The impact of the political context on discourse characteristics in Jewish-Arab encounters in Israel: Between peace talks and violent events

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Abstract

Research in the field of intergroup relations has developed considerably in the last two decades, influenced by events and by the historical zeitgeist. We suggest applying an interactional way of dealing with intergroup encounters, which emphasizes the situational macro-context (political, historical and social) in which the contact takes place. Employing this approach, the impact of the social-political context on the characteristics of two encounters, in which Jewish and Arab Israeli students met to deal with the Israeli-Arab political conflict, was examined. The workshops took place during two completely different political contexts. The first workshop was carried on at the time of peace talks, following the Oslo Accords (1996/7) and the second - during the “al-Aksa Intifada” (2001/2002). The discussions were recorded and fully transcribed. The two workshops were compared using a typology for classification of the developmental process of discourse between groups. The analysis revealed that during the peace talks "ethnocentric discourse" was the dominant speech category, characterized by two monologues that do not meet. In the second workshop, dialogic categories characterized by sharing of feelings, listening to the "other" and making an effort to understand how reality looks from his/her perspective, were salient. The research findings are discussed in regard to the paradoxical impact of the political-social context on the discourse in the small group. The findings give new understanding of the role of small intergroup meetings against the background of violent reality in an interactable conflict.

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Finding effective practices to permit groups at odds to coexist in the same state is a significant challenge in intractable ethnic conflicts (Ross, 2000). One of the practices aimed at improving relations and encouraging mutual reconciliation is conducting intergroup encounters to foster the possibilities of dialogue (Salomon, 2002). Research in this area has developed considerably in the last two decades, influenced by events and by the historical zeitgeist (Mackie & Smith, 1998).

The most influential paradigm for planned intergroup contact was presented by Allport`s "contact hypothesis" (Allport, 1954). A great variety of research has supported this theory, and broadened and refined the necessary conditions which are likely to enhance the effects of inter-group contact (Pettigrew, 1998). Research efforts have related particularly to conditions within the encounter situation and referred to the structural situation on a micro level. Most of the research has related to the construction of the meeting itself, and the effects of this structure on changes in attitudes among the participants (Sagy, 2002).

Indeed, encounters take place on what Lewin (1945) terms “a cultural island” which isolates, or tries to isolate, the participants from their daily lives. Planned encounters, however, are viewed as a major means of learning about and improving relationships within societies in conflict on the macro level (cf. Kelman, 1998). Moreover, the historical-political context of the conflict evolving through time is considered to be one of the significant factors in the formation and alteration of stereotypes, prejudices and feelings towards the rival group. A salient example was the visit of the Egyptian president Anwar Sadat to Israel, leading to the signing of a peace agreement between Israel and Egypt. This event caused a split in the stereotypical generalized perception of “Arabs” (Bar-Tal & Teichman, 2005).

Although it seems that the political-historical context is significant, almost no research literature can be found regarding the effectiveness of encounters set against changes in the macro socio-political situation. Except for a small number of studies (e.g., Hertz-Lazarovitz & Kupermintz, 1996), the effects of the macro level upon the encounters have not been systematically investigated. In this article, we will attempt

to address this need. This also provides a response to Gergen's (1973) demand for social psychology research to be anchored more in macro-social contexts. Pettigrew (1998), as well, emphasized that the social context is usually ignored by psychological research.

Our study examined the effect of the socio-political situation on the process and results of encounters between Arabs and Jews in Israel. We compared two series of meetings, which occurred at different periods of time during the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The first workshop took place during the peace talks following the Oslo Accords (1996/1997), and the second during the al-Aksa Intifada (2001/2002).

The al-Aksa Intifada, and the events which occurred in the Arab sector in Israel in 2000, dramatically changed perceptions regarding the conflict and images of the opposing group. In essence, the dramatic and on-going events of this conflictual reality changed public perceptions and altered emotions among both Jews and Arab Israelis (Bar-Tal, 2002). Thus, realities during the two periods of the workshops were very different in terms of public discourse and level of violence between the two nations. In addition, during the workshop periods, the two societies were going through a process of development from a clear collective orientation to greater individualism and pluralism (Sagy, Orr, Bar-On & Awwad, 2001). These social processes could also have impacted the character of discourse in intergroup meetings.

Did the different experiences of reality create a different repertoire of discourse in the workshops? In our article we will examine the qualitative differences in the discourse on the micro level against the macro level background.

Encounter Groups of Jews and Arabs in Israel

Encounters between Arab and Jewish young people have been taking place in Israel since the 1980s. These encounters have mainly focused on questions of the conflictual relations and the possibility of coexistence between the two nationalities (Bar & Bargal, 1995).

The research literature describes various types of encounters based on different intergroup approaches. There are groups based on the assumption that developing interpersonal relationships between the participants as individuals will contribute to a change in stereotypical perceptions, attitudes and relations. In other encounters, which attempt to find solutions to the socio-national conflict, group identity and power relations are emphasized (Katz & Kahanof, 1990).

Another type of encounters, stemming from an interactionist approach, leads to an integrated view of the two possible strategies - the personal and the political group (Sagy, 2000). This approach considers the situational context of the encounter as a significant factor in the development of the group and its progress. The interactionist approach sees the situational conditions of the encounter, and the cognitive expressions of the changing situation, as a powerful mediator in intergroup relations (McGuire, McGuire & Cheever, 1986). The situational factor may be on a micro level, for example, the structure of the meeting itself (Sagy, Steinberg & Fahiraladin, 2002), or on a macro level – the social and political situation within which the encounter takes place.

As mentioned previously, the macro level, despite its relevance to the encounter, has been studied only rarely. One of the studies, which related to the impact of daily events outside the workshop during the *Intifada*[1] on the character of the encounters (Hertz-Lazarowitz, Kupermintz & Lang, 1998), found that, as the conflict became stronger, hostility among the participants in the encounters increased and hindered the process of dialogue.

The empirical literature has usually included short reports which were written by the group organizers (Fisher, 1993), and research which examined the changes in attitudes and behavior of the participants after having taken part in these groups (Bargal & Bar, 1994). In recent years, an additional approach has developed which attempts to describe and analyze the group process and dialogue (Salomon, 2002) using qualitative research methods.

This approach has led to the construction of a unique tool to evaluate group processes (Steinberg & Bar-On, 2002). The present research has made use of this tool in order to analyze the discourse in the workshops that we examined.

The focus of the analysis is centered on three questions:

1. What were the features of the intergroup discourse?
2. Was there a process of development towards dialogic discourse?
3. Would there be differences between the two workshops considering the different background political realities?

Regarding the last question, it is important to emphasize that the two workshops were led by different moderators. Both the type of moderation and the

[1] The Palestinian uprising in 1987 against Israeli military occupation.

personal make-up of the groups could significantly affect the character of the workshops. However, both workshops were not structured, the intervention of the facilitators was minimal and not directive, and the discussions were open to development primarily in the directions to which the participants led them.

Method

Participants

The research analyzed two workshops at Ben Gurion University of the Negev. Each workshop lasted one academic year (1996/7 and 2001/2). Nine Jewish and eight Arab Israelis participated in the first workshop, eight Jewish and eight Arab students - in the second. They studied in different departments of the Humanities and Social Sciences Faculty at the university as undergraduate and graduate students. The workshops were elective courses, and the students chose them as part of their regular course schedule. The students were chosen to participate in the workshop after a short interview by the lecturers. The criteria for choosing the students was their motivation and openness in discussing questions relevant to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The composition of the two groups was similar and they might be considered equivalent on many relevant dimensions (gender, area of study, etc.).

The groups met together once a week, for two academic hours, and once in three weeks in uni-national groups. The joint meetings were carried on in Hebrew; the national group meetings were in Hebrew and in Arabic. The workshops were co-moderated by a Jewish and an Arab facilitator.

The first workshop (1996/7) took place during a period which was characterized by reports of peace talks, following the signing of the Oslo Agreements. During the year, however, there were a number of suicide attacks against Israelis, and from time to time, the media reported acts of violence by Israeli soldiers against Palestinians. The second workshop (2001/2) took place in a period of daily acts of violence: wide-ranging military activity in the occupied territories and suicide attacks by Palestinians in Israel.[2]

The workshops were observed from behind a one-way mirror by two lecturers and two doctoral students. Discussions were taped, filmed on video, and fully transcribed.

[2] A detailed description may be found on the Website of the Guardian: http:// guardian.co.uk

Research Tools

The discussions were analyzed using a typology for discourse classification (Steinberg & Bar-On, 2002). The typology includes seven categories which distinguish among kinds of discourse. The categories can theoretically be placed on an axis of which the lowest level is "ethnocentric discourse"- monologues which do not meet, while the highest level is "a dialogic moment"- emotional and cognitive understanding. The tool was developed as a part of a doctoral dissertation (Steinberg, 2002). It allows the examination of nuances during the group discourse. The types of discourse described in the typology reflect different ways of viewing the self, the other and the relationship. The categories can theoretically be located on a scale progressing from simplistic to more complex perceptions.

"Ethnocentric talk" reflects a monolithic view of self and other (Bar-On, 1999). Groups involved in long lasting and violent conflicts develop a positive view of their own collective while the other is seen as the mirror image (Bar-Tal,1995). Each side sees itself as right, moral and peace seeking while the other is seen as the opposite. Each party assumes that it knows who the other is (Gurevitch, 1988). This assumption of "knowing", based on stereotypic definitions, contributes to conducting two monologues that do not meet.

"Attack", like the former category, reflects a monolithic perception of self and other. By attacking, one tries to convey the message that he/she is the one who is right, the victim, while the other is wrong and guilty, but as opposed to ethnocentric talk, there is an attempt to reach out to the other.

"Opening a window" is an attempt to invite the other into one's world by sharing feelings with him, that may be seen as a sign of recognition of the other and of caring about the relationship. Sharing of feelings may lead, according to (Gurevitch, 1988), to dialogue and to mutual understanding. However, the attempt to achieve dialogue fails when the other side does not trust the opponent's intentions.

The category "recognition of differences" can be seen as a turning point in one's perception of self and other. It means recognition of the other's "otherness" and realizing that reality can be seen differently from another perspective. Gurevitch (1988) sees recognition of the distance between the self and the other, as a necessary step towards dialogue which may lead to understanding.

"Intellectual discussion" is characterized by listening and relating to the other's arguments. Listening is seen as a sign of recognition and respect (Buber, 1965). It helps gain new information and may lead to agreement between the opposing sides.

"Inclusion of differences" is a kind of dialogue where each side contributes to mutual understanding by sharing personal stories and experiences, expressing feelings, a process of gradually getting closer to understanding how reality is seen from the other's perspective (Broome, 1993).

A "Dialogic moment" is a moment of cognitive and affective understanding, of real meeting one another. It is the result of an egalitarian "I-You" relationship (Buber, 1965), and of the belief that there is no "objective truth", which lead to a joint effort to create shared worlds of meaning.

Because of the limited scope of this article, we will present an analysis of the workshops using only four of the categories at the two ends of the axis. "Ethnocentric Discourse" and "Attack" represent monologues which lead to a dead end, in contrast to "Intellectual Discussion" and "Inclusion of Differences" which represent dialogic discourse leading to understanding.

Categorization of discourse was made on the basis of the following criteria:

Ethnocentric Discourse: The participants use argumentation and do not share feelings. The discourse tends to be based on stereotypical and simplistic perceptions of self and the "other" in terms of black and white: "I am right and you are wrong", a kind of "discussion between the deaf".

Attack: The participants blame the other, use labeling, such as: racist, Nazis, terrorists etc.

Intellectual Discussion: The participants use arguments, do not tell personal stories and to not express feelings. However, they listen to the "other" and react to his/her arguments. The discussion may lead to cognitive understanding of the other side.

Inclusion of Differences: Participants speak about their thoughts, express negative and positive feelings, ask questions for information or clarification, listen and react to each other in a non-judgmental way. There are signs of differentiation among individuals and an attempt to understand realities from the other's point of view.

Analysis of Texts

The transcripts of each encounter were divided into sections according to the subject under discussion. Each section was categorized using the detailed typology.
A computer program was developed to graphically present the discourse categories. The program collected lines of text based on the transcriptions of discussions, and allowed the assignment of a category to each line of discourse. The program separately calculated the statistical data of each encounter. The data is presented in histograms that visually illustrate the proportion of discourse categories that appear in the various encounters.

Findings

The questions in the study relate to the differences in intergroup discourse features against the background of different external realities during the two workshops. We asked about the presentation of reality and its impact on the content, and on the way in which the group progressed towards a dialogic discourse. We will present a detailed comparative analysis of the findings that relate to these questions. The analysis includes:
A. Quantitative findings (illustrations) of the discourse features during each of the workshops.
B. Comparison of the discourse features using examples and quotes from the participants` statements.

A. Quantitative findings of discourse characteristics

- illustrations 1 and 2 around here -

The illustrations indicate that both groups underwent processes in the direction of the goals of the workshop. In both there was a decrease in ethnocentric discourse and an increase in dialogic discourse. However, they were significantly different from each other in both their progress and intensity, as expressed in the discourse categories in each of the workshops.

In Illustration 1, presenting the discourse categories of the "*1996/7 Workshop*", "Ethnocentric Discourse" is clearly the dominant discourse category. This category appeared in almost every encounter and constituted an average of 35.8% of discourse

in all of the encounters. The “Ethnocentric Discourse” and “Attack” categories, representing non-attentiveness, attacks and accusation, made up an average of 48% of the total discourse. During the year, there was a certain change in the developmental process that the group underwent, and some dialogic categories appeared during the second half of the workshop. However, “Ethnocentric Discourse” still constituted the prominent category.

On the other hand, in Illustration 2, showing the discourse categories of the “*2001/2 Workshop*”, the dominant categories were “Intellectual Discussion” and “Inclusion of Differences”. “Ethnocentric Discourse” was dominant in the first four encounters. During the year, however, "Dialogic Discourse" became more prominent, characterized by mutual attention and reference to what the “other” was saying.

In general, during the year in which the al-Aksa Intifada took place, the character of discourse was very different than that of the 1996/7 workshop. The direction of the difference, however, was paradoxical. In contrast to what might have been expected, in the 1996/7 workshop the discourse was more violent, more ethnocentric and less dialogic. Events of external reality such as a suicide attack during which Jews were killed in a Tel Aviv café, or abuse of Arabs by military border guards, dramatically affected the nature of the encounter. It was expressed by a striking increase of ethnocentric discourse. On the other hand, during a period when daily reality on the “outside” was extremely violent, throughout the entire year in the 2001/2 workshop, the encounters were characterized by dialogic discourse categories.

B. Content analysis of encounters

The following is an analysis of the content of a number of encounters at the two workshops. We will attempt to demonstrate the features of the encounters by quoting the participants.

The 1996/7 workshop

Despite the “dialogic” political situation on the macro level [3], dialogic expression in the meetings of this workshop was meager. Subjects that were discussed were usually conflictual and were brought up by the Arab members of the group. They primarily related to the sense of deprivation and alienation that they felt in the Israeli state, and expressed expectations for equal civil rights. They also argued for receiving

[3] For further details, see: http://www.mideastweb.rog/timeline.htm

recognition for their national identity as Palestinians, and greatly stressed their identification with their brothers in the occupied territories.

The following example is a discussion that took place during the fourth encounter:

Avner: Each of us can live as he wants in his own home, but there **is** a problem with your definition…Nasser said that, when a Palestinian state is established, he would not see you here as a minority… you **will** remain a minority, just like any other minority…
Ahmad: We gave up Jaffa, Haifa…we want you …to stop being occupiers. Give our brothers back…
Fatma: When you … return the Golan Heights…
Yaron: Why are you interested in the Golan Heights?
Fatma: Because I am Palestinian.
Nasser: I want to finish my studies and work… how can I work in a Jewish state?

The discourse category that characterized the discussion was "Ethnocentric Discourse". What Avner said seemingly reflected liberal democratic rhetoric, but hidden behind his words were suspicion and difficulty in recognizing the Palestinian national identity of the Arabs. From his standpoint, they were a sub-group of Israeli society. At the same time, the Arabs were expressing the lack of equality in the Israeli state.

A few of the meetings took place against a backdrop of violent external events. What occurred in the workshop after these events?

The discourse took place in terms of "us" against "them", the righteous against the guilty, victims against victimizers. The discussion focused on vulnerability and suffering, but each side was discussing its own vulnerability and suffering. The specific event evoked strong feelings on the part of the side that had been harmed, and the expectation that the other would accept responsibility. Feelings were worded as blame and attack. The reaction of the other side was an attempt to divert the discussion from the specific event, to disregard the feelings of the other, to use general terms, to be defensive and self-justifying. The present event was explained in terms of existing perceptions and the discussion just deepened the lack of understanding between the sides. The following are examples of encounters such as these.

The sixth encounter took place just after reports of abuse of Palestinians entering Jerusalem without permits by Israeli military border guards. Nasser brought up the event. From what he said, it could be understood that he considered the abuse as representative of the Israeli Jews` attitude towards Palestinians. Avner admitted the

facts, but attributed it to a small specific group. Each side seemed concentrated on its own arguments, disregarding the other's messages. When one attacked, the other was defensive. Each group interpreted the event differently. The Jews did not relate to the feelings of the Arabs, apparently due to their own need to maintain a positive self-image. This resulted in escalating accusations from the other side as we can see in following excerpt:

Fatma: That's called dehumanization. People who suffered in the Holocaust…You should know what suffering is… and suddenly they do these things…
Avner (raising his voice): There is no comparison between the two.
Nasser (almost shouting): Don't tell me what to compare…It's not the numbers. One event equals six million…
Avner: You don't understand the Holocaust… a historical event that led to the killing of six million people.
Nasser: That doesn't impress me.

The Palestinian participants made a clear distinction between the victim and the victimizer. Avner reacted with anger at the comparison to the Holocaust. At the same time, Nasser saw his reaction as lack of recognition of Palestinian suffering. It appeared as if the sense of attack and victimization didn't allow recognition of the suffering of the other side or understanding. The result was a sense of reaching a dead-end, and a feeling of despair on the part of the participants.

Another example has been taken from the eighth meeting, after a shooting attack in which a Jewish mother and her 12-year-old son had been killed. This time, the Jews were the victimized side. Here, too, "Ethnocentric Discourse" repeated itself.

Hanit: I'm sick of it. I'd like to know what the Arabs think about what happened yesterday…
Abed: We condemn these things…You think we have to stop the peace process?...
Hanit: These acts are very serious…It is as if someone has wounded me and I said that it wasn't important; let's go out to a restaurant.
Abed: And what do you think, what was the purpose of the person who did it?

As in the previous example, the same reaction pattern appeared. The injured side demanded an explanation of the violence, but the representatives of the victimizer avoided relating to the specific incident. Abed spoke on a general level about "these things", asked questions about the peace process and diverted the discussion from the specific event to a general political discussion. He did not relate

to the feelings that Hanit (whose family had been victims of a previous terror attack) expressed.

In summary, our analysis raises the point that, despite attempts at rapprochement on the level of political leadership, during a period of relative moderation in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the discourse in the group mostly expressed the tension between the sides. Almost every external incident, both terror attacks against Jews and acts of violence against the Palestinian population in the occupied territories, were brought up and led to mutual attacks. The discourse became representative of the social-national membership of each of the sub-groups, and thus, primarily expressed the tension between two national groups involved in an intractable conflict.

The (2001/2) workshop

This workshop took place during the second Intifada, and in the shadow of the events which took place between Israeli Arabs and Jews in October, 2000. These events involved serious violence and culminated in the tragic deaths of young people. It might have been expected that, against this political backdrop, discourse would be tense and conflictual. However, in contrast to the workshop of 1996/7, in which every external incident led to an immediate debate within the group, in the 2001/2 workshop, external events were almost completely disregarded during the encounters.

A characteristic example of discussion that took place against the background of particularly violent events is taken from the sixth encounter. This meeting occurred at the end of the week during which 25 Israeli civilians had been killed in three suicide attacks. In response, an Israeli helicopter had fired missiles in proximity to Arafat's offices in Gaza. On the day of the encounter, the Israeli response was continuing, with helicopters and planes firing on Palestinian targets in the West Bank. None of these events was mentioned and no collective accusations were hurled at the other side. The encounter developed into an internal discourse including clear dialogic components.

Especially prominent was discourse on the need to work together. An Arab participant, Ahmad, opened the encounter expressing frustration with the political situation. The participants discussed the vicious cycle of attacks and reciprocal attacks. Both sides agreed that, as long as the occupation continued, an escalation of violence was unavoidable. The meeting continued with mutual consideration about the correct reaction to the political situation.

Hanna: I keep thinking of the example of "Four Mothers"… and there was a withdrawal from Lebanon.... So I think a social struggle has an effect…
Alon (telling about his Reserve service): I just want to stay alive. I see a Palestinian and I am afraid of him. I know that he hates me, and if I were in his place I would hate myself… I hate and curse the leaders. Maybe if we all rise up…
Muhammad: We have to do something like "Four Mothers" did…
Fatma: The problem is that the two nations don't know each other. Here in the workshop, we have to listen to the "other". My family and friends ask me 'Who are the Jews?' In the workshop, I feel as though I am going through an important process.
Muhammad: It's important to me that people relate to me as Muhammad, not only as an Arab.
Noa: We are returning to the question of whether we are accomplishing anything by being here… Maybe we should do something constructive together…

The discourse was characterized by "Inclusion of Differences". The group succeeded in developing its own autonomous discussion: a dialogic discussion that was not based on accusation of the "other", but rather on a sense that each side recognizes its responsibility. The participants spoke about the need to establish relations of trust and to get to know each other, over and above stereotypes. Discourse was personal: participants spoke for themselves, expressed feelings and reacted to the feelings of others. This type of discussion at times led to understanding and agreement. The above example characterized many of the encounters throughout the year.

The subject of discrimination against Arabs came up in this workshop as well. The Arabs emphasized the attitudes of policemen and security guards at public places, carrying out degrading searches. Personal stories were told that illustrated the Arab distress. These stories evoked identification from the other side, along with understanding and the desire to change the situation. During the fifth encounter, for example, Fatma emotionally described an incident with a policeman who had stopped her and had given her a ticket for driving without headlights. She interpreted his aggressive behavior as discrimination on the basis of her nationality. Fatma spoke in terms of "we" and "you", and sounded angry and accusing. The "Attack" evoked defensive responses such as "the police behave aggressively towards Jews, as well", "policemen have hard lives," and "there's nothing we can do". Ilan said that perhaps it wasn't politically correct to bring this up, but once Bedouins had stolen his motorcycle and the police were afraid to go into the Bedouin village where the thieves had fled. His message was: You aren't always "right". The discussion was in terms of national identity, setting Jews against Arabs, a competition about which side was

more justified. However, the reactions changed when Fatma added another aspect of her identity to her story:

Fatma: Not only was I identified as an Arab, but I was also a woman. I felt what women feel when they complain about violence or rape.
Yael: Saying that all policemen are bastards is a kind of defense. I felt that way as a Jew in Poland.
Fatma: Male teachers in my school didn't like the fact that I shouted at a policeman. They said: Get it into your head that you are a woman, and women don't behave that way…
Alon: I understand your feelings of injustice and helplessness. You are both a woman and an Arab. That makes me want to take revenge…that would drive me crazy!

The discussion that began as an "Attack", turned into a dialogue when Fatma expressed her more complex identity. The feminine identity formed a connection between Fatma and Yael. The reactions of Yael and Alon indicated that a more complex identity and expressions of personal feelings led to "Inclusion of Differences" discourse.

Only once did we find an example where events on macro level were mentioned. In the third encounter, an Arab participant related to an incident of soldiers firing on a Palestinian ambulance. According to Israeli sources, the Palestinians were using the ambulance to smuggle ammunition and terrorists.

Ahmad: We saw on television how an Israeli tank ran over an ambulance.
Anat : But they were smuggling terrorists in the ambulance.
Muhammad: On both sides people are getting killed for nothing because of those who lead both nations. The Israeli Arabs are afraid, too. I don't remember the last time I went to the mall.
Hassan: My way of dealing with this is to make believe that I am Portuguese… As long as both sides are like cannibals, I don't want to be part of it…
Alon: Suicide attackers- that shows their morale, their desire to have a state…some friends succeeded in convincing me to sign the officer's letter…I also have an inner voice that says that we can't give in to them, that they could throw us into the sea.
Fatma: I want to believe that the future will be good. The other side doesn't want loss and fear either… This week is the first time that it's been difficult for me to speak to Jews, even when I met you, Anat…I have never had this feeling of discomfort before.
Ahmad: We can't reach a solution, but we can let our voices be heard.

The discussion began with mutual attacks, but Muhammad changed the direction. He spoke about the effect of the political conflict on his life. The sharing of feelings of one side led to similar responses from the other. The personal discussion seems to have led to expressions of acceptance of responsibility and the desire to act and to change the situation. .

In summary, a great part of the discussions in the 2001/2 workshop was “Inclusion of Differences”, a dialogic discussion leading to understanding. The group created its own discourse that was characterized by interpersonal discussion, opening additional possibilities for symbolic collective-national discourse.

During the eighth encounter, Fatma expressed the deep process she had gone through the workshop:

"I will tell you about the process I have gone through. During the first encounters, I was very belligerent. My goal was to let my anger out on the Jews. I saw them as the government, the address for my sadness. My tone began to moderate after a few meetings. On the day of the incident with the policeman, I came in with the story of “see how bad you are!” I received support. I didn’t expect the reactions I received…I started to differentiate between the policies of the government and the people."

Discussion

Our study attempted to examine the political context on the macro level as affecting the encounter workshops on the micro level. Although the workshops did take place on a “cultural island” (Lewin, 1945), they did not disregard the conflictual political realties. Thus, it seems important to us to understand whether and how the political context affected the encounter.

The encounter workshops took place during two different political contexts. It might have been assumed that during peace talks, the discourse would have reflected a growing proximity and an attempt to develop dialogue. On the other hand, during the period of the Intifada, a period of violent bloodshed and terror, we might have expected aggressive, ethnocentric and stereotypical discourse (Hertz-Lazarowitz et al., 1998).

Our findings indicated three characteristics that distinguished between the workshops:

A. The discourse categories: The salient characteristic of the first workshop was its ethnocentric discourse. In contrast, the 2001/2 workshop was dialogic in its nature: the discourse included personal experiences that enabled non-stereotypical information to be shared, and advanced the understanding between the sides.
B. The prominence of national identity: In the 1996/7 workshop the collective national identities were more salient than in the second workshop. Among the Arabs, the Palestinian national identity was stressed along with identification with their brothers in the occupied territories. In the second workshop,

national identities were still stressed, but other identities were expressed as well (on an individual or a gender basis, among others).

C. The way of dealing with external events: In first workshop, external incidents took great prominence in the discussions; in the 2001/2 workshop there were very few references to external events.

How can we understand these paradoxical findings?

We may suggest two explanations for the different features of the workshops. One explanation is related to understanding of the context on the macro level, while the second relates to the meaning of the micro group for its participants. The two explanations are naturally connected. However, we will discuss them separately.

On the macro level, it is necessary to understand the 2001/2 workshop against the backdrop of the crises of October, 2000 in the Arab towns in Israel, and the al-Aksa Intifada in the occupied territories. These difficult events in the conflict gradually led to a different perception of collective identity among Israeli Arabs. In the preceding decade, the prominent aspect of the split identity of the Palestinian minority tended to emphasize the "Palestinian" rather than the "Israeli" (Kaplan, Abu Saad & Yona, 2001). This process included attempts to participate in official and unofficial Palestinian discourse (Rabinovitz &Abu Baker, 2002). In fact, it seemed as though the Oslo Accords created concern for loss of national identity among Israeli Arabs (Miari & Diab, 2005).

However, beginning in October 2000, a clearer Israeli Arab call for participation in Israeli society was heard. These voices have called for strengthening of Israeli identification, which combined identity and collective memory as an Arab minority in the Israeli public sphere (Gamal, 2003). Some moderation in the oppositional positions against the Israeli state, and a greater openness and readiness to combine an Israeli identity in the collective Arab minority have been found in research among the Israeli-Arabs (Hujirat, 2004).

At the same time, a change could be identified among the Jewish-Israelis in their perceptions of the Arab minority (Smooha, 2004). At least among a section of this public, there was increasing understanding that dialogue with Palestinians, who are citizens of Israel, is an existential necessity for Israeli society. There are voices calling on the Israeli public to "muster all of their courage to listen to the multiplicity of voices in the cultural sphere… First and foremost, we are required to listen to the Arabs who are closest to us, the citizens of the state" (Sheleg, 2003, p.7). In other

words, it is specifically the violent reality and the deterioration in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that led, as it would appear, to the need among both national groups to maintain existential cooperation. It may be that this collective need was expressed in the workshop encounter.

The second explanation, which seems to correspond more to the findings of our study, refers to the meaning of the workshop, and the bi-national group which was formed, in the lives of the participants. It would appear that the workshop fulfilled different needs for the participants of each of the seminars during the two periods studied. In the 1996/7 workshop, in spite of the intractable Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the participants felt greater existential security. The political situation was, indeed, fragile, but a dialogue still existed between the two nations on a macro level. Peace appeared to be possible and the Peace Index during this period was relatively higher than during other periods (Yachtman-Yaar & Herman, 1997). This relative existential security apparently led to confrontational rather than dialogic discussion. The workshop enabled this kind of discussion and perhaps even encouraged it. It seems that the confusion among Israeli-Arabs about their own national identity in Israel with the implementation of the Oslo Accords, even led them to increase confrontation. Thus, the Arab group expressed extremist positions. The Jewish group's response was to return to their Holocaust fears.

On the other hand, when the external reality was violent and threatening, with relations between the two nations on the verge of collapse, the micro-group situation seemed to supply the need for appeasement, for closeness, for mutual understanding on the interpersonal level. At a certain stage, the 2001/2 workshop expressed the need for common activity. This occurred, perhaps, in order to deal with the fears of an external reality which was continuing to deteriorate. In a reality of difficult distress and fear, it would appear that the "collective identity" gave way to other representations of "self", more personal ones. This enabled understanding of the personal stories brought up during the 2001/2 workshop, instead of rationalized argumentation and slogans that characterized the 1996/7 workshop. The personal stories in encounter groups have been found to create feelings of empathy, to achieve deeper insights and readiness to be more open (Sagy, 2002). The personal stories placed the well-known collective ethos in question and challenged its goals. The external threat appears to have turned the discussion in the group from a collective one, representing national identity, to a more individual story, expressing personal

distress. This development may also be understood against the changes in society, as well, both in the Jewish and the Arab sectors of Israel, from a more collective orientation to a more individualized one (Sagy, Orr, Bar-On & Awwad, 2001). It seems that the personal acquaintance among the participants contributed to a more complex comprehension of the self, of the "other" and of the conflict, along with a development of the ability of the two sides to deal more effectively with the negative events.

Therefore, it appears to us that the concept developed by Gaertner and his colleagues (Gaertner & al., 1993) regarding "common internal group identity" may explain the findings that characterize the 2001/2 workshop. The new group identity that evolved did not erase national group identities, but rather succeeded in reducing their intransigence and increasing openness to additional understanding. This common identity, which was gradually created during the year- long workshop, lowered the level of anger and the collective mutual accusations. It succeeded in creating a different discourse, more personal, and one which enabled expression of feelings, doubts and hesitations. Deeper personal comprehension appeared, along with less stereotypical perceptions. As a result, a more complex understanding of the conflictual situation developed within the group, both on macro and micro levels. It appears that these results lowered the sense of helplessness regarding the difficult reality.

In summary, it seems that a common autonomous group identity appeared precisely against the backdrop of violence and existential distress, taking place outside the workshop room. This common identity was not possible when the external realities indicated relative calmness and political attempts at finding a solution to the conflict .

Can we attribute the differing features of the discourse in the two workshops only to the different political contexts of a conflictual reality?

There is no doubt that there are other factors, mentioned previously, that contributed to the difference in the character of the discourse. However, as we have attempted to describe in the analysis, the effect of the macro (political reality) on behavior in the micro (encounter workshop) still appears to us as one of the central factors that may explain the differences in the character of the discourse. Surely, far more research is needed in order to understand the significance of the political context on the development of dialogic discourse in intergroup encounters. Still, we can

cautiously conclude that such encounters, even in the context of extreme intergroup distrust, provide a possibility for developing intercultural and international understanding.

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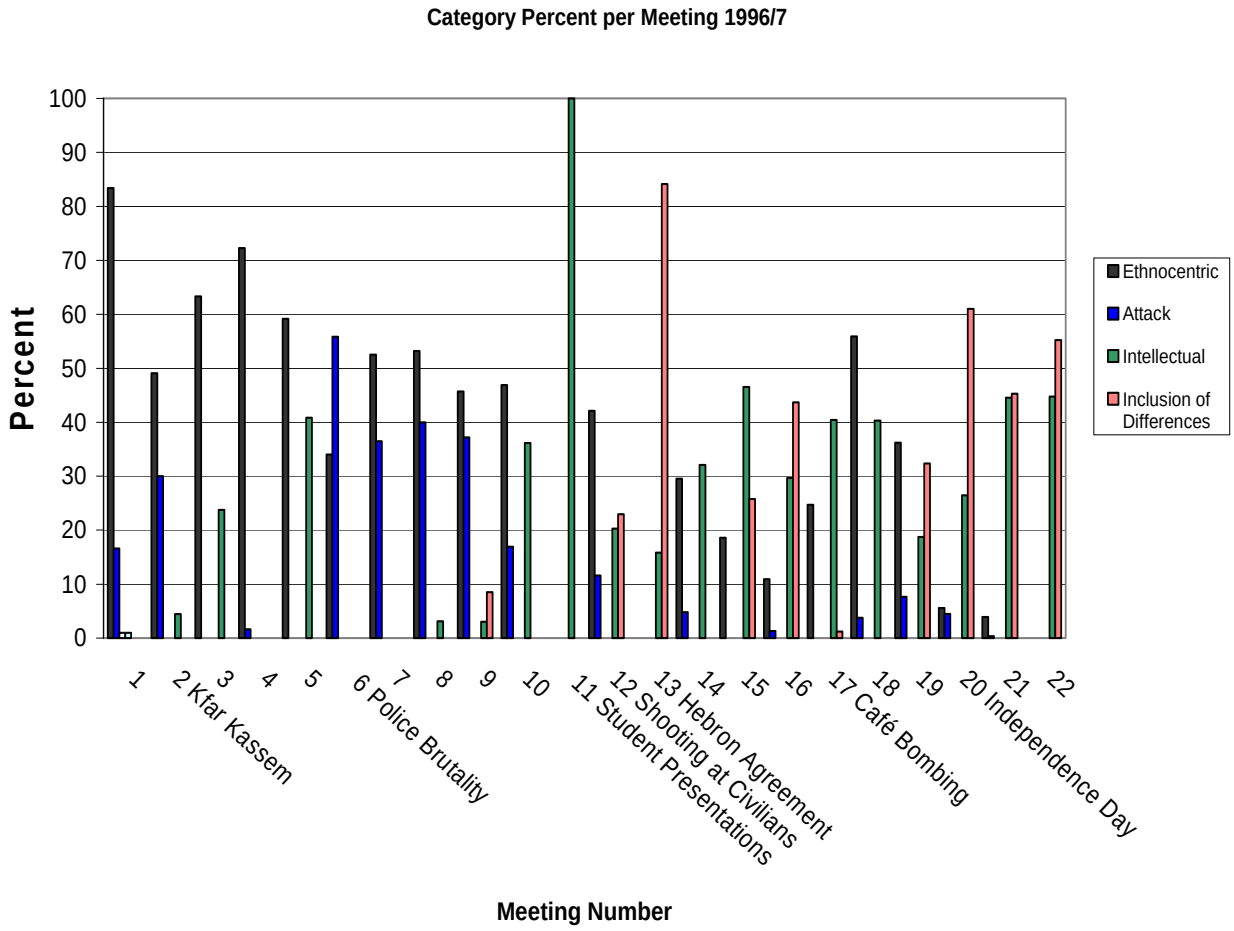
Category Percent per Meeting 1996/7
Percent
100
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80
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60
50
40
30
20
10
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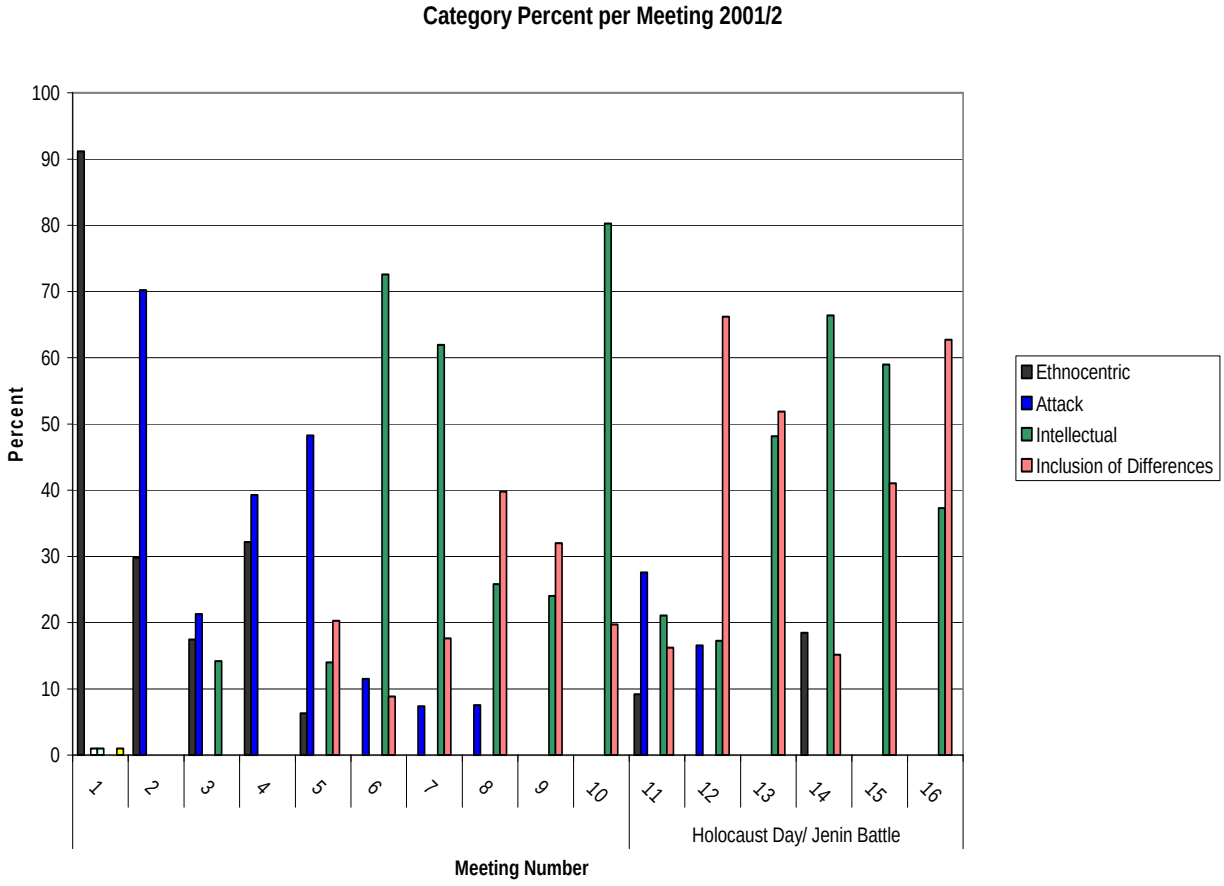
1
2 Kfar Kassem
3
4
5
6 Police Brutality
7
8
9
10
11 Student Presentations
12 Shooting at Civilians
13 Hebron Agreement
14
15
16
17 Café Bombing
18
19
20 Independence Day
21
22
Ethnocentric
Attack
Intellectual
Inclusion of Differences
Meeting Number


Category Percent per Meeting 2001/2
Percent
100
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16
Holocaust Day/ Jenin Battle
Meeting Number
Ethnocentric
Attack
Intellectual
Inclusion of Differences