The Importance of Narratives in South African Policy Work: How to Hear the Voices in a Participatory Democracy

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1. Introduction

Increasingly, the value of the 'narrative' is being recognized as a legitimate means of both gathering and interpreting information in social science. With its roots in literary theory the narrative is now being used in a variety of ways in the realm of public policy. As policy makers seek to better understand the dynamics of the policy process, policy analysts and researchers are exposing the value of the narrative as an instrumental means of providing coherence and structure to the life cycle of a particular policy issue in order to gain a better understanding of the issue. By way of illustrative example a policy analyst or researcher can attempt to gain increased insight into the Tobacco Products Control Act of 1993 by imposing a beginning, middle and end to the entire 'story' – from when the effects of smoking were first acknowledged globally in the early 1960s to the decisive policy action taken in South Africa – namely the 1993 Tobacco Products Control Act. Proponents of this narrative approach to policy analysis would maintain that one has increased ability to understand the policy issue because one can 'see' the whole picture, making it easier to identify policy solutions. This article proposes that narratives have additional value for policy work, particularly in the context of South Africa's participatory democracy. Although numerous avenues for participation exist, it remains a challenge to ensure the 'voices' of the electorate (particularly

those without power) are filtered into the policy decisions made by policy makers; politicians and technocrats. Thus the electorate remains polarized from those in positions of power in terms of their ability to affect the course of various policy processes. It is argued here that the narrative, as a tool, has the potential to give coherence and structure to the 'voices' of South Africa's 'passive spectators' (Mangcu 2005), who are located at the opposite end of the participatory continuum, in order for them to feed productively and effectively into the policy process.

Within the context of broader discussions of the various conceptions of polarization – particularly in the South African context, this article intends to expose the particular value this technique has for minimizing polarization within the South African policy processes. Many scholars (Esteban & Ray 1995; Sheshanna & Décornez 2003; Wolfson 1994) agree that polarization means a movement towards the poles on any given issue. For example, low income versus high income groups; liberals versus conservatives; politically active (by virtue of their power) versus the politically inactive (by virtue of their lack of power). Movement away from the 'middle' and towards the poles of this continuum signifies a polarization on a topic. In order for polarization to occur there must also be a concentration or convergence or groups around specific locations on the continuum. This article argues that polarization exists between policy makers, politicians and technocrats and the 'passive spectators' who make up the rest of the South African public.

The argument is largely inspired by various submissions made to a book published by the Institute for Democracy in South Africa (IDASA) entitled *Democracy in the Time of Mbeki* edited by Richard Calland and Paul Graham of IDASA. Primarily, Xolela Mangcu (2005) claims that the more we move towards ideas of public administration, the more momentum is gained for the current trend of centripetal policy formation the further removed the policy making process has and will continue to become from the masses, thereby perpetuating the notion of polarization within the South African policy process. Thus, what is discussed in this article is the current existence and consequence of this form of polarization within the South African policy process. The article offers a potential solution in the form of the increased utilization of the narrative in policy deliberation.

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2. GEAR, HIV/AIDS and the Arms Deal

The processes undertaken to arrive at the single most important piece of policy in South Africa, the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996), is characterized by a

> (a) history of the journey through [the negotiation process] [that] reveals a uniquely South African characteristic: an obsession with consultation (Ebrahim 1998:4).

During this particular policy making process, civil society was permitted to make submissions to the Court. According to *Certification Judgment* 1996, a total of 84 submissions were received from non-governmental organizations and individuals and 5 from political parties – evidence of vigorous participation in the formation of this policy. Once complete the Constitutional Assembly embarked on what can be described as a massive awareness campaign in an effort to educate people about their constitutional rights and further their participation in the policy process. This 'massive awareness campaign' was one of many initiatives by government to promote participation into various political processes. For the new government proof of participation was the first in many steps towards entrenching democracy.

In retrospect, perhaps the expectations held of participation were unrealistic and it is not wholly surprising that large distance has crept in between those that govern the country and those that put them in that position. Indeed, it can be argued that this gulf has been one of society's own creation, the source of which lies with the decision to institute a representative electoral system based on the idea of party lists. The party list system, according to Fick (2005:152) states that

> under this system political parties compile lists containing the names of the candidates they have nominated, ranked in order of preference with the leader of the party topping its list. The lists are closed in the sense that voters are not able to express with his or her vote, any preference for a particular candidate on the list.

Although applauded for its simplicity, inclusiveness and representativity, this system 'falls short on accountability' (Fick 2005:152). Essentially,

voters don't know who they are going to get as their elected representative –
the party for whom they voted makes that decision. This has perpetuated the
publics' shying away from engagement with the elected officials. For the
uninformed public, identifying who will listen to (and relay) their concerns
is extremely difficult. Issues of accountability fuel the development of this
chasm. Essentially the elected official is responsible to the party and not to
the electorate – after all it is the party that can either put the official on or off
the party list thereby promoting or halting their professional careers. As
Lodge (2004:2) puts it,

> under South Africa's electoral system, elected representatives are
> directly accountable to their leaders, not the electorate.

Habib *et al* (2005: 175) concur, saying

> (w)hen MPs carry out their constituency work they view themselves
> as political party members rather than non-partisan members of
> committees.

Furthermore, Jagwanth (2003:14) observes that South Africa's
impenetrable bureaucracy has increased the 'skew in favour of centralism'.
This has resulted in 'government being too remote from the population and
consequently access to government is often difficult', thus perpetuating the
polarization between those in positions of power and the general masses.
Somewhat more dramatically, Mangcu (2005:77) suggests that the initial
culture of consultation and participation no longer exists, with 'democratic
discourse reduced to a series of announcements about what the government
intends to do'. This is hinted at in the formation processes of the policies
discussed below.

The establishment of the Growth, Employment and Redistribution
(GEAR) policy, in Mangcu's (2005:75) opinion, appears as though it 'was
the result of a series of behind the scenes meetings involving a select group
of ANC economists and cabinet with officials from the World Bank and the
International Monetary Fund'. The policy was presented to political role
players as 'not open for discussion'. The controversy surrounding the arms
deal offers another example of this centralized style of policy making –

illustrated by Mosiuoa Lekota, the Minister of Defense, with his comment that 'under no conditions would the government reverse or cancel the programme' (Mangcu 2005:76).

President Mbeki managed to astound the global community by refuting the connection between HIV and AIDS. After significant interventions by various civil society actors, the High Court ordered the state to provide anti-retroviral drugs to pregnant mothers in state hospitals. In response, the government questioned the legitimacy of a 'court sitting in judgment of government policy' (Jagwanth 2003:15) and consequently announced its intention to appeal to the Constitutional Court. In a statement, the Minister of Health said this route was chosen because the 'judgment gave the wrong answer to the question of who makes policy' (Jagwanth 2003:15). The Minister elaborated:

> If this judgment is allowed to stand it creates a precedent that could be used by a wide variety of interest groups wishing to exercise quite specific influences on government policy in the area of socio-economic rights .... What happens to public policy when it begins to be formulated piecemeal fashion through unrelated court judgments? (Tshabalala-Msimang 2001)

Although the HIV/Aids issue refers in particular to issues around constitutional democracy and South Africa's legislative framework, the point is valuable. In his conclusion, Mangcu makes a fundamental observation. He says that 'at the very least, a little more listening, a little more learning would have saved us a great deal of embarrassment over the past few years' (Mangcu 2005:78). Certainly the task is now to avoid the polarization of the policy process by getting those policy experts and technocrats leading policy formation in South Africa to identify what it is they should be 'listening' to and incorporate what they have 'heard' into their policy making. As Mangcu (2005) says, '(t)he government has to find administrative ways – and not the occasional imbizo – to structure the collective intelligence of the population into its decision processes' (Mangcu 2005:78). One way to begin to 'structure this collective intelligence' is through the use of narratives.

3. What is a Narrative?

The term 'narrative' is, as the term implies, a story. Indeed, as H. Porter Abbott (2002:1) claims,

> (w)hen we think of a narrative, we usually think of it as art, however modest. We think of it as novels or sagas or folk tales or, at the least, as anecdotes .... But as true as it is that narrative can be an art and that art thrives on narrative, narrative is also something we all engage in, artists and non-artists alike.

Thus, a narrative is both a story discussing a particular issue as well as an instrumental tool which can be used to better understand a particular issue. When drawing on the instrumental tool conception of the narrative, the actual application can be referred to as 'narrativizing a reality by imposing on it a beginning, middle, and end' (White 1980:2). Thus in applying the narrative to a particular issue, that issue becomes clearer to understand.

- Academics in a variety of disciplines have long turned to the idea of the narrative to better understand aspects of their discipline. For example, the narrative has played an important role in family therapy practices (Burck 2005); understanding the sociocultural, political and institutional complexity around ecosystem change (Armitage 2004) and even for investigating caring in the nursing profession (McCance, McKenna & Boore 2001). Importantly the creation of narratives, within policy work in particular, is a process undertaken for a series of different purposes – one of which is proposed in the discussion that follows.

Emery Roe's seminal work *Narrative Policy Analysis: Theory and Practice* serves as the theoretical foundation of what is suggested in this article. For Roe (1994), narrative policy analysis, with its roots in literary analysis and critical theory, is a technique recommended for complex, uncertain and highly polarized policy issues. Quintessentially, it was a technique developed to construct meaning from the 'signs' revealed in a narrative (Roe 1994:17), which can accommodate the different perspectives that different readers have of the same issue. The story (narrative) that emerges in trying to accommodate these different perspectives is identified as the *meta-narrative*, which in itself then constitutes a 'new' story (narrative). This meta-narrative remains true to the elements of the polarized

accounts of the issue and makes no judgment about the validity of either. Essentially, the meta-narrative recasts the policy issue in a way that allows fresh consideration of the issue. Further to the meta-narrative, Roe (1994:41) identifies the existence of *counter-stories*. These have the ability to displace the existing narrative by offering an alternative account of a policy issue, 'telling a better story' (Roe 1994:41) Finally, *non-stories* constitute largely circular arguments as they have a beginning but no end – telling us 'what to be against without completing the argument as to what we should be for' (Roe 1994:53).

With this theoretical conception of the narrative in mind, how can participation be construed of as a narrative?

Mangcu (2005:75) believes South Africa has lost its way or

> at the very least it has produced a bifurcated identity of an active elite that is actively involved in the political and policy discourse, and the general mass of the population who are no more than passive spectators.

One recognizes, however, that the very notion of the 'general mass of the population' (Mangcu 2005:75) is complex and multi-faceted. In reality, there lies enormous distinction between different racial groupings, classes and genders – all of whom constitute Mangcu's single notion of the 'general mass of the population'. However further unpacking of this goes beyond the ambit of this discussion, which simply aims to illustrate the current (if general) reality of the simple bifurcation between those in positions of power (policy makers, politicians and technocrats) and the general population who do not have the access or ability to effectively influence policy deliberation in South Africa.

Participation, conceived of as voluntary activities through which members of the public, directly or indirectly, share in the legislative, policy making and planning activities of democratic institutions, should allow for the 'voices' of the masses to be heard. For Mangcu (2005) this cannot be the case given the increasingly centralized (and consequently less responsive) policy process. Issues raised at a community meeting held with a prospective councilor; motivations behind a 93 year old man from rural KwaZulu-Natal voting in local government elections or individuals submitting commentary

on a proposed policy from the public gallery of the provincial legislature during a formal sitting, all constitute public participation. However, the effectiveness of such participation remains limited because of its lack of coherence, its fragmentation and ultimately its relative silence.

Perhaps if the result of public participation – the 'voices' were given structure, such as that offered by narratives, there would be a greater chance of them being 'heard', their views being incorporated in policy deliberations. The 'voice', in general, lacks unity, making it easy to ignore. The 'narrative', on the other hand, offers structure to the 'voice' which increases their chances of being recognized and channeled into the policy processes. Thus, it is argued here that policy deliberations on any one policy issue can be increasingly representative and reduce the polarization (between the policy makers, politicians and technocrats and the mass general population) within the policy process if policy makers consider the information revealed through the application of narratives. Indeed, as Roe (1994:17) advocates, the narrative has the ability to construct meaning from the 'signs' revealed in a narrative, which can accommodate the different perspectives that different readers (or indeed participating members of the mass general population) have of the same issue. With this in mind, one cannot ignore the impact of the political power game that is played in every arena. This game will ultimately determine who will channel what, and why. This is elaborated on in the discussion that follows.

Although there are a multitude of avenues for public participation in South Africa, this discussion focuses, in the first instance, on participation in the legislative arena.

4. What Avenues Currently Exist for Participation in Policy Formation Processes?

If, as is suggested here, the search is on for different ways to channel the 'voices' (narratives), then it becomes necessary to recognize the avenues that currently exist. The framework for these avenues is provided by the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa. According to section 59 of the Constitution:

(1) The National Assembly must

> (a) Facilitate public involvement in legislative and other processes of the Assembly and its committees; and
> (b) Conduct its business in an open manner and hold its sittings, and those of its committees, in public ....

> (2) The National Assembly may not exclude the public, including the media, from sitting of its committee unless it is reasonable and justifiable not to do so in a democratic and open society.

This legislated participation is realized through the

> committee system in Parliament, initiatives undertaken by individual MPs to facilitate public participation through both party channels and constituency work, and Parliament's outreach programmes (Habib *et al* 2005: 174).

5. How Effective are these Avenues?

The Institute for Democracy's book *Democracy in the Time of Mbeki* acknowledges the progress made towards democratic consolidation thus far. A number of concerns are, however, raised. Included is 'access to the means. to participate, such as information about what exactly is going on and how and on what basis decisions are being taken' (Calland & Graham 2005:11). The dominance of English and Afrikaans as languages of preference also presents a barrier to successful participation. Clearly, the poorer, less resourced the citizen, the less likely they will be to participate in various political processes (compounding the polarization taking place in South African society). This conception of 'less resourced' requires considerable unpacking and debates circulate about at which point one can be identified as 'less resourced'. Murray and Pillay (2005:207) go some way to clarifying this by saying it has

> less ... to do with whether people are formally free to participate in the public arena and more to do with the ability of individuals to access the courts, government institutions and the media. This in turn depends on the delivery of social and economic goods such as

education, health-care and housing.

Further, by being 'less resourced' they are often consequently less organized, further reducing their ability to successfully access avenues of participation (Habib *et al* 2005). Often, the institutional mechanisms established to channel the 'voices' of the mass general population into the policy process are faulty and ineffective. Certainly, the parliamentary committee structure falls into this trap with 'matters arising in constituencies hardly getting fed into the respective work of the committee in parliament' (Habib *et al* 2005:175). They conclude that the situation is thus far from perfect. If the current institutional environment, while amenable to participation, is not acting as efficiently as it should, then other opportunities need to be found.

As alluded to earlier, political power games are a perpetual feature of the policy making landscape. Indeed, 'filters' exist, too, to ensure certain 'voices' are not heard. No matter how the opinions of the masses are structured – be it in the form of a narrative or not – there is no guarantee it will be considered by the policy experts and technocrats making policy. Even if they are, there is absolutely no guarantee they will be considered by the politicians. It simply may not align with their agenda. What results then, is the dominance of a single, powerful, narrative which excludes other narratives from being heard. For Tshabalala-Msimang, hearing other narratives in the HIV/Aids debate had the potential to set a 'bad' policy making precedent. There are simply too many interest groups, with too many different agendas all trying to influence the policy process. It is important to recognize though that although dominant narratives tend to remain in the hands of the politically powerful, when other interests organize and speak with one 'voice', heard through a single narrative (such as that offered by the Treatment Action Campaign), influence is exercised over the policy making process. Thus, the polarization illustrated in this discussion has the potential to be reduced.

6. How Narratives can Embellish the Policy Formation Process

As Steve Biko (1996:128) envisioned 'In a government where democracy is allowed to work, one of the principles that is normally entrenched is a

feedback system, a discussion between those that formulate policy and those who must perceive, accept or reject policy'. This article argues that it is this 'discussion' that is currently absent.

At present policy experts and technocrats make policy by drawing on particular types of information, 'data'. This 'data' is presented in research reports, in the form of survey results and statistics etc. – in a manner conducive to making measurable 'count, cost, deliver' decisions (Fukuda-Parr 2002:5). However, as Hayden White (1980:4) suggests,

> (w)hat is involved, then, is that finding of the 'true story', that discovery of the 'real story' within or behind the events that come to us in the chaotic form of 'historical records'.

Essentially, White is trying to question how the 'truth' (the policy solution?) can be found entirely within sets of documents that present policy issues in a particular guise.

As Mangcu (2005) argues, the formation of GEAR took place behind closed doors with various cabinet ministers and representatives of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, who no doubt arrived at the table armed with documents supporting this direction for South Africa's macro-economic policy. The result is a policy document that many feel does not reflect the issues, concerns and needs of the masses. Indeed, perhaps the identification and inclusion of the issues, concerns and needs of the 'mass general population', in the form of narratives, could be a useful means of validating the policy decisions arrived at. After all, the ideas presented by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund may well have been the only alternative available at the time of deliberation, making theirs the most dominant narrative.

This point highlights the argument presented by White (1980:4) who claimed that '(a)s a panglobal fact of culture, narrative and narration are less problems than simply data'. Indeed it is his belief that the information gleaned from narratives can and should carry the same weight as 'data' or information provided by, for example, technocrats when trying to arrive at a policy solution. Nonetheless, although the narrative has the ability to aid in improving decision making based purely on documents and similar 'data',

they are still 'interpretive' – the person uncovering the narrative has to interpret it in order to reveal its value. It is the processes of 'filling' in the blanks when putting various policy concerns into a narrative structure that constitutes this interpretation. For example, if a policy analyst were to ask members of a non- governmental organization advocating for the rights of victims of rape what South Africa's position on this matter was, they would be told a narrative from a very particular perspective. If they were to ask the same question to a politician aiming for re-election, the chances are good the narrative would be different. Thus, policy analysts must extract a meta-narrative that they feel accurately reflects the position of both parties. This undoubtedly involves interpretation but the very act of narrativising can offer insight which is not offered in traditional texts or documents. Utilizing the narrative in this way can reduce the polarization experienced in the South African policy process by, for example, incorporating the views (organized into a structured story) of the non-governmental organization as well as those of the politician up for re-election.

White (1980:3) elaborates saying

(t)he distinction between discourse and narrative is of course, based solely on an analysis of the grammatical features of two modes of discourse in which the 'objectivity' of the one and 'subjectivity' of the other are definable primarily by a 'linguistic order of criteria'. The subjectivity of the discourse is given presence, explicit or implicit, of an 'ego' who can be defined 'only as the person who maintains the discourse'. By contrast, the 'objectivity of narrative is defined by the absence of all reference to the narrator'.

Thus, complete objectivity in dealing with a policy concern is unlikely. Even 'data' contains an element of subjectivity. Although data is generally considered value neutral, depending on its role within a policy or deliberative narrative, the same data can be used to support very different policy positions.

The opportunity that exists for the narrative to take its place in policy processes is identified by Dodge *et al* (2005:286) when they refer to the 'narrative turn' in the social sciences, increasing its profile in public administration and public policy. For them, this 'narrative turn' has

'(o)pened up new pathways for research that focus on *interpreting* social events and understanding the intentions and meanings of social actors, rather than just explaining and predicting their behaviour'.

7. Where to Find the Voices

Of course this argument is inconsequential if one is unable to identify what is out there to be 'listened to'. And so one enters the realm of policy theorist John Kingdon (1995). His belief is that ideas, opinions and even policy solutions requiring policy attention are the result of a flow of three sets of interacting processes: *problems* (matters requiring public attention); *policies* (proposals for change based on an accumulation of knowledge) and *political process* (such as elections and swings in national mood). It is only when these processes collide that a concern makes it on to the discussion agenda.

Of particular relevance for this discussion are the *policies* that incorporate his notion of the policy issue stream. Here Kingdon believes ideas, policy concerns and even policy solutions exist 'out there'. This policy stream incorporates policy communities (of which the IMF and the World Bank during the GEAR process as well as the media, would be a part). For Kingdon it is simply a matter of time before these ideas, policy concerns and policy solutions come to the fore. Patton (1997) agrees saying, -

> (n)arrative analyses of policy argue for the importance of recognizing that public policy dialogues are, indeed, *public* discussions situated in complex discursive, legislative, and socio-political histories. Legislative agendas do not exist in isolation from popular culture and public opinion, and it is argued here, it is necessary to explore the relationships between shifts in public policy and widespread media narratives in order to fully understand the relations of power at work in such social shifts. The political narratives embedded in public policy agendas draw on broader social stories about race and identity, gender and family, class and work, citizenship and nation that are widely available in public discourse.

Perhaps controversially, this article suggests this might not be the case in the current South African context. Are there really policy alternatives 'out there'? Given the absence of policy research institutes and think tanks (IDASA, Human Sciences Research Council and higher education centres like the University of KwaZulu-Natal's Centre for Civil Society being amongst the obvious exceptions), perhaps the level of policy research sophistication required to identify the existence of ideas, policy concerns and policy solutions just does not exist.

However, the generation of ideas, policy concerns and policy solutions is not the exclusive domain of policy research institutes and think tanks. As Kingdon (1995) correctly claims, participants in the policy process can be 'inside or outside the government' and can include: political appointees, civil servants, interest groups, academics, researchers and consultants and the media.

8. Conclusion

The intention to seek and incorporate participation in numerous aspects of the political process in post apartheid South Africa was sincere. Increasingly, however, various structural realities (such as the electoral system) have dictated the gradual separation (polarization?) of those in positions of power, from those who voted them into the position in the first place. This tendency towards centralism is briefly illustrated by the policy examples discussed above. What does this mean for policy makers as well the citizens of South Africa? Should and can this issue be constructively addressed? Although the disconnection between the politicians and the people has gradually taken place, it does not mean that the people have ceased voicing their concerns about particular policy issues, discussing ideas in various forums, and potentially even offering solutions to various policy dilemmas. This article argues this kind of political activity can be conceived of as 'voices'. Once identified, these voices can be given structure, in the form of a narrative, in order to encourage coherency and consequently, impact. The 'voices' (narratives) can, and should, be considered as an additional information source for technocrats and policy experts. Of course, there is no guarantee the politicians will listen, with some of these narratives blatantly opposing their agendas (and those of the broader policy community). Surely, though, at the very least the narrative has the potential of becoming a functioning

tool of participatory policy practices in South Africa, and in so doing reducing the polarization that currently exists between those in positions of power and the general population.

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