

Linking Narratives to Dynamics of Social Movements Toward Sustainability

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Narratives have played a crucial role throughout the history of humanity by reflecting experiences and maintaining culture in the form of stories, music, dance, and images. They link the past with present and in some cases with an imaginary, perhaps aspirational future. While narratives in literary, cultural, psychological, and historical terms have been extensively discussed and analyzed, they are also important in terms of the sciences, as we struggle to address highly complex social-ecological system challenges.

Narratives are important in several ways in this regard. One is that narratives communicate ideas deemed especially important in a given context by representing the ideas in a form that incorporates a reduced degree of complexity. This allows us to process the ideas within the limitations of our short-term memory. In doing so, the narrative plays a significant role in facilitating sense making and thus also decision making. Secondly, narratives of vision convey a sense of a possible or plausible future state of the society in its environment and context. And thirdly, narratives of identity, both individual and social, are always present, with multiple identities residing in the mind of a given individual that are tied to different contexts in which the individual lives and functions. For example, these might include family, work, sports or recreational club, religious community. These narratives of identity contain clues about the possible motivations of an individual to act in accord with (or in opposition to) the decisions of a group with which the individual engages.

I have been particularly interested in affective narrative expressions of vision and identity as ways to understand and think more creatively about dynamics of social movements toward sustainable futures with equity and justice. In addition to extended narrative discourses, affective narrative expressions - condensed, memorable, and communicable extracts from narratives (e.g., "I have a dream" taken from the long, powerful 1963 speech of M. L. King, Jr.) - very often become a currency of exchange in lieu of the full expression. In many cases the entire narrative is no longer known to many, but the affective expression of its core message remains in circulation.

In the 2018 Taipei symposium of the Knowledge, Learning, and Societal Change research Alliance (KLASICA), we identified five analytical categories, which we used to characterize narratives of vision and identity in 20 cases from communities around the world. The five categories were 1) associative plausibility, 2) framing (context), 3) normative affirmation, 4) emotional identification, and 5) motivational incentives. The purpose was to examine the feasibility of using the categories to understand rationales for decision making in regard to aspects of sustainability in communities that go beyond the rationality of economic utility functions. In the on-going work of KLASICA, we are also exploring the use of the affective narrative expressions and characterizations as a basis for development of agent-based models for thinking about the dynamics of social movements.

In regard to public narratives of science and scientists, I want to mention a study that examined children's visual narrative expressions of what being a scientist or researcher meant to them. The Swedish organization, Vetenskap & Allmänhet, published a report following the European initiative Researchers' Night in 2007. A part of this activity was a drawing contest. Rather than asking children to do the usual task of drawing a scientist, I posed the challenge: "Draw yourself as a researcher". The contest attracted about 3000 contributions from 6–12 year-old school children. A sample of these drawings was examined by my wife, Lori Adams Chabay, Ph.D. who is an expert on early childhood learning. Her analysis, conclusions and recommendations were presented in a report: [*Myself as a researcher – an analysis of children's images of scientists, VA report 2008:3.*](#)