

NARRATIVE CHANGE FOR HEALTH & RACIAL EQUITY: EXPLORING CAPACITY & ALIGNMENT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



BY JEWLYA LYNN, POLICY SOLVE
& LYN KATHLENE

PREPARED ON BEHALF OF THE CALIFORNIA ENDOWMENT

OCTOBER 2020

Acknowledgements

Thank you to the following individuals and organizations who participated in one or more phases of the study:

- Alianza Coachella Valley, Silvia Paz
- ASO Communications, Anat Shenker-Osorio
- Bay Rising, Irene Rojas-Carroll
- Bay Rising, Kimi Lee
- Black Organizing Project, Jackie Byers & Jasmine Williams
- Borealis Philanthropy, Zaineb Mohammed
- California Alliance for Youth & Community Justice, CAYCJ, Abraham Medina
- California Immigrant Policy Center, CIPC, Cynthia Buiza
- Californians for Justice, Saa'un P Bell
- Center for Story-based Strategy (CSS), Bernice Shaw
- Children's Partnership, Mayra Alvarez
- Color of Change, Rashad Robinson
- Communities for a New California Education Fund (CNC Education Fund), Pablo Rodriguez
- Congregations Organized for Prophetic Engagement (COPE), Rev Sam Casey
- The Center For Cultural Power, Favianna Rodriguez
- Del Norte Building Healthy Communities, Michelle Carrillo
- East LA Community Corporation (ELACC), Isela Gracian
- Eastside Arts Alliance, Elena Serrano
- Faith in the Valley, Andy Levine
- First Nations Development Institute (First Nations), Michael Roberts & Raymond Foxworth
- Fresno Building Healthy Communities, Sandra Celedon
- Genders & Sexualities Alliance Network (GSA Network), Marinarde Soto Espinoza
- Othering and Belonging Institute at UC Berkeley, Gerald Lenoir
- Health Access California (Health Access), Anthony Wright
- Jakara Movement, Naindeep Singh
- LA Commons, Karen Mack
- Long Beach Forward, James Suazo
- Mid-City Community Advocacy Network, Diana Rodriguez Ross
- Motivating Individual Leadership for Public Advancement (MILPA), Juan Gomez
- Narrative Initiative, Jee Kim, Rachel Weidinger & Jacob Swenson-Lengyel
- PICO California, Jennifer Martinez
- Power California (Power CA), Jung Hee Choi
- Race Forward, Jeff Chang
- Radical Communicators Network (RadComms), Shanelle Matthews
- ReFrame Mentorship, Joseph Phelan
- Resilience Orange County (Resilience OC), Oswaldo Farias & Claudia Perez
- Resource Media, Marla Wilson & Refugio Mata
- Revolve Impact, Mike de la Rocha
- Right to the City, Malcolm Torregon Chu
- Safe Return Project, Tamisha Walker
- Sol Collective, Estella Sanchez
- Kern Sol News, Reyna Olaguez
- TransLatin@ Coalition, Bamby Salcedo
- United We Dream, Cristina Jimenez
- Youth Leadership Institute, Sher Moua
- YR Media, Rebecca Martin & Nancy Deville

Thank you to Makani Themba at Higher Ground Change Strategies for assistance in interpreting the results.

Thank you to The California Endowment who funded this study and the following Endowment staff who were deeply involved in guiding the study implementation and exploring the results: Alex Desautels, Janine Saunders, Evangeline Reyes, Rachel Poulain, and Alicia Castro.

And finally, thank you to the staff at the Center for Outcomes Research and Education for assistance with data collection and coordination, including: Kristen Dulacki, Natalie Kenton, Michael Sutcliffe, and Maggie Weller.

Recommended citation: Lynn, Jewlya & Kathlene, Lyn (2020). Narrative change for health & racial equity: Exploring capacity & alignment. Prepared on behalf of The California Endowment. Denver, CO: PolicySolve, LLC.

Executive Summary

In the fall of 2019, The California Endowment (TCE) commissioned a study to understand the capacity needs and strengths in California related to narrative change. The study was designed to be a participatory process where the findings would be grounded in a shared understanding with stakeholders directly involved in building power and changing narratives. It engaged over 40 narrative change leaders in California and nationally in shaping the study focus, data sources, and interpretation of results.

The Urgency of This Moment

While the study began in 2019, the results are being completed and shared in 2020, after a pandemic has changed the world, disproportionately affecting communities of color, and the Black Lives Matter movement has gained traction nationally and globally.

“What we’re in right now is a fight for what the narrative is going to be. It takes a cataclysmic event like we’re in right now for those narratives to open up. It’s a once in a generation moment.” *Karen Mack, LA Commons*

“Given the urgency of now, it is all the more apparent that we need trust to let the work move forward.” *Discussion Group*

When the study findings were brought to participants for interpretation, they explored what was learned from the previous year’s interviews, but also stated, in many ways and no uncertain terms: ***the time for action is now***. The need for action is visible, both because of the suffering of Black, Indigenous and people of color (BIPOC), the needs of communities, and the tremendous window of opportunity to change the narrative.

Different Approaches to Narrative Change

Study participants articulated a diverse array of approaches and ways of understanding narrative change (Table 1, next page), approaches that resonated with almost all participants in the interpretation discussions conducted at the end of the study to review the findings. This is not surprising in an emergent field, where there are no “best practices” or widely agreed upon ways of advancing change.

Each approach is distinct in how it centers different voices; the tools/tactics being used; how reach and impact are thought about; and even which capacities are priorities. These approaches are **not in competition with each other**, so much as being representative of current distinctions in how narrative change is understood and deployed across these organizations. In fact, some participants were intrigued by the idea of

Narrative Change Definitions

For this study, TCE proposed a set of definitions related to narrative change and the 13 participants in Phase I of the study gave feedback, resulting in the following definitions:

Narratives: Narratives bring together the values, beliefs and stories that shape how we see people and places, communities and cultures, ideologies and institutions. We use narratives to interpret and make meaning of the past and present, and to envision the future.

Narrative Change: Narrative change is the process of disrupting dominant narratives that normalize inequity and uphold oppression and advancing new narratives from our communities and individuals in historically marginalized groups, narratives that help us dismantle social inequities and imagine a different future.

Deep Narrative (also known as Meta-Narratives and Worldviews): Deep narratives are the unquestioned “truths” that have been normalized by society and feel like common sense, but can uphold systemic oppression. They are amplified through institutions, structures, and power systems, along with norms and social behaviors. They cut across issue areas and include such things as sexism, racism, machismo, and other forms of patriarchy, as well as the role of government and concepts of individualism.

how these approaches are complementary and could be intentionally used in different narrative change strategies.

Table 1. Four complementary approaches to narrative change

| | Approach A | Approach B | Approach C | Approach D |
|----------------------------|---|--|--|---|
| Summary | Narrative change as embedded into a larger power building and organizing approach that centers the voices of their community members. | Centers the voice of community members while also actively working across many communities and building networks working on aligned narratives. | Research-driven process, which may include many organizations at the table, that engages communities to deploy messages, frames, and narratives. | Mix of research and community-driven processes, all oriented around policy change processes (narrative as a tool to change policy). |
| Voices Centered | Begins first and foremost with the voices of people in their communities. Audiences are often the community members. | Often begins with a central narrative focus, but centers the voices of each community within that focus. May seek to reach larger audiences than just the communities. | Begins with research using strategic communications tools like polling, focus groups, and message testing. Explicitly focuses on larger audiences and significant reach. | Centers policymakers as the audience to reach, often with community members as the storytellers. |
| Reach/scale/desired impact | Deeply focused on the needs of one or a couple communities. | Works across communities, seeking alignment on central narratives. | Explicit, central goal of reaching many people and broadly shifting narratives. | Prioritizes policy change as the primary outcome. |

Interviewees recognize narrative change as an integral part of power building, and power building as necessary to address inequities in California. As many participants said, in one way or another, “**narrative change does not equal power**” and, at the same time, narrative change can help build power. For some, power building is foundational and narrative is a strategy to build power. For others, narrative change is insufficient - narrative power is needed to drive meaningful changes. For interviewees using Approach C, there is also a tension between building power in communities to help change narratives and scaling the reach of narrative campaigns through other tactics that are less community-driven.

Capacity & Infrastructure

Interviewees identified many different **capacities that organizations working on narrative change simply need more of** – some of which are needed across many organizations and some of which are needed only by a few organizations that can then share those capacities (Table 2).

Table 2. Critical narrative change capacities

| | | |
|--|--|--|
| <p><u>Critical, but missing or insufficient:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communications knowledge & skills • Trauma support for storytellers • Understanding stories • Conducting research • Planning skills • Physical facilities • Rapid response capacity | <p><u>Critical, but somewhat intangible:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Capacity to take actions that spread positive narratives (where actions, not words, change the narrative) • Humility, recognizing narrative change expertise as critical, but not the only expertise | <p><u>Less critical, but missing:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Influencing the institutions (schools, museums, gov) where narratives are reinforced • Disseminating stories/narratives on TV/radio |
|--|--|--|

Critical, but missing or insufficient:

- Ethnic and community-controlled media
- Cultural work

Critical, but somewhat intangible:

Less critical, but missing:

Communications Capacity & Shared Infrastructure

Across the interviewees, there were **very different ways of understanding what it means to engage in narrative change strategies, and where communications work fits into these strategies.** For some, narrative change is an umbrella term that many different types of work can help to advance (communications, cultural work, organizing, etc.). For others, narrative change is one of the tools in a communications toolbox, which can be deployed when shifting a narrative is needed to get to a policy or community-change goal.

Grassroots-focused organizations largely **did not want more communications capacity via new staff** with specialized roles (preferring capacity be built across existing staff and deeply embedded in the organization), while organizations focused on network and coalition building called out the **need for more dedicated communications staff**, including in grassroots organizations.

“For too long, we’ve just accepted that nonprofits don’t need narrative and communications capacity. But it is clear our investments in narrative change need to include those on the ground – local organizers, strategists and communicators – who are networked together.” *Jung Hee Choi, Power California*

Many participants are interested in various types of shared infrastructure, particularly around communications capacity or other narrative capacities, including via **multi-organization “hubs”** for narrative change, shared technology access, shared communications expertise, and infrastructure to help amplify narratives.

The Role & Risks of National Communications Firms

Participants consistently held a strong point of view about their desired role for how national communications firms show up in California’s narrative change work: less involvement, less funding, and more investment in communities. They do not believe these firms share their values, bring enough value for the cost, offer relevant products, or build local capacity. They asked that smaller, more value-aligned firms be engaged instead, and only for the specific skills not available in communities.

“Stop paying for expensive comms firms disconnected from the community who ‘hoard’ resources, knowledge, and contacts.” *Anonymous*

Cultural Work in Relationship to Narrative Change

Interviewees understood the relationship between cultural and narrative change strategies in very different ways. For some, **cultural work needs to be integrated into any narrative change** work and seen as core to shifting narratives. This has implications for how it is funded and staffed within an organization or with partners. The interviewees from grassroots organizations highlighted the importance of cultural work happening in partnership with people who have authentic stories to share. For others, **cultural work is a specific tactic**, one of many, to deploy in the context of a narrative change strategy. For one interviewee, **cultural change is the strategy and narrative shifts are a means** to make progress toward cultural change.

“Storytelling happens in all these different forms: in dance and music and theater and visual art... narrative means a story and that means storytellers/cultural workers.” *Anonymous*

Learning & Evaluation in Relationship to Narrative Change

Across all groups, most interviewees reported they are doing relatively little formal evaluation. However, interest in learning is high and many interviewees would like more tools and ways of measuring progress.

They also recognize that outcomes and metrics for their campaigns have been too often imposed by funders and not allowed to be more emergent as their work advances.

Scaling & Aligning Narratives

Many of the interviewees' organizations are already working on aligned narratives across communities, coalitions, networks, etc., often on narratives related to belonging and inclusion and a more just, equitable society. While some interviewees are having impact in just one community, most are working across communities either via multi-community power building that utilizes a narrative change approach or via large scale communications tools that seek to reach new audiences, often described by these interviewees as the "persuadable middle."

"Narrative change accelerates when a story of local struggle, rooted in place and community, joins a broader story of shared movement and experience." *Bernice Shaw, CSS*

Despite these successes, interviewees reported many barriers to aligning. One of the most significant appears to originate in **two very different understandings of what it means to deploy narrative change** across multiple organizations:

1. Narrative change requires organizations to share messages and branding, versus;
2. Narrative change is not about using the same words, but about moving a set of ideas, core beliefs, and core stories that express the narrative.

Notably, some narrative change consultants interviewed as part of the study advocated for the first approach and others advocated the second, helping to clarify at least part of how this confusion has arisen.

Another set of barriers comes from **how funders support narrative change work**, such as barriers to authentic, organic partnership, funding only for specific parts of narrative change strategies, and having limited support for experimentation. In general, those working locally saw the least opportunity and possibility of alignment, while those working across communities had more confidence. Those deploying research-driven approaches (rather than community-driven) tended to see more barriers, but were committed to overcoming them.

Feedback to Funders

A separate attachment at the end of this report calls out specific, actionable items for funders to consider. These suggestions came unprompted from interviewees. In brief, they center the concept of **placing more trust, control, and flexibility in grantees** and the ecosystem of narrative change partners. This includes allowing time for the processes to happen organically; offering flexibility; being okay with experiments, even ones that fail; not dictating the issue or messages; letting go of the focus on common messages; not dictating the outcomes or being inflexible with outcomes/deliverables; and not building new infrastructure or external infrastructure, but rather supporting what already exists.

"Trust-based philanthropy is needed. If there is a belief that power is in the community, allow those orgs to use the resources to utilize their power and build it." *Mayra Alvarez, Children's Partnership*

Using the Report Findings

The participants who interpreted the findings asked that **funders be a primary audience** of the report, not just the program staff but also foundation leadership. They want to share the key insights of the study within their organizations and among partners in accessible ways (e.g. webinars or other presentations).