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# Sociopsychological analysis of conflict-supporting narratives: A general framework

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## Abstract

Societies involved in intractable conflicts form conflict-supporting narratives that illuminate and justify their intergroup conflicts. These narratives play an important role in satisfying the basic sociopsychological needs of the involved individuals and collectives. In order to fulfill this role the narratives tend to be biased in favor of the in-group, selective, distorting and simplistic. This article analyzes such narratives that focus on the following major themes: Justification and Threats (of conflict), Delegitimization (of the opponent), Glorification and Victimhood (of the in-group), the in-group's need for Patriotism and Unity, and its Aspiration for Peace. Additionally, the article describes the individual and collective functions of these narratives. It also describes six main methods that are used in the narratives' construction: reliance on supportive sources, marginalization of contradictory information, magnification of supportive themes, fabrication of supportive contents, omission of contradictory contents, and use of framing language. Because conflict-supporting narratives are so functional, the involved societies struggle to support their dominance within their own society as well as in the international community. This article, therefore, presents seven methods that are used by the parties in their intrasocietal struggles – control of access to information, censorship, discrediting of contradicting information, monitoring, punishment, encouragement and rewarding, and closure of archives. Similar methods are used in the international arena struggles. Finally, it describes the process of change from adherence to the conflict-supportive narratives to the construction of new peace-supporting narratives and adherence to them.

## Keywords

collective memory, culture of conflict, ethos of conflict, ethos of peace, intractable conflict, narratives, peacebuilding, reconciliation

## Introduction

Intergroup conflicts typically involve conflict-supporting narratives<sup>1</sup> that are used by the involved parties. These narratives satisfy the needs of the rivals for justification

and explanation of the events of the conflicts in which they take part (László, 2008). The narratives are especially important in *intractable* conflicts, because these conflicts involve human losses and suffering that lead unavoidably to chronic stress and distress. In these contexts, conflict-supporting narratives play a major role not

<sup>1</sup> By using the term 'narrative' we do not mean that the story presented in the conflict-supporting narratives, with all its illuminations, explanations, and justifications, is necessarily all false. Some narratives are based on different extent of reality.

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only in the eruption of conflicts, but especially in their persistence – as well as in the use of violent means that often violate moral codes of conduct, and in the difficulty in resolving them peacefully. They become epistemic ideological foundations that serve as a prism through which society members process information and thus support continuation of the conflict (Bar-Tal, 2013; Bar-Tal, Halperin & Oren, 2010). Because the societies<sup>2</sup> in conflict typically develop opposing conflict-supporting narratives, and because additional counter-narratives may appear in each society, groups initially try to maintain the dominance of their own narratives among the in-group members and also make efforts to persuade other groups of their narratives' truthfulness.

Several empirical studies focus on the destructive impacts of conflict-supporting narratives: Božić-Roberson (2004) shows how the Serbs' negative narratives regarding the Croats and the Bosnians that were advocated by the Serb leader Slobodan Milošević in the 1990s contributed to the eruption of bloodshed in the Balkans; Russell (2005) reveals how similar narratives held by the Russians regarding the Chechens contributed to the eruption of the two Russia–Chechnya wars in the 1990s; Staub (2011) presents the negative narratives adopted by the Hutus regarding the Tutsis that led the former to conduct a genocide among the latter; and Papadakis, Peristianis & Welz (2006) describe the mutually held negative narratives of the Greek and Turkish Cypriots that prevent the resolution of their conflict. Moreover, as described below, previous studies address some aspects of narratives in general and those of conflicts in particular. Nonetheless, these aspects are scattered separately in different studies (for instance, addressing censorship only). Moreover, many of these studies are empirical and thus do not offer an all-inclusive conception.

In view of the pivotal role of conflict-supportive narratives, the present article makes four distinctive contributions to their understanding in the attempt to provide a comprehensive, integrated, and holistic conceptual framework. First, it clarifies the nature of the conflict-supportive narratives in times of conflict, particularly their unique themes and the functions they fulfill. Second, it describes the methods that are used in their construction. Third, it examines the practices that are used in efforts to preserve a narrative's dominance within the society that formed it and also in the international community. Finally, it provides a number of ideas

about changing narratives within the framework of a peace-building process and constructing new peace-supporting narratives.

## Narratives

The concept 'narrative' refers to a story about an event or events that has a plot with a clear starting point and end-point, providing sequential and causal coherence about the world and/or a group's experience (e.g. Bruner, 1990; László, 2008). Some scholars suggest that this concept represents an ideal root metaphor for political psychology in its ability to bridge 'levels of analysis in precisely the manner political psychologists have advocated since the emergence of the field' (Hammack & Pilecki, 2012: 95). Given this framework, narratives are analyzed on two levels. On the individual level, they are life stories that provide a sense of meaning, coherence, and purpose to the course of a person's life (e.g. McAdams, 2006). On the collective level, narratives are 'social constructions that coherently interrelate a sequence of historical and current events; they are accounts of a community's collective experiences, embodied in its belief system and represent the collective's symbolically constructed shared identity' (Bruner, 1990: 76). Bekerman & Zembylas (2010, 2011) added an emotional element to narratives, suggesting that historical collective narratives are embedded in particular emotional discourses about collective (national) belonging and otherness. They serve specific purposes in the process of creating and negotiating reality and making individuals into socially and culturally specific persons engaged in complex webs of power relations. In this way society members, investing strong emotions to particular historical narratives with which they identify, become entrenched in them, and thus changing the narratives is a very difficult challenge. As a complementary approach, Hammack focused on the theoretical basis of narrative as linked to language, power, and social practice (Hammack, 2008, 2011a; Hammack & Pilecki, 2012). In his view narrative is the central way in which individuals use language to mediate their experiences of the material world. In conflict settings individuals experience narrative in more compulsory ways because of the existential insecurity of the group (Hammack, 2010, 2011a). What bridges the two levels of narrative is *narrative engagement*, which refers to how individuals navigate among different collective narratives and the extent to which individuals accept collective narratives or challenge them (Hammack, 2010, 2011a; Hammack & Pilecki, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> Throughout the article the terms 'group' and 'society' will be intermingled as both refer to large collectives.

Our interest concerns mainly the collective level, but we will also refer at times to the way individuals deal with conflict-supportive narratives. Among the lines of research about collective narratives, the most relevant are studies of collective memory (Wertsch, 2002), also defined as social representations of the past (Liu & Hilton, 2005). In both fields – collective memory and social representations – scholars claim that events in the past and present are often narrated in such ways that promote maintenance of the status quo and/or justify the parties' contentions (Buckley-Zistel, 2009; Liu & Hilton, 2005). For example, Zerubavel (2003) shows how strategies in collective narrative construction, such as structure of time sequence (e.g. linear, circular, zigzag), separation of historical periods from one another, and presentation of historical beginnings, provide meanings to the past that legitimate present claims and acts, such as the establishment of territorial rights.

Studies of collective memory and social representations present a picture of multiple collective storylines that circulate in a society and compete for dominance. Moscovici's (1988) studies of social representations refer to *master narratives* that are 'dominant scripts which can be identified in cultural products and discourse' (e.g. media, literature, textbooks); within this context, Moscovici also alludes to hegemonic narratives that are consensual throughout society. These scripts contain 'collective storylines that range from a group's history to notions of what it means to inhabit a particular social category' (Hammack, 2010: 178). They are perceived as compulsory because individuals need to appropriate them into their personal narrative in order to qualify as society members (Hammack, 2011b). Previous studies supporting this line of inquiry looked into the assemblage of specific master narratives in school textbooks, history books (Buckley-Zistel, 2009), leaders' speeches (Reicher & Hopkins, 1996), and reports by committee investigators (Bogen & Lynch, 1989). Of special importance for the present article are narratives that support continuations of intractable conflicts, because they strongly influence the societies involved in them (Auerbach, 2010; Bar-Tal, 2013).

According to Bar-On, these narratives are building blocks of social identity. They are constructed against the other, and this positioning allows the definition of the collective. The negation of the other allows construction of a monolithic narrative, which excludes the other, including its narrative, and enables performance of immoral deeds. In the context of a violent conflict the rivals focus in their narratives on their traumatic

experience and feelings of victimhood. This situation leads to a collision between the rivals' narratives. Only a dialogue between the narratives can lead to new understanding of the own narrative, legitimization of the other group, and development of empathy (Bar-On, 1996, 2008).

In this line of research studies have identified contradictory narratives between societies engaged in intractable conflicts (e.g. Papadakis, Peristianis & Welz, 2006, in the case of Greek and Turkish Cypriot narratives; and Adwan, Bar-On & Naveh, 2012, regarding Israeli and Palestinian narratives). Some studies have focused on specific topics that the narratives emphasize, such as collective victimhood among a narrative's adherents (e.g. De Mel, 2007; Hadjipavlou, 2007). Also the struggle over opposing narratives within a society was noted mostly in the context of censorship (see review in De Baets, 2002). However, little work regarding the way two narratives of societies involved in intractable conflict compete in the international community has been done (e.g. Noor et al., 2012, wrote on competition between rival groups' narratives about presenting the in-group as the sole victim of the conflict). This topic is also partially covered in the literature about propaganda and public diplomacy, but these studies tend to focus on *images* of one's own society and its rivals rather than on narratives (O'Loughlin, 2011). For instance, O'Loughlin (2011) found that the impact of images of conflict on a target audience depends on the broader historical narratives that form the context for such images.

In sum, the literature addresses various aspects of narratives in general, including those related to conflict situations. Nonetheless, as noted, an inclusive analysis is needed of the latter narratives that focuses on their contents, functions, construction, processes of change, and struggles over their dominance. Below we provide several classifications regarding themes of conflict-supportive narratives and methods used in the construction of conflict-supportive narratives and in the struggles for their dominance. These categorizations are based on decades of extensive research of the Arab–Israeli conflict and intimate familiarity with the theoretical and empirical literature regarding this conflict and other intractable conflicts, such as those in Northern Ireland and Cyprus (see Bar-Tal, 2007b, 2013). These lists, which offer an organization of practices in settings of intractable conflicts, may not be exhaustive. They develop frameworks that can serve as bases for constructing observations in different conflicts and also suggest an opportunity to validate them.

## The content of conflict-supportive narratives

In every intractable conflict the rivals construct conflict-supporting master collective narratives that focus on the conflict's entirety and that often become dominant. The narratives form a collective self-presentation and describe the causes of the conflict, its nature, the image of the rival, the conditions needed to win the conflict, and more. In addition to this general master narrative, there are also more specific narratives that concern major events in the conflict, such as wars, and mini narratives that refer to specific incidents, such as a battle and even particular events within a battle, as well as personalities involved (Auerbach, 2010).

A master conflict-supportive narrative consists of two major kinds of narrative that pertain to the continuum of time from past through present and into the future (Bar-Tal, 2007a, 2013). 'Collective memory' refers to the narrative about a conflict's eruption and its course, providing a coherent and meaningful picture of the past (Paez & Liu, 2011). 'Ethos of conflict' as a narrative defines the particular dominant orientation of a society, which illuminates the present state of affairs and conditions and sets a direction as well as goals for the future (Bar-Tal, 2007a, 2013; Oren, 2009).

Both collective memory and ethos of conflict supply the contents of the culture of conflict that evolves within each group of rivals (Bar-Tal, 2013). Nevertheless, we recognize that these societies differ in terms of the degree of dominance of an identified master narrative, and that the characteristics of a narrative change with time. In some societies the conflict-supportive narrative is dominant at certain times – that is, widely shared and reflected in various societal, political, and cultural institutions and products. In other societies it may be less dominant, competing with various counter-narratives that may even reject the continuation of the conflict. Nevertheless, at the climax of an intractable conflict, the master conflict-supportive narrative, expressed in collective memory and the ethos, frequently achieves prominence within rival societies. This narrative often includes some combination of the following eight common themes, while one or more of these themes may appear in specific narratives (Bar-Tal, 1998, 2007a, 2013). The list of themes is based on insights drawn mainly from theoretical and empirical literature about several intractable conflicts and does not necessarily describe all actual conflicts.

First, the master narrative *justifies* involvement in the conflict and the course of its development while at the same time discrediting the goals of the other side as unjustified and unreasonable. Secondly, it *delineates the dangers* that

the conflict constitutes to the society – threats to the physical existence of the in-group and to its cherished values, identity, and territory (e.g. Bar-Tal, Jacobson & Klieman, 1998). Thirdly, it *delegitimizes* the opponent.<sup>3</sup> In essence, delegitimization denies the adversary's humanity and serves as a psychological permit to harm the rival group (Opatow, 1990). Fourth, in contrast to that of the opponent, the master narrative presents a *glorified image of the in-group* (e.g. Baumeister & Hastings, 1997). Fifth, it presents the in-group as the *sole victim* of the conflict and of the opponent (Bar-Tal et al., 2009). Sixth, it encourages *patriotism*, which is essential in order to mobilize people for achieving its group goals, especially for violent confrontations with the rival – including readiness to make the ultimate sacrifice, life. Seventh, it emphasizes the importance of maintaining *unity*, by ignoring internal discords and disagreements, in the face of an external threat. The eighth and final theme consists of the desire to live in *peace*, as the conflict situation inflicts suffering and losses.

Indeed, these major themes were found to be dominant in the cultures of many societies engaged in intractable conflict, such as among Serbs, Kosovars, Albanians, Croats, and Bosnians (MacDonald, 2002), Hutus in Rwanda (Slocum-Bradley, 2008), Greek and Turkish Cypriots (Hadjipavlou, 2007), and Israeli Jews (Bar-Tal, 2007b; Oren, 2009).

## The functions of conflict-supportive narratives

Specific conflict-supportive and master narratives as described above play a major role in helping society members on both individual and collective levels to adapt to the harsh, stressful, and demanding conditions of the intractable conflict. They fulfill the epistemic function of illuminating the conflict situation, which is characterized by uncertainty, stress, and unpredictability (Burton, 1990). They also serve to justify the negative acts of the in-group towards its enemy, including violence against humans and destruction of property (Apter, 1997). Additionally, the narratives prepare the society for threatening and violent acts by the enemy as well as for the difficult life conditions that may ensue. They attune the society to information that signals potential harm and continuing violent confrontations, allowing psychological preparations for lasting conflict and

<sup>3</sup> Delegitimization is defined as 'categorization of a group, or groups, into negative social categories that exclude it, or them, from the sphere of human groups that act within the limits of acceptable norms and/or values, since these groups are viewed as violating basic human norms or values and therefore deserve maltreatment' (Bar-Tal & Hammack, 2012: 30).

immunization against negative experiences (e.g. Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). By doing so, the narratives function as a motivating force for unity, solidarity, mobilization, and readiness for sacrifice on behalf of the group (Bar-Tal & Staub, 1997). This is especially important for a society that lacks formal institutions for mobilization, as is the case for Tamils, Chechens, and Palestinians (Hammack, 2010). They also enable the maintenance of positive personal and social identities with the sense of worthiness, esteem, and integrity that every group strives to preserve on both individual and collective levels (Leary, 2007). Often, the narratives differentiate between the in-group and the rival, imparting a sense of superiority to the in-group (Pronin, Gilovich & Ross, 2004). Finally, these narratives, as will later be demonstrated, serve the important function of providing positive self-presentation and victimhood status before the international community. Despite all of these functions, it should be noted that when windows of opportunities open for resolving these intractable conflicts peacefully, the same narratives become stubborn barriers to the peacemaking process (Bar-Tal & Halperin, 2011).

### **Construction of the conflict-supportive narratives**

The above listed roles of primary themes indicate that the basic function of the narratives is not to provide the most valid and accurate account of reality. Rather, they aim to serve the crucial needs that must be satisfied if societies are to meet the challenges imposed on them by conflicts. In order to address these challenges, conflict-supporting narratives are constructed selectively, simplistically, with biases and distortion – and through various methods, some of which are described below (Auerbach, 2010; Baumeister & Hastings, 1997).<sup>4</sup> These methods can be used by both parties in symmetrical and asymmetrical conflicts. The first method focuses on the sources used, the next five concern the contents of the narratives, and the last method refers to the use of language.

#### *Reliance on supportive sources*

The narrative is based on documents, testimonies, materials, and so on that support the major themes of the

master narrative, while sources that provide contents contradicting these themes are ignored (Havel, 2005). For example, the formal Turkish narrative of ‘no genocide of the Armenians in WWI’ ignores substantive archival documents and publications that contradict this narrative (Dixon, 2010).

#### *Marginalization of contradictory information*

Contents (especially information that reflects negatively on the justness of group goals or on collective self-image) that contradict the major themes of the conflict-supportive narratives are presented infrequently and assigned minimal importance. In one example, some Japanese textbooks from the end of the 20th century addressed the 1937–38 Nanking massacre of some 300,000 Chinese by Japanese soldiers, but the textbooks claimed that this atrocity did not represent the Japanese people because it was conducted by the Japanese army without their knowledge (Barnard, 2001).

#### *Magnification of supportive themes*

Themes of the master narrative are exaggerated and presented as salient and central, especially those that concern the justness of goals, collective self-presentation, delegitimization of the rival, and patriotism. They are repeated in various ways in minor specific narratives. An example of the magnifying of particular events is the focus of Irish Catholics on the 1972 Bloody Sunday in which 14 Catholic protestors were killed by British soldiers (Rolston, 2010).

#### *Fabrication of supportive contents*

This method reflects use of contents (details and even events) that are not supported by any evidence (Baumeister & Hastings, 1997). One example is the dominant narrative of the Whites in South Africa during the Apartheid regime, justifying their right to the land and treatment of the Blacks. The narrative argued that the vast majority of the areas in which the Whites initially settled were not populated by the Bantu people because the latter did not come to South Africa until the 16th and 17th centuries. This was asserted despite ample evidence that the Bantu people had lived in these areas centuries earlier (Trabold, 1990).

#### *Omission of contradictory contents*

Master narratives and other specific narratives that support a conflict omit contents that contradict their themes. This practice is sometimes referred to as ‘silence’ or ‘collective amnesia’ (Baumeister & Hastings, 1997; Winter, 2010). For example, until the late 1990s, French

<sup>4</sup> Social psychology provides unequivocal empirical support for the human tendency to preserve the beliefs and information that support the held views and reject inconsistent information (see for example reviews by Dovidio & Gaertner, 2010; Fiske, 2013). This tendency was also documented on an individual level in intergroup conflict (e.g. Shamir & Shikaki, 2002). We refer in our review to institutionalized collective practices.

media, cultural channels, and studies did not expose the widespread torture and execution of Algerians during the 1954–62 France–Algeria War (Branche & House, 2010).

### *Use of framing language*

This practice refers to the use of language as a framing tool that triggers emotions, memory, cognition, and motivation related to past events, nurturing and shaping these in line with the current conflict-supporting narrative (Tsur, 2013). For example, this method was widely used by the Serbs, led by Slobodan Milosevic, before and during the conflict in the Balkans that began in the late 1980s. The Serbs framed their support of Albanians for the separation of Kosovo (the cradle of the Serbian nation) from Serbia as part of the centuries-old enmity between them and Albanians, Muslims, and other neighboring nations (Božic-Roberson, 2004).

In summary, at least six specific methods are used in the construction of the conflict-supporting narrative to ensure its overall consistency with its major themes. As shown they appear in different conflicts and are described in detail. During each conflict or different phases of it, various combinations of these methods, their subsets, or even other methods can be employed in production of the narrative. These processes may be carried out unconsciously, since society members who produce the narrative are focused on the intractable conflicts that involve them. Thus these narratives are characterized, *inter alia*, by selective, biased, and distortive information processing that precludes contemplation of incongruent information and alternative approaches to the conflict (Bar-Tal & Halperin, 2011).

## **The struggles over the dominance of the conflict-supportive narrative**

The conceptual framework presented above for conflict-supportive narratives indicates that they are of great importance for the collectives. Thus, societies involved in a conflict engage in fierce struggles in order to instill their conflict-supportive narrative and then to maintain its dominance.

Two major types of campaigns are carried out against counter-narratives. The first type of struggle is intrasocietal, where the battle is over maintaining the dominance of the conflict-supportive narrative among society members (Dixon, 2010; Paez & Liu, 2011). The second campaign is carried out within the international community and aims to persuade relevant third parties that the conflict-supportive narrative of the given in-group is

truthful. Both types of struggle may take place simultaneously and use similar methods to support the narratives. The use of the various practices depends on the political, economic, and military power of each side, and especially on having institutionalized means, such as a state may have, to carry them out.

### *Level 1: Intrasocietal struggle*

Societies make efforts to maintain the dominance of the master conflict-supportive narratives and to prevent, or at least to minimize, dissemination among their members of counter-narratives and information that supports them. This is a continual struggle that intensifies greatly whenever individuals and groups within the society form or begin to propagate counter-narratives that contradict the themes of the master conflict-supportive narrative – especially those regarding justness of the goals (Gidron, Katz & Hasenfeld, 2002; Paez & Liu, 2011).

The leading factions of the in-group thus make tremendous efforts to impart the conflict-supportive narrative to society members and to preserve it. A society's formal and mainstream informal institutions, when under the control of conflict-supporting factions, widely disseminate the themes of this narrative among society members. These themes often appear in the mass media, have a central place in ceremonies, and are expressed in cultural products such as films and books. They also appear in school textbooks and are expressed by leaders (Bar-Tal, 2007b, 2013; Paez & Liu, 2011).

Formal and informal societal institutions of the in-group, such as governments, leaders, military, and NGOs, may also attempt to block by various methods counter-narratives that are promoted by individuals and organizations (Bar-Tal, 2007b; Wolfsfeld, 2004). Here are seven inhibiting methods that appear in different conflicts:

**Control of access to information** is a practice whereby members of formal and informal societal institutions selectively restrict access to information related to the conflict. They regulate access to information under their control in a way that sustains the dominant conflict-supportive narrative while preventing access to information that may challenge this narrative. This control is exercised, for example, by establishing a central organization responsible for disseminating official versions of information regarding current events; by restricting or even preventing access to a particular area in order to thwart the free collection of information; and by providing certain pieces of information only to trustworthy sources (Dixon, 2010; Matheson, 1986). An illustration of

such control occurred during the second Russia–Chechnya war in which Russians established an information center that briefed journalists on what was going on in the field with misinformation that was in line with the official position, and controlled the journalists' entrance to the war zone while effectively cutting off the Chechen separatists from the media (Caryl, 2000).

**Censorship** is the practice of preventing by regulatory means the publicizing of material that challenges the themes of the dominant narrative, through mass media, cultural products, and other channels of information. (e.g. De Baets, 2002). For example, in 1973, the government of Sri Lanka, in its struggle against the Tamil minority, enacted the Press Council bill that established a censoring council, whose members, appointed by the president, were authorized to prohibit the discussion in the mass media of sensitive policies and political and economic topics that directly related to the way the conflict was being handled (Tyerman, 1973).

**Closure of archives** is a practice that prevents in various ways the exposure of (typically) documents that are stored in archives (especially state archives) and that contradict the dominant narrative (Brown & Davis-Brown, 1998). For example, since War World I, the Ottoman and later the Turkish archives were closed to the public in order to block access to documents that pertain to the Armenian genocide. State officials had access to such documents, but only to search for material supporting the Turkish 'no genocide' narrative (Dixon, 2010).

**Monitoring** refers to the regular examination of public information in order to find out whether it contradicts themes of the master conflict-supportive narrative, with the aim of exposing and ostracizing sources of such information (Avni & Klustein, 2009). The objects of this monitoring are typically mass media news, studies by scholars and research institutions, history textbooks, and peace NGOs' reports. An example of use of monitoring can be found in the Israeli Jewish society where organizations such as Israel-Academia-Monitor and NGO Monitor use this practice widely to single out individuals, groups, or NGOs which in their view undermine what they consider Jewish Zionist interests (IAM, n.d.; Steinberg, 2003).

**Discrediting of counter information** is a practice that denies information supporting counter-narratives (e.g. documents or testimonies) and/or denounces its sources (individuals or groups that provide the information) as unreliable and even as endangering the causes of the in-group (Berger, 2005). The Greek society in Cyprus exemplifies extensive use of this practice. Conflict-supporting governments as well as political

parties, NGOs, and individuals have tried continually and systematically to discredit and even delegitimize individuals, groups, and organizations that have disseminated information that counters the conflict-supportive Greek narrative (Papadakis, Peristianis & Welz, 2006).

**Punishment** is a practice that includes tangible sanctions that are practiced against individuals and groups that challenge the hegemony of the dominant conflict-supportive narrative (Nets-Zehngut, 2011). This practice, for example, was used extensively in El Salvador during the civil war there. Journalists, scholars, and students who challenged the official narrative were constantly harassed, arrested, and physically attacked (Matheson, 1986).

**Encouragement and rewarding** uses a 'carrot' for those sources, channels, agents, and products that support the dominant conflict-supportive narratives. For example, the Israeli Ministry of Culture and Sport decided to award an annual prize for cultural work in the area of Zionism that 'gives an expression to values of Zionism, to the history of the Zionist movement and to the return of the Jewish people to its historical homeland' (Ministry of Culture and Sport, 2011).

### *Level 2: International struggle*

An important arena for the struggle over a conflict-supportive narrative is the international community. The goal is to influence this community, since the in-group needs moral – and often diplomatic – support from international organizations, as well as their tangible assistance with certain resources (both financial and military). Therefore, the in-group needs to persuade the leaders and public of other states and international organizations of the validity of their own conflict-supportive narrative (Cronin, 2010). Both rival parties use strategies, tactics, practices, and themes that mirror some of those used in the intrasocietal struggles; some tactics, however, are used only at this level. In this section we will describe some of the practices and content of themes used at this level on the basis of well documented cases.

**Practices.** Specifically, the *construction of the narratives* that are disseminated to the international community parallels the methods used in the construction of narratives targeted for the in-group. Thus, in constructing narratives for international audiences, each side may marginalize and/or omit contradictory information, magnify supportive information, and use causal inferences that are in line with the themes of their narratives.

In addition, some of the *related practices* that are used within a society are also used in this struggle within the

international community. For example, rivals who are increasingly sensitive to how violent clashes are reported to foreign audiences may exercise control over access by the foreign press to information from zones of violence, including prohibiting the press from entering these zones (Thrall, 2000). Additionally, societies may use unique practices in the struggle over the narrative at the international level – such as disseminating their conflict-supportive narrative to third parties through websites, books, films, and other media in foreign languages, while trying to block the dissemination of the opponent's narrative in other ways (Nye, 2008).

Another useful and efficient practice in the struggle at the second level consists of the political activity of one's own diaspora and of lobbying groups within the target society in promoting the in-group's own narrative and dismissing the narrative of the opponent. Strong diaspora groups often forcefully and successfully present and impart their own narrative about the conflict to policymakers, the media, and the public in the target state (Koinova, 2011). This strategy is evident, for example, in the activities of 24 Irish-American senators, congressmen, and governors who in 1981 formed the Congressional Friends of Ireland, announcing that the group would champion the goals of Irish constitutional nationalism (Wilson, 1995).

**Contents.** As for the *contents* that are distributed through the practices noted above, one of the most common themes is *justness of one's own goals*. In the effort to publicize this theme to a third party, the society uses narratives that mirror the theme's presentation in its intrasocietal struggle. Yet, the in-group will also try to relate its goal in the conflict to narratives of the particular target society in order to communicate this theme more effectively. For example, when states in South America or Africa are the target, the societies may frame their conflict-supportive narrative as a story of decolonization (Oded, 2010). Groups may also present their conflict as part of a larger conflict that the target society is involved in and refer to that conflict in such narratives as 'the war on terrorism' or 'the fight against the axis of evil'. These two narratives became especially popular after 11 September 2001. For example, Russia used the 'war on terrorism' narrative to get international legitimization for its operation in Chechnya (Harding, 2011).

Another frequently used theme is *victimization* (Noor, Brown & Prentice, 2008). Being a victim is of special importance because the international community tends to sympathize with the victims and denounce their aggressors (Barkan, 2000). Moreover, when a

society is recognized as a victim and receives international empathy, a legitimization of even violent acts against its aggressor to end its suffering might follow. It is thus not surprising that strong and weak parties in intractable conflicts try to persuade the international community of their status as victims and deny their rivals' claims of victimhood (Noor et al., 2012). For example, Darfurians mobilized the language of victimization as the main means of telling the world about the brutality sweeping their country, while the government of Sudan challenged the estimates by human rights organizations of a death toll of 400,000 in Darfur (Abusharaf, 2010).

At the end of this section we would like to note that those in power in societies involved in conflicts do not operate alone domestically or internationally. For example, in many of the societies enmeshed in intractable conflict, counter-narratives develop that negate the conflict-supporting narratives. Various groups including peace organizations and informal institutions try to disseminate these counter-narratives via the media, academia, and cultural channels to society members and beyond. These counter efforts are usually more forceful in democratic countries and when specific actions and wars lack (or lose) support for the governments responsible for such actions. In some cases these counter-narratives win and become dominant, leading to peaceful conflict resolution, as happened, for instance, in South Africa and Northern Ireland (Fitzduff, 2002; Gidron, Katz & Hasenfeld, 2002). These cases indicate that change of narratives is possible, as is their degree of acceptance, if societies indeed wish to embark on the road of peace. We will now turn to a short discussion about the transformation of conflict-supportive narratives and their loss of acceptance.

### Changing narratives in the peacebuilding process

One of the core elements in the process of peacebuilding<sup>5</sup> is weakening the adherence of the rivals to the conflict-supportive narratives and introducing new ideas, beliefs, and attitudes that eventually develop into new

<sup>5</sup> 'Peacebuilding' process is defined as the exerted efforts by society members, society's institutions, agents, channels of communications, and the international community to realize lasting peaceful relations with the rival within the framework of culture of peace through conflict resolution and reconciliation. Peacebuilding thus includes all the acts that are done to facilitate the achievement of this goal (Bar-Tal, 2013).

peace-supportive narratives (while increasing the adherence to these latter narratives)<sup>6</sup> (Clements, 2012). Construction of new peace-supporting narratives that are shared by at least a majority of society members and the elite often promotes the resolution of conflicts, reconciliation, and the establishment of lasting peace (Staub, 2011). In this section we will briefly address the main process of narratives change and the conditions that facilitate such a change, discussing its role in peacebuilding.

This process begins when the parties in conflict begin to change their beliefs, attitudes, goals, motivations, and emotions about the conflict, about each other, and about future relations – first with attempts to resolve the conflict peacefully and in later phases of the process, with efforts at reconciliation as well. The presentation of new beliefs, which revolve around changing goals, plans, information, images, arguments, justifications, and other considerations, eventually crystallize into coherent new counter-narratives. Such counter-narratives may present the rival in a legitimizing, humanizing, and personalizing way – and as a victim that suffers during the conflict (Bar-Tal & Teichman, 2005). The in-group is conversely presented in a less positive and glorifying light and as a group responsible for misdeeds during the conflict.

On the personal level, this process involves reduced support and even rejection of the master conflict-supportive narrative by an individual, and subsequently construction of an alternative, peace-supporting narrative (Hammack, 2010). As this process grows in substance and strength, the result is to weaken the adherence of the society to the conflict-supportive narratives and to strengthen the support of the peacebuilding process, with the construction of new narratives. On the collective level, the process of changing conflict-supportive narratives results in changes in the content of narratives as they appear in academic institutions, mass media, and cultural products such as literature, films or commemorative ceremonies. The latter informal process sometimes leads to the *institutionalization* of the new master narrative supporting the peace process. Institutionalization signals that formal institutions of the society – such as governmental information centers and educational systems, through textbooks – have joined the efforts to change the narratives. All of these processes may lead eventually to a change in the ethos of conflict and in the collective memory of conflict in a society, with

ensuing construction of new, revised parts of collective memory and of an ethos of peace.

It is evident that the process of changing conflict-supporting narratives, while being an essential component of the peacebuilding process, is difficult, complex, gradual, and nonlinear, because these narratives were maintained and imparted continuously and intensively to society members (Oren, 2009). After the peaceful settlement of a conflict, the process requires participation of the formal institutions, with plans, policies, and actions. This needs to be coordinated with a combination of bottom-up programs and top-down policy-based governmental activities (Nadler, Malloy & Fisher, 2008).

A bottom-up process often begins with small groups and civil organizations that resist the official conflict-supportive narrative, construct new peace-supporting narratives, and act to disseminate them (or such peace narratives as may already exist) among society members and especially among its leaders. The process typically requires legitimization and institutionalization of the new peace-oriented narratives (Bar-Tal, 2013). For example, both in North Ireland and in South Africa intense activities of NGOs and other groups that advocated peace preceded the major official agreements to settle these conflicts (Gidron, Katz & Hasenfeld, 2002). Yet this process can also include a top-down approach, when the leadership constructs and disseminates a counter-narrative. The Rwandan government, for instance, in pursuing reconciliation after the 1994 genocide, promoted a new narrative about the history of Rwanda claiming that ethnicity did not exist in Rwanda prior to the arrival of the colonialists. This narrative was disseminated to the public in history books and education camps through which a considerably large portion of the society had to pass. In both directions of the process, the key question concerned the extent of internalization of the advocated change among society members and especially among its leaders.

Numerous internal and external factors may facilitate the process of changing conflict-supporting narratives. These factors can be classified into categories; we suggest at least the following five: (1) *Nature of the conflict*, which includes such characteristics as its level of de-escalation and the rivals' adherence to their own narratives and readiness to change them; (2) *Characteristics of the given society*, such as its levels of homogeneity, political tolerance, freedom of expression, and dominance by conflict-supporting factions; (3) *Nature of the narrative*, including its level of centrality, society members' degree of confidence in it, and the extent of difference between the conflict-supportive and peace-supportive narratives;

<sup>6</sup> These two dimensional changes will be referred to hereafter as the 'changing narratives process'.

(4) The *core institutions* that deal with the narrative change (e.g. the Ministry of Education and the media), including such factors as their levels of formality and openness to change; (5) The *international context*, consisting of such factors as the international status of the given society and the level of interest in resolving the conflict among the international community. Support for the effects of the noted factors was drawn from various studies (e.g. Fitzduff, 2002; Nadler, Malloy & Fisher, 2008; Teitel, 2000).

Nevertheless it is important to note that eventually the disseminated peace-supportive narratives must be based on real and experienced changes in the living conditions of individuals and their society, as well as on acts that address and directly rectify the immoral behavior practiced by the rivals before the conflict erupted and during its course (Fitzduff, 2002; Teitel, 2000). In addition, attempts to change the conflict-supporting narratives sometimes rely on peace education that may be launched even before the conflict resolution process begins (e.g. Beckerman & Zembylas, 2009; Salomon, 2004). An example of the latter is the Northern Ireland program, Education for Mutual Understanding (EMU), which was developed in 1990 (before the Good Friday Agreement of 1998), aimed at promoting values associated with better community relations. This program tried to help young people learn to appreciate other groups and to show them nonviolent ways to deal with conflict (Gallagher, 2010). Another school project, PRIME, promotes familiarity with the rival's narrative in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict (Adwan & Bar-On, 2004).

While the efforts to change conflict-supportive narratives often start at early stages of the conflict before its resolution, such changes are especially important as part of a reconciliation process. In fact, some scholars like Auerbach (2009) refer to the change of narratives as an integral part of the reconciliation process and claim that reconciliation will not be achieved without a change in the conflict-supportive narratives of the rivals. An important step towards reconciliation is an acceptance of the legitimacy of the rival perspective (even if not adopting it or completely giving up one's own narrative). This acceptance may lead to the recognition that the narrative of the in-group, like that of the rival, is selective, biased, and distorted to some degree. This process requires inclusion of events and facts that were omitted from the in-group conflict-supportive narratives, illuminating the events from different perspectives, providing a more balanced interpretation of various events and processes of the past and even assuming responsibility for past

misdeeds. In some cases, this process may lead to incorporation of parts of the other's narrative into the in-group's own narrative (Barkan, 2000; Borer, 2006).

One way to change old conflict-supportive narratives as part of the reconciliation process is through truth commissions (Hayner, 2001), such as South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), when individuals from all sides of the former conflict 'come together in a communal activity of telling and listening to stories of one another; and through such a process the stories of individuals become transformed into threads of a new national narrative' (Andrews, 2003: 45–46). Another way to address the clash between conflict-supportive narratives as part of a reconciliation process is found in the establishment of a shared history book that is widely used by all sides. Indeed, most successful attempts to write a joint history book occur at later stages of reconciliation. An example of this can be found in history books that were written by French and German historians, which have been published in both languages and are used in high school history classes in both countries (Gruber, 2006). A similar project was conducted in the late 1990s by the Czech Republic and Germany (Kopstein, 1997).

It is important to note that there are problems with many of the efforts to construct a new narrative to replace the conflict-supportive narratives, whether it is done via truth commissions or shared history books. Some groups may feel that the shared narrative presents a 'victor's justice' when the stronger side dictates the narrative, while others may feel that the new narrative is too forgiving of past wrongs (Andrews, 2003). In addition, Leach, Zeineddine & Čehajić-Clancy (2013) show that acceptance of a group's own past wrongdoing tends to occur only when the violence took place in the distant past. We share the view of those scholars of reconciliation who believe that an attempt, even a partial one, to bridge the gap between opposing conflict-supportive narratives is a goal that reconciliation practitioners should try to achieve.

## Conclusions

This article presents a comprehensive conceptual framework that sheds light on the content, functions, and construction of conflict-supportive narratives, as well as on the struggle over their dominance. These narratives are powerful socio-political-psychological tools that provide prisms through which reality is viewed; that serve as foundations for socializing new generations; and that guide policies, actions, and practices of societies involved

in intractable conflict. While these narratives can motivate mobilization and help a society to cope with the stressful situation of conflict, they also sometimes cover up instances of injustice and immorality such as exploitation, discrimination, and occupation – which may have led to the conflict in the first place for the stronger party and to exposure of the other side as the weaker one.

Notwithstanding the pervasiveness and durability of the conflict-supporting narratives, they can be changed in a process of reconciliation. As part of this process a new worldview is established, one that is functional for these new relationships and that serves as a stable foundation for the cooperative and friendly acts that characterize them. This is a complex process; it goes beyond the scope of formal conflict resolution and even peace-making to profound societal change in the realms of culture and identity.

We suggest that future research should address the topics discussed in this article, since we are aware that the analysis provided here does not apply to all conflicts and rivals. Thus, future research should focus on the content, functions, and construction of conflict-supportive narratives as well as on struggles over their dominance, internally and externally. In addition, research should address questions that can illuminate pathways and conditions for enabling construction of new, peace-supportive narratives, which can serve as foundations for cultures of peace. These lines of research, using various methodologies, can elucidate the roles of leaders, educational systems, publishers, academia, and the mass media in changing conflict-supportive narratives and forming peace-supportive ones. It is important to study these topics since this line of research can lead to reducing the impact of conflict-supportive narratives and to promotion of peace-supportive narratives along with their wide dissemination within societies. All of this increases the likelihood of the peaceful resolution of intractable conflicts and eventual reconciliation between bitter rivals.

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