Quality as critique: promoting critical reflection among youth in structured encounter programs

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Quality as critique: promoting critical reflection among youth in structured encounter programs

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In this manuscript, I interrogate the concept of 'quality' encounter programs for youth in conflict zones. I focus on two Israeli organizations implementing encounters for Jewish and Palestinian citizens, and draw upon narratives of former participants as articulated during life history narratives to illustrate divergent emphases in each organization's goals and implementation strategies. Through my comparison of the organizations and their work, I highlight the importance in encounter programs of providing opportunities not only for legitimizing the collective narrative of the 'other' side, but also for critical reflection upon in-group narratives and policies, and suggest that 'quality' peace education programs are those that provide these opportunities.

Keywords: encounter; Jewish; Palestinian; narratives; critical; reflection

Introduction

> So first of all, I think it's not for nothing that there is constant confusion – coexistence organizations, shared life organizations, organizations for joint activities – these names, this terminology, it means something. Because there are multiple ways of seeing joint activities: one way is to say, let's bring the two sides … and have them speak. That's the objective of the organization. But today, it's much clearer to me that joint activities need to start with recognition of the fact that there is an imbalance between the two sides … Later we talk about how it happened, but we need to start with the fact that it's a discussion between one side that has power and another side that is weak. (Former Sadaka Reut staff member[1])

The quotation above highlights competing understandings of what it means to implement peace education in the form of structured encounters for Jewish and Palestinian Israeli citizens. In conflict areas, peace education aims to foster tolerance and awareness of multiple narratives. Yet, as the comment above highlights, and as is reflected within both the practice of and scholarship on peace education (Abu-Nimer 1999; Gawerc 2011; Halabi and Sonnenschein 2004; Maoz 2011), diverse perspectives exist on how such programs should be implemented. In this manuscript, I focus upon the work of Peace Child Israel and Sadaka Reut, two veteran encounter organizations in Israel, to explore how we characterize 'successful' or 'quality' implementation of peace education. Drawing upon

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narratives of former Peace Child Israel and Sadaka Reut participants, I highlight the importance of providing opportunities not only to legitimize the collective narrative of the other side, but also for participants to critically examine their own group's narrative. I suggest that 'quality' peace education programs are those that provide such opportunities for critical reflection.

Background and context

Since Israel's founding, the conflict between Jewish and Palestinian[2] citizens has been a central characteristic of the state. This conflict largely reflects the status of Palestinian citizens as a group subject to overt and implicit discrimination (Al-Haj 1995; Human Rights Watch 2001; Rouhana 1997): given Israel's dual definition as both Jewish and democratic (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 1948), fundamental questions exist about the nature of citizenship and the potential equality of all Israeli citizens (Shafir and Peled 1998). Moreover, Palestinian citizens experience institutionalized and cultural discrimination. For example, Israel's Law of Return grants automatic citizenship to any Jew who wishes to immigrate to Israel; however, this expedited process toward citizenship is not open to non-Jews (Ghanem 2000; Sa'di 2002). Palestinians also are ineligible for many employment opportunities open only to individuals who have served in the Israel Defense Forces (Ben-Porat 2003).

Within this context, tensions simmer constantly under the surface of Jewish–Palestinian relations. Xenophobic trends in Israeli society peaked in the 1980s, with the rise of the ultra-right-wing Kahane Chai political party (Sachar 1996); Palestinian protest simultaneously increased in intensity, then declined in the 1980s, due in part to the peace processes of the 1990s and to increased state support to localities under the Labor Government (Yiftachel 1999). However, disappointment and frustration grew as improvements failed to materialize in the late 1990s, and the situation has become increasingly worse since the outbreak of the Al-Aqsa Intifada in 2000. Today, there are multiple indicators of furthering polarization (Smooha 2010b), including numerous instances of anti-Palestinian vandalism and physical violence (e.g. Boker and The Associated Press 2013; Kubovich 2013; Lidman 2013). Most recently, responses to the kidnapping in Israel of four teenagers (three Jewish and one Palestinian) in summer 2014 and to Israel's subsequent military incursion in the Gaza Strip, highlight an increasing level of anti-Arab sentiment among Jewish Israelis (Morello and Halpern 2014).

As in many other conflict contexts, prevalent discourse in Israel privileges the dominant group. These dominant discourses emphasize Jewish victimization and promote Jewish claims to land while delegitimizing the Palestinian historical narrative (Bar-Tal, Halperin, and Oren 2010). Dominant narratives are disseminated in Israeli schools, which are almost entirely segregated,[3] thus contributing to continuation of the conflict and enabling intensification of stereotypes (Davies 2005). In practice, while Palestinian citizens must be familiar with Jewish norms in order to succeed in Israeli society (Rouhana 1997), Jewish youth receive few, if any, opportunities for exposure to Palestinian history and culture.

Theoretical background

Scholars have long recognized the importance and possibilities of peace education in conflict contexts (Bush and Saltarelli 2000). In these regions, peace education

reflects 'an attempt to change the individual's perception of the other's collective narrative … and consequently of one's own social self, as well as to relate practically, less hatefully, and more trustingly toward that collective other' (Salomon 2002, 9). Salomon (2002) suggests that this form of peace education has four inter-related objectives: (1) accepting as legitimate the other's narrative; (2) being willing to critically examine one's own group's actions toward the other group; (3) being ready to experience and show empathy and trust toward the other; and (4) being disposed to engage in nonviolent activities.

Much of the scholarship on peace education in conflict focuses on whether the objectives Salomon proposes can be met. This literature primarily emphasizes two issues: whether participation in peace education or intergroup encounter programs results in a perception of the other's narrative as holding greater legitimacy (e.g. Rosen 2009; Rosen and Salomon 2011); and whether such programs can foster a willingness for positive interactions with someone from the other side (Maoz 2003; Ohanyan and Lewis 2005; Rosen 2009). Research has also addressed issues such as changes in perceptions of peace (Biton and Salomon 2006), identity development (Hammack 2006, 2010, 2011; Litvak-Hirsh, Bar-On, and Chaitin 2003), and inter-action processes between encounter participants (Helman 2002; Maoz 2001, 2005; Maoz et al. 2002, 2004; Steinberg and Bar-On 2002).

As a whole, this scholarship highlights the potential for peace education in con-flict contexts to meet the first and third of Salomon's proposed objectives, both in terms of empirically gaging the success of existing programs in doing so and with respect to highlighting the mechanisms by which these two objectives may or may not be met. However, while scholars have discussed the importance of Salomon's 2nd proposed objective, that is a willingness to critically examine one's actions toward the other group (Halabi and Sonnenschein 2004), little research has empiri-cally assessed its accomplishment or lack thereof. In other words, little emphasis has been placed on examining whether peace education can foster a critique of one's own in-group narrative, and, with respect to members of the dominant group, a critique of the institutions and policies that perpetuate the status quo. (One exception to this is the storytelling encounter approach utilized by Dan Bar-On and his colleagues, which is designed to encourage both interpersonal dialog and a critical examination of each group's collective identity [Bar-On and Kassem 2004; Bar-On, Litvak-Hirsh, and Othman 2007].)

The burgeoning literature on critical pedagogy in education offers an alternative body of scholarship that directly addresses the issue of questioning systemic inequal-ities. Rooted in the notions of critical praxis promoted by Freire (1970/2004), this literature emphasizes promoting critical consciousness among youth about institu-tionally condoned and institutionally perpetuated systems of discrimination (Anyon 2009). The term 'critical' has also recently taken on increased importance in the peace education field: an entire issue of the *Journal of Peace Education* in 2011 was devoted to the 'politics, praxis, and possibilities of critical peace education' (Bajaj and Brantmeier 2011). In their introduction to this issue, Bajaj and Brantmeier high-light the necessity of peace education initiatives that enhance transformative agency; the remaining articles in the issue likewise emphasize social transformation. Beyond this issue, Bajaj (2008) emphasizes the importance of paying attention to issues of structural inequality in peace education. Likewise, Brantmeier (2011, 2013) suggests that critical peace education should focus upon examining and changing asymmetri-cal power dynamics through situated power analysis.

Critical peace education seeks to foster questioning, rather than accepting, of the status quo. From a critical perspective, therefore, it is insufficient for peace education to encourage respect for alternative narratives: programs must offer participants the opportunity to develop awareness that lets them see the reality of the conflict with a critical eye. Opportunities for building *knowledge*, *awareness*, and *a critical perspective* are particularly important for understanding how peace education programs can build into larger, societal-wide peace-building processes, because as scholars have noted (e.g. Futrell 2003; Nepstad 1997), a critical perspective is a prerequisite for actual engagement in endeavors aimed at positive social change. Thus, I suggest that fostering critical awareness should be considered a central component of the 'quality' underlying these initiatives or how we judge their success. In other words, in conflict contexts such as Israel, peace education initiatives must serve a dual purpose: not only should they offer Jewish and Palestinian youth an opportunity to interact in a positive manner, but they should also create a space for reflecting upon the systemic injustices that serve as the bedrock of conflict.

In the following pages, I draw upon data collected from Israeli peace education programs implemented by two organizations – Peace Child Israel and Sadaka Reut – to further discuss this issue. After introducing the programs, I utilize narratives of two former participants to examine the way each organization emphasizes fostering critical awareness of systemic issues, and to address the relationship between opportunities for critical learning and individuals' belief systems as articulated years after their participation. Given Israel's sociopolitical environment, I particularly focus on the way that these programs offer opportunities for Jewish participants to more critically examine their own narrative. This is not to diminish the importance of enabling Palestinian participants to engage in in-group critique. However, I believe that in this context, highlighting the perspective of Jewish youth offers a clearer opportunity for illustrating how peace education can (or does not) encourage the self-reflexivity and inward-focused critique that is necessary for progressive social transformation to occur.

Methodology

Data for this manuscript were drawn from a larger study examining the way that participation in Peace Child and Sadaka Reut activities shaped individuals' lives in ensuing years, in terms of: beliefs regarding the potential for social change in the Israeli context, what this change might entail, and how individuals might be a part of this change. The study involved interviews with 30 former and current staff members of both organizations as well as life history interviews with 73 former Peace Child and Sadaka Reut participants. In addition, during the period between August 2010 and April 2011, I conducted approximately 200 h of observations, including weekly meetings of one Peace Child and one Sadaka Reut group, staff meetings, regional activities, and weekend retreats. I also collected and analyzed educational materials from both organizations. My observations and document analyses, along with interviews with former and current staff, provided information about different emphases and areas of focus in Peace Child Israel and Sadaka Reut programs.

Life history interviews were conducted as a means of understanding individuals' experiences in Peace Child or Sadaka Reut, contextualized within their overall life stories. A life history approach was used due to the rich opportunities it creates for understanding the lives of research participants and its utility for demonstrating 'the

intertwining of "personal" problems and external conditions' (Della Porta 1992, 175). Former participants were selected for interviews based on quota and snowball sampling methods, with approximately equal numbers interviewed based on: organization, gender, ethnonational affiliation, and decade of participation. Participants ranged from 19 to 43 years old and were interviewed at least once between August 2010 and April 2011. Interviews were conducted in a location of participants' choosing[4] and lasted between 45 min and 2 h, with several additional interviews conducted in April and May 2012. They were conducted in Hebrew or in English, at the participants' choosing, and were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Interviews began with a request to 'Tell me about your life.' In line with the critical methodological approach underlying the study as a whole (Carspecken 1996), this initial invitation enabled participants to focus the interview on issues *they* deemed important. Topics addressed in most interviews included: experiences as participants in the organization's programs, family background, education, professional experiences, and beliefs and activities related to social change.

Hermeneutic-reconstructive analysis was utilized as the conceptual framework for interpreting data. Carspecken (2007, 2008) defines reconstructive analysis as an interpretive analytical method that puts into explicit discourse the implicit understandings of participants in research, with an emphasis on reconstructing meaning. The *hermeneutic* aspect refers to the reflexive process implicated in reconstructing meaning (Carspecken 1996), an iterative process which enables meaning reconstructions to more and more closely approximate meaning as understood by research participants. Within this framework, interview transcripts and observation field notes were initially read holistically, after which I wrote reflective memos discussing central themes and possible angles for interpretation. Transcripts were then coded by generating new codes and sub-codes iteratively with each transcript (Carspecken 1996; Lincoln and Guba 1985). After generating an initial set of 'raw' codes, certain categories emerged as major themes. Data were then recoded with an emphasis on these themes. This additional coding also brought to light negative cases and outliers (Miles and Huberman 1994), requiring systematic reflection on preliminary analysis that shaped my final interpretations.

I utilized a variety of techniques in order to validate the interpretations emerging from my analysis as a whole (Lincoln and Guba 1985). These techniques included: prolonged engagement in the field; triangulation via multiple sources as well as multiple methods; and checking the accuracy of my initial interpretations with research participants, both informally and via follow-up interviews and focus groups. I also used the technique of peer debriefing to obtain feedback from colleagues on my codes, preliminary analytical memos, and written interpretations of my data, as well as my translations.

The organizations: Peace Child Israel and Sadaka Reut

Peace Child Israel

Peace Child Israel was established in 1988 and operated continuously until it closed its doors in September 2011. During these 23 years, the organization used theater programs implemented around the country as the basis for achieving its primary mission – 'to promote, and contribute to, a life of peace and equality between Arab and Jewish citizens in Israel.'[5] Organization staff fostered relationships with Jewish

and Palestinian schools, recruiting 20–30 8th, 9th, and 10th grade participants each year to be part of a single group created from youth in two nearby communities. Over 1–2 academic years, participants met weekly after school, engaging in dialog and workshops building non-violent communication and critical thinking skills, and learning about similarities and differences between Israeli ethnonational and religious groups.[6]

The main focus of Peace Child Israel's work was theatrical: during their time together, participants would develop and rehearse a bilingual play that was performed in their schools and for the community at large. For at least the last decade of Peace Child programming, and as I observed over my time with Peace Child during 2010–2011, each year began with several separate Jewish and Palestinian meetings designed to prepare participants for their first binational encounter. Following these initial meetings, the binational group would engage in role-playing and other theatrical exercises as a way of learning about one another and about both Jewish and Palestinian narratives. After a team-building retreat partway through the year, each group began writing[7] and rehearsing a play to be performed during the late spring. In some cases, groups of participants continued their Peace Child engagement through a second year, performing in schools around the country.

Peace Child Israel's pedagogical framework relied on two central elements: the use of theater as a vehicle for change, and a primarily interpersonal and cultural focus. The use of theater reflects an organizational belief in the power of role-playing and improvisation to raise questions among participants about issues they take for granted, and to foster empathy, deeper interpersonal connections, and a more nuanced understanding of cultural similarities and differences.[8] For instance, theatrical exercises such as role reversal improvisations were built into Peace Child's work as a means of enabling participants to make their underlying assumptions about different cultures explicit. One staff member explained,

> [Our use of theater], it's all for learning. What did we learn? What more did we learn about each other's families, history, roots, and experiences? And then, some of it can be easy, [but] sometimes, you never know what it's going to bring up. [So at the end of the session we ask] ok what was the strongest thing or most significant thing you heard today? (Interview, August 29, 2010)

Alumni also emphasized the important role theater played in their Peace Child experiences. Several individuals told me that they joined the organization because of an interest in theater – Doron, a Jewish male from one of Peace Child's first groups, explained that he was interested in the organization's activities because he felt that 'theater is a very empowering tool for bridging all sorts of differences.' Adi, a Jewish woman who participated in Peace Child activities in the early 2000s, also emphasized that theater was a catalyst for the process of change she went through as a participant. She spoke explicitly about the emotional intensity of role-plays that her group engaged in their importance in helping participants develop empathy for one another.

However, a cultural emphasis was central for Peace Child, meaning that explicitly political content and structural inequities in Israeli society were not directly addressed unless participants brought them up. Indeed, as the organization's director stated, 'We don't expect that they're going to become political activists, necessarily. Maybe some, but not, that's not, we're apolitical, we're supposed to be apolitical, it's an educational program.' Instead, 'we hope that they will each see that it's a very

complicated relationship, but that there are humans on both sides, that there are not monsters, and to do what [they] can to be more compassionate to the other side.'[9] The cultural and interpersonal focus of Peace Child's work likewise was emphasized repeatedly in interviews with both facilitators and alumni who referenced, and in some cases lamented, the lack of political discussions in Peace Child's programming.[10,11] Thus, although the organization emphasized working toward 'peace and equality in Israeli society,' with the objective of 'education towards equal rights for both people(s),'[12] Peace Child Israel's curriculum lacked an explicit focus on fundamental inequalities that exist between Jewish and Palestinian citizens.

Sadaka-Reut

Sadaka-Reut was founded in 1983, guided then and now by an overarching mission of educating and empowering 'Jewish and Palestinian Israeli youth and university students to pursue social and political change through binational partnership.'[13] Two principles lie at the heart of Sadaka Reut's work: educating youth for social engagement, out of the belief that 'a single person has the ability to impact change in important issues'[14]; and providing a model of joint Jewish–Palestinian partnership, based on the assumption that 'only real and honest partnership between the two nations can bring about significant social change for a different future.'[15] Above all, Sadaka Reut emphasizes partnership as a tool for confronting and overcoming systemic inequalities in Israel.

Early in its history, Sadaka Reut brought together teenagers from nearby Palestinian and Jewish communities for weekly meetings and periodic organization-wide activities. However, while initially Sadaka Reut's emphasis was on fostering interpersonal ties, over the years, it developed a more political approach. A direct focus on issues related to the Jewish–Palestinian conflict became part of the organization's work after the signing of the Oslo Agreements in 1993; following the outbreak of the Al-Aqsa Intifada in 2000, Sadaka Reut became even more focused on addressing power dynamics. In recent years, organization staff also came to the conclusion that, as the Palestinian co-director said, 'the real work of consciousness raising happens in uninational meetings.'[16] In comparison, she explained, binational meetings, if not preceded by extensive uninational work, almost always reinforce dominant power dynamics. Thus, in Sadaka Reut's flagship program, *Building a Culture of Peace (BCP)*, weekly meetings are now uninational, with regular (usually monthly) opportunities for regional and national binational activities.

Within each BCP group, the year begins with activities aimed at establishing relationships among group members before shifting into discussions about identity, democratic principles, and equal rights and the Jewish–Palestinian conflict. Group facilitators are provided with a manual that describes the organization's mission, vision, and pedagogical rationale, as well as about the general structure BCP groups should adhere and examples of different activities to draw upon. However, BCP follows a flexible curriculum in which each group, over the course of the year, develops an action agenda based on an issue they deem important to their community (e.g. housing demolitions, intergroup relations, etc.). Group discussions draw upon the individual experiences of participants to address the topic of each meeting's focus. For example, in the BCP group I observed, the facilitator used photography as a tool for having group participants explore their community, and

then used photographs taken by the participants as a starting point for discussing social inequalities.[17]

Fostering critique

In the following pages, I illustrate opportunities presented in each program for developing critical awareness. I draw primarily upon the life history narratives of two Jewish alumnae to illustrate the experiences of participating in Peace Child and Sadaka Reut activities, to highlight opportunities for developing a critical in-group perspective, and to describe current beliefs of the alumnae regarding Israeli society. As stated above, my choice to focus on Jewish alumnae is rooted in the dominance of the Jewish narrative in Israeli society. Given its dominance, focusing on the per-spectives of Jewish individuals allows me to more clearly highlight the potential offered through these encounter programs to reflect inwards.

The narratives of the two individuals emphasized in this manuscript reflect trends present in the large majority of life history interviews conducted with Jewish partici-pants in Sadaka Reut and Peace Child Israel activities. I focus on these two individ-uals largely due to the two women having little knowledge of or interest in politics or social justice issues prior to their participation, and the degree to which they dis-cuss their Sadaka Reut/Peace Child Israel participation both in terms of its signifi-cance and in terms of concrete experiences. Their narratives, contextualized by data from other interviews and from observations, thus highlight the nature of each pro-gram and provide clear examples of the way that participation enabled development (or not) of critical in-group perspectives.

Shira[18]

Shira is a Jewish alumna of Peace Child Israel who grew up in a Jerusalem neigh-borhood bordering one populated by Palestinians. Despite the geographic location of her home, Shira told me that prior to joining Peace Child, she had never spoken with a Palestinian. Shira joined Peace Child because she was interested in doing something 'different'[19] and because she was intrigued by the theatrical component of the organization's work, but did not consider herself politically aware, nor did she hold, in her words, 'left-leaning' political beliefs.

When discussing her participation in the organization's activities, Shira told me that most of the meetings were 'light' politically, with a focus mostly on theater, rather than on issues addressing the Jewish–Palestinian conflict, and providing an opportunity for participants 'just to enjoy ourselves.' This perspective was corrobo-rated by a number of other alumni and staff I interviewed. For instance, Gabrielle, a Jewish woman who participated in Peace Child activities in the mid-1990s, told me that she didn't remember 'a single political activity there.' Likewise, a former Palestinian Peace Child staff member explained,

> It was really, like, a meeting around … stereotypes, um, I don't really remember all the topics at this point but it was really, like, talking in slogans, and not really about the political basis underlying them.[20]

Even when discussing what she referred to as more 'intensive' encounters, Shira brought up conversations related to the Jewish–Palestinian conflict, but indicated that the primary focus of activities from which these conversations emerged was

cultural and that discussion of sociopolitical issues was incidental. For instance, Shira mentioned an activity in which group members were asked to define themselves by choosing between words describing different aspects of their identity (for instance, 'Jewish' or 'Israeli'). Shira reflected about the intensity of her emotions in relation to making choices about how to describe herself, but she also described her reaction to hearing the choices made by Palestinian members of the group:

> I remember that we had an argument with the Arabs, like, what, why are you Palestinians, this is the State of Israel, and they told us, no, it's the opposite, it's not Israel, it's occupied territories, and it became a big argument and when we left, I remember that I was totally worked up.

> Karen: What do you mean?
> Shira: I remember that I was totally shocked that … how do you dare to call this country Palestine? Like, it's clear that it is Israel, and you, we let you be part of this country and it's as though you remove yourselves from the State. And I remember that I left that meeting with very difficult emotions.

This activity was Shira's first experience hearing a different narrative than the Jewish narrative. The significance of this experience for her is clear: a decade after her Peace Child participation, Shira still remembers the emotions the activity generated, calling the experience 'shocking.' Yet it is important to note that the argument generated during this particular meeting did not result from a planned discussion about the status of Palestinian citizens of Israel, but rather an activity about reflecting on personal identity. As such, as she told me, the depth of the discussion was limited, suggesting limitations in the degree to which her views might be changed, as well. Indeed, in my observations of Peace Child activities, I likewise noted that the few political discussions held by the group were impromptu, based on incidents that arose during a meeting, rather than emerging from planned discussions.[21]

With little opportunity for delving into the foundations of the Jewish–Palestinian conflict, coupled with, as Shira noted, very little interaction with Palestinian citizens in the years since Peace Child, Shira's views remain relatively unchanged a decade later. The 'shock' that she felt at first hearing Palestinian claims to the land remains for Shira today, although she now characterizes her emotional reaction to these claims as being 'hurt.' Specifically, in response to my question about her current views regarding those who refer to the State of Israel as Palestine, Shira told me,

> [I]t really hurts and it's like … he [a Palestinian citizen] is in this place that's called Israel and he separates himself from it. Like, he isn't willing to acknowledge the fact that this isn't Palestine … it's not … it's Israel, it's a State that since ancient times has belonged to the Jewish people and he comes and changes its name and doesn't acknowledge what they actually call it here, and, allows himself to claim it for himself … [Palestinian citizens] have identity cards and they use the services of the State and they live here in Israel. They receive what they need from the State. So … that's what really infuriates me, that they know how to take but they can't give anything for the State … But anyway, they still, they call the State by another name. They identify it as something else.

In other words, Shira remains convinced that Palestinian claims to the State of Israel do not have legitimacy, just as Israeli claims to the state retain their legitimacy in her eyes. Her words also suggest that she is not open to, or able to accept, the needs and wants of Israeli citizens who are of Palestinian descent. For her, calling the land

Palestine is wrong and personally hurtful, particularly given her belief that Israel has been a home to the Jews since biblical times. Such a perspective aligns with the dominant narrative in Israeli society (Bar-Tal 1993; Bar-Tal, Halperin, and Oren 2010) and indicates a strong adherence to normative Israeli discourse, emphasizing *the good* that is provided to Palestinians through services by the State of Israel, with little critical reflection on systemic issues characterizing the context.

In her narrative, Shira also expressed a discomfort around Palestinian citizens, likewise reflecting emotions characteristic of the majority of Israel's Jewish population.[22] She spoke about the fear she felt around Palestinians before her Peace Child Israel experience and the continuation of that fear in later years, stating that she continues to find herself very uncomfortable in their presence:

> It really feels to me that the attitude I get from the Arabs is, it's something very sexist, like when I walk in the street and they whistle or say something and it causes me to feel very uncomfortable. It's very unpleasant. A while ago something very unpleasant happened to me, I was at the *Cinematheque*[23] and an Arab man came and robbed me and another friend and it, it really affected my sense of security, like, to see someone and wonder … since then, I'm constantly thinking, maybe that person was the one who robbed me, maybe he was the one who took away my self confidence. And also, a few days ago I was walking near *Mamilla*[24] and just then some Arabs passed by, a group, and it made me feel really uncomfortable because they said to me, 'ooh ahh what a beauty,' and all sorts of insulting comments that made me feel uncomfortable. I don't know if that would happen if a couple of Israeli [Jewish] guys walked by. It really made me feel … listen, I feel uncomfortable when I am around Arabs.

These elements of her narrative suggest that despite Shira's experience as a Peace Child participant, relatively little changed in her overall perspective regarding Palestinians and the Palestinian narrative as a result of her participation. While the fear she feels upon seeing Palestinians is not a reflection on the validity of their historical narrative, her 'hurt' and 'shocked' emotions regarding the reference to a state of Palestine, coupled with her statements regarding government provision of services to Palestinians, suggests relatively little critical reflection on dominant Jewish discourse in Israeli society.

Standing in contrast with the majority of Shira's narrative and relatively uncritical perspective is her reflection on one specific Peace Child meeting, a rehearsal for the group's upcoming theater performance – thus, again, not focused specifically on issues related to the Jewish–Palestinian conflict. On this particular day, one of the Palestinians in her Peace Child group came late to rehearsal because he was stuck for several hours at a checkpoint. Shira told me,

> Later he arrived, towards the end of the meeting, and he was so angry about how they examined him at the checkpoint … I mean, I didn't understand the significance of checkpoints until that moment. What happens there and … what level of bitterness it can create. 'Those Israelis, because of them I stood now for several hours at the checkpoint and they need to examine me, a really thorough examination, and check my belongings …' and I don't know, it really shocked me. I mean, I thought that only they create problems for us, and I suddenly realized, like, where that comes from. I mean, why they are angry at us. Because there is a reason for [their anger].

From Shira's reflection, it seems that the opportunity to hear first-hand about the daily struggle faced by Palestinians helped her realize that there is a legitimate reason for their anger based on actions of Israelis. This incident thus allowed Shira to develop awareness of an alternative perspective, and a more critical understanding of the Israeli–Palestinian context as a whole. Although it did not result from a

planned activity, Shira's reflection suggests that through these unplanned discussions, Peace Child did create a small space for critical reflection, or what Bekerman and Zembylas (2012) refer to as 'small openings' for exploring and disrupting hegemonic narratives in Israeli society. Shira also indicated that these opportunities were important in creating hope for the possibility of a different future. As she told me,

> It's like I felt that we, within the group, can create peace, I mean, we don't need leaders, we just need people, the simple people like these who are … who, if there will be a desire or at least a little bit of desire, we can bring about a large change in our concern for and relationships with one another […] We don't need leaders.

> Karen: Political leaders?
> Shira: Yes. That the activities like this are what really bring about tolerance and hope for change.

In today's sociopolitical climate, the very existence of hope is uncommon, highlighting the importance of Peace Child in helping Shira's narrative veer from the dominant perspective in Israel. Moreover, as Shira's narrative illustrates, simply having the opportunity to hear about another participant's experiences crossing a checkpoint from the West Bank into Jerusalem left an impression that has stayed with her. Even so, as indicated by Shira and confirmed by other program alumni, staff, and organizational curricular materials, few Peace Child Israel activities addressed issues central to the Jewish–Palestinian conflict in a way that enabled deep reflection upon in-group narratives and actions, limiting opportunities for developing critical awareness of social injustices within Israel.[25] Thus, while perhaps Peace Child opened a door for Shira to critically reflect upon at least one aspect of Israeli policy toward Palestinians, one might say that this door was opened just a crack. Without multiple opportunities for and reinforcement of critical reflection, Shira retains a fairly negative perspective on the legitimacy of the Palestinian narrative, in contrast with her (relatively) uncritical view of Israeli policy vis-à-vis Palestinians.

Anna

Anna is an alumna of Sadaka Reut, who immigrated to Israel from the Former Soviet Union. Prior to joining Sadaka Reut, like Shira, Anna had never met a Palestinian. Likewise, Anna indicated that she had little awareness of sociopolitical issues prior to her involvement in the organization, although she told me that following Israel's war in Lebanon in 2006,[26] she developed an interest in politics, which drew her to Sadaka Reut.

Anna told me that Sadaka Reut staff encouraged her interest in politics and that in the organization she developed an awareness of the Palestinian narrative as well as of contradictions within the Jewish narrative and problems with current policies implemented in Israel. For example, Anna told me that her Sadaka Reut facilitator constantly 'pushed us to ask questions, questions about the army, and mostly questions about what we learned in school.' One time, Anna recounted,

> … we brought our history books [to the meeting] and [the facilitator] said, I want each of you to open your history books and look for a Mizrachi[27] or female narrative in the history you are learning about yourselves. It was crazy, because at that meeting I discovered that I am not Jewish.

Karen: What do you mean?

Anna: Because I understood that my history is not the Holocaust, and my language is not … like, from that, everything started to fall into place. I suddenly said, this is not my history. It's not relevant to my history. And from learning the history that I thought was my history, it built an entire identity for me, about me, that isn't relevant to me at all. It was amazing, that meeting. And [I realized that] I need to ask questions about everything that we learn in school.

Anna explained that by seeking out her personal narrative in her history textbook, she realized that the dominant narrative in Jewish Israeli society – the one with which she is associated as someone who immigrated to the country under the Law of Return,[28] despite not being Jewish – does not include or resonate with her. As a result of this activity, moreover, Anna began questioning *other* aspects of her formal education. Indeed, reflecting about what she gained from Sadaka Reut, Anna told me, 'First and foremost, the first thing [Sadaka Reut] taught me was to ask questions. And everything came from there, because it's something that [Israeli society] doesn't teach you to do and that we weren't accustomed to doing at all, like on a daily basis, and definitely not at age 15, 16, when mostly we don't ask questions at all.'

The activity Anna described exemplifies the core of Sadaka Reut's pedagogical approach, which emphasizes not only directly addressing the Jewish–Palestinian conflict, but also the connection between participants' personal experiences and systemic issues in Israel. One staff member told me,

> We start from the assumption that in order to try to create change in others one needs to understand himself, what is important to him, to what he connects – you need to help him create a connection between himself and his community … So our program is very focused on providing a space for [students], for their worldviews, and also for their racism. That is, without judging, simply giving them their space. And that, in many ways, is our power, both pedagogically and ideologically, that is, in order for someone to understand the world in a critical manner, and understand the other, and identify with the other, he needs to have his place, to understand his place, he needs to learn and act within the reality in which he lives. He won't act for others before he has established the responsibility to act for himself.[29]

My observations of weekly group meetings and organization-wide seminars, as well as interviews with Sadaka Reut staff, made clear how central linking the personal to the political is to the organization's work. For example, during one meeting of the group I observed, the facilitator utilized discussions about self-portrait photographs group members had taken as a starting point for discussions about gender issues in the military, and, expanding on that, other systemic issues in Israeli society.[30] Through this personal–political connection, Sadaka Reut's approach provides ample opportunity for participants to critically reflect on dominant discourses within their ethnonational communities, and thus for developing awareness of the disparities between these discourses and the everyday lived experiences of others.

During our conversation, Anna provided me with numerous examples of Sadaka Reut experiences through which she learned 'to understand her place' in Israeli society and thus expand her awareness of power dynamics and her ability to question Israeli power structures. Reflecting further on what she took away from Sadaka Reut, Anna commented,

> … Through the fact that I saw the power imbalance in our Sadaka group, suddenly I started to see all sorts of power dynamics in the street. From the fact that I saw what the history books say, suddenly I started to see what isn't told in the history books and

what isn't said in the street and what I don't see and the entire reality that is hidden from me, and all the stories that aren't told ... and suddenly I began to see what is oppressed and what is empowered and, like, how that happens. And then I started to examine myself within that ... Constantly, questions questions questions, why this and not that, why is it like this and why is it not like that. And, it's like, when you live here everything is very clear ... And nobody asks questions. That's what [Sadaka Reut] changed for me.

Ultimately, these experiences helped Anna develop an ability, not only to see legitimacy in the narrative and claims of her Palestinian counterparts, but also to critique 'the entire reality' of the situation in Israel. This ability is particularly evident in Anna's reflection on the Sadaka Reut environment itself. Anna told me she did not always feel comfortable in the Sadaka Reut environment because she felt that her emotions about certain issues might be considered unacceptable, given the emphasis within this particular context on a narrative, essentially the opposite of the one Anna was used to hearing 'on the street' of Jewish Israeli society. Anna reflected,

I now know what to say, under every circumstance, I know exactly which buttons to push, I know exactly what, what the other side feels, but I don't ... I don't feel that at every moment I said exactly what I thought, because I knew that it wasn't right.

Karen: To say what you really think?
Anna: Yes. Because I knew that it's not politically the right thing to say. It wasn't the right thing simply because of the fact that it would cause the person sitting in front of me to feel very badly. I mean ... it's clear that my awareness grew, it grew at a pace that I couldn't even imagine, and my knowledge expanded during that time also because I asked questions all the time. And because [I was in] an environment that addressed these questions and issues that society doesn't address and provides no opportunity to address ... but in Sadaka Reut it's just intellectual masturbation, everyone you know stands next to [the Palestinians] and says yes, you're right, you're right, and the Nakba was bad, and a Zionist Jewish State is racist, everything. But ... I don't know if there are things that I need to think, you know, because the Palestinians are oppressed and ... like, they are constantly attacked and their identity erased and so on and so on, so do I have to be, have to be entirely on their side, or can I keep some of my opinions, the ones that are *really* my opinion ... I know that I didn't entirely erase within me all of what television shows, all of what my teachers thrust into my mind. But I really try to erase it, I really try to erase those ideas that society forced on me.
Karen: Can you tell me why it's important for you to erase those ideas?
Anna: Because ... because I want to create an opinion of my own. I tried to erase it so that, you know, I could start from zero and then really see what is happening.

Anna's comment about trying to erase what she has been exposed to is also important, in that it indicates her desire to form an opinion based on, as she says, 'what is really happening,' by uncovering layers of truth and untruth in what is typically shown and said about Israeli society. Yet, Anna is aware that as someone who is part of the dominant group, she will never be able to entirely clean the slate. Still, as she says,

You know, now I go out into my life and it's like these huge glasses that filter [the world]. And it's frustrating. It's a lot easier to grow up [in a Jewish town], to go to the army, after that to go travel in India and then come back to start your studies. Really,

it's a lot easier … [The lenses] become so strong within you and you can't succeed in separating yourself from it … so, I'm constantly in these processes [of asking questions and uncovering layers] and it never finishes, it will never finish.

Ultimately, Anna's narrative indicates that Sadaka Reut provided her with constant opportunities to ask questions, confront issues at the heart of the conflicts within Israeli society, and establish a point of view that is not only accepting of the Palestinian narrative, but critical of mainstream Jewish discourse. Moreover, although Anna told me that while she is not yet sure how most effectively to be involved in changing the status quo, she was emphatic about the need to 'work against the things I know are wrong,' and emphasized that she is trying to figure out which paths to sociopolitical activism best fit her. It is clear from Anna's narrative that Sadaka Reut provided her with the critical lens spurring her in this direction of working for social change.

Discussion

Shira's and Anna's narratives illustrate important differences, both in awareness of Israel's sociopolitical environment and in the degree to which each is able to turn a critical eye on her in-group narrative. While their experiences are neither representative of nor generalizable to Peace Child/Sadaka Reut or encounter participants as a whole, they highlight, conceptually, several important points.

First, the divergence in degree to which Anna and Shira question dominant discourses disseminated by the Jewish community highlights important differences in the approaches utilized by Peace Child Israel and Sadaka Reut, in terms of opportunities presented by each organization for helping participants learn to ask critical questions about their environment. While not representative of all participants in Peace Child and Sadaka Reut, Anna's and Shira's narratives are reflective of trends among all my research participants, suggesting that these differences are related to the experiences of participants in each of the two organizations' programs. Of the 30 Peace Child Israel alumni I interviewed, only 9 (30%) narrated continued involvement in social change activities following their Peace Child participation, and nearly all attributed this continued involvement to factors outside of the organization, such as family, friends, or significant sociopolitical events. Indeed, while several said the organization provided them with an initial exposure to issues related to the Jewish–Palestinian conflict (6 alumni spoke about this), not a single former participant mentioned Peace Child as providing them with the sense that they individually might be able to contribute to social change. On the other hand, 29 of the 45 Sadaka Reut alumni I interviewed (65%) described ongoing participation in activities aimed at changing Israel's sociopolitical environment; a large percentage attributed this involvement at least partly to their involvement with Sadaka Reut. Specifically, alumni spoke about Sadaka Reut providing their initial exposure to sociopolitical issues, enabling them to gain skills as activists and organizers, and helping shape their perceived sociopolitical self-efficacy. These roles fit clearly with Sadaka Reut's vision and with the organization's stated goal of 'empowering Jewish and Palestinian youth … to pursue social and political change.' Thus, while it is impossible to determine the precise reasons for differences between alumni of the two organizations, it is likely that programmatic approaches played a role, particularly with respect to helping foster the critical worldview necessary for understanding the importance of continued social change involvement.

These differences in approach are significant not in terms of the specific cases highlighted here, but because they point to the importance of implementing peace education programs, and specifically intergroup encounters, that offer opportunities for critically examining the role of one's in-group within conflict contexts, particularly among members of dominant groups in society. In conflict contexts as well as in societies around the world, peace education has the potential to foster among participants, a desire to engage in activities aimed at challenging the status quo. This is especially true of encounter programs, which provide structured environments for individuals from different groups to interact. Opportunities for developing critical awareness, however, are the prerequisite for starting to question dominant narratives, which itself is a necessary precursor for encouraging continued participation in social change activities. Indeed, critical awareness is only one step in a longer process of confronting systemic inequities: scholarship on social movement participation suggests that prior to engaging in activism, individuals must be convinced not only that they can do something to effect change but also that there is something *that needs to be changed* about the way that society functions (e.g. McAdam 1982; Nepstad 1997). Thus, what Shira's and Anna's narratives highlight is that in order to help motivate participants to work toward changing the status quo, encounter programs should provide possibilities, especially for members of the dominant group, for better understanding what structural inequities exist in the first place. When thinking about what constitutes a 'quality' peace education program, therefore, it is necessary to consider the degree to which programs provide these opportunities.

While this manuscript focuses on encounters within Israel, the necessity of providing opportunities for critical learning is true whether encounters occur between Jewish and Palestinian citizens, or whether they bring together other groups for interfaith or interracial dialog in contexts around the world. Indeed, as Brantmeier and Bajaj (2013) note, this type of learning is a central feature of critical approaches to peace education as a whole. What we learn from Shira's and Anna's narratives, then, is just how crucial it is for encounter programs, and peace education programs more broadly, to offer structured and intensive opportunities for raising questions and deeply examining the status quo. Without in-depth discussions about existing injustices, there is little possibility for peace education programs in any context to help members of majority groups understand issues related to power imbalances and structural inequities, and thus to fulfill their objectives of enhancing transformative agency and participatory citizenship (Brantmeier and Bajaj 2013).

While such an approach should be considered necessary for 'quality' peace education, particularly in conflict regions, Shira's narrative illustrates that even unplanned opportunities to hear about another participant's experiences can leave a lasting impression. In other words, it is not that encounters guided by less-critical approaches lack merit altogether. Indeed, Shira's narrative also points to the importance of *any* positive encounter between Jews and Palestinians, in a context such as Israel, as providing hope for a better future. The importance of this should not be discounted. Still, there is a difference between hoping for a better future and being motivated to be actively engaged in doing something to bring that future about. In other words, a non-critical approach to peace education is quite limited in terms of its potential for fostering transformative agency.

Beyond the focus of this manuscript on a single conflict context, it is important to note that Shira's and Anna's narratives do not reflect the full spectrum of experiences held by participants in Sadaka Reut or Peace Child Israel. Indeed, they are

only two examples out of a group of nearly 10,000 alumni who have participated in programs implemented by these two organizations. Thus, while they reflect trends found among my own research participants, Shira's and Anna's experiences cannot be generalized to all alumni of these two organizations' programs, nor, for that matter, to participants in peace education programs more broadly. However, the excerpts from their narratives are not meant to reflect the perspective of all alumni of these two programs, but rather to provide insights into broader concepts that this paper addresses. In other words, the importance of their narratives here is in their contribution to elucidating a broader theoretical point about the importance of critical approaches in encounter programs.

In addition, it is worth noting that this manuscript is limited in terms of its focus solely on Jewish participants or members of the majority group. As stated earlier, this focus is important for elucidating the potential of peace education to encourage self-reflexivity among members of dominant societal groups. Nonetheless, a focus exclusively on Jewish participants limits our potential for understanding the potential of encounter programs to influence *all* participants in ways encouraging a critical perspective. Indeed, a cautionary note should be placed with respect to the very notion of promoting critical perspectives in conflict-based peace education and encounter programs. As Jansen (2009) notes in his discussion of critical education in South Africa, critical theory often pits an oppressor against an oppressed and takes sides with the oppressed. He states,

> The important point here is that in the rush to judgment and openly taking one side, critical theory dislodges the teacher from a compassionate involvement with the knowledge of the other side. Such positioning estranges the teacher from those who are arguably most in need of critical engagement with their troubled knowledge – and makes it impossible for constructive confrontation and transformation of this knowledge. (259)

In other words, by setting the world into an 'us' and a 'them,' critical theorists are absolved from closely reflecting on the role *all* individuals and groups play in perpetuating conflict. Thus, despite the focus of this manuscript on members of the Jewish majority, it is important for peace education and encounter programs that 'critique' be extended equally to all sides, so that members of *both* dominant and minority groups are able to critically examine their group's actions toward the other group (Salomon 2002).

Finally, I suggest that this manuscript highlights not only important implications for the *practice* of encounters between dominant and minority groups, but also for academic scholarship. For the most part, the connection between peace education participation and in-group critique has been relatively overlooked in scholarly research, which has primarily focused on how participation can foster changes in terms of willingness to be in contact and with respect to the legitimacy accorded to other collective narratives. Academic scholarship remains relatively silent on how participation might encourage critique of one's own narrative or the willingness to engage in nonviolent activities for change. Yet, existing literature on peace education and especially the burgeoning area of critical peace education (Bajaj 2008; Bajaj and Brantmeier 2011; Brantmeier 2011, 2013; Brantmeier and Bajaj 2013) suggests that doing so is a fundamental requirement of programs designed to foster transformative agency. To this end, this manuscript helps us understand what it means, in concrete terms, for peace education and encounter programs to foster critique, and what we might expect in cases when they do not. Such an understanding can help

us better assess whether peace education programs might be deemed 'successful' in terms of helping create critical perspectives that are a necessary first step prior to participants going out and doing something to change the world, or, in other words, whether peace education is challenging societal beliefs in a way that can help contribute to social justice and societal peace-building in conflict contexts and beyond.

Notes

1. Interview, September 5, 2010.
2. The citizens of Israel who are of Palestinian descent have been called, at different times and by different groups, Israeli-Arabs, Arab citizens, Palestinian-Israelis, Palestinian citizens of Israel, and Israeli-Palestinians. In this manuscript, I utilize the term Palestinian citizens of Israel (shorthand: Palestinians), except when citing academic scholarship or quoting research participants who utilize a different term. My choice of terminology is based on the fact that most, though not all, of my Palestinian research participants referred to themselves in this way. I note also that the focus of my study is on Jews and Palestinians residing within the State of Israel. Thus, my reference to Palestinians does not include residents of the West Bank, Gaza Strip, or elsewhere in the Palestinian Diaspora.
3. The Israeli education system is divided into four tracks, or sectors. Three of these sectors – State Education, State Religious Education, and Ultra-Orthodox Education – serve the Jewish population, while the Arab sector includes schools serving Palestinian citizens, including Druze and Bedouin students.
4. 13 of the 73 interviews were conducted over Skype with individuals no longer living in the State of Israel.
5. Peace Child Israel Mission Statement. Accessed March 29, 2010. http://www.mideast web.org/peacechild/mission.html.
6. Peace Child mission statement.
7. A few years before the organization closed, a decision was made to perform existing plays adapted for Peace Child and translated into Hebrew and Arabic, rather than having each group develop original productions.
8. Interview, August 29, 2010; February 7, 2011; April 13, 2011.
9. Interview, August 29, 2010.
10. Interviews, August 29, 2010; September 19, 2010; September 21, 2010; October 1, 2010; October 11, 2010; November 4, 2010; January 6, 2011).
11. While as a whole in my Peace Child observations I noticed that political discussions rarely occurred, one day during rehearsal there was a bombing in Jerusalem that killed two Jewish Israelis. Rather than ignore it altogether, the facilitators made sure to mention this during the day's closing activity and to discuss the reactions (field notes, March 23, 2011).
12. Peace Child mission statement.
13. http://en.reutsadaka.org/?page_id=627, accessed July 5, 2013.
14. Sadaka Reut's Facilitation Manual, 2000, 5.
15. Sadaka Reut's 'Ma'arachim' Facilitation Manual, 2005, 1.

16. Interview, September 8, 2010.
17. Field notes, January 6, 2011; March 21, 2011; March 30, 2011.
18. For purposes of confidentiality, the names of all research participants have been changed.
19. All quotations in this section of the manuscript are direct quotations from participant narratives.
20. Interview, November 4, 2010.
21. Field notes, March 2, 2011.
22. e.g. The annual *Index of Arab-Jewish Relations* shows that in every year between 2003 and 2009, between two-thirds and three-quarters of Jewish Israelis expressed a reluctance to enter Arab villages within Israel. More than two-thirds of Jewish Israelis also expressed a feeling of distance from Arabs in Israel overall (Smooha 2010a).
23. The Jerusalem Cinematheque is a well-known theater straddling East and West Jerusalem. It shows primarily independent films and is home to the annual Israel Film Festival (see http://www.jer-cin.org.il/Default.aspx?Lang=En).
24. Shira was referring to the *Mamilla Mall*, an upscale, outdoor commercial area located outside the walls of the Old City of Jerusalem and connecting the center of West Jerusalem to the Old City's Jaffa Gate. The Mall, which opened in 2007, generated significant controversy with religious, national, and environmental aspects (Kroyanker 2006).
25. Indeed, the lack of critical awareness characterizes not only Shira's narrative but also the narratives of almost all Jewish Peace Child alumni with whom I spoke. Even among Palestinian alumni of the organization, individuals with perspectives that might be said to be critical of *both* out-group and in-group narratives indicated that their belief systems resulted from experiences outside of Peace Child participation.
26. The '2nd Lebanon War,' as this conflict is sometimes referred to, was a 33-day operation that began following Hizbollah's abduction of 2 Israeli soldiers on 12 July 2016.
27. Mizrahi, or *Edot HaMizrah* (literally: 'Communities of the East') is a term referring to Jews of North African and Middle Eastern descent, as well those whose families immigrated from the Caucasus.
28. In Israel, the Law of Return grants Jews, children of Jews, and grandchildren who have one Jewish grandparent the right to obtain Israeli citizenship, facilitated by the Israeli government. Thus, even if someone was brought up in another faith, if he or she has one Jewish grandparent, he or she can become an Israeli citizen immediately upon crossing the border into Israel. The nearly one million immigrants to Israel from the Former Soviet Union included over 300,000 who were not Jewish according to Jewish religious law but who fit the definition of Jew under the Law of Return. It is important to distinguish the *Law* of Return from discussions of the *Right* of Return, which address the right claimed by Palestinian refugees to return to homes they left or were expelled from during the events of 1948 leading up to and following Israel's Declaration of Independence.
29. Interview, October 19, 2010.
30. See Ross (2013) for further discussion of this activity.

Notes on contributor

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