INSTITUTE FOR INTEGRATED TRANSITIONS

Narrative Elaboration: Tools for Change

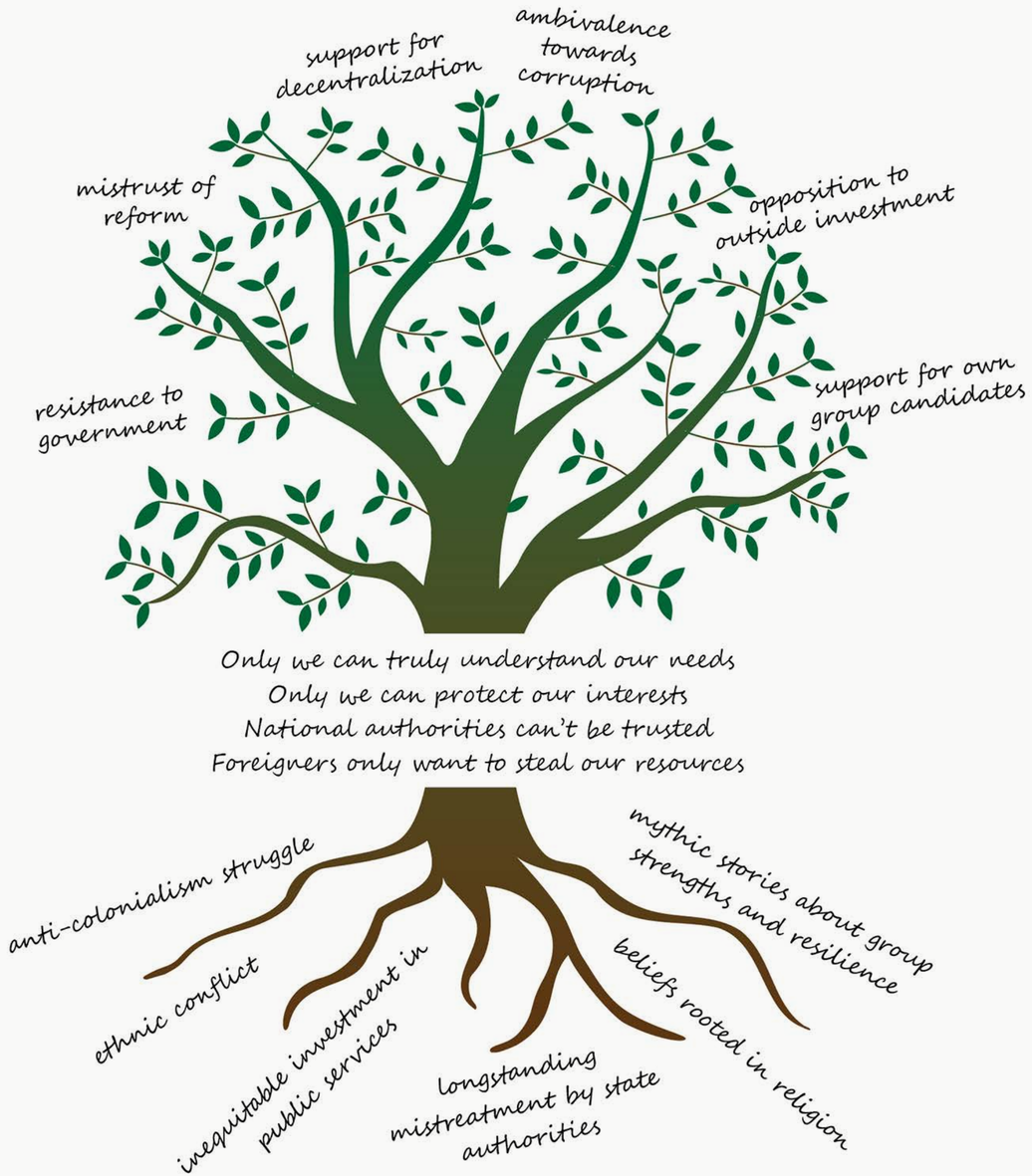
INSTITUTE FOR INTEGRATED TRANSITIONS

Narrative Elaboration: Tools for Change

Dr. Sara Cobb
Member, IFIT Inclusive Narratives Practice Group
Professor, Carter School for Conflict Analysis and Resolution,
George Mason University

INSTITUTE FOR INTEGRATED TRANSITIONS

Narrative Elaboration
Tools for Change



Getting to Narrative Roots and Branches

- **Roots:** What are the kinds of commitments that underlie what people are pushing for?
  - What are the values?
  - Where do these values come from?
  - What do the stories give to people?
- **Branches:** What kinds of policies and practices arise from these commitments?

Building Narrative Complexity

- Generate new kinds of descriptions
- Change the national narrative landscape from within

SOURCE: BOGOMIL MIHAYLOV

SOURCE: JAN CANTY

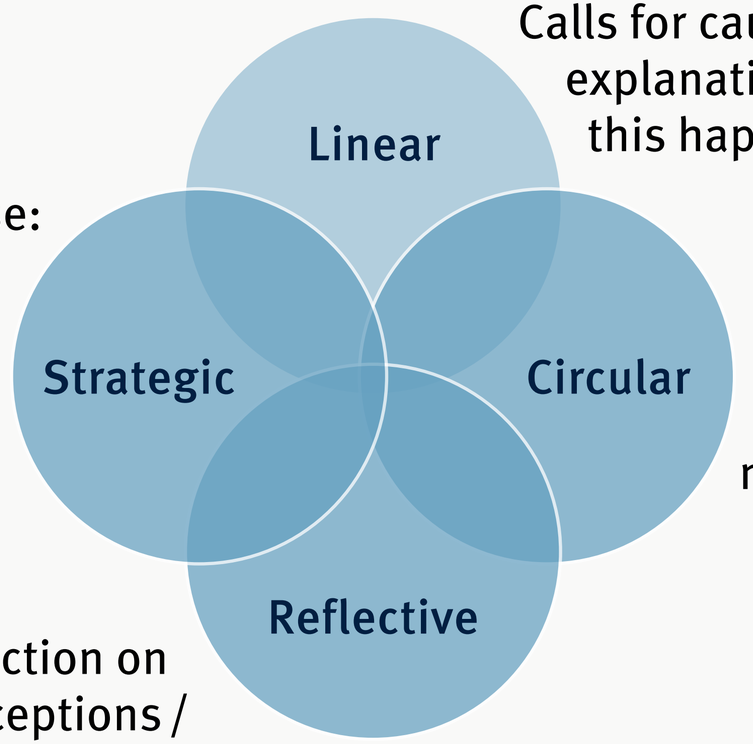
Trauma Narrative Elements

- Starts with unknowing
- Often moves to:
  - Awareness and disbelief
  - Fear and anger
  - Passive acceptance
  - Lack of agency and voice

Questions: A Tool for Evolving Narratives

Calls for causal explanations: “Why did this happen?”

Calls for a given response: “Don’t you think that this was the wrong thing to do?”

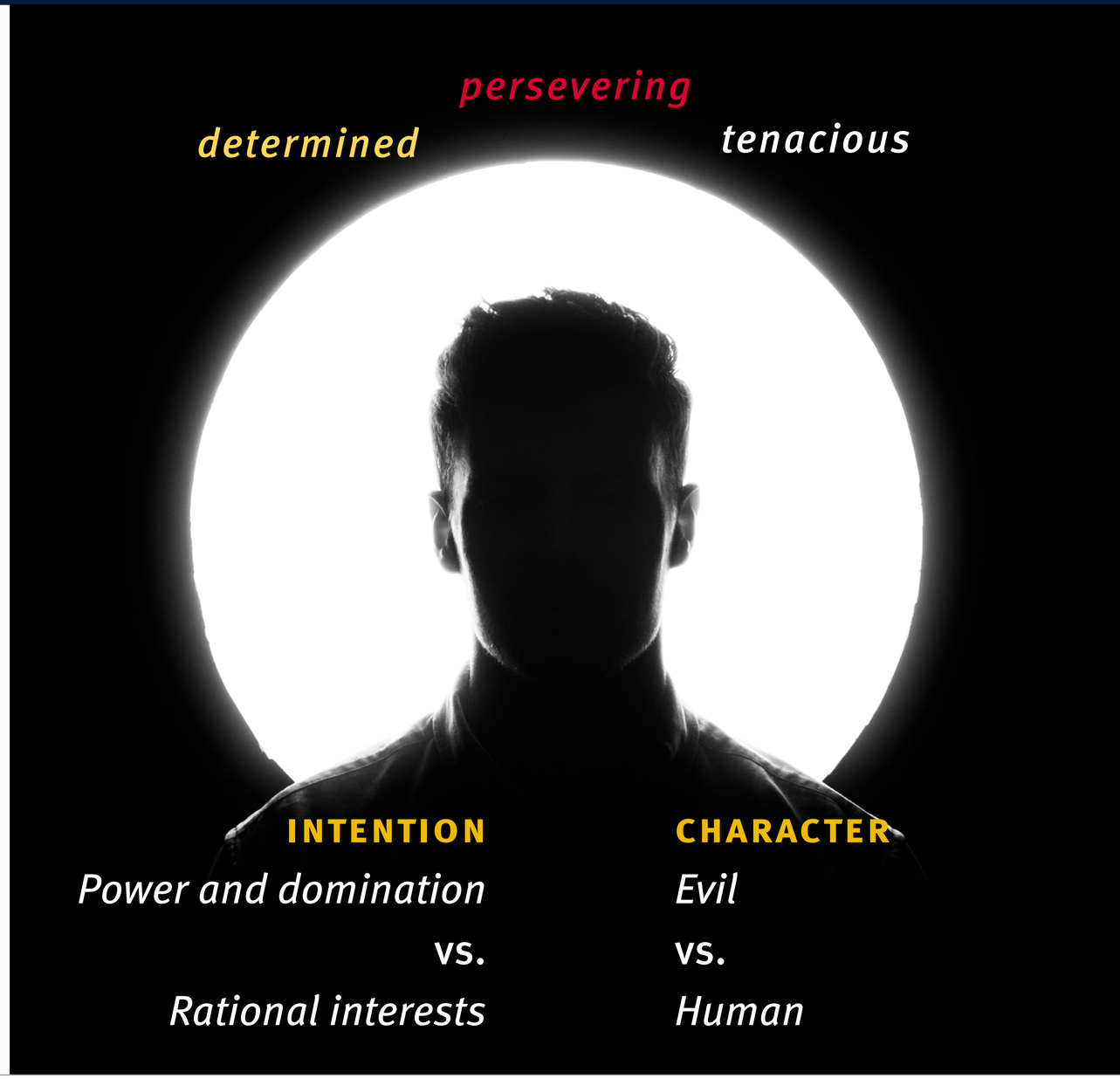


Calls for comparisons between times and people that introduce new descriptions

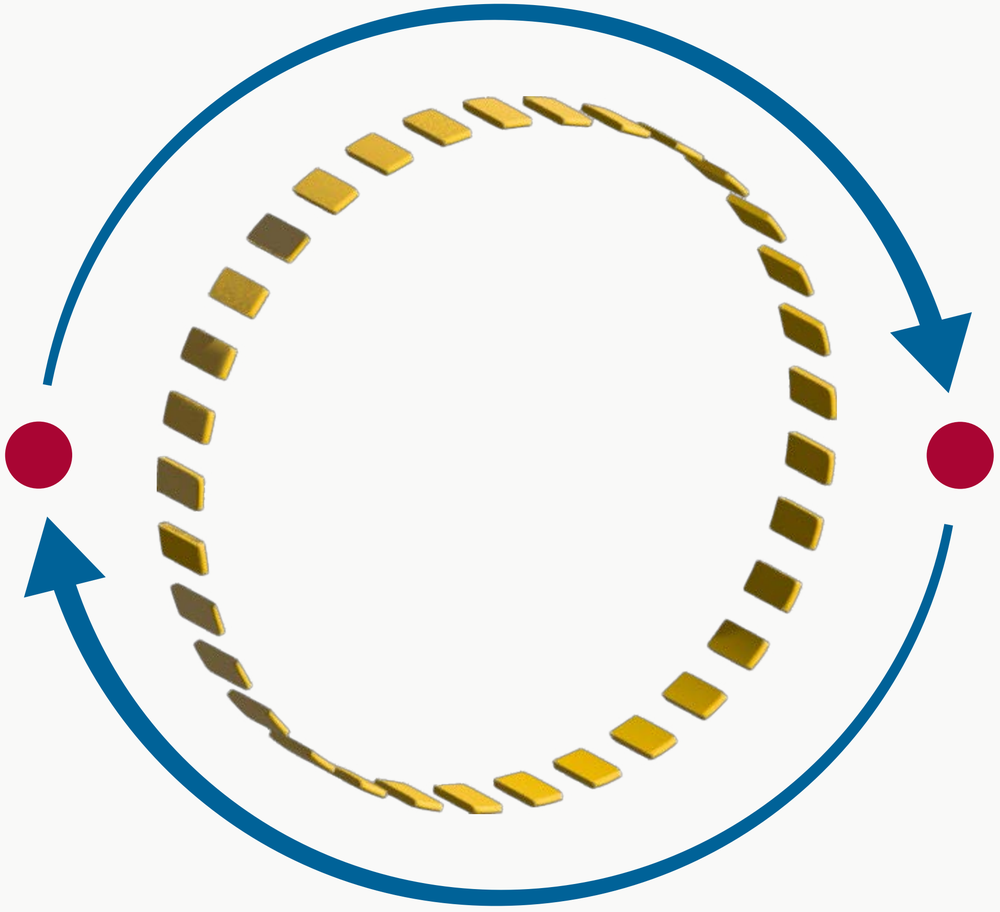
Calls for reflection on actions or perceptions / opinions of self or other

Tool 1: Positive Connotation

- **What:** Attribution of positive traits and intentions
- **Why:** Fosters legitimacy and opens up narratives
- **How:** Through positive statements
- **When:** You decide your own limits



SOURCE: JOE SHIELDS



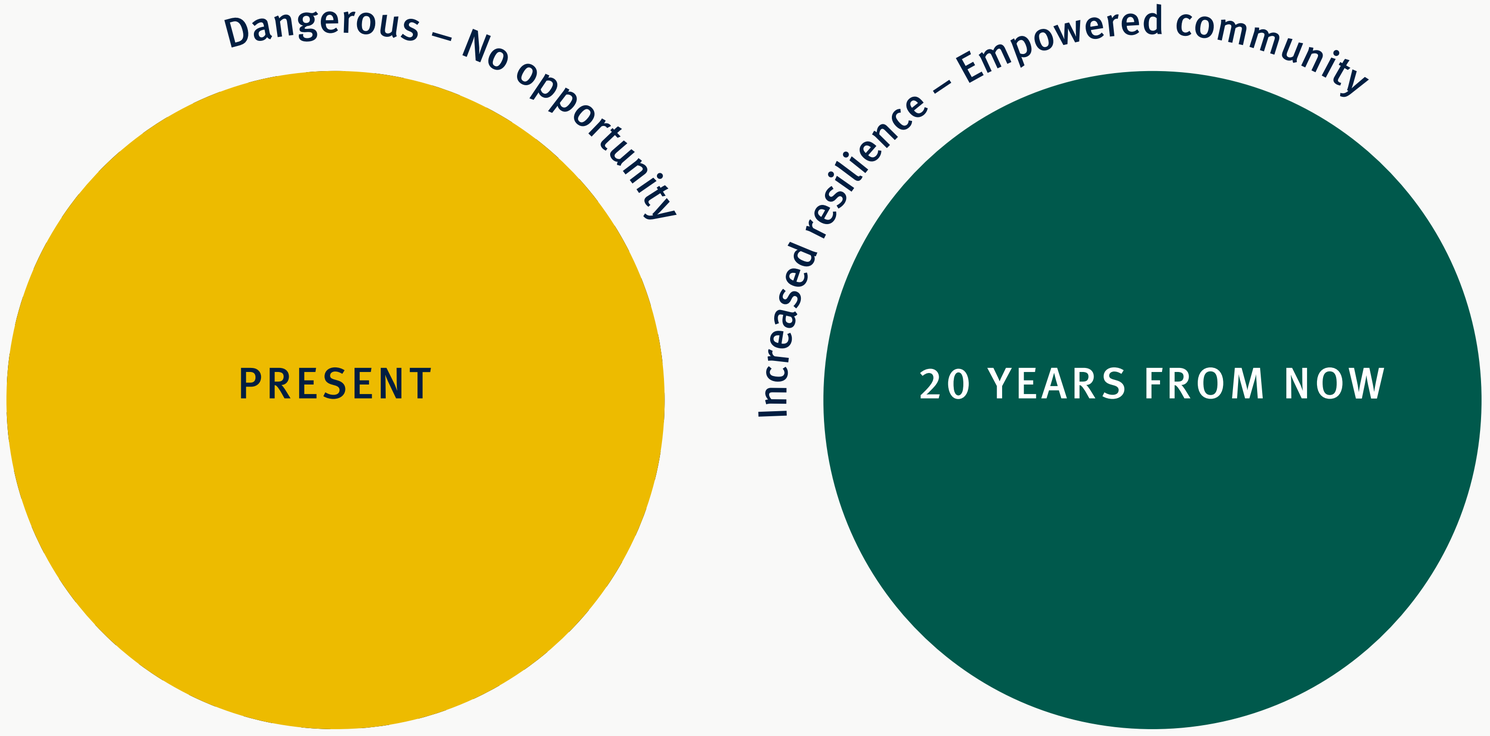
Tool 2: Circular Questions

- Two kinds of comparisons that **CREATE** new descriptions
  - Temporal (time 1 and time 2)
  - Relational (comparisons between people)

Comparisons in Time

EXAMPLE

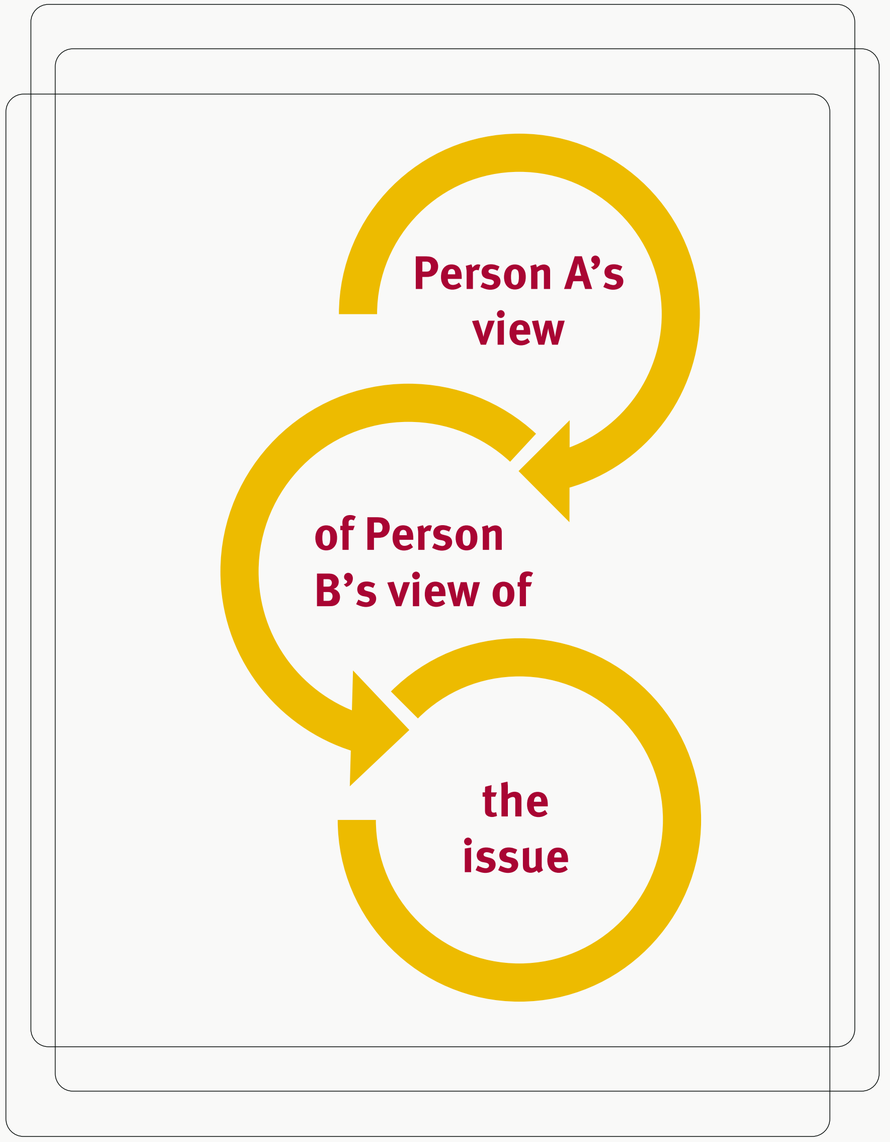
What thing would be different in 20 years?



Relational Comparisons

EXAMPLE

Who in your group is the most worried about the problem you are facing?



SOURCE: YESHI KANGRANG

Tool 3: Externalisation

- Makes problems external to people
- Redefines problems so people can engage them differently
- Entails the following steps:
  - Formulate the problem / conflict as an ‘it’
  - Map the effects of ‘its’ activities
  - Evaluate the effects of ‘its’ activities
  - Design strategies to reduce ‘its’ influence

Where and When to Use Externalisation

Get small stories into media, demonstrating transformation

Work with activists

Group problem solving

Strategic planning

Tool 4: Scaffolding

- Allows people to reflect on what they think and know
- Creates distance between the master narrative and a new narrative
- Enables people to have ownership and agency over their story, and to develop new strategies

SOURCE: NIKLAS HAMANN

Steps in Scaffolding

- Discuss the familiar and known
  - Ask for an exception or unique outcome
    - Ask what accompanied the unique outcome
      - Ask what can be learnt from that
        - Ask what can be done

Sample Scaffolding Questions

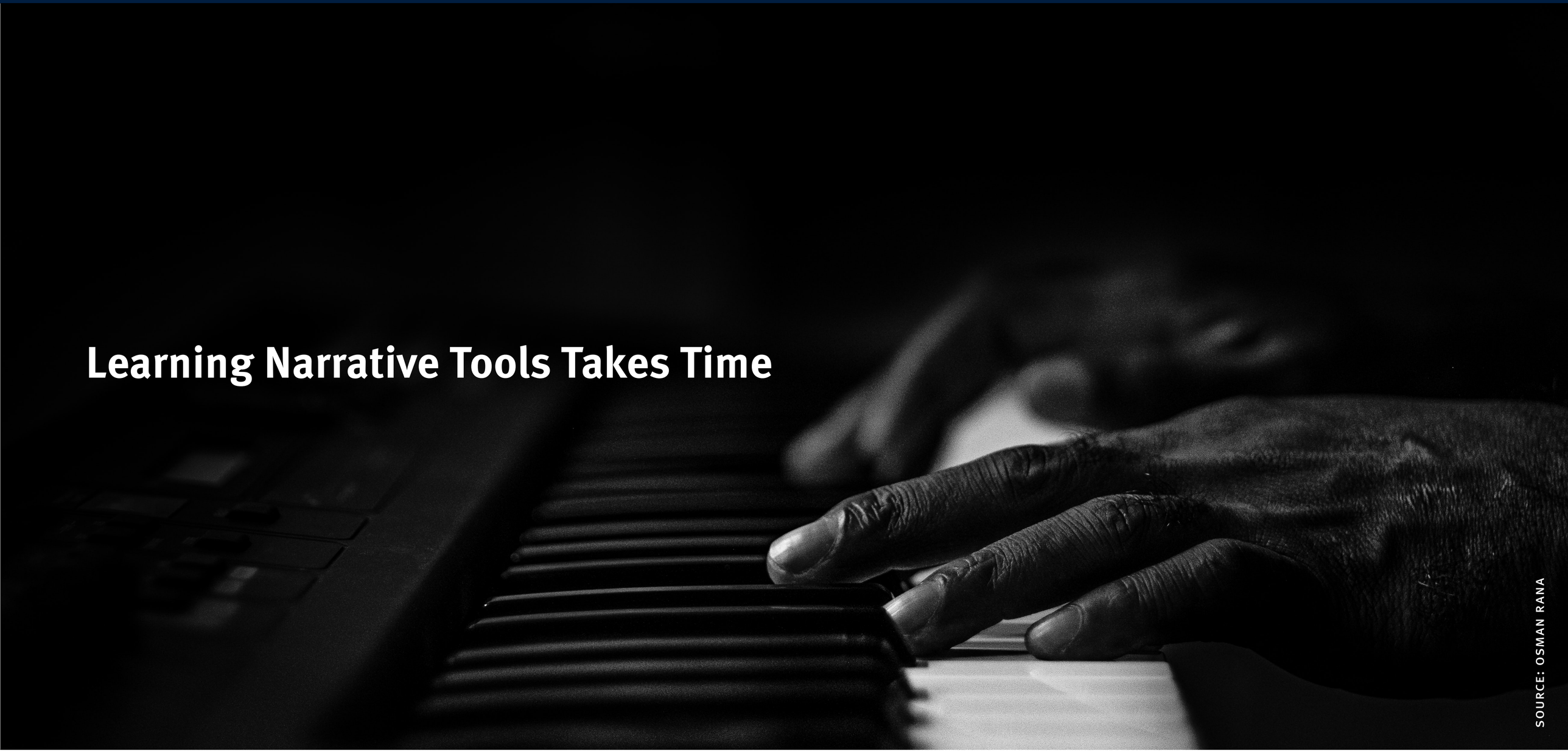
	Familiar Story	Unique Outcome	Chain of Associations	Lessons Learnt	Action Plan
Sample questions by intervener	Can you review for me how you see this conflict?	Was there ever a time when X was different?	Can we discuss what contributed to this unique outcome?	What lessons can we draw?	What can we do to make this kind of unique outcome more common?

Tool 5: Narrative Inoculation

- Protects a new narrative line from being killed off by the master narrative
- Who in your network would be the most resistant / concerned about the story we have been developing here?
  - What would worry them?
  - What would they need to know to feel safer / more open?
  - Who would need to be included and how would you invite them to this conversation?
- What would be signs that this conversation was moving in a good direction / bad direction?
  - What would you need to do as a result of either of those?

SOURCE: KAJA REICHARDT

Learning Narrative Tools Takes Time



SOURCE: OSMAN RANA

INSTITUTE FOR INTEGRATED TRANSITIONS

ALSO AVAILABLE

PRESENTATION **Features of Narrative:** Structure and Dynamics

Dr. Sara Cobb
Member, IFIT Inclusive Narratives Practice Group
Professor, Carter School for Conflict Analysis and Resolution,
George Mason University

IFIT

INSTITUTE FOR INTEGRATED TRANSITIONS

www.ifit-transitions.org

© 2023 IFIT