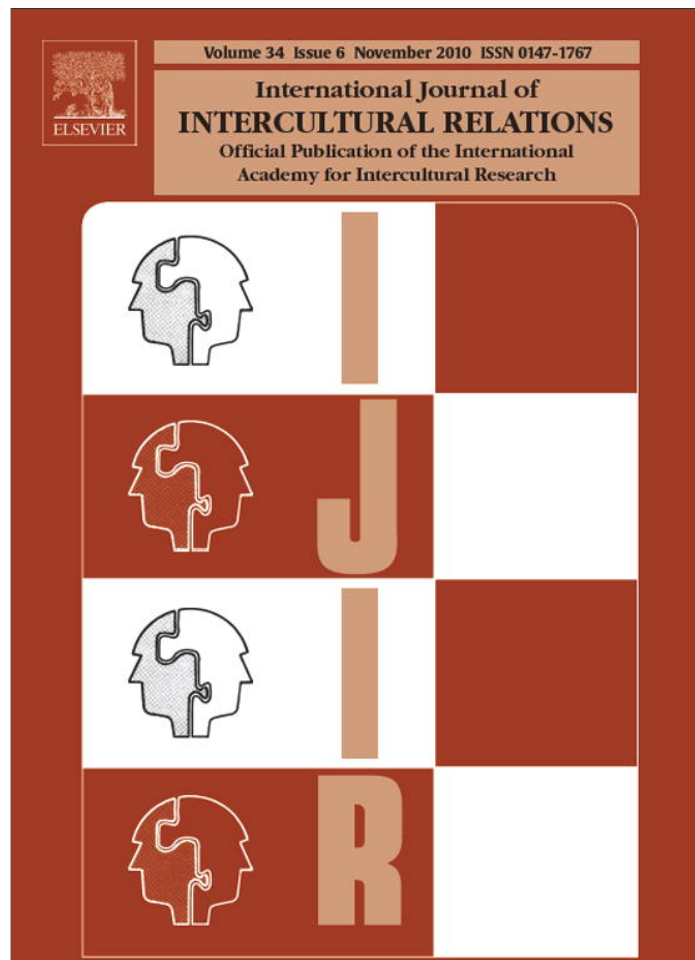


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Dialogue and ideology: The effect of continuous involvement in Jewish-Arab dialogue encounters on the ideological perspectives of Israeli-Jews

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the impact of continuous involvement in planned intercultural Jewish-Arab encounters on the ideological perspectives of Israeli-Jews. Specifically, we examine the extent to which continuous involvement of Israeli-Jewish group facilitators in encounters with Arabs is associated with reported changes in their attitudes toward the status of the Arab minority in Israel and toward the definition of Israel as a Jewish and democratic state. A thematic content analysis of 13 in-depth interviews with Jewish facilitators of major encounter programs in Israel reveals that these facilitators' continuous involvement in encounters is associated, in most cases, with a reported ideological shift. Specifically, the interviewees described encounters as raising their awareness to the asymmetric relations between Jews and Arabs in Israel, and to claims regarding discrimination toward the Arab citizens of Israel. Moreover, the vast majority of interviewed Jewish-Israeli group facilitators described their continued encounter with Arab citizens of Israel as leading them to an increased detachment from Zionist ideology and to a significant decrease in their support of the definition of Israel as a Jewish state.

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1. Introduction

A major issue in the relations between different ethnic, cultural and national groups is the issue of ideology and of ideological practices used by the majority group to preserve its advantaged status. However, many studies of intergroup attitudes and on intergroup contact and its effects focus on the psychological dimension of "prejudice reduction" and neglect to consider the wider ideological implications of such contact (Dixon, Durrheim, & Tredoux, 2005; Dixon, Durrheim, & Tredoux, 2007). The present study focuses on ideological process and transformations related to planned encounters between members of the Jewish majority and members of the Arab minority in Israel. Specifically, it attempts to explore the ways in which repeated encounters with Arab citizens of Israel are associated with reported shifts in the ideological views of the Jewish-Israeli facilitators of these encounters.

Jewish-Arab encounters in Israel these past 20 years have addressed the relations between the country's Jewish majority and the Arab minority. More specifically, these encounters have addressed attitudes of the Jewish majority toward the Arab minority in Israel, issues of discrimination and civic equality, and issues of belonging and loyalty (Abu-Nimer, 1999; Bar-On & Kassem, 2004; Bekerman, 2002; Bekerman, 2009b, 2009c; Halabi & Sonnenschein, 2004; Maoz, 2000, 2004; Zembylas & Bekerman, 2008).

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Dialogue encounter programs in Israel, among other activities, include simulation games explicitly designed to consider Israel's definition as a Jewish state, its character and laws, symbols and ceremonies, and the configuration of majority–minority relations. Beyond program segments dealing directly with this content, the issue of Israel's Jewish identity is omnipresent in multiple segments involving the unequal distribution of power and the feelings of threat and distrust between the two sides (Abu-Nimer, 1999, 2004; Bekerman & Zembylas, in press).

Discussing Israel's definition as a Jewish-democratic state often confronts Israeli-Jews involved in the encounter with questions regarding their identity as Jews and as Israelis, and with dilemmas regarding their values and worldviews (values of liberalism, democracy and equality versus Zionist-national values). Such discussions can also elicit Israeli-Jewish feelings of being threatened by, and distrustful of Palestinians (Bar-Tal, 2000). These feelings frequently lead Israeli-Jews to view the assurance of a Jewish government and a Jewish majority in Israel as an existential imperative.

Although discussions of ideological issues are a central part of many planned encounters between Israeli-Jews and -Arabs (Bekerman, 2009a; Halabi & Sonnenschein, 2004; Maoz, 2004), little research attention has been given to the impact of these encounters and of contact interventions in general on the ideological perspectives of those involved in them.

This article explores the ideological impact of continuous involvement in planned intercultural encounters between Israeli-Jews and -Arabs on Jewish-Israeli encounter group facilitators. Specifically, we examine the extent to which Jewish-Israeli facilitators' repeated encounter with Arab citizens of Israel is associated with a reported shift in these facilitators' attitudes toward the status of the Arab minority in Israel and toward the definition of Israel as a Jewish and democratic state. Facilitators of Jewish-Arab encounters are important to study as they hold a central role in directing and shaping the dynamics of the intergroup interaction. Furthermore, focusing on facilitators enables to investigate the impact of continuous and repeated involvement in intergroup encounters on ideological perspectives regarding Jewish-Arab relations in Israel.

2. Theoretical background

The contact hypothesis (Allport, 1954), the most influential theory guiding intergroup encounters, assumes that intergroup contact tends to promote the reduction of prejudice under four conditions: (1) both participating groups have equal status within the contact framework; (2) the intergroup contact is based on shared goals and cooperation in achieving them; (3) there is a potential for getting to know each other via close and sustained contact; (4) there is social and institutional support for the intergroup contact. Other researchers have defined additional conditions for creating successful intergroup contact, including: a common language for the two groups in contact; voluntary participation; contact that is pleasant and rewarding; structural conditions under which contact is enabled; attitudes toward the out-group that are not overly negative to begin with; etc. (Abu-Nimer, 1999; Maoz, 2004; Pettigrew, 1998).

Most of the empirical studies that examined the influence of intergroup contact on reducing prejudice found contact to be successful when conducted under the above-mentioned conditions (Pettigrew, 1998; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2000, 2006). Contact hypothesis critiques question the extent to which the contact experience can be generalized beyond the individuals directly involved, the extent to which contact can sustain its impact in situations of escalation in intergroup conflict, and the extent to which the contact model can adequately deal with questions involving interethnic relations and asymmetries in power (Abu-Nimer, 1999; Dixon et al., 2005, 2007; Halabi & Sonnenschein, 2004; Hewstone, 1996; Pettigrew, 1998; Suleiman, 2004).

Various alternative approaches to intergroup contact developed over time in the context of Jewish-Arab encounters in Israel. These approaches were greatly influenced by *social identity theory*, which emphasizes group identity and identification and intergroup interaction (Tajfel, 1981; Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

Maoz (2004) distinguishes between three models of contact: the *coexistence model*, heavily reliant on the contact hypothesis and focusing on fostering understanding and tolerance and on reducing stereotypes while stressing similarities and commonalities; the *confrontational model*, which stresses national group identities of Jews and Arabs in Israel, and the conflict and asymmetries in power between its Jewish and Arab citizens; and the *mixed model*, which integrates components of coexistence alongside components of confrontation (addressing the conflict and the asymmetries in power). The mixed model encompasses specific approaches—like that of Salomon (2004a), focusing on exposing, acknowledging and legitimizing the collective narrative of the other, or like that of Bar-On (Bar-On, 2008; Bar-On & Kassem, 2004), which is based on the use of individual stories within groups that are in situations of conflict or situations of post-conflict or post-trauma.

An important related classification is made by Abu-Nimer (1999, 2004), who distinguishes between the *reduction of prejudice approach*, which stresses stereotypes and images of the other with the aim of reducing hostility, and the *conflict approach*, whereby encounter participants confront each other and grapple with political and other contentious subjects so as to identify the role played by the conflict in the reality of their inner and external lives.

The backdrop to Jewish-Arab encounter programs in Israel is the complex relationship between Israel's Jewish majority (80%) and Palestinian Arab minority (20%) (Al-Haj, 2002). Maoz points at two main characteristics of this relationship with special relevance for encounter programs: (1) relations of conflict and hostility alongside coexistence and cooperation; (2) inequality, with Jews having access to greater resources and greater influence culturally, religiously and linguistically (Maoz, 2004). The structural inequality between Jews and Arabs in terms of their socioeconomic, political, educational and demographic situation is an important characteristic of the Israeli society that has been extensively described and discussed by several scholars, among them, prominently Al-Haj (2002, 2005) and Lustick (1980).

The state's definition and identity as Jewish and democratic also influences these relationships. Israel defines itself by law as the state of the Jewish people; this is manifest in state symbols (e.g., flag and anthem) and in various concrete laws reinforcing the bond between the state and the Jewish people both in Israel and the Diaspora.

Much has been written about the tension between the democratic and the ethnic-Jewish components of Israel, and about the place of Arab citizens given that Israel defines itself as the state of the Jewish people (Al-Haj, 2002, 2005; Lustick, 1980). Some researchers argue that the identity of Israel as a Jewish state does not necessarily contradict the democratic component of its character or the status of Arab citizens of Israel as citizens with rights (Rubinshtein and Yakobson, 2008; Smooha, 1997; Smooha, 2002a, 2002b; Gavison, 1999; Dowty, 1999), while others argue that the character and definition of Israel as a state of the Jewish people creates structural discrimination toward Arab citizens and hence an essential contradiction between the ethnic-Jewish component and the democratic component of Israel's society (Bishara, 2003; Ghanem, Rouhana, & Yiftachel, 1998; Jamal, 2002; Peled, 2005; Shafir & Peled, 2002; Yiftachel, 2000).

It is these tensions, and the relations between Israel's Jewish and Arab citizens, that programs of Jewish-Arab encounter in Israel must address. Studies done thus far of Jewish-Arab encounters have fallen generally into one of two main categories: quantitative studies addressing the influence of the encounter on changes in attitudes and opinions of participants (Kupermintz, Rosen, Salomon, & Rabia, 2007; Salomon, 2004a, 2004b), and studies addressing processes, power asymmetries, and interactions, mostly as they occur between the encounters' Jewish and Arab participants (Abu-Nimer, 1999, 2004; Bekerman, 2002; Steinberg & Bar-On, 2002).

Despite the importance of the topic, the research literature dealing with Jewish-Arab encounters in Israel offers relatively little on the perspective of the facilitators of these encounter groups. Facilitators of Jewish-Arab encounters are important to study as they hold a central role in directing and shaping the dynamics of the intergroup interaction. Furthermore, focusing on facilitators enables to investigate the impact of continuous and repeated involvement in intergroup encounters on ideological perspectives regarding Jewish-Arab relations in Israel.

Encounter facilitators crucially shape and influence the process undergone by encounter participants. Facilitators act as mediators between the ideologies, goals and conceptions of the encounter planners and what actually happens during the sessions. The encounter group facilitators are the main agents of change—leading and shaping the process undergone by those involved in the encounter: The facilitators lead and shape discussions and interactions within the encounter, help elaborate on and work through thoughts and feelings elicited by the encounter, and confront participants with contents and dynamics that occur between the two participating national groups, as well as within each of the national groups separately. Prior studies show that long time facilitators are able to develop a nuanced perspective on the dynamics of Jewish-Arab encounters and often acquire – through their role as facilitators – a sharp awareness of political and ideological processes that evolve within these encounters (Halabi & Sonnenschein, 2004; Maoz, 2000; Maoz, Bekerman, & Sheftel, 2007; Sonnenschein, Halabi, & Friedman, 1998). Probing facilitators' perspective is, thus, of utmost importance as it enables to learn from these central actors that both shape and are shaped by the encounter about emotional, cognitive and ideological processes and effects of the encounter. This knowledge can enhance our understanding of the ideological and political dynamics that are an integral part in planned encounters between Jews and Arabs in Israel and help to more clearly comprehend the ideological impact of Jewish-Arab encounters.

Moreover, while many studies focus on effects of one time encounters or of meetings that were conducted over a limited period of time (see relevant discussion by Salomon, 2004a), studying responses of encounter facilitators enable us to explore the impact of repeated, continuous involvement in planned intercultural encounters.

Our study thus attempts to examine encounter processes and effects via the reported thoughts, feelings and experiences of facilitators of Jewish-Arab encounter, thus joining earlier studies on encounter facilitators' perspectives (Bekerman, Maoz, & Sheftel, 2006; Maoz et al., 2007; and to a smaller extent: Abu-Nimer, 1999, 2004; Bekerman, 2002; Maoz, 2000, 2004). However, our study adds to previous studies by directly addressing the political and ideological context of the encounter and by charting the encounters' reported ideological impacts on its Jewish facilitators. More specifically, we explore here the extent to which Jewish facilitators view the encounter as having an impact on their attitudes toward the Arab minority in Israel and toward the definition of Israel as a Jewish and democratic state.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research population

The research population comprised 13 Jewish-Israeli interviewees, 7 women and 6 men. All interviewees work or have worked recently as facilitators of Jewish-Arab dialogue groups in established encounter programs in Israel, and have at least 2 years experience in the field. Their ages range from 28 to 54. As to other relevant demographic information: most of our interviewees (11 of them) live in Israeli towns that are predominantly Jewish, and thus have limited interactions with Arabs outside the dialogues interaction. The remaining two interviewees live in a mixed Jewish-Arab community. The majority of the interviewees (12 of them) served in the Israeli military forces, and reported on minimal contact with the Palestinian population during their service. All the interviewees hold academic degrees in the humanities or social sciences and four of them speak Arabic.

3.2. *The interviews*

Interviews were conducted in the interviewee's preferred location—generally, in their home or workplace. The interviews were conducted in Hebrew, except one which was conducted in English at the request of the interviewee.

The interviews were semi-structured and included two main parts: the first, more open, dealt with the interviewee's individual story, and a second part posed questions about the topics addressed in the study. Nonetheless, both parts included open components as well as more focused ones (Berg, 2004; Kvale, 1996). Each interview lasted from one and a half to two and a half hours. All were fully recorded and transcribed for analysis¹.

3.3. *Analysis of the interviews*

Our analysis is based on the grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), which emphasizes the generation of theories and concepts based on data derived from the research conducted (Strauss & Corbin, 1998; *ibid.*). In line with this theory, several stages of analysis were undertaken (Berg, 2004; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

The first phase included a thematic analysis of each interview separately. The initial analysis revealed numerous thematic categories emerging from each interview. After rereading a given interview, the number of categories was reduced by combining similar categories and focusing on those emerging as most relevant. Next the various interviews were integrated via categories they had in common. These categories were scrutinized again for centrality (repeated appearances across interviews), for the connections between them, and for their relevance to theory, to the subject of the study and to the questions it addresses (Berg, 2004; Roth, 2005).

The analysis process revealed major thematic categories that emerge from the interviews. These central themes are presented in the following findings section.

4. Findings

The thematic content analysis of the interviews revealed that Jewish-Israeli facilitators' continuous involvement in sustained planned encounters with Arabs is associated with a reported significant ideological shift. The interviewees described their involvement in encounters, first as participants and later as facilitators, as raising their awareness to the asymmetric relations between Jews and Arabs in Israel and to claims regarding the discrimination toward the Arab citizens of Israel. Moreover, the vast majority of our interviewed Jewish-Israeli facilitators (11 out of 13, i.e. 85%) described their continued encounter with Arab citizens of Israel as leading them to an increased detachment from Zionist ideology and to a significant decrease in their support of the definition of Israel as a Jewish state.

Below, we describe in more detail the themes emerging from the interviews.

4.1. *The encounter as a significant experience, confronting the interviewees with their role in the Jewish-Arab conflict*

For most of the interviewees, exposure to the realm of encounter workshops began with their own participation in Jewish-Arab encounter groups. Interviewees describe their participation in encounter groups as having a significant impact on their perspectives on the relations between Jews and Arabs in Israel, Zionism, the state of Israel and its character, and the Jewish-Arab conflict. Although we do not have direct information regarding their attitudes in the first place, the interviewees' descriptions of their significant experience in encounters indicate that their repeated involvement in dialogue encounters with Arabs is associated, in many cases, with a transformation in interviewees' ideological positions. In addition, interviewees' demographic data indicates that for the vast majority of them, the main and maybe only arena of consistently encountering and interacting with Arabs is in the planned encounter. This demographic information strengthens our argument regarding the planned Jewish-Arab encounter as a unique instigator of ideological transformation.

The encounter experience is described in most of the interviews as earthshaking—a significant experience in which they confronted, for the first time, their role in the Jewish-Arab conflict.

Avner², who experienced the encounter in a facilitators' course, describes how it felt:

“It was an experience for me, a really, really earthshaking one; it was the first time I understood what it means to live with this conflict. . . It was a very powerful experience for me to understand how much I am actually a part of this conflict”.

Doron describes the importance of what he learned as an encounter participant:

“The encounter brought a whole lot of things into focus. . . the understanding of power relations, of the way people speak, of language, the interaction with the other, all of these things were very, very significant. . . My personal

¹ The article is based on a Master's thesis written by the first author and supervised by the second and third author.

² All names of interviewees appearing in this article are pseudonyms.

encounter with the subject, with myself, and then with the group, my own group, the Jewish group, what happens to me inwardly, and then what happens to me with the Palestinian group. . . with 'the enemy', with 'the other'."

Several interviewees describe the Jewish-Arab encounter experience as one that fosters a new awareness and precludes self-deception. After the encounter, Yaron says, he could no longer evade the reality of the conflict:

"Perhaps for the first time I understood that this was not something that you could sweep under the carpet. . . I guess up to that point I was able to kind of camouflage it, to think it would be all right. . . I was going through an amazing experience there."

Interviewees repeatedly describe a process of self-scrutiny—an opportunity to see themselves from new angles in relation to the Jewish-Arab conflict and to reach new understandings about themselves via the group contact and the encounter experience.

Avner recalls a dream he had after an encounter session:

"After one of the sessions, I had a dream one night. . . that I was walking on the street and afraid of this Arab (a street cleaner), I identify this Arab and I am afraid of him. . . When I woke up and talked about it with the group and all, I understood, and in the end that was what I brought to the group, that actually I am afraid of Arabs, I actually am afraid of every one of the Arabs in the group. . . I am not generally afraid, I would move around in the Territories freely, but in a period of this kind of tension I remember how really strong this was."

The contact with the group brought Avner into contact with emotions and fears of which he was unaware before, exposing him to the fear he has of Arabs—all Arabs.

Several interviewees report revelations during the encounter about their own role in the conflict, not only about being part of it, but about being part of the Jewish side, whether they acknowledge it or not. Galit discusses her coming to understand that she herself is part of the Israeli system and hence part of the reigning oppression and discrimination:

". . .and the understanding where I am in this system, what my role is. I can't give any particular, very specific example, but it's like suddenly understanding that I am part of some kind of system that oppresses, that hurts people, that discriminates."

Avner talks about how, despite his declared identification with the Palestinian struggle, he understood in the encounter how much, in the end, he is part of the Jewish side, calling this the most powerful insight he took from the experience:

"It was a very powerful experience for me to understand how much I am actually part of this conflict, and from the Jewish side, and also in ways that are really emotional. . . to understand how much I am a part of my side in this thing, with all my talking, you know – I am with you in the struggle – and I am not . . . it's clear to me . . . and this was maybe the most powerful insight I had."

4.2. *The encounter with power asymmetries and majority–minority relations in Israel*

Many of the interviewed Jewish-Israeli facilitators mention that a significant insight they had when participating in encounter groups involves understanding the asymmetry of power reigning in the relations between Jews and Arabs in Israel.

Hanan describes participating in an encounter that was focused along the axis of power relations: "A very, very political aspect was clear to the encounter, that is, they were very intensively preoccupied with the question of power, strong–weak, who is served by that, how that serves. . ." And Udi describes how his experience in the encounter helped him see the power dimension in other social contexts:

"It opened my eyes and today I see power in other relations. . . between men and women and between Mizrahim and Ashkenazim (Israeli-Jews from Middle Eastern origins and from European origins, Y.R.), like on every level, like you can't cheat yourself anymore. This is a good place to be, for me, and. . . I think that for a society. . . it is aware of the implications of this on the other side and what the implications are for itself."

The process in the encounter helped Udi to see what he, as an Ashkenazi Jewish male, had not seen earlier: power dimension in various – national, ethnic, gender – contexts.

The main context for this learning about power, as reported by the interviewees, was in the relations between the Jewish majority and the Palestinian Arab minority in Israel. Doron describes this as a wake-up call, a slap in the face:

"I am actually the one with the power, because I am Jewish, I'm in the position of power, like I won't have problems with university (as opposed to Arab youngsters who had problems when they participated in a demonstration at their university). It was like a slap in the face, and after that—things changed some more, but at the time it was really, really, really not simple. . . it brought things into focus. . .; there is no doubt that it is harder to be Jewish since the (encounter) course."

Doron's newly discovered picture of reality regarding power asymmetries between Jews and Arabs in Israel and the State's treatment of Arab citizens forced him to confront his role as a person with power and to deal with the significance of being Jewish in Israel.

Several of the interviewees note that the encounter with Arabs offered them a kind of mirror, reflecting back to them a picture of the society and the state in which they live. Yaron describes the encounter using that metaphor:

"It was perhaps a mirror on my society in general, of the way you would say I idealized my state and then my society and suddenly I saw people who live in the same area and think totally different. . . have a totally different picture of it. . . I brought up this thing about Israel being a very moral society with a moral army and all that stuff, and suddenly – hearing this was kind of shocking."

In the encounter, Yaron was exposed for the first time to the perspective of the Arabs in Israel, and this perspective cast Israeli society and the state of Israel in a very different light than the one Yaron was accustomed to: it was suddenly not the same moral and just society about which he had been taught in childhood. Galit describes similarly how the encounter enabled her to see, for the first time, the way life is for Arabs in Israel and to be exposed to the perspective and the experience of Arabs as citizens of the country:

"To hear the things, the stories, and to understand that there are other people living here who actually I had not seen, I didn't know. They are not part of what you think about, of what you see, it's like something that exists but doesn't exist. And the understanding where I am in this system, what my role is. . . suddenly understanding that I am part of some kind of system that oppresses, that hurts people, that discriminates, and the whole image is, shattering that whole image that it is somehow very moral, very okay."

Noga, after the encounter, began to critically see herself as the "master in this country," in her words:

"Before (participating in the encounter). . . I was, like, I did not notice this at all. . . I did not feel uncomfortable, and here (in the situation Noga experienced after the encounter in which she had participated) I felt really as though I am the master in this country, or something, and they (the Arabs) have to ingratiate themselves with me and they have to prove something to me. . . It (the encounter) upset me and mainly it got me to know that I am living in let's say in denial and repressing and ignoring. And I'm still doing that now really; I live in Tel Aviv; I live the life of the real masters of the country. I feel, I am living at the expense of others in lots of things."

In fact, what Noga and the other interviewees are describing is how the experience of participating in the encounter exposed them for the first time to the reality of Jewish hegemony in the Israeli state and in Israeli society, to what "the Jewish state" means for the Arab citizens of Israel.

4.3. *Transformations in Jewish facilitators' perspective on Zionism and on Israel as a Jewish-democratic state*

Even more dramatically, the vast majority of our interviewed Jewish-Israeli facilitators, (11 out of 13, i.e. 85%), described their continued involvement in Jewish-Arab encounters as facilitators as leading them to an increased detachment from Zionist ideology and to a significant decrease in their support of the definition of Israel as a Jewish-democratic state.

In this vein, Anat described a significant ideological impact of her involvement in encounters on her views regarding Zionism:

"In term of political opinions, at large, the effect on me is that I stopped being a Zionist. I think it greatly affected the way I see the world. . . it totally shaped the way I analyze things, the structures of the state. The fact that it is not a democracy, that we are militaristic. I am not a Zionist first of all because I do not want to belong to a racist and discriminating society".

Galit similarly described a transformation in her beliefs regarding the state of Israel as a Jewish state:

"I am willing to give up (the Jewish state); today it is less important to me. It seems like something that comes out of the threat, fear. . . A Jewish existence in this state can exist also without all these defenses that we built. It is a type of trust that I have succeeded in creating"

Galit is almost proudly presenting a process of overcoming feelings of threat and fear that enabled her to give up the notion of a Jewish state. When describing her vision regarding the character of the state of Israel Galit said:

"What solution I see? I think it is in the direction of a state of all its citizens, this is what I am willing to go for. At the end of the day there is something artificial in this division to two states – Palestine and Israel, with the Arabs here. So in the long term also from my point of view it can be one bi-national state".

Also Yaron, like Galit, described an ideological transformation that he went through, as a result of his involvement in dialogue with Arabs that led him to stop seeing himself as a Zionist and to the support of a bi-national state:

"I have changed; I'm not a Zionist anymore. my vision is of a bi-national state, so personally I have changed a lot. . . my ideal is a bi-national state but the borders could be the borders of mandatory Palestine. I think that

each side should be able to preserve its culture, be able to have an autonomy in culture. That's the idea in general”.

To sum up, their continued involvement in the Jewish-Arab encounter is perceived by the Jewish-Israeli facilitators as a unique opportunity to become more aware and to meet, personally and tangibly, the existence of Arabs in Israel and what it means – for the Arab citizens of Israel to live in a “Jewish State.” It should be noted that these effects are attributed to a sustained long-term involvement in encounters and not to sporadic meetings between Israeli-Jews and -Arabs. The repeated encounter with Arab citizens of Israel that often leads to a renewed discussion of the state's character is described by the interviewees as difficult and complicated for them as Jews. Moreover, involvement in the encounter with Arab citizens of Israel is seen by the Jewish-Israeli facilitators as challenging their existing attitudes and as setting in motion a process of critical thought with greater awareness of the dilemmas and the questions related to the status of Arab citizens in Israel and concerning Israel's definition as Jewish and democratic.

5. Discussion

Although discussion of ideological issues is a central part of many planned encounters between Israeli-Jews and -Arabs (Halabi & Sonnenschein, 2004; Maoz, 2004), little research attention has been given to the impact of these encounters and of contact interventions in general on the ideological perspectives of those involved in them (Dixon et al., 2005, 2007). Moreover, while many studies focus on effects of one time encounters or of meetings that were conducted over a limited period of time (see relevant critical discussion by Salomon, 2004a), our studies' focus on encounter facilitators enabled us to explore the impact of repeated, continuous involvement in planned intercultural encounters.

The findings of this study indicate that the repeated involvement of Israeli-Jewish facilitators in planned intercultural encounters with Arabs is associated, in the vast majority of cases, with a significant ideological shift. The interviewees described the encounters as raising their awareness to the asymmetric relations between Jews and Arabs in Israel and to claims regarding the discrimination toward the Arab citizens of Israel. Moreover, the vast majority of our interviewed Jewish-Israeli facilitators described their continuing encounter with Arabs as leading them to an increased detachment from Zionist ideology and to a significant decrease in their support of the definition of Israel as a Jewish state.

The findings of our study can be understood in light of existing literature related to power, majority–minority relations, and the contact hypothesis (Halabi & Sonnenschein, 2004; Maoz, 2000; Suleiman, 2004; Tropp & Pettigrew, 2005). These previous studies discuss a consistent gap between members of majority and minority group in contact situations in which members of the minority group tend to have a higher awareness of the asymmetric intergroup relations and of the minority groups' disadvantaged status. The findings of our study indicate that Jewish facilitators' long-term involvement in encounters with members of the Arab minority group, serves to notably decrease this majority–minority gap in awareness, and through that lead to a transformation in ideological positions of Jewish facilitators.

Below we discuss in more detail the findings regarding the ideological impact of the encounter on its Jewish facilitators.

5.1. *The ideological impact of the encounter on its Jewish facilitators*

The experience of participating in Jewish-Arab encounter groups is described by the interviewees as an instructive and eye-opening experience, expanding their prior awareness (often minimal or missing entirely) about the Arab citizens of Israel, and about the nature of the relations between the State and the Jewish majority on the one hand, and the Palestinian Arab minority in Israel on the other. Many interviewees relate that their participation in Jewish-Arab encounter was their first exposure to the asymmetries in power between Jews and Arabs in Israel and as such a revelation. This finding ostensibly contradicts the argument in the research literature that many encounter programs ignore the dimension of asymmetries in power between the Jewish majority and the Palestinian Arab minority (Abu-Nimer, 1999, 2004; Suleiman, 2004). Note, nonetheless, that the sense of a meaningful encounter experience as reported by the interviewees involves unique ongoing encounter programs like facilitators training courses or other unique settings, the outcomes of which are quite possibly atypical. Alternatively, the findings may herald a shift in recent years in the degree to which various encounter programs actually address the existing asymmetries in power between the Jewish majority and the Arab minority in Israel.

Beyond the impact of involvement in the encounter on perceptions of the power relations between Jews and Arabs in Israel, many of the Jewish-Israeli facilitators we interviewed say that the experience of being involved in Jewish-Arab encounters enabled them to see, for the first time, in a tangible and personal way, the Arabs who live in Israel as human beings who are their equals, and to be exposed to the perspective of Arab citizens about the reality of life in Israel. According to the interviewees, this perspective showed them Israel and Israeli society in a new light, with a new critical awareness concerning the unequal status of and the racism directed toward Arab citizens.

Another dimension of discovery through repeated involvement in encounter with Israeli-Palestinians, according to the interviewees' reports, is that of self-revelation. Many of the interviewees report that their experience of being involved in Jewish-Arab encounters – both as participants and as facilitators – allowed them to learn about themselves and to discover inner feelings of hostility toward, and fear of, Arabs. Feelings they had earlier repressed and hence been unaware of and unable to analyze them. The reporting of such feelings, mainly about fear that surfaced and grew during the course of the

encounter, reinforces the findings of many researchers who stress the place of fear in the conflict and in Jewish–Arab dialogue encounter (Bar-Tal, 2000; Bar-On & Kassem, 2004; Stephan, Hertz-Lazarowitz, Zelinker, & Stephan, 2004).

In addition, Jewish encounter facilitators also describe their involvement in the encounter as increasing their understanding of the role they themselves play in the conflict, of their unavoidable status as partners to the Jewish side, and hence of their own responsibility for the conflict and the asymmetry of power relations between Jews and Arabs in Israel (see Halabi & Sonnenschein, 2004; Sonnenschein et al., 1998 for similar observations regarding the Jewish–Arab encounter).

The general picture emerging from the interviews suggests that their repeated involvement in Jewish–Arab encounters raises Jewish facilitators' awareness of the complexity of Jewish–Arab majority–minority relations in Israel and leads to ideological and political change among them. Most interviewees said that their involvement in encounters moves them to grapple with questions about inequality between Arabs and Jews and about the Jewish and democratic character of the state of Israel.

5.2. Methodological issues and limitations of the study

Our study is based on in-depth interviews with Jewish facilitators of Jewish–Arab encounters. The qualitative research method used here is not intended to provide an exact measure of changes in attitudes or opinions, or of the effects of intergroup contact, but rather to examine how Jewish–Israeli facilitators of the encounter understand and construct the encounters' effect on their ideological and political perspectives. Thus one limitation of our study is that it cannot point to a uni-dimensional causal association between involvement in planned encounters and ideological change.

Another limitation of our study relates to the research population. The study focuses on the perspective of Jewish facilitators of the encounter. In order to achieve a more complete picture on the ideological impact of the encounter, future research should also examine the perspective of Arab encounter facilitators.

6. Conclusion

The findings of our study indicate that involvement in repeated structured encounters with members of the Arab minority in Israel leads Jewish–Israeli facilitators of such encounters to develop a more critical awareness regarding the power relations between Jews and Arabs in Israel and regarding the definition of Israel as Jewish and democratic. Clearly, this ideological impact of the encounter can be viewed favorably or unfavorably, depending on the eye of the beholder. However, regardless of the perspective taken – it is important to devote systematic research attention to this potential transformative ideological impact of intergroup dialogues in situations of asymmetric conflict (Dixon et al., 2005, 2007).

The ability of Jewish–Arab intercultural encounter to alter awareness and reshape the discourse, as clearly reflected in our study, has significant implications not only for the nature of the relations between Jews and Arabs in Israel, but also for the theory and practice of working with other intergroup and intercultural conflicts in other societies and parts of the world.

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