

A VOLUME IN RESEARCH IN PUBLIC MANAGEMENT

Governing Fables

Learning from Public Sector Narratives



SANDFORD BORINS

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Learning from Public Sector Narratives

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Governing Fables

Learning from Public Sector Narratives

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For Beth Herst

Preface

An exploding Google count, from 16 million in 2007 to 50 million currently, makes it official. Narrative has become a buzzword. For those who study narrative, that is both good news and bad. Good, because attention is unquestionably being paid. Bad, because as the term grows ever more inescapable, it is losing both precision and meaning. Within popular culture, a narrative now is a rationale, an explanation, a justification. It is what wins an election, accounts for a catastrophe (economic or otherwise), sells a product, builds a brand. It is a story with intent. In its fullest conception, however, narrative denotes something more: a distinctive means of ordering experience; a particular mode of perceiving, representing, and communicating events; a way of structuring meaning in time.

Well in advance of narrative becoming a buzzword, there was an explosion of interest in narrative in the academic world. Originally, it was a field reserved for a small and specialized group of literary or film scholars known as narratologists. This interest is now shared across an expanding range of disciplines: cognitive science, artificial intelligence, evolutionary biology and psychology, anthropology, medicine, and law. Unlike the other disciplines, however, public management has been reluctant to embrace narrative, either as a research methodology or the subject of research. Therefore, my fundamental reason for writing this book is to encourage public management to take the narrative turn.

It is the understanding of narrative as a distinctive means of ordering experience that inspires *Governing Fables*. And it is for this reason that the

book addresses itself to both academics and practitioners in public management. Within the public management domain, we must all deal in narratives: political, institutional, personal, pedagogic, or methodological. They are the implicit structures that govern what we do, how we perceive it, and how we communicate it to others. When we gain “narrative competence,” we gain awareness of and perhaps mastery over the stories that shape our worlds. At the very least, we gain an understanding of the complex mechanisms at work in the narrative structures we are continually encountering and creating.

This book is offered as an example of a practice, not a *manifesto*. The analysis does not focus on single narratives looked at in isolation, but rather identifies a large enough range of narratives to establish genres, and then elucidates their common elements. More specifically, it focuses on authored narratives about public management produced in the UK and the United States in the last fifty years. Linking questions of narrative form to managerial content, *Governing Fables* discovers fundamental lessons about narrative and management. The most fundamental might well be the essential relationship between the two. That is the story at the heart of this book.

Acknowledgements

This book has been a long time in the making. It had its origins in the courses on narrative and management that I have taught over the last 2 decades at the Schulich School of Business at York University, the Department of Management at the University of Toronto at Scarborough, and the University of Toronto's Rotman School of Management. The courses have evolved over the years in terms of the increasing use of narratological concepts as a foundation, the expanding role I have given to student participation and presentations, and the continual updating of the set of movies, novels, and plays used. I have often assigned term papers requiring students to choose a text not discussed in class and analyze it, and these term papers have often brought to my attention works worthy of analysis. My University of Toronto at Scarborough colleagues Andrew Stark and Chandran Mylvaganam have occasionally given this course. Thus, the contributions of my colleagues and my students have influenced my thinking about public management narratives, and hence this book.

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Narrative as Object and Method of Study

Introducing Narrative into Public Management

Once upon a time, the study of narrative was an activity reserved for the literary scholars known as narratologists. Entrenched behind ramparts of specialist terminology, frequently absorbed in abstruse theoretical skirmishes, their claims for the universal and timeless nature of their subject matter went largely unnoticed. That was then. The past two decades have seen an explosion of scholarly interest in narrative, whether understood simply as storytelling or more formally as the action of ordering, representing, and communicating a constructed sequence of events. It is an interest shared across an expanding range of disciplines: cognitive science, artificial intelligence, evolutionary biology and psychology, anthropology, law, and medicine. And its influence extends to popular discourse too. At time of writing, “narrative” boasts a Google count of 50 million, up sharply from 16 million in November 2007.

The pervasiveness of this narrative interest should not surprise us. More and more, the narrative impulse is being understood to be embedded deep in the developmental history of our species, a universal “category of human endeavor and experience” (Gottschall & Wilson, 2005), essential

to our survival and evolution. Disciplines such as cognitive science, artificial intelligence, evolutionary biology and psychology, and linguistics posit a fundamental link between narrative and the management of complexity in acquiring, storing, and exchanging information. Narrative, in this view, is nothing less than the mark of that “cognitive fluidity” that enabled our *Homo sapiens* ancestors to enact a “cultural big bang” some 30,000 to 60,000 years ago, an evolutionary tipping point that saw the emergence of representational art, complex tool technology, long-range trade, and the rise of religion (Slingerland, 2008). Nor have we as a species outgrown our need for stories. They remain our primary means of making sense of experience, of creating meaning for ourselves and the world around us.¹

The literature on narrative tends to abound in universalizing statements like these. But if we shift our gaze from the general to the specific, the narrative imperative appears no less pervasive. Consider the contemporary public sector and its range of actors (or protagonists). Now consider the innumerable stories these protagonists generate, communicate, and enact.

Every political party consciously creates a narrative of recent history to validate its claim to govern. Election campaigns are increasingly structured around “the story.” How that story will be defined becomes the paramount strategic decision. And because rival parties’ narratives are necessarily in conflict, engaging with (and disrupting) opposing stories becomes a priority. Party leaders also fashion personal biographical narratives that root their leadership capabilities in their life histories. Barack Obama’s *Dreams from My Father* and *The Audacity of Hope* are perhaps the most striking example of the importance such personal stories now possess. Clearly, for large sections of the electorate, it was the explanatory, persuasive, and inspirational character of the candidate’s story, the coherence of his narrative, far more than specific policies, that mattered.

Narrative is equally inseparable from policy and planning, which invariably require stories of origins (how a particular policy developed), as well as predictive narratives of future interactions between environmental forces and departmental commitments. In controversial policy areas, such as the debate over public health insurance in the United States, proponents of alternative approaches invariably employ personal narratives about representative individuals to dramatize the benefits of their proposed solutions (“happy endings”) and the ineffectiveness or worse of their opponents’ programs (“scare stories”). Much of the so-called public debate over the issue then becomes a matter of dueling stories.

In a political culture that places heavy emphasis on performance and public accountability, failures are bound to occur, and they must be ex-

plained. And here too stories become central. These explanatory institutional narratives, often embodied in the reports of blue ribbon panels or special investigators, provide sequence and locate agency, culminating in an attribution of responsibility. They function, to use the popular term, as a means of effecting “closure,” an attempt to guarantee that this particular story will not be repeated.

Narrative functions even (or especially) at the purely personal level of the individual public sector career. When public servants apply for promotion, they must not only document their credentials but also generate a coherent narrative of their employment history and its meaning and why it has uniquely prepared them for the challenges of the new position they seek. Perhaps even more than most professions, public service demands a personal story—a work narrative—that can accommodate the complex interactions and competing claims of ambition, loyalty, discretion, commitment, service, politics, and governance.

The point I’m making is simple: if narratives so pervade the public sector, skill at engaging with, creating, and communicating compelling stories must be considered essential for both politicians and public servants. Similarly, if narratives are such a universal and compelling means of creating meaning and engaging an audience, they should be an essential way of communicating management concepts and skills.

There is an extensive and growing literature on “management and narrative.” Little of it, however, discusses how to create and communicate effective narratives. Most of it deals with how to use narratives to communicate *other* management concepts and skills. This literature encompasses a variety of forms, including prescriptive guides for using extracts or “clips” for teaching purposes, articles espousing the research and pedagogical benefits of narratives, books of so-called lessons for managers drawn from an array of narrative sources as disparate as Shakespeare and Winnie the Pooh, as well as studies of the fictional depiction of public servants, politicians, and other public sector agents and organizations across a variety of forms—novels, dramas, films, and television.

A detailed survey of this literature will be provided below. The point I would make here is that, with notable exceptions, all these studies tend to suffer from at least three significant limitations. There is a general lack of any rigorous, or even systematic, selection criteria to justify the choice of narratives analyzed. And this initial omission is compounded by an equal lack of a clearly defined analytic methodology capable of addressing issues of narrative form as well as content. Failing to address issues of narrative form, this literature provides no insight into what makes the narratives it