Evaluating Personal Narrative Storytelling for Advocacy

A Literature Review Prepared for Living Proof Advocacy

Authors: Jessie Austin and Emma Connell

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Introduction

Living Proof Advocacy, based in Minneapolis, provides coaching and consultation services to individual advocates as well as nonprofits, public agencies, and communication professionals. Its staff of coaches and consultants aims to equip individuals and organizations with the skills to effectively use personal narrative storytelling to advocate for a cause, organization, or mission. Living Proof Advocacy grew out of the work of Timothy Cage and John Capecci, authors of *Living Proof: Telling Your Story to Make a Difference.* For nearly twenty years, Cage and Capecci have helped thousands of advocates and hundreds of organizations share their stories to increase awareness, influence policy, raise money, and more—about issues ranging from health/wellness to social justice to environmental and safety concerns.

To further inform their work and the work of the organizations and individuals for whom they consult, Living Proof Advocacy collaborated with Wilder Research to create the following literature review. This literature review aims to address two major questions:

1. What are the identified best practices in using personal narrative storytelling for advocacy?

2. How can advocates use evaluation to understand the impact of their narrative advocacy efforts using personal stories?

Advocacy can entail a wide variety of strategies and approaches. For the purposes of this literature review, we specifically examined what existing literature has to say about the utilization of in-person speech to advocate for a cause, using personal narratives. This aligns with Living Proof Advocacy's mission.

Living Proof Advocacy's Mission

"Living Proof Advocacy helps purpose-driven individuals and organizations unleash the power of personal stories to advocate for positive change. We do so by providing communication coaching, consulting services and coaching certification to everyday advocates, nonprofits, public agencies and communication professionals working on today's most important issues."

Executive summary

This literature review focuses on the use of face-to-face personal storytelling for advocacy purposes with the goal of informing the work of Living Proof Advocacy, the organizations it works with, and others engaged in personal storytelling for change. First, we examine the literature that discusses how effective stories are in changing minds and advancing causes and why certain stories or approaches to personal storytelling are more effective than others. Then, we discuss a variety of options advocates and evaluators can use to determine the effectiveness of any given advocacy effort that utilizes personal storytelling. The following is a brief summary of our findings.

Why should advocates tell their stories?

People naturally think in stories; some have described stories as the "default mode of human thought." They support information processing, memory development, and provide cohesion to complex situations. Stories, and particularly those about individuals:

- Elicit greater empathy than facts and statistics
- Can motivate those who hear them to take positive action
- Lower audience members' resistance to new ideas

Because of this, those who aim for audience members to come away with new knowledge of a topic or with increased empathy for others should use personal stories to convey their message.

How can stories be most effective?

Stories are a useful tool for advocates, and can become even more powerful when used strategically. The literature describes certain characteristics of stories that make them especially persuasive:

- **Transportation**, in which audience members are absorbed by the story
- **Relatability**, in which audience members can see themselves in the story
- **Emotionality**, in which audience members feel for and empathize with the storyteller

Stories are an inherently persuasive form of communication that can influence audiences' real-world knowledge and beliefs through "transporting" them into the story. Story transportation lends itself to persuasion through stimulating emotional involvement, reducing resistance to new or different ideas, and making abstract ideas feel tangible and concrete.

How can storytellers know the impact of their work?

It is important for individuals and organizations to be able to evaluate their advocacy work to allow for improvement, and also for organizations to demonstrate that their work makes a difference. However, relatively little evaluation has been done in the field, and the literature base is limited.

Still, there are some promising approaches to understanding the impact of stories on audience members. These include:

- Logic model development and indicator monitoring
- Outcome harvesting
- Narrative assessment
- Contribution analysis

Storytellers have an opportunity to move the field forward by integrating evaluation into their work. By doing so, they can more explicitly show funders and other stakeholders why the work they do is important in moving the needle on social change.

Why storytelling matters for advocacy

Terminology used in the storytelling literature varies based on author and discipline. For the sake of clarity, in this review "personal stories" refer to anecdotes used to share personal experience. "Facts-based communication" is used to broadly refer to logical forms of communication used to provide information and educate, including technical, scientific, argumentative, and expository forms of communication (Dahlstrom, 2014). These forms of facts-based communication are "context-free" in that their meaning is independent of any one person's experience.

Personal stories of individuals increase comprehension and elicit empathy more effectively than facts and statistics.

Stories generally—whether fictional or true to lived experience—are thought to be the "default mode of human thought" (Dahlstrom, 2014). Stories support information processing, memory development, and provide "structure to reality" (Dahlstrom, 2014). Even when communicating scientific information, stories produce higher comprehension, recall, interest, and engagement (Dahlstrom, 2014). Compared to facts-based texts, readers are able to recall stories twice as well, regardless of their familiarity with or interest in the subject (Graesser, Olde, & Klettke, 2002). It is likely that these benefits extend to spoken stories, as well.

Personal stories encourage the audience to identify and empathize with those in the story (Dahlstrom, 2014). In contrast, statistics—even about atrocities like mass murder and genocide — are often ineffective in eliciting empathy and motivating action (Slovic, 2007).

"Psychophysical numbing" may result from our inability to appreciate losses of life as the numbers become larger (Slovic, 2007). A story of a single individual in distress, with a name and a face, often evokes more compassion and willingness to help than a story of multiple people (Slovic, 2007; Slovic, Västfjäll, Erlandsson, & Gregory, 2017).

> *The statistics of mass murder and genocide... fail to convey the true meaning of such atrocities… [and] fail to spark emotion or feeling and thus fail to motivate action (Slovic, 2007, p. 80).*

Telling stories about individuals can be an effective means of illustrating complex systems and social issues.

Personal stories can also be a means of illustrating how complex systems impact people's lives, demonstrating both existing problems and possible solutions (Hancox, 2017; Neimand, 2018; Saltmarshe, 2018). Even within journalism, a field centered on the communication of facts, personal storytelling is prevalent (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2013). Among 101 written articles that won a Pulitzer Prize for journalism between 1995 and 2011, nearly two-thirds (63%) used personalized storytelling to draw their readers in to the article or to illustrate a social issue (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2013, p. 135).

However, it is important to note that, by contrast, it may be difficult for *individual* stories to convey the complexity of the many economic, structural, behavioral, and social factors that influence individual health and well-being (Neiderdeppe et al., 2008) or other complex social issues. In practice, stories may need to be carefully crafted and framed to both accurately and sufficiently convey the complexity of social issues.

Narratives support public political engagement and participation, and social transformation.

Sharing personal stories in a collective space helps individuals realize and demonstrate connections between their individual struggles and larger political injustices (Clair, Chapman, & Kunkel, 1996; Dubriwny, 2005). Through connecting individuals via shared experience, narratives may encourage social action on behalf of the collective, and stimulate societal transformation (Richardson, 1990).

> *[Stories have a] basic role in transforming individual and essentially private experience into a shared and therefore public reality (Glasser, 1991: 235–236).*

Narratives are key to democratic participation because they support community residents' and political actors' desire to "carefully examine a problem and arrive at well-reasoned conclusions" (Boswell, 2013, p. 628). Narratives are universal and accessible, and allow both community members and experts to mutually engage around political issues. Narratives provide structure that clarifies confusing and complex information, and "weaves [that information] together in a compelling manner" (Boswell, 2013, p. 623). Additionally, narratives "dramatize politics… through engender[ing] vivid depictions, compelling plot developments and emotional attachments, all qualities that can make narrative transformative" (Boswell, 2013, p. 631).

While stories can generate empathy and connect people across differences, audiences may struggle to empathize with those they perceive as different from themselves.

Johnson, Jasper, Griffin, and Huffman (2013), studying written personal narrative, found that when readers who were given a story that countered stereotypes about Arab-Muslim women, and that included descriptive language, dialogue, and monologue, readers exhibited less prejudice and higher empathy for the Arab-Muslim community than readers who were given a simple narrative summary.

But while stories have been found to help audiences empathize and relate to others, audiences may also have a more difficult time identifying with characters who belong to demographic groups other than their own. Kaufman and Libby (2012) found that readers who learned sooner rather than later in a written story that the main character belonged to a group other than their own were less immersed in the story, had higher levels of stereotyping toward the characters in the story, and less favorable attitudes toward the main character's demographic group than readers who were told later of the character's "out-group" identity.

In another study, readers who were given a fictional story that used first-person narrative voice and that featured a character in their "in-group" (identified as either introverted or extroverted, in accordance with how the participants identified themselves) were more absorbed into the story and were more likely to demonstrate related behavior change than the comparison groups (for whom no information was provided on their introversion—extroversion level; Kaufman & Libby, 2012).

Stories are inherently persuasive and discourage counterarguments.

Stories have the potential to subtly influence an individual's real-world knowledge and beliefs, beyond other forms of communication (Green & Brock, 2000; Kennedy et al., 2018; Murphy, Frank, Chatterjee, & Baezconde-Gabanati, 2013; Oschatz, Emde-Lachmund, & Klimmt, 2019). In one study, women were shown either a film about a family's experiences with cervical cancer screenings or a film in which doctors explained the science behind why cancer screenings are important (Murphy et al., 2013). Women who viewed the film depicting other women's experiences were more likely to have improved attitudes toward cancer screenings and increased knowledge about the importance of screenings.

Stories may lower audience resistance to new ideas and discourage counterarguments (Green, 2006). Stories, as opposed to facts-based communication, may prompt readers to "engage in a less critical, more immersive form of mental engagement" (Green, 2006, p. 174). Stories may instinctively be viewed by readers as entertainment, and thus may not trigger critical thinking, counter-arguing, or information avoidance in the audience (Green, 2006; Green & Brock, 2000). The reader may be so focused on the stories' events, or use so many mental resources engaging in the story, that they may have difficulty formulating cognitive counter-arguments (Dahlstrom, 2014; Green, 2006).

> *Stories are commonly thought of both as authentic and as deceptive ('telling my story' versus 'telling stories'). They are seen as universal in their implications and as dangerously particularistic—idiosyncratic, even. Storytelling is appreciated, enjoyed, and distrusted (Polletta, 2006).*

Additionally, stories may be taken as evidence of their claims in and of themselves—they may not be held to the same standard of evidence as fact-based communication (Dahlstrom, 2014). The "cause and effect" arc used in storytelling may result in normalizing the assumptions made by, and the conclusions drawn from, the story (Dahlstrom, 2014). This may make the story's assumptions and conclusions seem inevitable, more acceptable, and more difficult to counter (Dahlstrom, 2014).

At the same time, though, those who use personal storytelling for advocacy may be criticized for using "argument by anecdote"— that sound, logical arguments or assertions cannot be generalized from the experience of a single person (Oldenburg & Leff, 2009). To address this issue, storytellers may need to acknowledge that theirs is just one story, and also that their experiences may resonate with the experiences of others, and carry wider implications.

These findings yield important ethical considerations. Because stories may not be held to the same standards of evidence as other forms of communication and may not be easily refuted, they may be used to perpetuate misinformation. This may lead to unintended harmful effects if stories motivate action that is factually misguided or selective (Fadlallah et al., 2019).

> *Many a bad policy has been created because decision-makers were moved to take action by a powerful story which was completely unrepresentative of a larger reality (Davidson, 2017).*

Additionally, because stories are open for "multiple understandings," they may be manipulated and used against the storyteller themselves (Davidson, 2017, p. 4).

> *Dreamers— young undocumented migrants in the United States, told stories that depicted them as 'innocent' and thus deserving of protections, because they were brought to the United States by their parents at a young age through no decision of their own— only to find these stories were used as justification for arresting and deporting their parents, who by definition were then not 'innocent' (Davidson, 2017, p. 4).*

Core components of effective advocacy stories

What should be included in a story, and how should it be told to make the most impact? We examined published literature about advocacy using narrative storytelling approaches to determine what the key components of effective advocacy storytelling are. As discussed later, this is an emerging field; further study is needed to further clarify these "active ingredients" of any given story and the impact it can have on an audience. We provide this summary as an opportunity for advocate storytellers to reflect on their storytelling practices as a complement to their own expertise and insights; for context, we have included Living Proof Advocacy's approach to effective storytelling at the end of this section.

Becoming absorbed into a story's narrative is an important mechanism for persuasive influence and belief change.

Transportation, the cognitive state of becoming absorbed into a story, may help explain stories' persuasive influence (Green & Brock, 2000). When readers are transported, they may experience emotional involvement in the story, focused cognitive attention, feelings of suspense, lack of awareness of surroundings, and mental imagery (Green & Brock, 2000). Transportation is associated with belief acceptance, changes in knowledge, attitudes and behavior, decreased counter-arguing, and increased interpersonal discussion (Green & Brock, 2000).

While some theories suggest that attitude change occurs via logical consideration of arguments, transportation may lead to audience persuasion in other ways (Green & Brock, 2000; Petty & Cacioppo, 1981). Transportation may increase persuasion through the reader creating connections with characters, reducing counter-arguing and critical thinking about the argument behind the story, and making abstract ideas feel like concrete, real experiences (Green, 2006).

> *To the extent that individuals are absorbed into a story or transported into a narrative world, they may show effects of the story on their real-world beliefs (Green & Brock, 2000, p.701).*

In Green and Brock's study (2000), audiences who were more transported into a story reported more story-consistent beliefs, had more positive attitudes toward the narrator and higher perceptions of the narrator's authenticity, and were less likely to doubt or question the story (Green and Brock, 2000). Participants' story transportation and its impact on their beliefs did not differ whether the story was presented as fact or fiction.

Personal stories in which the audience can relate to the storyteller and characters are more persuasive.

A reader's or listener's attachment to a storyteller or character may be key to the persuasiveness of the story (Green & Brock, 2000). Additionally, stories with storytellers or characters that share the reader's or listener's life experiences, values, cultural norms, or social identities are particularly persuasive, especially if that characteristic is relevant to the story (Green, 2004; Neimand, 2018). For example, women might have preconceived misinformation that heart disease is less likely to affect them than men. It may make more of an impact, then, for an advocate storyteller who is a woman to discuss her experiences with heart disease.

Storytellers and characters may serve as role models for appropriate behavior, increase perceived self-efficacy, create shifts in normative beliefs, and create emotional responses — all of which are thought to be key components of narrative impact (Green, 2006). For example, in response to being shown a film about cervical cancer screenings that featured a Latinx family as the main characters, Mexican American women were most transported, identified most with the characters, and experienced the strongest emotions compared to European American and African American women (Murphy et al., 2013). Transportation, personal identification with specific characters, and emotion contributed to shifts in knowledge, attitudes, and behavioral intentions related to cervical cancer prevention (Murphy et al., 2013).

> *Leave space for people to see themselves and their values and worldview reflected in the story (Neimand, 2018).*

When making decisions, people rely upon "frames, narratives, or world-views that affect what [they] perceive and how they interpret what they perceive" (Davidson, 2017, p. 2). When presenting new information or evidence, it is important to frame the evidence "in a way that connects with people's values and takes account of the frames, world-views, or narratives in people's heads of how the world works" (Davidson, 2017; Neimand, 2018).[1]

Presenting information that challenges the audience's preconceived beliefs may increase their likelihood of information avoidance or counter-argument (Neimand, 2018). Neimand (2018) asserts that storytellers must gain people's attention and empathy by demonstrating a shared perspective, while also challenging their biased assumptions: "To account for bias, we must leave empty space for people to see themselves and their values and worldview reflected in the story. At the same time, we must create full spaces with details about systemic factors that correct biases and assumptions" (para. 17). Neimand

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[1] Some organizations, notably the Frameworks Institute, compile resources for storyteller advocates to use when thinking of how to best frame their topic of interest. See frameworksinstitute.org to access their resources.

provides the example of a systematic review of studies assessing the role of storytelling in changing attitudes about social determinants of health. In this analysis, Niederdeppe et al. (2008) found that stories acknowledging the role that personal health behaviors play, but emphasizing social determinants of health as being greater predictors of health, were more persuasive. Popular belief in the United States is that access to health care and personal health behaviors are the greatest predictors of health outcomes; by acknowledging this belief in some way, those who hear the story are less likely to put up walls to hearing and believing the message of the story.

> *Each of us walks around with a bunch of stories in our heads about the way the world works. And whatever we confront, whatever facts are presented to us, whatever data we run into, we filter through these stories. And if the data agrees with our stories, we'll let it in and if it doesn't, we'll reject it. So, if you're trying to give people new information that they don't have, they've got to have a story in their head that will let that data in (Goodman, 2016).*

A story's ability to persuade the audience is most effective when the storyteller's persuasive intent is subtle (Dahlstrom, 2014; Green, 2006). When stories are overtly persuasive and audiences feel they are being manipulated, they are more likely to rebel and counter-argue (Dahlstrom, 2014; Green, 2006). As Neimand (2018) recommends, "leave space for the audience to put the pieces together" (para. 14).

Living Proof Advocacy's Five Qualities of a Well-Told Advocacy Story

Living Proof Advocacy highlights these qualities as important in telling an effective advocacy story. Many aspects of these qualities are supported in the literature, as detailed above and below.

"Advocacy Stories are Focused": Effective advocacy stories focus on key messages that are aligned with the advocate's goals and tailored to the audience. The advocates also connect those key messages to moments in their story as a means of demonstrating the message's power and importance.

"Advocacy Stories Point to the Positive": Effective advocacy stories focus on positive change: either the positive change advocates have experienced in themselves, or positive change they hope to see in the world (which the audience can become a part of).

"Advocacy Stories are Crafted": Effective advocacy stories are carefully honed to be specific to their audience and context, use language that makes the story come alive, and include attention-grabbing and memorable "hooks."

"Advocacy Stories are Framed": Effective advocacy stories use "framing statements" to shape how the audience perceives and responds to the story, and both frame and reframe the story to specific audiences and situations, so that the story—and the storyteller—aren't misunderstood or dismissed.

"Advocacy Stories are Practiced": Effective advocacy storytellers are practiced, so they can strike a balance between using their natural speaking style, being genuine, and being confident.

Including emotion in a story may be key for impact, but may not ultimately result in productive action.

Emotionality is thought to be central to narrative processing and a "necessary component to transportation into a narrative" (Murphy et al., 2013, p. 121). Emotion can be incorporated into stories through using emotional language (e.g., words like "afraid", "happy," or "worried"; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2013). Stories with concrete, visual language used to build emotion into the narrative may be more memorable than those that use emotional language (e.g., the difference between building dramatic tension to convey and provoke fear in the audience, versus simply stating, "She was afraid"; Bauer, Olheiser, Altarriba, & Landi, 2009; Neimand, 2018).

However, the audience's emotional responses to stories may not always be productive (Neiderdeppe et al., 2008; Murphy et al., 2013; Chattoo & Feldman, 2017). Stories may unintentionally provoke counterproductive emotional responses (e.g., anger and resentment; Neiderdeppe et. al., 2008). While stories that provoke guilt may motivate audiences to take action, those stories may also create other negative emotions which may counteract guilt's motivating effects (Neiderdeppe et al., 2008).

For example, in Murphy and colleagues' 2013 study comparing narrative and non-narrative films about cervical cancer screenings, viewers who experienced happiness while watching the film were less likely to have increased knowledge about screenings in a post-test. This may be because positive emotions are an "evolutionary signal that all is well and that vigilance can be relaxed," which may have the effect of reducing information processing and retention. Additionally, viewers who experienced both positive and negative emotion during the film had more negative attitudes toward getting a Pap test (Murphy et al., 2013).

This suggests that evoking emotion through stories may not necessarily be productive in achieving desired knowledge, attitude, and behavior change in the audience (Murphy et al., 2013). It may be important for advocate storytellers to assess whether their stories are having the desired emotional impact and resulting belief or behavior change in their audience.

Storytelling strategies may be used to effectively sway overarching policy narratives.

Policy narratives are stories that demonstrate larger underlying assumptions and beliefs about matters of policy. One of the most prominent examples in modern U.S. history is that of the "Welfare Queen"; Ronald Reagan used the story of a woman abusing the welfare system for her own gain to illustrate a broader point about believed misuse of the welfare system (Hancock, 2003). Policy narratives that follow storytelling arcs and portray characters in the form of heroes, victims, and villains have more sway with political actors (including community members, elected officials, and elites) than scientific or technical information (Shanahan, Jones, & McBeth, 2011).

Policy narratives often follow one of two narrative structures: a "winner's tale," that seeks to limit public conflict and political participation in order to maintain the status quo, or a "loser's tale," that appeals to the broad public interest and mobilizes broad political participation in order to affect policy change (Shanahan, Jones, & McBeth, 2011). A "winner's tale" will highlight how the current policies in place benefit the audience, while a "loser's tale" will discuss the ways in which the status quo harms the general public, and specifically the audience in question. However, policy narratives that overemphasize the "malicious motives, behavior, and influence of opponents" may result in public division and policy intractability (Shanahan, Jones, & McBeth, 2011, p. 554).

Evaluating narrative storytelling for advocacy

Why evaluate advocacy efforts?

As defined in the work of Living Proof Advocacy, "advocacy" refers to creating meaningful change to improve the quality of life for others. It is important for individuals and organizations to be able to evaluate their advocacy work to allow for improvement, and also important for organizations to demonstrate that their work makes a difference to their beneficiaries, stakeholders, and funders. Despite the importance of critically evaluating the impact of advocacy efforts, relatively little has been done to evaluate them because doing so is uniquely difficult (van Wessel & Ho, 2018). Because of this, the literature base is somewhat limited. This compounds the difficulty of evaluating the effectiveness of a particular kind of advocacy—such as using personal narratives to drive change. Those interested in determining the impact of storytelling for advocacy should continue to monitor the evidence base to glean new insights.

There are a variety of reasons why advocacy efforts are difficult to evaluate:

■ **Advocacy efforts must be flexible in their approach.** Glass (2017) discusses the importance of evolution in advocacy, as advocates must constantly be aware of opportunities to make progress and shift strategy to meet emerging opportunities and changes in thinking of policymakers. Because strategies and targeted outcomes must change as the need arises, it is difficult to use a typical evaluation approach of creating a logic model and measuring outcomes based on those stated, pre-determined goals.

■ **It is difficult to fully understand or prove what advocacy efforts led to any given change.** Advocates are often working to make large, societal changes in how people approach a given issue. These larger societal shifts, as well as more concrete goals like changes to policy, are a result of work done by a variety of actors using a variety of strategies. This complexity in approach makes it incredibly difficult to understand the impact of any given advocate, organization, or approach (Arensman, van Waegeningh, & van Wessel, 2018). As Teles and Schmitt (2011) describe, advocacy requires long periods of "quiet" work, in which advocates continue to push for change even when the collective attention of the community is on other matters. While advocates and evaluators understand that the quiet work lays the foundation for eventual change, it is much more difficult to discern the impact of that work than on larger, louder, and more temporally connected advocacy pushes that bring about change.

- **Those who are influenced by advocacy efforts may not admit or know which efforts persuaded them.** Key markers of success in advocacy efforts often include shifting the opinions of decision-makers, such as policymakers. While understanding what effectively persuaded these key players is helpful in understanding which advocacy efforts make a difference, these individuals are oftentimes unwilling to admit that they have been persuaded (or not persuaded) by different advocacy efforts and stories (van Wessel, 2018). Further, because of the complexity of different advocacy interventions, these key players might not fully know which components persuaded them, and to what degree.

While the research is limited, the evaluation methods discussed below are highlighted as promising approaches for advocacy efforts, broadly speaking, but are applicable to the evaluation of personal storytelling for advocacy purposes specifically.

Logic model development and indicator monitoring

The primary way that evaluators, advocates, and funders of advocacy efforts have examined impact has been through the use of logic models. A logic model is a visual depiction of the theory of change held by an organization or individual; it outlines what types of changes an organization or individual expects to see as a result of their efforts. Logic models are commonly (and preferably) created jointly by the group of people working on a given project or program with their evaluator. By establishing a common set of anticipated outcomes and connecting them to an effort's activities, individuals and organizations can establish commonly agreed upon indicators of progress.

This process of developing logic models and monitoring indicators of progress has been the go-to approach in evaluating advocacy since the mid-2000s (Arensman, van Waegeningh, & van Wessel, 2017).

The development of a logic model and progress monitoring of key indicators within that logic model can be a valuable experience for advocates and advocacy organizations to go through. Advocates and advocacy organizations can identify shorter-term milestones that they hope to achieve and how they might be able to achieve them. Those shorter-term milestones are opportunities for evaluation; while the grand outcome of advocacy efforts might be nebulous and difficult to attribute to evaluation work, evaluation of milestones can shed some light on whether or not advocates are being effective (Guthrie, Louie, David, & Foster, 2005; Reisman, Gienapp, & Stachowiak, 2007). An advantage of this approach is that individuals and organizations can do this work themselves. Numerous logic model development guides exist online and for free for those who are interested in creating or updating a logic model. Outputs or outcomes of interest can be measured by

those working within the initiative, and do not necessarily require an external evaluator to assist or facilitate the evaluation activities.

Limitations

- Several evaluation and advocacy experts take issue with the somewhat static nature of logic models, stating that advocates' activities must be more nimble than static theories of change can demonstrate (Arensman, van Waegeningh, & van Wessel, 2017).

Outcome harvesting

Outcome harvesting is an evaluation method that was developed in the mid-2000's, and since then has been lauded as a helpful approach to evaluating and understanding the impacts of complex interventions (Wilson-Grau & Britt, 2012). This method is reflection-based; rather than examining progress over time, it pinpoints a given outcome and works backward to determine how a given intervention contributed to that outcome (Wilson-Grau, 2015).

In this method, an external partner or "harvester" collects information on what outcomes individuals or organizations believe they have achieved through methods like interviews, focus groups, and document review (Wilson-Grau & Britt, 2012). Oftentimes, this harvester is an external evaluator. After an initial round of information gathering, the harvester drafts descriptions of the outcomes, which are then brought back to the same individuals or organizations for feedback. The harvester then goes through a process of validating as many details of these descriptions as possible by referring to other sources. These validated findings can serve as a point of discussion for the individuals or organizations involved to reflect upon their work and any adjustments for future efforts.

Limitations

- Outcome Harvesting relies upon those close to the advocacy initiative identifying which outcomes have been achieved (INTRAC, 2017). This introduces opportunities to miss outcomes that were unanticipated or those outcomes that are more difficult to see or measure. For example, if an advocate storyteller speaks to an audience of 1,000 people for 15 minutes, those people disperse and go back to their daily lives. How can we measure if they experienced any changes in attitudes or behaviors, or if they became advocates for the same cause as a result of the initial story they were exposed to?

- The process of Outcome Harvesting can be time- and resource-intensive (INTRAC, 2017). Because of the participatory nature of the work from both internal and external actors, the iterative nature of the work, as well as the focus on recording evidence that supports the accounts of internal and external actors, the scope of Outcome Harvesting efforts can quickly expand.

- Outcome Harvesting should be conducted by someone with strong qualitative analysis skills.

Narrative assessment

This method of evaluation marries theory of change work with storytelling itself. Within this approach, a storyteller and an evaluator walk through the story of an initiative's change (van Wessel, 2018). An individual external to the advocacy effort, preferably an evaluation expert, sits down with an advocate as they recount the process of their advocacy effort and the outcomes they believe the effort was able to create. The evaluator then seeks to validate the components of the story and seeks evidence to support that the activities did result in the stated outcomes. It necessitates that the advocacy effort have an existing theory of change, which serves as the framework for the conversation used in the Narrative Assessment.

> *It is often only in light of a theory of change, in some form, that the interconnected sequence of past actions and events can be given meaning and relevance for programmes and their stakeholders, as a journey over time, with twists and turns, setbacks and advances (van Wessel, 2018).*

Ultimately, this approach is a co-construction of the story of impact based on the advocate's understanding and the theory of change (van Wessel & Ho, 2018). The external evaluator critically engages this story and probes to determine whether or not it is plausible that the advocacy activities contributed to the stated outcomes. In this way, Narrative Assessment differs from Outcome Harvesting, as it seeks to determine what is plausible and does not go the extra step of validating those claims with other evidence (van Wessel, 2018).

Limitations

- While this approach might be quite helpful for advocates who aim to understand the impact of their work, the creator of the method provides some caveats about this method. Most notably, the author notes that stories, by their nature, tie together events to make one narrative from a variety of components (van Wessel, 2018). While this is helpful for a variety of reasons, as discussed later in this review, it has the potential of introducing bias. Activities and outcomes that appear to connect in hindsight do not always tie together in these ways; stories might then be weaving together disparate components in a way that leads the audience to believe they truly do work together.

- Narrative Assessment as a method does not necessitate that external sources and evidence be used to affirm statements from the advocate; this can make stating anything with certainty difficult for the advocate, the evaluator, or those using the results of the Narrative Assessment (van Wessel & Ho, 2018).

■ Narrative Assessment should be conducted by an external evaluator, to attempt to approach objectivity.

Contribution Analysis

Contribution Analysis is similar to Narrative Assessment in that its aim is to identify a plausible understanding of how a given program or initiative contributed to observed outcomes (Mayne, 2008). It is intended to provide greater clarity for teams working on a complex program or initiative and to aid in review and revision of theories of change (Kane, Levine, Orians, & Reinelt, 2017)

The Contribution Analysis process begins with identification of which questions the evaluating group wants to answer (Mayne, 2008). These often revolve around understanding whether or not a program or initiative contributed to an observed outcome, and if so, to what extent it has made a difference. It can also help those involved in the analysis determine what conditions are helpful or necessary for a program or initiative to make a difference.

Those participating in the analysis then work together to create a theory of change to spell out how the program or initiative is supposed to work (Mayne, 2008).[2] The analysis team then identifies existing evidence for the program, based on either published literature that addresses these presumed causal connections or evaluation or research specific to the program or initiative that is being assessed. Ideally, Contribution Analysis occurs after some evaluation of the program or initiative in question has been conducted.

From this point, the analysis team creates a story to describe why it is reasonable to think that their program or initiative has led to outcomes (Mayne, 2008). This story should follow the logical path of the theory of change and be supported by existing evidence. Once the story is formulated, analysis team members examine the story and its logical progression, looking for areas that need to be examined further or that do not seem fully reasonable. Team members can seek out additional evidence to support these areas to either bolster their Contribution Analysis claims or determine that it should be revised.

Limitations

■ Similar to Narrative Assessment, Contribution Analysis ultimately aims to identify plausible connections. External evidence can support these claims, but it is important for members of the analysis team to be up front about the degree to which they can definitively claim contribution to an observed outcome.

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2   Theories of change are descriptions of a given program or effort's intended outcomes and how the program believes they will achieve them. They describe inputs, activities, anticipated outputs, and anticipated outcomes of the program.

- Contribution Analysis should be conducted by an external evaluator or someone with strong qualitative analysis skills.

Frames for evaluation

While evaluation regularly looks at the outcomes of work, advocacy evaluators have suggested a couple of different types of frameworks for evaluating advocacy efforts.

Evaluating conditions for impact

Barkhorn, Huttner, and Blau (2013) discuss an approach for foundations to determine the potential impact of policy-focused advocacy initiatives as a means by which they can increase their own impact. The authors invite funders to examine nine conditions that researchers and practitioners have identified as being critical for successful policy advocacy. This includes having an open policy window, a developed feasible solution, strong campaign leaders, a mobilized public, and decision-makers who are bought in to the goals of the advocates. The authors suggest that funders could provide rankings on the strength of each condition to create a summed value for each advocacy effort to reflect its perceived potential for success.

Evaluating the advocates themselves

Teles and Schmitt (2011) discuss the difficulty of evaluating advocacy efforts, and suggest that evaluation instead focus on the advocates themselves. They encourage funders to be quite familiar with advocates and advocacy organizations and assess them based on the advocates' adaptability, strategic capacity, perceived overall influence, and the value they generate for others. The authors argue that this approach better sets up the conditions for funders to fund the "quiet work" of advocacy (Teles & Schmitt, 2011).

Opportunities for future research

Existing research that assesses the impact of advocacy efforts primarily assesses the impact of advocacy on policy outcomes; further research is needed to understand the impact of advocacy, and specifically storytelling for advocacy, more broadly.

Evaluation of the use of storytelling in advocacy efforts is an emerging field, with much of the literature published in only the past decade. A recent systematic review on the impact of storytelling on health policy found that storytelling advocacy is a promising practice.

> *Findings suggest that narratives may have a positive influence when used as inspiration and empowerment tools to stimulate policy inquiries; as educational and awareness tools to initiate policy discussions (and gain public support leading to policy prioritization); and as advocacy and lobbying tools to formulate, adopt, or implement policy (Fadlallah et al., 2019).*

However, while the studies' findings were promising, they did not meet the authors' standards of methodological rigor for establishing the causal link between the storytelling interventions and policy outcomes (Fadlallah et al., 2019). Thus, findings should be interpreted with caution. Across the storytelling advocacy literature, there are limitations in the existing research in terms of content and rigor. Because of this, it is important to interpret the evidence cautiously.

There are many opportunities for future research. Notably, it is not obvious how effective stories should be constructed or which story characteristics (e.g., plot, character, structure, realism) are most important to their effectiveness (Neiderdeppe et al., 2008). In Fadlallah and colleagues' (2019) systematic review, studies included limited descriptions of the narrative interventions (including how often people encountered the narrative, narrative length, content including plot, characters, and perceived credibility of the story) so they were unable to assess the impact of these factors. It is also unknown how narrative communication influences audience trust in the presented information, especially when conflicting narratives are presented (Dahlstrom, 2014). Additionally, differences in the narrative impact of true, personal stories and that of fictional stories may merit future study.

These and other evaluation studies with rigorous methodology are needed to establish what impact storytelling has on change and what aspects of stories are necessary for those impacts.

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