

Autumn Academy 2019

Narrative change on migration and integration at the municipal level

Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford
18 – 20 September 2019

What did we learn? Take-away themes, key reflections and areas for development

Jacqui Broadhead, Director of the Global Exchange on Migration and Diversity, COMPAS, University of Oxford

This note recaps a number of common themes and reflections which were developed over the course of the Academy as well as a number of key questions for further development and research. The Academy was held under the Chatham House rule and so reflections from participants are not attributed. As a result, this does not mean that all of the statements here are the opinion of the author or of all participants, but instead reflect a synthesis of the pertinent discussions and range of opinions expressed during the academy. The background paper, presentations and agenda from the 2019 Autumn Academy are available [here](#).

Why focus on the topic of narrative change?

Narratives shape our ‘collective common sense’, influencing what we have been told and have read. They can resonate deeply with how we frame and think about topics. As a result of this, influencing narratives is often an instinctive process. It is also something which can be proactively shaped over time through changing collectively held stories about people’s lives and communities. Narrative change is not about necessarily changing people’s minds and certainly not about manipulating opinion, but instead reflecting and referring to public opinion in the development of public policy, communications and a shared local story.

Narrative change has emerged as an important topic among those working on migration and integration due to the perception that policy aims and objectives are increasingly difficult to meet through policy alone and could be usefully supplemented by engaging with public opinion on the topic of migration and integration itself and in relation to issues of identity, belonging and place.

Public debate sets the boundaries of acceptable policy choices on these topics and so work on narratives can help to create the policy space for a wider range of policy options to be considered.

Understanding the research base

The background paper for the Academy recaps the research base which this learning note seeks to build on rather than replicate. In discussion at the academy a number of challenges and opportunities were identified.

Research in the topic is profoundly interdisciplinary and complex. It spans a wide range of academic disciplines and specialisms such as political science, cognitive psychology, social policy, sociology and migration and integration specific research. Whilst this presents significant opportunities for learning across disciplines, it also presents challenges. It is difficult for research to span these diverse disciplines and provide 'entry' points for policy makers and practitioners. In some areas (such as segmentation research on public opinion), policy research (led by think tanks or NGOs) has become the primary resource because it has been better able to bridge this divide.

Finally, researchers are not immune from the context in which they develop and carry out their research and the prevailing narratives which may shape their ideas – even where the academy strives for independence and rigour. Sometimes research can be seen to reinforce prevailing narratives, as well as challenging them – both in terms of content, but also in terms of form. One example of this is that studies are incentivised to report difference rather than commonalities, which may inadvertently reinforce ideas of the differences between groups and underplay their similarities. As well as contributing findings, knowledge exchange on this topic may support the development of research agendas.

Public Opinion

Where the conventional wisdom states that the public is highly polarised on the topic of migration and integration, segmentation and other approaches have sought to rebalance this argument by demonstrating the presence of a 'movable', 'anxious' or 'persuadable' middle (predominantly as demonstrated in European states and North America) whose views are less fixed, and who are less vocal but could wield significant influence if engaged with successfully.

The implication of this is that energy should not only be expended on adversarial positioning targeted at either extreme of debates, which reaches and motivates certain parts of the population, but also on messages and frames that make sense to the other parts of the population – roughly 55% in the countries studied - that hold conflicting, balanced or non-extreme views. In developing more nuanced approaches, strategies can be developed which will support organisations to speak directly to these segments of society who are often underrepresented in the discourse and who may be most open to examine pragmatic solutions.

It remains the case that that this approach should not overbalance the conversation, recognising that the two 'poles' of public opinion are significant (in particular within online and media discourses) and cannot be ignored. However, the research also demonstrates the ways in which these polarities can shape the wider discourse, for example, the research shows the ways in which those who are the most open ('liberal cosmopolitans') sit far outside of the views of other groups on some issues. In addition, by recognising that there are multiple world views rather than a singular general public, messages can be tailored and more nuanced ways of engaging with the public (e.g., through questions of identity, culture, values and emotions) can be developed. This approach aims to meet people where they are rather than assuming a particular world view.

There are a number of potential risks to this positioning. Firstly, as outlined above, it is important not to oversimplify in the other direction and negate the influence of entrenched positioning – in particular online. Secondly, it is vital to maintain an overall core coherence to the message, and not become overly focussed on micro-targeting to specific communities. Finally, migrant communities themselves must be included within this discourse – as a part of the conversation, not only as a group to which these topics happen to. However, these approaches are not either/or – messages which speak both to middle groups and to the poles of public opinion will be important in developing effective messaging.

Messages on integration versus immigration

Most discussion of public opinion on these topics focusses on migration rather than integration. When considering local policy making this can be problematic as migration is generally a national competency over which local government and other actors have relatively little control.

However, this also masks wider issues in relation to these debates. There is an overemphasis in the interest in migration policy amongst the wider public. In public debates, migration is generally a proxy for wider questions of identity and belonging (which are pertinent for local government) rather than the specifics of migration policy. In spite of this, it can be harder to get a hook for integration stories within the media, for example, where they may be seen as boring. Conversely, whilst the policy debates around integration may be somewhat arid, the public concerns or interests (in relation to community impacts, pressure on public services, contribution and questions of local identity and culture) fall much more squarely within the remit of local government and integration policy making than migration policy. It is this dichotomy which has allowed for some of these questions to remain under explored – even where the topics have registered as having high salience for the public in many European countries over recent years (though somewhat declining at present.)

Defining the messages

As outlined in the research paper, there are a number of ways of defining core messages on migration and integration. In broad strokes, these can often be boiled down to three areas; **control**, **contribution** (predominantly, but not only economic) and **compassion** (generally values based.) Most people are interested in a balance between these three areas, but will prioritise one over the others based on their underlying beliefs and values systems. Economic and values based messages are not necessarily opposed, although they are sometimes viewed in this way. Both types of messages may be valuable, depending on the context.

Frame theory posits that we slowly socialise these ways of viewing the world until eventually they are digested into a communal ‘common sense,’ so that challenging these stories, becomes not only a challenge to our opinions, but to our sense of identity.

As a consequence of this, place based narratives have to engage not only within these individual identities but within a larger project: that of ‘*building a bigger us*’ by telling the story of the city or local area in an inclusive way, which frames or reframes how residents view their city and community, moving beyond ‘us versus them.’ It was noted that ‘us versus them’ framing can come from across the public opinion spectrum, encompassing those who

are supportive of migration as well as those who are opposed. For example, the message 'migrants – they are good for us' is still an 'us and them story'. It draws a line between migrants and the rest of the population, even if it is framed in a positive manner. The way a story is told can influence the meaning of the message.

It is also important to bear in mind how different types of stories shape the message. In the local context, specificity is important to tie narratives to the shared identity and history of the city or locality. Everyday stories of success or shared identity can be as effective, or even, more effective than exceptional stories – but in both cases, these need to resonate with actual lived experiences, in order that they don't jar or seem discordant.

In order to understand which stories will resonate, social contact can act as both a method of understanding and implementation. Programmes of community conversations can act as a starting point for developing effective messages but also, at the local level, in promoting integration outcomes and linking policy, communications and communities. However, contact theory (the influential theory that, assuming certain conditions are met that contact between groups can serve to reduce prejudice) can be applied too simplistically and serve to reinforce divisions (emphasising differences which need to be bridged) rather than emphasising commonalities.

The role of the local and municipal level in narrative change on migration and integration

Local government is well placed to begin positioning itself at the forefront of narrative change on migration and integration. Public trust is generally higher in local government than in national government and local administrations have the potential to be closer to the communities they serve. Whilst at the national level conditions of belonging are controlled by immigration rules and regulations, the conditions to belong to a city or local area are often looser and so easier to access.

Whilst often extremely constrained in terms of resources, local governments still maintain the capacity to scale work up to a greater extent than many NGOs and often have a convening role which allows them to bring a wide range of stakeholders and communities around the table as well as providing political leadership themselves.

However, the assumption that the local level and local government are best placed to address the issue of narrative change on migration and integration comes with a number of risks. Firstly, where they do exist, these integration initiatives are often targeted at cities. There is a danger if cities engage in this strategy and isolate themselves from their surrounding neighbours and communities, in particular smaller towns and more rural areas. Cities must be careful not to exacerbate existing tensions over differences in education, age or place, for example, as this may prove to be counterproductive. It is also not necessarily true that the local level is intrinsically more likely to be inclusive, there may be a confirmation bias that cities who wish to distinguish themselves on migration and integration policy have chosen to engage on this topic, rather than assuming that the local level is automatically better placed.

Finally, given the structural factors which suggest the local authorities are well placed to engage on this topic, it is striking that it remains largely under-explored (both in terms of whether cities are best placed to do narrative change or evaluating the efficacy of narrative change approaches), in particular in the European context. This may be due to the resource

and capacity gaps within local authorities (outlined below) but may also speak to a broader reticence to engage.

Resource and capacity gaps

Participants of the 2019 Autumn Academy identified a number of capacity and skills gaps across local government which has impeded progress on this agenda. There are notable individual exceptions to these factors.

- a) There has been a reticence to provide political leadership and action. This primarily comes down to confusion over the role of local government in this agenda as well as the perception that there can be little to be gained from talking about these issues. (More recently, however, this has been counterbalanced by an increasing awareness of the need for cities to set out their positions and increased international mobilisation at the city level.)
- b) There is a significant lack of strategic communications capacity within local government and difficulties in matching the skills of policy makers and communications or branding professionals. This relates not only to resourcing, but also in defining who leads in the development of narratives. Communications capacity tends to be focussed either on specifically targeted initiatives or on promoting the city through branding or by emphasising the economic contribution of migration. These efforts are generally missing broader integration messages. Meanwhile, policy makers often lack the skills to translate their specialist expertise into communications campaigns. Where narratives work is undertaken, it is often outsourced to external partners. Whilst bringing in additional expertise can be helpful, it is vital that communications within local governments do not become untethered from community experience and the lived experience of integration within the city.
- c) Resourcing is a significant constraining factor and it can be especially hard to secure resources for non-tangible outputs like communications. There is often a lack of resources for message testing and knowledge sharing as well as involving communities in message development to ensure that messages resonate.
- d) Communications strategies must be linked to policy and the local authority must be seen to also 'walk the walk' in translating its message into service delivery and policy. For example, segmentation research and integration theory talk about a two-way process which involves both migrants and longer standing communities. However, where integration plans exist, they often remain targeted only at migrant or newcomer communities.
- e) Effective messengers need to be identified. Participants and the research both highlighted the importance of broadening the range of messengers involved in telling these stories and of matching messages to the aims and objectives of broader organisations within the local ecosystem. A number of underutilised messengers were identified:
 - i) Employers, and the voice of business in particular in the private sector
 - ii) Migrants and communities themselves
 - iii) Cultural institutions
 - iv) Civil Society organisations not directly involved in work with migrants

- v) Other public servants not directly involved in this area
- f) A broader range of media should be used, with a particular emphasis on the role of visual communications, which are currently underutilised.

Institutionalising the gains

One risk to focussing on the local level is that practices and their impacts may be limited to one-off projects in individual municipalities. The Academy looked at examples of narrative development which have tried to mitigate this in order to drive wider change. The smoking cessation movement in the US was cited as one example of an approach which had succeeded through bottom-up, localised initiatives, when attempts at legislative change had failed at the national level. The role of welcoming indicators and standards was also cited as a method of institutionalising gains which may otherwise be ad-hoc. This is particularly crucial when leadership is political, in order that change is sustained across changes in political administration. City networks have emerged as one way in which cities can share good practices and advocacy strategies regularly and over the long-term. However, where narrative change is rooted in the specific context of the city and its history, it is important that approaches are not simply replicated, but instead adapted to their local contexts, in order to be most effective.

Finally, there is a need for continued political leadership in the development of inclusive agendas and narratives. This relies on consistently making the case for local government's role in this area by identifying the benefits for continued engagement. It may also prove fruitful for the topic to be linked to other salient policy issues in order to gain traction (both within a local authority and in the wider community) - for example inclusive economic growth strategy or wider movements on climate change in order to make the link.

Examples from practice

A number of examples of city learning and thinking about inclusion were showcased at the Academy, either through the participation of city officials themselves, NGO partners or academics studying the initiatives. Further information on these presentations is available [here](#). Some of the approaches showcased included:

- **Athens, Greece** – using segmentation and survey data to build institutional knowledge and capacity within the civil service of the city, moving beyond institutional fatigue
- **Bristol, UK** – changing the narrative on local employment, showing how refugee employees are helping to improve local bus services (focussing on the gains for local communities as well as migrant ones)
- **Cardiff, UK** – using segmentation research to build a new narrative of inclusion for Cardiff through the Inclusive Cities programme (COMPAS) and URBACT Rumourless Cities Network
- **Mannheim, Germany** – developing a declaration of diversity which aims to tell a long term story of narrative change in this relatively young city, building a shared identity focussed on commonalities

- **Milan, Italy** – making welcoming practical by linking communications to activity through the development of the Bella Milano programme of neighbourhood renewal and taking a pro-active approach to developing the narrative including through orientation (welcoming centres and the development of a one stop shop for information)
- **Rotterdam, Netherlands** – telling the story of the city visually by creating a new bank of more representative images, taken by local photographers, so that all communications are more grounded in the local reality

Key Questions

Academy participants identified a number of ongoing questions and challenges for developing both academic research, policy and practice in this area:

- What pace of change can be expected, in particular when considering long term, iterative processes and how can progress and ‘good practices’ be measured and understood?
- What changes cannot happen at the local level and where should advocacy be focussed (at the national/ international level?)
- How can research gaps be filled, in particular given the interdisciplinary nature of the topic?
- How can the interplay between cities and their surrounding areas be managed? What are the differences, if any, in approaching this topic for smaller municipalities and rural areas¹?
- What are the further opportunities for cities to convene on this issue and for cities to convene key stakeholders within their cities?

To read the full report from the Autumn Academy 2019, please visit:

<https://www.compas.ox.ac.uk/event/autumn-academy-2019/>

For further information, please contact:

Jacqui Broadhead jacqueline.broadhead@compas.ox.ac.uk

Denis Kierans denis.kierans@compas.ox.ac.uk

¹ A new project as part of the Oxford-Berlin partnership is currently exploring this topic in relation to the UK and Germany: <https://www.compas.ox.ac.uk/project/migration-diasporas-and-planning-for-cosmopolitan-urbanity-in-smaller-municipalities-in-the-uk-and-germany/>