

## Narratives: The Front Line of Identity Conflicts

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*Conflict theory indicates that resolving incompatible goals or addressing unmet needs is necessary to resolve conflict. When identity is fully intertwined with the struggle, though, these measures may not be sufficient. Without addressing the front of identity, these conflicts will continue. Narrative theory argues that identity is created and communicated through stories. These stories dictate a particular understanding of past events, and indicate how future events should be interpreted. In times of conflict, societies use narratives to understand their struggle. Narrative, the dynamic mechanism that creates fluid identities, works to build hostile and mutually exclusive realities within a conflict environment. Once these realities clash, the conflict cannot be fully resolved by addressing only the underlying goal incompatibility. In seeking to solve conflicts with an identity front, the mechanisms of narrative must be understood. While they are dynamic, narratives—and the realities that they create—are not easily changed. This study seeks to map the process of conflict narrative creation, and offer some insight into how such narratives might be adjusted to allow for coexistence.*

The front lines of conflict are no longer found only on battlefields. Rather, the front spans entire states and nations, calling up resources and impacting lives across societies. When identities become entwined in conflicts, a new subjective front is added to the struggle over objective and tangible goals. The core perspectives and beliefs of societies can clash across this new front. This is the realm of narratives, the front line of identity conflicts.

When viewed through narrative theory, the definition of conflict is not confined to an analysis of exchange of hostilities over time. Rather, conflict is a continuum of shared experiences out of which the participants develop perspectives about the world and

beliefs about the conflict. These perspectives and beliefs contribute to a conflict group's identity. As these identities evolve and are communicated to others in the society, it creates a series of stories. The telling of—and listening to—these stories creates social meaning, creates a narrative. In creating a narrative, the parties' pasts can be reinterpreted and their futures re-imagined, each based on the need for society to make sense of the present.<sup>1</sup> Narratives are more than stories about events, though. They instruct members of a group in how to make sense of the world around them. In doing so, narratives both describe and create social reality.<sup>2</sup>

In conflict, the parties' narratives reflect the development of their struggle. The realities constructed by these narratives—the parties' identities—become increasingly adversarial as the conflict intensifies. The front line of the conflict expands to include the seemingly nonnegotiable element of identity: the narratives of the societies. Because narratives can reinterpret past events to make sense of the present, the original front line—the objective cause of the conflict—becomes obscured. In making sense of current events, narratives rework society's expectations for the future. Possible collaborative resolutions to the conflict may be ignored as narratives become more hostile to their opponents. In short, the development of conflict-focused narratives has the capability to add the intangible and intractable front line of identity to existing conflicts.

### *A Look at Conflict Theories*

To understand how narrative theory can point to a resolution of identity-infused conflicts, a brief review of existing conflict theories is needed. Rather than broadly examine conflict-resolution literature, though, this paper will focus on traditional interest-based or goal incompatibility conflict, protracted social conflict, and identity conflict. According to Otomar Bartos and Paul Wehr, conflict is “a situation in which actors use conflict behavior against each other to attain incompatible goals and/or to express their hostility.”<sup>3</sup> Actors can be either groups or individuals, and conflict behavior includes nonrational actions involving hostility. By nonrational, Bartos and Wehr mean an action that does not fully take all possible outcomes into account. A goal is incompatible if it is logically impossible for both actors to achieve the goal—that is, if a goal has a positive payoff for one party and a negative payoff for the other party. Bartos and Wehr make a further distinction between goals and interests: goals are the various actions that have a positive result for a party to the conflict; interests are the outcomes from all the possible actions that have a positive payoff for the party. Bartos and Wehr state that goal incompatibility develops because of scarce tangible resources, contests for power, or struggles for prestige. Contests for these desirables can begin because of injustices or absolute deprivation, or because a conflict party has a belligerent culture or personality. Additionally, the value systems of societies may come into conflict with one another, causing incompatible goals or interests.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Donald Braid, “Personal Narrative and Experiential Meaning,” *Journal of American Folklore* 109.431 (Winter 1996): 5-30.

<sup>2</sup>Patricia Ewick and Susan S. Silbey. “Subversive Stories and Hegemonic Tales: Toward a Sociology of Narrative.” *Law and Society Review* 29.2 (1995): 197-226.

<sup>3</sup>Otomar J. Bartos and Paul Wehr, *Using Conflict Theory*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, p. 13.

<sup>4</sup>Bartos and Wehr, Chapter 3.

The front lines of these conflicts include struggles between parties for tangible resources that have been made scarce because of goal incompatibility. The conflict is defined by conflict actions each party undertakes against the other. One question raised by this theory is whether a conflict can be resolved simply by addressing the underlying goal incompatibilities, even after long periods of hostility. Would parties be able to negotiate incompatible goals if they developed hostile and mutually exclusive identities over the course of the conflict? This theory allows that a society's value systems can come into conflict but attributes these value systems to preexisting facets of a nation such as static history and culture. Narrative theory adds a deeper understanding of the fluidity of conflict. It provides insight into how mutually exclusive identities develop and provides a mechanism for understanding how history can be reinterpreted to suit the demands of the developing identities.

Edward Azar also defines traditional conflict as a process involving two or more parties, incompatible goals, and a lack of coordinating mechanisms to resolve these incompatible goals. Azar, however, describes an additional type of conflict: protracted social conflict. This type of conflict cannot be abated by resolving goal or interest incompatibilities. There are several preconditions for protracted social conflict: a diverse physical composition of the community, lack of satisfaction of human needs, poor access to governance the state structures, and international linkages influencing the domestic society.<sup>5</sup>

Azar explains that if a society has multiple communities, protracted social conflict is more likely. These communities may be divided by the legacy of colonial governments or may experience a historical pattern of enmity between the communal groups. These communities form identity groups to fulfill human needs of physical survival and well-being. If scarce resources are distributed unjustly, protracted social conflict could result. The distribution of resources is determined by access to state institutions and political and economic power. According to Azar, "Political authority tends to be monopolized by a dominant identity group or a coalition of hegemonic groups. These groups tend to use the state as an instrument of maximizing their interests at the expense of others."<sup>6</sup> This behavior also increases the likelihood of protracted social conflict. Finally, Azar points out that international linkages exacerbate the above conditions through economic dependency and military client relationship. These relationships constrain the state's ability to respond to the needs of the community groups. In sum, "protracted social conflicts occur when communities are deprived of satisfaction of their basic needs on the basis of their communal identity. However, the deprivation is the result of a complex causal chain involving the role of the state and the pattern of international linkages. Furthermore, initial conditions (colonial legacy, domestic historical setting, and the multicomunal nature of the society) play important roles in shaping the genesis of protracted social conflict."<sup>7</sup>

Protracted social conflicts have a broader front line that encompasses the whole of a society, including especially its economic, political, and social systems. The front line still comprises tangible goods and remains in the realm of the concrete, undisputed

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<sup>5</sup>Azar, Edward. *The Management of Protracted Social Conflict: Theory and Cases*. Brookfield, VT: Gower Publishing, 1990.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

history and politics. What happens when the history of a nation is being disputed in conflict? Can politics be separated from a society's identity? Are identities fixed, objective things? Narrative theory may complement this theory of conflict by providing an additional layer of analysis. It describes how marginalized groups could develop identities that lead to the continuation of conflict long after the economic, political, and social inequalities are resolved. Narrative theory also offers a view into how the multiple communities involved in protracted social conflict perceive and understand their struggle. Some conflict-resolution literature does directly address identity conflicts. Jay Rothman and Marie Olsen see two kinds of conflicts: within-frame and between-frame. Within-frame conflicts are essentially struggles over the distribution of a shared resource. Such conflicts are over tangible resources and involve goal incompatibility. In the case of between-frame conflicts, though, "parties fight across an existential divide; they frame their own sense of self and priorities in mutually exclusive terms or in terms of distrust."<sup>8</sup> Rothman and Olsen find that between-frame conflicts are inherently more difficult to resolve, as they contain the nonnegotiable base element of identity. Identity-based conflict theory does locate the front line of conflict at least partially in the subjective realm. Narrative theory complements identity-based conflict theory in that it provides an understanding of the causal mechanism between objective conflict events and the subjective identity that develops out of those events. It provides insight into how the base element of identity is created and into how the front line between clashing identities can be slowly changed.

There is a general consensus that conflicts concerning identities are inherently more problematic to resolve. Rothman and Olsen find that "as long as parties locked in an identity based conflict fear that their identity needs will be neglected or negated by a conflict settlement, they will not be motivated to engage in negotiations to settle it."<sup>9</sup> Azar cautions that "conflicts associated with communal identity and fear of marginalization or loss of communal integrity, tend to involve an enduring antagonistic set of perceptions and interactions between and among communal groups and the state."<sup>10</sup> He goes on to say that "the perceptions and motivations behind the behavior of the state and communal actors are conditioned by the experiences, fears and belief system of each communal group."<sup>11</sup> This idea is echoed by Bartos and Wehr, who believe that "many conflicts are largely a clash of different realities, mistakenly viewed by the opposing parties as objective facts."<sup>12</sup> But there is room for optimism: "If a conflict is based on reality constructed by the opponents, it can just as well be reconstructed and reshaped by them into a less costly, more productive form."<sup>13</sup> The front lines of identity conflicts need not be a permanent barrier to conflict resolution.

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<sup>8</sup>Rothman, Jay and Marie Olson. "From Interests to Identities: Towards a New Emphasis in Interactive Conflict Resolution," *Journal of Peace Research* 38.3 (2001): 297.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Azar, *Management of Protracted Social Conflict*, p. 15.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Bartos and Wehr, *Using Conflict Theory*, p. 166.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

*Defining Narrative: An Architect of Social Reality*

What are narratives? How do they create reality? Because “people are more the products of social processes than determined by essences from the inside,”<sup>14</sup> narratives as social processes are vitally important in understanding social reality. Narratives are defined by Donald Braid as “coherent, followable accounts of perceived past experience.”<sup>15</sup> Braid specifies that narratives are temporally ordered sequences of events that are interpreted by the listener as a coherent whole. Narratives, according to Baird, tell a biased story about past events in sequential order. The listener to this story then interprets the conveyed events and creates an understood story. In the actions of telling and listening, a narrative is created. Julian Lee adds to this notion by describing narrative as a process of consciousness, whereby effects are linked to a cause.<sup>16</sup>

Braid and Lee’s definition of narrative is further clarified by Patricia Ewick and Susan Silbey, who hold that narratives have three elements. First, like Braid, they believe a narrative must have a select incorporation of past events and characters. Also, the events in a narrative must be temporally ordered. Finally, they state that the events and characters of a narrative must be related to one another through some overarching structure. Ewick and Silbey potentially frame this overarching structure as an opposition or struggle—a conflict.<sup>17</sup> This adds a dimension of social context to Braid’s definition. David Rudrum refines the concept of narrative by cautioning against the search for a static definition. Echoing the other understandings of narrative, he finds that they are temporally ordered events that are linked by causality. In addition to the sequence of events, an element of purpose must exist in narration: it is a language game used to achieve a specific end. The narrator must tell the story for some purpose. This purpose links the language of narrative to behavior.<sup>18</sup> As the narrator tells the story, he or she is to some degree influencing the behavior of the listener. Ultimately, though, a narrative remains difficult to define because “narrative is not a stable entity, and positing ‘narrative’ as a category or concept foists upon it an illusory self-identity and ontological fixity that narratives themselves, as dynamic acts, do not have”<sup>19</sup> As stories constantly being told, interpreted, and acted upon within a constantly changing context, narratives have no fixity.

Several important elements of narrative theory are worth highlighting. Narratives interpret—as well as create—the social world for people participating in the narrative.<sup>20</sup> They are stories created to understand events and to communicate that understanding to others. As narratives are told to listeners, they communicate a specific and biased understanding of events. This shared understanding of events, in turn, determines how the group will interpret and respond to future events. In influencing how a group will respond to events in the future, narratives create a group’s social reality.

The ability to transmit experiential meaning to the listener is the mechanism by which narratives create social worlds. As stories unfold, the listeners are constantly

<sup>14</sup> Winslade, John and Gerald Monk. *Narrative Mediation: A New Approach to Conflict Resolution*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers 2000

<sup>15</sup> Braid, “Personal Narrative,” p. 6.

<sup>16</sup> Lee, Julian H.C. “The Narrative Imperative” *Anthropological Forum* 15.2 (2005)

<sup>17</sup> Ewick and Silbey, “Subversive Stories.”

<sup>18</sup> David Rudrum, “Defining Narrative,” *Narrative* 13.2 (May 2005): 196-204.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 201.

<sup>20</sup> Ewick, and Silbey, “Subversive Stories,” 199

interpreting the narrative and placing themselves in the position of the narrator. Because of the act of this interpretation, personal meaning for the listener is generated in the act of following a narrator's experiences.<sup>21</sup> A narrative communicates the impact of an event in a very personal manner. Narratives transmit experiences throughout society.

As experiential meaning is communicated through a narrative, interpretations of the past and expectations for the future are subject to change. As the story unfolds, both the narrator and the listener will use shared past experiences to make sense of the narrative. If a past event is incongruous with the narrative, that past event may be reinterpreted or overwritten by the narrator and the listener. Expectations for the future will also have an impact on how the narrator and listener experience the narrative. Pessimism regarding the future can lead to positive events in the present being ignored or misinterpreted. In the understanding of narratives, the past and future are both fluid; they are subject to change according to the demands of understanding and experiencing the narrative present.<sup>22</sup>

### *Narratives in Conflict: Identities at War*

Because narratives create and communicate the social world, shape experiential meaning for participants, and subject past and future events to fluid interpretations, they are useful in understanding how an additional struggle over identity is added to many conflicts. This discussion will focus on the theoretical creation of conflict narratives between two societies, A and B. In times of normalcy, both society A and society B have narratives that are mutually compatible. That is, their group identities, understandings of the past, and projections for the future allow for both societies to coexist at some level. The existence of one group's narrative/identity does not negate the existence of the other. For the purposes of this paper, let us assume that societies A and B are experiencing goal incompatibility. They are not engaged in direct hostilities but are both increasingly antagonistic. The perspectives of groups A and B concerning their original goal incompatibility become increasingly polarized and mutually exclusive. Group A and group B begin to define themselves as enemies.

Conflict may begin when either A or B struggles to reconcile incompatible goals or interests. As increasing incompatibility occurs, conflict theory indicates that societies A and B organize into conflict groups and develop a certain amount of solidarity.<sup>23</sup> Narrative theory dictates that during this process, society A and society B tell a story to understand their present situation; each story informs its corresponding group how the conflict began, over what the conflict is being fought, and what resolution would be acceptable to the group. The story may reinterpret past events when searching for the cause of the conflict. Additionally, expectations for the future—the groups' preferred resolutions of the conflict—will shape how societies A and B act during the course of the conflict. In short, A and B develop—and operate under—conflict narratives. The front line of identity has been added to the existing struggles over goal incompatibility.

<sup>21</sup> Braid, "Personal Narrative," 6, 12, 14, 16

<sup>22</sup> Braid, "Personal Narrative," 15, 16

<sup>23</sup> According to Bartos and Wehr, *Using Conflict Theory*, conflicts emerge when societies form conflict solidarity (fostered with free communication and interaction between group members who share similar values and frustrations) and conflict resources (raw materials needed to engage in conflict). Groups possessing conflict solidarity and conflict resources are conflict groups.

These stories, or narratives, work to understand the present by incorporating the perceived past and expected future. In conflict, both the past and future contain hostility. The decision of group A or group B to engage in conflict behavior may be directly influenced—and self-justified—by real or imagined hostility from the other party in the past or future. Whether or not such enmity existed, the narrative makes the hostility a real experience for the society. The conflict narratives develop identities that are increasingly cemented, polarized, and mutually exclusive.

As conflict breaks out over an original set of incompatible goals, group A attacks group B. Group A's actions are justified within the group itself via the narrative. The result of society A's conflict action is realized throughout group B as the stories from the point of impact are absorbed, narrated, listened to, and interpreted throughout society B. Group B's narrative may look for a deeper understanding of the cause of the conflict action by reexamining their past history with group A. Possible positive interactions in the past may be overlooked or ignored. The past between group A and B is rewritten to make sense of the present.

As this newly adjusted conflict narrative is communicated within group B, it generates experiential meaning. The experience of receiving group A's conflict actions, as well as the narrative's dictated understanding of this experience, is transmitted throughout group B. Each person in group B receiving this narrative experiences group A's action as if it were happening to them personally. Group B's collective understanding of their past is adjusted to account for group A's conflict actions.

The present, though, cannot be understood by the past alone. To fully interpret current events and create a response to those events, a group must incorporate expectations for the future. As group B is creating an understanding of A's conflict actions, they are also reworking their expected future. If society A's actions were particularly hostile, then group B will likely predict escalating hostility from A in the future. Society B would then take actions in line with anticipated future events. In addition to expecting further hostility from A, group B's preferred resolution to the conflict may be adjusted. Negotiations and the resolution of the original goal incompatibility may no longer be sufficient for group B. Society B then chooses a response based on their conflict narrative's interpretation of the past, understanding of the present, and expectations for the future. Group B's identity has shifted to account for group A's actions.

As this cycle of action and response continues, conflict narratives destabilize the original focus of incompatible goals. The process of narrative creation leads to a reinterpretation of past events and to a blurring of the conflict's original causes. Both A and B may be unable to negotiate the original incompatible goals because their realities—their conflict narratives—have become mutually exclusive. Another front is operating throughout the conflict. In addition to the tangible conflict along the defined front lines, both A and B begin to believe that they are fighting over the nonnegotiable elements of who they are. The resolution of such a conflict is difficult to accomplish; a group's understanding and experience of the world cannot be easily adjusted. Narratives are large-scale phenomenon with tremendous social influence. How, then, can conflict narratives be addressed?

There is some hope that narratives can be negotiated. Jeffrey Michels examined the Oslo Agreement between Israel and Palestine for signs of narrative influence. He

termed the negotiations a success, even though they did not address the underlying incompatible goals, because neither the Palestinians nor the Israelis had to renounce sovereignty or “the narrative construction of [their] national identity.”<sup>24</sup> Michels notes that the very purpose of diplomatic agreements is not to resolve incompatible goals but to “allow different, conflicting interpretations, and conflicting narratives, to coexist.”<sup>25</sup> Michels also says that “changes in the narrative present (the realities on the ground) inevitably result in both reconsideration of the narrative past (what led to these realities) and changes in the national vision (what is acceptable and what is ‘national’) . . . new narratives begin to posit new narrative futures. The telos, the end or completion, of the national story is essentially fictional, since it has not happened yet.”<sup>26</sup> Because narratives are fluid and dynamic, they can be restructured to allow for coexistence.

The restructuring of narratives remains a daunting task. Michels cautions that if negotiations are perceived to lead to a change in the narrative of a society, the negotiations will be seen as against the interests of that society. The outcomes of the negotiations will then be rejected. “If, however, changes in narrative which ‘naturally’ occur [outside of official negotiations] seem to lead to negotiations, then changes (and negotiations) may be appropriated by national vision [i.e., national narrative].”<sup>27</sup> While there is evidence that conflicting narratives can be negotiated, the question of how remains problematic.

One possibility of addressing conflict narratives lies in the way they interpret the present. The nexus of a narrative is the understood present. In the act of creating the understood present, the perceived past and expected futures are adjusted. The expected future and perceived past influence what actions will be taken in the understood present. These actions then impact the world and create responses. The responses influence the present and may necessitate a further adjustment of the past and future.

If societies A and B are both operating under mutually exclusive conflict narratives, each has a set of expectations for the other’s future actions. These expectations are informed by patterns of the opponent’s past actions. If group A makes a peaceful action radically different from society B’s expectations, society B may reevaluate its understanding of the past and present to incorporate group A’s unexpected action. This is not a new hypothesis, being described in great detail in theories of Graduated Reduction in Tension (GRIT). Narrative theory, however, adds a greater appreciation of the causal mechanisms at work. As counternarrative actions continuously occur, the narratives may slowly dislodge from their mutually exclusive conditions.

Narrative’s nonhegemonic nature may provide another opening for the reduction of identity-based conflicts. Narratives are not mandatory; they are influential but not all-powerful. Ultimately, narratives are communicated and shared between individuals. If narrative expectations are continuously disrupted, then individuals may begin to step away from an identity conflict’s narrative-infused front line. They may begin to abandon an adversarial conflict narrative and create a new narrative to account for the unexpected

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<sup>24</sup> Jeffrey Michels, “National Vision and the Negotiation of Narratives: The Oslo Agreement,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 24.1 (Autumn 1994): 30.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.

action. This nascent counternarrative faces many challenges to its development and proliferation, but it offers hope that hostile identities can be slowly changed via narrative adjustment.

### *Conclusion*

Narrative conflicts are not a new category of conflict. Their resolution does not involve new skill sets and theories currently foreign to conflict-resolution literature. Rather, narrative theory offers an insight into how an additional, intangible front line can be opened in existing conflicts being waged over substantive and negotiable, but incompatible, goals. Once a conflict makes this transformation, the parties begin to construct their realities in mutually exclusive terms. Direct negotiation of the conflicting interests becomes impossible.

Fortunately, narratives are dynamic processes. As new events occur, narratives change. As narratives change, society adjusts its understandings of the struggle's past and its expectations for the future resolution of the conflict. This fluidity permits narratives to become less antagonistic over time and to change an identity-based struggle into a conflict over incompatible interests. What steps can be taken to reconcile opposing conflict narratives? This essay suggests taking steps to break away from narrative expectations in order to break a narrative's interpretive power. Can this process be accelerated? How can narrative disruption become a usable conflict-resolution tactic?

The front lines of identity are vicious and are fraught with interpretive danger. Intent, cause, and effect are all subject to an enemy's interpretation. This interpretation—shaped by the enemies own narrative—determines the reality of the conflict. Reality, as constructed by narratives, relies on the understood present to create the perceived past and expected future. Narrative theory offers insight into the fluidity of reality and into the transformation of conflicts from objective, incompatible goals to subjective, nonnegotiable identities. It points to an additional front line present or developing in many conflicts around the world: the battlefield of identity.

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Christian Noll received his Bachelor of Arts in Political Science from Gettysburg College in May of 2003, and a Master of Arts in International Peace and Conflict Resolution from American University in August of 2006. The author's past research and publications have focused on the conflict in northern Uganda.

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