

Exploring the Reproduction of Conflict Through Narrative: Israeli Youth Motivated to Participate in a Coexistence Program

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Contemporary Israeli youth are socialized in the context of intractable nationalist conflict with Palestinians, characterized by a “master” historical narrative of Jewish Israeli identity that exacerbates the conflict. This exploratory study examines the relation between this master narrative and the personal narratives of youth motivated to participate in a coexistence program. Narratives of youth suggest points of both convergence and divergence with the master narrative in their form, thematic content, and ideological settings. Like the larger story of Jewish Israeli identity, the stories of youth assumed a redemptive form and integrated themes of existential insecurity, historical persecution, exceptionalism, and delegitimization of Palestinian identity. Divergence with the master narrative suggested the significance of local communities and the growing pluralism of Israeli society, as well as policy shifts in Israel regarding the legitimacy of Palestinian statehood. Despite motivation to participate in a coexistence program, youth narratives tended to reproduce the narrative conditions of conflict. Implications for peace-building efforts with Jewish Israeli youth are discussed.

The social, political, and cultural context of contemporary Israel is grounded in the long-standing intractable conflict with the Palestinians. Although the story of Jewish Israeli identity takes many of its salient tropes from the historical period that provided the impetus for Zionism (i.e., the experience with anti-Semitism in Europe), the territorial conflict with Palestinians since the emergence of Zionism in the late 19th century has served to frame a coherent and unified Israeli narrative (Kimmerling, 2001; Zerubavel, 1995). The seemingly interminable context of conflict elevates the salience of “identity politics” (Gabay, 2006), both within Israeli society and between Israeli and Palestinian societies (Kimmerling, 2001).

As is the case in contexts of conflict more generally, notions of both “identity” and “narrative” are particularly highlighted for contemporary Israeli youth. As a conflict based on rival nationalist movements, the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians has come to be framed in largely narrative terms (see Rotberg, 2006).

Clusters of “societal beliefs” construct coherent narratives that inherently delegitimize the counter-narrative, such as beliefs about security, identity, and history (e.g., Bar-Tal, 1990, 1998b; Rouhana & Bar-Tal, 1998; see also Kelman, 1999, 2007).

Few scholars and practitioners in peace psychology and conflict resolution would disagree that the concept of narrative is useful in understanding and potentially ameliorating intergroup conflict (e.g., Salomon & Nevo, 2001). In fact, an emphasis on narrative and storytelling in coexistence and other intergroup contact programs has become increasingly valued (e.g., Adwan & Bar-On, 2004; Bar-On & Kassem, 2004; Salomon, 2004). The premise of narrative-based views of coexistence is that polarized and negatively interdependent collective narratives serve the function of maintaining (and often exacerbating) conflict (e.g., Bar-Tal, 1998b; Hammack, 2006; Kelman, 1999). Peaceful coexistence, then, must be predicated on transformations in these polarized group narratives that reconstruct the relation between in-group and outgroup toward positive interdependence (Kelman, 1999).

Despite these significant theoretical developments on the role of narrative in conflict, an important empirical question remains largely unexamined: How do contemporary youth inte-

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grate aspects of the polarized collective narrative to which they are exposed into their own personal narratives? It has largely been an implied assumption of theoretical accounts that individuals possess little agency to resist or repudiate aspects of the master narrative of history and identity. This study represents an exploratory effort to directly address the question of the social reproduction of conflict through narrative, with a focus on contemporary Jewish Israeli youth motivated to participate in a coexistence program. The purpose of the study was to provide rich, idiographic data on the narratives of youth to contribute to theory development on conflict, narrative, and peace-building.

The Master Narrative of Jewish Israeli Identity

Because the primary empirical question of this study concerns the relation between a master narrative and the personal narratives of youth, it is essential to begin with a brief account of this master narrative of Jewish Israeli history and identity. A master narrative is a cultural script or a “dominant discourse” that proliferates in a society (Hammack, 2008; Thorne & McLean, 2003; cf. Foucault, 1978). Its content infuses educational materials, the media, and conversations on the street. Narrative theories of conflict suggest that the power of master narratives is greater in the context of intractable conflict, given the perceived insecurity of the group and its collective narrative (Kelman, 2007; Rouhana & Bar-Tal, 1998; Salomon & Nevo, 2001).

The story of the modern state of Israel is a story of emancipation and regeneration, of the rescue and resurrection of a marginalized and threatened cultural identity (Halpern, 1969; Hess, 1862/1997; Pinsker, 1882/1997). It is a tale of suffering and success, of vulnerability and perseverance, of the emergence of power and strength out of weakness and persecution (Gamson & Herzog, 1999). It is a classic narrative of “descent and gain” (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998) in which great tragedies precede resilient triumphs (Talmon, 1970). Yet this triumphal story exists as a foil to the Diaspora narrative of rejection, persecution, and suffering, culminating in the Holocaust (Zerubavel, 1995). Thus, although the story of Israel assumes the form of a *redemptive* narra-

tive (McAdams, 2006), it possesses an underlying tone of threat and vulnerability that is not surprising given the historical Jewish experience and the present-day conflict (Pettigrew, 2003).

The thematic content of the master narrative centers on four dominant tropes. First, the *historical persecution and victimization* of the Jews as minorities in other countries prior to the establishment of Israel represents a powerful underlying theme in the master narrative (e.g., Mosse, 1978). Its promulgation provides the rationale for a collective focus on securing and maintaining a Jewish majority and a Jewish state, in keeping with the tenets of Zionism (e.g., Herzl, 1896/1997). The Holocaust serves as the ultimate story of Jewish victimization in the Israeli narrative (Caplan, 1999; Stein, 1984) and saturates the identity discourse in contemporary Israeli society, framing the politics of Israeli national identity (Zertal, 2005). This thematic focus on *vulnerability* and *threat* naturally begets a parallel thematic emphasis on *security* and on reconfiguring Jewish identity along the lines of *strength* rather than the historic *weakness* associated with the Diaspora (Zerubavel, 1995).

The second major theme in the Israeli master narrative is *existential insecurity*. The need for security has represented a trope in the Jewish Israeli experience since the aspirations of early Zionism in Palestine became known and violence initiated between Jewish and Arab communities (see Morris, 2001). A focus on security in present-day Israel is pervasive, from the airport to the streets of Jerusalem, where soldiers routinely patrol the Old City. Service in the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) is mandatory for all Jewish citizens, and Jewish youth relish the opportunity to serve as part of their unique life course (Seginer, 1999). The ritual of military service has powerful implications for the development of identity and relationships, given that the military serves as a primary site of socialization (e.g., Ben-Ari, 1998; Kaplan, 2006). Beliefs about security have become a firm part of the master narrative of Jewish Israeli identity (Bar-Tal, 1998b), institutionalized in the “siege mentality” (Bar-Tal & Antebi, 1992) that pervades both discourse and cultural practice (i.e., military service) in Israel.

A third trope in the master narrative is the idea of *exceptionalism*. Early Zionist texts high-

lighted the exceptionalism of Jewish national identity (e.g., Hess, 1862/1997), likely in response to the growing European ethnonationalist movements that explicitly excluded Jews (Mosse, 1978). The idea of Jewish Israeli exceptionalism likely owes much of its origins to eternal stories of the “Chosen People” (Stein, 1984), but it is probably the success of Zionism in achieving its aims for Jewish national fulfillment that also provides contemporary Israelis with a sense of exceptionalism (e.g., Talmon, 1970). This sense of exceptionalism among Jewish Israelis, at its most ethnocentric extreme, serves to delegitimize Palestinian identity, suggesting that the Jews have a connection to the region “from time immemorial” whereas “the Arabs” served only as temporary inhabitants, at best, or “squatters,” at worst (e.g., Peters, 1984).

The fourth and final predominant theme in the Israeli master narrative is thus *delegitimization of Palestinian identity*. Outgroup delegitimization is a fundamental social psychological phenomenon in contexts of intergroup conflict (Bar-Tal, 1990, 2007; Oren & Bar-Tal, 2007). The delegitimization of Palestinian identity in Israeli discourse is tied to the historical foundations of Zionism in an Orientalist vision of the Middle East (Said, 1978/1994). Orientalism in its broader thesis argues for the hegemonic construction of “the Orient” (i.e., Near or Middle East) and “the Oriental” in relation to the Occident (Said, 1978/1994). The Orient is viewed through the lens of European ethnocentrism as a place for civilizing, and the Oriental is thus a character *to be civilized*.

The legacy of Orientalism endures in contemporary Israeli society to the extent that Arabs are characterized as inferior, as exotic, or both. Studies of official Israeli textbooks across the state’s history confirm the notion that Palestinians have been typically characterized in ethnocentric, Orientalist ways (e.g., Bar-Gal, 1994; Bar-Tal, 1998a). Studies with Israeli children and youth continue to suggest that their view of Arabs and Palestinians is characterized primarily by negative stereotypes (Bar-Tal, 1996; Bar-Tal & Labin, 2001; Bar-Tal & Teichman, 2005; Teichman, 2001). The continued proliferation of negative discourse regarding Arabs and Palestinians is likely connected to other salient themes in the master narrative (e.g., existential insecurity) and thus contributes to the ingroup solidarity needed in times of

conflict. However, the presence of outgroup delegitimization in the dominant discourse of Israeli society contributes to the intractability of the conflict with the Palestinians (Bar-Tal, 1998b).

In sum, the story of Jewish Israeli identity is a story that begins with suffering, persecution, and victimization and ends with triumph, righteous indignation, and moral exceptionalism. Along its narrative path of redemption, in its attempt to construct a coherent, compelling, and sustainable story of identity, it offers a polarizing contrast in the construction of the Palestinian as (Oriental) enemy. The story has a clear protagonist and antagonist, with the necessary discourse to credibly frame these characters as such. The seemingly indefatigable existential threat posed by the antagonist (Palestinian) to the protagonist (Israeli) creates the narrative conditions in which the theme of *security* must assume primacy.

Like all master narratives, this collective story is always in a process of dynamic engagement by its group members. It is noteworthy that Israel’s increasingly pluralistic and multicultural character creates unique challenges for the sustenance of a master narrative of identity constructed largely by its Ashkenazi elite (Kimmerling, 2001; Mizrachi, 2004). Currently, Israeli society is characterized by dynamic and often conflicting views on religion, citizenship, Zionism, and the peace process, with axes of divergence often bounded by demography (see Kimmerling, 2001; Lemish, 2003; Shafir & Peled, 2002). As Israeli society becomes increasingly multicultural, the sustainability of a unified master narrative appears dubious (Kimmerling, 2001).

Yet, the engagement of this narrative by contemporary youth remains an empirical question, as the presence of a master narrative might, in fact, facilitate processes of assimilation and identity integration for immigrants to Israel—that is, even as the foundations of the master narrative may seem “hegemonic” to some subgroups within Israeli society (Kimmerling, 2001), the presence of such a coherent collective narrative likely provides a sense of meaning and purpose to young Israelis. The dominant tropes of the narrative, because they are rooted so decidedly in the conflict with the Palestinians, might in fact transcend some of the concerns that divide contemporary Israelis. Regard-

less, young Israelis undergo a process of dynamic engagement with the master narrative, and querying the nature of this engagement represents the empirical aspiration of this study.

This Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the relation between the formal and thematic properties of the master narrative of Jewish Israeli identity and the personal narratives of youth motivated to participate in a coexistence program. Guided by a grounded theory approach to field research (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), the goal of the study was to generate theory about the relation among conflict, narrative, and possibilities for peace-building among youth. Although the study focuses on a unique population of youth motivated to pursue contact with Palestinians, it is expected to contribute to broader theoretical perspectives on the reproduction of conflict through narrative engagement. If one key to peace-building is the reconciliation of divergent and polarized narratives of history and identity (Kelman, 1999), it is vital to understand the ways in which youth motivated to work for coexistence engage with these narratives. This study seeks to address this empirical concern, with the intent to offer fertile ideas for future research with larger samples of youth.

Method

Participants

Field research was conducted from 2003 to 2007 with Jewish Israeli youth and their families in a number of communities in Israel and in two American-based coexistence programs. Seventeen youth (10 girls, 7 boys) and their families were targeted for ethnographic study and interviews prior to and up to several years following their participation in the coexistence program. Youth in one program were randomly selected, whereas all youth in the second program were recruited. Of those recruited for the study, 100% agreed to participate. Of the 17 youth, 13 were Ashkenazi (i.e., European origin), whereas 4 were Mizrahi (i.e., African or Asian origin).

The sample is a non-representative sample of Jewish Israeli youth, given that they were motivated to pursue contact with Palestinians and

had the educational qualifications necessary to participate in the two programs (i.e., English proficiency). Although proficiency in English is common among Israeli youth, given that they begin to receive formal education in English as part of their elementary school curriculum, the ability of all those in this study to communicate in English is noteworthy. Wallach (2000) noted that this population of youth is important for intervention and analysis because they represent “future leaders” of their societies. Because the research questions for this study were focused on youth motivated to participate in such programs, the use of a theoretical, rather than representative, sample is appropriate (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Despite a common educational background, an assessment of individual motivations for contact revealed the ideological diversity of the sample. Although some youth reported that they were motivated to engage in contact based on their desire for peace, others indicated that their intent was to convince Palestinians that their narrative of the conflict is incorrect.

Interview

In addition to ethnographic work with youth and their families, a semistructured interview was administered to youth. The interview protocol was modeled on McAdams’s (1995) Life Story Interview. The interview began by asking the participants to construct a “life-line” drawing and to explain the “ups and downs” of their lives. The semistructured interview contained general questions about life experience, critical life events, and questions about political ideology. Interviews lasted from 1 to 3 hours, were conducted in English, and transcribed verbatim.

Analytic Strategy

The focus of narrative analysis was derived from McAdams’s (1996, 2001) life story theory of identity, as well as from other methodological perspectives (Gergen & Gergen, 1983; Lieblich et al., 1998). The three primary elements for analysis were the form, thematic content, and ideological setting of the life story. Narratives were holistically analyzed for each case, using an idiographic approach focused on the coherence and meaning making associated with each personal narrative (cf. Gregg, 2007; Schachter, 2005).

Of the 17 narratives collected, 4 are presented in-depth as exemplars to illustrate a rigorous idiographic approach to research in cultural psychology (e.g., Gjerde, 2004; Gregg, 2007; Hammack, 2008; Schachter, 2005). Selection of the cases was based on following a comprehensive analytic procedure in which case studies were created for all 17 participants. The 4 selected represent patterns across cases, as well as the demographic diversity of Jewish Israeli society—that is, the selection process sought to ensure the presentation of cases representative of the sample in terms of both demography and case content.

My intent in assuming an *idiographic* analytic approach is to highlight uniqueness over generalization (Allport, 1962) and to illustrate the rich process of narrative engagement as it is actively employed in identity construction by youth. Such an approach is in keeping with the goals of the study to generate theory about the role of narrative engagement in conflict reproduction.

Position and Reflexivity

The act of “locating” oneself with regard to research participants is vital to the credibility and interpretability of qualitative data (see Langhout, 2006). In the case of this study, my identity as a non-Jewish, non-Arab, American psychologist positioned me as an outsider or “stranger” (Simmel, 1908/ 1971) to the conflict. In the course of fieldwork, I attempted to remain as sensitive as possible to the ways in which my own identity influenced my ethnographic data, and I analyze and interpret the content of interviews accordingly.

Results

Yossi: The Ambivalent Pragmatist

At age 15, Yossi* is an Ashkenazi Jew from a secular family in the suburbs of Haifa. Like many Jews who, in the 20th century, fled from persecution in places like Russia, the story of Yossi’s family is one of *necessary* migration. In this way, with the common family story of immigration to Israel as a flight from persecution, the theme of persecution and victimization is encoded into Yossi’s life-story narrative.

Mirroring the Jewish Israeli master narrative in form, his life story offers a classic account of

descent and gain, with *nadirs* followed by ever-increasing upward slopes. Yossi’s earliest memory is of the first Gulf War, thus immediately positioning his life story in a place of existential insecurity. Aside from this early memory, however, Yossi’s story reveals the narrative of an adolescent traversing highly “normative” ups and downs: immigration to a new country, the death of a family member, the birth of a sibling, troubles with school, success in friendship building, and exciting travels. However, Yossi’s first memory reveals that this life story is being constructed in a particularly unique cultural context.

In constructing a personal narrative, Yossi recognizes the uniqueness bestowed on him by virtue of being Israeli. On the meaning of being Israeli, Yossi constructs a narrative of the elements that comprise a collective identity and identifies the ways in which he fits into this collective:

I think [being Israeli is about] speaking the language [Hebrew], all the education stuff, living in this country and speaking this language, and having friends that are Jewish, and being Jewish yourself—you know what, you don’t *have* to be Jewish. It’s just a way of life in Israel, and I think when you live this way of life, it doesn’t matter if you like it or not, and sooner or later you just have to act the same way you see these life ways demand you to behave somehow. . . . The whole way of life that makes you an Israeli includes the religion, it includes the language, it includes everything, the clothing.

To be Israeli in Yossi’s mind is first and foremost about *language* and *culture*. It is interesting to note that Yossi reveals some ambivalence about the role of being *Jewish* and the role of *religion* in Israeli identity. Initially, being Jewish seems foremost, but then he qualifies his statement with no explanation and no reference for example to the Arabs who are Israeli citizens. However, ultimately, his final definition of Israeli identity places religion at the forefront.

Yet, it is quite obvious that Yossi’s ideas about Israeli identity are in a process of formation, as revealed by his ambivalence. He has been exposed to a number of discourses in Israeli society on identity and citizenship (Lemish, 2003), and he remains in a process of selective appropriation:

* All names are pseudonyms.

We're not a religious country. . . . I'm Jewish in my blood; I don't really believe in all this stuff about religion, like I gotta pray and stuff. I don't believe in this. In Israel, we have the Islam, the Christians, but when you're talking about the Jewish people, you're talking about two large groups—the Orthodox Jewish, and the secular Jewish, which are a lot more than the Orthodox. What brings everyone together is this country. There are problems between the Orthodox and the secular, but what makes us all together is that we live in this country. *We have the same enemy* [italics added]. They're attacking us both. Not only Orthodox people die, not only Jewish people die, even Arab people die. . . . We have so many different ways of life, so many different cultures in Israel. But what brings everyone together is that you live in Israel, that you're an Israeli. Maybe we can call it, having the same problems. It makes you all together in some kind of way.

In this portion of his narrative, Yossi makes a number of very critical statements for understanding the way in which contemporary Jewish Israeli youth construct their national identity. First, being Jewish is an *ethnic* or, perhaps more appropriately, a *racial* matter. Yossi is “Jewish in his blood.” It does not really matter how religious he or any other Jewish Israeli is, they are united in a “blood line.” Yossi also makes reference to a key contributor to identity polarization *within* Israeli society: the religious-secular divide. He recognizes that Israeli identity includes members of other “religious” communities (Muslims and Christians). However, most critically, he identifies the *existence of an enemy* as the key uniting force in Israeli identity. Despite the pluralistic nature of Israeli identity, all Israelis are united against a common enemy—the Palestinians.

Yossi is an adolescent of the second Palestinian *intifada*. As such, experiences with attacks inside Israel form an important part of his narrative and highlight the theme of existential insecurity in his life story. Yet, what is most noteworthy about these experiences is the way in which Yossi's narrative reveals *resilience* to the possible impact of such a context on his life story. Reflecting on what daily life is like in Israel, having to cope with the possibility of an attack, Yossi reveals the sense of resilience and defiance that has come to consume the Israeli discourse on Palestinian bombings:

. . . My mother is so scared. She won't let me ride the bus or something to see my friends. . . . Now she's a little bit more calm because she realizes the situation, and if you show you're frightened, the terrorists will achieve their goal: to frighten us, to make us think

they're stronger than us. This is not right. So now I can go with friends to the mall and stuff, and to parties, and I can ride the bus and stuff. But you know, you always live in fear, that the next person who walks into the bus will just jump in and explode himself. And this is not the kind of fear you want to live in.

The possibility of attack creates an initial response of fear and anxiety, but Jewish Israelis like Yossi utilize defiant coping in which giving into anxiety is interpreted as a kind of “treason.” To continue one's life as normal represents the “patriotic” response to existential threat. In the case of young Jewish Israelis, and for reasons that are vital to national security and sustained national *existence*, resilience and defiance are necessarily incorporated into the self-narrative.

Ideologically, Yossi sees himself as a “man of peace.” He says, “I don't like violence. . . . Especially in what's going on in the last years. I don't like it. I really don't like it.” He expresses a curiosity about the Palestinians and about the conflict and a genuine will to understand its origins. Perhaps most crucially, he demonstrates a conditional acceptance of the legitimacy of Palestinian claims:

I do believe in the right of the Palestinians to have a country, and I think the education that I receive has a part in this, and I do believe in it. I think they should have a country. It's better for them, and it's better for us. Cause if a country will stop all the terrorism, I'll agree for it. I want peace—well, even if it's not peace, I just don't want these terrorist acts to continue. This is the first thing. After that, [the Palestinians] can do whatever [they] like.

Yossi, in keeping with left-wing Israeli political discourse, supports Palestinian independence, yet he places the onus of conflict resolution on the Palestinians, arguing that “terrorist attacks” must cease before the Palestinians can have full independence. This “conditional” recognition of Palestinian nationhood relies on the negatively interdependent interpretation of victimhood that characterizes the narrative stalemate between Israelis and Palestinians (Kelman, 1999). Although Yossi's legitimization of Palestinian statehood appears to repudiate the stalemate of narratives that characterizes the conflict, the conditional nature of this legitimization suggests a reproduction of the *status quo*.

In sum, Yossi's story conforms closely to the master narrative of Jewish Israeli identity in its redemptive form and much of its thematic content. The fluidity of its ideological setting suggests possibilities for pragmatic reconciliation

with the Palestinians in its recognition of the legitimacy of Palestinian independence. Yet, the conditionality on which this recognition is framed fails to recognize the power asymmetry that characterizes the conflict (Kelman, 2007; Rouhana, 2004), and the ideological trajectory of Yossi's narrative is difficult to predict.

Noa: The Kibbutznik

Noa* is a 14-year-old resident of a kibbutz in northern Israel. Although her kibbutz is in close proximity to both the border with Jordan and the separation barrier with the West Bank, her idyllic community feels worlds away from the conflict with the Palestinians. Its setting is pastoral and serene.

Contemporary residents of the kibbutzim are typically left-wing, not just economically and socially but also with regard to the conflict with the Palestinians. Secular and pragmatic, they tend to view the achievement of a Jewish state in 1948 as complete, and the idea of "Greater Israel" as problematic for the safety and security of Israel. Noa's family is no exception. Describing her own political socialization, she says, ". . . Most of the things that I know about politics is from my brother, and so, I don't know, he's very on the left side, and so I just heard from him and from my family."

Noa comes from a long line of kibbutz residents on her father's side, her great grandfather having emigrated from Russia. Her mother is an Ashkenazi Jew born outside of Israel, who immigrated for Noa's father. Noa's life story begins with the faint memory of loss at the divorce of her parents. Referring to the second descent in her lifeline, she says, "When I was like 10 years old, I remember that I started having problems with the fact that my parents got divorced, but I got used to it and worked it out."

The third of Noa's descents reveals the overall pattern of her narrative, like Yossi's and like that of the Jewish Israeli master narrative, of redemption:

This is when I'm in the seventh grade, and I remember that I *hated* the seventh grade because you become the youngest again, and I was so shy. I'm not a shy person now but I was back then, and I hated this about myself. It was a bad year. And then the eighth grade was good. I loved it.

The transition to a new year at a new school, where the developing social skills of an early

adolescent are still being tested and reformulated, creates a crisis for Noa. However, as with her previous challenges in the story, the resolution of this crisis is a successful adjustment, with accrued confidence in her ability to manage life's challenges.

Considering Noa's narrative in relation to the master narrative of Jewish Israeli identity, it mirrors the redemptive form of the master narrative. However, it is possible to see some distance from both the thematic content and the ideological setting of the master narrative in Noa's life story. In fact, Noa's narrative contains no references to persecution and victimization. Its references to the army are mostly in highly negative terms, rather than an emphasis on Israel's need for security. There are no explicit references to Jewish exceptionalism and little discussion at all of Arabs or Palestinians. Her social identity as a Jewish Israeli does not appear to be incredibly salient. What does appear to be salient is her *local* "kibbutznik" identity, even as the sustenance of that collective identity is in a process of erosion.

The ideological setting of Noa's narrative can be described as extremely left-wing. Narratively, this political perspective is transmitted to Noa through the stories of army service from her two brothers:

. . . My brother would talk with me about the conflict with the Arabs, and he would tell me how they would make him go to Arabs' houses and tell them to leave their house. And he was telling me these stories in a perspective, like, "This is bad, this is wrong, this is *morally* wrong."

Noa is introduced to the conflict through the stories of her older brothers, both of whom resented having to serve a country whose policies they saw as immoral toward another group. As a consequence, it is not surprising that Noa is ideologically very much in favor of Palestinian statehood:

. . . I think that Israel should give the Arabs those territories that we took from them. I think the Arabs should get their own separate state. This is the situation: there is a small piece of land, both cultures and religions. We should live together, and if we can't do it together then we should do it separate.

In the ideological setting of her narrative, Noa displays a real desire to compromise and an authentic pragmatism about the conflict. She does not, as the master narrative might have

encouraged her to do, delegitimize the national aspirations of the Palestinians. She sees their struggle as entirely legitimate, and she even seems to assign Israel a level of responsibility for the resolution of the conflict. The first step, according to her, is for Israel to return the territories to the Palestinians. Unlike Yossi's conditionality, Noa seems rather unequivocal in her conviction that Israel, not the Palestinians, holds the key to peace.

The ability of Noa to construct a narrative that conforms very little to the master narrative of Jewish Israeli identity reveals the extent to which this master narrative is contested and, perhaps, on the "decline" (Kimmerling, 2001). However, it is also connected to the unique social ecology of Noa's development. The kibbutz represents a unique site for political socialization and identity development (e.g., Avgar, Bronfenbrenner, & Henderson, 1977; Spiro, 1975). It is, as Noa notes in her life story, quite insulated from the realities of the conflict:

... We live in an area all those bombings and stuff aren't really here. I mean, it's everywhere, but it's not like in Tel Aviv or Jerusalem. It isn't affecting our daily lives, but it is. It's affecting our lives because guys from the kibbutz have to go to the army and serve in the territories. . . .

Noa's perspective is that the conflict affects her daily life more in the sacrifices the young community members serving in the IDF must make, rather than any specific existential threat she encounters in her life.

Noa's personal narrative at age 14 is closely aligned with the master narrative of Israeli identity in its redemptive form, but it diverges considerably from the master narrative in its thematic content and ideological setting. Noa's story demonstrates the way in which Jewish Israeli youth can, with the support of a local identity narrative, question and even reject elements of the master narrative that contribute to the intractability of conflict. In this local identity narrative, the outright repudiation of the stalemate of narratives that reproduces the conflict appears to be possible.

Roai: The Settler

Roai* is a 16-year-old Israeli from a West Bank settlement. The son of two immigrant Mizrahim from Morocco and Iraq, Roai grew up in a somewhat religious household. His life

story begins with a steady but slowly progressive form. He connects this time in his life with a period of relative stability in the conflict: "... We had a very quiet time in the country." The peak experience in his life story occurs during a two-year period (1998–2000) in which his father, a tour guide in Jerusalem, has significant work.

The year 2000 marks the beginning of the tragic descent of Roai's narrative, with the commencement of the second Palestinian intifada. The tourists stopped coming to Jerusalem, which was the focal point for the start of the uprising, so Roai's father suddenly found himself out of work. Then, very suddenly in 2002, Roai's father passed away. For Roai, not surprisingly, this event is the nadir in his life story. He claims now, two years on at the time of interview, to be coping well, saying, "... It's getting better."

Formally, Roai's narrative reveals stability disrupted by both political and personal events. His positive evaluation of the political situation as a child contributes to this stability, which is followed by a brief period of sustained ascent, then by a tragic regress owing initially to the dramatic change in the conflict and culminating in the death of his father. Yet, a sense of stability ultimately returns to the narrative, as Roai constructs a story that possesses coherence and acceptability for his role in the family as the oldest of three sons.

In contrast to Noa, political events figure prominently in Roai's narrative, highlighting the salience of local identity among Jewish Israelis. Although Noa resides far away from the epicenter of the conflict, Roai's residence in a settlement in the occupied territories places him directly at the epicenter of the conflict. Noa has known no Arabs in her life. Roai, however, recalls his first memory about the conflict as follows:

Since I live in the settlement, we had a checkpoint right outside. If we wanted to go to Jerusalem, we had to go through the checkpoint. But for me it wasn't a big problem because I'm an Israeli. But I saw the Palestinians waiting there, in the sun, and that's the first time I thought about us and them. . . . I remember asking my father why they are waiting and we are not. He said they have to be checked. I asked why, but he just said they have to be checked. Now, of course, I know why.

This early experience aroused within Roai a genuine interest in understanding the con-

flict—its origins, its characters, its differential structure.

Similar to Yossi, Roai accepts the idea of Palestinian statehood, seemingly rejecting the delegitimization of Palestinian identity contained in the master narrative. However, also like Yossi, Roai's is a conditional acceptance. His narrative of Israel's history reveals its foundation in the need for Jewish protection through national sovereignty, although he does not hesitate to acknowledge the existence of the Palestinians and their own desire for national self-determination:

In 1948 we established our own country, but there were a lot of Arab communities—the Palestinians were here, and they also wanted to build their own country. They started fighting us with the Arab neighbors. Four wars we had, and now today we are still fighting them. The main reason we wanted a state was the Holocaust—that's why we came here and tried to build our own country.

Roai's account of the historical origins of the state reveal the ways in which themes of persecution and victimization in Jewish history (culminating in the Holocaust) give way to a thematic emphasis on *security* for young Israelis. Although Roai recognizes Palestinian rival aspirations for national fulfillment, he identifies the threat to Israeli existence that such aspirations have typically brought.

Although Roai recognizes the existence and legitimacy of Palestinian identity, he conforms to a master narrative of “conditional recognition” that frames a post-Oslo Israeli discourse and that is appropriated among many Jewish Israeli youth:

I think that the Palestinians have to get their own state, but not in such a this condition—like today, they are attacking us. We need to have it quiet before we are letting them to build their own country. No attacks from the Palestinians, and then we will talk about the peace process. And it will not be a fast movement. It has to be for a long time. . . . But I think that they must have their own country.

Roai's conditional acceptance of the legitimacy of Palestinian aspirations for statehood reveals a level of ideological confusion. On the one hand, he seems to truly believe that the Palestinians constitute a distinct national group deserving of their own country. Yet, his stance remains one of paternalistic Orientalism.

During the second *intifada*, the Israeli discourse about the failure of peace talks at Camp

David that had preceded the outbreak of violence placed blame squarely on the Palestinians, and on Yasser Arafat, in particular (Bar-Tal, 2004b; Dor, 2003). Information about Arafat's rejection of the deal, as presented by the Israeli government at the time, essentially initiated this discourse by arguing that the Palestinians had been offered the best deal imaginable and had rejected it without making counter-proposals (Bar-Tal, 2004b).

Roai's view of the start of the *intifada* conforms very closely to this narrative of Camp David:

A time when I was very, very angry about the conflict was in 2000 when the *intifada* started. Yeah, because it was after Camp David when we tried to talk with them about the peace process, and we gave them a lot of good conditions before they are building their own country. But they wanted to return their refugees to Israel, and they didn't let it go, and we didn't want to give them this right, because then Israel would not be a Jewish state. There would be too many Arabs. They don't understand how important this is to us.

Roai believes in the legitimacy of Palestinian nationalism, but not at the cost of threatening Israel's identity as a Jewish state. Here we see the extent of Roai's ideological flexibility. He is open to Palestinian nationalism, so long as it does not threaten Israeli identity.

For Roai, to be Israeli first and foremost means to serve in the army. This experience is, in his pre-army adolescent view, the ultimate in identity fulfillment. When asked about what it means to be Israeli, Roai reveals a hierarchy of factors that comprise a coherent social identity:

That's a hard question. To go to the army, that's to be an Israeli. We're serving in the army, we're speaking Hebrew, we are Jewish. Religion has a major part in Israel. What else? Being in the conflict, *that's* Israeli.

For Roai, after military service, it is language and Judaism—ethnically and, for him, religiously—that comprise Israeli identity. The final element he identifies, however, is a very important one: Israeli identity is rooted in the experience of conflict itself. Having to traverse the daily anxieties of possible attack, internalizing the perceived existential threat of an entire collective identity—these factors, in fact, construct a coherent Israeli identity. Like Yossi, Roai views simply “being in the conflict” as a fundamental unifying feature of Israeli identity.

In terms of the master narrative, the experience of persecution and victimization resides within

Roai's narrative, but only as it serves as the root cause for what he views as the most essential aspect of Israeli identity: the need for security. The identity fulfillment in performing military service enables the social practice needed to fully qualify as an "Israeli." Military service is a rite of passage that reinforces the master narrative of Jewish Israeli identity (Ben-Ari, 1998; Seginer, 1999). The practice of "defense" of the nation does more than simply protect land and borders; it preserves an entire social identity.

Although Roai's life story closely parallels the master narrative in its form and thematic content, its ideological setting reveals points of divergence from the master narrative. Ideologically, owing to the differential contexts of the settlement and his school in Jerusalem, Roai inhabits two very different worlds, and he is still determining how to negotiate them:

All the ideology of my school is to be with the Arab neighbors . . . to live in peace. . . . My friends from my town, they are a little more militant than me, and my friends from school are the opposite of me. Their ideology is the opposite of my ideology. It's a bit opposite because they think we should give them the state and not fight them and not make all the action in Gaza and the West Bank. . . . [My friends from home], they think that we should fight them now, and all the Arabs are killers and something like that. . . . It's very hard to think from a different way while you're always living in one place and you can't hear the other side, or meet people from the other side. It's very hard.

In this direct admission of his ideological struggle, Roai reveals the deep ambivalence in the setting of his life story. Up to this point in his narrative, he has generally advanced conditional acceptance of Palestinian identity. For him, this conditional acceptance—this notion that Palestinians can and should achieve independence, but only under certain conditions specified by Israel—can be seen as a "compromise ideology." It is, for the moment, the ideological location that is essentially at the center of the two ideological poles Roai has been exposed to in his upbringing.

Ayelet: The Cosmopolitan

Ayelet* is a 16-year-old inhabitant of cosmopolitan Tel Aviv. With its beautiful Mediterranean coast lined with radiant sandy beaches and trendy bars and restaurants, Tel Aviv is distinct from other locales in Israel. An Ashkenazi–Mizrahi mix, Ayelet's fashionable dress and perpetually tan skin reveal her embrace of the Tel Aviv cosmopolitan identity.

Ayelet's life story, like the master narrative, assumes a redemptive form. The first descent, which also consists of Ayelet's first vivid memory, centers on the divorce of her parents at age 4. Her narrative achieves gains after this difficult early descent with the increase in her perceived social competence. By age 11, she reports to have achieved a peak experience of social acceptance and "popularity" among her peers, which positively impacts her self-confidence. From descent in her life story, she discovers a way to ascend through shifting the source of her self-confidence from her family to her peers.

In contrast to Roai, Ayelet's life story reveals no connection whatsoever to the conflict. Upon probing, however, it becomes abundantly clear that her story does possess an ideological setting—albeit one still in formation—that is quite connected to her *local* identity as an inhabitant of cosmopolitan Tel Aviv:

I'm kind of in the middle. I think we should all just learn to live together. It's such a small country. And with all the bombings and things, eventually we're not going to have an Israel. . . . And people dying for no reason. . . . I just hate the thought—we are coming from a place where we've been hated all our lives.

The Holocaust, wherever we go, we still have it. So people that go through such a thing are supposed to understand that thing. . . . We're part of a group that feels hated, so we shouldn't be hating another.

The trope of persecution and victimization, culminating in the Holocaust, is a salient theme from the master narrative that resonates for Ayelet, but she argues that the experience of victimization ought to sensitize Jewish Israelis to discrimination against other groups, such as Arabs.

Ayelet goes beyond a conditional recognition of the legitimacy of Palestinian identity and even views her own ingroup as partially responsible for the continuation of the conflict:

This is where I live and these are my neighbors, and you have to choose whether you want to live in a fight and make your life miserable, or whether you want to try and make a solution. I know you can't find a solution for everything; you need both sides for that I just sometimes feel like they stabbed us with a knife in the back. But we're not totally white in that thing. We're not totally good. So I really hope that the kids of this generation will have the chance to change it. . . . Maybe one day, you know, there'll be peace. It's got to happen, eventually. Though it seems like kind of a dream, one might say, but I really believe you can do it. You just need to be willing and have the strength for that.

The existence of the Palestinians is a foregone conclusion for Ayelet, as she refers to them as

“neighbors.” She reveals some ambivalence about them, having been exposed to one of the most common discourses about Arabs in Israel—that they cannot be trusted and are prone to betrayal. However, so far in her narrative it appears that, ideologically, she is a young Jewish Israeli who need not go far to embody the values of peaceful coexistence.

The extent to which Ayelet’s ideological identifications contain a measure of pragmatism is called into question by her utopian vision of a one-state solution to the conflict. Her views on the possibility of a two-state solution suggest less pragmatism and greater appropriation of more polarizing aspects of the master narrative than are initially apparent:

I don’t really understand [the idea of a two-state solution] because I don’t understand why they need a country, because they have so many. They have Egypt, Syria, so many Arab countries. Why can’t they live there? We have only one. No matter where we go, everybody’s gonna hate us, no matter where we going to go. . . . It’s not like they’re different—Syria and Egypt and all of those countries—it’s all Arabs. I mean, they’re part of it, they’re not supposed to *feel* different. And they could totally live there—Egypt and Syria are *huge*. Iraq even. . . . For the Jewish people, we have only one country. There’s nowhere we can go basically. This is where we live. . . . There’s no place for Palestine, and there’s no place for making it here. . . .

Quite alarmingly, given the initial sympathetic tone Ayelet reveals toward the Palestinians, this portion of her narrative reveals a contradictory sentiment and makes the ideological setting of her personal narrative appear more “right-wing.” Endorsing significant outgroup homogeneity in her understanding of the Arabs, she rejects the notion that the Palestinians indeed constitute a unique social identity apart from Egyptians or Syrians and, in this way, conforms to an extent with the delegitimization of Palestinian identity contained in the master narrative. Clearly, however, she is ambivalent and, at the age of 16, is still in the process of making decisions about which aspects of the master narrative to appropriate into her personal narrative. For now, her view of the Palestinians can be described as Orientalist, particularly in the paternalism that underlies the elaboration of her one-state solution:

[The Palestinians] need to stop complaining about the things they don’t have. They need to stop and think about what they do have. And they have each other, and they have families. I think if we go through them, if we help

them, because they barely have technology. . . . [A]ll around Gaza, build them houses, give them games, give them money a little bit, something like that, I think it will be better. It’s all about helping each other.

Ayelet has internalized the power imbalance in identity that Orientalism as an ideology establishes, and she views the role of Israel as a “civilizing” force for Palestinian cultural development.

Ayelet’s narrative may reveal significant ambivalence in its ideological setting, but her willingness to consider counter-narratives and to engage in the conversation of discourses that consumes the conflict reveals her cosmopolitan identity:

The key to everything is to accept the different. I might disagree with the other side; you can disagree with a person, but I’ll never see that as a negative. I’ll never take it and say, “No. You’re wrong. You’re definitely wrong and no, I’m not about to listen!” The whole point of it is success with the other and the other opinions, even if you don’t agree with them. You’re not always supposed to agree with others, you just have to accept their opinions. . . . You can see I’m a very peaceful person—against war, basically.

If cosmopolitanism condones, ideologically and culturally, a coexistence of conversations (Appiah, 2006)—a willingness to accept the multiplicity of discursive possibilities and the identities that they construct—we can see in Ayelet the promise of peace. Yet, her underlying delegitimization of the distinctiveness of Palestinian identity inhibits the development of a truly cosmopolitan identity.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore the reproduction of conflict through the process of narrative engagement among Israeli youth motivated to participate in a coexistence program. As intergroup conflicts become increasingly defined as conflicts of group narratives, it is essential for social scientists who study peace and conflict to query the process of individual engagement with narratives that maintain conflict. If the maintenance of conflict depends on the reproduction of polarized narratives, the extent to which youth appropriate or repudiate aspects of the master narrative represents a vital empirical question.

The stories of Jewish Israeli youth collected for this study reveal narratives of personal redemption that closely mirror the master narrative of national

identity, with its larger story of collective redemption. The tendency to construct personal narratives of redemption links Israelis to other cultures in the West (e.g., McAdams, 2006), suggesting an affiliation with Western notions of personhood (see Baumeister, 1987). Yet, the stories of youth strongly suggest the salience of *local* identity over *national* identity, particularly as youth determine the ideological settings of their narratives. Local identity also determines the extent to which the conflict has a predictable impact on their daily lives. Only Roai, who lives on a West Bank settlement and commutes to Jerusalem for school, has significant exposure to the actual social structure of the conflict. For Noa, Yossi, and Ayelet, their exposure is almost entirely relegated to particular discourses about the conflict, rather than to the conflict's tangible physical realities. This pattern was similar across youth interviewed in this study: Only those who resided close to or in the occupied territories had integrated experiences closely related to the conflict or to the Palestinians into their life stories. The prominence accorded to political events in narratives, like Roai's, speaks to the differentiation of Jewish Israeli identity across local contexts.

The portraits of Jewish Israeli youth offered here—exemplars of the narratives collected in this study—demonstrate the unique identity challenges created by conflict. Dealing with the possibility of attack on a bus, or hearing stories of siblings in the army, Jewish Israeli youth meet the challenges of conflict by constructing stories that reveal resilience, strength, and defiance. No matter what the challenge—the loss of a family member, difficulties at school, a parental divorce, the possibility of Palestinian “terror”—Jewish Israelis rise to the challenge with *strength*. This image of Jewish Israeli identity is meant to contrast sharply with the identity of Jews in the Diaspora (Zerubabel, 1995).

The thematic content of youth narratives reveals key points of convergence with the master narrative. The theme of Jewish persecution and victimization is consistently present, if sometimes only deployed to justify the need for a Jewish state. The need for security is internalized by all of the youth, with the recognition of continued existential threat. The idea of Israeli exceptionalism is closely connected to the delegitimization of Palestinian identity. However, this delegitimization, a legacy of Orientalism and its Eurocentric posture toward the Middle East, is contested within the

narratives of youth. What can at first appear to be a surprising legitimization of Palestinian identity frequently becomes conditional—and conditional in ways that fail to acknowledge the power asymmetry inherent in the conflict (Bar-Tal, 1998b; Rouhana, 2004).

The tendency for youth in this study to diverge from the master narrative on the theme of Palestinian delegitimization parallels shifts in Israeli political discourse that began with the Oslo accords. Those accords represented an official recognition of the legitimacy of Palestinian claims for statehood, and it is noteworthy that contemporary youth appear to have internalized this new discourse on Palestinian identity. Yet, Oslo policy can be described as “transitional,” given that it specified an interim agreement of principles rather than an actual peace agreement. The perceived failure of Oslo policy to achieve a reduction in conflict has resulted in a discourse of ambivalence in Israeli society. That both Israelis and Palestinians are locked within the liminal discursive conditions set by the Oslo accords—representing a kind of semi-recognition of mutual legitimacy and identity—is perceptible to contemporary youth as they begin to construct life stories. Narratives of Israeli youth reveal the reproduction of this deep ambivalence toward the Palestinians and the conflict more generally.

It is important to note that the narratives of youth interviewed for this study are not necessarily representative of the entire population of Jewish Israeli youth. Because the youth in this study were motivated in some way to engage in intergroup contact with Arabs, they may be more likely than other Israeli youth to repudiate the most polarizing aspects of the master narrative. For example, recognition of the legitimacy of Palestinian identity was universal among the youth, even for those like Roai who proudly identified as right-wing. Youth who are motivated to participate in dialogue programs with Arabs probably represent the most liberal of contemporary Jewish Israeli youth. However, this feature of the sample actually makes the findings more interesting. That an Orientalist posture toward the Palestinians is firmly entrenched in the narratives of cosmopolitan, liberal youth like Ayelet is alarming for the possibility of conflict reduction because it suggests that the coalition most in favor of peace contin-

ues to reproduce narratives that challenge the preconditions of peaceful coexistence.

The use of intensive qualitative field methods for this study, although limiting the generalizability of findings, was intentional to engage in a process of “thick description” (Geertz, 1973) to address the research question. Given that the relation between master narratives and personal narratives of identity has rarely been queried, and that the narrative basis of conflict has been increasingly recognized, studies on this topic must begin with thick description and gradually utilize research designs that allow for greater generalizability. This study contributes to the growing literature in the social psychology of peace and conflict that recognizes the salience of narrative in the maintenance and reproduction of intractable conflict. Absent the institutional and cultural support for coexistence (Bar-Tal, 2004a), young Israelis struggle to integrate a transformative ideological perspective in their personal narratives, instead reproducing a status quo of nationalist discourse (Bekerman & Maoz, 2005).

Even as the narratives of youth in this study reveal the *idiographic complexity* of identity (Hammack, 2008; see also Gjerde, 2004), they reveal their connection to a master narrative—the content of which secures the reproduction of a context of power, identity, and intergroup relations. Interventions that target the master narrative itself, through efforts in policy, represent an important role for social psychology beyond individual or small-group interventions. The very fact that the Oslo accords created a new discourse for Jewish Israeli youth *about* the Palestinians reveals the power of policy change to affect the psychological development of youth. That youth engage with this new, highly ambivalent discourse on Palestinian legitimacy reveals that shifts in the master narrative can indeed become encoded into the life stories of youth. Peace-building efforts with youth thus rely on both personal *and* political transformations that can create possibilities for social change and conflict reduction (Bar-Tal, 2004a; Hammack, 2006).

To the extent that the reproduction of conflict continues to serve the interests of those for whom the status quo of power dynamics is a clear advantage, there is pessimism for the policy action necessary to transform master narratives. A social psychology of peace and conflict, however, can and must recognize the complexity of these processes among discourse, social

structure, and the individual. It is the ability to query the interrelation among these factors that makes our role distinct. In this article, I have suggested that the empirical examination of the relation between master narratives and personal narratives represents a mechanism for theorizing the social reproduction of conflict and possibilities for peaceful coexistence.

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