PART I

Theoretical Background of the Book

CHAPTER 1

Personal Narratives in the Context of Genocide and War

In 1975, the literary scholar Roland Barthes wrote:

> There are countless forms of narrative in the world . . . in this infinite variety of forms, it is present at all times, in all places, in all societies; indeed narrative starts with the very history of mankind; there has never been anywhere, any people without narrative. (p. 237)

These understandings are the foundation of this chapter, indeed of this book.

This chapter presents an overview of psychosocial literature on personal narratives, in general, and in connection to genocide and war, in particular. We begin with *master narratives*, emphasizing their long-term impacts on personal narratives of genocide and war. We then look at the main characteristics and uses of personal narratives in psychosocial research. From there, we briefly discuss archives of personal narratives of survivors and their use in truth commissions, followed by usages of personal narratives in research of genocide and war, mainly – though not only – of the Holocaust and the Israeli–Palestinian conflict.

An Overview of Master Narratives

On the most basic level, a *master narrative* can be understood as "normative discourse" (Bamberg, 2004, p. 331) since it is "a story through and in which a collective recognizes and understands itself" (Krondorfer, 2020, p. 116). Master narratives are comprehensive, authoritative, dominant culturally shared stories that provide unambiguous representations of a given community's or society's history (Humlebæk, 2018).

Such narratives go by many names (Ilic, 2014). Bruner (1991) termed them *canonical scripts* – the unmarked scripts of everyday life, while Frosh (2002) used the similar term *canonical narratives* to denote broad stories

about how lives may be lived that justify certain behaviors. Georgakopoulou (2004) wrote about *shared narratives*, which are familiar or known *stories*. Van Dijk (1993) conceptualized *argumentative narratives*, which collect evidence to support generalizations about one's or another's society. Fleisher Feldman (2001) discussed the *group defining story*, which is conditioned by the group identity, similar to Hammack's (2010) term of *dominant scripts*. Ilic (2014, p. 48) argued that all of these types are a kind of *collective narrative*: "a collective experience which is evaluated, implicitly or explicitly, as being principally important for the community."

From the above, it is clear that master narratives guide people's thoughts, beliefs, values, and behaviors (Hammack, 2009): as such, they are never value-neutral (Syed & McLean, 2021a). Master narratives are potent because they are reinforced in a myriad of sociocultural products and ways: in the family, the schools, the media, and in the arts. As a result, master narratives – the term that we adopt here – strongly influence a community's and society's self-image for generations (Humlebæk, 2018; Syed & McLean, 2021a).

Jarausch (2002, p. 142) outlined five essential characteristics of master narratives. They offer: (1) the general pattern of historical development; (2) a basic pattern, characterized by progressive development that reflects the "true" nature of the nation and its "historical determination"; (3) dramatic representations, in which historical figures appear on a regular basis; (4) an ideological message; and (5) a form of a people's collective identity by tying the national identity to the historical ideals it represents.

While master narratives provide a representation of the collective past, the sense-making and identification that such narratives further is focused on the present (Humlebæk, 2018), since they "support the driving political agendas of the time" (Tint, 2010, p. 244). Moreover, Syed and McLean (2021a, p. 2) noted that master narratives influence individuals' stories of their experiences and support ongoing privileges of the ruling class, since personal experiences intertwine with the structural systems that uphold these privileges. In other words, master narratives are part of the fabric of people's everyday lives.

Master narratives do not only influence their own societies but also affect other societies and populations, especially when embroiled in a cross-border and/or internal conflict. People from the dominant group usually support and believe their society's master narrative, while people from minority/enemy groups tend to believe *alternative narratives* (Syed & McLean, 2021b) or *competing* or *divergent narratives* (Humlebæk, 2018; Krondorfer, 2020). Master narratives, therefore, do not universally

monopolize interpretation of the past, with their reign contingent upon their social dominance (Humlebæk, 2018).

The sociologist and conflict resolution theoretician Solon Simmons (2020, p. 24) conceptualized Root Narrative Theory, which relates to this issue:

> Root Narrative Theory assumes we see political events through the lenses of primitive story structures, the root narratives . . . parties to conflict employ these narratives in ways that they often fail to understand . . . they provide the moral grammar for any given account of conflict, anchoring assumptions about the organizational means in play, the kinds of actors who matter, the historical exemplars for similar events, the ultimate goals actors bring to their actions, and even evaluations of rival descriptions likely to be offered of what actually happened. The moral grammars provide us with the conditions for the possibility of establishing the meaningfulness of our political accounts. Without them, we speak nonsense.

Simmons further argued that by understanding the root narrative profiles of parties embroiled in a conflict, we become better prepared to interact with them. In doing so, we reduce radical disagreements. This point is important for us to make here since, in this book, we focus on understanding *conflict narratives* that connect to intergroup conflict and the ways in which such narratives can either help advance or obstruct peacebuilding. Another point that needs to be stressed is that conflict narratives represent the ways in which people create context for communication, as well as the ways in which contextual factors shape communication between enemies (Kellet & Dalton, 2001) – a point we explore in Chapter 4.

Given that one major focus of this book is narratives connected to the Israeli–Palestinian/Jewish–Arab violent conflict, we will end this subsection with Yadgar's (2003, p. 58) notions of a *national narrative*, in this context:

> the national narrative is the story that a (national) collective tells about itself. It tells the individuals constituting the nation . . . who they are, what comprises their past . . . the structure of their characteristics as a collective, and where they are heading; that is, how they should act in the political realm. This story is constructed from a set of secondary narratives, myths, symbols, metaphors and images . . . The complexity of national identity . . . calls for an ambiguous if not ambivalent presentation of certain aspects within the narrative . . . reflecting the complexity of individual and collective identity . . . [the national narrative] address[es] six themes: the values of

> the nation, the interaction between the national collective and other nations, the nation's past, the collective's limits, expressed in terms of belonging and otherness, the nation's attitude towards traditional religion (namely, in this case, Judaism), and the nation's heroes and villains.

Personal Narratives in Psychosocial Research

Donald Polkinghorne (1988, p. 160) wrote that people are "immersed in narrative," telling themselves stories in a "virtually uninterrupted monologue." Numerous scholars have focused on personal narratives of crises and/or landmark events (e.g., *turning points* in McAdams and Bowman's terms, 2001) in people's lives. People perceive their personal stories as "a version of reality" (Bruner, 1991, p. 5), selecting events and interactions to share that have personal and social significance and relevance (Bruner, 2004).

Sandelowski (1991) and Atkinson (1990) further tied personal narratives to master narratives. In Sandelowski's words (1991, p. 162), narrators are "socially positioned in a given biographical moment and under the influence of prevailing cultural conventions." Atkinson (1990) connected the personal to the more universal, perceiving personal narratives as opportunities for people to understand their own development and for gaining insights into how individual stories connect to wider, collective understandings. He described such creation as *personal mythmaking* or *monomyths* (pp. 200–201).

Among other things, Sarbin's (1990) and Brockmeier's (2005, 2015) work highlighted that narratives are *action* and *emotional work* as well. For example, Sarbin (1990, pp. 50, 53) asserted that "the actions of people in daily life are guided by narrative plots . . . human actors engage in conduct . . . to satisfy some purpose." Later on, Brockmeier (2005) related to narratives as phenomena that tie together emotions, perspective-taking, meaning, and actions (pp. 291–292):

> First, narrative brings a perspective to our experience, knowledge, thought, and much of our emotional life, a perspective that organizes how we face the world in which we live and how we position ourselves and others in this world. Second, it connects . . . several distinct elements to each other as to constitute a whole; that is, it creates a synthesis of meaning . . . Coherence, in this view, emerges as the connective force of a meaning structure . . .. And third, narrative is a way to do things . . . it is, a mode of action and performance inextricably entangled with the cultural grammar of

> a community of action and interpretation . . . narrative is a perspective, a synthesis, and a form of life.

While narrative scholars have elicited and analyzed personal narratives in different ways, in different contexts, and for different purposes, they agree on at least two points. The first one is that personal narratives are based on memory: Therefore, they are not objective recollections of facts, but rather understandings of events and relationships that people experienced (Josselson, 2009). This is especially important to remember when dealing with personal narratives connected to genocide and intractable conflict. In other words, when listening to people's life experiences, we should not relate to them as objective accounts of what happened, but rather as reflecting the *meaning* that the events had for the individual that influenced what they *chose* to share (Hiller & Chaitin, 2014). As the influential narrative psychologist Ruthellen Josselson (2009) wrote, autobiographical memory is a process of reconstruction. While the autobiographer can talk about the same event at different times, this vantage point from which they interpret these events transforms the meaning of the narrated event. As a result, the present constructs the past, creating a kind of dialogue between the remembered and the remembering self.

Connected to this point of consensus is the understanding that narratives reflect the "truth" as the autobiographer understands it and/or wishes to convey. However, this cannot ensure that what the person is narrating is necessarily truthful. At times, it may contain recollections of events that did not actually happen – or at least in the way that events and relationships are related in the person's story. This issue – of veracity and falsehood in narratives (Matthews & Kennett, 2012) – can, of course, influence people's willingness to enter into peacebuilding or obstruct such endeavors.

The second point of consensus is that narratives touch the very heart of identity, especially in contexts connected to social trauma (discussed in Chapter 2). Narratives, thus, are reflexive endeavors: they help us make sense of our own lives and define who we are (Flory & Iglesias, 2010; Hawkins & Saleem, 2012; McAdams, 1993; Svašek & Domecka, 2013). In addition, as we engage in this reflexivity, we create "truths" from these narrative discourses (Sarbin, 1998, p. 147) that we wish others to adopt as well (Riessman, 1991).

What are the characteristics of narratives? Narratives embrace complexity and invite discussion (Nicholson, 2016). When people share their narratives, they talk about experiences that occurred over time. The personal story includes characters, descriptions, emotions, climax,

denouement, explanations of why things occurred as they did, and, often, the moral of the tale. All of these offer insights into people's understandings of their personal and social lives, values, and beliefs (e.g., Brockmeier, 2015; Gilligan, 2015; Svašek & Domecka, 2013).

The ways in which people narrate their relations with others is especially important when these relationships are conflictual (Winslade & Monk, 2001). In such cases, narratives often become solidified, as they are "rehearsed and elaborated over and over again" (Winslade & Monk, 2001, p. 3). However, it would be a mistake to view conflict narratives as inherently solidified, unambiguous, or coherent. As some narrative scholars have shown – such as Langer (1991) in his analyses of Holocaust survivors' narratives and Uehara and colleagues' research (2001) of people who survived the Killing Fields in Cambodia in the 1970s – personal narratives of highly traumatic experiences are often fragmented and chaotic.

As a final point in connection to conflict narratives, Hammack (2011, p. 313) argued that personal narratives are "integrative prisms" through which we interpret social-political complexity. As he noted, a personal narrative "possesses implications for a particular configuration of social categories . . . and is a consistent encounter with the world of stories about the social categories we inhabit." Furthermore, as Gilligan and colleagues remind us (Gilligan & Eddy, 2017; Taylor et al., 1995), listening to people from different social categories (in their case, marginalized girls and women) also "tune[s] our ear to the multiplicity of voices that speak within and around us, including voices that speak at the margins and those which . . . tend to be held in silence" (Gilligan & Eddy, 2017, p. 76).

With these notions in mind, we now turn to a discussion of personal narratives found in archives and used for social-political purposes.

Personal Narratives in Survivor Testimonies' Archives, Courts of Law, and in Truth Commissions

Personal Narratives in Archives

In his description of archives that house documentation of social-political atrocities, like the Holocaust, Baum (2017, pp. 679, 681) stated:

> archives take the form of libraries, museums, monuments, shrines and churches. They are also morgues which, as Derrida (1992) notes, shelter as they conceal. Archives claim to be repositories for memory, and they are: memories politicized by their owners and re-crafted by the architect to demonstrate the most coherent narrative possible – or desirable. They are

> curated, but rarely curative. The physical construction houses the sayable and the seen, testimony recorded in some form. The archive is intended to be the safekeeper of an original record and hold an "authentic" document, but this is inherently disputable terminology, as the boundaries of the original, authentic, received and therefore "known" are invented and optimistic categories . . . Holocaust museums strive to make the Shoah "real" – to recreate a present-day, mundane experience of the Shoah so that contemporary viewers, and perhaps especially young people, can *feel* it.[1]

Audio, video, and written narratives of genocide and war are housed in numerous governmental, university, library, community, and internet archives. For example, for over half a century, Amnesty International (2022) has gathered and stored testimonies from people around the globe who have survived genocidal attempts and violent war. The organization publishes parts of these testimonies on their website, which is available in English, French, Spanish, and Arabic, in order to get victims' voices out to a worldwide public and, in doing so, increase the human rights of people who have been wronged.

Since one of our foci is on narratives in connection to the Holocaust, it is worthwhile noting some of the important archives of Holocaust testimonies. Major institutions (alphabetically ordered) include the Fortunoff Archive at Yale University, which was established in 1981 and houses over 4,400 testimonies (Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies, 2020). The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's oral history archive includes interviews that the museum has conducted, as well as testimonies that it collected from a variety of sources of different populations who were persecuted by the Nazi regime and their collaborators (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum – Oral History, n.d.). The USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive (n.d.) has over 55,500 video testimonies, undertaken in forty-four languages in over sixty-five countries. Founded over fifty years ago, the Yad Vashem Archives in Jerusalem (Yad Vashem, 2022) houses the largest collection of Holocaust documents in the world, with over 131,000 survivor testimonies. Finally, the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, established in 1945, includes Holocaust diaries and survivors' testimonies written in ghettos and concentration camps during the war (YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, 2022). The public is able to access documents from all of these archives either in person, on site, or via the Internet.

[1] Throughout this book, emphasis in quotes is always in the original.

Personal Narratives in Courts of Law and Truth and Reconciliation Commissions

Personal narratives – from victims and perpetrators – have been used as evidence in courts of law and in truth commissions in post-conflict countries aiming to right (at least, some of) the wrongs of the past. These legally binding forums work to give victims of gross human rights' violations voice and to hold perpetrators accountable for their crimes, which were sanctioned and carried out by governmental bodies and their militaries, in order to work toward reconciliation and repair. While there is not one official site that lists all the truth commissions that have been held, it is estimated that there have been between thirty-five and forty-five such commissions in different countries that have documented the personal testimonies of hundreds of thousands of people (Hayner, 2008).[2]

Personal testimonies of Holocaust survivors have also been used since the mid-1940s in courts of law. For example, Holocaust survivors gave testimonies concerning their horrific wartime experiences at the Nuremberg trials of twenty-one top-ranking Nazis in 1946 and later, in 1961, at the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem.

A few well-known truth commissions include the 1983 commission in Argentina (e.g., May, 2013; Vázquez Guevara, 2022); the 1990 commission in Chile (Ensalaco, 1994; Ferrara, 2015); the 1994 commission in Guatemala (The Truth Commission, 2022); the 1995 Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in South Africa (e.g., Andrews, 1999, 2019; Fuchs et al., 2013; Gobodo-Madikizela, 2003; Rothberg, 2009; Young, 2004); the 1992 East Germany commission (e.g., Andrews, 2003; McAdams, 2001); and the 2003 commission in Sierra Leone (Kelsall, 2005; Sierra Leone Truth and Reconciliation Commission, n.d.).

While there is no doubt that truth commissions provide one very important platform for victims to share their stories – and require perpetrators to confess their crimes – there is a lack of agreement regarding their ultimate value to social justice, peacebuilding, and human rights. For example, there is disagreement concerning whether victims' personal experiences should be publicized and if such commissions do indeed lead to reconciliation and provide some kind of closure for the victims (Urquidi Herrara, 2019), since the veracity of the perpetrators' "confessions" has been questioned (Kelsall, 2005).

[2] See, for example, Truth Commission Digital Collection, United States Institute of Peace (March 16, 2011): www.usip.org/publications/2011/03/truth-commission-digital-collection.

Personal Narratives in the Contexts of Genocide and War

In their study on personal narratives in contexts of war, Hammack and Pilecki (2012) coined the term *narrative engagement* to describe the process in which "members of a society engage with collective stories of what it means to inhabit a particular political entity" (p. 77). As we have noted, since people construct personal narratives that connect their own experiences to their group's history, identity, and ideology, personal story-making, especially in contexts of massive social trauma, is not solely an individual act: it is also a social-political act.

Some examples of narrative research of people who experienced genocidal attempts and/or have lived through intractable conflicts include the following.[3] Berents (2019) analyzed memoirs of child survivors of different wars, emphasizing their agency in navigating their wartime experiences. Laycock (2016) undertook analyses of interviews with children and families of survivors of the Armenian genocide that (re)settled in the Soviet Union of Armenia in 1945. These narratives tended to focus on the genocide that took place during World War I, as well as the ongoing migration of their people due to their traumatic past. Hosseini (2019) studied personal narratives of Êzîdî women who survived physical and sexual violence perpetrated against them and their community by ISIS. Halilovich (2016) explored personal narratives connected to the genocide in Bosnia in the early 1990s, Weine (1999) looked at trauma and forgiveness among Bosnian refugees and narratives that exacerbated ethnic hatred and genocide among Serbian nationalists, and Simic (2008) wrote about her personal experiences of visiting Srebrenica.[4] Another important piece of narrative research was undertaken with former Korean comfort women (Howard, 1996) who were forced into prostitution by the Japanese army during the 1930s.

In the African context, examples of narrative research include studies undertaken by Gilbert (2018), High (2013), Petersen-Coleman and Swaroop (2011), Sekalala (2016), and Williamson Sinalo and colleagues (2021) of Tutsis, who survived the 1994 genocide, for memorialization, reconciliation, and psychological treatment purposes. Two rare studies of perpetrators were undertaken in Rwanda and South Africa. Bigabo and

[3] The literature overwhelmingly focuses on victims' accounts. However, a few studies have been undertaken with perpetrators of the genocides and violent wars.

[4] In 1995, over 7,000 Bosnian Muslim boys and men were murdered by Bosnian Serb forces in Srebrenica, a town in eastern Bosnia and Herzegovina. Moreover, more than 20,000 civilians were ethnically cleansed from the area. This massacre was the worst episode of mass murder within Europe after World War II (R. Smith, 2022).