

Article

The Shapeshifting Self: Narrative Pathways into Political Violence

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Abstract: In the wake of numerous terror attacks around the globe, academic and popular discourse on radicalization has witnessed exponential growth in publications that, sadly, have not resulted in a coherent or consensus definition of the concept, nor have they determined its causality and effects. In this article, we use the term *three-pronged process of radicalization by narrative* to denote an ongoing process of meaning-making, adaptation, and coping, and argue this process to be inherently linked with the social, cultural, and ideological construction and reconstruction of the identity arch-story of individual lives. We suggest that, in some cases, the ceaseless process of social interaction of identity narratives eventuates in what we define as *the Shapeshifting Self*, by coherently fusing stories of personal loss, rupture, or trauma together with the counterparts of movements and national stories of sociopolitical engagement. At the endpoint of the process, violent engagement is perceived by the self as legitimate and even necessary for the psychological well-being of the perpetrator. By applying this approach to the *Jewish-Israeli context*, we aim to illustrate the socioculturally situated contingencies associated with the process of radicalization by narrative.

Keywords: narrative psychology; radicalization; politico-religious violence; Jewish-Israeli context

1. Introduction

Today, we are a nation awakened to the evil of terrorism and determined to destroy it.

George W. Bush at the Department of Defense service of remembrance at the Pentagon 11 October 2001
([Bush 2009](#), p. 79)

In more ways than one, these words, uttered shortly after the 9/11 attack, sum up the Western narrative of terrorism and radicalization. Ever since, popular and academic discourse focusing on these topics has precipitated an exponential growth in publications ([Kundnani 2012](#); [Koomen and Pligt 2016](#)). Despite this prolific production of texts, readers are left wanting for an articulate, coherent, and consensus definition of these concepts, let alone the determinant causes and effects (see, e.g., [Borum 2011a, 2011b](#); [Crone 2016](#); [Della Porta 2018](#)). Although radicalization is no longer considered to be “what goes on before a bomb goes off” ([Wray 2012](#)), the orthodox study of radicalization produces and applies a theoretical framework underpinned by Western nationalistic authoritarianism and an ever-expanding security industry, enabling the social framing of the *Other*. These are often challengers of Western states who are defined as deviant (often religious) fanatics. [Kundnani \(2012\)](#), for instance, skillfully exposed how a biased understanding of radicalization “has led to the construction of Muslim populations as ‘suspect communities,’ civil rights abuses and a damaging failure to understand the nature of the political conflicts governments are involved in” (p. 3).

The perpetual dissemination of terrorism and radicalization as apolitical and ahistorical phenomena is a “frequent and promiscuous” ([Jackson et al. 2011](#)) discursive force in Western society.

As scholars, we need to be clear about our conceptual definition. Terrorism, we argue, involves *instrumental violence (or threat thereof) in pursuit of political goals* (Lindgren 2009). As such, terrorism is a situated and violent form of rational and symbolic political communication disseminated by individuals, groups, and even state actors. Thus, the concepts of radicalization and its extreme endpoint—terrorism—cannot and should not be divorced from the sociocultural, historical, financial, and political dynamics of all participating actors (Jackson 2007; Jackson et al. 2011; Jackson 2016).

Thus far, studies on radicalization have focused on individual pathways into political violence, in terms of risk factors and psychological vulnerabilities (e.g., Horgan 2005, 2008; Borum 2014), socioeconomic marginalization (see, e.g., Khosrokhavar 2017), and small-group interactions (see, e.g., Sageman 2004, 2017; Della Porta 2018). Despite these extensive studies, we are still in the dark about why and how people turn to political violence. On a rudimentary level, radicalization involves people—whether as individuals, group-members, or state actors—who are socialized within their own cultural and sociopolitical milieu. As interaction between people requires communication, language, and discourse, narratives are frequently utilized to produce meaning, to construct social realities, and in establishing one's position and identity within the intrinsic social web of human interactions, experiences, and perceived realities.

Considering the above, the aim of this article is to contribute to and expand our understanding of radicalization through the lens of narrative psychology. Moreover, by applying this approach to the *Jewish-Israeli context*, we aim to illustrate the sociocultural situated contingencies associated with the process of radicalization by narrative. We argue that radicalization, in terms of turning to political violence, is distinctly a *social process* which evolves through interaction between the individual, the group, and state actors. As such, radicalization also refers to societal power struggles. By questioning dominant scholarly interpretations of radicalization and exploring the configurations of societal power-hierarchies, we aim to introduce a new perspective on the concept. More significantly, we emphasize the importance of *narratives*, as the dynamic exchange between context and mind for constructing, structuring, and maintaining realities in which a few engage in political violence. As stories of *meaning-making*, narratives are continuously configured and reconfigured in ways that define and redefine the identities of individuals, groups, and nations. We suggest that, in some cases, the ceaseless process of social interaction of these identity narratives eventuates in what we define as the *Shapeshifting Self* by coherently fusing stories of personal loss, rupture, or trauma together with the movements and national stories of sociopolitical engagement. Just as state actors or movements may favor violent resolution due to grievances (e.g., injustice, domination, unfairness, or persecution) as a means of restitution and redemptive restoration, so too can individuals emulate these violence-justifying narratives to overcome personal crises. Thus, the active engagement of individuals in political violence may be the end-product of a *transformative learning* (Wilner and Dubouloz 2010, 2011) or *coping strategy*, in which people internalize societal *master narratives* into a meaningful reconstruction of the self after negative life experiences. This realignment reconfigures the individual's identity and becomes a core component that fuses the identity narrative of the self, the group, and the nation. These narratives may be informed by social, religious, or other ideologies, but are consistently political, squarely situated in specific sociocultural contexts, and serve as the arch-story of the self.

2. Radicalization: For God's Sake?

Radicalization, as the emergence of political violence, emanates from the intricate and complex social interaction between individuals, groups, and state actors “in a series of reciprocal adjustments” (Alimi 2016; Della Porta 2018, p. 463). Borum (2014) suggested that individual mindsets construct a psychological climate in which personal dispositions and propensities frame ideas and behaviors

that may increase engagement with violent movements (p. 287)¹. Here, three factors are crucial: (1) a *need for meaning* (Hogg et al. 2010; Jasko et al. 2017); (2) *perceptions of injustice and humiliation* as a potent accelerator of violence (Pargament et al. 2005b); and (3) a *need for belonging*. These factors may actualize *cognitive openings* (Wiktorowicz 2005), in which individuals search for new ideas, outlooks, and world-views to mitigate psychological discomfort, thus motivating people to adopt extreme world-views towards ongoing social issues (Borum 2014; van den Bos 2020).

Research into social movements—in particular, *framing theory* (see, e.g., Wiktorowicz 2005)—is useful in understanding how groups attract and mobilize recruits through communicative processes of meaning-making (Della Porta 2008; Dalgaard-Nielsen 2010; Della Porta 2018)². Framing theory aims to explain how individuals attain a conceptualized understanding of themselves as part of a social collective. Here, social movements continuously and recursively characterize their contextually situated political position and religious interpretations to justify their, at times, violent actions as *frames*. These frames define the movement's political struggle by identifying themselves (the *ingroup*) as protagonists and their adversaries (the *outgroup*) as antagonists, thus specifying and justifying certain types of legitimate action (at least, from the movement's perspective). In other words, frames, for all intents and purposes, are emotionally powerful and consistent narratives that “connect the group's collective past to their present [and imagined future]” (Della Porta 2008, p. 227). Here, narrative and language could elucidate individual processes of *culturally situated radicalization*, in which personal uncertainties, crises, and existential anxieties dialogically apprehend, interact, and cope with the course of social, cultural, and political events. Therefore, situated radicalization is a part and parcel of the collective construction, production, and dissemination of meaning-making systems. This process is particularly extenuated if the individual has pre-existing social ties (family or friends) to groups in his or her immediate cultural context or socializes within a religiously tight-knit community (Sageman 2004). As religion can be viewed as such a system (see, e.g., Park 2005), we must attend the often-controversial topic of religious radicalization and terrorism.

The linkage between religion and violence has become high-profile in recent decades. For instance, Hoffman (2006), when discussing the upward trend of suicide attacks after 9/11, argued that the dominant force behind this development is “religion—specifically, groups and individuals identifying themselves as Islamic” (p. 426). Research suggesting a strong relationship between religion and violence, such as the studies of Avalos (2005), Juergensmeyer (2017), and Selengut (2008), has been heavily criticized on theoretical grounds in recent years (see, e.g., Cavanaugh 2009; Fitzgerald 2011; Gunning and Jackson 2011; Lindekilde 2016). As shown elsewhere (Jackson 2007; Kundnani 2012; Jackson 2016), religious terrorism emerged from a particular historical European conceptualization of religion, in which religion was conceived as irrational, while the practice of religion was exiled to the private spheres of individuals. The separation of church and state in the West implied an expulsion of religions from the political matters of sovereign states. Hence, radicalization viewed through the lens of religion connoted a *depoliticized process*. Moreover, the distinction between religious and secular terrorism is, by itself, suspect. As Jackson et al. (2011) succinctly pointed out, causally linking religion to violence is highly problematic, not in the least because religious beliefs are not a reliable predictor of behavior (see, e.g., Lindgren 2018; Moghaddam 2009; Bartlett and Miller 2012; Crone 2016). Moreover, the assumption that religious terrorism is essentially different from other forms of political violence is a political act of dominance which serves “as a means of domesticating religion, just as the original religious–secular dichotomy served to secure the modern state [...] and was then employed in the process of colonization to domesticate local religions elsewhere” (Gunning and Jackson 2011).

¹ Mindset is understood as a fixed mental attitude or disposition which predetermines a person's responses to and interpretations of situations (see note 1, Borum 2014, p. 287).

² In this approach, framing theory is inspired by Erwin Goffman's *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (Goffman 1974) and his observation that a *frame's* meaning (i.e., a cognitive model and an interpretative framework that enables people to perceive, identify, and interpret local and global events) has implicit cultural roots.

However, we cannot avoid the concepts of religion, as they could be adequately useful when situated in cultural and historical contexts as “a particular *discursive construct*” (p. 383, our emphasis).

Defining religion, however, is as hotly contested as the various attempts to define terrorism and radicalization (Lindgren and Sonnenschein 2020). As mentioned, concepts of religion, narrative psychology, and identity seem to be—at least, to some extent—intertwined. For instance, Lincoln (2006) outlined religion through four intrinsic definitional elements: (1) Discourse that communicates concerns that transcend humans, the temporal, and the contingent as a discourse that views itself as transcended by virtue of its claim to authority and truth; (2) A set of practices intended to construct a proper world and a proper human, as defined by the discourse; (3) A community whose identity is constructed by such discourse and practices; and (4) an institution which reproduces, regulates, and modifies these three elements while maintaining their eternal validity (pp. 5–7)³. Discourse, again, is key here: Bruner (1986) contended that humans utilize a narrative mode of cognition that essentially deals with human *intentionality* as the means for an ongoing process of meaning-making by structuring experiences and actions over space and time. Here, Bruner refers to the human propensity to interpret action in terms of intention which is “immediately and intuitively recognizable: it seems to require for its recognition no complex or sophisticated interpretive act” (p. 17)⁴. As such, *narrative cognition* is composed of stories related to actions with substantiating causal linkage between actions and events. The structure of narrative cognition is inseparably entwined with language which, in itself, functions as the underpinning of storytelling that renders actions and intentions comprehensible. As such, it is impossible to separate stories and discourses from cognitive processes. In other words, when Lincoln’s definition of religion clearly points to the direction of a discourse, Bruner clarifies that narrative as discourse is a form of a shared social cognition. In sum, narratives are key for the human endeavor of meaning-making, which shapes our perception of reality and constructs our identities.

3. The Turn to Narrative Psychology

In *A New Narrative for Psychology*, Schiff (2017) argued that the study of narrative must take center stage in the field of psychology, which he views as “in danger of being irrelevant to the understanding of persons and everyday experience” (p. 4). Schiff concurred with Sarbin (1986) astute observation of an “epistemological crisis in social psychology” (p. vii) and that “psychology [essentially] is narrative” (p. 8, emphasis added). For Schiff, narrative psychology is a unifying theory and method that provides great insight into “how persons, in context, interpret themselves, others, and the world” (p. 43). In this vein, Bruner wrote “how human beings construct their meanings needs necessarily to be at the center of the study of the human condition” (quoted in Shore 1996). For Sarbin, narrative psychology entails a focus on interpretations and meaning-making processes that take place within distinct historical, social, cultural, and temporal contexts, as a means to understand how people convey meaning and socially construct a sense of reality in “an interpretive action, articulated in space and time” (Shore 1996, p. 74, emphasis in original).

Narrative permeates human life and brings order and meaning to an ever-changing world. According to narrative psychology, people are born into a story-shaped world and experience life through the creation, modification, and exchange of stories and narratives. Therefore, narratives are after-the-fact constructions of experiences that bring order to peoples own lives and relates to the experiences of others. For Polkinghorne (1988), narrative refers to the process of story-making; that is, a *cognitive schema* that renders human experiences meaningful by making us aware of a world in which “timely human actions are linked together according to their effect on the attainment of human desires and goals” (p. 16). Here, human experience and activity are intimately related to the

³ Lincoln’s definition of religion is but one of a vast repository of definitions. We will not engage in the debate of defining religion, as such an endeavor is far beyond the scope of this article.

⁴ Bruner (1986) contrasts the narrative mode of cognition from what he defines as the mind’s paradigmatic mode that deals with the rational, logical, and empirical that forms human scientific truth and reasoning.

concepts of time and sequences of events. This process of fashioning meaningful stories by causally linking experiences, when successful, “provides a coherent and plausible account of how and why something has happened” (p. 112). Narrative, thus, is an organizing principle that brings coherence and meaning to human life and cognition. Sarbin (1986), for instance, proposed a *narratory principle* which implies that “human beings think, perceive, imagine, and make moral choices according to narrative structures” (p. 8). As temporality is the primary quality of human existence (Polkinghorne 1988), people interweave their life-events and actions spread across time into coherent stories of personal meaning. These experiences and actions are coherently interwoven into a *plot* with a beginning–middle–end structure, which indicates the interconnectedness and significance of past life events with *imagined* future experiences and action in the individual’s life. People, thus, exhibit a “predisposition to organize experience into a narrative form, into plot structures” (Bruner 1990). Bruner went further and argued that narratives deal with “human possibilities rather than settled certainties” (Bruner 1986, p. 26). In other words, reality is rendered conceivable for individuals by language that constructs the world not *as is*, but as retroactively interpreted and as imagined in terms of future life goals.

In *Acts of Meaning* (Bruner 1990; cf. Schiff 2017), Bruner reiterates the primacy of the narrative mode of thought, in which culture itself plays an essential and constitutive role. Bruner’s starting point is the observation that humans are born into a world in which symbolic systems used to construct meaning are already out there, “deeply entrenched in culture and language” (p. 11). Thus, culture provides ample resources; namely, a shared story-telling grammar for producing stories having both personal and social meaning. The centrality of culture, with its reservoir of typical narrative meanings in stories and myths, is shared by Shore (1996) concept of *epistemogenesis* as the collective and culturally regulated process of socialization and self-development by which one’s knowledge of the world, from cradle to grave, becomes consciously available through language. Hence, meaning-construction is a kind of learning that resembles the Piagetian *assimilation* process, whereby “people employ old cognitive models as resources for making sense out of novel experiences” (p. 319). However, Bruner suggested an even bolder proposition: Culture, itself, *is* narrative. Our narrative cognition is the organizing principle (cf. Sarbin 1986) of humans, and not logic or scientific empiricism⁵. Our temporal perceptions of reality and experience, along with the cognitive task of remembering them, are causally linked by narrative schemas which, in their absence, “we would be lost in a murk of chaotic experience and probably would not have survived as a species” (Bruner 1990, p. 56). Moreover, these cognitive schemas are, in turn, informed by “larger-scale narratives” (p. 59), which are schemas that contain temporally configured plots.

The turn to narrative in the study of identities integrates elements of cognitive, social, and cultural psychology into a novel and integrated theoretical and methodological framework, which is particularly useful in the contexts of conflict, identity threat, and social change.

4. Narrative Identity

One of the most significant tenets of narrative psychology is the notion of identity, as it gives credence to the centrality of narrative in forming the identity of our storied selves (McAdams 1996). As such, narrative identity is the “internalized and evolving life story, integrating the reconstructed past and imagined future to provide life with some degree of unity and purpose” (McAdams and McLean 2013). In this regard, *purpose* denotes an intentionality which adds an ethical layer to narratives, as humans are “moral agents whose actions can always be construed from [...] the values and norms of the society within which a story is evaluated” (McAdams 2008; cf. Sarbin 1986, p. 8). Moreover, framing experiences and stories as the building blocks of identity and selfhood further explicates the roles of culture, society, and social interaction (McAdams 2006;

⁵ Bruner (1986) makes the distinction between the narrative and paradigmatic cognitions, in which the latter deals with logic, linear causality, and empirical truth-seeking.

McAdams 2008; McAdams and McLean 2013) as constitutive for narrative identity. For Belzen (2010), concepts of religion are inherently bound and situated within cultures, as “there is no religion-as-such, separable from other cultural entities and manifestations” (p. 12). Therefore, narrative identity relies on the culturally available narratives (e.g., stories, myths, shared symbol-systems, and so on) used to construct individual and collective meaning and identities (p. 169). The *evolving* nature of narrative identity also indicates a progressive process (Singer 2004), as individuals gradually develop cognitive abilities to engage in narrating stories about the self through social interaction within cultures. Nonetheless, groups and nations are also known to develop narratives of identity and conflict.

Liebman and Don-Yehiya (1983), for instance, argued that—especially after the Israeli Six-Days War of 1969—the “Zionist civil religion” utilized powerful narratives and symbols drawn from Jewish culture that fused tradition, the Jewish people, and the political legitimacy of Jewish settlements into a narrative that “provide[ed] *content and meaning* to its Jewish identity” (p. 62, our emphasis). In this vein, Hammack (2008) viewed the process of identity development to be the link between self and society. Concurrently, Hammack offered an integrative framework that understands identity in terms of *content, structure, and process*. As such, identity is defined 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” (p. 230). The implication here is that the *content of identity* is inherently political and ideological and, thus, it is through the *narrative structure* that this ideological content acquires coherency and provides meaning by fusing personal and collective historical and cultural narratives. Language, memory, and ongoing social interactions are, therefore, representative of the process of identity construction. Moreover, Hammack (2011) viewed the concept of narrative as essential for the study of identity and conflict. Belligerent antagonists (individual or group) make sense and meaning of conflict experiences by telling coherent and culturally credible stories which reflect the master narratives of groups one feels a sense of belonging to (e.g., nations, religious groups, and so on). In this regard, religious beliefs have a significant role in shaping master narratives, as they are profoundly ingrained in cultures. As such, religious master narratives provide a template for social structure and cultural life, facilitate communication by providing scripts of action in diverse situations, and provide coherent ideological content. Hence, Hammack suggested that narrative identities are constructed through an active and personal *narrative engagement* with dominant ideological stories that provide attitudinal and evaluative perspectives. Similarly, van Dijk (2006) viewed ideologies as a form of *belief systems* which are socially and cognitively shared within groups and which are able to influence social representations and reproduce them through the social exchange of discourses. As such, they are necessary resources of “ingroup cooperation, coordination, and cohesion, as well as for the management of intergroup relations, competition, conflict, or struggle” (pp. 729–30; cf. Tajfel 1974). How these personal and culturally situated group narratives adapt to an ongoing conflict depends on societal power configurations: “it is impossible to study phenomena such as ‘culture,’ ‘identity,’ and ‘intergroup contact’ without reference to the positioning of individuals within a broader matrix of power and domination” (p. 341). These power configurations, upon which master narratives (or *larger-scale narratives*, in Bruner’s words) as dominant ideological/political stories of conflictual meaning-making, are often oblivious to the people who reproduce them in social interaction but, nonetheless, guide action and generate conflict between competing master narratives in an ongoing process.

In sum, the one common denominator for these concepts of identity, culture, narrative, and even radicalization is that they all are *verbs rather than nouns*; that is, they all denote active human processes of development over time. As identity narratives are, to some extent, political and ideological, in times of social struggle (e.g., competition, conflict, or domination–resistance), people, groups, and nations engage in dynamic, contextualized, and subjective ideological discourses which, over time, reconstruct the identity of groups and nations, as well as individuals, who internalize these master narratives into their selves. Therefore, narrative identity, as a life-story, facilitates self-continuity and identity coherence. As such, it is “critically implicated in psychological growth, development, coping and

well-being” (Vassilieva 2016). It is through human agency, discourse, and social interaction that identity evolves to resist or reproduce the social order, which can collectively transform the situated cultural landscape and hegemonic ideological master narratives of groups and nations.

5. Narrative Trouble, Religion as a Meaning System, and Transformation of Meaning

The quintessential question of radicalization research is how previously non-violent individuals come to engage in political violence in a manner that ultimately involves legitimizing and participating in terrorist acts. These dramatic acts of violence represent a narrative departure from everyday experience in the individual’s life-story. Trouble, argues Bruner (2004), is what drives the drama of life-stories; that is, culture provides individuals with narrative resources for dealing with crises and negative life-experiences. In fact, “it is the play between the ordinary and the extraordinary that is the stuff of stories we choose and need to tell” (Mattingly et al. 2008). Stories that construct individual narrative identities often concern an agent performing an action to achieve goal(s). The “troubled” plot and its resolution must be evaluated by the protagonist’s actions, in order to overcome, cope with, and integrate the crisis and its consequences in the individual’s narrative identity. It is through narrative adaptation and learning that human beings make narrative sense of negative events in their lives to produce positive insights and lessons learned, as “good stories need to have satisfactory endings [as] positive resolution of negative events is associated with higher levels of happiness and well-being” (McAdams and McLean 2013; cf. Gergen’s concept of valued endpoint, Gergen 2005). However, what makes a story good and a crisis resolution satisfactory?

McAdams (2006) argued that the concept of redemption can be found in “all of the world’s major religions and many cultural traditions” (p. 7); transforming a negative experience into a positive outcome requires redemption as the “deliverance from suffering to a better world” (ibid.). Although McAdams’ model of the redeemed self exclusively departs from the American sociocultural context, it is clear that he refers to an agent sensitive to human suffering who endeavors to overcome negative life experiences, as they lead to positive outcomes or teach valuable lessons in the pursuit of happiness and well-being. This narrative is profoundly shaped by the fact that the U.S. “is one of the most religious industrialized societies in the world” (p. 12). Indeed, research suggests that religion as a meaning system (henceforward, RMS) relates strongly and beneficially to physical and psychological well-being in everyday life and, particularly, in the context of coping with adversity (e.g., Pargament et al. 2005a; Park 2005). The question, then, is how does RMS contribute to psychological and physical wellness?

Mikulincer and Florian (1996) offered a meaning-making coping model applicable to individuals who are struck with major trauma and loss, which involves the cognitive processes of meaning-making as “only through cognitive adaptation can individuals transform the meaning of the stressful experience” (Park 2005). The model differentiates between systems of global meaning, including global beliefs and global goals, and the appraised meaning of particular life-events, which includes an initial and causal attribution that describes why such events took place (e.g., *Deus vult* or chance) and what can be done to overcome the event, by discerning discrepancies between one’s global system of meaning and the event itself⁶. As such, the model suggests the discrepancy between global and appraised meaning “is a highly uncomfortable state, involving a sense of loss of control, predictability, or comprehensibility of the world” (p. 710). Recovering from this state is achieved by recasting one’s global belief and goals, reappraising the meaning of the event, or both. Doing so facilitates the (re-)integration of reappraised meaning into one’s system of global meaning. Here, and much like McAdams’ view of redemption as the moderation of suffering, RMS is crucial in dealing with trauma and loss. Thus, it is a cognitive approach which conceptualizes religion as a core cognitive schema (McIntosh 1995) that constructs meaning of the self through interaction with the world. However, the activation of religion as a core

⁶ The concept of *Deus vult* (lat.), or God’s will, is a Catholic motto (i.e., a religious construction) closely associated with the First Crusade of 1096–1099 (i.e., a conflictual political consequence).

schema differs drastically between individuals. While, for some individuals, religious affiliation and identification may be marginal at best (e.g., “non-believers”), for other individuals, RMS may be highly salient in their narrative identity (e.g., “true believers”) and are likely “to be activated often—perhaps chronically—and thus will have more influence on his or her life [than for others]” (p. 13). Moreover, the change of global beliefs and goals as coping with traumatic events may entail “the development of new models for the world, the self, or their interaction” (Park 2005, p. 714) and, in cases of extreme distress, coping can induce profound religious conversion and transformation of goals, emotions, attitude, behaviors, and in “self-defining personality functions such as identity and life meaning” (Paloutzian et al. 1999; cf. Sonnenschein 2017). Moreover, Gopin (2000) acknowledged that, in the Jewish-Israeli context, the relationship between personal and collective trauma, the mythical religious story, and practice is “critical to understanding the compelling nature of religious violence [and the] ways to heal those injuries and cartel that violence” (p. 9). Levi and Rothberg (2010) observed that collective memory and trauma are closely associated in ways that constitute “a phenomenon that links collective, historical experiences—such as war and genocide—with the psychic suffering of individuals” (p. 15). In this vein, Lieberman (2015) understood shared traumatic experiences as “selective and meaning-laden [. . .] narratives” (p. 176). Thus, religious meaning-making is not a one-way street, “but is part of a reciprocal and ongoing process between individuals and the societies in which they live” (Park 2005, p. 723), at times with dire consequences.

The narrative process of coping and identity adaptation, in which individuals reconfigure their self and behavior through novel cognitive construction, is necessary for understanding the process of radicalization. In other words, engagement in political violence entails a process of transforming one’s *meaning perspective*. Wilner and Dubouloz (2010, 2011) suggested that Transformative Learning Theory (TLT), an educational perspective of adult learning, may provide insight into the “internal processes and personal transformations associated with radicalization” (2010, p. 34). Notably, TLT has been applied to medical rehabilitation, as it highlights individual reconstruction of personal meaning when coping with sickness, injuries, or health crises. Processes of transformative learning involve three phases: a *trigger phase*, a *phase of individual change* (in which people reconstruct their meaning perspective and narrative identity), and an *outcome phase*, in which the newly reconstructed identity is reflected in new patterns of behavior. The authors also identified three precursors of radicalization: *socio-political alienation*, such as a lack of integration in the broader community which generates experiences of discrimination, injustice, and humiliation; *religiosity and globalization/secularism*, in which individuals adhering to traditional socio-religious beliefs in a non-religious environment experience insecurity and identity confusion; and *reactions to foreign policy*, in which perceived grievances (e.g., a sense of authoritarian persecution, the suffering of fellow adherents of perceived ingroup, or Western military actions) lead to anger, frustration, and a desire for vengeance. It is striking how the processes of transformative learning align satisfactorily with the meaning-making coping model and Borum (2014) argument that a need for meaning, perceptions of injustice, and a need for belonging construct a psychological mindset which increases engagement with violent movements.

Surely by now, the thrust of our argument is discernable: The process of coping (religious or otherwise), as well as transformative learning and Borum’s psychological mindset, are *narrative processes* and a product of our *narrative cognition*. Moreover, these processes—much like the process of radicalization—are saturated with ideological constructions, shifts in people’s narrative identity, and occur during social interactions within situated sociocultural contexts. Although “religious” terrorism must be understood as a struggle in pursuit of *political goals*, RMS can instigate a process of *identity reconstruction inherent to radicalization*. More importantly, if we acknowledge that: (1) Myths are ideologically constructed *narratives* (Lincoln 1999); (2) that religion is a *discursive* meaning-making system; and (3) that RMS is deeply rooted within cultures (Belzen 2010) and disseminated socially through language and social interaction, then we must recognize that radicalization is a socioculturally situated narrative process of turning to political violence.

6. Radicalization by Narrative: The Shapeshifting Self

A synthesis of the models, theories, and proposed processes discussed in this article calls attention to a three-pronged process of change, in which identities and selves shapeshift by adapting to life-changing events through narrative engagement with societal discourses, stories, and ideologies. In essence, they represent *the* link between individuals and their situated cultural and sociopolitical context. We use the term *three-pronged process of radicalization by narrative* without referring to distinct stages or phases, as these personal narratives are continuously reinterpreted and reconstructed throughout life. Not all identity reconstructions may be completed (or even instigated) by some adverse experiences, but they will nonetheless be a part of one's *accumulative narrative identity*, which may become highly salient through other life crises. As such, these identities denote ongoing identity fluctuations or shifts in ways that are dependent on the master narrative and available stories (religious or otherwise) inherent to the individual's cultural context. Thus, to better contextualize our argument, we apply our proposed model within the Jewish-Israeli context.

According to Hammack (2011), the Jewish-Israeli master narrative of identity includes four major themes: (1) a sense of *persecution* and *victimization* throughout history, culminated in a collective suffering during the traumatic Holocaust; (2) *existential insecurity*, fueled by a "siege mentality" which manifested itself in a powerful military that reconstructed Jewish identities from victims to fighters; (3) a sense of *moral exceptionalism* of the Chosen People of God, who came to fruition by Zionism's achievements of becoming "a nation among the nations"; and (4) *delegitimization* of the Palestinian identity, which facilitates ongoing conflicts and violence (pp. 116–29). Bound together, these represent the arch-story of the nation in which a major trauma (the Holocaust) was overcome by the establishment of the Jewish state, whose citizens are now exceptionally righteous fighters (protagonists) struggling against the "Oriental" Palestinians (antagonists), due to the existential threat they pose to the nation. Precursors for this master narrative are the centuries of European pogroms and antisemitism that had struck fear, humiliation, and a sense of injustice in Jewish diaspora communities around the world. While the Holocaust was the impetus, or trigger, for national coping and adaptation processes, the sense of Israel's remarkable achievements and high moral standard has reinforced an ingroup cohesion which simultaneously promotes a highly negative outgroup categorization of "aggressive" Palestinians, who are the current iteration of evildoers saturating Jewish existence with perpetual insecurity. Thus, the Jewish-Israeli arch-story (or "Zionist civil religion") is a collective redemption master narrative which incorporates biblical stories (e.g., the Chosen People returning to Zion) to provide *content* and *meaning* to contemporary Jewish-Israeli identities.

Master narratives with a significant victimization component may elucidate the individual's motivation to engage in political activism and, ultimately, violence. As all young Jewish adults are, by law, expected to conscript to the IDF, the need for security is obtained by brute military force. These youth, in other words, internalize the legitimacy of violent actions in the face of (real or imagined) existential threats. The Oslo Accords of 1993–1995 granted Palestinians autonomy in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, which meant the evacuation of Jewish settlements from the autonomy. Moreover, in 2005, Israel unilaterally withdrew from Gaza by dismantling Jewish settlements established by the *religious-Zionist settlement movement*⁷. This political move was "a major jolt to religious Zionism both in theory and in practice" (Nissim 2010), which eventuated in the formation of young adult sub-groups living in the occupied territory who orchestrated violent action against Palestinians and the IDF (see, e.g., Friedman 2015). Here, the precursors of radicalization are laid bare: The sense of Jewish exceptionalism was complemented by a renewed sense of triumphalism, as the Six-Days War

⁷ Zionism can be understood as a sociopolitical Jewish national revival movement that emerged in the late 19th century, in the wake of antisemitism and the secular Jewish Enlightenment movement (*Haskalah*). Religious-Zionism incorporates the tenets of Jewish law (*Halacha*) with the Zionist ideology. This blend of secular and religious ideologies advocates the sanctity of *Eretz Yisrael*, the People of Israel, and the Torah (Pentateuch). For further reading, see Schwartz (2009). Religious-Zionism history and ideology. Boston, Academic Studies Press.

resulted in the occupation of what was regarded as “Judaism’s heartland”; that is, Judea, Samaria (West Bank), and Jerusalem, the religious heart of the nation. Here, the biblical narrative of Joshua’s conquest of Canaan, promised to Jewish people by God, reaches its ultimate fruition. However, and in light of the political concessions to Palestinians by the Israeli secular government, religious frustration and alienation within the sociopolitical context became salient. Increasing numbers of individuals and religious activist groups in Israel unilaterally rejected yielding lands to Palestinians, along with the religiosity of groups and individuals who had lost their homes due to Israeli policy, induced feelings of anxiety, fear, anger, and uncertainty.

As such, these precursors are not sufficient to propel individuals into political violence, but shaped the *context of living*; that is, the conditions in the immediate environment. At the individual level, this contextual change and emotions of injustice and humiliation are highly psychologically uncomfortable and contribute to a sense of self-uncertainty. As such, they may create *cognitive openings* (Wiktorowicz 2005) or *appraised meaning* reconstructions (Mikulincer and Florian 1996), in which people reassess their past experiences (or *global beliefs* as the cognitive structures of reality) and future expectations (or *global goals* as cognitive desired outcomes). Just as serious illness changes an individual’s context of living which may trigger the process of coping and adaptation, so can sociopolitical traumas which conflict with an individual’s perception of self and society trigger a narrative process of radicalization as adaptation. The forced relocation of settlers (or any other personal story of trauma), for instance, can serve as a vital story of dramatic personal and societal rupture that threatens to annihilate the individual’s existing *meaning perspective* (Wilner and Dubouloz 2010, 2011). To alleviate this stressful self-uncertainty and confusion, individuals are compelled to explore new cognitive constructions of the self, seeking to maintain a coherent and internally meaningful story of the self. This exploration may instigate a process of identity transformation inherent to the process of radicalization, as individuals experience an estrangement from the society they believe they are a part of.

Here, religious identity can play a crucial role. As the individual engages in identity deconstruction and reconstruction, the biblical story of the Jewish people overcoming great adversities to return to the promised land (i.e., the Babylonian captivity, the return to Judea, and the reconstruction of the Second Temple) may spur individuals to reinterpret Israeli politics in religious terms, embrace the righteousness of aggression as a safeguard for Jewish security, and reassess their place in their immediate community. The *secular* Jewish-Israeli master narrative (by itself, saturated with similar biblical narratives) has been replaced with a religious-Zionist counterpart, as it failed to secure ancestral lands to Jewish control. When internalized, it provides new unequivocal religious (albeit inherently ideological and political) meaning-perspectives and narratives, which may lead to a re-evaluation of the individual’s meaning-making system. The reinterpreted reality is cognitively constructed in a manner that propels individuals toward a tipping point, an epiphany clarifying that the perception of reality is no longer attainable and a new one must be established in order to mitigate discomforting self-uncertainty. It is a gradual, perhaps prolonged process of identity realignment which occurs through social interaction by engagement in societal discourses and participation in social practices; that is, “ideology cognized” (Hammack 2011). Past the tipping point, the newly internalized reality encourages strong identification with the (real or imagined) victimized religious ingroup, eventuating in a change of behavior. Stories of antisemitism around the world, as well as Palestinian terror attacks, compel individuals to internalize Jewish predicaments and suffering past and present into a personal one. This reinforces the newly acquired narrative identity through active socialization with ingroup religious movements. This reappraised meaning-making system inevitably results both in the self shifting its shape and the reconstruction of the individual’s value and belief systems; no longer “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Leviticus, 19:18, NKJ), but “you shall conquer them and utterly destroy them [. . .] nor show mercy to them” (Deuteronomy, 7:2, NKJ). In the Israeli context, individuals may turn to religious-Zionist movements or yeshivas, often secluded from the wider society, where they can engage in narrative exchange and interpretation of stories, in order to cement a meaningful rendition

of their lives and identities. This identity transformation process provides narrative motivators which facilitate a coping mechanism for the reconstructing of a meaningful narrative, in light of a key negative life-changing rupture in the individual's life story.

Violent behavior is, then, the ultimate consequence of the reconstructed meaning and value systems, in which a holy war for *Eretz Yisrael* is not just legitimate but pre-determined, as symbolized by the nearly successful attempt in 1984 to destroy the Muslim mosque on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem: "The radicalization of modern Jewish holy war ideology [...] has not ceased. It continues to exert a great influence within the [religious-Zionist] community" (Firestone 2012). The redemptive self (McAdams 2006) that shifts its shape to overcome suffering may lead to a violent outcome in pursuit of meaning, sense of belonging, and cognitive well-being. God moves in mysterious ways, indeed.

7. Conclusions

In this article, we argue that the individual's process of radicalization is inherently linked with the ongoing social, cultural, and ideological reconstruction of the story of the self. The process of radicalization is a process of meaning-making, adaptation, and coping that is induced by substantial life-changing events, compelling individuals to shift the contours of their narrative identity in order to make sense of everyday life. The content of an individual's narrative identities is essentially ideopolitical. Engagement in violent behavior is the outcome of coping with narrative identity shapeshifting, in which violence is perceived as legitimate and even necessary for the perpetrator's psychological well-being. In this regard, and although it may seem counter-intuitive, we believe that even suicide-bombings could be an outcome of the process of the Shapeshifting Self coping with trauma. This is because the cognitive and emotional process of the Shapeshifting Self motivates, prepares, and legitimizes violent engagement, regardless whether the violence itself leads to the individual's own demise. The narrative process of coping and identity adaptation, in which individuals reconfigure their self and behavior through novel cognitive constructions, alleviates the psychological discomfort that trauma causes and provides a sense of meaningful existence to both the individual's life and death. Thus, the Shapeshifting Self does not exclusively relate to the process of radicalization, but is an inherent feature of our narrative mode of cognition. The arch-story of the individual shifts its shape particularly by specific personal experiences that induce existential fear and propel people to adapt, which may be linked to the human survival instinct.

The Shapeshifting Self differs from current Western studies on the topic, as it deals with the individual psycho-cognitive processes associated with radicalization and not on terrorist profiling, structural characteristics, or on a "bunch of guys" (Sageman 2008). Finally, we identify a need for further research that empirically studies the Shapeshifting Self in diverse social and cultural contexts where conflict is involved, in order to evaluate the suggested pathways into political violence.

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