



## Review

# Negotiating the past, imagining the future: Israeli and Palestinian narratives in intergroup dialog<sup>☆</sup>



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## ABSTRACT

Intergroup dialog affords an opportunity to study the deployment of historical narratives in conversation. In this field study, Israeli and Palestinian adolescents were randomly assigned to one of two conditions of intergroup dialog commonly in practice in intergroup encounter programs. In the coexistence condition, facilitators encouraged participants to focus on similarities and to construct a common ingroup identity. In the confrontational condition, facilitators encouraged participants to see themselves as group representatives and to become aware of power differences among groups. Our analysis examined variability in narrative content based on dialog condition and topical focus on either history or the imagined future. Using an interpretive analytical framework, we found that recognition of the outgroup narrative emerged among Jewish Israeli participants within the coexistence condition when the topic of an imagined future was discussed. Participants nevertheless struggled to reconcile divergent collective narratives in conversations about the past and a concrete future—namely, the conditions of a future peace agreement—regardless of the facilitation model employed. Findings are discussed in relation to theories of historical narrative in intergroup conflict and reconciliation, as well as distinct approaches to intergroup dialog.

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## 1. Negotiating the past, imagining the future

### 1.1. Israeli and Palestinian narratives in intergroup dialog

Within the Israel-Palestine conflict, the past is not merely prolog. More than six decades have passed since 1948, which for Israelis marks the birth of their nation and for Palestinians the loss of their vision of national self-determination. Yet, the memory of 1948 is kept alive by the imprint it has left on the collective (Jawad, 2006; Sa'di & Abu-Lughod, 2007) and individual psyches (Bar-On, 2006; Hammack, 2006, 2008, 2011) of Israelis and Palestinians alike. Refugee camps, compulsory military service, checkpoints, and the persistent, underlying fear that whatever has been gained will ultimately be lost, and whatever has been sacrificed will ultimately be in vain, keep the events and consequences of 1948 fresh in the minds of those born long after their occurrence.

The historical narratives that Israelis and Palestinians construct regarding the past not only help explain the origins and development of the conflict up until the present time, but also legitimate past, present and future actions undertaken in the name of safeguarding the group or ensuring peace (Rotberg, 2006). Jewish Israelis and Palestinian hold contrasting accounts of the conflict's origin, its significant events, and the role each group has played within these events (Bar-Tal & Salomon, 2006; Rouhana & Bar-Tal, 1998). In addition, these narratives underlie processes of mutual identity denial (Kelman, 1999) and delegitimization (Oren & Bar-Tal, 2007). Crucially, these contrasting views of history obstruct efforts to achieve peace (Kackowicz, 2004; Rouhana, 2004). Therefore, a key to understanding how the future course of the Israel-Palestine conflict is viewed is to examine how Jewish Israelis and Palestinians engage with and reproduce these polarized collective narratives.

To address this relationship between past and future, our study examined the historical and future narratives that emerge within the context of Jewish Israeli and Palestinian intergroup dialog. Using an interpretive, hermeneutic approach to discourse analysis common in narrative research and other studies of intergroup interaction (e.g., Bekerman, 2002, 2009b; Helman, 2002; Steinberg & Bar-On, 2002), we sought to discover whether the reproduction of divergent historical narratives could be arrested within the intergroup contact setting. Our study thus addressed two research questions. First, can discussing the future, particularly a hypothetical, post-conflict future, facilitate the emergence of a shared collective narrative of the conflict between Jewish Israelis and Palestinians? Second, how does the dialog facilitation model affect the way in which youth engage with and reproduce collective narratives? In addressing these two research questions, our study adds to growing research illustrating the experiential process of intergroup contact (Pettigrew, 2008) as well as the potential effect of contact approach on this process (Hammack, Pilecki, & Merrilees, 2013; Pilecki & Hammack, 2013). Our study also demonstrates the relationship between how the past is viewed and prospects for peace in the future; thus our study not only aims to make a theoretical and empirical contribution to the literature but also inform the conduct of peace educators in the field.

## 2. Dialog-based contact among Israelis and Palestinians

Our study focused on dialog between Jewish Israeli and Palestinian youth participating in intergroup contact. Research investigating intergroup contact has proliferated since Gordon Allport's development of the *contact hypothesis* in 1954. Allport (1954) contended that contact between members of different groups in contexts characterized by equal status, institutional support, common goals and intergroup competition can result in reduced intergroup prejudice. Similarly, the Common Ingroup Identity Model (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000) emphasizes the role of common goals (Sherif, 1958) and the development of a common, superordinate identity in reducing prejudice. These approaches share the assumption that when members of different groups meet under favorable conditions they will encounter stereotype-disconfirming information and form affective ties (i.e., friendship) that will, in turn, lead to a reduction in negative intergroup attitudes (see Pettigrew, 1998). In practice, the implementation of this approach in intergroup encounters is termed the *coexistence* approach (Maaz, 2011).

Despite its widespread empirical support (see Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006), criticism of the contact hypothesis and related frameworks has persisted. Early work by Yehuda Amir noted that application of the contact hypothesis in intergroup encounters consisting of Jewish and Arab Israelis would often exacerbate tension between groups (Amir, 1969) or result in positive effects for Jewish Israelis only (Amir, Bizman, Ben-Ari, & Rivner, 1980). Encompassing much of the criticism that has been levied against intergroup contact research, Dixon, Durrheim, and Tredoux (2005) argued that contact research has focused

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