

Mind, Story, Society:  
The Political Psychology of Narrative  
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### Abstract

As social psychologists and political scientists have increasingly invoked the concept of narrative, there is a need for integrative theoretical and methodological statements about mind, politics, and stories.

Grounded in cultural psychology's thesis of mutual constitution, this chapter posits stories as the central link between mind and society and elaborates upon three premises and three psycho-political functions of narrative. Narrative is linked to concepts long prominent in the social sciences, including identity, interest, ideology, mentality, collective memory, subjectivity, and performance. Methodological approaches for empirical research on narrative and politics are reviewed, and the role of narrative inquiry in political change is discussed.

Key words: Narrative, politics, identity, subjectivity, interpretive, hermeneutic, cultural psychology

### Mind, Story, Society: The Political Psychology of Narrative

He is the son of immigrants and the grandson of a coal miner. A devout Catholic with consistently conservative views on topics like abortion and homosexuality, he lost a son born prematurely, solidifying the connection to his faith and values. For him, it takes a *family*, not a village, and the culture has shifted too far from recognition of this simple fact. He is a culture warrior, committed to securing that the institutions of yesteryear do not erode into the slippery slope of moral relativism and new ideas. He is a defender of the past, a steward of what is safe, secure, and comforting.

He is the son of a white, educated woman from Kansas and a bright Kenyan studying in the United States at the time of his conception. On one side, his grandparents confronted the shifting cultural and economic tides of a society in rapid development. On another, his extended family confronted the painful cultural and economic consequences of colonialism and its aftermath. He immersed himself in culture after culture, both at home and abroad, seeking a sense of identity, longing for a place in which he and his name might not be classified as exotic, a place of comfort and security.

For a moment in the US primary election of 2012, it looked as though these two men might compete on the global stage for leader of the world's most powerful nation. Yet the arc shifted, and another personal narrative emerged to capture the sentiment of an anxious populace, confronted with the possibility of continuing cultural and economic decline. The son of a self-made man, the descendant of a group persecuted for its beliefs and practices, emerged as the Republican nominee for President of the United States.

The personal narratives of these three men—Rick Santorum, Barack Obama, and Mitt Romney—reveal the contours of identity possibility in a complex world of cultural and historical change, characterized by the movement of people and ideas more fluidly across borders than ever before (Nesbitt-Larking & Kinnvall, 2012). They are redemptive stories of men who faced distinct challenges in life—the loss of a mother to cancer at a young age (Obama), the loss of a child at birth (Santorum), experience with religious persecution (Romney). Yet their stories diverge in the narrative positions with which they would seek to guide political behavior. If one identifies with the devout Catholic and his emphasis on the

protection of the heterosexual family as the central institution of social life, one is more likely to oppose social policy that might redefine that institution (e.g., same-sex marriage legislation). If one identifies with the son of a multicultural union, one is more likely to be sensitive to oppression and marginalization of some groups, for his is a story of the negotiation and management of stigma and subordination (Hammack, 2010b). Those who identify with his personal narrative might be more supportive of a view of institutions as always potentially oppressing some groups over others, thus viewing same-sex marriage as a necessary corrective to cultural heterosexism or heterosexual privilege and, consequently, supporting political attempts to achieve marriage equality.

The stories of these well-known politicians illustrate one of the functions of narrative I will argue is central to political psychology. A primary role of narrative in political life is *to motivate the political behavior of individuals to align their actions*. Through a process of identification with personal narratives of leaders, collective political behavior is achieved—whether that behavior involves voting, protesting, or other forms of cultural participation of a political nature. As we come to identify with the leader’s life story, we see a mirror for our own stories, and this identification serves as a powerful motivational force as individuals coordinate, either explicitly or implicitly, their behavior. In coordinating activity through cultural practice, individual subjectivity is constructed, and a status quo of power and intergroup relations is either reproduced, challenged, or repudiated.

Narrative does not simply play a defining role in political life via the personal narratives of leaders, however. To limit the significance of narrative to this role would be to suggest that the link from mind to society is extremely self-centered—that it relies exclusively on the psychological connection between two individuals (the leader and the ordinary citizen). To limit the significance of narrative to this role would also ignore decades of psychological theory and research and hold only to popular views of early social psychology and crowd behavior that ascribed almost all power to the influence of a leader (e.g., Freud, 1921/1959). Such views were popular in the era of totalitarianism, when all that was thought necessary to motivate atrocity was a leader with a charismatic, authoritarian personality (e.g., Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, & Sanford, 1950).

In this chapter, I will argue that narrative is a powerful rhetorical tool used far beyond the life stories of particular political candidates. Rather, consistent with growing arguments in social, cultural, and developmental psychology (e.g., Bamberg, 2011; Bhatia, 2011; Freeman, 2011; Hammack, 2008; McLean, Pasupathi, & Pals, 2007; Pasupathi, Mansour, & Brubaker, 2007; Syed & Azmitia, 2008), I suggest that we comprehend the social world through narrative—by clustering concepts, ideas, categories, characters, and events into a running dramatized storyline—provided to us through various forms of cultural construction, including the news media, entertainment industry, literature, law, and, of course, political discourse and rhetoric. In other words, our understanding of the social world is shaped by the meaning accorded people, places, events, and ideas, transmitted through the vehicles of culture—not a “neutral” culture but one understood as always serving the interests of some groups over others, a concept of culture informed by a recognition of power and domination (see Gjerde, 2004).

Although political rhetoric is typically framed as a set of truth claims, it is not the “accuracy” of narratives that is relevant to scientific analysis but rather the political positions they construct and the political actions they seek to motivate. The central premise of narrative is that it is fundamentally concerned with sense-making (Bruner, 1990, 1991, 2001). Narratives provide order, coherence, sensibility, and meaning to the world, and individuals call upon narrative to bring a sense of coherence to their own life course (Cohler, 1982; McAdams, 1990, 1997). Political actors exploit this fundamental psychological premise to motivate sets of actions that will contribute to the larger jockeying for power of some groups over others. Narrative is thus not neutral but always deployed to serve some interest for the maintenance or attainment of status, power, and dominance.

Narrative represents the ideal “root metaphor” for political psychology, similar to social psychologist Ted Sarbin’s (1986) prescient call for narrative as the root metaphor for the discipline of psychology at large. Sarbin (1986) argued for a “narratory principle” in psychology: “that human beings think, perceive, imagine, and make moral choices according to narrative structures” (p. 8). Sarbin, along with other major figures in the discipline around the same time (e.g., Bruner, 1986, 1990; Cohler, 1982), saw the science of mind and behavior as firmly grounded in an engagement with language and metaphor.

It has taken some time for the discipline to fully realize the seismic implications for this insight into our theories and research practices, but that day has clearly now arrived in political psychology (Hammack & Pilecki, 2012). This chapter seeks to provide a further anchor for scholars engaged in the interdisciplinary quest to link politics and the mind through rigorous theorizing and empirical inquiry.

A brief further note on the history of the narrative concept and its intrinsic interdisciplinary appeal is in order. One of the remarkable benefits of the narrative concept is its appeal to a wide range of scholars. Attention to narrative emerged with the invention of the novel as a particular cultural form (McAdams, 2012). Thus scholars in the humanities have been at the forefront of theorizing the narrative concept (e.g., Dray, 1971; White, 1987). By the 1980s, it had become clear that narratives are not just for novels, and psychologists increasingly turned to the narrative concept to theorize psychotherapy (Schafer, 1980), human development across the life course (Cohler, 1982), cultural participation (Bruner, 1986, 1990), and the formation of personality and identity (McAdams, 1988). Narrative was seen as a vital humanistic corrective in the psychological literature to the cold, computer metaphor of cognitive science and as a way to restore the idea of human beings as meaning-makers actively engaged in intentional acts (Bruner, 1990). Not surprisingly, when scholars from fields like sociology, politics, and history began to fully engage with the narrative concept, they found this psychological approach of relatively limited value, for its (over)emphasis on human agency and its neglect of a direct statement on the relative power of particular narratives. In other words, true to psychology's disciplinary biases, early narrative psychologists initially saw narrative as a kind of universal process, with the "absent standard" of its elaboration being the actor at the center of global power—the European American heterosexual male (see Sampson, 1993).

The political psychology of narrative offers a corrective to the psychologist's penchant for directing her conceptual gaze in this hegemonic, universalizing direction and to the non-psychologist's penchant for neglecting the significance of the individual mind in social and political action. In the remainder of this chapter, I posit three premises of the political psychology of narrative and three psychopolitical functions of narrative, expanding upon my argument for the centrality of narrative in both

political and psychological life. My intent is to integrate perspectives on narrative and discourse which have emerged somewhat separately in psychological and political science (and related fields like sociology) and to make the assumptions underlying this integration explicit. I offer examples of methodological approaches to narrative research in political psychology, including some that fuse levels of analysis and are inherently interdisciplinary or “transdisciplinary” in their efforts to be problem-centered, rather than discipline-centered. Finally, I conclude with a statement on the need for social scientists of narrative, psychology, and politics to offer practical knowledge that will advance interests of global social justice and the repudiation of violence as a means of silencing some narratives in the interest of domination.

### **Narrative, Politics, Mind: Three Premises, Three Functions**

The underlying assumption of a narrative approach in political psychology is that language, broadly conceived, represents the mechanism through which self and society are mutually constituted (Hammack & Pilecki, 2012). This assumption is rooted in classic and contemporary social science theory which emphasizes the content of mind as socially constructed through interaction and engagement with a system of meaning and signification apparent in language (e.g., Bakhtin, 1981; G.H. Mead, 1934; Vygotsky, 1934/1962). Narrative explains how concepts long theorized as central to political life—including interests, identities, ideologies, and mentalities—are consolidated in both individual and collective cognition and mobilized to achieve political ends.

#### **Premise 1: Interests and Identities as Narratives**

In the 2012 Republican Presidential primary, former House Speaker Newt Gingrich was solidly defeated by former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney, but Gingrich received considerable support from those who identified as “White Evangelicals” in states like South Carolina and Florida (CNN, 2012). What is it about Newt Gingrich that might have motivated individuals who identify as Evangelical to enter a voting booth and mark the box next to his name? His demonstrated infidelity in the realm of that most sacred institution to Evangelicals—heterosexual marriage—was not likely a consideration. Rather, Gingrich appeared to deploy a particular political rhetoric which appealed to those who identify as

Evangelical (Edsall, 2012). And those who identify as Evangelical also appear to be among the Republican Party's most enraged at the state of US national decline (Edsall, 2012). To the extent that Gingrich was able to successfully capture the affect of anger and rage in his rhetorical performances, he facilitated an identification process between the Evangelical and himself—an identification which motivated a particular political act on behalf of the Evangelical (i.e., a vote cast for Newt).

My point is that identity politics is not simply a popular term in the academy; it is a behavioral phenomenon. Our identities guide our political behavior, whether that behavior is situated at the level of a private voting booth in South Carolina or Florida, a mass protest against a hegemonic government in Egypt or Syria, or the actions of a coordinated social movement like the US “Occupy” movement of 2012. The link between identities and interests has been a topic of great concern for scholars of politics, economics, and sociology, but psychology provides the conceptual bridge to make sense of this link through the concept of narrative. We interpret our interests in material or symbolic terms by using narrative—by crafting a story of who we are and why engaging in some political action (e.g., casting a vote for a particular candidate, joining a social movement, engaging in a protest, etc.) is consistent with our interests. This narrative *is* our identity, and it provides the lens through which we justify our actions, to both ourselves and others (McAdams, 1993, 1996).

Two of psychology's great theorists—William James and Erik Erikson—spoke of identity in terms of a consciousness of self-sameness, by which they meant a sense that one is the same person from one day to the next (e.g., Erikson, 1959, 1968; James, 1890). In other words, identity confers coherence and continuity in the psychological experience of everyday life. Erikson (1959, 1968) importantly extended this view by fusing it with a more explicit concern with *social* identity—the idea that identity is not just about our sense of self but also about our sense of belonging to a group and a set of ideological commitments. In one of his most famous books, Erikson (1958) provided an analysis of Martin Luther not simply as an interesting character in religious history but as a political actor motivated by a passionate ideology in conflict with the dominant ideology of the day (i.e., corrupt Catholicism).

But what is the relationship between the psychological concept of *identity* and the economic or political concept of *interest*? In social psychology, interest became supplanted by the identity concept with the history of experimental social psychology. Muzafer Sherif's famous Robbers Cave experiment assumed that conflict between groups was driven by a real competition of material interests (Sherif, 1956, 1958; Sherif, Harvey, White, Hood, & Sherif, 1961). While Sherif and colleagues did demonstrate that conflict could be reduced when groups were compelled to cooperate to achieve "superordinate" goals related to common material interests (e.g., securing a common water supply), a key finding of the experiment was that constructing a symbolic difference between groups—giving them distinct names (or, in the jargon of social psychology, activating a categorization process)—was enough to instill and maintain intergroup hostility. Though Sherif himself preferred to emphasize the finding related to superordinate goals, this study offered a tipping point for other social psychologists to place identity at the forefront of their studies (e.g., Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 1986). It suggested that, over and above material interests, the symbolic nature of categorization into discrete social units (i.e., identities) could prove determinative of behavior.

In the 1970s, social identity theory—a perspective that has been of great interest in political psychology (e.g., Brewer, 2001; Huddy, 2001; Reicher, 2004)—affirmed in highly controlled laboratory experiments that mere categorization into arbitrary social groups was sufficient to activate ingroup bias (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 1986). Tajfel and Turner (1986) argued that ingroup bias in the lab was the analogue to ethnocentrism in the real world, but ingroup bias likely speaks to an even broader phenomenon in which individuals psychologically align their actions to vie for status and power (e.g., Sidanius & Pratto, 1999).

Identity, then, is not a neutral feature of individual psychological experience or development. Rather, it is a tool for collective action, a mechanism through which configurations of power are constructed, maintained, or resisted (see Polletta & Jasper, 2001). To the extent that we have an identity, we act upon the world in such a way as to coordinate with others so-identified to advance our interests. In this frame, the theory of the rational actor in political behavior diminishes and is supplanted by a view of

persons as pawns in the game of identity politics. This helps us to see why many vote against their individual economic interest—their narrative of identity compels them to act in a way that favors alignment with the group’s interest (communicated itself through rhetoric) to compete for status and power.

A concern with identity has grown all the more central to psychology as the identity concept has increased in cultural and political relevance (and discourse) since the peak of Erikson’s theorizing in the 1960s or Tajfel’s initial theoretical and experimental work in the 1970s (Hammack, 2008). But only relatively recently has a clear and compelling paradigm to empirically access what James and Erikson meant when they spoke of a “sense” of identity or what the interpretation of social identity in Tajfel and Turner’s (1986) theory might look like at the level of individual social cognition. That paradigm is narrative (Hammack & Pilecki, 2012; Pilecki & Hammack, in press).

The central premise of narrative identity development is that we construct life stories that provide a sense of meaning, coherence, and purpose across the life course (McAdams, 2008, 2011; Singer, 2004). These life stories assume a particular form, integrate thematic content, and are situated in an ideological setting—all of which guide our interpretation of the world and, as a consequence, behavior. McAdams (2006) has shown that highly generative adults in the US tend to narrate redemptive life stories which likely contribute to their ability to be generative (i.e., engaged in activity associated with care for the next generation; see Erikson & Erikson, 1981; McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1992). My research suggests that Jewish Israeli and Palestinian youth narrate radically divergent life stories (Hammack, 2011a). In the case of Jewish Israeli youth, a redemptive form and thematic content related to historic persecution, existential insecurity, and exceptionalism appear to provide important sources of psychological resilience to war and conflict, even as this narrative legitimizes their continued subordination of the Palestinians (Hammack, 2009b, 2011a). Palestinian youth, by contrast, narrate life stories “contaminated” (McAdams & Bowman, 2001) or “spoiled” (Goffman, 1963) by their subordinate and perpetually unrecognized national identity status (Hammack, 2010a, 2011a). This contaminated form is maintained through thematic content that

emphasizes loss and dispossession, existential insecurity, and the legitimacy of resistance—the latter of which legitimizes the use of violence against Jewish Israelis.

Our identities are thus not merely categorical labels that organize the world of social relations. Rather, we live our identities by constructing personal narratives that provide a vocabulary to the experience of inhabiting a particular social category. As we internalize the master narrative of belonging to a particular category—man, woman, gay, straight, Black, White, Israeli, Palestinian, Catholic, Protestant, to name a few in the realm of probably inappropriate binaries—we construct an identity anchored in our rhetorical engagement with the world (Hammack, 2011b). Hence to the extent that the politics of identity drives political behavior, motivating particular forms of political action, narrative is the vehicle through which individual actors come to identify with leaders and movements (Polletta, 2006).

### **Premise 2: Ideologies and Mentalities as Narratives**

Narrative identity development does not occur in a political or cultural vacuum. Rather, the stories with which we engage as we develop coherent identities are normative scripts about not only how the world *is* but also how it *might be*. In other words, narratives are not just *descriptive*; they are *prescriptive*. These normative scripts represent ideologies in the neutral sense of that term—as broad systems of beliefs that cohere and form a particular worldview (van Dijk, 1998). They characterize a particular “mentality” about the world and its presumed ideal order. Just as my personal narrative of identity leads me to act a certain way in the political world because of the social category I inhabit, my mentality about the world and how it “ought” to be provides further narrative content which guides my political action.

Narrative, then, is not a concept relegated to individual psychological processes of identity formation or meaning making. Rather, group life operates through collective processes of storytelling that construct a coherent account of group mentality or ideology. This idea can be linked to Durkheim’s (1893/1984) notion of collective consciousness: “The totality of beliefs and sentiments common to the average members of a society forms a determinate system with a life of its own. It can be termed the collective or common consciousness” (pp. 38–39). Durkheim’s student Maurice Halbwachs (1992) later

emphasized the concept of collective memory in the study of groups and society, and a whole field of knowledge has flourished in this area in sociology, anthropology, and politics (e.g., Wertsch & Roediger, 2008).

Concepts assumed to occur at the collective level—such as ideology, mentality, or collective memory—can be subsumed just as easily under the rubric of narrative as the personal narratives of identity psychologists have increasingly come to study. Thinking of these phenomena as narratives is useful because it specifies their location and a clear method for empirical study. Ideologies, mentalities, and collective memories are embodied in narratives that proliferate in societies—in anchoring texts, speeches of political leaders, media representations, and other cultural artifacts. Narrative is thus an empirical umbrella for a host of phenomena which scholars who emphasize collective or societal levels of analysis can call upon.

Social psychologists have increasingly directed their attention toward these ideas of collective cognition, through concepts like group beliefs (Bar-Tal, 1990, 2000) and master narratives (Hammack, 2011a, 2011b). In contrast to the original notion of a “group mind” (McDougall, 1921) or “crowd” psychology (Le Bon, 1895), these more contemporary approaches view individuals and settings as co-constituted. In other words, consistent with the central axiom of cultural psychology (Shweder, 1990), persons and contexts “make one another up” as actors appropriate some narratives they encounter but repudiate others (Hammack, 2011b).

Narratives are anchored in *beliefs*, which are “basic knowledge categories such as ideology, values, norms, decisions, inferences, goals, expectations, religious dogmas, or justifications” (Bar-Tal, 2000, p. xii). When beliefs form a coherent cluster in the form of a larger group or *master* narrative (Fivush, 2010; Hammack, 2011b), they invoke a shared sociopsychological repertoire which provides a heuristic for individuals to interpret reality (Bar-Tal, 2000, 2007). Social reproduction depends upon cultural participants appropriating these shared beliefs by invoking master narratives to motivate their behavior and coordinate their activity, itself then providing a common “consciousness” rooted in experience of the material and practical world.

In other words, master narratives compel individuals to appropriate a particular “mentality” or worldview which will then guide collective behavior toward some political end. They contain within them an ideological setting intended to offer what Isaiah Berlin (1976) refers to as “views, goals, and pictures of the world” and provide us with an interpretive anchor for what we consider “true, beautiful, and efficient” (Shweder, 2003). Master narratives construct a form of reality as it “ought” to be, rather than what it may in fact be on the ground. In this way, narratives become tools to guide collective sentiment and action toward some imagined end.

The clearest examples of the role of shared beliefs or master narratives have emerged from research on intractable conflict. In the Israeli context, Bar-Tal and colleagues have illustrated how Jewish Israeli society relies upon shared beliefs related to patriotism (Bar-Tal, 1993), security (Bar-Tal, Jacobson, & Freund, 1995), siege (Bar-Tal & Antebi, 1992), victimization (Bar-Tal, Chernyak-Hai, Schori, & Gundar, 2009), and delegitimization (Bar-Tal, 1989; Bar-Tal & Hammack, 2012) (for an overview, see Bar-Tal, 1998). Bar-Tal (2000) argues that these beliefs construct an *ethos* of conflict which frames the psychological experience of all citizens in a conflict setting (Bar-Tal, Sharvit, Halperin, & Zafran, 2012), influencing how Jewish Israelis interpret encounters with Palestinians (Bar-Tal, Raviv, Raviv, & Dgani-Hirsch, 2009). The point here is that individuals interpret reality using clusters of beliefs that can be considered widely “distributed” among a populace to fulfill basic needs related to security and identity, and these are particularly evident in settings in which groups feel insecure (Pettigrew, 2003).

The emphasis on beliefs as central components of narrative somewhat de-emphasizes the role of affect in securing individual appropriation of the beliefs that comprise a master narrative. And an overemphasis on rational cognition obscures the provocative nature of narrative. That is, the evaluative and prescriptive dimension of narrative is anchored in affect, and response to narratives is not always rational. Thus there has been greater attention in recent literature in social and political psychology on the critical role of emotion in guiding actions. For example, studies have shown how emotions such as anger (e.g., Zarowsky, 2000, 2004), humiliation (e.g., Fattah & Fierke, 2009), and hatred (e.g., Halperin, 2008)

are fundamental to the collective narratives that intend to motivate individuals to either maintain or challenge the status quo.

Master narratives do not proliferate solely in settings of active intractable conflict, though. Narratives are constructed in stable liberal democracies in the same way to persuade members of a populace to engage in political acts. In the 2012 US Presidential election, both Obama and Romney called upon narratives of national identity intended to respond to the widescale perception of national decline. They called upon distinct tropes, but their goal was identical: to construct a storyline that would evoke a sentimental identification and a sense of command over the direction the national storyline might ultimately take. While Romney (2012a, 2012b) anchored his narrative in the notion that Americans are “eternal optimists” whose values are rooted in the freedom of individual choice, Obama’s (2012a, 2012b, 2012c) rhetoric emphasized ordinary Americans as intelligent, hard-working, and perseverant.

Whether in settings of conflict, war, or stable liberal democracy, master narratives represent rhetorical devices by which groups vie for power, status, and legitimacy. In war and conflict, these master narratives are often perceived as compulsory for identification, particularly when the group perceives existential insecurity (Hammack, 2011a, 2011b). Master narratives represent ideologies about the nature of truth, beauty, goodness, and efficiency (Shweder, 2003). They provide interpretive anchors upon which individuals become motivated to engage in the intentional acts that form a “culture” (Bruner, 1990). In this way, narrative provides a window into the collective mentality of a group—its understanding of the nature of reality and the contours of imagined possibility.

### **Premise 3: Narratives as Performances**

The third premise which underlies a political psychology of narrative is that narratives are neither solely “out there” in the material world of cultural products or historical artifacts (e.g., textbooks, films, political speeches) or “in there” in the inner reaches of the human mind. Rather, narratives are performed and lived in social practice. Autobiographies are constructed through performance, as individuals engage in “acts of meaning” (Bruner, 1990). In this performance, a status quo of politics is either reproduced or repudiated.

The case of Israeli and Palestinian social practices in which ordinary citizens participate provides an example. While Jewish Israelis celebrate their Independence Day commemorating their victory in the 1948 Arab-Israeli War, Palestinians engage in collective protest the same day to commemorate what they call the *Nakba* (“Catastrophe”). Jewish Israelis perform their narrative of resilience, redemption (from the tragedy of the Diaspora and European anti-Semitism), and exceptionalism through participation in rituals commemorating Independence (Kook, 2005; Zerubavel, 1995). By contrast, Palestinians perform their narrative of loss, dispossession, and tragedy through acts of collective protest on the same occasion (Sa’idi & Abu-Lughod, 2007). Social psychologists and political scientists converge on the central tenet that these polarized narratives maintain and exacerbate the conflict between Palestinians and Israelis, mobilizing and justifying acts of political violence (e.g., Bar-Tal & Salomon, 2006; Kaufman, 2009; Rouhana & Bar-Tal, 1998). For Israelis and Palestinians, narratives guide and coordinate their activities, but participation in these activities also shifts the narratives from their location in texts, artifacts, or individual minds to a performative space in which they are lived and embodied.

The performative aspect of narrative is not relevant only to contexts of intractable conflict. Two recent political movements in the US illustrate the role of narrative in social practice intended to achieve some political end. In the 2010 US midterm elections, the Tea Party movement constructed a narrative of “impending tyranny” to motivate individuals disaffected and discontent with the economic state of affairs to organize and protest for a radical right-wing agenda (Barstow, 2010). The Tea Party movement effectively used affect, namely anger and fear, to instill its narrative of doom (Rasmussen & Schoen, 2010; Zernike, 2010). If one considers the outcome of that election, the narrative and its performance in widely covered protests achieved at least some of its political ends, claiming several winning candidates.

At the other end of the US political spectrum, the Occupy Wall Street movement relied upon a narrative of economic injustice to mobilize individuals to engage in collective protest (e.g., Hardt & Negri, 2011). While it is less clear that these actions achieved concrete political ends, they were nevertheless the subject of much attention in the general public and a considerable amount of discussion. The story of Wall Street executives hoarding and growing their wealth amidst formidable economic

hardship for the majority of Americans provided the impetus for a left-wing push to reconsider how capitalism is practiced in the US.

The point is that narratives are not static storylines about groups or individuals but rather are political acts in themselves. We embody narratives through our own set of practices, and these practices themselves make our identities. In other words, consistent with cultural psychology's thesis of "mutual constitution" (Shweder, 1990), minds and acts are co-constituted: how and what we think is shaped by what we do, but we act in ways that cohere with existing thoughts and sentiments.

### **The Psycho-Political Functions of Narrative**

To summarize the premises of a narrative approach to linking politics and mind, it is useful to articulate the psycho-political functions of narrative. By "psycho-political" functions, I mean the role narrative assumes in both mental experience—cognition, emotion, and behavior—and in influencing the power configuration of a society. Narrative, I argue, links mind and politics as it provides a "leading activity" in both the mental and political spheres. Here I am indebted to the cultural psychological approach of Vygotsky (1978), who emphasized the role of activity in securing the appropriation of linguistic tools that guide human development, and to the symbolic interactionist approach of George Herbert Mead (1934), who emphasized mind, self, and society as co-constructed in social acts.

The three premises outlined above speak to three concrete functions of narrative. First, narratives *provide individuals with a vocabulary* to interpret the sensory world. They specify a path to meaning. They allow us to make sense of what we see, hear, feel, and touch by going beyond mere description to both explanation and prescription. Narratives confer meaning, sensibility, and order to an otherwise chaotic and often troubling series of events. The Holocaust is a story of totalitarian madness and power gone deeply awry. Yet its inability to succeed in its eugenics-inspired end, coupled with the triumph of Israel and the demise (though by no means eradication) of global master narratives of ethnic hierarchy, constructs a redemptive story through which good defeats evil, light rises over dark. Thus the Holocaust narrative, as it is deployed in most of the world as a story of ultimate evil (it is noteworthy that the terms "Nazi" and "Hitler" immediately evoke the sinister in English language rhetoric; see Jackson, 2005),

describes and explains historical events but also *prescribes* a moral order in which genocide becomes an ultimate evil of humanity (Staub, 2011). For Jewish Israelis, the darkness of Diaspora anti-Semitism, culminating in the Holocaust, offers a foil to the narrative of modern Israeli identity (Zerubavel, 1995, 2002), and particularly the identity of the native-born or *Sabra* Israeli as a force to be reckoned with (Almog, 2000). In other words, contemporary Jewish Israelis understand their own subjectivity in light of the Holocaust narrative, among many other narratives intended to provide them with a collective sense of purpose and coherence. Their experience of the material world—including the violence of continued conflict with the Palestinians or impending conflict with Iran—is mediated through these narratives.

According to Foucault (1982), subjectivity is not simply a state of identity *consciousness* or self-awareness. Rather, subjectivity ties us to our identities through *conscience* and results in our subjugation to others through “control and dependence” (p. 781). Thus narrative, by constructing subjectivity, motivates particular sets of actions on the world that we perceive as compulsory if we are to be “faithful” to our identities. These actions fundamentally concern acts of power and domination, or the quest thereof. The second psycho-political function of narrative is thus *to motivate coordinated activity* among a collective that will enhance the power of the group and, in the process, affirm, construct, or reconstruct a narrative in which the group achieves elevated power or value in the larger matrix of social categories.

Here Foucauldian notions of power and language intersect with social identity theory, providing a bridge from a theoretical position rarely invoked in psychology to one that has come to dominate the discipline (or at least the subdiscipline of social psychology). Both perspectives are concerned with how individuals come to conceive their membership in arbitrarily constructed social categories and how that conception then influences behavior. At the core of both perspectives is the idea of power and social value. In Tajfel and Turner’s (1979) “minimal group” experimental paradigm, the categories constructed may be rather meaningless, but they are sufficiently *meaningful* to activate ingroup bias, manifest behaviorally in acts of favoritism toward ingroup members. In the real world of social categorization in which membership in a group confers, or fails to confer, all sorts of rights, privileges, and opportunities, identity is an even more central tool to guide our actions (Reicher, 2004). But until we bridge these

theoretical perspectives—one which emphasizes how discourse constructs subjectivity (Foucault, 1978, 1982), and one which emphasizes how social categorization influences behavior (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 1986)—through *narrative*, we are missing the mechanism through which the larger process of social relations and continued cycles of domination, liberation, or resistance occur. Narrative allows us to directly probe this process as it is underway, rather than to simply speculate on it historically, as some might claim Foucault to have done, or to do no more than simply continue to demonstrate the phenomenon in rarefied laboratory conditions, as many social psychologists might be accused of doing today.

In motivating action, narrative comes to achieve its third psycho-political function: *to clearly play a role in politics*. That is, by constructing subjectivity in such a way as to motivate action, be it casting a vote for Mitt Romney or joining a massive assembly in Tahrir Square, narrative becomes the vehicle for acquiring or exercising power, status, or authority. In this frame, narratives are not simply tools we as individuals use to make meaning, or documents of collective memory that enhance our solidarity and security in a group. Rather, narratives are the means through which politics unfolds in human communities on a universal scale. To the extent that all human communities use language as a form of communication, they use narratives as a form of motivation, domination, and liberation—as tools in the universal competition for status and power.

### **Interrogating Narrative**

One of the gems of narrative is that it anchors concepts often viewed as abstract—ideology, identity, collective memory, social practice—in an empirically accessible product: *the story*. Stories have beginnings, middles, and ends. They have characters. They have themes or tropes. They have motifs intended to educate, motivate, explain. They represent the most rudimentary form of our cognitive engagement with the social world, when one considers storytelling at the crib (Nelson, 2006).

Stories pervade our lives, and the task of the narrator is to access, document, interrogate narratives—to witness them and to represent them to a broader audience, but also to make sense of the particularity of their psycho-political functions in a given sociopolitical context. The narrator is thus a

problem-centered social scientist, concerned with how individuals and groups construct, deconstruct, and reconstruct their worlds through the linguistic practice of narration. The methodological toolkit of the narrativist includes, at minimum, ethnography, experimentation, life-story analysis, and discourse analysis, and I detail examples of empirical work that calls upon these approaches below.

At the core of a narrative approach is the central premise of a hermeneutic philosophy of science—namely, the assumption that *interpretation* is axiomatic to human life, development, and social organization (e.g., Dilthey, 1923/1988; Ricoeur, 1981; Tappan, 1997). The individual is a thinking, acting, intuiting subject of a social order she must navigate and, in her interpretive engagement with the existing sensory world, either reproduce or repudiate through her own actions. Any empirical approach to stories in the social world hence assumes that they are intrinsically interpretations of reality, and it is the *interpretations* that concern that narrativist, not whether or not the story may be considered “accurate” according to some material property of the empirical world.

The hermeneutic philosophy of science, originating especially in the work of nineteenth-century psychologist Wilhelm Dilthey (e.g., 1894/1977), is anchored in the idea that the scientist seeks to *understand* human and historical life. This early view of psychology as integrative of historical and cultural analysis was largely discarded in favor of a psychology more aligned with the natural sciences and the delineation of lawful regularities of mind and behavior (Gergen, 1976). The “descriptive” and “historical” psychology of Dilthey was largely eclipsed by the ahistoric empiricism of William James and Wilhelm Wundt (though Wundt later emphasized two distinct branches of psychology—one dealing with physiology and one dealing with “culture” or “folk psychology”; see Wundt, 1916).

The narrative approach advocated here is thus not necessarily novel in its emphasis on meaning and interpretation; it is linked to a philosophical stance that was present at the birth of psychological science. The ascendance of narrative in contemporary psychology reveals a renaissance of integrative and holistic perspectives of the person as historically situated and history as at least in part psychologically determined through the meaning persons make of their situated lives (e.g., Erikson, 1958). The hermeneutic philosophy guides the narrative empiricist toward multiple levels of analysis (e.g., the

individual, the cultural, the historical, the economic, the political), but it does so in a way that is focused on psychological *engagement* with the material world through acts of interpretation (e.g., Bruner, 1990; Hammack, 2011b; Tappan, 1997).

The anchoring point for a hermeneutic science focused on meanings and interpretations, fusing levels of analysis, is that the world is fundamentally and universal *textual*, by which I mean that material conditions and experiences command the construction of a coherent storyline which explains why they are, how they could be different (if so desired), and how one might achieve some change toward this end. The pothole in a street has an origin story; it evokes emotion when one encounters it; it has a solution story which requires human action. This may seem a trivial example, but it reveals the universality with which narrative operates in the mind and on the world. It is when narratives clash in their fundamental meaning that conflicts occur. The suicide bombing at an Israeli checkpoint in the occupied West Bank has two radically divergent interpretations for Israelis and Palestinians—and the result is that violence endures and even escalates, as the two interpretations fail to meet (Hammack, 2011a; Rouhana & Bar-Tal, 1998; Rotberg, 2006).

The point is that a narrative approach conceives of human experience and action as a text (e.g., Ricoeur, 1984). The aim, then, is to identify the storylines individuals and groups use to make sense of the social world. At the smallest level of analysis, one can collect the individual's own personal narrative or his response to a constructed narrative. In the social sciences, the former approach is represented in life-story narrative analysis (e.g., Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998), while the latter is represented in experimental studies in which subjects respond to a narrative account presented by the researcher (either constructed or a real-life stimulus such as a film or newspaper article). Life-story narrative analysis requires a text—the product of a life-story interview (e.g., McAdams, 1993). For those interested in narrative, identity, and politics, the interesting point of analysis in these texts centers on one's political position or viewpoint, or one's experience of a particular social category (e.g., oppressed minority; e.g., Ephrem & White, 2011; Hammack & Cohler, 2011). Psychologists who study life-story narratives have illustrated how “conservatives” and “liberals” in the US (McAdams et al., 2008) or

Israelis and Palestinians narrate divergent life stories (Hammack, 2011a)—how their forms, thematic content, or ideological settings reveal the salience of their political positions or self-understandings.

In studies of individual *response* to political narratives, the goal is to understand how stories influence thought, judgment, affect, or behavior at the individual level (though typically reported in the aggregate using statistical methods). For example, Bullock and Fernald (2005) examined responses to the way in which George W. Bush's proposed elimination of the dividend tax was framed. They found that the framing of the meaning of wealth and how it was acquired (e.g., product of personal initiative) affected individuals' support for the policy. Gross (2008) illustrated how opinion on policy issues such as mandatory minimum sentencing is shaped by the affective content of the narrative constructed to frame an event. Baird and Gangl (2006) found that the framing of the US Supreme Court as rendering "political" decisions rather than following legal guidelines increases citizens' negative perceptions of the Court. Eibach and Keegan (2006) examined how Blacks and Whites respond differently to social change related to racial equality depending on whether the change is constructed as a "loss" or a "gain." While these types of studies are not typically situated within the larger literature on narrative in social psychology, they detail how individuals respond to narratives about politics in ways that inform how leaders and policy makers might use rhetoric to mobilize individuals and groups to support policy or to take action.

Psychology is often criticized for its analysis of the self-contained individual as its primary unit of analysis (e.g., Sampson, 1989). Though both life-story narrative analysis and narrative response studies take context seriously, they study texts primarily in static form—as constructed by the individual storyteller or as responded to by an individual. Discourse analysis takes a different approach by considering how narratives are deployed in widely disseminated texts (e.g., political speeches or manifestos) or in conversation (see Woofitt, 2005). Thus the narrativist who takes a discourse analytic approach does not study individuals but rather *units of text*, such as utterances in a conversation or lines in a speech.

Most notably, discourse analysis has been used to examine the content and form of political rhetoric, typically in speeches or formal settings of political discourse. For example, Gibson (2012) analyzed the content of a British television program in which audience members could question authorities such as politicians, journalists, or commentators during the build-up to the 2003 invasion of Iraq. By relying upon this interactive source of textual data—conversations between audience members and authorities with particular political positions toward the war—he was able to illustrate how attitudes toward war are dialogically constructed. In the case of his analysis, the story for or against war was not a static text but a dynamic one in the midst of being co-authored between the British public and authorities.

A more common approach to discourse analytic research is to analyze the content of political speeches directly for their rhetorical aims. For example, Gholizadeh and Hook (2012) analyzed the speeches of Ayatollah Khomeini during the 1978-1979 Iranian revolution. They illustrated how Khomeini used the narrative of the Battle of Karbala and the idea of a “dangerous foreign other” to mobilize an anxious populace. Similar types of analyses have been conducted in speeches or official statements of political leaders in the UK about immigration and asylum (Capdevelia & Callaghan, 2008) or about the left-right political spectrum (Weltman & Billig, 2001), Hamas leaders in Palestine about the role of religion in society (McVittie, McKinlay, & Sambaraju, 2011), and George W. Bush and his administration officials in the US about the “war on terror” (Esch, 2010). The emphasis in this methodological approach is more concretely on the semantic and hermeneutic functions of language and its intended target for individual or collective perception.

Of all options in the methodological toolkit of the narrativist, the most comprehensive, but exhausting, of methods is ethnography. Long considered the ideal way to access the customs, practices, and ideologies of a group (e.g., Malinowski, 1927; M. Mead, 1928), ethnography relies upon participant observation and immersion into a group of study, thus providing a window into how stories may serve to construct meaning of political configurations and political violence. The ethnographer seeks to capture narratives in action through analysis of cultural artifacts in various textual forms (e.g., media representations, educational textbooks), but unlike other methods, the ethnographer embeds herself within

the community for some period of time to allow for an intimate analysis. She uses methods of field research common in anthropology and sociology involving the collection of a large corpus of qualitative data to understand how narratives shape meaning in a broad array of contexts.

Ethnographic practices and the nature of ethnographic writing have shifted considerably since the origin of this method in cultural anthropology (e.g., Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Denzin, 1997; Hammersley, 1992). For the would-be ethnographer of narrative, politics, and the mind, the goal is not to conduct the “detached” analysis of phenomena from a distance that once dominated the core practices of participant observation. Rather, the goal is to shift the lens toward what Tedlock (1991) calls “the observation of participation” (p. 69). In this frame, which Tedlock (1991) actually calls *narrative ethnography*, analysis of “self” (i.e., ethnographer and his positionality vis-à-vis the group of study) and “other” are intertwined in a single narrative account of the *dialogue* that characterizes ethnographic practice.

Because of its holistic, immersive approach, ethnography affords a much wider corpus of data for the narrativist to interrogate. Ethnographers have examined such topics as how historical narratives are represented and engaged with in educational settings in Israel (Dalsheim, 2007), how displaced Bosnian mothers constructed coherent narratives of war trauma (Robertson & Duckett, 2007), how Somali refugee narratives challenge dominant psychiatric conceptions of trauma (Zarowsky, 2000, 2004), and how intergroup contact efforts between Israeli and Palestinian youth fail in their attempt to indoctrinate superordinate identity narratives (Hammack, 2009a, 2011a). Increasingly, ethnographers integrate levels of analysis to understand how individual narratives and collective narratives intersect and are co-constitutive. In these approaches, life-story narrative analysis is often embedded within a larger set of ethnographic practices, and life-story texts are considered *in relation to* master narratives or dominant discourses. For example, Zenker’s (2010) analysis of interviews with a West Belfast Catholic over the course of extended fieldwork illustrated how he challenged local hegemonic narratives of conflict trauma. My work with Palestinian and Israeli youth reveals the way in which they appropriate some aspects of

group master narratives while actively challenging others, using both life-story narrative analysis and hermeneutic analysis of historical documents and political speeches (Hammack, 2011a).

In sum, interrogating narrative involves a commitment to a hermeneutic philosophy of science in which the aim is to understand the phenomenon of human interpretation in context. Experience of the world is textually mediated and embodied in the narratives individuals either construct or respond to in their actions. These narratives are accessible through methods that require individuals to directly provide them (e.g., life-story interviews) or to offer their interpretation or response (e.g., surveys administered or observations obtained in the context of an experiment). But they are also accessible through political speeches and other formal texts to which individuals are exposed en masse and through conversations (e.g., discourse analysis). And in the most comprehensive manner possible (i.e., ethnography), narratives are examined as sets of interconnected “webs of significance” (Geertz, 1973) with which individuals engage. In these types of studies, stories can be located at every level and are examined as part of a larger system of meaning, signification, and interpretation.

### **Narrative and Political Change**

The purpose of this chapter has been to offer an integrative statement about mind, politics, and stories by outlining three fundamental premises and three functions of narrative, as well as a broad and inclusive methodological statement about how narrative might be empirically interrogated at multiple levels of analysis. To conclude, I stake the position that an emphasis on human interpretation in political context requires a normative commitment for the narrativist to “do good,” by which I mean that the product of narrative study is itself a narrative which can play a role in the very social system it seeks to describe and explain. In other words, the knowledge produced through narrative inquiry stands to evoke a response to a political configuration or a status quo of domination and subordination. In this way, the product of narrative inquiry is itself a text that may support or challenge a status quo of intergroup relations.

The “interpretive turn” in social science research in general (Rabinow & Sullivan, 1987), and political psychology research in particular (Hammack & Pilecki, 2012), does not simply represent an

epistemological or philosophical shift from positivism or postpositivism to constructionism. Rather, I suggest that the turn toward language, meaning, and interpretation in political perspective pivots political psychology toward a normative, critical position in which the ends of justice and social change toward equality are explicit. In other words, a narrative approach recognizes the narrativist himself and the analysis he produces as part of the cycle of social stasis and change. Hence his analysis may work explicitly for ends conceived as contributing to the betterment of human communities, rather than supporting a status quo of domination or inequality.

In this frame, all knowledge is considered inherently political, and the narrativist's task is to offer a critical interrogation of the role of stories in social and psychological life. She herself constructs a story, or series of stories, about this role at a particular historical moment—a time of anxiety about national decline among Americans, or a time of political and cultural transition in parts of the Arab Middle East, or a time of economic anxiety in Europe. The point is to play a role in the discourse itself, toward positive ends that benefit a greater number of individuals and communities.

Here I do not actually stake a radical claim for narrative inquiry. I merely suggest that the normative ideology implicit in most social science research in political psychology becomes explicit and always frames the questions which guide the work. Thus the problems the narrativist addresses might more clearly focus on how narratives promote violence and align themselves with social movements which seek to advance the interest of social justice on a global scale. In this way, narrative science—as a normative science—prescribes a set of ideals for peace and positive intergroup relations that emphasizes checks on the human inclination toward social dominance and hierarchy apparent in the history of wars, genocides, and mass atrocities (Staub, 2011).

Just as a film of the continued struggle of Native Americans on the Pine Ridge Reservation in the US presents a text to motivate political concern or action (Becker & Everett, 2012), the product of narrative inquiry might use a story *of stories* to work for some political end. Though the challenge to construct an accessible academic text in the context of increasingly isolated language communities is formidable, there are examples of attempts to produce what Sampson (1993) calls “transformative

knowledge.” Cohler’s (2007) work on the changing historical context in which gay men constructed autobiographies in the US over the course of the twentieth century reflects a concern with describing and explaining the shift in vocabulary and social practices increasingly available to same-sex attracted men during this era, but he also aims to provide a document which could liberate contemporary youth from the confines of narrow visions of categorical sexual identity labels. Lykes’ extensive research among the Maya in Guatemala explicitly seeks to use narrative to contribute to greater social justice for the indigenous community (e.g., Lykes, Blanche, & Hamber, 2003). Her work has gone beyond that of engaged researcher to social advocate seeking to secure resources for the community (Lykes, 2012). And of course much work in conflict settings seeks to produce knowledge that will expose the injustice of hegemonic narratives that oppress an outgroup and their impact on the mind of the oppressor (e.g., Rosler, Bar-Tal, Sharvit, Halperin, & Raviv, 2009), or inform the kinds of peacebuilding and reconciliation practices in which we engage (e.g., Andrews, 2003, 2007; Hammack, 2011a).

The idea of narrative is rooted in assumptions of a socially constructed world, always in a dynamic state of mutual constitution through cognitive processes, linguistic practices, and mediated social activity and interaction. The narrative concept links the stuff of thought and feeling with documents of life—life stories, speeches, media representations, cultural artifacts accessible on paper or online, and the like. Stories surround us and offer us access to the intersection of cognition, emotion, and intentional action on the world. Transcending disciplinary boundaries, we can interrogate stories as individuals engage with them, in conversation or in response to some storied stimulus, and we can map how stories “out there” converge with stories “in there” by viewing the entirety of social life as interconnected storylines always in process. Finally, investigators of narrative themselves construct narratives that are not neutral vis-à-vis the political behavior, dynamics, or configuration they describe and explain. The political psychology of narrative is thus an integrative science which sees persons and settings as mutually constituted in relation to received matrices of power and the relative meaning and value of social categories, and the products of narrative science themselves may alter the very historical reality they seek

to describe (Gergen, 1973). The task, then, of the narrativist of politics and psychology is to produce knowledge that, to paraphrase Marx, goes beyond understanding toward change itself.

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