

# **Integrating context into the psychological study of conflict: The role of collective narratives**

**Rezarta Bilali**  
**New York University**

# Social Psychology's Contribution to the Psychological Study of Peace

## A Review

Johanna K. Vollhardt and Rezarta Bilali  
University of Massachusetts, Amherst, MA, USA

...the field of psychological theory  
and practice aimed at the prevention  
and mitigation of direct and  
structural violence between  
members of different sociopolitical  
groups

- Value-explicit
- Contextual
- Multiple levels of analysis
- Practically oriented

# Collective Narratives

- Conceptual cultural tool to bridge the gap between individual psychological processes and the geopolitical context
  - Narrative templates
  - Historical narratives
  - Global narratives
  - Ideological narratives
  - Clashing conflict narratives
  - Deep stories and counter-stories

- 1) Implications of not considering context and narratives**
- 2) How historical narratives can perpetuate conflict and violence, and the challenge of transforming narratives?**

# 1. Implications of not considering context and collective narratives



Defining the nature of the conflict



“Psychologizing” collective processes and phenomena



Construal vs. Objective Reality



Ethical Dilemmas

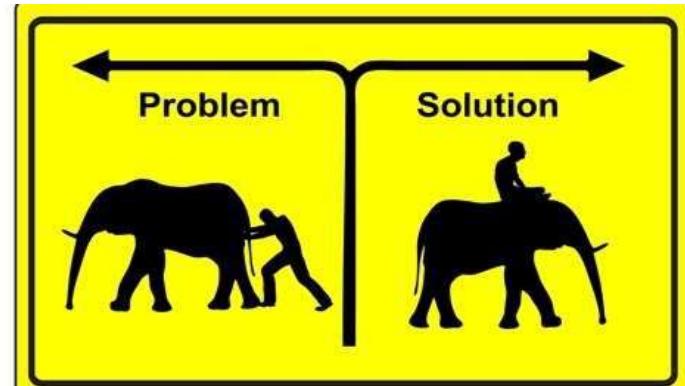
# **Conflict narratives define the nature of the conflict**

‘There is the conflict itself, and there is the meta-conflict – the conflict about the nature of the conflict’

Horowitz (1991)

# Defining the nature of the conflict

- Who decides what the problem is?
- How is the problem formulated?
- How does the definition of the problem guide its solution?



# Defining the conflict: The Turkish-Kurdish conflict

Conflict narratives

Minority Rights Frame

Terrorism Frame

Ethnic Tensions Frame

# Defining the conflict: The Turkish-Kurdish conflict

Conflict narrative	Primary Parties (Ingroup vs. Outgroup)
Minority Rights Frame	Turkish state vs. Kurds in Southeast Turkey
Terrorism Frame	Turkish state & all people in Turkey vs. insurgent group (PKK)
Ethnic Tensions Frame	Ethnic Turks vs. Ethnic Kurds

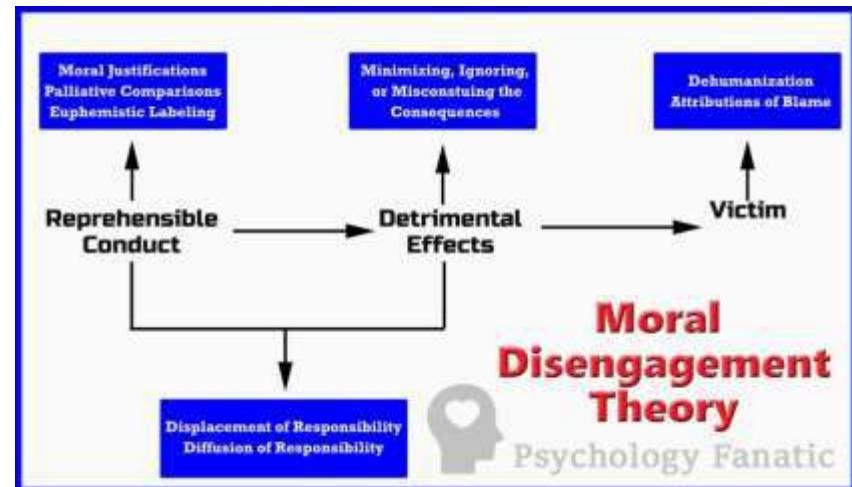
# Defining the conflict: The Turkish-Kurdish conflict

Conflict narrative	Primary Parties (Ingroup vs. Outgroup)	Outcomes
Minority Rights Frame	Turkish state vs. Kurds in Southeast Turkey	Social change; increase status & provide rights to minority group
Terrorism Frame	Turkish state vs. insurgent group (PKK)	Reduce violent extremism; reduce recruitment; de-radicalization
Ethnic Tensions Frame	Ethnic Turks vs. Ethnic Kurds	Reduce negative intergroup attitudes

# **“Psychologizing” collective processes**

# Example: Moral disengagement

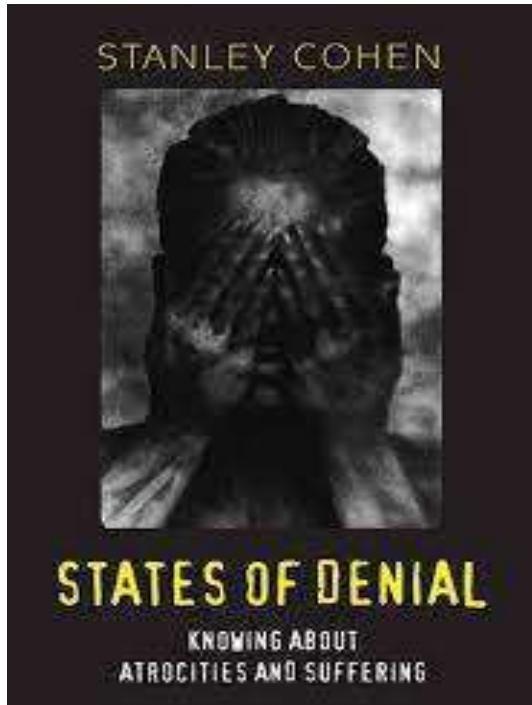
- Moral justification
- Denial, displacement, diffusion of responsibility
- Disregard, minimize negative consequences
- Attribution of blame to the victim or circumstances



(Bandura, 1999)

*Moral Disengagement Theory Diagram. (Bandura, 1996)*

# Denial of genocidal violence



## Denial of the genocide of Armenians:

- blaming Armenians for treason or for attacking Turkish-Muslim populations
- claiming that violent acts were in self-defense
- Contextualization; placing responsibility to external factors and third parties
- claiming benevolent motivations behind the deportations

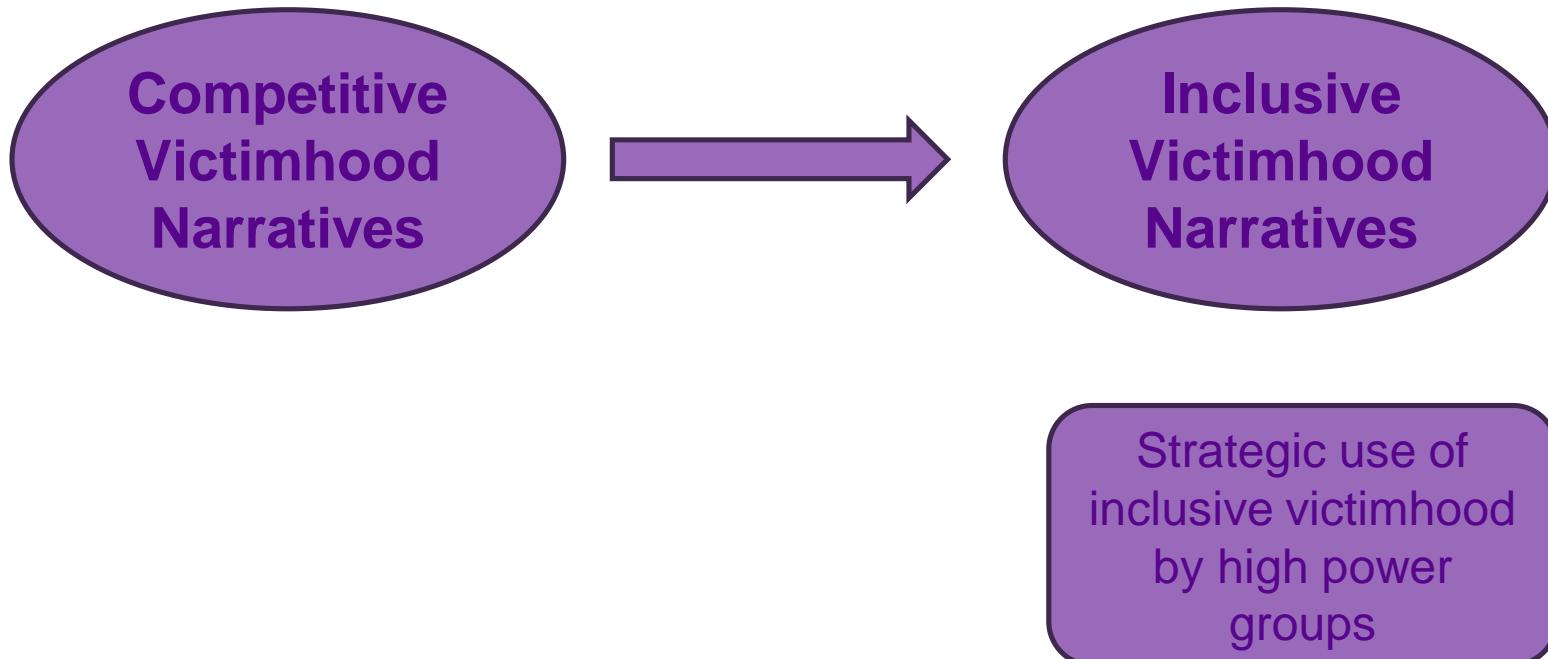
# **Narrative/construal vs. Objective Reality**

# Narrative vs. Objective Reality

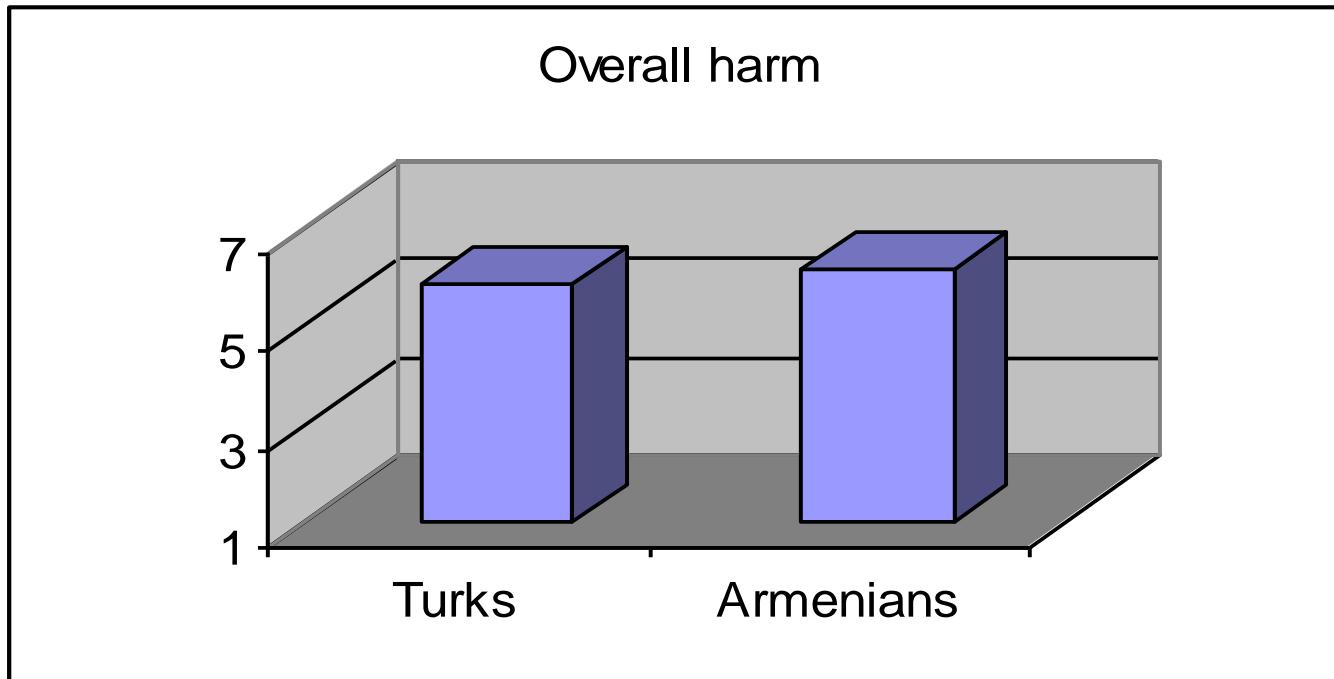
- Construals gain meaning in the context of objective reality
- **Denial of Mass Violence and Genocide**



A woman at the commemoration of the 27th anniversary of the Srebrenica genocide. Photo: EPA-EFE/JASMIN BRUTUS.



# Turkish participants perceptions of severity of harm experienced by Turks and Armenians



# Narrative vs. Objective Reality

- Exclusive focus on narrative in contexts of power asymmetries



# REAL versus PERCEIVED THREAT



# Ethical challenges

## Addressing violent extremism in the Sahel



- Mistrust and low collaboration with security forces
  - Mistrust of security forces
  - Climate of fear of retribution by the violent extremist groups
  - Prejudices and abuses of the population by security forces

## 2) Conflict Narratives

**How historical narratives can perpetuate conflict and violence, and the challenge of transforming narratives?**

# Conceptualizing Historical Conflict Narratives

- Multiple historical narratives: Master narratives (Swartz, 1992) vs. counter-narratives (Bamberg, 2004)
- Level of abstraction: specific narratives vs. narrative schemes/templates (e.g., historical trajectory) (László, Ehmannn, & Ihre, 2002; Wertsch, 2008)
- Located at the intersection of individual and collective levels; Individuals engage with and endorse different historical narratives at different degrees

# Conflict narratives as barriers to peace

- Selective, biased, distorted
- Justify the position of the group in conflict
- Portray the group as the victim, delegitimize the opponent
- Dominated by fear, hatred, and anger
- Fuel perpetuation of conflict and violence

# Clashing Narratives of Collective Violence

Questions	Being a target of violence	Perpetrating violence
<b>Nature of violence. Who is the victim?</b>	<b>One-sided</b>	<b>Two-sided; everyone suffered; inclusive victim claims</b>
<b>Who perpetrated harm, who is responsible?</b>	<b>Perpetrator</b>	<b>Circumstances; others</b>
<b>Why did the perpetrators commit this harm?</b>	<b>Intentional</b>	<b>Non-intentional or self-defense</b>
<b>How much harm was inflicted?</b>	<b>High harm</b>	<b>Low harm</b>
<b>How central are the events to the present?</b>	<b>Recent. Ongoing. Link between past and present</b>	<b>Distant; no links between past and present</b>

# What Drives Conflict Narratives?



**POSITIVE  
IDENTITY**

# Transforming conflict narratives?

# Strategies to Address Conflict Narratives

- Introducing factual information
- Perspective taking of the outgroup narrative
- Lay theory interventions
- Affirmation strategies
- Raising awareness and understanding
- Historical thinking and multiperspectivity
- Create a common narrative
- Healing from trauma

# Fictional Narratives to Address Conflict and Violence



- ❑ Challenge the dominant narratives of good versus evil (Bilali & Staub, 2016)
- ❑ Change norms about desirable behavior (e.g. Paluck, 2009; Paluck & Green, 2009)
- ❑ Perspective-taking and empathy (e.g., Batson et al., 1997)
- ❑ Reduce psychological defensiveness (e.g., Bilali & Vollhardt, 2013)



# Giving voice to diverse stories

- Master narratives privilege stories emphasizing collective victimhood and “us vs. them” boundaries
- They portray the ingroup as homogenous, downplaying internal divisions
- Silence the complex multifaceted experiences of groups in conflict
  - Stories of intergroup solidarity
  - Stories of ingroup betrayal
  - Stories of ingroup harmdoing
  - Stories of outgroup helping

# Diverse conflict knowledge

- Often silenced; becomes taboo; some stories are unshareable or unspeakable – climate of silence
- Rationale: to enhance group unity
- **What is the impact?**
- In Sri Lanka and OPT, in Pluralistic Memories project, the team collected oral histories from witnesses of violence, then created short vignettes representative of the themes in those stories

# Representative surveys in Sri Lanka and West Bank

## Vignette themes

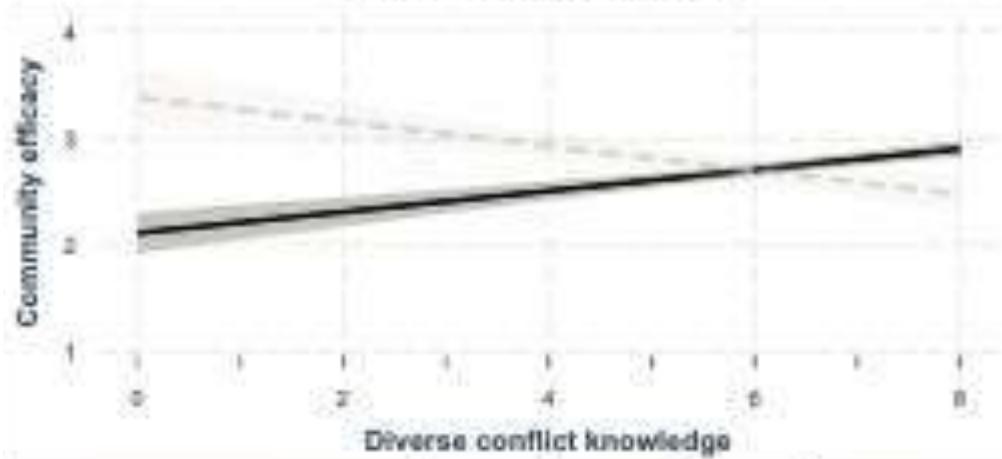
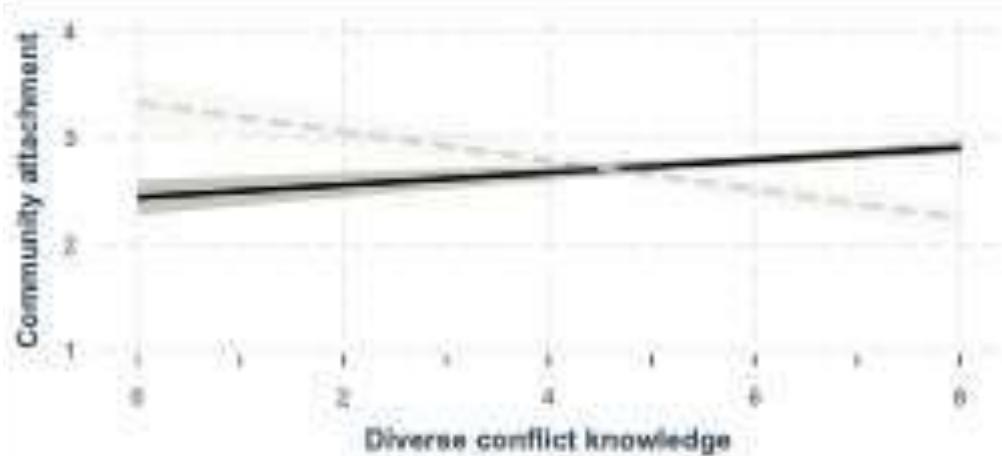
- Trapped by violence
- Violence disrupts normal life
- Daring to resist
- Sticking together to survive
- Betrayal by friends
- Support across frontlines
- “Not in my name”
- Betrayal by leaders

## Knowledge:

-Did you witness such an event?  
Have you heard of it from an acquaintance? From media?

## Shareability (climate of silence):

-How likely is it that if you talk about this event with a neighbor, they would express support or empathy?



Perceived shareability

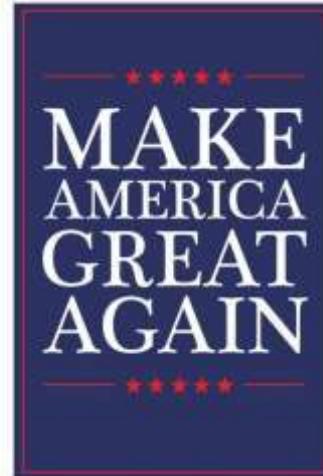
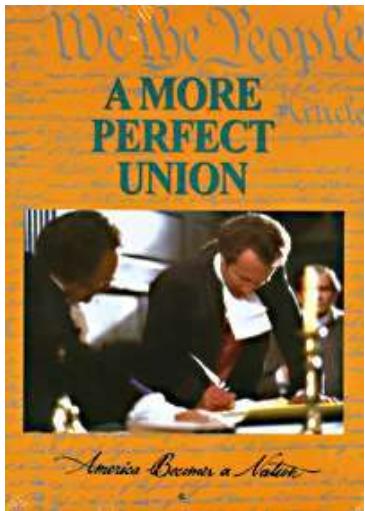
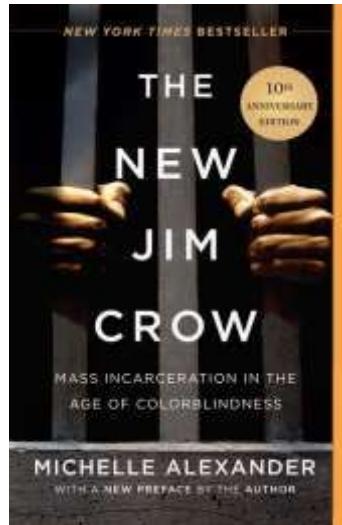
Maximum

Minimum

(Penic, Elceroth, & Bilali, 2025)

# **Historical collective narratives for liberation**

# History Wars in the U.S.



# **Narratives of Social Movements and Social Change**



“

# Thank you!!