This workshop was held at the 2019 Equal Justice Conference in Louisville, Kentucky.

Title:
Talking about Clients: Honoring Stories, Communicating Needs, and Disrupting Essentialist Narratives

Presenters:
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This session will explore the language we use when discussing our clients with various audiences, including funders, pro bono partners, the media, and ourselves. We will discuss examples that are disrupting “good”, “deserving”, or otherwise essentialist client narratives, and share strategies that embrace community informed story-telling.
Talking About Clients: Honoring Stories, Communicating Needs, and Disrupting Essentialist Narratives: EJC Workshop Timeline

Speakers: Hamra Ahmad, Piper Anderson & Elizabeta Markuci

Friday, May 10, 2019

1:45 – 3:15

I. Speaker Introductions & Journey towards Social Justice Storytelling – 1:45-2:00

II. What is Story Stewardship & How Do We Share Power? 2:00- 2:10

III. Legal Service Providers and Story Gatekeeper) 2:10-2:25
   a. Internal case acceptance
   b. Pro bono pitch to a law firm
   c. Working with Clients

IV. Trauma Informed Strategies 2:25-2:45

V. Client Success Stories - Hamra & Liz 2:45- 3:05
   a. Who is the Audience & What Factors Should Be Considered?
   b. Interactive Editing Success Story Exercise

VI. Resources & Questions 3:05-3:15
Talking about clients:

Honoring Stories, Communicating Needs, and Disrupting Essentialist Narratives

Hamra Ahmad, Piper Anderson & Elizabeta Markuci
What brought each of us here today?

- Her Justice – partnership with “The Moth” to work with clients
- VOLS Immigration Project video project with former clients
  - 4 Stories for New York
- Mass Story Lab
Mass Story Lab is a storytelling project that makes stories an instrument of justice. In a Mass Story Lab, the stories of people directly impacted by mass incarceration become the lens through which communities imagine a world beyond prisons.
REVEAL THE IMPACT OF MASS INCARCERATION
The only way that we can fully know the generational impact of incarceration is through stories, a massive number of stories, that shift culture, policy, and practice.

DEFINE STRATEGIES FOR JUSTICE
Stories are instrumental to defining organizing strategies. In stories, we discover how communities have survived, find solutions to shared problems, hold people accountable for harm, and call the U.S to reckon with the impact of mass incarceration and the Drug War.
HOW DOES **MASS STORY LAB** MAKE STORIES AN INSTRUMENT OF JUSTICE?

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<th>Stories</th>
<th>Restore Agency</th>
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**STORIES RESTORE AGENCY**

Communities have been traumatized by the criminal punishment system. Trauma is relational and takes away agency. Stories are relational and restore agency for the storyteller while enlisting empathy and action from the listener.
Power & Storytelling

When gathering stories, who has the power?

Who gets to lead? Is there a time when the narrator ever gets to lead the process?

How do you share power?

How do you make people feel like they are being cared for in the process? That they matter?
How does power show up in your relationships with the people you serve?

How does your understanding of “what works” influence the way you engage with formerly incarcerated/directly impacted people and the way you encourage them to engage in spaces?

What are some ways you can begin to share ownership of the outcomes and ensure they have choice? Directive vs. Facilitative: When should you guide and when should you inquire?
How we use client stories

- To assess for case acceptance
- To “pitch” to firms for pro bono placement
- To seek a legal remedy (affidavit, testimony)
- To publish/promote our success stories
Acceptance of Case

**What role do we play as Gatekeepers?**
- Who has the power to make decisions about priorities?
- What unwritten rules define who gets help?
- What factors do you use to determine eligibility?
- How much of the client’s story (that is shared) is considered?

**Interpreting facts/narrative**
- Influenced by past experiences
- Work with similar population – how do we define the population we serve?

**What are the red flags?**
Firm Pitch

What assumptions do we make about what types of cases/clients the firms are looking for?

What factors do you consider when choosing a case for pro bono?

What facts do you include or leave out?

How do we use descriptive terms: Messy, crazy case, articulate, punctual, organized, deserving

Do we make assumptions, against which we measure the client – victims must be all good, someone who gets arrested is “bad”

Practicing non-judgment*
Client Affidavits

- How do we value the information clients share with us?
- What elements of their stories do we highlight in order to persuade and influence decision makers?
- How do we engage in the practice of working with clients to reveal their stories for this purpose?
The Impact of Trauma

In short, trauma is about a loss of connection—to ourselves, to our bodies, to our families, to others, and to the world around us. This loss connection is often hard to recognize, because it doesn’t happen all at once. It can happen slowly, over time, and we adapt to these subtle changes sometimes without even noticing them...

We may simply sense that we do not feel quite right, without ever becoming fully aware of what is happening.

-Peter A. Levine, PH.D

Healing Trauma: A Pioneering Program for Restoring the Wisdom of the Body
Understanding Trauma

- Trauma brings into conflict two essential human needs: the need for **safety** and the need for **connection**. Which can lead to behaviors that appear contradictory (i.e., bonding with your abuser).

- Trauma looks different in each person. It shapes our identities and informs the ways we engage in relationships.

- Therefore, re-learning a capacity to self-generate safety and then form healthy boundaries in relationships is an important part of the trauma recovery process.

- In the body, trauma is always present. Doesn’t matter if the original event is in the past, for the body it is always present until we begin to heal.
Discussion

Think about the different spaces in which the people you work with are asked to give testimony or tell their stories:

How might these spaces create stress and undermine trauma recovery? What are the ways you support people in the process?
Six Trauma Informed Practices: Getting Grounded

1. **Getting grounded**: Staying in the present by staying in the body.

Separating the stress response in the body from the story we have about it by using neutral language to describe sensations: temperature, pressure, movement, numbness

Circular Breathing: The breath is the quickest way to come back to the present moment.

Use the Senses: Notice your surroundings, list what you see/feel/smell/hear.
Six Trauma Informed Practices: Normalizing the Experience

2. Normalizing the Experience

The body’s response to trauma is natural. Programmed into the oldest part of the brain. When in a state of “fight or flight” higher order processing is suspended.

Normalizing the experience of trauma expedites the healing process. Especially during a moment of crisis. As long it can be done in a way that does not cause harm to anyone else.

A moment of crisis might look like: contracting, dissociation, hyper – vigilance (enhanced sensory perception), panic breathing, disorientation, outbursts of rage, instigating conflict, feeling unsafe in a physically safe situation.
Six Trauma Informed Practices: Use Human Language

3. Use human language:
Language can be used to stigmatize and oppress or to create possibility and healing.

What are some ways that language is used to stigmatize and limit the possibilities of people directly impacted by incarceration?
Six Trauma Informed Practices: Systems of Support

4. Systems of Support:
Create a support plan. Making sure there is support before, during, and after the engagement.

What do you need to feel supported?
Six Trauma Informed Practices: Readiness

5. Are you ready to tell this story?
Choosing a story that you own, not the one that still owns you.

The integration of a story into your experience means there is enough “aesthetic distance” - you can contemplate the content and its meaning separate from who you are now without reliving the stress of it.

Additional Questions:
Why do you want to tell this story?
What do you hope will happen?
And how would you feel if it doesn’t turn out that way?
Six Trauma Informed Practices: Encourage Choice Making

6. Encourage Choice Making
Making sure there is an opportunity to practice choice making at every stage of the process.

Share ownership of the outcomes.
Issues to consider

- When thinking about the impact – where is the client’s voice in this narrative?
- How much should you engage your client in sharing their authentic story about receiving legal/pro bono services?
- Would she prioritize what is the most important part of this victory differently?
- Would you show your client the write up and ask for their edits/feedback?
- Do you edit the grammar of a client’s “quote”? Why or why not?
- Are we using these platforms to amplify our clients’ voices and perspectives?
- When talking about clients, why do we use certain words, such as: Neediest, Vulnerable, Oppressed, Disenfranchised, Poor, Minority, Marginalized, Low-income, Victim? Are we creating sympathy or empathy in the listener and why is that distinction important?
Success story exercise...

- Is this example reflective of a client informed narrative about a successful outcome?
- What phrases or words do you want to challenge or rethink?
- What changes would you make to this narrative?
- How might your client talk about their experience?
Who Tells the Story? is a guide to help nonprofit organizations engage in empathetic, social change storytelling where clients and communities are partners in shaping narratives. It shares research and concrete strategies for engaging clients in storytelling efforts, and includes sample tools to help foster informed conversations about consenting to share one’s story. The guide is a jumping off place for organizations to examine their current storytelling practices, and, hopefully, it is the start of a larger conversation within the social sector about how we can all do this work better.

https://whotellthestory.org/
Resources

Stories, values, and culture have the power to move hearts and minds in ways that facts and advocacy alone often cannot.

*The Opportunity Agenda* sees those narratives as perhaps the single most powerful asset that the social justice movement has. Our approach helps social justice leaders tell a better story, move hearts and minds, and drive lasting policy and culture change.

Thank you

Thank you for all that you do, and for taking the time to think about how we talk about our clients and this work!
Telling a New Story
A Collaborative Checklist for Social Justice Leaders
Using Narrative Strategies for Change

Social justice leaders across the country increasingly recognize the power of narrative strategies to shape hearts and minds on the most critical issues of our time. Narrative strategies commonly refer to shaping the story told about social and political issues to mobilize public will for change. This is often done through the use of mass media, but can also include art production and cultural strategies, community organizing, research and publishing, educational tactics, and all strategies intended to persuade individuals or groups toward a new understanding of social issues.

Any social justice leader who has attempted to use these strategies to affect social change knows that it’s a complex undertaking. Time and time again, social justice leaders working across the lines of difference struggle with developing narratives that don’t sacrifice long-term vision for short-term gains, push under-represented voices to the margins, position race and class in opposition, or worse—undermine allies. These challenges aren’t the fault of a few bad actors. Be it social position, geographic scope, issue, constituency base, or methodology—communicating strategically across diverse interests to build new majorities and win on issues of rights, equity, and justice can push the most well-intentioned leader into difficult compromises.

This checklist was developed to provide social justice leaders at every level with a set of guiding principles and a checklist that ensures, above all else, our messaging and framing strategies do not sacrifice each other in the social change process. The checklist emerges from a 2013 convening on social justice communications strategies hosted by The Opportunity Agenda and the Center for Media Justice, and was developed by a working group including progressive organizations from across the country that use narrative strategies as a primary tool for social change.
1. First, Do No Harm

The first, and most important, principle guiding this checklist is Do No Harm. “Do No Harm” refers to the principle that our organizational and campaign narratives should never fundamentally undermine the work of partners and allies in shared efforts for lasting change, even when managing competing needs and interests. The following considerations take relationships and the political landscape on an issue into account, rather than ignoring them, to ensure our messaging remains coordinated.

Checklist

☐ Is your organization familiar with the messaging landscape on your issue(s)?

☐ Have allied organizations worked together to identify broad themes or values that inform core messaging?

☐ If you are working in coalition, has message development been a participatory process? Do all members feel a sense of collective ownership over the messaging?

☐ For joint projects, are there clearly defined organizational roles? Do all allied groups agree on implementation strategy?

☐ If disagreements about messaging, strategy, or priorities exist, have you had thoughtful conversations with concerned parties to determine the source of disagreement? Are you willing to adjust your strategy?

Tips

✓ Elevate the successes of partners and continue to educate others, especially funders, about the challenges and strengths of collaboration.

✓ When countering oppositional messages or wedge strategies, be careful not to reinforce their worldview. Also consider how your message could be co-opted by your opposition.

✓ If disagreements are minor, determine how best to align and compromise, and use effective language in messaging that doesn't undermine your allies.

✓ Manage competing interests through consensus-building processes, rather than allowing interests with the most power to lead.
2. Critique Government without Undermining Democracy

“If the surgeon himself thinks his tools are rancid, why shouldn’t you?” —David Brooks

For social justice leaders working on public policy issues, it’s of critical importance that our narrative strategies are powerful enough to hold government accountable, while not playing into anti-government themes that seek to privatize, shrink, or otherwise weaken the democratic process. Our narratives should not make excuses for government or debate its size, but rather uplift the fundamental role of government and its benefits while still highlighting the need for change and a vision for greater democracy. Check the list as you communicate strategically about government.

Checklist

☐ Does your messaging critique specific governmental practices or policies, while including a vision for what good governance might look like?

☐ Does your messaging explain how public infrastructure and systems benefit us all and depend upon us all to create a better future?

☐ Does your messaging use core values to contrast the promise against the reality of public infrastructure, policies, or practices while maintaining the value of the public system itself?

Tips

✓ When messaging about government, foreshadow a vision of what good governance looks like. Progressives often talk about governance in relation to corrupt politicians, bad policies, or as a bureaucratic mess. These trigger negative stereotypes about government rather than creating an entry point to a discussion about what governance should look like and how we can get there.

How we win matters. That’s why it’s important to define, together, what winning looks like in advance of a campaign; it’s also crucial to allow the principles of interdependence, equity, and collective power to guide the process. When deploying narrative strategies, social justice leaders must balance the need to win concrete changes immediately and advance a long-term vision for more fundamental change, rather than sacrificing one for the other. It’s a careful balancing act, but if we are guided by our deeply felt values and long-term vision we can build messaging campaigns that win today and lay the groundwork for future wins. Check the list to see if your narrative strategies frame lasting change.

Checklist

☐ Thinking of audiences, is your strategy directed at marginalizing the opposition, moving the middle, or expanding the base? Long-term strategies consider the affect of the campaign on each audience.

☐ Are the shared values and framing strategies strong enough to translate across unexpected and continuous changes in media, policy, elections, and “politics”?

☐ Alternatively, if and when the frame is narrowly focused on eliciting a specific action, can that frame stand alone in an emblematic or symbolic way that translates across time?

☐ Is the frame capable of withstanding future or anticipated opposition or criticism?

☐ Is the frame purposed, tested, and proven to change attitudes and mindsets long-term?

☐ Have you done sufficient planning to determine whether your chosen narrative helps your campaign but also advances long-term goals? If you choose to lean on a strategy that accomplishes one of those objectives, would it interfere with objectives in the future?

Tips

✔ Discuss and flesh out your vision for the future and create messages and campaigns that point toward this vision.

✔ Beware centrist strategies. Deliberately decide to expand the base or move the middle.

✔ Be aware of how your strategy works with others who are addressing similar issues, but with different audiences.
4. Consider Context, History, and Landscape

Words are meaningful—but meaning is created by more than words. Narratives emerge from their context, history, and relations to power. Our narratives are most powerful when they create a new story using universal values that have stood the test of time. Social justice leaders should reclaim and re-frame these values, and use them to wedge the opposition while building a bigger “us.” To use values effectively, social justice leaders can give old values new context, and mobilize them with built power, to produce new meaning. Check the list to see how.

Checklist

☐ Do your narrative strategies adequately highlight patterns of inequity and privilege, track trends, and uplift the social, political, or economic context of the targeted issue?

☐ Do your narrative strategies simply state universal values in a way that reinforces old, dominant, negative, or oppositional frames, or do they give these shared values new meaning?

Tips

✓ Conduct research and story collection on historic patterns, and use metaphors, symbols, and action to demonstrate their impact on the targeted issue or constituency.
5. The Question of Attribution: Give Credit Where Credit Is Due

Too often, the fast pace and power dynamics of campaigns can make us forget to give credit for new ideas, successful interventions, and resource generation or coordination. Sometimes, social movements swing between rejecting the newest voices at the table or the oldest ones. Attributing success appropriately can result in new resources and relationships, and greater visibility and investment for all. In deploying your narrative strategies, are you giving credit where credit is due? Check the list to find out.

Checklist

☐ Have partners at the table contributed to or led to successful impacts or benchmarks achieved?

☐ Has the work of those partners been highlighted, and attribution appropriately given, in press hits hits, social media, and the policy foray?

☐ Will giving attribution to a particular group or type of groups strengthen the campaign, sector, or movement?

☐ Has prejudice or bias prevented appropriate attribution in the past? Are there protocols and practices in place to avoid that pattern now?

Tips

✔ For joint projects—clearly outline at the start of the project how you will describe everyone’s role to outside stakeholders (funders, partners, etc.). Agree how to tell the story of the project.

✔ Elevate the success of collaborative efforts, especially to funders, in telling the story about the importance and challenges of collaboration.
Within all discourse, there are terms that most accurately and respectfully acknowledge people's identities and positions within society. In general, consider using language that puts personhood first and emphasizes humanity.

This can often be done by using terms as adjectives rather than nouns (i.e. Black or White people vs. Blacks and Whites; LGBTQ people vs. gays and lesbians; young people vs. youths) or by actively putting “people” first (i.e. people with disabilities vs. disabled people; people living in poverty vs. poor people; people who are homeless vs. homeless people). Here are a few examples:

**X “ex-con,” “criminal,” or “felon.”** Terms that label people by past or present convictions posed against them reduce their identity to the violations they’ve been accused of rather than their humanity. Instead, describe people as people first and foremost, not by their mistakes.

✓ **INSTEAD:** People with felony convictions; people who have been incarcerated.

**X “minority.”** The word *minority* is originally a mathematical term meaning “the smaller part or number; a number, part or amount forming less than half of the whole.” As demographics shift in our nation, the accuracy of such a term is fleeting. However, it is most important to scrap the term because of its diminutive connotation. Try using “people first” terminology instead.

✓ **INSTEAD:** People of color.

**X “low man on the totem pole.”** Totem poles are monuments created by tribes of the Pacific Northwest to represent and commemorate ancestry, histories, people, or events. The term “low man on the totem pole,” when used as an idiom to describe a person of low rank, inaccurately trivializes the tradition and meaning of the totem poles, which do not have a hierarchy of carvings based on physical position.

✓ **INSTEAD:** Person of lower rank, junior-level.

**X “gypped.”** The term *gypped* is used colloquially to imply being ripped off or swindled. The dated term derives from “gypsy” and perpetuates negative and unfair stereotypes.

✓ **INSTEAD:** Ripped off, swindled, cheated, conned.

There are some phrases and colloquialisms with discriminatory or offensive roots, which are sometimes little known. It is important to learn, and then retire, these terms when possible.

Aim to avoid idioms or phrases that have obvious or even subtly demeaning connotations related to groups or cultural traditions. Here are a few examples:

**X “turn a deaf ear,” “turning a blind eye” or “the blind leading the blind.”** It is best to avoid idioms that cast a negative connotation on people's various physical abilities. Drop the idiom and instead use terms that cut to your point without offending others.

✓ **INSTEAD:** Ignoring, insensitive, misguided.

**X “pow-wow.”** A pow-wow is an inter-tribal social gathering that includes dance, singing, and ceremonial elements. Many tribes and Native organizations hold them on a regular basis. Using this term out of context to refer to a meeting or a quick chat or conversation trivializes the significance of these gatherings.

✓ **INSTEAD:** Chat, brief conversation, quick talk, brainstorm.

Advancing a social justice agenda starts with being smart and deliberate in how we frame our discourse. The Social Justice Phrase Guide is your go-to tool to craft inclusive messages. Whether developing language for your organization, communicating through media platforms, or engaging in personal discussions, follow these guidelines to successfully communicate across communities.

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This guide is a collaboration of Advancement Project, a multi-racial civil rights organization, and The Opportunity Agenda, a social justice communication lab.
It is imperative that social justice communications include a clear path toward a solution. Leaving this out can leave audiences hopeless, with just another list of “what’s wrong” in the world. In outlining these solutions, messengers should thoroughly examine the implications of word choices to avoid reinforcing values that are problematic to a social justice mindset, such as militarism or extreme individualism. A few examples:

**“Reform”** (used with education, immigration, welfare, tax, etc.). As linguist Anat Shenker-Osorio points out, we don’t tend to try to “reform” things that we like. In all of these cases, it’s the policies that we want to reform, but by skipping that word, we are maligning public education, immigration, or taxes themselves.

✓ **Instead:** Clearly identify what we want to reform: policies, rules, approaches, etc. (e.g. education policy reform).

**“Tough on crime,” or “War on drugs.”** Research shows that militaristic language and punitive metaphors inspire fear and lead to unduly harsh policy responses.

✓ **Instead:** Investing in healthy and safe communities; a healthy and safe approach to laws about drugs.

**5 TIPS AT A GLANCE:**

* Talk about policies and solutions in realistic and accurate ways that spur the action social justice advocates want.

* Lift up unity, participation, and cooperation over division, extreme individualism, and competition.

* Reinforce prosperity over scarcity.

* Accurately and respectfully talk about people’s identities, situations, and roles in society.

* Retire outdated and problematic phrases and metaphors.

**LIFT UP UNITY, PARTICIPATION, AND COOPERATION OVER DIVISION, EXTREME INDIVIDUALISM, AND COMPETITION**

It is important to choose language that emphasizes shared interests and discredits “us vs. them” distinctions. By highlighting the cultural, economic, and historical connections we all share, communications can emphasize a community-focused mindset over staunchly individualistic thinking.

Bad policies hurt us all, threatening values and disrupting communities. Good policies move us all forward. Instead of metaphors and phrases that encourage extreme individualism or competition, social justice advocates should consider phrases that reinforce interconnectedness and the value of cooperation. For example:

**X “Leveling the playing field.”** Team-based metaphors suggest that someone always must win and someone else must lose.

✓ **Instead:** Emphasize the common good, that we’re stronger together. We should share the “ladder of opportunity” and not pull it up behind us.

**REINFORCE PROSPERITY OVER SCARCITY**

Our country has an abundance of resources, and should be a place where everyone has an equal opportunity. To reinforce that idea, we should avoid discussing options and policy approaches in zero-sum terms, which tap into the fear-based part of our brain that is concerned about scarcity and individual survival.

Advocates can keep conversations productive by pointing to how policies and programs benefit society at large.

Here are a few common scarcity pitfalls to be aware of:

**X “Divide up the pie,” or “Do more with less.”** Discussing resource allocation in competitive terms or saying certain folks need to “do more with less” pits groups against one another instead of providing a space to work collaboratively toward mutually beneficial outcomes.

✓ **Instead:** Emphasize that we’re a prosperous country that should include everyone in enjoying our national wealth – but our plentiful resources are disproportionately divided right now to the benefit of a select few.

**X “Making tough choices,” or “Rein in spending.”** Using economic arguments as the basis for social change belies the moral reasons to adjust systems and policies to be in line with our values. For example, the ills of mass incarceration and flawed drug policy need to be addressed not only because current approaches are too costly, but also because they inflict harm on families, communities, and society.

✓ **Instead:** Speak to commonsense reasons for changing misguided policies that don’t fit with our society’s values.

**X “On welfare/food stamps/Section 8.”** Talking about people being “on welfare” or “on food stamps” reinforces the scarcity-based view that those individuals are “on the dole” getting something for nothing. But these shared programs exist to benefit society overall. We don’t talk about people being “on the U.S. Postal Service” or being “eligible to use the interstate highway system.” Context helps illustrate how a program is fulfilling its purpose and reinforces how that support will be there for others when they face hard times.

✓ **Instead:** Describe programs in context – a young person who used TANF as bridge while between jobs, a family that used Section 8 to find a home closer to work and school.