The contribution of narrative choice to institutional memory

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A permament public service is expected to act as a repository for lessons of past policies and programmes. Public management scholars regularly lament the decline of institutional memory over the past thirty years. Recent literature proposes a distinction between static institutional memory, an archive of the past, and dynamic institutional memory, the kind embedded in the stories that public servants remember and tell to each other. Reports on the decline of institutional memory tend to focus on the decline of static memory. Dynamic memory often takes the form of stories, and details that conform to the overall narrative are more likely to be retained and transmitted. Dynamic memory also takes the form of metaphor or analogy, acting as a shorthand for referencing shared knowledge. Therefore the choice of narrative and the choice of metaphor are important determinants of what learnings will be retained. This paper explores narrative and metaphor choice, through the lens of the New Zealand justice sector, an example of interagency collaboration.

Introduction

Amidst the churn of elected leaders, a permanent public service is expected to act as a repository for lessons from past policies and programmes (Richards and Smith, 2016). This memory of what works and what doesn't is claimed to be central to the pragmatic task of governing (Corbett et al., 2018, Scott et al., 2019). Public management scholars regularly lament the decline of institutional memory over the past thirty years (Pollitt, 2008). They claim that the regular rotations of managerial generalists have displaced technical specialists; collaborative and network governance now augments static institutions; and the indiscriminate storage of files in vast disorganised electronic libraries has replaced smaller, more organised repositories of physical files maintained by librarians. While public servants have access to more information than ever, it has been argued that they are more ignorant of the past.

This view is not held universally. Recent literature conceives institutional memory more dynamically, as the narratives about past events that are passed down and between the broad array of actors who contribute to policies and programmes (Corbett et al., 2018). Humans have been characterised as "the storytelling animal" (MacIntyre, 1984, p216), making sense of experiences through the creation of narratives. Narrative memories are constructed socially, are contested, are passed on to others, and evolve over time.

Memory through storytelling is more suitable for remembering certain types of information than others. Stories typically contain less information than static files, but can disseminate lessons more widely. As complicated experiences are reduced to stories, certain lessons are retained and others supressed or actively forgotten.

A recent research project compared four recent case studies from three countries: the justice sector in New Zealand; family violence in Tasmania, Australia; electricity metering in Victoria, Australia; and energy efficient housing in the United Kingdom. This paper explores one of these case studies, the justice sector in New Zealand, to illustrate the importance of narrative choice in greater detail. These case studies illustrate how complex experiences are resolved into narrative and metaphor, and that the choice or narrative or metaphor influences the selection of the lessons retained. We contend that actively remembering, through making deliberate decisions about how to craft stories from the past, should be considered a key leadership task for public managers.

Dynamic institutional memory

Pollitt (2008) describes institutional memory as an archive of the past. A more dynamic conception of institutional memory is to consider memories as representations of the past that actors drawn on to narrate what has been learned when developing and implementing policies (Corbett et al., 2018). This distinction between an “archive” and a “representation” becomes more pronounced when memory is retained by multiple actors. Where work once fell to individual departments, working across departments has been described as the “new normal” of public service (Carey and Harris, 2016). Memories are now distributed across multiple actors, and may be contested between them, with no single actor holding the definitive account. Others, outside the group of actors, are told about the experience and in turn relay their understandings, shaping the story further. To the extent that there exists a single representation of the past, it is through the intersubjective agreement of multiple storytellers. This paper forms part of a larger research project that explores how public institutions retain memory of leadership learnings from collaborative experience.

Institutional memory from these collaborative experiences can influence the future in at least three ways: enabling long-lasting collaboration by retaining key lessons from earlier experiences, enabling those same actors to apply those lessons to other contexts, and enabling other actors in other public institutions to learn about and apply those lessons to the

contexts that they face. The more distant, in time and social relationship, between the initial experience and the new analogous situation, the less information is likely to be remembered.

The information stored within actors tends to differ qualitatively from the information stored in files. Files tend to include facts and figures, as well as an “official” and potentially censored account of what happened and why. The memories of the various actors often includes less factual detail, but more frank judgements about what worked and what didn’t. These memories tend to be stored and transmitted in the form of narratives/stories and analogies for reasons discussed in the following section.

Story telling also has a political aspect, with the ability to assign a narrative to explain a past experience being key to how that experience is perceived by others, and this in turn influences future decisions that aim to avoid or replicate past practices. Brändström et al. (2004) identify in the literature two ways that public institutions use stories from the past: cognitive intepretations focus on the use of past analogous situations to inform current decisions (Neustad and May, 1986), whereas political interpretations focus on the use of historicially analogous situations to mobilise support for particular choices (March and Olsen, 1975). This paper focuses on the cognitive interpretation, though the political interpretation may also be important and requires further research.

Narrative formation and coherence seeking

Linde (2009) described how institutional memory often takes the form of a story or stories. Human’s have been characterised as a “storytelling animal” (Gottschall 2012), and make sense of their lives by thinking about them in story or narrative form (Bruner 1990). Storytelling has been of increasing interest in the social sciences since the 1970s (Czarniwska, 2017; see White, 1973, as an early notable example).

Linde (2009) was concerned with the content of the stories told, and the occasions or social settings of their telling. Important in the narrative view of institutional memory is that institutions and their members “work the past, reshaping stories to create a desired future”. Linde’s seminal work implies several important questions, some of which are beyond the scope of this paper. First, there is the content of the stories, that we will consider in the case study. Second is their retention within the memory of the tellers and the listeners, which we will consider here using the construct of coherence seeking. Third is the political nature of “working the past”, or refining stories to achieve political goals, which we exclude from the empirical aspects of the

case study but consider in the discussion. Finally there is the occasion of the telling, which is beyond the scope of this paper as these stories were extracted through interview. This section provides a brief discussion on the nature of narrative/stories necessary to understanding the findings in this paper.

For the purpose of this paper we consider story and narrative to be synonymous, and propose a general definition across the limited context presented. Frandsen *et al.* (2016) propose that a narrative is a version of events that provides a sense of causality and order. Narratives are described by social theoriests as being central to development of the self (Giddens 1991). Oragnisational theorists propose that narratives have explanatory value for the existence and practice of organisations; narratives "do not exist merely *in* organisations, but are instead *constitutive* of the organisation (Frandsen *et al* 2016, p2, emphasis in original). Under this view, organisations are narrative systems that perform themselves into existence (Boje 1991). Boje (1991) defines a narrative as an exchange between people during which a past or anticipated experience is referenced or recounted. In particular, word-of-mouth communication is typically structured as a narrative (Delgadillo and Escalas 2004). Learning theorists (such as Black and Bower, 1979) suggest that declarative memory is stored or at least accessed in the form of narratives. Black and Bower (1979) use a slightly different definition of narrative, to mean meaningfully connected statements that have a recognisable substructure (setting and plot). Note that other authors use different language for similar concepts (Thorndyke, 1977) including "schema" (Bartlett 1932), "theme" (Dooling and Mullett 1973), "surrogate structure" (Pompi and Lachman, 1967), and "macro structure" (Bower, 1974). For the purpose of this paper (and combining elements of the above), a story or narrative is a thematic representation of events that provides a sense of causality and order, which may be used by an individual to store past information as memory, or to transmit this information to others.

As described in the previous section, this project concerns "leadership learnings", or the conclusions drawn from past experience, that the individuals involved believe to have analytical generalisability to other contextually similar situations. Narratives, being ordered expressions of causality, seem likely candidates for storing and transmitting "leadership learnings".

Inferred causality and order are powerful sense-making tools used to understand past experiences. Empirical studies suggests that individuals are more likely to retain information that is consistent with the overall narrative, a phenomenon known as "coherence seeking" (Agar and Hobbs 1982). Coherence can be divided into themal and local coherence. Themal

coherence refers to organisation of a narrative around a main theme. Information is more easily retained when it has themal coherence with the narrative. This appears to be the case both with remembering details of the original narrative (Black and Bern 1981), and adding newly discovered details to the existing narrative (Lyons and Kashima 2006). At its simplest level, this means that individuals are more likely to remember positive elements of "success" stories and negative elements of "failure" stories. The second element of coherence is local coherence, where various parts of the story are connected to each other causally or temporally. While maintaining both levels of coherence helps the retention of information (Lyons and Kashima 2006), the following section discusses how information that is not locally coherent can be integrated into narrative memory through analogy.

Metaphor and analogy

Narrative is one method for retaining and transmitting information, though it is not the only one. Memory also functions through associations (Kohonen 2012, Anderson and Bower 2014), where information about one event can be recalled through association with other analogous events. This section describes the role of metaphor and analogy in dynamic institutional memory. While grammatically distinct, metaphor and analogy can be considered largely synonymous for the purpose of this paper, as a method for transmitting information through reference to something else. More formally, metaphor is a method of understanding one conceptual domain in terms of another conceptual domain (Kovecses 2005). Metaphor and analogy do not imply that the other conceptual domain is identical, but that their features are similar in qualified ways (Nguyen and Umemoto, 2012). It is a "set of systematic correspondences between the source and the target" (Kovecses 2005, p104). An alternate definition is to consder metaphor as the transformation of information from a relatively familiar domain to a relatively less familiar domain (Tsoukas 1991). In the context of institutional memory, metaphor functions as a cognitive or communicative "shortcut", in that large amounts of information about the less familiar domain can be stored by association with the familiar domain. Metaphors are therefore useful to the extent that the transformation of information is apt (the amount of transferable information is large) and that the qualifications or limitations on this transformation are understood.

Some authors have focussed on the transfer of historical analogies based on their literal similarity to the current situation (Brändström et al., 2004). Others are more interested in more fanciful likenesses, like referring to policies as "platforms" (Gaddefors 2007), the finance system as "clogged" (Nguyen and Umemoto, 2012), and organisations as biological entities

(Czarniawska 2017). In the case study, the flow of individual offenders through the justice system, is captured by the metaphor of a “pipeline”. The metaphor includes the custodial management of offenders, the relationship of policy to operations, and the interdependency of resource allocation and business planning between departments.

Case study: The Justice Sector in New Zealand

The New Zealand public service is divided into a large number of departments, with important policy problems often spanning multiple departments (Boston et al 1996). Responsibility for criminal justice is largely the responsibility of three large departments (the Ministry of Justice, New Zealand Police, and Department of Corrections) with supporting roles played by smaller departments. The Ministry of Justice has responsibility for justice policy, as well as administering the Courts, the Public Defence Service, and Legal Aid. New Zealand Police are a national police force with responsibility for keeping the peace, maintaining public safety, crime prevention, and law enforcement. The Department of Corrections make sure that prisoners, parolees and other offenders comply with their sentences. The Crown Law Office is the government’s legal advisor, and includes public prosecutors. The Serious Fraud Office is a small department that investigates financial crimes, bribery, and corruption. Other departments are involved in the justice sector without it being their primary focus, for example the Ministry of Transport, and the department responsible for child protection services (Oranga Tamariki). The following information regarding the justice sector was drawn from interview responses unless otherwise noted.

In the early 2000s, the core three departments (Ministry of Justice, New Zealand Police, and Department of Corrections) began to work together on understanding the interrelationships between their respective activities. This was an analytical exercise, used among other things to forecast demand for court time and places in correctional facilities. This analysis became known as the “criminal justice pipeline”.

From 2007 until 2012, various departments across the public service began to cluster themselves around common policy areas, known as “sectors” (Scott and Boyd 2016a). The departments of the justice sector had begun to meet more regularly and establish more formal structures for working together. The chief executives formed a group, the “Justice Sector Board”, chaired by the Secretary of Justice, and they met monthly. Deputy chief executives met every two weeks. Various sub-committees and project teams were formed to advance individual projects. A group fund was created (the “Justice Sector Fund”) to provide seed

funding for new and collaborative initiatives. A group secretariat was formed ("sector group") that grew to include detailed business analysis capability. Sector Group also took responsibility for ensuring that the processes and norms of the group were maintained and adhered to, with formal processes for the agenda, papers, decision-making, and monitoring.

From 2012 until 2017, the Justice Sector Board was given responsibility by the government for reducing the crime rate and the rate of criminal reoffending. While they were ultimately unsuccessful in meeting the stretch targets set for them, both rates fell. At the time of the case study (2017), the justice sector was continuing to operate using the formal governance structures that had been in place for the prior five years. The Justice Sector was beginning to consider the relationship between crime and broader societal conditions, and looking to deepen its connection and collaboration with departments of the transport, education, health, and social sectors.

In 2016, the authors conducted 10 semi-structured interviews with senior managers within the New Zealand justice sector. These were selected by the justice sector themselves following an approach to the deputy chief executives group. The group included current and former managers. The purpose of the interviews was to identify the leadership learnings of the justice sector, with a view to how these might be of use or interest to other managers. These leadership learnings were presented in a case study for the Australia and New Zealand School of Government (Scott, 2017).

Findings

Interviews with leaders in the justice sector revealed remarkably consistent answers regarding the leadership learnings of the justice sector, and the language used to describe them. This included responses public servants who had left the justice sector three years prior to the interview, and some that had only recently joined the justice sector in the two years prior to the interview; this suggests that the leadership learnings were described in similar ways over time.

Two key leadership learnings were each raised by nine out of ten interviewees. The first was that it was necessary to have a clear understanding and rationale for working together. Related concepts were that this rationale would be context specific and would not apply to other organisations that were attempting to work collaboratively, but they would need to find their own such rationale:

"(Each sector) needs to work out what are the things that will pull it together, what are the things that will keep it together, and what are the things that will transcend the personal relationships over time? When you do that you're kind of halfway there anyway."
(All quotes from senior public servants working in the New Zealand justice sector, or having worked within the New Zealand justice sector.)

The rationale for the justice sector was expressed through the "pipeline" metaphor, detailed further below.

The second leadership learning was that slow incremental progress was achieved through persistent adherence to the governance process. Indeed, there was more of a focus on the process than on any particular projects or policies:

"It's more about the how than the what, is probably what I would reflect on"

These two themes are potentially interesting for explaining a collaborative governance case study that is generally regarded as successful (see, for example, Scott and Boyd 2017). Of more interest to this study is how those leadership learnings were expressed respectively as a metaphor and a narrative.

Metaphor choice: The pipeline

The justice sector was described as benefiting from a natural and obvious linear dependency between its various components. One of the first activities of the justice sector was an analytical exercise to try to understand how decisions made in one department would affect another, and this became known as the "justice sector pipeline". Several illustrative quotes are included below:

"(The Justice Sector was) *assisted by having a fairly obvious pipeline.*"

"A natural pipeline means that you're naturally linked in together."

"A lot of moving parts and very much a pipeline in terms of how cases move through the system."

"One of the things that binds the justice sector together more than any other sector is this idea of the pipeline, the idea that people flow through the system. So, there's no manufactured sector here."

The pipeline was a metaphor that operated at several levels. It described "custodial chain management", where people who were held in custody were transferred between the police, the courts, and correctional facilities. Attending multiple hearings meant frequent transfers between different departments:

"Somebody who would get arrested by New Zealand Police will be held by police, they might have to appear in court, so they'll get transferred to the court. Then if they get a custodial (order or sentence), *they'll be remanded in custody, transferred to Corrections."*

The pipeline also referred to causal relationships across the broader justice sector, where actions taken in criminal justice policy or policing would have a flow on effect to other departments:

"So, the criminal justice system pipeline starts very much in the policy area then policing and then Courts and then on to Corrections, so there's a natural synergy across the sector."

"I think very much is about understanding how the pipeline operates, understanding how people come into the system, how they exit the system, what happens to them when they're in the system, and what are the different points of intervention we have. So from a policy perspective it's very much around that pipeline."

"So, one of the kind of defining features of the justice system is the kind of pipeline, the fact that sentences are set, people commit crimes, they'll go through the police system, they'll then go through the court system. If they're found guilty, one way or another, they'll end up through the corrections system."

Eventually the metaphorical pipeline bent backwards on itself, and offenders were released into society, where many reoffend. The different departments of the justice sector each had a role to play in ensuring that the pipeline didn't end up as an endless loop:

"If you look at reoffending rates, there's an awful lot that the Corrections Department can do but probably the biggest factor is what police do."

The pipeline metaphor had several effects within the justice sector. It reminded public servants why they needed to work together because of their dependency ("*There's no manufactured sector here*."). This sustained their collaboration even when things weren't going well. Secondly, it reminded public servants why information sharing was particularly important, as upstream activities created downstream effects. Embedded in the single word "pipeline" was a much larger collection of shared knowledge around custodial chain management, rehabilitation and reoffending, and financial and business planning. The pipeline supported certain behaviours – continuing to meet to share information, and to ensure that decisions taken by one department (or by its Minister) reflected advice provided by all departments. Mentioning "the pipeline" to members of the justice sector is a shorthand way to reference a large amount of shared understandings among members about why they work together and how they work together.

When asked what other "sectors" (for example, the "natural resource sector" or the "social sector") could learn from the justice sector, interviewees responded that they needed to find *"the things that would pull them together".* In this case study, that thing was a metaphor. The social sector subsequently tried to learn from the success of the justice sector by importing the "pipeline" concept (Ministry of Social Development 2012). This was seen as less effective, because the metaphor had less explanatory power in this context (Scott and Boyd 2015). The social sector operates more as a complex web of interdependencies, rather than the linear dependency of the justice sector pipeline. The analytical generalisation that we infer from the case is not that "the pipeline" is transferable, but instead that ideas and behaviours can be embedded in metaphor.

Narrative choice: Slow incremental successes built on repetition and process

The justice sector sees itself as one of the more successful attempts at interagency collaboration:

"I've seen the sector grow in strength over that time to a point where we're now - it probably is regarded as being one of the better sectors."

Yes this success has not come easily. Nine of ten interviewees described the justice sector as a success borne of repetition – meeting over and over again, following the norms and processes of the group, and maintaining the optimism to keep trying.

> *"You come in every fortnight or every week. I mean for a number of years, deputies met every week, and they attended. It wasn't their substitutes. You do that week in, week out, you make decisions on a joint work program, you move work along."*

> *"I think the thing that I see quite a lot in the Justice Sector is people working together week after week, and it kind of sounds a bit simple, but actually it is about meeting a lot, talking a lot, establishing relationships a lot, and doing things that are purposeful in those meetings."*

> *"I think it's really about the way in which you think about doing it, so it's not so much about the substance. It's far more about the process and it's about realising that this isn't a typical policy process. So, the things that become important to remember is that this is about compromise. Compromise isn't a dirty word. This is about understanding the views of others and then trying to find ways that you can reach mutually beneficial solutions."*

> *"I think that optimism is really important, so you're trying to strike deals here. Deals are really hard to conclude, so in order to keep everybody motivated from a leadership standpoint you have to relentlessly optimistic because you get knocked back a lot. That's okay. But in order to keep your staff upbeat you have to remain upbeat."*

A narrative based on persistent adherence to governance process found a welcome home in the hierarchical and procedural cultures of the departments of the justice sector.

> *"The individual agencies within the Justice Sector are all quite hierarchical. You've got police, courts, Corrections, they all rely very heavily on hierarchy to get things done."*

While other sectors might take a more person-centred or leader-centred approach, the justice sector put greater weight on process:

"The more you can solidify processes that outlive given personalities then so long as everybody doesn't change at once you've got a chance that the process and the way things are done around here endures beyond a given individual."

This suggests that even the choice of narrative should take into consideration the coherence between that narrative choice and the culture of the group:

"I think that's one of the things you have to know about the sector if you're working in it, and be able to name those sort of norms that are going on for people within organisations when you're working together."

The narrative of the justice sector, driven by repetition, process, and incremental improvement, was highly consistent between the interviews. Events and lessons volunteered by the interviewees showed coherence with this narrative, with two examples below. While many narratives in the public sector are reduced to "success" or "failure", this justice sector narrative is more nuanced. We speculate that this more nuanced narrative is compatible with lessons drawn from a greater variety of events. Important lessons with either positive or negative valence can be incorporated into the overall narrative, as illustrated with the following examples.

One interviewee described a case where one department had made an operational decision that resulted in a significant short-term increase in the number of offenders moving through the pipeline. This hadn't been adequately communicated and another department struggled to cope with the unforeseen demand. This prompted a change in the processes used to analyse and transfer information to prevent the problem from happening again. The interviewee described this event in a way that demonstrated coherence with both the pipeline metaphor and the narrative of adherence to process leading to incremental improvements. A decision made by one department had downstream effects (pipeline meteaphor), and formal processes were improved to prevent reoccurrence (process and persistence narrative).

A more successful event equally demonstrated coherence with the pipeline metaphor and the process and persistence narrative. Procedural hearings previously involved transferring inmates from correctional facilities, through police transport, to the courts, and back again. Detailed analysis revealed that this created significant cost to three departments. A small governance sub-group was created, the necessary policy and operating procedure changes implemented, and an audiovisual conference facility was installed; now defendants can attend procedural hearings via videoconferencing. This success has strong coherence with the

pipeline metaphor, both as an example of custodial chain management, and also demonstrating the costs incurred (or avoided) by one department based on decisions made by another. It also has coherence with the overall narrative, as an example of a small incremental success created by persistence and governance process.

Deliberate or accidental dissemination?

Our interviews did not reveal any evidence that we could interpret as suggesting that either the pipeline metaphor or process and persistence narrative were deliberate leadership strategies. And yet, they seemed to have strong intersubjective agreement between the interviewees, and show strong coherence with the leadership lessons that were remembered. We interpret this case study as consistent with the predictions of dynamic institutional memory (Corbett et al. 2018) and coherence seeking (Lyons and Kashima 2006); the leadership learnings of the justice sector are preserved in a metaphor and a narrative.

One of the authors was peripherally aware of these lessons prior to undertaking this research, through the Wellington "grapevine". From this we infer that it is likely that many Wellington public servants were aware of the rumours that the justice sector used a "pipeline" concept of linear dependency to generate commitment to collaboration, that they used formal governance arrangements and were strongly committed to processes, and that their efforts had demonstrated hard-won incremental gains. That is, the rumour-mill was consistent with the reports of those with deep personal experience in the sector. At this general overview level, we consider that dynamic institutional memory, through narrative and metaphor, has effectively preserved and widely-disseminated the leadership learnings of the justice sector.

Conclusion

Public institutions must take lessons from past experiences if they hope to improve performance over time. Static memory is thought to be in decline due to positional churn, institutional churn, and poorly managed digital file management systems. Collaboration adds an additional wrinkle, with information distributed among the various actors. The central thesis of dynamic institutional memory (Corbett et al., 2018) is that public institutions remember the past through their stories as much as through their files. These stories contain information that is different to the files. The files contain facts and figures, but the stories contain the judgements and inferences of those who experienced the past. These stories are retained within the memories of individuals, where details fade or alter over time. They are also

transmitted between individuals, passed down through long-lasting projects, and spread across the public service where they lose nuance.

This paper explores the case study of the New Zealand justice sector, which informally began in the early 2000s but progressively increased in depth and formality until the time of writing. This example of collaborative governance was seen externally (Scott and Boyd, 2016b) and internally (as shown in the quotes in this paper) as one of the most successful examples of interagency collaboration in recent New Zealand memory. Over a fifteen-year people, many employees have moved through the justice sector, and yet key parts of the justice sector story remains. Key elements are also known to public servants in other departments outside the justice sector.

The justice sector shows two devices for embedding leadership learnings. The metaphor of the pipeline provides a shorthand reference to shared knowledge about the relationship and dependencies between the departments. It allows a small amount of information (the single word “pipeline”) to stand for a large amount of information. Secondly, the narrative of persistent adherence to governance processes resulting in slow incremental progress, provides narrative coherence to support memory of a large number of events, both positive and negative. Due to this ability to accommodate a range of memories, we interpret this nuanced narrative as preferable to a simple narrative. A simple success narrative, where everything went well, is unable to accommodate lessons from adverse events. Similarly a simple failure narrative, where everything went badly, is unable to accommodate any lessons about things that worked. The more nuanced “process and persistence” narrative seemed to the authors as also being more realistic, as experiences are rarely all bad or all good. Further work is planned to explore dynamic institutional memory in situations of rapid employee turnover, the politics and power dynamics of narrative choice, deliberate suppression of memory, and occasions and social settings for story telling.

We did not find any evidence that these tactics were deliberate. Nonetheless we conclude that the “pipeline” metaphor and the “persistence and process” narrative were useful methods of retaining and spreading leadership learnings. As with any fortunate accident, we must consider whether such tools should be employed more deliberately in future. If we accept that remembering is central to the pragmatic task of governing, it seems that choosing useful metaphors (what Nguyen and Umemoto call “metaphoric intelligence”) and choosing a useful narrative (what Linde calls “working the past”) are important leadership tasks. Or, that *remembering is a form of leading*.

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