

Eyes Wide Shut: Political Ideology as a Tool of Discursive Avoidance Among Israeli-Jewish Students in the Context of Escalating Conflict

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Recent years have witnessed a significant escalation in Israel's relations with the Palestinians, as well as in the internal political divide and discourse between left and right. The current research asked how these processes of escalation that occur on the sociopolitical level came into play in interpersonal political discussions held among a group of Jewish-Israeli young adults that partook in an annual academic course exposing them to Palestinian narratives, right after the 2014 war in Gaza. Particularly, it demonstrated how internal political discourse served as a strategy to cope with threats to moral perception of social identity. Critical discourse analysis conducted on transcripts of the process revealed that the internal political discourse between left wing and right wing served as a platform for group members to establish fight/flight practices within the group discussion. Research findings discussed in light of the sociopolitical context highlight how the focus on the political Other—left or right—drew attention from the Palestinian Other and by that from the moral consequences of harm doing.

KEY WORDS: Israeli-Palestinian conflict, critical discourse analysis, political ideology, intra-group dialogue, Gaza War 2014

The Gaza war in the summer of 2014 marked a significant escalation in both Israel's combat policy towards Gaza and in the internal Israeli discourse that accompanied the war. During the war in Gaza, the Israeli army carried out large-scale operations that included a less considerate approach towards civilized areas (Adalah, 2014).

These actions took high tolls on the Gazan population and caused extensive destruction and damage to life and property that were more severe than the destruction caused by either of the last two Gaza wars (Ashkenas, Tse, Wallace, Watkins, & Yourish, 2014), leading to severe international criticism of Israel (Kershner, 2016). Escalation occurred also in the internal Israeli political discourse, which became much more polarized and violent and was characterized by growing political division between left and right (e.g., Averbach, 2014; Guy Pines Editorial, 2014; Morgenstern, 2014, Wertheim, 2014).

Studies that were conducted following the Gaza War pointed to the growing support in militancy as a result of exposure to the war (Zipris, Pliskin, Canetti, & Halperin, 2019), as well as to the growing polarization within the Israeli political discourse (John & Dvir-Gvirman, 2015). The current research takes place in light of these escalating events. Specifically, we ask how these processes of

escalation that occurred on the sociopolitical level came into play in interpersonal political discussions held between a group of Jewish-Israeli young adults. Drawing on the literature that addresses the social psychology of the occupier (Bandura, 1999; Halperin, Bar-Tal, Sharvit, Rosler, & Raviv, 2010; Shnabel & Nadler, 2008) and the implication of threat to morality (Bandura, 1999), we examine how Israeli-Jews as the dominant party handle the growing threat to their moral self-image following the war. In our research, we encountered Jewish-Israeli students with collective narratives of Palestinians as part of an annual course that took place right after the 2014 war in Gaza. The whole group process was documented and analyzed using the critical discourse analysis (CDA) approach (Van Dijk, 1993).

We draw the possible connection between the two escalating processes, the external growth in violence, and the internal political violence and polarization. In this regard, we demonstrate how internal political discourse serves as a strategy to cope with threats to morality and collective feelings of guilt. The construction of the political categories and their manifestation in the group dynamics reflect broader processes that occurred and are still occurring within Israeli society. We will interpret the research findings in light of the sociopolitical context and, particularly, the political discourse relating to the recurring elections of 2019.

Literature Review

Intergroup Conflict and Ingroup Threat

What is the psychological meaning of ongoing conflict and war on social identity? The literature suggests that intergroup conflict encompasses a broad range of situations which provoke threat to group identity. Specifically, there are two major types of threat, realistic and symbolic, that are relevant in this regard. Having its origins in the realistic group conflict theory (LeVine & Campbell, 1972; Sherif, Harvey, White, Hood, & Sherif, 1961), a realistic threat to the ingroup arises when a group competes for scarce resources. In this regard, group members perceive a threat to the group's existence. In international conflicts such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, these are often natural resources (e.g., land) that are perceived by the two parties as scarce. A possible resolution in this matter is construed as a zero-sum, leading to escalating violence and hence greater threat to group existence and security (Lederach, 1996). However, in ongoing conflicts, threats to the ingroup go beyond the realistic threat as they involve symbolic threat to social identity as well, as suggested by social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986)—that is, a threat to the positive perception of group identity, to their worldview, or to their system of values. According to the SIT, group members strive to perceive their ingroup as good and just in comparison to other groups in order to achieve a secure and safe self-concept. In situations of escalating conflict, these processes are enhanced, bringing group members to perceive ingroup and outgroup in monolithic terms: While the outgroup is perceived as bad and evil, the ingroup is perceived as humane and innocent (Kelman, 1999; Staub, 2003), and group identity is perceived as less complex (Roccas & Brewer, 2002). In the case of dominating groups in intergroup conflict, a symbolic threat arises when group members find themselves using force and violence and performing acts that are perceived by the international community as contradicting morality and human rights (Shnabel & Nadler, 2008). This, in turn, intensifies the competitive element of group comparison (Turner, Brown, & Tajfel, 1979), questioning ingroup morality in relations to other groups.

So how do group members cope with threats to their moral self-image? In the particular case of conquering societies such as the Israeli society, research addresses the ways in which group members selectively disengage their moral self-sanctions from their harmful conduct. According to Bandura (1999, 2016), they do so by sanctifying their harmful behavior as serving worthy causes, denying the harmful effects of their actions and/or their responsibility for having caused them by asserting

that the victim “brought it on him- or herself,” or by attributing their harmful actions to external constraints. Additionally, group members psychologically distance themselves from the adversary, either by belittling them or denying their pain and suffering, a mechanism that results in reduced levels of empathy with the victim’s sufferings (Shnabel & Nadler, 2008). The use of either of these psychological mechanisms reduces the perpetrator’s guilt and threat to moral identity (Wohl, Branscombe, & Klar, 2006) while allowing the occupiers to justify their deeds and to feel moral and just while still preserving and even escalating the conflict situation (Halpern & Weinstein, 2004).

Political Ideology, Morality, and Their Categorization

The way group members cope with the threat to morality shifts in accordance to their political views. Political and other belief systems assist people in perceiving themselves as persons of value in a meaningful universe, and by doing so they provide a sense of existential security. Particularly, ideology offers a sense of certainty, predictability, and control; a sense of safety, and reassurance; and a sense of identity, and shared reality (Jost, Federico, & Napier, 2009). Political ideologies may have different degrees of appeals for different individuals depending on needs and the extent to which these needs are being satisfied (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, & Sanford, 1950). In other words, our psyche and political views correspond in that we embrace those beliefs and ideologies that resonate with our needs and interests (Jost, 2017). In line with the latter, a correspondence between psychological needs to manage uncertainty and identity threat and core philosophical values of political conservatism, namely respect for tradition and hierarchy (or inequality), has been found— that is, people who hold conservative values hold heightened epistemic motive to reduce uncertainty and ambiguity and attain a sense of order. This favors the adoption of rightist attitudes (Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003). In contrast, people who hold liberal values may favor leftist attitudes towards restoring moral self-image and reducing feelings of guilt through the adherence to human rights, with leftists experiencing outgroup harm more emotionally than rightists (Pliskin, Halperin, Bar-Tal, & Sheppes, 2018).

Adopting the prism of CDA, viewing the ways power asymmetries and discrimination is being enacted, reproduced, and resisted through political and social discourse (Van Dijk, 1993), we can see the different world views of conservatives versus liberals as reflecting different strategies of power reproduction in the context of political conflict in general and regarding the suffering of the Other in particular. An example for that can be found in the analysis suggested by Žižek (2016) on the European internal political discourse in relation to the issue of African refugees who are fleeing into Europe. According to Žižek, there are two primary versions of “ideological blackmail” that appear in discourse. Left liberals state that Europe should show solidarity and open its doors widely, while the right-wing conservatives claim that Europeans should protect their lives and let the Africans solve their own problems. Žižek argues that by feeling morally superior in relation to the right wing, left-wing liberals still enjoy their power and privileges as part of the more satiate part of the world, while holding universalistic values. In a similar way, the right needs the liberal left in order to defend the nation and the ingroup from those who threaten to ruin it from within.

In the Israeli context, the ideological split between left and right is primarily defined by citizens’ positions on the resolution of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, such that “hawks”/rightists hold more deeply rooted conflict-supporting beliefs than “doves”/leftists (e.g., Arian & Shamir, 2011; Bar-Tal, 2013). Rightists, compared to leftists, tend to perceive Palestinians more negatively (Bar-Tal, 2013), hold less favorable attitudes toward contact with Palestinians (Maoz, 2003), and express lower openness toward Palestinians’ viewpoint and narrative (Hameiri, Bar-Tal, & Halperin, 2014). Furthermore, rightist, conflict-supporting ideology in these contexts leads to greater adherence to patriotism, security, and unity. Specifically, societal beliefs about patriotism focus on loyalty and

sacrifice for the collective, and beliefs about unity emphasize the importance of facing the opponent as a cohesive unit (Bar-Tal, 2013).

In the current research, we adopt a critical discursive approach, viewing political orientation and the discourse it produces as enacting, reproducing, and challenging social power. In our particular case, we analyze political discourse in a group of Jewish-Israeli students, taking into consideration their being part of the majority group in Israeli society; specifically, considering the conquering role their ingroup is taking in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in general and in the events of Gaza War 2014 in particular. This is done by examining the various ways in which language is used in reference to ideology. It is important to note that we address political ideology not as a static social construct, but rather as a *social category* that is constantly constructed and created by and through discourse (Butler, 1993).

The Sociopolitical Context of Gaza War 2014

The current study is being held within the broader context of the long-lasting effects of years of occupation on Israeli society and the effects of a long history of occupation on the perception of the Israeli population of current events. In this regard, we refer to Israeli society and the psychological implications on it as “occupiers.” Israel’s reality since its establishment was shaped by the conflictual relationship with its neighbors. Of importance for the current study is the fact that Israel has been occupying Palestinian territories since 1967, and the Palestinian population has been living under military occupation for over 50 years. The situation with Gaza is more complex, as Israel no longer directly occupies Gaza territories since it withdrew unilaterally from the Gaza Strip in the summer of 2005. However, it continues to control many aspects of life in Gaza, including the import and export of commercials and goods and the entrance and exit of the population (Bar-Tal & Schnell, 2013). Since Israel’s withdrawal in 2005, Hamas has been ruling Gaza, and there have been several hostilities and rocket attacks followed by Israeli army operations in the Gaza strip.

Escalation and Extremity of the Political Discourse Around the Gaza War 2014

The Gaza War (that was named “Protective Edge”) signified a peak in a series of escalating events that took place between Israelis and Palestinians, leading the Israeli army to initiate the “Protective Edge” operation on July 8, 2014. During the operation, attack-tunnels built by Hamas were revealed, which increased the perceived threat of the Israeli-Jewish collective that greatly supported the war. Extremity was not only evident in the attitude of Israel towards Gaza, but also manifested within the Israeli discourse. During the operation, the heated discourse between the different extremes of Israeli society intensified and raised the boundaries of freedom of expression, as journalists were threatened and even attacked (Averbach, 2014; Wertheim, 2014). On the other hand, indictments were filed against right-wing activists who called for violence against Arabs (Neuman & Ma’anit, 2014) and against leftists who called on the soldiers to turn their weapons towards the Knesset and the government (Ifergan, 2014). Evidence for the polarization in the Israeli political discourse is detected in a research that analyzed the new media, which revealed a total of 16% of Facebook users who unfriended or unfollowed others due to political disagreements (John & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2015).

Moral Justification in the Gaza War 2014

Despite the relatively high number of casualties among soldiers and civilians and the international critique on the operation that was routinely expressed in the media (Adalah, 2014; Ashkenas et al., 2014) and in demonstrations around the world (Bismut, 2014; Waldman, 2014), surveys

indicated that the Jewish public believed that launching the operation and its military moves was necessary, and a majority of parliament members supported the operation. This is aligned with research showing how prolonged exposure to political violence brings self-protective strategies of coping with conflicts, manifesting in greater ethnocentrism and greater support of retaliatory policies (Canetti, Elad-Strenger, Lavi, Guy, & Bar-Tal, 2017; Hobfoll, Tracy, & Galea, 2006).

According to Perugini and Gordon (2015), the fighting in an urban space during the Gaza War and the high number of casualties intensified ethical dilemmas and thereby demanded the moral justification of the attack and the killing of hundreds of civilians by the Israeli military. They examined various posters disseminated by the Israeli military on various platforms of new media as part of its propaganda efforts. For example, in the poster titled “When is a house a home?” a house in which weapons are hidden is shown, claiming that as long as Hamas is hiding weapons in houses, they are considered nonhomes, and their tenants are considered potential terrorists. Moreover, this example shows how Israel’s effort to morally justify its own violent deeds is bound up with the erasure of the Palestinian Other as a subject of human suffering. The attention and efforts that are given to establish moral superiority and moral justification shift the attention to Israel’s own internal drama, in which the Palestinian Other serves the role of an extra.

In light of the escalation, both external and internal, and the high threat to morality created by this war, we ask how escalation and its potential growing threat to social identity manifests within political discussion among young Jewish Israelis, and particularly, what the role is of political ideology in handling threats to social identity. In our particular case study, we analyzed the discourse that was held in a group of 25 undergraduate students, who met weekly and discussed political issues. The group met as part of an attempt to study the psychological meanings of encountering the Palestinian Others’ narrative in a model of intragroup dialogue (Ben David et al., 2017).

Our study from 2017 was based on a different group that met in 2013–14. The latter group had undergone an identical process to the one described in the current study, in terms of the curriculum (guest lectures, tours) and facilitators. However, in the first year, the political climate was relatively stable, and talks between Israelis and Palestinian representatives were held. During the second year (the current study) following the Gaza War, more tension was apparent. It was also a year of elections which impacted the process, as detailed in the following analysis. It revealed that the process of encountering the Other’s narrative led to greater empathy towards Palestinians and a greater willingness to reconcile. Unlike intergroup dialogue, this is an internal process of dialogue among ingroup members (in our case, Israeli Jews), which addresses their conflicted relationship with the outgroup (i.e., Palestinians). This understudied form of dialogue can be mainly found in the field of peace education (e.g., Salomon, 2004) and in recent initiatives (Rosenak, Leshem Zinger, & Isaacks, 2014). It has great potential in exploring the psychological implications of intergroup conflict on ingroup members’ subjectivity (Ben David et al., 2017), particularly in how internal political discourse evolves within social groups (Ben David & Idan, 2019).

In this study, we observe the emergence and meaning that is made to political ideologies by Israeli-Jewish undergraduate students, and how they serve them when addressing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, particularly in light of the Gaza war and the growing threat to moral self-image. Particularly, we examine: (1) how participants politically identify themselves and others in the group discussion; (2) the implications of the constructions of political categories on how the discussion unfolds; and (3) how these categories are used in the discussion, particularly in light of the escalation and the exposure to the Palestinian Other.

In order to do so, we rely on methodological frameworks of CDA, addressing discursive dimensions of political talk in order to reveal how power relations and power mechanisms organize and naturalize the political reality (Dunmire, 2012; Van Dijk, 1993). Observing dynamic group discussions enables us to identify how language is not only a conveyer of content in the political discussion,

but rather a performative utterance that organizes political reality (Austin, 1975). For example, when I say to someone “you are a leftist,” I am not only labeling them or making a statement, but I am also positioning that particular person in relation to others in a particular political realm. By saying so, I am defining what “left wing” means, thereby channeling the course of the discussion. In this way, language shapes reality, and by using political categories, language shapes our perceptions and assists in framing a political mind-set.

Methodology

Participants and Procedure

Group meetings between 25 Jewish-Israeli undergraduate students at the Department of Education at an Israeli University are the source of the research data. The University is located in a region that suffered from constant bombing during the Gaza war in 2014. Participants included 22 women and three men (average age 25.2 years). All students participated in a year-long seminar (two semesters) that was dedicated to the Israeli Palestinian conflict and to the encounter with Palestinian narratives. The course took place between October 2014 and May 2015, shortly after the “Protective Edge” operation. The course consisted of guest lectures on topics that are related to the Israeli Palestinian conflict, identities in conflict and narratives in conflict, power relations, and reconciliation. All lectures were followed by processing meetings that included in-depth discussions. Guest lectures were academic professionals, both Israelis and Palestinians. The particular choice of the guest lecturers was decided upon based on the specific research interests and their alignment with the content the research team found relevant to the group, specifically: collective narratives in conflict, gender and conflict, reconciliation and dual narratives. It was also important to introduce to the participants diverse identities of speakers, in terms of ethnicity and gender. The first speaker was a Palestinian researcher from east Jerusalem; the second was a female Palestinian Bedouin; the third was a Jewish professor; and the fourth was a Palestinian professor from the West Bank. All of them studied the Israeli-Palestinian conflict from different angles.

Overall, there were 16 meetings of which six included guest lectures and the rest were dedicated to open discussion and processing of the content. In addition to the class meetings, the course included two day-trips to historical sites that were relevant to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, jointly led by an Israeli and a Palestinian guide. In the tours, participants directly encountered Palestinians who told them their narratives. The course was facilitated by two professional facilitators, who were also part of the research team; the first author (female facilitator) together with another male facilitator. The main task of the facilitation unit was to encourage participants to talk freely about what came to their minds following the lectures and generally reflect on the Israeli–Palestinian conflict and their relation to it. The facilitation unit tried to encourage participants to express their multiple perspectives and to create a safe space for open participation (for a detailed description of the course, see first Ben David et al., 2017).

Measure of Political Ideology

As part of a broader study that required participants to address their attitudes regarding current political realities, including the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, human rights in the West Bank, and the occupation, our participants filled out a questionnaire, that included eight items that measured political attitudes towards the Palestinians (e.g., “I believe that the violence of Palestinians towards Israelis is a result of the Israeli occupation”) and the possible resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (e.g., “In order to reconcile with the Palestinians Israel needs to withdraw to 1967 borders”).

The items expressed left- and right-wing attitudes in accordance with the literature (Arian & Shamir, 2011; Bar-Tal, 2013). Participants rated each of the eight items (alpha Cronbach = 0.77) assessing political ideology on a Likert type scale from 1 to 7 (1 = *totally disagree*, 7 = *totally agree*). The questionnaire was administered three times: before, during, and after the course. Here we present the results received on the first round, as this was our baseline for measuring political ideology. The lower scores represented right-wing attitudes and the higher scores represented left-wing attitudes. Thus, the distribution of political perceptions was determined (extreme left: 8%; moderate left: 36%; center: 28%; moderate right: 20%; extreme right: 8%).

Analysis

Data analysis was based on full transcriptions of the group meetings and tours that were done by two research assistants that observed the group through a one-sided mirror. All meetings were recorded and later transcribed. During the tours, notes were taken by both research assistants and the facilitators, and parts of the discussions were also recorded (whenever was possible). Additionally, insights from the debriefing sessions that were held among the facilitation unit following every session were analyzed by the researchers. All discussions were held in Hebrew and so was the analysis. Only during the later stages of writings were the quotes translated from Hebrew to English. The quotes were translated by one of the authors who is bilingual, and translation was reversed into Hebrew by the other author in order to validate the semantic meaning of the discussion. We conducted CDA in accordance with Van Dijk's (1993) parameters of analysis. The categories were divided according to context and text. In terms of context, we addressed the broad societal context of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, particularly the war and its aftermath. In relation to text analysis, we addressed the following: (1) content, referring to primary assumptions regarding the political and topics that were raised in the discussion; (2) argumentation, referring to how participants built their arguments and how they legitimized and validated their talk in order to attribute acceptability in face of controversial actions, accusations, or doubts (Chilton & Schaffner, 2002; Van Leeuwen, 2008); and (3) rhetoric, referring to linguistic style and the use of specific words and metaphors. We analyzed the data using ATLAS TI version 8.

Results

Analyzing the construction of discourse within the group dynamics, we discovered that the group discourse was construed in accordance with the basic assumption of Fight/Flight suggested by Bion (1961). According to the Fight/Flight basic assumption, group members act as if they need to either flee from something or fight something. This basic assumption characterizes groups in situations of war, conflict, and threat.

In our particular case, it seems that political ideology, whether hawkish or dovish, served as a platform for group members to establish fight/flight practices within the discussion. The “fight” mode was demonstrated through participants' judgments towards each other, towards guest lecturers, and towards the facilitation unit. Alternatively, the “flight” mode was detected in dismissive behavior towards each other or refusal to participate at all. Particularly, we identified that the two axes of flight versus fight worked in a cyclical manner and fueling each other. In other words, we found that the group members were fighting and attacking in order to flee from emotional presence. In the following, we present how this main theme of *fight for flight* evolved and developed through the group process in four chronological stages: (1) comfort versus confrontation: construction of contrasting needs in the engagement; (2) exposure of the political conflict in the room through the encounter with the Other; (3) escaping trauma through escalating discourse; and (4) conscious avoidance.

Stage A: Comfort Versus Confrontation: Construction of Contrasting Needs in the Engagement

At the outset, students were asked to share their expectations regarding the course. Already at this initial stage, group members expressed two conflicting needs—the first, to challenge themselves politically and personally, and the other, to validate their positive ingroup identity and to defend Israel in light of negative international public opinion following the war. In the following quote, one of the participants described what happened to her after the War:

FP¹: “Since the War, I find myself with extreme opinions. I do not know why, but in a way that contradicts my life so far. I want to bring myself back to my ‘correct’ form. We were talking about it following the War and found ourselves providing answers in order to protect the nation. Everything that makes sense in Israel does not make sense abroad.”

In this quote, the participant describes her inclination towards extremity which results from her growing need to defend Israel’s actions in light of international critique. She notices this process that she is going through, identifying the more leftist position as the “correct form.” She chooses the word “contradiction” to describe an internal conflict between her need to protect her ingroup identity as moral and just and her wish to hold liberal values, reflected in left-wing ideology. Here we see the need of group members to validate their social identity in light of wrongdoings (Bandura, 1999; Halperin et al., 2010; Shnabel & Nadler, 2008) and its potential tension with liberal values (Pliskin, Bar-Tal, Sheppes & Halperin, 2014). While there are voices that express this need to defend the ingroup identity, there are other voices in the group that express a pressing desire to get “out of the comfort zone” and to challenge the ingroup identity:

MP: “I came because the course was recommended, but mainly to get out of my comfort zone, to experience the encounter (with the Palestinian Other). The first time I encountered Palestinians was in the army when I entered Calquilia² and I remember it as a disturbing experience. My conclusion was that meeting the Other meant physically getting out of my comfort zone.”

The participant perceives that engaging with the Other requires “getting out of the comfort zone,” based on his experiences as a soldier. Following the literature, we can infer that viewing oneself as ready and able to get out of the “comfort zone” expresses yet another attempt to view oneself as moral and just in light of escalating violence (Shnabel & Nadler, 2008). This voice later develops into recurring attempts to confront opposing voices inside the group.

Another example for the two opposing needs in the group—to be comforted versus being confronted—was evident in the group’s response to a questionnaire they were asked to complete as part of the research design and the course’s requirements. An analysis of questionnaire responses can be found in the Ben David et al. (2017). During the second meeting, some of the group members expressed suspicion and fear of being manipulated towards a left-wing political agenda, as some items directly addressed the conflict and the occupation, such as: “I believe that the violent actions towards the Palestinians are a result of the Israeli occupation.” In the Israeli context, the use of the word “occupation” is associated with leftist political ideology. The use of this word was intentional in order to address the political context straight on and not in an indirect manner. The following are examples of reactions to the questionnaire:

¹FP = Female Participant; MP = Male Participant.

²A Palestinian city in the West Bank.

FP1: "I am not saying that the occupation was not carried out, I am not saying it was. I am saying let me decide what I politically think about this issue. Do not decide for me. It is not fair."

FP2: "I was presented with the language of a particular political side and was forced to use it, agree with it. I feel frustrated because I was not given the option to genuinely express my opinion about the questionnaire."

FP3: "I think that I should have been given the option to disagree with the items."

Participants expressed their frustration, claiming that the questionnaire was unfair. Despite the fact that they could choose not to answer all the questions, they felt forced to do so. Rather than talking about the issues that the questionnaire provoked and facing reality, they focused on their lack of choice and a possible manipulation being done to them by the research project, accusing the researchers of being politically biased. The response of FP1 indicates a perception that the occupation is a subjective attitude, as opposed to the situation of the Israeli army's direct control over civilians in the West Bank. Identifying the research team as a "joint enemy" enabled the group to avoid the anxiety that was evoked when dealing with the Other. This reaction can be interpreted as a defensive way to cope with the threat to moral self-image (Bandura, 1999) and collective feelings of guilt (Wohl et al., 2006) that were provoked by the content of the questionnaire. We see how group members flee from feelings of guilt that are supposedly provoked by wrongdoings done by the Israeli side to the blaming of the research team and the facilitators. Moreover, participants are shifting focus from guilt by painting themselves as victims of the research team's "conspiracy," thus escaping reflection of their discomfort provoked by the description of Israel as an occupier.

In contrast to these voices, there were others asking to be confronted with difficulties:

FP1: "I think this is the purpose of the questionnaire. It is acceptable that there were controversial items. The purpose was achieved as it confronts you with issues that you are not comfortable with."

At this point, the tension inherent in these two voices—comfort versus confrontation—was still implicit, and conflict was directed toward the facilitation unit (resembling groups at early stages of development; see Bennis & Shepard, 1956). Later on, these voices evolved into intragroup conflict dynamics.

Stage B: Exposure of the Political Conflict in the Room Through the Encounter With the Other

The implicit tension between the two axes of needs, comfort versus confrontation, evolved into a full-blown conflict between political ideologies. The conflict was triggered following the encounters with two Palestinian researchers. In the group's reaction to the two researchers, the group was drawn into an internal conflict between comfort and challenge, which later developed into political ideologies, expressing different views regarding the timing of the encounter. The first encounter took place a day after a terrorist attack in a synagogue in Jerusalem. The group met a Palestinian male researcher from East Jerusalem that studied Palestinian narratives. Some students stated that it was not comfortable for them to encounter a Palestinian right after a terror attack, while others argued that this was exactly the time to encounter the Palestinian Other:

FP1: "...He (the Palestinian guest) came to talk with me about the conflict in the same moment I was hurt by the conflict...so to talk about this now was hard for me..."

FP2: "...maybe what's hard for us is to accept a Palestinian that actually objects to such horrible murder...so maybe this is our challenge to accept him..."

FP1: "...to talk about such a loaded issue on such a loaded day, it's hard..."

MP1: "I think this is a pure profit for us"

FP3: "One cannot deny the fact that we are Jews and they are Arabs... I also feel in the room that if my opinions are moving more towards the right or more towards the left, this indicates my level of love or hate for Arabs."

FP4: "This is an indicator of your values."

This dialogue reflects the transition from a more personal talk (the first FP uses the singular speech form) to a collective, more categorical talk (the responders use the plural speech form), and from there to an "us versus them" talk, indicating escalation (Staub, 2003). The discourse reflects a struggle between a complex attitude (FP2: "A Palestinian that objects to such a terrible murder") and a monolithic perception of ingroup versus outgroup (FP3: "...we are Jews and they are Arabs"). The first two quoted participants present a complex view of the Other (Roccas & Brewer, 2002) as both perpetrator and victim, which is a challenge to perceive, for it threatens the monolithic perception of identities of self and Other (Kelman, 1999) as contrasting, therefore intensifying the threat to positive perception of ingroup identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) and morality (Shnabel & Nadler, 2008). FP3 shifts the discussion to the categorical views of identities, which can be seen as an act of psychological distancing (Bandura, 1999; Shnabel & Nadler, 2008) in face of the suggested complexity of FP2. Later on, the movement from singular to plural constructed left and right categories in a bipolar manner, as "Arab lovers (and hence, Israeli haters)" vs "Israeli lovers (and hence, Arab haters)." Interestingly, rather than signifying different views of political resolutions to the conflict, they represented different positioning in relation to the ingroup.

This polarization in the group discourse became more and more salient in a discussion that was held after the group met with a Bedouin³—a Palestinian faculty member of the University studying Bedouin women, who told them her personal story as a woman who overcame obstacles in her personal life. The discussion began by participants sharing their feelings that were provoked following the encounter:

FP1: "The encounter was very interesting to me as well, but it was hard for me to hear how she talked casually about racism, and her whole story made me not want to be part of the country in which I live." (Long silence)

FP2: "I never heard a personal story and it made me appreciate the freedom I have as a woman and as a citizen. It is something that was taken away from her in several occasions"

FP3: "...I looked at her and said 'wow', she has to constantly recruit herself for every new struggle, she never gives up, this is totally admirable"

As we see in these quotes, participants expressed guilt and shame regarding the hardships the speaker had to endure in order to achieve things in her life ("her whole story made me not want to be part of the country..."), alongside admiration and empathy. These expressions reflected an ambivalence between the guilt and shame due to her hardships, particularly if we consider her coming from a highly disadvantaged group in Israeli society and in the Palestinian society (i.e., Bedouin community), alongside the admiration for her as a self-accomplished woman. This complex perception with regards to her identity challenged a monolithic perception of ingroup versus outgroup

³Bedouins are nomadic Arabs who historically inhabited the desert regions of North Africa, the Arab Peninsula, and the Levant. In Israel, there is a large Bedouin community in the Negev's southern area. As a minority group within Israeli society, the Bedouin are a marginalized group. Within this culture, women are said to be marginalized twice. They are marginalized once for being a Bedouin and a second time for being a woman.

(Roccas & Brewer, 2002), specifically, Jews versus Arabs. It is precisely this similarity that enabled participants, particularly women, to compare themselves to her and to acknowledge the advantage of their ethno-national identity in their lives (“it made me appreciate the freedom I have as a woman and as a citizen”). Additionally, participants at this stage of the discussion (as shown in the above example) used the singular form “I” in describing their personal experience and feelings following the encounter. The atmosphere in the room was heavy, with several moments of silence. The blurred lines of distinctiveness between the identity of the group members and the speaker created a symbolic threat to the social identity of some participants (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), which resulted in some of the students distancing themselves and searching for holes in the story.

FP4: “In contrast to what you say, I felt we are missing something here, she was the one who managed to succeed and I felt it was a nice story but there are still open questions regarding what’s really happening in the Bedouin villages.”

FP5: “She came here and she is amazing and all, but it’s not the typical story of the Bedouin women...it is encountering the specific ‘Other’ with whom we feel comfortable.”

In these quotes, we witnessed a shift from the singular “I” to the plural “we.” FP4 expressed her own feelings on behalf of the entire group, and FP5 validated this by using the plural when referring to the feelings the Other provokes. From this point on, a heated and polarized discussion evolved:

FP6: “...perhaps it was nice for us to listen to her because we connected to her, because it was possible to connect to her despite the fact that she comes from a different place. I think there was openness, maybe it’s naive, but maybe we were just open...”

FP4: “So what is the message from this encounter? That in order to connect to the Other s/he needs to be similar to us? It makes me very sad.”

The argument of FP5 about the *genuineness* of the speaker shifted the discourse from the emotional presence that was seen in the beginning into an argumentative dispute on the extent to which the group was tolerant. On the one hand, there were voices, such as FP6, that portrayed a benevolent picture of the group as open and tolerant, denying the harsh feelings the speaker provoked. On the other hand, there were voices, such as FP4, that patronized those who identified with the speaker, claiming that it didn’t infer their true openness. This shift in the group discourse, from emotional presence into internal critique and defensive responses, that was accompanied by shifting from singular to plural speech, reflected how the group psychologically distanced itself from direct examination of its members’ own feelings. The discussion also presented different strategies of handling identity threat: searching for security and assurance on the one hand, and searching for moral superiority on the other hand, corresponding to the different strategies of left wing and right wing described in the literature (Jost et al., 2009; Pliskin et al., 2014; Žižek, 2016).

It is interesting to note that only women took part in this discussion, holding an “internal discussion” amongst themselves. It appears that women were mostly provoked by her presence, which sheds light on the group as a group of women. Additionally, the discussion demonstrates how the fight/flight dynamic of this group is above and beyond gender roles and implies a broader phenomenon.

Stage C: Escaping Trauma Through Escalating Discourse

Escaping from emotions into political arguments became inherent in the group discourse. One such escape occurred in a discussion in which some participants expressed their trauma and fear following the war. In the meeting, the discourse constantly shifted from addressing feelings into categorical talk:

Facilitator: Let us really try to examine this. I think that others said that they were hurt by talking here about their feelings. It is not easy to speak emotionally and I am trying to understand this.

FP1: I have a question I really thought about. Can we say that people who are really left wing manage not to be afraid at all? If you are on a bus and someone with an Arab look enters carrying a big bag. does the thought he may explode himself go through your mind?

FP2: It bothers me what you are saying, because I'm the most fearful person. We talked about Protective Edge—I didn't leave the house, went to the shelter crying, and yes, I live in Tel Aviv...I was in a huge distress that a rocket would fall on my head... it is not like the leftists aren't afraid."

FP1: "That's if you manage to say that you are not afraid of all the Arabs..."

MP1: I really think that the left-wing is diverse, there are those who out of fear would say something that someone who is right wing would object to. Let's say, a leftist who wants to end the war and give up land because he is afraid and doesn't want the Arabs around here..."

In this dialogue, we see how the discourse shifts whenever emotions are aroused. The invitation of the facilitation is responded by a participant who is asking "how leftists feel." Her response reflects a categorical talk about "what leftists feel towards Arabs." By doing so, she is talking about emotions in an impersonal, categorical manner, but not about her own emotions. Moreover, when another participant responds to her by expressing her personal emotions of fear and her traumatic experience during the war, the responses to her remain impersonal. The response of FP1 includes the plural pronoun "You," which implies a collective and inclusive state as opposed to the singular pronoun "You," which emphasizes the categorical mindset of the group. While the response of MP1 tries to address the complexity of the left wing, it still embodies distant, categorical talk relating to "what left-wing people feel" instead of what a particular individual feels. We see here how the construction of political ideology in the room assists the group in its escape from the emotional trauma of the War. This dialogue demonstrates how the construction of internal conflict between left and right is allowing group members to flee away from emotional presence in relation to the external conflict, and therefore to preserve their power (Van Dijk, 1993). Moreover, this is a practice in which political ideology is serving as an escape tool from dealing with the consequences of the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Žižek, 2016).

As the meetings progressed, traumatic contents and experiences from the war became more present in the room, and the discussions were more emotionally charged. However, the group discourse continued to shift into arguments whenever feelings of guilt and pain surfaced, thereby morally disengaging from harm doing (Bandura, 1999). Despite it being the tenth session, the group members seemed to be incapable of truly listening to one another. The following dialogue, which took place in a discussion in which the group talked about the war and specifically about whether the IDF attack in Gaza was justified, demonstrates this point:

FP1: "I am not putting anyone down. Every soldier that experiences this, I think this is the most terrible thing that can happen, not only to the family, but also to everyone around. However, they did this not solely because we sent them to get killed, this is not a fascist dictatorship that simply sends its people (off to war). There was an existential threat here.

FP2 (interrupts): Don't you think that eighty people died for no cause from a missile? In a second there will be another war and there is no (foreseen) agreement and...

FP3: Let her finish, what's going on here?

FP1: You see why I didn't want to talk

FP4: I agree with you...

FP1: The issue is not whether you agree or not. That's it, say what you will, I am done (angrily)

FP4: I just wanted to say that I agree. I just wanted to say that my response is not against you. For me, it is from the heart. (FP1 is crying.) It raises my personal pain. Yesterday I read a headline in the news, four months after Operation Protective Edge, recurring violence and shooting, and I think to myself for what reason and why did the Israeli soldiers get killed.

FP1: So you could sit here."

In the group discourse, participants interrupted each other in rejection of each other's statements steering a fight/flight dynamic that takes group members away from reflecting on their pain (Bion, 1961). In the example, one participant is expressing her support of the need to send soldiers to the war. The rhetoric and use of soft language ("I am not putting anyone down") precedes her argument that soldiers need to be sent to the war. She is acknowledging that it is "the most terrible thing that can happen" and then says that "we" sent them, thus implying that the Israeli collective, including all members in the room, are equally responsible for this decision. She summarizes by highlighting that this act is not futile, but "there was an existential threat." In response, some of the members object, leading to an escalating discussion, in which the participant bursts into tears. Even when others try to validate her feelings by identifying with her ("I just wanted to say that my response is not against you. For me, it is from the heart"), she replies using cynicism, telling the other participants that they should be grateful for sitting in class due to the fighting soldiers. Direct expressions of feelings are ignored (e.g., "*for me, it is from the heart*") and the discussion takes the form of mutual accusations. Furthermore, it seems that while members are highly emotional, they cannot contain these emotions in themselves and in others.

Stage D: Conscious Fleeing

The final meeting of the course was conducted following the group's visit to East Jerusalem, in which they met with several people—Palestinians and Jews—who told them about their lives. They visited a checkpoint in Sheik Jarach, a Palestinian neighborhood in which there was a struggle with Jewish settlers who had attempted to take over their lands. The tour provoked many feelings, particularly the story of the Sheik Jarach neighborhood and encounters with both Palestinian tenants and a Jewish NGO that purchased lands for the purpose of taking over the neighborhood. The group members were overwhelmed by the fact that this had been carried out in such a blunt and direct manner. The atmosphere in the meeting was heavy, with many silences.

FP1: "My feeling is—now what? So, we were there. It surprised me how easy it was to return to a routine. I don't know what role all this plays in my life (long silence)

FP2: "I stayed with the impression of the map (of Jerusalem), it depicts this impossible situation. I kept it at home and showed it to people, but with a lot of frustration"

FP3: "The tour was mentally exhausting, I didn't have the strength, it was too much to contain, in the bus on the way back home I was tired and exhausted...to contain everything for better or for worse is tiresome...the tour took over me for a couple of days but then I forgot about it."

FP4: "In my mind there were a lot of conflicts in the room until the tour, and I experienced a revelation and the discourse is not much bigger than what is happening here in the room, the left and right in the room is suddenly a bit less relevant because we suddenly saw something much bigger and that is the issue."

FP5: "I felt that I am not doing anything regarding the issue and I don't know anything on the matter, and I grew up in Jerusalem and never have I entered east Jerusalem in this way. I also

feel that I can't do much about it... I always thought the solution would be two states, and the Palestinian guide always said no, we have to live together. I don't want to leave my home."

The quotes reflect disillusionment from the dramatic inner conflict into acknowledging the bigger picture of injustice. On the one hand, we see group members admitting the challenges raised by the encounter with Palestinians and with the reality in east Jerusalem ("I stayed with the impression of the map (of Jerusalem), it depicts this impossible situation"; "I experienced a revelation"). On the other hand, they express fatigue and helplessness regarding the possibility of change ("I was tired and exhausted...to contain everything for better or for worse is tiresome"). FP5 clearly expresses her understanding of the price reality claims (that is, Jews and Palestinians living together and not in two states), alongside her unwillingness to pay it ("I don't want to leave my home"—referring to Jerusalem where many Jews live in ex-Palestinian neighborhoods). In this last meeting, the group members were consciously willing to see the Other's suffering and injustices caused by the ongoing conflict and the Israeli government's policies. In this sense, we saw a shift from the fight/flight dynamic (Bion, 1961) that resembled the whole process, as here group members were emotionally present. However, at the same time, they denied their responsibility by claiming the inevitable temporality of their sight, and by doing so, they protected their moral image from further damage (Bandura, 1999; Halpern & Weinstein, 2004; Shnabel & Nadler, 2008). The course ends with a clear-cut choice to look the other way. The ability to make this choice, as constructed in the discourse, indicates their privileges as the strong side in the conflict (Van Dijk, 1993).

Discussion

The group process we described in this study was carried out during times of escalation. In terms of identity threat (LeVine & Campbell, 1972; Tajfel & Turner, 1986), it appears that from the beginning the group members expressed a need to restore their positive perception of their ingroup. Interestingly, this occurred in two different, allegedly contradicting needs: a need for reassurance on the one hand, and a need for challenge on the other. In light of the literature (Jost et al., 2009; Žižek, 2016), we can perceive both needs as two ends of the same bar. Both are trying to achieve a restoration of moral self-image, as the need for challenge and self-critique can also be interpreted as an attempt to engage in moral discourse and actions.

The construction of these two opposing needs led the group into a fight/flight dynamic (Bion, 1961), carrying a political meaning for the group as a whole, as group members constructed its meaning for what was right wing versus left wing. In this regard, political orientation was translated into a dynamic of comfort versus confrontation. Those who were identified in the group as right wingers searched for stability and self-validation, consciously avoiding the discomfort of dealing with their role in wrongdoing. They perceived themselves as defending and loyal to their ingroup, in opposition to the left wingers, and in this sense it allowed them to morally justify their patriotic concern and their bias towards their ingroup. This coincides with Jost et al. (2009), who suggested a correspondence between psychological needs to manage uncertainty and identity threat and core philosophical values of political conservatism. In contrast, those who were identified as left wingers constantly challenged the group's comfort zone by criticizing Israel's actions and the group's inaction. In a similar way to what Žižek (2016) argued regarding the liberal left in Europe, the leftist superiority over the right-wing group members allowed them to validate their identity as moral advocates. In the current analysis, the political categorical divide between left and right successfully served the group in its attempt to avoid emotional presence in the face of the threat to morality. As the group was preoccupied with internal dynamics of accusation and the defense of the Other inside the room, they overlooked the Palestinian Other outside the room. As detected in our analysis, the Palestinian Other served as a trigger to heated discussions, but it did not remain the focus of attention.

In line with the literature (Bandura, 1999; Halpern & Weinstein, 2004), we can argue that in order to handle threats to ingroup identity, group members psychologically distanced themselves from threats to their moral group image by fleeing from personal and emotional talk. In fact, we can argue that they were fighting—that is, judging, arguing, and dramatizing—in order to flee from emotional consequences driven by the escalating events. It could be assumed that the growing threat caused by the Gaza War intensified this pattern. The latter was a very painful yet provoking topic that resulted in the escalation of the group discussion whenever it came about.

Unlike the group process within the course which took place a year before in a different political context (see: Ben David & Idan, 2019; Ben David et al., 2017) in which the group discourse transformed from categorical and defensive to more complex and inclusive, the analysis of this year revealed that the group dynamic resembled an escalating circle. As it appeared, while the intensity of the discussion in terms of content (for example, surfacing of traumatic experiences and controversial issues) increased throughout the process, the rhetoric of the group discourse remained the same. Specifically, the group kept displacing guilt into blame, mutually accusing one another and avoiding direct reflection of their emotions. The sole moment in which the group members were conscious of their flight was in the last meeting that occurred following the group's visit to east Jerusalem. By that, they were acknowledging that their eyes were now open, but they will soon be shut again.

Conclusions

The article strongly reflects the current political reality in Israel, which is characterized, on the one hand, by escalating violence and the deepening of the conflict in both the West Bank and in Gaza, with no political solution in the horizon; on the other hand, by polarizing and divisive political discourse inside the Israeli society fueled by its leaders, who set right and left against each other. The significance of the current research is that it highlights how these two processes coincide, work together, and nourish each other. Thus, the focus on the political Other, left or right, drew the attention away from the Palestinian Other, and by that from the moral consequences of harm doing. In Israel's present reality of recurring elections, we are witnessing this very process in which the focus of attention is on political preference, and public discourse is concerned with the left and the right, while very few words are devoted to a political solution to the ongoing occupation.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

The group process described in this study was limited, as it concentrated on a small self-selected group of young Jewish-Israeli students who were interested in the topic of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and were politically inclined. Although the group does not represent the political distribution among Israeli voters, a variance in political opinions was apparent. In addition, it is important to note that the political discourse analyzed occurred in a planned setting of a facilitated group that was conducted within the framework of an academic setting. Therefore, future research should entail a larger population, which is not self-selected, and represents the political spectrum. One possible direction which we wish to pursue in our future research is political discourse that is held in different platforms of new media, in order to further investigate political discourse in the context of escalating violence, as well as practices of transformation in the discourse.

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