**Place-making: Toward a place-aware community practice agenda**

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**Abstract**

Compared to many disciplines’ growing interest in the place-making analytical framework, its incorporation into social work community practice is still embryonic—despite the fact that, since its very inception, the field of social work has acknowledged the importance of place in shaping communal identity, construing shared meanings, and generating collective actions. In this sense, the place-making perspective is particularly relevant to the multiple challenges faced by community practice in the 21st century. This qualitative study aims to encourage the inclusion of place-making theoretical perspective in community practice research by examining community practitioners' engagement in place-making processes within the complex context of Israeli Jewish-Arab mixed cities. Based on semi-structured interviews with 30 community practitioners in the public services, the findings reveal that participants were highly engaged in four main interrelated aspects of place-making: shaping the ethno-cultural meanings of place, managing the meaning of space in power relations, re-constructing the conflicted meaning of space, and framing the history of place. The study illustrates the usefulness of the place-making analytical framework in community practice, especially in the context of increasing contested and divided urban realities.

Keywords: community practice; place-making; place; divided cities; multiculturalism

Place-making processes are crucial to understanding how people construct socially and physically the place they live in, enabling them to be filled with meanings and identities (Lombard, 2014; Saar and Palang, 2009; Hague and Jenkins, 2005). However, compared with other disciplines such as architecture, geography, and urban studies, the important dimension of space is still understudied and undertheorized in social work community practice theory and practice. This is problematic, because due to globalisation processes and far-reaching demographic changes, social workers are increasingly engaged in work with complex diverse, urban communities fragmented by class, race, culture, religion, ethnicity, and nationality (Hardal-Zreik and Blit-Cohen, 2018; Gutierrez and Gant, 2018; Todd and Drolet, 2020). Social workers have been challenged to invent new strategies that address community practice in these turbulent urban spaces, and research and training efforts related to social work community practice have increased (Gutierrez and Gant, 2018; Weil et al., 2013). Critical guiding principles and models for community practice have been developed (Butcher et al., 2007; Weil et al., 2013) that take into account multiculturalism (Sisneros et al., 2008; Gutierrez et al., 2013), gender (Mizrahi and Greenawalt, 2017), race and colonialism (Craig, 2017; Occhiuto and Rowlands, 2019), as well as green social work (Dominelli, 2020), and anti-poverty perspectives (Strier, 2009).

However, place-making research still remains an undertheorized component in social work community practice theory and practice (but see Kemp, 2010; Westoby and Dowling, 2013). The current study is designed to fill this gap: by viewing community practitioners as place-makers, it aims to deepen our understanding of the ways community practice may help shape and manage urban spaces and construct their meanings on behalf of excluded communities. This qualitative study examines place-making processes in the complex setting of Israeli Jewish-Arab contested mixed cities. Like many other urban areas, these cities are home to diverse communities in terms of ethnicity, religion, and culture, but they are also the site of intense ethno-national conflicts. Moreover, in these cities, Jews and Arabs live in close proximity, in neighbourhoods where struggles over space and different national narratives of spatial division prevail (Yiftachel and Yacobi, 2003). Therefore, a close examination of this complex urban environment will shed light on the role of community practice in place-making processes, especially in challenged and conflicted urban settings.

**Community practice in the context of changing urban environments in the 21st century**

Community practice, one of the primary methods in the social work profession, refers to macro practice and interventions at the community level (Gutierrez and Gant, 2018). It aims to advance human rights and social justice by using strategies that engage and achieve 'active communities' (Butcher et al., 2007). Rooted in the settlement houses founded in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, community practice seeks to promote planned changes in communities, organisations, and institutions, and shape the relationships between them (Meade et al., 2016; Hardcastle et al., 2004). According to the guide to macro practice social work published by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE, 2018), community practitioners are engaged in strategies of community organizing, planning, development, capacity building, and social action and change.

Community practice in the 21st century faces multiple challenges, including the current marginalised position of macro practice within the social work field (Reisch, 2016) and the need to work in a dynamic environment subjected to far-reaching demographic, environmental, economic, and cultural changes, most prominently globalisation, neoliberalism, and immigration (Popple, 2015; Todd and Drolet, 2020; Lynch et al., 2020). Growing inequality and the increasingly multiracial and multicultural make-up of society demand attention from community social workers (Gutierrez and Gant 2018). Critical frameworks for the field should be expanded, so that current practice incorporates post-colonial practices, community-based approaches, and the needs of historically excluded groups. Similarly, CSWE (2018) defined several core competencies for current macro practice in social work, including engagement in diversity and difference in practice, and advancing human rights and social, economic and environmental justice. According to its guidelines, community practice should address oppression, discrimination, and racism; be culturally competent; and take into account the historical contexts of the communities.

To meet these challenges, the community practice field has developed new models that align with the CSWE guiding principles for interventions (Gamble and Weil, 2013; Popple, 2015; Meade et al., 2016). For example, Weil et al. (2013) offered a model for community practice interventions, taking into account cultural, gender, and global contexts. Guiding principles for community practice in multicultural societies have also been developed (e.g. Sisneros et al., 2008; Gutierrez et al., 2013). Recently the literature has highlighted the significance place of race in community practice, calling for the adoption of anti-racist and anti-colonial approaches (Craig, 2017; Occhiuto and Rowlands, 2018). However, there has been less study of the role of community practitioners in enabling community members to shape and create less conflictual and more equal urban environments that are filled with meaning and aligned with their identities, as embodied in place-making processes. The current study addresses the need for a place-aware community practice.

**Place, place-making, and community practice**

Places are not fixed, but rather dynamic, and hence may be (re)created, made, and shaped (Cresswell, 2014; Staeheli and Mitchell, 2009). One way to understand a ‘place’ is as a space that people have made meaningful and endowed with values through personal, group, or cultural processes (Cresswell, 2014; Altman and Low, 2012). Place-making provides an analytical framework within which to examine those processes that transform a space into a meaningful place. It is a vague term, widely used in the fields of human geography, urban planning, and art (Toolis, 2017; Lew 2017). It may occur both on the individual and collective levels and can be understand as those processes in which people socially and physically construct places, fill them with meanings, and shape their identities (Lombard, 2014; Saar and Palang, 2009; Hague and Jenkins, 2005). The making of places may occur through manipulating the physical environment or everyday activities, as well as attaching meanings to places through building shared understandings (Hutchison, 2010). It may also strengthen the connection between people and the place they share (Hague and Jenkins, 2005).

Place-making processes are also inherently political, often entailing struggles over how a place should be defined; that is, the vision of a place and who should be part of it (Staeheli and Mitchell, 2009). These processes may construct, challenge, or reproduce historical narratives and collective memory (Toolis, 2017; Bedoya, 2013; Othman et al., 2013). Moreover, place-making activities may construct the cultural meanings of place, as reflected in practices of place-naming, language use, and the creation of places with ethno-cultural characteristics (e.g. Lombard, 2014; Schuch and Wang, 2015). Lew (2017) suggests viewing place-making processes as situated on a continuum. On the one end there is organic place-making: bottom-up initiatives in which places are shaped through social everyday practices. On the other end are top-down place-making processes that contain elements of professional design and marketing influences. From that perspective, place-making refers to a wide range of activities, including informal everyday practices within a specific place, residents' struggles for social change, organisation of outdoor events such as festivals, and the creation of physical spaces such as community gardens, urban renewal housing, and marketing. This perspective may help conceptualise the multiple ways in which community practitioners are involved in place-making processes. Because community practice’s mission is to assist functional and geographically vulnerable communities, we believe that community practice becomes integral to projects that shape the urban space (Gamble and Weil, 2013). Community practitioners in the challenged urban landscape of this century are sensitised to their vital role in the construction of space as a social product and site of power that embodies social relations, identities, and inclusion and exclusion processes (Harvey, 1996; Cresswell, 2014; Staeheli and Mitchell, 2009). We therefore used the place-making analytical framework to examine community practitioners as place-makers in the complex context of Israeli Jewish-Arab contested mixed cities.

**Israeli Jewish-Arab contested mixed cities**

In recent decades, many cities have become highly multicultural contested centers riven by ethnic, cultural, racial, and economic sources of tension. Our study focuses on the unique case of Israeli Jewish-Arab contested mixed cities, in which those tensions are exacerbated by a national conflict. Mixed cities in Israel comprise both Jewish and Arab residents (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2018). These cities have complex histories and have experienced far-reaching demographic changes whose full description is beyond the scope of this article. In short, before the 1948 Arab-Israeli war, which ended in the establishment of the State of Israel, most of the residents in those cities were Arabs. After the war, many Arab residents were forced to leave their homes. As a result, these mixed cities currently have a Jewish majority alongside an Arab minority (Yiftachel and Yacobi, 2003). In this study we focus on four mixed cities—Acre, Haifa, Lod, and Ramla—whose Arab composition ranges between 11 percent and 31 percent.

Israeli mixed cities are characterised by tensions between groups, struggles over space, and an ongoing conflict over the definition of their cultural, religious, and national identity (Yiftachel and Yacobi, 2003; Monterescu, 2015). Moreover, studies show that the municipalities’ policies in mixed cities demonstrate structural discrimination and a preference for the Jewish population, as reflected in resource allocation and urban planning strategies (Leibovitz, 2007; Yiftachel and Yacobi 2003). Hence, community practitioners in Israeli mixed cities work with very diverse and extremely contested communities in terms of ethnicity, religion, and culture, within the broader context of the violent Israeli-Palestinian national conflict. This research aims to expand the limited research examining Israeli public community practice in the context of the political conflict in general, and in mixed cities in particular (e.g. Hardal-Zreik, and Blit-Cohen, 2018).

**Method**

Grounded in qualitative methodology, the study is based on a constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2016). This approach views knowledge as a social product, focuses on processes, seeks multiple perspectives and realities, and enables creation of a theoretical framework that develops inductively from the data (Charmaz, 2000). Moreover, it acknowledges multiple subjectivities of both research participants and researchers and aims to locate participants' meanings, actions, beliefs, and perceptions within broader social contexts and social structures (Charmaz, 2016).

Sample

Thirty interviews were conducted with community practitioners at different levels of seniority in Israeli Jewish-Arab mixed cities. All of the participants were employees of government social welfare services. Fifteen participants were certified social workers who had a bachelor's or master's degree in social work, and fifteen were community practitioners who came from other professional backgrounds, such as education, economics, or conflict resolution. The purposive sample consisted of 10 Arabs and 20 Jews from the four mixed cities: Acre, Haifa, Lod, and Ramla. Participants were involved in a range of community practices, including neighborhood and community organizing (e.g., mediating between cultural groups through dialogue, staffing building and neighborhood committees, organizing leadership groups); organizing functional communities (e.g., working with groups of single mothers, people with disabilities, or people who live in poverty); and engaging in community social, economic, and sustainable development (e.g. developing community gardens, urban regeneration projects, and educational programs for Arab women; Gamble and Weil, 2013). The varied sample of cities and national identities enhances the reliability of the study, enables exploration of issues from diverse perspectives, and facilitates the generation of holistic findings (Shenton, 2004; Padgett, 1998).

Data collection and analysis

Data were generated from face-to-face, in-depth, semi-structured interviews. These interviews focused on participants’ perceptions of the issues, challenges, and coping strategies that characterise their work in Israeli mixed cities and their responses to ethnic challenges within those contested urban spaces. Each interview lasted between one and two hours. Participants were recruited via the municipal social services.

The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and uploaded to MAXQDA, a coding and analysis qualitative software program. Data analysis was performed in three stages. First, the researchers identified initial categories that emerged inductively from the data, through an 'open coding' process (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). This process was followed by constant comparisons, within each transcript as well as among different interviews. Second, using an axial coding, the researchers identified links between categories and sub-categories, as related by content and context. Lastly, they created relationships between the themes through a process of comparison and reflection associated with the various themes. Data were analysed across cities and across Jews and Arabs.

Ethical considerations

The study was approved by the ethics committee of the [Institute Name]. Participants were informed that participating in the study was voluntary, with confidentiality assured; they then signed informed consent forms. Information that might identify the interviewees was omitted from the final report.

**Findings**

Research participants were engaged in four main aspects of place-making within mixed cities: shaping the ethno-cultural meanings of place, managing the meaning of space in power relations, re-constructing the conflicted meaning of space and framing the history of place.

**Shaping the ethno-cultural meanings of place**

As part of their work, community practitioners engaged in shaping the ethnic-cultural meanings of place. Both Jewish and Arab participants described the mixed city as a complex ethnic setting characterised simultaneously by a Jewish-Arab shared existence alongside structural inequality. Many also described overt and covert struggles over the ethno-cultural character of the urban space. Nonetheless, some interviewees, most of whom were Arabs, indicated the Arab residents' lack of trust in the establishment and the national and municipal discrimination against the Arab population. An Arab participant who works in a mixed neighbourhood illustrated the complex context in which community practitioners operate:

*The whole time there's resistance from the Jewish religious group […] to the Muezzin calls […] because the mosque is adjacent to the neighbourhood and the Muezzin is disturbing them [however…] it is unthinkable for Muslims.*

This participant described inter-ethnic tensions regarding the identity of the neighbourhood. Against this backdrop, the interviews indicate that most participants, both Jews and Arabs, aimed to create a space that acknowledges and respects diversity, as well as helps cultivate a shared urban identity. Participants revealed their intentions to create a sense of shared place around an urban common ground, while adjusting their activities to the cultural needs of different communities in the city. A Jewish participant shared this perspective:

*Ramla is a multicultural city […] there is a need to allow every group (to express) its uniqueness, its traditions […] On the other hand there is the shared life around a common ground that is called Ramla. This is where we join the picture.*

Some participants highlighted the importance of creating a culturally sensitive environment through their community activities. Other participants proudly shared that they organised large celebrations of Jewish and Arab holidays as a means to unite the two communities, as illustrated in the words of an Arab participant:

*We work with both Jews and Arabs and try to integrate them into shared activities […] We organised an event in the neighbourhood to celebrate Purim (Jewish holiday), and there were more Arab families than Jewish. We organised a meal for the Ramadan (Muslim holiday) […] and brought Kosher food […] so Jewish families [would] be able to participate […] we really want to promote the shared lives.*

In addition, some participants indicated that part of their practice included deliberating with residents over the cultural meanings of the public space and its usage as a way to mediate ethno-cultural conflicts, develop empathy, and prepare for potential disagreements. For example, a Jewish participant conducted cultural dialogue meetings between residents from a Jewish neighbourhood and those from an adjacent Arab neighbourhood to deal with conflicts that emerge as a result of their proximity. This social worker described a discussion between the residents about symbolic use of the common space:

*During the Holocaust Day ceremony […] fireworks were shot from one of the Arab neighbourhoods. So, a Jewish resident brought it up in tears: 'For us (the Jews) this is our most important mourning day. Why did you do this?’ [initiating a conversation between participants]. The goal of the evening was not to find solutions but to connect, get closer, enable connections between people.*

The interviews show that that, during the year, there were times that ethnic tensions surfaced, and community members did not plan joint activities then. For example, a Jewish participant described an incident that happened in a Jewish-Arab mixed activity for women. She shared that the religious Jewish women were angered by having to listen to a concert of traditional Arab music:

*It took thirty seconds from the moment they (the Religious women) heard the oud. […] there was already a feeling that it is being forced, and it is true, we are forcing the multicultural discourse upon them, telling them that they are part of the community. […] there was a huge breakout […]. They said that the Arabs take over, in the middle of the concert. […] 'Why did you bring us here at all? The fact that we are here doesn't mean we want to be with them (the Arabs)'. It was really awful.*

In summary, Jewish and Arab participants reported that they engaged in multiple efforts and activities designed to reshape the ethnically contested nature of space in the mixed cities. These professional practices seek to construct the counter-meanings of these cities as multicultural spaces through the provision of ethnically and culturally competent activities and by engaging in open dialogues with residents over the significance of the ethno-cultural space.

**Managing the meaning of space in power relations**

Another theme of the work of community practitioners was how they shaped the meanings of space in power relations. The interviews revealed that the construction of space is closely correlated to the nature of the relationships between the Jewish majority and the Arab minority, particularly regarding adjacent neighbourhoods' geographical borders and demographic changes. Arabs who had lived in more neglected areas in the city left those Arab neighbourhoods and moved to other Jewish or mixed areas in the city, seeking to improve their quality of life. In response, Jewish residents moved to other areas in the city. These demographic changes are accompanied by struggles over the urban space, as reflected, for example, in Jewish residents’ refusing to sell apartments to Arabs. An Arab participant talked about the complex dynamic between residents in a street that recently became mixed:

*The growing entrance of Arabs (into the street) caused the more affluent Jews to leave. When Arabs enter to the building the Jews run away […] One of the (Arab) residents told me, 'In the beginning I moved in [to the building], then another resident. Suddenly everyone who lived there start looking for other places, starting to rent (their properties) to move to another place' […] there's lots of complexity’."*

These demographic changes are a highly sensitive issue among participants, many of whom are current or past residents of the city in which they work: they care deeply about the city and its identity, and the demographic changes affect them personally. Although both Jewish and Arab residents described complex feelings regarding these trends, they differed in how they experienced them. Arab participants tended to experience those changes as members of a minority group, subjected to exclusion and discrimination, whereas Jewish participants tended to experience them as a majority and described threats to their dominance. For instance, a Jewish participant shared her fear that the city would lose the Jewish majority, given the growth of the Arab population:

*It's hard for me when I think it would be an Arab majority (in the city) […] I love this city. I grew up here. I want to continue to live in it. I want that a lot of people I love […] will keep living in it; that they won't leave because they feel that they are being pushed away.*

In another case, an Arab participant who lives within a mixed neighbourhood painfully described discrimination against the Arab population in the housing domain:

*The new neighbourhood (inhabited by a Jewish religious group) was built […] while (we) don’t have housing. There are no new Arab neighbourhoods […] or a possibility to buy a house in the new buildings.*

Most of the Jewish and Arab participants from the four cities, acknowledged the political dimension of inter-ethnic power-relations. However, they aimed strategically to create a neutral space through their practice. Many indicated that these demographic trends are very controversial and believed that, if they engaged in them, they would no longer be seen as neutral; a Jewish participant stated that it is not the role of social workers to intervene in these processes of demographic change:

*[As community practitioners] it isn't right to get involved in everything […] I used to get involved only in matters of shared (cultural) existence […]and to allow all opinions to be heard […]. But I don't know if I would insist on co-living in the same buildings when people don't want that.*

Despite the intention to leave urban politics out of their practice, Jewish and Arab participants from the four cities indicated that these demographic changes with significant political implications deeply influenced their community practice, mostly regarding their decision whether to conduct mixed or segregated community activities. Most of the participants shared a desire to conduct mixed community activities. However, some Jewish and Arab participants said that Jewish residents did not want mixed activities and asked them to provide such programs separately from the Arab population. Sometimes when practitioners conducted mixed activities, Jewish residents abstained from participating, as illustrated in the words of a Jewish participant:

*There is a lot of tension under the surface […] political tension. […] tension of who belongs in this city. Experience of gaining control. […] many times, if you organise groups and too many Arabs arrive, Jews will stay away […] the majority is less interested in integrating with the Arab minority.*

An Arab participant shared a similar experience:

*There is a community event that I am supposed to organise (in a mixed neighbourhood) […] there's resistance all the time […] What I'm saying is that I'm not discriminating, I'm producing the event and inviting the whole neighbourhood […] There's always this saying that is coming from the Jewish Orthodox community that we need separation […] we need to have two events […] I'm saying no. I'm doing an event for everyone and everyone is welcome to come.*

It appears, then, that although participants, both Jews and Arabs, aspired to practice social work free from controversial demographic and spatial processes, in some cases the politics of the city prevented them from doing so and inevitably shaped the community practice sphere.

**Reconstructing the conflicted meaning of space**

Another dimension that emerged in our study is the way in which community practitioners tried to modify the conflicted meaning of space. Community practice around the globe deals with the implications of ethnic, racial, economic, or political conflicts, and in this case, participants were operating within the context of the Israeli-Palestinian national conflict. Multiple participants, both Jews and Arabs, described the city they worked in as a unique space within Israel that enables Jewish-Arab neighbourliness based on mutual respect and maintaining the status quo. At the same time, many viewed the national conflict as an underlying sensitive factor that could cause tension and hostility between residents, as reflected in the words of an Arab participant:

*People talk about coexistence […] but in the level of the community it's still Jews and Arabs. It is obvious when there is a political tension, when there is an* *argument between neighbours […] another dimension emerges […] the nationality […] Then the argument intensifies.*

Most Jewish and Arab participants aspired to create through their community practice a non-conflicted meaning of space, a conflict-free space. Many shared that, within their routine practice, they intentionally avoid calling attention to the conflict and do not discuss this issue with the residents. As stated before, many believe that the involvement of community practitioners in space issues that have deep political meanings is unprofessional and might diminish their apolitical ‘neutrality’. A Jewish participant described the issues that politics creates in professional work:

*I'm an Ashkenazi Jew, I live in a good neighbourhood in the city; my politics is left-leaning. […] The moment I open up this issue (the conflict) people will automatically tag me in their mind, even if I want to discuss it in an objective manner.*

Avoiding politics was also prevalent among Arab participants:

*I try as much as possible not to get into politics in my work, in my meetings […] Once someone came in, a Jew actually, and said, 'Did you hear what happened in Jerusalem? Heard what the Arabs did to Israeli soldiers?' […] I told her, 'I did hear. I don't want to talk about it’ […] For me, the shared social life comes first. Politics, I'm not getting into it.*

For some Arab participants, their avoidance was also related to personal experiences of fear or of hearing racist comments in the workplace, particularly at times when the conflict escalated. An Arab participant shared this incident that occurred in her former workplace:

*We heard [when with colleagues] that there was a terrorist attack. […] One of my colleagues who was a real friend of mine said that all Israeli Arabs should be annihilated. […] I stood up and left. […] This experience was a life lesson for me. Where there is tension, I shouldn't step into.*

Other participants, Jews and Arabs, believed that discussing the conflict would only divide Jewish and Arab group members and generate feelings of despair and pain.Hence, some participants shared they aspired to create a liberated space through their practice—a community that developed a collective urban identity while blurring national identities—as reflected in the words of an Arab participant:

*Me as a professional, I'm not an expert when it comes to history, so I can't get them closer together […] If I open it in a meeting and I can't close it, people would finish the meeting more disappointed than they have started […] and I leave them with the pain. […] If I talk on the wound I will always stay on that matter. What I am doing instead is concentrating on the common ground […] and through that change I'm connecting people.*

Some participants shared that, at times of escalation in the national conflict, events such as terror attacks or wars invade the neutral urban space they aim to create and undermine the urban collective identity. When that happened, participants shared they had no choice but to mediate national narratives and develop empathy among community members, as well as trying to strengthen the sense of common ground. In some cases community residents initiated conversations on the conflict, and sometimes participants felt that opening up this subject was inevitable, as reflected in the words of a Jewish participant:

*One participant arrived upset and said, 'There was a terror attack in the central bus station' and I saw the Arabs shrivel […] I said let's have a discussion about what each one of you think on the subject […] and then the Arab women said, […] 'We feel that you are blaming us' […] The elephant was in our room. It wasn't something in the north, it wasn't in Gaza, it was in our room. So, I said OK, there's no other option."*

This participant explained she decided to initiate a conversation on the conflict with community members, because she understood that the conflict was already strongly affecting the group dynamic.

To conclude, participants managed the meanings of space as a site of conflicts and aimed to create by their practice a non-conflicted urban space detached from the national conflict, to preserve a shared sense of community. When the national conflict invaded the space, participants aimed to reconstruct the meanings of space as a site of shared coexistence.

**Framing the history of place**

The last dimension of place-making in community practice focuses on the way participants shaped the historical meanings of the urban space. Space has history. In our case, Israeli mixed cities hold highly clashing, conflicted, and competing narratives. However, most of the Jewish and Arab participants tended to minimise the historical narrative within their practice and aimed to construct an a-historical urban space. They perceived the history of the city as irrelevant for the current urban reality, and hence, believed they should leave historical national narratives out of their community practice, as noted by an Arab participant:

*We shouldn't talk (about historical events with residents). Things that happened stayed in the past. We need to look forward, to advance.*

Although both Jewish and Arab participants aimed to leave history out of their activities, their relationship to that history differed. Jewish participants tended to view it as negligible and irrelevant for their lives, as shared by a Jewish participant:

*We are not interested in the 1948 war […] We are interested in Ramla […] [we] want to live together peacefully.*

Conversely, Arab participants described deep personal and complicated feelings about historical events. Some shared that the events in the 1948 Arab-Israeli War, especially the expulsion of the Arab population, are inextricable parts of their personal-national narrative that generate feelings of anger and pain, as exemplified by the words of an Arab participant:

*The history is part of our lives, part of our culture […] My dad was thirteen years old when his village was vacated in 1948 […] He went without food […] without a home. These are painful things […] and you can't forget them.*

Thus, despite the intention to keep history out of their community practice, some participants shared that this complex history resurfaced at times, forcing them to deal with historical tensions, particularly those rooted in the events of the 1948 Arab-Israeli war. This usually happened when they were involved in activities that involved evacuating residents, such as urban renewal projects and relocation of residents in times of war. These tensions were raised in interactions with Arab residents but they also shaped how Arab participants identified with Arabs residents and how attentive they were to them.

One example that caused historical memories to resurface and that was mentioned in several interviews was related to an urban renewal project. In recent years, Israel has followed a governmental urban renewal process called “evacuation-building” in which residents are temporarily relocated until construction and renovation are completed. Several participants who played leadership roles in urban renewal projects shared that Arab residents were afraid that the government would not allow them to return to their homes and hence objected to the plan. A Jewish participant shared the residents' objection:

*In one of the first residents' conferences […] I presented the 'evacuation-building' plan and suddenly there was such a resistance. They heard the word ‘evacuation,’ and it immediately threw them back to the connotations of get all the Arabs out […] At the end of the day there are Arabs that experienced it [evacuation during the 1948 war]) as deportation.*

Hence, both Jewish and Arab participants shared they had to develop historical sensitivity within their practice. They had conversations with residents about the meanings they ascribed to historical events, thereby giving space to and acknowledging the existence of the historical narrative of the Arab residents. Moreover, participants shared they tried to gain residents’ trust by avoiding the term “evacuation-building,” as well as emphasizing their legal rights and that the process was voluntary. Furthermore, to lessen Arab residents’ anxiety, participants reported that they led the effort to institute a structural change in urban renewal practice, so that building would begin before evacuation, as noted by an Arab participant:

*The word ‘evacuation; is not perceived well in the Arab community […]; ‘you are evacuating me’. Therefore, we started to change the term. I changed it in the neighbourhood from evacuation to renovation […] because of the community's fears from evacuation, and that […] they won't be allowed to come back. So, we found a solution: first building and then evacuating the residents […] We adopted the plan to the community."*

Thus, although participants perceived the history of the city as irrelevant for their practice and their aim as creating a neutral ahistorical urban space, at times they had to deal with historical tensions and so developed an historical sensitivity within their practice.

**Discussion**

This study examined community practitioners' engagement in place-making processes within the complex context of Israeli Jewish-Arab mixed cities. We found that in their attempt to promote social work community practice values such as inclusion, empowerment and equality, practitioners constantly manage meanings of spaces, yet do so, for the most part, unconsciously. Our findings highlight that public community practitioners are highly engaged in four interrelated aspects of place-making: shaping the ethno-cultural meanings of place, managing the meaning of space in power relations, reconstructing the conflicted meaning of space, and framing the history of place. In light of our findings, we propose that the place and place-making analytical framework should become an integral part of social work community practice, especially in the context of increasingly contested and divided urban realities (Kemp 2010; Westoby and Dowling, 2013). Four recommendations on integrating place-making into social work practice emerged from our findings.

First, community practice should critically reflect on the ways it shapes the ethno-cultural meanings of places through place-making activities, such as dialogues between cultural groups, practices of place-naming, language use, and the creation of spaces with ethno-cultural characteristics (Lombard, 2014; Schuch and Wang, 2015). At a time when cultural competence has become a key component of social work, the place-making analytical framework may expand our understanding of the role of community practitioners in shaping cultural meanings of increasingly multicultural and multiracial spaces (CSWE, 2018; Gutierrez and Gant, 2018; Sisneros et al., 2008).

Second, community practitioners need to better understand the ways they manage the meanings of space in power relations by taking into account geographical and demographic sensitivities and trends. Given far-reaching globalisation processes, community practice should acknowledge and address the ways the political implications of demographic changes may permeate community practice. Doing so will shed light on the ways spatial processes are intertwined with core issues of community practice, such as ethnic integration or segregation of activities and mobilisation processes (CSWE, 2018; Gutierrez and Gant, 2018).

Third, community practitioners should acknowledge the ways they construct, manage, and modify the conflicted meanings of space. In the 21st century, community practitioners work with fragmented urban communities within challenging environments riven by ethnic, racial, economic, and political conflicts. Hence, they should acknowledge the political nature of urban settings and account for the ways in which conflicts affect different communities and inter-ethnic demographic power relations, as well as challenge community practice. We believe social work community practice may also be a fertile ground for conflict transformation, in which community practitioners re-construct the conflicted meanings of space, thereby transforming conflictual relationships and discourses (Miall, 2004).

Lastly, community practice should develop historical sensitivity, acknowledge the historical meanings that excluded communities ascribe to space, and understand the ways practice might construct, challenge, or reproduce historical narratives (Toolis, 2017; Bedoya, 2013; Othman et al., 2013). Using this historical-spatial lens is a powerful tool for advancing social work goals, such as deepening understanding of community processes, strengthening excluded communities’ sense of belonging, and addressing oppression, discrimination, and racism (Othman et al., 2013; CSWE, 2018).

Implementing these four recommendations can enable a more effective community practice strategy to achieve social work values. We encourage welfare services, managers, and community practitioners to develop critical awareness and reflect on their relation to and perceptions of place, as well as their vision of it. Such a critical reflexivity may shed a significant light on the ways those perceptions are intertwined with their practice and shape the meanings of places. We also recommend that discussions be initiated with community members on the multiple meanings they ascribe to the urban setting and the sense of place they would like to promote. We believe that such integration of the place-making perspective will not only lead to the development of place-based sensitivity community interventions but also empower excluded communities, mobilise them for collective action, and strengthen their sense of belonging. It may also enhance a more just, place-embedded, community practice agenda that promotes social justice and racial equality.

This study is not without its limitations. Although the study represents both Jews and Arab community practitioners from four mixed cities, it is based on a relatively small sample. Second, in the data analysis process we did not find significant differences in the practice of Jewish and Arab participants. We assume this lack of difference may be due to the Arab participants' employment in government welfare services, being part of the Israeli state establishment, and the Israelization process in which the Arab minority adopts characteristics of the majority Jewish group. Finally, the current setting is the Israeli context, and different findings may be found in other geographical, political, environmental and social contexts. Hence, we encourage further research that explores community practice and place-making.

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