Planned Encounters Between Jewish and Palestinian Israelis: A Social-Psychological Perspective

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Several ideas derived from Social Identity Theory are used to analyze intergroup processes taking place in planned encounters between Jews and Palestinians in Israel. In addition to the interpersonal dimension of such encounters, the article focuses on the importance of intergroup variables (e.g., power and status differences) in understanding psychological and behavioral reactions of majority and minority group members. The theoretical analysis brought here is used to suggest ways that can improve the management of structured Jewish-Palestinian meetings.

Planned group encounters between Jewish and Palestinian Israelis have been the object of considerable attention by researchers. Some have focused on the empirical study of variables involved in the encounter, such as prejudice (Bizman, 1978) and readiness for relations (Amir, 1976). Other studies have taken a holistic-theoretical approach in an attempt to analyze the interaction processes which take place in the encounter (cf., Katz and Kahanov, 1990; Sonnenschein, Halabi, & Friedman, 1992).

A satisfactory classification of the types of encounters held between groups in prolonged conflicts was suggested by Katz and Kahanov (1990). According to this classification, planned encounters may fall into one of three categories: workshops in the spirit of the “human relations” tradition (cf., Lakin, 1969), workshops emphasizing cross-cultural learning (cf., Argule, 1982; Brislin, 1981), and workshops based on a conflict-resolution approach. Another typology of encounter groups was proposed by Ben-Ari and Amir (1988), who classified encounters in accordance with three different models: the contact model, the information model, and the psychodynamic model. The contact model is based on the Contact Hypothesis,

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which prescribes the necessary conditions for a successful contact between group members (cf., Amir, 1969). The information model has characteristics in common with the cross-cultural learning approach. It assumes that the development of stereotypes and prejudice arises from insufficient information or from misinformation regarding the outgroup and its members. According to this model, the encounter provides an appropriate opportunity for clarifying faulty preconceived stereotypes and modifying them in light of more accurate information.

The psychodynamic model assumes that the individual’s negative attitudes toward the outgroup and its members are loaded with projective contents and may often reflect his or her intrapsychic world (Moses, 1987, 2002). Improvement in these attitudes, according to the model, is contingent on raising the individual’s awareness of his or her own deep emotional problems and improving his or her ways for coping with them.

In evaluating group encounters between individuals from different ethnic groups in Israel, Ben-Ari & Amir note that: “The quality and scientific merit of this work are far from satisfactory. Many programs for ‘change’ have been designed, but in most of them the goals have not been well defined, and their theoretical foundations are not always clear” (Ben-Ari & Amir, 1988, p. 50). I may add that a flawed characterization of the goals and a faulty understanding of the processes that took place in the group and of what is necessary for generating the desired changes, have all led to irrelevant considerations in determining the nature of the group and the facilitation style. Since most encounter programs have been run in the framework of the educational system, conventional educational views have influenced the goals set for these meetings and the style of intervention. Moreover, in the absence of other methods and styles of facilitation, psychological facilitation has predominated in these meetings (Maoz, 2000a). In fact, this was a natural outcome, since most facilitators have been psychologists, consultants, social workers, and educators with a background in psychology. Psychologically-oriented facilitation styles are typically characterized by a focus on the here-and-now aspects of the encounter experience. Facilitators encourage participants to freely express their thoughts and feelings about other group members and about the group as a whole (Beit-Hallahmi, 1972; Katz & Kahanov, 1990). When applied to moderating groups, such methods and techniques are frequently used to “reflect” and analyze intra- and interpersonal processes, with emphasis on personal and interpersonal processes. The primary goals of this moderation style are to raise awareness and sensitivity to the personal experiences of outgroup members and to encourage empathy toward them. Facilitators tend to emphasize commonalities between members of the conflicting groups and to shunt aside “problematic” political issues, in the hope that this may lead to a humanization of the “Other”—member of the rival group—and to a weakening of stereotyped attitudes toward him or her.

The process of adapting the facilitation style to the specific characteristics of encounter between ethnic groups was developed quite slowly, through trial
and error. Hence, one may contend that this process was not comprehensive and that sufficient effort has not been made to transfer accumulating experience to new facilitators. Another factor which has significantly affected the nature of the encounter groups relates to the fact that virtually all the initiatives and funding for these encounters have come from state institutions such as the Ministry of Education, or from non-governmental Jewish organizations. This fact has invariably had a decisive influence on setting the boundaries of what was permissible and what was not permissible within the group and has clearly slanted its objectives to meet the expectations and needs of the Jewish participants. Michelovitch (1986) has similarly noted that since these encounters were mainly a Jewish effort, potential “blind spots” may have been created, given the limited ability of a particular group to respond to the needs and sensitivities of members of a different group.

The hegemony of the psychological facilitation style, emphasizing personal experiences and interpersonal communication in the here-and-now, mandates a symmetrical view of the relations between members of the two groups. This implies, among other things, an expectation of similar behaviors on the part of the Jewish and Palestinian participants. In addition, the characteristics of the structure and process of a group created according to a psychological model are more suited to patterns of personal and interpersonal behavior and less suited to political and intergroup behavior (Halabi & Sonnenschein, 2000). Hence a basic contradiction exists between the structure of the encounter group and its potentiality to advance intergroup contents and processes.

Notwithstanding, it is important to stress that the “squeezing” of most encounters into a psychological and interpersonal model has not prevented intergroup processes from occurring. The purposeful playing down of political and intergroup components by facilitators was not successful in suppressing such processes. This observation is supported, among other things, by my personal experience in facilitating several encounter groups comprised of Jewish and Arab students at the University of Haifa (one of which convened each week for an entire academic year), as well as the monitoring of many other groups, including four groups that convened each week during one academic semester. It is supported, also, by the extensive experience gained at the School of Peace in Neveh-Shalom (cf., Halabi, Sonnenschein, & Friedman, 2000). One might say that despite the existence of a variety of goals and styles of facilitation, the encounter groups have always been a “microcosm” in which salient intergroup processes have indeed occurred, along with intra- and interpersonal ones.

In the remainder of this article I shall utilize a number of theoretical ideas derived from Social Identity Theory (e.g., Tajfel, 1981; Tajfel & Turner, 1986) in order to seek a better understanding of common intergroup processes that take place in Jewish-Palestinian encounter groups. The theoretical insights to be drawn here may apply to encounters between groups comprised of members from different age groups, but the main focus here is on groups comprised of adult participants.
Social Identity Theory (SIT) views the group as an “entity” that is qualitatively different from the sum total of all the individuals comprising it. The basic unit of analysis according to SIT is the group and not the sum of its individual members. Rather than discussing various hypotheses that can be derived from SIT concerning intergroup relations, I shall focus here on two aspects related to the theory and utilize them to analyze common interpersonal and intergroup processes in group encounters. These two aspects are: (a) the dimensions of the interaction and (b) the asymmetry in power between the groups that are involved in the encounter.

Dimensions of the Interaction

Researchers and facilitators working with Jewish-Palestinian group encounters in Israel distinguish between interactions occurring on an interpersonal level and interactions occurring on an intergroup level (c.f., Amir & Ben-Ari, 1987; Hoffman & Najar, 1986; Katz & Kahanov, 1990). Katz and Kahanov contend that the tension between these two levels represents one of the central dilemmas in Jewish-Arab encounters. They describe this dilemma as “the tension between the outlook of ‘the political man’ and that of ‘the psychological man’” (Katz & Kahanov, 1990, p. 36). The Continuum Hypothesis proposed by Tajfel and his colleagues (e.g., Tajfel, 1979; Tajfel & Turner, 1986) provides a fruitful theoretical framework for understanding these two dimensions of interaction. Based on this hypothesis, one may view any interaction between two or more individuals as if it were taking place along a bipolar continuum, such that at one end of the continuum the interactions are determined by interpersonal relations and individual traits and are not influenced by social groups or categories to which the individuals belong. In contrast, interactions at the other end of the continuum are entirely determined by the affiliation of the individuals to various social groups and categories and are not influenced by personal or interpersonal relations (see Tajfel & Turner, 1986, p. 8).

The importance of the Continuum Hypothesis is that it provides a model encompassing the two levels of interaction and allows one to hypothesize about different variables involved in group interactions. For example, Tajfel hypothesized that in situations of conflict, the two groups will operate closer to the intergroup pole. Moreover, he assumed that under such conditions, the intergroup relations will be characterized by two qualities: (a) members of the outgroup will be perceived as resembling one another, or in Tajfel’s terms, will be perceived as “unidentified elements within a unified social category” (Tajfel, 1981, p. 243); and (b) ingroup members will show a high degree of uniformity in their attitudes and behaviors toward members of the outgroup. In Tajfel’s view, phenomena like depersonalization, dehumanization, and stereotyping are particular cases of the more general phenomenon of “non-differentiation.”
Encounter groups between Jewish and Palestinian Israelis provide almost laboratory conditions for examining the Continuum Hypothesis and predictions derived from it. Given the intensity of political conflict between the two groups, one may predict that individuals from both groups will tend to operate near the intergroup pole. This prediction does not accord with my experience, accumulated in facilitating and monitoring various encounter groups, showing that Palestinian participants prefer to shift the interaction to the intergroup level, while Jewish participants prefer to shift it to the level of interpersonal communication. Following the warm-up stage in the first meetings, the Palestinian participants usually try to raise issues of a collective and political nature, like discrimination against Palestinian citizens of Israel, expropriation of land, Israel’s occupation policies, etc. Often, a Palestinian participant will turn to a Jewish participant, or to the group as a whole with a question such as, “Why don’t you expropriate land from Jews for development purposes in the Arab sector?” or “Why can’t I live in Carmiel in the framework of a government settlement policy?” It would seem that with queries like these, and many similar ones, the Palestinian questioner is relating to his or her Jewish colleague or to the Jewish group as a whole, as a “representative” of the ruling majority group, or even of the establishment. On the other hand, responses of Jewish participants are generally characterized by a rejection of attempts to provoke a political dialogue, in an effort to keep the group focused on personal and interpersonal experiences. These experiences are typically related to occasional meetings with Israeli Palestinians (the worker who came to paint my house, the student who sat next to me in class), some of which have been positive, but most of which have been laden with anxiety. The main point here is that while the Palestinian participants related to the Jewish participants as representing the Jews in general, the Jewish participants preferred to relate to their Palestinian colleagues mainly as individuals, not as representatives of their group, and to focus mainly on the here-and-now interpersonal encounter with them.

Similar observations are presented by Katz and Kahanov (1990), Amir and Ben-Ari (1987), Sonnenschein et al. (1992), and Maoz (2000a, 2000b). Katz and Kahanov (1990) note that they found a greater tendency among Arab participants toward a political-group emphasis, along with a relative avoidance of exposing differences of opinion within their camp. In contrast, they found that the encouragement of personal self-disclosure, confession of weakness, and admission of doubt was much more common among Jewish participants (see Katz and Kahanov, 1990, p. 34). A similar observation was made by Maoz (2000a, 2000b). Based on data from an extensive field study, Maoz conclude that Arab participants (and Arab facilitators) tend to shift the group discussions toward political issues, while the Jewish participants prefer to focus on neutral, non-political, issues. According to Maoz, the Arab participants’ behavior reflects an attempt from their side to enhance their national identity as well as their influence as minority representatives (Moscovici, 1980, 1985).
In light of the above observations, two remarks—one theoretical and the other pragmatic—seem in order. On the theoretical level, the validity of the Continuum Hypothesis in relation to situations of asymmetry, such as encounters between members of a majority and of a minority, may be challenged. As originally formulated, the Continuum Hypothesis is a symmetrical argument. It does not distinguish between the responses of members of the respective groups. It seems that this hypothesis needs to be modified in a manner that takes into account the characteristics of asymmetry embedded in interactions occurring between minority and majority members. The preceding observations suggest a possibility—not accounted for by the Continuum Hypothesis—according to which the two groups engaged in an interaction need not operate around the same “point” on the interpersonal-intergroup continuum. For example, in a given interaction, most members of one group might operate near the intergroup “pole,” while most members of the other group—during the same interaction—might operate near the interpersonal “pole.” Moreover, the findings of Levy and Guttman (1976) and of Adar and Adler (1965)—regarding the absence of a correlation between the attitudes of Jewish youth on interpersonal subjects and their attitudes on national-political subjects—raise the possibility of an additional extension according to which the interpersonal and the intergroup levels of an interaction need not be diametrically opposed. A modified model of the Continuum Hypothesis may assume that the two levels of interaction are represented by two bipolar dimensions. An individual could have an interaction with an outgroup member that is positive on both dimensions, negative on both, or positive on one and negative on the other, and at different degrees of intensity of positivity and negativity.

Another theoretical weakness of the Continuum Hypothesis lies in its ambiguous definition of the nature of the interaction. Specifically, the hypothesis—as originally stated—does not distinguish between the individual’s perception of the situation (evaluative dimension), his/her behavioral intentions (intentional dimension), and his/her actual behavior (behavioral dimension). The distinction between the evaluative dimension and the intentional-behavioral dimension is meaningful for situations in which individuals choose action strategies that do not reflect their real thoughts and feelings. Such situations are fairly common in the behavioral repertoire of Jewish participants in encounter groups, who will nearly always prefer to shift the interaction away from the intergroup level and towards the interpersonal level. The possibility for disentangling one’s perception of the level of interaction (interpersonal/intergroup), and his or her behavior, enables individuals to avoid political questions raised by outgroup members and to emphasize personal and interpersonal experiences. Katz and Kahanov (1990) give validity to this analysis in stating that “according to the advocates of the political model, the psychological model is manipulative. As if to say that when there is a reality involving a horse and rider, it is the rider who will say, ‘No politics!’ ” (Katz and Kahanov, 1990, p. 43).
Thus far I have mainly addressed the theoretical aspects of the relationship between the interpersonal and intergroup levels of communication. Another problem, pragmatic in nature, relates to the degree to which a “psychologically oriented” encounter is suitable for generating a process which enables a productive “flow” between the two levels of interaction. In their comparative evaluation of the “political man” conception, against the “psychological man” conception, Katz and Kahanov (1990) point out that “The transition from the level of personal relations (the psychological model) to that of intergroup relations (the political model) can be very instructive concerning external social processes, but is also liable to seriously impede the resolution of dilemmas raised by them. The moment the speakers become spokespersons for their groups, the possibility for the creation of a common denominator is diminished” (Katz & Kahanov, 1990, p. 34).

Similarly, Amir and Ben-Ari (1987) rely on the findings of Levy and Guttman (1976) and of Adar and Adler (1965; concerning the lack of correlation between personal attitudes and political-national attitudes) to conclude that “the interpersonal aspects at the micro level of intergroup conflict may be addressed, without necessarily addressing intergroup aspects on the macro level.” The authors state further that

this is, in fact, the source of hope for successful encounters between Jewish and Arab youth in Israel. It must be understood that in whatever concerns Jewish-Arab relations, action on the micro level is a tangible possibility. In contrast, action on the macro level is simply not under our control. Moreover, structured techniques and psychological approaches are likely to bear fruit in working with problems and conflicts the source of which is psychological. But on the macro level, other factors—political, economic, religious and cultural—are likely to be the basis of the conflict, and thus to limit the effectiveness of the psychological tools in solving problems (Amir & Ben-Ari, 1987, p. 313).

I will comment briefly that although I concur with the contention of Amir & Ben-Ari (1987) that “structured techniques and psychological approaches are likely to bear fruit in working with problems and conflicts the source of which is psychological.” I disagree with their conclusion that the source of hope for successful encounters lies in addressing interpersonal aspects, and not intergroup aspects. My nearly opposite conclusion is that since most issues addressed in these encounters are essentially not psychological, the effectiveness of encounter groups in addressing such issues is bound to be limited. Put differently, I contend that the psychological nature of the encounter group limits its ability to cope with conflictual problems and contents related to intergroup aspects.

The deflection of focus arising from the psychological character of these groups, in favor of interpersonal relations, is clear and self-evident. In the absence of other rules, it is the prerogative of any individual (not less so any group) to strictly clarify that he or she is not prepared to discuss political issues and, thereby, to set the boundaries of what is permitted and what is not permitted in the encounter. Based on my personal experience, I conclude that Jewish participants in such groups
usually demand that Arab participants relate to their emotional pain and distress as a condition for continuing the encounter. Since the road to intergroup content is evidently by way of interpersonal paths, Arab participants who are interested in the continuation, and success, of the encounter are prone to be responsive to this type of demand. It follows that the symmetrical nature of a psychologically oriented group is liable to be the source of an asymmetry which inclines the group in a psychological and interpersonal direction, far away from the political and intergroup dimensions.

Asymmetry in Power

Interestingly, the research on Jewish-Palestinian encounter groups in Israel has almost entirely disregarded the power dimension of the encounter. No serious regard was given to the fact that the groups participating in such encounters represent majority and minority groups who differ significantly in their power and social status (Rouhana & Korper, 1997). The organizers of such groups invest considerable organizational effort in neutralizing status variables. Usually, this is accomplished by nominating two facilitators, a Palestinian and a Jew, and by securing a numerical parity between participants from the two national groups. One might contend that understanding the social process of majority-minority relations is essential for making inferences about the intra- and interpersonal processes, as well as the intergroup processes, which take place in Jewish-Palestinian encounter groups. This is especially true given the fact that the dialogue in these groups is focused on the relations between the majority and minority groups to which the participants in the meetings belong.

In this section I will attempt to pinpoint different psychological responses on the part of majority and minority group members within the encounter group. Before doing so I wish to emphasize two principal characteristics of the asymmetrical relations between majority and minority: (a) the majority (the high-status group) holds most of the material resources common to the two groups and, thus, holds the reins of power and control in the state. This implies that, whereas the majority can discriminate against the minority, and indeed it does so extensively (cf., Ghanem, 1998; Kraus & Yonay, 2000; Rosenhek, 1999), the minority cannot practice substantive discrimination against the majority. (b) The majority is represented by a wide range of governmental and non-governmental institutions through which it enforces its control over common resources and acts in various ways against any tendency on the part of the minority to change the discriminatory status quo. In contrast, the minority’s own institutions and organizations are of limited effectiveness.

One might speculate that the gap between the two groups on the level of institutional organization dictates that individuals from the respective groups will have different modes of “conflict-oriented behaviors.” While members of the majority
can rely on many institutions to address matters related to the conflict, members of the minority cannot. This asymmetry obliges minority members to have a greater degree of involvement in issues related to the intergroup conflict. As a substitute for institutional activity, the minority must base its struggle on non-institutionalized “grassroots” activities. This requires a highly salient group identity and the enlistment of people’s emotions to bolster the group’s unity and increase individuals’ readiness to involve themselves in behaviors relating to the conflict. This asymmetry implies a difference between minority and majority group members concerning the relation between attitudes and behavior vis-à-vis the conflict. The minority’s non-institutional manner of organization and action, and the need for a high degree of involvement on the part of minority group members, render a stronger attitudinal-behavioral link more crucial for the minority than is the case for members of the majority. This asymmetry likewise implies that members of the two groups will have different perceptions of the degree of centrality and importance of their group identities. One might conjecture that members of an unorganized minority would tend to ascribe more weight to their collective identity, given its focal role for group cohesion.

As stated before, despite the importance of power and status differences in determining individual and group responses in situations of intergroup contact, these variables have not earned the attention they deserve in the research on encounter groups, nor in the broader research on intergroup relations. An important contribution in this regard is provided by Social Identity Theory, especially the ideas proposed by Turner & Brown (1978) concerning the social and psychological responses of minority and majority group members in asymmetrical interactions. According to Turner & Brown, the responses of members of the high-status and the low-status groups are dictated, among other things, by their perceptions and evaluations of the conflict in terms of two central dimensions: the degree of stability of the status quo and its degree of legitimacy. Perception of stability refers to the degree by which a high- or low-status group member perceives the status quo as secure, that is, as one that could not be seriously challenged by members of the other group. Perception of legitimacy refers to the degree by which a group member perceives the status quo as just or fair. Combining these two factors as dichotomous variables yields four theoretical possibilities: legitimate-stable, legitimate-unstable, illegitimate-stable, and illegitimate-unstable. For the sake of brevity, I will not discuss all four possibilities. Instead, I shall focus only on those that seem more relevant to the case at hand.

Regarding members of the Palestinian minority (low-status) group, one may contend that, in general, they will evaluate the status quo as illegitimate and will try to narrow the “social distance” between themselves and the majority (high-status) group. This conjecture is supported by the agendas and activities of all Arab political parties and civil society organizations, which pay great importance to challenging the discriminatory status quo. It follows that minority members
will perceive the situation as unstable in addition to evaluating it as illegitimate. The main prediction made by Turner and Brown regarding this situation is that minority members will act in one of three possible ways: (a) they might try to cross boarders—as individuals—and “pass” to the high-status group (i.e., by individual mobility); (b) they might cope with their situation by using cognitive styles characterized by social creativity, either by changing their value system so that comparisons, the result of which were negative, become positive or, alternatively, by changing their referent outgroup and engaging in downward—rather than upward—comparisons; or (c) they might challenge the status quo by competing, as a collective, with the outgroup (i.e., through social competition with the outgroup).

Although actual mobility is not a real option in planned encounters, some behaviors on the part of Palestinian participants in such encounters may be interpreted as attempt to close the social distance between themselves and the majority group, or even to “cross boundaries” (Sonnenschein et al., 1992). Examples of such behaviors are expressions of “understanding,” on the part of the Palestinian participants, of the Jewish majority’s reasons for oppressing the minority. Sonnenschein et al. (1992) quote cases in which Palestinian participants expressed some “understanding” of the fact that Palestinian travelers are obliged to undergo strict security checks at Ben-Gurion Airport and even of the cries, “Death to the Arabs!” sometimes heard from right-wing Jewish demonstrators. The authors point out, based on their observations, that the Jewish group usually expresses great interest in Palestinians who attempt to “cross borders” in manners similar to the ones described above.

Another class of responses by Palestinians participating in encounter groups may be classified as “creative” ways of enhancing their own group’s esteem (for example, by emphasizing their pride in the richness of the Arabic language and traditions), but for the most part minority members’ responses to the intergroup contact are characterized by an increase in ethnocentrism and in intergroup tension. A clear expression of this tension is the attempt of minority members to focus the group discussions on political issues, while avoiding intimate conversations of an interpersonal nature. The typical process in these encounters is characterized by a relatively rapid transition from the stage of “good intentions” (in which the group—under pressure from the Jewish participants—settles into a pleasant atmosphere with an emphasis on what the two groups have in common), to the stage of intergroup confrontation. The process of consolidation as two national groups, and the pressure to divert the dialogue toward the intergroup course, are always initiated by the Palestinian participants (Sonnenschein et al., 1992).

It is worth noting that alongside the overwhelming majority of Palestinians in Israel who see the status quo as illegitimate and unstable, there exists a small minority among them who see it as illegitimate, but stable. The general characteristics of this fraction resemble the “assimilating” group in the typology proposed by Smooha (1980). The need to diminish the cognitive dissonance experienced
by such individuals can cause them to justify the discrimination against their own group, which they see no way of changing.

Applying the typology offered by Turner and Brown to the majority group seems more interesting. One could contend that in general the majority would evaluate the status quo as stable, or at least as stable enough to render the minority group unlikely to seriously change it. Under this assumption, the alternatives proposed by Turner and Brown are reduced to two: (a) that majority members will evaluate the status quo as legitimate and stable and (b) that they will evaluate it as illegitimate and stable. Turner and Brown do not formulate a clear prediction regarding the first possibility, although one might suppose that majority members who perceive the status quo as legitimate and stable will continue to discriminate against the minority and will not demonstrate sufficient sensitivity concerning the existence of such discrimination. The prediction made by Turner and Brown concerning the second possibility is quite interesting. They posit that majority members who perceive the existing situation as stable but illegitimate, will engage in discriminatory behavior toward the minority, but at the same time, will attempt to justify their behavior by utilizing cognitive strategies that are self-confirmatory. As the theory of dissonance posits, majority members who experience the cognitive dissonance between the discriminatory behavior of their group and their sense of the injustice being done, will try to reduce this dissonance by changing their attitude toward the minority group members in a manner that justifies the discrimination taken against them.

The range of justifications expressed by majority group members in Jewish-Palestinian encounters is quite broad. They may be simple and overt, or complicated and covert. Based on my own observations, three types of justifications seem to be common in such encounters. These are stereotyping, rationalization, and delegitimization.

The use of negative stereotyping is a simple and direct tactic for justifying discrimination toward members of the Palestinian minority. Claims like “Arabs are not capable of adopting Western technologies,” or “Educational problems in the Arab sector are mainly an outcome of cultural differences,” are examples of commonly used justifications.

Rationalization in the present context refers to the use of pseudo-rational arguments to justify discrimination. A common claim which may fall in this category is the justification of denying full rights for Palestinian Israelis by arguing that they do not fulfill their obligations as citizens of the state, or the claim that discrimination against them is simply a “natural” behavior since “everywhere in the world minorities are discriminated against.”

Finally, delegitimization the minority group is often used as a rationale for justifying discriminatory actions towards its members. A common claim made in encounters, to delegitimize the Palestinian minority, is that “This is a Jewish State and so it is natural that Arabs can’t have equal rights.” Another related example
Suleiman holds that “This is the only state we (the Jews) have, whereas you (the Arabs) have more than twenty states.” Yet another example is the claim that “If you define yourselves as Palestinian, you can’t also be Israelis.”

It is worthwhile noting that the three strategies cited above do not exhaust all possible strategies, nor are they necessarily mutually exclusive. For example, majority members sometimes try to delegitimize minority members by means of negative stereotyping. Stigmatizing Arabs as “primitive” or reiterating that they lack a democratic tradition, are common examples of how negative stereotyping is used to increase the social distance from the minority as a means for delegitimizing its members.

**Concluding Remarks**

A number of theoretical ideas from the realm of social psychology were used here to analyze common processes that take place in planned encounters between Jewish and Palestinian Israelis. In the distinction made between the interpersonal and the intergroup dimensions of interaction, I emphasized the existence of a clear bias toward interpersonal communication. This bias, arising from the psychological character of the encounter, has greatly limited its capacity to address political issues. It also creates another difficulty in that it forces a symmetrical structure onto the encounter, thus ignoring the relations of dominance between the majority and minority and limiting the ability to cope with the various ramifications of the asymmetry embedded in these relations. The theoretical analysis in the final section highlighted some aspects of the differential responses of minority and majority, based on the differences in their respective power and relative status. An important difference, worth emphasizing here, relates to the centrality of national identity for members of the Palestinian minority and its importance for increasing group cohesion and mobilizing the group for collective activities. The same does not hold for members of the majority, who can rely on the existence of an organized institutional infrastructure designed to control the conflict with the minority.

The characteristics of the asymmetry in majority-minority relations produce different responses from majority and minority members. The analysis provided in the last section underlined a number of different behavioral and attitudinal responses by members of each group. As described, these differences are mainly determined by the power relations between majority and minority and by the perceived stability and legitimacy of these relations.

Can planned encounters—despite their structural bias toward “psychological” and interpersonal communication—serve as a platform for political dialogue between Jews and Palestinians? Rather than attempting to provide a definitive answer to this question, I prefer to emphasize two elements the existence of which seems necessary if encounter groups are to be applied effectively for political interventions.
First, the encounters must be managed in a way that insures that interpersonal communication will be invested in favor of cultivating intergroup dialogue. Maintaining the intergroup dimension at the center requires that facilitators do not yield to pressure coming from the Jewish participants who try to impose a “veto” on political and conflictual aspects. It also requires the development of facilitation techniques that are suitable for group interactions that are political in nature and the encouragement of expressions of group cohesiveness and group identity. A technique which implements these ideas has been developed by the School of Peace at Wahat al-Salam/Neveh-Shalom (cf., Halabi, 2000; Sonnenschein et al., 1992). Facilitators applying this technique purposefully stress the collective and intergroup dimension of the encounter. Also, they incorporate, in their programs, several sessions in which the groups in dialogue hold separate meetings. This structural manipulation appears to be effective in encouraging group members to assert their collective identities and in legitimizing these identities in the eyes of outgroup members. This is especially important for members of the Palestinian minority who have a greater need to assert their national identity.

Second, group members should be provided with relevant historical and political information and informed about the research literature on groups of differing status. The sociological research on majority-minority relations, and the social-psychological research on the effects of status and power differences on intergroup relations, are especially relevant for this purpose. Basic knowledge of this research, along with appropriate facilitation approaches, can improve the participants’ understanding of their own attitudes and behaviors, as well as of those of other ingroup and outgroup members. This, in turn, can improve the effectiveness of encounter groups in achieving their objectives.

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