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It takes three to dialogue: considering a triadic intergroup encounter

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to present findings from a research project that examined the contribution of a third partner in an encounter among three groups: Palestinian/Arab–Israelis, Jewish–Israelis and Germans. In recent decades, planned intergroup encounters have played an important role in conflict management, reconciliation and peace-building. Nearly all models use a dyadic structure, based on an encounter between two rival groups mediated by a third party.

Design/methodology/approach – The study was based on a year-long academic collaboration and two encounters between social work students from Israel and Germany (15 each). The central issues addressed were personal and collective identity; personal, familial and collective memory; and multicultural social work practice that were present in the encounter with the "other". Participants were heterogeneous in terms of gender, ethnic background and religion, inviting exploration of personal and professional meanings. Using 15 in-depth interviews with Israeli participants, we identified and analyzed the personal and interpersonal processes occurring during these encounters.

Findings – Jewish and Arab participants positioned themselves *vis-à-vis* the German group in two main configurations (singular identities and multiple multifaceted identities), which alternated according to the contexts to which the larger group was exposed, and in congruence with the developmental stage of group work.

Originality/value – The findings suggest that a "third" partner can significantly contribute to an intergroup encounter by reflecting on the relationship created between rival parties to a dyad, thereby helping them deconstruct their binary "us-versus-them" relationship.

Keywords Identity construction, Collective identity, Intergroup encounter, Peace education, Peace-building, Triad

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1. Introduction

In recent decades, planned intergroup encounters have played an important role in arenas dealing with diversity, group tensions and long-standing racial conflicts (Walsh, 2006). In the process, the parties to the encounter gain an opportunity to examine the socio-psychological factors that influence and preserve the conflict, and to generate personal and group-wide cognitive, emotional and behavioral change (Bar-Tal, 2002; Salomon, 2004). Bringing adversarial groups into situations where they can bridge past

differences, establish equal power relations and thus increase their access to different resources has become an important instrument for transformation. It is increasingly adopted in education (Ford and Malaney, 2012); community politics (Walsh, 2006); multicultural education (Nagda and Gurin, 2007); and in conflict management, reconciliation and peace-building (Fisher, 1990, 1993; Kelman, 1999).

Nearly all the models of intergroup encounter developed over the years for use with parties to a conflict rely on a dyadic structure, an encounter between two rival groups brought together by a third party. By facilitating contact between the two parties, the third party seeks to increase empathy, build trust and identify options for conflict settlement (Fisher, 2007; Saunders, 1999). In these models, each group serves as the "other" or as its counterpart and represents the out-group within the group work setting.

This paper is based on our experience of facilitating intergroup encounters between three groups: Jewish–Israelis, Arab–Israelis and Germans. We present our observations on the role and meanings ascribed to the "third" in this triadic structure by the two rival groups – Jewish–Israelis and Arab–Israelis[1] – and show how introducing a third party – the Germans – helps to deconstruct their binary, "us-versus-them" relationship.

First, we provide an overview of the theoretical and practical literature outlining prevailing approaches to intergroup encounters in conflict situations. We then present findings from interviews with Jewish– and Arab–Israeli participants in the encounters we facilitated. Finally, we discuss the findings with an emphasis on the contribution of the "third" party.

2. "Us" versus "them" in intergroup dialogue

The binary differentiation of opposing groups as "us" versus "them" was first suggested in social identity theories describing this split as inherent in human nature, and as a basic structure of human social organization. This primal, impulsive, unconscious categorization helps a group to define a separate, noticeable group identity ("us"), which is essentially different from everything and everyone else – that is, from the "other" (Berman *et al.*, 2000). Social identity is thus formed through an active process of categorization, identification, comparison and dichotomization, *vis-à-vis* an actual or imagined "other" (Tajfel, 1982; Tajfel and Turner, 1986).

"Us" versus "them" binary differentiation is a key element of international intergroup conflicts. This type of conflict is a process driven by collective needs such as security and a sense of identity, all articulated and fulfilled through ethnic groups, national groups and states (Kelman, 2008). The conflict becomes "existential" when each side perceives the other as a threat to its own existence. This "negative inter-dependence" (Kelman, 1999) exacerbates the exclusiveness of each group's national identity, and the conflict becomes a central part in each group's self-definition.

Thus, the conflict becomes an important aspect of daily life and penetrates its psychological, cultural, political and socio-cultural dimensions (Maoz, 2004; Mitrani, 2013). Through the "ethos of the conflict" and by the collective narratives in each society (Bar-Tal and Teichman, 2005; Nets-Zehngut, 2013; Srour *et al.*, 2013), each group justifies its own existence and perceives the other as less equal and less human (Cuhadar and Dayton, 2011). This process justifies acts of discrimination against the rival group and inequalities favoring the dominant group (Maoz, 2004).

Accordingly, intergroup relations characterized by "existential conflict" (Kelman, 2008) contribute to the purity of the distinction between "us" and "them", and to a

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hardening of intergroup boundaries. In times of conflict, attributes of the "other" are generalized and emphasized: ethnocentricity, prejudice and negative stereotypes are used to view the "other" as homogeneous, and conceive of "them" as the negative reflection of "us". This anchors and reinforces the distinction between the two groups (Srour *et al.*, 2013).

It is possible to identify two main schools or models of peace education interventions (Lederach, 1997; Maoz, 2011; Salomon, 2002) dealing with intergroup encounter for groups in conflict representing opposite poles of a continuum (Maoz, 2004): the coexistence model and the confrontation model. The *coexistence model* aspires to promote mutual understanding and tolerance to reduce stereotypes and out-group discrimination, elements that are inherent in the process of group formation (Tafjel, 1974; Tafjel and Turner, 1979, 1986). Intergroup encounters adopting this model seek to identify and emphasize the commonalities and similarities between members of the rival groups, and to promote a sense of partnership and connection between them. This model is based on intergroup relations theories (Pettigrew, 1998), and especially on Allport's (1954) "contact hypothesis", which focused on how contact between rival groups can increase or decrease prejudice.

The model emphasizes the situational and structural factors both inside the specific contact situation and in the broader social context that can reduce prejudice, such as equal status, shared tasks, norms and rules (Allport, 1954). Recent developments suggest a close examination of the role of social versus personal identities, and which aspects should be made salient to achieve optimal contact (Wright *et al.*, 2004) and make the encounter more generally applicable (Cuhadar, 2009). Thus, using a de-categorization process (Brewer and Miller, 1984) helps to better cope with anxiety and conflict during the encounter in the short term. However, in the long term, maintaining group membership salience (e.g. ethnicity and nationality) is more effective in improving generalizability outside the contact situation (Cuhadar and Dayton, 2011).

At the other end of the continuum resides the *confrontation model* that stresses the conflict issues and power relations of the two sides. This stream of social identity theory is based on studies of prejudice as an essential ingredient in conflict and group identity formation and construction (Cuhadar and Dayton, 2011). This model encourages inquiry into group members' collective identity and how they cope with the reality of conflict, while developing their awareness of the asymmetrical power relations between them. Unlike the coexistence model, the confrontation model does not aim to achieve harmony, but attempts to enable participating groups to experience direct confrontation, including discussion of collective identity and its consequences (e.g. discrimination and racism) (Maoz, 2004).

In addition, some mixed models incorporate elements of these two distinct models. One is the narrative model suggested by Bar-On (1993), which was originally developed for encounters between second-generation Jewish Holocaust survivors and second-generation Nazi perpetrators from Germany (Bar-On *et al.*, 1998). Subsequently, the model was adapted for use with Israeli and Palestinian students (Bar-On and Kassem, 2004), where shared family stories were used to study the influence of intergroup conflict. By creating intimate dialogue within a larger group, the narrative model enables participants to focus on their personal and emotional experiences. It also helps them to work through their stories, allowing the group as a whole to confront

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sensitive collective issues and the power relations embedded in the conflict (Litvak-Hirsch and Bar-On, 2007).

These different models use a dyadic structure, in which, each group serves as the "other" or counterpart, and represents the out-group within the group work setting. The underlying assumption is that the same binary thinking driving the production of prejudices, stereotypes and conflicts in reality is reconstructed in the group context. This therefore places the identity in conflict (e.g. race, nationality) at the forefront, where it can become the focus of mutual examination and reflection. Dyadic intergroup encounters facilitate the examination of both similarity and difference. They enable participant groups to identify with each other and express empathy toward the "other", as well as to examine the contexts that highlight their differences, giving rise to aspirations in each sub-group for unity and segregation.

The different models cited use a "track two diplomacy intervention" that emerged in recent decades as an addition to traditional diplomacy (Montville, 1987). Representatives from rival groups are brought together by a neutral facilitator to consider the underlying roots of the conflict (Fisher, 2007). This model can be used for diplomatic proposals in official policy-making and as an educative tool for promoting peace (Cuhadar and Dayton, 2011).

Although the majority of the models in the literature prepared us for work with dyads, in our intergroup work, we faced a triad: Jewish–Israelis, Palestinian–Israelis and Germans. Our experience with this triad revealed its unique contributions to encounters of groups in conflict.

3. The case study

This study is based on a multi-year project entitled "Berlin Meets Haifa", an academic cooperation between the School of Social Work at the University of Haifa, Israel, and the Alice Salomon University of Applied Sciences in Berlin, Germany. Its goal was to address the construction and formation of personal and collective identities in multicultural societies, through face-to-face encounters held in Germany and Israel.

Each session lasted for one academic year, during which 15 social work students from Israel met with 15 from Germany, with professional facilitation and supervision. During the first part of the project, prior to the encounter, each group underwent an intra-group process involving the exploration of various identities. In the second part of the project, an intergroup encounter took place in Germany, followed by a second intergroup encounter in Israel a few months later. Each encounter lasted one week, and included dialogue workshops and visits to institutions and sites relevant to the social work profession and to historical and commemoration sites significant to each of the three groups (e.g. Holocaust memorials in Israel and Germany, former Palestinian villages in Israel, a museum of East German history). The workshops were facilitated in a psycho-educational style, which relied primarily on mixed models of intergroup encounter – especially Bar-On's (1993) narrative model. The central issues addressed were personal and collective identity; personal, familial and collective memory; and multicultural social work practice.

The project allowed participants to be a part of a heterogeneous, diverse group, and invited exploration of the personal and professional meanings present in their encounter with the "other." As the "other" may represent a negative mirror-image of the self, the encounter enabled reflection on the image of the self and the image of the "other", and

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how these are used to construct new aspects of one's identity. At the group level, a parallel process facilitated reflection on each group's inherent (German or Israeli) collective identity. Experiencing these processes in an intergroup setting assisted the reconstruction of interpersonal and intergroup relationships.

During the group work, the German–Israeli encounter underwent a transformation. It changed from being a German–Israeli encounter focusing on issues of multiculturalism and diversity, to being a German–Jewish–Arab encounter dealing with conflicts between the groups. This transformation was accompanied by a split within the Israeli group into two sub-groups (Jews and Arabs), which functioned both as one large group (Israelis versus Germans) and as rival sub-groups. The process of shifting from a "diversity discourse" to a debate about conflict, and especially about the Jewish–Arab relationship, led us, the facilitation unit, to study the unique processes involved in the emergent triadic structure and to recognize the distinctive role played by the German group.

Our research questions were:

RQ1. What experience and meanings did the Israeli participants (Jews and Arabs) ascribe to the participation of the German partner?

RQ2. What was the role of the third (German) partner in the intergroup encounter between two rival groups?

4. Methods

To accomplish the goal of this study – to examine the role of a third partner in an intergroup encounter between German and Israeli groups in the "Berlin Meets Haifa" project – we identified and analyzed the personal and interpersonal processes from the Israeli participants' point of view. Due to technical and budgetary constraints, we were only able to interview the Israeli participants. The research proposal was approved by the Haifa University Institutional Review Board.

4.1 Participants

The sample consisted of 15 interviewees, undergraduate Israeli social work students who participated in the project between 2007 and 2009. They were recruited from two consecutive rounds of intergroup encounters (2007-2008, 2008-2009), in which a total of 29 Israeli students participated. The sample was heterogeneous and included 7 students from the first round and 8 from the second round; 4 men and 11 women, 4 Arabs (2 Muslim and 2 Christian) and 11 Jewish students. The ratio of Arab versus Jewish interviewees roughly reflects the ratios among Israeli participants in the Haifa–Berlin project, students enrolled at Haifa University and the Israeli population at large. Interviewees were recruited via an emailed request that explained the research goal and procedure. From the respondents, we selected a heterogeneous sample in terms of gender, religion, nationality[2] and year of participation, so as to achieve a range of responses and to ensure rich and varied information regarding the phenomenon under study (Creswell, 1998; Patton, 1990).

4.2 Procedure

Brief telephone conversations were held with respondents to the email request, when the context of the study was explained, a commitment to confidentiality and anonymity was made and interviews were scheduled. Times and locations for face-to-face interviews

were scheduled according to interviewees' preferences. At the beginning of the interview, the study objectives were explained and confidentiality again assured; all participants gave written informed consent. All 15 narrative interviews, lasting 1-2 hours, were recorded and transcribed, and all the interviews were conducted by an external interviewer unacquainted with the participants and the project. The rationale was that an external, uninformed interviewer might enable the participants to tell their stories in a richer and freer way, as well as avoid the influence of any previous relationship between participants and facilitators and the power relations embedded in them. All interviews began with the following grand tour question (Spradley, 1979): "When you recall your participation in the project, what are the significant milestones regarding your experience of the process you underwent?" Most interviewees identified their central milestones according to the project's chronology. For example, the first meeting with the German group, the Israeli group's preparations for the encounter in Israel, the second encounter, the termination, etc. After the interviewees had recounted their narratives, the interviewer repeatedly probed into their experiences and the meanings of these personal milestones.

4.3 Data analysis

The analysis of the narratives was carried out in two steps: case analysis and cross-case analysis. During case analysis, each interview was read by the first and second authors to become familiar with the data. Then, an open coding procedure was begun to identify basic units of meaning, and to create categories that later led to the emergence of themes (Denzin, 1989). During the cross-case analysis, we created meaning-clusters based on core themes identified in the data, and used axial coding to assemble the data and reveal connections among major themes in new ways that suggested an innovative interpretation of the data (Creswell, 1998; Maxwell, 1996). With this reorganization, a conceptual framework developed for describing and explaining how the participants constructed reality.

To maintain credibility and trustworthiness (Lincoln and Guba, 1985), we used investigator triangulation (consensus between researchers) (Denzin, 1989), which provides an external examination of the research procedure (Creswell, 1998; Morrow and Smith, 2000). The first two authors performed the analysis, first separately and then comparatively. To enhance the credibility of the findings, we provided relevant quotations from the participants' accounts.

5. Findings

Analysis of the interviews with the Jewish– and Arab–Israeli participants revealed two key concepts:

1. "Particularity", relating to exclusive aspects in the identity of the group members (e.g. Jewish Israeli, Arab Israeli and German nationality).
2. "Universality", relating to shared aspects in the identity of group members (e.g. shared sense of vulnerability).

These were apparent throughout the interviews, and clearly received much attention in personal and group processes throughout the encounter. The dynamic interrelation between these two key concepts created two categories:

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(1) "Singular identity", where one identifies primarily with one dominant aspect of one's self.
(2) "Multiple identities", where one identifies simultaneously with multiple and sometimes even contradicting aspects of the self.

In qualitative research, the core category explains and integrates the dynamic relationship among key concepts and categories. In our present study, the core category was the social and cultural context in which the interviewees act (both in Germany and in Israel).

5.1 Singular identities in relation to the "other"

The Israeli group (Arabs and Jews) tended to adopt singular identities *vis-à-vis* the German group. This was most evident during the early phases of the group work, when the Israelis tried to transform themselves into a working group. As noted, two categories of singular identity were adopted: universal and particular. The Israeli group used both the universal and particular categories to create one singular and coherent identity in the face of the (German) "other". The term "universal" represents shared aspects in the Israeli's group identity, and "particular" relates to its exclusive aspects.

5.1.1 "Universal" as a singular identity category. During the initial phase, when the Israeli group met in advance of their encounter with the Germans, the Israeli participants tried to cohere as a working group for the purpose of personal and collective exploration. At the same time, they expressed anxiety about the explosive potential of the encounter with the German group, especially a fear of the latter's view of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. They perceived it as critical and even dangerous with the potential to foment conflict within the Israeli group because it would expose the imbalance in power relations of the Jewish–Arab dyad.

One way to circumvent the political pitfalls in the dialogue was to focus on the universal aspects common to both sub-groups in the conflict. Emphasizing these in the formation of the group's identity enabled the Jewish and Arab sub-groups to achieve parity, without undermining their mutual sense of coalition and solidarity. This was expressed by Sharon, a Jewish female participant:

> What was so moving was that we succeeded in talking about it, and within the [Israeli] group we managed to understand each other, and it was a very emotional experience of sharing and crying and understanding that it is mutual, and made us feel optimistic about the Israeli–Palestinian conflict […] we came out with the message that there is no "them and us" situation; it's not one against the other; we're both hurting, both sides are hurting. And there is no issue here of right and wrong[3],[4].

Jewish and Arab participants sought to enter a dialogue about their sense of commonality, of sharing the same fate, while ignoring the anger and hostility arising from their imbalance in power relations. They were concerned that the use of explicit national symbols would generate tension and reproduce within the group context the socio-political conflict that exists in reality. In the words of one interviewee, the group members "*caressed one another*". This metaphoric expression illustrates the universal nature of identity experienced in this moment – an experience of pain and vulnerability shared by both Jews and Arabs. This aspect was emphasized by the anticipation of the encounter with a third group (the Germans) who would not share this experience.

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5.1.2 "Particular" as a singular identity category. Particularity was also salient in forming the singular identity which the Israeli group used *vis-à-vis* the German group. The shared history of Jews and Germans generated a discussion of each group's historical narrative and their implied power relations. Visits to Holocaust commemoration sites, both in Germany and Israel, created a need to work through (Bar-On and Kassem, 2004) the relationship between Jews and Germans, and raised issues such as shame, guilt, forgiveness and responsibility. Karen, a Jewish female participant, described her expectations:

> My personal point of view regarding the German group was really from the position of being the granddaughter of four holocaust survivors. And that means suddenly remembering; remembering what the project is all about […] and I think that most of us had the same expectations, more or less, of conversation, making their acquaintance, talking about things and putting the cards on the table.

The binary nature of the Holocaust narrative divided "us" (Jews) from "them" (Germans), and outlined the two groups' mutual expectations. The Israeli group felt threatened by the German group and addressed the victim–perpetrator roles derived from their shared history, but claimed possession of the nature and timing of the discussion in an attempt to form new power relations opposite to those of the historical narrative. In other words, the Israeli group attempted to position itself as equal to, or even stronger than, its German partner.

Correspondingly, group members became national representatives of their states. Participants in the Israeli group were expected to display unity before the German group, which was perceived as the "other". The desire to act from a position of power aroused the desire that irrespective of their self-identified nationality, all Israeli participants, including the Arabs, would show solidarity by working through, acknowledging and identifying with the historical narrative of the Holocaust. David, a Jewish participant, explained:

> In Germany […] I was fantasizing, was expecting the Arab students to be part of the Israeli group, considering that they live in the state of Israel […] and the interesting thing was that, at the point of contact with the German group, the Arab students also positioned themselves as representing a different nation; specifically at that point.

As the Israeli group confronted its German partner, previously blurred Jewish–Arab power relations began to come into focus and sharpen. The discussion about the Holocaust narrative aroused the Arab students' awareness of the national aspects of their identities. Thereafter, experiences of exclusion and victimhood were re-lived and re-enacted among the Arab participants, thus forming themselves as a distinct identity sub-group. Affaf, an Arab female participant, shared her experiences:

> I was angry with myself because afterwards, I understood that it was as if I had allowed the Jews to silence me. I kept silent there because I wanted to give them their space: You're in Germany, it's hard for you, talk about it all the time. Like, what was I doing there? I silenced myself, which is what they do to me the whole time, what the state does to me the whole time […] I kept quiet because that's what I'm used to, that the Jews are more important than me, that the Jews need to take a central place, that they are more important.

The silencing of Arab voices and their exclusion from the larger group discussion paralleled and reflected the exclusion of Arab voices in the Israeli society, given the

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current power relations between the Jewish majority and the Arab minority. In the presence of the German group, the Arabs expressed their feeling of exclusion, the need to call these power relations into question and to directly discuss the political conflict in Israel. National identities surfaced, and participants were increasingly perceived as representing their own national groups.

In the eyes of the Israeli group, the German group represented Western political discourse, which tends to criticize the self-image of Israeli society as absolute victim. When the Israeli group attempted to connect external reality and group reality, it could hardly see itself as containing victim and victimizer simultaneously. Instead, it tried to split them. Each sub-group (Jewish and Arab) took on the mantle of its distinct national identity, stressing its role as victim, so as to preserve its rights. Each attributed aggression and destructiveness to the "other" (where for the Jews the "other" was represented by the Germans, while for the Arabs by the Jews), and thus experienced the out-group – as the "other".

5.2 Multiple identities in relation to the "other"

Although the Israeli group tended to adopt singular identities, we found that it also sought to establish itself as containing multiple identities. The German counterpart was perceived as providing them with a platform for critical thinking and reflectivity about the processes involved in constructing group and collective identities. The alternating of the German counterpart thus facilitated examination of the similarities and differences between the German and Israeli groups, as well as between the Jewish and Arab sub-groups.

5.2.1 Using the German group to deconstruct "universality". In deconstructing the concept of "universality", the Israeli and German groups and the two Israeli sub-groups were able to examine their sense of differentness and otherness. The discussions held between Germans and Israelis of the political, social and cultural contexts of each country, and the mutual acquaintance with one another's lifestyles, enabled the Israeli participants to examine similarities and differences between themselves, as sub-groups of Jews and Arabs. In this way, otherness was no longer converted into universality, but was rather contained, and the processes of generating universality were explored and challenged by both Jews and Arabs. Ben, a Jewish male participant, referred to this:

> It was actually in Germany that I noticed the behavior of the Jewish guys, whom i'd put in the same group as me, thinking that we were like-minded. And then, in fact, I saw that, hey, they are not really like me; not like me at all. It was in Germany that I saw that the Arab students were the ones who had come to listen, to enjoy themselves, to have an open mind, with some kind of perspective and internal observation. At times, they were much more similar to me than the Jewish participants, whom I had thought were like me.

Ben adopts a critical standpoint when describing the unreceptive manners in which his Jewish group members participated and reacted to the discussions held with the German group regarding political, social and cultural issues. In contrast to his Jewish group members, Ben posits the Arab students as much more similar to him, as he noticed they could relate to the German group from a more reflective, curious stance. The awareness that arose in the encounter with the German group to the different ways of relating to them, pointed out that differences exist within the group.

Thus, two different but complementary processes were taking place: first, the deconstruction of universality within the Israeli group, alongside a realization that the

group's members differed as individuals and as representatives of their sub-groups; second, the realization that the "other" did not necessarily represent the pre-conceived idea of it, such that individuals from the "other" sub-group were actually found to share similarities – across, rather than within, their sub-group(s).

5.2.2 Using the German group to deconstruct "particularity". Group discussions about nationalism facilitated an examination of the role of these categories in the construction of each group's collective identity. The Israelis perceived the German group as representing European, post-national discourse; this challenged the attention and importance given to national identity in Israeli discourse. Sarah, a Jewish female participant, described this experience:

> One [of the German participants] said something that really annoyed me. She asked why we [the Jews] are bothered when someone burns our flag. And I say that it's not like that [...] the burning, OK, it's as if, what will be next? [...] so she said, burning a flag is just burning a piece of material; it doesn't mean anything.

The perceived post-national identity of the German group stimulated the Israeli participants to explore their own issues of nationality. One aspiration of the larger group was to challenge the concept of nationality, releasing binary Jewish-Arab relations from the category of nationalism, thereby enabling Israeli participants to adopt a more flexible view of their national identity. In the words of Gal, a male Jewish participant: "I wanted to show them that my Israeli identity also includes components of an Arab identity".

Thus, the German group's post-national discourse brought out beneficial, transnational aspects of personal and collective group identity (Kelman, 2008). The Israelis experienced this as an opportunity to examine these aspects of their own identity.

5.3 Using the German group as a means of reflectivity and integration

Acting as hosts to the Israeli group, the German group was experienced as external to the Jewish–Arab conflict, and was perceived as operating from a position of naivety and not-knowing. This allowed Jewish– and Arab–Israelis to present their positions on a more equal footing. Hanin, an Arab female participant, described the contribution of the German group:

> The fact that the Germans were present made us – the Arabs and the Jews – see that we need to talk about the conflict. The Germans came, and from their "blank sheet" position, asked innocent questions, which we were forced to deal with. And by dealing with them, we learned from that.

The German group's *tabula rasa* thus served as a platform for dialogue between the Jews and Arabs. It helped the Germans themselves to learn about the relationship between Jews and Arabs, and the different reasons for the complexity of their conflict. The German group's gaze at the Jewish–Arab relationship then led the Jewish and Arab participants to a far more complex view of their own relationship – simultaneously as victim and victimizer – and of reality. This was shown in the desire to present the German group with a living reality that was neither ideal nor catastrophic. Nur, an Arab female participant, described this process:

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> It was important to me to show them both sides. I Can't tell the Germans that we are constantly at war with each other and I can't say that I can't be with a Jew and that a Jew can't be with me. On the other hand, I can't show them that we are friends here the whole time.

The German group was perceived as needing a more complex image of Israeli reality that encompassed two contradictory historical narratives – Israeli Jewish and Arab Palestinian – that is, a living reality that cuts across common constructions of war and peace.

In summary, our findings suggest that the German group was perceived by the Israeli sub-groups in various ways depending on the context in which the group was working. When the Israelis were in Germany, negotiating national narratives and exploring the power relations between Jews and Germans, the Israeli subgroups responded differently. While for the Arabs, the German presence facilitated a more critical and reflective discourse concerning the national narratives, Jewish Israelis experienced the German group as a threat: The "third" was perceived as hostile and becoming "the other". Thus, the Jewish participants positioned the Germans as an out-group, leaving it no opportunity to participate in the intergroup dialogue.

In parallel, under different circumstances (for instance, when the Israelis were hosting the Germans and discussing cultural and societal issues), the German group was perceived as a "third" that served as source of reflection and role model. As a mediator, the Germans' prompting questions helped to improve interpersonal relations and attitudes between the two rival Israeli sub-groups.

6. Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to examine the role of a third partner to an intergroup encounter between two rival groups. We attempted to show how the "third" functioned as an agent of change and a source of reflection on how two sub-groups in a dyadic structure constructed and produced their "other". Under certain circumstances, the gaze of the "third", and the socio-cultural discourse in which it operated, was used to interpret the construction of the relationship between the two sub-groups.

The role of the "third" in the intergroup encounter can be better explained by Raggatt (2010), who based his argument on Pierce's semiotic work. He argued that the dyad (self–other relationship) is not sufficient as a platform for reflection because it lacks the mediating element that brings about interpretations. Therefore, the dyadic stance offers limited reflectivity and partial interpretation of the relationship between "self" and "other" and its possible characterization of patterns and processes.

Raggatt (2010) suggested a third position: the triadic stance, in which the relationship between "self" and "other" can be understood only from the interpretation suggested by a "third" located outside the dyadic unit. By virtue of its location, the "third" can provide an interpretive gaze at the dyadic relationship. From the semiotic perspective, the "third" is the symbol that allows individuals to express and manipulate their cultural contexts: where they grew up, where they act and where they create meanings.

When taking a meta-position toward our findings, we found that the German group, as a "third", functioned as a source of reflectivity for the Jewish–Arab dyad in two main ways. First, it interpreted the dynamic of the Jewish–Arab relationship. By asking inquisitive or naïve questions or, alternatively, offering a rather critical perspective, the Germans allowed the Jewish–Arab dyad to become aware of how its historical, political and cultural context continually reshaped its relationship. Second, by refusing to side

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with either of the sub-groups, the "third" was perceived by the dyad as a role model for a multifaceted identity that can accommodate contradictions. The attitudes of the "third" allowed Jews and Arabs the advantage of complexity, and enabled them to take a more empathic and nuanced view of the "other", leading to the forming of better relationships between the two sub-groups.

The ability to recognize and reflect on the "third's" multifaceted identity facilitated an examination of the contexts that affected the "third's" movement between identifying with one or the other group. For example, in working through the competing historical narratives of Jews and Palestinians, the German group offered interpretations in which either group might be victim, perpetrator or both. Victim and victimizer thus ceased being essentialist positions, and instead could be perceived relative to their context and historical narrative. In this way, German interpretation enabled the Jewish–Palestinian dyad to deconstruct its binary "us-versus-them" relationship. This challenge to the binary relationship helped the dyad to *constantly move* between the two positions of a singular identity and multiple identities that contained the needs of the "other" in a more complex manner.

The constant movement between single and multiple identities can be explained by the background of the political and societal discourse in which the rival groups operate, both on micro and macro levels (Cuhadar and Dayton, 2011). Thus, in a given context in which their national identity is under threat, the rival groups construct their relationship using the "third" as a means of preserving and strengthening their national and ethnic identities (Northrup, 1989; Steele *et al.*, 2002). In another context, such as during discussions about post-national identities, the two sub-groups constructed their relationship using the "third" as a trigger for the emergence of multiple identities.

Thus, the "third" was a source of reflection not only on the dynamic and construction of the dyad relationship, but also on the way the dyad posits itself, beyond the individuals in the setting of the group work. It appears that the "third" serves as a representative of the international socio-cultural and political discourse on the Arab–Jewish conflict, and helps to create their salient categories. It seems that in exploring its own attitudes, narratives and salient identities, the "third" promotes the feeling that the encounter is authentic, and the construction of the relationship between the rival groups better reflects real relations outside the encounter. By its presence, the "third" reproduces the "explicit reality" in which the conflict exists.

Through its unique position, the "third" is able to maintain salient group membership (ethnic, national) between the rival groups, and encourage them to explore the context in which new identities emerge across group boundaries, and to re-align (Cuhadar and Dayton, 2011). In the case of groups in conflict, the "third" can also contribute by heightening the individual's reflectivity – a counter-practice to the essentialist perception that preserves conflictual attitudes. In so doing, the "third" facilitates an understanding of situations in which the "self" produces the "other" according to its needs in the socio-political-cultural context in which it operates.

Another major contribution of the "third" to the intergroup encounter is that it can assist each party in the dyad to express its collective wish for a singular, coherent and integrated identity. The "third" thus provides the platform for development of an integrated group identity. Consequently, the "third" serves simultaneously as a means of reflection and a means of constructing two opposing positions: one that preserves singular identity and one that encompasses expansion and change, striving for

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transcendental identity (Kelman, 2008; Raggatt, 2010). As such, its relationship to the dyad can be viewed as a dynamic, contextually constructed event, created in the zone between coherence and deconstruction, between integration and differentiation (Raggatt, 2010).

Our study has some limitations. First, although interviewees were recruited from different rounds of the intergroup encounters, which broadened the perspective to some extent, the sample remained relatively homogeneous: All the participants were social work students in their early twenties. Moreover, we studied only the experiences of the Israeli participants. Our research could have been enriched by exploring the German participants' perspectives and their possible impact on the Israeli participants' experiences. We therefore recommend that future research examine all three perspectives of a triadic intergroup experience. Another limitation was that the researchers shared the same group reality as the participants. Because we were concerned lest this should affect our ability to analyze the data, we employed self-reflection and a supervised peer group to monitor our analysis. We were therefore able to use our double position to enhance our ability to acquire insights.

An additional limitation concerns the lack of the third party's neutrality in view of the complex history of German–Israeli relations, and its potential implications. Future research should examine the contribution of a neutral third party, with little or no historical connection to any of the rival groups. A neutral partner is likely to trigger different identities during the process of identity construction and thus provide conceptual insights on identity as a "shifting target" (Cuhadar and Dayton, 2011), rather than relying on essential attributions from others. Thus, our findings will require further validation in different settings addressing the limitations of our current study.

The vast body of literature concerning the role of the third party in "track two interventions" raises questions about the generalizability of the encounter's effectiveness (Cuhadar, 2009; Fisher, 1997; Kaye, 2007). This is considered to be limited because the participants' attitudes are often not those of "typical" members representing salient "out-group" categories. Using the "third", exploring its attitudes, narratives and salient identities, promotes the feeling that the encounter is authentic, and the construction of the relationship between the rival groups better reflects actual relations between the rival groups outside the encounter. This is especially relevant to the ongoing dynamic of the Arab–Jewish conflict (Kelman, 2008), which exacerbates the re-entry problem of the participants. When participants in the encounter perceive themselves and each other as "representatives" of their respective groups, they will make better use of the encounter as a platform for negotiation and for changing public opinions outside the encounter.

7. Conclusions

In recent decades, intergroup encounters have become a means of promoting reconciliation and peace education in areas of conflict or post-conflict (Lederach, 1997; Maoz, 2011; Salomon, 2002). The various models for facilitating these usually rely on a dyadic structure, in which each party becomes the "other" for its counterpart and represents the out-group within the group work setting. The present study aimed to examine the role of a third (German) partner to an intergroup encounter between two rival groups (Jews and Arabs). We have attempted to show how a third partner can

contribute to an intergroup encounter by being a catalyst for complex reflection on how the two groups in the dyad construct and produce themselves and their "other".

Our findings demonstrate that in the presence of the German "third", the Israeli group constantly moved between two different but complementary identities: singular identities and multiple identities. The admission of the "third" to the dyadic structure enabled reflection on the intergroup relationship, as well as on the social and political contexts in which individual participants constructed their relationship with the "other" as a means of preserving and strengthening their identity, or of experiencing themselves as having a multi-voiced identity.

The study also highlights the active process involved in the construction of the "other" in conflict situations. In other words, the otherness of the "other" is an active process involving the creation of new identities of the "self". As such, it facilitates an understanding of those situations in which the "self" produces the "other" according to its needs, in the socio-political-cultural context in which it operates.

Finally, our findings suggest that a triadic model may serve as a tool for developing mutual understanding and recognition among groups in conflict. Whereas the more traditional dyadic model fosters an essentialist perception that preserves conflictual attitudes, the triadic model offers a counter-practice whose de-constructionist, reflective stance helps to untie the knot of the "us-versus-them" binary relationship. Future studies about the contribution of a third party to intergroup dialogues in various fields (e.g. education, politics and management), addressing some of the limitations and questions raised by the current study, will be of interest.

Notes

1. The terms "Arab" and "Palestinian" appear synonymously in this article and are used interchangeably, as both appear in the interviews.
2. Israeli Arabs often do not self-identify with Israeli nationality. We therefore use the term nationality distinguishing among Jewish Israeli nationality, Arab Israeli/Palestinian nationality and German nationality, bearing in mind that a wide range of different ethnicities is associated with each nationality (e.g., Ashkenazi vs. Sephardic Jews, Muslim vs. Christian vs. Druze Arabs, etc.).
3. All names are pseudonyms, and details in interviews that could reveal the participants' identities have been changed to maintain confidentiality.
4. All quotations in this paper were translated from Hebrew into English by a professional translator.

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