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Handbook on Intervention and Statebuilding

Statebuilding and Narrative

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Abstract

In recent years, narrative approaches have become increasingly popular in the study of peace- and statebuilding. Yet, the conceptual and empirical idiosyncrasies of stories and storytelling are rarely acknowledged. This chapter provides an overview of the uses of narrative in the field to date. It highlights its value for understanding power imbalances, the complexity of human experiences and knowledge creation, and ethical challenges connected to fieldwork. Engaging in greater depth with conceptual and analytical perspectives on narrative, not least by drawing on insights from related social science disciplines, will help to uncover the unique contribution these perspectives can make to researching and practicing peace- and statebuilding.

Keywords: narrative, event, story, hegemony, ethics, agency

Introduction

The study of narrative has enjoyed popularity in the social sciences ever since the narrative, spatial and temporal turns began to open up new perspectives for exploring how human beings make sense of social reality through storytelling, which may be defined as the organisation and synthesizing of events in their spatial and temporal contexts (Sarbin, 1986; Bruner, 1987; Polkinghorne, 1988; Brockmeier, 2009; Frank, 2010). Research on peace, conflict and statebuilding, particularly in the critical tradition, has also begun to draw on the concept of narrative to explore how various actors – internal and external, national and international, individual and collective – engage with each other in the creation and strengthening of government institutions in (post-) conflict environments (e.g., Senehi, 2002; Brewer, 2010; Justino, Brück and Verwimp, 2013; Mac Ginty and Richmond, 2013). This is evidenced by the increasingly frequent appearances of the terms 'narrative' and 'story' in books and articles published within the field, with a noticeable surge over the past five years or so.

It is striking, however, that both terms appear very rarely in the title or keywords relating to these publications. This is not a coincidence, but rather an indication that very few authors actually engage in-depth with the conceptual and empirical idiosyncrasies of narratives and processes of storytelling. In fact, as in many other areas of the social sciences, much of the statebuilding literature which mentions the terms 'narrative' or 'story' does not employ a narrative approach at all. Instead, 'narrative' is frequently used as a synonym for 'discourse', 'frame', or 'argument' (e.g., Hellmüller, 2014; Pedersen, 2018). At the same time, the human disposition for telling stories is all too often seen as somewhat self-explanatory rather than as a distinct level of analysis. This narrow view limits scholars in how they

approach and evaluate the rich qualitative data that their research on statebuilding processes often generate. This chapter provides an overview of the uses of narrative in the field to date. It illustrates how recent work has begun to carve out its particular value for exploring the complexities of peace- and statebuilding practices, and what gaps remain to be filled.

Strategic Narratives in Statebuilding Processes

The key reason that narrative research on statebuilding has been relatively slow to develop is that both too little and too much narrative complexity may have negative effects on such processes (Dauphinee, 2015). Preference is often given to "a stable narrative history of conflict that all parties are expected to accept and reproduce" (ibid., p. 264) in order to provide a solid basis for the creation – and legitimisation – of government structures and social cohesion that statebuilding aims at. In fact, the international peacebuilding agenda as a whole is shaped by a particular historical narrative governed by the imperative to reproduce the hegemonic international order and its normative ideal of liberal market democracy, as Lacher (2007) has shown with regard to the US-led post-conflict reconstruction of Iraq.

Unsurprisingly, then, the notion of 'strategic narratives', developed in the discipline of International Relations, has also proven popular among scholars of statebuilding. These are narratives that fulfil a political purpose by projecting a particular story about how a socio-political order has been disrupted by a specific event (e.g., a terrorist attack, a civil war, an uprising), and what measures need to be taken to re-establish that order. In doing so, these narratives help to define what is at stake in a particular conflict (or post-conflict situation), and hence serve as a tool to shape collective action and manage expectations in a contested process of sense-making (Miskimmon, Loughlin, and Roselle 2014; Levinger and Roselle, 2017).

As Egnell (2010) explains, strategic narratives are useful because they help the public to make sense of political transformation processes against the background of contradictory and often irreconcilable norms. An example of this the tension between the liberal democratic framework for peacekeeping and the importance of 'local ownership' and self-determination, particularly emphasised in the critical tradition (p. 466; see also Mac Ginty, 2008). By ironing out inherent contradictions, at least to a certain degree, these narratives seek to render international statebuilding more effective. Egnell emphasises, however, that such narratives are easily disrupted if they do not correspond to actual activities on the ground, risking "discontent and possibly opposition amongst the local population" (p. 467). Kostić (2017), similarly, shows that informal networks of 'shadow peacebuilders' in post-2010 Bosnia-Herzegovina promote strategic narratives as a way of creating knowledge about the conflict to influence policymaking. Their success in the 'battle of ideas', mainly in opposition to the 'official' peacebuilding policy, would not only depend on the provision of a compelling story – composed of the definition of a situation, its disruption, and potential solution – agreed upon by members of the network. Rather, coherence between talk and action would play an important role in that it binds such networks together by endowing them with a sense of purpose and common identity. The weakening of their strategic narrative would thus risk a defeat of the network as a whole – and with it a defeat of alternatives to authoritative, top-down narratives of statebuilding.

The strategic construction of statebuilding narratives by both international and local actors (as well as those who blur the boundaries between them) thus oscillates between

acknowledgement and denial of the inherent contingencies and ambiguities of storied realities in an effort to shape policy-making and reduce political risks. Ultimately, however, they may undermine statebuilding processes, precisely because they potentially render the complex lived experiences on the ground invisible and disconnect macro- and micro-level narratives from each other. In order to challenge hegemonic as well as simplified narratives, and to better connect statebuilding to social realities, in particular those of less powerful actors, more attention needs to be paid to the interaction between different stakeholders and their naturally complex stories.

Statebuilding and the Richness of Human Experiences

Promoting narrative complexity, then, may challenge the legitimacy of political and social authority. Hence, a plurality of stories might be "seen, ironically, as a problem to overcome, rather than a condition to be nurtured and supported" (Dauphinee, 2015, p. 265). To respond to this dilemma, scholars have recently begun to show how narrative research can help not only to uncover the complexity inherent within and the interaction between stories, but also to reconcile the competing stories of different stakeholders through re-imagination, dialogue, and performance.

Nussio (2011), for example, emphasises the importance of understanding the narratives of non-state actors for successful disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration (DDR) of illegal armed groups. More specifically, he explores how ex-paramilitaries of the United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia (AUC) imagine their personal post-conflict security through storytelling. Paying close attention to the temporal dimension of notions of threat, Nussio identifies narratives relating to *potential* and *imminent* threats perceived as a result of ex-combatants' particular sensitivity to security issues and previous disarmament. They may imagine (and simultaneously respond to) future insecurity by hiding their identity as a demobilised person, isolating themselves from former comrades, or distancing themselves from state institutions. Ex-combatants may also relocate to a different area, drop out of reintegration programmes, re-join armed groups, or resort to self-defence and vigilantism to increase their personal security, especially if anonymity, isolation, or protection by the state are unattainable. From this Nussio concludes that policy-makers, instead of making ex-combatants' alleged proneness to violence their focus, are better advised to address their feelings of personal insecurity by improving reintegration programmes (e.g. facilitating orderly relocation) so that ex-combatants' confidence in state institutions is strengthened. By influencing their imagination of future security in a positive way, chances for effective de-mobilisation can be increased. This approach sits well within the growing literature on the role of narrative in motivating individual and collective action (Davis, 2002; Andrews, 2014; Graef, da Silva and Lemay-Hébert, 2018).

Read and Mac Ginty's (2017) work on the UNAMID mission in Sudan further highlights the ways in which narrative constructions of time and memory are shaped by power relations, and how this, in turn, impacts statebuilding. Drawing on security incident records of the conflict in Darfur and interviews with Darfurian refugees living in UNHCR camps in Chad, they conclude that international and local actors record violent events differently. This happens not only in terms of *what* is reported (e.g., sexual violence in the official database as a 'non-event' leads to under-reporting), but also in terms of their temporal order and importance vis-à-vis each other. The different accounts are of two types – one 'top-down', i.e., bureaucratic,

purposeful, hegemonic, and recorded in 'real-time' with technological support, and the other 'bottom-up', i.e. local, experiential, and remembered. The authors find that the two types result in different narratives of the conflict as a whole, especially as they relate to perceptions of uncertainty and (hence) insecurity. This suggests that, in order to close the gap between bottom-up and top-down analyses, the two accounts should be seen as complementary to improve the quality of 'actionable data' to inform peacebuilding processes, given that both are prone to particular omissions and inconsistencies (see also Mac Ginty and Firchow, 2016, and Mac Ginty and Read in this volume). Müller and Bashar (2017), building on a similar study of the narratives of UNAMID and Darfurian refugees, also emphasise that the parallel narrative worlds in which peacebuilders and local populations often live need to be merged to create trust and to "contribute to long-term conflict resolution strategies and mediation efforts grounded in local realities" (p. 775).

Another emerging strand of research connects storied experiences of violent conflict to art, as a tool for responding to the needs of communities on the ground. Premaratna (2018a), for instance, argues that theatre performances form an important element of peacebuilding efforts because they are capable of rendering visible everyday experiences of structural violence. This is violence that fosters inequality between groups, which is often excluded from official, quantitative peacebuilding data (Mac Ginty, 2017; Read and Mac Ginty, 2017). The dynamic plays performed by the grassroots activist group in the Indian state of West Bengal that Premaratna examines, 'rescript' power hierarchies through a combination of audience participation, dance, song, and symbolic action. In doing so, they not only expose existing injustices, but also empower local communities as marginalised groups to become the narrators of their own stories and resist hegemonic narratives. The theatre group's political activism helps to connect participants' on-stage transformation to their everyday lives off-stage. Theatre is thus capable of initiating social transformation by breaking the self-reinforcing cycle of structural and physical violence to create a more sustainable peace (see also Premaratna, 2018b; Hatley and Hough, 2015; Giesler, 2017). However, Premaratna also points out that challenging power asymmetries in a peaceful way requires dialogue. Otherwise, encouraging resistance to narratives of violence, instead of producing empathy, may provoke emotions of revenge that threaten rather than promote peacebuilding (2018a, p. 15).

Narrative Research as an Ethical Practice

In light of its sensitivity for power imbalances, injustices, and subjective experiences, narrative is not only a powerful tool for effecting social change, but also a meaningful ethical practice of doing research on statebuilding (Dauphinee, 2015; Kappler, 2013). Researchers – and other stakeholders such as journalists, activists, soldiers, and civil servants – take on a particular responsibility as they simultaneously listen to, evaluate, and tell stories, thereby acting – not always knowingly – as intermediaries between different stakeholders who are embedded in a complex network of power relations, as well as their respective audiences. Researchers, therefore, are not only fieldworkers, but also often witnesses to a particular conflict on some level. Again, recent work in the field has begun to engage in greater depth with the possibilities opened up by such a perspective.

Bake and Zöhrer (2017), for instance, address the importance of stories' authenticity – i.e., their ability to have their claim to truth accepted – for raising public awareness in order

to motivate collective action and effect policy change. Building on the assumption that 'telling the stories of others' creates actionable (narrative) knowledge, they compare the methodologies of two intermediaries of different sites of conflict (Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Kosovo, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Syria, and Gaza): the non-governmental organisation *Human Rights Watch* and the US comic journalist Joe Sacco. Their findings show that both manage to achieve an "authentic authority" in how they represent knowledge about these conflicts to their audiences: one by relying on institutional reports, fact checking and an 'objective' style, the other based on his detailed drawing style and the inclusion of ambiguities and contradictions, as well as the foregrounding of his own emotions. The two also share elements that emphasise the truth content of their narratives, especially their physical presence at the site of conflict, personal testimonies from locals, and the integration of the research process itself into the stories they tell.

This suggests that the way the researcher chooses to approach his or her own role in the research process has an impact on whether narrative knowledge about peace and conflict is *perceived* as objective, factual and independent of the researcher's own position and experiences, or as subjective and shaped by the complex emotions of 'real' people. This choice does not only concern methodological questions, but also the degree to which the process of mediation between research subjects and the researcher's audiences becomes *visible*. Williams (2018) also emphasises that it is important to reflect on the opportunities and risks afforded by the fieldwork methodology a researcher chooses. This could concern, for instance, his or her degree of immersion within the local community. This reflection, he argues, helps to avoid "ethically unacceptable consequences" (p. 612) such as stigmatisation or self-incrimination of interviewees through their storytelling or their very act of speaking when their stories become accessible to unintended audiences (e.g., neighbours or international tribunals).

Another important part of narrative scholars' duty to reflect carefully on the ethical dimensions of their role vis-à-vis other stakeholders and intermediaries of the peacebuilding process is a sensitivity to the absence of stories. Any narrative analysis needs to take into consideration *who* gets to talk to *whom* about *what*, under *what circumstances*, and with *what consequences* for storytellers, audiences and their communities (Gready, 2013). This becomes even more important in a context in which many stories remain untold because their narrators have been silenced through trauma, oppression, or death, and survivors remain highly vulnerable in the aftermath of violent conflict, war, and genocide (Graybill, 2004; Ben-Ze'ev, Ginio, and Winter, 2010; Meierhenrich, 2011; Dauphinee, 2015).

Successful peacebuilding, then, is partly dependent on the fragile balance between remembering a violent past and imagining a non-violent future. Narrative approaches can help to uncover the complexities behind practices of (not) speaking and how they shape (non-) agency. In their study of Timor-Leste and Bougainville, George and Kent (2017), for example, deal critically with the fact that women's (and other vulnerable groups') silence about their experiences of conflict-related sexual violence is generally treated either as a precondition for or an obstacle to peacebuilding, often reflecting a conflict between local and international approaches. Silence, however, is not always imposed on them from above, but may also be a form of agency in the context of the post-conflict order by resisting or opposing certain stories of suffering that perpetuate victim identities, or may lead to stigmatisation and (thus) socio-economic marginalisation. In this way, silence enables women who have been subjected to sexual violence to maintain "their personal sense of peace" as well as the "peace that holds within the broader community" (p. 527) which they contribute to. While the authors do not

reflect actively on the narrative terminology that they employ, referring for example to "certain types of storytelling about women's experiences in conflict" (p. 531), the phenomenon under investigation is clearly a narrative one. By remaining silent on some events, the telling of other stories becomes possible in the first place, thereby strengthening, rather than weakening, these women's agency. Taking these dynamics into consideration, the authors point out, is particularly important in the context of hybrid peacebuilding where local norms, customs, and regulatory structures intersect with global efforts at promoting a "gender-just peace" (p. 518) in problematic ways (see also Wilén, 2014, and Boege in this volume).

Uncovering Narrative

Another phenomenon pertaining to narrative research on peace- and statebuilding is that a lot of the narrative work that is already being done in the field remains hidden, usually for one of the following three, often overlapping, reasons. Some scholars, as indicated at the beginning of this chapter, make frequent use of the terms 'narrative' or 'story', but do not employ them in a conceptual manner, instead equating them with common-sense notions such as 'views', 'perceptions', 'ideas' or 'assumptions'. Mitton (2013), for instance, dedicates a whole section of his piece on the post-civil war period in Sierra Leone to "Narratives of War and Peace". However, his discussion of data gathered from official reports and non-structured interviews with ex-combatants does not actually engage with the dynamics of narrating conflict, but focuses on causal explanations for conflict and peace rooted in materialistic aspects and rational interests. While the latter certainly form an important part of ex-combatants' storied experiences of war and conflict transformation, Mitton does not comment on the temporal and spatial links between these and other narrative elements (see also Zanotti et al., 2015, on the "UN narrative concerning sport and peacebuilding").

A second group of authors effectively conducts narrative analyses without labelling them as such. Henry's (2015) study of the "peacekeeping economy" in Liberia is a case in point. While she emphasises that these actors co-construct their "social, cultural, moral and everyday worlds" through "narrating experiences of living and working as a peacekeeper" (p. 373), she does not comment on the particularities of narrative inquiry. Her distinction between "the professional and personal, the military and civilian, and the disciplined and imperial" (p. 375) as "narrative positions", instead, draws on a general discursive framework which assumes that the "talk about" everyday experiences and "embodied practices" of peacekeeping co-construct the peace missions themselves as a meaningful practice.

A third category of authors makes use of narrative as a conceptual lens, but does not follow it all the way through to their analytical method. In particular, the features of narrative interviews vis-à-vis other forms of interview data – which are drawn on by many scholars anchored in the discipline (Brounéus, 2011) – are rarely reflected on. Twort (2018), for example, adopts an ethnographic approach to "explore the webs of meaning attached to education as a narrative in everyday life" (p. 1) in post-conflict Sierra Leone. Drawing on non-structured interviews with locals about their life trajectories and personal success, Twort identifies education as a narrative itself to the extent that its meaning in everyday contexts results from a composition of life events geared towards achieving a better future. While this narrative perspective is very much present in the author's analysis, it is somewhat unclear how it emerges from the interview data. This is because the focus is on education as a 'theme'

and 'frame', rather than the narrative elements that produce perceptions of continuity, threat, disruption, etc. A more in-depth engagement with these elements could strengthen the author's argument about the need for a bottom-up approach to the role of education in order to establish long-term, sustainable peace.

Conclusion: The Value of Narrative for Statebuilding

This chapter has addressed the particular value of narrative for research on and practices of peace- and statebuilding. While the literature in the field reflects the perspectives opened up by the narrative, spatial, and temporal turns in the social sciences, the ways in which heterogeneous events are selectively and purposefully combined to create stories, and what role such storytelling processes play in post-conflict situations, remain under-explored.

As the discussion illustrates, engaging in greater depth with conceptual and analytical perspectives on narrative as a sophisticated qualitative approach can lead to a better understanding of the nature of power imbalances between different stakeholders on the local, regional and international level, and the ways in which they create, negotiate, and exchange certain forms of knowledge. It can also help us understand how intermediaries such as researchers and activists need to present this knowledge in order to effect social and political change. Narrative approaches, therefore, present one important avenue for ensuring that the overall "mixed balance sheet" ascribed to practices of state- and peacebuilding (Goetze, 2016, p. 215) actually leads to improvements. Drawing on ideas from disciplines other than political science and law, especially sociology and cultural studies (Higate and Henry, 2010; Read and Mac Ginty, 2017, p. 148), and engaging in a more intense dialogue with related fields in the social sciences where similar challenges are faced (such as political violence and terrorism studies) may also help to realise this goal.

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