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## Personal Narrative as Shaping the Activist Identity of Religious Women in Israel

By Ayelet Makaros<sup>1</sup>, Edith Blit-Cohen<sup>2</sup>

### Abstract

This article is based on the life stories of 14 religious activist women in Israel. It aims to understand the extent to which these women's stories and their childhood and maturation experiences shaped their activist identity. In this qualitative, critical-feminist study, the women activists' life stories were examined using semi-structured interviews. The findings indicate that personal or social events perceived as significant in the women's lives as children and adolescents acted as catalysts for activism. These events were central to their personal narratives and became embedded in the women's activist identity, as they came to perceive activism as the most "natural" response to life challenges. Specifically, two types of events were identified: events in the individual-family-community sphere and events in the public-national sphere. They affected the interviewees and led them to act, whether out of antagonism and anger at a perceived injustice, or out of a sense of power and constructive thought. This study contributes to the literature by highlighting the new and unique phenomenon of religious women who, despite being educated to accept and comply with the conventions of a patriarchal society, choose to make their voice heard and lead sociocultural changes in public spaces. The findings emphasize the personal-political nexus and provide insight into the activists' motives for fighting for their values and for committing to long-term activity in the public sphere—despite considerable personal costs.

*Keywords:* Women activists, Personal narrative, Life story, Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox women in Israel.

### Introduction

This study examines how religious women's personal narratives have shaped their lives as activists. To do so, we have interviewed Jewish Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox women living in Israel who are active in their communities on issues that are important to them personally and socially, such as women's exploitation in the job market, preventing prostitution, and the promotion of healthy sexuality. Little is known about the relationship between the construction of women activists' sociopolitical identity and their life stories. The activists' life-stories in this research are self-narrativized, meaning that the women themselves have, in telling their stories, identified events that lead to their activism. In that way, the stories illustrate patterns of self-consciousness that arise. By studying these stories as they present them, we try to identify factors in women's lives that lead them to devote their lives to activism. This can help us understand how communities change, as activists have the

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power to affect their community directly through their work, as well as indirectly as models and mentors for others (Andrews, 2007; Morris, 2000).

### **Narrative**

Narrative is “an ordered account created out of disordered material or experience” (Abrams, 2010, 106). Narratives are symbolic representations of the past that include a variety of stories and memories. We tell stories that help us construct our world and understand our experiences. They reflect personal, interpersonal, and social processes that shape the unique individual meaning we ascribe to our actions (Clandinin & Connelly, 1998). Stories are part of the human condition as they provide shape and meaning to our experiences; through them, both personal identities and social relations are structured (Brockmeier & Carbaugh, 2001).

Bertaux (1981) was one of the first to study life stories and highlight their importance in research. With others he argued that personal narratives do not permanently predefine the individual, but develop constantly in a process of self-imagination, among other things, as a result of encounters with other groups (Escobar, 2004). Hammack and Pilecki (2012) proposed that narratives are ideal to understanding the way people interact with the political. Among other things, narratives are conveyed through political rhetoric, popular media, and personal communications. Through them, we gain insight into the ideologies prevalent in our culture and others (Somers, 1994). Thus, one of the ways we construct our individual and collective identity by interacting with various social narratives (Hammack & Pilecki, 2012; Sarbin, 1986). Adopting a social narrative may be manifested by engaging in sociopolitical activism.

### **Sociopolitical Activism**

Activism is defined as efforts to promote sociopolitical change and improve the status of marginalized groups (de Lemus & Stroebe, 2015). Often used interchangeably, activism and collective action include activities such as canvassing, petitioning, organizing meetings, participating in organizations, demonstrating, and protesting. Thus, activism includes not only participation in massive political protests, but also individual actions that may have collective impact.

Researchers are interested in the question: who or what kind of person becomes an activist? The very question suggests that some sociopolitical situations contribute to the maturation of activists as such. Stewart and Healy (1989) argue that sociopolitical events affect people differently according to their life stage. In childhood, we shape our values and expectations of life. Our experiences in that period are screened by our families and the prevalent social conditions, affecting the way we perceive life and behave. When crises occur in adolescence, for example, they can powerfully affect individuals' identity development. Much of the literature on activism focuses on the attitudes and actions of large groups in society, measuring such variables as political beliefs and evaluating the willingness to act in such ways as writing to government representatives (Corning & Myers, 2002). Nevertheless, there is a difference between expressing willingness to promote social change through specific actions and devoting one's life to constant efforts to promote social change. While the former may involve developing a critical perspective about inequality, for example, the latter requires constant grappling with individual barriers and their effect on the willingness to act. This distinction suggests that a specific and significant type of knowledge may be gleaned from a more focused examination of the life histories of activists who have proven their devotion to sociopolitical change over several decades (Stewart et al., 1998).

### **Narrative and Activism**

Perhaps more than for others, narratives are key to the way activists express the way they understand the world, their role in it, and the changes they would like to promote (Owens, 2009). Nevertheless, the literature tends to emphasize the narratives of social movements rather than individuals (Davis, 2002). Within those movements, the activists construct stories that they share in meetings, marches, and rallies. These stories express the spirit of the movement and serve its purposes: establishing solidarity and collective identity, developing tactics and modes of action (Davis, 2002), explaining the movements' actions and successes (Polletta, 2006), and recruiting new members (Beckwith, 2015). These stories are communicated through the movement's hierarchic structure, representing its ideology and concerns. Consequently, they have a significant effect on the way activists tell their stories—on what they emphasize and what they choose to omit—leaving little room for authentic personal narratives.

Conversely, we find it highly important to address individual narratives as detached from the “movement experience”. Analyzing them is important because they contribute to processes of sense making by activists. In fact, as argued by Ricœur (1980), it is through narratives that we turn a temporary experience into a significant one. In particular, individual narrative analysis can provide insights into the psychological experiences of activists with regard to overcoming personal barriers and mobilizing the resources required to maintain long-term commitment to social change. Accordingly, including the analysis of individual narratives in the study of sociopolitical activism offers a significant opportunity for understanding diverse types of activism and developing a more nuanced perspective on the phenomenon (McGuire et al., 2010). Given the relative lack of studies on people with a life-long commitment to activism, narrative analysis can pinpoint the complexities and personal nuances that affect their sociopolitical commitment, including those related to their cultural identity (Hammack, 2008; Josselson & Lieblich, 1993; Madill et al., 2000).

### **Identity, Narrative, and Activism**

For activists, identity is the outcome of constructing meaning through narrative. A fascinating area of study is the relationship between activists' identity construction and their political biographies. McAdam (1986) coined the term “biographical availability” to indicate how political commitment is directly related to personal and family circumstances at given moments in life. Indeed, over the past two decades, it became obvious that the biographical aspect of activists is important, not only due to the relationship between the personal and cultural experience (Chamberlayne et al., 2000; Jasper, 2008; McAdam, 1986), but also because activism has a powerful effect on the activists' life course (Giugni & Grasso, 2016; Nolas et al., 2018).

Various theoreticians have expounded on the complex relationship between narrative, identity, and activism (Jasper, 2009; Polletta, 1998, 2006; Pratt, 2003; Somers, 1994; Tilly, 2002). As suggested, narratives are central to constructing the meaning of social movements, as well as the identity of individual activists. Narratives are configured in a way that enables activists to weave together past, present, and future events, which is particularly important in times of change (Polletta, 1998). Studying the anthropology of social movements, Pratt (2003) was one of the first to highlight the identity-narrative-activism nexus. He argued that in studying sociopolitical activism, we have much to gain by understanding that identity narratives develop and organize around two related axes: the horizontal biographical or diachronic axis, and the vertical or synchronic axis, which determines who “we” are through resistance and the construction of an “other”. In some contexts, one identity aspect can become more salient, as in a political action focused on an external enemy or when the movement celebrates its successes. These two axes remind us that identity is always

multifaceted and contextual (Pratt, 2003). In the present study, religious women's personal narratives are analyzed to understand how they shaped their activist identity.

### **Religious Activists in the Israeli Sociocultural Space**

The recent decade has seen the emergence of Jewish women from the Orthodox (also referred to as national-religious) and ultra-Orthodox (Haredi) women active for social change into public and political visibility in Israel. These women lead significant change processes that are often inconsistent with the norms of their community (Ferziger, 2015; Frimer & Frimer, 2014; Israel-Cohen, 2012; Safran, 2006; Schnabel, 2018; Sperber et al., 2012; Wolowelsky, 2002; Zion-Waldoks, 2015, 2018). This new phenomenon is related to the wave of social protests, particularly the one that swept Israel in the summer of 2011 and reignited the social rights and justice discourse (Burton, 2011; Gordon, 2012). Social media, which also occupied public space in this era, provided convenient platforms for raising issues, organizing, and protesting. In particular, it contributed to the ability of religious activists to break the silencing barriers and make their own voices heard (Artzi Srur, 2018; Shitrit, 2013).

Recent years have seen the gradual adoption of some modern norms by Jewish religious communities (Cahaner, 2014; Cahaner et al., 2015; Kaplan, 2007; Novis-Deutsch, 2015; Sheleg, 2000; Zicherman & Cahaner, 2012). Nevertheless, the space where they are socially active remains a religious one, characterized by authoritative and patriarchal leadership, conservatism, and varying degrees of segregation from the outside world; above all, it is a space where women are considered inferior (Brown, 2017; Safran 2006).

Accordingly, by the very fact that they are socially active, religious women activists challenge and criticize the conventions and norms of their society (Safran, 2006; Zion-Waldoks, 2015, 2018). They promote hitherto silenced issues, and their activism is therefore daring, transgressive, and often severely objected. Some of the activists have led dramatic, successful moves, whereas others cope with multiple difficulties and encounter various degrees of resistance, including excommunication and shaming, to the point they feel they must conceal their activism (Schnabel 2018).

One of the key factors in these dynamics is activists' personal narrative, which is significant in constructing their identity. While the literature tends to focus on the narratives of activists as influenced by those of social movements, the present study focuses on the life stories as constructed since childhood and adolescence years of individual activists, prior to joining the movements that they have founded or wherein they are currently active.

### **Research Questions**

In light of the review of the literature, and in order to address the gap related to the individual life story of activists, the present study addresses the following questions: What are the life trajectories of women who have devoted most of their lives to collective action? What types of experiences have shaped their activist path? How do they talk about their life experiences? Which events do they consider fundamental in shaping activist identity?

### **Method**

#### *Design*

This qualitative study is informed by a critical feminist approach that considers the participants' discourse as a major source of information (Shkedi, 2011). The critical approach seeks to free the interviewees from the bonds of conventional sociopolitical discourse (Guba & Lincoln, 1998; Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005). Complementarily, the feminist approach challenges social inequality and seeks to free women from automatically viewing men as the

powerful in society, and to encourage them towards self-realization and being able to affect the social institutes and processes that (re)produce this inequality (Grbich, 2007; Travers, 2001).

In critical studies, the researchers' worldview and perspective are highly important (Guba & Lincoln, 1998). The two researchers are community social workers with years-long field and academic experience in social change in communities. The interviews were conducted by two interviewers (one of the researchers and a research assistant) identified with the religious community, familiar with its unique content world and highly sensitive to its cultural code, social symbols, etc.

### *Participants*

Fourteen religious activist women took part in the study, located using the snowball technique. Of these activists, eight were Orthodox and six were ultra-Orthodox Jews. Their mean age was forty. All had received some form of higher education (two had a third degree, six had an MA, five had a BA, and one had a diploma). All were married except for one divorced participant, all with children (2-6). These women were active in a variety of areas, including women's rights at the workplace and municipal and national politics; preventing sexual harassment and assault; and reforming religious divorce procedures.

### *Data Collection and Analysis*

The data were collected by semi-structured in-depth interviews (Chirban, 1997), 60-90 minutes in length. The interviews were conducted like a conversation and were held in an environment that was safe for the interviewees. They were audiotaped and transcribed. Data analysis was performed in three stages. In the first, the researchers read the interviews several times to become empathically acquainted with the interviewees' narratives. In the second stage, units of meaning were identified (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). In the third stage, similar utterances were grouped into themes. These themes constitute the conceptual skeleton of the research findings (Creswell, 2013; McLeod, 2013).

### *Ethical Considerations*

The study was conducted in keeping with ethical rules and was approved by the ethics committee of the Social Work School at Bar-Ilan University, Israel. The participants signed an informed consent form having understood the study's objective and the use made in the findings. The latter were reported anonymously to protect the participants' privacy. In referring to the participants below, we used aliases.

## **Results**

The participants' narratives indicate that their childhood and adolescence have been significant to the development of their activist identity—an incubation period for the activist “fetal gestation”, so to speak. Two types of major events that influenced that development were identified: events in the individual-family-community sphere and events in the public-national sphere. They affected the interviewees and led them to act, whether out of antagonism and anger at a perceived injustice, or out of a sense of power and constructive thought.

### *"I'm active from the soul ": Events in the Individual-Family-Community Sphere*

In their childhood and adolescence, some interviewees had difficult and even traumatic experiences that led them to develop critical thinking about their immediate environment as well as society in general. Rachel, a 40-year-old ultra-Orthodox woman, mother of six, is active in promoting ultra-Orthodox women employee rights. When asked

about her activism, she said that her family experienced a major economic crisis, and as her parents ceased to function, she had to run the house as a young girl:

I was seventeen. [...] I have a bigger brother, and he just got married. My father had a heart attack, and I was the oldest child in the house and we went through a major catastrophe, we were totally beaten and the family broke down. I mean my father left his job and we got into all kinds of troubles. The kind of catastrophe that brought our life to a standstill. [...] My mother is a woman with very low hemoglobin and anemia. There are ten kids and I enter mom and dad's big shoes, become a ninja and start fighting. I went to the State Comptroller and the President and told them. There was no longer any use to contact the police [...]

So slowly [...] I took upon myself the burden of all the siblings. Suddenly I find myself surviving and fighting, on the verge of starvation. [...] And my smallest brother was five months old. And slowly I got into my daddy's big shoes and opened a business, and got into trouble. And as a result of all those troubles and copings I realized that the world is divided into the weak and the strong. [...] From the State Comptroller to the President and parliament members. I used to write letters upon letters, and they never knew who was contacting them behind the scenes. I arrived at all the meetings {laughing} [...]. No, you don't get it, today I recall those things and I don't understand where I got all that courage.

Rachel's story sharpens how a traumatic event in her adolescence brought her to action. An activity that she claims shaped her identity. Naomi, an ultra-Orthodox woman in her late thirties, mother of four, helps ultra-Orthodox women in divorce proceedings. For her as well, the personal and familial are intermeshed. She felt that others around her were blocking her, that she became subservient, doing things that the family—under the community's pressure—was expecting her to do against her own will:

And that was the first time I realized that the fact I was ultra-Orthodox was blocking my initiatives. It's as though until then I never felt it [...] and then suddenly I felt limited because I wanted to study medicine, and then my parents said, "Wait a minute, you can't do that" [...] and it wasn't "how are you going to be a doctor because you're not good enough", but because it's inappropriate [...] It's time for matchmaking [...]. Eighteen years ago, it was inconceivable, impossible. No way would an ultra-Orthodox girl go to the university. [...] and it really bothers me. Like a tape that keeps playing in my head, and I don't want to be part of it. And I really felt I had no choice, so I went to the seminar [for girls] to become submissive.

Naomi's personal distress was exacerbated when she experienced a crisis in her relationship and felt there was nobody in her family that could listen to her, let alone help her: "I tried. Nobody would really listen to me. I didn't share with my family, because [in ultra-Orthodox society] you don't "talk outside" [...] I felt like in a cage".

Active in the coalition of religious organizations for combating prostitution, Ronit, an Orthodox mother of two, had negative experiences in a wider context. Following a conflict with her school, she decided to leave it:

And then in 11<sup>th</sup> grade [...] they told me: “Listen, this is too much. Either you’re here or you’re volunteering [...]. It’s not that my grades were bad, but for them attendance is very important. [...] And after realizing, after six months that I didn’t really have anyone to talk to... at the end of 11<sup>th</sup> grade I moved, I said to myself [...] “You can’t stay in a place that doesn’t let you volunteer and do what you believe in”.

Referring to another milestone on the path to adulthood in Israeli society, Ruth—a mother of five active in promoting healthy sexuality—described her decision to enlist in the military as a turning point at a time when women’s choice to serve in the IDF was highly unusual in Orthodox society:

Upon graduating, from high school I was the only one from my age group that went to the army. We’re talking 17 years ago, not like now when it’s fashionable. [...] my parents were all for it, very much so. [...] But then when I was in the army we got married. Getting married at age 20 is like doing exactly what the community expects you.

Both Naomi's and Ronit's narrative sharpen how the personal story was influenced by community norms. They both felt that community norms were holding back their aspirations and desire to fulfill themselves, facts that in the past shaped their being active women in the present.

Ruth also described how her community and family environment encouraged her to do charity work:

I do think that in Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox communities, this whole thing of helping others is very strong. It comes from a different place, it’s not really activism, but [...] Let’s say my next-door neighbor, my parents’ neighbor, so they were from those families that had ten children themselves, but they always had all kinds of boys and girls there who had nowhere else to stay. Like some kind of unofficial welfare institute. This is very common [...] I think it affected me a lot—seeing her all the time. It’s always around you.

Finally, Tal, who is active in the sexual abuse area, expressed the relationship between personal experiences and the shaping of an activist identity most directly:

I think that my activity is really inseparable from my personal story. [...] I think my social activism was really motivated by distress [...]. It was a kind of escape from coping with difficult things that I had gone through [...]. I am active from where my blood is boiling like cheese on a pizza that just came out of the oven. Simply sizzling, I bleeding like that. [...] I always say I



invented a new type which is soul feminist—not radical and all that. I'm active from the soul.

*"You'll have to drag me out": Events in the Public-National Sphere*

Unlike the interviewees in the first theme, the activist identity of the interviewees quoted in this section was shaped by events that occurred in the public and national sphere when they were children or adolescents.

Ayelet is an ultra-Orthodox mother of four in her thirties. A major trigger for her activism was Israel's withdrawal or "disengagement" from the Gaza Strip in 2005, which involved the evacuation of some 8,000 Jewish settlers. She expressed her opposition by refusing to leave by herself and insisting on being pulled out by force:

And in the end, we found ourselves in the big synagogue [...] and then it took time before all the boys and girls were evacuated, and stayed there, pretty much the last ones, everyone was exhausted, it was 2-3 am. And the women soldiers came to us and said, "OK, let's move it", but I said I was really sorry, but I won't forgive myself [...] you'll have to drag me out, and they pulled me out.

Her protest did not stop there, but was broadcast nationwide during the International Bible Contest held on Independence Day, attended by the Prime Minister, Minister of Education, and other leaders:

During the Bible Contest, we got in a huge sign saying "A Jew Does Not Expel another Jew", but we had it folded into some kind of folder. And during the Prime Minister's Question [...] so I stood up with the sign [...] and many in the audience joined me, and I simply shouted there "A Jews does not expel another Jew!" [...] while he was reading the question, that ironically enough was about the Land of Israel, and as he spoke, they could see me pushed out of the hall. They took me and my friend and they questioned us for like seven hours {laughing}, who sent us and why. And indeed, afterwards they invited us to all kinds of interviews and this was the first time I was actually interviewed [...] on the radio and then also on TV.

Ayelet's activism actually began at an earlier age:

In high school, I studied in Jerusalem [...]. This was at the time of the [Second] Intifada, suicide bombings all the time. [...] it often happened that there was an explosion and smoke right outside the windows, and some of the girls in my school were killed in the terrorist attacks. I was also in an attack with a friend. They took me to the hospital because I was in a state of shock [...] Try to study for the finals like that {laughing}.

I remember that during that wave of attacks there were all sorts of benefits for students [...] And then the Education Minister [...] decided that those living in certain areas would receive rent support [...] but me and other students who lived in Gush Etzion [a cluster of West Bank settlements] and studied in Jerusalem did not get it. So, we petitioned to the High Court of Justice [...]. I remember my experience as a 16-17 year-old in court. We lost {laughing}.

The withdrawal from Gaza was highly significant for Ronit as well: “the disengagement was a highly formative event because I was active on crazy levels during that summer [...]. I don’t think there was a demonstration or anything I wasn’t involved in”. In their narratives, Ayelet and Ronit describe events that took place at the national level, and link them to the traumatic personal experience, when the obvious result for them was the activist activity.

Born and raised in France, Lali, an ultra-Orthodox mother of five active in supporting divorced women, described how a presidential election affected her as a little child:

May 1981, I’m six [...] there’s elections in France. My parents don’t have French citizenship [...] the socialist movement wins. We hadn’t voted, but it didn’t prevent us from going out to the streets, me on my father’s shoulders, and we’re shouting in the streets: “We won! We won!” From my father’s point of view, the socialist victory was like we, like we won, the immigrants from North Africa, it’s the Jews who won—he was certain that a new day would dawn for him the next day [...].

Ruth also described parental support for her engagement in party politics as an adolescent:

[...] politics is something I always liked [...] at age 14, I would take people to vote for [the ultra-Orthodox party] United Torah Judaism. I used to go to demonstrations and stuff [...] our parents would also take us. What kind of ultra-Orthodox people do things like that?

In the narratives of Lily and Ruth, national events intersect with the family experience, gaining reinforcement and legitimacy in the evolving activist consciousness and identity.

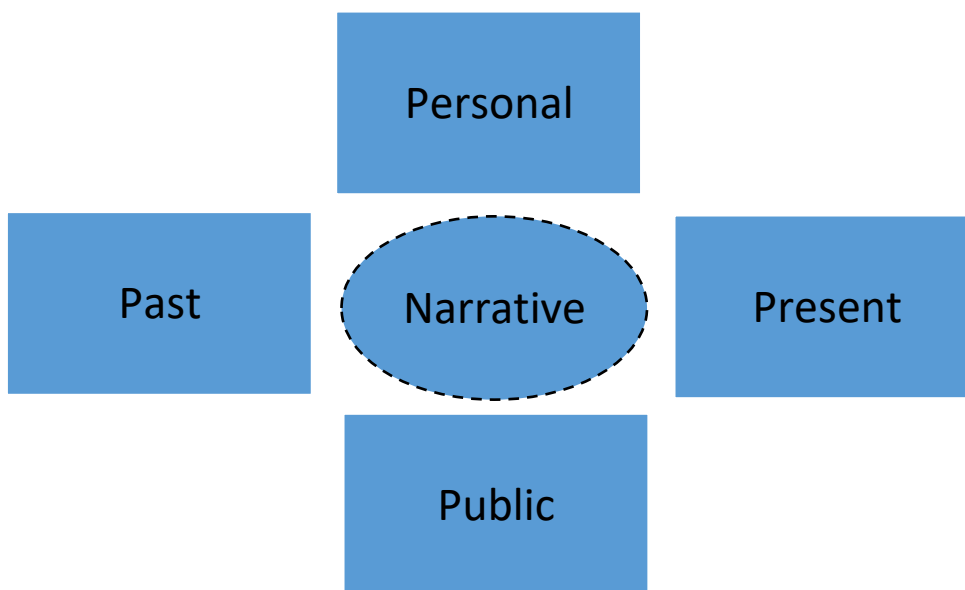
## **Discussion**

The findings of this study lend support to the claim by Stewart and Healy (1989) that sociopolitical events affect activists according to their age at the time. Many of the interviewees in this study described events in their childhood or adolescence as turning points that shaped their activist identity. Stewart and Healy argued that children growing up in difficult times come to perceive life as “a struggle for subsistence”. Stephens et al. (2014) referred to the same phenomenon as “hard interdependence”—a combination of social responsiveness and self-defense, whereby independence is manifested by emphasis on strength and toughness but requires attention for the environment to protect the self against potential threats. In addition, the activists interviewed experienced certain events in their adolescence and early adulthood as disrupting their daily lives and referred to their importance in shaping the person they came to be. Stewart and Healy’s (1989) framework suggests that disruptive social events have high personal impact when experienced in that age, and that they become part of individuals’ self-definition (see also Pasupathi & Weeks, 2011).

Interestingly enough, even though our interviewees’ descriptions of life-shaping events were clearly divided into the private-family-community and public-national categories, and despite the obvious difference between these events, both types led the participants to be active in the public-national sphere. Moreover, as seen above, some interviewees referred to events from both spheres as shaping their activist identity. One possible reason that significant events in childhood or adolescence become etched in our

memory and shape our identity, regardless of whether they occur in the private or public sphere, is that this is the age when personality is shaped (Erikson, 1968; Fitzgerald, 1988; Sullivan, 1968). For our participants, this was particularly true if they were supported by significant others, obtaining their approval for their new endeavors. Paradoxically, there is some indication in the findings that when they encountered opposition—whether by people close to them or state authorities—this only spurred them on to become active and played a role in shaping their activist identity as adults. The research findings make it possible to build the four-P's model of activist narratives.

**Figure 1: The Four-P's Model of Activist Narratives**



According to our model, major life events are coded and preserved in our long-term memory. They gain further significance later in life, as seen in the interviews where the participants shared their biographies and referred to them as crucial for constructing their activist identity. This way, the narratives enabled them to join past and present together (Polletta, 1998; Ricœur, 1980). Moreover, the narratives join personal and public together. Usually, researchers define activist identity as social or collective (Tajfel & Turner, 2004/1986). Our findings show, however, that when one's personal biography clashes with a significant social or collective event in childhood or adolescence, activist identity also becomes integral to the sense of self-identity. This distinction is important, because when activist identity becomes embedded in one's self-definition, it will probably continue to “sizzle”—to borrow from one of our interviewees' words—throughout life.

As suggested in the interviews, the catalyst that fuses these factors to light the “activist spark” is usually a traumatic event that disrupts one's normal expectations about oneself and significant others (Crossley, 2000). In response, the personal narrative becomes a means of overcoming or recovering from that disruption (Murray, 2000), providing a new meaning that can span past and future and provide continuity (Neimeyer, 2001). Activism is thus a bridge that enables the trauma to make sense and provides a rationale to justify the time spent on activism and the prices it entails. Moreover, it is the activists' way of

demonstrating their resilience, compensating them for early traumatic events by providing them with a regained sense of power and control (Ottmann & Maragoudaki, 2015). Political identity is one of the strongest predictors of collective action and activism (van Zomeren et al., 2008). Nevertheless, the literature debates whether political identity is the result of participation in a social movement or a predictor of such activism (Hopkins et al., 2006). Our study provides insights into the bidirectional nature of the relationship between activism and political identity. On the one hand, it appears that the uniquely intensive events experienced by the interviewees have served as mechanism contributing to strengthening their activist commitment. Some of the participants in our study explained that they had been politically conscious very early on and it appears that the external events—to the extent that they are indeed external—have “awakened” that consciousness. Thus, although our sample did not allow for an empirical measurement, we surmise that political identity may predict activist commitment.

Conversely, it may be that some of the participants had little political identity to speak of prior to encountering significant life events, which provided them the grounding to develop a political identity of their own. In other words, the actions related to activism may have occurred prior to the development of their political identity and gradually became stronger as little achievements accumulated. For example, as we have seen in Lali’s narrative about the elections in France, parental political commitment may be an important mediator in shaping activist identity. Again, although this pattern has also arisen from the analysis of our findings, like the previous one, it has not been empirically tested. Therefore, we recommend that future studies examine these two patterns, with particular attention to potential catalysts of political identity formation.

### **Limitations and Implications for Research and Practice**

The limitations of this study are related mainly to its size and qualitative approach—ours is a sample of fourteen Jewish Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox women who have shared their personal-political stories. Nevertheless, despite their limited number, as the interviewees are well-known and leading activists in religious Jewish society in Israel, their voice is significant for exploring the little-studied phenomenon of women’s activism in those communities.

Relatedly, the study is also limited in terms of its context—Israel’s unique sociopolitical reality, where political events may have a particularly intense effect on the development of individual personalities, to the extent that “the personal is political” to a significant degree. This point should be examined in future comparative studies that will consider the sociopolitical structures in which women participate in countries with different local characteristics. Such research will provide a more complete description of the identity-narrative-activism nexus worldwide.

Thirdly, the study’s qualitative approach was suitable for exploring the relationship between life stories and activism, but not for testing specific hypotheses regarding that relationship. A quantitative approach would be required for a study of this kind.

In addition, we recommend studying activist women with particular reference to ethnoreligious diversity, including non-religious women activists and activists from a specific ethnic background such as Palestinian-Arabs or Jews of Ethiopian or Russian descent. We believe that each of these groups has unique characteristics and copings, and that these must be understood in order to identify major events in their young lives that have shaped their activist identity.

Finally, whereas some of the findings of this study may be applicable to male activists, particularly of the Jewish Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox communities in Israel, the fact that all our participants were women limits the possibility to generalize beyond gender

boundaries. This is particularly so given the significant gender differences in those communities, resulting in highly differential experiences of personal and political events in childhood and adolescence. Although clearly these events have been instrumental in paving the participants' paths to activism, it is unknown how they may have been perceived by men in those communities.

Alongside the limitations, the present study highlights that the process of politicization is highly individual and at the same time profoundly influenced by public life. Events that happen during the childhood and adolescence are likely to become part of our assumptions about the world, and these events may shape our conscious identities.

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