

# Combining Narratology and Psychology to Examine Multinational Cultural Motivators, Expression, and Perceptions

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In October 2016, Paul J. Selva, Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, signed the *Joint Concept of Human Aspects of Military Operations* (JCHAMO). The document acknowledged that, as warfare is a human endeavor, the future Joint Force needed to focus on understanding relevant foreign populations' motivations and will (Department of Defense, 2016). The idea of better understanding populations around the world, regardless of where they fall on the adversary-neutral-friendly continuum, is not just a military endeavor confined to an operational need. It is a challenge for the entire US government, especially as there are increasing calls for synchronicity and "whole of government" efforts. To improve the government's efforts, there are several social science disciplines that have been underdeveloped for national security interests, such as narratology, cultural psychology, and narrative psychology, that offer new opportunities to deepen knowledge of how other populations view themselves and others, providing additional information to support to national security objectives. Although these research areas have been explored in the past, their application has been isolated to certain already-accepted topics. We advocate for a renewed exploration of the capabilities these fields provide, including a deeper understanding of how they function and how they can become force-multipliers when they are combined.

**Narratology** is the study of narrative, narrative structure, and narrative discourse that can be performed at the micro and macro levels, from individual biographies to global master narratives; when examined through additional social sciences lenses such as psychology, discussed below, it reveals the ways that that stories affect social realities. The common assumption that narrative is merely a story, and so lives outside of the realm of experience and action, does little justice to understanding how narratives shape people's personalities and identities. People sometimes experience nostalgia, or a feeling of getting completely enveloped in a good movie or a song that takes them back to a better time. This process is called narrative transportation, and refers to that state of being so wrapped up in a story that one is almost unconscious of the immediate surroundings. Narrative research shows that "narrative

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transportation heightens a reader's identification with the worldview of story characters, while reducing the salience of the readers own worldview and identity. A transported audience is less likely to directly counter ideas integral to the storyline of the narrative" (Green & Brock, 2000). This research traced the power once understood as existing only in communication to evidence that narrative is a powerful force for lived life, action, and interaction. This aspect of narrative can only be useful to a national security expert when they understand the world through the others' eyes, to understand the effect of transporting these "other" humans into a reality other than their own. In this situation, we are essentially asking the national security experts to see the world from the perspective of another relevant group (or as they chose to construct it in the narrative). Practicing that skill of attempting to see through another's eyes increases the effectiveness of creating the narrative transportation effect. The important thing to remember is that the narrative that grips one audience enough to transport them is very seldom the same narrative that can transport a different audience. Narratology, narrative, and cultural psychology are requirements for success in the human domain.

Psychology includes a broad range of disciplines and sub-disciplines. While many could aid U.S. government efforts, two critical disciplines that have not yet received sufficient attention are cultural psychology, and narrative psychology. Increasing the amount of research that uses these lenses to focus on national security issues will increase the available knowledge-base on relevant foreign populations and their responses to international events. This knowledge base then needs to be systematized. It must be transferred from academic and applied research efforts into a form consumable by government analysts, such as in the form of articles and white papers. Another option is to explore how to represent that knowledge in formats and mediums utilizing new technology, such as interactive applications or web portals, that are accessible to planners and decision makers and flexible to accommodate for timeframes compatible with shifting operations. The ultimate goal of this increased understanding and knowledge-adaptation is to help the U.S. be relevant in the realm of human terrain and influence—understanding that all operations are influential and that our study of narrative, psychology, and culture will provide detailed understanding as to how operations influence groups of people.

Psychology historically focused on Western societies. This poses a challenge when dealing with non-Western cultures. Many aspects of psychology were developed in Europe in the nineteenth century and progressed further in Western countries such as the United States, particularly in the late twentieth century (Yang, 2012). The theories and methods developed in the West were often transferred to other societies or generalized to explain psychological phenomena within them, without initially recognizing that they were missing a key component in the variation between societies: culture. Though non-Western scholars contributed to rectifying discrepancies through their own research, found in works such as *Hindu Psychology: Its Meaning for the West*, cultural psychology did not become a recognized sub-discipline until the early 1990s (Akhilananda, 1948).

**Cultural psychology** focuses on the "study of how cultural meanings, practices, and institutions influence and reflect individual human psychologies" (Snibbe, 2003). Human beings are influenced by their culture and environment from the moment they are born. Culture is a

“package of meanings that are embodied in such artifacts as human icons, behavioral routines, conventions, social institutions, and political systems that as a whole constitute daily reality” (Kitayama, 2000). Culture shapes what people think and how they behave, just as people shape culture. Because no two cultures are the same, and people exhibit observable differences in their cognitive processes and behaviors, culture can be predictive in that it provides insight to uncover differences between individuals and groups.

Culture is a variable that is analytically challenging because it is intangible and often obscured through the analyst’s own cultural viewpoint. However, when it is understood, it can lead to significant breakthroughs. Atran and Axelrod (2008) demonstrated that using culturally-laden sacred values appropriately in conflicted regions often led to increased tolerance and willingness to compromise. Gelfand, LaFree, Fahey, and Feinberg (2013) explain how cultural dimensions, as defined by cultural psychologists, appeared in over 80,000 terrorist attacks from 1970-2007. Cultural psychology aids in explaining the role of culture that is embedded within many issues related to U.S. national security, and therefore deserves greater consideration as the U.S. government explores and narrows its focus on the importance of the human domain.

*Narrative psychology*, another relatively new field in psychology related to narratology, focuses on how narratives operate within individuals and collective groups as storied histories and examines their autobiographical, or self-understanding (Polkinghorne, 2005). The center of inquiry is about how narrative influences cognitive processes, such as judgement and thought, to develop an understanding of how the stories people tell help to orient them in the world and in relation to others. The primary research method to date relies on qualitative methods, and specifically, on interviews. Other data sources have been less explored to comprehend peoples’ stories through the lens of psychological theory, though these sources offer potentially rich, supplemental material.

Narrative psychology provides additional mechanisms by which to interpret why individuals or groups choose to act in specific contexts. For example, Pemberton and Aarten (2017) argue that more narrative psychology work should be conducted on the pathways to radicalization because it enhances knowledge on how people come to hold the values and morals that permit them to succumb to extremist influences. From this vantage, narrative psychology offers an extra dimension to previous, and likely on-going, research on causal pathways to radicalization, starting with the inner workings on the human mind. While psychology provides insight into the brain, narrative analysis correlates communication frameworks to those cognitive processes; short of fMRIs and similar medical intervention, communication is a medium through which we understand cognitive processes and have an impact upon them. Narrative psychology is a lens that has not received much attention within the U.S. government research or analytical community, and yet it is an area where social science can amplify the available information and provide new insights into the human dimension to support strategic interests.

In conclusion, when it comes to being proficient at psycho-narrative analysis and communicating existing narratives in culturally-relevant ways, missteps can damage national security interests. But the cost of ignoring narrative psychology and its power to impact world events imposes greater opportunity costs. The fight relies much less heavily on the swift, but on the agility of the

communicator, who understands that weapons send messages and the messages they send can be framed ahead of time, that those who speak first and keep speaking have the most influential voice, and that narratives exist everywhere already: they can't be countered, they cannot be created from nothing and imposed by an external entity, but psychological expertise can be leveraged to fashion narrative-inducing actions and so implement the U.S. intent in a strategic way (Mallory, 2017). In modern warfare, the battle belongs to those who understand that messages themselves can be weapons—but only when the warfighter understands how the weapon works and has been trained, equipped, and supported in using it. If there is doubt about the value of narrative and cultural psychology to national security, it only takes one look beneath the events displayed in the daily news and even intelligence reports: somewhere prior to the action garnering international attention, communication happened that resonated with an audience, who found more reasons to act than not. The great space race has returned; narrative and cultural psychology are being successfully employed against the U.S. and its interests and allies. To respond efficiently and effectively, however, we cannot successfully use narratives, cultural psychology, or narrative psychology in return until we apply the necessary resources to understand how they function, train to use them situationally and contextually appropriately, make them operationally-friendly, and incorporate them into our national security strategy. When understood, and wielded carefully, narratives are critical tools and methods for achieving advantage in the human domain.

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