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## The power of stories

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# The power of stories: A framework to orchestrate reflection in urban storytelling to form stronger communities

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## ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the particular power of storytelling to foster reflection and connections between people in urban life. In fact, the core principles and mechanisms for public storytelling to achieve this have yet to be made explicit. This gap is addressed by introducing a novel reflective storytelling framework that unveils the underlying principles of fostering reflection and connection through public storytelling. The framework is proposed on the basis of the literature and its appropriateness is explored in a case study in the Hague (the Netherlands) with particular focus on the influence of content and form on successfully orchestrating reflective storytelling. The impact of citizen stories on the creation of new and stronger social ties, as well as challenges, tensions, and opportunities are discussed. These results inform researchers, urban planners, and other city practitioners on how to design effective storytelling initiatives to strengthen ties in urban communities.

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## KEYWORDS

Community building; citizen engagement; storytelling; citizen initiatives

## Introduction

Storytelling has been part of human life for as long as we know. The power of stories has been acknowledged since the times of Aristotle, and is still embraced by modern philosophers: *“You can’t really change the heart without telling a story”* (Martha Nussbaum, (Nussbaum, 2007)). Stories are special in making people aware of their shared values and they call to action to protecting these values (Ganz, 2010). Sharing individual stories builds relationships and leads to a collective identity (Ganz, 2009). Storytelling is deeply rooted in community traditions (Mcgrath & Brennan, 2011; Moody & Laurent, 1984), and supports reflection (Boase, 2013; Goodson, 2013) and connection (Ball-Rokeach et al., 2001; Elkins, 2018; Fuertes, 2012; Ganz, 2010).

Storytelling practices have also found their way into the city, with the purpose of creating stronger urban communities (Ball-Rokeach et al., 2001). Strong communities are considered a necessity for cities, as these have the potential to provide social support (Wellman & Wortley, 1990) and make use of their social capital to address and solve local

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problems (Betancur, 2011; Nah et al., 2016; Pinkster, 2007). Public storytelling initiatives, such as Human Libraries or Story Circles (Dreher & Mowbray, 2012), focus on empathy building, embracing diversity, and finding common grounds in citizen communities.

Human Libraries, for example, invites citizens to “read” a human book by asking questions. These one-on-one conversations aim to challenge stereotypes and foster reflection (Dreher & Mowbray, 2012). Similarly, the practice of Narrative4 uses storytelling to build empathy with students who want to design for social change in communities. Other initiatives, such as Story Circles or Community Digital Storytelling, engage in collaborative storytelling whereby participants build collective stories through sharing their story of self (Copeland & De Moor, 2018; Ganz, 2001). A major challenge, however, is to move storytelling practices from the empathy building stage to a stage where participants jointly reflect on their community and engage in actions to achieve common goals (Allan et al., 2017; Davis, 2011; Schanche et al., 2002).

While there are many public storytelling practices and initiatives, these are often about building empathy and do not specifically encourage a community to reflect on each other’s stories and identify pathways to move forward. This paper addresses this gap introducing a framework for reflective storytelling that has impact on communities, built from best practices of public storytelling described in literature. The appropriateness of the framework is explored using empirical insights from a Dutch storytelling initiative. The paper presents five lessons learned on how to setup public storytelling initiatives that support reflection and potentially builds stronger communities.

## Approach

The paper starts by reviewing both theoretical research on storytelling, and practical research in which storytelling is applied as a method to foster reflection and social ties between participants. The core principles and mechanisms identified provide the constructs for the EPPD Reflective Storytelling framework, showing how, from a theoretical perspective, storytelling can support reflection in urban communities and create social ties within and between them. The abbreviation EPPD stands for the four elements that are considered to be essential for reflective storytelling: Empathy, Perspective, Prejudice, and Dialogue; and are further outlined below.

The second part of the paper applies the EPPD Reflective Storytelling framework in a qualitative case study for the purpose of qualitative validation (Creswell, 2009, p. 190). This means that the appropriateness of the framework is explored using empirical findings from the case (Leung, 2009). The selected case is a storytelling initiative in the Hague, the Netherlands, called *Haags Verhaal* (The Hague Stories). Interviews with participants and organizers of this initiative are used to identify the appropriateness of the framework and augment it with lessons learned for researchers and practitioners on designing future storytelling initiatives for stronger urban communities.

## Conceptual framework

A substantial body of literature discusses the benefits of storytelling practices for individuals and communities, and the purpose they can serve (e.g. (Ganz, 2010; Meretoja, 2017; Nah et al., 2016; Schanche et al., 2002)). These studies conclude that both storytellers and

receivers benefit from engaging in storytelling (Davis, 2011; Lukosch, Klebl & Buttle . 2011). Telling stories about your own life is a process of meaning-making (Bruner, 2004) and similarly, receivers of stories reflect on them through their own experiences (Ganz, 2009). Storytellers with minority-backgrounds, for example, have shown to experience telling their story to be empowering (Boase, 2013). Nevertheless, storytelling requires proper facilitation to mitigate risks, such as oppression of certain voices (McCarthy & Wright, 2015), misinterpretation of stories, or not taking stories seriously (Razack, 1993). Facilitators of storytelling events are responsible for safeguarding the transmission of stories in an inclusive and respectful way.

Fuertes (2012) describes storytelling as a therapeutic practice, and many other scholars acknowledge its potential to stimulate reflection (Bidwell et al., 2010; Goodson, 2013; Meretoja, 2017; Schanche et al., 2002). In fact, Goldstein et al. (Goldstein et al., 2015) highlight how reflection is essential in storytelling to form social ties. As such, the *story* (the content) (Davis, 2011; Fuertes, 2012; Goodson, 2013; Rappaport, 1995; Schanche et al., 2002) and the *telling* (the way the story is told: the form) (Boase, 2013; Goodson, 2013; Razack, 1993), distinguished as two separate entities, need to be carefully considered to the purpose of forming stronger communities.

### ***Story content and form for reflection***

The **content** of a story often serves a particular purpose, such as to communicate, educate or entertain (Buttler et al., 2011; Schanche et al., 2002) and is supported as such by the plot, character, and moral (Boase, 2013; Ganz, 2010). For example, life stories tailored to a specific theme are utilized in initiatives such as Arctic Entries<sup>1</sup> or Stoop<sup>2</sup> to build empathy between different groups. Friction in a story stimulates listeners to reflect (Ganz, 2009; Korn & Volda, 2015), as the audience needs to think to understand the point of the story (Rappaport, 1995). Life stories, for example, most often contain universally shared elements, such as choice moments (Ganz, 2009, 2010), that story receivers can interpret through their own experience (Schanche et al., 2002). Life stories are used in practices such as Human Libraries (Dreher & Mowbray, 2012) for people to explore different perspectives (Goldstein et al., 2015), to create meaning, emotions and to change views (Boase, 2013; Manuel et al., 2017; Meretoja, 2017; Rappaport, 1995). This process of reflection has shown to activate citizens to form and strengthen their social ties (Goldstein et al., 2015; Pstross et al., 2014).

Reflection is also supported through the chosen **form**, particularly if the form includes dynamic interaction between story receivers and tellers (Davis, 2011; Ganz, 2010; Osborne et al., 2018) as in story circles of the Human Library initiative. While face-to-face storytelling is a unique and intimate experience (Davis, 2011) in which body language plays an important role, digital storytelling allows for stories to be easily shared with others, increasing the number of people who receive these stories (Buttler et al., 2011). In face-to-face storytelling, facilitators can assist further group reflection through finding common ground (Schön, 1983). Facilitated paraphrasing workshops, for example, enable participants to reflect on each other's position and find ways to work together (Goldstein et al., 2015; Kusnandar et al., 2019). Many existing storytelling practices make use of facilitators, mainly to help storytellers prepare their story and to make sure it is received well by the audience. Facilitators play an essential role in handling power dynamics in public storytelling events,

to make sure all voices are heard and stories can be critiqued (Razack, 1993). Facilitators can ensure that a storytelling event supports reflection with storytellers and receivers, but this is often not the focus of current public storytelling initiatives.

### ***EPPD: Four elements of reflective storytelling***

While literature suggests that storytelling can orchestrate reflection with appropriate content and form, many public storytelling practices do not seem to take particular measures to foster reflection as an outcome of their storytelling. For example, Narrative4 invites people to share their story with someone, to then paraphrase the story of the other, but offers no joint reflection on this experience or the stories that were shared. To understand how public storytelling initiatives, such as Narrative4, may lead to reflection, literature suggests four elements that are required.

The first element is to **support empathy (E)**. Stories invite listeners to relate the content to their personal life and to interpret it through their own experience (Schanche et al., 2002), creating meaning, emotions, and possibly changing their identity (Boase, 2013; Manuel et al., 2017; Meretoja, 2017; Rappaport, 1995). Public storytelling initiatives focus on building empathy by offering experiences (e.g. paraphrasing the story of somebody else as your own) that lead to mutual understanding (Boase, 2013; Davis, 2011; Fuertes, 2012; Ganz, 2010). Mirror neurons play a role here when story receivers experience the emotions of the story as their own (Ganz, 2001). Indeed, citizens can build empathy for each other through storytelling, by emotional connection and engagement.

The second element is to **change perspective (P)**. Life stories provide deeper insight into underlying reasons to explain behavior of others to help people to look at a situation in a different way (Davis, 2011; Elkins, 2018; Goldstein et al., 2015; Meretoja, 2017). Changing perspectives is about opening up to a multiplicity of perspectives and accepting that each individual has his/her own way of looking at the world. This is, for example, illustrated in Stoop where seven people tell a personal story around a certain theme. Storytelling can bring suppressed perspectives to the surface, the stories that are otherwise not heard (Razack, 1993). Through storytelling, people can playfully explore these different perspectives to find a common ground (Goldstein et al., 2015) or to accept the diverging perspectives that exist within a community (McCarthy & Wright, 2015).

The third element is to **challenge prejudice (P)**. While this element is also a result of the power of stories to show underlying reasons for choices, opinions, or attitudes of people, the effect on story receivers is different. Besides changing perspectives, it also challenges the current assumptions of the story receiver (Mercken, 2002). This happens, for example, in Human Libraries, when people ask each other questions about their life choices or behavior in an open and respectful way (Dreher & Mowbray, 2012). Facilitators can further mediate this process, to enable storytellers and receivers to reflect on their shared experiences and values (Ganz, 2010).

The fourth element is to **instigate dialogue (D)**. Reflective storytelling opens up conversations, as it brings different kinds of people and communities into contact (Bidwell et al., 2010; Fu, 1999). The practice of Human Libraries, for example, intentionally organizes conversations between people who are different from each other (Dreher & Mowbray, 2012). Learning about stories from other citizens inspires neighbors to do

something to help (Fuertes, 2012). The presumption of initiatives such as Human Libraries, is that knowing more about a person's background through dialogue supports common ground and understanding (Bidwell et al., 2010; Dreher & Mowbray, 2012).

### ***From reflective storytelling to social ties and stronger communities***

The four elements (EPPD) presented above all rely on reflection. However, many existing public storytelling practices do not explicitly support reflection, while they do incorporate one or more of these four elements. This leads to a limited understanding of the impact of the four elements on the communities who have participated in such events, in terms of reflection and the creation of social ties. The EPPD Reflective Storytelling framework presented below outlines how public storytelling events can orchestrate (interactions needed for) reflection and stronger urban communities.

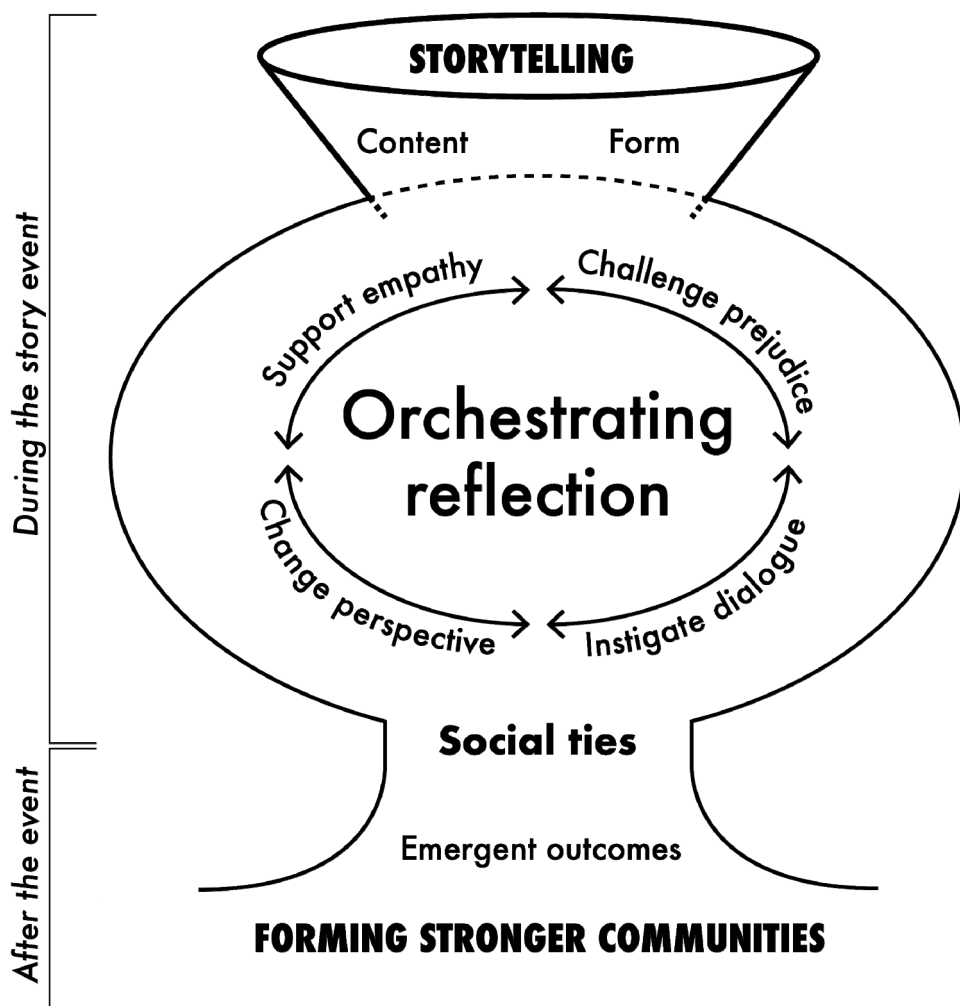
### ***The EPPD Reflective Storytelling framework***

The literature on storytelling and its best practices indicate that the way stories are told (form) and what the stories are about (content) are essential elements to foster reflection. Life stories orchestrate reflection by offering a common ground to which storytelling participants can relate. Interaction between storytellers and story receivers orchestrates reflection when they jointly, for example, consider their differences and commonalities, and their role in the community.

Figure 1 shows how the identified principles and mechanisms of reflective storytelling are visually associated in the EPPD Reflective Storytelling framework. During a storytelling event, *content* and *form* feed into a process in which reflection is orchestrated (through *supporting empathy*, *changing perspectives*, *challenging prejudices*, and *instigating dialogue*), creating social ties. These social ties could, after the event, lead to further emergent outcomes and, as a result, to stronger communities.

The four elements of reflective storytelling in Figure 1 align with the arrows to show they influence each other. Supporting empathy, for example, can lead to a change in perspective. Note, however, that manifestation of only one of these elements can be sufficient for social ties to be created. For example, if the orchestrated reflection results in a citizen realizing that (s)he shares a common experience in life with a storyteller this supports empathy (Kusnandar et al., 2019; Lancel et al., 2019), and this realization in itself forms or strengthens a social tie. The EPPD framework depicts four elements that orchestrate reflection in public storytelling to create social ties between citizens and citizen groups (Fuertes, 2012; Korn & Volda, 2015; Lepofsky & Fraser, 2003; Rappaport, 1995).

The EPPD Reflective Storytelling framework proposed above outlines the theoretical perspective of how social ties can be formed between citizens through reflective storytelling. The Haags Verhaal storytelling initiative, presented in the next section, is used to explore the appropriateness of the framework in a case study with empirical insights.



**Figure 1.** The EPPD Reflective Storytelling framework to support the design of public storytelling to orchestrate reflection and form stronger communities. Note that not all four elements are always needed for reflection to happen.

### Case study

Haags Verhaal is a citizen-run initiative in the Hague, in the Netherlands, that started early 2019 in which monthly storytelling events are organized at different locations in the city. Two citizens coordinate the initiative together with a group of about 10 other volunteers. This initiative was selected as a representative case, as it applies storytelling in a way that is commonly found in initiatives described in literature (Yin, 2003). Further, the initiative centers on reflection in storytelling, as explained below. Hence, this initiative is appraised to be suitable to provide qualitative validation of the proposed framework with empirical insights on how reflection can be fostered through public storytelling (Leung, 2009).



In terms of content, the central story content is life stories of citizens. In terms of form, all storytelling events have the same set-up. Two different communities from The Hague are chosen in advance by the organizers and the volunteers, and invited to participate in a storytelling event. The organizers take care that the stories will not divide, but rather are stories that may unify the community through reflection. One representative of each invited community tells his or her life story. This person is selected by the community itself. One or two meetings take place with one of the Haags Verhaal's volunteers to prepare the story to be told. The stories are told in an interview setting. The storyteller and interviewer are staged with a projector behind them showing pictures of the storyteller to complement the story. The interview takes about 45 minutes and is followed by a short break. After the break, the second storyteller is invited on stage and is interviewed in a similar manner. Each event has different speakers, communities, and topics, and different audiences with between 70 to 100 participants.

Haags Verhaal has been purposefully designed to orchestrate reflection during their storytelling events. Deliberate selection of two citizen communities takes place: communities whom have something in common (e.g. a common interest or life experience), but are unlikely to otherwise meet. Reflection is also orchestrated during the plenary discussion after the storytelling, in which the audience and storytellers can ask questions to each other and reflect on their experience. One of the interviewers facilitates the discussion and tries to articulate commonalities and differences between the two citizen groups. This discussion and the mingling time at the closure of the event, are the occasions in which social ties are created and potentially stronger communities are built.

### **Data collection**

Several events of Haags Verhaal were attended and in-depth interviews were held by the first author of this paper to collect data about individual experiences of participants: members of the audience, storytellers, and organizers of Haags Verhaal. Interviews were conducted in October and November 2019. The participants were recruited through (1) the coordinator of Haags Verhaal and (2) snowball sampling after the first interviews. [Table 1](#) shows the roles within Haags Verhaal for each of the participants. Theoretical saturation (Bloor & Wood, 2006) was assumed after 16 interviews as the last two to three interviews did not generate any new conceptual insights.

**Table 1.** Participants for the study and their role in Haags Verhaal.

Participant	Role	Participant	Role
P1	Audience	P9	Audience
P2	Volunteer, Audience	P10	Volunteer, Audience
P3	Volunteer	P11	Storyteller, Volunteer
P4	Audience	P12	Audience
P5	Volunteer, Audience	P13	Storyteller
P6	Storyteller	P14	Volunteer, Audience
P7	Volunteer	P15	Audience
P8	Storyteller, Audience	P16	Storyteller

The aim of the semi-structured interviews was to gain insight into how the storytelling content and form of Haags Verhaal orchestrate reflection and establish social ties during and after a storytelling event. Hence, the participants were asked about their reasons for joining one or more of the events, how they prepare and experience the events in terms of the four elements of reflection, and whether they feel that the initiative establishes or strengthens social ties. While these topics were discussed with each type of participant (audience, volunteer, or storyteller), the questions were sometimes phrased differently according to the role of the participant. Storytellers were, for example, asked if they met new people during their story event and connected with them afterward, whereas volunteers were asked how volunteering during story events provided them with new connections. Each interview took 45 minutes to one hour. The interview guide is added as supplementary material to this paper.

### **Data analysis**

The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed.<sup>3</sup> The interviewer took notes during the interview, focusing on quotes and topics that stood out. These notes were processed directly after, adding the setting of the interview, behavior of the participant, and initial thoughts of the researcher. The final transcripts combined the word-by-word transcribed interviews and the elaborated interview notes. These transcripts were used for data analysis. The analysis followed a qualitative inductive procedure (Rubin & Rubin, 2005; Weiss, 1994; Wester, 1996). Summarizing transcript excerpts and open and closed coding formed the main activities in the analysis as shown in Table 2. The interviews were conducted in Dutch and the analysis was done using the original Dutch statements.

**Table 2.** The steps taken in the analysis and division of tasks between researchers.

Analysis step	Who	Activity
Read through transcripts (first time)	Two researchers independently	Get a first impression
Read through transcripts (second time)	Two researchers independently	Mark notable quotes and open coding based on units of analysis
Summarize interviews	Two researchers independently	Write summary of each interview based on units of analysis
Meeting 1	Two researchers	Discuss and compare written summaries, quotes and codes. Formulate main topics.
Create theme-based transcripts	One researcher	Restructure transcripts from participant division to topic division
Read through theme-based transcripts (first time)	Two researchers independently	Note down codes, concepts, themes related to analysis framework
Summarize theme-based transcripts	Two researchers independently	Write summary of main storyline for each topic and compare to alternative storylines
Meeting 2	Two researchers	Discuss summaries and storylines, develop final coding scheme
Read through theme-based transcripts (second time)	Two researchers independently	Find relations between themes and concepts: examples, contradictions, causations, consequences
Meeting 3	Two researchers	Discuss final concepts, themes and their relations. Formulate final coding scheme
Read through theme-based transcripts (third time)	Two researchers independently	Closed coding using the final coding scheme
Memo writing	One researcher	Document final coding scheme with memos
Meeting 4	Two researchers	Discuss final closed coding and memos to complete analysis

The statements presented below have been translated to English by the authors. The first and second authors of this paper engaged in the main part of the analysis and translation of the statements. All authors discussed the procedure and outcomes.

During Meeting 1 (see [Table 2](#)), two researchers discussed their codes and summaries of the interviews, and in consensus clustered them into nine initial main topics. From these topics, one researcher created theme-based transcripts allowing them to consider each theme in depth and find commonalities and tensions between participants within a theme (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Researchers analyzed the role of reflection in Haags Verhaal and how the story events establish social ties to develop the final coding scheme. The analysis outcome was documented with memos: a short description of each code (finalized in the scheme as categories and subcategories) and an illustrative quote of participants for each code.

The final coding scheme consists of 39 codes in total, divided into five categories and 34 subcategories as shown in [Table 3](#). The main categories distinguished are: (1) Storytelling form to orchestrate reflection, (2) Storytelling content to orchestrate reflection, (3) Orchestrating reflection, (4) Social tie outcomes, and (5) Emergent outcomes.

## Results

The five main categories from the final coding scheme align with the factors in the EPPD framework: storytelling content and form, orchestrating reflection, social ties, and emergent outcomes. As such, the interview results highlight how the story events (content and form) orchestrate reflection to create social ties and support other emergent outcomes, to form stronger communities. The following sections align with the categories from [Table 3](#), the bold text corresponds to the subcategories.

### *Storytelling form to orchestrate reflection*

The setting of the story events creates opportunities for citizens and communities to form or strengthen social ties through orchestrated reflection. Four participants noted that the **intimate** setting contributes to bringing people closer together. People also connect because participants experience **equality** during the story events. This experience of intimacy and equality provides the appropriate setting for communities to **exchange** information, ideas and thoughts. Thirteen respondents argued that a story event is successful when such exchange takes place, because then connections are created. One respondent stated: *“In a conversation, by talking, you can let the communities find common interests, and let them experience they have more in common than they initially thought”* (P1, audience). Participants would like to experience more joint reflection on the stories during the events to further establish social ties. This implies that reflection is successfully orchestrated when participants are able to share experiences after the stories are told.

The success of story events depends on citizens’ willingness to share their life stories and represent their community. This is relevant for the storytelling form, because the setting of the event needs to support these motivations of citizens. The interviews included four reasons for citizens to come forward as storytellers. The first reason is to **be listened to**. Two storytellers experienced the story events to be a unique moment in which the audience actively listens to the stories that are told. Story facilitators hence

**Table 3.** Final coding scheme, categories and subcategories align with EPPD framework.

Subcategory	Number of mentions	P numbers	Example quote
<b>Category 1: Storytelling form to orchestrate reflection</b>			
Equality	14	P1-3, P6-7, P9, P11, P13, P15-16	"During an event people are equal, there is no distinction." (P16, storyteller)
Intimacy	11	P2, P5, P9, P16	"The personal stories create some kind of intimacy, shared with the whole audience." (P5, volunteer)
Exchange between communities	31	P1-7, P9-12, P14-15	"Talking lets the communities experience that they may have a lot more in common than they think." (P1, audience)
Being listened to	2	P1, P6, P8, P11, P13, P16	"How often do people actually listen to you? I think not often." (P5, volunteer)
Process past experiences	6	P5, P8, P13, P16	"I could look back at that phase of my life." (P8, storyteller)
Change perception	11	P6, P13, P16	"Many people don't think well about the real estate world. I felt the urge to show a different side." (P6, storyteller)
Sharing own experience	11	P1, P8, P11, P13, P16	"I wanted to show people how proud I am to be married to an Arabic man." (P16, storyteller)
Dare to tell story	16	P2-3, P5-6, P8-9, P11, P13-4, P16	"I was not nervous to tell my story, because I am used to present for an audience." (P8, storyteller)
Role interviewers	25	P1, P3-6, P11, P13-14, P16	"The trick is to listen carefully and zoom-in on what is not told. I am always asking myself, what is interesting for the audience?" (P5, volunteer)
<b>Category 2: Storytelling content to orchestrate reflection</b>			
Common subject of communities	5	P1-2, P4-5, P7, P10	"One event there was this gypsy from a thrift shop, but also an auction house, where they work with second-hand stuff as well, but in a different way." (P1, audience)
Relatable	20	P2, P4-5, P7-9, P11-12, P14-16	"You could feel the vibe in the audience, people were recognizing things: I met my husband there, I always got my ice cream there as well." (P9, audience)
Contrast between communities	16	P1-2, P4-7, P9-10, P12-14, P16	"Real estate and homeless people, it won't get any extremer." (P6, storyteller)
What do the communities mean for the city	10	P1-2, P4-P6, P10, P12-13	"It is not only about the personal stories, but also about what do the communities mean for The Hague, for each other and what they could mean for each other." (P5, volunteer).
Balance between community and life story	26	P1-2, P4-6, P10, P12-13	"The life story of a person is very interesting, but it is not about the initiative they are connected to." (P4, audience)
Societal relevance	17	P3, P10-12, P14-15	"Just look at the social problems that are there. How can we connect different layers in society?" (P15, audience)
Interest in life story	26	P2-9, P11-12, P16	"I don't know if I am interested in the person itself, but I am really interested in their story." (P7, volunteer)
Relevance for profession	17	P1-3, P12, P15	"I thought for my job it is very nice to see if you can reach different population groups in The Hague where I don't always get access too." (P3, volunteer)
Getting to know the city	24	P1-4, P7-9, P11, P14	"With Haags Verhaal I get to know the city a lot better." (P10, volunteer)
Introduction to other cultures	37	P1-12, P14	"You get to know others, other cultures, things outside your own 'bubble.'" (P1, audience)
<b>Category 3: Orchestrating reflection</b>			
Supporting empathy	11	P5, P7, P9	"The stories create empathy: people get to know about each others existence and their ideals." (P5, volunteer)
Challenging prejudices	18	P1-3, P5-6, P10-11, P13, P15-16	"Ignorance is often the reason why people have prejudices towards each other. With the personal stories, you recognize things, which makes you stand in someone's shoes." (P5, volunteer)
Expanding perspectives	21	P1-2, P6-7, P10-16	"In my daily profession I also regularly do things around real estate and that you suddenly get a different perspective on things, well, that enriches." (P2, volunteer)
Instigate dialogue	36	P1-4, P6-16	"I once approached a lady during a story event, but we could not have a conversation because she spoke only Chinese." (P9, volunteer)

(Continued)

**Table 3.** (Continued).

Subcategory	Number of mentions	P numbers	Example quote
Purpose unclear	12	P1,P4	<i>"Some people also think: so what is next? What are we going to do with this?"</i> (P12, audience)
Effects unclear	29	P1, P3-5, P9-10, P12-14	<i>"I think it is a great initiative, but I am wondering, does it really bring people closer together? Does it work?"</i> (P15,audience)
<b>Category 4: Social tie outcomes</b>			
New connections	21	P1-2, P6, P8-9, P12-16	<i>"I got some connections from Haags Verhaal, but do not engage with them too often."</i> (P12, audience)
Establishing cross-connections	41	P1-7, P9-12, P14-15	<i>"By confronting people, in a positive way, cross-connections can be established. This occurs more on some events than others."</i> (P10, volunteer)
Expanding network	8	P2-P3, P8, P11-12, P15	<i>"The network of Haags Verhaal is very convenient for me."</i> (P3, volunteer)
<b>Category 5: Emergent outcomes</b>			
Return to other events	19	P1-4, P8-11, P14-16	<i>"I enjoyed the first story night I visited, so I became a regular visitor."</i> (P4, audience)
Becoming volunteer	17	P2-5, P7, P9-P12, P14-15	<i>"I was about to retire, and I thought it would be fun to contribute as a volunteer."</i> (P10, volunteer)
Act as ambassador	15	P5, P7, P8, P9, P10, P12, P14, P15, P16	<i>"People I tell about Haags Verhaal like the idea, but maybe that is because I tell with enthusiasm about the story nights."</i> (P9, volunteer)
Follow-up meetings	19	P3, P5-7, P9-12, P14, P16	<i>"We had a follow-up meeting with the other community that was present that event: we visited them and they went to visit us."</i> (P9, audience)
First step new initiative	8	P2, P5, P6, P12	<i>"I later talked to the organizer of Haags Verhaal to see if we could do something similar as well."</i> (P3, volunteer)
Inspiration for other projects		P2-3, P6, P8, P12, P15	<i>"Some audience members who visited several story nights got inspired and want to create a similar platform in their own neighborhood."</i> (P2, volunteer)

need to activate the audience to provide this experience. The second reason is to **process past experiences**. Telling a story can be retrospective, for example, P8 (storyteller) said: *"And you know, it was quite fun, to look back at that phase of my life."* This requires the structure of the event to incorporate enough time before the event, for the storyteller to reflect on their past experiences in the process of preparing the story. The interviewers further support this reflective process during their preparation meetings with the storyteller. The third reason is to **change perceptions** of the audience about the storyteller's community. Stories might challenge the prejudices of the audience. One storyteller said: *"[Our work] is not very well thought of by many people, they think we are all about making money. I felt the urge to spread a contrary note about us"* (P6, storyteller). This motivation is supported through the structure of the event in which interviewers deliberately explore with the storyteller and the audience during the event what are prejudices about the community, and how they might have changed. The fourth reason is **sharing their own experience**. Storytellers feel their experience is unique, they are proud of it, and they think the audience might learn something from it. This feeling is often amplified through the interviewer during the preparation meetings, where storytellers become aware of the uniqueness of their story. All of these motivations indicate that storytellers aim to foster some form of reflection with their story, either reflection from the audience or within

themselves. To orchestrate reflection, event organizers (facilitators and interviewers) need to discover and amplify the storytellers' motivation by adjusting the structure of the event to tailor for these motivations.

Moreover, citizens need to feel comfortable enough to **dare tell their story**. One of the volunteers reported two instances in which a citizen did not want to share their story after the first preparatory meeting. Another storyteller mentioned: *"Well, at the beginning I needed some time to think. It is my story, it is personal, you see. I realized that when I participated, I will need to share some things about my private life that [my community] might not know about"* (P8, storyteller). To orchestrate reflection, the **role of the inter-viewers** is thus to build a relationship of trust with the storyteller, to make them feel comfortable to tell their story, and to determine the content together with the storyteller.

### **Storytelling content to orchestrate reflection**

The storytelling content is of importance to the orchestration of reflection to create social ties between citizens. The first prompt for citizens to connect is a **common subject**. When participants **relate** to a subject, they are drawn in and engage with the story. They start to recognize certain parts in the stories, and this orchestrated reflection forms social ties: *"And this is the power of life stories: you will always recognize things of your own"* (P5, volunteer). The impact of finding commonalities and forming social ties is challenging due to the **contrast between the communities**. Without intervention of Haags Verhaal, these communities would probably not meet. The storytelling events allow them to explore their shared experiences: *"Then I figured well, we are not that different. Actually, we have a lot in common"* (P16, storyteller). As such, Haags Verhaal orchestrates reflection by exploring differences and similarities between contrasting communities.

According to all respondents, the story content should both emphasize the life story as well as the story of the community the individual represents. As one participant states: *"It is not only about the personal stories, but also about what do the communities mean for The Hague and what they do mean for each other and what could they mean for each other"* (P5, volunteer). Eight participants would like the story events to pay more attention to **what the communities mean for the city**. While the life story enables the communities to find commonalities and connect, the community story helps participants to understand which communities are active in The Hague. This is relevant for participants to identify how they can contribute to the values of the community, but also for professional organizations such as the municipality. To orchestrate reflection, a **balance between the community's story and the life story** needs to be established.

Story content needs to be relevant and interesting to the audience and communities. The interviews indicated five different ways for the story events to be relevant and interesting: First, **societal relevance** of the content is important. For example, many participants acknowledged the societal importance of housing, and therefore were interested in joining that particular event. Second, **interest in life stories** was mentioned 26 times. Third is the **relevance for the profession**: sometimes the subject of the story event is directly relevant for specific professions or it can help to empathize with groups, for which policies are created. Fourth is **getting to know the city**. Fifth is

**introducing citizens to other cultures.** People want to get out of their own “bubble.” As one respondent states: *“It is the unexpected things the audience get to know about a certain community which makes it interesting to visit a story event”* (P9, volunteer). Stories orchestrate reflection when their content is relevant and interesting for the story receivers.

### **Orchestrating reflection**

The content and form of a storytelling event aims at orchestrating reflection within and between citizens individually or within and between the communities. The four elements of reflection in the EPPD framework are identified in the Haags Verhaal events.

#### **Support empathy, challenge prejudice, change perspective and instigate dialogue**

One respondent stated: *“Prejudices have to do with ignorance, people do not know everything about a community. The power of the personal stories is that one recognizes things. This makes you see things from another perspective, you will create empathy and remove prejudices on their own”* (P5, volunteer). This statement illustrates the links between **supporting empathy, changing perspectives, and challenging prejudices**. The story events of Haags Verhaal support empathy through the life stories that contain common elements that people can recognize and to which they can relate. The life stories also give a glimpse of the life of others, making it easier to understand their point of view, and thus adding a new perspective to a story. Participants change perspective by reflecting on their own standpoint in relation to other perspective(s). This reflection then challenges prejudices, sometimes confirming them, but more often they are nuanced: the image of other people or communities changes.

The fourth element of reflection is **instigating dialogue** between citizens. During the story event, participants talk about what they have heard. One respondent said: *“During an event I talk to other audience members. Then we reflect on the stories that are told. We talk about how intense, special or beautiful the story was, if it touched me, and how it resonated to others and myself, depending on what was told”* (P2, volunteer).

#### **Frustrations of reflection**

Reflection, and so the creation of social ties, are frustrated when participants are unsure about the purpose and effect of the stories told. Three participants stated, during different story events, that they found the **purpose unclear**. For example, one event brought together a Rotary International club and a society for Chinese women. While both storytellers were female, the commonalities between these two groups were not clear. Although the life stories did foster reflection as audience participants reported stages of reflection, such as prejudices being challenged, these did not lead to a connection between these two groups. In these cases, citizens are unable to create social ties.

Furthermore, nine participants said that the **effects are unclear**. They question whether the story events really bring communities closer together. The coordinator of Haags Verhaal tries to demonstrate the purpose and effect by facilitating a group



discussion explicitly asking the audience to reflect on differences and similarities between the stories they have heard. The success of this orchestration of (facilitated) reflection determines whether the discussion is continued at the end of the event, when the audience mingles in smaller groups. When successful, participants mingle and meet new people forming social ties during this part of the story event. Figure 2 summarizes the main elements of content and form in the Haags Verhaal events that orchestrated reflection as presented in the results.

### **Social tie outcomes**

The storytelling events are considered to be successful when **new connections** are created between citizens and between communities. Ten participants stated to have made new connections during one of the storytelling events. Because different communities are invited to the events, **cross-connections are established** between them. A prerequisite to create these social ties is the form and content of the story events to orchestrate reflection amongst the participants. As the presented insights have shown, this requires a balanced life story and community story, an intimate setting, and a properly facilitated discussion at the end of the event.

The storytelling events provide citizens with the opportunity to **expand their network**. Six participants recognized the opportunity to meet communities that are otherwise more difficult to reach. Professionals see the storytelling events as an opportunity to get in touch with other groups and networks. The communities themselves also come into contact with people from different backgrounds, illustrating how Haags Verhaal supports social ties to be created.

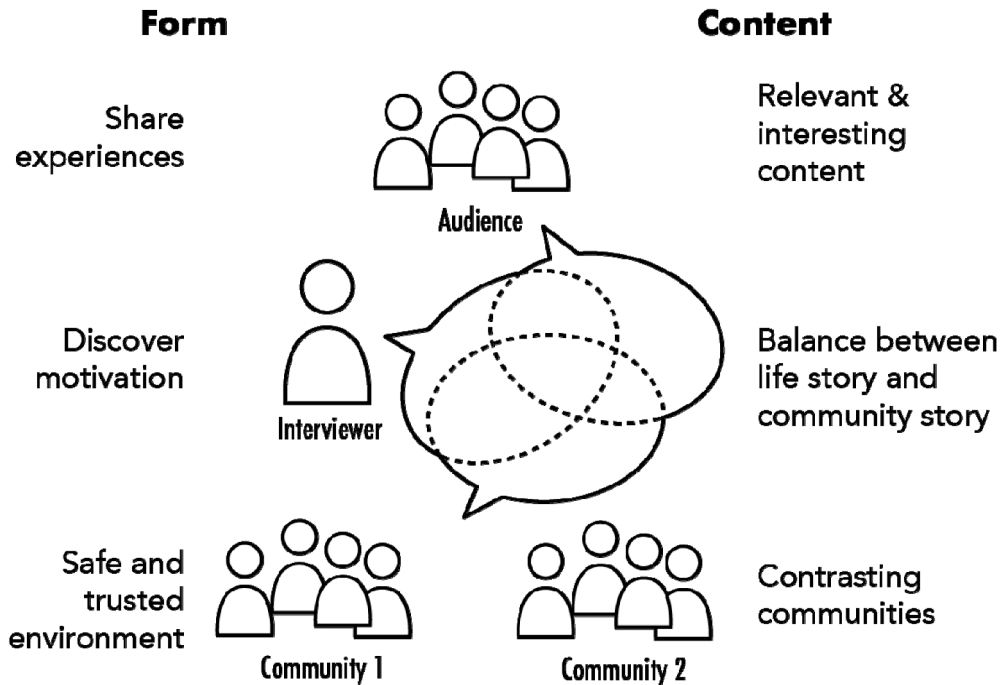
### **Emergent outcomes**

The interview participants mentioned several occasions in which citizens and communities continued to form or strengthen social ties after the actual event. These situations are categorized as emergent outcomes: although the foundation for these actions is created during the storytelling events, they are not specifically supported by the events because they happen afterward. Six types of emergent outcomes were identified during the interviews.

The first three emerging actions are when citizens **return to other events, become volunteers** or start to **act as ambassadors**. They are inspired by the concept of Haags Verhaal and the stories they heard during an event. They become regular visitors of storytelling events or want to get involved in some way. This can be in the form of a volunteer “detective,” searching for new stories and communities in the city, or by offering a space for the next storytelling event. This resulted in a fixed group of volunteers and participants who return to (almost) every storytelling event. Some participants start to actively promote Haags Verhaal by enthusiastically telling other people about the initiative or bringing people along to a storytelling event. As one respondent said: *“One event was about cooking. I took 3 or 4 other women with me, because I know they like cooking as well”* (P8, storyteller). Citizens do this without being



## ORCHESTRATE REFLECTION in Haags Verhaal



**Figure 2.** Specific parts of the content and form of the Haags Verhaal storytelling events orchestrated reflection to form social ties.

asked to do so. These three emergent outcomes continue to form social ties and form stronger communities via citizens who actively engage with the storytelling events and take others along.

The other three emerging outcomes form stronger communities because new projects and initiatives are setup as a result of a storytelling event. Several storytelling events have led to **follow-up meetings** between the communities present at an event. For instance, during one storytelling event a Polish women's association met a Pakistani women's association, after which they planned to visit each other again. Through the stories told, they became interested in one another. While, in this case, at least two follow-up meetings happened, these ideas often stagnate on the practical side: bringing people together and agreeing on a date and place is challenging and requires energy and effort: *"At first they are positive, but then you need to convince them to find a date, mobilize people. They need to do something for it"* (P14, volunteer). Another emergent outcome is when participants come up with ideas to start new projects and set a **first step for a new initiative**, because of the encounters that take place during the events and the stories that are told. Finally, people acquire **inspiration for other projects** as well, for example, to start a similar storytelling event in their neighborhoods. *"Some audience members who*

*visited several storytelling events were inspired and want to create a similar platform in their own neighborhood” (P2, volunteer). This can result in new social ties forming in another place.*

## Discussion

The results outline how the factors in the EPPD framework are manifested in the Haags Verhaal storytelling initiative. They indicate that careful consideration of content and form in storytelling events is required to orchestrate reflection with storytellers and story receivers. The case study was analyzed using the factors from the EPPD framework and lead to five lessons learned regarding best practices of public storytelling for community building. These lessons learned are discussed below indicating some of the challenges, tensions, and opportunities that play a role in understanding reflective public storytelling.

In terms of storytelling form, the results showed which aspects of the Haags Verhaal storytelling events support different citizen groups to tell their story and contribute to an engaging exchange between the involved communities. These aspects include the careful preparation that is required for a successful storytelling event, to discover the storytellers’ motivation and build a relationship of trust. Such careful preparation is also suggested by existing practices as Human Libraries, Narrative4 and Story Circles (Copeland & De Moor, 2018; Dreher & Mowbray, 2012). In Haags Verhaal, the facilitators take care of the preparation, and ensure a safe and trusted environment during the event. The results also resonate with current practices of storytelling in terms of finding commonalities, to be able to reflect through one’s own experience (Ganz, 2010). This process can potentially lead to social relationships between citizens and between communities (Ganz, 2009), when citizens engage in emergent activities after the story event.

These main insights constitute the five lessons learned for the EPPD Reflective Storytelling framework:

- (1) Careful preparation of storytelling events is required to orchestrate reflection within and between citizen communities.
- (2) Experiencing equality and intimacy in a safe and trusted environment is essential to the orchestration of reflection.
- (3) A diversity of citizen perspectives on a common topic are needed to orchestrate reflection during storytelling events.
- (4) A combination of life stories and community stories is essential to the orchestration of reflection.
- (5) Reflective storytelling creates social ties and triggers other activities to emerge, forming stronger communities.

Lesson 1 and 2 relate to the form factor in the EPPD framework: how stories are told. The success of public storytelling is highly dependent on the network and people-skills of the facilitators, and the time they are willing to invest. Razack (1993) convincingly argues the importance of overcoming differences in positions between the people telling and receiving stories. The facilitators (or interviewers) in Haags Verhaal are a unique element of this storytelling initiative and engage in a balancing act to serve both the storyteller and the audience during the event. They need to build a relationship of trust and mutual

respect with the storytellers, to be able to bring forward controversies or differences during the story event. The facilitators need to be fully open to the stories that are told, while daring to critique the story with respect and curiosity. To open up critical conversations, facilitators and storytellers need to get to know each other and feel at ease in each other's presence.

Lesson 3 and 4 surface a tension in the content factor in the EPPD framework. The results indicated a need for reflecting on differences between communities whom have something in common (lesson 3). Finding commonalities and addressing conflicts is essential to foster reflection within and between citizen groups (Korn & Volda, 2015; Razack, 1993). During public storytelling, facilitators support the audience to reflect on the choice moments in the story and add meaning through interpretation (Bruner, 2004). Initiatives such as Human Libraries expect people to make this reflection themselves, while in Haags Verhaal facilitators take up this role by asking provoking questions at the end of the storytelling. They help the audience to move from the life stories to a "story of now" (Ganz, 2010). With this story of now, the audience starts to think about what action they can take to help the community forward, based on their shared values. This conversation often takes place at the end of the story event, when the audience mingles in smaller groups and jointly reflect on the stories told. This translation from life stories to collective stories is a unique element of Haags Verhaal that creates community-wide engagement. The EPPD framework helps initiatives such as Haags Verhaal understand how they can make this translation to create engaging public storytelling.

Lesson 5 concerns the potential of storytelling to build stronger communities. Bringing people of different citizen groups together in one event is in itself an opportunity to network and form social ties (Scott & Liew, 2012). However, this research shows the challenge of evaluating the actual impact of storytelling on the community. The story events of Haags Verhaal have definitely sparked interest of citizens to continue dialogue about a certain topic, but whether or not these meetings have actually been scheduled remains unclear, and is often challenged by practicalities. Established public storytelling practices also struggle to make their impact visible, and this research experienced similar difficulty. Indeed, more tools are needed to evaluate the success and impact of public storytelling and the EPPD framework contributes to this gap as it indicates a number of factors that support reflective and engaging public storytelling.

## Conclusion

The power of storytelling has been recognized by many (Ganz, 2001; Nussbaum, 2007). Initiatives that support storytelling among citizens have shown to be effective in bringing citizens together to establish and strengthen social ties (Ball-Rokeach et al., 2001). This paper proposes the EPPD Reflective Storytelling framework: a novel theoretical framework that can be used to analyze and understand how public storytelling events foster reflection and build community.

The core of this framework is the storytelling practice itself; how *content* (story) and *form* (telling) orchestrate reflection within the storytellers and -receivers, and activate them to connect. This reflection process is orchestrated through *supporting empathy*,

*changing perspective, challenging prejudice, and instigating dialogue.* Through these elements, citizens could establish social ties with other citizens, resulting in stronger urban communities. However, this research also calls for future work to expand the presented framework or identify other tools that help researchers understand how the success and impact of public storytelling can be evaluated. The EPPD framework presented in this paper has been helpful in analyzing the Haags Verhaal initiative, and the authors look forward to engaging in future work, and encouraging other researchers to apply this framework for other public storytelling initiatives, to improve and expand our understanding of best practices of public storytelling.

## Notes

1. <https://arcticentries.org/about/>.
2. <https://stoopstorytelling.com>.
3. This study has approval from the University Ethics Committee. All participants gave their informed consent for participation.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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