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Competing Narratives and Escalation in Ethnic Conflicts: the Case of the Holy Sites in Jerusalem

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Resumen

La corrección histórica de las narrativas psicoculturales de un grupo es menos importante que la percepción que estas pueden ofrecer en la dinámica de un conflicto étnico a largo plazo, así como en los posibles caminos para la paz. Este artículo reflexiona sobre las razones del mantenimiento de narrativas sobre el propio grupo de pertenencia, así como sobre el papel que éstas desempeñan en un conflicto étnico largo e intenso. La respuesta pasa por el hecho de fortalecer la unidad del grupo al ofrecer un relato emocionalmente coherente para explicar acontecimientos complejos. Estas narrativas se comparten y refuerzan dentro del grupo, de tal forma que la re-experiencia a través de las interacciones diarias logra enfatizar emocionalmente lo significativo. En conflictos intensos existen siempre narrativas enfrentadas que reflejan experiencias social y culturalmente divergentes, dentro y entre los grupos, y ofrecen mecanismos para cambiarlas hacia formas más inclusivas o exclusivas a través del curso de un conflicto.

El autor, reflexiona sobre las características de estas narrativas psicoculturales, así como sobre su origen enraizado en una cosmovisión cultural y en la identidad de un grupo, identificando los múltiples (pero no exclusivos) roles que éstas desempeñan en conflictos intensos: como causas –cuando actúan de selectores que dictaminan las opciones que tiene cada grupo–, como reflectores –cuando ofrecen el entendimiento del conflicto y las motivaciones que tienen sus protagonistas y oponen-

tes–, y como agravantes del conflicto –cuando ofrecen apoyo interno y solidaridad que crean imágenes negativas de un enemigo. Posteriormente, se examinan las narrativas enfrentadas, judías y musulmanas, referidas al contexto de los conflictos entre palestinos e israelíes. Por último, se argumenta a favor de una resolución efectiva del conflicto que subraye las poderosas narrativas referidas a la identidad vulnerable de cada bando. La principal apuesta del autor pasa por el desarrollo de nuevas narrativas frente a las viejas, re-enmarcadas en términos más inclusivos que resten significado emocional a las diferencias de grupos y permitan una mayor identificación de metas y experiencias comunes.

Descriptor

Psicología política, conflictos étnicos, narrativas psicoculturales, identidades de grupo, significado emocional, encuadre, resolución de conflictos, conflicto palestino-israelí.

Introduction

All groups recount their past, present and future in selective and emotionally salient ways. Ethnic group and national narratives are filled with memorable events, victories, defeats, and past heroes and villains. Faced with these accounts many scholars deconstruct what they see as incorrect, and often naïve, stories. This understandable reaction is not necessarily the only way to respond to a narrative's contents. In this article I suggest that the historical correctness of a group's psychocultural narratives is less important than the insight these narratives can provide into the dynamics of specific long-term ethnic conflict and possible paths to peacemaking.

I am interested in why people develop and fiercely maintain narratives about their group and the role that competing group narratives play in long-term, intense ethnic conflict. A short answer is that these accounts help unify a group by offering an emotionally coherent account for complex, powerful events. Furthermore, narratives are shared and reinforced within a group as they are recounted and emphasize emotionally significant experiences that are re-experienced through daily interactions. At the same time, in intense conflicts there are

always competing narratives that reflect the very divergent social and cultural experiences within and between groups and provide mechanisms for changing narratives in more inclusive or exclusive ways throughout the course of a conflict.

This article has three sections. In the first I discuss the key features of psychocultural narratives and their origin in deeply rooted cultural worldviews and group identity. I identify multiple, but not mutually exclusive, roles narratives play in intense conflicts: as causes, reflectors, and exacerbators of conflict and its escalation. As reflectors, narratives reveal how protagonists understand a conflict and their own underlying motivations, as well as those of their opponents. As exacerbators, narratives provide in-group support and solidarity that promote negative images of an enemy, escalatory actions, and offers little room for accommodation. As causes, narratives serve as gatekeepers ruling in or out options for groups, decision-makers and politicians. Second, I examine competing Jewish and Muslim narratives surrounding the holy sites in Jerusalem in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflicts. Third, I briefly argue that effective conflict resolution must address the powerful narratives related to each side's vulnerable identity. Good settlements must meet the real interests of the protagonists, but also that they must be framed to address the emotional fears and threats that drive the conflict and make it so hard to settle. Central to this process is the development of new narratives, ones which do not directly challenge older ones, but which reframe them in more inclusive terms that deemphasize the emotional significance of differences between groups and identify shared goals and experiences.

Psychocultural Narratives¹

Psychocultural narratives² are important in conflicts for at least three reasons. First, a narrative's metaphors and images can tell us a great deal about how individuals and groups understand the social and political worlds in which they live and explain the conflicts in which groups are involved (Roy, 1994). Second, they can reveal deep fears, perceived threats, and past grievances that drive a conflict. Third, narratives are important because they privilege certain understandings and actions

over others. For example, defining the September 11 attack as an act of war, which was central to the Bush Administration's narrative, provided support for different kinds of responses than defining them as a criminal act, would have done.

Psychocultural narratives are explanations for events –large and small– in the form of short, common sense accounts (stories) that often seem simple. However, the powerful images they contain and the judgments they make about the motivations and actions of one's own group, and opponents, are emotionally powerful. Narratives are not always internally consistent. For example, group narratives often alternate between portraying one's own group as especially strong and as especially vulnerable –and the same holds for portrayal of the opponent. Narratives meet a number of needs and are especially relevant for groups and individuals caught in situations of high uncertainty and high stress. When people are most disoriented, they struggle to make sense of events; shared narratives that are reinforced within groups help them find reassurance and cope with high anxiety. Opposing groups with divergent beliefs and experiences develop and maintain different narratives of the same event. All cultural traditions have access to multiple metaphors and images that when included in narratives provide support for action in times of tension. Narratives, therefore, are not made from whole cloth but are grounded in selectively remembered and interpreted experiences and projections from them that resonate with a large number of people.

Narratives are rooted in shared culture, personal experiences, and worldviews. Shared worldviews provide the deeply emotive images and references that are the building blocks of psychocultural narratives. Narratives invoke the past in response to contemporary needs for meaning and control over ambiguous and stressful situations. Narratives are normative accounts with heroes and villains and lessons about how life should be lived. They offer in-group versions of the past, including the origin and development of the group, and they invoke past threats, conflicts with enemies, and laud group survival.

Fears about attacks on identity are among the strongest feelings people have in bitter conflicts, and within communities high conformity pressures increase acceptance of a narrative's dominant elements.³ Usually these fears involve perceived denigration and humiliation that

evoke past losses and link them to present dangers. In violent conflicts, the fears also include concern for physical security and fears of extinction of self, family, and the group and its culture, including its sacred icons and sites. In times of uncertainty, narratives connect individual and group identity heightening in-group solidarity and conformity through a sense of linked fate that inhibits social and political dissent. As part of this dynamic, disagreement quickly becomes disloyalty and often those holding dissenting views are careful not to express them publicly, and sometimes not even in private.

Narratives are central to understanding “who is a people” and to articulating what in their “imagined past” is shared. Much of the emotional power of group narratives is tied to their fluid linkage to behavior –meaning people’s daily experience as well as ritual action. Cultural performances are enactments associated with narratives that assume high emotional significance in the context of group conflict. What are otherwise ordinary behaviors take on intense emotional significance when these actions are reaffirmations or challenges to a group’s identity. As Cohen suggests, they can serve to establish boundaries, strengthen identity, increase coordination, and facilitate mobilization (1969). In this way cultural performances are more than verbal accounts and are filled with richly evocative timeless images and metaphors that are regularly invoked and this “time collapse” depends upon the emotional rather than the chronological immediacy of the past (Volkan, 1997)⁴. Holidays and rituals that assert connections between the present and past through sacred objects, holy sites, special foods, and prayers are good examples of such shared events. Flags, memorial sites, inaugural ceremonies, sacred holidays, pilgrimages, and state funerals are ritual objects and events that reinforce in-group identity and the emotional power of the group’s narratives; they can also be sources of intense conflict.

In conflicts, each group maintains its own narratives that attribute hostile intentions to the enemy and justifies its own escalatory response that easy leads to in ethnic conflicts. Protagonists’ narratives offer an explanation for the motives of opponents, the unfolding of events, and prioritize possible responses. In addition, narratives are interactive in that as they legitimate one’s own actions and worldviews, they also provide support for those on the other side who cite key parts of the narrative as a justification for their own actions.

Narratives are reflectors of deeply held worldviews and assumptions the parties make about each other that include ideas concerning ones own vulnerability and the attribution of an enemy's motives. When a narrative is repeated, it offers significant cues to ingroup members and can make it clear that dissenting from a societal consensus is risky. As reflectors narratives can reveal how the parties see a conflict and this can help potential third parties decide on the best ways to try to move it towards a constructive outcome.

As exacerbaters of conflict, narratives emphasize differences among the parties and support continuing hostility and escalation. Sometimes a dominant narrative leaves no room for negotiation. In the Middle East since September 2000 Israelis and Palestinians see the other as undertaking nefarious behavior that is a direct assault on their own positions. At the same time, there is virtually no understanding of how their own side's action contributes to the escalation of the conflict. Because there is little acknowledgment of the other side's positions, there is little appreciation of how their own actions produce intense and aggressive responses.

Finally, narratives play a causal role in conflicts when they frame cognitions and emotions in ways that limit the actions individuals and groups consider. As causes, narratives are gatekeepers shaping what constitutes evidence and how it is to be used and when they portray no common ground between opponents, there is little search for alternatives to fighting. While narratives do not force parties to take a particular action if, for example, they lack the capabilities or support, but narratives may be crucial in limiting the choices that are considered plausible.

Narratives and Peacemaking

Narratives certainly can play in the escalation of conflict. However, it is important to recognize their potential in de-escalation as well. Evolving narratives have played a role in peace processes in long-term conflicts, such as South Africa, Northern Ireland, and the Middle East, as groups on all sides come to believe that movement towards a settlement is possible, even with those who were previously viewed as mortal

enemies. In these situations, there is a significant shift as the parties come to believe there are people on the other side to whom they can talk and things that are worth talking about (Kelman, 1987). Each side gradually alters how it describes the other (sometimes including the name by which they are called) and there is an emergence of images of the benefits that peaceful coexistence could bring. When the narratives begin to include more nuanced views of the other side, people can envision a future apart from the intense conflicts, and political leaders have newly opened space to move the peace process forward. This occurred most dramatically in South Africa, but in Northern Ireland and the Middle East (prior to September 2000) the same shifts of public opinion and discourse have also been present. Narratives that promote peace processes develop when there are explicit connections made between culturally available references and events on the ground. These connections are seen in changes in language and behavior and provide mutually reinforcing deescalatory steps.

Because narratives are about images and emotions, not just cognitions, the symbols and rituals associated with them are especially important. Some are very dramatic gestures, such as example of Egyptian President Anwar Sadat's 1977 trip to Jerusalem and his address to the Israeli Knesset, or Nelson Mandela donning a Springboks Rugby jersey⁵. Powerful narratives often involve behaviors such as ritual reenactments of historical events, the construction of memorials, or the development of sacred holidays where the narratives are retold and passed to succeeding generations. When exclusive rituals are redefined in more inclusive ways to allow previously disputing groups to coexist, they can serve to support new narratives of coexistence and even reconciliation. In Northern Ireland, for example, a Protestant cultural organization in Derry (the region's second-largest city) recently recast its annual celebratory parade as part of a more inclusive city festival, which is open to both Catholics as well as Protestants (Ross, 2001).

Narratives continually change –sometimes towards more hardened positions and sometimes towards accommodation. This movement is, in part, a response to on-going events, some of which can be affected by groups seeking just and peaceful settlement of long-term conflicts. Kelman (1995) argues that one of the significant benefits of the Israeli-Palestinian problem-solving workshops he has organized for 30 years is

that key people on each side acquired a more realistic sense of what the other side was thinking and what they needed. As a result, new understandings developed, new language and metaphors came into use, and each understood much more fully and realistically what a peace process and eventual settlement might look like. The narratives participants provided in his workshops often surprised those on the other side, reflecting deep fears that were central to each group that needed to be understood for movement to peace talks to occur. Sparks (1995) describes a similar learning process in the peace process involving the African National Congress (ANC) and White South African government in the 1980s, prior to Nelson Mandela's release from prison and the legalization of the ANC in 1990. Meeting in a variety of places, often outside South Africa, each side developed a clearer picture of the other's positions and needs and concluded that fruitful negotiations were possible.

Holy Sites in Jerusalem: the Politics of Archaeology

In many ways, the on-going conflict over Muslim and Jewish holy sites in the Old City of Jerusalem is a microcosm of the larger conflict within which it is embedded. In each, both sides present mutually exclusive claims, and there are great fears that accepting even part of the other side's position is a denial of one's own rights (Kelman, 1987). There is high insecurity and feelings of vulnerability as well as long historical memories at the core of each side's narrative. Jews regularly recall the destruction of their first and second temples, the long period of exile, periods when they were variously banned from the city or denied access to the Western Wall and other sacred sites, and the Holocaust. Muslims remember the Crusades as a time when the Dome of the Rock and al Aqsa mosques were turned in barracks for Christian troops, the expulsion from Spain, and the more recent sense of vulnerability they experienced during British colonial rule and the Israeli occupation since 1967.

Christian, Jewish and Muslim narratives all attach great emotional significance to sacred sites in and around the old city of Jerusalem, and in the history of the city there have only been short periods when the

city's rulers provided open access for members of all faiths (Armstrong, 1997). Narratives about Jerusalem are central in each tradition and link the present political claims to the city's historical, and even prehistorical, past. Since at least the fourth century, when Constantine sent his mother Helena to Jerusalem to locate sacred sites and relics from Jesus' life (Armstrong, 1997: 179-93),⁶ facts on the ground have provided crucial support for each religious group's narratives and their political legitimation. Archaeological excavations are ideally suited to this task, providing "hard evidence" upon which to build exclusive political claims. Such connections are especially important for Jews and Christians whose political claims to the city rest upon a linkage between the ancient past and present. For Muslims the "facts of the ground" central to their claims are clearly visible for all to see and hence archaeological evidence is less important to their case. In fact, given their above ground, contemporary presence, there is great fear that subterranean findings will, if anything, be used to undermine their position.

The site around which Muslim and Jewish assertions about the past and the present are played out most intensely in the Old City of Jerusalem is around competing claims over what Moslems call the Haram al Sharif (Noble Sanctuary) and Jews refer to as the Temple Mount. Atop the Haram, the third holiest place for Muslims after Mecca and Medina, are the Dome of the Rock and Al-Aqsa Mosque. Jews consider the Haram's Western Wall, from where Muslims believe Muhammad began his Night Journey, to be the only remaining part of their Second Temple that the Romans destroyed in 79 AD and is Judaism's holiest site. They assume that under the Haram are ruins from the Temple including the Holiest of Holies although there is disagreement about exactly where it is located. The Old City and its holy sites was under continuous Islamic control from the 12th century when the Crusaders withdrew until 1967. For most of this period the small number of Jews in the city had access to the Western Wall with some restrictions. During the British Mandate period from 1917-48, Jewish access was greater. After Israeli independence in 1948, however, when the Jerusalem was divided and the Old City was under Jordanian rule, Jews could only visit the Western Wall if they traveled through Jordan (which was not an option for Israelis).

In 1967 Israel captured the Old City in the Six Days War. Some assumed that Muslims would be evacuated from the Temple Mount and others, including members of the Israeli army, expected it to be blown up. However, Moshe Dayan, then Israel's Defense Minister, quickly negotiated an agreement with the Muslim religious authorities that granted them continued *de facto* control over the Haram and its Islamic holy sites and forbade Jewish prayer or ritual on the Temple Mount (Gorenberg, 2000: 99-104). At the same time, the Israeli authorities authorized the bulldozing of a Palestinian neighborhood, the Moroccan quarter, located in front of the Western Wall to build a large plaza that would allow greater access to religious Jews and tourists.⁷ At present few Orthodox Jews have any desire to visit the Temple Mount because Dayan's agreement was reinforced by a rabbinical ruling that forbids them to walk above the remains of the Temple's alter in an impure state. Muslims, however, have little confidence in what some Jews might do to the Haram and its sacred buildings if they were given a chance. For example, since 1967, there have been regular Muslim charges that Jewish excavations were damaging the foundations of the Haram and claims that Israeli archaeologists were tunneling beneath it to variously search for the ruins of the Second Temple or to build a prayer area⁸. Head of the Waqf, Adnan Husseini, said in 2000 "the Al-Aqsa Mosque has not faced so many challenges since the Crusades" (Atallah, 2001). In addition, from time to time some Israelis, apparently including then Prime Minister Ehud Barak at Camp David in 2000, have sought to build a small synagogue for Jewish prayer on the corner of the Temple Mount⁹.

The two sides' competing claims have been played out in a number of ways in recent years –in formal negotiations, through the use of violence, and in hotly contested arguments about what the other side was building or excavating in and around the area. In such a setting, intrusions or threatened loss of control of the sites are perceived as attacks on the group and its existence and reminders of their vulnerability. Archaeology serves as a double-edged sword providing "evidence" of a people's historical roots and bolstering their national narrative and its core political claims (Trigger, 1985; Kohl, 1998) while, at the same time weakening those of the other side. When used to assert mutually exclusive claims, archaeological evidence ignores the other and

its narrative. A significant consequence of this mutual refusal to acknowledge the other side's basic narrative then sets off another spiral of collective anxiety. Sometimes, of course, this denial is accompanied by actions to destroy a group's links to the past –what Smith (1991) calls ethnocide, such as the Taliban's destruction of the giant Buddha status in Central Afghanistan, and Hindu destruction of the Babi Masjid (Babri Mosque) at Ayodhya and the call for the construction of a Hindu Temple in 1992.

Certainly in Jerusalem, both Jews and Muslims feel they have been victims of ethnocide. Muslims cite destruction of houses, olive groves and entire villages and eviction from Israel in 1948 as well as the destruction of the Moroccan quarter and their eviction from the Jewish quarter of Jerusalem after 1967 (Abu el-Haj, 2001: 165; Benvenisti, 2000). On the other side, Jewish archaeologists and politicians have expressed great outrage at the destruction of Jewish religious sites in the Old City between 1948 and 1967. More recently there has been a great outcry at the decision of Waqf authorities (the Muslim religious trust) to build a third mosque on the Haram, an underground structure in the area known as Solomon's Stables. To do this heavy building equipment was brought to the site and at least 6,000 tons of earth was removed much of which was scattered at various dumpsites. Gabriel Bar-Kay, an archaeologist and member of the Committee for the Prevention of the Destruction of Antiquities on the Temple Mount, describes this as part of a pattern of "erasing evidence of Jewish presence"¹⁰. The strongest Jewish fears, other than the loss of access to the Western Wall, are that Muslim construction projects under the Haram will either destroy or render inaccessible evidence of the Temple's existence on the site. For example, an Israeli Attorney General described recent Waqf building projects as an archaeological crime and termed it "kicking the history of the Jewish people" (Sharagai, 2000), and one MK, a member of the National religious Party called for the arrest of member of the Waqf who were "desecrating antiquities at the [Temple Mount] in an effort to wipe out the traces of the Jewish nation from its most sacred site." (Ha'aretz, January 22, 2001).

In some ways this is precisely the goal, driven by insecurity and fear that recognition of historical Jewish presence will lead to Jewish appropriation of the Haram in much the same way that Arabs feel Jewish

have appropriated Palestine. In this mutually reinforcing pattern, often each community's emotionally intense cultural representations exclude any reference to, or recognition of, the historical presence of the other on the site. As Gorenberg says, "Anxious about the future, Muslims seek to erase the Temple from the site's past. In the work of radical rewriting, they are not alone" (2000:72).

In Jerusalem, history provides all groups with experiences in which the fears of physical destruction came to pass and these catastrophes are regularly invoked in group narratives when any group experiences existential threats.¹¹ In this context, each group sees the other's refusal to recognize its history as a fundamental denial of their existence and a political threat. Mutual denials escalate and political distrust and polarization increase. This is seen when Jews and Muslims have linked archaeological issues to political claims that each side has perceived as highly threatening. For Muslims, one incident was the 1996 Israeli decision to open an exit on the Via Dolorosa to an archaeological tunnel running the length of the long northern side of the Haram. Another came in September 2000 when Ariel Sharon, accompanied by dozens of Israeli security personnel, visited the Temple Mount, symbolically asserting both Jewish presence and ownership to Muslims.

Especially upsetting to Israelis are Palestinian assertions that there is no evidence that the ancient Jewish Temples was located on the Temple Mount. For example, an article on the Al Quds University website on the Old City of Jerusalem asserts that "the Al-Aqsa compound cannot possibly be in the same place as the first or second temple," (<http://www.alquda.edu/overview/main.htm>) and that the Western Wall was probably the wall of a fortress built for Roman legions. This denial infuriates Israelis and raises their fears (also see Al-Ifranji, 2001).

At the same time, Muslim denial of the Temple's location is mirrored in the computer imagery found in a recently built Israeli visitor center just below the Haram that focuses on what the area might have looked like at the time of the Second Temple. Muslims were outraged when they realized that there were virtually no images inside the building showing what the area looks like today and none with the Muslim holy sites on the Haram (Rubinstein, 2001).¹² Muslims easily feel that their holy sites somehow have ceased to exist, although if one were to just walk outside the front door and look up, it is clear that this is not the

case. The same denial of Muslim presence is seen on T-shirts sold in the Old City's Jewish Quarter and in posters and books the Temple Institute has published that picture a newly built Third Temple astride the giant platform now holding the Dome of the Rock and Al-Aqsa. Equally explicit is the asserted Muslim need for vigilance in light of alleged Israel strategies to demolish Al-Aqsa through settlement, weakening the foundation through excavations, burning, blowing up the mosque, or by a manmade earthquake (Abdul-Ghafour, 2002).¹³ Muslims experience denial in presentations of Jewish archeological excavations and exhibits that emphasize the period of the second temple and its clear connection to the present (Abu El-Haj, 2001; Benvenisti, 1995). When it is suggested that the Moslem holy sites are merely an interlude to the coming of the Messiah and the construction of the Third Jewish Temple, Muslim fears increase.

In trying to understand the political dynamics at work in the intensely felt threats both Jews and Muslims experience, it is obvious that archaeology is a significant political weapon in bolstering each national narrative that emphasizes each group's long history and struggle (Abu el-Haj, 2001; Kohl and Fawcett, 1995; Kohl, 1998; Meskell, 1998). Evidence and assertions about the past are powerful because they speak to intensely felt concerns in the present. Archaeological findings are political because they are often and easily used to bolster a certain version of the past and to legitimate one side's political claims and, at the same time, to denigrate those that opponents make. Each side is worried lest the assertions of the other side serve as a denial of their own claims.

In the Israeli case more generally, it is striking to note how archaeological finds have created a seamless web between ancient Israel and the present state (Zerubavel, 1995). "It was important, so the argument went, to uphold every archaeological remnant that testified to the Jewish presence in the land, and confirmed the legitimacy of the Zionist claim." (Elon, 1997: 34-5) "By digging up the hard ground they were retrieving memory –one is tempted to say– as though they were recovering checked baggage from a storage room." (36) Silberman (1997) warns that a wide range of presentational elements ranging from brochures, signposts, and guides that "combine to present the public with a composite historical 'story' or narrative that is far more sweeping

in its conclusions and implications than the specific archaeological data on which it is ultimately based” (63).

In Jerusalem, the emotional intensity of the archaeological issues surrounding the Haram al Sharif/Temple Mount can only be understood in terms of the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Symbolizing the wider conflict, in Jerusalem it seems that what is one side’s heritage, is merely the other’s landfill. Settlement of the differences over Jerusalem’s holy sites is not likely outside of a broader political settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This does not mean, however, that these disputes are just an epiphenomenon however. Nor does it mean that even when an agreement takes place, that the intense fears about the holy sites will not have to be addressed. Instead, it is more useful to think about how any effective political settlement must consider what each side needs to reduce its deepest fears around the holy sites. There must be a particular effort made to take these fears into account and to provide each group with emotional, not just political, guarantees that the other side has sufficient motives to adhere to an agreement. What form this would take is, of course, for the parties to the conflict to determine for it must be one they feel capable of accepting, not one that an outsider thinks is good. What is clear, however, is that whatever the details, a good agreement must provide some mechanisms for acknowledging each other’s claims and perhaps for providing some kind of inclusive arrangements that recognize the dual claims to the site rather than acknowledging only one or the other as legitimate (Ross, forthcoming). Such an arrangement is most likely to be effective if in addition to a written agreement there is a more inclusive shared narrative that addresses the deepest fears of both Jews and Muslims and redefines the activities in the area in ways that produce some level of mutual reassurance.

Conclusion

Jews and Muslims both have powerful narratives around the holy sites in Jerusalem growing out of historical memories and reinforced by recent political events. These narratives are important reflectors of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict but, in addition, they have also served as exacerbaters and causes of the conflict as well. The current narratives

emphasize the other side as a threat and through the use of archaeological and other evidence each seeks to deny the validity of the other side's claims. This is especially problematic when each takes actions and makes statements that are seen as highly threatening to the other. In such a context, many conclude that ongoing conflict is inevitable.

Narratives can and do change however, but not necessarily when they are confronted directly. Simply telling people that their story of events is wrong is rarely successful, because there is often great emotional attachment to an account, which is defended from such frontal assaults. It is the images and organization of narratives that give them their power, not the facts. A joint strategy to develop more inclusive narratives needs to be part of an effort to address the causes of conflicts. To do this, new experiences and emotional connections need to be introduced that alter the salience of elements in the existing exclusive narratives, and invite new and/or revised linkages among their key elements. Rather than denial, developing more inclusive narratives has significant implications for future behavior. Given the hypothesis that narratives are produced interactively, and that change in one group's perceptions of the opponent can alter their own narrative, there are constructive steps that can be taken to help resolve a conflict.

Developing narratives that contribute to peacemaking and peacebuilding is not easy. To engage in this process, the parties need to alter the context in which they interact. To do this each side must feel a genuine sense of security. Three steps that can facilitate this are (1) *Better listening and learning*. Parties need to better understand the roots of anger, and even rage, motivating those on the other side. It is easy to cast blame, but it is crucial to understand why the other side's narratives resonate so strongly with their citizens. To do this, each side must understand the deeply rooted vulnerabilities, fears, and humiliations and recognize the importance of past experiences and perceptions in current reactions. The goal is not to challenge the specific beliefs people hold, but to understand much more fully why they feel as they do. What is it in their experiences that lead to strong feelings around past events and what connects them to the present conflict? (2) *Acknowledgment*. There is often a long and bitter history of relations between the parties and still vivid, bitter cultural memories of the past. An important step each side can take is the acknowledgment of the other's understanding of the past

in a way that diminished perceived threat and fear. Acknowledgment can be both verbal and symbolic. It involves empathy without necessarily communicating apology or agreement. What are acknowledged are the deep feelings and threats a group feels (Kelman, 1992). This can be painful for all sides but it can result in a lowered intensity of feelings or even, when accompanied by meaningful actions, and rearrangement of connection among elements in a narrative. (3) *New actions and labels for them*. In many ways, the most difficult step is for the parties to develop new ways of behavior towards each other and a new language for describing their relationship. This is seen in developments in Western Europe since the end of World War II. Former enemies created new patterns of interaction and new understandings through the European Union. The specific behaviors that need to change are, of course, to be defined contextually and need to be significant so that people come to experience group relations differently than they did in the past.

A single common narrative that is widely accepted by groups in a long-term conflict will not emerge from, nor is it the goal of, such a process. It would be naïve to think that differences in culture, historical experiences and political disagreement around Jerusalem could be bridged so easily. It ignores the reality that on both sides significant change will have to focus on behaviors and not just what is said. In addition, when there are strong differences in how two parties see the world, it is important that these differences be acknowledged and explored and not just swept under the rug. Rather than one joint narrative, the goal should be that the several narratives become less polarized, hostile and distrustful. Perhaps they should have more common elements, but more importantly, they should have a more nuanced language and one that suggests, or at least permits, strategies for interaction and mutual adjustment.

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Notes

- 1 For an expanded version of the argument presented here see Ross (2002).
- 2 I use the term psychocultural because I am interested in interpretations of the world which are widely shared among people in a culture and which are transmitted through psychological processes. For further elaboration of this concept see Ross (1993, 2001).
- 3 This does not mean that once a narrative emerges, it is unchanging. Quite the opposite, as new events unfold, there can be questioning and conflict around, and change in, a narrative. When stress is very high, sometimes there are multiple narratives that arise along with the disintegration of social cohesion.
- 4 For example, Zerubavel (1995) shows how early 20th century Zionists stressed parallels between ancient Israel of the first and second temple periods while variously ignoring or denigrating the almost 2000 years of Jewish exile. Resistance and revolt were emphasized in school texts and new holidays and the myths and rituals surrounding them were developed and widely celebrated.
- 5 Springbok is a rugby team that for many epitomized white supremacy during the apartheid regime. Mandela's action, and the response to it, clearly signaled a new relationship in the country.
- 6 "Constantine also knew that his Christian empire needed symbols and monuments to give it historical resonance" (Armstrong, 1997: 179).
- 7 For the next ten years there were large-scale excavations in the expanded Jewish quarter which was then rebuilt in a way to produce a seamless connection between Jerusalem of 2000 years ago and the city today. Establishing these physical linkages, served as important evidence to bolster the Zionist narrative and claims to the city (Abu El-Haj, 2001). For a discussion of the connection of archaeology and nationalism more generally in Israel, see Zerubavel, 1995.
- 8 The claim concerning Israeli subterranean excavations has some basis in reality. The claim that Israeli archeological excavations threatened the foundations is harder to evaluate.
- 9 Muslims also publicize to the efforts of an Israeli fringe group, the Temple Mount Faithful, that each year tries to visit the Temple Mount

and lay the cornerstone for the Third Temple. As in many conflicts, this is only one example of how each side cites the actions of extremists on the other side to show the enemy's "true intentions."

- 10 Personal interview, June 2001. The detailed data and photos concerning the construction activity on the Temple Mount or presented in the group's website: <http://www.har-habayt.org/>.
- 11 Volkan (1997) describes such events as "chosen traumas." These events are so powerful in the collective memory that it is particularly difficult to mourn them in a normal manner.
- 12 See <http://www.archpark.org.il> for the computer presentation.
- 13 Some of these scenarios are based on past events. This is another example of how in polarized situations the statements or actions of fringe groups are taken to be symptomatic of action plans of the mainstream.