

Bringing Forth Hidden Narrative:

Storytelling in Peace and Conflict Studies

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## ABSTRACT

Storytelling is a deeply embedded cultural tradition across the globe: multiple disciplines within the humanities find ties directly back to prehistoric man's attempts at constructing narrative—from cave painting to the eventual sprawl of literature following the advent of Gutenberg's printing press. In consideration of this, is there space within western Peace and Conflict Studies (PACS), for constructed narrative, not only as a component of PACS processes, but also as a framework for conflict transformation and peacebuilding? This paper explores trends in western PACS literature that identify current applications of narrative, if any, in conflict management, resolution and transformation as well as peacebuilding practice and highlights potential directions for further research in bringing forth hidden narrative—as a framework and a process—through PACS.

*Keywords:* constructed narrative, narrative formation, storytelling

### Bringing Forth Hidden Narrative:

#### Storytelling in Peace and Conflict Studies

Storytelling is a deeply embedded cultural tradition across the globe. From “catching up” around the kitchen table to more formal constructions like commemoration events, narrative formation continues to play a large role in global society. The concept of constructed narrative is so deeply entrenched, we have developed 24-hour news cycles; memoirs; self-publishing; blogging; and Facebook. The inevitable pull of telling our stories continues to keep us engaged with one another.

In consideration of this, several questions emerge: is there space within western Peace and Conflict Studies (PACS), for constructed narrative, not only as a component of PACS processes, but also as a framework for conflict transformation and peacebuilding? What are the challenges of such an approach? Are there opportunities within current research for deeper exploration of constructed narrative as a strategy for conflict resolution and peacebuilding? Can narrative strands be teased out of conflict models within western PACS praxis?

This review explores trends in western PACS literature that identify current applications of narrative, or lack thereof, in conflict management, resolution and transformation as well as peacebuilding practice. First, is an examination of narrative as it sits in current PACS literature. What follows then is an exploration into the possibility of narrative as a framework and a strategy in PACS theory and practice. The paper concludes with assessing challenges and opportunities for utilizing narrative as both a framework and a strategy.

### Narrative in Current Literature

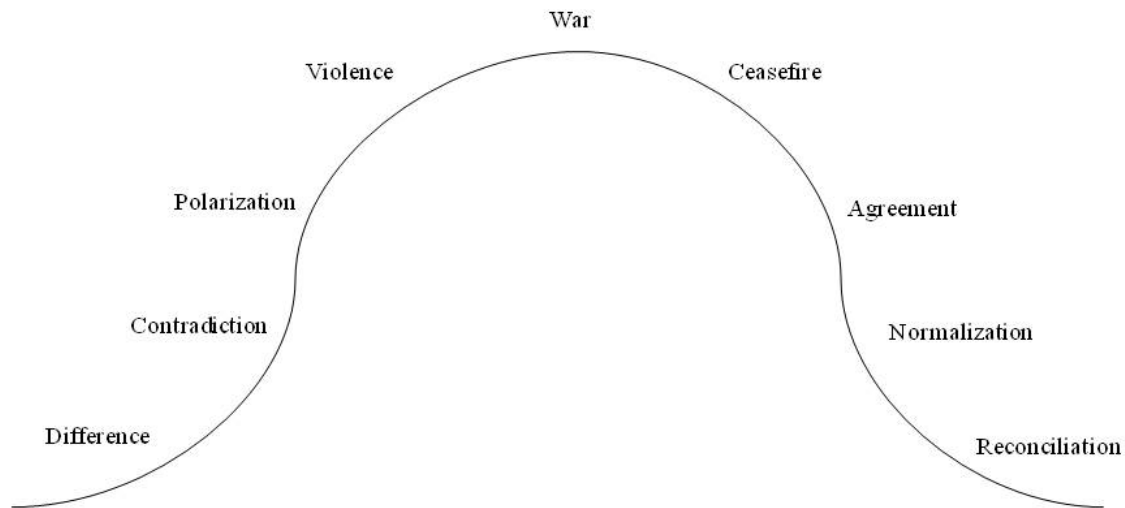
Current Peace and Conflict Studies (PACS) literature wrestles with identifying narrative and narrative construction as embedded in PACS processes. Within Ramsbotham, Woodhouse & Miall's (2011) *Contemporary Conflict Resolution*, the term "narrative," is not indexed, hinting at the distance between PACS and the concept of narrative as both a contextual framework and a strategic process in driving peacebuilding efforts. Paradoxically, the text alludes to, while avoiding the term, narrative in various chapters, particularly in connection to media and conflict (p. 359), truth and reconciliation commissions (p. 255) and the post-structural critique of cosmopolitan conflict resolution (p. 406). Ramsbotham, et al. (2011) avoid drawing direct connections to the cultural and social importance, as well as the historical act of narrative construction or formation in PACS.

However, it is important to consider the implicit definitions of narrative in *Contemporary Conflict Resolution* (Ramsbotham, et al., 2011).



**Figure 1 Primary source information comes from direct conflict participants; additional layers include political leaders, other nation-states, aid agencies and non-participant observers.**

Within the text, media is depicted as a conflict force in both escalation and de-escalation of conflict; the formation of news items as disseminated through various channels is one of relevance and concern, determined by a "social and political process" (p. 361). This begins a process of conflict layering (Fig. 1) as media then becomes affected by structural and asymmetric demands (p.364); in this, how the story of conflict is told around the kitchen table and before the monument, shifts dramatically.



**Figure 2 Conflict escalation and de-escalation model (Ramsbotham, et al., 2011, p. 13)**

Within the escalation/de-escalation model (Fig. 2), Ramsbotham, et al. (2011) discuss reconciliation through official amnesia and truth commissions (p.252), both processes which operate through narrative: official amnesia through letting go of contested portions of dominant narrative and truth commissions attempting to catalogue human rights violations through individual shared stories (p. 252). Adding in the tension that Ramsbotham, et. al (2011) grapple with when considering the post-structural critique of cosmopolitan values, particularly in regards to identity (p. 407), we see individual constructions of conflict and peace processes in both cases, falling before a dominant, often more palatable construction adopted as the nation's history or the national narrative. In this way, globalism, technology and individualism have broadened constructions of narrative that have generally been reserved for Track 1 actors within a conflict.

It is within this implied framework that Yehudith Auerbach's (2009) Reconciliation Pyramid (Fig. 3) leverages the concept of national narrative, or meta-narrative, as an integral part of the conflict process. Proposed within reconciliatory processes, Auerbach (2009) asserts that two warring parties continually experiencing conflict as "fueled and exacerbated by the constant cultivation of mutual victimhood narratives," require a deeper shift in attitude than material means

can enact (p. 294). The Reconciliation Pyramid (Auerbach, 2009) proposes that, within the apex of conflict resolution lays a paradigm-shifting, seven-stage model that culminates in narrative incorporation for conflict parties.



Figure 3 Auerbach's (2009) Reconciliation Pyramid

This is a particularly salient model when considering other work and research in PACS. Academic research and generally accepted global history by multiple authors highlights both the necessity for a multiplex methodology in conflict analysis (Boudreau, 2011) and a continuous push toward inclusive peacebuilding practices that seek to recognize more distinct subgroups within conflict parties (Auerbach, 2009; Chaudhry & Bertram, 2009; King, 2010; Seibt, 2011; Tabbush, 2009). In addition to a broader approach to conflict and peace processes, Seibt (2011) calls for a deeper understanding of identity within a critical and a cultural framework, which helps in expanding Auerbach's (2009) concept of identity conflict. King's (2011) work adds shadings of such subgroups within identity groups in her work, detailing discourse within Post-Genocide Rwanda; there is very little structural space for narratives that might contradict or challenge the selected memories highlighted by the current Rwandan government in its efforts toward legitimization.

King's (2011) work is pivotal in understanding the power of narrative in PACS; as the dominant, legitimized narrative is adopted within the nation-state, conflict parties are splintered into subgroups that may or may not feel recognition within the social structure. Additional work from R.R. Garagozov (2002) enlarges this concept to include historical narratives that "are considered to be cultural instruments promoting collective remembrance" (p. 55). Garagozov

(2002) also reports that J.V. Wertsch, in his work, *Voices of Collective Remembering* (2002), was able to identify a Russian schematic narrative template (p. 56), giving further support to a generally accepted, dominant narrative that can be entrenched within a nation-state and, in effect, be carried forward in the realms of national, social and personal identity. This idea fuels Seibt's (2011) observation that:

identity-based conflicts typically are mitigated or dispersed rather than resolved and require different means of deescalation [*sic*] beyond negotiations of access and distribution, namely, in-depth and long-term interactions of the conflicting groups that include identity transforming practices of counseling, reconciliation, and trust-building (p. 229).

Coupled with Seibt's (2011) later assertion that critically, identity is more complex than behaviors and variously defined by individual experience and cultural expectation (p. 230), the necessity for a framework that considers narrative becomes clearer.

Professor Dan Bar-On (2006; 2008; Bar-On & Adwan, 2004; Bar-On & Kassem, 2003) worked directly with narrative construction as part of a strategic framework for peacebuilding. Working with post-World War II survivors and descendant populations as well as within Israeli-Palestinian ethnoterritorial conflict, Bar-On is able to bring forth hidden narrative within dominant conflict narratives. Though his work focuses on more traditionally defined identity conflicts, his storytelling process serves to underscore the functionality of Auerbach's (2009) Reconciliation Pyramid model; he moved conflict parties through several stages of the model, most notably Acquaintance, Acknowledgement and, to some extent, Empathy. Bar-On's (2006) work outlines both the process and some of its short-term results in articles, workshop presentations and books. Bar-On's (2006) storytelling process comes to PACS as the product of hegemony and silence (p.15), again bringing forth the idea of dominant narrative silencing dissenting voices. Auerbach

(2009) finds connection to, and cites specifically, Bar-On's work within the Acquaintance stage of the reconciliation pyramid; Auerbach also mentions that the Education ministry of the Likud government banned the project in the late '90's, highlighting more dominant national and social narratives that supplant the efforts to bring forth lesser known and neglected narratives (p. 305). Bar-On's work still provides insight into regional PACS processes, including Alkirnawi's (n.d.) work with more subgroups, the Bedouins and the Jews of the Negev, in the region; though the work may not currently be structurally supported in either case, Bar-On's storytelling process still provides hope for many participants—and inspiration for practitioners—who begin to understand the power of shared experience and narrative incorporation (p. 12). As with all processes, there is a continued evolution in both practice and application as experience with the form continues to grow.

W. Zheng (2009) shares work surrounding the narrative incorporation of China, Japan and Korea, three Asian countries with long, conflicted and conflicting histories. Similar to the storytelling process of Bar-On, a conglomeration of independent teachers, historians and members of civic groups from the three nations gathered to formulate a shared interpretation of the history between the countries, working toward the creation of an incorporated history text (p. 102). While not a new invention (p. 103), it recognizes the power of narrative formation in that "history text books have been regarded as major components in...construction and reproduction of national narratives" (p.103). Again, similar to Bar-On's work, the effort was not structurally supported and, at the time of the writing, the texts were more likely to be purchased by individuals than adopted within educational systems.

Building upon Bar-On's (2006) storytelling process as a grassroots communal sharing project and incorporating later stages of Auerbach's (2009) pyramid which bring focus to structural



support of peacebuilding process, *Telling Stories in Conflict* (2008), edited by Liam O'Hagan, provides insight into the work of The Junction, a Northern Ireland community relations group. The blend of processes across conflict levels within two of their current projects takes participants through the storytelling process and moves toward narrative incorporation, a bottom-up approach (p. 111). Additionally, there is structural support within the conflict parties for work to occur that directly affects the national narrative through structural and systemic shifts and re-contextualization (p. 148). This creates space for critical, objective exploration of a shared history embroiled in conflict through the very soft and affected lens of human experience, but also highlights the necessity of working toward and through peace on multiple levels. By mitigating individual impact and supporting structural and systemic changes, the opportunity does exist for narrative to be employed as both a framework and strategy in PACS.

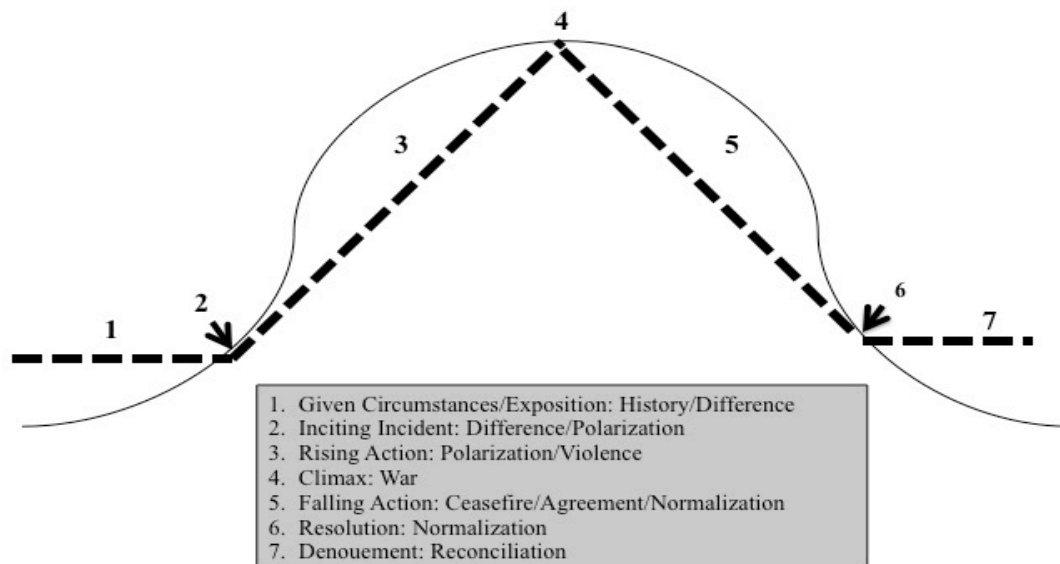
### **Narrative as a Framework**

Utilizing the lens of formal theory, connections can be drawn in conflict escalation and de-escalation (Ramsbotham, et al., 2011) to Aristotelian narrative plot structure. Additionally, Auerbach's (2009) Reconciliation Pyramid finds space within these connections and, though founded on reconciliatory process, can exist within other phases of conflict analysis and narrative construction.

The application of formal theory creates the linear model of conflict escalation and de-escalation; more importantly, it draws causal connections between events and data within the conflict. By itself, it creates the particularly narrow view of conflict that is in opposition to both cosmopolitan conflict resolution (Ramsbotham, et al., 2011) and the broadening definition of identity emerging in PACS (Seibt, 2011). Overlaying this model with Aristotelian plot structure—a nod to Garagozov (2002) and the schematic narrative—aids the escalation/de-escalation model

in broadening its scope and creating more elasticity in what can be a rigid conception of conflict. It does this through correlations with the traditional elements of narrative construction: given circumstances, exposition, inciting incident, rising action, climax, falling action, resolution and denouement (Fig. 4) With these connections to the traditional PACS model, there is a fuller incorporation of the trends in the literature of layered conflict (Bar-On, 2006; O'Hagan, 2008; Ramsbotham et al., 2011), diversity in conflict (Alkirnawai, n.d.; Auerbach, 2009; Bar-On, 2008; Bar-On & Adwan, 2003; Bar-On & Kassem, 2004; Chaudhry & Bertram, 2009; King, 2010; Salomon, 2004; Seibt, 2011; Tabbush, 2009) and multi-level approaches to peacebuilding (Auerbach, 2009; Boudreau, 2011; King, 2009; O'Hagan, 2008).

The limitation of this model exists in its two dimensional state; it only catalogs cause and effect and essentially neglects or avoids the human element in peace and conflict. Causal modeling is reliant upon direct connections between events and information, something which is diluted by the multiple layers of contemporary conflict (Ramsbotham et al., 2011); with this in mind, the



**Figure 4 Conflict escalation/de-escalation overlaid with Aristotelian plot narrative**

simplicistic additive process of one thing happening and causing another does not accurately capture

PACS process in consideration of current literature. Through the literature and an understanding of narrative construction as a process, narrative as a framework indicates a strong connection to the intersection Auerbach's (2009) Reconciliation Pyramid and the two dimensional framework. Accepting that it sits within the apex of conflict resolution shows visual connections (Fig. 5), similar to that of Aristotelian plot structure to the escalation/de-escalation model (Fig. 4).

Utilizing this connection and formal analysis, an equation can be proposed (Fig. 6); not a comprehensive model, it works toward including the complexities outlined in the literature in an effort to provide space for theoretical exploration as well as practical application. Additionally, it acknowledges the inter-relational aspects of various models, such as Byrne's Social Cubism, within the broader strokes of each variable. Higher-level mathematical functions are used to indicate processes within narrative framework, a nod to practical complications within the field of PACS. The proposed equation is an attempt to capture human experience in potentially quantifiable and qualitative terms and provide guidance for peacebuilding as a dynamic, narrative process.



Figure 5 Conflict escalation and de-escalation; Aristotelian narrative plot structure; and the Reconciliation Pyramid.

Exploring the equation highlights connections drawn in the literature and work emerging in the field. History and facts are a culmination of how we got “here” (Alkiranawi, n.d; Chaudhry & Bertram, 2009; Garagozov, 2002; Zheng, 2009) and are reduced, from general occurrences to

**Figure 6 Formal Narrative Framework**

$$\left[ \frac{\text{(History)(Facts)}}{\text{Individual Perspective}} \times (\text{Opportunity})^2 \times \text{Capacity to Heal} \right]$$

specific examples, by individual perspective

(Alkiranawi, n.d; Auerbach, 2009; Bar-On, 2006, Bar-On & Adwan, 2003, Bar-On & Kassem, 2004; Garagozov, 2002; King, 2010; O’Hagan,

2008). As an indication of the complexity of the process, recursive loops or re-presentation and challenging of learned information (Rich & Cargile, 2004), either through experience or observation, occur within the scope of the individual perspective. These loops either reinforce or deconstruct individual perspective. This exemplifies what individuals or conflict parties bring into the narrative framework.

Next, the action is compounded by opportunity: do the conflict parties have opportunities to come together (Bar-On, 2008)? Is direct violence still occurring (O’Hagan, 2008)? Are there resources to provide space, literally and figuratively, for peacebuilding to occur? Within this “opportunity” exists space for employment of third-party techniques like mediation and negotiation.

Finally, on the other end, the plausibility of healing must be considered; is there actual capacity for healing in the situation? This encompasses the necessary, multi-level approach to conflict resolution and peacebuilding the literature calls for in allowing narrative framework to function; eventually, everyone involved in the conflict has to be moving toward narrative incorporation (Auerbach, 2009). Assessments of this capacity must be taken and taken often; the

multiplicative power of zero-sum (Ramsbotham, et al., 2011) can negate any progress toward peace.

### **Challenges to Narrative Framework**

In acknowledging negation, narrative integration into generally accepted frameworks provides a wide array of challenges: epistemology, the willingness of conflict parties to share in integrated narrative forms and a large over-arching need for multi-level support of PACS process. The opportunity for narrative as a framework and a strategic process is immense as evidenced by specific work done around the globe in multiple arenas, but it is necessary to address concerns in moving forward.

Much of the current literature discusses the asymmetry in victim/perpetrator relationships within conflict parties. With this dichotomy in all levels of narrative, there is very little elasticity to create the emotional landscape integral to peacebuilding through the narrative process. Ironically, current practice is establishment of uni-national or singular identity-based groups to build trust and confidence before moving to a bi-national or multiple identity setting (Bar-On & Adwan, 2003; Bar-On & Kassem, 2004). While this does not wholly guarantee the unsettling of the dichotomous paradigm, moving incrementally in this manner serves to create some individual agency for such a change.

Additionally, individuals choosing to participate in de-legitimizing the dominant narrative may face more conflict—including within the larger parent group (Salomon, 2004; Tabbush, 2009; King, 2010). It is possible that long-term benefit can outweigh initial discomfort with further study in specific conflict arenas, but, much like the tension experienced by the women of Greater Buenos

Aires (Tabbush, 2009), continued threats of violence—social or structural—can silence hidden narrative and minimize individual agency.

With a traditionally heavy emphasis on ethnoterritorial conflict in current practice, storytelling can provide a larger backdrop for identity conflict in its broadest and most contemporaneous sense; as we see larger strides in individualism moving society away from a singular "national" identity, PACS principles utilized in traditionally identity-based conflicts might still apply.

Storytelling as a function finds its roots in indigenous or "traditional" peacebuilding practices that provide relational structures, like circle processes—often employed in restorative justice—and a strong sense of responsibility to community. Paradoxically, current practice with constructive narrative now serves to move storytelling away from preservation of a group's culture or way of life, a powerful backdrop to indigenous practice. The storytelling practice focuses on cataloging conflict and emotional reactions to events and transitions participants toward generally more inclusive identity formations.

Beyond the process of sharing narrative, or, as Bar-On (2006) discusses, collecting data, there are no concrete models that provide an action plan for resolving or transforming conflict and building peace. As practice continues with storytelling, proliferation of technique will depend upon first-hand experience of practitioners; it is unlikely that there will be a storytelling workbook or educational DVD in the near future to provide hard skills to employ in facilitating the process. Additionally, it is likely that research on the tools utilized in the field will continue to be a reflexive process—what worked, what did not; research provoking changes in tactics or strategies may only be undertaken by practitioners already committed to the efficacy of the tool itself.

### **Opportunities for Further Study**

Current PACS praxis gives strong indication that viewing narrative as both a framework and an opportunity to address deeply entrenched issues within conflicted relations holds transformative power. It also serves to provide an insight into unification across conflict intervention levels, driving both the personal and political to continue working toward, and building upon, peace.

Continuing to identify hidden and neglected narrative strands in current ethnoterritorial conflicts and the growing arena of identity conflict across the globe, provide the largest and most tangible opportunity for narrative framework and storytelling process. Utilizing Auerbach's (2009) reconciliation pyramid, with its narrative base in PACS processes can increase both the body of academic literature and practical evidence of application.

Kellett (2011) encourages the use of narrative as a framework and process tool in academic settings, detailing particular strengths and critiques of the process when working with burgeoning practitioners. The power of this work comes in its call to value narrative outside of the formal theoretical lens—moving toward a plausible account versus a demonstrably true account, one built upon causal relationships of events and data within scope of the conflict (p. 319). Kellett is the only author that directly references narrative as framework for conflict analysis and mapping, highlighting “how life stories, culture, identity, conflict and learning are interconnected” (p. 325). This suggestion provides a safe and viable laboratory setting for academic exploration into narrative process as a framework and strategy in PACS.

Tightening the intersections of indigenous or “traditional” modalities in PACS and that of western practice will also enhance the possibilities of narrative formation in peacebuilding. With indigenous processes that serve to strengthen communal and relational bonds, the possibility of deepening current storytelling process or the reconciliation pyramid is real (Batchelor, 2007).

Finally, continued exploration into inter-disciplinary connections in conflict management and resolution should provide insight into narrative construction, as evidenced by current research in such fields as sociology, psychology, education and interfaith studies. K. Mumby's (2005) article examines the victim/perpetrator asymmetry as a control/resistance paradigm in organizational conflict, utilizing Marxist, neo-Marxist, post-structural critiques as well as Foucauldian discourse analytics.

Rich & Cargile (2004) utilize storytelling process in a Cal State University course, enacting a theoretical framework as inspired by cultural anthropologist, Victor Turner's notion of social drama (p. 351). Paralleling Aristotelian plot structure, social drama is concerned with reestablishing equilibrium after an event has upset the dynamic (p. 352). Focusing on transformative properties within highlighting conflict and recursive looping—mirroring what has been said or written regarding the issue in the community—the two aimed at proving the necessity for transformation of White identity to promote multiculturalism. Again, much like storytelling in PACS, long-term results were not readily apparent, but like most identity-based conflict work inside and outside of PACS, the seed must be cultivated.

It is these types of work across the broad spectrum of the social sciences and the humanities that could truly benefit PACS at little to no cost of human life or material resource. Such forays within intersectional work are likely to bear fruit for informing PACS as a theoretical field.

### **Conclusion**

Through an in-depth analysis of a larger body of literature, the plausibility of narrative as a framework for conflict resolution and peacebuilding becomes clearer and clearer. PACS study over the past three decades has created space for individual agency within larger conflicts; multiple layers of conflict participants play party to PACS processes in manners not seen before widespread



technological advances. This, along with economic and political globalization and stronger leanings toward individualism, broadens what has become the traditional definition of identity conflict in the field.

With this growing definition of identity, it is more plausible and seemingly desirable to approach conflict with a larger lens. The connections to escalation/de-escalation in conflict, Aristotelian plot structure and Auerbach's (2009) Reconciliation Pyramid, create a formal narrative framework that can underpin multiple models specific to conflicts within a larger context of moving toward peace through narrative incorporation.

Continuing to test this idea will be necessary in theoretical and practical arenas; challenges to narrative framework will need support from both to facilitate true, applicable growth in the field. While there are current cases where storytelling process is being employed, the larger framework requires additional support and testing to increase its credibility. Seizing existing opportunities to exercise storytelling processes, deepen connections to indigenous practice and build upon the interdisciplinary strengths of PACS will contribute to the credibility and viability of narrative as a framework.

The work that exists in the narrative framework truly supports cosmopolitan values in a continually growing global landscape. Bringing forth the hidden narrative of PACS includes bringing forth how we see and contextualize conflict in our own lives. While there is not an implicit plan of action intimated through this process, it gives us more pieces of the puzzle to truly work toward building a positive and lasting peace.

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