

Storytelling as a Way to Work Through Intractable Conflicts:  
The German-Jewish Experience and Its Relevance to the Palestinian-Israeli Context

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## Abstract

The storytelling method can be used to work through intractable conflicts. Working-through enables people who have suffered traumatic social experiences to learn to live with these painful events while developing an ability to listen to the pain of the "other." The storytelling approach focuses on the way personal storytelling facilitates the working-through processes in intractable conflicts. The storytelling approach was used in To Reflect and Trust (TRT), a dialogue group that began in 1992 and involved descendants of Nazi perpetrators and Jewish descendants of Holocaust survivors. The storytelling method was applied to a year-long Jewish-Palestinian student workshop held at Ben Gurion University in 2000-2001.

## Storytelling as a Way to Work Through Intractable Conflicts:

### The German-Jewish Experience and Its Relevance to the Palestinian-Israeli Context

The major aim of this paper is to demonstrate how storytelling can be used to work through intractable conflicts in intergroup activities. We begin by defining the concept of working-through, then widening it to apply to traumatic social events. Next, the To Reflect and Trust (TRT) group, the group in which the storytelling technique was first used, is discussed and we show how it was later applied in a year-long Jewish-Palestinian student workshop held at Ben Gurion University in 2000/1. We end our paper with a discussion on the ways personal storytelling can facilitate working-through processes in intractable conflicts.

### Working-Through Collective Historical Traumatic Events

The assumption upon which our work is based is that if groups in intractable conflicts are to reach some degree of reconciliation, they must work through their unresolved pain and anger related to the past through intergroup encounters. In the context of intractable conflicts, we define working-through as learning to live with the painful past better than one has up to now. The concept of working-through was initially developed in individual therapy and has been used to explain the laborious psychological process, as opposed to a one-time insight, that an individual must undergo in order to confront repressed childhood experiences. In the absence of this process, the repressed content may continue to interfere with one's feelings, attitudes and behavior (Novey, 1962).

The definition of working-through has undergone changes over the years. When it was first introduced by Freud (1930), he used it to describe the process between patient and therapist. Later on, the concept was widened to apply to traumatic social experiences and PTSD (post traumatic stress disorder) (Danieli, 1988). The goals of the working-through process have also

changed; if the original goal of the working-through process was the letting-go of the influence of the repressed content, the later goal was more modest in that it aimed for the individual to learn to live with the painful traumatic event better than s/he had done before (Lehman, Wortman, & Williams, 1987).

After the Second World War, therapists borrowed the concept of working-through to describe how survivors coped with the traumas originating from the Holocaust and the intergenerational aftereffects of this trauma on the children of the survivors (Danieli, 1988). Later, the concept was used to understand the ways in which Holocaust survivors processed their distress, seeing this processing as a normal delayed reaction to the terrible persecution and losses they had suffered both during and after the Holocaust (Danieli, 1988). Working-through also served those researchers and clinicians who attempted to understand how survivors of social trauma continued to live with their losses and feelings of helplessness, in ever-changing realities (Danieli, 1988; Davidson, 1980). Finally, the concept helped explain the paradox of how survivors often succeeded in normalizing their lives, not showing pathological signs for many years, and then would suddenly become overwhelmed by the surfacing of the repressed contents of the trauma that threatened this functioning (Davidson, 1980).

Working-through the consequences of social trauma has been found to have intergenerational aspects. For example, research has shown that the children of Holocaust survivors were often sensitive to their parents' silence, and a sort of double wall was erected between the two generations (Bar-On, 1995b). Parents did not talk about their experiences and their children did not ask. Even when one side wished to open up a window in their wall, they were usually confronted with the other's wall. In our work, we have found very few spontaneous incidences in which both parties simultaneously opened up windows in their walls, making the

sharing of feelings a possibility.

To date there is very little psychological literature on the working-through process and the intergenerational effects of the Holocaust on the descendants of the Nazi perpetrators. The literature that does exist has explored a number of issues: the ways in which descendants of perpetrators work through their parents' dark past (Bar-On, 1990), the extent to which the atrocities, committed by the descendants' fathers, have been transmitted to their children through a conspiracy of silence (developed for very different reasons than that of the survivors' silence), and how the children have begun confronting and working through this silence (Hardtmann, 1991; Rosenthal, 1993). One reason why there has been so little inquiry into the working-through processes of the second generation of Nazi perpetrators can be attributed to the fact that health professionals have tended to suppress this inquiry, sensing that such research might point to psychological symmetry between children of survivors and children of perpetrators. That is, if both sides were presented as being psychologically burdened by the Nazi era, this thinking might interfere with the moral superiority that the victims had over their victimizers (Bar-On & Charny, 1992). Almost no attempt has been made to discuss these issues or to try and bring children of survivors and children of perpetrators of the Holocaust together into a dialogical, semitherapeutic context. Later in this paper, we will describe one such attempt, showing how the working-through concept was used in a group setting that brought together descendants of Holocaust survivors and descendants of Nazi perpetrators.

As a final note on working-through, we would like to draw the readers' attention to work that has related to the manner in which personal working-through both differs from and is similar to the working-through processes in groups (Bar-On, 1990; 1995a) and to the ways in which the concept of working-through differs from the concept of reconciliation (Bar-On, in press).

### Previous Work: Developing the Method

In this section, we will describe past encounters that attempted to address and work through various levels of intergroup conflicts. The first attempt took place between Germans and Jews and the second attempt took place between Jews and Palestinians in Israel. We describe these encounters in detail to show the workings of the storytelling encounters and to demonstrate how the storytelling technique was adapted for use with Jews and Palestinians.

#### *Storytelling as an Intergroup Method for Working Through the Holocaust*

The TRT (To Reflect and Trust) group, which began its work in 1992, initially brought together descendants of Holocaust survivors from the USA and from Israel and descendants of Nazi perpetrators from Germany (Bar-On, 1993). The group process that evolved was based on the participants' sharing personal stories. This process helped group members work through the abyss that still appeared to exist between Germans and Jews so many years after the Holocaust. The TRT group process will be described, as it evolved from 1992 to 1998. The criteria used for choosing the TRT members is described elsewhere (Bar-On, 1995a).

Six encounters between a group of eight descendants of Holocaust perpetrators and a group of five American and four Israeli descendants of Holocaust survivors took place between 1992-1997. The meetings rotated between Germany, Israel and the USA with each meeting usually lasting between four to five days. The first meeting was devoted to getting acquainted mainly by listening to each other's personal accounts and stories (Bar-On, 1993). The subsequent meetings continued to focus on reflection on these personal and family stories. The types of discourse used during the group interactions were examined for change over time. In-depth explanations of the technique (Bar-On, 2000) and the analysis of these groups (Maoz, 2000) are available elsewhere.

During this joint working-through process, the group developed a common emotional and conceptual language that differed from the separate languages that characterized the communities from which the people came. However, the development of this language created a dilemma for the groups of descendants; members began to struggle with the question: Shall we become an isolated sect, since the communities to which we belong are not yet able to cope with the new understandings that we have gained from our group experiences, or will we have to end this common work in order to remain active members in our communities? Interestingly, this group chose to use the group for support and hoped that their communities would slowly move toward one another arriving at the new “space” that had been created by the group. This decision may help explain why the TRT process was a relatively slow process, one that was only partly acknowledged by their German and Jewish communities several years after the group began its work.

As the group work proceeded, members developed a feeling of mutual trust and respect for one another and this led to a new symmetry between the parties. However, this by no means erased the asymmetry that still existed in people's minds concerning their parents—there were victimizers and there were victims. Although it was difficult for group members to simultaneously maintain these two frames of mind, it was very important to find a way to navigate between them. This process of navigation led to discussions about the relationship between the past and the present and about ways to manage this relationship

This and previous group experiences taught us that we should not try to forget the past, or to rid ourselves of it, once and for all, but that we should look for new ways to live with it—ways that were more conscious, less threatening and self-destructive than our previous attempts (Bar-On, 1990, 1993; Maoz, 2000). This suggests that by working through massive trauma, one does

not let it go, but one finds new ways to live with it. While the Holocaust cannot be undone, the negative impact that it has had on the lives of the descendants can be reduced through conscious working-through processes on a group or on an individual level. Perhaps confrontation with these issues was the TRT's main "product" as it was through this confrontation that the group worked through their joint traumatic past by *becoming* forgiving and by *reconciliating* with one another, rather than by only *talking* about it.

### *Hamburg 1998: Bringing in Practitioners from Current Conflicts*

In 1998 the TRT decided to invite practitioners who work with victims and victimizers of atrocities in current conflicts (South Africa, Northern Ireland and Palestine and Israel) to participate in a joint meeting. The purpose was to see whether the TRT group process of storytelling and reflections on the stories, in an atmosphere characterized by trust, would also be relevant for these other settings. Following the 1998 meeting, it was clear to the organizers of the TRT encounters that each conflict setting had its own biography that had to be carefully studied and taken into consideration. It also became clear that the new group work had to be approached differently than the work that had taken place previously between descendants of survivors and descendants of perpetrators. These insights were gained in the meetings that took place in Bethlehem, PNA, in October 1999 (Adwan & Bar-On, 2001); at Stockton College of New Jersey, in July 2000; and in Northern Ireland, in August 2002.

The original TRT had dealt with the Holocaust, an event that had happened many years ago and that had a clear-cut division between victims and victimizers. While the descendants of the Holocaust were dealing with what still burdened their minds and hearts, they were not involved in a current conflict with one another. In spite of these differences between the Holocaust and the current conflicts chosen for our focus, we found that the TRT storytelling

approach had relevance for the practitioners who were struggling with the processes of peace building (Maoz, 2000). Employing the storytelling method in encounters between members of the opposing sides helped the participants reach deeper underlying issues of their conflicts which political, legal, or financial steps, or time had not succeeded in healing. The expanded TRT experience also showed us that the process of working through the past into the present is an intergenerational process (see Maoz, 2000, for a full analysis of the Hamburg conference). Based on our experiences with the expanded TRT group, we decided to employ the method of storytelling in a university workshop that took place between Jews and Palestinians in Israel. We will now describe the workshop that we facilitated in 2000-2001.

#### Current Work: Storytelling between Jewish and Palestinian Israeli Students

The authors developed a workshop entitled “Life Stories in the Service of Coexistence” for Jewish and Palestinian Israeli students, based on the TRT approach of storytelling. Students were asked to interview members of their parents’ and grandparents’ generations and to present some of these interviews in the classroom. Using theory-related materials, the students analyzed their respective interviews in mixed Jewish and Palestinian couples and wrote a final joint paper based on their analysis.

Where did the idea for this particular seminar come from? For four years, the first author observed Jewish and Palestinian students’ encounters that had been held at Ben Gurion University in Israel. These encounters had been facilitated by practitioners from Neve Shalom who employed the confrontational model (Halabi & Sonnenschein, in this issue). The second author had participated in and had facilitated a number of educational programs for Israeli Jews and Arabs that tried to promote coexistence and dialogue. Both authors felt somewhat frustrated with these experiences and believed that a new attempt was needed for work with such groups. The

workshop presented here describes this new attempt to work through the painful past and to confront each other's reality in a constructive way (Cohen, 1994; 1997).

## Method

### *Participants*

Thirteen Jewish students (nine undergraduates, four graduates; nine females, four males) were recruited from twenty-four Jewish students who had applied to take a class on Jewish-Arab encounters based on storytelling. They were selected on three criteria: previous experience with Palestinian students, and sex and ethnic origin balance. All twelve Palestinian students (ten undergraduates, two graduates; seven females, five males) who applied were accepted. The authors both acted as group facilitators, thus providing a same-group facilitator for each set of students.

### *Storytelling Method*

The storytelling method employed uninational meetings, binational meetings, and lectures.

*Uninational meetings:* Twelve sessions were held during the first semester, four of which were uninational, and twelve sessions were held during the second semester, one of which was uninational. In the uninational meetings, the Palestinian group met with the second author and spoke in Arabic, and the Jewish group met with the first author and spoke in Hebrew. These uninational meetings were deemed necessary because there was a real threat (and a lot of talking among the students) that the Palestinian students would not show up for the workshop due to the events of October 2000 in which thirteen Israeli-Palestinians were killed by the police (see Stephan, Hertz-Lazarowitz, Zelniker, & Stephan, in this issue).

In the uninational meetings the students discussed their fears and concerns and became acquainted with the members of the group. They were also instructed to conduct tape-recorded

interviews with members of their parents' or grandparents' generations using Rosenthal's (1993) biographical method of interviewing. The students were requested to encourage their interviewees to tell their life stories with as little interference as possible and to ask the biographical questions only after the main narration had been completed. The students underwent a short training period in which they interviewed each other in triads, rotating the roles of interviewee, interviewer and observer and reflecting on aspects of these different roles. Students were instructed to transcribe their interviews and bring them to the workshop.

*Binational meetings:* Of the twelve sessions held during the first semester, eight were uninational, and of the twelve sessions held during the second semester, eleven were uninational. The binational meetings mostly consisted of the telling of oral histories. Seven Jewish and seven Palestinian students shared with the entire group the interviews that they had conducted with a member of their parents' or grandparents' generations. The participants then reflected on these stories. The facilitators modeled and attempted to enforce an atmosphere of equality and openness to new information.

*Guest lectures:* Guest lectures were also used in the binational meetings. Marc Ross of Bryn Mawr College (Ross, 2000) talked about his research and observations of ethnic conflicts in France and Northern Ireland. Shoshana Steinberg presented a typology of group dialogue that she developed while analyzing the Jewish-Palestinian workshops that had been conducted by facilitators from Neve Shalom. She showed the participants how these previous workshops had moved back and forth between ethnocentric discourse and other categories of group dialogue, every now and then touching on "dialogical moments" (Steinberg & Bar-On, 2002).

#### *Dependent Measures*

The authors/facilitators took notes during the sessions and made extensive notes after

each. In addition, students were told that they should keep a personal journal in which they would describe on one page what had happened in the group in each meeting. On the second page, they were asked to write down their own reactions to these events. The participants were also given two additional assignments that were to be conducted in mixed Jewish-Palestinian pairs: (1) to read and summarize one article from the course syllabus and to give a joint presentation during the last part of the second semester and (2) to jointly write a final paper comparing their interviews. For this paper, they were asked to incorporate materials from their personal logs and to use these and relevant theories to compare and analyze their interviews. Together these measures were used to form initial impressions of the group process and the role of storytelling in it detailed below.

The authors did not audio- or tape-record the sessions (in such workshops, there is often audio-visual recording of the group process) since they assumed that this might cause apprehension, especially on the Palestinian side.

### *Analytic Techniques*

In the following section, we present an initial description of the changes in the group process, including representative quotations from the participants employing the measures listed above. These quotations are mostly taken from students' journals and final papers. Observations of group feelings, quality of communication, degree of disagreement, and content of the sessions are largely taken from author/facilitators' notes made during and after each session. Examination of these materials allowed the authors to characterize the developmental process of these groups and the role of storytelling in this process.

A more rigorous linguistic analysis focused on identities is currently in process (Litvak-Hirsch & Bar-On, in press). Facilitator notes, student journals and final papers were analyzed

using the hermeneutic case reconstruction method, in which discourse is used to build hypotheses, which then are tested in detail using text analysis (Rosenthal, 1993). The method is based on the assumption that change in the quality of discourse is a sign of cognitive and affective change in the way the other, the self, and the truth are perceived.

## Results

### *Uninational Sessions: Concerns and Fears*

During the initial two uninational sessions, group members were asked to share some of their family background with the other participants before conducting any interviews. In these meetings, the Israeli facilitator observed that Jewish students openly expressed the tension they felt and their concern regarding the events that had happened outside the classroom. They were especially worried that the fatal shootings that had occurred in October would limit the willingness of the Palestinians to meet with the Jewish participants. For example, one Jewish student wondered, "Will they [the Palestinians] be willing to listen to my family story?" (facilitator notes of student comments, first session). The Palestinian facilitator noted that, in the Palestinian group, many students indicated that they were afraid to express their (negative) feelings within a Jewish-dominated university setting and feared that such expressions might jeopardize their future studies.

### *Binational Sessions: Uneven Progress*

As oral histories were told and processed and the workshop progressed, it became clear to the facilitators that the students' perceptions of themselves and of each other were being influenced by the family stories. The facilitators' notes on the topics and content and the students' journals and final papers all led to the conclusion that the sharing of stories contributed to the students' ability to listen to one another and to construct a more complex image of the "other"

than the one usually conveyed through the media. To some extent, the students, especially the Jewish ones, had developed an ahistorical perception of themselves in relation to the other (Adwan & Bar-On, 2001). The Jewish students' responses in the groups and writings showed that they had learned for the first time some of what had happened to Palestinians in Israel since the creation of the Israeli state. Through the Palestinian students' stories, the Jewish students learned for the first time some of what had happened to Palestinians in Israel since the creation of the Israeli state. Some of the Palestinians told stories of family members who were refugees during the 1948 war. Some participants described the period under the military regime in the 1950's and 1960's; others emphasized what current daily life was like for members of an underprivileged minority in Israeli society. Similarly, Jewish stories were told of grandparents who lived through the Holocaust, of others who had immigrated to Israel, some based on their Zionist ideology and others out of necessity and hardship of being refugees that no other country was willing to absorb. The students talked about the difficulties that these family members had in adjusting to a new society and of wars and heroism of other family members (oral histories).

The facilitators' notes of the sessions showed that the Palestinian students first responded by criticizing some of the Jewish stories as being biased: In their perception, the Jewish students emphasized their family's suffering or heroism, but excluded the Palestinians' suffering and heroism, and the Palestinians' perceptions of the past. As one student said, "We have heard so much about your Holocaust, but where are our grandparents' stories of suffering caused by Israeli-Jews? Why do these aspects of the past not appear in your stories?" (facilitator notes of student statements). However, from their reactions in the group and their journals, it became clear that the Palestinian participants listened closely to the Jewish stories with which they could identify and toward which they felt empathetic. For example, their writings showed that some

could identify with the story told by a Jewish participant about her father who had immigrated from France and who still does not feel at home in Israel. A Palestinian student reacted in the session in which this story was read by saying that she, too, did not feel at home here in Israel (facilitators' notes of student statements). Though the background was different for the two participants (immigration versus persecution), the common image of rootlessness elicited feelings of empathy and openness on both sides (as it had in the German-Jewish TRT group described above).

As another example, when a Palestinian student described how her family avoided evacuation from their hometown in 1948 and then were later forced to live in a ghetto, a Jewish participant responded with the comment that her father had grown up near that ghetto and that he used to describe it very vividly in a positive way (facilitator notes of student comments). After hearing the Palestinian's story, that Jewish participant's journal entries showed that the story forced her to re-examine the stories that she heard from her father and the reasons for the discrepancies that existed in the ways both fathers constructed their past (Litvak-Hirsch & Bar-On, in press).

Progress toward true communication and shared understanding was not linear. When the Jewish and Palestinian Memorial Days arrived in April-May, new difficulties arose. The difficulties reached a peak when the Palestinian group asked the Jewish group to stand with them for a moment of silence as part of their new Al-Naqba ritual (thereby adopting a Jewish ritual that is used on Holocaust Memorial Day). The Jews did not join in and this created a traumatic experience for the Palestinians in the group (facilitators' notes on student statements, student journals and final papers). Questions such as the following were examined in the Palestinian students' journals: "Can the Jewish participants only talk about what they learned from the

Palestinians' stories, but not implement behavioral changes?" "Had we only imagined that we were becoming closer to one another through our storytelling?"

Some of the Jewish members felt a severe inner conflict about this issue, which was expressed in the group and in their journals and final papers. On the one hand, dominant collective Zionist values, which they deeply held, made it impossible for them to accept Al-Naqba as a day of mourning. On the other hand, the new intergroup solidarity that had begun to develop as a result of the group process made them feel guilty for not being able to commemorate Al Naqba with their Palestinian counterparts. The students did not find a way to resolve the conflict at that meeting. S\_\_\_\_\_ (a Jewish participant) wrote in her journal, "I wanted to join them (the Palestinians) but could not withstand the (Jewish) group pressure. Later, I thought we could suggest that whoever wants could go, but no one said it." The two groups worked through this crisis during the following joint sessions (facilitator notes on group process, student journals, and final papers). A few Palestinian participants voiced their anger--an anger that had never before been verbalized so clearly in the group (facilitator notes on student statements). Some of the members of the Jewish group apologized for their reaction and said that they believed that in the future they would join the Palestinians in their mourning (students' journals).

The intergroup process did not happen in a vacuum: there was a war outside and, at times, external violent events disrupted the workshop processes and made it difficult for the two sides to listen to one another's stories. On the basis of previous storytelling groups, the facilitators know that violence led immediately to recriminations, accusations, and claims of injustice on both sides (Bar-On, 1990, 1993; Maoz, 2000). At times, external events and internal voices became interwoven with one another to interrupt the communication that had evolved in the group (Zupnik, 2000), rendering as storytelling only part of the process.

Several meetings were actually devoted to political clashes of an ethnocentric nature (Steinberg & Bar-On, 2002) during which each group tried to obtain control over what could be claimed to be just, true and relevant. For example, when a Palestinian participant declared that he did not believe in coexistence, this declaration alarmed some of the Jewish group members because it mirrored what they felt was taking place outside the group in their daily lives (facilitator notes on group conversation, student journals). They saw this declaration as reflecting the stance of other Palestinians, in Israel and in the PNA, that the Palestinians totally rejected the idea of the Jewish State. There were other moments of fear and despair. After a suicide bombing killed twenty-three teenagers at a discoteque in Tel Aviv, some Palestinian participants heard news broadcasts in which Jews were shouting in “death to Arabs.” In the group, these students expressed fear of what might happen to them (facilitator notes on student statements). A Jewish student also spoke about what this bombing had done to her, saying that she felt that she had totally regressed back to where she was at the first encounter (facilitator notes on student statements).

As a rule, the facilitators tried to bring the group back to the storytelling mode, but several students felt that by doing so, the facilitators were trying to stop the "real thing" from happening (facilitator notes of student statements, student journals). That is, they felt that the facilitators were trying to prohibit one group from winning this power struggle. For example, a Palestinian male wrote in his journal, “We wanted to discuss politics, because that was what was happening outside the workshop, but Fatma and Dan tried to bring us back to our storytelling.” However, the students’ journals showed that in a way, the ethnocentric discourse had a positive function for the group: it clarified for them how far apart the positions were and that there can be no winner. The participants also learned that this power struggle only brings about a kind of group fatigue

(student journals and final papers). One of the Jewish participants wrote, “This constant struggle about who is more a victim of the other brings us nowhere. Perhaps we should try something else.” This discovery may have led these students to search for other ways to continue their group work.

The guest lectures were intellectual interventions that proved useful to the participants. They provided them with concepts that they could use in their reflections on what had happened earlier in the group and what was happening in the “here and now” (student journals and final papers). For instance, a Jewish female wrote in her journal, “Shoshana’s typology suddenly clarified for me that (its) not only our group (that) gets stuck in such endless discussions about politics and other issues we cannot resolve. It also gave us hope that we are on the right track in what to look for.” Said another, “When we listened to Shoshana I suddenly could account for events that happened in our group as well and which I did not understand until now” (final paper).

There were also many positive expressions. For instance, some Jewish participants said that the group meetings encouraged them to read more about the roots of the conflict and to listen more intensively to the news. Some of the members also stated that they tended to present more "dovish" views outside the group, in contrast to the more "hawkish" views they had expressed earlier in the group discussions (facilitator notes on student statements).

#### *A Summary of Successes and Failures*

This workshop enabled students to learn about their own family’s history and about the origins of their own identity construction. Most of the Jewish students emphasized that the group process was important in that it enabled them to learn about the Palestinian “other” of whom they had been ignorant (student journals, final papers). One Jewish male participant wrote, “This was my first opportunity to learn something about what their families went through during the 1948

war Until today, I only heard about our heroic war.” Through this group process, the Jewish students began clarifying for themselves some of the aspects of their construction of identity that had previously been ambiguous (Helmes, 1990; Bar-On, 1999).

Some of the Palestinian students described another process. By interviewing family members, they learned more about their own families and this knowledge strengthened their ties and identification with their collective (student journals). For example, one Palestinian female student wrote, “I found out many things that my grandfather and parents never told me about how difficult a time they had during the (1948) war. Now I want to find out even more, and I feel it has strengthened by identity as a Palestinian.” The storytelling approach used in the workshop made it possible for the Palestinian to acknowledge aspects of the Jewish stories that up until the workshop, had been unknown to them or difficult for them to understand (final papers and student journals). A Palestinian female student wrote, “When N\_\_\_ (Jewish participant) spoke about her father’s feelings of not being at home in Israel, I could identify with that feeling. For the first time I felt that Jews are not only enemies, but have similar feelings to those I have.”

Negotiation around what is a “good story to tell” became an important issue in this process, probably relevant also to other similar learning situations (Cohen, 1997). Based on our experiences with these groups, it is clear that only certain stories opened up an emotional and empathic dialogue (facilitators’ observations). In the case of the Jews, these stories tended to present recognition of shortcomings or internal human dilemmas (i.e., the issue of rootlessness). In the Palestinian case, these stories highlighted experiences of personal oppression (i.e., the experiences of being a refugee since the 1948 war).

One of the successes of the storytelling method was the exposure of internal group differences, which surfaced in both the Jewish and the Palestinian groups—a facet of group

process that is usually difficult to achieve in encounter groups. The uninational meetings that we held in the Jewish-Palestinian workshop also contributed to this aspect. These meetings gave the Palestinian group opportunities to discuss internal differences and to decide whether or not to voice them in front of the Jewish group (Palestinian facilitator's notes). Because the storytelling process allows for the development of deep emotional involvement and a level of mutual trust, using this approach probably made it more difficult for group members to talk only about their collective group identities, thus making it possible for more complex internal group differences to surface.

One limitation of the storytelling approach is that it is time- and energy-consuming. Many Jewish and Palestinian participants mentioned also that a longer time span was needed in order to work through the issues and to bring about long-lasting effects of the group process (final papers). Another limitation of the storytelling approach is that it is sensitive to violent external events. When there are *new* outbreaks of violence, it becomes extremely difficult for group participants to try to work through the *past* and to maintain trustful intergroup relations.

### Discussion

In this section we compare the results of this workshop to other TRT workshops. We focus on the following issues: (a) the relevant contexts and goals of the TRT group encounter, (b) the challenges faced by the participants, (c) the role of the facilitators, and (d) the meaning of working-through for each group.

#### *The Context and the Goals*

When participants from current conflicts were invited to join the TRT work, the TRT group had to learn how to deal with issues that were relevant for these conflicts. This was because these conflicts not only differed from that of the original TRT context, but because they also

differed from one another (Bar-On, 2000). The participants came from societies in which the conflict was still ongoing or from societies that were still dealing with important unresolved social issues. Furthermore, the differentiation between victims and victimizers was often blurred. The new members lived and worked in regions in which people from both sides of the conflict often felt that they were victimized by the other and in which people were unable to take responsibility for their role in the victimization. In addition, in the current conflict regions, an asymmetry in power also contributed to this aspect. These meetings gave the Palestinian group opportunities to discuss internal differences and to decide whether or not to voice them in front of the Jewish group. Because the storytelling process allows for the development of deep emotional involvement and a level of mutual trust, using this approach probably made it more difficult for group members to only talk about their being victimized, thus making it possible for more complex internal identity constructions to surface.

Despite these differences, we found that the storytelling approach used by the TRT had relevance for the members of the current conflict group. Participants were able to learn from the TRT experience how to bring in the past without disrupting the present. They also learned how it was possible to create a sense of trust that enabled them to listen to the others and, in some cases, even to identify with them. The storytelling approach also highlighted the intergenerational aspect of the conflict and the tension that existed between the micro process that was taking place in a sheltered group atmosphere and the processes taking place on the macro, societal level.

#### *The Challenges Faced by the Participants of the Workshop*

Adapting the TRT process to an educational program designed for Jewish and Palestinian Israeli students can be seen as an additional outcome of the original TRT group process. In this workshop, young adult students were involved, not practitioners or middle-aged descendants of

the Holocaust. Although the students, like the original TRT members, had volunteered to participate in the group process, many of them had no previous experience in trying to work through the Palestinian-Israeli conflict with people from the “other side.” These young adults were at the developmental stage in which they were still constructing their individual and collective identities (Litvak-Hirsch & Bar-On, in press). Perhaps for that reason, in comparison to the older members of the TRT, they were less able to reflect on the group process and its relation to the external conflict and to understand the processes that the other group was undergoing (Bar-On, 1999).

The Jewish-Palestinian workshop also posed different technical problems than those faced by the TRT group, and these technical considerations impacted the group process. The workshop took place in a different time span than that of the TRT encounters; the group work was adjusted to fit into one academic year with no further obligation or commitment on the part of the participants to continue on with their joint work after the year ended. This seminar also included academic requirements. Because the participants were graded for their work, the facilitators had to insure that (a) the students demonstrated an understanding of the concepts they were taught in the formal learning sessions, that (b) they knew how to write academic papers, and that (c) they were capable of understanding and presenting theoretical material to their classmates. We translated the TRT process into this context by creating additional opportunities for the participants to analyze their interviews and stories and to have encounters with one another by giving them the task of having to learn how to write a paper together about their interviews.

### *The Role of the Facilitators*

The facilitators of the students' workshop used their TRT experiences to help them foresee and manage situations, especially during critical moments, such as in the Al Naqba crisis described

above. We assume that facilitators without such experiences would be less prepared for such crises. The TRT experience helped us demonstrate to the participants how stories from both sides could be acknowledged, and in doing so, we helped create an atmosphere of trust and acceptance that made reflection on and acceptance of the stories possible. However, we also had to undergo some “unlearning”; we had to teach ourselves not to expect the students to follow in the footsteps of the TRT group.

The TRT experience also helped the facilitators take into account the emotional needs of their students in this delicate process of storytelling. For example, both facilitators felt a great responsibility to care for the participants of the other group. Therefore, at times, the Palestinian facilitator supported a Jewish participant who felt under attack, and the Israeli facilitator tried to legitimize the feelings that were behind radical anti-Jewish statements made by a Palestinian student, even when these positions were hard for certain Jewish students to accept.

A comparison of the learning process that took place in the original TRT group and in the Jewish-Palestinian students’ group shows that many of the issues were context-related and could not be transferred from one context to the other. However, issues such as rootlessness, the difficulty in confronting the victimizer within oneself, the acceptance of kinds of suffering as different and not something to be scaled, and the tension that exists between group processes and the external hostile reality seemed to be universal. These issues surfaced through the telling of family stories in almost every conflict setting. Still, the Jewish-Palestinian students’ group had its own characteristics: It needed time to warm-up, to delve into political discussions, to develop crisis situations and to find ways to work through these crises. It is important to remember that this workshop took place during a difficult time in Israeli-Palestinian history: It began during a time of extreme violence in which it was difficult for the participants to put that aside and just talk

about and listen to family stories. But the timing of this workshop also motivated the members of both groups to look for and find ways to work through the threatening external reality. The violent events taking place outside the seminar were also difficult for the facilitators to deal with. At times, they began their weekly pre-seminar planning by sharing feelings of anger and frustration about the daily violence.

### *The Meaning of Working-Through for Both Intergroup Processes*

For the Jewish and Palestinian students, working through the past meant, first of all, to acknowledge and listen to stories of the other side and to develop an ability to tie them into their own narratives. The Jews learned not to focus solely on their own pain (i.e., during Holocaust Memorial Day) and they learned to address some of the pain that the Palestinian students expressed on Al Naqba Memorial Day (student journals). Confronting the mutual painful history also helped the students address the present conflict. The group developed its own collective memory out of the personal stories that were told and reflected on. This led to the development of a joint space through which the participants' narratives could be accepted. This space also helped filter out some of the frustration and helplessness that accompanied the external violent outbreaks taking place (facilitators' notes).

The encounters with the Palestinian members added new dimensions to the intergroup working-through process, especially in terms of acknowledgement and legitimation of the other. The Palestinian members of the group expressed their own gains from the group process (student journals and final papers). They developed the ability to move away from the dichotomous belief that "we are the victims and they the perpetrators." The group process helped them come to the understanding that the world is complex and that some of the descendants of the victimizers suffer from the atrocities their parents had committed (Adwan & Bar-On, 2001).

In summary, we see the storytelling intervention for groups engaged in working-through intractable conflicts as a transformative process that has the potential for leading to the building of relationships between the groups. Clearly, our work constitutes only a first step, because in order for reconciliation to take place on a wider level, more extensive microlevel acts of intergroup recognition will have to follow, such as the symbolic acts of taking responsibility and forgiveness (Bar-On, in press). In spite of its limitations, the wide applicability of the storytelling method is promising because it can be used to address current conflicts that have a long history, such as the conflict between Jews and Palestinians.

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### Author Biographies

DAN BAR-ON is a Professor of Psychology at the Department of Behavioral Sciences at Ben-Gurion University, where he served as Chair of the Department between 1993-1995. In 1985 he launched a pioneering field research in Germany, studying the psychological and moral after-effects of the Holocaust on the children of the perpetrators. His book *Legacy of silence: Encounters with children of the Third Reich* was published in 1989 by Harvard University Press and has since been translated and published in French, German, Japanese and Hebrew. Since then, Bar-On has brought together descendants of survivors and perpetrators for five intensive encounters (the TRT group, shown by the BBC on TimeWatch, October, 1993), as well as students from the third generation of both sides. His book *Fear and hope: Three generations of Holocaust survivors' families* was published in Hebrew, English, German and Chinese. His last book *The indescribable and the undiscussable* was published in 1999 by Central European University Press. He is the co-director of PRIME (Peace Research Institute in the Middle East) near Beit Jala, PNA, with Professor Sami Adwan of Bethlehem University. Together he and Katma Kassem received the Alexander Langer Prize in Bolzano Italy for their efforts in Peace Building between Palestinians and Israelis in June 2001. Bar-On also received the 2003 Remarque Peace Prize in Oesnabruck, Germany.

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