Coherence Co-constructed:

Using Coherence for Analysis and Transformation of Social Conflicts

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Abstract

Current approaches to narrative coherence are focused on the ways that speakers establish legistimacy and coherence by connecting to cultural norms. This paper summarizes the current literature on narrative coherence and suggests an alternative understanding of coherence could be used to deconstruct privledged narratives and provide avenues for intervening and transforming conflicts. The author presents an analysis of political rally poster used by the Turkish Prime Minister in the summer of 2013 to explore how narrative coherene is a relationship co-constructed between a text and a wider audience through shared cultural and historical narratives.

Authors' Note

Introduction

   The subject of narrative coherence presents a predicament. On the one hand, part of the literature on narrative coherence suggests that coherence, as an internal logic, is an inherent part of storytelling—both in literary and in personal narratives. On the other hand, some scholars noted that abiding by certain standards of what is considered coherent not only limits the possible diverse range of stories, but also it makes the storyteller conform to the social standards and norms of what is considered coherent—therefore ensuring submission to dominant discourses regarding issues such as gender roles, violence, religiosity, nationalism and so on. While the formal school of thought suggests that coherence *must* exist *in* a given narrative, some in the latter suggests doing away with the concept of coherence altogether. In this article, I reflect on the literature on coherence and offer another perspective on this predicament by providing an alternative view on coherence.

   In this particular stance on narrative coherence, I utilize both aforementioned approaches to suggest an alternative take on coherence. I argue that understanding coherence as meaning-structures that exist within the text indeed confirms to dominant narratives, but it is nevertheless a useful tool—especially when engaging in analyses on conflicting narratives that are interdiscursively connected with historical texts. The goal of this article, therefore, is to point out the usefulness of narrative coherence as a tool of analyzing conflicting narratives while subverting dominant paradigms of storytelling. In other words, this article asks how can conflict resolution scholars and practitioners see understand narrative coherence in a way in which it helps to deconstruct privileged narratives and provides avenues for intervening in and transforming conflicts?

   To this end, I start with a review of literature on narrative coherence. I sort the literature in two categories: semantic, and critical approaches to coherence. Following the literature, I present an analysis of Turkish Prime Minister's political rally poster that he used to counter the Gezi protests that took place during the summer of 2013 in Turkey. Through this analysis, I demonstrate the main idea of this article: coherence is a relationship co-constructed between the text and the audience based on shared cultural and historical narratives. Based on this connection, the widely circulated, mainstream, and dominant stories are considered coherent, while the stories, or story elements, such as characters, who do not fit into this relationship are deemed incoherent and thus ostracized. While this might be the case, understanding these

connections might show us which narratives an audience privileges over others. This, in turn, has the potential for a conflict analyst and transformation practitioner to engage not only the privileged narratives, but also their connection to their audiences and, ultimately, audiences themselves.

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Literature on Narrative Coherence

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The literature that surrounds narrative coherence clutters roughly into two categories: semantic and critical. Semantic approaches try to map out meaning structures in a given text and suggest that certain themes that arise in the text offer the reader strategies by which the text seeks coherence with the reader and on which themes this relationship might be built. This perspective centers on the writings of four researchers: Fisher (1987), Linde (1993), and Bluck & Habermas (2000). Critical approaches, on the other hand, find that idea of coherence problematic and they argue that for a text to cohere, it has to agree with a definition of coherence—which is set by dominant narratives in a given context. Arguments of this approach can be found in the writings of Hyvarinen, Hyden, Saarenheimo and Tamboukou (2010), and Cobb (1993, 2004).

Semantic Coherence

The Fisherian tradition on narratives, which he titled "the narrative paradigm", suggests that humans are "homo narrans;" not only humans narrate, but also human behavior can be understood within "narrative rationality" (Fisher, 1987, p. 46). Narrative rationality, according to Fisher, refers to the possibility of interpreting all human interaction as parts and parcels of narratives that we legitimize. He describes narrative rationality as "an account, an understanding, of any instance of human choice and action, including science" (Fisher, 1987, p. 66). Within his framework of narrative rationality, Fisher claims, "human communication is tested against the principles of probability (coherence) and fidelity (truthfulness and reliability)" (Fisher, 1987, p. 47). Fisher describes coherence as "whether a story 'hangs together'" and according to Fisher it "is assessed in three ways: by its *argumentative* or *structural coherence*; by its *material coherence*, that is by comparing and contrasting stories told in other discourses (a story may be internally consistent, but important facts may be omitted, counterarguments ignored, and relevant issue overlooked); and by *characterological coherence*" (Fisher, 1987, 47), which is the interplay between a character and its context. Consequently, Fisher treats narrative coherence as a property of the text, or the story that is told. A story "hanging together," as well as three

assessments of coherence that Fisher outlines are dependent on the meaning structures in a given story.

Linde (1993) furthers the Fisherian perspective towards narrative coherence through an analysis of the life stories of thirteen white middle-class Americans. She finds two "major coherence principles of life stories: causality and continuity" (Linde, 1993, p. 127). In her study, Linde is interested in "the social practice of establishing that the events of one's life have been motivated by adequate causality" (Linde, 1993, p. 127). Linde defines, "adequate causality" as an explanation "that is acceptable by addressees as a good reason for some particular event or sequence of events" (Linde, 1993, p. 127). For Linde, "good reason" not only means "how well they accord with a store of common-sense beliefs about the world that the speaker and hearer can be assumed to share," but it also refers to the requirement for "the narrator to establish that the protagonist exercised correct and sufficient agency" (Linde, 1993, p. 128).

Linde's two criteria for "adequate causality" are similar to Fisher's "good reasons" and "characterological coherence." Just like Fisher, Linde suggests that character's behavior should match with its environment, culture and learned belief systems in order to be considered coherent. Furthermore, according to Linde, speakers have an easier time to establish coherence within their narrative accounts when the causality in a given narrative is adequate. Inversely, when the causality is inadequate, speakers seem to employ certain strategies and extra effort to stay coherent.

The third comprehensive study regarding narrative coherence is written by Bluck and Habermas (2000). In their work where they examine the "mental organization used to produce" (Bluck & Habermas, 2000, p.123) autobiographical narratives, they explain their understanding of coherence as it pertains to their research. Bluck and Habermas believe that examining narrative coherence "provides support for the assertion that the life story is more than just a collection of single memories of important events ... but has a more integrated form" (Bluck & Habermas, 2000, p.125), which they call coherence.

Bluck and Habermas identify four types of coherence: temporal, cultural, thematic, and casual. Temporal coherence, according to Bluck and Habermas, is the result of the interplay between memory and narrative: "Like other narratives, the life story follows a temporal order mimicking the flow of time. Events that are remembered later are situated in terms of their temporal relation to aforementioned events" (Bluck & Habermas, 2000, p.124). Their approach

to cultural coherence echoes Fisher and Linde. They describe it as "internalized cultural norms concerning what is appropriate material for inclusion in a life story" (Bluck & Habermas, 2000, p.124). Casual coherence, events, life periods, and the self are linked in terms of motivations, causes, or explanations. The speaker describes why certain events occurred and how those led to what happened next. They may use logic but may also rely on implicit theories of what motivates people, how emotional events should be coped with, and how development across the lifespan occurs. (Bluck & Habermas, 2000, p.125)

Lastly, thematic coherence refers to the ways in which the storyteller merges her story with 'life lessons', in other words, themes that confirm with overarching morals in a given context. The storyteller either continuously waves these themes within the story, or ends the story with such a theme, fixing the 'point' of the story to a particular cultural norm: "the individual understands the flow of life's events by creating overarching themes or drawing morals" (Bluck & Habermas, 2000, p.125).

These three approaches to narrative coherence converge on the following points: (1) Establishing coherence in a narrative account can be easier or harder depending on how much it agrees with culturally existing narratives. This point privileges those stories that agree with the cultural norms as more coherent than others. (2) Should they mostly disagree, they need to provide strategies to account for the disagreement. (3) Should they mostly agree, they need to provide a certain narrative rationality. (4) In both cases, however, the protagonist has to be at the center of the narrative. (5) Narrative rationality should include a certain understanding of time, motives and themes, although they needn't necessarily be linear.

Consequently, these approaches to narrative coherence attempt to identify points in which the speakers establish coherence through their speech and its relationship to cultural norms. They argue that the text needs to establish coherence using rhetorical strategies and strive to be more coherent, to be more predictable vis-à-vis the already accepted and circulating narratives in a given culture. Such approach results in treating coherence as a cultural artifact—only legitimate when the society at large deems it so. This understanding of coherence sustains privilege and it is the exact point with which scholars in critical approaches to coherence disagree.

Critical Approaches to Coherence

Rather than mapping out the meaning structures that coherence might co-create with other cultural stories, critical approaches treat coherence as a privilege issue. When some stories are judged as incoherent because they do not adhere to established cultural patterns of storytelling, they are othered and treated as strangers. Both approaches within this category emphasize this point.

One of the critical approaches towards narrative coherence examines this relationship through the lens of traumatic testimonies and concludes that the society ostracizes such testimonies precisely because they do not agree with the cultural norms of coherence (Hyvarinen, Hyden, Saarenheimo and Tamboukou, 2000). They suggest that paying attention to coherence, seeking coherence in personal accounts for generating meaning or using certain standards of coherence to judge the value or the virtue of the stories one hears—culturally, morally, or politically—means surrendering to dominant discursive paradigms of a given context. That surrender, in turn, sustains the power imbalances and abuses against persons who do not 'fit in' with the dominant ways of telling stories. Physical, cultural or structural violence, marginalization and Othering against people who either consciously refuse to display compliance towards norms of coherence, or cannot do so because of trauma, consequently, are deemed as 'abnormal,' 'stranger,' or 'Other.' To eliminate the sustenance of this power imbalance, authors suggest that the focus should not be the coherence of the story. Rather it should be the performance of storytelling itself, in which "a significant part of the politically and humanly most important narration comes out hesitantly, often incoherently, replete with contradictions and resistant to chronologically smooth, linear progress" (Hyvarinen, Hyden, Saarenheimo and Tamboukou, 2000, p. 11).

Cobb's (1993, 2004) approach to coherence also emphasizes the issue of privilege that stories that adhere to dominant cultural narratives posses over others. Examining conflicting narratives during mediation sessions, Cobb also argues that coherence may lead to power imbalance—those who have stories cohere with the dominant narratives are more powerful in a conflict when compared to those who are the victims of such domination (Cobb, 1993). However, instead of 'changing paradigms' or abandoning the coherence completely, she suggests working with the concept of coherence to use it to disrupt the power imbalance. She suggests using various understandings of coherence to co-construct narrative accounts and coherences that provide pragmatic, contextual, and policy-based change (Cobb, 2004).

The critical approaches draw our attention to the power relations in which the story exists and away from judging a text as coherent or incoherent based on an attributed merit that a text might or might not hold. While critical approaches are not descriptive, Cobb (2004) provides a basis on which both approaches can be fused in a way where conflict analysts and transformation practitioners can see the ways in which a story would be perceived as coherent or incoherent, can recognize cultural narratives that sustain dominance, and work to deconstruct or suggest alternatives to dominant narrative accounts.

Turkish PM Political Rally Ad

In this section, I offer an analysis of a political rally poster used by Turkish PM Erdoğan as a counter movement against the protests that swept the two-thirds of the country over the summer of 2013. I engage in this analysis because it is a multilayered text and image that demonstrates the ways in which a story coheres with its audience and, in this case, calls for social polarization. Erdoğan's polarizing political discourse reflected in the rally ad is based on the use of discursive tropes and "citations" (Butler, 1993, p. 12) resting on historical events to construct coherence. This coherence, in turn, feeds polarization in public discourse. Through such construction of coherence, the rally ad aims to construct a solid and coherent in-group identity. The coherence within an in-group simultaneously identifies out-groups, who do not find these references coherent with their identities and experiences. As such, through this analysis, I show that constructing narrative coherence is a dual-purpose rhetorical device, with which one can solidify an identity with its intended audience and identify as well as marginalize those who are not part of the group.

Turkish Republic was established to distance itself from its Ottoman past, where the state religion was Islam and the Sultan was the Caliph. The funding of the Republic involved various reforms from clothing to alphabet to a unified and secular education system to create this distance (Lewis, 1968). The Republic and the ideology that drove the establishment of the Republic, Kemalism, did not aim to eliminate Islam. "[O]ne of the six pillars of Kemalism, halkçılık (populism), not only approved "the public" as the "master" of the nation but also accepted their ascribed Islamic identity (the religion of the majority) as one of the constitutive elements of the imagined Turkish nation in the making" (Öncü, 2014, p. 162). Öncü (2014) further explains how the new republic aimed to control public religious life, instead of creating a

true distance between state and religion through the establishment of Directorate of Religious Affairs (DRA). DRA's propagated purpose was

> [T]o provide the citizens with Islamic religious services such as the appointment of preachers, muezzins and imams and the distribution of sermons. The true objective of the DRA, which was to establish control over the Islam practiced in civil society in order to contain any form of opposition against the development of modern capitalism from the quarters of heterodox Islam. (Öncü, 2014, p. 162)

Therefore, from its inception, the aim of the Turkish state regarding public religious life had been to control the type of Islam the public practiced—at the expense of banning and prosecuting what the state perceived as unorthodox practices. Before 1970s, this process was one of secularization. Only orthodox Islam was to be practiced individually in ways that would not associate, therefore threaten, the political life and processes. However, those who wanted Islam to have presence in education, political discourse, economy, foreign policy, and day-to-day life, began the Islamist movement in the 1970s (Tuğal, 2014, p. 52). To this end in 1969 Necmettin Erbakan, an Islamist politician, founded a political party named National Order Party. The ideology of this party was dubbed Milli Görüş (National Vision), and it was an ideology based on the values of political Islam fused with ethnocentrism and militarism, which also contains xenophobic undertones towards a reductionist perception of 'the West' (Atacan, 2013, p. 47). Through the 1990s, this movement lived through its greatest successes. In 1996, it was elected to lead the coalition government. However, in 1997, the military intervened and aimed to reestablish the secularization that it perceived to be under threat.

Following the military intervention, which witnessed arrests and harassment of politicians, "a new generation of Islamists began to challenge the old leadership. The former radicals were quick to adopt a free market, 'moderate Muslim' position" (Tuğal, 2014, p. 54). Among the new generation of Islamists was the current PM, Erdoğan, who was elected to power in 2002.

Erdoğan's brand of political Islam, although it aimed to challenge the limiting aspect of secular politics, used some of the same rhetorical tropes that were established during the foundation of the Republic, such as the Turkish National Anthem (TNA) and Atatürk's Address to Youth (AAY). TNA was written in 1921 in midst of War of Independence, a national war effort against invading European forces. AAY was written in 1927, shortly after the Republic was established, to reflect the nation-building efforts. Both TNA and AAY were written to

establish national solidarity based on a narrative of constant threat from the "Other," thus constructing unison and division along national lines. At the time these texts were written, the 'self' referred to public, while the 'Other' was the Europeans. TNA, for instance, is a text that exclusively identifies Sunni-Islam and Turkish ethnicity, as well as a nationalistic ideology as components of self-identity (Erol, 2013).

Through referencing these texts, Erdoğan's political discourse, therefore, reflects the polarizing nature of these texts and his references to these texts. A close reading of Erdoğan's political rally ad reveals how references to these texts act as tropes that establish the same self vs. other fault-lines between his constituents and the Gezi Park protestors—just as these texts established the same lines between the people and the European invaders.

What is today known as Gezi Park Protests, began as an #occupy-type sit in demonstration against Istanbul Municipality's attempt to demolish a public park in favor of a shopping mall in central Istanbul. At the initial stage of the protests, the first couple of days following May 30th 2013, the clashes were limited to the environmentalist activists in the park and the police. The protests escalated in a matter two weeks to include a total of "3,545,000 citizens participated in 4,725 events in all but one of Turkey's 81 provinces" (Özel, 2014, p. 8).

To counter the protests and show solidarity among its base PM Erdoğan organized five rallies in different cities at the end of June. To promote his rallies, he used a poster that is composed of a Turkish flag, Erdoğan's portrait and a body of text.

On the background of the poster, there is the Turkish flag, where the crescent and the star looks angled, with the red looking slightly bent in places, casting parallel shadows—implying that the flag is not just any Turkish flag, rather it is a rippling flag. On the foreground, we see Erdoğan's image, looking at the text. At the very bottom, there is the date and time with the ruling AKParty's logo on the left. Above the date and time, the text reads, from the top:

1.   Rally for respect to national will (Milli iradeye saygı mitingi)
2.   To spoil the big game (Büyük oyunu bozmaya)
3.   Let's write history (Haydi tarih yazmaya)

The background image, the rippling flag is a direct reference to the TNA. The symbolism of the rippling flag is in the first line of the first and the last stanzas of the TNA:

"Fear not, the crimson banner that proudly ripples in this glorious dawn, shall never fade…"

"So ripple and wave like the bright dawning sky, oh thou glorious crescent…"

Through the imagery of the rippling flag, the ad taps into the narratives existing within the TNA, which outlines a dystopic imagery of invasion of the homeland—"fear not"—and ends with a utopic hope towards a better tomorrow—"the bright dawning sky" (Erol, 2013). Drawing from the imagery of the TNA, the visual rhetoric of the rally ad references the same narrative of threat in the face of a countrywide *invasion.*

The TNA and the self/other, attack/defense, friend/foe narratives that the TNA brings provide the narrative background on which the text further references and recontextualizes TNA and AAY.

On this background, the text first engages in identification of the self and the other. Just as the TNA signifies an imagined nation at the intersection of Sunni-Muslim, Turkish, and nationalist identities, the rally ad constructs a similar imagined self at through the phrase "respect to the national will." Erdoğan often uses "national will" in his discourse to signify to himself and to his own party. The reference rests on being elected to power, therefore being the manifestation of the "national will." The ad constructs those who identify with him as those who *respect* the national will—bridging the gap between Erdoğan and the public. Dialectically, akin to TNA pointing to the European forces as the Other that wish to harm the imagined nation, the ad constructs those who rally against Erdoğan's rule as rallying against the national will. Consequently, the text constructs the Other as those who *disrespect* the national will, the protestors.

"Let's write history," the third line of the text in the ad, feeds from this identification of self and other. "To write history" is an expression in Turkish that means to undertake and complete a monumental task with success. The word "haydi," while does not have a direct transliteration, can be translated as "let's." Just like "let's" it has a tacit imperative, such as "let's [go]." The call to action in the tacit imperative collocated with an imposed task of "writing history" can be read as an attempt to establish consent through hailing individuals and transforming them into subjects (Althusser, 1971).

In addition, in this discursive context where the background is established through TNA's narratives, it arguably refers to similar calls to action TNA makes to the imagined public to take up arms and defend the nation. Further ossifying the lingering perception that treats the protests as an echo of the War of Independence, the ad takes a step further than framing those who positively respond to the PM's rally ad as patriotic as fighting against the Europeans. Such hailing not only justifies the police brutality witnessed during the protests but also explains, at least in part, citizens who grabbed knives, clubs, and machetes to attack the protestors.

The second line of the rally ad, "Büyük oyunu bozmaya" is transliterated as "to spoil the big game." "Game" in Turkish also means "trick" and refers to conspiracy theories that were generated throughout the protests by the state-supporting media, as well as the 28 minute long video made by the government's "PR and Media Directorate." The video, named "big game," shows protestors throwing rocks to the police and vandalizing public property. It argues that protests cost over 140 million dollars and draws attention to allegations of "interest lobby" and "foreign media" as the main driving force behind the protests. The protests, therefore, are not perceived as manifestation of dissent. Rather, they are framed as conspiracies in which foreigners' attempt to damage Turkey using protests and protestors.

In a discursive context where the protests echo the War of Independence and support for the PM is constructed as patriotism, the "big game" becomes a conspiracy marker that refers to *previous* efforts of the foreigner's attempt to damage Turkey. The conspiracy, the trick, in this context possibly cites the secret treaties made to partition the Ottoman Empire, such as Sykes-Picot. Here, the ad reaches back to AAY, a text that talks more explicitly about games, colonial efforts, and future enemies:

1. 'Oh Turkish Youth! Your first duty is to preserve and defend forever the
2. Turkish independence and the Turkish Republic. This is the only
3. foundation of your existence and of your future. This foundation is your

4. most precious treasure. In the future, too, there will be malevolent people
5. at home and abroad who will wish to deprive you of this treasure.'[1]

Obscure personal as well as temporal pronouns throughout the text set the stage for recontextualization between the post-war newfound Turkish Republic and protests against PM Erdoğan's decade of rule. In the fourth and fifth lines, the implicit reference to the past through "too," and explicit reference to the future set the stage to point out enemies and reach out to allies. Those who answer the *hailing* of the "duty" to "preserve and defend" are deemed as allies, while the enemy, who provoke such defense, can be within or without the national borders. The narrative of constant threat, victimization, as well as the ambiguous prophecy rhetoric allow for "big game" from PM Erdoğan's rally ad to tap into the narrative that the AAY uses.

"Big game" from the PM Erdoğan's rally ad, constructs a parallel with the prophecy from the past and events in the present. By suggesting the existence of a "big game," the ad suggests that the protestors on the street are a part of those "malevolent people' who "wish to deprive [the people] of [the] treasure." As such, the ad hails good citizens to duty, to rally around the leader in order "to preserve and defend."

Conclusion

Through the analysis, I demonstrate how we can *read* coherence in a given text through its relationship with dominant cultural and historical stories. The discourse presented in the ad with its underlying meanings that refer to specific times and memories within the Erdoğan's political Islam ideology makes sense, connects, and aligns—in other words, *coheres*—with an audience that can make meaning of those markers at a glance. An audience who cannot engage or derive meaning from the markers presented in the ad will inevitably find the ad *incoherent,* and those who cohere with dominant ideological narratives will deem such audience incoherent with the rest of the culture.

Consequently, this moment highlights the central issue with narrative coherence: those who align with privileged cultural stories have the power to judge, other, outcast, and ostracize those who do not align with those narratives. In these kinds of cases, coherence is used as a tool of political rhetoric to both unite and divide—to unite those who align with the dominant cultural narratives against those who do not. These rhetorical moves have the power to escalate social conflict and polarization. The ad cites TNA and AAY, using their culturally dominant status to

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[1] Refer to AAY's full text for all the text.

transcend their context allowing for frequent recontextualization. The ad's citation of these texts grants it rhetorical credibility and legitimacy on the eyes of those whom with it coheres. Consequently, citations provide moral superiority as well as grounds on which *the other* can be delegitimized. The privilege of citing culturally dominant texts, therefore, deems those who find the text incoherent as targets of othering and ostracization.

Cobb (1993, 2004) engages with coherence as a tool in conflict resolution in the context of mediation. I believe it has a similar potential in the contexts of escalating social and ethnic conflicts. Engaging these kinds of texts, however, might be counterproductive. Talking back at any text that implicitly or explicitly cites the culturally dominant tropes means talking back at the tropes, and therefore talking back at the cultural and historical experiences and memories. This renders the very act of talking back to the initial text that cites the trope a defiant, deviant act that does not cohere with the text and audience—already framing the act of engagement itself as marginal and harmless at best and threatening at worst.

However, analyzing a text to see how it coheres with its intended audience provides us the historical narratives and stories that the text and the audience uses to construct or solidify their identity. This gives a unique opportunity to engage the privilege that is co-constructed through coherence. We can reinterpret the culturally dominant narratives on the grounds of reconciliation; or we can produce alternative and counter narratives that also cite those particular sacred texts that work to de-escalate the conflict. We can circulate these reinterpretations and alternative narratives to promote coexistence and cooperation instead of conflict and contestation.

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