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## Narrative in the Study of Victimological Processes in Terrorism and Political Violence: An Initial Exploration

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### ABSTRACT

Narrative is intimately connected to victimization and radicalization. Trouble, the notion that drives narrative, is often coupled with victimization: the experience of suffering intentional harm. This experience can play a turning point in the stories that radicals construct about their own lives and thus play a role in their pathway to radicalization. In this article, three main themes of narrative will be further explored in relation to victimization and radicalization: identity, emotions, and culture. Central in this article is the discussion on how narrative can contribute to theory and research into victimological processes in radicalization, while offering new means to further develop key constructs.

In a recent article for debate in the journal *Terrorism and Political Violence* Marc Sageman<sup>1</sup> voiced his concerns about the lack of progress in research into the processes of radicalization. He states: “Despite over a decade of government funding and thousands of newcomers to the field of terrorist research, we are no closer to answering the simple question of “What leads a person to turn to political violence?”” A similar question can be asked for those who desist, as most members do leave political violent groups at some point.<sup>2</sup> Despite the growing number of studies on disengagement and deradicalization,<sup>3</sup> we are even further away from answering the question “What leads a person to desist from political violence?”

Why have scholars not yet answered these two questions? Sageman<sup>4</sup> argues that there is stagnation in terrorism research because governments are making the necessary primary—but highly sensitive—data unavailable to academia. As a result, he states, a lack of primary data has mainly resulted in an “explosion of speculations” in the field of terrorism. Sageman’s assessment has led to a number of talking points by a group of scholars.<sup>5</sup> While these scholars agree that the question why people turn to political violence remains to be answered, the lack of an answer is not the result of a stagnation of research in this field. Although Schmid<sup>6</sup> argues that this question is unanswerable, terrorism research has reached a new level of maturity, as we know more than ten years ago.

We think that an additional impetus to research in this area lies in narrative. Hammack and Pilecki<sup>7</sup> already argued that narrative should be viewed as the root metaphor for political psychology and the specifics of political violence and terrorism give their argument

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additional weight for our field. The argument that lies at the heart of this article is that narrative can contribute to theory and research into phenomena of terrorism, political violence, and radicalization, offering new means to further develop key constructs.

Narratives and counternarratives already feature in the body of research on terrorism and violent political extremism.<sup>8</sup> By and large, however, this solely concerns the message that acts of terror and political violence convey or with which they are accompanied. This is an important area of research, but the relevance of narrative research is considerably broader than these explicit political stories. This article cannot address all the features of the “narrative turn” in social sciences<sup>9</sup> and how they might enrich the study of terrorism and political violence. Instead, it will provide relatively brief sketches of the connection between narrative and identity, emotion and culture, and focus on narratives of victimization in their connection to research and theory in terrorism and political violence. Where victims’ narratives are addressed in the current literature on these topics, they exclusively refer to the use of the stories of victims of terrorism in counterterrorist efforts and/or as a means to ensure sufficient attention to their plight in policy and practice. These are important subjects, but victimological narratives can also be key to understanding the behavior of perpetrators of these acts. The latter is the interest in this article.

This article proceeds as follows. First, some key issues concerning narratives are discussed, and why victimological narratives are of particular interest, also to gain further insight into the behavior of perpetrators. Subsequently, it will examine in more detail three constructs central to narratives: the centrality of narrative to identity,<sup>10</sup> the role of narrative in emotions,<sup>11</sup> and the importance of narrative in connecting individual lives to the wider cultural context.<sup>12</sup> Each will be linked to the victimology of political violence and radicalization. In particular, this article will discuss the relevance of narrative understanding of the identity implications of victimization to Kruglanski and colleagues’ notion of the significance quest, how understanding the complexity of emotions elicited by victimization can enrich the understanding of the development of counterterrorist messages and how the impact of victimization on (severing) the connection between individual life stories and the wider culture can provide insight into the development and maintenance of violent extremist groups. These examples do not exhaust by any means the range of topics that could be helpfully addressed by applying insights from narrative theory and research to the topic of terrorism and political violence. They serve as preliminary illustrations of the fruits that this interlinkage might bear.

## **Narrative and Victimology**

According to Burke,<sup>13</sup> all stories have at least in common that they contain an Agent who performs an Action to achieve a Goal in a recognizable Setting by the use of certain Means. What drives the story is a mismatch between the elements of this “pentad”: what Burke refers to as “Trouble.” The story is one that is unexpected, and the plot and its resolution must be seen in conjecture with the efforts of the characters in the story to cope with, resolve, integrate, or overcome the unexpected event and its consequences.<sup>14</sup>

The understanding that narrative concerns an Agent, performing an Action to achieve a Goal underlines Bruner’s view that narratives are fundamentally about “the vicissitudes of human intention.”<sup>15</sup> Events are not merely mentioned or described, but are causally connected, at least from the point of view of the protagonist. In stories, causality is shaped in terms of the intent of its characters. Bruner distinguishes the narrative mode of reasoning,

which in his view people typically use to explain “how the human world works—how and why, that is, human beings do what they do,”<sup>16</sup> from the paradigmatic mode: the rational analysis, logical proof, and empirical observation that forms the basis for scientific reasoning. The importance of intent in narratives lays bare the connection to ethics and morality: in narratives things happen for a reason, and this reason concerns either good or bad intentions.<sup>17</sup> Even if an event happened by chance, morality will still feature heavily in the narrative, with the characters querying the lack of intent, or reason behind the event that shapes their own further existence. Overall, the narrative imposes structure and sequences events in such a fashion it becomes a coherent plot and that an evaluation of these events becomes possible.<sup>18</sup> As will be discussed later in this article, “getting a life,” that is, the construction of a coherent life story is one of the most important elements of an individual’s personality development from adolescence onward.<sup>19</sup>

The structure of narrative has a natural link to victimology. The experience of victimization is a particular and poignant instance of the (intentional) “Trouble” that Burke describes.<sup>20</sup> Victims are confronted with the negative consequences of behavior at odds with key ethical or moral values. This necessitates attempts to make sense of this behavior, which occurs through narrative modes of cognition. This also becomes clear from the research that reveals a so-called moralization gap between the victim’s perspective on a given event and the way the perpetrator of the same event experiences this.<sup>21</sup> Victims see the event as an injustice, exaggerate the impact, minimize the context and extend the time frame of the event forward and backward in time, while “perpetrators” tend to find justifications for what happened, attribute the event to outside causes, minimize the impact on the victim and see the event as a moment in time. The perpetrator’s perspective singles out immediate causes rather than intentional (and countermoral) reasons in his or her own character. In Bruner’s terms, the perpetrator’s perspective is in line with the logico-paradigmatic approach to understanding the event rather than the narratively derived version the victim has constructed. The perpetrator’s perspective is relatively shorn of narrative components: if intention is key to narrative, the perpetrator’s emphasis on impersonal causes rather than intentional reasons undermines the extent to which it can be accurately termed a story.

Important for the current discussion is that this also means that victimization narratives can exert large influence on the self-understanding of those who are perpetrators of (politically motivated) offenses. Although their own acts of violence will lead them to be labeled offenders, their life stories are riddled with victimization narratives that often loom largely in their own explanations for and understanding of their behavior.<sup>22</sup> Where this is the case, any acts of perpetration of violence and crime are likely to be justified as logical reactions to these experiences victimization narrative, seen as the a determined consequence of outside forces, beyond the offender’s control and/or as temporary aberrations from otherwise moral lifestyle. In sum, victimization narratives play a large role in perpetrator’s behavior, while first person accounts of that behavior itself remain wedded to the logico-paradigmatic mode of thinking. It is for this reason that Baumeister maintained that when he “donned his scientific spectacles,” he was in effect taking the perpetrator’s perspective on the moralization gap.

## **Narrative and Identity**

A key area of narrative research concerns narrative understanding of identity. Research in personality psychology gives credence to the view that life can be understood as narrative.

McAdams<sup>23</sup> argues that personality can best be seen as consisting of three levels. The first level, which McAdams terms the social actor, consists of traits, such as the well-known Big Five.<sup>24</sup> Level II is termed the motivated agent and concerns personal strivings, life tasks, defense mechanisms, coping strategies, skills, and other motivational, developmental, or strategic constructs. What differentiates the agent from the actor is that the former is contextualized within time, place, and/or role. Whereas dispositional traits account for broad consistencies in how people behave across situation and over time, personal goals and motives address what people want (and fear) and how they strive to obtain what they want (and avoid what they fear) in particular social and developmental contexts and with respect to particular social roles.<sup>25</sup>

Level III involves identity narratives or self-stories, which McAdams calls the autobiographical author. This narrative identity draws on and is layered over traits and adaptations. Key is the understanding that “beyond dispositional traits and characteristic adaptations, human lives vary with respect to their integrative life stories or personal narratives that individuals construct to make meaning and identity in the modern world.”<sup>26</sup> A narrative identity is an internalized, evolving, and integrated story of the self. It reconstructs the past, present, and future in such a way to provide a person’s life with unity, purpose, and meaning. Through narrative identity, “people convey to themselves and to others who they are now, how they came to be, and where they think their lives may be going in the future.”<sup>27</sup> In other words, understanding the person is understanding his or her story. McAdams and McLean<sup>28</sup> link the development of the three ways of understanding the self—the social actor, the motivated agent, and the autobiographical author—to challenges associated with three different forms of self-awareness. The social actor is tasked with overcoming the challenge of self-regulation and the motivated agent with self-esteem. In addition to this the autobiographical author offers the self a means to integrate different experiences and episodes in life: through the coherent life story it constructs it provides the “I” with a continuous story of “me” in space and time; in other words, it offers self-continuity. The self of today is the self of yesterday and the self of tomorrow. Any changes also have retrospective implications: events in the past are reinterpreted in the light of the current understanding of a life story. The drive to achieve self-continuity means that the self-attempts to bring the present in line with the past and vice versa.

### **Narrative Rupture and Radicalization**

How does victimization play a role in a person’s narrative identity? A main link is McAdams’s emphasis on the narrative attention demanded by specific nuclear episodes in the construction of one’s life story.<sup>29</sup> The storyteller is tasked with making meaning: explaining the causes of the event, the role of the main protagonists, the consequences on him and herself, and the further development of the story.<sup>30</sup> Life stories are thrown into turmoil in the event of severe forms of victimization. The victimization experience presents a narrative rupture, which threatens the sense of self-continuity.<sup>31</sup> How to understand the life preceding the event as continuous with the present, the event itself and the future? The efforts to make sense and meaning are concerned with coming to terms with the manner in which the past, the victimization, the present, and the future can be reconceived anew to represent a coherent and continuous whole. The narrative rupture also concerns the experience of being out

of sync with the rest of society, with much of the worth of social support and acknowledgment lying in their contribution to this recalibration.<sup>32</sup>

Understanding the importance of the level III personality dynamics, including the victimological notion of the narrative rupture, can further inform the understanding of Kruglanski and colleagues' notion of the significance quest, which is a key lens to understand the process of radicalization.<sup>33</sup> In Kruglanski et al.'s view, the key to understanding why a person does or does not resort to political violence resides in the notion of counterfinality: although a person might be motivated to achieve a given end, this end can also run counter to other ends that this person may want to achieve and/or the norms that guide the ways in which goals might be pursued. So where many people might agree with the analysis of a given terrorist or radical group of the ends that should be reached, this can run counter to the understanding that violence is not permitted, that there are other nonviolent means by which the person could contribute to those goals and/or that taking up arms might make leading a normal family life impossible and will interfere with pursuing a career. In Kruglanski and colleagues' view then, radicalization can be conceptualized by the degree to which the radical's goal trumps other meaningful purposes in life and/or norms that run counter to the violent means by which this goal would need to be pursued. This means that radicalization can occur through amplification of the importance of the radical's goal, the muting of other goals, the increasing difficulty of achieving the goal through other means and/or the muting of the norms that contradict the radical means to achieve the end. As Kruglanski and colleagues note, this also helps to understand why it is difficult to settle on a definition of radicals and radicalization: where one case intense identification with the focal goal of the radical group is necessary to override other concerns, in another case it the lack of norms or contradictory ends that motivates this behavior.

Kruglanski and colleagues introduce a general motivating force behind the focal goal, which they describe as the quest for significance: which means to matter, to receive respect. In this light, the radicalization process, then, also includes the arousal of the goal of significance; identification of terrorism and violence as the appropriate means to reach significance and a commitment shift away from other concerns toward the goal of significance. The centrality of significance in their theory suggests that a triggering event might relate to experienced significance loss: that is, humiliation or deprivation, which appears particularly acute when this relates not only to the individual, but also to the group to which the individual belongs.

Even though Kruglanski and colleagues' work does not refer to the body of literature discussed in the previous sections, this article argues that narrative psychology can be an added value to this theory. Two points need to be made. First, it seems that Kruglanski and colleagues view radicalization on the levels of the social actor and the motivational agent, but not on the level of the autobiographical author. Yet given the ideological component of radicalization and the coincidence of identity and ideology, narrative can offer a useful framework of perceiving the pathways to radicalization and political violence. As Haidt, Graham, and Joseph<sup>34</sup> explain: "Level III centrally concerns identity, and more specifically identity as experienced in a narrative mode. At this level, the stories people tell themselves and others about how they came to hold the moral and political beliefs they currently hold should be examined. These stories are not expected to be literally true as historical accounts, but it is expected that they influence a person's behavior, including political behavior such as voting, and involvement in political movements." And, in particular to radical, extremist political

activity, including terrorist acts, the authors would hazard to conjecture. The nonbehavioral components of radicalization can be understood along the dimensions of the extent of agreement with given causes and the extent to which the ideology forms a component of someone's identity. The extent to which the master narrative of the terrorist organization coincides with the life narrative of an individual goes beyond mere attitudinal agreement: it forges an identity based union.<sup>35</sup>

A second point is that Kruglanski et al.'s notion of significance quest appears, not only terminologically, to have a strong connection to the terrorist's life narrative. Yet they view this term solely in terms of attitudinal constructs and as a goal to which the self as a motivational agent aspires. Yet it is believed that the significance quest is (also) an element of people's overarching life narrative. Like the choice for an occupation, a spouse or habitus, the choice for this quest says more about a person than merely a strong preference: it says something about who they are, also to themselves.

Finally, the fact that the narrative rupture also applies to the connection with wider society also can provide insight in important mechanisms that underlie the connection of victimological processes to the significance quest.<sup>36</sup> The experience of lost connection between one's life story and the master narrative of society often leads to a view that only others with similar experiences can understand one's experiences. Together with these peers those experiencing such a narrative rupture can engage in the co-construction of a smaller scale community narrative.<sup>37</sup> In turn this community narrative can replace (parts of) the role of the cultural master narrative in the development of one's identity, and form the basis for the significance quest.<sup>38</sup> The narrative perspective thus provides both insights into the processes by which this occurs, but also offers the view that narrative through which radicalization occurs can be co-created by people living through the same victimization experiences.

## Narrative and Emotions

As noted above, nuclear episodes are important components of a life story. They are critical events that are often described as turning points in an individual's life story. These events have the capacity to trigger (strong) emotion(s) and thus emotions form the nucleus of a narrative. The process model of Frijda<sup>39</sup> views the trigger of emotion as an appraisal of a situation that is out of the ordinary. This appraisal is inherently evaluative: it relates probable outcomes of the unexpected event to the individual's concerns, thereby relating the event to the individual's past and future selves. The autobiographical experience of victimization can give rise to a whole host of emotions. Each of these emotions is associated with different action tendencies. The emotion in question guides the appraisal of the situation and subsequently leads to radically different actions. The most obvious ones are related to anger, which is the emotion associated with the experience of injustice, and can include vengefulness, hatred, but also forgiveness, contempt, and disgust.<sup>40</sup>

Narrative also transmits emotions.<sup>41</sup> According to Oatley's taxonomy of emotional response to literary narratives there are assimilative and accommodative schema. The former concerns the empathic, interactional, and autobiographical responses noted above. Here, the narrator can draw on the emotions of the reader/ listener to get the story across. The story appeals to the reader's curiosity, where "incompleteness can provoke arousal, and the reader becomes engaged in assimilating new elements to the schema until completion and relief occur."<sup>42</sup> A particular form of assimilative communication is covered by the concept of

framing, in which a very brief narrative, often consisting of no more than a stereotypical image, can be used to transmit a compelling argument to a proven and potentially receptive audience.<sup>43</sup> Framing relies on schemata shared by the communicator and the target of communication. The frame supplies the material to define problems and their causes, to clarify the moral issues involved and to point to suitable remedies. The most ambitious form of framing, so-called frame transformation, attempts to substantially alter the manner in which the target audience views a particular social or political issue.<sup>44</sup> In doing so it relies on a novel connection between the particular issue at hand and a stock meta-frame, about which the target audience has already an established emotionally charged view.

In accommodative schemas, the narrator has to overcome resistance, and/or (purposely) makes easy assimilation more difficult. Where assimilative schemas can rely on the listener agreeing with the narrator's point, and seeking to remember experiences, evidence and stories that confirm the narrator's position, accommodative schemas, make for a harder sell. The initial resistance will lead to a search for incongruities, counterarguments, and mistakes.<sup>45</sup> The former entails the target asking the question "Can I believe it?," the latter "Must I believe it?" Within accommodative schemas it is worthwhile to distinguish between the elicitation of outright adverse emotions and of conflicting emotions. The latter is the case when communication elicits both positive, approach-oriented emotions and negative, avoidance-oriented emotions. As will be noted below, this conflict is an important feature of the reaction to victimological experience. Viewing victims can trigger sympathy and compassion, but also disgust, fear, and distress at the same time.<sup>46</sup>

Narrative is a key ingredient in shaping emotions experienced as a collective. In a recent review Bernard Rimé emphasized the importance of sharing narrated emotions as a means to establish bonds within communities.<sup>47</sup> Indeed, much of the fabric of groups, communities, and even nations and cultures consists in these bonds. Where collectives may experience emotional contagion when witnessing events or as a consequence of being in close proximity to others, the two other main paths to collective emotional experience rely on narrative.<sup>48</sup> Key events in collective memory are accompanied by a narrative—often supplied by a meta-frame<sup>49</sup>—which gives rise to a shared appraisal of the event itself, its causes and consequences, its meaning and the emotions that are appropriate as a reaction to discussing this event. Narrative is also an agent in experiencing emotions as a member of a collective. Narrative connects personal experience to that of an encompassing cultural group (see below), and in addition signals whether or not a particular event should rightly be experienced as a collective issue. Evidence is accumulating that emotions that are experienced in such a "we-mode" have qualitatively different characteristics and associated action tendencies than emotions experienced in "i-mode."

## Emotions, Victimization, and Radicalization

In a review, Rice noted the limited attention to emotions in terrorism research, which he finds to reflect the influence of rational choice approaches prevalent in political science and international security studies on the one hand<sup>50</sup> and the similarly longstanding preoccupation with the individual pathology of terrorist perpetrators in psychological studies on the other.<sup>51</sup> Interest in the role of emotions in terrorism is increasing following the lead of the scholarship concerning emotions in social movements and protest,<sup>52</sup> conflict resolution,<sup>53</sup> as well as in politics and morality more generally.<sup>54</sup> Rice mentions a number of different



emotions that play a role in radicalization and terrorism: hate, humiliation, fury, disgust, anger and moral outrage, shame and revenge, but also positive emotions such as pride, exhilaration, excitement, and ingroup love.

Understanding the concept of framing and its connection to assimilative and accommodative schemas illuminates the manner in which communication functions in and around radical political movements and terrorist organizations. A frame may highlight the organization's essence as a remedy for a particular problem or seek to glorify the movement's "superstars." It can also focus on defining the problem and highlight the accompanying negative moral judgment. In this drawing, a shared experience—a master-frame—of victimization is often vital. Social movement theorist William Gamson has shown the power of so-called injustice frames across contexts.<sup>55</sup> These frames rely on a shared feeling of suffering injustice and are particularly effective, not in the least because the accompanying emotion—anger—is powerful, easily recognizable and directed toward action.<sup>56</sup> As will be noted below, Vamik Volkan's work on the re-appropriation of particular positive ("chosen glories") and negative ("chosen traumas") events in the current day and age offers similar insights.<sup>57</sup>

In turn, the literature on framing can expose much of the complexities in various avenues toward the construction of counternarratives. First and foremost, it reveals the extent to which arguments solely directed toward the "minds" err in viewing the matter as an almost academic debate, rather than as an antagonistic struggle, guided by the emotional experience and the identity of the parties in question.<sup>58</sup> It can also serve to question the wisdom of a too overt focus on the "voice of the victims" in counterterrorism policy. Where this was believed to contribute to empathy with the emotional experience of victims, sympathy with their predicaments and perhaps even guilt and remorse on the part of offenders, it can have the unintended effect of increasing hostility toward the victimized ingroup and strengthening the resolve of those involved in terrorist activity. The notion that victims' narratives will not always meet with a sympathetic reaction has been repeatedly confirmed across contexts and forms of victimization.<sup>59</sup> This can be contingent on the characteristics of the victimization in question, with situations inciting disgust and other avoidant reactions, making a sympathetic reaction more effortful and less likely.<sup>60</sup> The difficulties in creating sympathy for victims are particularly acute when the people in question are more likely to be seen as offenders. Their suffering is highly likely to be interpreted as a fair outcome of their own or their group's actions,<sup>61</sup> as just deserts rather than unjust suffering. This is particularly important in situations of so-called adversarial competitive victimhood.<sup>62</sup> In prolonged conflict between groups either side has reason to see each other as offenders rather than victims: tales of suffering are juxtaposed against the suffering endured by one's own ingroup and recast as worthwhile retribution. Any further emphasis on the victim's suffering is only likely to foster hostility to the victim's narrative, as it seemingly downplays in comparison to the suffering endured by the ingroup.

Second, it emphasizes the futility of adopting counternarratives that require full-scale jettisoning of the radicals' identity. Here the narrative runs head first into the deep-seated desire to see the self as continuous and effectively benign. Instead, it supplies support for recent research into so-called credible messengers.<sup>63</sup> Their identity facilitates assimilative listening, while the accompanying narrative can serve to offer a different set of possible outlets for the radicals' grievances. As Braddock and Horgan recently wrote, "it can be particularly useful to utilize individuals that agree with the themes that comprise a terrorist narrative in principle, but dismiss the use of violence as a viable option for realizing those themes. These

individuals may be uniquely suited for disseminating a counternarrative, given that they will have the added credibility of agreeing with the terrorist group's goals, if not its methods."<sup>64</sup> Instead of denying the sense of victimization and injustice and the emotions that accompany this, successful counternarratives can draw on these emotional responses and what they represent but reframe the appropriate response to them.

Finally, the role of emotions in collectives and the use of framing in the actions, tactics, and maintenance of social movements can enrich the understanding of how radical groups form and maintain coherence.<sup>65</sup> This can provide a worthwhile addition to the "bunch of guys" literature,<sup>66</sup> complementing its focus on social networks with the emotional and identity implications of membership of such groups and networks. This, in turn, offers the opportunity to re-orient the focus of the work on the significance quest from solely agentic concerns and purposes to those that include the other elemental force in human motivation—communion.<sup>67</sup> Much of the recent work on the so-called Big Two of human motivation suggests that we might often be asking the question "what does this social actor want to achieve," where the question "where does this social actor need to belong" might offer more rewarding answers. The research into radicalization is—the authors think—no different.

## Narrative and Culture

The construction of culture is largely narrative in nature.<sup>68</sup> Collective memories concern historical moments in a group's existence, with narratives that institutionalize these memories into coherent stories.<sup>69</sup> The memory is not only continued through time by storytelling and re-telling, but its narrative nature also emerges in the way collective memories are shaped and re-shaped by current-day needs. Instead of understanding the collective memories of the past as a fixed canon, they are re-interpreted in light of present events.

These cultural narratives about national history, ethnicity, religion, and politics shape the personal stories people live by, and these personal stories can sustain or transform culture.<sup>70</sup> In other words, the interaction between culture and identity works through narrative. For instance, Hammack<sup>71</sup> defines identity as "ideology cognized through the individual engagement with discourse, made manifest in a personal narrative constructed and reconstructed across the life course and scripted in and through social interaction and social practice."

Cultural narratives not only provide a sense of self-continuity but also continuity with the other members of one's community. As Hammack and Pilecki<sup>72</sup> note, narrative provides the solution "not only to a need to see oneself as the same from one day to the next, but also to see oneself as engaged in a cognitive process that is the same as others within a particular time and place." Culture provides a menu of stories to which the person's autobiographical narrative can relate.<sup>73</sup> Culture provides (implicit) definitions of what is and what is not narrative, what is a good narrative, and the sites where telling narratives—or at least particular types of narrative—is or is not appropriate.<sup>74</sup>

But individuals can also find themselves struggling to square their own narrative with the master narrative in society, and in some fundamental way find themselves to be outsiders or deviants.<sup>75</sup> This is also and particularly true for those who go through sudden, life-altering experiences that lead to "shattered assumptions" or "narrative ruptures."<sup>76</sup> The sense of alienation from the master narrative of society, and the need to connect to others who share similar experiences, goes a long way to explain the spontaneous emergence of self-help, mutual aid, and/ or more explicitly politically motivated groups who have a particular

experience in common.<sup>77</sup> Whether that is disease, addiction, or indeed victimization, this experience, the view that only others with this experience can fully comprehend what the individual is going through and in tandem the distance from the narratives the culture supplies, underlies this self-organization, and forms the point of departure for the construction of a group-based community narrative. The latter lies at the heart of sub- or countercultures.<sup>78</sup>

### Cultural Victimization Narratives and Radicalization

Most, if not all, points discussed in this article resonate in the relationship between culture and victimization. Culture scripts can define what victimization is, how forms of victimization are ranked, and what narrative the reactions to victimization ought to follow. Instances of victimization can be seen as emblematic of or run counter to the master narrative, with the latter varying in the extent to which victimization is embraced or not. In a study of Israeli and Palestinian youths, for example, Hammack<sup>79</sup> found that both groups imported the master narratives from their cultures into their personal narrative identities. As a result, Israeli youth were more likely to adopt redemptive scripts, seeing themselves as having overcome previous victimhood, while Palestinian youth were more likely to use contamination scripts, seeing themselves as becoming deeper encroached by victimhood. The adherence to different scripts, Hammack argues, leads to difficulties in finding cultural common ground and establishing peace.

Although it is hard to find a culture that does not have an emblematic tale of victimhood, the extent to which stories of this victimhood become part of the social representation of culture varies. Vamik Volkan's<sup>80</sup> analysis of large group identity suggests a key role for chosen traumas, a shared mental representation of a massive trauma that the group's ancestors suffered at the hands of an enemy. These social representations can also be put to use in times of conflict: the notion of *competitive victimhood*<sup>81</sup> encompasses past narratives of victimhood, which are put to use in a similar way to current instances of victimhood. In other words, to deliver a sense of moral entitlement to the group, which by brandishing its views of victimhood attempts to gain support, respect or as a cover for retaliation. Volkan finds the use of chosen traumas as the main social representation of the group to be particularly activated in times of group threat. Here the chosen trauma serves as an emblematic reminder of why the group in question forged its key national, cultural, and/or ethnic identity in the first place.<sup>82</sup> Narratives of "chosen traumas" play a particular role in ideologically and politically motivated violence. Volkan's key text on the issue was titled *Bloodlines: from ethnic pride to ethnic terrorism*. A whole host of terrorist movements invoke tales from a distant past. For instance, the modern day notion of martyrdom in Shi'ite-inspired terrorism often invokes the Battle of Karbala in 680 A.D., but similar tales can be found across terrorist movements.

Much of this article concerns the narrative connection to culture in one way or another. The main issue is the extent to which radicalization and terrorist activity draw on the master narratives that certain cultures have to offer, or are developed in opposition as counterculture or subculture. In the latter case the insights from cultural criminology can be usefully marshaled.<sup>83</sup> Here radicalization and even terrorist activity can be understood as another form of deviance or opposition toward the master narratives of the dominant culture.<sup>84</sup> The

dominance of these master narratives can be perceived as an element of oppression itself, with those adhering to the subculture as victims of this oppression.

A second and complementary avenue is that of self-organization and its connection to community narratives in the aftermath of victimization.<sup>85</sup> The narrative rupture caused by victimization, also threatens the connection between the individual's life narrative and wider cultural narratives. In particular, it questions whether others who do not share the victim's experience can fully comprehend what the victim is going through. Communities of those with similar experiences form as a means of self-help or mutual aid and in the sharing of their individual narratives a communal narrative is shaped, as a means that can replace the function of the wider cultural narrative. It might seem odd at first glance to draw a link between the peer support groups in the aftermath of life-threatening disease—that forms much of the topic of the self-help literature—on the one hand and radical political movements on the other. However, in both these seemingly disparate topics one can observe the importance of coping with a sense of victimization, the difficulty in squaring one's personal experience with that of wider society and the importance of finding meaning in a co-constructed shared narrative with others who have similar experiences. Engaging with the literature from community psychology on this topic has much to offer.

## Conclusion

This article has provided an overview of some of the pertinent issues concerning narrative and explores its connection to the victimology of terrorism and radicalization. The main issues of narrative that are worthwhile for further consideration in the field of political violence are the following: It was first noted that victimization is the emblematic form of "Trouble" that forms the heart of narratives. Severe forms of victimization are likely candidates to constitute the specific "negative" nuclear episodes in one's life story. One's identity and personal ideology are heavily influenced by these turning points, and the meaning one gives to them. The construction of meaningful narrative in the aftermath of the shattering of assumptions is, in turn, an important coping task. These victimization narratives can concern personal experiences in a fairly recent past, but can also refer to vicarious, group experiences, which occurred in distant history. These "chosen traumas" can become a key component of group ideology, offering a short hand and a priori justification for the acts committed against those viewed as the erstwhile perpetrators.

Second, the effects of (severe forms of) victimization are best understood in terms of a "narrative rupture," which impacts victims' sense of identity in terms of self-continuity throughout time and in connection with others. Efforts to cope with victimization involve narratively rebuilding this sense of continuity with the past and future selves and reconceiving the sense of communion with the social surroundings. This sense of narrative continuity is also important in conceptualizing processes of disengagement and deradicalization. In this regard, this article maintained that understanding victimization, radicalization, and deradicalization processes need to incorporate the idea that the life narratives involved are constitutive elements of identity. The chosen traumas and ideology of radicals, extremists, and terrorists are not mere (strong) attitudes or opinions, but form elements of their identity. This article has noted the importance of incorporating the body of theory and research on life narratives fully in the most well developed perspectives on radicalization and deradicalization processes.

Third, emotions are inherent to (understanding) the reactions to victimization, while victimization narratives transmit these emotions. Empathy and sympathy play an important role in understanding the reactions to victimization and the transmission of the emotions of victimization experiences. The transmission, sharing and retelling of a wide variety of emotions experienced relies (to a large part) on narrative. This article questioned the role of empathy for victimization experiences as necessarily benign: victimization experiences of the “enemy” are likely to be interpreted as just deserts for wrongdoing in the past. The phenomenon of competitive victimhood suggests that the confrontation with these experiences is more likely to invite a defensive response, including rehearsing one’s own or one’s own group’s victimization experiences as outweighing those of the outgroup. In general, the transmission of emotion through narrative is moderated by the division between assimilative and accommodative listening. In the former, the listener is biased toward agreeing with the messenger, in the latter to disagreeing and/or viewing as negative. This also underlies the importance of the understanding that who tells the story is as or sometimes even more important than what is being communicated.

Finally, narratives of victimization are important elements of culture. Culture scripts can define what victimization is, how forms of victimization are ranked and what narrative the reaction to victimization ought to follow. Instances of victimization can be seen as emblematic of or run counter to a given society or community’s master narrative, but the authors are not aware of societies that do not have at least one stock tale of their people’s victimization as an important social representation. The notion of competitive victimhood encompasses current and past tales of victimhood: the collective memories of past victimizations can be staple elements of a collective’s current master narrative, one that provides cover for moral entitlement and even violent and retaliatory action. This article argued for further integration of the insights of subcultural criminology and community psychology in the understanding of the way that radical, extremist and terrorist groups draw upon or oppose master narratives in society.

As stated from the outset the goal was not to provide a full overview of all the manners in which narrative approaches might contribute to research and theory concerning terrorism and political violence. This article has restricted itself to illustrations of some useful applications of this approach. Further and more in-depth exploration of the issues mentioned is undoubtedly in order. In particular the notion of “life as narrative,” that is, the role of narrative in the construction of life stories, is of key importance and is likely to enrich understanding engagement and disengagement from terrorist activity and violent political extremism. This applies not to theory alone. Much of the most interesting work into the experience of perpetrators of terrorist acts and political violence relies on in-depth examination of individuals lives. Here narrative approaches such as the life story interview, surely have much to offer.

In any case, the authors hope to have ignited interest in cross-fertilization between narrative approaches and the topic of terrorism and political violence. This article was an initial exploration of the use of these approaches. The authors definitely believe it should not be the final word.

## Notes

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