**The aftermath: community workers as place-makers in conflict-riven societies**

**Abstract**

Social workers play a vital role in making violence-stricken communities into safer places for human development. However, research directly examining the experiences of community practitioners in the context of political conflict is scarce. Using an analytical framework based on the notion of place-making, this study contributes towards addressing this gap in the literature. In this study, community practitioners’ responses to outbreaks of violence in Israeli Jewish-Arab mixed cities are analysed. Based on fifty semi-structured interviews, the findings reveal that participants can be categorised into three modalities: place-developers; place-protectors, and place-remakers. The study highlights the significant role of community practice in constructing spaces in the light of practitioners’ sense of place and calls for greater inclusion of place-making as a framework for social work practice within conflict zones.

**Keywords**

Community practice, political conflict, place-making, place, divided cities

# Introduction

In recent decades, in response to the global refugee crisis and conflicts between or within countries, the social work profession has paid increased attention to how political conflicts affect its practice, policy, and training (Campbell et al., 2018; Ramon, 2021; Strier et al., 2021). Notably, scholars have called upon the social work profession to take an active and critical role within these contested settings. In particular, they call for the creation of solidarity and alliances in divided communities and the promotion of peace and conflict resolution (Moshe Grodofsky, 2019; Truell, 2019). Research directly examining the role of social work community practice in such efforts has, however, been limited, tending to focus instead on more explicitly macro-level social, cultural, and political issues (cf. Al-kilani, 2019; Federico et al., 2007; Torczyner, 2021).

Our study aims to contribute towards filling this gap in the literature by employing a spatial theoretical perspective. Community practice that offers interventions at the community level tends to see communities as social places with concrete physical boundaries (Weil, 2005). Communities inhabiting sites of conflict often experience struggles over the identity, meanings, and organisation of space, while facing threats to their sense of place and belonging (Shamai, 2017; Sutherland, 2017; Yiftachel and Yacobi, 2003).

In this study, we used an analytical framework based on place-making to explore the ways community practitioners construct divided socio-geographical settings and imbue them with meanings as conditioned by their sense of place. We examined this issue within the complex context of Israeli Jewish-Arab mixed cities. These cities are sites of an ongoing violent national conflict and are characterised by Jewish-Arab neighbourliness, structural inequalities, and spatial disputes (Yiftachel and Yacobi, 2003). Specifically, we focus on a case study of eruptions of violence that occurred in Israeli Jewish-Arab mixed cities in May 2021. Such an examination can cast light on the role of community practice in creating shared communal spaces and mitigating tensions in conflict zones that are under immediate threat.

# Social work within the context of political conflicts

The nature of social work in a community is inevitably profoundly affected by conflict (Baum, 2012; Maglajlic and Basic, 2019). Affecting both social workers and clients, studies have shown that political conflict can shape their joint encounters and the active role of social workers. During times of conflict escalation, social workers may face difficulties providing services to clients who are not part of their national group, viewing them as representing the ‘the enemy’; generating feelings of distrust, hostility, and anger (Baum, 2010; Kadan et al., 2017). Studies have also shown that, when a violent national event occurs, feelings of suspicion and fear increase among colleagues who then limit their interactions (Ramon et al., 2006; Strier et al., 2021). Moreover, in conflict zones, social workers often experience direct and secondary trauma during their practice (Truell, 2019). They deal with high levels of stress, feelings of fear and anxiety, and experience aspects of post-traumatic stress (Campbell, 2019; Naturale, 2007; Ramon et al., 2006).

Scholars have highlighted their potentially critical roles in these extreme settings despite the serious challenges that conflicts inflict on social workers. Truell (2019) puts forward a view of social workers’ role as peacebuilders and mediation-facilitators. Drawing on examples of social workers’ practices in several conflict zones, he holds that social work has the potential to create solidarity among divided communities and promote peace strategies. In the same vein, Moshe-Grodofsky (2019), presented peace-related macro-level initiatives led by Israeli Jewish and Arab social workers and calls upon the profession to take an active role in fostering peace. From this critical perspective, the social work profession should develop political alliances with communities that are affected by conflicts and play a part in conflict resolution (Campbell et al., 2018). Operating on the macro level, social workers can promote community advocacy, develop community support systems, and unite divided communities (Federico et al., 2007; Shwartz-Ziv and Strier, 2021; Stubbs and Maglajlic, 2012). Moreover, the social work profession needs to be aware of how structural social injustices intersect with political conflicts. Reflecting on the role of social work in South Africa, Turton and Van Breda (2019), hold that social workers should develop skills for activism and advocacy, and mobilise people to resist injustices.

Drawing from this critical perspective, community practice that addresses macrosocial, material, and political issues can be seen as a significant social work practice within the context of political conflicts (Al-kilani, 2019; Miljenović and Žganec, 2012). Community practice has developed diverse models and guiding principles to address the contested environments of the 21st century, tackling multiculturalism, race, and colonialism (Craig, 2017; Gamble and Weil, 2013; Sisneros et al., 2008). However, limited attention has been paid to community work within political conflicts (cf. Miljenović and Žganec, 2012; Moshe Grodofsky, 2012; Torczyner, 2021). Research that explicitly examines the roles, experiences, and practices of community practitioners within contested settings is scarce.

This study addresses this gap by adopting a place-making analytical perspective. Communities in sites of political conflicts often face disruptions to their sense of belonging and their relationships with places. In some cases, they also deal with damaged infrastructure and built environments or are forced to leave their homes (Shamai, 2017; Sutherland, 2017). Community social workers often focus on communities as places (Weil, 2005). Given their significant intervention in space, together with their potential role in promoting peace-building (Moshe Grodofsky, 2019), it is vital to understand how practitioners shape divided settings while imbuing them with meanings and identities. For this reason, in this study, we examined the role of community practitioners in conflict zones in terms of place-making.

# Place, place-making, and sense of place

Communities and places are social products. They are sites of power, with social, political, and cultural meanings, where social relations and identities take shape and interact (Creswell, 2014). Place-making is an analytical approach that examines the processes of transforming a space into a meaningful place. Place-making can be understood as the processes by which people physically and socially construct places and shape their identities and meanings in relation to those places (Hague and Jenkins, 2005; Lombard, 2014). According to Lew’s broad definition (2017), place-making processes refer to both top-down initiatives that include elements of marketing and professional design and everyday bottom-up local activities. The making of place is a highly political process, as it often shapes the collective memory of ethnocultural groups, involves struggles over the identity of a place, and shapes relationships between majorities and minorities (Bedoya, 2013; Lombard, 2014; Othman et al., 2013; Hague and Jenkins, 2005).

Place-making processes may shape, challenge or (re)create people’s ‘sense of place’—the symbols and sentiments that individuals and groups develop toward specific localities (Williams and Stewart, 1998). The term ‘sense of place’ is often viewed as the combination of ‘place attachment’, the emotional bond people develop with places (Altman and Low, 1992), and ‘place-meaning’, the symbolic meanings people ascribe to places (Stedman, 2002). While place-making processes can strengthen people’s connection to place (Project for Public Spaces, 2016), changes to a place can also disrupt a pre-existing sense of place (Devine-Wright, 2009).

Recently, Toomey et al. (2021) offered an analytical framework integrating the concepts of place-making, place disruption, and place protection. Using a case study of a development project on a polluted waterfront, they showed that place-making practices directly shape communities’ sense of place and are, in turn, shaped by it. They claim that disruption of places may threaten this connection and lead to place-protective actions to counteract the change on the part of community members.

Place-making as an interpretive framework can also be used to explore how escalations in political conflicts shape communities and community practices. Despite the prevailing view of communities as constructed places (Weil, 2005), the integration of a place-making analytical framework into social work community practice remains underdeveloped. Recently, Shwartz-Ziv and Strier (2020) called for the inclusion of a place-making perspective into community practice research, claiming it should reflect on the ways ethnocultural, historical, and conflicted meanings of place are constructed. In this study, we view community practitioners as space-makers and investigate how they construct places within politically and ethnically contested communities in the light of their own sense of place. We explored this issue through a case study of unfolding violent uprisings occurring in Israeli Jewish-Arab mixed cities.

# The context: Israeli Jewish-Arab mixed cities

In Israel, the term ‘mixed city’ refers to cities composed of a Jewish majority alongside an Arab minority (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2018). These cities are characterised by intergroup tensions, social inequality, and spatial segregation between the two populations in terms of housing, culture, and education. Moreover, municipal policies reflect discrimination against the Arab population, as seen in the allocation of resources and urban planning (Hadad Haj-Yahya, 2021; Monterescu, 2015; Yiftachel and Yacobi, 2003).

In May 2021, during Israel’s war in Gaza, severe violent events erupted between Jewish and Arab citizens in Israel, most notably in mixed cities. These violent episodes occurred in the context of escalating tensions between Israel and Hamas, pending evictions of Palestinians in East Jerusalem, and clashes between Arab citizens and police forces at the Al-Aqsa Mosque. These incidents resulted in many injuries and heavy property damage. Jewish and Arab citizens violently attacked each other on the streets and torched and damaged houses, cars, places of worship, and public buildings (Ayyub, 2021; Lavee et al., 2021). This study addresses community practitioners’ practices prior to, during, and after the described events.

# Method

## Participants and procedure

The sample included 33 community practitioners from four Israeli Jewish-Arab mixed cities: Haifa, Lod, Ramla, and Acre. The participants were all employed by public community services at different levels of seniority. Interviewees were engaged in diverse community practices, including sustainable social and economic community development (e.g. housing and urban renewal projects); organising functional communities (e.g. working with groups of disabled people), and neighbourhood and community organising (e.g. mediating between ethnocultural groups).

The purposive sample consisted of 12 Arab and 21 Jewish social workers. Seventeen of the participants had Bachelor’s or Master’s degrees in social work, and 16 interviewees had other educational backgrounds, including conflict resolution. Data collection was conducted in two main stages. First, 32 semi-structured interviews were conducted prior to the eruption of violence. We asked participants about their practices, experiences, and perceptions of the challenges they face working in Jewish-Arab mixed cities. Further, the interviews highlighted their coping strategies in response to issues of ethnocultural diversity, inequalities, and political conflict. Second, we reinterviewed some of the research participants after the eruption of violence in May 2021. Eighteen semi-structured interviews were conducted that elicited the experiences, perceptions, and practices of these social workers during and after the violent events. All but one of these interviewees had participated in the first stage of the study too. Overall, the study is based on 50 interviews.

## Data analysis

We analysed the interviews of both Jewish and Arab respondents, comparing participants’ practices, experiences, and perceptions prior and after the unrest. Interviews were transcribed verbatim, and uploaded into MAXQDA, a qualitative software programme, to create thematic categories. Guided by a grounded theory approach (Strauss and Corbin, 1998), we analysed the data in several stages. First, we read the transcripts several times to become familiar with the data. Then, using an ‘open coding’ process, we generated initial analytic categories that emerged inductively from the interviews and compared them. Secondly, we identified links between categories and subcategories by axial coding. Last, by comparing and reflecting on the different themes, we developed relations between them.

## Ethical aspects

The participants signed informed consent forms after being informed that participation in the study was voluntary and their confidentiality was assured. Given the sensitivity of the research topic, some participants expressed concerns that their anonymity would be revealed. Careful consideration was given to ensure that any information that might identify the interviewees was omitted from the report. Ethics approval was obtained from the [Institute Name] ethics committee.

# Findings

The analysis reveals that community practitioners were engaged in three modalities of place-making: place-developing, place-protecting, and place-remaking. Each shows how community practice operates in the context of political conflict, highlighting the practices practitioners use to (re)make shared places in terms of their sense of place.

## Community practitioners as place-developers

The first modality we identified is ‘community practitioners as place-developers’, which focuses on the everyday work of community practitioners prior to the violent uprising. The interviews we conducted prior to the violent events reveal that most community practitioners’ sense of place is rooted in a positive relationship with the city. During the interviews, participants, many of whom are past or current residents of the city in which they work, expressed a deep connection to the city and its identity, and feelings of pride and care towards it. They were committed to peaceful co-existence. Despite the contested settings of the mixed city, most of them believed that the ethnocultural diversity is one of their city’s strengths, and expressed confidence that the status quo would be preserved by Jewish-Arab mutual respect. These feelings are demonstrated in the words of one Jewish participant:

There is a sense of community in the city [...] we discuss the conflict as an opportunity [...] I feel that we are turning the ethnocultural diversity of the city from a challenge into a strength.

Against this backdrop, participants functioned as place-makers who constantly construct the conflictual and ethnocultural meanings of the urban space. Data analysis shows that, through their community practice, participants were striving to create a space that is apolitical, non-conflictual, and ethnoculturally diverse.

## Reconstructing a conflict-free urban space

Most participants believed that the urban communities have learned to detach themselves from the national conflict and have minimised its negative implications on their daily lives. They perceive it as a silent backdrop to the city’s daily reality. Many of them described the mixed city as an alternative shared sphere within Israel, where Jewish and Arab citizens live together in mutual respect while maintaining the status quo, as illustrated in the words of an Arab participant:

Whether I’m Jewish or Arab, here we have a common urban identity [...] it’s like we live in a different world, where we get along. Here I will accept you as a right-wing Jew […] and you will accept me as a Muslim religious Arab, and there will be good neighbourly relations.

In the same vein, most participants shared that they perceive the city’s contested history as irrelevant to contemporary life in the mixed city. Therefore, they tend to leave the contradictory historical national narratives out of their practice. Moreover, some of them proudly noted that, despite the formal definition of the city as ‘mixed’, in practice, the city is not binational, in their opinion, but, rather, culturally diverse. From this perspective, the Arab population is not a distinct national group but part of many other ethnocultural groups in the city. One of the Arabs participants noted in this regard:

Everyone is talking about a Jewish-Arab mixed city […] but as a community worker in the field, I talk about a multicultural city. […] within which both the Jews and the Arabs are sub (ethnocultural groups) […] then the mixed city is only a title. In practice […] there are multicultural neighbourhoods.

At the same time, some interviewees did acknowledge the conflict as a source of friction, easily escalating daily interactions between Jewish and Arab residents and bringing disagreements rooted in the national conflict to the fore. In particular, participants indicated the prevalence of struggles over population composition in the city as reflected, for example, in Jewish residents refusing to sell apartments to Arabs.

Against this complex urban backdrop, participants became place-makers by actively seeking to cultivate a conflict-free urban space through their community practice. Most of them indicated that, during their routine work, they tend to avoid addressing issues related to the Israeli-Palestinian national conflict. They portrayed engagement in such issues as “opening Pandora’s Box” and expressed a deep reluctance to address it.

Participants believed that including conflict-related politics in their practice would make them appear politically biased or unprofessional. Some of them were also concerned that conflict-driven practices, such as initiating Jewish-Arab dialogue meetings, could generate distress among community members. Additionally, many participants shared that they would avoid addressing issues related to the demographic changes within the cities, perceiving it as too politically controversial as illustrated in the words of a Jewish participant:

I don’t think this is our place as community practitioners [...] we are not courts [...] we cannot be neutral [...] it is a complex political issue.

## Constructing an ethnoculturally diverse space

Trying to reconstruct an apolitical space, participants put their efforts into creating a culturally diverse environment that acknowledges ethnocultural sensitivities and develops a sense of shared place. Many of them reported that they organised activities that highlight the common ground between Jewish and Arab residents. By focusing on joint interests, they aimed both to promote a shared urban identity and reduce intergroup hostility. O in this regard

Often we work on common issues, and the multicultural encounter […] occurs as part of the joint work. Even if in the beginning the encounter revolves around the shared issue, it also becomes a basis for joint meetings to celebrate holidays, and for deeper acquaintance with […] the other culture.

Other participants proudly shared that they adapt their activities linguistically and culturally to the needs of different groups in the city. One of the Jewish participants noted:

There is a great deal of cultural sensitivity required [...] if you are hosting a residents’ meeting [...] you need to be aware that you may need an interpreter who speaks Arabic [...] when we put up signs in the buildings before a holiday, we made sure there were Arabic signs as well. (...) It is important that they feel we are considerate towards them […] I care that they don’t feel offended.

**Community practitioners as place-protectors in light of disrupted sense of place**

The second modality we identified, referring to practitioners’ actions with the background of violent events, is community practitioners as place-protectors in contexts of disrupted sense of place. It reveals how the violence damaged community workers’ sense of place and reshaped their actions as place-protectors.

### Community practitioners’ disrupted sense of place

Nearly all research participants described the uprising as a severe breaking point. As stated before, they believed in the urban community’s ability to preserve peaceful Jewish-Arab coexistence. They were deeply shocked by the occurrence and the intensity of the events and shared feelings of disappointment and anger. This disruption to practitioners’ sense of place is reflected in their experiences both as citizens and community practitioners. Many of the participants are residents of the mixed city, and their personal lives were directly influenced by the unrest. Participants portrayed the city as a battlefield, encountered violent incidents, and shared feelings of trauma and a grave fear for their lives and their children’s lives, as illustrated in the words of an Arab participant:

It was frightening [...] we had two extremely difficult nights. [...] tear gas got into my house and living room and we had to hide […] it was like being in a battlefield […] [people were] yelling and screaming on the street. [...] everyone was worried about their family and children.

Several Arab participants reported how the unrest brought the broader complexity of being an Arab citizen of Israel to the surface. Relatives participating in demonstrations, the use of excessive force by the police, and a sense of commitment to the Arab community caused feelings of discomfort and frustration. Moreover, some participants, both Jewish and Arab, reported that the incompetent management of the unrest on the part of the municipality and law enforcement generated feelings of disappointment and abandonment. This is illustrated in the words of a Jewish participant:

The father and mother of the city shut the door […] if there was something Jews and Arabs had in common during the unrest, it was the anger toward the municipality and police.

In addition, the analysis of the data shows that the events also threatened participants’ sense of professional identity as community practitioners. Many of them indicated that the violent events are essentially the antithesis to their community practice which aims to promote shared existence and community strength. They shared that the events swept them off their feet, posed difficult questions regarding the impact of their work, and forced them to re-examine their assumption that coexistence is possible. This crisis of confidence is reflected in the following quote:

[I felt as if] my whole world collapsed. All the things I believe in [...] it generated regrets and doubts and it took me some time to say ‘ok, it doesn’t undermine my world-view [regarding shared existence]’.

Moreover, the events disrupted positive collaborations between colleagues that were perceived to be the epitome of shared existence. Many participants, both Jewish and Arab, shared that the events generated hostility and tensions between staff members. While some Jewish participants shared that they felt deeply offended by the Arab population, Arab participants shared that they felt Jewish colleagues blamed them for the events:

In the time of the riots, we had a holiday and hardly anyone […] wished us Happy Holidays. [...] On the Jewish side, whenever there is a terrorist attack [...] they generalise […] it hurts the most. [...] Even if I come out of the department and someone Jewish hurts me, I won’t make generalisations about all the Jews [...] but for you, it’s enough that one or two or a hundred Arabs are causing a mess and then all Arabs are the same.

### Community practitioners as place-guardians

Most of the participants reported that, during the events, they were not engaged in community practice activities, indicating that they were ‘frozen’, hurt, or afraid. Some of them, however, became ‘place-guardians’, who sought to protect the meanings of the urban space as a site of safe shared existence. They did so mainly by using strategies to mitigate the tensions between the Jewish and Arab populations. Participants noted that they approached community leaders and asked them to use their authority to influence their communities to put a stop to the violence. Moreover, some of them tried to gather community activists and formulate a shared statement calling upon the city’s residents to preserve Jewish-Arab coexistence in the city. One of the main examples presented in the interviews is of a group of leaders who represent the city’s diverse communities that organised a meeting during the events. They signed a bilateral declaration calling for de-escalation and held several meetings with the police and municipality’s management to discuss the events. They also marched with these public servants to central sites in the city, calling to maintain the peace. A Jewish participant described the rationale for their action:

During these difficult times and after discussing who is right and wrong […] one of the most powerful statements made [at the leaders’ meeting] was that now is the time for us to take responsibility and be leaders. It means that we put ourselves aside, focus on the population we represent, influence, take responsibility, and lead.

In another case, an Arab participant who works in a mixed neighbourhood that was one of the crises’ main sites, described an initiative to revitalise the public space to restore residents’ sense of belonging:

Someone has to come and collect the shatters [...] we recruited 30 or 40 young people from the neighbourhood […] telling them, ‘Start working, this is our space, and if you won’t clean it, no one will, if you don’t keep it, no one will’. It was a success, and it made people understand [...] that burning garbage cans won’t lead to anything.

While in some cases participants’ efforts succeeded, in others they faced difficulties since residents refused to meet each other or cooperate with the establishment.

Another channel of community workers’ action focused on providing emotional and concrete support for the communities by trying to restore a sense of safety and order to the urban space. Some participants said they were in constant contact with community members, listened to their difficult experiences, and assisted them in difficult and anxious moments. For instance, an Arab participant shared that she emotionally supported an anxious woman whose young grandchildren were arrested during the events. Another participant said she supported single mothers who live in one of the neighbourhoods in which the events occurred:

Mothers in mixed areas were terrified to stay in their homes with their children [...] I spoke with a single mother who was alone with her child on the phone until three in the morning [...] The screaming and stones [that were thrown] were horrified. [...] [I assisted the single-mother activists] calm down through messages and phone calls. In finding alternatives for living so they won’t remain in the turbulent areas.

Moreover, a few participants reported they organised concrete assistance to community members who lived in the problematic areas and were afraid to leave their homes. They recruited volunteers who handed out hot meals and groceries and accompanied residents when they left their homes.

## Community practitioners as place-remakers

The third modality of place-making refers to the remaking of the urban space after the violent uprising. Given participants’ disrupted sense of place, many participants portrayed the encounters with community members from the opposite side as highly challenging. They found it difficult to meet and provide services during and in proximity to the unrest, and they described feelings of anger and lack of trust.

When we asked participants how community practice should remake the urban space, we heard diverse, sometimes conflicting attitudes and practices. We identified three main approaches: enabling separate recovery of the traumatised space, maintaining routine to reinforce co-existence, and addressing the conflictual nature of space*.*

### Enabling the separated recovery of the traumatised space

Some of the participants believed that the urban community had gone through a shocking and traumatising experience and believed that each community should first lick its wounds and rebuild itself separately before considering dialogue. These participants believed the communities needed time to heal separately before conducting joint activities or dialogues. Some of the participants noted that shared dialogue at early stages would be too tense and lead to negative results among community members, indicating that community members are currently not willing to participate in joint activities. An Arab participant who works with Arab women and who, in a prior interview shared her intentions to develop Jewish-Arab joint activities, explained why she would not develop them in the aftermath of the unrest:

The Arab women aren’t willing [to meet with Jews] after what happened. we aren’t emotionally ready to talk with the ‘other’ […] our women have been hurt […] it is hard for both sides now.

Moreover, a few participants honestly shared that they felt hurt by the unrest; doubted that the shattered urban space could be repaired, and said that they were not motivated to develop Jewish-Arab cooperation at that time. These attitudes are illustrated in the words of a Jewish participant:

I feel traumatised […] I don’t have any motivation or interest to create [Jewish-Arab] partnerships on the community level.

In practice, participants shared that they conducted meetings with community groups of Jewish and Arab community members separately and processed the events, while others minimised their routine practices. Some of them expressed that this attitude would be temporary, and normal activities would resume when calm was restored.

### Maintaining the routine and strengthening the shared existence

Some of the participants believed that to rehabilitate the urban space, community practice should reinforce Jewish-Arab co-existence and avoid any mention of the unrest. These participants believed that they should focus on a shared future in the mixed cities and that addressing the past unrest would intensify divisions between the two communities. One of the Jewish participants noted:

The more that they [residents] discuss […] the national identification, it can further intensify the situation and [the Jewish] population will no longer want to live here, or new people would be scared to move in.

These participants reported that they were adhering to their routine practice while emphasising the integration of the two populations and gathering them around common ground. They believed that they should rehabilitate the urban space by conducting joint community projects they could generate shared urban identity and respectful Jewish-Arab relations. This approach was put forward by an Arab participant who said:

We should create opportunities for people to meet [...] to enrich their acquaintance during everyday life. We should not wait for such [escalating] situations; we can fight together in favour of the neighbourhood [...] To rally around common interests to improve the quality of life.

### Addressing the conflictual nature of the urban space

Many participants shared that, following the violent unrest, they decided to address the conflictual aspects of the urban space, de facto constructing a space that acknowledges its own political nature. These participants strove to learn from the events and believed the unrest brought to the surface the need to address urban issues such as discrimination against the Arab population and the nature of Jewish-Arab encounters in the context of the national conflict. This opinion was expressed by one Jewish participant in the following terms:

[Following the unrest] I think there are serious issues we need to address […] to talk about the conflict […] it is very hard […] [but] perhaps these eruptions of violence illustrate […] that we need to talk about [….] identities and feelings of oppression.

This participant, like others, believed that, following the uprising, community practice within a mixed city cannot avoid the topic of the conflict and its implications. Participants became engaged in political, controversial issues related to Jewish-Arab coexistence in their cities. For example, some participants organised dialogue meetings regarding the violent events to allow Jewish and Arab residents to process feelings and discuss continued peaceful co-existence in the city. Some of them expressed their hope that the dialogue would lead to Jewish-Arab community initiatives. An Arab participant said in this regard:

[We initiated] Jewish-Arab dialogue meetings, where we share experiences, fears, hopes and thoughts in response to the crisis the city has been through […] the goal is to facilitate an open conversation where everyone can raise their voices, meet the ‘other’ and to promote shared initiatives […] that would address the shared existence in the city.

Other participants shared that they decided to initiate community activities to better prepare for future violent events. Many of them indicated that there was no formal policy regarding their role in the event of unrest and that this left them confused and helpless. For this reason, several participants expressed their intention to establish formal guidelines for community practice in the context of violent events in the community. Furthermore, a few participants decided to organise activities to mitigate future tensions between the two populations, such as organising a group of Jewish and Arab local leaders that would intervene in times of crisis.

Other participants shared that they decided to develop projects focusing on the Arab population in the city aimed at strengthening their sense of belonging and addressing their many needs. Among the examples that emerged in the interviews were promoting additional community work in Arab neighbourhoods and organising meetings with Arab local leaders to hear about the community’s needs.

# Discussion

This study used place-making as a framework to explore community practitioners’ roles and experiences in response to the violent eruptions in Israeli Jewish-Arab mixed cities in May 2021. In particular, the study analysed the ways social workers construct divided spaces and infuse them with meanings based on their sense of place. We found that community practitioners were engaged in three modalities of place-making. The first highlights community practitioners’ role as ‘place-developers’ and refers to their everyday practices prior to the violent events. As participants hold positive and deep relations to the city, they functioned as place-makers who sought to construct a conflict-free and ethnoculturally diverse urban space. The second modality reveals community practitioners’ role as ‘place-protectors’ and focuses on their practices during the unrest. Although this stage was characterised by a sense of threat to participants’ sense of place, some of them became place-guardians, aspiring to protect the city’s nature as a site of safe intercommunity harmony. The third modality focuses on participants’ practices after the violence and reveals their role as ‘place-remakers’. In light of community practitioners’ threatened sense of place, they used three approaches to regenerate the urban space: enabling separate recovery of space, strengthening co-existence, and addressing the conflictual nature of space.

By revealing the concrete practices community practitioners adopt in trying to cope with an ongoing conflict, the study strengthens the important role of macro social work in conflict-ridden societies (Truell, 2019). Both in the everyday, as well as during and after the escalation, community practitioners play a crucial role in creating solidarity among divided communities, responding to community needs, and facilitating collective trauma processing (Al-kilani, 2019; Federico et al., 2007; Shwartz-Ziv and Strier, 2021; Stubbs and Maglajlic, 2012). Moreover, they become ethnocultural mediators, using practices of mitigating tensions between populations (Truell, 2019). These findings highlight the political nature of community practice within conflict zones and illustrate its ability to develop alliances with excluded communities affected by political conflicts (Campbell et al., 2018).

Our findings illustrate the need to incorporate the theoretical and practical framework of place-making into social work community practice, particularly in conflict zones (Shwartz-Ziv and Strier, 2020). Given the prevailing view of communities as social places (Weil, 2005), the spatial framework helped to reveal the role of community practice in constructing place in the context of division. By developing place meanings; protecting existing place identities and regenerating places affected by human-made disasters, community practitioners took an active critical role in enhancing community well-being. Thus, we maintain that community practice should acknowledge its crucial role in forming the contested nature of places and facilitating communities’ sense of place.

Alongside community practitioners’ efforts to strengthen communities’ relations to space, the study shows how their own sense of place comes into play in their practices and experiences. The participants’ personal meanings of ‘the city’ informed their practices; sometimes challenging, shaping, or strengthening their actions. In line with Toomey et al. (2021), we found that the violent uprising deeply disrupted their positive relationship with the city and undermined the alignment between their sense of place and their practices. This led to efforts to regenerate the space, and in some cases to take place-protective action. So, to understand community practice within the context of political conflict, the profession must take into account the emotional connections, beliefs, and symbols of practitioners toward conflict sites. Given the challenges community practitioners face in conflict zones, the study emphasises the importance of providing emotional support and developing professional tools and policies regulating their role during conflict escalation.

Community practitioners’ place-making practices aspired to create safer and more promising places that enable communities to manage the political conflict at the urban level. They sought to create an alternative safe space, where Jewish and Arab communities could engage in negotiation over their shared urban existence and manage conflict non-violently and at the local level. In many cases, community practitioners aimed to blur national dichotomies and generate a hybrid urban identity. Given the increasing racial, cultural, and political conflicts worldwide, community practice is obligated to engage in the creation of safe spaces. Within the contested political climate, it has the potential to take a critical role in promoting hope, solidarity, and peace within contested societies (Moshe Grodofsky, 2019). Therefore, we suggest that welfare services, managers, and community practitioners critically reflect on their ability to create safer spaces in contested urban settings and develop sensitive, place-aware interventions. Achieving this goal can be accomplished through dialogue with communities, professional development sessions, education, and training. We believe that the inclusion of place-making perspectives can promote core social work values such as equality and social justice and establish the profession’s role in peacebuilding.

Several caveats concerning this study should be noted. As this is a qualitative study, generalisation from its findings to other settings, communities, and practitioners is limited. Additionally, this study was conducted within the specific context of the Israeli-Palestinian national conflict. Future research in this field would benefit from examining social work community practice’s roles in the contexts of other political conflicts.

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