



# How mindset and narrative shifts can enable change: a briefing paper

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## How mindset and narrative shifts can enable change

Many of us share a deep sense of responsibility to do better for all people, especially those who do not have their needs met by current systems. This sense of responsibility is felt keenly by people working in public, private and academic institutions, within te ao Māori, and in civil society. We understand that there are changes required that will make a big difference for a more just and equitable society and a planet that sustains us. Often we have knowledge and hope that these changes are possible with sufficient will from the decision-makers who shape our systems. It is often less clear what tools work to enable these changes to happen. This briefing paper explains the role of public mindset and narrative shifts in creating some of the conditions that enable change to happen.

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## Mindset and cultural shift are critical to enabling change

Systems level change is an efficient, effective and ethical way to improve people's health and wellbeing.<sup>1,2,3</sup> Systems change in this context means upstream actions and interventions to ensure all the building blocks are in place for people across all communities to live healthy lives, be valued for who they are, and thrive.

Practically speaking, creating or repairing the building blocks of a healthy and thriving society, from antiracism kaupapa through to transport systems focused on people, not cars, involves working on visible transformations to our systems, structures, policies, and practices — for example, legislation, regulation, and enforcement. It also needs us to work on the semi-visible — transformations of power dynamics and relationships. For example, that could mean changes in who provides information to decision makers and how, who speaks and gets listened to in public discourse, and who is best resourced to do so.

However, this visible and semi-visible change work relies on cultural change. Cultural change encompasses shifts in the dominant, but often less visible, assumptions, mythology and narratives, and values that a culture draws on to understand what we



- 1 Frieden TR. A framework for public health action: the health impact pyramid. *Am J Public Health*. 2010 Apr;100(4):590-5.
- 2 Barton, H. and Grant, M., 2006. A health map for the local human habitat. *Journal of the Royal Society for the Promotion of Health*, 126(6), pp.252-252.
- 3 Williams, D. R., & Mohammed, S. A. (2013). Racism and Health I: Pathways and Scientific Evidence. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 57(8), 1152–1173 and Curtis E, Jones R, Tipene-Leach D, Walker C, Loring B, Paine SJ, Reid P. Why cultural safety rather than cultural competency is required to achieve health equity: a literature review and recommended definition. *Int J Equity Health*. 2019 Nov 14;18(1):174.

see as normal, or what we see as a problem, how the world works, or how our society is structured.<sup>45</sup> We call these less visible but critical factors **shared mindsets**. The mindsets concept is based on research on cultural mindsets, mental models or cognitive schemas, cultural ethos, and subjective culture.

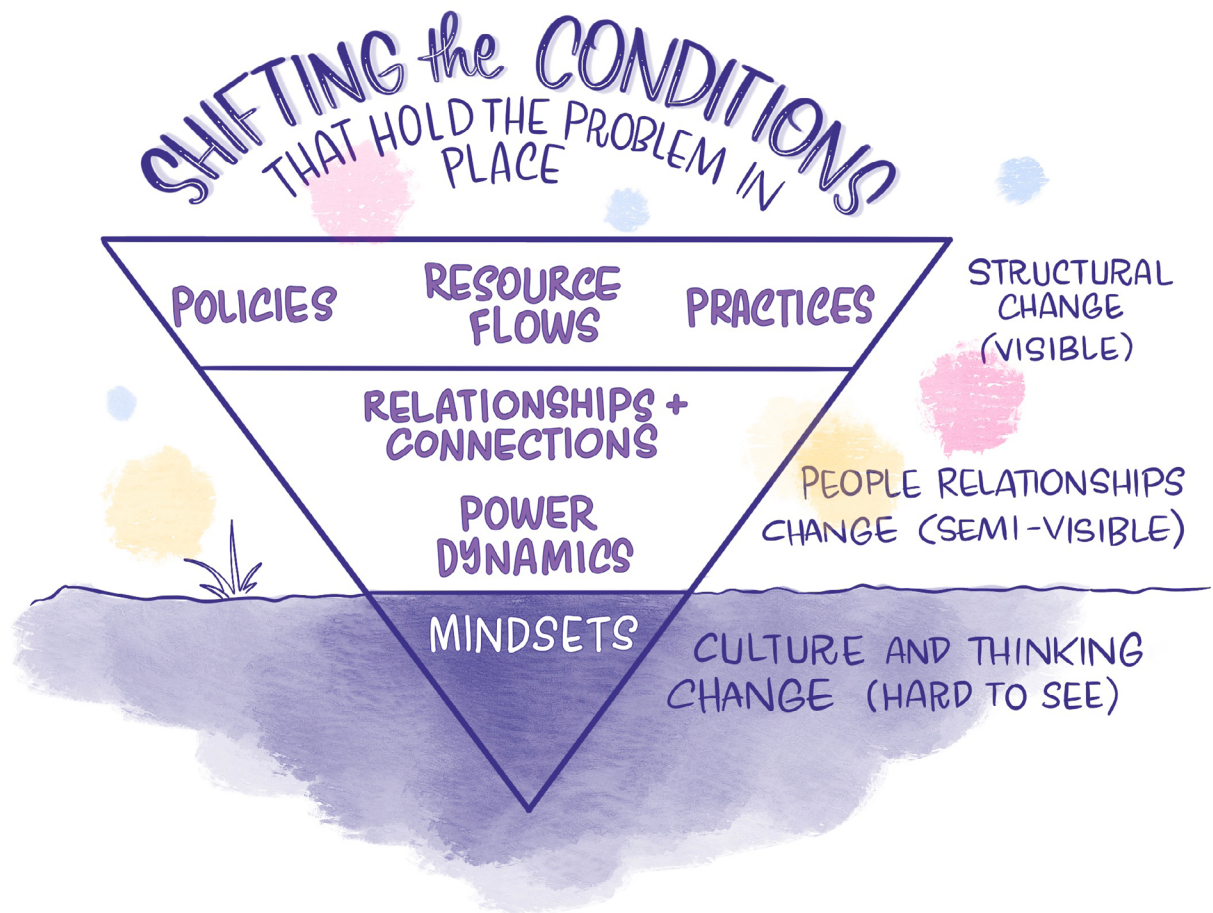


Figure 1. Adapted from Kania et al (2018)

Social scientists have shown that shared mindsets shape our willingness to support changes to our systems, policies, and practices, and ultimately the success of their implementation.<sup>6</sup> They are one of the key sources of power in our society.<sup>7</sup> Shared mindsets are deep, taken-for-granted patterns in how we think about the world.

Mindsets are part of our culture. We get them from living within our culture, being exposed to public discourse through news and entertainment media, and from receiving information in our families, schools, and community groups.<sup>8,9</sup>

4 Kania, J., Kramer, M., & Senge, P. (2018) *The Water of Systems Change*. FSG. Accessed Feb 2022 <http://efc.issuelab.org/resources/30855/30855.pdf>

5 Meadows, Donella. "Leverage points." *Places to Intervene in a System* 19 (1999). [https://www.donellameadows.org/wp-content/userfiles/Leverage\\_Points.pdf](https://www.donellameadows.org/wp-content/userfiles/Leverage_Points.pdf)

6 Kania, J., Kramer, M., & Senge, P. (2018) *The Water of Systems Change*. FSG. Accessed Feb 2022 <http://efc.issuelab.org/resources/30855/30855.pdf>

7 Fung, A (2020) *Four Levels of Power: A Conception to Enable Liberation* *Journal of Political Philosophy*. 28(2).

8 Frameworks Institute (2020) *Mindset Shifts: What Are They? Why Do They Matter? How Do They Happen?* Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute;

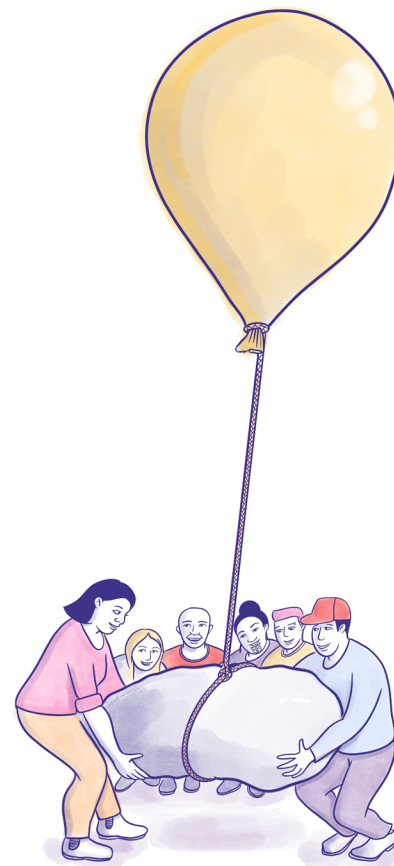
9 Shore, B. (1998). *Culture in Mind: Cognition, Culture, and the Problem of Meaning*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

For example, the mindsets that people hold about ethnicity and colonisation will affect their understanding of the problems Māori and Pacific people face in Aotearoa, their understanding of the need for new or different systems, their willingness to accept changes that are proposed, and their engagement in behaviours that the new systems require.

Mindsets can be deep and productive, or shallow and unproductive. Some mindsets are a barrier to deeper understanding of complex and scientific issues and changes that need to be made, while others are enablers. Multiple shared mindsets operate in a culture at any one time, many in direct opposition to each other. People can draw on different mindsets under different conditions. We need to understand this cognitive and cultural landscape to find pathways for productive thinking, and to understand those pathways that are unproductive on important issues.<sup>10</sup>

Critically, the most dominant shared cultural mindsets in a society will also influence the willingness and ability of decision-makers, including people in politics, to put in place or repair the key building blocks that are needed to enable all people to thrive and the planet to sustain us. To paraphrase Daniel Hunter, decision-makers are like a balloon that is tied to a rock — that rock being the mindsets of the people they believe they represent. Those with decision-making power can only sway so far from the rock. Shifting the balloon (people with the power to make decisions that will make the biggest difference) requires that we shift the rock it is anchored to (shared mindsets in our culture).<sup>11</sup>

These shifts mostly commonly happen when groups of concerned and impacted people and their supporters come together in movements to build a strong foundation from which they can amplify helpful narratives. Such movement building is about using structural power, while mindset and narrative shift is about using discursive power — it is together using these two types of power that people have the greatest impact on social change and improving equality.<sup>12</sup>



<sup>10</sup> Quinn, N. (2005). *Finding Culture in Talk: A Collection of Methods*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan

<sup>11</sup> Daniel Hunter. (2013) *Strategy and Soul: A Campaigner's Tale of Fighting Billionaires, Corrupt Officials, and Philadelphia Casinos*. Philadelphia: Hyrax Publishing.

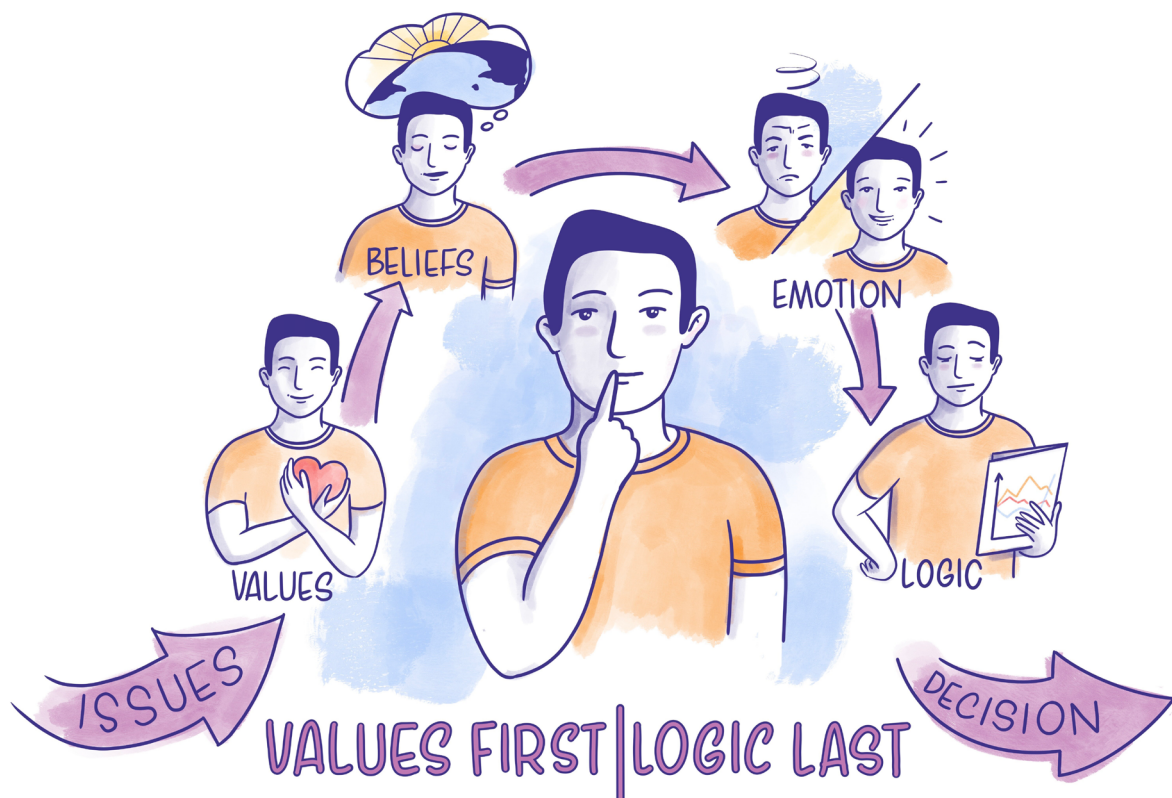
<sup>12</sup> See Fung's video. *Power and Social Change*. <https://case.hks.harvard.edu/power-and-social-change/>

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## Shared mindsets are held in place by our fast-thinking systems — they can't be countered by rationality

Where people hold unproductive or unhelpful mindsets about issues our evolved mental processing system can hold them in place. Our fast-thinking system is what Daniel Kahneman<sup>13</sup> calls the mental shortcuts that help us cope with the vast amount of information in the world — and protect our existing reasoning. Some well-known examples of our fast-thinking system in operation include confirmation bias, omission bias, motivated reasoning, status quo bias, and credibility bias.

This fast-thinking system means that when we process information, we filter information through our values and beliefs first, unconsciously respond with emotion and feelings, and use facts and data to backfill our decisions. Our fast-thinking system can mean we grasp the concrete, easily explained, and shy away from the abstract and complex — for example, availability bias means we frequently grasp explanations that come most readily to mind.<sup>14</sup> Fast thinking is an immense challenge for having a productive public conversation about complex social and environmental public policy issues and it has implications for how we shift mindsets. Narratives play a key role.



<sup>13</sup> Kahneman, D. (2013). *Thinking Fast and Slow*. New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

<sup>14</sup> Waddington, L. and Morley, S., 2000. Availability bias in clinical formulation: The first idea that comes to mind. *British journal of medical psychology*, 73(1), pp.117-127.



## Mindsets reflect, and are reflected in, our shared narratives

Our very busy information environment is filled with stories. Our fast-thinking systems are very good at identifying the common patterns of meaning in these stories — seeking and confirming the existing meanings and explanations we hold. When different stories are tied together with a common meaning or explanation — like a golden thread — the thread itself becomes a shared narrative.<sup>15</sup>

For example, across different stories we see on television, in the media, and in our conversations, we often hear about people needing to make better or different choices to improve their health. These stories reflect a common narrative we call ‘health individualism’, which itself reflects a shared mindset that suggests health is primarily determined by individual effort - which does not reflect best evidence.



<sup>15</sup> Lueg, K., Starbæk Bager, A., & Wolff Lundholt, M. (2021). Introduction: What counter-narratives are: Dimensions and levels of a theory of a middle range. In K. Lueg & M. Wolff Lundholt. *The Routledge Handbook of Counter-Narratives*. Routledge.

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## Motivated people can shape dominant narratives and mindsets in a noisy information environment

Our context shapes the process by which information, stories, and narratives get out of step with best current understandings, and lead to unproductive mindsets. <sup>16</sup> It's useful to know that:

- We're exposed frequently to unhelpful narratives through all kinds of media.
- People can create and contribute to unhelpful mindsets and narratives with ill intent, to maintain status-quo systems, or to benefit themselves.
- People also use unhelpful narratives with no ill intent — unhelpful narratives are so prevalent that we don't notice them, like how a fish doesn't notice the water it swims in.

Fast thinking makes it impossible to disrupt embedded unproductive mindsets and narratives with logic or facts alone. However, by providing new narratives or amplifying existing ones, we can unseat or suppress unhelpful mindsets while bringing to the surface more helpful mindsets that many people already hold and create a space for quality information to be heard.

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## Amplifying more helpful narratives can shift unproductive mindsets

Cognitive linguist George Lakoff tells his students, 'Don't think of an elephant' to emphasise how hard it is for people to think of something else when you name the very thing you don't want them to think about. Naming unhelpful mindsets and narratives, even to expose their harmful nature, won't shift shared mindsets — in a busy information environment this simply acts like repetition. Repetition and exposure is a powerful tool that embeds ideas.

Likewise, trying to rationalise people out of unhelpful mindsets by filling them up with more information or giving them better facts is ineffective outside of one-on-one deep dialogues and learning environments. <sup>17</sup> This is because naming unhelpful mindsets and providing better facts cannot create new patterns of meaning for people. Where fast-thinking systems work to protect existing dominating mindsets, people will find ways to fit facts, even discordant ones, into their existing understandings rather than review those understandings entirely. <sup>18</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Vraga, E.K. and Bode, L., 2020. Defining misinformation and understanding its bounded nature: Using expertise and evidence for describing misinformation. *Political Communication*, 37(1), pp.136-144.

<sup>17</sup> Berentson-Shaw, J. (2018) *A Matter of Fact*. BWB Texts. Wellington

<sup>18</sup> Ecker, U.K., Lewandowsky, S., Swire, B. and Chang, D., 2011. Correcting false information in memory: Manipulating the strength of misinformation encoding and its retraction. *Psychonomic bulletin & review*, 18(3), pp.570-578.

Shared mindsets can and do shift in the same way they are formed — through exposure to new or existing productive stories and narratives. Changing existing narratives that dominate public conversation involves introducing or amplifying counter narratives.<sup>19</sup> Changing those dominant narratives can shift how people think about issues, society, and themselves.

Consider the culture and mindset shifts that have taken place in the last two decades about queerness, queer marriage, and relationships. Deeply dehumanising mindsets and narratives dominated in our culture for many years. It took strong counter-narratives of love, humanity, and justice to shift to new, more generative latent cultural mindsets. Other examples include the civil rights movements in the US, the cultural shift that happened along smokefree legislation, and the shift made in public mindsets about the physical punishment of children in Aotearoa. These policy shifts were all underpinned by work on shifting shared mindsets and narratives.

[Read more case studies about policy shifts, large-scale culture change, and the role of narratives on The Opportunity Agenda's website.](#)

Narratives can emerge from grassroots or community experiences and be crafted by narrative strategists to provide an alternative. Narrative shift means a change in the type of narratives used, how often different narratives are used, or both.

In Australia, 'Passing the Message Stick' is a narrative shift project led by First Nations peoples with support from other Australians. The project focuses on shifting deficit narratives about First Nations peoples to strength-based self-determination and justice narratives.

[Read more about Passing the Message Stick on the project website](#)

In New Zealand in 2022 The Workshop completed a narrative shift project on transport-specifically to deepen understanding and build public support for public and active transport.

[Read more about How to talk about opening our streets](#)

<sup>19</sup> Frameworks Institute (2021) The Features of Narratives. A Model of Narrative Form for Social Change Efforts. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.



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## The sciences of narrative shift — the power of frames

Narrative shifts can happen in many ways.<sup>20</sup> At The Workshop, we apply theory and research from the disciplines of cognitive and social psychology, cognitive linguistics, and communication. This approach allows us to apply scientific methods to develop narratives and assess the impact on people’s mindsets, intentions, and actions.

In narrative work, **framing** is a term used to describe how people who communicate consciously or unconsciously construct a point of view, or a way to see an issue. This way of seeing an issue activates particular ways of thinking about or interpreting the information or facts about the issue.

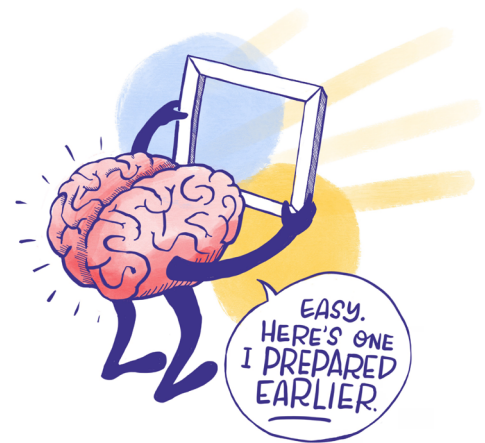
A frame, singular, is a hard wired neurological association between specific phrases, metaphors, words, images, music, and people’s mindsets.

*‘Frames operate in four key ways: they define problems, diagnose causes, make moral judgments, and suggest remedies. Frames are often found within a narrative account of an issue or event, and are generally the central organising idea’.*<sup>21</sup>

A frame — the association between the word and the way of thinking — is built over years of living, talking and listening. Frames are the narratives at work in our culture. We can look through many different frames to understand and explain big issues. Different frames activate different shared mindsets. For example, the word ‘consumer’ when used in the context of health activates very different mindsets from the word ‘citizen’ or ‘person’. These different words frame for people different assumptions about how health is built, who is responsible for it, and what solutions are on offer.

Framing is one of the building blocks of a narrative strategy designed to activate or bring to the surface particular mindsets.

Developing research-driven narratives tends to involve some or all of the following methods.



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<sup>20</sup> Davidson, Brett. "Narrative change and the Open Society Public Health Program." (2016). Accessed September 2022 [https://onthinktanks.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/20160711\\_Narrative-change-paper-1.pdf](https://onthinktanks.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/20160711_Narrative-change-paper-1.pdf)

<sup>21</sup> Kuypers, J (2009) *Bush's War: Media Bias and Justifications for War in a Terrorist Age*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.

## Discovery

- Conversations with experts about changes that will make the biggest difference.
- Listening to public thinking and reasoning to identify the various mindsets and narratives — including mindsets and narratives that need sidelining because they oppose the changes that are needed.
- Understanding which people are more or less open to shifting mindsets through public attitudinal analysis and segmentation. In general, in our own experiments we find supporters, those open to persuasion, and those who are firmly opposed reflect a normal distribution — smaller numbers of people reflecting both supportive and opposed mindsets at each end and the majority sitting somewhere in middle, theoretically able to be persuaded by narratives that are both unhelpful and helpful to the change.  
[See our publications page for more on our research into audience types.](#)
- Listening, talking, and collaborating with advocates to identify more helpful narratives to amplify — for example, strength-based narratives to overcome the othering (or deficit) narratives frequently used about particular groups in our community.

## Development

- Developing key frames and metaphors for testing. At The Workshop, we use social, cognitive, psychological, and linguistic strategies and tools as the building blocks of more helpful narratives. This includes visioning alternative futures, values,<sup>22</sup> frames,<sup>23</sup> explanatory metaphors,<sup>24</sup> explanatory chains, and providing social proof and messenger effects.

## Testing

- Facilitating focus groups with key narratives, frames, and metaphors to assess initial reactions, especially in those people most impacted.
- Measuring attitudes towards key frames and metaphors.
- Using experiments to test the effect of key frames and metaphors

## Support

- Supporting organisations and people advocating for changes through training, coaching, and consulting with a focus on building a narrative strategy and helping coalitions and movements implement it.

<sup>22</sup> Schwartz, S. H. (2012). "An Overview of the Schwartz Theory of Basic Values." *Online Readings in Psychology and Culture* 2, no. 1.

<sup>23</sup> Chong, D., & Druckman, J. (2007). Framing theory. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 10, 103–126; Benford, R. D., & Snow, D. A. (2000). Framing processes and social movements: An overview and assessment. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 26, 611–639.

<sup>24</sup> Kendall-Taylor, N. and Haydon, A., 2016. Using metaphor to translate the science of resilience and developmental outcomes. *Public Understanding of Science*, 25(5), pp.576-587.

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## To shift mindsets, narratives need to be heard

Ultimately, the work of mindset shift requires that many sectors of our communities use and share better narratives. That means those narratives must be acceptable to people who have advocated the hardest, and are most impacted by current systems. Narratives must also appeal to those people who are most open to persuasion on an issue, so that the mindsets most active in a significant group of people are tipped towards helpful ones.

Research is not yet clear on exactly what the tipping point is — tipping points for change could be as low as 25%.<sup>25</sup> But maintaining mindset shift may require a greater proportion of the population to shift their mindsets than this. Because narratives need to be shared and repeated consistently to reach a scale that will sideline unhelpful narratives, narrative shift work also needs collaboration and long-term partnerships across different organisations and communities working on change — this is the work of building a movement and implementing campaigns to shift mindsets, narratives and ultimately influence decision makers. It is work that requires constant focus because unhelpful narratives remain ‘live’ in some pockets of our culture.

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## Mindset and narrative shift are one part of the solution to help make changes that make the biggest difference

Change happens because people who care, and have a deep sense of responsibility to do better for all people, continue to look for ways to make it happen. Mindset and narrative shift, the science of reframing our narratives, are tools we are particularly interested in working together on with people advocating for change. This work has no natural end point. Rather, we adapt, innovate, and learn, much like the people and communities we get to work with.

<sup>25</sup> Centola, D., Becker, J., Brackbill, D., & Baronchelli, A. (2018). Experimental evidence for tipping points in social convention. *Science*, 360(6393), 1116-1119.

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