



# Narratives of belonging (and not): Inter-group contact in Israel and the formation of ethno-national identity claims



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## ABSTRACT

Inter-group encounters have been used for decades as a means of ameliorating relationships between Jews and Palestinians in Israel. A central focus of much of the scholarship on such encounter programs has been their potential to shape beliefs and behaviors of participants. Despite the centrality of identity to this and other intractable conflicts, however, relatively little literature has focused on the way that encounters create conditions for identity change or how this change is maintained over time. The present study makes an initial attempt to address these limitations by focusing on identity claims of former participants in two Israeli encounter programs as they are narrated in years and decades following program participation. Using life history interviews and a reconstructive analytic approach, it explores the way that former participants narrate identity claims in relation to dominant ethno-national narratives in Israeli society, and with reference to the encounter programs in which they participated. These identity claims are defined according to four patterns: (1) expansion, or limited openness to the out-group narrative; (2) accentuation, greater identification with the in-group narrative; (3) ambiguity, defined as a difficulty in integrating perspectives that do not align with the collective narrative into personal narratives; and (4) transformation, characterized by an ability to perceive structural injustices systemically and an openness to in-group critique. Findings suggest that ethno-national group, type of encounter, and location of encounter implementation may potentially shape the possibilities for identity change among encounter participants.

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## 1. Introduction

Inter-group encounters have been used for decades as a means of ameliorating relationships between groups in conflict (Abu-Nimer, 1999). A central focus of much of the scholarship on encounter programs has been their potential to shape beliefs and behaviors of participants (Salomon, 2006, 2009). However, although identity is a central element of the conflict between Jews and Palestinians in Israel (Kelman, 1999), relatively little literature has focused on the way that encounters create conditions for identity change and how that change persist over years and decades. The present study presents an initial attempt to address this limitation by focusing on identity claims of former participants in two Israeli encounter programs. Specifically, it explores the way that former participants narrate identity claims in relation

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to dominant ethno-national narratives in Israeli society, and with reference to the encounter programs in which they participated.

### 1.1. *The Israeli context*

Since its founding in 1948, the conflict between Jewish and Palestinian<sup>1</sup> citizens has characterized Israel. This conflict, related to but distinct from Israel's conflict with Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, largely reflects the status of Palestinian citizens as a group subject to overt and implicit discrimination (Al-Haj, 1995; Human Rights Watch, 2001; Rouhana, 1997) and is rooted in Israel's founding documents. In its Declaration of Independence, Israel is defined as both Jewish and democratic (Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1948). This raises fundamental questions about the potential equality of all citizens and places Palestinians "in a circle peripheral to the core" of Israeli society (Shafir & Peled, 1998, p. 254). Moreover, the dominant ethno-national discourse in Israel – disseminated in the media and education system, and via other societal institutions – privileges beliefs emphasizing Jewish victimization and promoting their claim to land (Bar-Tal, Halperin & Oren, 2010), while de-legitimizing the Palestinian historical narrative. Thus, while Jews and Palestinians each tell a 'master narrative' of history and identity (Bar-On, 2008; Fuxman, 2012; Hammack, 2006, 2009b), the Jewish narrative is most widely heard.

Given this context, tensions simmer constantly under the surface of Jewish–Palestinian relations. Since Israel's establishment, Palestinian citizens have reacted to these tensions in different ways. In autumn 2000, frustrations among Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza led to an uprising known as the Al-Aqsa Intifada. Tensions between Palestinian and Jewish citizens exploded soon after the outbreak of the Al-Aqsa Intifada, when 12 Palestinian citizens and 1 Jew were killed during protests held in solidarity with Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza. These events were a warning to Jewish citizens about the degree of alienation felt by their Palestinian counterparts (Or, 2004), yet today there are indications that Israeli society has become even more polarized. Recent protests decrying relationships between Jewish and Palestinian citizens indicate the degree to which Jewish Israelis view Palestinians with suspicion (Hadad, 2011; Levinson, 2011), while numerous instances of vandalism, graffiti and physical violence, instigated by Jews (e.g., Boker, 2013; Kubovich, 2013; Lidman, 2013) have further damaged inter-group relationships.

### 1.2. *Inter-group encounters*

Against this background, inter-group encounter programs have been implemented in Israel since the 1980s as one approach to improving relationships between Jews and Palestinians (Abu-Nimer, 1999). These are part of the broader array of encounters, implemented both within and out of the Middle East, that bring together Israeli Jews with Palestinians from within and out of Israel, and with Arabs from other countries.

*Peace Child Israel*<sup>2</sup> and *Sadaka Reut* are two veteran Israeli encounter organizations founded in the 1980s, implementing programs for 14–18 year olds that take place over a period of 1–3 years. Their programs differ considerably in approach, reflecting differences that can be seen throughout the field of inter-group encounters. Traditionally, encounters have been characterized as based on one of two theoretical approaches: Allport's (1954) Contact Hypothesis, which posits that inter-group encounters can lead to prejudice reduction when certain conditions are met; and Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 1986), which argues that group memberships play a central role in the formation of social identities and asserts the salience of collective identities within inter-group encounters. Programmatically, these two approaches differ in terms of an emphasis on interpersonal relationships in Contact Hypothesis-based encounters, as contrasted with a focus on empowering participants as members of a collective group, and directly addressing structural issues, in programs based on Social Identity Theory (Abu-Nimer, 1999; Suleiman, 2004).

Maoz (2011) provides a more nuanced classification of encounters, categorizing them as fitting into what she calls *coexistence*, *joint projects*, *confrontational*, and *narrative* models. Of these, the former two are based on the Contact Hypothesis, although rather than focusing only on inter-personal relationships, the *joint projects* model emphasizes the creation of a super-ordinate identity among encounter members through engagement in a concrete process of working together. Contrasting with both of these approaches, encounters using the *confrontational* model take as their basis the tenets of Social Identity Theory and aim to encourage greater awareness among Jewish participants about structural asymmetries characterizing Jewish–Palestinian relations in Israel, while simultaneously empowering Palestinian participants by enabling them to directly confront Jewish participants about issues of national and civic identity and discrimination. The *narrative* model of encounters, a relatively new model developed in Israel in the 1990s, contains elements of both the *coexistence* and

<sup>1</sup> The citizens of Israel who are of Palestinian descent have been called, at different times and by different groups, Israeli-Arabs, Arab citizens, Palestinian-Israelis, Palestinian citizens of Israel, and Israeli-Palestinians. In this manuscript, I utilize the term Palestinian citizens of Israel (shorthand: Palestinians), except when citing academic scholarship or quoting research participants who utilize a different term. My choice of terminology is based on the fact that most, though not all, of my Palestinian research participants referred to themselves in this way. I note also that the focus of my study is on Jews and Palestinians residing within the State of Israel. Thus, my reference to Palestinians does not include residents of the West Bank, Gaza Strip, or elsewhere in the Palestinian Diaspora.

<sup>2</sup> After 23 years of programming, Peace Child Israel closed its doors in the Fall of 2011. I refer to its programs in the present tense in this manuscript since the organization was still in existence during my fieldwork, and for purposes of narrative flow.

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