This article discusses the following question:

What is the influence of a divided socio-political relationship—in the form of a protracted national conflict in which small and diverse ethnic-cultural groups participate, their formation and goals not by choice—upon relationships, intergroup contact, mutual perceptions and interactions within a group?

 In other words, the research in this article examines group dynamics and experiences such as: Balance of power; mutual trust; perception of members of other groups; perceptions of justice and fairness versus feelings of discrimination – in regular, unorganized interactions not held in a laboratory or study groups, but rather in a natural workplace context where interactions take place regularly (in which full cooperation is required in order to carry out tasks).

Additionally, the article defines and demonstrates a group of innovative studies that examine intergroup contact in natural situations—in reality, unlike most studies that examine these relationships in optimal conditions and in organized meetings.

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**Findings**

The findings of the interviews show that feelings of discrimination and perceptions of inequity are a dominant factor shaping the relationships between members of the staff belonging to distinct cultural-ethnic groups. These elements are expressed in several ways and will be presented through the three central themes of this study:

1) Discrimination and inequity: Not wanted but present.

2) Jewish patients refusing to receive treatment from Arab caregivers.

3) Who is the strongest?: participant attitudes to their perceptions of victimhood

**1) Discrimination and inequity: Not wanted but present**

The interviewees feel that labor practices and organization do not allow for discrimination against workers. Therefore, they note that there is a sense of equality and fairness towards all workers (Jews and Arabs alike). In practice, however, their examples show a different story, revealing a gap between the feeling that equality exists and the exercise of equality in practice.

Sharoni,[[1]](#footnote-1) a veteran nurse in the ward’s staff, was asked about the issue of fairness and equality among the workers in the ward. She claimed that “equality comes from up top [from the hospital administration]… I consider everyone equal. I care about everyone… there has to be equality… and I think that's the way it should be, there's no such thing as caring about one person and not another”.

During the interview, Roni described a conflict between two nurses in the ward (one immigrated to Israel from the former Soviet Union and the other was a Muslim Arab). She said that the Muslim worker was denounced by the shift supervisor while the worker from the former USSR was given support and was not asked to follow the procedures, as was made clear to the Arab worker:

[An argument] was sparked between two women, one of them a Russian Christian... but she really loves the country (Israel), she is very objective about these kinds of things, and the other is an Arab with a hijab. She was watching TV and there was a shooting incident, a child was injured in Gaza by soldiers.

The Russian said, "Really, how can this be?"

And the Arab woman attacked her: “Sure, you’re murdering children!”

There was a commotion, and the worker from the former USSR was terribly hurt and cried. The next day I spoke to the lady (the Arab worker)... You know how it is, she knows how to turn the whole thing around, all the information, to blame everyone else.

I told her: “Everyone works together here. I don’t want politics or political views. Besides, you’re telling this woman who has no connection to Judaism and is so loyal to [this] place that she appreciates what she didn’t have in Russia and she says thank God about what she has here…”

So she (the Muslim worker) said, “I didn’t mean it”.

I said, “Keep your opinions to yourself, no one should bring them here...”

“I don’t agree. You can’t blame people like this... so sure of yourself when you live in a place where you condemn him and attack him and you call him very unpleasant words.

I told her “Listen, she (the worker who immigrated from the former Soviet Union), wants to raise the issue with the nursing director, and I support her.”

She (the Muslim worker) wanted to talk and cried a lot, she didn’t want to leave the ward. I told her, “listen, we expect a person to have some common sense, even if you have opinions do not express them. And don’t start accusing one side.”

Mohammed, a knowledgeable and experienced nurse, reinforces the gap in perception regarding inequality between Jews and Arabs in the hospital. Muhammad angrily describes the inequity vis-à-vis places of worship for Jews and Muslims in the hospital. The hospital has a synagogue where Jews can pray. Muslims, on the other hand, do not:

They did renovations next to the emergency room… they left the synagogue untouched, they didn’t make another room for the Muslims to pray. Damnit, where do we live? We live in a democratic state, at least, that's what they call it. So care about the other side.

If consideration was given to culture, at least they would build something, a small room for the Muslim population to pray in instead of [making them go] pray on the grass outside the hospital, or finding a corner in each ward to pray in. Or to bring out a small carpet and pray when there’s free space for two minutes… There’s no shortage of rooms. No shortage. Even a shed [would suffice], they don’t need a room. They need a shed and a sign pointing to Mecca so that they’ll sit facing that way. But even that doesn’t exist.

Muhammad raised another issue regarding the inequality between Jews and Arabs. He said that the observance of the customs of different religions is not the same and this leads to conflicts and inconsiderate behavior among the workers:

During my Ramadhan, no one is considerate to me… You (the Jews) come here, eat, drink, it doesn’t bother anyone that I’m fasting… [But] on Passover I can’t put a pita in my mouth, which is my main diet, and I don’t eat other things. This is my food. My food is based on bread, so they (the Jews) forbid me to bring bread into the workplace for a week because it’s your holiday… when you force me as a Jew… you are the majority here, not to eat bread during Passover, and you eat whenever you want during Ramadhan when I fast for a month… it creates conflicts, he’s not considerate of me on his holiday, I won’t be considerate of him on his holiday either.

**2. Jewish patients refusing to receive treatment from Arab caregivers**

The first theme described relates to the gap between the perception of equality and the workers’ fairness and their behavior in practice. Their story shows that perception and behavior are different and even contradictory. The interviewees’ story highlighted another aspect of the phenomenon of discrimination. Jewish interviewees described situations in which a caregiver’s (nurse/physician) Arab affiliation triggered racism—reflected by a reluctance to receive medical treatment from staff members of this origin.

Ruth and Dafna illustrate how Jewish patients are unwilling to receive treatment from Arab doctors:

Ruth referred to a case in which patients protested against receiving care from an Arab doctor:

When an Arab doctor arrived, there were some unpleasant responses. Some people told me, “What’s going on, they don’t have enough work among themselves? Why do we have to accept an Arab?”

I told them: “She’s a good doctor, she’s a certified doctor, she’s a doctor who has a certificate of distinction.” Why were they anti? Because of the religious thing, the racist thing, because she was an Arab, because they didn’t know her.

Dafna referred to another case in which she suggested to her colleague that an Arab doctor at the hospital examine her. The colleague, whose brother was killed in a military operation, refused to receive treatment from the doctor in light of his ethnic background.

A nurse in one of the wards, her brother was killed, doesn’t matter which war… she needed to be checked by a neurologist, and the neurologist was an Arab ... So I suggested to her, I said to her, “Doctor X [of Arab origin] is ready to examine you”, she told me, “No, I won’t have it, I'm not willing to have an Arab doctor examine me.” It was recently after a family member, her brother, had been killed. So it does affect [things].

The interviewees’ stories show that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict highlights and intensifies fear of, and adversity to, the other group—to the point of refusing to receive treatment from people associated with that group, even if the caregiver is considered a senior, leading physician in their field.

**3. Who is the strongest?: participant attitudes to their perceptions of victimhood**

Israel is defined as a Jewish state with a Jewish majority living alongside an Arab minority. In contrast to the country’s overall demographics, in medical teams, Jews do not always constitute a numerical majority, but still feel and behave in the team as befits a dominant majority. The third theme relates to another aspect of discrimination and unfairness, expressed by a victim mentality. Victimhood is described by interviewees from both national groups. Each group views itself as a victim in a different way. Jewish workers refer to fears of being accuses of racism. According to them, they are expected to give up on various issues at work, in order to maintain proper working relations. The concessions required of them leads to resentment, a sense of deprivation and frustration. The Arab minority group, on the other hand, feels discriminated against because of their affiliation with this group. Therefore, they are unable to act like a group of the Jewish majority, thus also creating frustration and unfairness that mars the team dynamic. In both cases, this element creates tensions and conflicts between the different groups within the medical team.

Fatima, a Muslim nurse, explains why Jews and Arabs in the ward cannot behave in the same way:

There are some… you know, some have a stronger personality… who do speak out. And then they solve the problems. “You can’t talk to us like this, work is work, friends are friends, but you cannot treat me like this” [characterizing Jews] Why? They’re not scared, like, I'll give you an example. I have one member of the team that is a Sabra [native] Jew. It’s a personality, a character. She’s not afraid, she called the chief nurse a “liar”. I couldn’t do that, for example, as an Arab, it's hard for me to go tell her because I know I’ll be sacked the next day.

In contrast, Shira, a Jewish nurse, presents a completely different picture. According to her, there is a tendency to accuse Jewish workers of racism against Arab workers. Therefore, she and her Jewish friends are frequently forced to give up on things to avoid such accusations. The following quote illustrates these arguments:

When it comes to a Muslim worker… [the Muslim shift supervisor] can get angry at him for slacking off at work, and get as mad as she wants at him. However, I can’t allow myself to get angry at him. I know that he’ll immediately say that it’s discrimination, “that you're angry with me because...” I have to be careful with everyone… It's expected that we as Jews will accept all of them, as they are. That we’re like hosts. That’s how I feel... that we seem to have all the rights and we’re sort of accepting them. This is very general. After all, they feel discriminated against. Not all of them, it’s like that generally, in the Jewish state, in a Jewish hospital. And we seem to need to fold somewhere.

Interviewer: Do you feel that you're folding?

A. Nothing terrible… Yeah, a little bit, a little… They feel that they’re being discriminated against and we have to agree that they’re being discriminated against. Especially my supervisor, I feel that she’s very afraid that they’ll say that they are being discriminated against. If, for example, there are differences of opinion during a shift, there is a preference to take the Arabs’ side… It's a little maddening... once more they get their holidays, let’s say Ramadan, sometimes they take the whole month. And like this year it was in August, and together with Rosh Hashanah, we had a lot of bickering. Yes, we worked on the holiday. They didn’t come on their holiday. None of them came on their holiday. And we do come... Our supervisor also doesn’t expect them to come and we are expected to come. Sometimes even on a holiday. It's really annoying. But I still don’t hurl accusations at anyone… I don’t blame them for it. What do they demand? They get backup, so why not take it. I would also take it…

Iris reinforces Shira's feelings and says,

I think that below the surface, the Arabs have some feelings of inferiority, and based on this they push and say, “I deserve this because I come from a place that you prefer less, so give it me.” They often take advantage of the fact that they are Arabs in order to advance their interests, to say, “Oh, you’re not giving this to me because I'm an Arab,” so they want to prove to him, “Here, we’re giving you [what you want]”.

Ruth felt that the Arab team members felt that they were being discriminated against even when this had no basis in reality:

From my point of view… once there was an incident which was very funny, even with the discrimination. Once we had a parking lot close to the hospital… And I came a minute before someone I work with who is a Christian (Arab). I was allowed in but she was not because there wasn’t any room. The whole shift, and I'm ion pretty good terms with her, I kept on hearing [her say] that they didn’t let her in because she’s an Arab, that's why they didn’t let her go in with her car.

The story told in this theme illustrates the complexity of the concept of power. The majority group (of Jewish workers) feels that belonging to this group is actually a point of weakness. They are expected to give up various things to the minority group during the course of their work in order to avoid slander about alleged discrimination. They portray themselves as victims of a situation that they feel discriminates against them. Workers who are part of the Arab minority group also see themselves as victims. They claim that they do not have the same equal rights enjoyed by the majority group and are unable to speak as freely as their Jewish co-workers. The two groups do not feel comfortable in this situation and perceive the other side as being in a position of strength and having a stronger position in the workplace.

1. Fictional name [↑](#footnote-ref-1)