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# The cultural psychology of Palestinian youth: A narrative approach

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## Abstract

Contemporary Palestinian youth engage with a tragic master narrative of loss and dispossession supported by the social structure of ongoing intractable conflict and Israeli military occupation. This article illustrates a narrative and idiographic approach to research in cultural psychology, interrogating the relationship between constructions of personal identity and the master narrative of Palestinian history and collective identity among contemporary youth. Narratives of youth reveal points of both convergence and divergence with the master narrative of Palestinian identity, the most notable of which are the reproduction of tragic stories of loss and dispossession and the current ideological divisions within Palestinian society between secular and religious nationalism. Implications for theory and methodological practice in cultural psychology are discussed.

## Keywords

Culture, identity, idiographic, Israeli-Palestinian conflict, narrative, youth

To be in a viable culture is to be bound in a set of connecting stories, connecting even though the stories may not represent a consensus. (Bruner, 1990, p. 96)

The story of Palestinian history and identity, which assumes the form of a tragedy (Said, 1979), represents a ‘master’ narrative that dominates the discourse in Palestinian society. Centered on the historic loss of land and aspirations for national fulfillment in 1948—a loss commemorated as the *Nakba*

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(Catastrophe)—this narrative describes the Palestinian experience as a tragic and unjust usurpation of land, dignity, and freedom (Jawad, 2006; Said, 1979; see Sa'di & Abu-Lughod, 2007). The loss of 1948 and the failure to resolve its consequences for Palestinian lives and national identity fulfillment constructs a master narrative of identity characterized by a profound sense of insecurity and injustice (Khalidi, 1997; Pettigrew, 2003), affirmed by the social structure of continued military occupation and the absence of a resolution to the conflict (Gordon, 2008).

A coherent master narrative of Palestinian history and identity is thus realized both through discourse and the lived experience of occupation. Though they are always in states of contestation (Gjerde, 2004), master narratives provide the discursive resources with which participants in a culture construct their own individual life stories (Hammack, 2008), setting these personal narratives in some ideological context that provides meaning and purpose (McAdams, 1990, 1996, 1997). As Bruner (1990, 2008) argues, it is through narrative that individuals make meaning of their social surround and its symbolic systems.

In this paper, I seek to illustrate the value of an idiographic cultural psychology that is grounded in the co-construction of person and culture through a process of narrative engagement (see also Hammack, 2009). An idiographic approach restores a focus on the individual as a unit of analysis (see Allport, 1962; Lamiell, 1981, 1998; McAdams, 1995b; Schachter, 2005), consistent with the 'study of lives' tradition within personality psychology (e.g., Murray, 1938), thereby seeking to discover knowledge that contextualizes lives within the distinction of their own personal narratives. Yet the study of individual cases does not preclude the ability to speak of 'general' psychological knowledge (Lamiell, 1998), for a comparative analysis of cases can provide great insight into what is shared by members of a particular cultural community. A narrative approach, because of its emphasis on *discourse* and *story* as the primary modes of meaning construction (Bruner, 1990; Gjerde, 2004), represents an ideal theoretical and methodological framework for the study of identity in cultural context.

The context of conflict and longstanding military occupation uniquely positions the lives and narratives of Palestinians in a place of existential uncertainty (Khalidi, 1997). Both the significance and the fragility of a master narrative of identity are apparent in such a context, as groups under threat seek to attain some measure of security through solidarity (Bar-Tal, 1998; Pettigrew, 2003). My intent is to offer both a descriptive account of contemporary Palestinian youth, as well as to demonstrate a rich, multi-level theoretical and methodological approach to research in cultural psychology.

## **Narrative and the cultural psychology of identity: A person-centered approach**

Because of its inherent interdisciplinary character, the field of cultural psychology remains intellectually diverse, and discussions about its epistemological focus and methodological practice remain vibrant (e.g., Christopher & Bickhard,

2007; Cohen, 2007; Greenfield, 2000; Gutierrez & Rogoff, 2003; Shweder, 2003, 2007). The theoretical perspective developed in this paper relies on three major perspectives within cultural psychology.

First, my emphasis on the documentation of diversity in psychological experience and on person–culture co-constitution is rooted in Shweder's (1990, 2003) vision of cultural psychology. He argues for a rejection of general psychology's assumption of 'psychic unity' through the promulgation of a universalist doctrine of mind (Shweder, 1990), though he does not deny the presence of 'universals' across human communities (Shweder & Sullivan, 1993). Rather, Shweder's approach privileges an analytic emphasis on *distinction* and *specificity*. A primary goal of cultural psychology, he argues, is to document this distinction across contexts of development (Shweder, 2003).

In his approach to cultural psychology, Bruner (1990, 2008) argues for the primacy of narrative as a central organizing feature of cultural life. Through the provision of *meaning*, narratives form the salient content of mind and reveal the link to a community of shared stories and practices (Bruner, 1990). This emphasis on narrative enhances cultural psychology's interdisciplinary character, for it links to a number of theoretical advances in personality (e.g., McAdams, 1996; McAdams & Pals, 2006; McLean, Pasupathi, & Pals, 2007), developmental (e.g., Pasupathi, Mansour, & Brubaker, 2007), clinical (e.g., Howard, 1991), and social psychology (e.g., Sarbin, 1986), as well as anthropology (e.g., Ochs & Capps, 1996), sociology (e.g., Somers, 1994), and history (e.g., Suny, 2001).

Gjerde's (2004) person-centered cultural psychology represents the third major influence on the theoretical perspective advanced in this paper. Arguing against the static notion of 'culture,' Gjerde (2004) suggests that we must study the relationship between person and culture by examining narratives as 'ideology in speech' (p. 152), always positioning the narrator within some larger matrix of power and hegemony. In his view, culture and the individual are co-constructed through discursive practices that reveal either acquiescence or resistance to some status quo of power relations among groups. Hence Gjerde's vision of cultural psychology is dynamic, dialogic, and integrative of both social structural and individual psychological accounts of cultural participation and practice.

Anchored within these three perspectives on cultural psychology, I advance a theoretical perspective on identity that emphasizes the relationship between social identity and the personal narrative. Through a process of *narrative engagement*, individuals construct life stories that both appropriate and repudiate aspects of a master narrative of social identity (see Hammack & Cohler, 2009). By querying this process, cultural psychologists gain access to the larger process of social reproduction as it unfolds. Because personal narratives reveal the *positions* of subjects within a matrix of power relations and the *internalization of discourse* at any given moment, they provide windows into the process of person–culture co-construction. A cultural psychology that privileges the study of personal narrative, concurrent with the study of the social structural context within which

individuals construct narratives, thus illuminates the dynamism of culture and its ongoing contestation (Gjerde, 2004).

In this theoretical approach, identity is conceived as a tripartite psychosocial construct (Hammack, 2008). Linking Erikson's (1959) notion of ideological identification with discourse approaches that emphasize social cognition (Van Dijk, 1998) and Gjerde's (2004) notion of narratives as expressive of 'ideology in speech,' this model theorizes identity content in ideological terms. The structural mechanism by which individuals come to make meaning of their ideological identifications and personal experiences is the *personal narrative* (Cohler, 1982), a life story that begins to be constructed in adolescence (Habermas & Bluck, 2000; McAdams, 1990, 1993, 1996). The *process* by which this narrative is constructed is inherently social, as the individual engages with a dynamic social ecology of development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

This theoretical position therefore recognizes that narrative alone provides an incomplete picture of identity (Shi-xu, 2002). The recognition of identity as a *process* (e.g., Peacock & Holland, 1993), rather than a *product*, of human development responds to prior visions of identity as a 'task' to be 'achieved' (e.g., Erikson, 1959; Marcia, 1966). Identity construction as a social process grounded in narrative engagement links this model to approaches that ascribe primacy to language and symbol (Mead, 1934; Vygotsky, 1934/1986), social practice (e.g., Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998), and semiotic mediation (Valsiner, 2001). While the idea of narrative as central to processes of identity construction is considered universal, such a model acknowledges that cultural psychological investigations must shed light upon both intercultural and intracultural variations in the *content* of narratives (Gjerde, 2004).

A major focus of the theoretical model is on *idiographic specificity*, or a person-centered approach to cultural psychology that considers the ways in which each unique individual engages with a particular social structural reality (Gjerde, 2004). Consistent with Shweder's (2003) vision for cultural psychology, such an approach seeks to document the *distinction* of individual lives based on some shared meaning system and some collective narrative about what is 'good, true, beautiful, and efficient' (Shweder, 2003, p. 25). An emphasis on individual differences within a particular cultural context is also closely connected to Lamiell's (1981, 1987) 'idiopathic' paradigm of personality, grounded in William Stern's 'critical personalism' (Lamiell, 2003). Such approaches seek to restore a recognition of the vitality of an idiographic approach to personality *description*.

## The context of Palestinian lives

Recognition of the political and social context within which contemporary Palestinian lives unfold is vital to an interpretation of the personal narratives of youth and serves to locate individual life stories within a larger matrix of social identity. Rooted in the historical experience of loss and dispossession (Said, 1994), contemporary Palestinians inhabit a physical and psychological space in which

their identities continue to be interrogated and challenged, both by Israelis and by the outside world (Khalidi, 1997). The Palestinian population is dispersed across a number of physical locales, including a significant diaspora resettled in a number of countries (Aoudé, 2001); refugees still inhabiting camps in Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan (Abdel-Nour, 2004; Morris, 1987); naturalized citizens of Israel (Rouhana, 1997); and inhabitants of the occupied territories of the West Bank and Gaza Strip (see Kimmerling & Migdal, 2003). It is this latter group—those who continue to live within the social structure of military occupation—that represents the focus of the current study.

Palestinians in the occupied territories engage with a tragic master narrative of history and identity, the thematic content of which centers on the experience of loss and dispossession (e.g., Said, 1994), resistance to the occupation (e.g., Harkabi, 1968/2001), existential insecurity (e.g., Khalidi, 1997; Pettigrew, 2003), and the moral and ideological justness of the Palestinian cause (e.g., Arafat, 1974/2001). In its exclusive claims to ideological legitimacy, this narrative seeks to render its rival, successful nationalist narrative (i.e., Zionism) illegitimate (e.g., Arafat, 1974/2001; see Oren & Bar-Tal, 2007). In its contested ideological setting between secular and religious nationalism (i.e., between Fatah and Hamas), the Palestinian narrative presents a story common to many other postcolonial contexts grappling with the failure to create cultural and economic contexts that can guarantee the health and happiness of its subjects.

This master narrative does not solely exist in the *discourse* of Palestinian society. Rather, its content is affirmed through the continued social structure of military occupation and intractable conflict (see Gordon, 2008; Makdisi, 2008). Palestinians in the territories are subject to mobility restrictions enforced by the Israeli army in the territories. Although there are semi-autonomous regions within the territories, as designated by the 1993 Oslo accords which created the Palestinian National Authority (PA), the Israeli military still effectively controls the territories and regularly conducts military operations within them. Permission is required for Palestinians to leave the territories and, in some cases, to travel between locales within the territories. Thus the social structural environment of the Palestinian territories is characterized by power asymmetry (Rouhana, 2004; Rouhana & Korper, 1997) and lack of control in issues of mobility and basic daily affairs, including trade and economic development (Roy, 2004). This structural asymmetry possesses powerful social and psychological implications, including the regular experience of humiliation and derogation (Giacaman, Abu-Rmeileh, Husseini, Saab, & Boyce, 2007).

The context of military occupation and lack of control thus frames the discursive setting for narrative engagement among Palestinian youth. Given the inherent dynamism of a culture and its dominant discourse (Gjerde, 2004), however, a coherent master narrative is always a fragile construction. The Palestinian case is no exception to this general rule. The introduction of an Islamist discourse into the mainstream of Palestinian society has rendered the foundational master narrative of Palestinian secular nationalism extremely fragile, particularly since the death of



Arafat and the disenchantment with the Fatah-led Palestinian Authority. The perceived success of movements like Hamas in political and social matters has presented a new discourse of national liberation with which contemporary youth engage (see Lybarger, 2007; Mishal & Sela, 2006).

## The stories of Palestinian youth

The purpose of the current study was to document the life stories of Palestinian youth at a unique historical moment in the evolving narrative of their group and to examine the utility of a narrative and idiographic approach to research in cultural psychology. If conflict is reproduced through the intergenerational transmission of polarized ingroup narratives (Hammack, 2006, 2008)—narratives that possess negative interdependence (Kelman, 1999) and inherent delegitimization (Oren & Bar-Tal, 2007)—a descriptive study of youth narratives reveals this process of social regeneration as it unfolds. Such a study thus provides a valuable window on the reproduction of the narrative conditions of conflict at a particularly intractable phase of the ongoing struggle between Israelis and Palestinians (see also Hammack, 2009).

## Method

### Overview

Methodologically, this study was concerned first and foremost with the *meaning* that Palestinian youth ascribe to their identities and daily experiences. In this way, my approach is closely aligned with the visions of cultural psychologists who identify the study of personal and social meaning as central to the study of culture, mind, and human development (e.g., Bruner, 1990; Kral, Burkhardt, & Kidd, 2002). Since the central empirical question of this study is the relationship between a ‘master’ narrative of Palestinian identity and the personal narratives of youth, ethnographic and interview methods were used.

### Field sites and interview sample

Beginning in 2003, I conducted ethnographic fieldwork with Palestinian families in East Jerusalem and the West Bank. In addition to the observational data and informal interviewing that characterizes ethnographic work, I conducted extensive life story interviews with 16 Palestinian youth. Although these youth represented a geographically diverse sample for the West Bank, the interview sample does not include youth from the Gaza Strip, an area that was difficult to access during the period of field research.

The interview sample consisted of a deliberate ‘theoretical’ (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), rather than representative, sample of Palestinian youth. Since the larger study from which data were drawn was concerned with intergroup contact between

Palestinians and Israelis (Hammack, 2006), the Palestinian youth whose narratives are analyzed in this paper were motivated in some way to engage in contact with Israelis. An assessment of their motivations for contact, however, revealed the ideological diversity of the sample. While many youth were motivated out of a stated desire for peace and coexistence with Israelis, many claimed that their primary motivation was to ‘convince the Israelis they’re wrong.’

The 16 youth whose personal narratives were analyzed for the current study resided in diverse locales in East Jerusalem and the West Bank. The sample consisted of 10 males, 12 Muslims, three Christians, and one youth of mixed religious background. In terms of geographic region, youth resided in East Jerusalem, Ramallah, Tulkarm, Bethlehem, Nablus, and a village called Qadas.<sup>1</sup> For the study of intergroup contact, youth were recruited to participate in an American-based coexistence program through secondary schools and through informal contacts in the territories. The primary criterion for recruitment was demonstrated oral proficiency in English, since dialogue sessions with Israelis were to be conducted in English. These youth thus represent a non-representative sample of Palestinians who have a high level of educational achievement. All of the youth were pre-screened by an interview to participate in the larger study of intergroup contact. As part of this pre-screening, youth displayed no active symptoms of trauma or psychopathology.

### *Life story interview*

A life story interview modeled upon McAdams’ (1995a) protocol was conducted with the 16 youth targeted for ethnographic study. The interview began by instructing youth to draw a ‘life-line’ representing their life to date, charting the ‘ups’ and ‘downs’ of life. Modeled upon Runyan’s (1980) Life Satisfaction Chart and Gergen and Gergen’s (1983) approach to narrative analysis, the life-line drawing allowed participants to construct the form of their own personal narratives. Following the drawing, youth were encouraged to tell the story of their life using the line as a guide.

After this initial life story account, McAdams’ (1995a) formal protocol was administered; this contains questions about general life experience, critical life events (e.g., peak and nadir experiences, turning points), influences in life, and religious, spiritual, and political values. Extensive questions about the Israeli–Palestinian conflict and the political views of youth based on the major policy platforms in Palestinian society were posed in the final part of the interview.

### *Analytic strategy*

The research question guiding the current analysis centers on the process of narrative engagement in the context of political conflict. As suggested by the theoretical framework outlined, this psychosocial process is best accessed through an analysis of the personal narrative—its form, thematic content, and ideological



setting (McAdams, 1996, 2001)—and its relationship to the master narrative of the group (Hammack, 2008). The *form* of the narrative refers to its overall organizational pattern (see Gergen & Gergen, 1983; Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998). For example, a *progressive* narrative assumes a constant upward trajectory, with no low points or nadirs. By contrast, a *tragic* narrative assumes a constant downward trajectory, particularly in its presently conceived ‘ending.’ A *redemptive* (McAdams, 2006), or *descent-and-gain* (Lieblich et al., 1998), form is characterized by ups and downs, with challenges followed by cumulative gains and, thus, upward trajectories.

In terms of *thematic content* and *ideological setting*, life stories of youth were analyzed comparatively with the master narrative of Palestinian history and identity, which I constructed using both my ethnographic field notes and historical documents such as political speeches. Of particular focus were the following four major themes of the master narrative: loss/dispossession, existential insecurity, resistance, and delegitimization of Israeli identity. In terms of ideological setting, the main comparative point of analysis centered on whether youth had incorporated the secular nationalism of Fatah that has traditionally characterized the master narrative, or the more recent religious nationalism represented by Hamas.

Narratives were analyzed holistically to maintain the integrity of each personal narrative (Lieblich et al., 1998; see also Mishler, 1999). Three cases of the 16 analyzed were selected for presentation as exemplars based on their ability to highlight patterns revealed across cases. The consideration of three of these life stories in their totality only begins to shed light on the experience of contemporary Palestinian youth, yet an in-depth analysis of these three cases provides idiographic specificity on the cultural psychology of Palestinian youth.

### *Position and reflexivity*

Since qualitative research relies heavily on the researcher for both observation and interpretation, the researcher’s identity becomes relevant for analysis (e.g., Hendrix, 2002; Henwood & Pidgeon, 1992; Langhout, 2006). Reflexivity about one’s position in relation to the population of study renders the interpretation and representation of data more credible by contextualizing the data as the product of a social exchange between researcher and ‘subject’ (Mishler, 1986). My status as a non-Jewish, non-Arab American with minimal initial knowledge about the conflict positioned me as a ‘stranger’ (Simmel, 1908/1971) to Palestinian society, which enhanced my access to youth and their families, who were eager to extend their hospitality and to educate me about their experiences. My identity as a psychologist conferred a high degree of ‘prestige’ (Simmel, 1908/1971) that also enhanced my access to communities, given the value placed on education in Palestinian society. Yet my American identity positioned me as a member of a national group whose policies have detrimentally impacted Palestinian lives. As I analyze the narratives of youth, I remain fully aware of my position within the interview encounter, and this awareness influences my interpretation.

## Narratives of youth

### *The unlikely Islamist: The story of Ali*<sup>2</sup>

With his baggy shorts, baseball cap, and iPod, Ali looks like a typical American teenager. The first day I met him, he engaged with me, in his fluent English, about some of his favorite movies, like *The Matrix* and *Lord of the Rings*. He is, in fact, a 16-year-old Palestinian Muslim from East Jerusalem. His appropriation of American style, his consumption of American products, his fluent mastery of English and French, in addition to his native Arabic and some Hebrew, all attest to his participation in the global youth culture (Arnett, 2002). From a wealthy Palestinian family that is apolitical and anti-ideological, Ali has, by most standards, an exceptional status as a Palestinian.

Yet despite his privilege, Ali's life story does not present itself as a narrative of progress or ascent. It is, rather, true to the tragic form of the Palestinian master narrative. With its tone of despair and depression, loss and anger, and vengeful resistance, it conforms quite closely to the master narrative of Palestinian identity, and Ali has in fact appropriated much of the discourse of this narrative into his life story.

Ali's narrative assumes a stable form until age 4, when the first Gulf War begins. His story is grounded in the foundational tone of fear that characterized that historical moment in the lives of both Palestinians and Israelis, connected in the mutual fate of potential annihilation (e.g., Elbedour, 1998; Lavee & Ben-David, 1993; Lavi & Solomon, 2005; Milgram, 1994).

I wasn't really aware of everything, but I remember it. The gas masks, and I remember my little brother was like, two or one, and they had to put him in this plastic box or something. And I was really scared. I remember that. . . . You could hear the alarm every day, the sirens. I remember crying sometimes.

Ali's first memory is thus the first descent in his life story. It is a time at which the idea of existential insecurity is awakened for him—the notion that his life is not secure and that he and his family live a fragile existence as Palestinians.

Ali's life-line ascends as he professes to have slipped into a period of political unconsciousness, dismissing the threats in his social ecology and attempting to live a 'normal' life: 'I was a kid, so I wasn't aware of the situation, just normal life, school, making friends. [Life] starts going down when I grew up.' With the emergence of political consciousness and the birth of a sophisticated understanding of 'the situation,' Ali's life story begins its tragic decline:

I didn't really start to care about other people until I was like 12 years old. But then I came to know about the whole thing, and it's really depressing. It was like, to see how people are humiliated. . . . And then the *intifada* started. It's like, when you're

a 16-year-old, I'm a 16-year-old Palestinian... and it's so hard. It's hard to be who you are.

For Ali, the increase in his political awareness became a 'depressing' influence on his life story. The conflict and its social structure results in the perception that he cannot fully express his identity as a Palestinian, which is connected to his residence in East Jerusalem, a locale that Israel officially annexed following the 1967 war and has sought to diminish in terms of Palestinian population (Klein, 2004). From age 12, Ali's narrative contains one tragic story after another—stories of his own experience, but even more so of the collective experience of the Palestinians. His privilege has, to some extent, shielded him from the harsh realities of the conflict, and he experiences a sense of guilt as a result.

The form of Ali's narrative mirrors the master narrative of Palestinian identity with alarming precision. His story is saturated with the tone of fear and the experience of identity insecurity that characterizes the dominant Palestinian story. As we consider in greater detail the thematic content of the narrative (i.e., dispossession, existential insecurity, resistance, and delegitimization of Israeli identity), the link between his story and the master narrative becomes increasingly apparent.

Dispossession of the land is a central theme in Ali's life story. In connecting resistance to this loss, he reveals the extent to which he has appropriated the master narrative of Palestinian identity:

It's like we're supposed to fight for every inch of the country. It's ours, and they took it by force. We're gonna take it back by force, if we can. But we, we can't take it back by force! We don't have money. We're not allowed to have an army, weapons, nothing! This is why we use the freedom fighters... I believe, if we're not gonna get our land back, we don't have to make peace. Everyone should fight until they die.

In this brief excerpt from his narrative, we see quite readily the axis upon which Palestinian identity is constructed and reproduced among youth: the *unjust* dispossession of the land ('It's *ours*, and they took it by force'), and the *just* cause of Palestinian resistance, symbolized during the second *intifada* by the 'freedom fighters' (Allen, 2006; Naaman, 2007). In this excerpt, though, the theme of Palestinian *powerlessness* is also apparent. For Ali, the inherent *weakness* of the consistent *loss* of the Palestinians is not fully reversed through resistance, as perhaps it is intended to be in the master narrative.

Ali endorses the practice of suicide bombing as a legitimate form of resistance, though he professes that he would never become a 'fighter,' because of his family. As he says, 'I don't wanna mess up their lives,' causing yet another disruption in their own narratives:

And how come do they call the suicide bombers 'terrorists' and not the Israeli government? They started all the violence! They invaded Palestine! It's like, we're

just defending ourselves. What else can you do?! If your wife was raped and killed, your mother and father, your whole family was killed in front of you, and you were humiliated, your wife being raped in front of you, and your home destroyed, and you have no reason to live, and all the hate, and you have all the hate inside you, and all you could think of is revenge, right?!... It's wrong, but it's the *only* way. And it's like every Israeli has to join the army. It's like, so no one's innocent.

Ali appropriates the master narrative when he rejects the label of 'terrorism' to describe Palestinian acts against Israelis. As he notes, 'They started all the violence! They invaded Palestine!' In this narrative frame, Israel is the aggressor and antagonist and the Palestinians defenders of a legitimate cause for liberation from occupation and oppression. But Ali also reveals the current phase of Palestinian resistance as a time grounded in desperation. He presents a narrative of the suicide bomber as the ultimate victim, and thus someone who has 'nothing to lose.' In many ways, Ali shares the same sense of collective depression, despite the fact that he has not experienced these kinds of traumatic losses: 'We don't believe that we have a good life,' he says, 'We live, like, we have no reason to live.' Yet Ali reveals his own ambivalence about the practice of suicide bombing—justifying it as a legitimate tactic on the one hand, but claiming that it is somehow 'wrong' on the other.

Ali's characterization of the Palestinian collective experience, as well as the obstacles of his own life story, reveal salient perceptions of insecurity, trauma, and humiliation because of the occupation and military control of Palestinian mobility (see Giacaman et al., 2007):

[As a Palestinian in East Jerusalem] you're so humiliated, discriminated against, everywhere... Checkpoints everywhere you go, soldiers looking at you. You are not allowed to look at soldiers. You get beat up if you do anything. If you do...you're fucked up. You can't be yourself. And if you do, you're in danger. Like a guy was shot next to my house, just because a soldier felt like killing somebody... Like a month ago, I was going through the checkpoint, and the soldiers were just training, practicing how to shoot and stuff. They were pointing the guns at us, and they started shooting but the rifle was empty. They didn't care. It was so scary.

The structure of the conflict, with its ubiquitous checkpoints that serve to reinforce the power differential of the conflict (Gordon, 2008), creates regular traumas for Ali and essentially blocks his ability to express an identity: 'You can't be yourself,' as he says. As an East Jerusalemite, a member of a subordinated identity group within Israeli society,<sup>3</sup> Ali's identity is under constant threat by Israelis who seek the 'de-Palestinization' of Jerusalem and insist on its Jewish identity (Klein, 2004; see also Romann & Weingrod, 1991).

Ali is particularly influenced not only by his own experiences but also by stories of Palestinian suffering that proliferate in the larger society—on the streets between friends and on the internet:

A friend of mine was shot—not a friend of mine, someone I know—was shot because he was walking in the street during curfew, and he was killed. That was really, really terrible. Yeah, he's my friend's best friend. It's so fucked up. And you get to hear lots of stories. They show it on the, they show it on the Palestinian TV. It's so weird, like, the media's so biased. You hear about every suicide bombing, right? But you never heard about what the soldiers are doing.

Palestinians like Ali, who are somewhat more distant from the nexus of violent confrontation with Israeli soldiers, know the stories of loss and trauma in the second *intifada* through stories in the media and through friends. The salience of these stories commands a powerful sense of identification, as the existential security of one's *identity*, if not one's actual life, is at stake (Pettigrew, 2003).

Ali experiences only glimpses of identity insecurity—at checkpoints most notably. But the plight of Palestinians in the West Bank resonates with him and forms a crucial part of his personal narrative. Identifying the West Bank as 'the most dangerous place you can live,' he explains the inherent insecurity of daily existence there:

'Cause you never know what happens, even if you are in the middle of your house. An F-16 could just come and shoot! They bomb houses. Little babies get killed with their family. It's so scary. There's this guy, Ahmed, he's a singer, a Palestinian singer. There's a song about a little girl that was on the roof of her house, and the Israeli soldiers were shooting and she was shot and died. He made a song about her. She's like an innocent little girl that had nothing to do with anything! I think she was 5 or 4. Yeah, it's heart-breaking.

The stories of Palestinian struggle in the *intifada* are extremely salient to Ali, who reports feeling a sense of guilt that, as an East Jerusalemite, he 'suffers less' than his West Bank compatriots.

Ali's narrative reveals the significance of stories of collective suffering and their proliferation in the discourse of contemporary Palestinian culture as fundamental to the narrative engagement of youth. It is these stories that infuse Ali's personal narrative with its tragic form and tone and the reproduction of themes associated with the master narrative—loss, resistance, existential insecurity, and exclusive legitimacy. His narrative exemplifies the active process of narrative engagement and reveals the power of this process in the construction of a personal narrative of identity.

Ali's personal narrative also reveals the dynamic nature of culture and narrative, as he positions his life story within one of the two primary competing ideologies of Palestinian politics during the second *intifada*. Given the secularism of his family, it

is somewhat surprising that Ali has appropriated the discourse of political Islam into the ideological setting of his life story.

And there's this thing in Islam, if someone dies for his own country, he's like, these are the best people. If you die for your country, you go straight to heaven. That's what we believe. It's in the Koran also . . . The whole Islamic population is supposed to fight for Palestine because, you know, there is the prophet Mohammed was there. It's a holy land.

Considering his narrative in the context of his larger social ecology, Ali's identification with political Islam seems unlikely. While refugees and Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza have experienced great hardships during the second *intifada*, Ali's family has suffered little. They own a profitable business in Jerusalem. Ali, like his parents, acknowledges that he does not practice Islam. Yet it is precisely his sense of privilege as a Palestinian that makes him all the more motivated to appropriate an Islamist variant of the master narrative of Palestinian identity.

The unanticipated ideological setting of Ali's personal narrative, with its clear connection to a religious nationalist version of the Palestinian master narrative, reveals the success of movements like Hamas in the Palestinian territories. By the second *intifada*, organizations like Hamas had come to quite successfully attract youth to their ideological discourse by presenting an empowering, viable alternative to Fatah, with its perceived corruption. Hamas' provision of social services was central to building a credible movement that could attract youth (Mishal & Sela, 2006).

It is precisely because Ali feels *incomplete* as a Palestinian, because he feels unable to fully express an identity, that he appropriates a polarized self-narrative that conforms closely to the master narrative. This sense of *inadequacy* as a Palestinian stems both from the uniqueness of his socioeconomic privilege and his status as an East Jerusalemite. The following excerpt from his narrative illustrates:

The most disturbing thing is, like, little kids, throwing stones. It's like, you see the courage in your people. And I'm really proud of being a Palestinian. I'm *really* proud. It's like, you see men in 8-year-old children. *Men. Real men* . . . I live in East Jerusalem, it's different there. I think these children are better than me. Better. Better than me . . . They're like men, *real men*.

Ali's sense of *inferiority* as a Palestinian from East Jerusalem—his sense that he does not undergo the same kind of daily trauma that affects Palestinians in the West Bank—likely motivates his identification with a discourse that he *perceives* to represent the master narrative of Palestinian identity. As an elite, he may be shielded from elements of this *experience*, but its master narrative is too compelling to repudiate. It is a narrative that commands identification in the meaning and purpose it can provide young Palestinians who perceive the powerlessness in



their midst. For Ali, identification with the master narrative restores power and a sense of agency through its call to resistance and justice.

### *The pious villager: The story of Adara*

Nowhere is the Palestinian master narrative and its ideological content more salient than in Palestinian villages like Qadas, the home of 16-year-old Adara. Physically isolated from Israel and the rest of the world, an insular discourse in the service of producing identities of resistance is carefully deployed. Posters of the *shahid* ('martyrs') are ubiquitous (see Allen, 2006), as are the flags and symbols of Hamas and Islamic Jihad.<sup>4</sup> The popularity of these organizations and their ideologies is probably enhanced by the religious character of Qadas. Nowhere else in Palestine did I witness so many people waking early to pray at the mosque, or interrupting their daily routines to bow toward Mecca. And nowhere else did I encounter such a proliferation of songs and symbols of Palestinian resistance.

Qadas, then, offers a social ecology in which an Islamist version of the Palestinian master narrative would likely have appeal. In the midst of this social ecology, Adara, a quiet, deferent young woman, devotedly covered in a *hijab*, like nearly all the women in her family, has begun to construct her personal narrative and ground it in an ideological setting. Adara's narrative begins with the forgotten happiness of childhood. Quickly, though, her story assumes the tragic form of the Palestinian master narrative:

I think when I was a baby I had a good time. But then, I was 5 years, 6 years, at that time it was the occupation, and I became aware of it, and it was so bad.

Adara's political awareness begins at an earlier age than Ali's, and with that awareness the tone of her story becomes grounded in the struggle of life under occupation.

Asked to divide her narrative into chapters, she identifies two: a 'good' chapter and a 'bad' one. Tragically, she says, 'I think the bad time is more than the good time.' Her first memory reveals the only role an Israeli will assume in her life story: that of a soldier:

When I was a child, always soldiers were there. They came to our house to take my brother. I remember I was 4 years old. The soldiers came to our house. I was in another room, and they stayed the whole night waiting for my brother to come home. And my mother, she was crying. It was a terrible experience.

As it turns out, it is only one of many encounters with the occupation for Adara and her family, most of whom have chosen exile over the limitations imposed by Israel. But a small number of family members, including Adara, remain in Qadas, forced to reckon with the obstacles of daily life under occupation.

Although she cannot identify a peak experience in her life story, Adara does claim to experience happiness, but that happiness is entirely contingent on the status of operations in the occupied territories.

When I see the news and there will be no people killed from the occupation here in Palestine, I am so happy. I am like, 'Oh, it must be like this always.' Without killing or the separation wall.

The perpetual descent of Adara's narrative is also rooted in the experience of life under occupation.

It's extremely hard, the checkpoint. And from 2003, the life is always going to be difficult and complicated, with the separation wall. So we can't go to Jerusalem to visit Al-Aqsa Mosque, to visit other holy sites. So always when you want to go to another city in Palestine, you see the Jewish settlements, and I feel so bad, when I see the Israeli flag here in Palestine. Because Palestine is our land.

In this excerpt from Adara's narrative, the connection between the tragic form of her life story and the social structure of military occupation is apparent. Adara's emphasis on the *land*, and her sense of alienation from it, reveals a close connection to the master narrative.

In its form and thematic content, Adara's life story closely mirrors the master narrative of Palestinian identity, with its focus on cumulative loss and trauma as the master trope, and tragedy as the guiding tone and form of the story. The ideological content of Adara's narrative also closely conforms to the master narrative. Although she makes a number of references to land dispossession, Adara espouses a two-state solution to the conflict and a willingness to recognize Israel and to concede that the entirety of the British mandate of Palestine is not a realistic goal for reclamation.

We are here in Palestine, we are helpless... We want the world to believe that Palestine is our homeland. Palestine *is* our homeland... Palestine is our land, so I don't like these feelings [that the conflict creates]. I think that Israel-Palestinian conflict is complicated... But we are two nations, we must decide to stop killing and live peacefully in the two separated countries in 1967 borders.

Adara longs for the tranquillity of life without occupation. As a compromise in her ideological setting, she has exchanged willingness to acknowledge the legitimacy of Israeli identity with the possibility of emancipation from the occupation. While youth like Ali emphasize that the Israeli occupation includes *all* of mandate Palestine, Adara seeks only the liberation of the territories occupied in 1967. In this way, she is clearly more aligned with the secular nationalism of Fatah than the Islamist nationalism of Hamas.

A central theme of the master narrative is the existential threat of identity insecurity, as symbolized in structural encounters Palestinians undergo, such as the checkpoint. This theme resonates strongly with the experiential content of Adara's narrative. Insecurity consumes her narrative when she identifies the struggles of life under occupation, beginning with her childhood memories of soldiers coming to her house to look for her brother. The fact that the occupation comes to create for youth in Qadas insecurity and unpredictability is extremely disruptive, socially and psychologically. Qadas is a simple village, and lives are lived in relative simplicity. But the occupation introduces a layer of complexity that reverses the 'natural' flow of life and reframes the 'life space' (Lewin, 1951) of Qadas' inhabitants.

It is not, however, simply stories of the daily life of Qadas' inhabitants that influence the life stories of youth like Adara. Rather, it is the highly effective dissemination of stories throughout Palestine, as evident in Ali's narrative, that serves to ensure an ideological setting, as well as a thematic reproduction, that conforms to the master narrative of Palestinian identity. In discussing her favorite film, Adara describes it as follows:

It's talking about the Palestinians in 1948 when they are getting, they got out of Palestine and they go to Lebanon and Egypt and Jordan. It talks about the story, and about the soldiers. It talks about the children of Palestine. Some children were lost from their parents. When you see these things, you feel sad about them. Because it's a hard feeling to be without your parents. Maybe the child, his parents are still here in Palestine. Sometimes a family from Israel has taken this baby and made him Israeli, Jewish.

In film, then, Palestinian youth like Adara are exposed to the master story of Palestinian identity and to its tragic foundations in the *Nakba* (Catastrophe) of 1948. The story offers in alluring simplicity the construction of a protagonist (the Palestinian) and an antagonist (the Israeli) that is appealing to youth and that resonates with their daily experience of the occupation, in which the only Israelis they encounter are soldiers. The mechanism of identification and reproduction is, as revealed in Adara's story, *affective*—its contents possessing a deep emotional resonance that constructs social identity and ingroup solidarity.

In her engagement with Palestinian literature and poetry as well, Adara comes to internalize the discourse of the Palestinian master narrative.

I'm reading now a book by a Palestinian writer about Palestine, and about the war here in Palestine and in Lebanon. The writer who wrote this book, it's so nice because he wants to make the people understand what the Israelis want from the Palestinians. Maybe we can understand them, the Israelis. Every story finished in Israel, and the plans Israel has . . . When you read the book you can understand many clues about the occupation, from the beginning until now.

[...]

I like the poetry of Mahmoud Darwish... There's this poem about Israel, he says, 'You are stealing my children. You have stolen my whole church with my ancestors, and the land which I cultivated, along with my children, and you have left us with nothing except for these socks.' He talks about the true stories, how they have stolen our land. And sometimes our children.

The perception of the conflict as the unjust dispossession of her people's land is firmly secured through her engagement with these texts—these sites of discursive reproduction that are highly effective for both their emotional salience and their resonance with the structural conditions of the occupation itself. Such stories affirm the *imago* (McAdams, 1993) of the Israeli as a brutal, inhuman antagonist acting against the Palestinians.

The most significant family story transmitted from generation to generation in Adara's family is the experience of dispossession in 1948, when her parents were forced to flee their placid seaside village for Qadas. For Adara, this story is so vivid, so real and raw, that she struggles to even discuss it. The story of dislocation in 1948 is the great tragedy in the narrative of the family. When I ask her about the story, she says, 'I don't like this story. Many are crying in this story. And when my parents talk to me about this, they are so sad. And me too. It is too sad.'

Adara's personal narrative, still in its formative stages of construction, illustrates a connection to a number of stories accessible in the discourse of her social ecology. These stories are quite appealing to Adara in their thematic content. They provide a larger perception of group struggle and loss that serves to construct a coherent tragic narrative and to imbue Adara's experiences of life under occupation with meaning. The inculcation of a tragic narrative—a narrative that focuses on loss, dispossession, and injustice—is necessary if one is to also cultivate a narrative of resistance, for the two are mutually contingent. Yet Adara's story does not emphasize the trope of resistance. Instead, Adara seems to possess a kind of resignation to tragedy, or at least to the futility of Palestinian organized resistance.

Because of her family's experience with Palestinian resistance—initial involvement followed by resignation and then exile—Adara has perhaps internalized a sense of futility in resistance. Ideologically, as noted, she supports a two-state solution:

We need to live peacefully, and to separate the countries in 1967 borders, so that if we can find a good result... I think this is good for the Palestinians, for Israel. We need this. And of course, without separation wall.

Interestingly, even though Adara strongly supports a two-state solution to the conflict, she purports to identify more with Hamas than with Fatah. Yet, as she

confesses this identification to me, which I do not find surprising given her religiosity and the fact that Hamas has, in fact, provided a number of social services to the youth in Qadas, she seems to do so with a sense of guilt: 'I think that [Fatah] is good, but sometimes I feel Hamas.'

It is noteworthy that my initial interview with Adara took place in the summer of 2005, before Hamas assumed power in the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) and before their forcible takeover of the Gaza Strip created a context in the West Bank in which one could not safely express allegiance to Hamas. But clearly, at this point in her identity development, Adara is more aligned ideologically with Fatah, even if the Islamic nature of Hamas at times appeals to her. Her ideology more closely resembles the secular nationalism that underlies the traditional Palestinian master narrative. Yet, of course, the ideological setting of her life story is only beginning to be constructed, and the path it will eventually assume remains to be seen.

Describing the theme or message of her story, and the impression that it will have on an audience, Adara describes it as follows:

[People will think about my story], there is a nice story. When you read it, you can feel good. You feel you are good now, at first, but then you feel not so good because then you, the whole story about the Palestinians, you can't, you shouldn't feel good in the story about the occupation, the separation wall, about the killing here. About the situation. So it's not so good a story.

Adara's personal narrative is thus a story that was not meant to be a tragedy. It is the story of a good life, with great possibility. Yet the tragedy of collective struggle infuses the story. In this important concluding passage of her narrative, Adara reveals the extent to which her life story is intimately connected to the Palestinian master narrative, with its tragic form and thematic content.

While Adara's life story conforms closely to the master narrative, her story diverges from the master narrative in two notable ways. First, there is little in her narrative about resistance. She seems relatively resigned to Palestine's historic loss and willing to compromise for peace. Second, she does not seem to delegitimize Israeli identity. Though she emphasizes that 'Palestine is our land' and that it was taken unjustly, she does not refer to Zionism or to Israeli national identity as explicitly illegitimate. She does not question the existence of Israel, nor does her two-state solution to the conflict suggest that Israel might not exist. On these dimensions, Adara's personal narrative reveals points of contestation in the Palestinian master narrative, as the legitimacy of violent resistance and the lack of recognition of Israel have become increasingly interrogated as worthy elements of the narrative over time.

Adara's life story reveals the way in which youth dynamically engage with the content of a master narrative as they begin to construct their own personal narratives. Beyond the elements of the master narrative that Adara clearly reproduces,

such as its tragic tone or its thematic focus on loss and land dispossession, what is most interesting about her story is its *idiographic complexity*. Without knowing the holistic picture of her life—for example, the encounters with the Israeli army that her older siblings had—it would be difficult to comprehend her ideological perspective, her willingness to recognize Israel, and her dismissal of resistance as a legitimate response to the occupation. The contrast between the personal narratives of Ali and Adara reveals quite saliently the ways in which the content of personal narratives cannot always be anticipated by the social ecology of development. Although Adara lives an ideologically insulated life, she is far more open to the possibility of peace and coexistence than Ali, whose privileged status in Palestinian society creates within him a kind of compensatory reaction as he sets his life story in a particular ideology.

### *The Christian fighter: The story of Luca*

The two stories presented so far have been the stories of Palestinian Muslim youth. Let us now consider the narrative of a Palestinian Christian youth—someone for whom the Islamist discourse on Palestine, with its calls for an Islamic state, can have no resonance by virtue of its exclusionary ideology. Luca is a 16-year-old from the West Bank city of Bethlehem. The son of a carpenter and small-scale entrepreneur, Luca's life story begins in conflict:

The first day I was born my parents could not take me to the hospital because it was a Palestinian holiday, where people remember the day the Israelis came and started digging up, uprooting the trees. After that day until now, they remember that day... My father suffered and they both suffered to take me to the hospital in Jerusalem... The soldiers wouldn't let anybody move, and this was the day my life started. Just my mother only, they wouldn't let my father go to the hospital.

Luca's narrative thus begins in the social structure of occupation. The fundamental task of getting to the hospital for childbirth is disrupted by the conflict, and his life story thus begins in complete engagement with the conflict.

Luca's narrative assumes in its form immediate tragedy upon his birth and the complications of it, the story of which has been passed down to him from his parents. As the conflict becomes more psychologically remote, his life-line briefly ascends and stabilizes, yet its direction is inevitably downward as it makes a gradual descent toward a present-day nadir. This period of ascent and stability occurs during the first *intifada* and the subsequent aftermath of the Oslo accords. As Luca describes it,

[The first part of my life] was during the first *intifada*. And the situation was getting better day by day until the peace agreement, and then it's back to normal for 2 or 3 years. And then it got worse and worse until now, and now we have the second *intifada*. I got injured in the second *intifada*.



Luca's story is entirely connected to the political context of his life. His life-line is essentially a map of the conflict itself, perceived through the lens of a young Palestinian. Experientially, he cannot escape the conflict.

The second *intifada* is the great nadir of Luca's story. It is a time in which the fragility of his very existence was called into question during the siege on Bethlehem 2 years prior to our initial interview. That period of reoccupation is vividly imprinted into Luca's life story.

You know when they occupied Bethlehem we can't go out of our homes. So I was riding my bike and a jeep was passing by. He called me, the soldier. I ran as much as I could, but there was something in the way, and I hit it, and flew in the air before I came down. This is one of the times I got injured.

The events of Luca's life which determine the form of his narrative cannot be dissociated from the master narrative of Palestinian identity, or its ideological setting, for Luca's experiences mirror the experiential content of the master narrative itself.

In describing his life during the second *intifada*, Luca highlights Palestinian insecurity:

We don't have anything. We don't have zoos, parks, nothing... And it's a terrible life. It's like a jail. You can't do anything. Even in jail, people don't worry about their food. But us, we're worried about our food, how we're going to drink water. The Israelis control everything in our lives... And now, the new, what's called the new separation wall, makes a big difference. Smaller jail. Every time, smaller and smaller. They're trying to cage us in. Until we just disappear.

The 'abnormality' of Palestinian life is well represented in this excerpt from Luca's narrative, with his description of the deprivation of Palestinian life under Israeli occupation and its comparison to imprisonment. But what is perhaps most thematically salient in this excerpt, in terms of his story's connection to the master narrative, is his pervading sense of identity insecurity. The perception that the Palestinians have no control in their own lives, that the 'Israelis control everything,' including the water, leaves Luca with an internalized sense of threatened existence. His conviction that the separation barrier just creates another phase in the Israeli attempt to eradicate the Palestinians—'until we disappear'—reveals the extent to which he identifies with the existential insecurity of the Palestinian master narrative. This identification is secured in the structure of the conflict itself, in the concreteness of the separation barrier and its location inside of the Green Line (i.e., the 1967 armistice line separating Israel and the Palestinian territories), and in the checkpoints and closures that complicated Luca's birth and continue to create barriers in his life (see Gordon, 2008).

Existential insecurity may lie at the root of Luca's narrative, with the challenge of getting to the hospital for his own birth, but it has been consistently affirmed

during the course of the second *intifada*. Describing life under occupation, Luca says:

It's terrible. You can't imagine, every day, how we go to school. And whether we're going to school or not. If the school is destroyed or not. Even if we're in school, we hear shooting, we are confused all day, we can't concentrate, we don't understand anything. But Palestinians have a really hard life. You're going to wake up the next day, and the house is going to get blown up. You know, it's always, Israelis always say it's a mistake. 'We hit this house, we thought it was a terrorist house.' . . . The beginning of the second *intifada*, they were shooting a lot, and my house was shot over 30 bullets. It came in the windows. It didn't hit anyone. There's some nights when we didn't sleep at all.

Luca must deal with the uncertainty of daily life as a young Palestinian. With this uncertainty and its experiential content comes a perception of existential insecurity.

As Luca describes his motivation to engage in intergroup contact with Israelis, the thematic proximity of his personal narrative to the master narrative is striking:

I want to show all the people that Palestinians are suffering. The Israelis occupied our land. They don't have any rights, no human rights. They use all the ways to torture us. Plus, freedom fighters are not terrorists because they are fighting for the country, and we don't have an army. I came to show all the people, Israelis, Americans, Jews . . . I want to show them all what Palestinians are actually going through, how much we suffer.

The dispossession of the Palestinians from their land, despite the fact that Luca and his family indeed remain in possession of their original home in Bethlehem, is a central message that Luca seeks to communicate in his life story. In Luca's narrative, the Palestinian cause is a just cause, and actions against Israel are legitimate, justifiable, and cannot credibly be labeled 'terrorism.' Palestinians suffer under the harsh, unjust Israeli occupation, and resistance to something so unjust, so threatening, is both normal and justifiable in his view.

Speaking more directly of his personal experiences in the second *intifada*, Luca identifies being an adolescent during this historical moment as beneficial to his own personal connection to his social identity as a Palestinian.

[The *intifada*,] it's a bad thing, but it's a good thing because it made, the second *intifada* made me stand for Palestine. The first *intifada* I was small, I didn't understand much. But now, I like understand more about it. People are dying for their country, for Palestine, and I think the second *intifada* was good too because people are fighting, not like the first *intifada* because now we have suicide bombers and the first *intifada* was just throwing rocks and small things. And now, we have small weapons . . . Plus the whole world gets to know what's happening now in Palestine.

Luca identifies the second *intifada* as formative in his connection to his national identity, which he sees as extremely beneficial. He also views the second *intifada* as a better and more effective demonstration of Palestinian resistance, revealing his connection to the ideology of active Palestinian resistance as a method of opposition to the occupation. He sees the first *intifada* as a passive movement in which the Palestinians did not possess weapons and did not use the suicide bombers.

Clearly, Luca identifies strongly with the thematic content of the master narrative of Palestinian identity, including a focus on dispossession of the land, existential insecurity of Palestinian identity under occupation, and the legitimacy of armed resistance. Though he does not explicitly delegitimize Israeli identity or call for the destruction of Israel, he implicitly does in his argument for the unjust dispossession of Palestinian land. Not surprisingly, his is the discourse of a secular nationalist Palestinian resistance. As a Christian, he cannot identify with the Islamist discourse that has emerged as a viable competitor for ideological identification among youth.

Aside from the influence on the ideological setting of Luca's story, however, his status as a religious minority in Palestine has no distinguishing influence on his process of narrative engagement. When asked about how his Christian identity impacts his experience of life in Palestine, Luca says,

I am the one guy that was throwing rocks, everyone throws rocks, because you want to do something for your country. It doesn't matter if someone's Muslim or Christian, or this myth like only the Muslims are involved in the shooting and fighting, it's not true, 'cause we're all Palestinians.

For Luca and other Palestinian Christian youth, religious identity is not a source of divergence in identification with and appropriation of the Palestinian master narrative. Because the social structure and political violence of the occupation does not discriminate on the basis of religious identity (as is evident in Luca's narrative of the 2002 siege of Bethlehem by the Israeli army), the narratives of Palestinian youth converge in the unity they ascribe to *national* identity over religious identity.

The form and narrative tone of Luca's story closely mirrors those of Ali and Adara in its emphasis on the tragedy of Palestinian existence. Ideologically, we saw in Adara's narrative the seemingly genuine desire for a peaceful resolution of the conflict, as well as a de-emphasis on Palestinian resistance. In Luca's story, we see the same kind of ideological identification with armed acts of resistance that were present in Ali's narrative. As I queried Luca about his thoughts on suicide bombers toward the end of our interview, he revealed the frustration and rage that underlie the tragic tone of the Palestinian master narrative.

[The suicide bombers] they're depressed. *I'm* depressed. I'm here, I don't know. I feel that I'm going to explode... I don't know, it makes me angry... I would kill any Israeli, I don't care. Being Palestinian, and living the Palestinian life, going through hundreds of checkpoints, getting beaten by soldiers...

Luca's narrative is thus more than merely tragic and despondent in its tone and form; it is on the brink of an overwhelmingly furious anger. This anger is, for Luca, channeled into his support of armed acts of resistance.

In sum, Luca's personal narrative closely mirrors the form, thematic content, and ideological setting of the Palestinian master narrative. Like the master narrative, Luca's life story assumes the form of a tragedy. This form is retained by the history of existential insecurity and sense of loss that pervade his personal narrative. Luca expresses strong support for armed resistance against the occupation, but the ideological setting of his story conforms more closely to the traditional secular nationalist ideology of Fatah than its Islamist competitors. Luca's Christian identity assumes a role in solidifying this ideological setting, but it also reveals the unity of Palestinian experience in the context of the occupation, given his experience of the 2002 Israeli invasion of Bethlehem. As in the cases of Ali and Adara, Luca's narrative sensitizes us to the idiographic complexity of young lives and their relationship to a complex social ecology characterized by the social structure of conflict and occupation.

## Discussion

### *The narrative engagement of Palestinian youth*

The engagement with stories is a fundamental process of human development (McAdams, 1990, 1993; McLean et al., 2007; Pasupathi et al., 2007; Sarbin, 1986). Human communities use language—organized into coherent narratives—to provide the tools for social sense-making (Bruner, 1987, 1990, 2008; Vygotsky, 1934/1986, 1978). Groups promulgate master narratives of collective history and identity and seek to instill in their members a sense of affiliation with the narrative, thereby reproducing the group by fostering the integration of the master narrative into the individual life story (Hammack, 2008).

The narratives of youth examined in this study reveal points of both convergence and divergence with a master narrative of identity. Most fundamentally, the youth in this study have internalized the central historical narrative of Palestinian identity that has framed their collective struggle for national liberation. This narrative is a decidedly tragic one, replete with tropes of loss, dispossession, and injustice (e.g., Said, 1979, 1994). The sense of loss is connected not only to the physical land itself, but also to the perception of existential threat that the trauma of continued loss has cultivated. Although these youth all identify with the historical narrative of Palestinian dispossession, it is perhaps the trope of existential insecurity that is most salient in the stories of contemporary youth, their lives in relatively regular danger owing to Israeli military operations in the occupied territories since the start of the second *intifada* (Gordon, 2008; Roy, 2004).

Interestingly, two central themes in the master narrative were at least partially contested among youth in the study. The legitimacy of armed struggle and resistance to the Israeli occupation is not universally appropriated by youth as they

construct their personal narratives. Though few are outright critical of Palestinian resistance, they all allude to the problematic nature of it, particularly in the common form of suicide bombing it has taken during the second *intifada*. Some youth, like Adara, seek a peaceful, negotiated solution that does not require armed struggle. But even these youth are conflicted, at times arguing that resistance represents 'self-defense' for atrocities committed against Palestinians by Israel. From their internal conflict about the legitimacy of resistance naturally flows an acceptance of Israeli identity. That is, to concede that resistance and the liberation of all of the British mandate of Palestine is futile, as do youth like Adara, and to embrace the possibility of a peaceful resolution through negotiation and a two-state solution, one necessarily acknowledges the legitimacy of Israeli identity. So the second significant point of divergence from the master narrative of Palestinian identity seems to center on a willingness to acknowledge the existence of a Jewish state and an Israeli national identity, so long as such acknowledgment is reciprocated by the Israeli willingness to legitimize Palestinian identity.

An additional source of divergence among youth centered on their internalization of either a traditional *secular* narrative of liberation—the ideological setting of the Palestinian master narrative as it emerged through the discourse of Fatah and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in the 1960s and 1970s—or an *Islamist* narrative that has emerged with the growth of organizations like Hamas beginning in the 1980s (Lybarger, 2007; Mishal & Sela, 2006). Interestingly, among the cases presented here, it was Ali, the son of very secular Muslims, who had internalized the Islamist narrative of liberating all of mandate Palestine in the name of Islam. Adara, the daughter of devout Muslims from a very religious village, set her personal narrative more in the secular ideology of Fatah.

Several caveats must be noted as we interpret points of divergence from the master narrative among the youth in this study. First, although it is tempting to draw conclusions and generalizations about Palestinian youth from the narratives collected for this study, the participants in this study constitute a theoretical, rather than representative, sample of Palestinian youth. Therefore we must consider the ways in which their particularity may influence the data they provide. To speculate, they are all in some way motivated to participate in intergroup contact, which suggests *some* acknowledgment of outgroup identity immediately. To enter into dialogue with an outgroup, one must accept the fact that the outgroup exists. Therefore, the youth in this study may be more likely to diverge from the master narrative on the delegitimization of Israeli identity. Second, the youth in this study are seeking the opportunity for intergroup contact through dialogue. It makes sense, then, that many of them might question the viability of armed resistance as a response to the Israeli occupation. They might, rather, view dialogue as a more effective means to achieve their ends. So there is a 'selection bias' in the sample that might explain the presence or absence of certain themes in the narratives of youth. Interestingly, though, many youth, such as Ali and Luca, defy this expectable distinction to construct personal narratives that *do* delegitimize Israeli identity and promulgate support for armed resistance. The proximity to these most



polarizing features of the master narrative among youth motivated to pursue inter-group contact suggests formidable obstacles to conflict transformation, as the reproduction of polarized master narratives suggests continued intractability in the next generation (Hammack, 2006).

In spite of elements of divergence from the master narrative among youth in this study, we can readily see the ways in which the Palestinian master narrative is reproduced in the personal narratives of youth, particularly in its tragic tone and form. The mechanism of reproduction may be discursive, but it is also secured in the continued confrontation with the structural conditions of the conflict that Palestinian youth continue to endure (Gordon, 2008). That is, the master narrative of Palestinian identity is not *merely* reproduced through discourse, though we see in the stories of these youth powerful identifications with the stories available in the larger culture. It is, rather, reproduced and rendered salient in the experiences with *personal* loss and insecurity that characterize the ongoing Israeli occupation. The stories of youth are saturated with intimate experience of the conflict itself, even among those who encounter the structure of the conflict with somewhat less frequency, such as Ali.

### *Toward an idiographic cultural psychology*

The cultural psychology of self and identity has typically been construed in aggregate theoretical terms (e.g., Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Shweder & Bourne, 1984; Triandis, 1989). While these taxonomies of identity helped to awaken mainstream psychology from its problematic vision of 'psychic unity' (Shweder, 1990) and the discourse of universalism that had too often characterized theories of human development, they have in some ways over-simplified the complex process of identity formation (Gjerde, 2004; Hammack, 2008). As Gjerde (2004) argues, an emphasis on the dichotomous conception of culture and identity obscures both the dynamism of culture and the role of *power* in the relationship between person and culture.

An *idiographic* cultural psychology speaks to a concern for *distinction* and *specificity* over the aim to produce generalizable, context-independent knowledge (Shweder, 1990, 2003). Following Allport's (1962) conceptualization, this approach privileges the 'unique' over the 'general' (cf. Lamiell, 1998) and seeks to highlight, through an analysis grounded at the level of the individual, efforts at personal meaning-making in cultural context (see also Schachter, 2005). An idiographic approach fully contextualizes lives and highlights the positions of social actors, thereby affording the opportunity for an analysis of power—understood through the relationship of an individual or a group to a larger social order and its accompanying institutions and discourse (Foucault, 1978, 1982). In the case of the current study, the status of Palestinians as subordinate to the military rule of Israel highlighted possibilities for narrative engagement by revealing the unity of Palestinian experience in the context of occupation. Yet an idiographic analytic approach revealed the complexity of individual locations within the matrix of Palestinian



identity—locations framed by issues of class (e.g., Ali), family history (e.g., Adara), and religious identity (e.g., Luca), among other indices.

The stories of Palestinian youth presented here illustrate the ways in which identity represents a particular ‘configuration’ (Erikson, 1959; Schachter, 2004, 2005) that provides coherence and meaning to the individual as he or she integrates personal experience with the discourse of a particular cultural surround and the narrative of a particular social identity (Bruner, 1990; Cohler, 1982; Hammack, 2008; McAdams, 1997). The complexity of the relationship between the personal narratives of youth and the master narrative of Palestinian identity reveals both the utility of a particular idiographic method in querying identity integration and the dynamism of culture itself—too often reified by the interpretive simplicity of rigid dichotomies in selfhood.

The narratives of youth collected for this study reveal the ways in which youth appropriate a discourse of identity that possesses salience in their particular social ecology of development—a discourse that gives them a sense of credibility and ‘fidelity’ (Erikson, 1963) with the significant others in their midst. In other words, the appropriation of a tragic master narrative as youth construct their own personal narratives of identity provides meaning in the context of the structural and cultural violence that characterizes military occupation (Galtung, 1990). The unity of narrative engagement for Palestinian youth lies precisely in their shared context of intractable conflict. An analysis of individual lives through the lens of a cultural psychology that ascribes primacy to power, discourse, and social structure (Gjerde, 2004) reveals a dynamic process of person–culture co-constitution through narrative engagement.

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### **Notes**

1. Qadas is the name of a Palestinian village that was destroyed during the 1948 war. It is used here as a pseudonym for a small West Bank village.
2. Pseudonyms are used for all interviewees to preserve confidentiality. Cases are titled according to my interpretation.
3. After the 1967 war, East Jerusalem was officially annexed by Israel and its residents granted ‘permanent residency’ but not citizenship. This annexation remains unrecognized by the international community.
4. It is noteworthy that in a return visit to Qadas in 2007, after the violent takeover of the Gaza Strip by Hamas, the Hamas flags that adorned the main street of the village during

my earlier fieldwork had been removed. A large poster of Sheik Yassin, founder of Hamas, remained on the street but was faded by the sun.

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