**Fostering emotional intelligence and intergroup empathy: An intervention program for Jewish and Arab adolescents**

**Abstract**

The intractable, violent and lengthy Arab-Israeli conflict has had significant and profound effects on relations between Israeli Jews and Arabs. In recent decades, various intervention programs have attempted to deal with the conflict through direct contact between Jews and Arabs in Israel—with inconsistent effects. The current study examined a unique uninational intervention program, conducted separately for Jewish and Arab adolescents, with the aim of cultivating emotional intelligence skills and empathy. The basic research hypothesis was that the intervention would bring about observable improvements in empathy and relationships vis-à-vis members of the other national group (Arabs/Jews). A total of 287 adolescents aged 16–17 (115 Jews and 172 Arabs) participated in the program and the study to assess its initial effects. All participants completed self-administered questionnaires; observations and focus groups were conducted by the researcher. For the Arab participants, the findings showed an improvement in emotional intelligence, empathy toward Arabs and Jews, and relationships with Israeli Jews. Among the Jewish participants, although no statistically significant change in emotional intelligence was observed, there were positive changes in empathy, as well as relationships with Israeli Arabs. The degree of improvement was stronger among Arab participants. In addition, for Arab participants, positive correlations were found for emotional intelligence, empathy toward Arabs and Jews, and relationships with Israeli Jews. These findings support the theoretical underpinning of the effects of empathic skills on intergroup relations, but extend existing knowledge by showing that these skills can foster more positive attitudes and feelings toward members of an opposing national group in situations of conflict, and improve mutual relations. Operational recommendations for the development of future intervention programs were derived from insights gained in the present study.

**Introduction**

The long-lasting Israel-Arab conflict has had a profound effect on many aspects of Israeli society, both materially and psychologically (Kriesberg, 1993; Kupermintz, Rosen, Salomon, & Rabia, 2007; Rouhana & Bar-Tal, 1998). Because Israel is defined as a Jewish state, the Arab minority is often discriminated against in many aspects of their lives (e.g., occupation, health, education) and are denied access to influential positions. In addition, Israeli Arabs struggle to define their identity, torn between their identity as Israeli citizens and their identification with the Palestinian national ethos (Ghanem, 1998). This issue distinguishes them from Jewish Israeli citizens and leads many of them to see the Palestinians citizens as a threat in the context of the national conflict (Ghanem, 1998; Yephthal, 1993). Against the backdrop of the profound and severe effects the Israeli-Arab conflict has had on Israeli residents, it is crucial to change relations between Jews and Arabs living there, and to address deeply ingrained negative attitudes and prejudices toward the other group—for the benefit of all its citizens and the country’s future prosperity.

In the last few decades, several educational initiatives have attempted to cope with the reality of the Israeli-Arab conflict while reducing its negative effects on all Israeli citizens and facilitating co-existence (Agmon, Sagy, & Shneider, 2005; Bar-Tal & Rosen, 2009; Biton & Salomon, 2006; Maoz, 2011; Oppenheimer, 2006). Most of these were based on intergroup contact theory, which states that direct personal encounters between group members are needed in order to improve mutual understanding, perceptions and attitudes (Pettigrew, 1998; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). In the context of the Israeli-Arab conflict, such interventions (e.g., Neve Shalom or Givat Haviva) that focused these encounters on open communication between participants, had inconsistent effects. Some contributed to a reduction of stereotypes and better relations between Jews and Arabs in Israel (Maoz, 2000); others ended up radicalizing the national narrative of each group and strengthening the conflictual atmosphere between them (e.g.,Maoz, 2004).

The main challenges these programs are facing are: the inherent power imbalance between the Israeli Jews and Arabs, the strong national identity of the participants of each group which can trigger intense emotions if perceived as threatened and the program not being adapted to the Arab culture – particularly as it relates to coping with emotions (Maoz, 2004; Suleiman, 2004). In order to overcome these issues, the present intervention was conducted separately for each national group (Israeli Jews and Arabs) and focused on fostering emotional intelligence and empathy. It aimed to foster these social-emotional skills perceived as necessary to improve interpersonal and intergroup relations. The basic premise of the study was that before Israeli Jews and Arabs meet each other – they need to learn to identify, understand and cope with their emotions and be able to empathize with members of the other group. Arriving at the encounter with these skills will allow them to open up to the other group and understand how they see their reality.

**Background**

**Jewish-Arab intervention programs based on intergroup contact theory**

According to intergroup contact theory, in order for encounters between individuals from different groups to succeed, four conditions need to be met: equal status to all participants during the encounter, joint goals, intergroup cooperation, and institutional support. When these principles are adhered to, the encounter between members of different national groups has the potential to improve mutual recognition, understanding, and acceptance; limit bias and the perception that members of the other national group are the enemy; and help create meaningful social cross-group relationships (Ben-Ari, 2004; Emerson, Kimbro, & Yancey, 2002; Pettigrew, 1998; Pickett, Baker, Metcalfe, Gertz, & Bellandi, 2014; Schroeder & Risen, 2014). These positive effects result from the encounters’ emphasis on the human and universal characteristics of all participants, while avoiding any controversial issues, like conflicting national identities or the discrimination against the Arab minority (Ben-Ari, 2004; Emerson et al.; Maoz, 2011; Pettigrew, 1998).

Several challenges diminish the potential outcomes of direct encounters between Israeli Jews and Arabs. First, the power differences between Jews and Arabs inherent in Israeli society make it difficult to create a balanced ground for interaction, which in turn makes it harder to allow a real dialogue between members of both groups (Maoz, 2000; Sagy, 2002; Suleiman, 2004). Moreover, violent events related to the Jewish-Arab conflict occur during encounters (Halabi & Sonnenschein, 2004), often radicalize each side’s national narrative and the perception of the other group as an enemy with illegitimate demands (Pickett et al., 2014; Pilecki & Hammack, 2014). Under such conditions it is very difficult to have an open and direct dialogue between the members of both parties and bring them closer to each other. Another factor that limits the success of direct encounters lies in the fact that most are initiated by Jewish people and as such are conducted according to Jewish culture and norms, which are often not familiar with Arab culture and the needs of Arab participants. And so, a built-in bias in favor of Jewish participants is created, reducing the efficiency of such interactions (Suleiman, 2004).

One possible way to overcome these difficulties is to conduct uninational encounters, where Jewish and Arab participants meet separately, but with the aim of increasing their openness and willingness to initiate or restore relations with members of the other national group. Earlier initiatives included such uninational encounters at the start of the intervention program, as a preparatory step before conducting direct intergroup encounters. For example, Bar-Gal & Bar (1992) found that, for all participants, this process improved self-esteem and encouraged more openness toward members of the other group. Another program that included a combination of uninational and binational encounters in order to improve relations between Jews and Arabs in Israel is Sadaka Reut. This program was conducted over two years with university students. The first year involved primarily uninational activities, in combination with a limited number of binational encounters during special activities. It was during the second year that direct Israeli-Palestinian encounters were conducted. It was found that, by initially conducting uninational encounters, participants were able to increase their awareness and understanding of the life circumstances and motivations of members of the other national group—a process that set the stage for the joint encounters (Ross, 2013).

Thus, a uninational setting provides an opportunity to foster key skills such as critical and reflective thinking, tolerance, empathy toward members of other groups, awareness and sensitivity to human rights, and conflict resolution tactics (Ramsey & Latting, 2005). This type of education can also include learning about other social groups in Israeli society (Bar-Tal, Rosen, & Nets-Zehngut, 2010) and changing the way students see members of a rival group by humanizing its members and legitimizing their needs and wishes (Bar-Tal & Rosen, 2015).

**Emotional intelligence and empathy in the context of intergroup relations**

The intervention program in the current research focused on providing Jewish and Arab adolescents with necessary social and emotional skills and capabilities, in the hope of bringing about an improvement in intergroup relations. This focus stemmed from previous research findings, which have shown that the inherent, mutual hate, anger, and fear rooted in relations between Jews and Arabs constitute a major obstacle to any improvement in the situation (Halperin, 2014). Specifically, the program sought to cultivate emotional intelligence and empathy. Emotional intelligence is defined as the ability to process your own and other people’s emotional information accurately and efficiently. It is composed of four elements: using emotions to promote thinking; understanding (your own and others’) feelings; perceiving and exhibiting emotions (by identifying and registering verbal and nonverbal emotional information); and emotional regulation (Salovey, Bedell, Detweiler, & Mayer, 1999; Salovey, Bedell, Mayer, & Detweiler, 2000; Salovey, Woolery & Mayer, 2001). Previous studies have shown that the existence of group emotional intelligence (a group's ability to develop norms that support emotionally intelligent behavior – i.e. that attends to the emotional needs of each individual member, provides positive regard and appreciation when emotions are expressed appropriately and speak out when they are not) the ability of a group to identify the emotions of its members, to regulate and manage them in a way that will not interfere with its work) encourages sensitivity to the emotions, needs, and concerns of members of another group, and thus enhance positive relationships with them (Druskat & Wolf, 2008).

Empathy is defined as the ability to identify and understand another person’s emotions and to personally experience his/her inner world as one’s own (Davis, 1983; Golman, 2002; Salovey & Mayer, 1990). Empathy was previously found to have a bidirectional relationship to emotional intelligence (Miville, Carlozzi, Gushue, Schara, & Ueda, 2006; Schutte, et al., 2001). Three distinct processes have been previously identified: resonance (the ability to experience the same emotional experiences and emotions as the other person); reasoning (understanding the thoughts and emotions the other person is having, thinking of the reasons for them and concluding what they are a result of); and response (and internal response motivating prosocial behavior) (Zisman, 2009). A number of studies have shown that empathy toward a member of another group (especially following a request to examine an issue through the eyes of that person) reduces prejudice and stereotypes against his/her group members, increases the motivation to help them, and improves relationships with them (Batson et al., 1997; Dovidio et al., 2010; Eisenberg, Eggum, & Giunta, 2010; Hannigan, 1990; Husnu & Crisp, 2014; Shih, Wang, Bucher, & Stotzer, 2009; Zisman, 2009). McDonald et al. (2015) asked Israeli Jewish participants to describe their reaction to an anger-eliciting news story. Participants were then informed of the emotional response of an individual Arab Israeli or of Palestinians in general to the same news story. The shared emotional reaction induced by the study led the Israeli Jewish participants to humanize Israeli Arabs and Palestinians more, and to express greater support for tolerance toward them.

**Social and emotional skills interventions**

Over the last few years, educational institutions around the globe have implemented social and emotional learning interventions with the aim of cultivating skills associated with emotional intelligence and empathy (Castillo, Salguero, Fernández-Berrocal, & Balluerka, 2013; Elias, Bruence-Butler, Blum, & Schuyler, 2000; Kunnanatt, 2004; Payton et al., 2008):

1. Self-awareness: identifying, naming, and evaluating emotions and examining their causes and consequences.
2. Self-management: emotion regulation when coping with stress or conflict while controlling impulses and expressing emotions appropriately.
3. Social awareness: an ability to see things from the view point of another, to express empathy toward him/her, and to identify and evaluate the similarities and differences between oneself and another person.
4. Relationship management: creating and preserving healthy and satisfying relationships that are based on cooperation, and adaptive nonviolent interpersonal conflict management and resolution.
5. Responsible decision-making: decisions that contribute to the welfare of the person and take into account the possible ramifications of the chosen act.

These programs have resulted in improved social relationships among students, in empathy towards others, in prosocial behaviors, and in a reduction in anti-social and violent behaviors as well as prejudice and stereotypes against members of other groups (Castillo et al., 2013; Garaigordobil, 2004; Kessler, 2000; McWilliam & Hatcher, 2004; Rea & Pedersen, 2007; Roffey, 2006). For example, Khuri (2004) designed an intervention that aimed to promote dialogue between Israeli Jews and Arabs through learning emotional, interpersonal, and communication skills (e.g., sharing personal experiences with others, listening non-judgmentally to others). Results showed that all of the participants had changed the way they perceived the members of the other national group and were able to see them as fellow humans with their own needs and emotions (Khuri, 2004).

**Method**

**Principles underlying the intervention program**

The current research presents a unique uninational intervention program that was informed by a number of guiding principles. First, there was a need to create a safe and trusting environment where participants could learn and implement different skills that were relevant to intergroup. Second, the group moderators needed to have a non-judgmental empathic stance that reflected understanding, support, respect, and curiosity. Third, it was also important to build the program around a structured activity process that would gradually build trust and cooperation among participants, establishing open and free dialogue (Bar-Tal et al., 2010; Khuri, 2004). Finally, it was important to exclude from these encounters any direct reference to issues pertinent to the conflict itself—its reasons, history, costs or the different national identities (Bar-Tal et al., 2010; Ramsey & Latting, 2005). The rationale of this approach was that the skills and communication methods learned in a uninational environment would be generalized to the attitudes and relationships between participants of different national groups. In other words, the basic research hypothesis was that, as a result of this process, participants would better understand what motivated them and affected their relationships with other people in general and with members of other national groups in particular; as such they would be more empathic toward the suffering and pain of the outgroup. Ultimately, mutual prejudice and negative attitudes would then diminish, enabling closer relationships between the groups.

**Participants**

The program was delivered to 287 junior and senior high school students (115 in four Jewish groups and 172 in five Arab groups), aged 16–17, at their respective schools in northern Israel. Among the participants in the Jewish groups 36.6% were boys and 63.4% were girls. Among the Arab groups 33.1% were boys and 66.9% were girls..

**Program activities**

The program included 12 encounters lasting 1.5 hours, focusing on the following skills:

1. Emotional intelligence: management and regulation of emotions; expressing emotions in a focused and clear manner; identifying the emotions and needs of other people and appropriate reactions.
2. Empathy: mirroring the emotions of others; active listening; giving an empathic and sensitive response to others without judgment or interpretation; coping with critical or judgmental messages directed toward them.

Following a successful approach from a similar intervention initiative (Garaigordobil, 2004), our program employed different methods, such as arts (drawing, sculpture, simulations, role playing, and photography); movie viewing; exposure to personal stories (of mothers in the other national group); and discussions. This combination of different methods exposed the students to different aspects of themselves and other people around them (including members of other groups. The groups were moderated by school counselors—external to the schools attended by the participants—who were also trained as group moderators. The Jewish groups had one Jewish and one Arab moderator, and the Arab groups had one Arab moderator. The structure and specific methods used in each encounter were preplanned. The first encounters focused on creating a group contract to which all participants contributed and committed. It determined the types of communication and behaviors that would be acceptable to all participants during group meetings, such as active listening, mutual respect, giving feedback, and open expression of emotions. This stage established the group as a safe space for learning and experimenting in emotional skills, allowing the participants to be open without fearing others’ reactions.

**Research design**

The goals of the current research were to examine the implementation and initial effects of the intervention program. Specifically, it sought to identify any changes in the following areas: emotional intelligence, empathy, relationships with members of the other national group, and social relationships among members of the same national group and between groups. Another aim of the research was to determine if there were any relationships between variables.

The research design was mixed method, using both qualitative and quantitative tools (Bates-Marom, 2001). Qualitative tools were used in order to examine the program’s implementation: how it was perceived by the participants; which aspects of the program worked better for them and which did not; what they thought might hinder the successful implementation of the program; and how it affected them. These questions were answered through participant observations and focus groups. First, participatory observations were made by the researcher (who was also the group moderator) for seven Arab groups, and non-participatory observations were recorded for nine other groups (four Jewish and five Arab). Second, focus groups were conducted in three Jewish subgroups and six Arab subgroups, with four participants in each, who met three times at different points in the intervention program to discuss the open questions posed by the researcher.

Quantitative tools were used to assess changes in the variables following the program, and to identify any relationships between the variables in each group. Data collection involved administering a number of questionnaires to all participants in order to obtain information on the following aspects:

1. **Demographic profile.**
2. **Emotional intelligence:** The questionnaire, based on the emotional intelligence model developed by Salovey & Mayer (1990), included 33 items relating to different aspects of emotional intelligence, including evaluation and expression of self and others’ emotions; self and others’ emotional regulation; and use of emotions to solve problems (Schutte et al., 1998). For each of these items participants were asked to rate on a 5-point Likert scale their degree of agreement (from 1 – strongly disagree to 5 – strongly agree). The internal reliability of the questionnaire was measured using Cronbach’s alpha, which was .92 among Jewish participants and .96 among Arab participants.
3. **Ingroup Empathy:** The questionnaire used was the Intergroup Empathy Scale developed by Zisman (2009). This is a 20-item scale examining the three components of empathy: empathic resonance (e.g., “I notice when someone tries to conceal their true feelings”); empathic reasoning (e.g., “I can usually understand the view of another, even when I don’t agree with it”); and empathic response (e.g., “I become sad when I see a stranger in a group standing alone”). The Cronbach’s alpha value for this questionnaire was .89 among Jewish participants and .91 among Arab participants.
4. **Outgroup Empathy:** The same questionnaire mentioned above was used, with subjects asked to rate the items according to the level of empathy they have for members of the other national group.
5. **Relationships with the other national group:** This questionnaire included three separate subscales with different answering methods. The first subscale examined **willingness for contact** and social closeness with a member of the other national group (Schwarzwald & Cohen, 1982). Each participant was asked to rate his/her willingness to do the following activities with an Israeli Arab/Jew: meet, study together, host in his/her home, live in the same neighborhood, and be a friend—on a 5-point Likert scale between 1 (not at all) and 5 (definitely). The Cronbach’s alpha value for Jewish participants was .94 at the beginning of the study and .76 at its conclusion; for Arab participants the value was .90 at the beginning of the program and .81 at its conclusion. The second subscale of this questionnaire, which was based on Rosen’s study (2006), examined **positive and negative stereotypes and images** of members of the other national group. Participants were asked to rate the degree to which the item (e.g., smart, brave, stingy, violent) characterized members of the other national group on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (not at all) to 5 (definitely). For this section, Cronbach’s alphas for Jewish participants at the beginning and at the end of the study were .86 and .87 respectively; the corresponding values for Arab participants were .77 and .84. In the third subscale, participants were asked to rate the degree to which they felt certain **positive and negative emotions** (e.g., hate, affection, guilt) toward members of the other national group. For Jewish participants, Cronbach’s alpha was .82 at the beginning of the program and .83 at its conclusion; the corresponding values for Arab participants were .68 and .73.

**Findings**

**Qualitative Findings**

The qualitative data gathered from the observations and focus groups suggest that participants experienced notable changes as a result of their involvement in the program. One of the most prominent changes observed was in the emotional intelligence of the participants. In the Jewish groups, the social atmosphere and relationships between classmates were negative and even violent prior to program initiation. Following the program, the emotional resonance of the participants had improved and they were better able to see the desires and needs of the other children in the class, which contributed to a more positive and accepting approach toward the interactions between them. In addition, the program helped participants learn to better regulate their emotions, reducing the potential to negatively impact other people. For example, at the beginning of the program the research participants (particularly in the Jewish groups) expressed strong anger and other negative emotions toward other classmates, the teacher, and the school. Later on , it was clear that they had learned to cope with these emotions more constructively, express themselves adaptively, and work toward direct conflict resolution, instead of the flight or fight responses they had used in the past. One manifestation of this change was an increase in their ability to openly share their thoughts, feelings, and personal history. For instance, one of the students opened up about the frequent fights her parents had had when she was a child, which led to their divorce when she was in second grade:

They did not know that my parents are separated and I live with just my father. This was the first time I shared information about my family with them. I was always embarrassed about what was going on in my house and angry at the constant fights between my parents. I used to do everything I could to hide it from my friends. Today I relate to it differently than I used to. I am more open and less reluctant to share. I have enough self-confidence to bring up personal matters inside the group and the listening ear I received from my friends was very supportive.

Other students shared the frustration and difficulties they had experienced during a social boycott against them or other crises in school. Even students who at the beginning of the year were shy and refrained from sharing personal information became more active later on in the discussion and group activities. In addition, at the conclusion of the program the participants felt more empowered and self-confident, believed more in their abilities, and exhibited higher levels of self-efficacy. Similar changes were observed among the Arab participants, although they were less pronounced. This is because that even at the beginning of the program the Arab groups expressed positive emotions toward other classmates, and the class atmosphere was mostly positive and accepting.

Another positive result of the current intervention program was that its participants learned of different groups in Israeli society and in their school, helping them to understand that, despite possible differences between them and members of other groups, all human beings have a lot in common. Specifically, during the program the participants’ perceptions of members of the other national group (Arabs/Jews) improved. At the beginning of the program, the Jewish group members exhibited negative generalized attitudes toward Arabs, saw them as one homogenous group, and resisted talking about them. During the program, especially after discovering that some of their classmates were Arabs (a fact they were not aware of) and while coping with an Arab moderator, their perception of Arabs became less narrow and more balanced. In other words, the Jewish group started seeing and treating Arabs as fellow human beings, in sharp contrast to their initial stereotypes against them. The two statements below, made by focus group participants, illustrate this change:

I will tell the truth. I always thought that Arabs were dirty, ignorant and lacked any understanding. This is how I was brought up and today I am ashamed of having had these thoughts all the time and of how it was presented in the news and papers.

At the start of the meeting I admitted that I believed all Arabs were dirty, liars and ignorant, and today I see how I was so wrong with this attitude and it is not okay to generalize like that and say that all of them are this or that.

One of the processes that especially increased empathy and reduced prejudice toward Arabs in general was the exposure to the personal stories of Arab mothers.

**Quantitative results**

Table 1 presents means and standard deviations for each scale and for each national group before and after the program. Regarding emotional intelligence, the changes exhibited by the Arab participants were more significant when compared with the Jewish participants (F=8.29, p<.01). Regarding empathy toward their own national group, all participants exhibited improvements following the program, but these changes were more significant among the Arab participants (F=6.02, p<.05). Regarding empathy toward the other national group, all participants experienced similar improvements following the program (time effect – F=13.29, p<.001, interaction timeXgroup effect – F=1.15, n.s) but the empathy levels among the Arab participants were lower both before and after the program (national group effect – F=18.55, p<.001).

In addition, Pearson correlations were calculated separately for Jewish and Arab participants in order to examine relationships between the main variables. Among the Arab participants, significant relationships were found between levels of empathy toward Arabs and empathy toward Jews (r=.44, p<.01), and between empathy toward Jews and willingness to have contact with them (r=.49, p<.01). Among Jewish participants, a significant relationship was found between empathy toward Jews and empathy toward Arabs (r=.50, p<.01), but no significant relationship was found between empathy toward Arabs and willingness to have contact with them (r=.17, n.s).

**Discussion**

The current research examined the implementation and initial outcomes of a unique uninational intervention program for Jewish and Arab adolescents. The basic premise of the study was that conducting the intervention separately with each national group and focusing on cultivating emotional skills and empathy – will contribute to stronger empathy towards the other national group and inter-group relations. To a large extent finding supported our hypotheses but the specific results regarding each part of the model will be discussed below while comparing between the effects of the program on its Jewish and Arab participants.

As hypothesized, the program's focus on improving participants' empathic abilities (i.e. empathic resonance, empathic feedback) – resulted not just in higher ingroup empathy but also in higher outgroup empathy. In other words, the skills they learned and practiced in their own national group – of looking at reality from the view point of the other person - were generalized and used with members of the other group. This finding is supported by studies that showed that asking people to look at reality through the eyes of another person (an ingroup or outgroup member), leads them to experience similar emotions and to have a deeper understanding of the underlying motives for their behaviors. As a result, these participants exhibited higher empathy towards that particular person and the group s/he is a member of (i.e. Dovidio et al., 2004; Vescio et al., 2003). Our findings went further and showed that learning and training in empathic skills can be generalized to members of outgroups. The Jewish and Arab adolescents that participated in the study exhibited similar improvements in empathy towards the other national group – even though at both time points the Jewish group's empathy levels were higher than those of the other group. This might show that getting Arab adolescents, who live as a minority group that suffer discrimination, to see reality from the point of view of the Israeli Jews is harder to achieve than vice versa. Another possible explanation to consider is that for the Arab population, the workshop provided one of the first opportunities (if not the first) to talk about their emotions and learn how to cope with their own and other people's state of minds. For this Jewish participants, emotional language is a more natural part of their everyday lives and as such the emotional change they underwent following the program was different. An indication of that is the significantly larger changes in Emotional Intelligence and empathy towards their ingroup that the Arab participants went through compared to the Jewish group. As a result, the Arab participants started the study with a lower empathy level and might have needed more time to implement their new learned skills in order to reach a higher level – more similar to the Jewish participants.

In addition, the program resulted in improved images, feelings towards and willingness for contact with members of the other national group (Israeli Jews/Arabs). For the most part, degree of improvement was related to level of empathy towards the outgroup. In other words, participants didn't just generalize the empathy skills they learned in the program, but it actually changed the way they perceived and felt about the other group. This finding is supported by the theory of empathy according to which looking at reality through the eyes of another person, emphasizes the similarities between him/herself and the other person and how every human being is basically the same. This reduces the feelings that others might be a threat (Holt, 1989; Stephan & Finlay, 1999). As a result, stereotypical thinking and prejudice are reduced, there is a higher willingness for contact with members of that group and relationships between them are improved (i.e. Batson et al., 1997; Eisenberg et al., 2010). The only exception to the relation described was when it came to the association between Jewish participants empathy towards Arabs and improvement in their willingness for contact with them. It seems that the fear of Arabs among Israeli Jews is too intense to change their willingness for contact following empathy training – at least when it comes to adolescents.

However, in contrast to research hypotheses, Emotional Intelligence was not found as related to empathy towards outgroup or to images, feelings and willingness for contact with members of the other national group. These findings were similar in both groups even though the Arab participants experienced a large improvement in the Emotional Intelligence following the program. This might mean that f – only indirectly through its relation with empathy

The improvements found in reduced stereotypes and prejudice between Jews and Arabs following this program were similar and in many ways stronger than those found in previous studies that conducted direct encounters between Jews and Arabs based on the Contact theory (i.e. Emerson et al., 2002; Maoz, 2000). This demonstrates the clear advantage of conducting a uni-national intervention at least as a first step in any co-existence program. One of the major obstacles of previous interventions based on the Contact Theory was the intense hostilities between the Israeli Jews and Arabs which made it hard to get them to see beyond the conflict and focus on the human side. Our findings showed that by conducting a uni-national intervention it was possible to bypass that problem and improve empathy towards members of the other group.

The study showed for the first time that strengthening empathy skills can result in improvements in positive emotions, attitudes, and relations vis-à-vis the outgroup—and other groups in general, even in situations of conflict. These skills can create better social relationships and facilitate co-existence and comradeship between members of different groups, including those in a lengthy, intractable conflict (as is the case with Jews and Arabs in Israel). In other words, even when there is mutual suspicion, fear, and hostility, not to mention a long history of violence, a uni-national group intervention can promote willingness for contact and improve the attitudes and feelings of Jews toward Arabs and vice versa.

The current study had a number of methodological limitations. First, the moderating conditions for the Jewish and Arab groups were not identical. Whereas the Arab groups had one Arab moderator, the Jewish groups had two moderators—one Jewish and one Arab. As a result, the participants in the Jewish group had to cope not only with the intervention itself but also with the implication of interacting with a member of the other national group. Future studies could compare the results of interventions where moderators are of the same national group as the participants, and interventions that include moderators from the other national group. In addition, because the study was conducted only with participants living in northern Israel during a set period of time, it did not allow an examination of the effects of certain participant characteristics or specific security incidents on the success of the program. Future studies should incorporate these factors to enable future programs to be adapted to specific participants and circumstances in order to increase effectiveness.

Future studies should also seek to broaden the findings of this initial research. First, it is important to examine in greater depth the influence that specific cultures with different norms (e.g., as regards expressing emotions, sharing personal history, or in interpersonal relationships) might have on the impact of similar intervention processes. Aside from deepening our theoretical understanding, such studies would enable the intervention program to be adapted to fit the culture of all participants (even if they come from different cultural backgrounds). Second, it would be useful to conduct longitudinal studies to examine the long-term effects of this type of program (e.g., 3, 6, 12 months post-intervention) on participants’ attitudes and feelings toward members of the other national group. This could help ascertain to what extent the changes the participants experienced immediately after the program’s conclusion would be maintained over time, and whether any program effects manifest themselves only after a certain period of time has lapsed. Finally, it is hoped that future research into such interventions would attempt to locate the most effective and significant elements that contribute to an improvement in Jewish-Arab relations in Israel, incorporating these components into future programs.

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