

# ***Making Peace with the Haunted Past: On the Role of Public Narratives in Treating Historical Trauma***

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**Abstract:** This article is dedicated to investigating the role of public narratives in ameliorating historical trauma. My purpose is to summarize the parts of the literature on this topic that I find the most insightful and then critically engage with and try to elevate some of their discussions. The method of this study is a review of the most pertinent literature. The finding is that the public narratives which frame people's experience of traumatic events are crucial in healing historical trauma and maintaining peace in the future. Overall, it is recommended that both the victims and the perpetrators can improve the situation by adjusting the public narratives that frame the experience of historical trauma in their culture. The victim group can reorient its focus to universal humanism instead of sticking to antagonistic narratives against the perpetrators. The perpetrator group needs to demonstrate in their public narratives their willingness to acknowledge the past wrongdoings, which is the prerequisite for the victim group to form non-antagonistic narratives.

**Keywords:** Healing, Historical trauma, Public narratives, Cultural identity, Peace

## **1. Introduction**

Modern human history is filled with mass violence resulting from political conflicts. Situated in the aftermath of these conflicts, countries seek to conciliate citizens and rebuild a stable social and political structure to maintain peace in the future. Nonetheless, the nightmare of past catastrophes never stops haunting us, provoking the cry for revenge and disrupting our best efforts to move on to peace. Mamdani uses the book title *When Victims Become Killers* to describe the Rwandan genocide, which expresses the idea that in some political conflicts around the world, the members of a former victim group can turn into perpetrators in later conflicts [1]. In parallel with significant political and social efforts, the peace-building project after violent conflicts also requires a response to individual and collective memory of historical hauntings [2].” Thus, this article aims to explore ways to help societies reconcile with their haunted past and thereby create more possibilities for peace in the future.

The concept of historical trauma was initially developed from the clinical observation that the descendants of Holocaust survivors had developed close to PTSD symptoms, such as high stress, anger, depression, psychic numbing, self-destructive behaviors, etc. [3]. To clarify, historical trauma is not the only available concept to describe the phenomenon of transmitting traumatic experiences and responses to subsequent generations. Various terms have been deployed in the

current academic literature to label the same phenomenon [4]. These include (but are not limited to) cultural trauma [5], collective trauma [6], and intergenerational trauma [7]. In this article, I will stick to the term “historical trauma.” Yellow Horse Brave Heart defines historical trauma as “cumulative emotional and psychological wounding, over the lifespan and across generations, emanating from massive group trauma experiences [7].” According to this definition, three elements constitute historical trauma: trauma or wounding, the experience is shared by groups rather than individuals, and the trauma continues to influence multiple generations aside from the generation that experienced it. It is worth noting that historical trauma does not refer to tragic events in history per se. An experiential-interpretive approach should be emphasized to understand historical trauma, which means that it is the group’s subjective traumatic experiences and the interpretive meanings they themselves attribute to those experiences that comprise historical trauma. In other words, a tragic event is not traumatic in itself; it’s being traumatic is the result of the collectively mediated attribution to it [5]. The reason is that what happens in our collective memory, like all kinds of memory, is not a mere reproduction of the facts but a continuous reconstruction and reinterpretation of them in an effort to make sense of the traumatic experience [8].

Abundant research has been conducted to analyze historical trauma. But much of them focus on the influence of parents and the biostructure of the individuals in causing the transmission of trauma from one generation to the next instead of the larger sociocultural context that shapes our understanding of the trauma. This article demonstrates an alternative perspective by focusing on the role of public narratives in analyzing the causal factors of the transmission of historical trauma and then providing resolutions accordingly.

## **2. Methodology**

The article's methodology reviews the most pertinent literature obtained from Pub-Med, including books and articles. The fundamental sources for this article are Mohatt et al.’s Historical trauma as public narrative: A conceptual review of how history impacts present-day health [9], Manojlovic’s Representing Historical Trauma of Korean War: Creative Education as a Peacebuilding Strategy [10], and Hirschberger’s Collective Trauma and the Social Construction of Meaning [8]. The primary emphasis of the research is on the role of public narratives for both the victims and perpetrators in ameliorating historical trauma and building peace in the future.

## **3. Result and Discussion**

Public narratives shape people’s understandings of and attitudes toward historical events. By “public narrative,” I mean the stories that (a) are told collectively to ascribe meaning and interpretations to events; (b) dominates the public discourse on the issue; (c) spread extensively through various means of transmission, such as the internet, television, newspaper, pamphlet, etc. In this section, I will first explain the public narrative’s significant value in coping with historical trauma. Then I will discuss the standards for desirable public narratives for the victim group and how to achieve them. This will be followed by an analysis of the public narratives of the perpetrator group. Last, I will consider the complexity of this problem and make some concessions.

### **3.1. The Importance of Public Narratives in Healing Historical Trauma**

An individual’s capacity to recover from a traumatic experience is primarily related to her ability to reorganize that experience in the narrative form [11]. Unlike treating other types of memories, traumatized individuals often cannot incorporate their traumatic memories into their existing knowledge system to establish a coherent story for long-term memory storage. Instead, these

terrifying memories are described as “frozen” or “stuck” in the lower or the limbic brain, devoid of language ability, and they are reserved as images and vivid sensations [11]. Since these memories are not adequately processed or assimilated into a higher cognitive reserve when triggered, they tend to come back with great intensity and cause strong affective responses, often of extreme fear, anxiety, rage, helplessness, and other strong emotions [11]. Thus, a crucial step in the process of healing trauma is to enable the individual to talk about her traumatic experience, in order to accelerate the integration of memories into cognitive storage in the form of a coherent narrative [12].

The same also applies to ameliorating trauma experienced by a group of people. While being able to narrate the story is fundamental for traumatized individuals, such narrating is more therapeutic when there is a group of people who can acknowledge, listen, and respond to the pain [12]. Suppose the trauma resulting from mass violence is only perceived as an individual psychological problem. In that case, it is likely to create a sense of isolation and convey the painful message that it is the individual who is sick, further distancing her from the support of the community [6]. Public narratives of mass traumatic events serve the function of reuniting individuals with the group and providing a safe environment where people can find a sense of connectedness and mutual support. This type of healing involves enabling people to feel once again being witnessed and supported and having one's suffering, fragility, and humanness acknowledged by others [3]. When feelings return to the body, they enable empathy for both the self and others [3].

Moreover, public narratives of traumatic events are primarily related to our mental health, maybe more so than the actual events, because they shape the social-cultural context in which the events are experienced [13]. Another inneglectable aspect is that a shared public narrative is also indispensable for reconstructing a strong cultural identity, which is crucial for individual and community well-being after traumatizing events [14]. Alexander et al.'s studies indicate that the ones who develop a strong sense of identification with cultural values benefit more from social support [5]. Cultural identity, based on the establishment of public narratives, provides people a buffer from the impact of traumatic events.

The lack of public narrative will result in the deterioration of trauma transmission. A frequently referred to mechanism of the transmission of trauma is called “the conspiracy of silence,” which refers to an explicit or implicit taboo in a society that forbids the questioning or discussion of the trauma [15].” The conspiracy of silence prevented survivors from communicating their frightening experiences with each other and their offspring. Consequentially, their children only receive fragmented information regarding their parents' experiences while frequently exposed to their parent's PTSD syndromes [16]. Being left in the dark, the children are more vulnerable to being plagued by the trauma themselves. In surveying the mitigating factors of the historical trauma of the Holocaust, Kellerman discovers that it is essential to maintain a healthy communication style between parents and children [17]. The children less affected by the trauma have significantly benefited from their parents' open discussion of their camp experience in a non-terrifying way [17]. Mohatt et al. also conclude that the absence of collective and public recognition of the Native American genocide and people's suffering has contributed to historical trauma [9]. Therefore, the presence of a public narrative of the traumatic event is essential to the amelioration of historical trauma.

### **3.2. What Kind of Public Narrative is Desirable?**

Framing a public narrative of past tragedies has crucial therapeutic value to the traumatized group. The next question is what kind of public narrative we should frame. I think a desirable public narrative of trauma should satisfy two basic requirements: the first is that it should be able to soothe the traumatized souls and contribute to the cessation of trauma transmission; the second is that it should have positive effects on maintaining peace in the future.

We do not want a public narrative filled with rage, resentment, and division. Admittedly, this kind of narrative can be extraordinarily therapeutic to the victim group because it reinforces people's group identity and strengthens inner-group ties, which are essential for mental well-being. Inherent in this type of public narrative is a strong "Us versus Them dichotomy [10]." In such narratives, the Us group is presented as virtuous, peaceful, and self-defensive, while the Them group is shown to be greedy, aggressive, and oppressive. The sense of identification with "Us" is always intensified in the presence of a clear image of the communal enemy, from whose oppression the "Us" has gloriously liberated itself. Foucault's idea of "speaker's benefit" in feminist struggle is of reference here: by taking about sex as repressed, speaking about sex becomes a revolt against the repression, giving the speakers a comforting illusion that they are liberating themselves from repression [18]. By the same token, constructing one's identity by antagonizing an oppressive and tyrannical Other is fundamentally an expression of freedom, which empowers the individual. This line of narrative formation makes people feel good not only by placing them on an unshakable moral high ground, but also by giving them a sense of powerfulness. However, intense hatred toward another group can create more tension and division, with the risk of generating further inter-group conflicts in the future [10]. Such dichotomous narratives sacrifice the possibility of sustaining peace on the altar of being therapeutic. It is undesirable because we do not welcome the situation "When Victims Become Killers" [10].

A more optimal public narrative of trauma, thereby, should include the consideration of peace-sustenance. To achieve this purpose, Manojlovic suggests that rather than focusing on accusing wrongdoers, the public narrative should emphasize the aspect of human suffering resulting from wars based on the principle of universal humanism [10]. This strategy will focus on identifying the tragic effects of wars, such as the number of victims, atrocities, destruction, and the pain of ordinary citizens on both sides [10]. This does not mean a denial of responsibility for the perpetrators, which needs to be recognized. The point of such public narratives is to be more humane, universal, and acknowledgeable for both sides by emphasizing ordinary people's suffering. It can raise people's awareness regarding the tragedies of war, and thereby enable their desire for peace to overwhelm their wish for revenge. Of course, it may be unrealistic to demand that the traumatized group completely renounce the idea of revenge. The wound has penetrated their soul so profoundly that any whisper of removing it would risk frivolity. Instead, a more plausible alternative would be to override it with a stronger wish for peace.

Manojlovic proposes that this reorientation of public narratives should be initiated in the education system, the important locale where the new generations learn about the unsettled past and form their views and identities [1]. Besides textbooks, political propaganda is another critical area for presenting public narratives. Political leaders are always the ones who have the power and resources to determine citizens' knowledge regarding the past. It is of utmost importance for them to prioritize the project of long-term peacebuilding, thereby directing the public narratives in the direction of universal humanism rather than revanchism. Public narratives can result in more conflicts and division, but they can also become a unifying and peacemaking mechanism for broken societies, depending on the direction they go.

### 3.3. The Public Narratives of the Perpetrator Group

The public narratives of one culture are always constructed in an ongoing negotiation with the narratives of the other group. It is never just the victim group's business to frame a both therapeutic and peace-inducing public narrative because the victim group's narratives of the troubling history are, to a large extent, related to the attitudes and responses of the perpetrator group as manifested in their collective narratives of the same history.

The contradiction is that while the traumatized struggle to be heard and witnessed, the traumatizing want to leave the inglorious past to be forgotten. The social and cultural contexts often determine the construction of narratives of past traumatic events. Foucault points out that dominant cultures usually seek to diminish the validity of other cultural groups' narratives; in other words, the dominant group often disqualifies other groups' knowledge and interpretation and controls what can be discussed in the public sphere [18]. The more powerful the perpetrator group, the greater their privilege to define and control reality, and the more likely their argument would prevail [19]. Consequentially, the victims have to struggle for narrative recognition in conflict with the perpetrators' denial of the past and minimalization of their responsibility for wrongdoing. Hirschberg calls this conflictual dynamic between victims and perpetrators the "tacit memory war," which consists of the intra-group struggle against a haunted history and the inter-group negotiation of what to be remembered collectively [8]. But in the absence of justice, the victim group is prone to construct narratives of the trauma around the notion of victimhood so that they can blame the perpetrators for the shared source of pain, mourn their loss, and strengthen solidarity within the group; at the same time, they tend to dehumanize their opponents, forgetting that they are also human beings who are plagued by sufferings caused by the war [5].

To enable the victims to focus more on future peace than revenge, the perpetrators must resign from the memory war by demonstrating the willingness to recognize past wrongdoings and bear responsibilities. However, admitting and remembering the past can be bitter for the perpetrator group. This may entail bearing loads of social stigma and guilt, enduring the fracturing of their moral self-image and sense of meaning, and coping with their severed sense of identification with the larger cultural community. Though these may still haunt the perpetrators even if they tend not to admit the past, denying it means they can hide behind an illusory shield of self-assurance with the hope that one day everything will be forgotten and nothing will be left to remember, while admitting means a direct and bitter confrontation with these troubling issues in their blunt force with nowhere to escape. In the process of confrontation, the perpetrators need to create a new identity for the cultural group through public narratives based on the acknowledgment, not denial, of the dark history. Germany can be viewed as an excellent example of completing this task. It forms a new cultural identity that sticks to anti-militarism and multiculturalism [8] and presents its humanitarian image by adopting a generous policy to provide asylums to refugees. Germany has constructively utilized its inglorious past as the backdrop based on which its present positive image is founded [8]. These attitudes have contributed to the recovery of Jews from historical trauma and the prevention of further conflicts between the two groups. Therefore, the perpetrators' public narratives are crucial in making peace with the haunted past. Their confession and acknowledgment of mistakes are important prerequisites for less antagonistic public narratives of the victim group.

### 3.4. A Concession to Complexity

What have been discussed are theoretical inquiries regarding what should be done ideally in response to historical trauma. But the real world is never an ideal land. Thousands of complexities may hinder the realization of those ideal solutions reasoned out by scholars sitting in their armchairs, especially when the recommendations are not determined by ordinary people but by the states. It is mainly the political leaders who control public narratives of historical trauma. They decide what will be presented in textbooks, TV shows, movies, and other means of transmission. What is available to ordinary people's eyes and ears is always filtered by them with the intention to promote their own agenda, which might contradict our ideals. For instance, the political propaganda of the victim society may emphasize the Us-Them dichotomy because the leaders want to stimulate citizens' nationalist sentiment so that they will be more approving of the regime and easier to control.



On the other hand, the politicians of the perpetrator group may also be reluctant to acknowledge the past because this signifies their failure and bad decisions, which may oscillate their legitimacy. Therefore, in concession to these complexities, I suggest individuals form their private narratives based on humanist principles and the acknowledgment of the past. In line with Foucault's theory of diffuse and localized resistance, privately adopting a nonantagonistic and reconciliatory narrative of historical trauma can provide the main site of resistance against the public, antagonistic narratives, or discourse currently in power.

#### 4. Conclusion

To conclude, the public narratives that frame people's experiences and understandings of traumatic events are crucial in healing historical trauma and maintaining peace in the future. The victims and perpetrators can improve the situation by adjusting their public narrative regarding the events. It is suggested that the victim group adopt non-antagonistic public narratives based on universal humanism, focusing on ordinary people's suffering caused by wars instead of the dichotomy between Us and Them. For the perpetrator group, they need to demonstrate in their public narratives their willingness to acknowledge the trauma they caused to the victims and take on responsibilities, which is the prerequisite to the formation of non-antagonistic narratives by the victims. It is possible that in reality there are difficulties hindering the realization of the above suggestions regarding public narratives, so a makeshift is that individuals can develop their private narratives of historical trauma based on these principles. Recovering from historical trauma need not entail erasing our collective memories; rather, we should make the most of those memories to illuminate the path toward a peaceful future.

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