*

Living Things - *Our company is growing, They are rats, The fruit of knowledge*

Human Activities – *Laundering money, She cut him down with words, My nose is running*

Environment / natural phenomena – *I saw the light, Hope is on the horizon, Feeling blue*

Metaphors can be powerful story changers, for better or worse. We should be aware that in groups and bigger communities, metaphors, once established, can become a filter through which participants now see their reality. Metaphors can borrow from particular (social and societal) discourses that invoke specific understandings of life and identity (White, 2007). Soon enough the metaphor can become the reality. When ‘identity’ becomes threatened, ‘battle’ or ‘contest’ (action) metaphors will rise. ‘White power’ communities (militant action), ‘Immigrants are rats’ (de-humanisation allows extermination), a nation described as a ‘fragile vase’ (defensive, protective action, e.g. The Dutch society as described by its prime minister, 2019).
"They're sending people that have lots of problems, and they're bringing those problems with us. They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists. And some, I assume, are good people."

Donald Trump

CHAPTER 3 – NARRATIVE, STORY, AND ‘OTHER’ NARRATIVES AND STORIES

We have made an effort to define (oral) storytelling, what it is and what its applications and benefits may be. Now may be the moment to look closer at ‘narrative’ and ‘story’, as these concepts have been introduced as well in the preceding chapters.

Schiff (2012, p. 33) argues that ‘narrative’ is an elusive concept, perhaps this is because the term ‘narrative’ is so widespread that the sense of the word has become stretched and overextended. It is an empty vessel, configured for the purpose of each user who can define the term in any way he or she likes. However, as Hyvärinen (2006) argues, what narrative defines is, often, life; narrative is a powerful metaphor for understanding life. We should focus on how ‘narrative’ and ‘story’ work to create meanings (Schiff, 2012, p. 34).

The presented views on ‘narrative’ and ‘story’ will show that both can be applied in different ways, depending on the context (e.g. personal, society) we use them in. They also help us to explore their connection with social discourses, which can be drivers for conflict, polarisation, discrimination and exclusion.

3.1. THE STRUCTURALIST VIEW

Narratologist Seymour Chatman (1978) introduces us to a model - he calls it ‘distinction’ - of narrative, story and discourse.

![Figure 10: (after Chapman (1978, p. 19))](image)

Thus, a narrative has two parts: a story – the content or chain of events (actions, happenings) plus what is called ‘the existents’ (characters, setting); and a discourse – the expression of the story, the means by which the story is communicated in oral storytelling (also as a performance), written, musical, broadcasted, cinema, etc.) In short: the story is the ‘what’ in the narrative, the discourse is the ‘how’. This is what Chatman (1978, p. 19) calls the structuralist view, reflecting a defined order.

3.2. THE FORMALIST VIEW

The formalist view (e.g. Vladimir Propp) used only wo terms: the fable - the basic story ingredients, the sum of the events to be related to the narrative; and the plot – the story as actually told by linking the events together. In short: fable is ‘what has in fact happened’; plot is ‘how the listener/reader becomes aware of what happened’, basically the order of the appearance, which can differ but still make sense: beginning-middle-end; beginning-end-middle; or middle-beginning-end (Chatman, 1978). This suggests that there are no general stages of development but (interactive)

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opportunities.\textsuperscript{9}

Events and existents are single and discrete (the story components), but the narrative is a sequential composite. Events in the narrative tend to be related or mutually related to each other. So, in this perspective, \textit{story} is the content of the narrative expression, while \textit{discourse} is the form of narrative expression.

3.3. LANDSCAPES OF ACTION AND CONSCIOUSNESS

Jerome Bruner, one of the pioneers of narrative psychology, ‘borrowed’ from the above mentioned structuralists and formalists, and proposed that stories are principally composed of two landscapes – a landscape of action and a landscape of consciousness.

The \textit{landscape of action} is the “material” of the story and is composed of the sequence of events (actions, settings, characters) that make up the plot and the underlying theme (\textit{fable}). The \textit{landscape of consciousness} is composed of “what those involved in the action know, think or feel, or do not know, think or feel.” (Bruner, 1986, p. 14).

This landscape features the consciousness of the protagonists and composed of their reflections on the events of the landscape of action – their giving meaning to these events, their deductions about the intentions of these events, and their conclusions about the character and identity of other protagonists in these events (White M., 2007,, p. 77-79). This also be applied to personal narratives, whether or not connected to a social context.

In addition, there is also the issue of coherence. According to Chatman (1978), narrative existents must remain the same from one event to the next. If they do not, some explanation (covert or overt) must occur, for example when we hear/read: “The king died, and then the queen died of grief”, we assume that the queen was the wife of the king. If not, we would have to explain that a particular queen died of grief because she was troubled by the death of a king. If in a personal story a teller switches from his story and goes on with the story of, for example, his uncle, this ‘identity switch’ can be confusing. So, some principle of coherence must operate.

3.4. ‘NARRATIVE AND ‘STORY’ IN THE SOCIAL AND SOCIETAL DOMAIN

There is another point of view towards narrative and story, and it comes from social constructivism, the theory that our experience of the world is (partly) constructed by social processes that depend on the society in which we live. Berger & Luckman (1966) argued that reality experienced by the average person is not based on theoretical beliefs, but is shaped by socialization. How we experience and name reality therefore depends on the norms and values that apply in society.

Social constructivism was also combined with a strong critical perspective from the perspective of conflict sociology and the work of authors such as Michel Foucault (1982). Foucault talks about post-structural power, which is shaped by dominating discourses in the social and societal domain. Dominating discourses define boundaries between what is "normal" and desired and what is "not-normal" (e.g. white/black, Muslim/non-believer, hetero/gay or sick/healthy). Certain distinctions to which a society gives importance would not be natural distinctions, but social constructions which, additionally, favoured certain inequalities of power. Demonstrating that something is a social construct is therefore often seen as a political phenomenon that would perpetuate inequality and injustice.


This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication reflects the views only of the author(s), and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.
The use of language and symbols play an important role in this view. Narratives create ‘symbolic universes’ (similar to Harari’s imagined realities), a set of beliefs that aim at making an institutionalized structure (‘men don’t cry’) or different type of discourse (a dominant narrative – ‘all Muslims are terrorists’) plausible and acceptable for the individual—who might otherwise not understand or agree with the underlying logic of the institution or ideology. As an ideological system, these social discourses/dominant narratives “put everything in its ‘proper’ place”. It provides explanations - sometimes reassuring, sometimes agitating, sometimes agonizing - for why we do things and why we think the way we do.

Like the data we mentioned in the previous chapter, we also structure (or connect) stories (or mere events) into a narrative that ‘makes sense’ and gives meaning to us. This can be one of our personal ‘life narratives’, in the figure above the impeding ‘I am clumsy (that’s why I always get fired)’, supported by stories of clumsiness. It can be an ideological narrative (‘Muslims are…’) supported by terrorist attack stories. It can be a general narrative about a particular group (‘Bankers are…’) that again and again show themselves as greedy vultures. These narratives can be so dominant that we fail to see the better alternatives, other possible and more promising (life) narratives. And we tend overlook the fact that we have other talents as well, which could be used in another profession; that most Muslims are peaceful and hospitable; and that there are a more integer bankers than the greedy few.

Figure 11: Dominant narrative/discourse (after Frühmann et al. (2016, p. 57)

3.5. THE DARK SIDE – THE ‘OTHER’ NARRATIVES

The sociologist and the literary scientist Theodor Adorno’s claims that after postmodernism “the great stories are dead”. Adorno saw the postmodern world as fragmented, and therefore believed that the great tales of the world, the nation, and the genealogy and truths contained therein were no longer valid or viable. Instead, the postmodern world is composed of, or rather divided into many small stories that we can put together or pick apart that we want and feel. We live in a time, as mentioned earlier, where there is a combat between who has the right to and is able to tell which stories.

Within this framework, we have to consider that in our cognitions there is dualism: every ‘up’ has a ‘down’, where there is light there is dark. Stories also have a dark side, and thus also destructive traits like hate, envy, discrimination, stigmatization, domination, manipulation etc. And stories are used for the purpose of creating distances between opinions. Current beliefs are that these are the
more powerful, ‘attractive’ stories (some media seem to savour them, again (remember: “Hell is story-friendly”), but also disruptive and destabilizing.

3.5.1. STORIES AND CONFLICT
Whether we look at the folk story model and the Hero’s Journey, in the most universal story models there is always a moment of crisis, an often surprising realization of a disturbance in the balance, a moment of asymmetry. It makes us insecure, scared, insecure or angry. It is almost always brought about by external forces (ourselves), and sometimes a feeling of asymmetry or imbalance is generated by others who have an interest in us being insecure, afraid or angry. And that we stay that way, because that is in their interest. Sometimes it’s our own fault, and even then we are not able to solve it ourselves or make ‘it’ stop. Taking action for change often turns out to be difficult and needs courage. “Courage is the spiritual muscle that, at the moment it is activated, can stimulate the imagination of the other, leading to making one’s own choice.”

That moment, the turning point, can be crippling. It can also be the moment when we accuse others of having brought us there. It can also be the moment when we are told that it is not our fault, but that of ‘someone else’. We can remain passive and sulking in our pit, but it can also be a moment when we ask for help. For all we know, it can also be a moment when all hell breaks loose and violence is used. In both cases, decisive actions are taken to change the conflict that has arisen, in order to arrive at a desired situation - symmetry or equilibrium. This can be done in a peaceful, reasonable way, but on a larger scale (when apparently a lot is at stake) it results in an even larger crisis (and asymmetry) that is bad for all parties. And then, a ’morale’ or learning moment is more than once doomed.

3.5.2. DOMINANT NARRATIVES
Thus, these stories, and some of them are outright hate stories - and narratives that come from them - simplify, categorise and freeze individuals or groups as the story affects the perception of what is possible and impossible, and important and unimportant. And it limits the ability to see new opportunities. In order to conform to certain behaviors within an environment, we learn to behave in certain ways or are educated/trained towards some (e.g. social class) behaviors or not showing other behaviors. Dominant narratives can shape us, and we tend to believe that the shape is permanent; and then we think it’s impossible to change. If these narratives become too dominant, they marginalise groups within society and can take away their agency completely (“He who is born for a dime, will never become a quarter”).

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10 Barel (2020, p. 52)
11 Dutch proverb
CHAPTER 4 – CONFLICT, POLARISATION, RECONCILIATION, AND TRANSFORMATION

Conflict is not limited to the human species. It already occurs when it comes to rank and order in packs and groups, power relationships, mating rights, food distribution, territorial rights, and so on (De Waal, 2009, 2019). Conflicts often have many and complex histories. Sometimes it is no longer clear what the cause was, and why the cause no longer matters. Conflict mostly arises unintentionally, as opposed to provocation (e.g. a barfight to release aggression).

Polarisation, unlike conflict, is intentional in wanting to enhance (or even create) friction and as such much more planned by the (human) rational brain. When (economic and personal) gain is at stake, polarisation and all the narratives and stories connected to it kick in to widen and sustain a conflict. Everything becomes emotionally charged: experiences, activities and relationships. Once polarisation is in motion, it’s like a sea tanker, and once it has momentum, it will take a long time and distance to slow it down to a stop.

This chapter tries to clarify the drivers and dynamics of both phenomena. It will also explain the motivations of actors within the playing field. In its appearance, it surprisingly corresponds to the structures of narratives and stories. The content of this chapter is based on the knowledge of expert practitioners who have studied conflict and actively practiced conflict and polarisation resolutions for many years. It will appear that conflict and polarisation needs to be handled much more carefully than many governments, conflict managers and many groups of aid workers think.

Imagined realities play a dominant role in daily life – religions, the capitalistic economic system, and much more. However, it would not have lasted a single day if the majority (e.g. believers, bankers, entrepreneurs etc.) failed to believe in them. It needs a conscious effort to sustain them, and it makes them unstable and manipulable.

Myths (e.g. religion, a brand) can leap out of the imagination and take shape (e.g. a cathedral, a car), but they can also take shape in private space, privacy, individualism, and borders (the metaphorical door to shut out others).

Imagined realities can also shape part of our desires. Present-day desires are shaped by romantic, ethnic, nationalist, capitalist and humanist myths. For example, consumerist myths (e.g. diet coke), romantic myths (the ‘good old’ times), ethnic myths (the superior ‘boreal race’), capitalist myths (social Darwinism), or humanist myths (Christianity).

And here we are moving towards the possible onsets of conflict.

Imagined reality goes beyond a subjective reality – meaning that something exists depending on the consciousness and beliefs of a single individual. It ceases or changes if that particular individual changes his beliefs (e.g. the ‘imaginary friend’ of childhood disappears, it’s not ‘really’ Santa Claus bringing presents).

Imagined reality is rather an inter-subjective reality, existing in the shared imagination of thousands and millions. If a single individual changes his mind or dies, it’s of little importance. If many die, the phenomenon (narrative, conflict, religion, organisation) will mutate or disappear.
There is almost no way out of the imagined reality (Harari, 2016). An example could be rigid (social) discourses and narratives where self-fulfilment lurks. A vicious (and conflict generating) circle that emerges would be that by the occurrence of a historical event (e.g. discovery of a continent) the ‘whites’ start to control ‘blacks’, draft discriminatory laws, which lead to poverty and lack of education among the ‘others’, which leads to cultural / ethnic prejudices, which lead to more discriminatory laws, more poverty, and so on. Fuel for polarisation and conflict. And yet, there may be a way out.

Brandsma (2016) calls conflict ‘the little brother of Polarisation’, by which he does not mean that conflict is a lesser phenomenon, on the contrary, it is - as other authors will also make clear - a biological and behavioural phenomenon, strongly related to our evolution as a social species.

Polarisation interacts with conflict. Brandsma (ibid.) explains that, in addition to those directly involved in a conflict, there is often an audience watching. And if there is no audience, the conflict players will ensure that they have supporters. Imagine a brawl in the schoolyard: first, you are attracted to the spectacle, but soon you (will have to) choose for one of the supporter groups. The relevance who started the brawl disappears into the background. Polarisation is the ultimate ‘we-them’ thinking, and the human amplification of the climax of a conflict.

4.1. CONFLICT

The first question to you as a human would be: “What does ‘conflict’ mean to you?”

Every one of us will recognize situations where we had some level of direct personal experience with ‘conflict’. Maybe you would like to reflect for some minutes.

We humans have taken conflict to many levels and manifestations: from marital quarrel to disagreement, fist fighting, stabbing, murder, trial, war, and genocide. In addition, we can also focus on various philosophical and religious traditions that have conflict as a theme: acceptance of conflict and pain are essential parts of life in Christianity, in Islam conflict is (also) the inner struggle (jihad) that one engages with in order to find the way to peace in the fight with evil. Conflict can be a (spiritual or otherwise) condition for achieving growth. In the end success, redemption, harmony or balance is promised (Brandsma, ibid.).

In psychology conflict is also the area of crises: in personal development, the periods of changes, the periods of ‘not knowing for sure’, lack of direction, moments of feeling powerless. Then, we are offered rites of passage that help us go through the changes.

There are numerous conflict areas: at home, in schools, at work, in politics, football stadiums, on a local, regional, national and even global scale.

4.1.1. CONFLICT AND CHANGE

In the light of the above, it shows that conflict is difficult to define: it is a continuum that stretches from inner conflicts to outright war. It also will have a cultural context: what we experience as a conflict may differ, dependent on our upbringing at home and the society we live in and its values, norms and discourses (Craig & Van der Sar, 2019). The mistake of addressing issues of cultural values as though they were issues of rational explanation and objectivity involves, in a fundamental sense, the oppression of value meaning. It is an unjustifiable discounting of those personal identities and preferences that underlie the way (cultural) groups live their lives (Nordby, 2008).

There is one thing we can be sure of: certain kinds of are the sparks that can ignite conflict, and the more radical the change the more intense the conflict.
Conflict responses
By now we know that we are not always the architect of our decisions, our emotional reactions play a part in that. Craig & Van der Sar (2019) point at even older mechanisms in our brain: our reptilian brain. If a sudden change in our environment happens, our sub-conscious system – in this case the amygdala - kicks into action. It is an autonomic response: confronted with a deadly danger we immediately switch on one of the three possible (survival) responses: fight, flight or freeze.

We are primed for the possibility of conflict (Craig & Van der Sar, 2016). Adrenaline is pumped through our body, our senses are in overdrive. Imagine walking through a dark alley at night and hearing footsteps behind you, your first speech in front of an audience. What’s your autonomic response to that?
On the other hand, if it’s false alarm, and if it occurs again and again (The boy who cried ‘Wolf!’), the repetition might lead to stress or otherwise to denial and/or carelessness and thus sometimes to extinction. Precaution as a survival strategy is preferable to denial, or becoming blind or deaf to habitual patterns.

Social dynamics and conflict
Next to the ‘nature’ component, our specific social and cultural context (‘nurture’) shapes and determines how our perception of ourselves and others becomes formed.
As we have mentioned, our common narratives are the glue that generates and sustains bonds between individuals and in groups. When we are able to do this in sufficient numbers, it may give us a competitive edge towards others (Craig & van der Sar, 2019). The authors add that “...whenever the pressure to survive (as an individual or as a group) increases, the greater the pressure on the system (individual or group) will build. At those moments, conflict and conflict narratives will emerge.”

4.1.2. CONFLICT AND CULTURAL CONTEXT
Cultures are formed as an outcome of historical processes that have shaped values and norms. We learn and adapt to our places in the social world. We develop identities with roles and responsibilities. Practices, values and norms blend together and become (culture/social) narratives and discourses – supported by exemplary stories to give meaning to the group and the society we live in. Over time these narratives can become a subconscious set of beliefs (taken for granted), which determine our actions and attitude within our group and towards ‘others’. They become habitual patterns that can hold back change because the narratives (and our cultural identity) are threatened by it.
CULTURAL DIMENSIONS
Craig & Van der Sar (2019) offer three inter-connected and interdependent dimensions that evolve into systems in cultural structures. Depending on the nature of a culture (bureaucratic, autocratic, laissez-faire, etc.) the relative balance of these three elements will correspondingly vary.

Formal culture
It is characterized by language, beliefs, art, food, rules, laws of society, church, organizational contracts and agreements and such. The whole lot of formal stories and practices state ‘What you are supposed to do.’ In very closed societies, these rules may become rigid and suppressing.

Informal culture
If the culture is less rigid, a more open or liberal society, informal culture represents the day-to-day ways in which the formal structures are interpreted and negotiated by individual members or groups. A simple example can be ‘violating’ the speed limit under certain circumstances. ‘Informal flexibility’ can alleviate complexity, in society and also in organisations. It allows for more space for creativity and improvisation.

Tacit culture
In more rigid cultures the possibility of a (hidden) tacit culture will occur, an unspoken set of non-negotiated rules. These hidden patterns can become informally accepted and implemented. Imagine a new employee being informed that “this is the way we actually do things here.” Sometimes newcomers will pick up these tacit rules by simply observing (e.g. patterns, stories). Craig & Van der Sar (2019) explain that tacit culture becomes embedded into cultures through a process of informal collective approval or disapproval. They show this by example of the Northern Irish conflicts (The Troubles) when tacit culture was “Whatever you say; say nothing” (about politics, religion or history). They also conclude that the tacit culture is the hardest to locate and become acknowledged. It is the zone of resistance to any change.

Craig & Van der Sar (2019): “It is possible to change a culture, but to do so we need to pay attention to all three of these elements. It requires sustained energy, perseverance, resources, patience, and above all, time.” We have to realise that it’s a long shot.

4.1.3. CONFLICT STYLES

4.1.3.1. Individual and intra-personal conflict
We already pointed at individual conflicts when it came to emotions and feelings. We are our worst critic at times, sometimes we struggle with issues within ourselves. In stressed relationships, tensions can build up and will escalate to a point where they will seek a release. The outcome: frustration, anger, emotional or physical hurt. In this one-to-one conflict the partners determine how far the conflict can escalate.

4.1.3.2. Group conflict
However, we do not keep conflict contained (Craig & Van der Sar, 2019; De Waal, 2019). A common response is to seek allies who - in human contexts - will share the same conclusions and/or versions about or towards the other party. What had started as two opponents - social, ethnic, political - grows as others choose or are pressurized to take sides, which will become the ‘joiners’ (Brandsma, 2016) in polarised situations. Sometimes ‘winning’ for the group becomes dominant, the initial reasons become blurred or are lost completely, and sometimes opponents scoop up old stories (which have nothing or little to do with the original conflict) to support ‘the cause’.
4.1.4. RESPONDING STYLES

When in a conflict or drawn to or into a conflict, humans have developed different modes or styles of responding to conflict situations. In this context, response is not referred to (automatic) response, but referring to choosing to respond. Craig & Van der Sar (2019) present different styles, but stress that neither of them are inherently right or wrong. “We often find ourselves moving between styles when navigating through a conflict.” It is paramount to be aware of that when offering facilitation.

9.1.4.1. Avoider

Chooses not to deal with the conflict, steps aside.
Advantage: if the conflict is hot, it’s safer. If it is uninteresting, not worth engaging.
Disadvantage: Avoided on regular basis, needs may not be met, no change will happen.
Cost: High cost when conflict is not resolved. Resentment and bitterness may grow.

9.1.4.2. Accommodator

Choosing to deal with conflict by meeting needs of the other party to ensure maintenance of relationship.
Advantage: When the relationship is more important than the conflict. Accommodator can be useful to move a conflict forward.
Disadvantage: Will inevitably try to smooth out problems, loose opportunity to resolve issue.
Cost: Sacrificing own needs for needs of other party, can result in just short term peace.

9.1.4.3. Compromiser

Have some of his/their issues met and give ground to some issues of other party.
Advantage: Will win some part of the settlement in conflict.
Disadvantage: May also lose some in the settlement. Therefore, in the long-term danger of conflict re-occurring.
Cost: Sacrificing some own interests for a short-term goal. Risking relationship and resolution.

9.1.4.4. Controller

Choosing to deal with conflict by going all out to win all their needs without concern for other party’s needs.
Advantage: Winning is paramount. In terms of a justice issue or principles, a clear approach to stand by your values.
Disadvantage: Going for the win at all costs. What others think of him/her/them does not matter.
Cost: Whatever resolution, the relationship may be severely damaged.

9.1.4.5. Empathetic Problem Solver
Ensuring that both parties’ needs are given equitable attention. They seek to engage a real sense of what the other party’s needs are and feel it as an explicit concern in finding a way forward.

**Advantage:** Work through issues and pay attention to relationships. In the long term, a resolution may hold.

**Disadvantage:** Not useful in an emergency (e.g., an argument what exit to use in a burning building).

**Cost:** Time-consuming.

## 4.2. MORE ASPECTS OF CHANGE

We are a mix of ‘nature’ and ‘nurture’, and each individual is a unique fabric with a unique narrative, which may evolve and change as we move forward in our life. Our identity and our life narrative is neither static and always ‘real’. And it also shows our capacity or flexibility and (adapting to) change. “Biological evolution may move slowly, cultural evolution may speed up or slow down depending on the social context and the environment we find ourselves in” (Craig & Van der Sar, 2019).

### 4.2.1. MEMETIC LANDSCAPES

A *meme* is a cultural construct that provides its host with a template of meaning through which to interpret and predict the world. A meme is also a *replicant*, intentionally passed on by its host to other potential host brains with as much fidelity as possible. Memes (as genes / species) also evolve over time to maintain their ‘fitness’, or they’ll go extinct.

Memes can give insight as to how and why a culture, belief system and also conflicts can become very resistant to change. The term ‘meme’ was introduced by Richard Dawkins (1965). He investigated how human cultures evolve and develop. He explored the idea of cultural memes as similar to but not the same as genes.

We are aware that ‘meme’ has become a buzz word in social media nowadays. Many (short-lived) hypes in the (social) media are called ‘memes’, but when we look into the description below, we must conclude that they do not always deserve that classification.

Over time *memetic systems* develop their own immune systems. To survive they need to continue to replicate, among other things through *(memetic) narratives*. Craig & Van der Sar (2019) suggest that if there is no change in the *memetic (cultural) landscape*, then there will be no change of someone’s behaviour. If this relates to a particular *conflict*, then we can expect it to continue replicating itself, and by that maintaining the conflict.

“There is no essential misunderstanding between the Palestinian Arab and the Israeli Jew. In essence, there is no religious conflict: the Palestinians want the land they call Palestine. They have very strong historical reasons to want it.

The Israeli Jews want exactly the same land for exactly the same historical reasons, which provides for a perfect understanding between the parties. At the same time, this is where they (and their current cultures) collide with each other, which causes a terrible tragedy.”

*Amos Oz* (2012)

### 4.2.2. MIMETIC DESIRES AND MEMETIC NARRATIVES

The intention within any cultural set-up is to create a container for our capacity for personal competitiveness (rivalry). But it also carries the explicit function for how we learn to belong together and cooperate for the collective good. We are not simply a product of our biological needs, but we are also shaped by our cultural narratives, which shape what Girard\(^\text{12}\) calls our ‘mimetic desires’.

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4.2.2.1. Mimetic desire
In an apparent contrast to experiences of asymmetry, conflicts can also arise through similarity. In this vision, we get a conflict because we all want the same thing, and in this we resemble the other. We strive for the same thing, and precisely because there is a certain degree of (material or immaterial) scarcity, we collide with each other. Think of income, territory, social status, recognition, love, etc..

![Figure 14: Mimetic desire (after Brandsma, 2016, p. 64)](image-url)

There are different authors (Craig and Van der Sar, 2019; Brandsma, 2019) who are inspired in their work by the ideas of René Girard (1923-2015). He shows us what drives our social (mimetic) desires, and how this ignites competitive instincts, rivalry and potentially violent conflict.

We learn to desire through our relationship to what others also find desirable. Brandsma (2019) gives a striking example: two toddlers in a playroom where a big red tractor but also a blue one are available, as well as a block tower and other toys. Now, if one child wants the red tractor and grabs it fast, what does the other child want? The red tractor. The desire of the second is mediated by the first. When the boys are grown up, they want the same nice leased car as the neighbour. We don’t have an original desire, we want what seems desirable. We derive our desire from the other, says Girard’s model, our desire is not original. All desires may therefore be understood as being socially formed (Craig & van der Sar, 2019).

The interesting conclusion is then that ‘the other’ in our desire is our model, but also the obstacle. We have conflicts, says Girard, because we want the same thing. It is not the difference in identity that is the split, but the other as a model. We both want the same opportunities to study, the same social appreciation, the same land to live on.

Girard himself distinguishes needs from desires. Water, food and shelter are intrinsic needs. However, there is no hard boundary between need and desire (Craig & Van der Sar, 2019). Take water: if someone has water and you are thirsty you have both a need and a desire. Mimetically, you also desire the other’s water. The harder question may be: “What are you prepared to do to get it?”

As, according to Girard, most conflict emerges as an outcome of our mimetic desires, it results in our collective rivalry to gain access to our objects of desire. In a social world that would also mean that we need to secure allies. This process may also shape who we view as ‘in’ and who we view as ‘out’. The ‘out’-group enables us to justify our rivalry (e.g. by bringing up or inventing plausible stories) and eventually validate potential use of violence.

4.2.2.2. Memetic narratives
And what are the main drivers (the memetic narratives) of our mimetic desires? Craig & Van der Sar (2019) offer us components that we should not see as separate or distinct; each of them influences and draws influence and meaning of the others:
Acceptance/Alienation
Both words are important when we look at the me-you and we-them dichotomy. It is about inclusion and exclusion, it is also about identity, about the process of building and rebuilding our (individual and group) world. We are also aware that everyone who is not ‘me’ is a ‘you’, there is no ‘me’ without ‘us’, there is no ‘us’ without ‘them’. We are part of this social construct (and contract). When we experience acceptance, we will feel a deep sense of belonging. On the other side, we feel alienation, that is where the ‘others’ live. The boarder between these two is necessary for giving sense to personal or social identities. It does not necessarily mean that conflict is built merely on this assumption. Conflicts appear when the preferences of ‘me’ and ‘the other are not aligned. Deeper cultural conflicts may be embedded in narratives of who we are and who we are not, who belongs and who doesn’t belong.

Freedom
The freedom to decide, to have and own, to choose, to stay or go wherever you wish. These ‘freedoms’ become the characteristics of success. The mimetic drive is to sustain these gains and if possible build on them. But we can become saturated like addicts, and then might desire more of ‘freedom’ to satisfy our needs. On the other side, when something is scarce but has status (identity) to offer, it becomes very desirable. Once acquired, you’re faced with the paradox of the more you have, the more you have to protect, the more afraid you are to lose it when it becomes threatened or endangered.

Economics
In this context, it is about the control of resources, and often ‘money’ is involved. Money may be one of the strongest memes and/or a mimetic desire. It belongs to the imagined reality. It only carries value because we have agreed that it has value. The greater the control one has over the access to resources, the better it is for the safety and security for the group, the greater the power is over those around them.

Rivalry, and the scapegoat mechanism
Conquering our place in the world goes with defending that place and the fear to be defeated. Craig & Van der Sar (2019) suggest that the expression ‘You can be anything you want to be in this world’ is a proposition that opens an endless capacity for rivalry, but is surely also a myth, if not an outright self-deception. You can imagine anything, but making it a reality may be impossible.

The pressure to compete has led to the evolution of the scapegoat mechanism (Craig & Van der Sar, 2019). The scapegoat is the person (originally an animal) that we can blame for everything that went wrong for us or might go wrong for us. It is sacrifice to angry gods (or to satisfy our anger). However, Craig & Van der Sar (ibid.) subtly point out, the scapegoat mechanism does not require that the person is actually guilty, but it does require that something or someone is chosen to be blamed. The act of choosing is enough to release stress during competition or conflict and polarisation. It also provides a level of solidarity and a relief (‘it’s not me’). And most of us will have to admit that there were moments in our lives when we did not act to stop someone being scapegoated. It illustrates the power of it. It is an appeasing anxiety and allows a release from responsibility.

Scarcity and Survival
Yuval Harari (2016) suggested in his writings that human existence has been shaped by four existential realities: famine, pestilence, war and death. In addition, the (evolutionary) history of mankind has developed in us a strong desire to survive and a deep fear of scarcity.
An example, given by Craig & Van der Sar (2019, p. 36): Imagine a food truck entering a village where famine has struck. The promise of food triggers both the fight and fright mode. You want to get access to the food for your family, at the same time you might be frightened of violence when competing. The drive to survive can overwrite any normal sense of social order, let alone compassion with fellow villagers.

All the above-mentioned components come together in this situation: how much are we willing to do (rivalry) to get our food (new energy resource; economy) for our family (acceptance/alienation) so they can survive (freedom). The same process goes for applying for a job: you know that of all the applicants for a certain function only one will be chosen, ‘the happy one’.
4.3. THE CONFLICT MAPPED

Before we move to Brandsma’s (2016) analysis of polarisation, we would like to investigate two conflict model concepts. We will first give an overview of Glasl’s escalation model and then move to more recent extended models, offered by Craig & Van der Sar (2019) and Brandsma (2016). All models are based on research and professional practice in ‘real life’ social and cultural contexts: in organisations, communities, regions, and nations.

The models will also explain the phases conflicts go through, the actors that play a role, and – for a part – will already suggest when and how to intervene or facilitate. These are important clues when it comes to choosing applied storytelling activities, narrative approaches and counselling towards specific actors and groups. The most appropriate ones will be introduced in the next chapter.

4.3.1. GLASL’S MODEL OF CONFLICT ESCALATION

Economist and conflict researcher Friedrich Glasl (1980) represents conflict escalation in a nine-stage model. This model can be used to analyse all kinds of conflicts: divorces, conflicts between colleagues or students, but also conflicts between organisations, or nations. It does not show a higher and higher rising escalation, but a ladder downwards into an abyss of more and more primitive forms of behaviour, ending in (potentially) uncontrollable menace.

Towards the first main level, both parties can still win because it still ensures a cooperative solution on the factual level. Respecting the second main level means that one is still guided by moral-ethical scruples — but it will turn to one party being the winner. In the third main threshold phase, both parties lose.

The different stages can be described as follows:

**First Level (Win - Win) – “Everything is still possible”**

**Stage 1 – Tension**

Conflicts start with tensions, e.g. occasional clashes of opinions. It is commonplace and is not perceived as the beginning of a conflict. If a conflict does arise, opinions become more fundamental. The conflict could have deeper causes.

**Stage 2 – Debate and emerging polarisation**

From here on, the conflict partners consider strategies to convince the other of their arguments. Differences of opinion lead to a dispute. One wants to put pressure on the other. Black and white thinking develops.

**Stage 3 – Actions instead of words**

The conflict partners increase the pressure on each other to assert themselves or their own opinion.

Figure 15: After Glasl (1980, p. 237)
Conversations can be broken off. Verbal communication no longer takes place and the conflict intensifies more quickly. Compassion for the “other” is lost.

**Second Level (Win - Lose) - From here on winners and losers**

**Stage 4 – Alliances, image damaging**
The conflict is aggravated by seeking sympathizers and allies for his cause. Since one believes oneself right, one can denounce the opponent or competitor. It is no longer about the cause, but about winning the conflict so that the counterparty loses.

**Stage 5 - Loss of face**
The opponent is to be destroyed in his identity by all possible insinuations. Here the loss of trust is complete. To lose your face means loss of moral credibility.

**Stage 6 - Threat strategies**
With threats, the conflict parties try to control the situation totally. They will have to illustrate their power. Threats can become demands (“you will have to pay...”), which become amplified sanctions (“otherwise I will...”) and are underpinned by a potential for retaliation (“...and I can...”). Here, the proportions decide on the credibility of the threat.

**Third Level (Lose – Lose) - From here on only losers**

**Stage 7 - Limited destruction(s)**
Here the opponent is to be sensitively harmed with all tricks. The “other” is no longer perceived as human. From here on, a limited damage to oneself is already considered a gain, should the other’s damage be greater.

**Stage 8 – Fragmentation**
The opponent’s support system is to be destroyed with destructive actions.

**Stage 9 - Together into the abyss**
From here on, you calculate even your own destruction in order to defeat your enemy.

The model describes how two conflict parties behave and act. The descriptions of the stages probably evoke personal observations, personal analyses by the media of the current context, or personal memories you might have of past events or incidents, or visions (maybe nightmares) you might have of the future.

The model also already incorporates aspects of polarisation in different stages.

At first glance, solutions for reconciliation, transformation and change are not offered in this model. In the case of conflicts, it does not seem possible for either conflict party to leave the situation - e.g. an aggressive act on the territory of a state, separation of a child from the other parent, withdrawal of civil rights by a state, mass dismissals to improve shareholder value, etc..

It could also be that one party chooses deliberately for conflict escalation as a strategic moment.

Yet, there are opportunities, and Glasl (1980) suggests the following intervention and facilitation strategies for de-escalation to the various stages of escalation:

- Stages 1-3: Moderation
- Stages 3-5: Process support
- Stages 4-6: socio-therapeutic process support
- Stages 5-7: Advocacy / (Inter)mediation
- Stages 6-8: Arbitration / court action
- Stages 7-9: Power intervention

These interventions move from sensible to severe, and Glasl is not alone in advocating such a build-up of de-escalation resources. Based on their experiences, Craig & Van der Sar (2019), Brandsma (2016), and also Rosenberg (2015) have elaborated de-escalation further towards reconciliation,
change and transformation in their conflict, polarisation nonviolent communication models, which we will present in more detail in the next chapter (narrative approaches).

4.3.2. THE CONFLICT/POLARISATION ICEBERG – ‘THE MAP IS NOT THE TERRITORY’

The model represents a combined model of Craig & van der Sar’s (2019) and Brandsma’s (2016) ideas of conflict, polarisation and resolution, restauration and reconciliation. As much as model of an emotional landscape suggests a linear progression, it also illustrates the limitation of a two-dimensional projection. Conflicts and polarisation actually progress in a non-linear and complex way:

Figure 16: Conflict and Polarisation (after Craig & Van der Sar, 2019, p. 42, and Brandsma, 2016, p. 59)

This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication reflects the views only of the author(s), and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.
the surface and sub-surface direct and indirect actors are not distributed in a linear way, they may also be distributed (3-dimensionally) to either side of the meandering path the conflict takes.

However, in reality many conflicts never actually progress beyond formation and intensification, otherwise mankind “would be locked in a cycle of perpetual warfare” (Craig & Van der Sar, 2019). Sorting conflicts out in the early stages is in the interest of both parties. The authors also suggest that the model can be seen at a macro- as well as at a micro level: there also maybe smaller and much bigger hidden icebergs.

**The narrative perspective**

The iceberg model resembles the structure of folk tales and the Hero’s Journey. As in the Hero’s Journey, the actors in conflicts and polarisation often embark on a journey through the unknown. Some are facing a major conflict for the first time. Conflicts have an episodic (and sometimes repetitive) character, actors in them may also have their personal conflicts and objectives, which are based on personal experiences (and stories) themselves. These can either contribute and/or affect the maintenance or (re-)ignition of the ‘bigger’ conflict (and polarisation) as much as they can contribute to the resolution and reconciliation.

Craig & van der Sar (2019) refer to those involved in conflicts as *direct* and *indirect* actors:

**Direct actors**
The iceberg metaphor shows them as ‘above the surface’. You will probably understand from your personal experience that those involved in an intensifying conflict will be sharing their concerns, frustrations, fears and anger with others in their immediate social networks and try to make them allies. We will try to engage these direct actors to support our perspective and ‘reason’ behind the conflict.

**Indirect actors**

In a more indirect way, we may also use the (social) media as a tool for support. This is the moment where - depicted below the surface - indirect actors (whom we don’t know personally) are drawn into the ‘story of the conflict’. They will build up their own vicarious engagement with the conflict and its impact. ‘Vicarious’ meaning “an indirect experience gained through observing, listening to or reading about a situation that we are not directly involved in” (Craig & Van der Sar, 2019).

Indirect actors will begin to react physically and mentally as if they were having the direct experience themselves. They will start to feel as if they had become part of the conflict, and the conflict will become part of their (personal) story. Sometimes this can kick in immediately (reacting ‘from the gut’ – e.g. hate reactions in social media), sometimes it needs time to trickle in (“I don’t like him, but here he has a point…”). When this happens, individuals (and groups) can become the ‘joiner(s)’ in polarisation building (Brandsma, 2016).

**Timelines**

Craig & Vander Sar (*ibid.*) also point at the complexity of timelines. Sometimes the conflict is ignited by something that develops under the surface (e.g. increasing annoyance towards someone or something). On the other hand, solutions reached on the surface may only slowly trickle into the conscience of those under the surface where hidden narratives can develop or can smoulder to flare up again at unexpected moments, leading to violent (new) conflicts – the ‘Balkan Effect’, as explained further on.
4.3.3. THE CONFLICT PHASES

4.3.3.1. The Prevention Phase

It often starts with too much of something or too little of something. It can be ‘just’ inter-personal (imagine a repetitive irritation about a minor issue), but it can extend to inter-group and inter-cultural dimensions. The typical dynamic of conflicting emotions can pull us in different directions.

Formation or Preparation

Depending on the conflict styles we sketched the participants can either deal with the situation that has arisen, or not. If not, the voltage will increase and there will be no immediate resolve. Conflict reduction can already take place at this ‘front end’, when a situation is still relatively calm and tensions only surface from time to time. Those involved in this situation, haven’t dug themselves into their own trench yet. Storytelling and story exchange lends itself well to preventing conflicts from intensifying, by bringing people into contact with each other, making them listen to each other and understanding each other’s stories (Barel, 2020).

Intensification

Now the conflict starts to develop an emotional history - it’s the last straw that breaks the camel’s back - and we’re in the fight-flight-freeze mode. We react physically (adrenaline rush, heart rate, scream) and mentally. The speed of this will depend on memories of conflicts we have experienced in our lives (De Waal, 2019). It will also depend of what (or how much) we have learned when it comes to reading cues and anticipating the other’s behavior (Boyd, 2009).

If there is no release, mind and body might give in; we either go into ‘fight’ or try ‘flight’. ‘Freeze’ happens when we cannot decide or want to ‘hide’: we shut down, and this can become a dominant response when someone has experienced trauma in the past (Craig & Van der Sar, 2019).

Escalation

It can rise to a level when the reptilian brain overrules the ‘rational’ brain (the neo-cortex): it’s about our survival and we have to act. If there is too much at stake, we can still leave the situation, but mostly parties choose the ‘fight’. Both will (have to) commit to a win-lose strategy. Anger will be the dominant emotion. This can result in (sudden) extreme violence, and for some it will seem unintended (“I lost it…”). It’s still a choice we make (De Waal, 2019) and will not help as an excuse, but we also have to understand the power and impact of this phase (Craig & Van der Sar, 2019).

4.3.3.2. The Intervention Phase

The intervention phase is the most critical one. From here, the conflict can ‘freeze’ to polarisation. The authors distinguish maintenance and recovery and/or reduction.

Maintenance

Although this win-lose situation may be seen as a phase of intervention to reduce harm or limit damage, the authors (Craig & Van der Sar, 2019; Brandsma, 2016) warn us to be aware of naivety. Stepping into a conflict at this stage could be counterproductive and potentially dangerous. It could lead to firing up the conflict or to furious scapegoating of the facilitators or mediators, with personal risks at stake.

(Future) practitioners will have to assess contexts / situations / phases very carefully. One will have to be aware of the important traits of an intervening party in the midst of conflict: credibility, confidence and personal (social) skills and competences. Other priorities would be to assess potential (human) resources to minimize risk: to ask for support from people close to the parties (e.g. parents, teachers, friends), or officials (e.g. police, army).
The height of the maintenance phase is still nourished by emotion. There will be no possibility of rapprochement in this phase yet. In the heat of the conflict, both parties invest in contrast. And that will last as long as they feel they have an interest in it. Both parties want to win, also the cost for retreat (social and/or personal) may seem too high. When both parties lack frequent support or resources to ‘defeat’ the other, the conflict will recycle itself (Craig & Van der Sar, 2019). It will wave back and forth. Northern Ireland was (during The Troubles) and Israel and Palestine still are locked in this phase for a long time.

**Recovery / reduction**

However, there is a limit to the length of the maintenance phase - sometimes it’s days, sometimes it can take years when we think of (territorial, religious, economic) wars. But there will be a moment when there is a lack of energy, when fatigue sets in. It is the moment that Craig & Van der Sar (2019) call the *recovery phase*. This can be followed (and again, this might take years) by a *reduction phase*, the moment when the insight can ripen that maintaining a conflict costs more than it delivers. The energy and emotional demands on individuals and social systems run out of fuel.

This is the moment to be alert of because it creates an opportunity for reassessment of how facilitators and/or mediators can re-engage (with) the parties. The conflict may still be around in the background and can reappear, but at least the parties can be invited to the table. Brandsma (2016) calls this the *approach phase*: there is always a risk present (think of the indirect, vicarious actors), but it can also lead to a recognition phase where people can also listen to themselves and others. What actually was the true ‘cause’? Could we accept it and put it behind us?

A research with among Palestinian and Israeli students by Bar-On and Kassem (2004) illustrates that intra-group story collecting and analysing can deliver material to share with the other group before moving into inter-group conversations and story-sharing and joint analysing. The case is presented in the Appendix.

### 4.3.3.3. The Resolution Phase

As already pointed out, the path of the conflict is not linear and two dimensional, and neither is the path to a resolution. The model also shows too many factors and actors to simply move from the initial state to a desired state. The speed of the steps may vary, and it’s not the parties in the conflict alone we have to be aware of (Craig & Van der Sar, 2019). We’ll have to take that into account. In this phase, the key elements are reconnection, the role of the go-between (or inter-mediator), possible resistance to acknowledge alternatives, resilience to change and/or lack of resilience, the danger of reversal, and the fragility of resolution.

**Reconnection**

It will be critical to facilitate the parties to begin rebuilding a tentative connection. Without a relational connection, it will be impossible to face and work with the topics central to their damaged relationship. We should be aware that this can only be the start of a resolution. Both are facing an unknown future: there may be hope and it may look appealing, but it is still uncertain. It can also evoke fear and discomfort. Retreating into old certainties lurks in the background, and these ‘certainties’ can become manipulative tools for the polarising ‘pushers’ from both sides.

**An essential decision in this phase: the go-between**

When a conflict - or an out-of-control dominant narrative - is woven in the cultural, national, political, tribal, social or religious identity fabric, the initial connections, let alone a dialogue, are hard to initiate. At such a moment, Craig & Van der Sar (2019) and Brandsma (2016) agree in suggesting...
that the facilitators act as intermediators and/or go-betweens for the parties. Meaning that they let the parties themselves independently reflect on the conflict, their roles and motivations in it, and their needs and desires (not their demands – this would be win-lose) for a reconnected future. The authors suggest that facilitators will have to present (as go-betweens) the outcomes of one group to the other group, building trust and giving them confidence to move towards each other and forward. If there is an agreement to meet, to exchange thoughts and to reflect on the presented mutual stories, needs and desires, the facilitators will have the task to ensure the right, neutral and safe meeting spaces and places.

*Resistance – Reaction*

As we have pointed out before, conflict can become a part of people’s lives, they can become habituated to it (“It happens every 50 years…”). By then, it has become a part of their cultural narrative and sustains the identity of the community – ‘threatened by the other’. It has become a certainty, it sustains the sense of history and place, and victimhood. But, what if one loses that certainty? We would have to find a way to make them aware of their ‘status quo’ - lingering in the past - and let them explore an alternative narrative.

And how would change feel for those who extract power from the conflict? How would those react who benefit economically (e.g. autocrats, arms industry)? We have to expect active resistance based on their concerns, and the pressure they will exert through intimidation, (social) media propaganda and misinformation, sowing new fear, blaming new scapegoats. There has to be a counter-strategy (and counter story) to prevent this from happening.

*Resilience*

‘Resilience’ is a vast domain. It can be physical resilience when it comes to hauling long distances, which can also afford mental resilience. It can be the ability to become strong and healthy again after something bad has happened, to recover from or adjust easily to misfortune or change. On the other side, there can also be a resilience to change (in the sense of resistance to change), because we know that people rather do not want to change, are adverse to change. However, there are also changes that are welcome, as mentioned earlier (raise in pay, the love of your life, etc.).

Nonetheless, facilitators have to be aware of the downsides. People who have been hurt for a long time and have developed beliefs about themselves and their environment can have trouble realizing that these no longer serve them (Craig & Van der Sar, 2019). The lack of resilience - acceptance of one’s situation - can be a key factor that could compromise mediative processes. Sometimes people accept less favourable outcomes (“Let’s stop bothering each other”) out of fatigue and exhaustion. The danger here is that it only needs one unexpected moment to trigger the old conflict again.

Yet, Craig & Van der Sar (2019) stress that sustaining this fragile relationship can let the parties experience some hospitality towards each other rather than hostility.

*Reversals*

It becomes a challenge when some participants in the process try to sabotage a dawning resolution, for reasons already described in the resistance phase. It’s bad for their business, status, identity, power or authority: for example, paramilitary troops engaging in organized crime, corrupted politicians or business leaders. It can lead to harmful actions or right-out lying within their own communities to frame ‘the others’, to create or fuel polarisation.

An example would be a tweet from a Dutch right-wing politician that stated “that the culprit had a North-African appearance and that’s officially confirmed”. When the police clearly indicated that it
had been an older white man with white curly hair, the politician kept claiming that her tweet was ‘true’.
Similar actions can express the fear that the process is moving beyond their capacity to influence their audience (Craig & Van der Sar, 2019). If the parties in the conflict can (and are enabled to) withstand this sabotage and can maintain their courage to step into the initiated conversation, a new future is feasible. This may also be the right moment to activate the ‘silent’ middle to support the parties’ efforts.

Resolution
Once open to this face-to-face conversation the parties may find a resolution and arrangements (alternative narratives) to end the conflict. By then, the good thing is that the parties have put work and effort in reflection (the ‘go-between’ phase), have had insights and possibly ideas. They might have become eager to move forward.
Despite that, Craig & Van der Sar (2019) warn of thinking of a resolution as a point in time. It may rather require a range of (small) steps. It may involve issues of justice, compensation, return of land, sense of victimhood... These can be sensitive issues that can slow down a basis of agreement. In the aftermath of violent conflicts there is no easy resolution, and if there is no acceptable outcome they may stay dormant and re-emerge, ruining the process.

Relief
If successful, everybody (including the media) will react enthusiastically, this is a moment you want to grant everyone. However, here is a potentially dangerous illusion. The end of the conflict, the agreement, can be seen as the end of the journey, but Craig and van der Sar (2019) state that we have to see it as a waypoint. They advise everyone to take a well-earned break from the conflict and the resolution process. But they also advise to reconvene after that to keep the momentum the process needs. It has to be re-energised, because here also a danger lurks: in that pause some may try to re-romanticize the past.
This relief moment can be relished, but it is no more than the launch of the real transformation.

4.3.3.4. The Transformation Phase
The deeper a conflict the more difficult it is to ‘cut a deal and move on’. For a transformation to reconciliation it is more realistic to recognise that parties need time to re-engage. Levels of trust and compassion, from enmity to mutual respect, need to be restored.
According to Craig & Van der Sar (2019), the only thing a practitioner/facilitator can do here is to support the parties, restoring, rebuilding and healing is the journey the individuals and groups have to do themselves; the transformation can only come from within, after mutual trust and confidence have been built.

Restoration and rebuilding
There has to be a direct experience and real engagement by each party with ‘the other’. This is where an old narrative can begin to change and can adapt. And maybe a new inclusive narrative will come up. Brandsma (2016) recommends looking very closely at all stages of the conflict. In what phase are the direct actors and in which the indirect actors? It could also be that both parties have a different perception of that, due to their indirect actors. So, also at this moment we have to be aware of the attitude of the ‘indirect, vicarious’ actors, they could be lagging behind, or feel abandoned. They are a critical factor and have to be informed and engaged in time, or maybe better, all the time.
Reconciliation
In Craig & Van der Sar (2019) we find the following definition:

“Reconciliation is that transformative moment when one or both of the parties to the conflict feel that those issues and dynamics that drove the conflict, now no longer carry influence on them. They have regained a future, free of the past.” (p. 55)

Common ground, common future. The parties may never be ‘best friends’ from now on, but their commitment to reconciliation helps imagining a positive future.

Reconciliation has not a fixed endpoint, there will be no enduring peace. When we have solved one set of problems, we will inevitably find new ones; conflict is part of our nature. Or, as Brandsma (2016) points out: peace is learning to solve conflicts and becoming more and more competent in resolution and reconciliation.

Even if we say ‘forgive and forget’, forgetting is often a problem.
We do not erase the memory, but decide not to think about it anymore.
Frans De Waal (2019)

4.3.3.5. The Balkan Effect
We also have to be aware that reconciliation is the perceptible effect, while forgetting is an inner experience (De Waal, 2019). So, before we conclude this chapter, we have to stop at the phenomenon that Craig & Van der Sar (2019) coined as the ‘Balkan Effect’, and it comes from their work in Bosnia.

In 2001, they were discussing the upper part of the iceberg with young adult Serbs, Croats and Bosnian Muslims. It was not clear why the war had become so violent. One explanation by a 20-year old was: “You need to understand that we tend to do this about every fifty years around here.” Asked how she had learned this at such a young age, the answer was: “It was actually from my grandparents.” It turned out to be a story that had been told and retold within each of the separate ethnic groups living in Bosnia. It was about ‘the others’ guilt’ and ‘our victimhood’. Another element was “If tensions really start to build up again, we need to get them first before they can get us.”

This was the tacit narrative that had never been defused. Under Tito, Yugoslavia had relative peace for about fifty years, on the surface things started to look fine. After his death, the sub-surface tensions erupted. The hidden narrative(s) found a new opportunity to re-emerge and fed murderous inter-ethnic slaughtering.

When we reflect on this, we realize that the ‘Balkan effect’ is not limited to ex-Yugoslavia, but we find it in many parts of the world. These memetic narratives seem to want to survive and replicate and want to find future expression under the ‘right’ conditions (Craig & Van der Sar, 2019). That is why we should pay extra attention to the tacit stories and their ‘who, what, where, why and how’.

4.4. CONFLICT AND PEACE

Maybe one can conclude for now that ‘conflict’ is a natural phenomenon and part of natural life. It can originate from a reaction to our direct environment, but also from (long-term) humiliation, bullying, irritation, being ignored or ridiculed. Conflicts exist because people are different: in terms of gender, interests, religions, cultures, customs, and preferences. They can also be based on cultural narratives or imagined realities, or on ‘too little’ or ‘too much’.
Many want to believe that peace is the absence of conflict. This harmony definition is the most common. However, Brandsma (2016) presents a challenging proposition: “... peace is a long line of conflicts that we have dealt with successfully” (p. 78). He realizes that it takes a lot for many people to accept this, but it can also overturn common thinking. For him this is essential. For a facilitator, it may be a conversation starter.

Conflict is always waiting to emerge or re-emerge. Yet, as this compendium wants to demonstrate, it is still something where there can be decided on rapprochement, reflection, mutual listening, dialogue, transformation and reconciliation. And although it can or will re-emerge, conflict is something we can learn from: how to analyse it, to deconstruct it, and to learn how to deal with it.

4.5. POLARISATION

As already mentioned, polarisation is intentional in wanting to enhance a conflict, and as such much more planned by the rational brain. Polarisation strongly concentrates on identity - in this case being different from the other - and longs for a ‘solution’. It will create a division and discord; it wants to emphasize and magnify ‘we-they’ thinking. It feeds on an emerging or already existing conflict and escalates it. It thrives by maintaining a conflict. Any form or expression of scepticism is also eliminated: anyone who doubts the ‘authority’ of the teller is the enemy. Polarisation also thrives on moral compulsion: “How dare you doubt...?”

Those who deliberately create polarisation (we vs. them) use the knowledge of emotions, feelings (e.g. anger, fear) and sentiments, they employ ‘empathy’ to manipulate parties into an illusion of autonomy, self-determination, victimization, superiority thinking, and towards exclusion, discrimination, blind hate, violence, and worse.

Healthy scepticism about the stories of polarising parties requires the knowledge and understanding that a story always has (at least two) sides. In the absence of clarity, everyone is equally vulnerable or influenceable. Asking questions to the dividing stories (something other than fact-checking) can remove cloudiness, makes the underlying intention visible, and facilitates de-construction.

4.5.1. POLARISATION DYNAMICS

Brandsma (2016) proposes a number of polarisation dynamics, which are open for consideration and discussion. Polarisation can be perceived as a construct, but also as a process.

4.5.1.1. Thought constructs

Polarisation is we-they thinking and the thought construction consists of everything that can be thought of about ‘us’ and ‘them’. It’s about words, views and ideas, other than in a conflict. Polarisation is always abstract, an imagined reality. Think of ‘free speech and democracy’ against ‘caliphate and sharia’, ‘men’ against ‘women’ (many social discourses have the sting of polarisation in them). The ‘bad news’, says Brandsma (ibid.), is that we cannot do without polarisation. We make distinctions (I-the other, we-they). Polarisation is an identity provider and that is why we will continue to do it incessantly. Polarisation keeps us in an adolescent mode (“I’m different from you”).
The 'good news' is that polarisations – or should we say polarisation topics - are thought constructs that can be converted, de-constructed or broken down. We are not powerless.

4.5.1.2. Fuel
Polarisation needs to be fuelled. It is almost always about (group) identity, and a discourse on identity provides polarisation. Northerners are described by Southerners as slow and humourless, Southerners by Northerners as ludicrous and corrupt. A dark complexion makes you look lazy, a light makes you a dominant exploiter, bankers are pocket fillers, politicians are there for themselves. It is the identity of 'the other' that provides the fuel.

Every statement we make, negative or positive, does not do justice to the other: “Gay people are perverts” is a statement that delivers as much polarisation fuel as “Gay people are creative and empathic”. We think (or pretend) that we have knowledge about him/her/them. It is this ‘convenient’ rationality and justification (an opening move for discourse and discrimination) that belongs to polarisation.

4.5.1.3. Dynamics of feeling
As the polarisation process continues, the discussion material increases, while reasonableness decreases. It is not the intellect that counts, but the pathos, and often that which we call ‘the underbelly’. Take the example of systematic gang rape in which a Dutch politician recently tweeted that it had all the signs of ‘foreign’ / Islamic customs. Shortly afterwards, the crime turned out to have been committed by white natives. But the indignation and hate reports were already out in the world and were not taken back by the politician; the tweet was not removed. Mexicans 'steal jobs and rape' in the United States, Poles 'steal the jobs' of hardworking British people. Facts that prove otherwise do not count in the dynamics of feeling ‘polarisation’. If people have invested in an enemy image or a scapegoat, facts are simply not convincing enough. Conspiracy theories are the escape in order to get and hold on to one’s own ‘truth’. Evil is always elsewhere, thinking in terms of ‘enemies and friends’ is persistent.

4.5.2. ACTORS IN POLARISATION
As we have seen in conflict styles, a role always generates a profit, but also has a cost price. Brandsma (2016) introduces five roles in polarisation, who may have some similarities with conflict styles or provide a pool from which we can pick up direct and indirect actors.

4.5.2.1. The Pusher
Control gives power, and power wants to control. The pusher’s grist to the mill is controlling and moulding ‘identity’. He provides fuel for polarisation by putting the opposite side in a bad light and exerts maximum (manipulative) pressure on ‘the silent middle’ to take sides. Pushers always make 'simple' statements (preferably in tweets) that are presented as ‘truths’. Pushers - and we find them on both sides of the spectrum - know the power of repetition and therefore they always tell the same ‘single’ story or one-liners (e.g. non-believers are decadent, Mexicans are rapists, workers are stupid).

They only offer two choices: “Either you are with us or you are with the terrorists.” Pushers know perfectly well that their audiences cannot digest three complex explanatory stories at a time, which has been the pitfall for many a reasonable, sensible and even caring politician or leader. The pusher seeks extremes, but this behaviour also has drawbacks: his personal safety is compromised and sometimes he is washed away because everything gets out of hand.

Another interesting observation cones from Amos Oz (2012) who says the following about the pusher (which he calls the ‘fanatic’): he has a desire to force people into change. “He sees himself as
an altruist, more interested in you than himself. He is here to liberate you, and he is always falling on your neck because he truly loves you or else he is at your throat in case you prove unredeemable” (p. 65).

Pushers often use the word ‘traitor’ for those they claim they have no honour. Not to become a follower, means to be a traitor in the eyes of the pusher, e.g. if you advocate democracy, you are a traitor in the eyes of autocrats.

4.5.2.2. The Joiner
The joiner (follower) chooses a camp, thus gaining visibility and affiliates, and will take a more moderate stance than the pusher. The primary choice is not so much one or the other camp, the choice is joining. He joined a camp because he gradually became more sensitive to the story of a pusher (“He does have a point here…”). He has become a supporter and is among like-minded supporters, which provides an ‘identity’ and status (something that marginalised groups can be sensitive to). The urge to belong, to follow a strong leader in uncertain or confusing times, and the

Figure 18: Pushers, joiners, silent (after Brandsma, 2016, p. 39)

desire to make everyone else belong, the fascination with conformity and uniformity ("identity") may be the most dangerous form of fanaticism (Oz, 2018). The need for acceptance can result in blaming 'the other' loudly, which shows the group that 'I am not like him' and strengthens the position within the group. The closer one comes to the pusher the more one will listen selectively to his own ('moral') right. It may result in self-convincing monologues.

More moderate joiners may still engage in a discussion in which their right is still paramount. If one can manage to steer a discussion in the direction of a debate (and listening), this can create an opening for dialogue. In conflict terms, joiners are the pool of direct, indirect and vicarious actors.

4.5.2.3. The Silent
Between the pushers and joiners there is a space for a group that does not choose for either side. The silent resists polarisation. This prevents escalation of black and white thinking. In the middle is the nuance, neutrality, but also indifference. Neutrality and/or nuance seem to be necessary in certain professions in which it is better not to choose a camp: police, legal people, clergy, journalism, but also the marginalised (e.g. homeless, very poor)… In the middle, there are numerous individuals and groups who may be differently motivated to stay there.

Brandsma (2016) is very clear in his assumption that the middle, the ‘silent’ are the target audience for the pusher – the ‘other’s’ opinion is only moderately interesting. It is from the silent from whom he can recruit new joiners. Being defiant or ‘rogue’ works better within a group than invisible greyness. Belonging, visibility, self-assurance and security are strong motivators to choose a group. Underprivileged youngsters, or victims of a situation (either rightly or as such (self)appointed) are sensible to the lure and ‘buzz’ of the pusher. It can lead to radicalisation or ‘defence of our own’,
aversion against what current right wing populists’ call ‘population transfer/replacement’. It's that false security of belonging to a community that pulls.

4.5.2.4. The Bridge Builder

The bridge builder wants to work on harmony, dialogue and understanding and thus - often with the best intentions - provides fuel for polarisation. He oversees the context and the shortcomings of the opposites. In most cases, he wants to organise a dialogue in order to find and analyse differences and similarities. He will search for a counter narrative in order to bring the parties to a more moderate point of view - to emphasize the humanity in the refugee and debunk the idea of ‘fortune hunters’. By giving the opposites a stage, the bridge builder provides fuel with the best of intentions: he will confirm the raison d'être of polarization, he is continuing polarisation conversations. Brandsma (2016) emphasizes that it is a misconception if you think you can build a bridge from the open void of a ravine.

Another example of ‘bridge-building’ are the media, who claim to mediate, for instance in talk shows: they too provide fuel for polarisation by offering pushers and joiners a platform and thus visibility (and justification) of their opinions, letting them maintain their subject of polarisation. The middle (the silent) may or must then form an opinion. Think of election debates that are often no more than a succession of monologues about one’s own right, instead of constructive dialogues that aim at common ground and the common good. Social media offer (with the tech giants as facilitators) freedom to spitefully polarise and distribute threats and hate. In all cases, the (social) media are a catalyst for polarisation and, in Brandsma’s (2016) view, one of the major purveyors of fuel.

4.5.2.5. The Scapegoat

We have described the mechanism earlier. According to Brandsma (2016), the scapegoat will be designated during maximum polarisation - or the height of a (painful) conflict - and he or she will be found in the middle. When the quiet middle is thinning out, more and more joiners are being recruited, and joiners are becoming pushers. Pushers start to lose control; they have created an uncontrollable monster. In the worst case this leads to civil war and even genocide and/or ‘ethnocide’. The opponent is dehumanised, a ‘rat’, a ‘cockroach’, and once you have dehumanised, you’re allowed to exterminate.

The middle position becomes a danger to life, and that is where the scapegoat is. The scapegoat is not the enemy (Brandsma, 2016), but it has become the cause of polarisation (the ‘wolf in sheep’s clothing’) and must be sacrificed. The bridge builder is a candidate for this role, but also those who have to be neutral in the middle and preach reason and tolerance (the judges, mayors, police, etc.).

Figure 19: From bridge builder to scapegoat (after Brandsma, 2016, p. 39)
4.6. THE INTERPLAY – CONFLICT & POLARISATION

There is an interplay between polarisation and conflict. In the first two phases of conflict, prevention and intervention, groups will be mobilized in we-they thinking. The opposite identities are framed. Because allies (‘joiners’) are needed, there will be massive communication towards indirect and vicarious actors. Polarisation is fed by the conflict and growing polarisation escalates the conflict. The big group of joiners (mostly indirect and vicarious) will not be informed of nuances and back-stories (or histories), but of ‘facts’ that can attribute blame. It’s not motivations that come through, but assumptions fed by one-liners. A reason why polarisation always increases easier and stronger than it decreases (Brandsma, 2016).

As Craig & Van der Sar (2019) already pointed out, there is the danger of indirect and vicarious actors lagging behind the development of resolution and transformation. The pushers will close the border between above and below of the iceberg. Where the people directly involved start getting closer, those indirectly involved continue along the same path of polarised thinking. And even worse, as Brandsma (2016) explains: these audiences might even be disappointed by the parties showing insight or remorse. Expectations have been raised, and a change like that (e.g. a pusher that backs down) will be unacceptable. Remember the brawl in the schoolyard: when one of the fighters wants to quit, he might be pushed back into the pit.

If negotiators - after a delicate process and agreements - are afraid of loss of face and leave out the final stage of explaining, the danger of the Balkan Effect is very real. The authors stress that the indirect and vicarious groups are a critical factor and have to be informed and engaged in time, or maybe better, all the time.

It may also be clear that a conflict is not a polarisation. Conflicts can arise anywhere and anytime. In time, we can learn to deal with conflicts and solve them, although we know that this is not leading to eternal peace. Yet, by finding common ground over and over again, we can build a decent co-existence in a common future.

Polarisation is not looking for solutions, it has the objective to create and stress separation and division. It leans heavily on ‘identity’ and the (implicit) ‘criteria’ attached to it, but factually denies autonomy. It knows what De Waal (2019) explains: autonomy barely exists. We are 'obligatorily social', we cannot survive outside a group. The actual norm is how we feel when we are embedded between others. Few of us deal alone with tensions in life (because meaning making is rendered in interactions) - we want to trust others and we suffer greatly from being kept in isolation. We crave for belonging, inclusion, and joining (a group identity).

The motives of those who initiate and fuel polarisation may be many: power, self-enrichment, anxiety, disgust, aversion, xenophobia, and more.

Both, conflict and polarisation, are based on emotions, feelings, memories, and stories. We should also be aware that some stories have a history, be it culture narratives or personal stories. Both, conflict and polarisation, also employ stories and narratives: to explain, to understand, to inspire, to manipulate, to win supporters, to comfort, to humiliate, to give hope and to destroy hope. In conflicts, the dark side of stories may threaten the survival of relationships and whole societies. Conflict (based on a feeling of inequity or injustice or any other asymmetry) can promote polarisation processes... On the other hand, it could be that a remark (like explaining an issue topic) can have a polarising effect and by that bring people in conflicting positions.
With facilitation and mediation, we might be able to support conflict parties in reflecting on their stories first and come to an exchange of experiences, ideas, desires and opportunities. We assume that conflict parties will be more inclined to find solutions, because the stakes are often high, and maintenance of conflicts can come at a high cost: victims of violence, loss of jobs, broken relationships, etc.

Polarised parties will be the bigger challenge, as the group of indirect and vicarious actors are more difficult to address when we think of the influence and reach of social media, and the repetitive ‘single’ stories disseminated there. These groups may also be more ‘identity’ focused and thus an easier prey for pushers. Their distance to the conflict parties can be big, and they will sometimes not even be affected by the consequences of conflicts (and their own behaviour) either. And still, how do you disarm a pusher? Maybe joiners can learn to realize that pushers, for at least the past hundred years have had the predictability of ebb and flow. Recurring, re-igniting discourses about migration, Islam, culture, identity... doesn’t it become boring hearing the same arguments over and over again?

As Brandsma (2016) suggests, mobilising the ‘silent’ middle - hopefully the silent majority – in polarised contexts can be a way out (become agents of anti-polarisation). This group has to be invited as influencers of their direct environment that may contain ‘joiners’. De Waal (2019) supports this thought: reconciliation is most common in family relationships. Spouses, brothers and sisters, as well as friends, continually go through cycles of conflict and reconciliation. Reconciliation is easiest with those closest to you. Thus, the challenge is not to appeal to ‘reason’ or being ‘the reasonable ones’, which will only fuel polarisation. The challenge will be to awake or rekindle critical questioning and de-construction of discourses or single stories by un-packing them on a basis of ‘emotionally’ engaging activities and tools.

4.6.1. TOWARDS THE MIDDLE
We also have to realize that the middle (the silent) is the most diverse group, and it is precisely diversity that can make depolarisation possible. Being different is a welcome antidote for one-sidedness (Brandsma, 2016). Diversity is therefore not a problem. The right eye for diversity makes an inclusive society possible. As we have shown above, it is possible to approach the middle from time to time, to mediate, and to acknowledge the values that people bring in from their various worldviews. To listen sincerely and discover values that are crucial for the narrators.

4.6.2. RECOVERY STORIES
What we need now are what Montbiot (2020) calls ‘recovery stories’. Stories that convincingly put forward whatever we are: beings capable of altruism, empathy, cooperation and mutual help. Because these are precisely the forces that have always helped us to survive. According to Montbiot (ibid.), without powerful, new recovery stories, the highly necessary political and religious transformation cannot take place.

4.6.3. FINALLY: THE MEDIA - A GAME KILLER?
All media (print, online, social, television, radio) act as a catalyst. They mostly are not the cause of conflict and polarisation, but they can act as a conduit, and through that even become a scapegoat themselves – “It’s the media...” (Brandsma, 2016).
Yet, the media are a major player. They resonate tension and show extremes. They can become the portal for fuel. The harsh tone-of-voice of the pusher is taken over. The frame is dictated by the
pusher: are you for or against, perpetrator or victim, rich or poor... The labelling starts, scapegoats are appointed. This is also reflected and/or repeated in blogs, vlogs, Twitter, Facebook and other ‘social’ media message platforms. The pushers and joiners hijack these media with coarse language, hate, death threats, and even horrific - yet for some sensational - images (e.g. decapitations). Of course, the media are also an outlet for the sensible thinking communities, sharing valuable, inspiring, relativizing thoughts. The problem is that these are also ‘bubbles’ with like-minded people, which again contain we-they thinking.

When it comes to journalism, it often falls into the pit of an offered or imposed frame: someone must always be blamed for ‘it’. Mostly the pushers from both sides are invited to ‘discuss’, which - as we know - will only lead to throwing accusing monologues at each other and refusing to listen to whatsoever. Hosts often merely provide a stage and often allow the polarisation to continue to be fed. If the host dares to support one of the pushers’ arguments or asks a ‘critical’ question to one of the opponents, he will quickly either be accused of partisanship or become the scapegoat. The chaos that arises in these broadcasts may boost the ratings, but it will also help the pushers in the saddle.

The challenge is to apply the four game changers in journalism as well. So, not bridge builders who provide fuel, but the (inter)mediative position in the middle, listening, not ‘objective’, but connected to the individual narrators, highlighting issues from a different position (e.g. “What does your culture say about that? And what do you think yourself?”), and taking a different and independent position yourself.

An example of objective and independent journalism may be The Correspondent, an independent (investigative) journalistic platform, financially supported solely by subscribed members, who also can contribute with ideas connected to social, economic and educational topics. We dare to say that this platform emphasizes the middle, the silent, and it also thrives on loyalty and collaboration / cooperation. The ‘correspondents’ regularly publish ground-breaking ideas and books (e.g. finance, equity, co-existence), which are already embraced by leading educational experts and economists, and some (political) leaders worldwide. They also organize well-attended live meetings with younger audiences (millennials and younger) to discuss ideas and hopefully to disseminate these ideas to others around them. Additionally, they produce frequent informative and entertaining podcasts to current topics, including interviews with thought leaders of all generations.

Yet, we should not be naïve. These audiences are already ‘the middle’, often higher educated and engaged and willing to commit themselves to change, but seen as ‘lefties’ by populists, and thus leaning towards the opposite pole – in danger to become fanatic joiners as well...

In addition, we also have to realize that studies (in the Netherlands) repeatedly show that an overwhelming percentage of the population hardly reads any more, not newspapers or magazines, let alone (literary or popular-scientific) books. Recent school research in the Netherlands has shown that pupils have virtually stopped reading books (and thus informing themselves critically) already in secondary education. Universities and colleges complain about the poor language level and reading comprehension of students, not to mention primary and secondary vocational education.

140 characters on Twitter, incendiary vlogs and Facebook messages now seem to be the information provision standards that are also ‘the truth’ for many people. Online is where pushers easily recruit...

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14 https://thecorrespondent.com
joiners, which makes it all the more important to *physically* seek out audiences and to discuss and/or question stories presented to us or imposed upon us (including conflicts), which affect ‘us’ and ‘them’.
CHAPTER 5 – EMOTIONS AND FEELINGS

In the preceding chapter the emphasis was mainly on causes, manipulation, pushing, joining, and more, but also about transformation, reconciliation and co-existence. Conflicts arise for a reason (something has to change) and conflicts are sought (something has to change). They have a history or they make history.

It may already be clear that at the basis of and during every conflict, every crisis, there are emotions and feelings involved that hardly ever arise ‘spontaneously’. They are caused by someone or something, a situation. In general, emotions and feelings play a paramount role in how we behave, have interaction and relationships with others, in attachment behaviour, cohesion, inclusion and empathy, but also in discord, and exclusion and re-emerging conflicts - small and sometimes huge.

Understanding what happens to people in conflict needs an understanding of emotions. Emotions and feelings also have a history. They are linked to survival behaviour, experiences, and memories. They are linked to the past, but also to the immediate presence, and to thinking and planning for the future. Everything that we assign meaning to has an emotional charge. In describing the behaviour of humans, emotional words and language are almost inevitable. We will therefore pay ample attention to emotions, feelings and related or overlapping behaviour, and their consequences.

5.1. EMOTIONS

We cannot deny that they are there, but in his book ‘Mama’s last hug’ (2019) renowned ethologist and primatologist Frans de Waal has an interesting central question: “What purpose do emotions serve?”

He states that emotions alone are quite useless. Being scared is of little use, but if a state of fear incites an organism to flee, fight back or hide, it can save its life. As already addressed in the previous chapter, most organisms have three autonomous reactions: fighting, fleeing or freezing. Emotions are action orientated: they have evolved because of their ability to evoke adaptive reactions when there is danger, competition, opportunity to mate, and more (De Waal, 2019).

In the context of the influence of emotions on behaviour, the following guiding principles for studying emotions by psychology professor Nico Frijda (2001/2008) are worth considering:

1. Emotions have a biological basis. This should be understood in two ways.
   First: emotions are (or can be) derived from the body: from the heart, the stomach, the intestines, from physical activity and impulses. They are carnal matters, but also matters of the brain and blood vessels.
   Secondly: emotions also occur in animals, we are strongly related to each other: fear, anger, depression, attachment, sexual desire and curiosity we have in common. From the biological principle flows the functional principle on. If we assume that emotions - in whole or in part - are biological phenomena, then it can only be that they serve the survival of the species.

2. Emotions in humans are human phenomena, i.e., it is to expect human emotions to have typically human aspects, are related to norms and values, to human interaction patterns, and to the cognitive capabilities of humans, in particular the reflexive consciousness and intentional activity.

3. Humans and animals are not only subject to emotional impulses; they also try to respond to them adequately. Control and inhibition even occur in animals, and humans are trying to make the emotional experience manageable. This reaction pattern (‘regulation’), is a fundamental part of the emotion. (Frijda, 2008, p. 16-17)

All emotions are mixed with knowledge, suggests De Waal (2019), otherwise they would not exist. They are never simple and they are never separate from an evaluation of the circumstances or context. Take mourning: it represents the sad side of social bonding – loss, the realisation and knowledge that the bond is irreversibly moved from present to past. Thus, when we observe mourning we must realise that it is much more complex than it seems when we call it an ‘emotion’.

De Waal (2019, 2011) offers this definition of emotion17:

“An emotion is a temporary state brought about by external stimuli relevant to the organism. It is marked by specific changes in body and mind – brains, hormones, muscles, heart viscera, alertness, etcetera. ... Instead of a one-on-one relation between an emotion and ensuing behaviour, emotions combine individual experience with assessment of the environment to prepare the organism for the optimal response.” (De Waal, 2019, p. 100)

5.1.1. MIND AND BODY

When we were talking about storytelling, we have introduced the ‘expression’ of the teller and how he or she is perceived by others when telling. When it comes to experiencing from the perspective of the teller we may consider this:

The mind needs a body to make contact with the world (De Waal, 2019). Body and emotion interact. Not only have emotions an influence on our body and actions, emotions themselves are influenced by the body: we even associate certain emotions with locations in our body – ‘butterflies in your tummy’, your ‘gut feeling’, ‘a lump in your throat’.

Other physiological manifestations might be due to a psychological cause: an unexpected or psychologically significant (traumatic) event (Frijda, 2001), such as the loss of a loved one. Emotions often know better what is good for us, but often we don’t want to listen to them – we think we are rational. Emotions ‘know’ things about the environment or context that individuals do not always realise consciously. Choosing the ‘pusher’s’ side against your gut feeling (‘why should I trust him?’) may deliver quick status, but may backfire in the long run and would cost you otherwise valuable friendships.

5.1.2. EXPRESSING EMOTIONS

We all have bodily and facial emotional expressions at our disposal, unconsciously and consciously. We do not differ from most species, think of your dog’s ear- or tail positions, showing of bare teeth; how horses breeze when they’re having a good time; how we laugh when we have fun; how we express disgust, or aversion.

In general, emotional expressions are part of our biological nature. We are born with them. Paul Ekman (1999) tested the universality of facial expressions of primary emotions. It showed that people all over the world, irrespective of their gender, age, or education, recognize and express similarly these six ‘basic emotions’ (Ekman, ibid.): joy, sadness, fear, anger, surprise, and disgust.

Some of our emotional expressions are ritualised and have varying origins. As an example, take smiling: for a long time, it was put aside laughing, as if a smile was a laugh with a lower intensity. Yet, human smile originates from the ‘nervous grin’ (monkeys and primates), a social signal that mixes

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17 Translated and slightly shortened from the Dutch version (Mama’s laatste omhelzing, 2019).

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fear with the desire to be accepted (Frijda, 2001). We use the smile when a potential conflict lurks, something we are always worried about, even in the friendliest circumstances. When we visit friends, we at least bring our smile when we enter their ‘territory’ (De Waal, 2019).

In the first chapter, we have mentioned play, and pretend play. Thus, our face might not always be ‘the mirror of our soul’.

Humans are very capable in controlled, subtle facial ‘acrobatics’: moving eyebrows, wrinkling our nose, frowning, and so on. We are able to fake emotions as well, you might recognise the expression ‘sham rage’ (to intimidate), the mimicking of emotions by actors, or the artificial smile of e.g. a stewardess or a salesman. Some leaders - populist or not - have a talent for faking emotions (e.g. love, empathy, grief, anger, disgust) and use it ‘to play’ their followers. An unfriendly but just term is economics of emotion: how emotions are leveraged to generate attention, sympathy, awe, authority etcetera.

However, it is mostly difficult to suppress the expression (of an emotion) that inadvertently arises. The sunny side is that sincere expressions of joy and affection are difficult to feign. We have less control over our face than the rest of our body (De Waal, 2019). It shows when we rather hide a smile, when we get tears in our eyes when hearing sad news, when we blush, or when we look away in disgust or contempt when others are not looking. From a communicative perspective that would make no sense, unless we have evolved in a way that we involuntarily communicate an inner condition.

This ‘lack of control’ is a bonus, says De Waal (2019), because others have the chance to read our emotions (no matter how ‘real’). The relationship between what goes on inside us and what we show on the outside, creates connection.

When I play with my cat, how do I know she’s not playing with me?
Michel de Montaigne, Essais

5.2. FEELINGS

Feelings arise when emotions penetrate our consciousness, and we become aware of them (De Waal, 2019). We know that we are angry or in love because we feel it. We can say we feel it ‘in our stomach’, but in fact we notice changes all over our body and we express that – we could not choose the right facial expression if we did not feel anything. Feelings are deeply personal.

The Renaissance philosopher Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592) already suggested in his Essais that there must be more to visible emotions in animals. For him, it was enough to watch a dog dreaming to see that it must have an inner world just like ours. In his view, animals populate their internal world with “ghosts of their own invention” like we do.

De Waal (2019) makes a distinction between emotions and feelings: they are not the same. We tend to mix up these words, but a feeling is an inner, subjective (private) state that is only known to the one who experiences it. You know what your feelings are but you don’t know what another person feels, except for what he or she is telling about it. We communicate our feelings through language. Feelings presuppose, first of all, the presence of sensations, representations, thoughts, that is, they presuppose an object or (past) event to which the ‘feeling’ relates. Feelings are experienced as part of the subject’s personal response, not as a property of the object or event (Frijda, 2001).
Imagine working with stories of parties in a conflict, when they become emotional stories, or when emotions run high in discussing the rights and wrongs of each other’s stories. How can we interpret emotions when we do not really know about the feelings attached to them? Indeed, stories elicit engagement, evoke feelings and hopefully empathy. Indeed, they are probably the best tool we have for understanding what it must feel like to be someone else (Saltmarsh, 2018). Indeed, language helps us to discuss feelings, but it does not play a role in their origin, experience and expression.

‘Language sticks a label on an inner state, but does it help to distinguish inner states?’ (De Waal, 2019). For example, we have two different words for ‘anger’ and ‘disgust’, other cultures use the same word for both emotions. And yet, they make a distinction between the visible emotions (expression).

‘Sad’ can have a different meaning for you (or within a different culture) than for me. Pain can be a hurtful experience for some but a pleasure for others. We may have a lot of words for ‘fear’, but do they really help us to understand the state of mind of the other?

And what about ‘conflict’? Do these words have the same meaning for you and me and are they an adequate representation of what is felt? When one tells you he is grieving, can you really comprehend that? His grieving might not be the same as your experience of grief, maybe it was mixed with other emotions like relief or anger, something he would rather not talk about or is even unconscious of (De Waal, 2019).

In addition, what people tell about their emotions and/or feelings can often be incomplete, sometimes downright wrong, and mostly adapted to public (social) opinion or dominant norms, something that is also suggested in e.g. ‘Life as a narrative’ (Bruner, 1986) and in Adams and McLean’s ‘Narrative identity’ (2013). Furthermore, the consequences can be far reaching: the audience can retaliate, envy, punish, disapprove, exploit ‘weakness’, participate in mockery, show pity or evoke guilt, or show unpleasant surprise (Frijda, 2011). On the other hand, we are (or become) aware of such consequences, and that awareness determines how we regulate, intensify or employ telling about our feelings (Frijda, 2011).

5.3. PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE ORIENTED EMOTIONS

Some emotions are focused at the future, such as hope and anxiety, while others are related to the past, such as revenge, forgiveness and gratitude. De Waal (2019) calls these the time-line emotions. When it comes to conflict, conflict resolution and reconciliation it may be useful to reflect on these very powerful emotions. To hear the words themselves evokes worlds, memories of experiences, persons, feelings, desires, and stories connected to all of them.

We also have to be aware that some emotions are typical for adults, especially those emotions that require more insight into the importance of time than you see in young people. Young people live more in the ‘now’, adults don’t. This said, time is relative: the past could be a second ago or years ago, the same goes for the future: it can be the next moment or years from now.

5.3.1. PAST
Gratitude

We feel gratitude when we think of receiving (or having) food, care, love, empathy, and being listened to. But also for receiving services, favours, shared knowledge, support of any kind and for many purposes, shelter, help in precarious situations. All this we collect and most of it we remember. But we also express gratitude for what we receive. Gratitude is an evolutionary ‘old’ emotion that connects individuals inside and outside groups.
Revenge
is the ugly sister of gratitude. It is about settling a past deception, humiliation, experienced pain or trauma. It is an urge we almost cannot resist, we call revenge ‘sweet’ as if it was a treat. When it comes to conflict related situations, taking revenge individually is not the only option: if a person is offended, conned or murdered, it can also happen that his or her group of relatives or friends are driven by a similar urge to harm the culprit. Blood vengeance and payback are examples. Revenge will eventually do harm to many. ‘Retaliation’ is a similar expression, but can rather be seen as an ‘educative’ reaction to undesirable behaviour.

Forgiveness
already opens a door to the realm of reconciliation. Basically, forgiveness is the (emotional) switch from hostile to friendly after a conflict, something common to many species, and they can switch quickly (Van Hoof, 2019; De Waal, 2019). We humans are almost continuously in conflict sensitive environments, e.g. (large) families, working environment, or communities. These environments demand daily compromises (‘regulation’) and forgiveness.
With conflict in mind, forgiveness is never a hundred percent and even if we say ‘forgive and forget’, forgetting is often a problem, because we do not erase the memory, but decide not to think about ‘it’ anymore. According to De Waal (2019), reconciliation (and forgiving) is the perceptible effect, while forgetting (or trying to forget) is an inner experience.
These three emotions contribute to social intelligence. They have a function in friendship as much as they have in rivalry, in undermining as in reinforcing trust and in maintaining the functioning of the community.

5.3.2. PRESENT
We set everything that happens to us against the past and the future. Timeline emotions transcend the present: we remember specific events, we are forward-looking, we exchange favours, we take revenge and we forgive.
Looking at that from a narrative perspective, we can imagine ourselves a permanently in the middle of a story, looking back, looking forward. And in this respect, there is something interesting with regard to the story you think you’ve ended up in. The lead question would not be “What story am I in?” but rather “Where am I in this story?” This might take you to a position where you can decide where to continue and what you want to carry with you from the past.
It is the position of the middle or as practitioner Paul Costello18 explains - interest, which comes from the Latin inter esse, being in-between. “Are you in the middle of a storm or a tornado? Are we in the middle of a conversation or a conflict?” This moment or period of time could be the end of one thing and the beginning of another, the end of a marriage or the beginning of a new relationship. “Where are you now? Is it interesting enough to initiate action, change or transformation?”

5.3.3. FUTURE
Hope
Some mammals and birds are known for being able to plan the future. They collect and hide food, they prepare tools for certain goals, so they already know where they will go and what they will do later. They delay immediate rewards for deferred and better rewards, which requires self-control. These are already ‘expectations’. In humans, we call this expectation of something desirable ‘hope’.

Cognitive bias and anxiety
There is optimism and there is pessimism, for some the glass is half full, for others it is half empty.

The latter will look towards the future with anxiety. If one has been bullied in the past, the fear of similar experiences will create an unpleasant expectation for the future. The same will apply to children repeatedly placed with foster families, minorities or ethnical groups with a history of oppression, and more. These feelings stand in the way of plans and block the view to hope.

5.4. SHAME, VULNERABILITY AND GUILT
There are emotions that result from following norms or breaking norms: satisfaction with one's own sense of decency, pride in one's own outstanding achievements, admiration for those of others. But there are also shame and guilt about one's own transgressions, and (pre-)judgements about vulnerability.

5.4.1. Shame
In conflict ridden contexts, in (national and personal) crises, shame can be a huge obstacle to a decent exchange of experiences and stories, and also to deconstruction of a problematic, sometimes shared past and present.

When experiencing shame, the person contemplates himself or his acts; in doing so he considers himself watched by others and attributes to them condemnation of his deeds; moreover, he shares their condemnation (Frijda, 2001).

De Waal (2019) tells that ‘the verb ‘being ashamed’ originates from a much older verb that meant ‘to envelop oneself’. Shame becomes literally and figuratively a belittling emotion. It expresses itself by evading the eyes of others, covering our face; shrug, shrink, and wanting to vanish from the face of the earth. We say that we feel ashamed, but we also think (or think we know) that others are disappointed in us, irritated or mad at us. The reaction would be that you want to calm others down and explain.

People may also be ashamed for their kin, their friends, teammates or colleagues, their income, origins and social status, or of a characteristic (e.g. clothes, weight, body).

In her appraised book ‘Daring greatly’, researcher and practitioner Brené Brown (2012) shares a different perspective of shame, which she links to vulnerability.

When shame descends, Browns says, we are almost always hijacked by our limbic system, which means that our thinking and analysing capabilities give way to the fight-flight-freeze part of our brain. Emotions can tip the balance of decision making, and shame is one of those emotions. It is also the fear of disconnection.

Next to what was described as expressions of shame (withdrawing, hiding, appeasing), Brown (ibid.) adds the move against others, by trying to gain power over others through aggression, and by using shame to fight shame. Think of reactions on Twitter and other social media with verbal and visual abuse back and forth – acts of revenge may also kick in here.

Shame is experienced differently by men and women. When interviewing the genders in a research, Brown (ibid.) found out that for men shame means failure, means to be afraid of being pushed, criticised or ridiculed. It means not to tell that you are low- or illiterate, and more of that. The bottom line and rule for men was: “Don’t be weak.”

Women experience shame differently: lack of perfection, being judged by others, never feeling ‘good enough’. There is also a ubiquitous ‘mother shame’: either too many or no children, working or not working ("What kind of mother are you?").

When it comes to sharing stories (getting out of the ‘shame-hole requires courage’), the fact that someone responds with empathy and understanding can drive shame away. “Own your story, ...then you are able to write the ending to it.” (Brown, 2012).
5.4.2. Vulnerability
Vulnerability is often associated with fear, shame, grief, sadness and disappointment. We can be, act, or be perceived as ‘vulnerable’.
Brown (2012) describes us as wearing armour to protect ourselves from vulnerability, a process that already starts when we are children. This war metaphor even extends to having acquired weapons to defend our vulnerability. Thoughts, emotions, and behaviour help us to protect ourselves from being hurt, belittled, and disappointed. Armour can make us feel stronger, but it is also heavy and it may wear us down after time. According to Brown (ibid.), the paradox here is that we can become frustrated when we encounter the armour of the other: ‘Vulnerability is the last thing I want you to see in me, but the first thing I look for in you.’ And there it is: we don’t trust someone who does not show his/her vulnerability, but we also don’t trust ourselves – or have the courage – to drop our mask and reveal our vulnerability.

Vulnerability is not a ‘weakness’. It can be an act of courage, maybe also a sign of self-esteem (“I’m okay”), and will mostly be appreciated and respected by others.
Accepting (showing respect for) the vulnerability of others also means understanding that they need support. Nobody can ‘go it alone’. Showing yourself first, sharing a personal story of a vulnerable moment, can earn you trust and make you a reliable listener to the other’s vulnerable story. Trust means that the other believes that you can bear the weight of the story, that there is mutual empathy, that he/she can ask for what is needed.

Speaking of trust - it is a product of dependency. When we are dependent, we also have to trust, e.g. that our mother will carry us, that the other party has the best intentions for us. Since people prove time and time again that they ‘have a mutual interest in doing the right thing for each other’, we might have to cultivate this ability, dare to be vulnerable and trust others.

Vulnerability has a dark side, too, and when facilitating personal storytelling (in groups), practitioners should also be aware of that. Brown (ibid.) warns for oversharing, which is not vulnerability.
Oversharing is testing the loyalty of others or the tolerance in a relationship, or hot-wiring a new connection (“We only know each other for a short time, and I’m already sharing this with you”). It can also be attention seeking, which, again, is not vulnerability, and the response may be the opposite of what one intended. It can be seen as one-directional self-exposure.
When we experience this (from others, but just as much from ourselves), the questions to ask may be ‘What need is driving this behaviour?’, ‘Is this the right way to connect?’ (Brown, ibid., p. 164).

“I am not what has happened to me. I am what I choose to become.”
Carl Jung

5.4.3. Guilt
Think of situations when you ‘blew it’, when you didn’t stand up to your boss, when you did not defend your little brother against bullies, when you looked at someone in danger and froze. Feelings of guilt lead to endless brooding about what could have happened if one had acted differently (Frijda, 2001).

Guilt is an emotion close to shame. But shame has to do with the judgement of others, while guilt has to do with the judgement of yourself (De Waal, 2019). The social hierarchy provides the original template for guilt. We actually punish ourselves (internalising fear of punishment) by feeling bad (guilty or remorseful) about behaviour we have shown or behaviour we should have shown but did not perform. This may also be found among survivors of natural disasters, epidemics, combat, terrorism, or among friends or family of those who committed suicide, which has been coined as survivor’s guilt.
Feelings of guilt are a striking aspect of feelings after the loss of loved ones (Ramsey, 1979). It could very well be because they give events a less definitive appearance. In these cases, guilt could act as a defence against depression as such. It could provide an explanation for one's own misery, an explanation that the event (as terrible as it may have been) gives at least a shred of control in the swamp of helplessness (Frijda, 2001).

Guilt and fear often go hand in hand and reinforce each other. Guilt and shame are nourished by a deep longing for belonging and inclusion – necessary for survival. On the other hand, feeling guilty, but also showing guilt (‘pleading guilty’) shows moral awareness and offers protection against moral attacks: after all, one has (immediately) admitted one's mistakes (Frijda, 2001).

Unfortunately there are also situations when we ignore guilt. People are capable to throw their inhibitions over board when circumstances change: visiting a rival football club can turn a decent family father into a hooligan, betrayal can kick in when your (social, professional) position is threatened, and in the worst scenario (political) war mongers can push people into unscrupulous atrocities.

5.5. ANGER AND HATE

With some emotions, the impact is not attached to the result of an event or action but to an object or (other) person. The emotion contains a ‘dispositional attribution’, meaning that the impact is the property (the fault) of the object or the ‘other’ (Frijda, 2001).

In the past, aggressive behaviour (the ‘fight’ mode) was coined as behaviour that that causes damage or aims to cause damage. The attention was towards the result. However, behind aggression was an obvious emotion known to man as anger or rage (De Waal, 2019). Anger is usually generated by frustrated goals or by challenges of your ‘status’ - shame (for different reasons) can also be a part of that - and it manifests itself in shouting, screaming, clenched fists and intimidating looks. In many situations that is enough, but things can get out of hand if the goal is not achieved.

However, anger can turn into, or is fuelled by, feelings of hate. Hate is the kind of emotion that has a component of (object / personal) evaluation; love, too, of course: an event or its result can be pleasant, but love concerns a person. It has consequences for behaviour whether an emotion concerns an event or a person. Anger is directed towards the outcome of an event. In the case of hate, the behaviour is directed against a person and against their existence (Frijda, 2001).

De Waal (2019) challenges anger and aggression as anti-social behaviours. He suggests that they are in fact very social: when you would pin the cases of screaming, door slamming, insulting, hitting and throwing cutlery on the map of a city, you will find the majority in family homes, and not in the streets, schools or shopping malls. Because anger can also be seen as a way to do something about the conditions of social relations, it happens here the most.

At the same time, it is true that strong social bonds are the most resilient. Families stay together because reconciliation is also present in these relationships and able to counter anger. Families (and their members) as friendships go through cycles of conflict and reconciliation, which are repeated and contribute to defining the relationship (De Waal, ibid., p. 216).

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5.6. DISGUST, AVERTION AND XENOFOBIA

There were (and there still are) secular and religious leaders who use the metaphors ‘rats’, ‘hyenas’ or ‘cockroaches’ for (ethnic) groups that do not ‘please’ them, and by using these metaphorical words they succeed in not only de-humanising these groups, they also sow disgust and aversion among their followers with regard to these groups. ‘They must be exterminated.‘

Conflicts and polarisation, and thus war and terror can start with evoking these emotions, and as past and current discords show, these emotions play an important part in those.

Disgust and aversion belong to the oldest emotions. Disgust is clearly visible as a facial expression, e.g. a wrinkled nose, curled upper lips and a protruding tongue. It is a signal to others that something is ‘gross’, filthy, poisonous, rotten, something that might make you throw up or sick in other ways. But we also see the disgust expression when we look up when it starts to rain, when we see a dirty toilet, or when we smell our armpits. Disgust is one of the drivers why we (as most animals) want to be clean and tidy in every way.

In society at large, disgust and aversion are also related to our moral awareness: we are disgusted by certain forms of behaviour, but also by corruption, fraud, betrayal, hypocrisy, ‘others’, as mentioned above. We talk about something or somebody ‘leaving a foul taste’ or finding their behaviour disgusting’. And we agree with others: priority to conformation is immense. Conforming to disgust or aversion of others is no exception, but widespread. After all, following the example of others (which may or may not be ‘healthy’) has a greater chance of survival...

The phenomenon of xenophobia - the aversion to strangers, is a trait we seem to share with our relatives, the chimps. Put two groups of chimps together and a bloody fight will be the result. This might have let to assumptions about man as the ‘murdering ape’ and the ‘man, the hunter’. It has also led to ideas about competition between groups, which has been appointed as the driver for cooperation in groups. We had to suppress these ‘savage’ instincts, and ‘civilisation’ would have been the tamer of these basic instincts. De Waal (2019) points at the irony of this: it were the ‘civilised’ societies who slaughtered the ‘savages’ who often welcomed them with friendship and presents. We’re quick to label ‘others’ as primitive, stupid, infidels, when we can benefit from that. However, our brain is also equipped with areas that control aggressive impulses, areas that are involved with perception of others’ pain – our empathic brain. De Waal (2019) has done research on xenophilia - attraction to strangers - and found it in another relative of ours, the bonobo’s. Their brain is equipped with even bigger empathic areas than ours. Put two bonobo groups together and you will get immediate cooperation. They have social networks that extend beyond their own group (Hararai, 2015). Our hominid forefathers show more physical resemblance to bonobos than to chimps. This would lead us to the other idea that acceptation of other groups has led to cooperation in humans, even on a larger scale.

Maybe the truth is in the middle. We should not look at ourselves from the most gruelling perspective, as so many leaders want us to believe. It only stimulates the vision that first we had our biological nature and then developed our civilized nature. That might be a wrong assumption. According to De Waal (2019), they go hand in hand. Civilization is who we are. Social life is part of our evolutionary history, just like cooperation, bonding, and empathy. Group cohesion is our most important survival strategy. Civilization has something to offer, among other things an ancient capacity for peaceful co-existence.
CHAPTER 6 - ASYMMETRIES

With some more knowledge about the purpose and influence of emotions and feelings, it may be the moment to zoom in on specific feelings and emotions that create unrest and conflict. ‘Symmetry’ is a term from aesthetics for the harmonious relationship between parts in relation to each other and a part in relation to a whole. The main (ideal) form of a symmetrical relationship is always the mirror image. Unfortunately, as the previous chapters have suggested, we humans are never quite ‘symmetric’, neither in our physical appearance nor in the lives we live, nor in our relationships, nor in the stories we tell. There is always something out of sync that can unsettle us.

6.1. INEQUALITY, INEQUITY, INJUSTICE

We have mentioned ‘mimetic desire’ earlier. It already showed us that we have two sides, a social one and a selfish one. We accept differences, but only to a certain extent. When a boundary is crossed, we choose sides. We have a deep-rooted sense of justice born out of a long history of egalitarianism (De Waal, 2009), i.e. certain forms of equality: social, opportunity, or political. ‘Equity’ and ‘equality’ seem to have the same meaning. Both seem to point toward treating everyone the same – with dignity, respect, appreciation. Both terms suggest that everyone should have the same opportunity to reach his or her full potential, not only to survive but also to thrive. ‘All men are equal’ suggests the same, but maybe that does not cover the load entirely. Maybe equality does not always equal fairness or justice. And we can’t avoid justice issues if we want cooperation. After all, we tend to critically assess the balance - the symmetry or the asymmetry - between give and take. Life and ‘the others’ often seem unfair. As feelings of inequity - and thus possibly injustice - may be one of the emotional drivers for a conflict, it pays to delve into that as well.

Equality generally means that everyone - regardless of who he or she is - begins from an equal place, with equal access to resources and an equal chance to thrive. The ‘rules’ of the game are the same to everyone. Everyone has the same rights. However, we are not equal, as in ‘the same’. We are not the same, we are diverse: we are tall, short, young old, have different (cultural) backgrounds, and different social backgrounds. We do not have the same intelligence. Even though we might have be given the same chance, the outcomes depend on the individual. ‘Equality has the tendency to push us into treating people as if they are all the same in order to ensure fairness’ (Craig & Van der Sar, 2019).

Equity - in an exaggerated sense - means that regardless of who you are you will get the same result as everyone because you will be provided with all the help and resources you need. Which suggests that the rules can be ‘rigged’ in some way or another. This may sound as cheating or unfair, but as Craig and van der Sar (2019) explain, it can be ethically just, or at least prudent. For example, sometimes it can be better not to give or support in order to let someone figure something out himself (a learning experience). Which may seem a difficult decision. Equity is about ‘equality of opportunity’ but is less concerned whether we are all equal. We are not only all different “but each situation (or context) may cause us to find a different but equitable answer; hence equity is always being informed by context and real or perceived inequality” (Craig & Van der Sar, 2019). This is what the authors define as equity in action.
As an ethical concept, equity is embedded in social and economic contexts, culture, law and order, responsibilities, and (civic) leadership. We have to face the complexity of all these structures and/or constructs and where they can cause inequity or injustice. It is there where many of our small or big conflicts can originate.

Equity is centred on the commitment to work to achieve fairness in how our cultural systems and beliefs impact on our lives. And although not everyone might experience a new context as ‘equitable’ it can at least be accepted as ‘fair’ or ‘just’.

**Injustice**

Annette Simmons (2019) says that most of our (epic) stories feature the struggle between justice and injustice. However, justice “cannot be limited to single assertions of what is right or wrong – because justice is reflection of what feels right or wrong. Personal experience drives which stories about justice feel most important to us” (p. 149).

When a favour invokes a favour in return, this form of exchange (tit-for-tat) must be based on a memory of past events, combined with a sense of ‘gratitude’. Mutual aid is something that everyone can benefit from, but such a system only works if everyone - one-on-one, within groups, in communities - contributes more or less equally. Nevertheless, selfishness is always lurking. In older, egalitarian (hunter-gatherer) societies hunters were not allowed to cut up their prey, to prevent them from favouring their families. Injustice was minimized in favour of a cooperative and harmonious - and, why not, already democratic - society (De Waal, 2009).

Still, according to Simmons (2019 / 2006) there is an infinite array of right/wrong ratios humans use to define justice: who works harder, who needs more, who served the longest, who contributed most, who belongs to the in-group, etc. We have all experienced injustice once in our lives, some more extreme than others: not being selected in the basketball team; not invited to a friend’s wedding; unfair labour practices; age, ethnic or gender discrimination; or total absence of justice under conditions of war.

Inequality evokes feelings of injustice. 'Inequality is deadly' concluded epidemiologist Richard Wilkinson (2006) from statistical evidence: in the United States - a country with high income and education disparities - life expectancy is lower than in at least forty other countries.

**EQUALITY and EQUITY are two strategies we can use in an effort to create FAIRNESS**

**Equality** is treating everyone the same. It aims to promote fairness, but it can only work if everyone starts from the same place and needs the same help. **Equity** is giving everyone what they need to be successful.
‘The most obvious reason that income inequality and health are related is apparently that it represents the degree of class differentiation. It probably reflects the degree of social distance and the associated feelings of superiority and inferiority or lack of respect’.20

In less egalitarian societies the mortality rate is higher, and we might add that in these divergence will be greater in many respects, becoming a feeding ground for conflicts and polarisation.

However, De Waal (2009) argues that every form of society has its pros and cons: an extremely competitive society (rather the United States) and a more moderate, leveling society (rather the countries of Western Europe) both use their idea of justice or fairness, which is then perceived by others as unjust or unfair – and thus food for conflict.

And then he offers a thought-provoking reflection: of the three ideals of the French Revolution – 
freedom, equality, brotherhood - Americans repeatedly stress the first and Europeans the second, 'but only the third refers to inclusion in society, trust and community spirit'.

Whichever way, justice issues require cooperation (Simmons, 2019/2016). We are keen on monitoring the balance between give and take. We can’t digest stories of injustice (betrayal, cheating, exploitation). Discrediting one group’s interpretation of injustice as minor (e.g. “slavery was a long time ago”) or exaggerate small injustices as major (e.g. male protest concerning “reverse discrimination”, when it comes to women in leading positions) can undermine shared interpretations.

When it comes to (stories of) injustice, feelings don’t go away; as we have mentioned earlier, they can go underground and keep on sulking there, and feed our emotions. Unless an understanding, empathic witness is able to ensure sure that these stories are told.

Lt. Kaffee: I want the truth!
Col. Jessup [shouts]: You can’t handle the truth!!!
A Few Good Men, 1992, Columbia Pictures

6.2. TRUTH

Given the contemporary obsession with ‘truth’ it seems worth to investigate what we mean when we talk or write about truth. It seems to play an ever important role in societal debates, social discourses, politics and (social) media.

It’s about questions like “What is true? What do you want to be true? What do you believe?” The fact that you could also put the emphasis differently in any of these questions already indicates how complex the domain of ‘truth’ is, and we can imagine the role experiences and emotions play in it. These may also influence the perception of truth, and determine our (personal and social) narratives as well. The following exhibits some viewpoints and their consequences.

6.2.1. TRUTH AS A CONSTRUCT

Anyone can make their own truth, if truth is understood as a matter of perspective. The assumption that every truth is a construct does, on the other hand, not mean that there are no facts. From this point of view there can be countless truths. When we consider dominant social discourses (and in extreme polarisation) built on narratives, every story can be sold as a ‘true’ story.

Dutch linguist and writer Bas Heijne (2020, p. 22) quotes from an interview of journalist Peter

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Pomerantsev with the executive of the Russian propaganda broadcast station *Russia Today*: the executive gives the example of the banana (a fact): for one it is a fruit, for another it is food, for still another it is a (fake) weapon, for a racist it is something to tease a coloured person. This can be meant or felt as a cynical exploitation of the concept that there are innumerable perceived truths. It’s about the way we look at the facts, how we experience them. Or, as the executive said: “You have your Western truth. We have the Russian truth”, by which he means that (subjective) experience (and construction) is everything (Heijne, 2020). Seen from this point of view, ‘truth’ can be very conveniently turned into a polarising statement.

Additionally, *truth finding* (in the positive sense of *fact checking*) is the enemy of *identity* in the view of many: the faith in one’s own untouchable cultural, religious values that are above reasonable criticism is infallible. Anyone who doubts this is ‘hypocritical and lying’, so you no longer need to critically examine your beliefs.

A belief that prioritises perception to facts makes truth and identity coincide. Thus: how a banana is *experienced* is more important than what a banana *is* (Heijne, 2020). The objective, factual reality is then seen as a threat to the subjective and the imagined/constructed reality.

### 6.2.2. TRUTH AND CONTEXT

Think of politicians who declare vaccinations of children useless or harmful and even suggest that it is related to autism, and then threaten scientists who raise valid and substantiated objections.

‘Criticality’ often ignores facts or gives them a comfortable twist (Heijne, 2020). For “post-modern politicians” (a description coined by Pomerantsev) facts are a burden, and even threatening, and this is why these politicians show contempt of truth (facts) and present their own ‘truths’.

People may say that they look ‘critically’ at social media reports, but their own emotions are not always critically examined. Increasingly it is shown that we are sensitive to arguments, that we allow ourselves to be influenced and pushed. It is as if some people do not listen with an ear that seeks to understand the subject of the matter and examines if the message fulfils the criteria of truth (true/untrue) or relevance. Nowadays, a statement or story is often all right or ‘true’, even if it is pseudo-scientific, and is readily believed because ‘we don’t like the elite’.

Heijne (2020) introduces us to philosopher Susan Sontag, who expresses her view in the essays *On Photography*: each photo (but also each event) is merely a *fragment*. Its moral or emotional weight depends on the context in which it has happened (e.g. war, draught, home) or in which it is placed: in a museum, during a demonstration, at an article in a magazine, and in a more contemporary context: in a Facebook group, on Twitter or Instagram.

We see more and more, but we are less and less able to judge (rationally) what we see. For example, when you see on Facebook how someone is beaten up by a group (even on the other side of the world), it is hard to accept that crime rates have statistically fallen. Emotions make us take sides, so your emotional relationship is with the person who gets the beating, not with the statistical facts.

#### 6.2.3. TRUTH AND REALITY

Gradually but increasingly, our emotions have become dominant and they are also being ‘played’ in an increasingly sophisticated way, which means that they often can no longer be questioned.

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21 *Peter* Pomerantsev is a Soviet-born British journalist, author and TV producer. He is a Visiting Senior Fellow at the Institute of Global Affairs at the London School of Economics.

22 In this short animated video Pomerantsev explains post-modern politics (e.g. contempt of facts): [https://bbc.in/3ahMfpj](https://bbc.in/3ahMfpj)
effectively. ‘Reason’ is only there to support the subjective emotions. Reason, which has to test our emotions, becomes suspected, a threat to our individuality.

This may be in line with a contemporary phenomenon, for example the vision of the director of the Dutch public television in an interview (2018)\(^{23}\) where he defended the cuts in quality news programmes. He commented that journalists are arch-conservative and that other programme makers are more willing to adapt, and that “journalists argue too often.” In his opinion, informative journalism had to make room for drama series, which is the way to tell ‘contemporary stories’: the HBO series *House of Cards* shows the machinations of American politics much more clearly. A news programme could never do that. Facts must be ‘experienced’, but reviews or contemplation of them are not important. Thus, fiction would become ‘more true’ than facts.

Seen this way, we do not so much live in a *post-truth era*, we have never lived in an “era of truth” (Heijne, 2020). Saying that, it could be that ‘truth’ can be seen as a synonym for (factual/objective) reality. What could be a remedy, is to prepare ourselves to allow submitting assumptions to actual critique; to make room in our heads for contradiction, for other credible versions of reality, and to submit to the knowledge of others who really know something about it (e.g. scientists).

This opens the way to turn to the tellers of stories and narratives, and their truths. And what’s more, to the (supporting) role of facilitators/story practitioners and listeners.

\[ It's \text{ no wonder that truth is stranger than fiction. Fiction has to make sense.} \]

*Mark Twain*

6.2.4. TRUTH AND PERSONAL STORIES

Even if you are not (yet) a professional story practitioner, you might have noticed from yourself that sometimes you are telling the same story to several people. “Did the story change as you told it twice, three times, ten times? Did it get just a bit further away from the literal truth?”, asks researcher and writer Cynthia Kurtz (2013). When it comes to working with (personal) stories – in contrast to facts, opinions or direct questions – we would have to realize the position of stories and storytelling in social life as a mechanism for the ritualized negotiation of truths.

Similarly, associate professor and storyteller Heidi Dahlsveen (2020)\(^{24}\) explains that the tension between fact and fiction is one aspect of a personal story. Generally, as long as the storyteller and protagonist in the story are the same, the story will be perceived as "true". Truth is relative, and some will have a strict code for the truthfulness of a story, while others will perceive a "fact-based truth" as insignificant in meaning-production. The truth of a story lies not only in the facts, but also in the interpretation or reflection you attach to the story.

Story practitioner and writer Simmons (2019) calls this *narrative truth*: a story is a narrative account of a significant emotional event or events that demonstrate relational truths. Good stories always have an element of Truth (with a capital ‘T’) in it (Simmons, 2019): the story of your child’s first bike ride, King Arthur, the time you stood up against your boss.

Not all details may be factual, but some were really there and we have made them more meaningful (by weaving in fiction). The stories might not be absolute truths, but they are real.

Simmons (2019) asks us to recall past personal experiences of receiving, delivering, or avoiding a ‘naked truth’, which she interprets as (factual) information that has become a ‘truth’ and affects the perceptions of responsibility, obligation, or fairness. Sometimes it’s pleasant to feel being put in your

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\(^{23}\) Mentioned in Heijne (2020, p. 16)

\(^{24}\) From ‘Oral Storytelling’, a supporting essay by Heidi Dahlsveen, written for his project
place by another person who justifiably (honestly) points something out to you. For example, telling an authority “that’s a bad idea” might get you in trouble, even when you come up with facts that prove it. Telling the truth is shaming the devil, as a saying goes. Hence, dress truth in story, express it in allegory or metaphor.

‘Naked truth’ would apply to personal stories as well. When you hold your story against the light, or when others shine their light on it, it might be confronting and something you (and even the listeners) would rather avoid. However, even if only parts of it are acknowledged, it still can have a positive impact. Exploration and awareness can come in little steps.

And there’s the **paradox of story work** (and truth), because what is the end result of the exploration of truth and fiction, opportunity and danger? A paradox. The telescope is not one view but two, and it must be seen from both ends to be fully understood (Kurtz, 2013). As the Gestalt therapist Barry Stevens\(^{25}\) said: *The truth will set you free, but first it will make you miserable*...

### 6.3. THE LIE

When we talk of story sharing, trust and empathy, but also about opposites and asymmetries, we also have to talk about lying. Dor (2017) explores this phenomenon, which is closely related to the evolution of language. He calls language a collectively designed communication technology, developed for the construction of imagination. After mimetic communication had stabilized, language provided honest and meaningful communication – but it did even more for *deception* (Dor, 2017). Deceptive communicators did not anymore have to find ways to provide (mime) false experiences for others to perceive, their audience could no longer experientially verify what they received, hence the expression ‘lying with a straight face’. Dor (2017) suggests that it may have taken lying sometime to appear after the stabilization of language, “but once it did it could not be constrained.”

The reality of lying became an integral part of the environment for both language and its speakers. Dor (2017) also suggests that language (and cultures) would be ‘simpler’ - perhaps even poorer - without lying. We would be less imaginative, suspicious and inquisitive, and emotionally controlled. “We would probably have very little symbolic culture, no myths, no propaganda, and we would probably insult each other much more often”(Dor, 2017). It suggests that on certain occasions nothing’s wrong with ‘a little white lie’, sometimes it can prevent an unnecessary conflict.

However, we also should be aware of lying for other reasons: because we are ashamed of a wrong decision, because we do not want to admit to a mistake, because we feel trapped, because we want to hide a violation or crime, and you can think of many other reasons when it seemingly pays or is convenient. We can also lie out of honour, because it’s a disgrace in certain cultures if you snitch on your friends...

Thus, as much as we believe in intersubjective co-operation as a product of human evolution (Harari, 2016), we have to realize that stories are not always as linear and simple as we would like them to be. Our capacity of sharing had also brought new opportunities for free-riding, manipulation, coercion, and lying (Dor, 2017). It’s the never ending struggle between light and dark. In conflict and polarisation and working with stories and narratives in these situations, we should stay aware of that.

And it just might be true that those who tell wonderful stories can also tell wonderful lies.

\(^{25}\) Quoted in Kurtz (2013)
CHAPTER 7 - MEMORY

In his famous novel “In Search Of Lost Time” Marcel Proust lets his narrator recall an episode from his childhood. As a child, his aunt had given him small madeleines (a French cake) dipped in tea. As an adult, he realizes that the act of smelling and tasting a madeleine, resurrects the context of his childhood.

Memories play an important role in our life- and community stories. They are often related to feelings and emotions. Also, when it comes to ‘truth’, one could refer to the saying that sometimes “memory plays tricks on us”, and it seems useful to assess this phenomenon as well when talking about conflicts, especially long-lasting conflicts. Practitioners who want to work with people’s stories of the past, have to be aware of what memories can cause, and of their influence on thinking about the past, the present and the future. Practitioners should also be aware of the mutual influence of autobiographical and collective memory. It can be that learning from memories (by questioning the stories and narratives that come from them) can deliver elements for transformation and future change.

Memories are diverse and they are found individually and collectively. Before writing was invented, and also even later, before book printing, it was important to preserve and remember the great elaborate (tribal / culture) stories. This meant an important role for oral storytelling and required memorizing, thus thinking in mnemonic patterns (e.g. using rhythm, repetition, alliteration, etc.). Otherwise epic (tribal) stories or transfer of (shamanic) knowledge about nature and natural remedies would have been lost. Oral memory works effectively with ‘heavy’ characters, whose deeds are monumental, memorable and commonly public. Colourless personalities cannot survive oral mnemonics (Ong, 1982).

Remembering something is not a linear activity from the past into the future in a cognitive and chronological sequence of events. Memories today are understood as a rich text that is important for many disciplines (Freeman, 2010, p. 263). Once upon a time it was important to preserve and remember the great elaborate stories to ensure an equally magnificent future. Personal memories and everyday events were dysfunctional elements that destroyed the grand, pure picture of history as it should appear (Radstone & Schwartz, 2010)26. Today, the memories of individuals are important to nuance the reality.

The evolution of narrative research has not stood still. From the neuro-scientific point of view there is one important part of our brain responsible for storing and retrieving information: it is called the hippocampus, a relatively small part of our brain but of essential importance for the functioning of the whole brain, especially when it comes to information- and knowledge storing and -retrieving (Spitzer, 2013). The hippocampus is continuously at work, creating connections and links of (and within) events or experiences. Thus, our memories are not only linked to facts, they are also linked to settings, emotions and sensory information (e.g. smell, taste and sound) which makes retrieval also quicker and more context related, similar to

storytelling. That way the hippocampus (and respective brain centres connected to it) is responsible for the ‘play-back’ of events: the episodic memory.

Much of current cognitive neuroscientific research suggests that we are able to flexibly combine elements of episodic memory in order to plan for the future, particularly in social contexts (Boyd, 2017). Autobiographic memory and imagination and constructive episodic memory can act as the basis for future episodic simulation (‘the ability to flexibly recombine elements of past experience into simulations of novel future events’), and on the social imagination engaged in fiction. However, we also need imagination to distinguish factual narratives from fiction (Boyd, 2017).

It was. It will never be again. Remember.
Paul Auster, ‘The Invention of Solitude’

7.1. AUTOBIOGRAPHIC AND COLLECTIVE MEMORY

As mentioned above, working (and living with) with memories is about forming patterns, working with stories of individuals or communities is about finding patterns. Remembering something is not simply a linear activity from the past into the future in a cognitive and chronological sequence of events. Memories are understood as a diverse domain that is important for many disciplines (Freeman, 2010, p. 263). On the one hand memories can be important to nuance reality, on the other hand memories can be building bricks for creating ‘realities’, for instance through re-combining of (episodic) elements.

7.1.1. AUTOBIOGRAPHIC MEMORIES

Involuntary memory
Proust’s ‘sweet’ memory of the madeleine explains the theory of involuntary memory (Mace, 2007), a component of memory that occurs when cues in everyday life evoke recollections of the past without conscious effort; the memory comes unsummoned, it is primarily an activity of the senses. A less sweet involuntary memory can be the popping of fireworks that remind some (traumatized) people of life in a war zone. Becoming conscious of that past restores the thread of memory (and in some cases the threat) and makes it re-experienced.

In addition, there is also the concept that involuntary memories have the tendency to trigger other involuntary memories that are related, which can lead to a so-called chaining effect (Mace, 2007). Involuntary memory would also confirm Lang et al. (1983), who stated that memory contains various interconnected components, in an emotional, sensorial and perceptual network which contains “hot” memories (emotions, sentiments, body sensations) and “cold” memories (contexts, facts), which may interact.

Voluntary memory
A voluntary memory is distinguished by a deliberate effort to recall, putting conscious effort into remembering events, people and places. Proust’s protagonist calls voluntary memories ‘incomplete’ because they do not encompass all of the past (the essence).

However, involuntary memories may actually be primed by asking people to do a deliberate effort and remember a past event, person or place (Mace 2007). Therefore an intentional question may trigger both types of memory.

‘Phantastic’ memory
We have mentioned that oral memory works better with ‘heavy characters’ and surprising situations that excite and stay with the audience. In a way, this mechanism is still present in daily life: as people tell stories (to themselves and others), they explore the areas of their worlds that hold the most opportunity and danger: the edges of experience. We pay attention to the edges because telling stories takes time and energy, and only at the edges is it worth the expense. “Traditional folk tales are never about people sowing wheat and baking bread but of babies who drink oceans and tumble-down huts full of gold” (Kurtz, 2013). As the ‘Hero’s Journey’ has also been mentioned as a personal (learning) journey into one’s inner space (and memories), it can also provide understanding both worlds, the outer and the inner, something stories offer their service for. Exploring the well-known simply does not always pay off. It could also explain why people present themselves as ‘heroes’, ‘survivors’ or ‘victims’ in their episodic stories as well as their (dominant) life narratives. We almost never have an ‘ordinary’ life.

Following that, Bruner (2004) argues that the culturally shaped linguistic and cognitive processes (that guide the self-telling of life narratives) acquire the power to structure our experiences and perceptions. They also organize memory, and segment and build purposely ‘events’ of a life. In the end we become the autobiographical narratives by which we “tell about” our lives. In the context of conflict resolution, people should be given the opportunity to share their memories and narratives, but also to (jointly) explore and question them. It can help to bring nuances and give events a place.

False memory
And then there is the phenomenon of false memories, which seem to be quite common (Ball, 2019). We all misremember things once in a while, but the fascinating thing is that these ‘memories’ can be rich in detail. In an interview in The Times, novelist Ian McEwan described the memory of an “incredibly beautiful” novella that he was convinced he’d written and then stowed somewhere in a drawer after he’d moved house. He looked all over the place for the work. “I saw it in my mind’s eye, the folder, the pages, the drawer it was in,” McEwan says. It never had happened, he could not have written it at the time he thought to remember, but it haunted him.

Thus remembering, suggests psychologist Rob Nash, isn’t a matter of retaining a fact from a mental drawer. It resembles telling stories – sometimes we forget details and invent new details. And they might not be congruent with reality: “memories are our reality” (Nash). It seems that in spite of research we still can’t distinguish true memories from false ones unless we can independently verify or falsify the remembered facts, which is either impossible or often not worth the effort. It does not matter if a terrible experience happened on a Tuesday or Wednesday. Professor Mark Howe, of City University of London, says: “false memories are produced by the same processes as true memories – they are reconstructed from whatever mental imprint remains of the original experience.” We may be able to play with memories, but memories can also ‘play’ our minds. Which is confirmed by prof. Damian Denys (2022) who said that memories and the stories that go with them are becoming increasingly disconnected from the original events. We seem to craft our memories with elements of the original event.

7.1.2. FROM AUTOBIOGRAPHIC MEMORY TO COLLECTIVE MEMORY, AND BACK
Memory can also be seen from these angles as well: It can be both about remembering a story that you are going to tell, and about gathering experiences and memories from your own life as a starting point for your own stories. Today there is more focus on preserving personal stories to create a broad and rich understanding of what it means to be human. In the personal story, the narrator or informant himself carries with him the raw material of the story.

Here you find both: the collective and the autobiographic memory (Dahlsveen, 2020), meaning that collective, cultural and historical memory accompany and influence the personal autobiographic.

What happens to us when history has to be rewritten (by or because of others)? It can lead to individual/personal crises. This tells us that collective memories are important to us and to the relationships with others. Dahlsveen (2020) mentions French philosopher and sociologist Maurice Halbwachs (1992), who believes that collective memories are mental images we have of the past, and that they arise in the face of the present. A collective memory is not something we inherit, it is a social construction for us to have a common foundation.

The autobiographic memory is based on something we individually/personally experience. This is a memory that tends to fade or disappear. It disappears if we do not consciously care for the memory and the relationship with those we experienced something with.

When it comes to the collective memory we often don’t have a direct experience of the original happening of the historic event that was the basis of the collective memory. But there is a group memory that exists outside of and lives beyond the individual, and it encourages us through the ‘commemorative’ events, where we gather to remember what had happened (Dahlsveen, 2020). Thus, an individual’s understanding of the past can be strongly linked to this group consciousness.

Commemoration offers collective memory tie to society and its conceptions where physical monuments and rituals fix and affirm collectivity (Halbwachs (1992)).

Recreation of what has happened is dependent of the context in which it is recreated. This can be a comfort. We should not (and we cannot) remember everything. However, what memories show us is that we are not alone, they keep us in a community.

7.1.3. THE ‘PHENOMENON’

In the context of collective memory Cynthia Kurtz (2013) explains the phenomenon of a story: its life history as it moves through time and society. In the domain of phenomenon a story works when it survives and spreads through the conversation and memory of people. Phenomenon deals with context: when and where the story’s events took place; when and where it first took form and was told; when and where it was retold; how it changed and developed over time; its current use, range and variations. It also includes interpretations of narrated events (in the story) and narrative events (storytellings) by storytellers, audiences, observers, subjects, and all other participants in the life of the story.

In the perspective of ‘we-they’ thinking, this may be imagined from a publication by Marschall (2018) on memories related to migrants, displaced people, exiles and diasporic communities, so often seen as ‘the others’. Their concept of ‘home’ is closely related to and dependent on memory. Home can be conceived of as repository of autobiographical and episodic memories; as a place of remembered material objects, spaces, landscapes, social relations and sensory experiences (Marschall, 2018).

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Descendants of migrants (e.g. 2nd or 3rd generation) and diasporic groups without personal memories of the homeland could be defined by the preservation (of former generations) of a cultural and historic memory of the dispersion: a collective identity formed by memories and myths of the homeland. Members of ethnic groups may not even consider themselves as belonging to a diaspora, until they begin to identify with such collective memories (and stories), from which a desire may arise, to travel back (Marschall, 2018) or to re-create it on site. As strong as collective memories and myths can contribute to cohesion, they can also be re-framed or distorted and can used as strong stimuli that lead to distrust, radicalisation, divergence and conflict. The rise of ISIS, the emergence of nationalist populists propagating a return to 'old' values and times, the invention of traditions that stress differences may serve as examples of that.

A research project by Bar-On and Kassem (2014) with Israeli and Palestinian students investigated this assumption. The participants were asked to interview their respective parents and grandparents, who gave their memories (and realities) and interpretations of the past, which led to (new) insights of the interviewers, and in some cases reinforced their current views. During initial uni-national meetings the participants could discuss their fears and concerns: “Will they listen to my (Israeli) story?” and “Afraid to express (negative) feelings within a Jewish-dominated university”. By the end of the project the Israeli group began clarifying for themselves some of the aspects of a constructed identity (e.g. heroism) that had been ambiguous previously. The Palestinian group had learned more about their families and that had strengthened their identification with their (Palestinian) history and community. In general, there had been an increase of mutual understanding, based on shared analysis of all stories and contexts.

Another example of a fusion of collective and personal memory and how this can impede individuals and communities is given Bas Heijne (2020). Many years after the Good Friday Agreement (from 1998) he had visited Belfast where former convicts gave guided tours, on the Catholic side ex-IRA, on the Protestant side the former enemy. Heijne tells an often experienced story: the Catholic guide emphasized the Catholic struggle and victims, many by name, the Protestant did the same. Visitors occasionally got the impression that the memories had to legitimize the bloody terror. It did not matter to the individual guides that ‘the other’ told the same thing; together they were part of the same story (and similar memories) that legitimized their existence. ‘It’ should not be forgotten. They transferred the tourists to each other, but at the handover, the men hardly looked at each other, if at all. There was peace, but the perception of each other had hardly changed (Heijne, 2020). It seemed more like a stretched truce.

7.1.4. MANIPULTING MEMORY, AND FAKE NEWS

It seems to be relatively easy to implant false and even fake memories in people by prompting them with fake evidence. False information can influence people’s beliefs and memories. It can even induce individuals to accuse another person of doing something they never did. A study by Nash & Wade (2009) revealed that fabricated evidence may, indeed, produce false eyewitness testimony.

In Ireland a study (Murphy et al., 2019) took place one week before the 2018 initiative to repeal the Eighth Amendment, which had made abortion illegal. 3.000 eligible voters were asked how they planned to vote in the upcoming referendum, and then offered six new stories about the referendum. Two of the stories were fabricated and featured inciting behaviour by supporters and opponents of the cause.

33 One of the authors (Frühmann) of this compendium had a very similar experience in Belfast

This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication reflects the views only of the author(s), and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.
The addressed persons then were asked if they had heard the stories before and if they had any memories of them. It turned out that nearly half of them reported having previous memories, with some even reporting details that were not contained in the fabricated stories. It implied that it may be easy for malicious persons to manipulate others by exploiting their (pro, contra) biases. It also reveals that it’s not easy for people to readjust their perspectives after manipulation. People thus seem to act on their fake memories, too.

7.1.5. UNPROCESSED MEMORIES

In his book *Man’s search for meaning* psychiatrist Victor Frankl (1962), a survivor of the Nazi concentration camps, writes: “We dislike talking about our experiences. No explanations are needed for those who have been inside,” and the others will understand neither how we felt then nor how we feel now.”

With respect to narrative and trauma one may state that traumatic experiences describe negative effects and the simple invitation to tell or repeat the traumatic stories has the undesired impact of re-traumatisation. As a result, the development of a literature and practice of “psychological debriefing” in 1970s and 1980s, in the area of (multi-professional) trauma interventions proved to have mixed and unsatisfactory results, in the end. Simply “talking about” or storying traumatic experiences does not ensure healing, changing the meanings attached to them, it simply creates traumatic stories. For the individual as well as for communities.

The war in Kosovo between Serbian military forces and the Kosovo Liberation Army was a severe human catastrophe in the Western Balkans. Even though the war has ended 20 years ago, its aftermath and impact are still visible. The situation in Kosovo remains fragile, especially in the northern part of Kosovo, populated mostly by Kosovo-Serbs. Kosovo declared its independence in 2008, but Serbia does not recognize Kosovo as a state. Various grave violations of human rights such as massacres, sexual violence, and burning of houses, are one of the most civic common memories of that war. 90% of Kosovo’s population had been expelled from their homes by the end of May 1999. Yet, memorisation and documentation of this experience are still lacking and the narratives about it are kept silent in discussions about the past.

Civilian suffering during the war was silenced by the dominant narratives of ‘heroes’ (the army officers now in political power) that were imposed through media and power relations. It resulted in glorification of commanders and belittled the civilian victims’ narratives. The collectively experienced trauma still makes the war and the experienced violence makes the traumas difficult to address, especially because there is no structural institutional support that deals with this psychological damage. People are left consuming information from the public domain, which contributed to deepening the militarization (heroization of the leaders) of the collective memory.

The Turkish occupation of Cyprus in 1974 led to mutual atrocities and a long list of (still) missing persons from both sides, with families on both sides waiting for them to return, which still has an impact on many families. The island is divided in two separate parts, now both with an almost ‘pure’ Greek Cypriot or Turkish Cypriot population.

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34 Note: in this case Auschwitz, but you can fill in any atrocity
35 Comment: Gavrilovici O. (2020) for this Compendium
36 Case offered by Guri B. (2020) for this Compendium
37 Case offered by Center for Social Innovation Cyprus
The narratives of elders or middle-aged, in both parts, who experienced the war are passed on to the younger generations and shape the collective memory. “I do not forget” is still the motto of the Greek to commemorate 1974, and this suggests that some people are still struggling with an unresolved past and are far from forgiveness and/or reconciliation.

However, it is also observed that a high percentage of young people develops a more open-minded perception and leaves the way open for good cooperation and communication between the two communities. Since 2003, nine roadblocks have been opened along the island and allow the passage for Greek and Turkish Cypriots between the territories.

Unfortunately, the current pandemic has led to a new division and roadblocks and has made Nicosia (again) “the last divided capital in the world”, very much to the regret of the older generation who want to revive the old days as this picture shows. The text on the sign of this Greek Cypriot protester says: “Turkish Cypriot compatriots. Those who try to separate us try in vain.” It suggests he did not forget.

De-constructing memories
Viktor Frankl was not as pessimistic as the quote above suggests. He shares a belief in man’s resilience by also saying: “Forces beyond your control can take away everything you possess except one thing: your freedom to choose how you will respond to the situation.” One can support each other, and narrative approaches can be of assistance and facilitate this response.

In order to safeguard the co-construction of alternative meanings about someone’s (or some community’s) life, which was endangered and traumatized, a narrative facilitator creates initially a platform for alternative, desirable descriptions of intentional identity – resurrecting from the person’s life exceptions from the trauma, examples of experiences of life and conclusions based on them which are preferred, desired, and cherished. Only after building such platforms of preferred personal description and understanding there is some ground for further exploration of traumatic experiences, their effects, and the resulting ideas, which can fuel agency. As we will elaborate in the next chapter.
CHAPTER 8 - IDENTITY AND (LIFE) NARRATIVES

Identity cannot be seen separate from stories. The concept of identity, its (erratic) fluidity its influence on the individual and the group, contributes to belonging, comparison, inclusion, and exclusion. Narrative identities can differ under circumstances, but some personal identity narratives can be rigid and dominate one’s life. Group narratives can become rigid and dominant as well and lead to (judgemental and discriminating) societal discourses. All identity narratives have a (hi)story and can be the cause of (or flare up) conflicts.

8.1. IDENTITY NARRATIVES

Our identity is always a tension between concurring with and distancing ourselves from the other, from the very start of our lives. In addition to this first process of identification ('mirroring') there is always a second process at work: the pursuit of autonomy and uniqueness (Verhaeghe, 2013). We are indeed unique; because we become a unique combination of everything we are and have been given from the beginning, from our environment and our educators. And - adding another perspective - to some extent we are all more or less identical because reflections ('mirroring') are also common within a certain group and a particular culture (Frühmann, Frezza, 2019).

From a postmodern social-constructionist and post-structuralist point of view, identities can be considered as situated performances (Thorne, 2006): people tell and enact as many different kinds of stories in social life as there are social situations within which to tell and enact them (Gergen, 1991). Moreover, personal narratives reveal multiple and conflicting self-expressions. Thus, identity is akin to a polyphonic novel that is authored by many different voices within the person, all of whom engage in dialogue with each other and with flesh-and-blood characters in the external world (Hermans, 1996).

Considering the identity as a narrative gives us to focus on six important principles (McAdams, 2008):

1. **The Self is storied**
   Human beings are storytellers by nature (Bruner, 1986), and stories are the best vehicle to conveying how (and why) a human agent, endowed with consciousness and motivated by intention, enacts desires and strives for goals over time (Ricoeur, 1984). The Self is both the storyteller and the stories that are told (James, 1892/1963).

2. **Stories integrate lives**
   Stories bring together into an understandable frame disparate ideas, characters, happenings, and other elements of life that were previously set apart. In other words, stories contribute to the formulation of an integrative narrative identity.

3. **Stories are told in social relationships**
   People tell stories to other people. As such, stories are social phenomena, told in accord with societal expectations and norms. The self as a narrative cannot be understood outside the context of its assumed listener or audience, with respect to which the story is designed to make a point or
produce a desired effect (Pasupathi, 2001). People narrate personal events in different ways for different listeners, and they may switch back and forth between different models of telling.

4. Stories change over time
   Autobiographical memory is unstable. People accumulate more experiences over time, some of which may prove to be so important as to make their way into narrative identity. As people’s motivations, goals, personal concerns, priorities and social positions change, their memories of important events in their life and the meanings they attribute to those events may also change (Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000).

5. Stories are cultural texts
   Life stories mirror the culture wherein the story is created and told (McAdams, 2006). Stories are born, grow, proliferate and die according to the norms, rules and traditions that prevail in a given society, according to a society’s implicit understanding of what counts as a ‘tellable’ life (Rosenwald, 1992).

6. Some stories are better than others
   MacIntyre (1981) argues that a life story always suggests a moral perspective, in that human characters are intentional, moral agents whose actions can always be construed from the standpoint of what is “good” and what is “bad” in a given society.

8.2 THE SINGLE STORY
   Our lives, our cultures, are composed of many overlapping stories. In her famous TED talk novelist Chimamanda Adichie (2009)38 tells the story of how she found her authentic cultural voice. She argues that inherent in the power of stories, is a danger—the danger of only knowing one story about a group. “The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story.” People’s identities can be reduced to the problem(s) and/or one event they are struggling with. They are ‘labelled’ as fugitive, unemployed, lazy, greedy. All other identities and character traits are subordinated to this. Single stories like those are closely linked to and can easily lead to victimisation. The moment you reduce yourself to one identity or file and start behaving accordingly, you quickly lose contact with others (Barel, 2020).

8.3. DOMINANT NARRATIVES REVISITED
   To illustrate this, the figure below (adapted from Morgan, 2000) shows how complex life is and how it consists of seemingly unrelated events. In this illustration some of the events are given emphasis and put into a coherent narrative of e.g. ‘being slow’. The events/stories might be from work situations, relations with family or friends, and memories of school. This narrative can become dominant, supported by selective memory and perception.

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38 https://youtu.be/BQR8x3CCo0A

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Events disconfirming are left unnoticed or untold as insignificant. It can also be supported by similar stories by family, friends and colleagues. Notice that it can work both ways: the intention of the narrative’s teller can influence the perception of his or her environment (Frühmann et al., 2016). What it shows foremost is that potential other and maybe more empowering narratives (and identities) are ruled out, and that the dominant narrative can be limiting and blocking alternatives, now and in the future, for the individual, groups and whole societies. As we have already pointed out in the ‘dark side of stories’.

People make stories, and stories make people.

Christien Brinkgrave

8.4. THE NARRATIVE APPROACH

When it comes to life narratives, and we can add ‘memories’ to that, Bruner (2004) explores two theses. One is the paradigmatic thinking and one is the narrative thinking. There is no other way of describing ‘lived time’ but in the form of a narrative. Although there are other temporal forms that can be imposed on the experience of time (clock, calendar, etc.), none can capture the sense of lived time. Even when we make narratives out of simple events (White, 1984), they will be seen as chosen with a view to their place in an implicit narrative (Bruner, 2004).

Mimesis is a poetic imitation of action, an important aspect of Ricoeur’s view (1984) on the relation between experience and narrative. Taking this into account, Bruner continues his to his second thesis: he sees the mimesis between life so-called and narrative as a two-way affair, which he compares to Aristotle’s ‘art imitates life’ and equally Oscar Wilde’s ‘life imitates art’. “Narrative imitates life, life imitates narrative. ‘Life’ in this sense is the same kind of construction of the human imagination as ‘narrative’ is.” (Bruner, 2004).

The story of one’s own life - and in the context of this book, conflict stories or narratives - may be a privileged one, but can be somehow clouded, because it is reflexive: the narrator and the protagonist are the same, which creates dilemmas. We, as listeners, cannot judge rightness by adequacy alone; an exciting tale is not necessarily ‘right’ or ‘true’. Cultural backgrounds (and its discourses) may already provide ‘templates’ for what has to be or can be told.

PRINCIPLES AND PRESUPPOSITIONS OF NARRATIVE PRACTICE (Fox, 2011; Gavrilovici, 2015)

- There is a large stock of human experiences in everybody’s life.
- Putting things into relationships is a primary meaning-making process.
- Storying experience is the way we give meaning to life.
- Stories have effects on somebody’s life.
- Stories can only describe a part of somebody’s life.
- There may be many stories emerging from somebody’s many experiences.
- We live multiple storied lives.
- Preferred identities may be constituted in connecting relevant desirable stories.
- Rich identity descriptions are sustaining preferred ways of living.
- The person is the person, the problem is the problem

We tend to ‘organize’ memory and intentionally build ‘events’ of a life from elements or segments and put them in order. We construct and we become these autobiographical narratives (Bruner, 2004). These can also be told in different versions and lengths, depending on the context in which
they are told (home, pub, therapy) and the audience to which they are told (child, adult, friend, colleague, etc.). Its *fabula* (gist, moral) will generally stay the same. And sometimes we simply lie, for better and/or for worse.

We could state that life as it is lived is richer than life than it is told. There are always events *not* confirming the dominant and self-evident ideas. Life is multi-storied, there are many different narratives (and stories) depending on perspectives, individuals, and groups. We have many potential identities and thus futures.

The narrative approach aims to make dominant narratives visible and to unpack them, to see them as just ideas... not truths. Externalization of the problem, visualizing it and exploring its relative relationships with a person, describing its voice and strategies, helps to make the problem ‘the problem’. At a certain point it becomes manageable for the individual, be it through counterstrategies or even bid it farewell (White, 2007).

In the long run, narrative practices enable individuals, groups and communities to construct alternative, preferred and achievable (future) narratives. These can empower people to take action and get to grips with life’s challenges. Preferred narratives are grounded in life as well, as they draw upon real events/stories *not* fitting the dominant one and connect these into a new, alternative narrative.

**8.4.1. NARRATIVE IDENTITY AND THE INDIVIDUAL**

According to the theory of narrative identity (McAdams, 2001), in that process we form an identity by integrating our life experiences (past, present) into an internalized, evolving narrative of the self that provides us with a sense of unity and purpose (present, future) in life. It includes episodes (events/stories), characters, settings, plots, and themes. It is ever evolving, and narrative sophistication increases with age (McAdams, McLean, 2013).

Narrative therapy (Morgan, 2000; White, 2007) teaches us that it can happen that a problem story (trauma, failure) takes too much power over the life of an individual (a ‘dominating’ narrative), leaving him/her with a feeling of failure and/or limited agency and can also lead to a feeling of exclusion. (see also figures 17 and 18).

**MAPS OF NARRATIVE PRACTICE**

Gavrilovici (2017) summarizes the narrative therapy literature and practices emerging from the foundational work Michael White from 1980s on; White developed a series of narrative practices that support narrative conversations guided by a genuinely curious and respectful facilitator:

- ‘Externalizing’ conversations (Statement of position map 1)
- ‘Unique outcomes’ conversations (Statement of position map 2)
- ‘Re-authoring’ conversations
- ‘Re-membering’ conversations
- ‘Absent but Implicit’ conversations
- ‘Outsider witnessing’ conversations
- ‘Definitional ceremony’ conversations

Other individual, family, group, organizational or community development narrative practices are based on previous maps of narrative practices in connection with other expressive modalities (promoted by David Denborough from Dulwich Centre, Australia, and other generative collaborators) such as:

- ‘Tree of Life’ practice
- ‘Thread of Life’ practice
- ‘Team of Life’ practice, etc
Narrative Practices can be seen as a non-expert, anti-oppressive, and social justice responses (Williams and Baumgartner, 2014). They are not neutral. They adopt a position against the dehumanizing effects of power interactions.

According to Carr (2000) “the narrative approach rests on the assumption that narratives are not representations of reflections of identities, lives and problems” (p. 17) but that they constitute identities, an idea he shares with Bruner. The therapeutic process in narrative practice supports the ‘re-authoring’ of a self-story, an identity supporting narrative, and this is acting countering the problematic descriptions and stories.

Based on the basic narrative principle of “the person is the person, the problem is the problem” and the narrative conception that putting things into relationships we arrive at new meanings (as stories are meaning bearers) a number of narrative practices which are used in narrative therapy and in other influential relationships.

Change facilitators can learn from narrative therapists, who use the narrative practice of externalizing conversations, also named “statement of position map 1” by Michael White (2007), the founder of narrative therapy. This practice is inquiring the person in the centre about his/her of the problem, describing it richly, and arriving to a negotiated name expressed in person’s familiar, experiential terms. Then, there is an exploration of problems that govern or dominate people’s lives.

Following that comes an invitation to express the ways that the person prefers to live their life, according to intentional, non-structuralist descriptions of identity such as, intentions, desires, wishes, hopes, purposes, aims, values, principles, horizons for the future, etc. In supporting this co-editing context, the narrative facilitator supports people to rewrite alternative preferred stories by which they can continue their lives and identify a platform to stand on in order to tackle the problematic effects if they are still present.

Recognizing the impact of dominant narratives and the skills to author new ones can catapult people from a place of acceptance (of the system and their role in it) to a place of action, becoming agents of change. By inviting people to reflect on the systems that shape their lives this may give people a critical awareness as to the forces that affect their own story (Saltmarshe, 2018).
At a macro-level, it may influence narratives held by policymakers and the public (including social media), so that structural opportunities can arise that meet the aspirations of those who need to change.
8.4.2. NARRATIVE IDENTITY AND THE GROUP

Most of us grow up with stories of certain family members, the stories of their successes and the stories of their failures and even ‘family secrets’. The stories and images from our family and relatives, the social class we belong to, the culture we are part of, all contribute to the Big Story, the narrative whole that is shared by a broader group, resulting in a more or less shared identity.

More or less, because the moment we enlarge or decrease a group (family, village, region, nation...) the identity will shift. The basis, however, will always be a ‘real’ story whose embedding can become more and more vague and mythical. And yet, these stories give colour and power to our identities. They tell us about values and how to live together.

These narratives allow us to develop different identities, depending on neighbourhood and social class or - in current times – social media in which we are presenting ourselves, as individuals and as communities. Here we enter in the borderland between identity and image, of how we want to be perceived and how we are perceived, and how we perceive others.

We enter the duality of ‘we’ and the ‘other’ and the dividing stories and narratives connected to that: the dominant narratives and discourses, and conflicts and polarisation that potentially emerge from those.

Examples are many in society, be it people with ADHD, divorced fathers, unemployed people aged 50+, LGBT people, ethnic minorities, women etc. In every community or society there are dominant narratives, they are also referred to as social discourses. In Western societies these are, for example, the white, often male/heterosexual, Judeo-Christian narratives, India is still a caste society. Dominant narratives determine the norms and anything that deviates from them is worthless (Barel 2020).

8.4.3. FACILITATING AWARENESS AND CHANGE

As mentioned earlier, in more open societies one may not notice dominant (and disqualifying) narratives right away, but on a deeper and more subtle level they are constantly present. Once you’re aware of it, you’ll see it all the time, wherever people get in touch with each other. One might also become aware that oneself shares some dominant views. In more closed societies dominant narratives dictate norms and submission to them, often disguised as (national) ‘values’ and ‘identity’. These also include the ‘superior we’ vs. the ‘inferior them’ narratives. The rise of populism suggests a desire for more closed societies.

When it comes to conflicts and polarization, the basic assumption is that conflicts arise because we start fighting about the truth – the true story about who we are or what happened. In narrative mediation the idea about the truth and the facts are put on a hold39. The conflict stories that the parties share are not seen as referring to facts. Instead we look at what the parties do with the stories, what they are performing, how they position themselves in a favourable position and thus disqualify (either themselves or) the other, and which (fictional) ideas and discourses each of them are drawing upon to do this, which keeps the conflict alive.

Examples of positioning oneself in a more favourable position than “the other” could be: “I am being rational and reasonable, you are being irrational and unreasonable; out of humanity we have to take care of a certain population group - you are being inhumane if you disagree”; etc.

Drivers towards dominant narratives

All leads to unwelcome causes and effects that drive both parties into self-fulfilling (dominant) narratives and (social) discourses. They can create vicious circles, e.g. when a chance historical

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situation (discovery of a continent) is translated into a rigid social system (slavery), which can influence the social structure for hundreds of years. These discourses not only influence ‘we-they’ perception and -thinking, but also influence the self-perception of the (stigmatised) individuals or groups.

In figure 17 some of the drivers / causes are summed up

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Individual / Group</th>
<th>Society</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal Story(ies)</td>
<td>Story(ies) about “the other(s)”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘IDENTITY’ CAUSES:</td>
<td>‘IMAGE’ CAUSES:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poverty</td>
<td>Economy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual preference (LGBT)</td>
<td>Migration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upbringing</td>
<td>Sexual preference (taboos)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traumas (family, war, rape, bullying etc)</td>
<td>Xenophobia</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
<td>Nationalism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion (also: potentially traumatic)</td>
<td>‘Culture’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literacy (low / illiterate)</td>
<td>Political agendas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age...</td>
<td>General knowledge of public</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EFFECTS → DOMINANT NARRATIVES (self-positioning):</td>
<td>MEDIA / politics:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Success</td>
<td>selective information...</td>
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<td>Failure</td>
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<td>Winner</td>
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<td>Loser</td>
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<td>Misfit</td>
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<td>Beliefs</td>
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<td>Blame</td>
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<td>Pride</td>
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<tr>
<td>FEELING OF EXCLUSION</td>
<td>EXCLUSION</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FACTS (interpreted by teller) → FICTIONS</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 23: Self-fulfilling discourses

Objectives for change – effects of intervention

For change facilitators it is important to spend time on exploring and externalising these different ideas to allow the parties to become aware and understand the effect of living according to these ideas - their positive and negative effects - on themselves and on others. It creates an opportunity to take a stand in opposition to these ideas or at least understand that they are just ideas and others might have been recruited into thinking differently for equally valid reasons...

Change should therefore not come from a problem solving approach but from a solution-focused approach, ‘merely’ facilitated by the story worker / facilitator. By this the individual (and or group) will arrive at a solution he ‘owns’ and can continue with.

The possible positive effects of an intervention through working with stories for (stigmatised, discriminated) individuals or groups are:

- Awareness of the dominant narrative, realistic self-perception, self-confidence (take leave from past / dominant narrative), (finding) alternative (future) stories, positive attitude, action readiness and planning, actual action, (perceived and actual) INCLUSION.

The possible positive effects of an intervention through working with stories for the dominant (discriminating, disapproving) group:

- (Critical) awareness of dominant discourse, realistic perception of other, respect for other, acceptance of other, action readiness, (active) support, and INCLUSION.
“To love someone is to put yourself in their place, we say, which is to put yourself in their story, or figure out how to tell yourself their story. Which means that a place is a story, and stories are geography, and empathy is first of all an act of imagination, a storytellers art, and then a way of traveling from here to there.”
Rebecca Solnit in “The Faraway Nearby”

CHAPTER 9 - EMPATHY AND SYMPATHY

In real life we are inadvertently influenced emotionally by others. Again, we are not the rational beings we think we are. Like other social creatures we have the capacity of empathy: the ability to identify with another’s distress - a catalyst for compassion and charity.
We are (unconsciously) mirroring someone else’s behaviour or emotion, our brains are built to feel another’s pain. There must be an adaptive and social value of that for us. If we know how to empathize, can we manipulate or hurt others with it as well? Empathy seems to differ from sympathy, but both have a meaning in relationships.

9.1. MIRROR, MIRROR

In the 16th century the French philosopher Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592) already was convinced of the power of body language and sincere interest in the other. In the case of e.g. grief and sympathy, he wrote in his ‘Essais’, the role of cognition is grossly overrated compared to physical proximity, which is, among other things, our innate ability to ‘follow’ the other’s behaviour, “to mirror” it because it allows us to get closer to the other and by that allows us to 'disarm' him, so to speak.
According to recent research discoveries, the so-called "mirror neurons" or "empathic" neurons in our brains seem to be responsible for that behaviour. Mirror neurons endow us with the electrical circuit to experience empathy.
A Swedish research (Dimberg et al., 2000) concluded that people automatically mimicked expressions they saw on a monitor, even when they were shown subliminally in between images of landscapes. The participants thought they were looking at landscapes, but felt either good or bad, depending on the picture of smiles of frowns. Our facial muscles unconsciously copy these faces, which later give us feedback about how we feel.

9.2. EMPATHIC CONNECTION AND SYMPATHY

“Our empathic connection with others is something like an unseen handshake between bodies, which we perceive as a ‘vibration’ that can be positive and inspiring, or poisonous and exhausting.” (De Waal, 2019). The end of this quote seems slightly provocative. Empathy is mostly described as ‘walking in the shoes of another’, comparing our perspectives with that of the other, and determining what could be of help to the other. We do not expect a ‘dark side’ of empathy, but we can assume it. Where there is light, there is also dark.

In ‘I Thought it Was Just Me (But It Isn't)’, psychologist Brené Brown refers to Theresa Wiseman’s four characteristics of empathy:

40 Quoted in Barel A. (2020), Storytelling en de wereld. Uitgeverij IT&FB Amsterdam
Seeing the world as others see it - this requires you to put your own 'worries' aside to see the situation through the eyes of someone you love, or feel with. 

Nonjudgment - judging someone else's way of thinking limits experience and is an attempt to protect ourselves from the pain of the situation. 

Understanding someone else's feelings - We need to be in touch with our own feelings to understand someone else's behaviour. Again, this requires you to put aside your own "worries" to focus on the other person with whom you feel compassion. 

Expressing your understanding of someone else's feelings - instead of saying, "But you have..." or "It could be worse..." try, "I've been through it too, and...

Brown explains that empathy is a skill that can be strengthened by practicing it and encourages people to give and receive it often. By receiving empathy, we not only understand how good it feels to be heard and accepted, we also gain a better understanding of the strength and courage it takes to be vulnerable.41 “Empathy is connecting with the emotion that someone is experiencing, not the event or the circumstance” (Brown, 2012). Therefore it does not require to have the exact same experiences as the story the other person shares with us. 

In her famous animated video on Empathy and Sympathy Brown42 suggests that “empathy fuels connection, sympathy drives disconnection”, and “empathy is feeling with people in contrast with sympathy, which is feeling for people. In the video Brown ridicules ‘sympathy’, she suggests a shallowness and egotism in the ‘sympathising’ person (“My marriage is falling apart.” “At least, you have a marriage...”.)

As much as the four empathy-characteristics Brown mentions cover a lot of terrain, it is worth to investigate other views on empathy and sympathy.

In his book 'The Age of Empathy' (2009) De Waal explains the (evolutionary) benefits and rewards of empathy: 

Comfort
Human children “by one year of age... spontaneously comfort people in distress.” Distress at the sign of another’s pain is “an impulse over which we exert no control: it grabs us instantaneously, like a reflex.” (De Waal, 2009)

Consolation
As species become more flexibly social, such sympathy deepens: chimpanzees readily offer consolations to victims of aggression.

Recognition
Empathy arises from recognizing other’s desires and goals, a capacity necessary in an individualized social species. Darwin had already noted that “many animals certainly sympathize with each other’s distress or danger”, as modern laboratory research confirms (de Waal, 2009).

He defines three layers of empathy and he illustrates it with Russian puppets:
1. First layer (State Matching): A correspondence of mood (state matching) will evoke emotional contagiousness (most species). Around this core, evolution has been building up ever more refined capacities, like feeling with the other and taking perspective. 
2. Second layer (Sympathetic Concern): care for others is expressed in consolation (primates and humans) 
3. Third layer (Perception Taking): taking perspective of the other (walking in the shoes of the other,

41 Quoted in Barel A. (2020), Storytelling en de wereld. Uitgeverij IT&FB Amsterdam 
42 https://youtu.be/1Evwgu369iw
we have the power of imagination) will lead to targeted help (mostly present in humans).

Figure 24: after De Waal (2009, p. 231)

Children, even before the age of 2 already understand what is going on with someone who is suffering, they show ‘empathetic concern’, try to alleviate pain: touching, hugging (expressions of sympathy).

Empathy deprivation
To be able to show empathy, you have to be able to control your own feelings (suffering, grief, pain). De Waal (2019) points to a serious disturbance of emotional life: when individuals are deprived of a caring environment while they grow up. It severs emotional regulation. He gives an account of orphanages in Romania during the Ceaucescu period. These children grew up without affection, with supervisors who abused them and incited them to violence against others. Children like these develop an excessive focus on negative information, and are easily frightened. Their emotional regulation is permanently disrupted. The Romanian orphanages became known as ‘the slaughterhouses of the soul’. This is an extreme example how empathic abilities can become impaired.

9.2.1. A NEUTRAL CAPACITY
In his recent publication on emotions De Waal (2019) makes an interesting, diverging distinction between empathy and sympathy that offers suggestions when we think in terms of communication and action.

Empathy, he states, is a neutral capacity. It can be used for better or for worse (“poisonous”), depending on someone’s intentions. We probably have to realise that sympathy is mostly positive, but that this does not necessarily apply to empathy. There are individuals (e.g. psychopaths), who use their ability to understand to torment others. “Care and cruelty have more in common than we think. They’re two sides of the same coin” (De Waal, 2019).

Empathy seeks information about others and helps to understand their situation, whereas sympathy is about actual concern for others and the desire to improve their situation. Empathy is ‘in the skin’ of the other person, sympathy is less spontaneous, and more subject to calculation. And this is where it might differ from Brown’s definition.
Sympathy is *action-oriented* (De Waal, 2019), it often has its roots in empathy, but it generally goes further. Going ‘into the skin’ of a drowning person (‘Einfühlung’) will not prevent drowning, jumping into the water and rescue the other will. The action is thus based on empathy, insight and/or calculation.

### 9.2.2. MORALITY AND SOCIETY

Other perspectives are offered in an analytical article by Fagiano (2016) wherein he wonders if empathetic concern is *moral* and if empathy is necessary for *morality*. He quotes ethicist Michael Slote who states that sympathy is feeling for someone, while empathy would be feeling into someone’s experience. One could sympathize with you, caring deeply for your well-being, feel your depression or humiliation, without empathising with your pain, meaning that this feeling would be *involuntarily* aroused in you.

Slote stresses the intention of empathy, as a *mechanism* that allows moral approval or disapproval. In other words, an empathetic person will be moved when the empathetic action of the other person reflects their own empathetic warmth, but will feel repelled when the other feigns empathy. Similar to De Waal’s observation, empathy is thus defined as a morally *neutral* phenomenon, which can be used for various purposes.

When we look to society and politics, Fagiano (2016) also signals a trend – *discursive power* – that shapes a moral discourse, a downward psychological move towards ‘empathic sensing’, a form of *social power* that structures moral discourses. Which means that projections of moral concern or care are *imposed* on ‘weaker’ persons by empowered persons. Given the current communication of populists and autocrats, this is a trend we should not underestimate. For example, when asked why he never talked about civilian casualties during the war in Iraq, Donald Rumsfeld, the former Secretary of Defence of the United States, answered: “Oh well, we don’t count other people’s corpses.”

Empathy for ‘other’ people, says de Waal (2009), is precisely what the world has a greater shortage than of oil. And he adds: ‘If I were God, I would do something about the range of empathy’.

> “...On every level, on the most everyday level, just imagine each other. When we quarrel, when we complain, imagine each other precisely at the very moment when we feel that we are one hundred percent right”.
> Amos Oz (2012)

Empathy and sympathy are not redundant qualities, on the contrary. If we stay aware of the pitfalls, they have the potential to make us super co-operators; we need each other to survive and to succeed. Empathy would never have evolved if it did not offer an advantage: it undoubtedly contributes to a community in which individuals can count on each other (De Waal, 2019). All of the above opens perspectives to a more pluralistic view of empathy and sympathy that does justice not only to the individual but also to her or his current situation or context. The same would apply to (homogenous) communities. Especially when it comes to listening to stories.

### 9.3. EMPATHIC LISTENING

*Listening is not our strong suit, and in conflict talks, people are often so much taken by their emotions and feelings that genuine listening falls short.*

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43 In Fagiano (2016)

44 Quoted in De Waal F. (2009), The Age of Empathy - Nature’s Lessons for a Kinder Society, Harmony Books
There is a difference between hearing and listening. Hearing (like taste, touch, vision) is one of our natural senses. We always hear something, it does not necessarily require special attention. Listening, however, requires focus and attention. Listening is intentional (indeed, like telling) and to a single ‘message’ (e.g. a story, music).

Most of us are born with hearing but we develop listening by learning in (social) contexts. In most cases our listening skills and competences are developed during our early years (e.g. within a family setting). Listening can even have a survival value: by listening to the experiences of others we are also learning. It ‘pays’ to listen.

Telling on the other hand can be limited to sending. Once we tell a story we are also obliged to receive and ‘listen’ (with our eyes) what is going on in our audience, be it one person or a group.

9.3.1. INTERACTION BETWEEN TELLER AND LISTENER

It can be difficult for people who have the feeling that the story they tell doesn’t matter and isn’t worth to be told. Their self-esteem and self-confidence will constantly be put to the test. Sometimes inadequate command of language (e.g. low literacy, illiteracy, second language) can also be a factor contributing to an inferiority complex. If you have the feeling that you cannot make yourself understood adequately, you will assume that others will not listen or will not understand.

Additionally, when it comes to sharing personal experiences or stories (which provides a place for self-verification), distracted listeners can undermine this process, and they not only elicit shorter stories (with less information) but they also induce negative emotion in the teller (Pasupathi & Rich, 2005). It can also lead the teller to distance himself from that story (or event) as representative of the “usual” self. Inattentive or distracted listeners give little support to the joint project of story sharing.

They also fail to acknowledge the tellers meaning and may even impair the story told – their memory of the story would be ‘heuristic’ in the best case, which would show little respect for the story and the teller (Pasupathi & Rich, 2005). It does not matter if distracted listeners are really unresponsive, when they are perceived as unresponsive and disagreeable, things already move the wrong way. If the teller stops expecting anything, story sharing will cease, and so will the interest in undertaking novel activities (Pasupathi & Rich, 2005). Put disappointed, vulnerable, (culturally) diverse or conflict-ridden people in a room and ask them to exchange stories, nothing much will happen (Barel, 2020). It requires courage.

Costello (2017) defines listening as a co-created reality: “Effective (story) listening will always reveal the power of joining, or identifying in with the speaker, and making someone feel that they are not alone, that they are not isolated in their experience of need, and out of that sharing comes a team, a support network, etc.”

9.3.2. HOW TO BE PREPARED TO LISTEN

To start with, there is something worth considering: the non-judgemental stance. Montaigne (1533-1592) already favoured ‘holding back’ (‘Je soutiens’), a healthy self-questioning when it comes to ‘regiment, arrange and fixing truth’. He was able to look upon himself with suspension of judgement and questioned everything, including his own (sometimes failing) memories and (deceiving) associations when listening to someone else’s story. All too often we listen to what we think we hear or think we want to hear.

9.3.2.1. THE FOUR EARS

When it comes to the interaction between teller and listener, Schulz von Thun (2012) offers the four ears-model with four facets for the teller’s message and the listener’s interpretation: a. factual information, b. self-revelation, c. relationship, and d. appeal. The listener - he suggests - has four ears with which he is able to receive and interpret the message. Depending on to which of the four ears he gives priority, the interaction can differ. Switching off (unconsciously) one or more of the ears can change the course of the conversation. Although this model may feel as ‘explanatory’, it gives us tools to better understand processes that come in handy when telling and listening.

a. Factual information (“What is he informing me about?”): This fact-layer contains statements about data or facts by the teller. With the fact-ear the listener seeks to understand the matter and examines if the message is true/untrue, relevant/irrelevant, or complete/incomplete.

b. Self-revelation (“What does he (want to) reveal about himself?”): The teller says something about himself, e.g. his motives, values, emotions, or feelings. This can be a conscious (intentional) as well as an unintended disclosure. He/she may try to show himself from the best side (self-promotion), hide or disguise negatively perceived parts of his personality, or remain silent. With the self-revealing ear the listener explores the information about the sender, and while doing so he turns to personal diagnostics (“Who is she/he?” or “What’s wrong with him/her right now?”). This way of listening has its pitfalls: immunisation when the ‘other’ only becomes a diagnosed object, or when a fact is only accepted after psychologization. Active, empathic listening, and not judging the feelings and thoughts of the narrator, leaves the narrator in his value.

c. Relationship (“What does he think about me” or “How we relate to each other”): In this layer two messages are contained: what the teller thinks of the listener, and how he/she sees their relationship. The listener is personally affected, depending on the chosen articulation, intonation and body language of the teller – does he/she express respect, esteem, sympathy, indifference, or total disinterest? Depending on which message the listener experiences with the relationship-ear, he/she could feel either depressed or accepted, or patronized. If the listener does not feel well within this situation, problems can arise; good communication hinges on mutual appreciation.

d. Appeal (“What does he want me to do”): This facet is all about intention of the teller (desires, wishes, advice, instruction, behavioural effects). When somebody tells something, he usually wants an effect or impact; the moment he states something it will affect something. The purpose of appeal is do or refrain from doing: thinking, feeling; influencing can be more or less open (e.g. advising, informing vs. manipulating). With his appeal ear open the listener may ask himself: “What should I do, feel or think now? Why this story? Where does he/she want to take me or want me to go?” In many listeners, the implicit desire to meet the unspoken expectation of the other may lead to an oversized appeal ear, and although he is self-conscious, it could diminish the ‘antenna’ for his own feelings and needs – the perception of a soft appeal can automatically trigger an appropriate reaction that may overshadow one’s personality.

*You cannot connect to people if you aren’t in their world.*

Melis Senova (2017)

### 9.3.2.2. THE LISTENING CHANNELS
A more practice-oriented perspective and an invitation to become better listeners is offered by Senova (2017) with a useful ‘channelled’ checklist when it comes to tuning into empathic listening. It covers the problems that Montaigne had already identified (assessing, interrupting, associating), the recognition and courage that Barel (2020) wants to give to teller and listener, and the safety, inclusion and (intentional) appreciation the listener can offer the teller (Costello, 2017).

Senova (2017) explains that a scientific perspective of verbal communication is that, as we speak, audible symbols (words) carry meaning. The listener will either be open to receiving the (meaningful) symbol or not. If the opportunity for resonance is not there, there may be a greater probability for dissonance.

As a teller, it is useful to know which listening channel your audience is using. It offers insight in what ‘frequency’ you need to transmit at. For example, if the other listens from critical channel you need to communicate about practical evidence.

The same mechanism applies to the listener. When he is absorbed in his world, he will miss important (often subtle) cues. These are the listening channels Senova wants teller and listener to be aware of:

Channel 0
Tuned out (you are not present). This can make the other feel disempowered.
Check, and ask yourself:
“Am I actually listening? Would I be able to answer a question if someone asked me one right now?”

Channel 1
Self (judgemental, listening to self). This can be frustrating to the teller.
Check, and ask yourself:
“Am I just waiting for them to stop talking so I can say my important bit? Am I practising what I’m about to say next, instead of listening intently to what is being said now?”

Channel 2
Agreement (familiar, listening for similarity). This may make the teller feel incomplete.
Check, and ask yourself:
“Am I listening for what is similar to what I already know, or am I focused on whether or not they agree with what I’ve just said? Am I looking for allies in this situation?”

Channel 3
Critical (factual, listening for evidence). This can be tiring for the storyteller, but it can help him/her to think about his story.
Check, and ask yourself:
“Am I listening for proof that what they are saying is right? Am I looking for evidence to back up their story / work?”

Channel 4
Empathic (connected, listening from the speaker’s / teller’s perspective). The teller feels understood and connected. You have created a safe space and trust (maybe even intimacy) for him/her to carry on.
Check, and ask yourself:
“Am I listening from a place that has no other motive but to connect with their perspective? Do I understand what it feels like to have that perspective?”

Channel 5
Generative (insight, listening from possibility). The teller feels supported, maybe even excited.
Check, and ask yourself:
“Am using my empathy and insight into their context and motivation to help achieve the best outcome? Have I taken a position of possibility, to ensure that we are able to generate a meaningful alternative?”
9.3.3. BEING AWARE OF THE LISTENER

Now we know that listeners can wander off while listening (and sometimes even get into an ‘altered state of mind’), a probably unexpected influence on listening abilities can be their occupation or training (Sturm, 1999; in this study e.g. teachers, nurses). We could therefore also add cultural background, or personal histories. It only shows that the teller has to be aware of who his or her audience is. Additionally, some other of Sturm’s findings were that for listeners the type of story was also important. The more the story was connected to interests, an emotional relation to an issue or a protagonist, the better it ‘landed’. Also, the teller’s perceptible involvement (‘related to the story’) added to the appreciation and adequate listening to the story.

In short:
Feeling empathy and sympathy, listening with empathy, expressing empathy and acting sympathetically all answer to people’s need or their search for responsiveness. Empathy offers the opportunity to verify their self-perceptions (“I see you”) and opens a door to possible resolutions (‘What can I do to help you’). Storytelling occasions are full of potential for change and transformation when others - the listeners - can be induced to help.

9.4. DOUBLE LISTENING

Regarding conflict situations between two parties (and the activities in the toolkit) we would like to add some additional practical listening tips from experienced conflict mediators.

Active (empathic) listening, paraphrasing, and reflecting are skills that provide parties with acknowledgement for what they have told. What is mostly not realised is that any piece of listening is necessarily selective. There are multiple readings of any conflict and it matters which one(s) we listen to (Monk & Winslade, 2013, p. 44). Even the most active listening requires to select some representation of the teller’s experience ahead of possible other candidates, and context plays a role in that as well.

Conflict stories are always multiple stories, and obviously the two parties will always have different stories as to what has happened or is happening. Facts will be selected and arranged with different emphasis and/or in a different order. As Monk & Winslade (2013 p. 45) demonstrate, even one person’s account can contain two different stories. People actively rule out competing accounts and state their preference for the account they want a listener to attend to.

Active listening (and selecting one story for paraphrasing and reflecting) can be extended to listen and to respond to both stories. Normally, one story has become dominant and has narrowed the narrative focus.

However, double listening (a term coined by Michael White, 2007) means listening at the same time for expressions of the conflict story and for elements of other stories, particularly for those elements that might become part of a possible counter-story (Monk & Winslade, 2013, p.46). It involves listening for both, the dominant story, and other possible stories aside, behind or underneath, and it also involves listening to bifurcations where different stories part company. Thus, it pays to listen ‘double’ for little ironies, exceptions (unique outcomes – White, 2007), actions or elements that contradict the escalation, etc. (Monk & Winslade, 2013, p. 47).

9.4.1. Double listening to two stories within the same sentence

‘You may think that I sound selfish when I say I want the children to stay mostly with me, but actually I am thinking of the children’s best interest.’
The teller is trying to avoid one possible reading (selfishness-story) in favour of another one (caring for children). Thus, there are two stories at work here, whereby the word ‘but’ indicates the separation. Other separating words/expressions may be ‘and’, ‘(and) yet’, ‘or’, ‘on the other hand’, ‘and because of that...’, and similar. Monk & Winslade (2013) suggest that it is better to appreciate the two stories as competing and invite the parties to think about which story deserves to be nurtured and grown.

9.4.2. Double listening to two stories within the same sentence
People (usually) show up for mediation for several reasons. One of the reasons might be a sense of hope. Rather than always beginning a mediation process by defining the problem, it is possible to ask participants to articulate this sense of hope.

Facilitator: “My guess is that, coming here today, you had some sense of hope about [   ], what today might lead to. I wonder whether you/we could start speaking about that?”
Asking for people’s hopes elicits something bigger than personal desires (Monk & Winslade, 2013, p.47). It can pave the road to a ‘civil conversation’.
Double listening (with two parties) requires hearing two stories (party 1, party 2), exploring arguments, but also exploring openings for a counter story.

Facilitator (to party 1): “I’m interested in your hope for… Help me understand why that is important for you?”
→ 1st party’s story
Facilitator (to party 2): “Is that important to you as well or do you have some other hopes...?”
→ 2nd party’s story (maybe with a possible opening)
Facilitator (to party 1): “What would it look like from your point of view?”
Etc.
If the conversation slips and escalates again into an argument, the facilitator may ask the parties something like:

“Does this resemble the fighting you said you were hoping to step out or the civil conversation we hoped to achieve? Which would you prefer?”

9.4.3. Double listening to the expression of emotion
Earlier in this compendium we presented ‘intentions’ (of stories, but also of emotions). Monk & Winslade (2013) take as a starting point the assumption that an emotional experience is not just an event that affects the individual but also a relational exchange, which opens a range of possibilities. Expressing an emotion could thus not only be considered as an internal physiological event but also as a performance with an intended effect (e.g. intimidation, manipulation). In this way it might be a practice of power, an action upon others’ actions (Monk & Winslade, 2013, p. 51).

In this case, the authors state, Michael White’s idea of the absent but implicit (White, 2000, p. 153) can be useful. It helps to ask, for example, with something one is angry about, what could help ‘flipping the coin’. Double listening allows to inquire into both the source of anger (What are you not happy with?) and to flip it over and inquire about the absent but implicit (And what would you prefer?). There is always an implicit story (of hope, peace, etc.) that has been lost and can be retrieved again. Double listening allows us to hear both the emotion that is present and the one that is absent but implicit (Monk & Winslade, 2013, p. 52).

9.4.4. Double listening and exceptions to a dominant story
In addition to the above, double listening can alert facilitators and/or mediators to exceptions to the dominance of a conflict story. Sometimes people become exhausted, they stop fighting and
withdraw (e.g. in the reduction/recovery phase). They refuse further escalation, or establish a ‘truce’, they opt for breaks of calmness. These are not just gaps in a conflict narrative but also significant openings to a different narrative. Monk & Winslade (p. 53) offer examples of questions for the facilitator:

“How come it was important to you to not allow things to escalate further?”
“Does it suggest how you would like to change the direction of where things have been heading?”
“Does it indicate what you value and don’t want to see damage any further?”

There can also be moments of cooperation that manifest themselves in the side-lines:

“So in the middle of arguments you were able to set things aside and ensure [ ]... How did you manage that?”

Sometimes double listening can involve hearing the difference between a story that is stalled at the point of an intention and a more dominant story has been acted upon: ‘I have been feeling bad about what I said last time and I have been trying to get up the courage to apologise. But... the arguments just keep getting in the way of doing that.’

Again, there is one story shadowing another one. The facilitator can open a narrative line from that stalled intention:

“So, the arguments keep interfering with your intention to apologise. But if that interference were not happening, what sort of apology might you want to offer?”

Obviously, double listening requires training. But it can turn out a valuable approach, especially because it is a chance to give back a sense of agency to the parties in a conflict, rather than a sense of being a victim to the situation and/or a lack of choice (Monk & Winslade, p. 57).
CHAPTER 10 - CULTURAL AND CONTEXTUAL SENSITIVITY

Everything is happening in a context (e.g. society, culture, community, family, school, work). Individuals and groups can come from the same culture as ours, but a practitioner/facilitator might also encounter individuals from other cultures, sometimes even groups consisting of diverse cultural backgrounds. It would be asked too much to know everything about their cultures (history, laws, art, etc.), but one will have to go to work with them and their stories. Thinking of diversity, consider gender, literacy, education, religion, profession, age and any possible mixture of all that. In addition, ‘power’ and ‘power relationships’ also influence behaviour, individually and in and between groups.

10.1. CULTURAL SENSITIVITY
Cultural sensitivity is being aware that cultural differences and similarities between people exist without assigning them a value – positive or negative, better or worse, right or wrong. It means that one is aware that people are not all the same and that one recognizes that his/her culture is no better than any other culture. In private-, societal and work environments there can be situations where there is a dominant and a secondary culture. Cultural sensitivity implies that groups understand and respect each other’s characteristics. This can be a challenge for members of dominant cultures.

10.2. CONTEXTUAL SENSITIVITY
The domain of contextual sensitivity implies that people are sensitive to stereotypes and try to unconditionally accept others at face value. We can add qualities like perspective taking, to see the world the way in which others view and perceive things; a tolerance for ambiguity, where people show the ability to accept multiple interpretations of the same situation. And finally, alertness to premature ultimatums: being able and willing to accept ideas or concepts, which inspire further conversations / dialogues.
Contextually sensitive people are able to pick up on emotionally charged language, as well as emotional meanings and implications. They refrain from using manipulative language like cons, double talk and jargon. They do not influence or twist viewpoints or opinions with misleading language, or words and phrases that manipulatively generate a highly emotional appeal for acceptance.

Thus reasoned, the most important qualities of a facilitator are
Respect, which means stepping back enough to place yourself as an equal towards the other / your audience.
Humility: respecting the other means being humble. Humility is our defence against fear, prejudice and hasty decisions. Humility enables us to listen openly and thoroughly to others, becoming or being aware of our limits.
Empathy in the sense of comparing the own perspective with that of the other – determining what could be of help for the other – is the foundation of higher developed empathy. Empathic listening means disempowering yourself, exercising humility, empowering the other, as we already have pointed out in chapters 3 and 4.

10.3. POWER RELATIONSHIPS
Power relationships have always existed wherever there is the capacity of one individual or group to command, direct or influence the life or lives of others. Sometimes power is enforced on others resulting in harm, but sometimes this relationship comes from a different, accepted hierarchical agreement (e.g. parent-child, teacher-student, employer-employee, government-citizens), relationships which imply force, but not actually impose it.

When working with individuals, groups and/or communities, you need be aware that due to the characteristics of your participants there is a chance a power relationship is there, in which you have a certain level of power. This can be due to the fact that you have certain information or knowledge regarding the activity and its purpose, or due to the fact that you have the ‘power’ to take decisions that affect them directly.

A healthy balance of power in a relationship can be achieved through:

Attention: when both parties feel that their (emotional) needs are met
Integrity: when each partner maintains a positive value of the self and is able to be his own person within and outside the relationship

With the parties (or participants) in a conflict resolution project you could potentially give them the following types of information that is helpful (or not) depending on the situation (Kurtz, 2013):

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<tr>
<th>ETHICS AND TRANSPARENCY</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>TELLING PEOPLE…</strong></td>
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<td>WHO IS INVOLVED IN THE</td>
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<td>PROJECT (SPONSORS,</td>
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<td>COLLECTORS, BENEFICIARIES,</td>
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Figure 25: after Kurtz (2013, p. 110)

To fully understand, here are explanations Kurtz gives for some of the aspects addressed in figure 25:

**Low and high narrative distance**
In short, narrative distance is about making meaning and sense.
Low narrative distance is being able to compress information meaningfully, or re-expand compressed information meaningfully. The greater the narrative distance in a story event (or given information), the lesser meaningful the re-expansion will be, meaning that interpretation errors or rejection of your story or information can occur.
Low and high value perception
People can have the impression that they have to obey or being ignored. With people who are used to having authority you will have to prove your worthiness. With people who feel ignored or are afraid of letting themselves heard you may have to convince that you really do want to hear their voices.
Some people may not think your work as a facilitator is not as important as you think it is. You may have to ‘sell’ your work (or project) to draw them in through entertainment and engagement (activities) and creating a sense of purpose.

Low and high power differential
An audience (or participants) may perceive you differently: as a friendly helper or a hostile force, and anything between that. When you ask them to share stories, they have to feel safe. They might have questions about their privacy. Don’t assume that they already know. Ask, because people might be more wary then you think. Also, if you will be taking to two groups (or individuals) and one is more concerned than the other, you might want to use two different methods to talk to them.

10.3.1. THE DOMINANT AND THE SHY
Whether working with homogenous groups or heterogeneous groups, we have to be aware of dominant group members. It is best to talk about this issue at the beginning. It can be by explaining that there is a ‘common issue’: that there are - for instance - people who tend to dominate people who show shyness, or modest people who feel dominated by loudmouthed participants. But, whether one feels a ‘natural’ self-confident talker or ‘naturally’ modest, no one should feel threatened or rejected (Chambers, 2002)\(^{47}\). In most cases this preamble helps to take the sting out of potential power play during the process.

\(^{47}\) In the guidelines of this project we present advice and solutions by Chambers (2002, Participatory workshops)
CHAPTER 11 – NARRATIVE APPROACHES AND APPLIED STORYTELLING FOR RECONCILIATION, TRANSFORMATION, AND CHANGE

As we have already explained at length, stories are inextricably linked with how people perceive and try to understand and adapt to the world, themselves and others. Narrative approaches and applied storytelling are not such a crazy solution if we want to understand, investigate, deconstruct, and resolve conflicts. This is why we want to present a choice of approaches. Some focus more on personal (conflict and trauma) stories, others more on collective, socially, and culturally determined stories and narratives.

They have been researched, tried, and tested by the authors we have mentioned and will mention, and by ourselves as story practitioners. In our toolkit and guidelines, we will link the application opportunities to the respective phases in conflicts and/or polarisation. In addition, we would like to draw attention to the fact that the approaches we present have overlaps, and thus are not ‘stand-alone’. The phase and intensity of the conflict and/or polarisation will determine which approach (or a mix of approaches) will apply as most hope-giving and effective.

11.1. PARTICIPATORY NARRATIVE INQUIRY (PNI)

PNI has been coined by Cynthia Kurtz in her extensive book ‘Working with Stories (2013, 2014). As she puts it: “PNI is not so much a new idea as a new way of putting together existing ideas into a package that works” (Kurtz, 2013, p. 92). It is an approach in which groups of people participate in gathering (and working with) raw stories of personal experience in order to make sense of complex situations for better decision making. It works for mixed groups and communities, but also for cohorts within communities (e.g. unemployed 50+, single mothers, victims of the same trauma), and it not only can benefit the group (cohesion, mutual understanding, mutual support) but also the individual and his/her individual decision making and (new) focus.

PNI focuses on the profound consideration of values, beliefs, feelings and perspectives through the recounting and interpretation of lived experience. Kurtz stresses that factual elements, truth, evidence, opinion, argument and proof may be used as material for meaning- and sensemaking, but they are always used from a perspective and to gain perspective. This focus defines, shapes and limits the approach.

What makes PNI attractive is that it is a practical method. It grew over the course of several dozen real projects (Kurtz, 2014) with real storytellers, real needs, real constraints, real clients and real collaborators. What didn’t work was dropped and what worked stayed in.

11.1.1. THE BASIC ELEMENTS OF PNI

One thing is paramount: ‘the individual/community (local knowledge) is the expert’.

11.1.1.1. Narrative

The essence of PNI is the use of stories of personal experience. Stories are essential to PNI because without them its ability to address its core goals would be reduced. Kurtz stresses that PNI is not a superior method for all decision support projects, only those for which the profound consideration of values, beliefs, feelings and perspectives is required. “If you want to understand the influences of
societal and social influences, taboos or stigmas... PNI is likely to give you a more deeply meaningful result than direct (or closed) questioning.” (Kurtz, 2014)

11.1.1.2. Participation

PNI is not (only) narrative inquiry; it invites its storytellers to work with their own stories. Participation can vary: from simply answering questions about stories to participating in structured group meaning- and sensemaking activities where the storytellers ponder issues. The facilitator in a PNI project does not tell or interpret or change or even select stories. Only the members of the community do all of these things. What the facilitator does is help the stories get to where they need to be to help the community achieve a goal (Kurtz, 2014). Facilitators might initiate and facilitate story collecting, ask questions about the stories, and help people look at, think about, and talk about them, the answers they provide, and the patterns they form. But they by themselves never decide for the community what the stories mean (Kurtz, 2014).

11.1.1.3. Inquiry

‘Inquiry’ makes clear that the approach is not just about ‘telling stories’, nor is it listening for the sake of listening. Asking questions to start or to prompt stories, asking questions about the stories is an important activity in the process. It not only facilitates “finding out something about something” (Kurtz, 2014), it also amplifies understanding of conflicts, topics, feelings, it helps to explore and solutions and improvements. Questions about future- or alternative stories can lead to commitment and concrete action. PNI makes something happen and it happens because somebody, some community has found a new way to look at something and believes in it.

11.1.2. THE PNI STAGES

PNI involves little top-down control. In each phase the unique perspective of each participant is heard and included without coercion or artificial consensus. In the ideal situation all members of the community join in all essential stages. However, “…in some projects some members may participate more in some stages than others... Rarely is the entire community able, willing and motivated to participate in every stage of the process. For example, often many people will participate in the collection and return of stories, but fewer will be able or willing to invest the time required to participate in sensemaking. Trust in representation is a critical element when not everyone can participate - whatever the reason.” (Kurtz, 2014)

11.1.2.1. Planning

Often ‘planning’ is a stage in which elements such as questions, workshops and exercises can already be chosen and/or designed. It can also help to (pre-)assess the community’s readiness for change and help in not moving too fast from aspiration to action. Inviting the community to test your ideas and assessing the community’s readiness is one thing (you will find out about their real needs), mapping the community is another. Mapping will help you to find out more about their interest to cooperate, the (power) relationships and the story capacity of the (members of the) community. For example, a small pilot project might be used to test questions and methods before the larger project takes place.
11.1.2.2. Collecting

All PNI projects start with stories. Community members tell stories around a topic of concern and those stories are collected in different ways: the collection can vary widely, from twenty stories gathered and used in an hour-long workshop to ten thousand stories gathered over a year and used for many years afterward. Collecting activities can be one-on-one interviews, peer-to-peer interviews, group interviews, story circles, time lines, libraries, existing story collections, (social) media etc.; each of which serves one or more purposes and can have limitations as to participants and time.

Whenever possible, let people interpret their own stories by answering questions. The questions used should be related to the individual’s, group’s, or community’s topics (or conflict). ‘Witnessing’ of stories of others can be added, so that each story becomes surrounded by a cloud of perspectives. The latter can also be applied in the next phase.

![Figure 26: PNI stages in short (after Kurtz, 2014)](image)

11.1.2.3. Meaning- and Sensemaking

Some or all community members (and sometimes interested others) participate in structured group activities in which they negotiate meaning as they construct larger stories in the form of artifacts such as timelines, or event-experience landscapes and/or sets of emergent constructs (e.g. a tentative or possible future story).

Meaning-making can be preceded by a phase where the (facilitated) participants look for patterns and/or trends in the collected stories – it can lead to “Aha!”-experiences. In this phase, the facilitator should be on his guard: not all data are necessarily meaningful at once. Our brains insistence on generating stories from random data (‘memory’) can play tricks on our perception and mislead us (Kahneman, 2012).

However, these interpretations and implications serve a purpose: they can enhance the meaning-and sensemaking. Asking questions to these interpretations and implications (“Can we trust this?”, “What does it tell about...?”) can lead to further exploration, extract meaning and sense, and provide new perspectives. Sensemaking may take place on the same day as story collection or months later; it may involve few or many people; it should be facilitated, but unenforced. In the end, it always will involve somebody making some use of gathered stories to better understand (or communicate to others) some situation or issue.

11.1.2.4. Return

This is a crucial activity. Remember when we were talking about not informing indirect and/or vicarious actors about the development of the process going on.

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What has been gathered and produced in the collection- and meaning-making phases is returned to the community and enters into the collective discourse. Such a return may include ‘formal’ communications, and it may involve a wide or narrow distribution of collected stories. But it is also likely to include informal story exchanges about people's experiences surrounding the project. This informal storytelling may be more influential than the formal outputs, for better or worse, and they deserve attention on their own terms.

The return stage of the process - the reviewing - is one many project initiators and supervisors are unprepared for and would prefer to sweep under the rug; but it is futile to pretend storytellers and audiences are unaffected by storytelling. In fact, conscious attention to the return stage is a mark of projects that have lasting positive impacts. Reviewing can lead to reconsidering and recollecting and re-cycling the stories for the better (Kurtz, 2014).

**Rounding up**

PNI is a broad approach that might be applicable in all phases of conflict and polarisation. Because it relies on diverse proven approaches and methodologies, including those proposed in the following, it can be a useful framework to create tailor-made pathways for different contexts and groups. Different emphases can be placed on one or the other (narrative) approach (e.g. interview, story circles, timelines, narrative therapy) in PNI and/or conflict phases. Ideally, effective narrative sensemaking produces positive change and can spark a spiral of storytelling that leads towards a (common) future.

### 11.2. GAME CHANGERS AND RECONCILIATION

Brandsma (2016) offers some thoughts and approaches to consider. As mentioned before, he suggests it is not the differences in identity (beliefs of life, religion) that are the primary cause of conflict, but the fighting for (material and immaterial) scarce goods: housing, jobs, control and recognition, status, appreciation. But, says Brandsma, they can be useful at the moment when we look for reconciliation.

**Also, timing is everything.** The situation, the phase of conflict/polarisation dictates what intervention is needed. The estimation must be exactly right. This is demonstrated in this diagram (Brandsma, 2016):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STAGE</th>
<th>PREVENTION</th>
<th>INTERVENTION</th>
<th>(INTER)MEDIATION</th>
<th>RECONCILIATION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Topic</td>
<td>Harmony</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Conflict</td>
<td>Philosophy of life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What and Who</td>
<td>Identity - other</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Personal experience - me</td>
<td>The relationship - us</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level</td>
<td>Knowledge</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Skills</td>
<td>Attitude</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation</td>
<td>Open enrolment</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Recruit - us and them separately</td>
<td>Recruit - us and them together</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Characteristic</td>
<td>Conversation</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Training and conversation</td>
<td>Reflection, training and conversation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig 27: Timing and characteristics of effective dialogue (after Brandsma, 2016, p.74)
As previously explained in the ‘iceberg’ (phases) model, during the intervention stage, especially the maintenance phase is unsuitable for dialogue, the power of the pushers is too great. Mediating through dialogue could be counterproductive and can lead to scapegoating or firing up polarization even more.

Here, Brandsma proposes a setting in which the individual parties can ask themselves what insights, what attitude their culture, religion or philosophy of life stands for. What can they bring in when it comes to conflicts? What do holy scriptures, beliefs, philosophical currents, philosophers contribute? What is an Islamic, Christian, humanistic approach to conflict? Searching within one’s own sources, listening to the sources of others, can ignite inspiration, create a new ‘us’, a new system of values. Not necessarily as a goal, but as a value-filled by-product of an honest reflection. Brandsma (2016) is convinced that this inter-group, interpersonal storytelling (and meaning-making) will train the parties to become more competent in dealing with conflict.

11.2.1. GAME CHANGERS – GETTING BACK INTO DIALOGUE

Getting (back) into a dialogue during the maintenance of the conflict or the height of polarisation there are four factors - game changers – that determine the conditions (Brandsma, 2016).

1. Change the target group
The opponent of the pusher is the opponent, but the target group of the pusher is the middle. There is profit to be made. The most effective way for the pushers is to force people in the middle towards a choice for black or white. An example would be the attack on innocent visitors to the Bataclan concert in Paris. Striking at the middle increases the polarisation pressure. However, depolarisation also goes via the middle. Make the centre your investment area, and give the pushers no longer attention. The power that needs to be mobilized is in the middle.

1.1. The Allies Method
Strengthening of the ‘silent’ is central to this. Brandsma (2016, p. 82) mentions community workers who recruit the right people (no pushers) in their networks. Once every two months meetings are organised to discuss neighbourhood safety issues, or tensions. Potential polarisation can also be assessed. Three types are distinguished who could promote reconciliation and/or peace:

1.1.1. The role models:
These are figures that should inspire the youth, they often come from the neighbourhood and have made it. They have influence. But experience shows that they have no impact (anymore) in conflict situations, they might have outgrown the neighbourhood.

1.1.2. The key figures:
They are, for example, the chairman of a mosque, a trade union member, administrators of community centres, or gang leaders. Yet, they too have interests and will take their own interests into account as polarisation increases.

1.1.3. The allies:
These networks are built in ‘peace time’, recruited from people in the middle (the silent). Sometimes they can be a key figure, sometimes mothers with influence in the street, teachers with impact at school, sports club trainers, middle men, it can be anyone. The characteristic is that the middle is strengthened and that the group meets regularly. Social cohesion is in the middle.

2. Change the subject – ‘the absent but implicit’
Depolarisation means radically moving away from the identities of the opposites. The subject (or problem) then is not ‘aggressive immigrant youth’, ‘thieving Roma’ or ‘selfish natives’, for example,
but 'security'. That knocks the gun ‘fear’ or ‘evil’ out of the hand of the pusher (Brandsma, 2016).

When listening to problem narratives (e.g. conflict / polarisation) it is important to not only listen to the problem in the foreground, but also to the “absent but implicit”. The idea about “absent but implicit” was developed by Michael White (2000): it referred to the idea that a perceived problem is never the full story. Externalising conversation can turn the problem into an external entity, with certain powers and tactics. Then it may be time to find times when the problem had no power and could be resisted, for example when one felt ‘secure’. An ‘exception’ that can be the starting point for a re-authoring conversation.

The subject/problem then becomes (literally and figuratively) an issue instead of an opinion or point of view: What are the possibilities to offer young people a future, what can we do to feel safe? What should be needed from the municipality, the police? Who raises obstacles in reaching the goal? Note that these are (open?) questions that have nothing to do with identity, but with loyalty and cooperation. ‘Changing the subject’ can facilitate re-authoring problem narratives towards acceptable shared narratives.

A word of warning (Brandsma, 2016): Anyone who invests in a conversation about the identity of the other brings the relationship into question. That is what the pusher wants, and that can sometimes also be the facilitator’s or bridge builder’s blind spot.

3. Change of position

Pushers tolerate bridge builders, but label them as ‘not ours’. They will always try to tempt him/her to take a stand (for/against 'us'). One small slip of the tongue may suggest bias... In doing so, they (comfortably) take the bridge builder hostage.

In addition to changing subject and target group, changing position is also a strategic choice. For instance through listening to the middle, knowing the middle.

Being part of the middle is not the same as being a bridge builder between the parties, it is a radically different position. People want to be listened to. Hearing the nuance, knowing the middle is giving a voice to the middle, is speaking from the middle, e.g. “We as citizens...” does not point at opponents and takes the sting out of the conflict. Brandsma (2016) suggests that the three game changers (target group, subject, position) could interlock in the persons of mayor, teacher, and police.

Moving on from there could offer possible steps to progress. And what would be the hallmark for depolarisation, asks Brandsma (2016)? He suggests that loyalty is the key. It does not mean that one has to force or convince the opponent, but it means moving the opponent (back) in small steps towards the middle where lines of loyalty constantly demand attention. Storytelling initiatives can be of added value to that. Barel (2020) suggests ‘team building’ activities, with ‘triggering’ (e.g. memories) as a starter. It already creates some common ground, and one step further will be sharing stories from experiences, strengthening the bond.

Although pushers and radicalized joiners will probably not be able to move back anymore, within the circle of the silent and the overlap with (late or wavering) joiners there is still a lot to ‘regulate’ through stories: the other person’s investment is worth the effort. This is also prevention from radicalisation.

4. Changing the tone

This is probably the toughest issue (Brandsma, 2016). If you want to deconstruct conflicts or depolarize, don’t moralize. We all have an opinion, we have a mind of our own and we become affected. In potential conflict situations we look for reasonable insights, common ground: where are the openings, but also: where is the temptation (e.g. becoming a ‘pusher’, lecturing others, but also ‘are you manoeuvring yourself (unconsciously) into a power position’?"
Which brings up another dilemma: if you consider yourself 'above the parties' as a facilitator or bridge builder, you will also recognize that there are contradictions, because then you are dependent on the space 'granted' to you by pushers.

Asking the right questions is paramount. So not closed questions like "Is it or isn't it?" but, for example, "What do you recognize of (or about) yourself in him/her/them/the topic?" The tone of voice must be the tone of real interest. Nuance only gets the chance after real, non-judgemental recognition of the position (Brandsma, 2016).

11.3. THE COEXISTENCE MODEL

In the context of approaches to plan conflict transformation meetings, there are four different approaches: the coexistence model; the joint project model; the confrontation model; and the narrative model. Applied storytelling - as we described it in chapter 1 - is best to use in the coexistence and narrative model.

The coexistence model focuses on bridging differences between conflicting narratives of groups in a positive way, with a focus on togetherness and cooperation, or on finding common ground. A consequence of this is that this approach does not directly address the conflict underlying the tension between the two groups and the dilemmas raised by the conflict. It is a so-called non-confrontational approach.

The narrative model uses narratives to help people in a conflict area interact with each other to make contact. The participants in a storytelling project share their own stories about experiences in and suffering as a result of the conflict, where sharing collective narratives about the conflict can be a part of it. The confrontation plays an important role in this model. One can allow confrontation and sometimes even value it, but Barel (2020) rather opts for the coexistence approach, especially in the early stages of projects.

Evidence shows that when a conflict immediately plays a role in an encounter, people immediately get stuck in their own position and can't open up to the other anymore (Barel, 2020). The latter, however, is a prerequisite for increasing empathy, to reduce stereotypes and to create balanced togetherness. However, experts in the field of conflict transformation believe that a conflict cannot be resolved if the conflict is not uncovered and negotiable.

Barel (2020) accepts these limitations, because experience shows that an immediate focus on a problem or a conflict is usually counterproductive. Therefore he prefers to work around a problem or conflict. He reasons that one can only really talk about the core of the conflict after one can guarantee symmetry, balance, and equality in the conversation, and when you talk from the same position. To achieve this, storytelling can play a major role in reaching that situation and can, therefore, lay a solid foundation on which a conflict becomes negotiable and thus manageable.

In search for reconciliation: shared narratives and asymmetric relationships

All experts agree that reconciliation is only possible if there are equal relationships and if there is a common goal. That goal can lead to a shared narrative, in which everyone recognizes themselves. A narrative that connects and includes. It is possible to arrive at that new narrative on the basis of existing narratives, that are shared through telling and listening to and reviewing each other's

49 Mentioned in Barel, A. (2020), Storytelling en de wereld. Uitgeverij IT&FB Amsterdam
stories. Big differences will emerge, but there will also be common ground to discover.

A composite group can, on the basis of the shared stories, discuss how differences and similarities relate to each other. This can be the basis for a new shared narrative. Not a narrative that replaces the existing stories, but a narrative that stems from the encounter, respects the existing narratives, enriches and finds its place alongside existing narratives. An inclusive narrative in which there is room for differences and those differences do not become negatively approached and appreciated—but celebrated. The new narrative is the common ground on which the different groups find each other.

Before this process can be set in motion, the asymmetric relationship that is at the root of many conflicts has to be identified to prevent the asymmetry from impeding reconciliation. Here, too, it is the narratives about each other that play a major role. These stories are often the basis of power relations. Some dominant narratives are aimed at creating a subordinate position for a particular group in a community or society and keep it retained in that position. Marginalising stories ensure that one stays in the margin or is kept in the margin. It goes without saying that the use of this narrative depends on (and forms part of) the narrative context of the (cultural and social) system that we as a society maintain together.

Asymmetric relationships are sometimes directly demonstrable, but often they are much more subtle, sometimes merely through the use of certain words or images and not even always consciously by those who use them. This confirmation can cause a lot of pain in groups that are excluded by the dominant narrative, which often leads to great anger and hinders the formation of a common new narrative.

Therefore, possible asymmetry in the set-up of storytelling meetings should be avoided as much as possible. We have to be aware that sometimes a facilitator could work from his/her own system of norms and values. Critical self-examination is never superfluous.

One of the other elements that can be important is language. If you are working with two groups that do not speak the same language, it is wise to work in a third, neutral language. In this way, you prevent one of the groups from having an advantage and thus becoming dominant. The composition of the team of facilitators is also an aspect to look closely at. It is better to work with facilitators who do not belong to any of the groups and who cannot be linked in any way to any of those groups. Or one can work with a larger team, with representatives from all groups.

11.4. RESTORATIVE JUSTICE

We would like to introduce restorative justice because we think it can apply in more contexts than what it was originally intended for: the judicial system. Restorative justice views crime as more than breaking the law—crime causes harm to people, relationships, and communities. Justice here means ‘justice’ for all in any circumstance (Davey, 2006). The basic principles of restorative justice are around harm and relationship, and in this it goes beyond the classical objective of ‘retribution’. In the context of conflict (especially in the phases where harm is or has been done) we think it makes sense to take a closer look.

There are several definitions of restorative justice to choose from. The most widely accepted one is (Davey, 2006):

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Restorative justice is a process whereby those most directly affected by wrongdoing come together to determine what needs to be done to repair the harm and prevent a recurrence.

And some add: This can lead to the transformation of people, relationships and communities. Effective restorative justice and practices foster awareness of how others have been affected by inappropriate behaviour. One of the responses in restorative justice is to organize a meeting between the victim and the offender, sometimes with representatives of the wider community. The idea behind this is that all share their experience of what has happened, to establish who was harmed and how, and to create a consensus for what the offender can do to repair the harm, e.g. material compensation, apologies and other actions to compensate.

Every instance of wrongdoing or conflict is seen as an opportunity for learning. For the offender it can create an opportunity “to take responsibility for their actions, to understand the harm they have caused, to give them an opportunity to redeem themselves and to discourage them from causing further harm. For victims, its goal is to give them an active role in the process and to reduce feelings of anxiety and powerlessness”.

Studies have revealed that restorative justice had the highest rate of victim satisfaction and offender accountability of any method of justice (Sherman & Strang, 2007).

Looking at ‘harm’ and ‘relationships’, Davey (2006) compares an accusing language style to the restorative style:
- **Accusing**: “What happened?” – “Who’s to blame?” – “What punishment is needed?”
- **Restorative**: “What happened?” – “What harm resulted?” – “What needs to be done to make things right?”

As we see, the restorative questions have a stronger narrative component.

Davey (2006) takes us by the hand, explaining how The International Institute for Restorative Practices (IIRP) defines five main consecutive steps (moving from informal to formal):
- **Affective Statements**, which are brief comments about how others were impacted by the person’s behaviour.
- **Affective Questions**, which are one step further, asking the wrongdoer questions like who was affected, how they were affected, etc.
- **Small Impromptu Conference** where you bring together a few people to talk about the incident, its impact and what to do next.
- **The Large Group or Circle** which allows everyone to have some say in what should happen as a result of the wrongdoing and...
- **The Formal Conference** which involves more planning and preparation and tends to be more structured and complete. This is often used in cases where responsibility has been accepted and harm acknowledged.

Davey (2006) recommends the informal to formal order, as conferences not always involve full acceptance of responsibility and acknowledgement of harm caused. Sometimes all parties may be involved, and sometimes services have been provided to only one or the other party and their respective supporters.

She also makes a note that while we use a certain language and questioning in the way we deal with conflict and/or inappropriate behaviour we make a difference in the lives of those harmed and the

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lives of the offenders. Restorative practices have four key elements (defined by the IIRP) that make them explicit rather than implicit. Davey (2006) stresses that to be explicit they must be *actively* integrated:

1. **The Social Discipline Window**
   This view stresses that the approach is about working *with* people rather than doing things *to* or *for* them. It is a combination of high levels of support and facilitation and at the same time challenging inappropriate behaviour through high levels of control to encourage acceptance of responsibility and setting clear boundaries.

   ![Diagram of Social Discipline Window](image)

   **Figure 28: The Social Discipline Window (after Davey, 2006)**

2. **Fair Process**
   In this context a fair process is seen as having three core elements, which more or less represent a ‘contract’ between the participants and facilitators (quoted from Davey, 2006):
   - **Engagement** – Involving individuals in decisions that affect them by asking for their input and allowing them to disprove each other’s ideas.
   - **Explanation** – Everyone involved and affected should understand why decisions are made as they are. This is considered as creating good feedback that enhances learning.
   - **Expectation Clarity** – Once decisions are made, new rules are clearly stated, so everyone understands the new boundaries and consequences of failure.

   This not only can build trust, commitment and cooperation, it can also enhance performance because it goes beyond ‘duty’ through sharing experiences, knowledge and being creative. Again, it is about interacting *with* others and allowing them to tell their stories, knowing that they will be heard and listened to with respect and treated with dignity.

3. **Free expression of emotions**
   Given the above, and provided with a safe environment (and contract), all will have the freedom to express all of their emotions or feelings, including those which are negative.

   **Shame** plays an important part, here interpreted as being the ‘interruption’ of positive emotions or feelings. Anytime these are interrupted, we will experience varying degrees of shame up to feeling humiliated, which can lead to four main negative responses (from Davey, 2006):
   - **Withdrawal** – isolating oneself, running away, hiding
   - **Avoidance** – denial, drug- and alcohol abuse, distraction (e.g. thrill-seeking)
Attack others – ‘turning the tables’, blaming the victim, lashing out verbally or physically
Attack self – putting yourself down, masochism

Restorative justice stresses to take time to talk about the negative ways people deal with shame. Expressions of shame are in a way mirroring an admission that one feels that one has done something wrong. Once the person recognises what it actually is, he/she can be helped to deal with it in a positive way. The important thing is to recognise these responses, and there are positive ways we can respond to others experiencing shame by:

- Listening to what they have to say
- Acknowledging their feelings
- Encouraging them to talk about their experiences

These steps are essential to build and maintain a healthy relationship (Davey, 2006). Surely, they can be applied to recognising other emotions and feelings (grief, vulnerability, injustice, etc.) as well.

4. Restorative questions

Davey (2006) presents an introduction to relational and restorative questions, which are part of a scripted conference model that has been tried and tested internationally. Details can be found on the website of IIRP. She distinguishes between (Davey, 2006, p.5):

- **Restorative Questions to respond to challenging behaviour**, e.g. “Who has been affected by what you did?”
- **Restorative Question to help those harmed by others actions**, e.g. “How has this affected you and others?”

In short

Restorative justice notes that crime causes harm and justice should focus on repairing harm instead of ‘simply’ retribute or punish. In various conflict stages the same ‘laws’ would apply. The people most affected should be able to participate in the resolution because encountering the other side and facilitating cooperation and exchange of stories (experiences, emotions, feelings) can help to determine reparation (making amends) of any kind by letting offenders recognize that they have to take responsibility for their actions and the harm they have caused. It can lead to transformation because it can result in fundamental changes in people, relationships and communities. It provides a chance of prevention of recurrence, and in some cases even a chance of reintegration in the community. It also requires a cooperative attitude and effort by communities and the judiciary.

“If ‘violent’ means acting in ways that result in hurt or harm, then much of how we communicate could be indeed called ‘violent’ communication.”


11.5. NONVIOLENT COMMUNICATION – “ASK, ASK, ASK…”

Nonviolent communication (NVC, sometimes called Collaborative Communication) was developed by Marshall Rosenberg in the 1960s. It clearly overlaps with topics we have addressed in the previous chapters. It originates from a belief that we all have a capacity for compassion and empathy. According to Rosenberg (2015), the only reason we move to violence or to harmful behaviour

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52 [www.iirp.org/uk](https://www.iirp.org/uk); [https://www.iirp.edu/continuing-education/professional-development](https://www.iirp.edu/continuing-education/professional-development)
(verbal, psychological or physical) towards others when we do not recognize more effective strategies for our needs. NVC is a mainly verbal approach that can help us to lead participants into storytelling, analysing how these stories impede relationships and communication. It helps to understand behaviour, and change it towards a beneficial communication and relationship.

Patterns, habits of thinking and speaking that can lead to use of violence, are learned through education and culture, and narratives supporting those. Human behaviour attempts to meet universal human needs. Rosenberg states that needs are never in conflict; conflict is evoked when strategies for meeting needs clash. Miscommunication about needs arises due to coercive, manipulative language that drives the attention away from clarifying needs. We could better identify shared needs, reveal thoughts and feelings surrounding these needs, and collaborate to develop strategies together to meet each other’s needs.

Rosenberg suggested that social change facilitators should focus on “ask, ask, ask” those in power for changes that will make life / a situation better for all, including the powerful. With those ‘in power’ he meant not only literally those ‘in power’ (gang leaders, politicians, managers) but also sulking children, obstinate adolescents, angry citizens, etc.; in fact anyone who wants to force something through his ‘violent’, uncooperative behaviour. This may sound ‘soft’, but it is working on change on three interconnected levels: the self, between the self and others, and within groups and social systems.

These are Rosenberg’s (2015) assumptions underlying NVC:

**All human beings share the same needs**, which are: autonomy, integrity, celebration, interdependence, play, spiritual communion, physical nurturance. **There are sufficient resources** for meeting everyone’s basic needs. **Feelings point to needs** being met or (having been) unmet. **We all have a capacity for compassion. We enjoy giving. We meet needs through interdependent relationships. We (can) change. Choice is internal. The most direct path to (inner) peace is through self-connection.**

Rosenberg (2015) formulates four components of NVC, and they have two parts (A, B). We will introduce them and illustrate them with some personal practice examples offered by Rosenberg.

**A. Expressing honestly** (me → other):

1. **Observation**: The concrete actions we observe that affect our well-being.
2. **Feelings**: How we feel in relation to what we observe
3. **Needs**: The needs, values, desires etc that create our feelings
4. **Requests**: The concrete actions we request in order to enrich our lives

The ‘trick’ is to be able to leave out judgment or evaluation, simply say what people are doing that we either like or don’t like.

**B. Empathically receiving** (other → me), in a way mirroring what we observe, sense and hear:

1. **Observation**: The concrete actions we observe that affect their well-being
2. **Feelings**: How they feel in relation to what we observe
3. **Needs**: The needs, values, desires etc that create their feelings
4. **Requests**: The concrete actions they could request in order to enrich their lives

Example (angry citizen), giving room to answers / facilitating story of the other:

“You look angry. (1) Are you angry because you would like ...? (2,3). So, you would appreciate some support in ...? (4)”

**Ad A. Expressing honestly**
Judgements, evaluation, comparisons and more

NVC also means that we step away from communication that blocks compassion, and obviously this is connected to the language we use. Examples are moralistic judgements that imply wrongness or badness on the part of others, e.g. “The problem with you is...”. In the world of judgements, our concern centres on “who is what”. Yet, it is important not to confuse value judgments and moralistic judgments (Rosenberg, 2015). All of us make value judgments about the qualities we value in life. We make moralistic judgments of people and behaviours that fail our value judgements. Judging (“They’re no good”) can also promote violence (e.g. punishment).

Another form of judgement is making comparisons. Only, if we start to compare ourselves to ideals and dominant standards, or the achievement of others, comparison will make us miserable (jealous, envious) in more than one way. And this will block compassion, both for ourselves and for others.

When we combine observation with evaluation, others might hear criticism and resist to what we are saying. So we have to separate them and make observations specific to time and context (e.g. not “You are too generous”, but “When I see you giving high tips all the time, I think you are being too generous”).

Also, the words always, never, ever, whenever, seldom, frequently etc. can express observations (e.g. “You never listen”).

Denial of responsibility is also a form of alienating communication. Personal responsibility for our actions can be obscured in speech (Rosenberg, 2015). Think of “You make me feel guilty”, “I had to, because...”, “I was overcome...”. Rosenberg suggests that we replace language that implies lack of choice with language that acknowledges choice: “I choose to...”, “I want to...”

A common compassion-blocking form of communication in our culture is communicating our needs and desires as demands. A demand explicitly or implicitly threatens with blame or punishment if someone fails to comply. When other people hear demands, they see two options: to submit or to rebel.

To tell if it’s a demand or a request, Rosenberg (2015) suggests we observe what a speaker does if the request is not complied with. This will tell us if the ‘request’ was actually a ‘demand’. He gives an example of a dialogue:

A: “I’m lonely and I would like you to spend the evening with me.”(request or demand?) B: “I’m really tired. Is it possible to find someone else to be with you this evening?” A: “How typical of you to be so selfish!”

Blame and guilt

We have to realise that people may have a history of either having blamed or ‘laid guilt’ on others when those haven’t responded to their requests. So their requests will be heard as demands. On the other hand, those who have been blamed, punished or urged to feel guilty, are more likely to carry this load to every subsequent relationship and hear a demand in every request.

Expressing genuine requests also requires an awareness of our objective. If our objective is merely to change others and their behaviour or to want to have it our way, NVC is not the right approach. Even when we’re conscious of our intent and express ourselves with care, people who may have suffered (coercive) authority may still hear a demand.

Ad B. Empathically receiving

Listening
This may feel like a recap of ‘empathic listening’, yet Rosenberg gives his own twist on it. Empathy means emptying your mind and listening with your whole being. Examples of probably recognisable common responses (sometimes ‘with the best intentions’) that prevent us from connecting empathically with others, they are similar to those we already mentioned (Senova, Schulz von Thun): Advising, One-upping, Educating, Consoling, Storytelling, Shutting down, Sympathising, Interrogating, Explaining, and Correcting.

When listening - no matter what the tellers say - we ‘only’ have to listen to what they (themselves) are observing, feeling, needing and requesting. We think that this approach adds an extra dimension to empathic listening.

Paraphrasing
‘Real listening’ occurs inside your head; another person cannot see if it is happening or not. Paraphrasing is offering a reflection to others. If we have accurately received the other party’s message, our paraphrasing will confirm this for him or her. If the paraphrase is incorrect, we give the teller an opportunity to correct us. NVC suggests that paraphrasing takes the form of a question, which elicits any necessary corrections from the other easier. Going back to NVC components questions may focus on:

1. **What others are observing:** “Are you reacting to how I have been acting...?”
2. **How others are feeling:** “Are you feeling hurt because...?”
3. **What others are requesting:** “Are you wanting me to...?”

**Ignoring** the narrator’s reality would sound like this: 1. “What did I do...”, 2. “Why are you feeling that way?”, 3. “What are you wanting me to do about...?”. There is the subtle difference.

Rosenberg advises paraphrasing only when it can lead to greater compassion or understanding. He also asks us to be careful when paraphrasing (or reflecting back) on stories that are emotionally charged, the tone of voice is highly important. The intention behind our paraphrasing could be misinterpreted (“Don’t try to be a psychologist...”). Cultural norms should also be respected.

From the teller’s perspective, the ‘real listening’ of the audience is also an issue. One way to determine that the other was actually listening is to have them reflect back what had been told: we ask the other to take an action that we ourselves can see or hear. If the other can tell us what was just said, we know that he had listened.

**Empathy revisited**
We are all vulnerable, we need empathy to give empathy (Rosenberg, 2015). Sometimes we (and others) are unable to give empathy. If that is the case, personal distress, stress or pain can be the hurdle we cannot take. On these occasions, Rosenberg advises:
1. Stop, breathe, give yourself empathy (listen to what is going on in yourself and give it attention)
2. Scream non-violently (e.g. “Hey, I’m in a lot of pain! (feeling) Right now I really do **not** want to deal with your fighting. (need) I want some quiet and peace! (request)”
3. Take a time-out (remove yourself from the situation and recharge your empathy)

**When people say ‘No’ to meeting face to face**
As mentioned in Craig & Van der Sar (2019), in situations where parties rather want to maintain conflict, they often claim: “There’s no use talking, they won’t listen. We’ve tried to talk and it

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53 Examples from Rosenberg (2015)
doesn’t work.” One method Rosenberg has tried out was to visit each party separately, bringing an audio recorder and playing the role of the other side. First he would listen in a way that supported the party to clearly express their needs and to experience being understood respectfully. Then he took the role of the other party and asked to be listened to what he thought the other party’s needs were. After that he went back to the first party with the recording and to verify that their needs had been properly expressed. This approach can help to increase trust that needs might be possible to be met and sessions can be added until the moment comes where the parties can meet with mutual respect, and come to an understanding.

Unless we make sure that both sides are aware of their own as well as each other’s needs, it will be hard for facilitators and (inter)mediators to succeed. Because, as we already have pointed at earlier, we can get caught up in scarcity thinking – seeing only the importance of our needs met. And as we also have mentioned, when scarcity thinking gets mixed with ‘right-wrong’ thinking, people can become militant and violent. Conflicts can be solved if we first offer empathy without focusing on our own needs.

The protective use of force
You might remember the ‘lose-lose’ phase (stages 7-9) in Glasl’s escalation model, where he proposes ‘power intervention’, which suggests enforcement (e.g. military, police). In some situations, the opportunity for dialogue may not exist (anymore), and the use of force may be necessary to protect life or individual rights. Yet, NVC proposes to differentiate between the protective and the punitive uses of force.

Protective
The intention behind the protective use of force is to prevent injury or injustice (Rosenberg, 2015). Punitive force makes individuals suffer for their perceived offences. Rosenberg gives a vivid example: when you grab a child who is running into the street to prevent injury, you use protective force. When you spank the child and swear at it, you use punitive force, physically and mentally.

The premise behind the protective use of force is that people behave in ways that can harm themselves and others due to some form of ignorance (Rosenberg, 2015).

Punitive
The premise behind punitive force (physical, mental) is that people commit offences because they are bad or evil, and to correct them they have to repent. The ‘correction’ is to make them suffer enough to see their error, make them repent, and make them change. Yet, in practice it usually works counterproductive; instead of repentance and learning it is more likely to generate resentment and hostility to reinforce resistance (Rosenberg, 2015).

Questions
In general, Rosenberg (2015, p.189) recommends first empathising with the party who is ‘misbehaving’ by applying questioning as demonstrated in the beginning.

B. Empathically receiving
B. 1. Observation: The concrete actions we observe that affect their well-being
B. 2. Feelings: How they feel in relation to what we observe
A. Expressing honestly
A. 2. Feelings: How we feel in relation to what we observe
A. 3. Needs: The needs, values, desires etc that create our feelings
A. 4. Requests: The concrete actions we request in order to enrich our lives
**B. 4. Requests:** The concrete actions they could **request** in order to enrich their lives

The decisive question behind this, which we should be asking ourselves **in advance**, is: “What do I want this person’s reasons to be for doing what I’m asking?”

**In short**

Nonviolent Communication may seem cumbersome and it certainly requires good training to formulate the right words and questions in diverse contexts. It helps to show an honest interest in what drives or bothers the other person, but it also gives an opportunity to ventilate our (facilitator, (inter)mediator) own needs and feelings. The apparent vulnerability can open a conversation and generate trust because one takes the other seriously. We think that in precarious situations it can take the sting out of a quarrel because it respects the other person's feelings and openly tries to meet their needs.

**11.6. DIALOGUE FOR PEACEFUL CHANGE**

Colin Craig and Jaap van der Sar are the key persons in the NGO **Dialogue for Peaceful Change (DPC)**, and it is from their handbook (2019) - and work - we have extracted so much useful information and inspiration. Within the context of approaches we present an assessment approach – the Pillars Analysis – that can be based on story collection. Also, an overview of a six stage (narrative) process the authors propose within formal mediation. The authors stress that models and processes can evolve, adapt and change. Also, the restoration of fractured relationships may require a thousand small steps. And once again, we have to keep in mind that the key element in conflict management and depolarisation is **time**.

**11.6.1. THE PILLARS ANALYSIS**

This tool can help to assess the key issues and dynamics that underly and/or sustain the conflict. Each party can identify them separately or (in a recovery or reduction phase) together. The conflict triangle stands on its point. If we can take away the ‘support’ of the other two, it will become unstable and fall over. By working on the pillars (and the stories attached to the issues addressed) that support the conflict, there is an opportunity to create a constructive momentum to change the impact of the conflict (Craig & Van der Sar, 2019).

The issues we show in the table below are examples, they can be replaced by others if the collected stories reveal them. The same model can be useful when we want to explore issues (and the stories around them) deeper. For the sake of understanding: if ‘dishonesty’ is a big issue, we can replace ‘conflict’ and then explore what is maintaining ‘dishonesty’ within the conflict. And we can do this with all issues, if necessary, to investigate the weight of their impact. The authors suggest that this might provide new perspectives and even indications where the leverage points may be.

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**Figure 29:** The Pillars Analysis (after Craig & Van der Sar, 2019, p. 40)
11.6.2. THE SIX STAGE PROCESS

In these six stages we will encounter familiar narrative- and applied storytelling approaches. Each stage has specific aims and is designed to be a foundation for the next.

Stage 1 – Individual storytelling

First of all, participants will have to be invited. They will not know exactly what is expected of them, and they will at all times have the right to leave. They will be asked to share their understanding of the (conflict) situation, and the facilitators will ask story eliciting questions. Be aware of any temptation the participants may have to start exploring solutions already. This is about getting the stories out and identifying dynamics and issues.

The facilitators will paraphrase and summarise and encourage the participants to identify and agree on dynamics and issues that have come up. Gradually confidence (in being able to express through stories) and trust (towards the group members) will build up, which can create an atmosphere for committing to the next stage.

Outline the next stage, which will involve meeting the (stories and issues of) the ‘other’ party. Agree on guidelines and rules and the needs of the members for a ‘safe space’. Only when all members agree (and it might take more than one meeting) it will be possible to arrange stage 2.

Stage 2 – Joint storytelling

In this stage we can expect an increased level of tension, so we will have to lay down the ‘rules of engagement’ we have established in stage 1 and have the pledge of both parties to comply with them. They will have ‘to check in’.

Each of the parties will allow the other to share their stories (and perceptions) uninterrupted, as difficult as that may be. As both parties have failed in the past to resolve, they will obviously have an antagonistic view of each other.

The facilitators support the storytelling and the clarification of dynamics and issues that are exposed by each party’s view. Also, there should be an open ear for positive comments one party makes about the other. Craig and Van der Sar (2019) call these the ‘olive branches’, which should be reflected back with specific appreciation (there is, after all, some constructive understanding). Confirmation of the stories by summarizing is again essential.

Outline stage 3 to the parties and confirm the agreements for it.

After the meeting the facilitators should complete a pillars exercise based on the understanding of each party’s dynamics and issues.

Stage 3 – Framing the issues

According to Craig and van der Sar (2019) this is a pivotal key moment. Stage 2 may have confused the different perceptions about key issues, they also may have become more focused on their hurt and sense of injustice.

First of all, we have to check if everyone is still ‘on the same page’ when it comes to general rules that were agreed on.

Now will be the moment to establish the key issues, which might seem similar, but are not perceived as such. The authors give a simple example: a wall has been built between their houses, but in fact this is two separate issues – one wants the wall and the other doesn’t...

Craig & Van der Sar employ the pillars exercise to present an initial set of possible issues and dynamics that the parties had shared during stage 2. This is not meant as prescriptive, it just offers
the parties to either confirm, change, or delete any of the identified items. At a certain point there will be some kind of an agreement on issues and dynamics both find important.

The next step is crucial: the parties are invited to think of the benefits if they could, together, find solutions to the identified issues. The authors stress that the facilitators must not suggest or prompt as to what the benefits may be. If we want to continue meaningfully to the next stage, the parties each need a real sense that finding some potential joint solution will offer them a better outcome than continuing the fight. Paraphrase the benefits back to the participants who have shared them. Outline stage 4 and confirm all parties’ commitment to proceed.

Stage 4 – Creative problem solving
This is an important stage because here we can find openings towards reconciliation. In the previous stages the parties were enabled to explore their own understanding, compare it to the other’s views, come to a consensus as to the roots of the conflict, and acknowledge potential benefits together.

Now they (each participant) have to share their ideas how they would overcome the issues and dynamics they have acknowledged. We have to be aware that this (still) can lead to prioritizing particular concerns. If they didn’t, it would mean a leap forward. So, this stage may require a number of meetings, because we can expect that we have to support the parties building some momentum on potential ‘small wins’ (Craig & Van der Sar, 2015).

It is important that the facilitators acknowledge and affirm these steps and support to formulate details. There should be a kind of an agreement recorded, either in writing or verbally, for every step. If a break is needed, support the parties to set up a timetable for further sessions. During the breaks the facilitators can informally follow up with the parties by informing how they are progressing.

If the parties finalise an overall agreement that will be needed to follow through, the facilitators should ensure that all (that has been agreed on) is summarized and formally acknowledged by the parties. A praise should be given to the parties for their courage, efforts and commitment for reaching the opportunity to reconcile.

Stage 5 – Formalising the agreement and follow up
Given the success of stage 4, there is a danger that both parties ‘relax’ and that the momentum subsides. This stage is mainly to minimise that risk. The first step is to formalise the written agreement(s) by letting them sign by all parties, if possible including the facilitators as witnesses. This can enhance the psychological commitment to following through the next steps (Craig & Van der Sar, 2019).

The agreement may also include when and how the facilitators may follow up with the parties individually or together. The authors refer to the opportunity for a further build-up of trust between the parties, also because it indicates a certain monitoring and reviewing of the agreement(s).

Stage 6 – Melting the iceberg
Craig & Van der Sar (2019, p. 112) are taking a step back in this stage. When looking at the iceberg model, we should not forget the indirect and vicarious actors. As we have said earlier, those can lag behind, for reasons of communication, or - when we look at the polarisation process - they could (partly) be snatched away by pushers from both sides, who now benefit from the legacy of the stories of the direct actors. The conflict might have become ‘the truth’ to them.
It would help to engage the parties to involve ‘their’ indirect actors. Craig & van der Sar (2015) lay down three facilitating questions for the individual parties to answer:
1. Who else may have been impacted by this conflict?
2. Given your work, what should they be told about to now reconcile this conflict and relationship?
3. How might you practically achieve this?

Facilitation can be supporting the direct actors to ‘retell’ the story of their conflict and its resolution. In an ideal world the parties could agree to a collective way to retell their new and *common story* in the light of the conflict’s history and their new commitment. Together they can also design a communication ‘strategy’: where and when (including all media) and how often, to maximise the change of thinking and acting of their indirect and vicarious audiences. It can also include strategic communication to the ‘silent’.
CONCLUSION

There is no single approach that provides a complete answer to all the complex aspects regarding conflict and polarisation. We have tried to show many conflict- and polarisation- but also reconciliation- and forgiveness drivers. We have seen how emotions can contribute to our knowledge about feelings. How emotions, feelings and desires - from anger to empathy, from love to grief - are connected to experiences we remember, and how all that contributes to our attitudes towards and understanding of ‘good’ or ‘bad’, equity, equality, justice and their opposites.

We have looked into the evolution of language and storytelling, and its adaptive value and its pitfalls. How both help us to understand each other and the world, but also how they can realise imagined worlds and (dangerous) ‘truths’: stories and shared (dominant, cultural) narratives can connect and divide: the stories about ‘us’ and ‘them’. They can forge bonds and destroy. Stories are always there and are told and disseminated in different contexts: the personal, the group, the community, the nation. With language and stories lying became a relevant part of communication as well, and again: sometimes quite innocent but usually blurring and dividing: some dominant and ‘single’ stories are proof of that.

Each narrative approach we want to apply – including the choice for e.g. story collecting and meaning-making, dialogue, (inter)mediation - becomes determined by the context: the personal, the group, the social, the community, the nation, etc... It also shows that we have to be aware of the ‘where and when’ that the various approaches can be implemented most constructively. The more an answer for a specific conflict is determined by external agents (vicarious, pushers, joiners), the less the parties will feel ownership for ‘the solution’. It can even deepen the conflict (polarisation). Looking at the iceberg model, and to the escalation and especially the conflict maintenance and polarisation stage, we consider ‘dialogue’ a questionable choice; it might bring harm and fuel polarisation ever more. The preferred intervention would be intermediation (‘go-between’) until the parties are ready to meet.

Most authors also tell us to be aware of reconciliation as the endpoint: it can lead to a transformation, but a definite change cannot be reached if the indirect and vicarious groups have not had the opportunity to be informed about the process the parties have gone through, and to digest that the parties have found a common ground, have made agreements and have processed a new, common future, based a consensual coexistence. If not, the danger of either enduring polarisation lurks, and otherwise the hidden danger of the ‘Balkan Effect’. Peace, as we have quoted one of the authors, is not the absence of conflict; it is the way we (learn to) deal with a series of conflicts in a constructive way.

The approaches we have presented in this compendium, and the practical exercises and applied storytelling activities we offer in the CGCF toolkit and the Guidelines can be valuable resources for conflict solution and depolarisation – if used sensibly.
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