

ARTICLES/ARTÍCULOS

The Use of Public Narrative as Way to Facilitate Team Formation in Leadership Development and Community Organizing

El uso de la narrativa pública como medio para facilitar la formación de equipos en el desarrollo del liderazgo y la organización comunitaria

Emilia Aiello

Autonomous University of Madrid, Spain
emilia.aiello@uam.es

Nelly Fuentes

We The People Michigan, USA
nelly@wethepeoplemi.org

Recibido/Received: 13/10/2023

Aceptado/Accepted: 5/3/2024



ABSTRACT

Public narrative is a leadership practice being learned and practiced across different contexts worldwide. Examining specific instances provides valuable insights into the grassroots adoption of public narrative, particularly in environments conducive to agency development. This article delves into the utilization of public narrative for team formation within the realms of leadership and community organizing. We delve deeper into the case of We the People Michigan, an organization engaged in community organizing, and its pivotal role in convening the Drive Michigan Forward coalition through the lens of public narrative. Our findings highlight the crucial role of public narrative in enhancing two critical aspects of team formation and effective group collaboration. Firstly, the act of sharing personal narratives serves as a means to foster mutual understanding and establish a shared foundation. Secondly, it facilitates a shift from the specific needs of individual organizations towards a focus on the urgent challenges facing their constituencies, particularly the undocumented migrant population in Michigan.

KEYWORDS: public narratives, leadership, migrants, team, organizing, community.

HOW TO QUOTE: Aiello, E. y Fuentes, N. (2024). The use of public narrative as way to facilitate team formation in leadership development and community organizing. *Revista Centra de Ciencias Sociales*, 3(2), 31-52. <https://doi.org/10.54790/rccs.79>

English version can be read on <https://doi.org/10.54790/rccs.79>

RESUMEN

La narrativa pública es una práctica de liderazgo que se aprende y se practica en diferentes contextos en todo el mundo. El examen de casos específicos proporciona información valiosa sobre la adopción popular de la narrativa pública, particularmente en entornos propicios para el desarrollo de agencias. Este artículo profundiza en la utilización de la narrativa pública para la formación de equipos dentro de los ámbitos del liderazgo y la organización comunitaria. Profundizamos en el caso de We the People Michigan, una organización dedicada a la organización comunitaria, y su papel fundamental en la convocatoria de la coalición Drive Michigan Forward a través de la lente de la narrativa pública. Nuestros hallazgos resaltan el papel crucial de la narrativa pública en la mejora de dos aspectos críticos de la formación de equipos y la colaboración grupal efectiva. En primer lugar, el acto de compartir narrativas personales sirve como medio para fomentar el entendimiento mutuo y establecer una base compartida. En segundo lugar, facilita un cambio desde las necesidades específicas de las organizaciones individuales hacia un enfoque en los desafíos urgentes que enfrentan sus electores, particularmente la población de inmigrantes indocumentados en Michigan.

PALABRAS CLAVE: narrativas públicas, liderazgo, migrantes, equipo, organización, comunidad.

1. Introduction

Stories are a fundamental means through which we come to know ourselves, our surroundings, and even the sacred (Bradt, 1997; Ricoeur, 1992). Jerome Bruner contends that stories allow for simultaneous but also alternative interpretations of reality, which he refers to as 'possible worlds' (Bruner, 1986). As human beings, we structure our experiences and memories in the form of narratives, using stories to organize our consciousness and imagine new possibilities and realities. Sociologist Margaret Somers has introduced the concept of 'narrative identity,' suggesting that narratives are constellations of interconnected relationships, embedded in time and space, and shaped by causal emplotment (Somers, p. 601). Emplotment enables the construction of networks or configurations of relationships. Recognizing the pivotal role of narratives in interpreting and making sense of our personal and social realities, as well as in shaping our individual and collective identities, raises the question of how stories can be harnessed to propose innovative solutions to real-life problems. Exploring this question leads to a more specific inquiry: Can narratives contribute to advancing both individual and collective leadership capacity?

Narratives, as cultural resources, have the potential to assist individuals operating in diverse fields in developing their multifaceted agentic capacity. Public narrative represents the intersection of narrative and human action. As a leadership practice, it connects the power of narrative with the work of leadership by teaching individuals how to tell a story (Ganz, 2010). Harvard Professor Marshall Ganz and his collaborators initiated the development of a public narrative pedagogy at the Harvard Kennedy School in 2006. Public narrative involves articulating and linking three elements: a story of why I have been called, a story of self; a story of why we have been called, a story of

us; and a story of the urgent challenge on which we are called to act, a story of now. According to Ganz, this articulation of the relationship between self, others, and action is also at the core of our moral traditions. In this context, leadership is pivotal for enabling others to work towards a shared purpose in the face of uncertainty. Within this framework, leadership is seen as the capacity to transform moments of uncertainty into constructive purpose by responding with self-agency, not only by assuming responsibility for one's part of the work but also for the collective effort. Enhancing one's agency is as important as enhancing the agency of others (Ganz & McKenna, 2018).

This article presents and discusses how We the People Michigan (WTP-MI), a statewide organization engaged in community organizing in Michigan, USA, has leveraged the public narrative framework to convene a state-wide, multi-organization coalition known as the Drive Michigan Forward Coalition (DMF). This coalition is dedicated to the restoration of driver's licenses for undocumented migrants in Michigan. As part of the Narratives4Change research project, funded by the EU Horizon 2020 program (Project No. 841355), this article explores the case of WTP-MI and its deliberate use of public narrative within its organizing efforts. It showcases how WTP-MI utilizes public narrative to engage, build trust, and foster meaningful interpersonal relationships with its constituents, ultimately contributing to leadership development.

1.1. Narratives and their role in building relationships

Existing research has thoroughly explored the ways in which narratives and storytelling influence organizing, impact the social relationships within it, and serve as a method for creating meaning and identity. Within the field of social movement studies, scholars have critiqued the overemphasis on political opportunities and rational-choice approaches. Instead, they argue for the exploration of the cultural and emotional dimensions of collective action and protest (Goodwin & Jasper, 1999; Davis, 2002; Jasper, 2010, 2011; Polletta & Jasper, 2001).

Polletta (1998, 2008) emphasizes the moral and cultural meanings conveyed by narratives through plotment. The way narratives configure events over time is essential for constructing and maintaining individual and collective identities. Her perspective challenges the framing processes discussed by Gamson (1988), McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald (1996), and Benford and Snow (2000), which focus on acknowledging and incorporating meanings into action. Polletta argues that framing theory may limit the understanding of social reality in social movements, as it takes an instrumentalist view of acts and events. This shift in understanding narratives within the context of social movements and protest activities moves beyond viewing them solely as resources for expanding opportunities. Human narratives have evolved to serve as a means to infuse emotions, cultural repertoires, and meaning into these movements (Ganz, 2009; Polletta, 1998; Jasper, 2011; Davis, 2002; Polletta & Jasper, 2001; Alexander, 2012).

Other scholarly works have delved into the utilization of storytelling and narratives within the context of organizing, with a specific focus on helping individuals comprehend personal and community stories, amplifying shared values, and nurturing individual and shared meaning. For instance, Delehanty and Oyakawa (2018) conducted research on how storytelling is employed within faith-based community organizations. They sought to understand how faith coalitions effectively mobilize individuals for collective action on various issues, even across social differences, while other types of coalitions may not succeed. Their findings highlight the importance of one-on-one conversations and narrative practices in fostering a constructive moral meaning. These narrative practices enable activists to internalize a 'collective moral imaginary.' Narratives serve as a conduit for conveying both individual and social meaning, bridging individual motivations with the idea that advocating for a collective good is a worthwhile endeavor.

In a more recent work, Delehanty (2020) explored the significance of interactive cultural practices, such as songs and storytelling, in contemporary social movement organizing and their capacity to address the challenges of social differences. Storytelling expands participants' comprehension of themselves in relation to their community. Practices centered on personal moral authenticity prove to be particularly effective in aligning social movement objectives with individuals' pre-existing moral commitments, even when encompassing diverse racial and religious sub-groups.

Goldstein and colleagues (2015) conducted a study on the use of narratives within communities engaged in enhancing social-ecological resilience in complex urban systems. They focused on a case in Orange County, California, which had been severely impacted by wildfires. The researchers demonstrated how narratives served as a tool for participants to envision alternative environmental futures. This not only facilitated critical learning but also enhanced coordination. The use of narratives allowed for the expression of the subjective and symbolic meaning of resilience, promoting the engagement of multiple voices and facilitating self-organizing processes to determine what should be more resilient and for whose benefit.

Similarly, studies in the realm of undocumented migrants' rights have yielded comparable findings. Dao (2017) conducted research with Asian American and Pacific Islander youth engaged in political activities. He found that strategic storytelling throughout the political organizing process prompted a reevaluation of internalized stereotypes and led to a return to organizing co-ethnic communities. Storytelling proved to be a valuable strategy, enabling those involved in the movement to make the choice to reveal their status. This, in turn, shaped their collective identity formation and increased their political engagement across inter-racial boundaries. Similar accounts of the efficacy of organizing with narratives and storytelling have been documented in the fields of human rights and migrants' rights (Gouge, 2016; Pande, 2012), education (Welton & Freelon, 2018), the feminist movement (Polletta, 1998), and more.

While previous research has delved into how narratives and storytelling are employed to foster interpersonal relationships grounded in shared meaning and values, a deeper understanding can be gained by examining specific cases that illuminate the convergence of leadership, grassroots organizing, and the use of narratives to propose innovative solutions to emerging problems. Focusing on these intersections and contexts that challenge the status quo, encourage the envisioning of new alternative futures, and delve into the intentional crafting of narratives for these new projects can provide valuable insights into the mechanisms that influence actors' range of action in relation to existing constraining structures and in the realm of public leadership.

1.2. Public narrative for leadership development

Public narrative is the use of stories for public leadership, learning how to craft and articulate a *story of self*, a *story of us*, and a *story of now*. Narrative is grounded in specific story moments in which a protagonist is confronted with a disruption for which s/he is not prepared, the choice s/he makes in response, and the resulting outcome. Because we can identify empathetically with the protagonist, we experience the emotional content of the moment, the values on which the protagonist draws to respond (Nussbaum, 2001; Keen, 2006). The “moral” of the story we learn, then, is in this emotional experience, a “lesson of the heart” rather than only a cognitive “lesson of the head.” We can thus call on this experience as a “moral resource” when we must face disruptions endemic to the human experience (Aiello & Ganz, 2021). Consequently, narrative is a way of accessing emotional resources embedded in values to transform threats to which we react fearfully and retreat into challenges to which we can respond with hope and engage.

The idea of agency as a relational entity is central in the understanding of public narrative. This is what distinguishes public narrative from other individual-centered understandings of leadership. Public narrative as a leadership practice is oriented to develop not solely one's agentic capacities, but also that of others. The theoretical understanding of human agency by Emirbayer and Mische (1998) —largely influenced by Herbert Mead's social-interactionist contributions— is useful for capturing the manifold agentic orientations that can be triggered by public narrative, especially due to their projective character when used in public leadership. These authors define agency as the temporally constructed engagement by actors of different structural environments — the temporal- relational contexts of action— which, through the interplay of habit, imagination, and judgment, both reproduces and transforms those structures in interactive response to the problems posed by changing historical situations (Ibid., p. 970). In their definition, Emirbayer and Mische distinguish three constitutive elements of human agency: iteration which is linked to habit; projectivity which is linked to imagination; and practical evaluation which is linked to judgement. Each of these elements of human agency allows us to analytically examine forms of action that are oriented toward the past,

future, and present. This is of relevance in our explanation of public narrative as it illuminates, for instance, how public narrative can trigger the projective dimension of agency. As narratives provide alternative roads for actions, they can also serve to ideate and envision ways out of emerging problems. The underlying question here becomes, *in which ways can public narrative trigger the projective dimension of agency, equipping actors with ways to think more creatively on potential solutions to emerging challenges?*

The public narrative pedagogy has been adapted for use in both online and onsite courses at the Harvard Kennedy School (HKS) and has been integrated into workshops, projects, and campaigns, including the 2008 Obama for President campaign. From 2006 to 2016, over 32,000 individuals participated in 448 workshops across approximately 25 countries. These workshops spanned diverse regions, including Denmark, Serbia, Jordan, India, Vietnam, China, Japan, Australia, and Mexico, and encompassed various domains such as healthcare, education, politics, religion, and advocacy.

This article delves into the case of We The People Michigan (WTP-MI), an organization that strategically employs public narrative within its leadership role in convening the Drive Michigan Forward coalition. The use of public narrative by WTP-MI is an integral part of its organizing methodology, aimed at fostering leadership development and forging a multi-racial, working-class constituency across the state. This constituency is envisioned as a powerful force for advancing a unified, proactive agenda rooted in economic, racial, and social justice for all Michiganders.

2. Methods

This study is one of the three in-depth case studies conducted in the framework of the broad Narratives4Change research project (EU Horizon 2020, 2019–2021). The purpose of these case studies is to analyze initiatives that have used public narrative and to what extent it helped to develop leadership and enhance the agency of those most vulnerable communities.

Data was meticulously gathered from a variety of sources, with a focus on enriching the research through qualitative online fieldwork conducted between 2019 and 2020. This fieldwork engaged deeply with members of the We The People Michigan (WTP-MI) and the Drive Michigan Forward (DMF) coalition. Participants were carefully chosen based on their distinct roles and profiles within these organizations, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the campaign's dynamics and impact.

The selection process prioritized individuals who not only held diverse positions within WTP-MI but also varied in their tenure and involvement levels in the campaign. This led to conducting six in-depth interviews with key members, including the executive director, known for their strategic leadership and vision; the Michigan immigrant justice coordinator, who focuses on the rights and legal support for immigrants; community organizers, who are the backbone of grassroots

mobilization; the communications director, responsible for messaging and public engagement; and the deputy director, who plays a critical role in operational and administrative leadership. Furthermore, two focus groups were organized, offering a collective insight into the organization's internal dynamics and strategy formulation.

Simultaneously, the study extended its reach to stakeholders within the DMF coalition, which comprises various organizations dedicated to driving policy changes for immigrant rights and justice in Michigan. This phase included six in-depth interviews with organizers from member organizations, such as the Michigan League for Public Policy (MLPP), known for its advocacy on socio-economic issues; the Michigan Immigrant Rights Center (MIRC), a pivotal legal resource for immigrants; Action of Greater Lansing, focusing on community-based social justice initiatives; and the Cosecha Movement, a collaborating organization with a grassroots approach to immigrant rights. These interviews were instrumental in understanding the coalition's collaborative efforts, challenges, and achievements in advocating for policy reforms and immigrant rights in Michigan.

This detailed approach to selecting and engaging with fieldwork participants provided a rich, multi-dimensional perspective on the advocacy and policy change efforts led by WTP-MI and the DMF coalition. It ensured a deep dive into the strategic, operational, and grassroots levels of campaign work, reflecting the complexities and nuances of social justice and policy advocacy in the contemporary American context.

Also, participant observations were done in October and November 2020 specifically about WTP-MI training sessions related to the Deep Canvassing Programme held by WTP-MI, as well as a series of events in which the DMF campaign was presented between September-November 2020. All the fieldwork was run online due to COVID-19.

Qualitative fieldwork was recorded and transcribed, and in this article pseudonyms are used to refer to all interviewees and to prevent the disclosure of potential personal data. Data was coded and analyzed using NVivo software (Version 12). In doing this an initial coding scheme was created drawing on the Narratives4Change project general research questions, and the specific research question defined for this case study, which was the following: *How is WTP using Public Narrative for the development of individual and collective leadership in the context of its organizing activities?* This article solely reports some of the findings of this case study.

2.1. Ethical issues

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the Harvard University–Area approved this study, IRB Registration Nr: IRB00000109. In addition, all information gathered for the Narratives4Change project complies with the Ethics Appraisal Procedure required by the Horizon 2020 research program, funded by the European Commission. Accordingly, Narratives4Change project follows the Regulation (EU) 2016/679, the EU new General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).

2.2. A glimpse about the We The People Michigan and its role in the Drive Michigan Forward Coalition

We The People Michigan (WTP-MI) is a left-of-center-non-profit organization which was created in July 2018, with the goal of organizing for the rights of minority and vulnerable groups across the state of Michigan in the United States. Since its beginning, WTP-MI has been working in explicitly multiracial urban, suburban and rural communities with a racial justice lens, from all corners of the state -from Calumet to Flint, from Detroit to Grand Rapids. To achieve its goal, WTP-MI focuses on three main edges: build long-term deep organizing infrastructure; foster stable, long-lasting alliances, and be an engine for learning.

Estimations point out that 130,000 undocumented people in Michigan do not have access to a driver's license or an ID card. In 2008, the state of Michigan decided to revoke driving licenses and IDs for the undocumented. For this reason, immigrants and their allies, through previously established organizations such as WTP-MI, formed a statewide coalition called Drive Michigan Forward (DMF). The mission of the DMF coalition is to build a coalition to restore driver's licenses to all and to ensure that undocumented migrants benefit equally from access to all basic services. This way, the DMF coalition emerged from immigrants and their allies in order to put forth an inclusive policy which allows all Michigan residents to obtain a driver's license, regardless of their resident situation.

By the end of 2021, the DMF coalition had already been formed by 16 immigrant-led organizations, organizations advocating for the rights of undocumented migrants, and allies who believe in restoring driving licenses to all. Member organizations are the following: We the People MI; African Bureau of Immigration & Social Affairs, Action of Greater Lansing; Interfaith Council for Peace & Justice; American Civil Liberties Union Michigan; Michigan Immigrant Rights Center; Michigan League for Public Policy; Progress Michigan; Detroit Hispanic Development Corporation; Detroit Jews for Justice; Michigan United: Justice and dignity, Jewish Community Relations Council; MI Students Dream; Interfaith Action and Berrien Immigrant Solidarity Network.

3. Results

This section explores in which ways the public narrative pedagogy used by WTP-MI a core aspect of its organizing methodology, has been adapted and used in its leading role at the time of convening the DMF coalition.

Sitting down face to face and getting to know each other: knitting interpersonal relationships

I consider the concept of a public narrative in the following way: Firstly, it's about understanding what motivates and drives us to engage in this type of work. The work we're involved in demands considerable sacrifice and a consistent willingness to tackle challenging tasks. Therefore, it must hold great significance. This entails a deep commitment, which is rooted in our personal experiences and the values we carry with us (...) These experiences and values serve as the foundation for our motivation. It's a rather personal exploration of what drives us, but it's also essential that we can articulate it effectively to establish trust with others. (WTP-MI executive director)

The excerpt above is from a conversation with the current executive director of WTP-MI. What he explains captures the essence of the work that WTP-MI has undertaken in convening the diverse organizations that currently form the DMF coalition. These organizations are laying the groundwork to collaborate and establish relationships founded on trust:

WTP-MI has achieved success through its partnerships. However, according to WTP-MI, things have to move at the speed of trust, which, at times, may not be as rapid as we desire. Organizing is indeed challenging, yet prioritizing transformational relationships is an even more formidable task. It entails adopting a specific approach. (DMF organizer)

The use of public narrative within the WTP-MI organization has been instrumental in its community organizing pedagogy. It has enabled its members to engage in the introspective work mentioned by the WTP-MI executive director. Through intersubjective dialogue and conversations among each other, WTP-MI organizers have delved deep into their personal motivations that drive their commitment to the work they do. This exercise involves crafting 'stories of self,' 'stories of us,' and 'stories of now,' a process for which the community organizers at WTP-MI have received training. These narratives are then applied when facilitating team formation during the convening of the DMF coalition:

[When working with new people in the DMF coalition] Doing that was really important. Sitting down with representatives of other organizations and getting to know each other. Sharing my story, and getting to know why they were doing the work they were doing helped us to get where others were. (WTP-MI community organizer)

3.1. Using our story to “discover each other”

The incorporation of storytelling within the process of forming the DMF coalition has played a significant role in helping individuals understand and ‘discover’ others who, despite their diverse backgrounds and unique life stories, share similar motivations for joining the cause of supporting undocumented migrants. This insight is emphasized by another member of the coalition, who underscores that the DMF coalition’s primary focus when bringing individuals on board has been to anchor the campaign in shared values that resonate with all of them:

My boss for example, she thought that organizers were terrible... and just really annoying to work with... until she met WTP-MI. It’s the value of listening (...) For instance, in the communication group – Sara didn’t have experience in communication but she joined the meeting just to guide it and to root the communication in values. Guiding the narrative – community voices are listened to – the communication group was predominantly white. So they asked: Why are you here? Who are you bringing into this campaign? (DMF organizer)

Establishing actions rooted in shared values has been a fundamental aspect of bringing together a diverse array of organizations based in Michigan. Despite having progressive agendas, these organizations operate from different angles and possess distinct working cultures. Some engage in legal and advocacy issues, while others work directly with the community, and so on. In some cases, these organizations had not previously collaborated. To address this challenge, the application of public narrative pedagogy proved instrumental in fostering team formation within the coalition. It provided a common ground for organizations to align their efforts. This approach is elucidated through the following quotations, shared by individuals who represent various organizations within the coalition:

So, I think the biggest difference here is really having those kinds of grassroots groups and seeing how they do things (...) that’s been the most refreshing part... is having that energy and excitement and enthusiasm and really there’s something different because I sense when I sit at this table or now when we sit at our zoom, we really care about each other. It’s not just a meeting. It feels like we have a connection that is deeper than just this goal (...) (DMF organizer)

Another member of the coalition also emphasizes how stories are deeply woven into the fabric of the coalition’s approach and the nature of relationships it fosters, both within the organization and in interactions with others across Michigan:

(...) over the last 10 years my sense is that the position of the organization I represent have been much more delivered about doing work, about getting involved with community organizations and community partnerships, which I think is a really important shift. I think in particular with undocumented community here in Michigan that’s a group that is often left out of the policy discussions and this policy and the work that the coalition is doing really focuses on them. And so here is the role of WTP-MI which is a grassroots organization, to come to us and to other similar organizations and saying: “we’d love to partner with you on this”. And this is a great opportunity for us to support this issue and to land what we can for the campaign (member of the DMF coalition – legal expertise).

3.2. Holding each other accountable and daring to be vulnerable in conversations with others

Another aspect that emerged in the conversations with members of the DMF coalition was how because of setting a common ground to work together since the very beginning of the coalition formation, getting to know each other knowing for what they care, enabled them to hold each other accountable during their monthly meetings. Also, they explained that this common ground in which trust predominated helped to better navigate conflicts in those specific moments when they emerged:

I facilitated a conflict resolution meeting between two of the organizing groups that we interact with. The goal was not for them to talk to each other about each other, but to hear, from each other, their own feelings. I think of conflict resolution from the point of view of learning from each other, especially where the other person is coming from and what their mindset was to get to the positions they had. And from there, the conversation goes around what we want now and how we can work to get there. What is the way we want the world to look for us (WTP organizer).

Sharing personal stories and using them in a public context revealed that vulnerability is not something to be feared. On the contrary, daring to be vulnerable in public and sharing these personal (not private) stories during conversations can humanize the other person, thus fostering more humane interpersonal relationships within the coalition:

Using my story when we were working on the ID campaign made me feel guilty because I thought I was victimizing myself, but learning how the public narrative actually works made a change. The story of self doesn't serve to make you a victim, but to show your plight. The story of self is a story of victory of the self within oneself, the one that allows us to tell our stories with agency (DMF coalition member).

In conclusion, the fieldwork conducted with DMF participants has revealed that the use of elements from the public narrative pedagogy during initial meetings, where they introduced themselves and joined the coalition, greatly facilitated a deeper personal understanding among members. Participants had the opportunity to uncover the true motivations of individuals representing the member organizations and the organizations themselves. In these initial encounters, they followed the core principles of public narrative, which involved sharing why they were particularly committed to the campaign and why the issue of undocumented migrants and driving licenses resonated with them, even if many of them were not migrants (Story of self). They discussed the shared values that united them as a team and motivated them to form a working coalition (Story of us). They also delved into why they needed to address the driving license issue in such a turbulent socio-political moment in Michigan and the USA, or in other words, what was at stake if they didn't take action (Story of now). These discussions encouraged them to commit to the leadership mission required by the DMF coalition.

3.3. Agreeing a shared agenda based on community needs, and not on the needs of single organizations

Another noteworthy aspect of the coalition was the willingness of organizations to collaborate on an issue of great importance to their constituencies—undocumented migrants in Michigan—rather than solely focusing on their individual organizational priorities. The evidence collected indicates that WTP-MI's intentional use of public narrative pedagogy, based on shared experiences and rooted in strong relationships, played a pivotal role in bringing the DMF coalition together. It facilitated the development of mutual understanding and the establishment of a shared purpose.

When collecting data for this research in 2020, the DMF coalition comprised fewer than 10 organizations. By 2022, the coalition had grown to include 16 organizations, all of which are dispersed across the state of Michigan. These organizations represent various migrants' groups and approach the issue from different angles. The notion of prioritizing issues that impact the entire undocumented migrant community, rather than focusing solely on organization-specific matters, was eloquently articulated by members of WTP-MI during a focus group discussion. They emphasized the significance of this approach when aiming to build a different organizing ecosystem in Michigan. According to the organizers from WTP-MI, this is a long-overdue commitment that Michigan organizations owe to their constituents, rather than being solely accountable to funders:

We build relationships in depth; we function with trust. Listening to the community's stories and understanding what has happened to them allows us to create deep and meaningful bonds (WTP-MI organizer).

Sharing values and establishing a common purpose are not just prerequisites for collective action but also the foundation for cultivating a shared sense of identity among diverse actors. As WTP-MI organizers discussed among themselves, this process involves asking themselves what type of Michigan they envision and dream of:

I think we slowly started to tell a more complete story about what Michigan is, to be honest about our state's divisions, where the sort of fault lines are... But also, you know, it does not reach for like a kind of bland unity but says no, there are like forces deliberately dividing us and they are not just pitting us against each other, but they are scapegoating certain groups (poor communities black and brown communities, immigrant communities). And they want us weak... So, we've started to weave that in the different entities, different campaigns and the driver's license campaign has definitely been one of the more prominent (member of the DMF coalition – legal expertise).

Moreover, by prioritizing the needs of their constituents, the DMF coalition was able to tap into a diverse range of skills that could be harnessed as key resources during the campaign's strategic planning. Member organizations within the DMF coalition offer varying expertise, with some excelling in community outreach, others specializing in legal matters, and still others focusing on communication campaigns. However, despite their varied expertise, the

coalition shares a common message: advocating for the rights of undocumented migrants, particularly the need for driving licenses to be restored as a means of empowering the people:

And instead, what we have been doing is pushing people and saying, no, this is not an economic issue. This is not a law and order issue. This is a dignity issue that immigrants as human means inherently or what and deserve these rights and driver's license is a step in that. It is not the full dignity package. Just one small step that undocumented communities have asked us to do and work on and we're responding to a call, but it's not the full picture. So I think the role that we play is like reminding people of that and also finding other organizations and other people who understand it and can help us do that like personal transformation (member of the DMF coalition – communications expertise).

3.4. It's not the economy, it's our dignity

In the excerpts shared in this section, it becomes evident that an ongoing issue within the coalition and a particular concern of some member organizations is how to continually remind both their own constituents and the broader public, including those familiar with the situation of undocumented migrants and those who are not, that the restoration of driving licenses is not merely an economic or public safety issue, nor is it a privilege. Instead, it directly relates to the dignity of migrants and the vision shared by all the organizations within the DMF coalition for the type of Michigan they aspire to create:

You know, previously and still the case in a bunch of places that immigration issues are framed all around deserving and undeserving. And I always like to make this argument that like we don't use that for any other marginalized group of people. We like never say we need to give like LGBT rights because they bring in money to the economy because they pay taxes. And past campaigns and like sometimes we still get people in the coalition or other community members are like want to have the argument or driver's license be on money and economy and public safety in terms of law and order. And instead, what we have been doing is pushing people and saying, no, this is not an economic issue. This is not a law and order issue. This is a dignity issue that immigrants as human means inherently or what and deserve these rights and driver's license is a step in that (member of the DMF coalition – communications expertise).

Overall, placing the needs of the undocumented migrant community at the forefront of every strategy and action undertaken by the coalition, rooted in the principle of dignity, lies at the core of its mission and its shared vision for Michigan as a place where everyone can thrive, develop, and progress. An example of this commitment is the Deep Canvassing program, as explained below.

3.5. Deep Canvassing: another way to share the message

WTP-MI implemented a Deep Canvassing Program to organize and campaign across 12 different counties in Michigan leading up to the November 2020 election. The program aimed to facilitate anti-racism conversations centered around the criminal justice system, the promotion of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) leadership in local politics, and the reduction of prejudice. Remarkably, the entire program was conducted remotely, with organizers engaging in conversations with voters over the phone.

To achieve their goals, the program focused on establishing genuine and unique connections with each voter through the use of listening tools, curiosity, and storytelling. The experience of WTP-MI community organizers, rooted in the public narrative pedagogy, played a significant role in developing and organizing volunteers for this initiative. WTP-MI trained volunteers to initiate meaningful conversations with fellow Michiganders over the phone, regardless of whether the conversation lasted one minute or thirty:

and the deep canvassing program is rooted in Story of Self. It's about going into a person's home knocking on the door and saying, Hey, this is me, ... This is my story. It's more complicated than that of course... but... that's the basic. So the driver's license campaign with the beep canvassing along with the with already like the fertile ground that has been created in northern Michigan. I mean, there's a chance that we can change the landscape in order for Drivers' License to happen. And so yes driver's license is very important, but it's just a part of the whole ingrained (WTP-MI organizer; focus group).

WTP-MI organizers interviewed shared some of their experiences while leading the deep canvassing program. One of them explained that a significant number of participants in the deep canvass in Michigan's Upper Peninsula began to believe in the potential of deep canvassing to engage and convince voters due to the stories they would hear. She emphasized that, for many white Michiganders, the abstract concept of undocumented migrants might not be relatable. However, when specific situations are shared, such as the challenges undocumented migrants face when providing for their children, the fear of job loss, or the longing for their homeland, these particular aspects resonate with the personal stories of those listening on the other side.

During one of the observed training sessions for this study, WTP-MI volunteers recounted how deep canvassing strategies often proved effective in engaging the most skeptical voters. This success was attributed to the ability to establish a personal connection with others. Deep canvassing, combined with strategies from the public narrative pedagogy, enables a call to basic emotions, ultimately invoking empathy:

We both want the same thing but we talked about it differently, but at the bottom, we want the basic thing. For this, public narrative has helped me to build that connection (WTP-MI organizer; focus group).

In my organization, we have clients with 16-year-olds who are unaware that they won't be able to obtain a driver's license, and their parents often delay sharing this difficult news. It's these stories that motivate me to stay involved. During a conversation with DACA recipients, I realized that many of them had parents struggling with alcoholism. It dawned on me that attributing this issue solely to being Latino or an immigrant is a misguided perspective. The challenges they face every day, the constant worry about work and the risk of not returning home due to the fear of arrest, contribute to the stress they endure. How can anyone endure this for 15, 20 years? (member of the DMF coalition).

While one of the strategies employed by WTP-MI in the program involved making phone calls to understand people's concerns and worries, the subsequent step was to consider the actions and decisions required to make that envisioned future a reality. The Deep Canvassing Program, designed to shift power in Michigan, played a pivotal role in the election of a progressive candidate in one of Detroit's districts. An interviewee explained that part of the success of the winning candidate's campaign lay in her substantial effort to visit households and get to know the people in the district.

This success not only serves as an example of a collective achievement that worked alongside the community to influence the political landscape of the county but also highlights the impact of agentic action, fostered by the intentional use of the public narrative pedagogy.

4. Discussion and conclusions

In this article, we have explored how WTM-MI has leveraged the public narrative framework in its role as the leading organization convening the Drive Michigan Forward coalition (DMF). The evidence gathered illustrates that the use of public narrative pedagogy has enhanced two crucial aspects that were instrumental in team formation and effective group functioning. First, it facilitated sharing personal stories to foster mutual understanding and to establish a collective sense of identity, crafting a narrative of "us". Second, it encouraged the member organizations of the coalition to shift their focus from individual needs and personal agendas to address the urgent needs of their constituents—specifically, the need to enable undocumented migrants in Michigan to obtain driving licenses.

The findings discussed in this article reveal that the use of public narrative significantly contributed to building and strengthening social relationships among DMF coalition members. Interviewed members of the coalition described the transformation they experienced, moving from being relative strangers, often not having worked together in the past, to sharing personal experiences that shaped their commitment to the dignity of undocumented migrants in Michigan. By sharing their personal journeys and fostering dialogic communication, they were able to engage in discussions about the challenges they faced, make tough strategic decisions, and identify with others' sources of hope and courage, ultimately believing in the possibility of creating a different Michigan.

Previous research has shown that leadership development within organizing and volunteer-led organizations often becomes entangled in managerial models (Skocpol, 2003), expending considerable effort on mobilization but sometimes falling short on effective organization (Han et al., 2011). In contrast, this study reveals that activities oriented toward relationship building should not be neglected, as they play a crucial role in activating effective leadership and fostering a dynamic environment that can build and sustain organizational capacity (Andrews et al., 2013). This aligns with one of the core organizing goals of WTP-MI, which is to cultivate diverse relationships among Michiganders, thus restoring people's power while nurturing a transformational and emancipatory organizing environment. This approach prioritizes accountability to constituents rather than funders.

While conducting a comprehensive analysis of the campaign's organizational effectiveness may require examining additional aspects beyond those addressed in this study, the evidence suggests that developing leadership grounded in interpersonal relationships characterized by trust, solidarity, and a shared purpose (the 'Us' dimension) is pivotal for driving effective change. As demonstrated above, the use of storytelling within the framework of public narrative serves as an effective organizing method.

The case of WTP-MI and its use of public narrative, not only within its own organizing pedagogy but also in convening and collaborating with other organizations within the DMF coalition, illuminates three essential aspects of how public narrative fosters and envisions leadership that are worth considering in other campaigns.

First, public narrative has the potential to enhance individual and collective agentic capacities even within constrained conditions. It motivates individuals and groups to take the lead together. Public narrative employs stories with intentionality through a pedagogy that is inherently relational, experiential, and reflexive. Consequently, it emphasizes the importance of inter-relationality in the pursuit of shared goals, shaping the 'Self' in dialogue with the 'Us,' and vice versa, within the temporal framework of the 'Now.' In cultivating such interrelationality, the modeling and practice of public narrative contributes to the creation of a shared sense of 'usness' (Steffens, Haslam & Reicher, 2014). Narratives enable the identification and articulation of sources of common concern, moving away from an 'Us' identity rooted in essentialist singular categories (Somers, 1994). Instead, it delineates group boundaries based on shared experiences, revealing shared values. Through the act of storytelling, public narrative links the 'story of self,' 'story of us,' and 'story of now.' It presents a narrative process in which individuals engage with internal and external emotional resources, bridging the personal, collective, and temporal dimensions.

This can be observed in the narratives and stories shared by members and leaders of WTP-MI and the DMF coalition when explaining the changes in their own perceptions of power structures and hierarchies. These changes extend to their workplace, the public domain, and even their private lives, altering how they relate to these structures. They transition from being passive agents to becoming agentic actors capable of challenging and contesting these contexts.

Within the DMF campaign, public narrative served as a means to develop agentic capacities by invoking urgency and anger instead of inertia and apathy. It promoted solidarity and hope in place of isolation and fear. This showcases the potential of public narrative to expand one's agency while empowering others to expand theirs. Furthermore, public narrative reinforces the importance of pursuing shared goals. In public narrative, agency involves responding to and generating alternative solutions to the problems we face in our daily lives (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998), which Mead (1934) referred to as 'reflective intelligence.' Through the use of the story of self, the story of us, and the story of now, public narrative challenges audiences to envision the impact of activating collective agency on the unfolding of events. It invites them to engage in processes of change rather than allowing 'threats' to undermine the values at stake. Stories serve as maps of action, allowing people to consider 'either' 'or' alternatives.

Second, public narrative shifts leadership and social relationships from transactional interactions to opportunities for potential social transformation. This shift redirects the focus from achieving a specific outcome to locating outcomes within a broader network of interpersonal relations, which can be cultivated and nurtured through each leadership initiative. This shift is rooted in the relational aspect of public narrative and its view of individuals as moral beings (Smith, 2003) rather than mere material entities. Public narrative brings culture to the forefront, recognizing the morally constituted and permeated world in which we all exist (Collins, 1993). This is particularly relevant in the state of Michigan, where marginalized communities are often left behind by party politics.

The third aspect worthy of consideration for other campaigns is the potential scalability of public narrative as a leadership practice. This scalability isn't limited to well-funded and resource-rich areas but extends to more challenging conditions, as experienced in Michigan. This state is marked by divisions across ethnic and racial lines, urban-rural-suburban divides, economic disparities, and various other complexities. By examining where public narrative is being used and extracting lessons related to its universal elements, particularly the use of narratives rooted in a pedagogy that is relational, experiential, and reflexive, we can gain insights into how it can be adapted in other contexts.

Our investigation into WTP-MI's strategic use of public narrative reveals a broader societal relevance, illustrating how grassroots movements can leverage storytelling to foster inclusivity, empathy, and collective action. Thus, the study underscores the critical importance of voice and storytelling in mobilizing communities for social justice, emphasizing the role of personal narratives in bridging divides and humanizing policy debates. The findings highlight the transformative potential of narrative practices in not only advocating for policy change but also in building resilient, interconnected communities capable of confronting systemic challenges.

Furthermore, the utilization of WTP-MI as a case study serves as a compelling empirical example of the efficacy of narrative strategies in community organizing and leadership development. This example offers valuable insights for other organizations and movements seeking to galvanize support and foster deep, meaningful connections among diverse groups. By detailing the mechanisms through which public narrative facilitates team formation and collective action, this research contributes to a broader understanding of how similar approaches can be applied across various societal contexts to address pressing issues.

The implications of our study extend beyond the specific case of WTP-MI, offering a blueprint for knowledge transfer to other domains facing similar challenges. The strategies employed by WTP-MI can be adapted and applied in other settings to enhance leadership development, organizational effectiveness, and social impact. This research enriches the toolkit available to community organizers, social movement leaders, and policymakers, providing them with a tested approach for cultivating solidarity and driving change. The study's insights into the power of narrative to mobilize and unite suggest pathways for broader societal engagement and the potential for significant social transformation.

In conclusion, this study not only enriches our understanding of public narrative's role in community organizing and leadership development but also highlights its significance as a tool for social change. The case of WTP-MI exemplifies the profound impact of narrative practices on societal engagement and policy advocacy, offering a model for other movements and organizations committed to social justice and equity. By emphasizing the social impact and applicability of our findings, we aim to inspire further research and action that harnesses the transformative power of storytelling in addressing societal challenges.

5. References

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Funding

This study has been conducted under the framework of the Narratives4Change research project, which has received funding from the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No 841355.

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank all individuals’ members of We The People Michigan (WTP-MI) and the Drive Michigan Forward (Coalition DMF) who have accepted to collaborate in the fieldwork of this study, providing insights and reflections on the topic discussed.

Data Availability Statement

All qualitative data derived from the fieldwork and used for this study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Emilia Aiello-Cabrera

Emilia Aiello es Investigadora Ramon & Cajal en el Departamento de Sociología de la Universidad Autónoma de Madrid (UAM). Entre 2019-2022 fue EU Marie Sklodowska-Curie Fellow en la Harvard Kennedy School of Government (Ash Center) y en la Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (UAB, Departamento de Sociología). Sus intereses de investigación se centran en estudiar aquellos factores que generan y facilitan la agencia humana en contextos sociales deprimidos, especialmente en los grupos sociales más vulnerables como son las personas migrantes y/o refugiadas y de minorías étnicas, y en especial el rol de las mujeres en estos grupos. Además, su preocupación científica y personal también está en identificar formas de maximizar el impacto social de la investigación científica, para generar mecanismos de conexión entre ciencia y sociedad.

Nelly Fuentes

Nelly Fuentes es organizadora regional en We The People en el suroeste de Michigan. Es una mujer nativa de Mesoamérica que migró a la región de Michigan a principios del siglo, estableciéndose en Kalamazoo en 2006. Cree en el derecho humano a la migración libre dentro de la Isla Tortuga y está comprometida con los esfuerzos de liberación de los migrantes. Las prácticas anticoloniales y de sanación son el centro de su visión organizativa. Como parte de sus prácticas de sanación, invoca la guía y sabiduría de sus ancestros a través del arte de hacer tortillas. Fuentes colaboró con la Dra. Aiello en el desarrollo del caso de We The People Michigan, dentro del proyecto de investigación Narratives4Change (2019-2021).