

Narrative Concepts + Definitions

Narrative

Narratives are the values-based themes of stories that we use to understand our world. A narrative communicates and reinforces a worldview and engages people in considering their own understanding of the world around them.

Public health's ability to advance health equity is greatly limited by current **dominant narratives**. Over the last fifty years, people interested in limiting the role of government and limiting oversight of corporations have advanced a set of narratives that keep equitable policy changes far outside mainstream debates.

New, **transformative narratives** can shift public consciousness, which changes how we think the world operates and what we view as the problem and its solutions.

Narratives change what is possible to achieve for health equity.

Among other things, **narratives**:

- Provide an understanding or interpretation of people and situations
- Are grounded in, and reflective of, a larger set of values and beliefs, or worldview
- Serve a purpose – they are designed to shape possibilities and outcomes
- Are most powerful when they draw on the values and beliefs that people already hold

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Dominant Narrative

Dominant narratives are:

- Narratives held by many people at this moment in time
- In our heads and actions without us being aware of them
- Embedded in our institutions, structures, and norms
- Not naturally occurring – they are created, advanced, and maintained by people to intentionally shape possibilities and outcomes
- Drawn from a subset of the values and beliefs held by those in power
- More powerful than facts

Shifting dominant narratives requires:

- Exposing the dominant narratives
- Uncovering and elevating new narratives
- Contrasting the narratives and offering a choice

Shifting narratives is not about winning an argument. It is about engaging people to explore values, beliefs, and assumptions that they already hold.



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The Relationship Between Narratives and Messaging



Messages

How we communicate the story we want specific audiences to hear. We use verbal and non-verbal messages to communicate frames, narrative, and worldview. Messages may vary with audiences and situations, but they should be consistent.

Frames

Lenses that bring some aspects of a picture, or situation, into focus while distorting others. Part of the power of a frame is that it points the audience toward particular solutions that are grounded in a particular narrative and worldview.

Narratives

A way of communicating and reinforcing a worldview and engaging people in considering their own understanding of the world around them.

Worldview

The rich variety of values, beliefs, and assumptions, both formal and informal, that we draw upon and inherit from the larger social world in which we live.