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Can we empathize with the narrative of our enemy? A personal odyssey in studying peace education

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ABSTRACT

The reader is taken on a journey spanning some 30 years devoted to the author's involvement in practicing, teaching and studying peace education. The core concept in this journey is active *bystandership*, which implies the capacity to disengage from our ethnocentric narratives and perceptions and to face the emotional challenges of acknowledging narratives that contradict our collective assumptions about the conflict and accept the moral obligation to address our contribution to violence. The author describes her non-professional as well as her professional activity in academia of participating, initiating, teaching and facilitating peace education projects. She describes inter and intra-group encounters and attempts to identify the limitations and opportunities of each type. Finally, some research methods and results of recent studies in peace education, especially regarding perceptions of collective narratives, are presented and discussed.

I have called this paper a personal odyssey, for my intention is to take the reader on the journey that I have travelled in practicing, teaching and studying peace education over more than three decades. Let me start with my personal story, which has led me to be so involved in peace education. I was born in 1945, towards the end of World War II, in what was then Palestine, to parents who had arrived in Israel as pioneers from the Ukraine in the 1930s with the aim of building a Jewish state. In 1945, they found themselves the only survivors after they realized that their families had been completely wiped out in the Holocaust. My childhood memories, as well as my evolving identity, are rooted in this background. The Israeli–Jewish identity became the most significant value for my parents; it was a value that could give them some feeling of comfort, a sense of belonging and a sense of coherence in the chaotic world they lived in. These ambivalent, somewhat contradictory feelings of victimhood, but also of coping and survival, have been deeply integrated in my identity and later on, in my research and academic activity

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in peace education. In many ways, I have assumed the role of the 'memorial candle' in my family, but also the role of the 'successful survivor'.

To be an active bystander

My country is a violent place, where people's lives are completely dictated by their ability to cope with the reality of never-ending wars, terror, and violence. My way of coping with this violent reality, from the time I was a young woman until today, has been that of an active bystander. As we know from history, passivity by witnesses or bystanders has greatly contributed to the evolution of violence and harm carried out by groups. Passive bystanders have allowed this violence to occur without condemnation. There is no doubt that positive social–cultural change requires active *bystandership* by individuals and collectives (Staub 2003). The shift towards active bystandership implies the capacity to disengage from our ethnocentric narratives and perceptions. It demands that we face the emotional challenges of acknowledging narratives that contradict our collective assumptions about the conflict and accept the moral obligation to address our contribution to violence (Staub 2015).

As for myself, being an active bystander, I have never stopped raising questions about our way of engaging with conflictual situations. I have never stopped my political and social involvement with the hope of finding ways towards reconciliation.

For many years, my active bystandership was not on a professional level. I was very much involved in different political activities: Those connected to left-wing parties as well as those connected to NGOs (the Association for Civil Rights; Peace Now; Mental Health Workers for Peace; etc.). It was only later that I began combining my activities in these areas into my academic work: conducting joint research projects with Palestinian colleagues (Sagy, Adwan and Kaplan 2002; Sagy, Ayalon and Diab 2011) or joint workshops with Arab and Jewish university students (Sagy 2002; Sagy, Steinberg and Fahiraladin 2002; Srour, Mana and Sagy 2016). Most recently, I have been involved with a trilateral Encountering the Suffering of the 'Other' (ESO) project, which I will describe later (Ben-David et al., 2017). This is the kind of academic work, however, that completely sweeps me away. My personal involvement is intense. Therefore, perhaps it is still hard for me to define it as 'academic'. A major part of this activity has been my exciting journey into personal group encounters with Palestinians.

Inter-group encounters of Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arabs

Finding effective practices to permit groups at odds to coexist is a significant challenge in intractable conflicts (Ross 2000). One of the practices aimed at improving relations and encouraging mutual reconciliation is conducting inter-group encounters to foster the possibilities of dialogue (Salomon 2011).

Most of these attempts have received wide application and scholarly attention (Al Ramiah and Hewstone 2013; Pettigrew and Tropp 2006). Within the Israeli–Palestinian context, many dialogue initiatives inspired by contact theory (Allport 1954) have attempted to cope with mutual de-legitimization of collective narratives among Israeli and Palestinians. Usually, this was done by initiating inter-group encounters with the relationship between the sides as a focal point (e.g. Litvak Hirsch and Bar-On 2007; Sagy 2002). Studies that evaluated the effect of such interventions on Israeli–Jews found that it led to greater acceptance and concession of legitimacy of the Palestinian 'other' by Israelis (e.g. Biton and Salomon 2006), but simultaneously threatened the core elements of their own identity (Ron and Maoz 2013). These initiatives involving group encounters are very meaningful to me, whether as a participant, a facilitator or as an initiator. As a 'product' of the Israeli educational system, I had not met any Palestinians until I was a university lecturer, when some of my students were Israeli–Palestinians. Unfortunately, my students today (most of them) also meet with Palestinians only in the context of being soldiers in the army.

Despite the differences between the activities, workshops and encounters in which I have been involved, they all were attempts by people on both sides to have an open encounter and to try to gain a better understanding of the difficult conflict between us. The meetings have always been fascinating and emotionally loaded but, at the same time, they have raised questions. Very often I felt these encounters to be very detached, distant from reality. Each time the question of the significance of the specific encounter beyond the meetings arises. Does it impact our conflictual reality?

What has usually arisen in these encounters is the question of the pain connected with 'me being a victim' and 'me being a victimizer' (Shnabel and Nadler 2008). Sometimes we have avoided confronting the question of the ability of the 'victimizer' to feel the victim's pain and the question—perhaps the most difficult one of all—of the victim's ability to feel the pain of the 'victimizer'. The question of our ability to understand and to sense one another, in our authentic identities, is much more complicated than this difficult dichotomy. Is it possible at all to do this within the framework of such inter-group encounters?

This question has arisen particularly in trilateral encounters of Germans, Palestinians and Israelis. The most influential, for me personally, was the TRT project (To Reflect and Trust) under the facilitation of Prof. Dan Bar-On (Bar-On 2000). The method used in the TRT was 'life story telling'. I do not have enough space in this limited article to discuss these encounters in detail, but I will describe one session which took place in Hamburg, in 1998. We sat in the room in a circle—American Jews (sons and daughters of Holocaust survivors), Germans (sons of perpetrators), Israeli Jews and Palestinians. A lot of pain was present in the room. A Palestinian story followed that of a Jew, a child of survivors who had emigrated to the USA, which followed that of a Jewish–Israeli daughter of survivors who had tried to set down roots in Israel, and then a Palestinian story of a mother who was prevented from being unified with her children. Before the encounters, I was afraid of meeting the story of Martin Bormann, the son of the Nazi officer. Could I empathize with his life story?

Surprisingly, the most painful stories for me were those of the Palestinians in our circle. Their stories evoked feelings of shame and guilt in me. After the meeting, I wrote: 'Painful comments came from the Palestinian side: "Did the Holocaust really happen?" or "Give me a break from Holocaust stories"'. Is this an expression of an inability to absorb all of these painful stories—especially when they are told in the first person: I, my mother, my son? Do I also have permission to express my inability to take in all the pain in the room? Martin Bormann's response to these Palestinians' remarks was 'Please hear my life story …'. The story told by Martin, the son of the Nazi officer, was an attempt to create a bridge between the Jews and the Palestinians, between the two expressions of pain which almost could not exist together in the same room …

> I do not remember when it was my turn to talk. Neither do I remember what I told and what I did not tell of my life story. I do remember that I felt that it was a personal story – not a collective story, not a national representation, not a representation of my cohort. Just me, my mother, my husband, my children. But … all of the points in the personal story touch upon the collective memory. How significant is this?
>
> One of the hard parts of my personal story was about my son who was sent as a soldier to Ktziot (an Israeli jail for Palestinian prisoners). We visited him there, as parents, bringing food and cigarettes. There was a dark look in his eyes during that period. I had a feeling that I couldn't 'save' him from that terrible task. And against this – there was Sammy's story about how he was imprisoned there, in the same camp, for a number of months, probably at the same time. His son had been born a bit before that. We worked out the dates with one another and we even laughed. A sad, embarrassed laugh.
>
> When I finished, the first hug that I got was from Sammy. A real hug from a person, a personal friend. I couldn't wear any other, more collective hat at that moment. That is how I felt toward him. I believe that is how he also felt towards me. That hug still remains with me today as my strongest experience during the meeting in Hamburg. But I still have the question – can the creation of such personal relationships between individuals, solve some part of the conflict between our two peoples? I would like to believe that it can. And if so – how? (Sagy 2000, 106–107)

I could conclude then that the political argument—which was taking place, at the same time, outside the seminar, in the real world—in the end, paralyzed the possibility of deeper insights concerning the conflict. This argument, more than anything else, had the effect of forcing the participants to confront their helplessness concerning their ability to significantly change external reality on the macro level. Azar (1979) calls this situation 'structural victimization'. The collective identity in these inter-group encounters emphasized this feeling of helplessness.

I also wrote:

> I didn't feel especially comfortable either with the representational hat of the Jewish-Israeli identity. After long years of growing up, completely identifying with my national collective (which characterized the entire Israeli group, at the time), I went through a deep change. Today, I have more difficult, mixed feelings. The clear sense of collective identity slowly turned into a feeling that includes alienation toward political – social elements of Israeli society today. It is not easy for me to wear my national, collective hat

today. However, when I come in contact with other national groups, especially outside of Israel's borders, it still pops up. Moreover, I am jealous of Europeans whom I meet, who have developed a post-modernist, universalistic identity for themselves, with no feelings of guilt, and having done so, are easily freed from national and ethnocentric feelings. Can I also develop such a universalistic identity? The significance of this kind of identity is that I can choose, at any particular moment, to which group I belong (women, psychologists, and grandmothers). Do I have such an autonomous ability within me? (Sagy 2000, 65)

Encountering the Suffering of the 'Other' (ESO project)

These open questions have brought me to my current joint project—Encountering the Suffering of the 'Other'—the ESO. It is a trilateral and multidisciplinary project, but I will focus here on the Israeli part only, and present some results from our evaluation research. What we have attempted to create in this project was different from the previously described encounters. For the first time, this was an *intra-group* encounter in which the participants were all Israeli–Jews. We developed this encounter with the aim of helping our students open up to hear about the enemy's suffering as a way to promote willingness to reconcile.

As I previously mentioned, my rich past experiences with inter-group encounters have brought me to an awareness of its limitations. Such dialogue groups, even when they are based on personal stories, cannot ignore the collective identity of the participants which, in turn, mainly addresses the external power relations in the dialogue. The reality outside the dialogue room increases self-defence mechanisms against feelings of shame, guilt or anger (Sagy 2002). In the ESO project, we have developed an *intra-group* dialogue, which has enabled the Israeli participants to explore their internal conflicts, and through this, to initiate new thinking and broaden their openness towards Palestinian narratives. Attempts to discuss inter-group conflict in an intra-group setting are mainly found in the field of peace education (e.g. Ford 2012; Salomon 2011) and in recent intra-group dialogue initiatives (Rosenak, Isaacs, and Leshem-Zinger 2014; Rothman 2014). An intra-group dialogue has been found as a potential encounter to enhance complex thinking about the 'other' by first fostering it within the in-group. In his work with Israeli students, Rothman (2014) suggested a process in which participants meet within their own ethnic or communal group and explore their different perspectives of the political and social future, specifically regarding the relations with Palestinians.

Actually, the development of intra-group dialogue in the ESO project was forced on us by the external reality—the frozen talks between the sides, the growing violence and the opposition towards cooperation with the 'other' side. The planned meetings of our Israeli students with their Palestinian counterparts were postponed and then cancelled. Thus, by the end, the project was based on intra-group dialogue only. At the end of the first year, we found that the *intra-group* process has

a value of its own in dealing with the identity threats posed on collective identity in the *inter-group* encounters.

What was the procedure?

In the academic years 2013–2014 and of 2014–2015, 24 undergraduates participated in a course offered by the Department of Education of Ben-Gurion University entitled 'Encountering the Suffering of the "Other"'. Participants in 2013–2014 course included 17 women and 7 men with the average of 25.29 (SD = 1.16) years. All participants were self-selected and voluntarily participated in the course after being briefed on the process. The course design combined 'content and process' elements. In the first part of the course, we focused on theoretical concepts. Members of our research team presented and discussed theoretical concepts relating to group identities in the context of the conflict, the roles of narratives in conflict, power relations in asymmetric conflict and reconciliation.

Another part of the course was experimental and process oriented. This included encounters with narratives of the suffering of Palestinians, field trips to sites that relate to Al Naqba within Israel and the Palestinian territories, facilitated discussions in which students were invited to explore their cognitive and emotional responses to the theoretical concepts, the narratives and field excursions. Throughout the course, students wrote a diary in which they reflected on their experiences.

The first tour was to Lod and Ramle—two Israeli towns where many Palestinians were expelled in 1948. The second tour was to East Jerusalem and the Shuafat refugee camp, and included meetings with three generations of refugees who told their life stories.

What were the guiding principles in facilitation? The first principle was to encourage active listening to the Palestinian narrative. We also invited the students to self-reflect, self-question: What does the 'other's' narrative bring out in myself? Another meaningful element in the encounter was to observe power mechanisms: What do we know and how do we play a part in social construction? Lastly and the most important principle for us in facilitating the group was to encourage multiple voices *within* the group.

In order to conduct a comprehensive evaluation, we combined both quantitative and qualitative research to evaluate the process and outcomes of the intervention. Relating the qualitative evaluation, we identified two criteria representing progress in self-identity: (1) Movement in the group discourse from a black-and-white view of self and 'other' to a more complex view, which reflects both cognitive and emotional understanding of the self as well as the 'other' and (2) The extent to which participants were willing to acknowledge the implications of the Palestinian narratives on their identity and to take responsibility for their own group's contribution to the continuation of the violence (for a more detailed description of the changes in the group throughout the different phases of the process see Ben-David et al., 2017).

The quantitative evaluation research of the course was based on a questionnaire administered through an online platform (Qualtrics) during the first two weeks of the academic year (t1), and again following the two-day trips during spring semester (t2). All 24 participants completed the questionnaire, which was a course requirement. We included various variables in the questionnaire: perspective taking, victimhood, respect and readiness to reconcile. Significant change results were found regarding fear of victimizing, trust, perspective taking and willingness to reconcile (Ben-David et al., 2017). One of the most significant changes was related to the perceptions of collective narratives, which was at the focus of our intervention. I will focus on this concept in the following lines.

Collective narratives in intractable conflict

Collective narratives are composed of the stories that a group uses to represent its own history and to conduct a shared identity for all group members. Narratives tell us who we are, where we came from and who the 'others' are (Liu and Hilton 2005). In the intractable Israeli–Palestinian conflict, collective narratives play a major role (Bar-Tal 2000). How can we measure perceptions of collective narratives?

The questionnaire we used in the evaluation study of the ESO project was developed 15 years ago by a joint research team of Palestinian and Israeli researchers (Sagy, Adwan and Kaplan 2002; Sagy, Steinberg and Diab, 2006; Srour, Mana and Sagy 2016). Israeli and Palestinian teams distributed these questionnaires from 1999 until 2009 (Sagy, Ayalon and Diab, 2011) and found that the delegitimization towards the 'other's' narrative on both sides has become more rigid, the empathy towards the other's suffering has decreased during this decade, and anger has been increasing. We found high correlations, however, between acknowledging the legitimacy of collective narratives of the other and the expectations of future relations. Since the level of legitimacy was very low, the expectation of conciliation in the future was also low and was connected to less openness towards peaceful resolution (Sagy, Ayalon and Diab, 2011; Srour, Mana and Sagy 2016).

Here are two examples from the questionnaire. The first example concerns the narrative of 1948. The development of the collective identities of Israeli and Palestinian societies has been a dialectic process in which the negation of the 'other' has played a special role. The Israeli–Palestinian conflict is so resistant to resolution because of unique characteristics of the opposing narratives that are mainly rooted in the historical events of the 1948 war. This war is perceived dramatically differently in the national narrative of each side. In the Israeli narrative, it is a War of Independence, which signifies the beginning of a hopeful period in which the State of Israel was established, thus fulfilling the Jewish national dream. For the Palestinians, this event is known as Al Nakba—The Catastrophe the beginning of a long period in which Palestinian hopes for national self-determination and a national home were severely thwarted, as many Palestinians lost their land, homes,

and property and became refugees in many countries. In our questionnaire, the two narratives were introduced with these questions:

- Many Jewish–Israelis view the 1948 war as an important event marking their survival and independence. How do you feel about their attitude?
- Many Palestinians view the 1948 war as a disaster/catastrophe. How do you feel about their attitude?

The second example relates to the memory of the Holocaust. This memory is a central component in the construction of the Israeli national identity. It exists in the Israeli consciousness and in the collective memory as a traumatic historical event (Bar-On 1989). The memory of the Holocaust expresses itself in the attempt to take one's fate 'into one's own hands'. The collective memory of helplessness of the Jewish victims has created the Israeli ethos of the need for security and military strength. The mentality of a nation under siege, and the existential fear which resulted from the near extinction of Jews in the Holocaust, provided a basis for the moral justification of Israeli acts of violence against the Arab population. Moreover, the memories of the Holocaust were used by the Israeli establishment to define basic national interests (Bar-Tal 2000).

The Palestinians have opposed the Israeli narrative of the Holocaust as the justification for Zionism and for the right of the Jewish state to exist. They have turned it into: 'Your Holocaust has become our Karita (Holocaust)', as stated by Emil Habibi (1986), an important Israeli Arab writer. The Palestinians see themselves as victims of the Holocaust. The Holocaust collective narratives were introduced in the following questions:

- Many Jewish–Israelis view the Holocaust as the greatest tragedy that ever happened to any nation, and this fact provides justification for establishing a Jewish state for the Jews. How do you feel about their attitude?
- Many Palestinians view the Holocaust as a tragedy of the Jewish people that does not justify inflicting suffering on the Palestinian people. How do you feel about their attitude?

The evaluation study results of the ESO project

As mentioned previously, this measure of perceptions of collective narratives was used in our evaluation study of the ESO project. We found that the Israeli–Jewish students experienced some increase in legitimacy towards the Palestinian narrative and a significant increase in empathy and knowledge. Surprisingly, with regard to their own Israeli narratives, we also found a significant increase in legitimacy, empathy and knowledge.

Thus, the significant results we found were as follows: an increase in knowledge of *both* narratives; an increase in empathy towards *Palestinian* narratives; and an

increase in legitimacy and empathy towards the *Israeli* narrative. We also found a dramatic increase in the relationship between perceptions of the Palestinian narratives and willingness to reconcile (for detailed results of the research evaluation see Ben-David et al., 2017).

In terms of our research goals, the increase in acceptance of both narratives indicates the development of complex perceptions rather than acceptance of the narrative of one group at the expense of the other. In addition, there was an increase in levels of empathy towards Palestinians, as well as in the participants' willingness to apologize. These results indicate the growing capacity of our students towards reconciliation.

These evaluations are indeed restricted to the ESO project only, and there is no doubt that the generalization of our discussion is limited. However, the results could give us some initial answer to the question of the *intra-group encounter* as a tool in advancing empathy towards the suffering of the 'other'. Our model of intervention enabled the students to meet themselves within a conflicted relationship. The intra-group dialogue provided an opportunity to observe the complexity of one's own identity and to adopt a more complex view of the 'other'. It also provided a safe space to empathize with the 'other' in a way that does not negate one's own identity.

Trying to summarize

Despite the limitations of this small project, I can cautiously summarize the special ESO project I have described here, as well as the research findings, as quite encouraging. This work is still ongoing, and there are many questions that demand further attention. Still, these initial reports can illustrate how small steps can bridge huge gaps.

In this paper, I have sought to explain my personal motivation, as well as the serious difficulties, in combining practical work and academic research with my social and political activity, as a woman who was born into a 'culture of victims' and has lived all her life as a survivor in a violent conflict. I have briefly discussed my long journey to become an active bystander and how I try today to encourage my students to be brave enough to take such a position in their own lives.

One of my students said 'Now that I know all that – what shall I do with it?' That is a question, perhaps a cry that we must deal with in the future. Thus, my personal odyssey cannot be stopped at this point. I will continue it by other small steps, combining practice and research in the meaningful area of peace education.

Disclosure statement

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Notes on contributor

Shifra Sagy is professor emerita of psychology in the Department of Education, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev. Formerly head of the Department of Education and the Educational Psychology Program, she was founding director of a multidisciplinary graduate program for conflict management and resolution. She currently heads the Martin–Springer Center for Conflict Studies. Sagy is among the pioneers and leaders in Israel and worldwide of the salutogenic approach that emphasizes coping resources and assets in explaining well-being and health. She is involved in research in political psychology, and her work has been published extensively.

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