

# “Under the Radar”: How is the Jewish–Arab Conflict Reflected in Internal Jewish Dialogue?

Lipaz Shamo-Nir<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Zefat Academic College, Israel

Correspondence: Lipaz Shamo-Nir, Department of Behavioral Sciences, Zefat Academic College, Israel.

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## Abstract

This study explores the role of intergroup conflict in the identity exploration process among 83 Jewish participants in a dialogue in a multicultural college in Israel. Thematic analysis has shown that the behavior of most of the participants has been affected by the Jewish–Arab conflict as follows: they centered on internal commonalities among Jewish subgroups; they neither engaged in conflict among Jewish subgroups nor explored their Jewish identities, and they expressed confusion regarding who the out-group was: the Jewish subgroups’ members or the Arab students in the college. These findings expand the knowledge about the identity exploration process in a social context of religious–ethnic conflict and may pose a practical contribution to the field of intergroup dialogues and conflict resolution in divided societies.

**Keywords:** identity, religion, intergroup attitudes, self-exploration, Israel, dialogue

## 1. Introduction

Dialogues create a safe environment that can promote positive psychological processes within individuals. The scientific literature points to two dimensions of impact on participants: the psychological processes that occur within individuals (Dovidio et al., 2004) and the intergroup processes (Nagda, 2006). Moreover, research has indicated that dialogues have positive applied results in international, community, and academic settings (Dessel & Rogge, 2008). Additionally, participation in dialogues can promote mutual learning and intergroup relationships among groups even with a history of conflict (Dessel & Rogge, 2008). In fact, studies over the years have shown that intergroup dialogues can improve communication among groups, promote positive psychological outcomes among individuals (Gurin-Sabnds et al., 2012), and reduce hostility between groups that are in conflict (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). However, further investigation is needed to examine the identity exploration processes of the participants in the dialogue, especially in the context of intergroup conflict (Shamo-Nir, 2017a). In this study I will address these issues by exploring the attitudes of participants in a dialogue course in a divided society.

First, previous findings have indicated that participants in intergroup dialogue are encouraged to explore their own and others’ experiences in social interactions (Nagda, 2006), especially in the higher education context (Brunton & Buckley, 2020; Shamo-Nir & Hellinger, 2015). This study will continue this line of investigation by exploring a dialogue course in a multicultural setting in Israel. It should be noted that the intractable Israeli–Palestinian conflict has been influencing mutual attitudes between Jewish people and Arabs living in Israel for many years. Particularly, Arab Muslims who are highly involved in the conflict (Shamo-Nir & Razpurker-Apfeld, 2019; 2020a) report experiencing higher intergroup anxiety than other minorities do (Shamo-Nir & Razpurker-Apfeld, 2020b). Moreover, researchers found that exposure to Muslim or Jewish symbols had negative effects on attitudes toward out-group members (Razpurker-Apfeld & Shamo-Nir, 2015; Shamo-Nir et al., 2021). Therefore, it is important to explore whether and how this multicultural context will be reflected in the dialogue course and the participants’ attitudes.

Second, self-exploration mostly occurs among young adults (Arnett, 2006). In this process, an individual explores his or her worldview and asks general questions about values and the meaning of life (Arnett, 2006). Moreover, because individuals often perceive themselves in a specific social context (Beijaard et al., 2004), self-identity relies on one’s group membership and can be explored in relation to others (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). In most cases, individuals compare their worldviews with their parents’ worldviews (Arnett, 2006) and even explore their belief systems and religious membership (Arnett & Jensen, 2002). However, the findings are unclear regarding which contexts and social processes in young adults’ lives promote dialogue and identity exploration, especially issues

related to an orderly process of ethnic–religious identity development. Additionally, researchers tested identity development among young people in various locations, such as in Europe and North America (Brunton & Buckley, 2020; Meca et al., 2021; Neblet et al., 2019). Hence, the aim of this study is to broaden people’s understanding of self-exploration in the context of intergroup religious conflict. Considering this aim, the research explores the personal process undertaken in a dialogue course among undergraduate students in a multicultural college, followed by two questions: Will personal identity issues arise during the dialogue? And will the participants address issues related to the Jewish–Arab conflict?

## 2. Method

### 2.1 Dialogue Course

The course was composed of group encounters among 18 to 23 students lasting 4 hours each and occurring every week during one semester. Participation in the course was voluntary, and each participant underwent an interview before being accepted. Acceptance criteria included motivation to take part in discourse (the acceptance rate was 95%). The groups were composed of religious, traditional, and secular Jewish students.

### 2.2 Participants and Procedures

Eighty-three undergraduate college students participated in the study. In total, there were 92 participants. Four students dropped out of the study, and 5 students did not submit a final paper. Of the 92 participants, 54 were women and 29 were men. Twenty-three were secular, 27 were religious, and 33 were traditional.

The distinction among the religious affiliations of the participants was based on their self-definitions. It should be noted that although religious and secular affiliations are not limited to Israeli society, traditional Jewish affiliation is unique to Israeli Jewish people. Traditional Jewish people participate in some aspects of Jewish religion without strictly maintaining all Judaic law (*Halacha*), out of solidarity with the Jewish people. That is, these Jewish people maintain *Halacha* customs that are considered symbolic and significant.

The students’ final papers were individually written as part of the course’s requirements for credit. The papers were submitted 2 months after the course ended and included descriptions of students’ experiences during the course. All students were notified of the intention to use their work for research, and they were assured that deciding not to participate in the research would not affect their grades in any way. All personal information was deleted from the papers, and the students’ identities remained confidential.

## 3. Results

### 3.1 Analysis Strategy

The final papers included participants’ open answers about their attitudes and experiences during the dialogue. First, the author and a former facilitator analyzed nine final papers, three from each group (religious, traditional, and secular), to formulate themes and decide which ones to pursue (interrater agreement: 93%). After identifying the major themes, the researchers developed a coding scheme according to which the presence or absence of relevant themes in each paper was marked (Bryman, 2004). The author’s codes were compared with two research assistants’ blind coding, which resulted in an interrater agreement of 89%-95%.

Most of the students (92%) had high levels of willingness to participate in a social interaction with Jewish students and a desire for positive interaction. Thus, throughout the discussions, they addressed and highlighted what they had in common. The desire for a positive and pleasant social atmosphere was expressed in the willingness of all participants to bring refreshments to the meetings and to ensure refreshments were brought to each meeting. The following two themes explain the contribution of the Jewish–Arab conflict to the internal Jewish dialogue and participants’ attitudes toward the members of other Jewish subgroups.

### 3.2 A Desire for Solidarity

Most of the participants (87%) expressed a desire to hold the dialogue within Jewish subgroups. Participant 2 wrote, “It was obvious to me that this group is the best atmosphere to share your personal thoughts. Jewish students are my natural colleagues, but I can say this freely only in a Jewish group.” Furthermore, half of the participants expressed the view that questioning the relationship between the Jewish subgroups would be best done in a “sterile environment” without Arab students present. Regarding this concept, Participant 17 wrote the following:

It was important to ask the questions, mainly questions that can be asked only in a group without the presence of Arabs [ . . . ] it’s like doing the dirty laundry in the family and not in front of the neighbors. For that reason I refused to join to the mix group [Jewish–Arab dialogue course]. Dialogue with your brothers and sisters must come first.

However, some secular participants (15%) expressed disappointment at the unwillingness of the religious and traditional participants to discuss disputes over issues of Jewish identity within Jewish society. Although they recognized the need for a safe space for dialogue, these participants described the atmosphere in the meetings as “artificial homogeneity” that did not allow for “authentic discourse” about the differences between the Jewish subgroups.

### *3.3 Who is the Out-Group in the Dialogue*

The second theme is directly related to the multicultural context in which the meetings were held. Most of the participants (90%) addressed the Jewish–Arab conflict and expressed confusion regarding who the out-group was: the Jewish subgroups’ members or the Arab students in the college. Regarding this concept, Participant 7 wrote the following:

I joined the dialogue course in order to be in a group with only Jews since in all the other courses we study with Arab students. So it was really confusing when we were asked to divide into different groups according to our religiosity level: religious, secular, and traditional. As a religious woman, I was not prepared to see the secular students as members of the opposition group because they are Jews like me, and therefore, it seemed strange to expect us to conduct discussions about our identity in separate groups. After all, we are all in the same boat.

In addition, half of the participants indicated the contact between Jewish and Arab students in college activities was a significant factor in attending the course, along with some concerns. These participants focused on difficulties stemming from studying at a multicultural college and expressed a need to address these issues in the dialogue course without the participation of Arab students, as Participant 31 expressed:

I decided to join the dialogue course after two years of studying in this college and after I got to know some Arabs. Now, I am in a place of uncertainty. This is why I entered the dialogue course, mostly to sort out my head a little. This might be the right place and time to ask questions about relations between Jews and Arabs.

Moreover, many of the participants perceived that the Israeli–Arab conflict was a dominant factor (compared to the internal conflict within the Jewish subgroups), and 60% of the participants wrote that these conditions “make it difficult” for them to explore themselves. For example, Participant 1 wrote the following:

I was confused most of the meetings because I didn’t have the quiet place to deal with myself . . . because of the existence of the Arab students in the college; they were always there in the background, and it was difficult for me to ignore them and to relate to myself.

## **4. Discussion and Conclusions**

The aim of this research was to examine the self-identification process in an ethnically and religiously diverse environment. The findings revealed that participants did not value opportunities for identity exploration through an internal Jewish dialogue because they were engaged in conflict with Arab out-group members. The participants’ solidarity against Arab “others” reinforced their shared feelings of belonging over internal distinctions, contributing to the confusion regarding who the out-group was. These findings expand one’s understanding of the individual and social identity exploration process in a double-intergroup context—namely, among the Jewish subgroups and the Arab out-group.

The presence of Arab students in the wider social context dominated the dialogue, and the participants referred to the Arab students, rather than the other Jewish students in the dialogue group, as “others.” As a result, the participants found it difficult to identify the differences that exist within the Jewish society. This finding is consistent with previous studies that have shown how exposure to religious content is associated with a strong awareness of negative attitudes toward the out-group (Razpurker-Apfeld & Shamo-Nir, 2015; Shamo-Nir & Razpurker-Apfeld, 2019). Moreover, these findings can be explained in light of the unique setting of this study: a multicultural college where there is daily contact between different ethnic–religious groups. These groups—the Jewish majority group and the dominant minority Arab-Muslim group—are characterized by different religions, languages, and traditions as well as additional cultural differences (Shamo-Nir, 2014). Moreover, the ongoing Israeli–Palestinian conflict has been found to intensify the negative attitudes of Jewish people and Arabs (Eiran, 2017), especially when conflicts include religious elements.

As a result, the dialogue has shifted from discussion of Jewish and Israeli identities to discussion of relations with Arabs living in Israel. Hence, the Jewish subgroups emphasized internal commonalities, and differences within the Jewish in-group were minimized. Moreover, it appears that the homogenous composition of the group and the supportive atmosphere among group members were not encouraging conditions for identity investigations and

instead were factors that inhibited the self-exploration process. That is, striving for homogeneity comes at the cost of a false consensus and reduced differences and disagreements between subgroups in Jewish society. Nevertheless, it is possible that the participants perceived the homogeneity and consensuses as necessary conditions for a successful discourse. As a result, they nurtured interpersonal interaction by discussing opposing worldviews and, thus, missed out on the potential for meaningful discourse on their Jewish identities.

Furthermore, although dialogues may be an ideal context in which mutual effects of multiple identities are explored (Sanders & Mahalingam, 2012), the findings showed that the participants were not striving for change from a monolithic view to a complex identity but instead referred to their self-perceptions mainly by relating to members from the Arab out-group. This pattern may be explained by Tajfel and Turner's (1986) model, which emphasizes the centrality of group identity; in the dialogue, participants' social identities received considerable attention by other participants. Moreover, it was expected by participants that the discourse would focus on the identities of the secular and religious Jewish participants, particularly in the current setting and because religion plays a central role in identity exploration processes in Israeli society (Shamoa-Nir, 2017b) among both adults (Razpurker-Apfeld & Shamoa-Nir, 2020) and children (Shamoa-Nir et al., 2021). Surprisingly, the findings of this study did not support this hypothesis. It should be noted, however, that the participants' emphasis on the conflict between Jews and Arabs is consistent with the notion that interreligious group dialogue can provide a safe setting to express attitudes that may be taboo outside the group (Sanders & Mahalingam, 2012).

The findings of this research may be limited because they are based on a sample of undergraduate Jewish students, which makes generalization of the study's findings challenging. However, the analysis of the participants' self-reflections expanded understanding of the identity exploration process in cultural contexts. Nevertheless, further exploration should be conducted among members of different religious groups. Additionally, evaluation of this identity exploration process is recommended at a later stage in participants' lives.

In conclusion, these study findings have expanded people's understanding of individuals' perceptions toward others within intergroup relations. Specifically, the findings have illustrated the complexity and challenges of identity research in a context of ethnic-religious verity. From a practical point of view, the findings may contribute in designing interventions to promote multicultural awareness and positive attitudes among individuals and groups in divided societies.

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