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Book Review

Phillip L. Hammack, Narrative and the Politics of Identity

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Published in:
Swedish Missiological Themes

2011

Document Version:
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
Engberg, A. (2011). Book Review: Phillip L. Hammack, Narrative and the Politics of Identity. *Swedish Missiological Themes*, 99(4), 491-492.

Total number of authors:
1

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Phillip L. Hammack

Narrative and the Politics of Identity – The Cultural Psychology of Israeli and Palestinian Youth

New York: Oxford University Press, 2011, 398 pp.

Phillip L. Hammack is an American Cultural Psychologist who aligns himself with the wide field of personological research called narrative psychology. Ever since Jerome Bruner's suggestion in the pioneering article 'Life as Narrative' (*Social Research*, 1987:54) that narrative is a central mode of human thought – and we have no other way to describe 'lived time' except in the form of narrative – as such life story interviewing has risen to a central methodology in the study of individual development and the interplay between individual and culture. Philip L. Hammack's study of Palestinian, Jewish-Israeli and Palestinian-Israeli youth participating in American coexistence programmes fall within this field of research. *Narrative and the Politics of Identity* is the result of several years of field study carried out in Israel, Palestine and the United States during the first decade of the new millennia. The research question guiding the project is two-fold: (i) the first part concerns the relationship between individual life stories and national 'master narratives of identity' (p. 115); (ii) the second question concerns the programmes' explicit intention of creating a new 'transcendent' master narrative of coexistence for the youth. The question is if the participants in the coexistence programmes are successful in internalizing these new identities and break the 'narrative stalemate' (p. 13) of the Israeli and Palestinian national narratives; ultimately, do the programs provide change?

As can be seen from the research questions, Hammack is interested in the relationship between individuals' life stories and the Israeli-Palestinian context of intractable conflict. To survey this relationship he develops a theory of the relationship between identity and culture. Identity, as Hammack has written in his article 'Narrative and the Cultural Psychology of Identity' (*Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 2008/12: 222), is 'ideology cognized through the individual engagement with discourse, made manifest in a personal narrative, constructed and reconstructed across the life course, and scripted in and through social interaction and social practice.' Culture, on the other hand, is a 'linguistic production [that] mediates our experience' (p. 21). Rather than a 'thing' out there, culture is something that we do first and foremost in our production of stories. The relationship between identity and culture, claims Hammack, is one

of ‘narrative engagement’. Narrative is the link between an individual and the culture within which this individual resides (p. 22). Through the development of stories we make sense of our individual experience, but these stories always need to possess credibility within a certain cultural context. A personal story, like any other, can be ruled out as ‘false’ if it does not seem credible within a specific context. This implies that individual stories of personal experience always reflect the master narratives of our group and consequently life narratives provide a ‘window’ into the process of (local) cultural production. In Hammack’s terms, individuals are both *products* and *producers* of culture (p. 39). The thought of narrative as a link between individual and culture is a useful theoretical contribution, if not entirely new: Bruner already made the same point in the late 1980s. Hammack claims that the process of identity construction he describes might be universal but nevertheless that the nature of this process is distinct and relative. A study of local identity formation, then, calls for empirical investigation.

Concerning the first of Hammack’s questions he identifies three master narratives (which correspond to his three focus groups – Jewish-Israelis, Palestinian-Israelis and Palestinians) that he uses in his analysis of the life stories. His analysis clearly focuses more on the thematic content of the stories than on formal aspects. This has the undesirable consequence that the bulk of his analysis, in this first part of the study, is concerned with searching for elements of the master narratives that his theoretical outlook already has lead us to expect to be there. Yet his term ‘narrative engagement’ does not imply that the master narratives *determine* the content of the life stories, but rather that individual identities are negotiated *in relation to* master stories of identity. Nevertheless, a more ‘grounded’ material-centred approach towards the life stories and more analysis of the form of the narratives would have yielded, I expect, a quite different result.

For the analysis of the second question Hammack has done additional interviews after the youth’s participation in the coexistence programmes in the United States. In this way he is able to compare the life stories’ dependence on the master narratives before and after the coexistence training. The explicit aim of these programmes is to foster the development of a new, ‘transcendent’ identity of coexistence in the participants, which Hammack rightly points out is a notion that relies on the liberal discourse of cosmopolitanism. The expectation that the mere meeting with the ‘Other’ and the expected development of interpersonal, trans-national acquaintanceships will automatically lead to reduction of prejudice is an intuitively attractive thesis, and yet, according to Hammack, empirically false. The post-contact narratives of the Israeli and Palestinian youth

are as likely (in fact, more likely) to contain *identity accentuation* (i.e. that the thematic elements of the master narratives of the group have been accentuated in the individual life stories) as the expected *identity transcendence*. That is, many of the youth seem to have been strengthened in their in-group identity post-contact. Hammack is careful not to draw a casually conclusive argument here; he does not claim that the coexistence programmes in fact *caused* this development in the youth. Nevertheless, he seems to indicate that the 'cosmopolitan' thesis is a house on shaky empirical ground. Hammack's conclusion is that the power of context, in this case the context of intractable conflict, is essential to take into consideration in practical peace building (p. 336). The coexistence programmes systematically negate the structural power relations of the conflict by placing the youth in an American context, and by relying on a liberal individualistic paradigm. In the context of conflict, in-group identity is as much a benefit as it is a burden; the internalization of the national master narratives fulfills essential cognitive and emotional needs for the youth. Hence, to expect that a three-week programme in the States will be able to solidify a new identity, as psychologically beneficial as the former in-group identity, is clearly to expect too much.

Hammack's study is guided by a participatory approach and a desire to contribute to peace in the region which makes it an interesting read. Moreover, his theoretical approach is well-grounded and provides a systematic paradigm for the study of the power of narrative and the politics of identity. For a religious scholar, his claim that the conflict in Israel-Palestine has 'little to do with religion' (p. 56), his choice to exclude religious parameters in his selection of interviewees and his overall analysis is somewhat disturbing. Even if the conflict is essentially a conflict about land it is naïve not to consider the way religion influences the production of master- and personal narratives of identity. Also, Christian Palestinians and their Muslim co-patriots could be expected to tell quite different life stories. If this is indeed the case, Hammack leaves us entirely ignorant. Yet, *Narrative and the Politics of Identity* is a well-researched book, with interesting, practical conclusions for the future possibilities of peace work and with a theoretical model well-adapted to the study of the interplay between individual and culture.

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