



Futures Studies of Social Narratives in Cognitive Governance: The Embodied Representation of Narratives in the Nexus of Language, Memory, and Social Policy*

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Abstract

Narrative is not merely a tool for transmitting experience; rather, it constitutes a cognitive, neurocognitive, social, and cultural mechanism through which human beings construct meaning from their world, identity, and embodied experiences. Adopting an interdisciplinary approach and employing a meta-synthesis methodology, the present study examines the relationship among social narratives, episodic memory, mental spaces, embodied meaning, and cognitive governance, while also analyzing the consequences of the unheard narratives of people in forming social depression. The findings demonstrate that narratives emerge from the interaction of neural networks, episodic

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memory, and conceptualization processes. During the hearing or retelling of narratives, sensory-motor, visual, parietal, and temporal areas of the brain are activated. From this perspective, narrative is not merely the linguistic representation of experience, but rather the neural and mental reconstruction of embodied reality. The article further argues that the gap between the grand narratives of governance and the counter narratives of ordinary people leads to feelings of being unheard, socially forgotten, and deprived of meaning and belonging. Such conditions may foster collective depression, social distrust, and the expansion of cognitive fragmentation within society. Under these circumstances, cognitive governance requires the capacity to hear, analyze, and represent social narratives within policymaking processes.

The study subsequently adopts a futures-oriented perspective to investigate emerging trends in the relationship among technology, media, narrative, and governance. The results indicate that, with the expansion of artificial intelligence, algorithmic media, virtual reality, and cognitive big data, narratives will become the primary arena for shaping social perception and governing the mind. Thus, societies lacking mechanisms for “hearing the narratives of the people” will face intensified cognitive polarization, erosion of social capital, crises of meaning, and increased collective psychological disorders.

Keywords

Cognitive Governance, Futures Studies, Cognitive Narratives, Embodiment, Episodic Memory.

Introduction

Narrative is one of the most fundamental cognitive and social mechanisms through which human beings attribute meaning to the world, represent embodied experiences, and construct both individual and collective identity. From the earliest stages of social life, humans have transmitted their experiences, fears, hopes, and knowledge through stories and narratives. Archaeological evidence suggests that cave paintings, petroglyphs, and oral rituals constituted some of the earliest forms of storytelling in human societies (Gottschall, 2012).

Within Iranian culture as well, storytelling has long been an inseparable aspect of everyday life—from coffeehouse recitations and readings of the *Shahnameh* to folk tales, lullabies, and family narratives passed down through generations (Azar, 2008). These narratives were not merely forms of entertainment or channels for transmitting information; rather, they provided a foundation for empathy, experience transmission, emotional regulation, and the preservation of social cohesion.

Research in cognitive science and cognitive linguistics demonstrates that narrative is not simply a linguistic structure, but an embodied mental process emerging from the interaction of memory, perception, emotion, and embodied experience (Barsalou, 1999). According to the theory of embodied meaning, human conceptual structures arise through bodily interaction with the environment, and meaning is constructed through sensory-motor experience rather than existing as a pre-formed abstraction or concept within the mind (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999).

Accordingly, every individual may be understood as the narrator of his or her own bodily experience—a subject who

experiences and narrates the world through a network of sensory perceptions, episodic memories, and mental representations.

Studies in cognitive neuroscience have further shown that, during the listening to or retelling of narratives, the same neural networks involved in the actual experience of events become activated. Research by Speer et al. (2009) demonstrates that while reading or hearing stories, sensory-motor, and emotional areas of the brain are dynamically engaged, as though the individual were personally undergoing the narrated event. From this perspective, narrative is not merely the transmission of words, but the neural and mental reconstruction of experience.

Beyond their individual function, narratives also play a significant role in shaping social reality and collective memory. Grand narratives within societies organize power, identity, and meaning, whereas counter narratives represent the experiences and less-heard voices of ordinary people (Lyotard, 1984). When a gap emerges between the grand narratives of governance and the counter narratives of the people, feelings of exclusion, invisibility, and social insignificance are intensified. Such conditions may weaken social trust, diminish the sense of belonging, and contribute to the emergence of social depression. As Benjamin (1999) argued, modern human is living within a condition of “poverty of experience,” wherein real experiences lose their capacity to be narrated and heard.

In recent decades, the concept of *cognitive governance* has emerged as a significant approach within governance studies and cognitive science. Within this framework, policymaking is not limited to the management of material resources; rather, it also involves the governance of perception, meaning, attention, and social narratives (Bevir, 2011). From this perspective, the ability of governing systems to

hear and comprehend the narratives of the people constitutes an essential mechanism for preserving social capital and collective mental health. A society in which people's narratives are systematically ignored may gradually develop feelings of powerlessness, social isolation, and collective depression.

Simultaneously, technological evolution and the rise of digital media, artificial intelligence, and cognitive algorithms have transformed narratives into the principal arena for shaping public opinion. The future of societies will increasingly depend on their capacity to understand, analyze, and manage social narratives. Under such conditions, futures studies in cognitive governance may provide a framework for analyzing emerging trends related to narrative, collective mental health, and transformations in social perception.

Accordingly, the present study adopts an interdisciplinary approach and employs a meta-synthesis methodology to explain the relationship among social narratives, episodic memory, mental spaces, and cognitive governance. It seeks to demonstrate how the recognition—or silencing—of people's narratives can influence collective mental health and contribute to the emergence of social depression. Furthermore, from a futures-oriented perspective, the study examines the implications of future cognitive and media transformations for the relationship between governance, narrative, and collective psychological well-being. Beyond their historical and cultural significance, narratives also play a crucial role in shaping collective images of the future. Contemporary futures studies increasingly recognize that societies do not merely respond to objective conditions; rather, they act according to the stories they tell about possible, probable, and preferable futures (Bell, 1997; Inayatullah, 2008). Within Narrative Foresight approaches, narratives function as

cognitive infrastructures through which societies imagine alternative futures, construct expectations, and coordinate collective action. Consequently, the study of narratives is not only a matter of understanding past experiences and present perceptions, but also a means of exploring how future social realities are envisioned and enacted. From this perspective, the future of cognitive governance depends significantly on the capacity of governance systems to understand, interpret, and engage with the narratives through which citizens construct meaning and anticipate the future.

Review of Literature and Theoretical Foundations

Review of the Literature

The study of narrative, memory, and embodied experience has, in recent decades, become one of the major interdisciplinary fields within cognitive science, psychology, cognitive linguistics, neuroscience, and even governance studies. Researchers have gradually moved beyond the traditional understanding of narrative as merely a literary structure and have increasingly approached it as a cognitive, social, and neurobiological mechanism for organizing experience, constructing identity, and shaping social reality. One of the earliest and most influential theoretical movements in this field is the “embodied mind” approach in cognitive science. Speer, Reynolds, Swallow, and Zacks (2009) demonstrated that during the reading or listening of narratives, the sensory-motor, and spatial areas of the brain turn to be activated in such a way that the brain neurally simulates the narrative experience. Likewise, Feldman (2006), in the Neural Theory of Language, argues that language and narrative comprehension are grounded in the neural simulation of experiences within the sensory-motor networks of the brain. These findings indicate that narrative is not merely a linguistic

act, but also a neurobiological and embodied experience. Within memory studies, the relationship among episodic memory, narrative, and social identity has also received considerable scholarly attention. Tulving (1972) conceptualized episodic memory as a type of long-term memory that stores personal experiences together with their temporal and spatial contexts. More recent studies demonstrate that individual memory and collective memory are profoundly intertwined through the process of narration. The research conducted by Thomsen, Fivush, Coman, Hirst, Luminet, & Pillemer (2025) indicates that individual memories, collective memories, and narratives enable both individuals and societies to reconstruct the past and imagine the future. Likewise, Lopez, Van Alphen, and Carmona (2025) emphasize that narratives serve as instruments for reproducing collective memory and reconstructing social identity, continuously being redefined within the context of social and political transformations.

In the field of social psychology and mental health, the relationship between narrative and depression has likewise attracted scholarly attention. Recent studies have also been conducted on collective memory and social narratives. Figueroa-Grant (2024) demonstrated that collective memory and social narratives are shaped by social identity and power relations and may therefore acquire ideological functions. Thomas Antweiler (2024) argues that memory and narrative can become instruments of governmentality and the management of social perception, while memory policies constitute part of the mechanisms of power in contemporary societies. Furthermore, recent studies concerning “cognitive infrastructures” indicate that artificial intelligence technologies and algorithmic media are increasingly becoming invisible infrastructures shaping perception, meaning, and social narratives. Despite the expansion of research in

the fields of narrative, memory, neuroscience, and mental health, an important gap still exists within the literature. Most studies have examined these domains separately, and relatively few studies have comprehensively analyzed the relationship among narratives, episodic memory, and the embodiment of meaning, social depression, and cognitive governance. Moreover, within Persian-language scholarship and Iranian studies, limited research has addressed the intersection of cognitive science, narrative studies, and futures studies of cognitive governance. Accordingly, the present study seeks to address this theoretical gap through an interdisciplinary and futures-oriented approach by presenting future-oriented propositions concerning the role of cognitive narratives in collective mental health and cognitive governance. Existing studies have examined narrative, memory, cognition, governance, and futures studies largely as separate domains. However, little attention has been paid to the integrated relationship between embodied narrative processes, cognitive governance, collective mental health, and future-oriented social imaginaries. This study addresses this gap by proposing a unified framework connecting these domains.

Theoretical Foundations of the Research

The present study is grounded in an interdisciplinary framework and draws upon theories from cognitive science, cognitive linguistics, neuroscience, narrative theory, cognitive governance, and ultimately futures studies in order to explain the relationship among social narratives, episodic memory, embodied experiences, and social depression. Within this framework, narrative is understood not merely as a linguistic or literary structure, but rather as a neurocognitive-social mechanism for organizing experience, constructing meaning,

representing identity, and regulating emotion.

This conceptual framework illustrates the multi-layered process through which human experience is transformed into social and future-oriented meaning structures. The process begins with embodied experience, where individuals interact with the social and physical environment through sensory, emotional, and bodily engagement. These experiences are subsequently encoded within episodic memory, allowing individuals to store and reconstruct lived events. At the neurocognitive level, memories are reactivated through neural simulation, whereby sensory, emotional, and motor networks are partially re-experienced during narrative construction and interpretation. These reconstructed experiences are then organized within mental spaces, enabling individuals to connect memory, imagination, interpretation, and anticipation. Through this process, mental representations emerge as social narratives, which provide shared frameworks for understanding reality, identity, and collective experience. These narratives subsequently influence cognitive governance, where perception, attention, meaning, and public understanding become central dimensions of governance and policymaking. At the futures level, narratives evolve into narrative futures, shaping collective expectations, images of the future, and societal visions of possible, probable, and preferable futures. Finally, depending on the degree of alignment between governance narratives and lived experiences, societies may experience either collective resilience, characterized by trust, social cohesion, and hope, or social depression, manifested through meaning erosion, distrust, alienation, and cognitive fragmentation. The framework therefore positions narratives as a critical bridge connecting embodied human experience, governance processes, and the construction of future social realities.

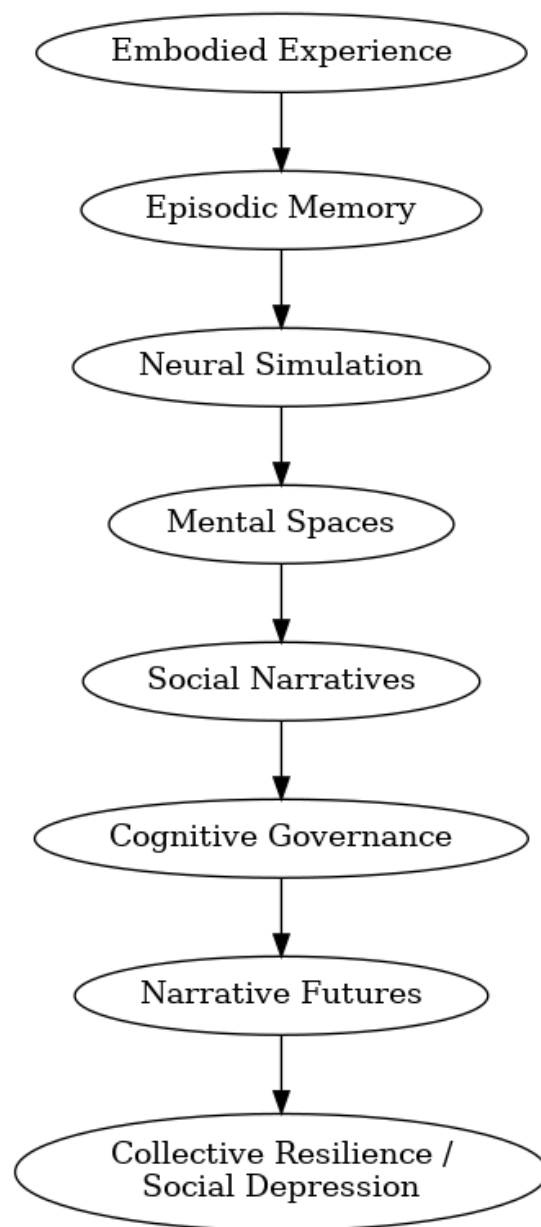


Figure 1. Integrated Framework of Narrative Futures and Cognitive Governance

Cognitive Narrative Theory

Cognitive narrative refers to the mental representation of experienced events within episodic memory, organized in the mind as structured, hierarchical, temporal, and sequential episodes. These narratives function as internal frameworks for organizing experiences, understanding them, and enabling their meaningful retelling in the form of stories. This mental structure underlies the stories individuals produce and demonstrates how the cognitive system processes narrative. Therefore, cognitive narratives are not merely external stories told to others; rather, they are internal quasi-narrative structures that the mind constructs in order to organize and interpret experiences and memories (Bruner, 1991). For instance, a citizen may organize disparate events—such as tax law changes or subsidy reductions—into a coherent internal narrative of ‘systemic victimization.’ This cognitive structure then serves as the primary lens through which they interpret and respond to subsequent political developments. This cognitive narrative influences the individual’s political attitudes and behaviors. Even if the dominant governmental or media narrative claims otherwise, this person’s cognitive narrative becomes the mental structure through which political events are interpreted and political behavior is shaped. One possible consequence of having such a belief may be voting for opposition parties, participating in protests, or transmitting this narrative to others.

Similarly, in social movements like the U.S. Civil Rights Movement, shared cognitive narratives transform historical memories and experiences of discrimination into a unified story of injustice, which in turn catalyzes and sustains collective political action. This cognitive narrative incorporated historical memories, experiences of discrimination, and contemporary news events, all organized into a coherent mental story. This narrative not only shaped individuals’

political behaviors—such as participation in demonstrations, legal protests, and social struggles—but also enabled them to persuade others and transmit their narrative to future generations. Narratives operate at different levels and determine how a society or culture thinks (Sarbin, 1986). Narratives establish general rules for society that most or all members follow. We encounter personal narratives, interpersonal narratives, subcultural narratives, and, at the highest level, grand narratives. Jean-François Lyotard (1984) argues that grand narratives are stories articulated through structures of power and accepted as dominant and normalized within society. These include ideas concerning what is considered “normal,” “good,” or “real.” Such narratives reflect the perspectives of those who possess cultural, social, or political power. Grand narratives are difficult to define and highly complex to study. Nevertheless, in the social sciences and humanities, what matters most is understanding the role these narratives play in shaping patterns of human behavior. Where conflicts emerge among grand narratives, the probability of social or cultural crises increases. Consequently, the coexistence of two or more grand narratives within a multicultural society may challenge social cohesion.

Grand narratives therefore enable social psychologists and researchers in social cognition to better understand subcultures and the multicultural nature of societies. Grand narratives play a significant role in understanding identity and politics because they demonstrate how cultural and social structures impose limitations upon individuals. These grand narratives help explain why individuals generally conform to the rules and norms established by society.

In contrast to grand narratives, counter-narratives emerge when individuals reveal the biases, assumptions, or power relations underlying dominant narratives (Bamberg & Andrews, 2004). These

narratives create spaces in which overlooked, marginalized, or silenced truths and voices can be heard. Counter narratives consist of stories or sets of stories that challenge grand narratives, question them, or provide alternatives to them. For example, a grand narrative may claim that “success can only be achieved through individual effort,” whereas a counter narrative may reveal that “systemic inequality” restricts opportunities for certain groups and demonstrate that not everyone begins from an equal position. Similarly in media, grand narratives may portray certain communities as “dangerous,” while counter narratives may recount stories depicting those same communities as resilient, compassionate, and diverse. In other words, counter narratives constitute a form of resistance through storytelling and narration. They challenge existing accounts of events and create space for alternative possibilities and social transformation.

Bamberg and Andrews (2004) further classify counter narratives into four categories: factual counter narratives, moral counter narratives, ironic or satirical counter narratives, and positive counter narratives. Factual counter narratives operate by exposing inaccuracies and weaknesses within extremist narratives, often through fact-checking processes. However, this approach does not necessarily result in changes in audience attitudes or behaviors. Moral counter narratives emphasize ethical dimensions and demonstrate that violence is not a morally legitimate means of achieving goals. This approach is more effective when the narrator possesses moral credibility among the audience. Ironic and satirical counter narratives employ humor and satire as tools for delegitimizing extremist narratives by weakening their symbolic power and seriousness. Positive counter narratives seek to strengthen inclusive and convergent voices by constructing active, constructive, and hopeful stories. Providing alternative narratives for feelings of injustice and

dissatisfaction enables individuals to channel their energies and aspirations toward positive and constructive change.

Individuals narrate stories every day in different contexts, ranging from simple accounts of ordinary events to unusual and unexpected experiences, and even dramatic incidents capable of transforming lives. In the process of narration, stories are constructed through the creation of characters, descriptions of actions, and the arrangement of these actions within meaningful sequences. Individuals express their stories through words and linguistic habits that frequently contain implicit biases regarding intentions or behaviors. A patient visiting a physician narrates the story of the limitations caused by pain. A grandmother may describe to a physician how back pain prevents her from engaging in everyday activities and shopping, while the physician usually focuses on selected elements of the story and searches among what may appear to be irrelevant details for clues leading to the cause of pain. Yet the entire narrative remains meaningful to the grandmother herself.

These narratives are often counter narratives formed within the interaction between personal assumptions and broader social assumptions, deeply intertwined with embodied experience. Through expressing counter narratives, individuals challenge the grand narratives of society that emerge within cultural, social, political, and power structures. The articulation of such counter narratives creates opportunities for alternative truths to be narrated and heard, providing different perspectives on events and objective realities presented by dominant grand narratives. Stories are always connected to the specific time and place in which they are narrated and possess social, communicative, and situational functions for both narrators and audiences. Understanding the relationship between narrative, time, place, and social function provides deeper insight into the

interpretation of narratives. Recognizing that every story is narrated within a specific context and serves a “social, communicative, and situational” function for narrators and audiences requires accepting that stories are fluid and dynamic; they may be rewritten and retold differently without necessarily altering the central line of the narrative or its core sequence of events.

At times, narratives are consciously designed and strategically presented by members of society in ways intended to challenge assumptions generated by grand narratives concerning power relations, governance issues, and identities. These articulated counter narratives may initiate processes of social and even cultural transformation—provided that they are heard by policymakers and social administrators. For example, the handling of judicial corruption and economic crime cases in Iran offers a useful illustration of the construction of counter narratives by the people. Such events occurred during periods of financial crisis, inflation, and economic stagnation within Iranian society. The publication of economic corruption cases generated counter narratives and alternative narratives among citizens. Simultaneously, prosecuting and defense attorneys each presented their own narratives to judges. While judicial narratives are formally heard and considered in issuing verdicts, what becomes of the people’s narratives regarding these events? If this process becomes characteristic of broader social conditions and what people embodiedly perceive and experience through their sensory and motor neurons generates narratives contradicting the grand narratives articulated by rulers, then the people’s mind is filled with countless unheard narratives. This feeling of invisibility and being unheard by those possessing the power to improve society may ultimately lead to social depression.

Theory of Embodied Meaning

One of the most fundamental theoretical frameworks of the present study is the theory of embodied cognition and embodied meaning. This theory stands in opposition to classical cognitivist approaches that regarded the mind as an abstract system independent of the body. Within the embodied approach, human mind and cognition are understood as products of dynamic interaction among body, brain, and environment (Varela, Thompson, & Rosch, 1991; Lakoff and Johnson, 1999). Barsalou (1999), in his theory of “Perceptual Symbol Systems,” argues that mental concepts are constructed on the basis of perceptual and sensory-motor experiences, and that human beings simulate associated perceptual experiences within the brain when understanding concepts. Accordingly, meaning is not the result of abstract symbolic representation, but rather the consequence of the reactivation of past embodied experiences. Similarly, Lakoff and Johnson (1999) demonstrate that conceptual structures, metaphors, and human narratives are rooted in bodily experience, and that the human mind understands the world through body-based metaphors. Within this framework, social narratives are not merely linguistic representations; they are embodied reconstructions of real experiences. When individuals narrate experiences, they do not merely recount events linguistically; they recreate them at neural, perceptual, and emotional levels. Research concerning the embodied foundations of narrative demonstrates that storytelling activity is rooted in the bodies of narrators and audiences, in the temporal and spatial context of narration, in human relationships, and in the organizational structure of narratives themselves (Grishakova & Poulaki, 2019). In another study, Speer et al. (2009) demonstrated that readers dynamically activate neural networks associated with visual, motor, and conceptual characteristics of narrated activities while reading

stories. During narrative reading, areas of the brain associated with purposeful action, spatial navigation, and object manipulation exhibit high neural activity, as though individuals were directly involved in the events described.

Studies further indicate that when narratives focus upon sensory experiences and immediate perceptions, activity increases within the parietal and temporal areas of the brain. This pattern of activation reflects embodied representations of perception; in other words, the brain utilizes the same pathways activated during direct observation or physical interaction with the real world (Fauconnier & Turner, 2002). Conversely, when narratives emphasize meaning, relationships, and interpretation, hippocampal-cortical networks—particularly the default mode network—become activated. This neural system connects memory, self-awareness, and the experience of subjective time (Fauconnier et al., 2002). Based on such evidence, when parts of the brain become impaired—as in conditions such as Alzheimer's disease—it can no longer function effectively for narration. During storytelling or narrative production, both narrator and listener rely upon complex neural networks as cognitive resources.

Neural Theory of Language and Neural Simulation of Narrative

Another theoretical foundation of the present research is the Neural Theory of Language developed by Feldman (2006). This theory is based on the assumption that language and meaning emerge through neural networks and the interaction of sensory-motor systems within the brain. According to this perspective, language comprehension is not an abstract symbolic process, but rather depends upon the neural simulation of experiences. Research in cognitive neuroscience demonstrates that when individuals hear or read narratives, the same

brain regions involved in actual experiences become activated. Speer et al. (2009) demonstrated that fictional narratives activate motor, spatial, and perceptual areas of the brain in such a way that the brain neurally reconstructs the narrative experience. This process is also related to the functioning of mirror neurons, which enable empathy, understanding of others' actions, and simulation of others' experiences (Rizzolatti & Craighero, 2004). Consequently, narration is not merely the transfer of information, but rather a form of "neural reliving" of experiences. This characteristic makes narrative a crucial instrument in providing social empathy, collective memory, and mental health.

Mental Spaces Theory and Narrative

Mental spaces are temporary and dynamic cognitive structures created during language processing and narration. These spaces enable the representation of real, hypothetical, and imaginary situations. Fauconnier et al. (2002), in their theory of "Conceptual Blending," demonstrate that the human mind creates new meanings by mapping and integrating elements from different mental spaces. Narratives, through the interaction of memory, imagination, and experience, activate multiple mental spaces that enable individuals to interpret events, imagine the future, and organize experiences. In the present study, cognitive narratives are regarded as collective mental spaces through which members of society interpret social reality and power relations. Conflicts between grand narratives and counter narratives may therefore be analyzed as conflicts between competing mental spaces.

Cognitive Governance and Narratives

The concept of cognitive governance has recently emerged as one of

the most innovative approaches within governance studies and cognitive science. In this framework, governance is understood not merely as the management of material resources, but also as the management of perception, meaning, attention, and social narratives (Bevir, 2011).

In the era of digital media and artificial intelligence algorithms, narratives have become the primary arena for shaping public opinion and managing social perception. Governance systems influence collective memory and interpretations of reality through media, social networks, and cognitive mechanisms. At the same time, public narratives may challenge formal structures of power. Accordingly, the present study conceptualizes cognitive governance as a process in which the capacity to hear, analyze, and understand social narratives constitutes an essential mechanism for preserving collective mental health and social capital. A society in which people's narratives are ignored will gradually face the spread of powerlessness, social isolation, and collective depression.

Futures Studies, Narrative, and Cognitive Governance

Futures Studies is a field dedicated to analyzing trends, drivers, and possible, probable, and preferable futures. It regards the future not as predetermined, but as constructed through perceptions, narratives, and social actions (Bell, 1997). Within this approach, narratives play a significant role in shaping images of the future, social hope, and cultural orientations. Polak (1973) and futurist scholars such as Dator (2009) argue that human beings understand the future through "images of the future" and social narratives. Consequently, narratives do not merely represent the past; they also construct the future. In contemporary futures studies, the concept of "narrative futures" has gained increasing significance. This perspective suggests that the

futures of societies are profoundly shaped by narratives produced by media institutions, governments, and citizens regarding the future (Inayatullah, 2008). In today's world, social capital is more important than physical capital in organizations and societies. This capital acts as a network of collective and cohesive relationships between individuals. Social capital refers to the instrumental and supportive resources available in networks that are accessible through social ties and allow individuals to benefit from a wide range of supports (Ghasemi & Sharahi, 2025). Hopeful narratives may strengthen social cohesion and resilience, whereas narratives rooted in fear, exclusion, and meaninglessness may contribute to anxiety and social depression. At the same time, the expansion of artificial intelligence, digital media, and cognitive algorithms has transformed narratives into the most significant arena for shaping social perception.

Integrative Framework of Narrative Futures and Cognitive Governance

The present study proposes that narratives operate across multiple interconnected layers. At the cognitive level, embodied experiences are encoded as episodic memories. At the neurocognitive level, these memories are reconstructed through neural simulation and conceptual blending processes. At the social level, they emerge as narratives that shape identity, collective memory, and social perception. At the governance level, narratives influence the management of meaning, attention, and legitimacy. Finally, at the futures level, narratives become mechanisms through which societies construct images of the future and coordinate collective expectations. This integrated framework forms the central theoretical proposition of the present study.

Research Methodology

The present study is, in terms of its objective, fundamental–developmental, and in terms of its approach, qualitative and interdisciplinary. Drawing on concepts from cognitive science, neuroscience, cognitive linguistics, and futures studies, the research examines the relationship between social narratives, episodic memory, cognitive governance, and collective mental health. The research design is descriptive–analytical and based on meta-synthesis. In this approach, theories, models, and findings from previous studies across different domains are collected, compared, and re-synthesized into a coherent conceptual framework (Sandelowski & Barroso, 2007). Accordingly, rather than focusing on statistical or survey data, the present study is grounded in conceptual analysis and theoretical explanation.

In the first stage, approximately 90 sources were reviewed, of which 47 were retained for final synthesis. The sources included books, peer-reviewed journal articles, indexed publications in reputable international databases such as Scopus, ScienceDirect, and Google Scholar, as well as selected Persian-language academic works related to narrative and popular culture. In the second stage, the theoretical data extracted from these sources were analyzed using thematic analysis and comparative analysis. At this stage, shared concepts and interconnections among different fields were identified and organized into a conceptual network. The main focus of the analysis was to explain how social narratives, through episodic memory, embodied experience, and cognitive mechanisms, influence the sense of meaning, social belonging, and collective mental health.

Subsequently, to strengthen the futures-oriented dimension of the study, a trend and driver analysis approach was employed. In this

section, emerging trends related to digital media, artificial intelligence, cognitive algorithms, social networks, and transformations in governance were examined in order to analyze their future implications for social narratives and collective mental health. In addition, concepts from critical futures studies, such as “images of the future” and “narrative futures,” were used to analyze the role of narratives in shaping possible social futures. The theoretical population of the study consists of works and theories in cognitive science, narratology, neuroscience, and futures studies. Sampling was purposive and based on the conceptual relevance of sources to the research problem. The validity of the study was ensured through source diversity, the use of reputable scientific literature, comparative analysis of perspectives, and conceptual coherence among the employed theories. In qualitative and meta-synthetic research, validity and reliability are assessed not through statistical measures but through conceptual coherence, transparency of the analytical process, and traceability of arguments. In this study, credibility was ensured through the use of authoritative international scientific sources in cognitive science, narratology, neuroscience, and futures studies, as well as comparative examination of diverse theoretical perspectives. Efforts were made to avoid reliance on single-source interpretations and to incorporate diverse and even conflicting viewpoints in explaining the relationship between narrative, memory, and cognitive governance. The credibility of the study was ensured through source triangulation, conceptual coherence, and the use of authoritative literature from multiple disciplines, including cognitive science, neuroscience, narratology, governance studies, and futures studies. Rather than relying on a single theoretical perspective, the study synthesized diverse and complementary viewpoints to construct an integrated conceptual framework. Transparency in the analytical process and consistency between

theoretical arguments, thematic findings, and conclusions further enhanced the trustworthiness of the research.

Findings and Analysis

A. Process of Conducting Meta-synthesis and Thematic Analysis

This study is based on theoretical meta-synthesis and thematic analysis. In this approach, “data” are not defined as numerical or field-based datasets, but rather as validated scientific texts in the domains of cognitive science, neuroscience, narratology, memory studies, cognitive governance, and futures studies. In the first step, a set of classical and contemporary sources was collected, including theoretical works on embodied cognition (Barsalou, 1999; Lakoff & Johnson, 1999), episodic memory (Tulving, 1972; Conway, 2005), the neuroscience of narrative (Speer et al., 2009; Rizzolatti & Craighero, 2004), narrative and identity (McAdams, 2001; Lopez et al., 2025), cognitive governance (Floridi, 2014; Dennardis, 2020), and futures studies (Bell, 1997; Inayatullah, 2008). In the second step, these texts were decomposed into fine-grained conceptual units, and initial coding was performed. In the third step, similar codes were clustered into higher-order themes. Finally, in the fourth step, relationships among themes were extracted and a multi-level conceptual model was developed to explain the role of narrative in cognitive governance and collective mental health.

B. Explanation of Theoretical Meta-synthesis

In this study, meta-synthesis refers to the integration and reinterpretation of findings from prior theoretical research in order to generate a new conceptual framework. Unlike statistical meta-synthesis, which relies on quantitative data, the unit of analysis here consists of concepts, theories, and scientific propositions embedded in textual sources.

Stages of Theoretical Meta-synthesis

Stage 1: Selection of texts and extraction of theoretical data

In this stage, texts related to the following keywords were collected:

- Narrative
- Episodic memory
- Embodied cognition
- Cognitive governance
- Collective memory
- Futures studies

Subsequently, key propositions and conceptual elements were extracted from each text.

Table 1. Example of Theoretical Data Extraction

<i>Source</i>	<i>Extracted Theoretical Proposition</i>
Tulving (1972)	Episodic memory enables the mental reconstruction of past experiences.
Barsalou (1999)	Concepts are stored in the form of perceptual and sensory symbols.
Speer et al. (2009)	Reading narratives activates sensorimotor neural networks in the brain.
McAdams (2001)	Individuals construct their identity through narrative processes.
Floridi (2014)	Contemporary society is governed within an informational ecosystem.

At this stage, the extracted data are still fragmented and independent.

Stage 2: Conceptual Comparison and Alignment

In this stage, similar or related concepts were juxtaposed in order to reveal shared patterns. For instance:

- Tulving describes memory as the reconstruction of experience;
- Barsalou introduces the idea of perceptual reactivation of experience;
- Speer et al. refer to the neural activation of experience during narrative processing.

Within the meta-synthesis process, these three perspectives were integrated into a single shared conceptual cluster.

Table 2. Example of Conceptual Alignment

<i>Initial Concept</i>	<i>Extracted Shared Concept</i>
Episodic memory	Reconstruction of experience
Perceptual symbols	Reactivation of experience
Neural activation during narrative processing	Simulation of experience

Stage 3: Generation of Meta-synthetic Concept

In this stage, a higher-order concept was constructed through the integration of shared conceptual elements. For example, the following concepts:

- reconstruction of experience;
- perceptual reactivation;
- neural simulation;

were synthesized into the meta-analytic proposition:
 “Narrative is the reconstruction of neural networks of real-life

experiences.” This proposition does not appear explicitly in any of the original sources; rather, it is the outcome of the theoretical meta-synthesis conducted in the present study.

C. Thematic Analysis

Following the theoretical meta-synthesis, the data were organized using thematic analysis. In this study, thematic analysis was conducted based on Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-phase framework:

1. Familiarization with the data;
2. Generation of initial codes;
3. Searching for themes;
4. Reviewing themes;
5. Defining and naming themes;
6. Producing the analytical narrative.

Phase 1: Initial Coding

In this phase, key sentences and conceptual statements extracted from the texts were transformed into concise codes.

Table 3. Example of Coding

<i>Theoretical Text</i>	<i>Initial Code</i>
“Narratives activate sensory regions of the brain.”	Neural reactivation
“Humans construct meaning through life narratives.”	Narrative meaning-making
“Official narratives are distant from lived experience.”	Narrative gap
“Narratives shape images of the future.”	Narrative future-making

Phase 2: Code Clustering

In this stage, similar codes were identified and grouped together. The purpose of this step was to reduce fragmentation in the initial coding phase and to organize the data into meaningful conceptual clusters. Through iterative comparison, codes sharing semantic proximity or functional overlap were merged, allowing the emergence of preliminary thematic groupings that later served as the foundation for higher-order themes.

Table 4. Example of Code Clustering

<i>Codes</i>	<i>Conceptual Cluster</i>
Neural reactivation, experiential simulation, episodic memory	Embodied experience
Narrative meaning-making, personal identity, autobiographical memory	Narrative identity
Narrative gap, neglect of real experience	Perceptual disequilibrium
Future imagery, social hope	Narrative futures

Phase 3: Extraction of Final Themes

In this stage, the conceptual clusters were transformed into overarching themes. These themes represent higher-order interpretive categories derived from systematic comparison and refinement of clustered codes. Table 5 presents examples of these primary themes, illustrating how lower-level conceptual groupings were synthesized into coherent analytical constructs.

Table 5. Thematic Analysis

<i>Level of Analysis</i>	<i>Type of Data</i>	<i>Key Sources</i>	<i>Extracted Theme</i>	<i>Social Implication</i>
Cognitive	Real-life experience, neural data	Barsalou (1999), Tulving (1972)	Narrative as reactivation of experience	Construction of meaning
Neural	Experiential simulation	Speer et al. (2009), Rizzolatti & Craighero (2004)	Neural re-experiencing of narrative	Social empathy
Psychological	Episodic memory	Conway (2005), McAdams (2001)	Narrative identity	Identity coherence or fragmentation
Social	Grand/Counter narratives	Lyotard (1984), Lopez et al. (2025)	Narrative gap	Decline in social trust
Governance	Perceptual and narrative data	Floridi (2014), Dennardis (2020)	Cognitive governance	Perception management or meaning crisis
Futures	Images of the future	Bell (1997), Inayatullah (2008)	Future-shaping narratives	Resilience or collective anxiety

D. Interpretive Analysis of Themes

The thematic analysis indicates that narrative in this study is not

merely a linguistic instrument but a multilayered socio-cognitive mechanism that:

- encodes real-life experience;
- organizes individual and collective memory;
- constructs identity;
- regulates social perception; and
- produces future-oriented imaginaries.

Furthermore, the findings demonstrate that disruptions in the circulation of social narratives—particularly the marginalization of counter narratives—lead to a form of cognitive disequilibrium between the public sphere and governance structures. This imbalance may generate conditions conducive to social depression, meaning crisis, and the erosion of social capital.

E. Analysis of Theoretical Data and Core Findings

Narrative as Transformation of Lived Experience into Cognitive Data

Analysis of cognitive science literature suggests that human real-life experience is initially encoded in the nervous system as sensorimotor data at the moment of occurrence. These data are subsequently structured as episodic memory, enabling mental reconstruction of past experiences (Tulving, 1972). According to Barsalou (1999), such experiential data are stored as perceptual symbols in the brain and are reactivated during narrative production. Narrative, therefore, is not merely recounting events; it is the reactivation of experience at cognitive and neural levels. Accordingly, the process can be summarized as:

Real-life experience → neural networks → episodic memory → narrative

Narrative Data and the Formation of Individual and Collective Identity

At the psychological level, memory-based data are organized into

coherent personal narratives (McAdams, 2001). This process constitutes what is known as **narrative identity**, whereby individuals construct a coherent sense of self through life storytelling. At the collective level, these individual narratives interact and aggregate into collective memory (Lopez et al., 2025). Thus, narrative data play a constitutive role at both individual and social levels. A key finding here is that any disruption in narrative circulation—such as the silencing of real-life experiences—leads to identity fragmentation and a sense of meaninglessness.

Social Data and the Gap between Grand and Counter Narratives

Theoretical analysis suggests that social data emerge at two distinct levels:

- **Counter narrative data:** everyday life experiences of individuals
- **Grand narrative data:** official, media-based, and governance narratives

Lyotard (1984) conceptualized this tension as the conflict between grand narratives and real-life experience. The present study shows that when counter narrative data are not represented within grand narrative systems, an **epistemic–perceptual data gap** emerges.

This gap gradually results in:

- reduced social trust;
- feelings of marginalization;
- erosion of meaning;
- increased social depression.

Cognitive Governance and the Management of Perception

Based on Floridi (2014) and Dennardis (2020), contemporary governance is not limited to economic or political data but also includes

perceptual, attentional, and narrative data. In this framework, cognitive governance refers to the management of narrative production, dissemination, and interpretation within society. Findings indicate that:

- When governance integrates people's narrative data, social cohesion increases.
- When such data are suppressed or ignored, perceptual imbalance and trust crises emerge.

Futures Studies: Narrative as Future Production

Within futures studies, data include “images of the future,” scenarios, and future-oriented narratives (Bell, 1997; Inayatullah, 2008). Analysis shows that narratives are not only representations of the past but also **future-generating data**, as they:

- shape social expectations;
- guide collective acts;
- determine decision-making horizons.

Consequently, controlling or shaping narratives equates to influencing social futures directly.

F. Deep Analysis of Narrative, Being Heard, and Social Depression

One of the most significant findings of this study is the role of **narrative recognition (being heard)** in individual and collective mental health. Humans require not only survival and physical security but also recognition of real-life experience. Narrative functions as a mechanism for meaning reconstruction, emotional discharge, and identity stabilization. When a narrative is heard and understood by others, it produces existential validation and social belonging. Conversely, when narratives are ignored or cannot enter the public sphere, a **perceptual rupture** emerges between the individual and

society. Over time, this rupture leads to feelings of voicelessness, social exclusion, collective forgetting. At the macro level, the accumulation of such conditions may manifest as **social depression**, characterized by reduced hope, meaning erosion, distrust, and collective passivity. The analysis suggests that social depression is not merely a psychological condition but a structural outcome of disrupted narrative circulation and governance incapacity to process lived experiences. In such conditions, individuals perceive a widening gap between official narratives and everyday reality.

G. Cognitive Analysis of the Grand–Counter Narrative Gap

Another key finding is the existence of a cognitive gap between grand and counter narratives.

Counter narratives emerge from everyday life experiences such as poverty, inequality, hope, fear, insecurity, or existential uncertainty. Grand narratives, in contrast, are produced by institutional, media, and governance systems and underpin policy formation. Thematic analysis shows that as the distance between these two kinds of narratives increases, societies enter a state of **cognitive disequilibrium**. In this condition, official narratives no longer reflect experiential reality, resulting in reduced social capital, declining public trust, increased social skepticism.

From a cognitive science perspective, this represents a breakdown in perceptual alignment between society and governance. Effective governance thus depends on its capacity to receive, interpret, and re-integrate societal narrative data. Otherwise, it suffers from **narrative blindness**. The findings further suggest that social depression emerges through a cumulative cognitive process rather than as a purely psychological condition. When individuals repeatedly experience a mismatch between embodied reality and dominant public

narratives, their lived experiences fail to receive social recognition. This narrative exclusion weakens meaning-making processes, undermines narrative identity, and generates a persistent sense of cognitive dissonance between personal experience and socially validated reality. Over time, this condition contributes to identity fragmentation, reduced social trust, declining collective efficacy, and the erosion of future-oriented hope. Social depression can therefore be understood as the macro-social manifestation of prolonged narrative misalignment between citizens' embodied experiences and institutional narratives.

H. Futures-Oriented Analysis of Narratives in the Age of AI and Cognitive Media

The futures analysis of this study is based on trend analysis, driver analysis, and critical futures studies. Futures are not treated as deterministic outcomes but as emergent configurations of technological, cognitive, social, and media-related dynamics (Bell, 1997; Inayatullah, 2008). Accordingly, developments in artificial intelligence, recommendation algorithms, interactive media, social networks, and digital governance are identified as key drivers shaping the future of narratives. The meta-synthesis reveals that the contemporary world is transitioning toward a condition in which competition among social and political actors is no longer primarily about control over information, but about the ability to shape perception and manage meaning. Thus, narratives are evolving beyond “texts” or “stories” into **cognitive data structures** capable of reorganizing perception, emotion, memory, and even social futures. From an embodied cognition perspective, this transformation extends beyond the circulation of information and directly affects the mechanisms through which individuals construct meaning from experience. Human narratives emerge through the interaction of embodied experience, episodic memory, and neural simulation. However, in increasingly

algorithmic media environments, digital platforms and AI systems act as intermediaries that selectively amplify, suppress, or reconfigure narrative exposure. As a result, the cognitive simulations activated during narrative processing are no longer shaped solely by direct social experience but also by algorithmically curated narrative environments. In this sense, AI-mediated narratives function as cognitive infrastructures that influence perception, memory reconstruction, emotional engagement, and future imagination. The future of cognitive governance therefore depends not only on managing information flows but also on understanding how algorithmic systems shape embodied processes of meaning-making and narrative construction. Thematic analysis identified recurring core codes such as attention management, perception engineering, recommendation algorithms, digital collective memory, cognitive polarization, narrative warfare, and narrative futures.

These were ultimately organized into two macro-themes:

- Narrative as a cognitive power infrastructure
- Narrative-based governance

Trend analysis indicates that AI systems and cognitive media are increasingly becoming primary mediators of social perception. Algorithms no longer merely transmit information; they determine visibility, invisibility, and narrative salience. Consequently, public opinion formation is shifting from a linear media-based process to a networked and algorithmic configuration. From a futures perspective, this transformation has several fundamental implications:

1. **Social attention steering:** Narratives will become the primary tools for directing collective attention.
2. **Collective emotion production:** Governance may evolve into “emotional governance,” regulating fear, hope, anger, and empathy.

3. **Digitalization of collective memory:** Memory increasingly depends on algorithmic infrastructures, with both participatory and manipulated outcomes.
4. **Construction of social futures:** Narratives directly shape future imaginaries, expectations, and perceived possibilities for change.

Discussion

The findings indicate that societies lacking mechanisms for systematically listening to citizens' narratives are progressively prone to increasing levels of cognitive polarization¹. Cognitive polarization refers to a condition in which social groups inhabit distinct or parallel narrative worlds and gradually lose the ability to construct a shared perception of reality. The consequences of such a condition include rising distrust, a crisis of meaning, erosion of social capital, and the expansion of collective depression. In contrast, the results demonstrate that narrative-based governance can foster a form of cognitive resilience². Cognitive resilience is defined as the capacity of a society

¹ In the context of this study, cognitive polarization refers to a condition in which different social groups increasingly rely on distinct narrative frameworks for interpreting reality, resulting in reduced overlap in collective meaning-making processes and diminished capacity for shared social understanding. The meta-synthesis suggests that such polarization is intensified when experiential narratives remain disconnected from dominant governance narratives and when algorithmic media environments reinforce selective exposure to particular narrative streams.

² Cognitive resilience is defined as the capacity of a society to maintain shared meaning structures, adaptive collective learning, and constructive dialogue despite conditions of informational uncertainty, narrative conflict, and technological disruption. The findings indicate that cognitive resilience is strengthened when governance systems remain capable of incorporating diverse social narratives and reducing the gap between lived experience and institutional discourse.

to maintain perceptual coherence, shared meaning, and social solidarity under conditions of informational turbulence and narrative conflict. Such a governance model seeks to systematically capture counter narratives of citizens, integrate real-life experience into policymaking processes, reduce the gap between grand and counter narratives, and utilize narrative analysis to anticipate emerging social and cognitive crises.

Accordingly, the future of governance is no longer determined solely by the management of economic and security-related data, but increasingly by the capacity to interpret and manage narratives. In future societies, cognitive power becomes the dominant form of power, and narratives emerge as its fundamental infrastructure. The findings of this study indicate that narratives function as multilayered socio-cognitive data structures that originate in embodied experiences and extend toward the construction of possible social futures. These data operate across four interconnected layers:

1. **Cognitive layer** (language and memory);
2. **Neuroscience layer** (reactivation of neural networks);
3. **Social layer** (identity and collective memory);
4. **Governance and futures layer** (social perception and scenario formation).

Accordingly, narratives do not merely represent the experienced reality; they actively construct the social and perceptual realities of the future. The overall analysis suggests that narratives in contemporary societies are not simply communicative tools but constitute the cognitive infrastructure of society itself. Embodied experience is first encoded as episodic memory, which generates structured mental spaces. It is then expressed through narrative forms and subsequently integrated into collective memory and governance systems. Any

disruption in this cycle—particularly the silencing of authentic real-life experiences—may lead to a crisis in meaning construction, erosion of social trust, cognitive polarization, and collective depression. From this perspective, the future of governance depends less on controlling economic data and more on the ability to understand, interpret, and manage cognitive narratives. Overall, the theoretical meta-synthesis conducted in this study generated a novel conceptual framework regarding the relationship between narrative, cognition, and governance. Thematic analysis further enabled the systematic organization and interpretation of theoretical data. The integration of these two approaches demonstrates that narratives are not only reflections of human experience but also constitutive elements of the cognitive infrastructure and future-making capacity of contemporary societies.

The proposed framework aligns with previous scholarship emphasizing the role of narratives in identity formation (McAdams, 2001), collective memory construction (Thomsen et al., 2025), and embodied cognition (Barsalou, 1999; Varela et al., 1991). It also resonates with emerging studies on cognitive governance and the role of digital infrastructures in shaping social perception (Floridi, 2014). However, the present framework extends existing research by integrating these previously fragmented perspectives into a single explanatory model linking embodied experience, neural simulation, social narratives, governance processes, and future-oriented imaginaries. Unlike many existing approaches that examine these dimensions separately, the proposed model conceptualizes narratives as a continuous socio-cognitive infrastructure connecting individual cognition, collective meaning-making, and future construction.

The primary theoretical contribution of this study lies in the

development of a four-layer integrative framework connecting cognition, neuroscience, social narratives, and governance futures. Although previous studies have examined embodied cognition, narrative identity, collective memory, cognitive governance, and futures studies independently, few have systematically integrated these domains within a unified explanatory model. The proposed framework demonstrates how narratives function simultaneously as cognitive, social, governance, and future-making structures. By linking embodied experience to future imaginaries through narrative mediation, the model offers a novel conceptual lens for understanding governance challenges in increasingly algorithmic and cognitively mediated societies.

Conclusion

The present study, through an interdisciplinary approach combining theoretical meta-synthesis and thematic analysis, examined the relationship between social narratives, episodic memory, mental spaces, cognitive governance, and collective mental health. The central research question addressed whether the recognition and institutional reception of citizens' lived narratives within governance structures can influence meaning-making processes, social belonging, and perceived social well-being. The findings suggest that narratives are not merely tools for information transmission or retrospective accounts of events; rather, they function as constitutive elements of the cognitive architecture of society. Narratives organize human experience, shape both individual and collective identity, regulate social emotions, and contribute to the construction of shared futures. From the perspective of embodied cognition, narrative processes are grounded in the reactivation and recombination of neural and experiential patterns, indicating that storytelling and being heard are

not only communicative acts but also cognitive and affective processes tied to recognition and social existence. The study further shows that personal and collective identities emerge through dynamic interactions between episodic memory and socially shared narratives. In this sense, society can be understood not merely as an aggregation of individuals, but as a distributed network of interrelated narratives that produces a shared sense of social reality.

Disruptions in this narrative circulation may weaken meaning-making structures, reduce perceived recognition, and undermine social cohesion. One of the central conceptual contributions of this study is the proposition that narrative exclusion or institutional silencing of citizens' lived experiences may contribute to conditions of social disaffection and depressive social states. This claim is formulated at a theoretical level and should be interpreted as a conceptual model rather than a directly empirically verified causal relationship. Within this framework, when lived experiences are not adequately reflected in dominant institutional or "grand" narratives, a gap emerges between everyday life and formal systems of representation. This gap may be associated with diminished social trust, reduced perceived agency, weakened social capital, and heightened experiences of alienation. In contemporary contexts shaped by digital media and algorithmic infrastructures, narratives increasingly function as instruments of cognitive governance. Governance is therefore not limited to the allocation of material resources but extends to the structuring of attention, perception, and meaning. Media platforms and AI-driven systems play an increasingly significant role in shaping collective memory and social imagination. This development amplifies the importance of aligning institutional narratives with lived social experience. From a futures-oriented perspective, narratives are not passive reflections of reality but active forces in shaping anticipatory

structures, collective imaginaries, and social expectations. Inclusive and participatory narrative ecosystems may enhance social resilience and cohesion, whereas persistent divergence between institutional narratives and lived experience may increase the risk of meaning fragmentation and social disaffection.

Accordingly, narrative-centric governance is proposed as a conceptual orientation in which policy-making processes systematically incorporate lived experiences, counter-narratives, and plural forms of social expression into decision-making and institutional design. In practical terms, this implies establishing structured channels for narrative inclusion (e.g., participatory listening systems, deliberative platforms, and feedback mechanisms that integrate qualitative lived experience into governance processes), alongside traditional data-driven policy tools. In conclusion, the study argues that narratives constitute a foundational cognitive infrastructure of society and a key dimension of future governance. Their recognition and integration within institutional frameworks may contribute to enhanced social meaning, cohesion, and collective well-being, while their systematic exclusion may correspond with weakened trust and reduced social integration.

Suggestions for future Research

Based on the findings of this study, the following researches are proposed:

- Development of narrative-based governance systems aimed at capturing, processing, and analyzing citizens' social narratives in a systematic manner.
- Integration of narrative analysis approaches into social and cultural policymaking processes to enhance responsiveness to experience.

- Establishment of monitoring systems for tracking social perception and public narratives within digital and online environments.
- Conducting empirical studies on the relationship between social recognition (being heard) and collective depression within the Iranian context.
- Examination of the role of artificial intelligence and media algorithms in shaping collective memory and cognitive governance structures.

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