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What is This?
The complex construction of psychological identities in Palestine: Integrating narratives and life experiences

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Abstract
Palestinian youth is challenged by multiple discourses in the process of constitution of its identity. This discursive multiplicity, characteristic of contemporary global societies, is confronted with personal life experiences, giving meaning to primarily nebulous affective impacts in the social environment. Starting from a semiotic–cultural perspective in cultural psychology one can establish a link between the notion of master narrative used by Hammack (2010) and the notion of myth—using the conception of ideology as a bridge that articulates both. Antinomies in the self-biographic narratives presented and discussed by Hammack (2010) support the master narrative of Palestinian identity and enter into interactions with other psychological identities of the interviewed youngsters, such as their religious tradition and secular education. Symbolic elements that are brought to the identity-making process by the diverse narratives are to be seen as resources for the comprehension of life experiences, demanding an integrative effort in the face of what is known and unknown in relation to alterity.

Keywords
dialogism, idiographic approach, Palestinian identity, narrative, Semiotic–cultural constructivism

Phillip Hammack (2010) presented an accurate investigation of self-biographic narratives of three young Palestinians, focusing on the convergences and
divergences of these narratives through which he detected the ‘master’ narrative of Palestinian identity. Based on a cultural and idiographic psychological approach, in which personal discourses take part in power relationships with ideological content, Hammack (2010) moves towards explicating a theory of identity and specifies its methodological practice. His approach brings the idiographic cultural effort for contextualizing lives into focus and highlights the positions of social actors within a social matrix, revealing the variety of personal integration of institutional/empowered discourses.

My aim in this paper is to comment on the analysis carried out by Hammack (2010) in light of semiotic–cultural constructivism in psychology. It is being considered the person’s positioning from the perspective of his or her lived experience (Guimarães, in press), which allows views about other people and objects in the world to be used in identity-making, while ruling out alternative views.

**Semiotic constructivism in cultural psychology**

Semiotic–cultural constructivism in psychology is positioned as a theoretical–methodological perspective concerned particularly with the investigation of individual development (Simão, 2003, 2005, 2008). The relational processes involving I–other differences and the efforts addressed by active subjects in their lived meaning-making processes are considered central to the understanding of symbolic transformations in the cultural field. This perspective is being developed around Jaan Valsiner and Ernst Boesch’s notion of culture, and dialogism, strongly elaborated by Ragnar Rommetveit and Ivana Marková. If, on the one hand, the precursors of these psychologists are Lev Vygotsky, Mikhail Bakhtin, George Herbert Mead, Pierre Janet, and Jean Piaget, on the other hand, the notion of alterity, from the philosopher Emmanuel Lévinas and the hermeneutics of Hans-George Gadamer, is an important conception which stands out from the philosophical background of the field.

After this brief presentation of the conceptual references of my perspective in cultural psychology, I will take the risk of translating some of the fruitful ideas developed by Hammack into this framework, in order to unfold implications for theory and methodological practice in cultural psychology.

**Mythical properties of the palestinian master narrative: What is ideology?**

Hammack (2010) presented a master narrative of Palestinian identity that he systematized from ethnographic studies, historical documents, and the analysis of political speeches, as the ‘narrative that dominates the discourse in Palestinian society’ (p. 507). Master narratives are considered to provide ‘the discursive resources with which participants in a culture construct their own individual life
stories ...[allowing individuals to] make meaning of their social surround and its symbolic systems’ (p. 508). These narratives are also perceived as being instrumentally linked to social power structures (such as political parties or religion) in order to ideologically guide people’s actions and addressing certain interests.

The term ideology is controversial and demands further elaboration. Chauì (1980) explains that the notion of ideology has assumed different meanings throughout history. It first appeared in France, in a work by DeStutt de Tracy (Eléments d’Idéologie), expressed as a belief in the scientific progress destined to overcome the religious and metaphysical dogmatism in education. Nevertheless, the ideologists were soon referred to by Napoleon as thinkers who had inverted the relation between the ideal and the real, notably because they disapproved of their government. The notion of ideology was reused by Auguste Comte with a meaning that was close to the original: ‘as systematic organization of all scientific knowledge, from the formation of general ideas in math, to less general ones in sociology, and most particularly in morality’ (Chauì, 1980, p. 26). These ideas were the basis of a technocratic conception of social organization, subordinating social practices to the scientific knowledge of reality.

The notion of ideology was also used by Durkheim in a different sense. In his proposal of sociology as science, ideology is a knowledge that is constructed without respect to the apparent scientific separation of subject and object. Finally, the Marxist notion of ideology conceives of it as a set of logical, systematic, and coherent representations (ideas and values) accepted by the members of a society; norms and rules are socially convened, and ideology is concerned with and justifies social differences (political and cultural). It is produced by an ascending social class in order to allow it to appear as representative of the collective (Chauí, 1980).

Contemporarily, the cultural psychologist Ernst Boesch makes reference to the notion of ideology while discussing his psychological notion of myths and fantasms. For him, ideology refers to the crystallized discourses and social practices that a person faces throughout life in his/her cultural field:

It is impressive to think about the multiplicity of ideologies which a young person may have to face in his or her development. The ones of the home, the school and the church [...] frequently will be confronted with the ones of a street gang, a soccer or a tennis club. The ‘New Left’ ideology at the university competes with the ideologies of professors or sectarians gurus, and if one happens to be conscripted into the army, again other ideologies have to be faced. All these ideologies correspond to underlying myths, i.e. systems of belief, justification and explanation shared in specific groups, and each again expresses itself not in an entity, but in mythemes and actemes. [...] the individual is faced with the task of structuring, selecting and choosing, i.e. creating his or her own synthesis between myths and fantasms. Let us not overlook, however, that this is a continuous process of ‘filtering’, assimilation and, thereby, transformation: myths, once blended with fantasms, obviously participate in the reception of newly perceived mythemes. (Boesch, 1991, p. 278)
In a certain sense we are always ideologically implied, even when we are not fully aware of it. In a plural society where different social groups fight for hegemony in different levels or fields of action, we are supposed to find a variety of ideological discourses. Through the notion of ideology we can trace a link between the concept of master narrative, used by Hammack, and the notion of myth, used by Boesch, also ascribing the place of mythological systems in the psychological, idiographic, open-ended developmental systems. Boesch’s symbolic action theory asserts that the myth channels personal imaginary anticipations of the future without strictly determining personal actions because it is, as the master narratives, a type of discourse that supports diverse life experiences, giving sense to them. That is, myths constantly reproduced in the narratives of important people and institutions of the lived community offer symbolic resources (cf. Zittoun, 2006) to an originally nebulous (Valsiner, 2007) and disquieting (Simão, 2003) social experience.

Creating ‘I–other in the world’ oppositions

Mythological narratives can also be distinguished from other kinds of storytelling in the sense that the first are a form of narrative that organizes the chaos of lived experience by fixing parameters for symbolic understandings of reality. In other words, myth is a narrative that talks about a moment that is not necessarily past or future, but expresses the process of constitution of a relational configuration among beings in the cosmos (cf. Levi-Strauss & Eribon, 1988/1990). The master narrative of Palestinian identity has this mythological property of structuring the meanings of social experience in the sense that it organizes Palestinian identity, conferring semiotic boundaries to affective exchanges of people with their alterity.

Hammack (2010) notes four relevant aspects of the Palestinian master narrative which allow personal positioning in that complex environment: the unjust dispossession of the land; powerlessness; existential security under risk; and resistance. These aspects of the Palestinian master narrative are constituted in direct opposition to the Israelis, who occupied the land using military power, threatening the lives of Palestinian people and social groups who now have to resist (Figure 1).

![Figure 1](image_url)
Therefore, the master narrative distinguishes Palestinians from Israelis, giving sense to the positions of elements of their reality, i.e. the power asymmetry, humiliation, and derogation affectively lived with intensity, as related by the youngsters whom Hammack (2010) interviewed. It is through internalization of these narratives that nebulous life experiences start to achieve a meaning, establishing social positions around an object of mutual interest. Hammack (2010) stresses that the object of negotiation in the boundary between I (Palestinian) and the other (Israeli) is not just ‘the physical land itself, but also … the perception of existential threat that the trauma of continued loss has cultivated’ (p. 529).

The quality of I–other opposition is supported by diverse symbolic resources such as political and religious narratives, works of art, music, literature, cinema, etc. It is notable in the testimony of Adara; when talking about a book she was reading and the poetry of Mahmoud Darwish, she says: ‘When you read the book you can understand many clues about the occupation, from the beginning until now’ and ‘He [Darwish] talks about the true stories, how they have stolen our land. And sometimes our children’ (p. 523). Hence, the affective intensity that emerges in the relation with the other is signified by the people who participate in the cultural field, who transform it, and who live together or in similar conditions. These people are capable of using symbolic elements to deal with the problems that they live with, addressing their narratives to guide the perception of the environment as it is and as it should be (cf. Boesch, 1991; Valsiner, 2007).

Additionally, the stories would make no sense if they did not allow the subjects to recursively speak and feel their own lived experiences through them. Therefore, as ideology is expressed not just in discourses but also in social practice, attitudes, and conventions, the narratives need to deal with ‘the continued social structure of military occupation and intractable conflict in Palestinian territories, subject to mobility restrictions enforced by the Israeli army’, an expressive part of their lived experiences. Resistance against Israel is performed, as well, in symbolic actions traditionally codified in the intifada, allowing the subjects to live concretely aspects of narrated master stories. These semi-coordinated, almost ritualized actions promote the internalization of ‘political consciousness [. . .] a sophisticated understanding of “the situation”’ (p. 515), as noted by Ali:

I didn’t really start to care about other people until I was like 12 years old. But then I came to know about the whole thing, and it’s really depressing. It was like, to see how people are humiliated… And then the intifada started. It’s like, when you’re a 16-year-old, I’m a 16-year-old Palestinian… and it’s so hard. It’s hard to be who you are. (pp. 515–516)

The suitability of the narrated stories to the social-affectively lived experiences promotes the internalization of meanings, integrating the self in a coherent structure.

A duality between the lived and the narrated, which are both subject to constant transformation in the personal trajectory, can be derived from our analysis and will
be discussed later. I will now address contradictions that emerge in the social environment and remark how intracultural and interpersonal variations create tension in the field of symbolic actions.

**Competing narratives in Palestinian life**

A dialogic conception of identity supposes that the I and the other compose an antinomy with a tensional boundary which concerns an object (cf. Marková, 2006). Almost every object can support an opposition. For instance, if we are to nominate different objects which support an opposition we can point out national identity or ethnic identity, sexual identity or gender identity, cultural identity or professional identity, and so on. Concerning psychological development, each antinomy a subject is faced with offers some structural basis for classifying the I and the others and guiding personal actions in the world. Hammack brought the relational characteristic of identities into the open by investigating the opposition between the Palestinian and the Israeli.

Adopting the dialogical conception of identity referred to earlier allows us to identify three elements involved in its constitution: it evokes what *is*, in opposition to what *is not* and what *should be*, modulating the boundary between the first two elements (cf. Valsiner, 2007). Therefore, futurity also has an important role in the approach of these authors to the dialogical relation between I and other.

Boesch’s notion of fantasms articulates the generality of a myth (or of an identity) and personal specificities, demanding the apprehension of the heterogeneity of each social group. It concerns one’s selective perception, transformation, and integration of cultural structures. Fantasms are psychologically expressed in motivational ideas, private objectives, anticipated values, expectancies, and duties. They play a part in personal dispositions to act in the face of a configuration of the world, that is, the personal action potential (cf. Boesch, 1991). As Boesch (1991) emphasized, ‘the individual is faced with the task of structuring, selecting and choosing, i.e. creating his or her own synthesis between myths and fantasms’ (p. 278).

The unfolding of this notion can help us to understand aspects of the Palestinian testimonies, guiding our attention to certain parts of the study. For instance, when Hammack warns us that the interview sample is not representative of Palestinian youth (p. 530), it indicates the plurality of representations and the peculiar selectivity of the studied group, for whom educational achievement has a strong influence.

Moreover, from the group of 16 analyzed interviews, Hammack (2010) selected three for his detailed presentation: one of them, Ali, comes from a traditionally Muslim but predominantly secular family; another, Adara, comes from an Islamist environment; and the third, Luca, is a Christian. Taking the aspect of religiosity, the I-Palestinian identity is provided by at least three different ‘should values’ that mediate relations with others (non-Palestinian) and the desired future.
These peculiarities insert the master narrative in dialogue with specific narratives of social groups. They demand, in some cases, psychological effort to integrate discourses that originate in different social loci.

We could systematize this plurality as shown in Figure 2.

Notably, Ali, who belongs to a more secular tradition, has internalized symbolic resources of western societies, e.g., appropriating American styles. Also, he was the interviewee who expressed the most endeavor and strongest disposition to get into direct confrontation with Israelis. Besides Hammack’s interpretation of his attitude as, mainly, a compensatory reaction, we could speculate one more reason for it. The secular discourse of western capitalist societies, since the French Revolution, has elevated possession and property as fundamental elements for existential security above religious interests (cf. Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, France, 1789), and we can identify a similar claim when Ali says: ‘It’s like we’re supposed to fight for every inch of the country. It’s ours, and they took it by force’, and continues, ‘I believe, if we’re not gonna get our land back, we don’t have to make peace. Everyone should fight until they die’ (p. 516).

Possibly, Ali’s almost secular tradition, associated with his bourgeois origins, guides him to appropriate the master narrative in terms of the profitable notion of buying a free pass to heaven by fighting for his country. On the contrary, Adara’s discourse focuses on the loss of parents and children and on the necessity of peace, stressing the ethical dilemma of the maintenance of strict separation between what she consider as two nations. Luca claims the Palestinian identity, emphasizing the communal suffering to which all inhabitants are subjected. Both Luca and Adara remark upon the necessity of a national resistance over religious differences.

Despite each self-biographic narrative articulating the Palestinian identity with familiar or communitarian traditions, achieving different shapes, all of them converge in the recognition of the Palestinian dispossession, powerlessness, existential security under risk, and the necessity of a collective resistance, which are the key contents of the master narrative guiding the social identity of the people. The suitability of the master narrative discourse to the personal lived experiences addresses the collective integration faced with an imminent possibility of social and personal mutilation.
Personal synthesis and idiographic analysis

Hammack’s investigation of youth narratives of life stories, regarding their relations with symbolic resources provided by the master narratives, evinces different moments in which personal lived experiences are articulated by narrated experiences of other people (in literature, testimony of friends, religious discourses, and political discourses). Personal stories are mixed with collective stories, presenting convergences and divergences with aspects narrated by others. Luca answers offer a clear instance of it, when he says:

I am the one guy that was throwing rocks, everyone throws rocks, because you want to do something for your country. It doesn’t matter if someone’s Muslim or Christian, or this myth like only the Muslims are involved in the shooting and fighting, it’s not true, ’cause we’re all Palestinians. (p. 528)

The idiosyncratic process that articulates lived experiences with suitable narratives, avoiding inappropriate ones, encompasses the use of symbolic mediators developed along personal trajectories in an irreversible time (cf. Valsiner, 2001). These symbolic mediators have the property of giving meaning to an affective, nebulous experience in the social environment. Additionally, the self-biographic childhood is marked by nebulous feelings that start to make sense at some point of the personal ontogenesis. The memories of the initial life moments are signified in convergence with or divergence from the explanation of the social others present in the convivial environment (parents, caregivers, and friends, among others). Afterwards, institutional discourses offer an ideological conception of the Palestinian situation in the world, reorganizing and channelling the meanings of the original affective experience.

Figure 3 organizes the conceptual opposition between narratives and lived experiences in an integrative personal synthesis that is reviewed and transformed along one’s life.

The vertical and horizontal axes express the duality between the lived and the narrated, which demand integration in the construction of personal history. In this process, which occurs in the irreversible flow of time, the presence of gaps, non-defined and disquieting feelings can emerge. Besides, the temporary symbolic integration of a person can be crystallized, creating some limits for reconceptualizations. Consequently, if there is no possibility of experiencing exchanges in the power asymmetric positions between I and other, that is, if there is no conviviality with otherness, the unknown aspect relative to the other (people, culture, nation) tends to be filled with the content of the narratives usually spread among the society, some of them loosening the humanity of the otherness identity. In this sense, Adara’s claim to the removal of the ‘separation wall’ (p. 73) seems to be a more ethical perspective on the horizon of Palestinian and Israeli lives, addressing the necessity of a dialogic, instead of an authoritarian, interchange.
Figure 3. Idiosyncratic articulation between lived and narrated experiences as the result of a personal effort to give meaning to disquieting feelings in the social environment.

References


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Danilo Silva Guimarães, PhD, is Professor of Social Psychology at the University Padre Anchieta, Jundiaí, São Paulo, Brazil. He has been working with analysis of I–other interactions from a semiotic–cultural constructivist perspective. His main focus of investigation is the boundaries between Amerindian and non-Amerindian processes concerning alterity and identity constructions.