"Intergenerational narrative of violence: trying to grasp social representations of the past"

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20 July 2016
22nd International Summer School on Social Representations and Communication

Aims

To discuss social and psychological theories exploring the role played by intergenerational narratives in the processes of intergroup reconciliation.

The issue at stake: how young members of a community, born after the end of massive violences or wars, are presented with the controversial historical past of their group by previous generations.

The core idea: intergenerational narratives of violent historical past play a crucial role in the complex set of processes slowly building intergroup reconciliation after the end of conflicts (Nadler, Malloy & Fisher, 2008).

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"What is the use of history?" Why youth wants to be acquainted with their historical past

A valuable insight on meaningfulness of historical narratives for young people could be taken from the classic little book of Bloch, "The Historian's Craft or Apology of History" (1954).

In the very first pages of this posthumously-published book, Bloch remembered that, as Paris was taken by the Nazi troops, his twelve-years-old son asked him: "What is the use of history?"

Bloch explained historical accounts not as a matter of advice or strategic counselling, but as a basic law of human mind, and of its "instinctive need of understanding".

Conversations between generations take part in this collective effort to attribute a meaning to past events and, due to this basic activity of human mind, contribute to shape their impact on present days (Sweeny, 1993).

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Intergenerational narratives of violence

This basic psychological need of understanding past events and periods may account for the fact that "from very early on we are exposed to an avalanche of remembrances and narratives about the past of the different groups we belong to – family, community, nation, etc." (Bresco de Luna & Rosa, 2012, p. 300).

These interactions are inserted in a net of pervasive social interactions, allowing older generations to share their knowledge and experiences with younger ones.

However, when these narratives of older generations refer to *wars or violences*, there is another basic psychological need that accounts for young people's attention.

Intergroup violence, in fact, has to be prepared by important societal changes: Since the coming of intergroup violence is announced and promoted by the shift of societies to a *conflit ethos* (Bar-Tal, Sharvit, Halperin & Zafran, 2012).

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The conflict ethos and the social construction of enemy

The conflit ethos is a change in societal normative assumptions, based on the emergence of the idea that the other group is an *enemy*, and therefore intergroup relations have to be conceived as a threatening zero-sum game that could come to an end only when one of the players is completely defeated (Bar-Tal, Sharvit, Halperin & Zafran, 2012).

Violence and death of out-group members is suddenly perceived not as a shameful action, yet as an heroic one: and narratives vary accordingly.

However, when conflict settlement is finally achieved and agreements negotiated through peace treaties, a new intergroup situation arises, and social and psychological processes revolve completely.

The marginalization of enemy's from the core of social identity

Reconciliation processes may be essentially seen as a slow marginalization of the idea of enemy from the way in which people think to their social identity (Kelman, 2008).

It means that removing the enemy's idea from the core of one's own social identity rules out again violence from the set of plausible strategies to use when facing the other group.

Evidently, it changes intergenerational narratives on intergroup relations.

This research question may be explored by *longitudinal studies* on changes of intergenerational narratives of violence as generations change.

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Lived history and communication memory

Narratives of those who lived in violent times are directly linked to their *autobiographical memories*, and are often shared during families memories.

Halbwachs (1925; 1950) stressed also how some of these family recollections are *memories of historical events* as well as to *memories of past ways of living*, experienced by older generations and subsequently gone.

The function of this specific kind of family memories is to scaffold a *"living" image of history* for young people.

Many years later Assman (1992 quoted in László, 2003) proposed to call *communication memory* the collective memories of a community that appears in a vivid and "lived" way to young generations, since they received them through interpersonal communication from older generations. This kind of collective memories goes back for about a century of the community's history, i.e. the range of *three generational changes*.

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Semantic memories of imagined communities

Collective memories about the in-group past that took place before this time span reach the young generations instead only as a *semantic knowledge.*

Therefore, Assman (1992) proposed to call them *cultural memories*, in order to distinguish them from communication memories received through the intergenerational narratives of those who witnessed consequential events of the collective past or lived in historical situations subsequently gone.

Referring to this last kind of memories, a different set of intergenerational narratives are offered to students through *history manuals, movies, literature and fictions, and a large amount of cultural artefacts as museums, place names, statues, ...* .

Narratives included in cultural memories concern the past of "imagined communities" (Anderson, 2006), first of all national ones, and scaffold *a positive image of the social identity* linked to the nation-state where students are born (Liu, Onar, & Woodward, 2014).

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History teaching between knowledge and acknowledgment

On the other hand, however, history manuals are meant to convey first of all a *knowledge* about the past, linked to scientific research.

Moreover, due to globalization classrooms are growing more and more multicultural, and the use of history teaching as a nation-state technology (Liu, Onar, & Woodward, 2014) often seems inadequate.

History teaching stands apart from other kinds of intergenerational narratives, since it has the specific role of providing a robust scaffold for *historical knowledge **and** cultural memory.*

Taken for granted the idea that narratives help the search for meaning by organizing scattered aspects of experience into a unified schema (Bruner, 1990), the search for the meaning of past violence by young people requires unifying into a joint consideration the role of perpetrators, victims and apathetic bystanders – requiring not only to acquire *historical knowledge*, but also to *acknowledge* the role played by all actors of violence.

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Different stances of perpetrators, victims and by-standers

Obviously, intergenerational narratives are developed according to the different *stances* of the three actors of any violence.

The stance of *perpetrators* when narrating these facts to their descendants has to deal with the issue of acknowledgement of their moral responsibilities.

The stance of *victims* requires coping with the inability to control their destiny and defend themselves (Nadler & Shnabel, 2008).

The stance of *apathetic bystanders* tries to morally justify their lack of intervention.

A long time elapses since these different kinds of stances could sound bearable for all protagonists involved – perpetrators, victims, and bystanders (Kelman, 2008).

Natality

To reach the moment when acceptable narratives are elaborated and a new trust between groups is eventually reconstructed, *several generations* are needed. Reconciliation is due not only to social and psychological processes, but also to the biological change of natality (Arendt, 1977).

Introducing the new idea of *natality* in the very core of the description of intergenerational narratives, Arendt argued that the real source of novelty in social life is linked to the fact that each birth represents a new beginning for the community – since, once born, each human being may start something unexpected and new (for the best, but also for the worst!)

However, intergenerational communication on past violence encompasses not only narratives, but *silences* too.

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Silence during the violence

During intergroup violence, silence selects infos and evidence opposing the ethos of conflict

However, as Serge Moscovici (1976) convincingly argued in his classic work on social influence, social discourse observed at any given point in time cannot be reduced only to the dominant point of view of majorities.

Also when the dominant social discourse on intergroup relations fuels a conflict ethos, there are some *active minorities* refusing to see the other group as an enemy one, and to judge killings as heroic acts.

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Silence immediately after the conflict's settlement

Immediately after the conflict settlement, silence enhances an initial viable local life, allowing perpetrators, apathetic bystanders and victims to live side by side and to continue their unavoidable social exchanges (Eastmond & Selimovic, 2012).

However, when new adults arrive to the social forum, this first "viable" silence may change into highly detrimental states of social denial (Cohen, 2001).

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The "banality" of social denial (Cohen, 2001)

- Often many years are needed for atrocities to be overtly recognized and officially narrated to descendants of perpetrators' group (Leone & Mastrovito, 2010; Leach, Zeineddine & Čehajić-Clancy, 2013).

- Instead of well-organized manipulation, historical denials dominant in many social situations are often simply the result of "a gradual seepage of knowledge down some collective black hole" (Cohen, 2001, p. 13).

- Many examples of denials: of the Armenian genocide (Hovannisian, 1998; Bilali, 2013); of French collaboration with Nazi occupation (Campbell, 2006); of the role of native Americans in episodes commemorated by Thanksgiving day (Kurtiş, Adams, & Yellow Bird, 2010); of *the Italian colonial crimes perpetrated during the occupation of Ethiopia* (Leone & Sarrica, 2012a; 2012b).

- Denial as a refusal: to admit the historical reality of violent facts *(literal denial)*; to recognize the moral responsibility of perpetrators for these facts *(interpretive denial)*; or to assume the practical consequences of acknowledging one's own responsibility for past violence *(implicatory denial)* (Cohen, 2001).

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Why teaching on literally denied historical facts is a parrhesiastic act

- Are young people empowered or threatened by listening and understanding narratives about denied in-group historical wrongdoings?
- We may consider as prominent the psychological need for a positive social identity (Tajfel, Flament, Billig & Bundy, 1971): then, avoidance of inconvenient facts could be expected as the best way of coping with a troubling past.
- We may consider that young people that do not master historical knowledge of their in-group past cannot really participate to democracy (Ortega y Gasset, 1930): then presenting descendants of perpetrators with a frank and truthful narrative of in-group wrongdoings may be seen as a first unavoidable step for a real intergroup reconciliation (Vollhardt, Mazur, & Lemahieu, 2014)
- Not only telling the truth, but also the way of telling it matters: parrhesia is the only way of frankly telling the truth, that threatens AND empowers its receivers at a same time (Foucault, 2001)
- However, its effects depend on receivers reactions: parrhesia is not a persuasive tool, it's a *communication game* (Leone & Sarrica, 2014)

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