**Introduction**

The Western world is characterized by vast heterogeneity that can create friction and tensions between different social groups. These tensions can potentially affect the dynamics of a variety of situations in day-to-day life, including working relationships in organizations, and social interactions in places of residence and communities. Contact and interaction become even more complex when they take place in the context of a divided society suffering from a protracted conflict. (Arieli & Hirschfeld, 2010; Desivilya, 2011; Hargie, Dickson, & Nelson, 2003; Maoz, 2011; Tyler, 2012).

In light of the above, it is surprising to discover that there have been almost no studies examining the **implications of social divisions, and of protracted national conflict especially on non-voluntary, intergroup contact occurring within a small heterogeneous group brought together in real life conditions or situations—as opposed to organized meetings**. The current study aims to fill-in these lacunae in the research.

Various studies have examined intergroup contact and the role of narrative in the lives of individuals, society, and intergroup conflicts (Hamack, 2008; Liu & Hilton, 2005; Maoz, 2011; Ron & Maoz, 2013). Their findings show that narrative represents the collective history and memory of a group; the development of group identity; and its perception of the other group (Bekerman & Zembylas, 2005; Hamack, 2008), as well as societal norms (Bekerman & Zembylas, 2010).

In divided societies, where there are intractable conflicts, narratives play a major role in legitimizing the group’s actions, identity, meaning and social solidarity. (Bar-On 2006, 2009; Bar-Tal & Salomon, 2006; Bekerman & Zembylas 2010; Hamack, 2008). The parties’ contesting narratives are characterized by justification of the in-group, and demonization and non-recognition of the out-group (Bar-Tal, 2011, 2013; Bar-Tal & Salomon, 2006; Bekerman & Zembylas, 2010).

The present study examines how members of a small group, specifically a nursing team, with members drawn from rival groups who are forced into intergroup contact perceive the processes that take place within their team, as they work together in a reality of a conflict-ridden society with an intractable conflict between the majority and a national minority.

## Conceptual Framework

Political, economic, national and ethnic interests are fertile ground for intergroup tensions. These tensions may affect the conduct of the groups in different situations, such as workplaces, educational institutions, places of residence and random encounters.

Our research examines the encounter and contact between groups in a **natural** setting, the workplace. It focuses on the relationships and intergroup contacts of Jews and Arabs working side-by-side on work teams of mixed nationality, in light of the intense paradox of an **intractable** conflict and the need to cooperate on work teams, whose formation and objectives are not of the members’ choosing, but rather a result of organizational policy.

These phenomena are examined in the context of a team on the nursing staff of a hospital that meets the definition of a small group with national and social variety, operating in a natural context, in the context of a divided society with a protracted national conflict.

### The social and political context of conflict and its influence on intergroup narratives

Divided societies are societies in which there is a significant split between component groups. The division into groups is determined according to cultural, religious, and political identities (Hargie, Dickson, & Nelson 2003). Schaap (2006) adds that divided societies are characterized by multiple, conflicting identities that provide fertile ground for intergroup competition and attempts to impose a dominant identity at the expense of others.

Some divided societies include a protracted conflict, which the literature defines as an “intractable conflict,” characterized by violence over a long period of time. Such a conflict is perceived as irresolvable, and affects the attitudes and worldviews of its component societies (Bar-Tal et al., 2009).

The research literature that investigates intractable conflicts attests to the negative implications of interpersonal perceptions and relationships in the group (Coleman, 2000; Friedman & Desivilya, 2010; Syna-Desivilya, 2004). In situations of protracted conflict, different social groups interpret narratives so that they are perceived as victims, thereby legitimating the actions of the in-group, while the actions of the out-group are interpreted as immoral and illegitimate (Bekerman & Zembylas, 2010). The destructive effects on relations between individuals are evident in their positions (competitive, uncompromising, stereotypical and selective approach), feelings (expressed as hostility, hatred, and a desire for revenge), and negative behaviors (confrontations and communication difficulties). (Bar-Tal, 2007a; Deskilya-Syna & Yassour-Borochowitz, 2010).

In light of the above, it is important to examine how groups in which intergroup contact occurs are influenced by their very existence in a divided society experiencing intractable conflict. The present study focuses on this issue, and shows how the consequences of socio-political context for relationships are reflected in a natural situation, a workplace in which functional work teams have members belonging to groups that are “rivals” in the socio-political context. This reality, which it should be noted was imposed by the organization’s policy, may harm the positive perceptions of group members, and amplify the negative narratives about them.

## Intergroup Conflicts, Narratives and Storytelling in Intergroup Meetings

The reality of life today requires frequent coping with intergroup tensions and conflicts, which are expressed by contact with people belonging to groups perceived as adversaries (Desivilya & Raz, 2015).

Studies have examined intergroup dynamics and encounters in small groups (in the form of encounter groups and work teams). The findings revealed the factors that may promote positive, reciprocal perceptions and interactions for intergroup collaboration as well as the obstacles that hinder relationships in diverse groups in the context of a society where an acute, asymmetrical conflict is being fought.

One can learn about the implications of intractable conflict from studies of encounter groups. Maoz (2004; 2009; 2011) maps the five main models used to run encounter groups in Israel, which is a divided, diverse society. From a national point of view, Israel is divided into a majority of Jewish immigrants and their descendants (approximately 80% of the Israeli population), and a minority of Arab-Palestinians who remained in Israel after the establishment of the State and their offspring. Furthermore, the State of Israel is embroiled in the intractable Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Bar-Tal et al., 2009; Friedman & Desivilya, 2010, Ron & Maoz, 2013).

The **Inspirational Contact Model** promotes personal acquaintance, understanding and moderation of stereotypes. The **Joint Projects Model** was constructed according to the **Realistic Conflict Theory** and the findings of Sherif (1966). In these encounters, a joint task that is relevant to both sides is provided, in the hope that it will bring participants closer together, and forge a common identity. The **Study Model** is based on joint learning, focused on topics relevant to the quality of the intergroup relationship (e.g., democracy, human rights, equality, tolerance and multiculturalism). The **Confrontational Model** focuses on the social/group identity, as presented in the social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner 1986). This model relates to the asymmetrical relations between the groups, with reference to the national group identity. The **Narrative Model** focuses on the exposure and recognition of the narrative of the other (Bar-On, 2006); through storytelling, participants reveal their personal and collective narratives about their lives. The encounter with the other’s experiences and suffering creates trust and compassion, thus increasing the understanding of the complexity of the image of each group.

It can be seen that all of the encounter techniques mapped above attempt to convert the inhibitory factors that affect interactions between rival groups into instruments of progress by using them in intergroup encounters. These meetings are held under optimal conditions, and do not always refer to violent or asymmetrical conflict (Dixon & Durrhiem, 2003; Maoz, 2009, 2011, 2012).

The research literature on improving intergroup relationships through the use of the **planned intergroup meetings** (Maoz 2011, Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006, 2008) shows that intergroup communication indeed moderates prejudices (Maoz 2004); reduces anxiety and negative emotions (fear of anger, threat); and strengthens positive feelings towards the other group (Pettigrew, Tropp, Wagner, & Christ, 2011; Pickett, Baker, Metcalfe, Gertz, & Bellandi, 2014). However, contact is limited to preserving the experience created in the encounter. Moreover, it should be noted that little has been written about the effectiveness of these encounters between groups involved in an acute conflict and asymmetric power relations (Dixon et al., 2005; Dixon & Durrhiem, 2003; Maoz, 2009, 2011; Suleiman 2004, Plous, 2003; Salomon, 2006). Zuma (2014) has shown that aspects of the motivation for encounters damaged by intractable conflict, unbalanced power relations, and a sense of unfairness also help to gain an in-depth understanding of intergroup relationships and tensions. Ron and Maoz (2013) focused on the perceptions of facilitators of Jewish-Palestinian encounter groups who were frequently exposed to the Palestinian narrative of the out-group. The study examined the processes and effects associated with repeated exposure to the narrative of the out-group by reporting on the feelings and experiences of the group facilitators, and their ability to arouse moral concern. Research has shown that confronting the narrative of the other group can result in a change in awareness of unequal power relations, social injustice, and create a moral response to the suffering of the other.

In light of the above, it would be interesting to understand how the above dimensions affect the behavior and perceptions of members of groups whose contact is forced upon them, and who are obligated to cooperate over time, within a group operating in the context of a society experiencing intractable conflict.

Blader and Tyler (2009) examined a series of studies on factors that could lead to high levels cooperation and engagement in a small group. They focused on the relationship between social identity, perceptions of justice, and group behavior. Their findings showed that when people identify with their group, they tend to cooperate widely and invest efforts for their group. The perception of justice, and especially of fairness,[[1]](#footnote-1) was also found to influence the cooperation between members of the group and the behaviors of its members (Tyler, 2012). In other words, in groups where identification and a sense of belonging to a large group were evident, cooperation between members, and the desire to advance its activities were also evident. However, their study did not address the situations in which these groups operate in the reality of a divided society and intractable conflict, and did not examine how this affects relationships and behaviors in socially diverse groups.

Hargie, Dickson & Nelson (2003) examined the patterns of communication and labor relations between Catholics and Protestants in **joint** workplaces in Northern Ireland in light of the ideological conflict there. The study was conducted in four large organizations in Northern Ireland, and was based on the employees’ perception of the intergroup relations and communication patterns within the organization. The findings showed that the rivalry between Catholics and Protestants had a detrimental effect on intergroup communication and revealed discrimination, disrespectful behavior, prejudice and stereotypes between groups. Their study, therefore, indicates that intractable group conflict has negative implications for relationships between co-workers belonging to rival social groups. It can be assumed that in light of the intergroup bias and the prominence of the imaginary separation (a strong emphasis on intergroup hostility), the obstacles to interaction in diverse social groups that have been forced upon them over time will intensify.

To summarize, in Israel, citizens belonging to rival social groups are in daily contact in different areas of life, especially in the context of work. Intergroup contact is imposed on the members of the mixed group, and obliges them to act together. Group behavior takes place in the context of a divided society – specifically, the intractable Israeli-Palestinian conflict – over time, both in periods of relative calm and those marked by escalation and increased violence. Their behavior may be influenced by the phenomenon of group bias, in the form of the preference for the in-group, which may be expressed as mutually negative perceptions, feelings of unfairness and discrimination, and a lack of cooperation. Despite this, it is surprising to discover that there are no studies examining the implications of this complex reality on the relationships and behaviors and perceptions of individuals from different social groups in situations of shared frameworks imposed on group members, and not only in the optimal conditions. An investigation of this kind might sharpen the factors that promote positive relationships and mutual behavior versus inhibitory factors.

1. Procedural justice refers to the importance of visibility and fair treatment expressed, for example, in neutrality (lack of bias and fair treatment); consistency (similar cases are treated similarly); representation (anyone affected by the decision can speak); transparency (the way decisions are made is evident to all affected parties). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)