

The art of storytelling across cultures

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14. Triangle of working with stories

Our individual experiences and stories we share at the personal level are never formed in a vacuum. They are intertwined with the stories of the groups we are part of at the collective level and with global narratives.

In this chapter you are going to get inspirations on how you can work with storytelling practices at these three levels:

Personal level - Multicultural identity

At this level we work with the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves as well as stories about ourselves we share with other people. These stories are both an expression of the self and a way of learning about the self. By sharing our stories of how we perceive ourselves, we try to understand who we are. Michael White, the co-creator of the narrative therapy calls this process *making narrative maps* that serve us to externalize our inner story by telling it and thus bring it out of the self to be explored in the safe space.

The story we repeat in our minds determines what we experience, impacts our choices, and has an influence on the outcomes of our actions. Keeping a diary is helpful in this process. As my precious One Word Stories guest, George Simons emphasizes:



ONE WORD STORY Value of journaling

George Simons: *Journaling is a way of telling your story to yourself but also giving you a chance, when you go back, to examine it. About ten years ago I went to my old home in California to sell the house where I grew up. While I cleaned it up, I found many different things, my old journals, some photographs and “family treasures” such as my mom’s letters. I digitalized all of that. What I realized was that there were stories I kept telling, that did not happen exactly the way I remembered them.*

Similarly, my other inspirational guest, Mohit Kanade emphasizes the value of journaling and links it to gratitude.



ONE WORD STORY Value of gratitude

Mohit Kanade: *One of my favorite activities is writing. When I write I do feel that I go into the moment of flow. I find myself in writing. I experienced that I could find a lot of answers to my questions just by being calm. I have been writing journals for the past twenty years, writing the POD, part of the day and SOD, satisfaction of the day. Gratitude is very important.*

Collective level - Group belonging

At this level we focus on the narratives that are shared by people who belong to different groups. I have decided to call this level **Culture** despite the complexity of this term. In the context of narrative work, I relate to culture as *a set of stories that we enter*, as it was defined by the cultural psychologist, Jérôme Bruner. Inspired by the re-narrating and re-authoring practices of our times, the rising voices of people whose voice has not been heard or whose voice has been silenced (#metoo #blacklivesmatter are well known examples) I would like to propose an enriched definition of culture. Culture is a set of stories that we enter and stories we co-create. Hence working with stories at the collective level embraces telling and listening to established stories as much as co-creating new ones.

Global level - Sharing and co-creating stories

This time the narratives are common to all of us, independently of the cultural influences, for instance narratives on pandemics, conflicts, and their impact on the geopolitical, economic, social, situation worldwide, ecology and climate change, to name just a few. At this level we work with stories while communicating with other people from various cultural contexts and exchange our experiences, and perception of the phenomena that are common to our humankind. In the context of the climate change and sustainability for instance, we share our personal stories and group narratives to weave them into the global narratives, so that people who have not cared for wellbeing on our planet, wake up, feel empowered to be pro-active, take responsibility and get involved in projects in their communities and organizations.



Drawing 8. Levels of working with stories

As a result of working with stories, people are empowered at all three levels:

At the personal level – they can start to re-narrate and even re-author stories that hinder them in living up to their full potential and develop intercultural competencies to thrive in the diverse environments.

At the collective level - they can engage with larger narratives in new ways, question the world of obviousness and co-create spaces where new stories can emerge. They are ready to reject collective narratives that do not serve humanity any longer and abandon telling worn-out stories.

At the global level – they are asked to bring more sensitivity, empathy, and compassion to sharing their own stories and listening to other people's stories on global scale as well as paying more attention to the context when talking about sustainability, coping with xenophobia and racism and constructive coping with mental and physical health challenges, to name just a few of global narratives.

At every single level, they can make a conscious decision what stories they want to start telling, which they want to continue telling and which they want to stop telling.

14.1. Mosaic Identity - personal level

The acceleration of historic events and transitions characteristic of our times lead to changes in us. Many of us have the feeling that there are several persons living inside us, who either do not care for each other or are contradictory to one another.

Ryszard Kapuściński Polish journalist

Long before Socrates encouraged *Know thyself*, Chinese sage Lao-Tzu had stated, 'Knowing others is intelligence, knowing self is true wisdom.' In order to introduce working with stories at the personal level, we are invited to think about identity as a narrative identity and above all as a mosaic identity that emphasizes the multicultural complexity of every single person.

In the intercultural field the concept of identity has been adapted from Sigmund Freud and influenced by the research done by Erik H. Erikson (1902-1994) who developed it to the I-Identity. According to Erikson, who created eight stages of personal development, the I-Identity gets fixed in the adulthood. Such a static image of "unchangeable identity" has dominated the psychological field for decades. No wonder that the research on identity in the more complex and globalized world of our times reached the limitations of interpretation possibilities. In psychology in the mid-1980s US-American scholars delved into this understanding.

Psychologists who were specialized in cognitive, developmental, personality and cultural psychology started to look for a broader way to describe identity and human behavior. Dan McAdams was central to this shift and developed a life story model of identity based on the theory that people construct their continuously changing narratives.

Jerôme Bruner, the cultural psychologist of Polish-Jewish origin, based in the USA, also focused on the ongoing process of becoming rather than being and called this process *the narrative identity*.

'There is no such thing as an intuitively obvious and essential self to know, one that just sits there ready to be portrayed in words. Rather, we constantly construct and reconstruct ourselves to meet the needs of the situations we encounter...' (Bruner, 2002:64).

Personality psychologist, Dan P. McAdams defined narrative identity as, ‘the internalized and evolving story that results from a person’s selective appropriation of past, present, and future.’ (McAdams, 1999:486). He also emphasized that, ‘the narrative identity is a joint production, an invention of the storytelling person and the culture within which the person’s story finds its meanings and significance.’ (McAdams, 2019: 14) and further he added that narrative identity itself also changes dramatically over time, as a result of decisions that people make, as agents and authors of their lives (McAdams, 2019: 79).

No wonder that the stories we tell ourselves are central to our wellbeing. McAdams noted that some self-narratives are full of hope whereas others are filled with resignation, mistrust, and pessimism. A pessimistic narrative tone suggests that people do not get what they want or that they feel unworthy.

In the globalized world, storytelling practices are crucial not only for better mutual understanding across cultures but also to better understand our own multicultural selves. Whenever you think of yourself and others as human beings, imagine how our own stories would change if we started to talk about ourselves as *human becomings*.

And we have biological and neuroscientific evidence that such an approach to understanding an individual is not only valid but also logic. We are changing all the time. Today we are not the same as yesterday and it should not be scary. It is normal and in addition it gives us faith in our skills to take ownership and authorship of our own lives.

Let’s begin with our bodies. Every day our brains evolve, depending on the activities we devote time to. If we learn new stuff, new neuronal cells and pathways get created, expanding our understanding of the surrounding world and our personal perception every single day. As Rita Montalcini, the Nobel Prize winner put it, ‘Everyday, new neurons are created in my brain.’

But it is not only our brains which evolve. Our liver gets renewed every 300 to 500 days and we have completely new hair every five to seven years. Isn’t that amazing?

If our bodies are in constant change, why do we tend to be so resistant to changes, remaining stuck in narratives that limit us? The answer is that out of box thinking, searching for new solutions and being proactive cost our brains energy. Our brain tries to save energy at any price, which makes introducing any changes, and modifying thinking patterns, so challenging.

And still, thanks to our brain’s plasticity, we can work on developing a

growth mindset and searching for possibilities for bringing different layers of our multicultural identity to the table to contribute to better cooperation and innovation.

In order to approach our multicultural narrative identity, I would like to propose the metaphor of the mosaic identity and different storytelling activities that can be applied in the intercultural and DEI context.



ONE WORD STORIES Multicultural identity

Mai Nguyen-Phuong-Mai: *All the aspects of your identity change all the time. It is amazing how people are still using the Meyer Brick Test MBT and trying to figure out if you are introvert or extravert. My reaction is: What are you talking about? Have you ever heard of brain plasticity? Have you heard that you can change and that there is nothing such as personality? Why do you take a snapshot of who you are at the moment, and make it an eternal version of yourself?*

Joanna: *Yes, definitely, yes. We can be so much more when we accept brain plasticity and just allow curiosity and openness guide us through our lives. When we think of oxytocin, dopamine, serotonin all these beautiful hormones that get released when we give ourselves permission to be openminded and to listen to other perspectives.*



ART INSPIRATION Byzantine mosaics

Have you ever seen a Byzantine mosaic? You can find them in many parts of Eastern and Southern Europe, the territory of current Turkey and Russia. They depict scenes from the Bible and Christian texts in vivid colors placed on the background skillfully made of tiny tiles very often covered with gold.

The effect is amazing. Imagine such an experience when you feel like entering a jewelry box and find yourself surrounded by a luminous interior, literally bathed in gold, when light gets reflected from the walls. When you come closer, however, you would see, that among mosaic tiles covered with gold there are some black and dark brown tiles as well. Because of them you experience the shining effect as they break light. You do not really perceive their existence at first sight and still they make the overall picture unique and shining.

In the chapter on visual storytelling you are going to find an activity how you can work with the metaphor of the mosaic, inspired by the portrait of Empress Theodora and her court in San Vitale in Ravenna in Italy.

This art inspiration resonated with me a lot when I did my research on the multicultural aspects of identity. I found it a real eye opener to embrace various aspects of identity, those visible at first sight and those that are not necessarily communicated by individuals to the outside world and still play an important role in the way they think, feel, and behave.

In all my book chapters and articles, intercultural trainings, and coaching sessions I address multicultural identity, emphasizing the importance of the regional, gender, age, racial, ethnical, social, and educational layers of identity additional to a national one; and asked the participants, clients, and students to share their own stories, regarding the impact of these factors on their perception of the world, their thinking and behaving patterns.

What is more, by giving personal examples and sharing stories, they realized that reducing a person to the culture of their origin (or culture of the country where they used to live or are based now) does more harm than helps. Conversations shifted towards issues such as what cultures we identify with and why. What were the assumptions that people made about us and how we could face them and act against the danger of a single story. Third Culture Kids, multiracial persons, and first, second, and third generation migrants breathed easier and often told me afterwards, 'Thank you for this inspiration. Now, it makes much more sense.'

Narrative mosaic identity is a dynamic, variable, process oriented in a constant flow. Just like any mosaic, it is composed of a multitude of colorful tiles that can be distinguished separately and create an overall picture at the same time. It embraces factors such as regional (also tribal), ethnical, national, gender, age, racial, spiritual (also religious), social and educational layers of identity and stories we tell about these factors.

This identity is nourished by stories we stop telling, keep telling and start telling ourselves and people we encounter. It is impacted by the cultural collective narratives and global narratives we are part of. Eventually, it is co-created by the *untold stories*, narratives we inherit from our ancestors in the epigenetic way (more in the chapter Untold Stories - on the epigenetics in the storytelling field). Some of these stories, can be re-narrated and seen in a new perspective.