**Discussion**

Studies examining intergroup encounters and relationships have done so differently during different periods. Initially, research focused on the results of contact and its effects (e.g., Allport, 1954; Sherif, 1966). Later, studies examined the processes of communication, cognition, and emotion (Stephan, 2008; West, Shelton & Trial, 2009). Some studies addressed the role of narratives that influence the formation of group identity and perceptions of the out-group (Maoz, Bekerman & Zembylas, 2010; Ron & Maoz, 2011; 2013), and showed their role in justifying the in-group’s actions, and non-recognition of the out-group, crystallizing into divided societies that experience protracted conflict (Bar-Tal, 2011, 2013; Bar-Tal & Salomon, 2006; Bekerman & Zembylas, 2010).

Others have discussed the improvement of intergroup relationships using techniques for planned intergroup encounters (Maoz 2011, Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006, 2008), showing that intergroup contact moderates prejudices and negative feelings toward the out-group (Pettigrew & Hewstone, 2017; Pettigrew, Tropp, Wagner, & Christ, 2011; Pickett, Baker, Metcalfe, Gertz, & Bellandi, 2014). The studies in this period were usually conducted under optimal conditions and in organized encounters (Dixon et al., 2005; Dixon et al., 2007; Maoz, 2011; Pettigrew & Hewstone, 2017). This prompted the need to expand research on intergroup encounters to real life settings. Pettigrew and Hewstone (2017), who reviewed and analyzed the issues examined in studies on intergroup encounters, found that most studies assessing the effectiveness of intergroup encounters for reducing prejudices were characterized by the single factor fallacy, omitting other variables that could affect the findings. In other words, they claim that when examining encounters and considering their impact, it is necessary to consider the influence of multiple dimensions, as well as different levels of measurement (macro and micro), and the context in which the encounter is held. They further contend that methodological precautions should be taken to ensure that the main factors of any given phenomenon are treated.

Therefore, it is necessary to develop and expand the research by using a pioneering method to examine intergroup encounters in real life settings‎, while addressing the context and diverse variables that may influence findings.

The present study narrows the knowledge gap presented above, and is part of an innovative approach that examines intergroup encounters and tension in a real-life setting—the workplace—in a divided society experiencing intractable conflict. Specifically, the study examines intergroup encounters in a small team of co-workers from different ethnic-religious groups (Jews and Arabs) working together in a reality of protracted conflict. The study shows the varying perceptions of the majority and the ethnic-religious minority, revealing the complexity of asymmetrical power relationships within work groups, where membership is involuntary and imposed by organizational need.

The findings show that feelings of unfairness and inequality are a major factor influencing the relationships between the team members. The interviewees bring to light the complexity of asymmetric relations between the Jewish majority and the Arab minority. On the one hand, employees in both groups declare that the medical center’s procedures do not permit inequality between workers. Their stories, however, reveal a very different picture, with each group presenting a different narrative of injustice, fairness, and equality at work.

The Arab employees express perceptions of inequality and unfairness because of their minority status. It is interesting to note, that the Jewish employees (a majority) – also experience a sense of unfairness. They indicate their fear of being accused of racism and feel that they are expected to give up on various issues at their work in order to maintain proper work relations. Furthermore, the Jewish employees minimize the Arab employees’ accusations of inequality. They claim these allegations, are exaggerated and do not necessarily reflect the reality. In both cases, the groups view themselves as threatened by the other, and the perceived inequality and injustice creates tensions between the two groups within the work-team.

The research findings prove the importance of examining intergroup contact in a natural field, referencing the composition of the group in which the encounter occurs, and the context of asymmetrical relations between a minority group and the majority, within a reality of protracted conflict. The study shows the complexity of such relationships, and their impact on the dynamics of the work teams. Moreover, the findings prove that even though there is a superordinate goal (patient treatment), and even when the employees do their job, feelings of tenseness, unfairness, and inequality still persist.

Similar studies have rarely been conducted in the past, which allows us to illuminate the understanding of intergroup encounters ‎from a new, previously unexamined vantage point (Dixon et al., 2007; Pettigrew & Hewstone, 2017).

**Conclusions**

Most of the studies investigating intergroup encounters ‎ examined them in organized situations under optimal conditions. The present study is an innovative example, and makes significant contribution to the understanding the relationships between groups that interact in the context of asymmetric power relationships, based on the ethnic-religious reality in which they live. The study combines group dynamics and intergroup encounters‎ in work teams, as well as the effects of intractable conflict on asymmetric relationships, such as a majority and an ethnic-religious minority functioning in a small group. This combination has not been studied previously, and the present study is the first to combines these two corpora of knowledge for examining intergroup encounters.

Asymmetric relationships exist in varied real-life settings. The important question that arises is the extent to which the parties’ voices are heard as important and meaningful in the relationship. The findings of our study prove that individuals in the minority and majority groups do not feel comfortable expressing themselves to the staff, fearing this may be interpreted as unacceptable in a workplace context. In a reality of ethnic-religious conflict with asymmetrical relationships, members of an involuntary work-force formed in response to organizational needs feel uncomfortable expressing their voices and feelings.

If scholars want to improve the understanding of intergroup relationship in real life situations, they must be aware of this complexity and understand that it is very important to relate to asymmetric power relationships when analyzing intergroup conflicts and intergroup relationships in real life.

**Limitations of the Research and Future Research**

Despite its contribution of the study to reducing the gaps found in the literature examining intergroup encounters‎, the present study does have certain limitations. The study examines how Jews and Arabs working together on a team perceive fairness and equality in the context of an protracted, asymmetrical conflict. The method chosen for examining perceptions of the encounter was qualitative, so the findings do not provide any insight into changes in the perceptions and attitudes of employees in teams of mixed ethnic-religious identities, but only of participants’ understanding of their experiences and encounters during work.

In future research, it would be desirable to trace the factors that inhibit and promote positive dynamics, relationships and behaviors that lead to cooperation among the group members in a work context, rather than the optimal conditions that have previously been examined in *ad hoc* groups (laboratory and meetings).

It is important to study the factors influencing ways to minimize the tensions and improve the contribution of the superordinate goal to better relations between the groups. In addition, it would be possible to examine the relationships between the groups when the conflict escalates, and violent events are occurring in the context of the protracted conflict.