Mixed workplaces with both Jewish and Arabs employees constitute a microcosm of Israeli society. Employees in these workplaces are exposed to and influenced by the external political environment, and each employee comes with his own prejudices and culture—characteristics of his own ethnic group. The encounter between employees creates an opportunity for cooperation, friendship, and a mutual understanding of the difficulties faced by each group. The encounter and the relationships it helps forge are fertile ground for studying the nature of the relationships between Jews and Arabs in an uncontrolled environment, unveiling the flashpoints between both groups.

This study examines the relationship dynamics between Jews and Arabs working in an Arab-owned organization, in an Arab city. Jewish-Arab relations have already been studied in the past. However, the uniqueness of this study lies in the reversal of the prevailing power relations in Israel. The organization is Arab-owned and the Jews while majority population in the country, are an ethnic minority in the organization employing them. Except for a previous comparative study of an Arab-Jewish workplace, this study is the first to conduct an in-depth examination of the nature of these relations in a setting where the Arabs are the majority and the Jews the minority. Consequently, this study enables an examination not only of the relationships created among the employees, but also of the perspective of Arab and Jewish employees when they meet at workplaces under conditions that differ from other work environments.

The study attempts to identify the nature of the relations forged between the Jewish and Arab employees and to reveal the flashpoints between both groups. The study also explores the prevalence of offensive ethnophaulisms and analyzes how the members of both groups and the management cope with the exchange of such offensive remarks. The study also examines the hierarchical relationships between the Arab management and the Jewish employees, seeking to discover whether Jews face exclusion or discrimination within the organization.

The study includes semi-structured in-depth interviews with 15 employees—Jews and Arabs—and four observations in the organization during a four-month period. The interviews were analyzed and interpreted according to the well-entrenched theory in the field, enabling conceptualization of social patterns and conclusions regarding the manner in which meanings and perceptions are formed around various social practices. Thus, the study findings help to identify the nature of the relations between Jews and Arabs working together in an Arab-owned organization.

The employees in the studied organization share work spaces and are constantly interacting with each other. These conditions help to foster positive colleague relations and encourage situations where the employees can get to know each other better. This familiarity often leads to friendships, which sometimes extend beyond the workplace and include meetings with family members and acquaintances. These relationships remain virtually untarnished even during violent or turbulent times. During such periods, although a rise in tensions is salient, it dissipates rapidly, partially because of the open dialog between the Jewish and Arab employees regarding political topics and various events occurring outside the workplace.

The findings show that the Arab ownership and environment significantly contributes to reducing tension and racism between Jewish and Arab employees. The relatively low tension levels, compared to the external environment or other workplaces, are also associated with the role reversal in the studied company compared to greater Israeli society. In a Jewish-owned business, the Arab employee is in a doubly inferior position, both as an ethnic minority, and as financially dependent on the Jewish managers and owners. In contrast, in an Arab-owned organization, the Arab employee feels empowered because he belongs to the same ethnic group as the owners and the ones paying his salary. This sense of belonging reduces the Arab employee’s vulnerability and raises his degree of tolerance and acceptance towards the Jewish employees, who are the minority group in the studied organization. According to interviewee testimonials, cooperation at all levels of the organization and equal representation of Jews and Arabs in all levels of the hierarchy, including in senior management positions, have empowered the Arab employee and created symmetry in the power relations between the Jews and Arabs in the organization. On the other hand, the Jewish employee is dependent on the Arab employer for his livelihood and must defer to his management authority. Despite being a minority in the workplace, the Jewish employee knows that belonging to the country’s majority group opens up numerous opportunities for him, reducing his dependence on the Arab-owned workplace. Moreover, the Jew’s presence in the workplace is considered vital and desirable, partially because of his belonging to the ethnic majority group. In this situation the employee’s Jewishness becomes an asset from the perspective of the company's management. Because of the Jewish employee’s financial dependence, and possibly also because of the company’s management’s respectful treatment of him, it seems that the Jewish employee tempers his ethnophaulisms and behaves in an egalitarian manner towards his Arab colleagues.

According to testimonials from some of the employees (Jews and Arabs), management treats Jews fairly and respectfully and they even receive preferential treatment compared to the Arab employees. This treatment manifests in improved salaries, employment conditions, and benefits. The study also reveals that the management values the professional skills of the Jewish employees, and therefore tends to rely on them for more professional matters than on the Arab employees. The interviews revealed that one of the reasons for this is the management’s treatment of the Jewish employees as a resource that the Arab employees and management lack—belonging to the majority group in the State of Israel. Belonging to the majority group in Israel, affords Jewish employees economic power and influence, and in professional meetings with various institutions and state bodies that award the company contracts, it is they who are chosen to represent the organization

The findings show that the organization’s work environment supports a shared space for both cultures and allows each group to express its own culture. Thus, the Jewish employees experience Arab culture directly, become familiar with it, and learn about various nuances of that culture of which they were previously unaware. Joint work, constant interaction, and the maintenance of cultural pluralism, have dismantled prejudices that the employees held before working in the organization. However, Jewish and Arab employees expressed regret that the dynamics created at work do not affect the greater society or do anything to alleviate the prevailing political conflict.

The conclusions of this study may prove applicable for Israeli organizations employing Jewish and Arab employees, or any organization which employs a mixed staff comprised of a majority group and a minority group. A few applicable recommendations can be gleaned from the study’s findings for the purpose of creating optimal shared spaces. These recommendations include: creating ethnic heterogeneity in the workplace; creating communication and cooperation between the employees; maintaining reciprocity, egalitarian discourse and fair representation of members of all the groups in all levels of the hierarchy; and maintaining cultural pluralism.