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Addressing Collective Trauma through Narrative Engagement

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IFIT DISCUSSION PAPER | OCTOBER 2025

Executive Summary

This discussion paper explores the relationship between collective trauma and narrative in post-conflict and divided societies. Drawing on emerging insights from psychology, peacebuilding and narrative practice, it argues that traumatic experiences are not only individually held but also collectively transmitted through group stories, cultural symbols and social memory. These narratives help communities make sense of harm, but they can also entrench rigid identities, polarise intergroup relations, and perpetuate cycles of fear, blame and exclusion.

Building on the narrative peacebuilding approach developed by the IFIT Inclusive Narratives Practice Group, the paper looks for practical ways to engage with narratives that allow for new, more complex ways of relating to traumatic experiences, and thus strengthen the capacity of a society to live with and navigate collective trauma in a way that moves away from polarisation and fosters peace and understanding.

Key Insights

Collective trauma is experienced not only individually but equally at the societal level, and becomes encoded in group identities, culture and memory. Collective trauma can result from acute events or chronic structural violence, and manifest in collective emotions of loss and despair, victimhood and angst, which can be transferred across generations. The way in which social groups interpret and give meaning to traumatic events has significant implications not only for their own well-being, but also for their attitude and behaviour towards other groups in society, and can lead to significant socio-psychological barriers to social cohesion.

Trauma fragments narratives and causes a rupture in the story of self and in relationships to others. In the aftermath of collective trauma, groups seek to restore narrative coherence through renewed collective meaning making and restoring a sense of self-continuity and cultural continuity. Events are interpreted and re-interpreted, in a manner that is often disconnected from historical reality. Groups choose how to remember, or how not to remember. These post-traumatic narratives provide a renewed sense of security.

Narratives formed after trauma can become maladaptive over time. While they may initially help communities regain a sense of moral order, they often harden into dominant narratives that resist contradiction and suppress alternative viewpoints. Post-traumatic narratives tend to be linear and lacking in nuance and complexity. They attribute blame, use simplified moral framings and often delegitimise the other. One or more dominant narratives tend to

emerge that are strongly reinforced through narrative policing and socially codified behaviour. They create 'us versus them' thinking, foster distrust, and can be instrumentalised by political actors to mobilise fear, anger and exclusion.

Trauma-based narratives can entrench division and justify violence. Collective trauma can lead to a reduced ability to trust and empathise with other social groups. A competition over victimhood can emerge, along with justifications of redemptive violence. Victims' and survivors' feelings of hate and anger have a tendency to extend to all members of the named perpetrator group and generalise both perpetratorhood and victimhood, thus creating rigid identity boundaries. Collective trauma leads to hypervigilance and a hyperdefensive stance. Groups that have been traumatised tend to view all intergroup conflicts as a continuation of their historical trauma and thus feel less guilt over their own group's actions and are more likely to support militaristic policies over conciliatory ones.

Collective trauma can also positively strengthen a group's resilience. Narratives that highlight acts of resistance, resilience and community support have greater healing capacity and are associated with stronger empathy for other victim groups and desire for social justice. Narratives that have more nuance and more permeable boundaries between victim and perpetrator groups are more conducive to constructive group relations.

Diversifying the narrative landscape is key to long-term reconciliation. In situations of severe past harm and polarising narratives in society, it may seem best to forge a new, shared, inclusive narrative. But while the emergence of an overarching narrative may be a desirable long-term aim, experience shows that forcing such a unifying narrative often fails. A more fruitful approach lies in fostering self-reflection on the narratives that shape individual and collective worldviews, and in promoting greater complexity and nuance in public narratives. This allows for a more diverse 'ecosystem' of narratives to emerge, which better reflects the multiplicity of experiences within society, is less polarising, and provides a more fertile soil for societal healing and reconciliation.

Engaging with narratives can help in three broad ways. First, it can help by facilitating inclusive storytelling. Supporting individuals and groups to reflect on the stories they tell – and why – can reduce defensiveness, interrupt cycles of blame, and expand the space for new and more nuanced and constructive meaning making. Second, it can help by encouraging narrative self-reflection. Enhancing the awareness of the role played by narratives in understanding oneself and one's relationship to the world can reduce bias and foster greater emotional willingness to engage with the other. Finally, narrative engagement

can help to diversify and complexify public narratives. This involves amplifying silenced stories, increasing the visibility of more complex and inclusive narratives, and fostering public recognition of multiple truths – especially through education, art and memorialisation.

Narrative engagement requires the active participation of civic, cultural, religious, political and other leaders. Because such leaders are deeply grounded in the moral and ethical values of their communities, an improved understanding of how narratives are shaped, sustained and transformed can empower them to recognise the narrative environments they inhabit and begin to identify where openings for narrative transformation may lie. They can play a key role in working towards more inclusive narrative landscapes that address collective trauma, foster resilience and enable peaceful engagement.

Acknowledgements

While the responsibility for the content of this discussion paper rests solely with the authors, we would like to extend our deep appreciation to the members of IFIT's Inclusive Narratives Practice Group for their invaluable contributions to the development of the paper. Their rich discussions, critical reflections and generous sharing of lived experience were essential in shaping the core ideas and direction of this work.

Special acknowledgement and thanks go to Sellah King'oro and Refik Hodžić, whose willingness to reflect deeply on their own contexts through this new analytical lens has been a profound inspiration for us, and made us feel that we are touching on something valuable with this topic.

We also wish to give credit to IFIT staff who engaged closely throughout the drafting process, offered thoughtful feedback and editing support, with a particular acknowledgement of the important input provided by Jasmina Brankovic, Mark Freeman and Seth Kaplan. We further gratefully acknowledge the wider IFIT network, whose collaborative spirit and intellectual generosity continue to inform and inspire.

Contents

1. Introduction

In recent years there has been increasing recognition of the impacts of trauma in polarised and conflict-affected contexts. The World Health Organization estimates that 22 percent of people in conflict settings suffer from mental disorders, ranging from anxiety to depression.[1] This is the tip of the iceberg, as many suffer from less clinical manifestations of trauma and the effects extend beyond the individual, passed down through generations and embedded in the cultural DNA.

The way in which social groups interpret and give meaning to traumatic events has significant implications not only for their well-being, but also for their attitude and behaviour towards other groups in society and the prospects for reconciliation. Collective trauma can lead to significant socio-psychological barriers to social cohesion. Moreover, it may prevent societies from thriving and reaching their full potential. This is a dimension of conflict settings that has received insufficient attention in peacebuilding and development practice.

With this discussion paper, we do not have the aspiration or ambition to heal trauma. Rather, we seek to analyse the way collective trauma can linger across generations, affecting the capacity of a society to foster understanding and dignity among its citizens and the prospects for peace and social cohesion. In doing so, we recognise the centrality of narratives, which are systems of stories that help people make sense of their experiences and create a coherent view of the world. The way stories of trauma are told and understood, and in particular the way post-traumatic narratives are formed, interpreted and re-interpreted, may either foster conflict and societal fragmentation or contribute to resilience.

Building on the narrative peacebuilding approach developed by IFIT and the members of its Inclusive Narratives Practice Group,[2] we identify practical strategies for engaging with narratives that allow for new, more complex ways of relating to the experience of collective trauma, and thus strengthen the capacity of a society to live with and navigate the trauma so as to move away from polarisation and foster peace and understanding.

This paper, which is based on original research, begins with a discussion of the long-lasting socio-psychological effects of collective trauma on groups and societies, and the reshaping of collective narratives that ensues as a form of renewed meaning making, a restoration of a sense of coherence, and a reforging of a cultural identity. The paper continues to describe how these post-traumatic narratives often feed cycles of violence, but may also lead to increased resilience, empathy and post-traumatic growth. Illustrative examples from Kenya and Bosnia and Herzegovina give a sense of how these dynamics play out in practice.

Finally, the paper elaborates on a number of strategies that may be adopted to foster a shift towards narratives that are less polarising and more conducive to resilience and constructive intergroup engagement – narratives that provide dignity, agency and voice to all groups within society. We argue that this requires an intentional nurturing of a more complex, diverse and dynamic narrative landscape, which reflects a broad spectrum of individual and collective experiences, while simultaneously promoting shared understanding and social cohesion.

2. The Lingering Effects of Collective Trauma on Societies

Large-scale traumatic experiences, and the way social groups interpret and give meaning to these events, have profound societal effects, which may span generations.

The term 'collective trauma' refers to psychological and social reactions to traumatic events that affect a large group of people or an entire society. Collective trauma changes the narratives, culture and psyche of a group. Traumatic events need not have directly affected all individuals, but their social impact is present in the group in the way they become encoded in culture and habitual practices. With collective trauma, the traumatic stress response is experienced as a group.

Trauma is caused by events that overwhelm an individual's and a group's ability to cope with or respond to a major threat. These events often involve a significant threat to our lives or our bodies and produce terror and strong feelings of helplessness and loss of control.[3] Fluctuating between 'hyper-arousal' and 'hypo-arousal' in response to stress, common symptoms of trauma include anxiety, aggression, hostility, distrust, fear, numbness, depression and social isolation. Trauma hinders a stable sense of self and the capacity to form healthy relationships with others.[4]

Not all trauma results from a single, dramatic, rarely experienced event. Trauma can also be the result of the ongoing structural harm of economic, legal and social systems, through ongoing marginalisation, humiliation and failure to have one's basic needs met. It can likewise be caused by a sudden recognition that the world order and the values it is based on are not at all what one thought they were.[5]

Traumatic responses manifest in collective emotions of loss and despair, victimhood and angst. Trauma often leads to group apathy, silencing, suppression of truth, lack of empathy, a reduced sense of agency, loss of a positive vision for the future, and a reduced ability to trust. It presents itself in intol-

erance of difference, dichotomised 'black and white' thinking, and scapegoating and stereotyping of other groups.[6]

Collective trauma can transcend generations. Collective trauma includes historical trauma and intergenerational trauma. Historically traumatised groups have symptoms in common that can be ascribed to past traumatic experiences. Intergenerational trauma can result in patterns of abuse, unconscious re-enactment of traumatic experiences, and a tendency towards denial and a 'conspiracy of silence', which perpetuate harmful and maladaptive patterns across generations. High levels of post-traumatic stress disorder have been found among second- and third-generation family members of Holocaust survivors, for example.[7] Beyond socio-cultural mechanisms of cross-generational transfer, there is growing evidence that trauma may even be inherited through epigenetic changes.[8]

Although most emphasis in the literature on trauma is on victims and survivors, perpetrators can also be traumatised. With perpetrators, trauma is mostly caused by the realisation that actions taken by them or by members of their social group are not in line with their own moral order and value system, creating a destabilising threat to their moral identity and evoking a sense of guilt and shame.[9]

3. How Collective Trauma Fractures Narratives

Collective trauma shatters people's worldview and understanding of themselves and their relationship to others, meaning their narrative about their individual and group identity.

Trauma causes dissociation and disrupts narratives. When a traumatic event occurs, the sensations entering the brain at the time of the trauma are not properly assembled into a story. The prefrontal cortex is cut off and unable to make order and meaning out of an event. Traumatic memories are dissociated; they are not stored as a narrative with a beginning, a middle and an end, but as isolated sensory imprints – images, sounds and physical sensations – that are stored in a different part of the brain.[10] For this reason, trauma survivors have real difficulties expressing their experiences in a story. Trauma survivors are said to suffer from *narrative wreckage*,[11] as trauma disrupts the self-narrative that gives sense and meaning to the world and one's role in it.

Trauma causes a rupture in the story of self and in relationships to others. In the aftermath of traumatic events, people need to recreate a sense of 'self-continuity', meaning an ability to process narratives, form coherent life stories, and link one's sense of self to the past and future. Self-continuity is

an essential determinant of psychological well-being, and its absence has proven to be predictive of suicide risk.[12] People restore self-continuity by re-storying their lives, looking for ways to explain what happened in a way that recreates a sense of meaning and identity. This story of self also includes a person's identity as a member of a social group.[13]

Trauma constitutes a threat to the collective identity. Trauma raises questions about the significance of the group and splinters its worldview and sense of role in society. At the collective level, self-continuity thus has its corollary in cultural continuity. This produces a psychological need for the reestablishment of a narrative that gives meaning to a group identity. In this regard, reconstruction of a strong cultural identity is shown to be critical to individual and community well-being following traumatic events.[14]

4. Why Collective Trauma Requires Renewed Collective Meaning Making

To restore a sense of coherence and reconstitute a cultural and social identity, a process of renewed sense making is required, which occurs through reshaping the collective narrative.

Through interpretations and reinterpretations of harms suffered or committed in the past, traumatic events become imprinted on the collective memory of a group. Over time, the collective memory becomes the lens through which group members understand their social environment – it becomes a crucial group identity marker or even the epicentre of group identity.[15] In this manner, new mental models are created that provide a source of moral and social orientation, and present a new cohesive ideology or memoryscape.

Collective meanings and cultural interpretations are often disconnected from historical reality. The collective meaning-making process is not restricted to the immediate aftermath of traumatic events but often plays out over time. The meanings that are regenerated are often symbolically resonant rather than factual. According to Jeffrey Alexander, "It is the cultural meanings that are ascribed to past events, and the symbolism, meanings, cultural relevance and circulation of these ideas that breathes collective traumas to full existence".[16]

Groups do not remember the past in neutral ways. Vamik Volkan argues that social groups, particularly those that have suffered significant harm or oppression, often reinforce their identity through repeated storytelling about a *chosen trauma or chosen glory*.[17] He shows how members of a group continually refer to a specific past event, until one mental representation of that event links all the individuals in the group together, becoming a central part

of their identity. This often comes with a *time collapse*, whereby a past event – of which no one alive has a living memory – is emotionally perceived as if it is happening in the present.[18] A chosen trauma and a chosen glory are often associated with an entitlement ideology, meaning a desire to return to an earlier state where the group perhaps had a higher social standing.

In the case of perpetrator groups, they use different strategies to cope with the cognitive and emotional dissonance between the desire to view one's group in a positive light and acknowledgement of severe moral transgressions in its past. One strategy commonly used to overcome this is closing the door on history and focusing the group's discourse on 'looking ahead' and not wanting to 'dwell on the past'. Other strategies often subconsciously employed by perpetrator groups are downplaying their acts of aggression, focusing attention on their victimhood, and reconstructing history by painting the group's role in past events in more positive terms.[19]

Groups may also avoid or suppress certain memories. Members of groups that have perpetrated harms in the past often choose to deny and 'forget' these events through socially reinforced silence. Such strategic silence is frequently upheld by those in power and enforced through control over the narrative, as the Bosnia and Herzegovina example below shows. In a different scenario, groups may choose not to remember due to an unwillingness to cast themselves as victims. The Kenya example, also below, shows how past suffering caused by decisions of leaders of one's own group can be left unspoken, as revealing the acts would paint a negative image and thus reduce in-group social cohesion.

Newly formed collective beliefs and narratives provide a renewed sense of security. These newly formed systems serve an important psychological need: they establish a new ideological structure and mental model that provides a sense of moral orientation, and thus create a new ground underneath one's feet after the old one has been shaken. As a consequence, any change in these beliefs may be psychologically costly to the individual and the group.

These new belief and narrative systems tend to become deeply entrenched. Whereas new collective beliefs and narratives may serve an important function in the initial process of meaning making, over time they tend to become rigid, with fixed and impermeable boundaries. They form a new coherent ideological structure, which resists counterarguments and new or contradictory information. As a result, the group's members stay trapped in a particular way of thinking, in *memory prisons*.[20]

Powerful actors in society tend to reinforce these new systems, especially through narratives. The newly emerged narratives often portray the explanation of the past preferred by those in power, who tend to control the dissemi-

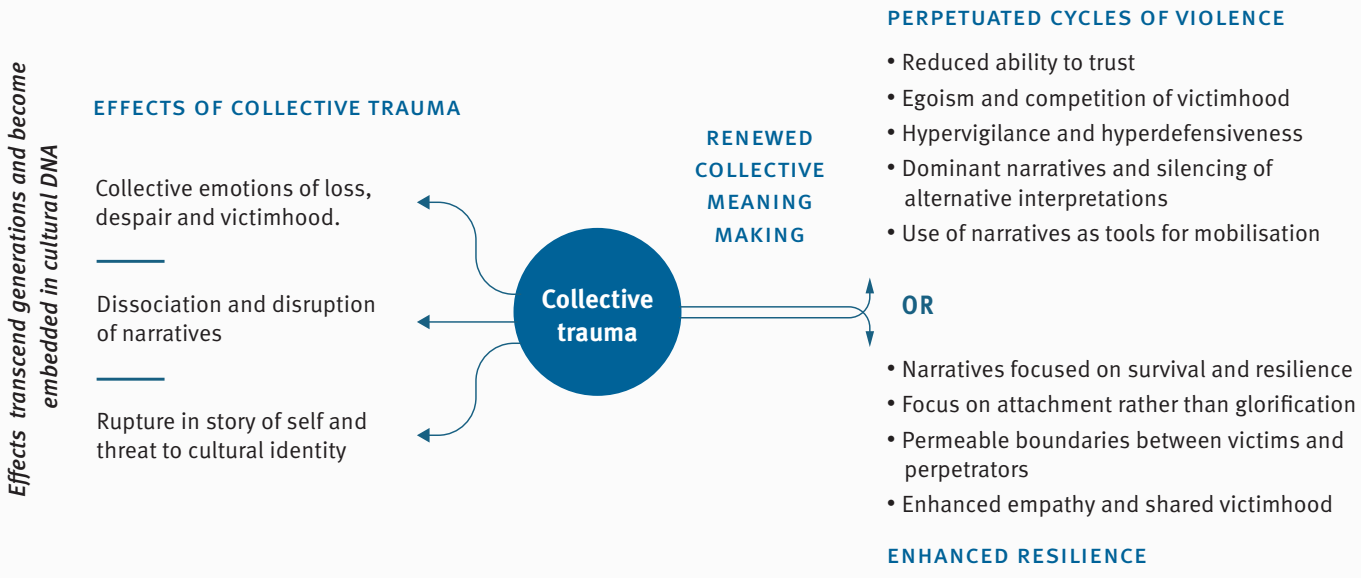
nation of information and counter any potential threats to this new collective identity.[21] Alternative interpretations are censored and individuals expressing such views punished, silenced or shunned.[22] The dominant narrative is maintained, at all costs. This may be even more important for perpetrator groups, as they have a more fundamental need to bandage the wound that the threat to one's moral identity has caused.

5. How Collective Trauma Narratives Can Perpetuate Cycles of Violence

The way collective meaning is made has significant implications for a group's attitude and behaviour towards other social groups and for the prospects of reconciliation. The process bolsters a feeling of shared destiny and in-group cohesion, but often comes at the expense of constructive relations with other groups.[23]

Collective trauma can lead to a reduced ability to trust and empathise with other social groups. While the process of recreating a story of self and reforging a coherent collective identity strengthens in-group social cohesion, the lowered ability to trust tends to be directed towards other groups and undermines intergroup social cohesion. An 'us versus them' mentality can be forged and, in more extreme cases, violence can be seen as redemptive. Dehumanisation and attacks on the other can be justified in the name of self-defence, justice or honour.

Figure 1 Relationships among Collective Trauma, Meaning Making and Narratives



Societies with extensive trauma and conflict are prone to an 'egoism of victimisation'.[24] Victims may find it hard to see beyond their own pain and empathise with the suffering of others, even if it is as severe as theirs or worse.[25] This can lead to justifications of violence towards others, particularly those seen as members of the perpetrator group. In the words of Amela Puljek-Shank, "This is fed by a belief that 'since we have been hurt we have the right to hurt others'. We are not able to see beyond our pain, we are not taking responsibility for hurting others and we feel little guilt about committing violence to the other".[26]

People may enter into a competition of victimhood. A need to assert the primacy of one's own suffering and to clearly establish oneself as the victim often emerges after traumatic events. One's identity as a victim becomes a distinctive and essential part of one's overall identity. The victimisation of any other group may be seen as a threat to one's own group, due to a perception that one's victimisation may be overshadowed and therefore not receive due attention and acknowledgement. For instance, to be recognised as victims of genocide can become a psychological need – since this is the 'crime of all crimes', it makes one the 'victim of all victims'.[27]

Victims' feelings of hate and anger have a tendency to extend to all members of the perpetrator group. Victims and survivors often have strong feelings of anger and hatred towards perpetrators, which can extend to all members of the perpetrator's ethnic, religious or political group. As a consequence, the latter may be deprived of any possible good features, seen as pure evil, and dehumanised. This may be reinforced by constructed myths and collective histories. It may lead to the belief that relief from pain can only occur if its source or cause is punished or destroyed, and redemptive violence may appear on the horizon. In this manner, victims can themselves become aggressors and perpetrators.[28]

Collective trauma leads to hypervigilance and a hyperdefensive stance. Groups that have been traumatised tend to view all intergroup conflicts as a continuation of their historical trauma. These effects are particularly salient if traumatic events have led to a collective experience or sense of existential threat, as for instance in the case of many Israelis.[29]

Moreover, research shows that individuals who are reminded of past harm, and of a narrative of the past that highlights threats to their group, are excessively defensive of their group when confronted with current conflicts. These individuals feel less guilt over their own group's actions and are more likely to support militaristic policies over conciliatory ones. This effect can extend even to conflicts and out-groups completely unrelated to those involved in the original harm.[30] However, this effect is dependent on the socio-psychological

well-being of the individual. More psychologically secure people are less prone to hypervigilance and feelings of revenge, and vice versa.

Leaders may use narratives that enflame fear and anger as tools of mobilisation. They may enflame this hypervigilance and instrumentalise fear, in order to hold on to power or foster cohesiveness against an external enemy. Leaders of a traumatised collective may thus magnify danger, blur reality and fantasy, and constantly remind the public of vague looming threats.[31] Collective trauma can easily be instrumentalised for political gain, and a chosen trauma or glory is particularly conducive to this tactic.

For example, former Serbian leader Slobodan Milošević seized on Serbia's chosen trauma of the 1389 Battle of Kosovo, in which the Serbian Prince Lazar was killed, and ordered Lazar's remains to be placed in a coffin and taken to almost every Serb village and town. Over and over, Lazar's remains were ritualistically buried and exhumed, until they were given a final resting place at the original battleground on the 600th anniversary of the Battle of Kosovo. This encouraged a shared sense of victimisation, followed by a shared sense of entitlement to revenge, and helped Milošević mobilise his supporters, including eventually for violence.[32]

Perpetrator trauma can also foster negative group dynamics. As discussed above, perpetrator trauma often leads to a denial that certain events happened, a rewriting of history, and a wish to look ahead and not dwell on the past. None of these strategies leads to an acknowledgement of the harms done to victim groups, which is one of the key elements that can help victims and survivors to heal. Nor does it allow perpetrators to come to terms with their own past, which reduces the scope for constructive engagement.[33]

Within perpetrator trauma, a distinction can be made between collective guilt and collective shame. With collective shame usually comes an acknowledgement of the harm done, which fosters a sense of moral responsibility and a desire to make amends. In this mindset, people are more likely to view past actions as specific aspects of a group's behaviour that can be controlled and rectified. In contrast, when past actions are interpreted as moral flaws inherent to the group's nature, the ensuing collective guilt tends to lead to denial, paralysis and further radicalisation.[34] This collective guilt mostly goes unrecognised and is pushed into the subconscious.[35] Collective shame is thus more conducive to intergroup cohesion than collective guilt.

6. How Collective Trauma Narratives Can Lead to Increased Resilience

Collective meaning making through narratives after trauma has the potential to increase resilience and enable healing, breaking with the scapegoating and silencing of the past to promote intergroup engagement and cohesion.

Collective trauma has the potential to strengthen a group's resilience. Post-traumatic meaning making can foster strong attachments and cultural identity and reinforce a sense of dignity and collective worth. It may help re-emphasise certain values and norms, strengthen group resilience, and lead to post-traumatic growth.[36]

Narratives focused on survival and resilience have greater healing capacity. A narrative with an emphasis on loss or hopelessness may lead to a sense of irrevocable injury and passivity, while a narrative that highlights acts of resistance, survival and resilience inspires group collaboration, agency and constructive action. These transformative narratives are associated with better psychological well-being and can lead to post-traumatic growth. As time passes, such positive perceptions may grow in importance, as the focus of memory shifts from painful losses to the long-term lessons groups derive from the trauma.[37] In practice, post-traumatic narratives tend to be characterised by a combination of stories of loss and resilience.[38]

Instead of glorification, attachment is a more constructive tenet of group identification. Glorification of the in-group can be seen as a form of collective narcissism, which triggers hypervigilance and defensiveness. By contrast, being strongly attached to one's group without glorifying it functions as a psychological resource that provides a sense of belonging and is more conducive to empathy towards other groups.[39]

Narratives that show more permeable boundaries between victims and perpetrators are more conducive to intergroup cohesion. Groups able to recognise that there were allies and helpers within the perpetrator group – as reflected for example in the "Righteous Among the Nations" designation created after the Holocaust – are less likely to close themselves off in a strong and exclusive victimhood and tend to suffer less from distrust of other groups. For perpetrators, an important differentiating factor is whether the group views its past actions as expressions of an essentially morally flawed aspect of the group's nature or whether the group can interpret past behaviours as something that can be controlled and rectified, which enables them to face up to the truth and integrate it into their new sense of identity in a healthy manner.[40]

Victimhood can also lead to enhanced empathy, based on a shared victim identity. In contrast to competition over victimhood, a victim identity can also take on a more inclusive form. This ability, however, has been noted primarily among more psychologically secure individuals, which again shows the linkages between individual and collective psychological health.[41]

Acknowledgement of past harm and narrative legitimisation are essential for post-traumatic growth and reconciliation. Having one's story heard and acknowledged has been shown to be an important precondition to healing, which creates space for more nuanced and empathetic narratives to emerge. Truth commissions are based on this principle, whereby establishing facts and acknowledging the harm done can validate the experience, dignity and suffering of different groups of victims and survivors and represent a break from the silencing of the past.[42]

KEY CHARACTERISTICS OF COLLECTIVE TRAUMA NARRATIVES

Polarising post-traumatic narratives tend to be linear and lacking in nuance and complexity. They attribute blame, use simplified moral framings, and often delegitimise the other. They entrench fragmentation in society, in line with the characteristics below.

Simplified, exclusionary and polarising:

- Rely on 'good versus evil' stories, portraying 'black and white', stereotypical and constructed images of one's own group as inherently good and other groups as essentially evil.
- Employ 'us versus them' narratives, expressing strong distrust and blanket feelings of hatred towards all members of an adversarial group, or towards the world writ large.
- Tend to be narcissistic, emphasising in-group glorification and entitlement.
- Justify redemptive violence as necessary for the security of the group.

Dominant and imposing:

- Withstand – and punish – alternative interpretations.
- Reinforce existing power structures and deny marginalised perspectives.
- Create firm distinctions between victims and perpetrators, with little nuance or sense of shared experience or responsibility.
- Leave no space for what Primo Levi calls 'grey zones' between polarised groups or the particularities of people's experiences.

Socially constraining:

- Set strong societal expectations of how to behave as a member of the in-group.
- Codify 'correct' behaviour, for instance what it means to be a 'worthy victim' or a 'good patriot'.
- Sanction any treading outside predetermined boundaries.

On the positive side, non-polarising post-traumatic narratives are more conducive to psychosocial well-being and constructive group relations. They are more likely to promote resilience and cross-group engagement, in line with the characteristics detailed below.

Inclusionary and resilience-promoting:

- Focus on acts of defiance, resilience and community support.
- Enhance empathy for other victim groups and a desire for social justice.
- Allow more permeable boundaries between groups, such as through acknowledging allies within the perpetrator group.

7. Narratives and Collective Trauma in Practice

To see how narratives and collective trauma interact to shape identity, trust and intergroup relations in practice, we turn to Kenya and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Drawing upon the first-hand reflections of two peacebuilding practitioners with deep ties to the communities in question, the two cases serve as illustrative examples and interpretations of the way narrative forces operate in situations of collective trauma.[43]

While Kenya's narrative landscape is shaped by political betrayal, ethnic rivalry and the mobilisation of memory across cycles of localised violence, Bosnia and Herzegovina reveals how those same dynamics unfold in the aftermath of mass atrocities and through more formalised mechanisms of denial and erasure. In both contexts, trauma is not simply remembered; it is actively narrated, suppressed or revived in ways that shape group identity and intergroup relations.

7.1 Kenya: Narratives of Political Competition between Luo and Kikuyu

Kenya has experienced recurring waves of political tension and intergroup violence, particularly around election cycles. While peace has largely held, the country remains shaped by unresolved trauma tied to historical exclusion,

political betrayal and ethnic rivalry. The following reflections centre on the narratives from the Luo and Kikuyu communities, two groups whose relationship has been marked by deep mistrust.[44]

Political Competition as the Main Group Identity Marker

Kenya is a multiethnic country that has seen repeated ethnic violence, notably around transitions of power. Tensions are largely driven by political competition, particularly between the Luo and Kikuyu communities. Since the Luo conceded the presidency to a Kikuyu leader at independence in 1963, a member of the Luo group has not held the highest public office, which is perceived as a collective trauma by the Luo community. The political competition has become a key marker of group identity for both communities.

A Narrative of Betrayal and Loss

The Luo community's sense of betrayal dates to 1966, when their political leader was dismissed from the vice presidency by the Kikuyu president,[45] as well as a 1969 demonstration during a presidential visit that escalated into violence, in which numerous civilians were killed by police fire.[46] The latter event features heavily in the collective memory of the Luo community as the Kisumu Massacre. Although these events happened decades ago, they are remembered with striking clarity, even by those not yet born at the time. The incidents are not just historical episodes but living stories, imprinted onto the collective memory and invoked to explain the Luos' continued exclusion from political power. The past is not past; it is present in every act of political interpretation.

A Frozen Narrative and Time Collapse

Despite later efforts at cross-ethnic power sharing – most notably in the government of national unity between Kikuyu president Mwai Kibaki and Luo leader Raila Odinga – the dominant narrative among the Luo has not shifted. The narrative remains frozen, retold in nearly identical form across generations. Even significant events that might offer a counternarrative have failed to alter the core story of betrayal, exclusion and mistrust. As a result, "If you talked to a Luo today, you would think the Kisumu Massacre happened yesterday".[47]

Delegitimisation and Moral Framing

Both sides moralise their histories in ways that flatten nuance and harden positions. For many Luo, the Kikuyu are cast not only as political adversaries but also as morally untrustworthy – a people who betrayed a historical pact. In turn, many Kikuyu justify the actions of Kikuyu-led governments as politically necessary, including firing a disloyal vice president and responding to

dangerous security threats. The prevailing Luo view is that they are consistently seen by the Kikuyu as inferior.

Strategic Silence and Socially Codified Behaviour

Not all trauma gets told. Post-independence, the Kikuyu experienced displacement and betrayal – first via British colonial land grabs and later via their own post-independence leadership's land policies – but most do not narrate this pain. The Kikuyu narrative has been shaped to exclude these losses, lest they weaken loyalty to a respected leader or introduce moral ambiguity into the group's identity. Narrating the pain would risk destabilising the group's internal cohesion and challenging the dominant narrative of Kikuyu political legitimacy and strength. This silence is a strategic omission, since what remains unsaid can be as politically potent as what is spoken. Those members of the group who dare to shed light on these particular pages in history are at risk of being cast out of the group.

Narratives as Tools for Mobilisation

Trauma narratives in Kenya are not just remembered; they are reactivated. Political campaigns routinely draw on these stories to mobilise ethnic solidarity and opposition. Moreover, the narratives extend beyond the political sphere and penetrate deep into society. Youth *bunges* (community discussion groups) and social media amplify the stories, sometimes more powerfully than official speeches. The narratives are retold not to foster understanding but to deepen divides.

7.2 Bosnia and Herzegovina: Redemptive Violence and Narrative Policing in Prijedor

Bosnia and Herzegovina was one of the main arenas of the multiple wars surrounding the breakup of Yugoslavia. While peace has been restored, political and social institutions remain highly fragmented, and the past has not been laid to rest. The following account stems from the city of Prijedor, a town that was inhabited by Bosnian Serbs, Bosnian Croats and Bosniaks (Bosnian Muslims) before the war. After the Serbs took power in April 1992, a campaign of violence was orchestrated in the area, aimed at removing Bosniaks and Bosnian Croats. More than 3,000 people were killed, villages were razed to the ground, and over 50,000 people were forcibly detained in camps.[48]

Redemptive Violence and Chosen Trauma

Bosnian Serbs made sense of their actions through a narrative of redemptive violence, a dominant storyline that legitimised harm by framing it as necessary for the survival, security and liberation of their people. This narrative drew deeply on historical grievances and cultural memory from World War II

and the Battle of Kosovo. The latter served as a chosen trauma, and the narrative was anchored in emotional connections to latent notions of a 'Greater Serbia'. The subsequent atrocities were diminished and normalised as to be "expected in situations of war". The presence of camps and massacres was often denied altogether. Tellingly, today, the city tourism office speaks of the 1992 violations as "demographic changes".[49]

A Narrative of Betrayal and a Shift in Identity Markers

In the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (1945–1992), the foundational narrative was one of 'brotherhood and unity'. This definition of community changed rapidly with the subsequent war, from an inclusive notion to an in-group centred notion of identity. Ethnic identity rose to the foreground, at the expense of civic identity. Many Bosniaks in Prijedor experienced the betrayal of the notion of brotherhood as deeply traumatic when the atrocities were committed. One camp survivor remarked that being betrayed by one's 'brother' was more painful than the camp experience itself. This is a vivid example of narrative betrayal and the emotional damage caused when foundational stories disintegrate.[50]

The Dominant Narrative and Contested Memory

The authorities in Prijedor today have a strong hold on public narratives, and the official narrative drives contestations over memory. The dominant narrative is upheld through material and emotional infrastructures. The city centre hosts 16 memorials to Serbs killed in the Yugoslav wars, including those killed elsewhere. By contrast, there is not a single memorial to the 3,300 Bosniaks and Bosnian Croats killed locally. Attempts to commemorate these victims have been systematically suppressed. While in surrounding rural areas such monuments may be allowed, in the city itself this political space does not exist, which shows the weight authorities give to controlling the narrative.

Efforts to introduce more inclusive and less threatening memorials have also been consistently blocked. Based on the assumption that the suffering of children is ubiquitously condemned, citizens led an initiative in Prijedor to establish a joint memorial for the 102 Bosniak and Bosnian Croat children who died in the war. But the initiative ran into numerous obstacles and ultimately failed after 15 years of trying. While a newspaper obituary acknowledging the tragedy of the children was permitted, the erection of a public monument continued to be denied. This shows how acknowledgement and legitimisation of victimhood can threaten dominant narratives.

Socially Codified Behaviour and Narrative Policing

The authorities in Prijedor maintain tight control over who is allowed to be remembered, what must remain unspoken, and how silence is enforced. State control over public discourse is pervasive. The cultural sphere is also tightly controlled. The works of Prijedor's most renowned author and playwright, Darko Cvijetić, are well known across Bosnia. Yet they cannot be read or performed publicly in Prijedor, as they offer a more complex and evidence-based account of the past that challenges official memory. This is despite the fact that the author is a Serb and served in the Bosnian Serb Army.

In the social sphere, things are slightly different. In private conversations between Serbs and their Bosniak and Croat neighbours, people speak more openly and subtly about past events, acknowledging the harm done. But these openings are fragile. As soon as another person enters the space, the conversation shuts down, influenced by fear and social sanction. This shows that the control over the discourse has to some extent become internalised.

Generalised Perpetratorhood and Victimhood

In the aftermath of the war, transitional justice efforts placed significant pressure on Serbs to acknowledge their group's role in the violence. Many Bosniaks, meanwhile, adopted a victim identity, which was reinforced by international political and accountability approaches. While aimed at redress, these dynamics had unintended consequences. Perpetratorhood became broadly assigned across Serb communities, generating a sense of collective guilt and encouraging a turn inward towards familiar in-group narratives that offered emotional safety and moral clarity. At the same time, the perceived moral superiority conferred on Bosniak victimhood risked hardening fixed roles. Generalised perpetratorhood and victimhood thus entrenched simplified narratives and reduced constructive engagement.

Narratives as Tools for Mobilisation

While narratives have been frequently used as tools of group mobilisation, the tactic is losing effectiveness. Narratives in Bosnia and Herzegovina have fluctuated in emphasis and tone over time, particularly as political actors have attempted to shape public memory. In the immediate aftermath of the war, for example, there was a degree of public acknowledgement of the violence. But this space quickly narrowed as Serb nationalist narratives reasserted themselves. Later, around 2006, rhetoric briefly softened with official gestures of recognition by the Bosnian Serb leadership, but in recent years it has hardened again, leading some observers to note echoes of the early 1990s.

Even as political narratives retrench, however, the public's susceptibility to incitement appears to be waning. Interconnected economies, exposure to other ways of living through migration to Western Europe, and growing

fatigue with political manipulation have introduced narrative cracks. These shifts suggest that the hold of divisive narratives in Prijedor may have weakened and the resilience of people against manipulation may have increased, thus opening space for more complex and interconnected meaning making.

8. Strategies for Engaging with Narratives and Collective Trauma

Having examined the complex relation between collective traumas and narrative formation, we now address two practice-oriented questions. First, how can our understanding of narratives help societies address the effects of collective trauma? Second, what strategies may be adopted to shift towards narratives that are less polarising and more conducive to resilience and engagement between opposing groups?

In situations of severe past harm and polarising narratives, it may seem best to forge a new, shared, inclusive narrative. But while the emergence of an overarching narrative may be a desirable long-term aim, experience shows that forcing such a unifying narrative often fails. It encounters resistance from narratives that are frozen and rigid, are forcefully maintained by powerful actors, or do not connect with people emotionally.[51]

A more fruitful approach lies in fostering self-reflection on the narratives that shape individual and collective worldviews, and in promoting greater narrative complexity and nuance in public narratives. This allows for a more diverse 'ecosystem' of narratives to emerge, which better reflects the multiplicity of experiences within society, is less polarising, and provides a more fertile soil for societal healing and reconciliation.[52]

Engaging with narratives can help in several interconnected ways. One crucial way is by enhancing awareness of how narratives shape understanding of the self and its relationship to the world. This process can reduce bias and foster greater emotional willingness to engage with the other. In parallel, diversifying and complexifying public narratives can allow for a broader diversity of stories to be recognised and legitimised, lend voice to and help reduce the silencing of affected groups, and expand the spectrum of emotions and behaviours that are considered socially legitimate.

Likewise, narrative practices that support meaning making, identity repair, and the emergence of agency can further help individuals and communities re-author their post-traumatic stories in ways that affirm dignity, deepen resilience, open space for new possibilities, and move from stuck patterns of blame, guilt and victimhood to more constructive interpretations. These

strategies are not linear steps but mutually reinforcing pathways towards greater narrative complexity and social cohesion.

8.1 Encouraging Narrative Self-Reflection

Engaging in self-reflection, individually and collectively, can bring underlying biases to the surface, illuminate the narratives we construct about ourselves and others, and reveal the extent to which these narratives, particularly post-traumatic narratives, influence our thinking.

Members of a society are often like fish in water, unaware of the environment that shapes their perceptions and behaviours. Research has indicated that mere awareness of one's biases in narratives can help one overcome them.[53] This insight opens opportunities to collaborate with diverse political and civic leaders in fostering reflective practices that promote greater self-awareness and openness.

Surfacing prevalent narratives raises awareness of their impact on behaviour. A participatory process of identifying, articulating and mapping dominant narratives – a narrative assessment – is a good starting point for making these narratives more visible.[54] It also sheds light on the degree to which they influence behaviour and societal attitudes, and in turn contribute to societal fragmentation. In addition to these dominant narratives, more nuanced or inclusive narratives can be brought to light and mapped, as well as silenced narratives. When conducted in a participatory fashion, the emergence of this palette of narratives can already set in motion a process of self-reflection among those involved.

Increasing awareness of how collective trauma manifests at the societal level provides insight into the influence of narratives. Making people see to what extent they have bought into dominant narratives can help them to nuance these perspectives. For both victim and perpetrator groups, the notions of chosen trauma and chosen glory may help them see the gap between the historical reality and socially constructed narratives. Social leaders may also become aware of the degree to which glorification has become the main tenet of group identification and reflect on whether they would be able to shift their group towards the tenets of strong cultural identity, attachment and resilience. In addition, victim groups can become more aware of how they may have succumbed to competition over victimhood and move into more shared notions of victimhood.

This self-reflection may lead to a reduced susceptibility to being mobilised on the basis of these narratives. When people understand the hold narratives have on them, and how politicians and other influential actors are instrumentalising these narratives for political gain, they become less susceptible to manipulation and the narratives lose some of their power.

Self-reflection needs to overcome defensive positioning, in particular in perpetrator groups. This may be the most difficult dimension of moving towards societal healing, as the psychological need to hold on to dominant narratives may be the greatest and the desire for change the lowest for perpetrator groups. This requires strong moral leadership and a deep understanding among influential actors of the negative impact of the narratives on the broader society as well as on their own group. But there are ways of supporting (descendants of) perpetrator groups to acknowledge and process the past.

For example, leaders can help people become aware of the degree of denial in their group and attempt to foster a greater sense of acknowledgement of the past by speaking out clearly and publicly. To reduce defensiveness, they can make a clear distinction between actions ('our group committed harm') and identity ('our group is morally flawed'), emphasising that taking responsibility is an act of courage and strength. They can frame this responsibility in ways that align with the group's values, by using stories from the group's past that highlight courage, justice and moral accountability. This process can be presented as a form of cultural growth and the logical evolution of history.

Political and civic leaders need to work within their groups to prepare members mentally for these processes, including later engagements with other groups. Narrative shifts can carry a significant psychological cost, for victims as well as perpetrators. For communities with histories of victimisation, moving beyond competitive or exclusionary victimhood identities is also emotionally demanding. It may involve letting go of narratives that have served as sources of meaning, legitimacy or unity. Often a deep inward process of self-reflection and opening up is required before there is sufficient emotional readiness to reach out across the group boundary; otherwise, efforts at intergroup trust building may backfire or result in superficial outcomes. This is an aspect that is often overlooked in peacebuilding efforts, which tend to move prematurely to intergroup contact for improving trust and social cohesion.

8.2 Diversifying the Narrative Landscape

A rich narrative landscape allows for a multiplicity of diverse stories to flourish, reflecting the complexities of political and social realities and lived experience, and reducing the influence of the binary and polarising narratives that hinder peaceful and constructive intergroup engagement.

Dominant narratives need special attention because they eclipse other narratives, impoverishing the narrative landscape. Narratives have their expression in the public sphere, through media, art, public symbols, rituals and memorials, public speeches and statements by leaders, as well as other visible representations of history embedded in the environment. Due to collective trauma, the resulting narrative landscape tends to be one of scarcity,

with one or two dominant narratives outcompeting other narratives. Nurturing a more diverse narrative ecosystem involves diminishing the dominance of prevailing narratives by amplifying other more subtle, nuanced and inclusive narratives, as well as enriching dominant narratives with greater complexity. The aim is an increase in the diversity of narratives and a stronger acknowledgement of lived experience in the public sphere.

Supporting the emergence and enhancing the legitimacy of alternative versions of reality unfreezes and enriches the narrative landscape. The more a narrative is spoken or shared, the more simplified and calcified it can become. As such, the unfreezing of beliefs is a precondition for acceptance and internalisation of information that counters dominant narratives. The process of unfreezing usually begins with the appearance of a new idea that is inconsistent with held beliefs and attitudes, which causes some kind of tension. To be effective in the face of the powerful societal mechanisms that prevent the penetration of new ideas, this *instigating* idea or belief must be of high validity and come from a credible source, forcing the individual to pause and consider the conflicting information.

On a societal level, only a minority may emerge that has the courage to present alternative ideas and promote their dissemination.[55] Protecting, supporting and amplifying these voices, by giving them a platform and means to further disseminate alternative ideas and stories, is thus an important role for (independent) media, civil society, artists and others with the power to influence public opinion.

Increasing the complexity of existing narratives enables peaceful engagement. More complex narratives are stories that have a thicker plot, that are more multidimensional. They emphasise the complexities of history and blur the boundaries between adversaries, between the good and the bad, between victims and perpetrators. They introduce shades of grey into 'black and white' narratives.

A useful example is what has been called the 'other barn' story. When a book was published that described Poles burning their Jewish neighbours in a barn during World War II, many Poles reacted with rage because the episode violated their need to believe in Poland as a nation victimised by the Nazis. The Israeli ambassador to Poland at the time, however, said that he also remembered other barns, referring to Poles who hid him and other Jews during the war. This 'other barn' narrative, which includes both the horrific crimes and the acts of grace that took place in the traumatic past, added nuance into a dominant narrative and opened the door to different thinking.[56] Such complex narratives need to be activated, promoted and given more space in the public discourse.

Diversifying the dominant narrative is a political endeavour and requires courage. Critiquing and disrupting dominant narratives is an act of political opposition and potential empowerment. At its heart lies the question of legitimacy – which stories are allowed to be told and acknowledged. When the discursive strongholds that shape how people narrate their experience are highly polarised, the risks of speaking are high for all parties to a traumatic event. Telling these stories is an act of narrative resistance and a struggle for narrative recognition, and witnessing these stories can be an act of support, especially when it is done in public.

The enriched narrative landscape needs to be visible in the public sphere. Memorials, statues, street names and other public reminders of (re-interpreted) history are highly symbolic manifestations of official narratives. Yet, removing the symbols of dominant narratives can be politically and socially thorny, as seen in Prijedor, and thus it may be more feasible to increase the range of narratives that are publicly visible by creating more equity in memorialisation, leading to a complexified memoryscape. Public reminders of the stories and lived experiences of nondominant social groups or victim groups can further help diversify the public narrative, for example through media and art. The diversification of stories also needs to come through in education, museums and other outlets of history.

Transformation of collective trauma narratives requires moving beyond rhetoric. Being heard, having one's story legitimised, and being acknowledged as a victim or survivor are important preconditions for healing, as they restore dignity and agency. But apologies that are deemed inauthentic, public statements that are unaccompanied by policy changes, or agreements that are half-heartedly implemented may be interpreted as manipulative or performative, leading to renewed resentment, disengagement and narrative entrenchment. When symbolic gestures are not matched with efforts at accountability, reparations or institutional reform, the original harm may be compounded.

Similarly, the impact of structures, systems and other elements in the environment that remind people of historical trauma narratives must not be underestimated. These include obvious signs of poverty and marginalisation, media-portrayed stereotypes, institutional discrimination, and so forth. Explicitly addressing such inequalities can assist in reducing the salience of exclusionary victim narratives.

8.3 Facilitating Meaning Making, Identity Repair and Narrative Agency

Providing trauma-, conflict- and culturally sensitive spaces for people to reflect on and tell their stories can help restore a sense of coherent identity, agency and dignity. At the same time, to mitigate the risk that storytelling further entrenches linear and exclusionary narratives, it is essential to support

people to understand the narrative environment they inhabit and encourage an increased complexity, variety and nuance in their stories.

Sharing one's collective trauma story can help generate new forms of meaning and support a sense of narrative integration. It can enable a restored sense of self-continuity and cultural continuity, which can contribute to healing and resilience. This can be done through various narrative approaches, such as storytelling exercises, art and drama, or creative methods such as weaving one's story or the story of one's group into a quilt.[57] This kind of engagement can be facilitated by mediators, therapists, civil society organisations, church leaders and other community leaders. Often there are traditional practices for storytelling in a given context, which could be taken as a starting point, provided they can enable safe spaces and allow for divergent stories.

Narrative approaches can help individuals and groups reconnect with a sense of agency. One approach, Narrative Exposure Therapy, supports people in constructing a life narrative that contextualises traumatic experiences. It is often used for groups that experienced trauma as a result of political, cultural or social forces, such as refugees. The method does not focus exclusively on the traumatic experiences, but rather engages a broader perspective on one's life and incorporates some positive events, thus cultivating a strong personal identity and reclaiming agency. As a result, individuals and groups learn to reframe their experiences and see themselves as capable and resourceful, constituting a more resilient identity.[58]

Narrative approaches must challenge participants to increase the complexity of their stories. Such processes need to guide people to move from recounting events to exploring meaning, growth and resilience. In particular, they need to help participants re-author their stories, challenge simplistic narratives, and incorporate multiple perspectives. However, while sharing stories in group settings can foster solidarity and shared understanding, the group must also be supported to move beyond individual accounts to collective reflection and action. Unstructured storytelling can perpetuate oversimplified or harmful narratives, such as focusing on blame, victimhood or a single perspective.

Crucial for any storytelling exercise is to create a supportive space.[59] Without this, storytelling can reinforce feelings of vulnerability or helplessness. And, as in all things, context matters. For example, in a highly restrictive environment, with strong dominant narratives, it can be dangerous to diverge from the official paradigm. Similarly, there may be strong cultural limitations in how openly one may speak out. As such, persons facilitating narrative evolution need to be attentive to the significant role that cultural and power dynamics can play in terms of whose collective trauma stories are told, believed or memorialised.

Table 1 Strategies for Engaging with Narratives and Collective Trauma

Encouraging narrative self-reflection	Conduct a narrative assessment, mapping dominant, silenced and emerging narratives to illuminate power and legitimacy dynamics
	Raise awareness of in-group narrative dynamics and how legitimacy is policed internally
	Emphasise the distinction between in-group actions and identity
	Acknowledge personal losses entailed in narrative transformation
	Ensure in-group emotional readiness before encouraging intergroup contact
Diversifying the narrative landscape	Unfreeze beliefs by encouraging new, credible ideas and narrative elements that challenge dominant narratives
	Introduce shades of grey into 'black and white' narratives
	Amplify voices and stories that are alternatives to dominant narratives
	Publicly support and serve as witness to struggles for narrative recognition
	Make transformed narratives publicly visible via memorialisation
	Underpin narrative transformation with institutional and policy reforms that address structural inequalities and group grievances
Facilitating meaning making, identity repair and narrative agency	Use narrative approaches and tools to facilitate locally relevant storytelling while recognising local power dynamics
	Contextualise traumatic experiences in a broader life story
	Move from individual recounting of events to collective reflection and action that shifts notions of victimhood and resilience
	Create a supportive space for narrative transformation that accounts for contextual constraints
	Use trauma-sensitive methods and provide access to a mental health professional
	Launch a public process to promote acknowledgement and legitimisation of transformed narratives

Re-traumatisation needs to be anticipated and avoided. In narrative work that responds to collective trauma, harmful coping behaviours and symptoms need to be destigmatised, and the presence of a mental health professional is recommended. Essential are active listening practices, a compassionate understanding, a nonjudgemental positive regard, and not demanding disclosures beyond what is shared voluntarily. Because shifting narratives implies changing parts of stories that people cling to because they served them, it is also important to acknowledge the psychological cost of 'narrative loss'.

Public acknowledgement and legitimisation of these narratives are important for societal healing and reconciliation. While personalised storytelling practices can offer important openings for meaning making and identity repair, their societal transformative potential depends on whether they are acknowledged and legitimised externally. Without accompanying processes of self-reflection on the stories individuals and groups inhabit in the face of collective trauma, and without efforts to surface and complexify dominant narratives, these practices risk reinforcing simplified or binary understandings of the past. Storytelling alone cannot build complexity in the narrative landscape; it must be held within a wider process that actively engages the politics of narrative and the power of interpretation.

9. Conclusion: Towards More Inclusive Narratives and Resilience

From a peacebuilding perspective, the ultimate objective of engaging with narratives hardened by collective trauma is to foster the development of inclusive narratives that provide dignity, agency and voice to all groups within society and reduce the risk or reality of violence. The narratives must ideally reflect a broad spectrum of individual and collective experiences, while simultaneously promoting shared understanding and social cohesion.

More inclusive narratives can bring people from competition over victimhood or perpetrator defensiveness to a shared empathy and greater sense of connectedness. It is often the complexity within these narratives that makes such shifts possible, offering a counterweight to oversimplified or binary framings. When nourished methodically, they can strengthen the connective tissue of society, offer space for both personal expression and deeper engagement across lines of difference, and provide a critical foundation for constructive dialogue that can hold tension and mitigate the binary constructions that fuel societal polarisation and conflict.

However, in contexts of collective trauma, such peace-conducive and inclusive narratives cannot be engineered from the top down. Instead, they require sustained engagements within and across diverse and dynamic groups through tailored spaces that are intentionally nurtured across all levels of society. Narrative transformation is not about replacing one story with another. It is about disrupting what stories do, expanding who gets to tell them, and creating space for more complex and interconnected ways of making meaning together.

A deeper understanding of how narratives are shaped, sustained and transformed is especially important in contexts of collective trauma and can empower civic and political leaders to recognise and act purposively in mitigating the trauma-specific challenges of the discursive environments they inhabit, ultimately identifying where openings for narrative transformation may lie.

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