

# Kluwer Mediation Blog

## Finding a narrative for our time – the challenge for the world in general and conflict resolvers in particular.

Rosemary Howell (University of New South Wales) · Monday, January 22nd, 2024

This is Part 1 of a two-part blogpost. Part 2 will be published in February 2024. This blog explores what narrative means for us in the field of conflict resolution as we navigate an increasingly complex global context.



We humans love stories. Wherever we are in the world, whatever our culture, our beliefs and our history, we all have stories to share and we are drawn into the stories others share with us.

**Neuroscience** explains to us why and how stories have a unique way of engaging our senses and emotions – in a way that facts and figures do not.

[Karen Eber's useful Ted talk](#) demonstrates that stories:

- Generate empathy for the storyteller – help us to make a connection
- Stimulate the release of oxytocin (our feel-good chemical) and
- Enhance trust

From the research it appears that the narrative is a cognitive structure to enhance meaning-making – a mental tool for framing the world so we can understand and navigate it. It is the product of our unconscious mind working behind the scenes – always in play but never recognised.

**Research** by from the Harvard Graduate School of Education's Lisa Lahey and Robert Kegan gives us the concept of [Immunity to Change](#). It presents a compelling argument that constructing

our own narrative is a lifelong activity in which we are constantly seeking to resolve the tension between our desire to be included and connected and our desire to be a distinct, autonomous individual.

Most significantly the researchers tell us that the outcome of our lifelong work to develop our narrative creates an attachment to it from which it is hard to separate ourselves.

### **Research in the conflict space**

[Professor Julie Macfarlane](#) has added to the work of Lahey and Kegan through her research which examines the assumptions and behaviour of participants in dispute settlement processes. She discovered that how and what participants experience is highly personal and, as conflict escalates, participants tend to interpret the behaviour of others in a way that fits their assumptions and theories. Macfarlane draws on research in the field of cognitive dissonance, first described by the American social psychologist [Leon Festinger](#) as the uncomfortable psychological tension caused when people experience inconsistency among thoughts, feelings and behaviours. Festinger considered that we seek ways to reduce the discomfort of cognitive dissonance, such as adding more beliefs to outweigh dissonant beliefs, reducing the importance of the conflicting belief or changing beliefs.

Macfarlane observed that participants in conflict engage in dissonance reduction – interpreting the behaviour of others in the conflict in ways that fit their own assumptions and theories. She sees this as part of our narrative development which is reinforced by our unconscious ability to be highly selective in how we experience and interpret behaviour. Macfarlane identifies the narrative that parties develop for themselves as the most significant influence on why they decide to reach a conflict settlement or to pursue a claim.

### **Challenging and changing the narrative**

Significant work has been done to explore the mechanisms of narrative creation and maintenance. This work has been used to develop strategies for reframing the narrative in many different fields. A [recent paper](#) reports research undertaken using system-thinking design, a tool based on recognising and harnessing the collective parts of systems that have evolved across multiple disciplines – it encourages an exploration of all the cross-disciplinary ‘moving parts’ . The object of the research was to develop a strategy ‘stimulating the adoption of privacy-preserving behaviours when sharing images online’. The authors reflect on the privacy paradox, in which individuals profess to value privacy and, at the same time, engage in behaviours online **most likely** to lead to invasion of their privacy.

Although in quite a different field from conflict resolution, this research is a good example of the many pieces of research exploring system thinking as a vehicle for social change.

### **Where are we now?**

The conflict resolution field has also been active in the task of challenging and changing the narrative. Part 2 of this blogpost will explore this question more deeply. Watch this space!

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The banner features a dark background with vibrant green and orange light streaks. On the right side, there are two overlapping screenshots of the software interface. The left screenshot shows a 'Profile Navigator' search results page with a list of profiles and filters. The right screenshot shows a detailed profile page for a user named 'John Smith' with various tabs and data points.

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