

EDITORIAL

Engaging Conflict Narratives: Challenges, Strategies and Horizons

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Once upon a time, the *International Journal of Conflict, Engagement and Resolution*, together with the Center for the Study of Narrative and Conflict Resolution (CNCR), at George Mason's School for Conflict Analysis and Resolution (S-CAR), conspired to develop a special issue, focused on narrative and its application to understanding, engaging and resolving conflicts. CNCR's mission is to create a hub for narrative analysis and narrative engagement for conflict resolution, in local, national, and international conflict. Jay Rothman, co-editor at IJ CER and Sara Cobb, director of CNCR, imagined that the issue would invite readers to consider how narrative is/could be important to our understanding of, and intervention in, conflict. They solicited papers from colleagues at, or associated with, CNCR. These papers were then reviewed and revised. The articles that unfold in this special issue, together, offer a snapshot of this intersection of the complex and multitudinous ways narrative can be pertinent to conflict analysis and resolution. We are pleased to offer this special issue, as a way to engage both scholars and practitioners working to engage and resolve conflicts.

The intersection of narrative and conflict is inherently complex. First, narrative is both the object of the analysis and the focus of intervention, but it is also the medium for any analysis and intervention. Reflexivity is foundational to narrative studies of conflict – analysis is always both itself a narrative, and an intervention in the narrative landscape of any conflict. This makes it hard for scholars and practitioners to stand outside of the meaning-making processes through which we make sense of conflict and engage it. Our stories, as analysts of and intervenors in conflict, are, of course, part of the narrative landscape of that conflict. Working with a narrative frame calls up the reflexive, and at times paradoxical, conundrums that result from building narratives, about narratives. From this perspective, a narrative approach to conflict analysis and intervention calls for reflexive knowledge of how we, as storytellers, in the conflict, make sense of ourselves and our role.

Second, this narrative/conflict intersection is complex as narratives circulate in a landscape of other narratives; they do not exist in isolation but on the contrary are brought to life in and through interaction. And in a conflict, this interac-

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Sara Cobb

tion contributes to regulate and restrict, if not police, what narratives can be told, and how they are told. In other words, as narratives engage each other, in a given conflicted landscape, they work to accomplish hegemonic control over that landscape. So, this “interaction” is really a struggle for mastery, for narrative supremacy. But the marginalized narratives, the ones that seek to counter the master narrative, do not slink away in the night, licking their narrative wounds; they consolidate themselves via intra-group interaction, and maintain a sharp look-out for any logical or ethical weakness in the master narrative. Whether it is power as the capacity to exploit narrative, power as the ability to create “sticky” narratives, or power in the narrative’s own capacity to legitimate itself, and marginalize any opposition, the power of narrative to escalate, as well as transform conflicts must be included in our assessment of the narrative/conflict nexus. From this perspective, a narrative approach to conflict analysis and resolution calls for a *critical* analysis of narrative dynamics.

Third, because history itself is narrative, a story about what happened to whom and why, the narrative/conflict intersection must include not only attention to time, but also the layered way that historical narratives accrue descriptions that become, like sedimentary rock, “truth”, over time. And in this process, historical narratives, as well as truth itself, hide from us the messy details that could contradict, or challenge, our understanding. From this perspective, a narrative approach to conflict analysis and resolution calls for the interrogation of history and accumulated facts that all too often simplify, rather than complexify, our understandings of a given conflict.

Together, the articles in this special issue address these complexities, as well as provide examples of the multitudinous ways that narrative can be used to understand, as well as transform, conflicts. Dr. John Winslade’s article, “A Case Study of a Narrative Restorative Conference”, is the lead article for a reason: it offers a description of a narrative intervention practice called “externalization” and, in so doing, anchors our understanding of how narratives can be engaged, towards relational transformation. John provides a transcript of a process of restorative justice, giving us, as readers, a ring-side seat for both the evolution of the narratives, and John’s role in supporting that process. We thought to put this article first to accent for you, our readers, the critical importance of micro-level conversational moves that comprise narrative practice. This, we hope, challenges the belief that narrative is “macro” and that micro-level conversations can do little to change them. All of narrative change happens not through marketing “good” narratives, but by interacting with narratives, in conversations between people. Additionally, Dr. Winslade’s article is a great read – it moves along with the ease of any good story. In this way, it demonstrates the power of story to support our learning, in this case, about narrative itself.

The second article, “Narrative Approaches to Understanding and Responding to Conflict”, by Dr. Sarah Federman, offers a sweeping review of narrative research methods, narrative interventions and even offers a description of narrative evaluation. This article provides an excellent bibliography as part of this review, mentioning some who have contributed mightily to the intersection of narrative and conflict. What we can see, through her article, is the coherence and

resonance of narrative analysis, with narrative practice. She offers some case examples that drive home her points, so the article is not just a theoretical description, but is also anchored in real cases, lighting our way, as readers. Sarah's article touches on several of the complexities mentioned above, including power and reflexivity, and offers an orientation, as any good review, to a narrative approach to conflict.

Jessica Smith's article, "Snaga Žene: Countering Discourses of Victimhood in Bosnia-Herzegovina", takes us on a deep dive into a specific case, exploring the power dynamics of dominant narratives and women's struggles to counter them in a post-conflict setting. Jessica provides an excellent description of the way that women in the Bosnian conflict were storied in and through the institutionalized narratives that developed after the war, anchored by UN Resolution 1325, which mandated programmes for women in post-conflict settings, storying them as "victims" of war crimes. And indeed, the Bosnian women were victims of war crimes. Using a narrative lens, Jessica shows how these women were also victims of these institutionalized narratives – she refers to this as a form of "representational violence". To support women to counter the "victim" narrative, Jessica used an arts-based process called "photovoice" that enabled women to take pictures of their lives, and then narrate the pictures. She then did a narrative analysis of these stories and found, contrary to the dominant narrative, that women storied themselves as "strong", building up stories of their capacity to respond agentically to struggles and challenges. This article helps us explore the complex relationship between agency, as the capacity to story one's experience and have it elaborated by others, and conflict. In our view, the article breaks new theoretical, as well as practical ground.

Dr. Alison Castel and Dr. Sara Cobb offer readers an article that addresses a core puzzle at the heart of the narrative practice of conflict resolution – does "participation", bringing people together to problem-solve, design, or collaborate on building peaceful solutions, actually change the narratives on the ground, or does it just move the chairs around on the deck of the Titanic? If indeed a conflict is constituted by the set of narratives that circulate in that conflict, how would we, as practitioners, know whether fostering participation of people in peace-building processes alters the narrative foundations of the conflict, creating real change (*revolution*) or just reinforces existing narrative structures, promoting *reform*, which might lead to an agreement, but not to lasting change in the conflict dynamics. This article explores the complexity of "participation" for the field of conflict resolution and offers a way out of the reform versus revolution frame, using a case description of working with African American youth in Oakland, CA, as a context for exploring a narrative approach to "participation". It makes, we hope, a contribution by "narratizing" an ethics of practice for conflict resolution practitioners.

Last, but certainly not least, Angelica Martinez and Rich Rubenstein contribute an article that explores the intersection of literature and conflict, as a way of promoting reflection and deepening our analysis of conflicts. They lay out an argument for how literature contributes to the understanding of conflict, honing our interpretative skills and imaginary capacity. They argue that witnessing the

Sara Cobb

experience of characters can heighten empathy and help us as readers “catch” the counter-stories that have been layered over, forgotten, or simply erased. But they also provide a description of a course at S-CAR, taught by Rich, experienced by Angelica, that uses literature to teach conflict analysis and resolution. They provide a description of this course, the literature that is used, and they show how this literature illuminates the power of narrative, to draw in readers, but then to witness the power of narrative in conflicts. They point out that literature “disrupts” hegemonic narratives, exposing their underbelly, and in this process, we become, as readers, less taken in, more suspicious, more educated about the workings of narrative in our lives. In fact, this course they describe includes an assignment that requires students to write a short story. They note that this has been, at times, a collective activity, and students, together, sort out how to introduce the characters, how to structure the plot, and develop their voice, as writers. And we, as readers, can see that all of us are writing stories, writing our way in and out of conflicts in our own lives, disrupting hegemonic narratives where we can. This article helps us see not only the role of literature in conflict studies, but it also calls attention to our role as interpreters, and writers, of conflict stories. And given the centrality of this point, indeed it is at the centre of a narrative approach to conflict.

Together, these articles form a “special” issue of this important journal; it is special because it offers articles that are not traditional in academic journals, such as Winslade’s birds-eye view of “externalization” or Martinez and Rubenstein’s article describing an academic course that links narrative to conflict. Both of these articles reduce or erase the kind of detached role of authors that is customary in academic journals. But it is also special as it reports on narrative dynamics from the field in way that gives us both insight into, and perspective on, the power dynamics in narrative processes, dynamics, which, of course, challenge us, as readers/practitioners, to trace these processes in our work, and in our lives. And it is special because it orients the reader to a growing field – narrative research and practice, inviting engagement.