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**THE IMPORTANCE OF NARRATIVES IN
SOUTH AFRICAN POLICY WORK: HOW TO HEAR THE VOICES
IN A PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY**

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I. 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. This paper intends to expose the particular value this technique has for South African policy processes and 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 further removed the policy making process has become from the masses. At present policy making resides largely in the exclusive domain of policy experts and technocrats. Further, the current trend is for centripetal policy formation, at the expense of the participation of the masses in the policy formation process. I would like to suggest that a potential solution to this style of policy making does exist. It lies in the increased recognition and use of narratives in the embellishment of policy deliberation.

II. 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 Ebrahim (1998) when he says “(a) history of the journey through [the negotiation process] reveals a uniquely South African characteristic: an obsession with consultation” (p 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 undertaken by the government to promote civic 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 between those who govern the country and those who put them in that position. Perhaps I can go so far as to argue that this gulf has been one of our 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) 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” (p 152). Although applauded for its simplicity, inclusiveness and representivity, this system “falls short on accountability” (p 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 those who will listen to (and relay) their

concerns is extremely difficult. Issues of accountability fuel the development of this chasm. Essentially an 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) puts it, “under South Africa’s electoral system, elected representatives are “directly accountable to their leaders, not the electorate” (p 2). Habib *et al* (2005) concurs, saying “(w)hen MPs carry out their constituency work they view themselves as political party members rather than non partisan members of committees” (p 175).

Furthermore, Jagwanth (2003) 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” (p 14). Somewhat more dramatically, Mangcu (2005) 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” (p 77). 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) opinion, appears as though it “was the result of a series of behind-the-scenes meetings involving a select group of ANC economists and the cabinet with officials from the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund” (p 75). 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” (p 76).

President Mbeki managed to astound the global community by refuting the connection between HIV and AIDS. After significant intervention 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” (ibid). 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 nonetheless. In his conclusion, Mangcu makes, what I believe to be, 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” (pp 78). I agree. The task, however, is 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” (p 78). One way to begin to “structure this collective intelligence” is through the use of narratives.

III. WHAT IS A NARRATIVE?

The term “narrative” is, as the term implies, a story. Indeed, as H. Porter Abbott (2002) 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” (p 1). 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 narratives 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 (p 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 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” (pp 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” (pp 53).

IV. THE REASON PARTICIPATION CAN BE CONSTRUED AS A NARRATIVE

Mangcu (2005) 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” (p 75). Essentially, what is being argued here is that narratives (as both a story discussing a particular issue as well as an instrumental tool which can be used to better understand a particular issue, depending on the purpose) can, and should be, offered as a means of bringing into the policy process the “voices” of the masses who currently constitute the “passive spectators” referred to by Mangcu. 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. Perhaps if these “voices” were given structure, such as that offered by narratives, there would be a greater chance of them being “heard”. The “voice”, in general, lacks unity, making it easy to ignore. The “narrative”, on the other hand offers structure to the “voice” and is more capable of being heard.

Thus, I do not believe the value of narratives lies only in extracting solutions from potentially opposing positions, as Roe postulates. Not least, the value lies in organizing the “voices” into a specific structure (a narrative) which increases their chances of being recognized and channeled into the policy processes. 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 which 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.

V. WHAT AVENUES CURRENTLY EXIST FOR PARTICIPATION IN POLICY FORMATION PROCESSES?

If, as I suggest, 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* 174).

VI. 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” (p 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. 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) 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” (p 207). 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 “voices” of the masses 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” (p 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 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. Simply too many interest groups, with too many different agendas all strive to influence the policy process. It is important to recognize that although dominant narratives tend to remain in the hands of the political elites, when other interests organize and speak with one “voice”, heard through a single narrative (such as that offered by the Treatment Action Campaign), their influence is exercised over the policy making process.

VII. HOW NARRATIVES CAN EMBELLISH THE POLICY FORMATION PROCESS

As Steve Biko (1996) 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 who formulate policy and those who must perceive, accept or reject policy” (p 128). This “discussion” is exactly what I am arguing 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: 5). However, as Hayden White (1980) suggests, “(w)hat is involved, then, in 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” (p 4). Essentially, Hayden is trying to question how the “truth” (the policy solution?) can be found entirely within sets of documents which 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 which many feel does not reflect real issues, concerns and needs of the masses. I argue that perhaps the identification and inclusion of the issues, concerns and needs of the “masses”, 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 idea is not original, with White (1980) claiming that “(a)s a panglobal fact of culture, narrative and narration are less problems than simply data” (p 4). Thus, the suggestion here is that narratives should simply carry the same weight as “data” when trying to arrive at a policy solution.

Although the narrative has the ability to enhance 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 uncover its value. It is the processes of “filling” in the blanks when putting various policy concerns into a narrative structure that constitutes this interpretation. White (1980) elaborates by 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 be 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” (p 3). 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) when he refers to the “narrative turn” (pp 286) 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 behavior” (p 286).

VIII. 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 we enter 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 fluctuations in national mood). It is only when these processes collide that a concern makes into the discussion agenda.

Of particular relevance for this discussion are the *policies* which incorporate his notion of the policy issue stream. Here Kingdon believes that 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’s 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 I would argue, 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. 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, I would suggest this might not be the case in the current South African context. Are there really the policy alternatives “out there”? Given the relevant 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.

IX. CONCLUSION

The official intent to seek and incorporate participation in numerous aspects of the political process in post apartheid South Africa was a sincere one. Increasingly, however, various structural realities (such as the electoral system) have dictated the gradual separation 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? I believe so. Although the disconnect 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. I argue 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.

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