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## “Victims” Versus “Righteous Victims”: The Rhetorical Construction of Social Categories in Historical Dialogue Among Israeli and Palestinian Youth

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*Informed by social identity theory and a rhetorical approach to the study of social category construction in social interaction, this study analyzed the nature and function of participant utterances in two conditions of intergroup dialogue about history between Israelis and Palestinians. Across conditions that sought to either emphasize recategorization into a common in-group identity or subcategorization into mutually differentiated identities, Palestinian and Arab Israeli utterances primarily reflected the theme of victimization, while Jewish Israeli utterances primarily reflected themes of justification and victimization. The way in which these utterances produced social competition for victim and perpetrator roles and reproduced master historical narratives of Palestinian victimization versus Jewish Israeli “righteous” victimization is illustrated. Findings are discussed in terms of the role of narrative and rhetoric about social categories in settings of intractable political conflict, and implications for dialogue-based intervention about history are addressed.*

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**KEY WORDS:** Israel-Palestine conflict, history, identity, social categorization, intergroup contact, discourse analysis, rhetoric, victimization, narrative

As a scientific discipline, political psychology is concerned with the relationship between particular political configurations and accommodations (e.g., government, public policy) and the mental—the stuff of thought, feeling, and motivated, situated action. A recent significant movement in political psychology concerns the increasing centrality of the idea of *narrative* as a mechanism through which to interrogate this complex and dynamic relationship between politics and the mind (Hammack, 2008; Hammack & Pilecki, 2012). Scholars have increasingly argued (and demonstrated empirically) that narratives represent sense-making devices of the social and political world that individuals call upon as they explain, justify, and legitimize their political behavior, be it related to their decision to vote for a particular political candidate or to engage in acts of political violence (e.g., Andrews, 2007; Couto, 1993; Hammack, 2010; Witteborn, 2007). The stories with which individuals engage as they ascribe a sense of purpose to their acts tell us much about the nature of human political behavior and contribute to our larger theoretical concern with the relation among politics, mind, and action.

In this article, we examine the way in which narratives that explain and justify violence are deployed in conversations about history among Israeli and Palestinian youth, seeking to apply this rich theoretical perspective on narrative and politics to the naturalistic setting of an existing program ostensibly seeking to alter the rhetoric of conflict through conversation. We addressed three research questions in this study. What are the dominant themes that emerge in historical dialogue among utterances of Israeli and Palestinian youth? How does this thematic content construct social categories of “Israeli” or “Palestinian” that might either challenge or perpetuate the intractability of conflict? Finally, do the thematic content and the social categories that emerge through discourse *vary* as a function of dialogue-facilitation paradigm? In other words, is there a type of intergroup dialogue that more effectively challenges the polarized nature of intergroup social category construction and thus *interrupts* the tendency for groups to vie for status and power in an intergroup interaction (Tajfel & Turner, 1986)?

The key theoretical and empirical work with which we are engaging in social and political psychology thus centers on (1) sociopsychological perspectives on intractable conflict, (2) the rhetorical perspective on social categorization, (3) and intergroup contact. Our intent is to bring political psychology’s increasing commitment to a narrative epistemological approach to mind and politics to bear upon a social intervention that has become increasingly common in settings of intractable conflict—the intergroup dialogue encounter. In this way, we seek to produce knowledge that can both reveal the utility of a narrative approach in political psychology and hopefully inform practice aimed at social and political change.

### *The Sociopsychological Infrastructure of Conflict*

What themes posited as part of the sociopsychological infrastructure of conflict dominate dialogue about history among Palestinian and Israeli youth? This question is central to our aim of interrogating the relationship between discourse that proliferates at the collective or societal level and rhetoric mobilized in intergroup dialogue. According to Bar-Tal (2007), societies engaged in conflict develop a *sociopsychological infrastructure* that is marked by the institutionalization and dissemination of widely shared societal beliefs, attitudes, motivations, and emotions related to the conflict. Historical narratives constructed as part of the sociopsychological infrastructure are comprised of collective memories that reflect four themes: justification, positive differentiation, delegitimization, and victimization (Bar-Tal, 2007).

The theme of *justification* refers to content that justifies the outbreak of conflict, usually by placing blame on the rival group, and the course of its development (Bar-Tal, 2007). This theme can also refer to content that provides justification in anticipation of, or in direct response to, threats posed by the rival historical narrative (Rouhana, 2004). The theme of *positive differentiation* refers to content that glorifies, praises, and presents an overall positive image of the in-group. The theme of *delegitimization* refers to beliefs that categorize rival groups into extremely negative social categories reflected in depictions of rival group members as immoral or inhuman and their behavior as intransigent and irrational (see also Bar-Tal & Hammack, 2012; Pilecki & Hammack, 2011). Lastly, the theme of *victimization* refers to content that emphasizes acts by the rival group against the in-group. Doing so not only serves as a juxtaposition in which the justness of in-group goals are contrasted with the purported “wickedness” of the rival, but it also reenforces the belief that the conflict is one that was imposed upon the in-group (Eidelson & Eidelson, 2003).

There is an emerging body of research illustrating the specific role that victimhood beliefs serve in perpetuating conflict between groups. According to Noor, Shnabel, Halabi, and Nadler (2012), groups often desire to show that they have suffered more at the hands of the out-group than vice versa. This process, which Noor et al. (2012) term *intergroup competitive victimhood*, is marked by competition over an exclusive “victim” label. Researchers have noted the effects of competitive

victimhood. Within the post-conflict context of Northern Ireland and Chile, Noor, Brown, Gonzalez, Manzi, and Lewis (2008) found that competitive victimhood was negatively correlated with intergroup forgiveness. In addition, using a sample of Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland, Noor, Brown, and Prentice (2008) found that competitive victimhood was related to decreased out-group trust and greater in-group identification. These two outcomes were in turn found to be negatively correlated with intergroup forgiveness and positively correlated with legitimizing beliefs regarding violence against the out-group (see also Wohl & Branscombe, 2008). Thus, research has shown that competition over victimhood has deleterious effects on intergroup relations, particularly with respect to intergroup reconciliation in postconflict settings.

Although research employing a sociopsychological infrastructure framework has begun to flourish (e.g., Bar-Tal, Raviv, Raviv, & Dgani-Hirsh, 2009; Halperin, Bar-Tal, Nets-Zehngut, & Drori, 2008; Halperin, Canetti-Nisim, & Hirsch-Hoefler, 2009; Hammack, Pilecki, Caspi, & Strauss, 2011), there is a noticeable dearth of research on historical narratives of intractable conflict. In addition, no research has examined the emergence of sociopsychological infrastructure elements within contexts of intergroup dialogue or their effect on the dialogue process. Our study aimed to address both of these gaps in the literature by analyzing the historical discourses that emerge in the context of dialogue. In the case of the Israel-Palestine conflict, a conflict marked by mutually exclusive national claims as well as mutual identity denial (Kelman, 1999; Rouhana & Bar-Tal, 1998) and delegitimization (Oren & Bar-Tal, 2007), historical narratives represent a platform upon which national identity is emboldened and rival identities are denigrated (see also Bar-Tal & Salomon, 2006).

### *The Rhetorical Construction of Social Categories*

The question of the relative deployment of themes of justification, victimization, delegitimization, and positive differentiation in historical dialogue is purely descriptive. Through this question, we ask what is happening in intergroup interaction. To move a step further, we seek to interrogate *why* certain themes are deployed more or less often than others. In other words, we move from an empirical concern largely with interpreting the meaning of *particular* utterances to a concern with the larger *interpretive repertoires* (Potter & Wetherell, 1995) clusters of those utterances reveal. In this aspect of our analysis, we are informed by rhetorical and discursive approaches to social categorization.

Billig (1985) argues that social categories do not reflect the natural differences that exist among groups but rather those that have been put forward via argumentation. From a discursive perspective, Edwards (1991) argues that categorization is something done via talk to accomplish particular social actions (persuasion, blamings, denials, refutations, accusations, etc.). As a result, categorizations should not be examined for what they *are* but rather what they *do*. As such, categorizations are often linked to political projects that attempt to define relations among groups (Reicher, 2004; Reicher & Hopkins, 1996, 2001a, 2001b) for the purposes of legitimizing inequality and/or intergroup violence (Tileaga, 2006). Thus, processes of social category construction underlie efforts to justify and/or legitimize unequal or antagonistic relations between groups.

The content with which in-group and out-group social categories are constructed is often derived from the prevailing ideological frameworks that exist within a society (Van Dijk, 2006). In this regard, the narratives that comprise the sociopsychological infrastructure constitute an ideological framework from which the content used to construct conflict-maintaining social categories emerges. In terms of peace-education interventions such as the one we examine in this study, intergroup contact under optimal conditions is supposed to challenge such constructions, thereby decreasing prejudicial attitudes (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew, 1998). However, some argue that the contact setting, particularly set in a larger context of intractable conflict, represents a forum for the reproduction of

intergroup relations as they exist on the macro level, making the contact setting a site of social competition (Halabi & Sonnenschein, 2004a, 2004b; Suleiman, 2004a). The contact setting can thus be viewed as a site in which social categories are rhetorically constructed and deconstructed, reified and challenged.

### *Paradigms of Intergroup Dialogue*

A central aim in this study was to compare this process of category construction as it occurred in the naturalistic setting of an existing intergroup-contact program across two different conditions of dialogue. Although intergroup contact has long been conceived as a tool to affect the categorization process (Allport, 1954; Brewer, 1996), no studies have actively examined the process of category construction through rhetoric in intergroup dialogue. Rather, intergroup-contact research has focused almost exclusively on the individual as a unit of analysis, rather than the dialogic content of contact. The focus on individuals has largely taken the form of studies of outcome, typically involving self-reports of out-group prejudice in a simple pre- and posttest design (for a review, see Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006, 2011). Scholars of intergroup contact have increasingly argued for the need to interrogate the meaning participants make of contact and to develop novel research designs, including those that rely primarily on qualitative methods (Dixon, Durrheim, & Tredoux, 2005). There is also a need to examine differential approaches to contact, since social psychologists have increasingly recognized that divergent approaches exist in practice (Maoz, 2011). Our study addresses this need by situating our level of analysis at the *utterance*, rather than the individual, and examining the differential discourse which emerges in two distinct approaches to contact.

Two common approaches to intergroup contact are grounded in distinct social psychological theories, both of which have divergent goals with respect to social categorization. The first approach, which Maoz (2011) labels the *coexistence* model, is founded on Allport's (1954) contact hypothesis and seeks to promote mutual understanding and tolerance, foster positive intergroup attitudes, and reduce prejudice. In the *coexistence* approach, facilitators seek to promote a sense of commonality among groups in conflict through the *recategorization* of participants into a common, superordinate in-group identity (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000; Maoz, 2011). This approach, in accordance with traditional approaches to contact in social psychology which emphasize decategorization and stereotype reduction (e.g., Brewer & Miller, 1984), emphasizes the encounter as between distinct individuals who are united in their membership in a third category—in this case, the category of “peacemaker” or individual committed to peaceful coexistence. Facilitator interventions in this approach are aimed at challenging utterances which suggest monolithic or ethnocentric category constructions.

In the second approach to dialogue facilitation, which Maoz (2011) labels the *confrontational* approach, facilitators seek the *mutual differentiation* of groups in order to emphasize that participants serve as group representatives rather than distinct individuals or members of a superordinate identity (see Hewstone & Brown, 1986)—a process Brewer (1996) terms *subcategorization*. This approach is modeled upon social identity theory's key finding that mere categorization into arbitrary groups is sufficient to activate in-group bias (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Hence, this approach views category constructions as indicators of collective needs and processes, rather than as evidence of “dysfunctional” or “intolerant” thought (see Hammack, 2009a). The encounter is thus a forum for the discursive reproduction of intergroup relations as they exist beyond the immediate contact setting (Halabi & Sonnenschein, 2004a, 2004b; Suleiman, 2004a). Facilitators in this approach model their interventions upon these basic assumptions and premises and thus focus on reflections of collective processes and needs.

A core difference between the two models is the extent to which intergroup competition within the dialogue setting is viewed as normative. According to social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner,

1986), individuals seek a positive social identity, which is engendered through comparisons with relevant out-groups on dimensions that the in-group compares favorably. As a result, heightened in-group identification and identity polarization occur in settings in which group membership is made salient and can be identified in utterances related to social categories. Whereas the *coexistence* approach tries to limit this type of competition by avoiding issues that may drive groups apart, instead focusing on that which groups hold in common (e.g., desire for peace), the *confrontational* approach views intergroup competition as a means to address and eventually recognize the differences that exist between groups and perpetuate conflict (Halabi & Sonnenschein, 2004a, 2004b).

We investigated the extent to which these divergent paradigms of intergroup dialogue indeed resulted in distinct rhetorical processes related to social categorization and social competition. In the *coexistence* paradigm, we expected that master historical narratives which serve the maintenance and reproduction of stereotypes would be challenged by facilitators. As a result, national category constructions would reflect the common in-group identity sought in the *coexistence* group while social competition between Jewish Israeli and Palestinian participants would be attenuated. Because they view the encounter as a site in which the dynamics of conflict are inherently reproduced (Suleiman, 2004a, 2004b), we expected that facilitators in the *confrontational paradigm* would not actively discourage competition for status and recognition via the mobilization of historical narrative within the dialogue setting. Thus, we anticipated that dialogue would be characterized by the formation of distinct in-group and out-group national categories that reflect the goal of mutual differentiation indicative of the *confrontational* paradigm.

### *The Current Study*

To summarize, the purpose of our study was threefold. First, we aimed to compare the thematic content, as outlined in Bar-Tal's (2007) sociopsychological infrastructure, of the historical narratives deployed in Israeli-Palestinian dialogue following two distinct facilitation paradigms (*coexistence* vs. *confrontational*). Second, we aimed to determine the extent to which the social categories that emerge from these historical narratives reflect the discourse of superordinate identity formation within the *coexistence* model or mutual differentiation in the *confrontational* model. Third, we sought to examine how these categorization goals worked to either facilitate or attenuate social competition between Jewish Israelis and Palestinians.

Given the lack of previous research on the variable process or outcome of contact based on facilitation model, we employed a multimethod approach that combined both inductive and deductive methods. Thus, we coded participant utterances using Bar-Tal's (2007) sociopsychological infrastructure to reveal larger thematic trends within the dialogue sessions we analyzed. We then employed a hermeneutic approach to the data (Tappan, 1997) guided by a discursive analytical framework (Gee, 1999; Potter & Wetherell, 1995) to reveal how thematic historical content functioned within the dialogue session. Specifically, we were interested in interpreting how the utterances of Israeli and Palestinian participants utilized aspects of their respective historical narratives to construct *meaning* within the dialogue while viewing the discussion of historical events as discursive acts that accomplish the dual aims of social category construction and social identity management.

## **Method**

### *Overview*

In order to address critiques of intergroup contact theory and research as too reliant on artificial or laboratory settings (e.g., Dixon et al., 2005), we fused an ethnographic and experimental design in our study and conducted it within the setting of an existing contact intervention. As part of our

ethnographic approach, both authors assumed roles as participant observers throughout the two-week duration of the intervention and took copious field notes. Our ethnographic description of the intervention aimed to capture the *meaning* that participants made of the intergroup contact process (see Rosaldo, 1993) via the construction of a theoretically informed “thick description” (Geertz, 1973) of the dialogue process. Thus, our design aimed to capitalize on the strength of qualitative research, namely the ability to capture events as they occur in natural settings (Miles & Huberman, 1994), within the context of a field experiment that would also permit us to make plausible claims regarding the effect of facilitation model on the dialogue process (Shadish, Cook, & Campbell, 2002).

It is important to reiterate that, consistent with methodological approaches such as discourse and conversation analysis (Wooffitt, 2005), the unit of analysis in this study is the *utterance*, not the individual participant. Hence our focus is on the language participants deploy in interaction and not on person-level variables related to cognition or perception. Consistent with phenomenological and hermeneutic approaches in psychology and other social sciences (e.g., Martin & Sugarman, 2001), we do not aim to produce knowledge that will generalize broadly to a larger population. Rather, our intent is to provide “thick description” (Geertz, 1973) of discourse and interaction that will contribute to theory development in social and political psychology, as well as applied peace-building practice. Our approach is thus situated within the aims of rhetorical and discursive psychology to emphasize how language reflects and maintains social category constructions related to indicators such as race and nationality (e.g., Billig, 1985, 1999; Durrheim & Dixon, 2005; Edwards & Potter, 1992; Reicher & Hopkins, 2001a).

### *Procedure and Sample*

Our study examines four dialogue sessions which occurred in the context of an existing contact program for Israeli, Palestinian, and U.S. youth. With effort to balance demographic (e.g., nationality, sex) factors and to separate previously acquainted youth, 28 participants were randomly assigned to dialogue conditions (i.e., coexistence, confrontational). Participants (nine Israelis [seven Jewish, two Arab], seven Palestinians, and 12 Americans) were selected by the program organizers based primarily on English language proficiency. Israeli and Palestinian participants traveled to the United States and resided with host families in a suburban Midwest community throughout the duration of the two-week encounter. This number of participants in qualitative research in general, and in studies of intergroup dialogue in particular (e.g., Bekerman, 2002b, 2009; Maoz, 2001; Maoz, Bar-On, Bekerman, & Jaber-Massarwa, 2004; Zupnik, 1999, 2000), is common (Marshall, 1996).

As opposed to a sampling approach in quantitative research in which the aim is to maximize generalizability to a population, sampling in qualitative research is deliberately nonprobabilistic because the aim is not to generalize to populations but rather to produce knowledge about a particular phenomenon (Marshall, 1996; Mays & Pope, 1995). In our case, the phenomenon of intergroup contact in settings of prejudice and conflict represents a unique, uncommon experience in need of rigorous qualitative inquiry (Dixon et al., 2005).

Each condition was facilitated by one Arab and one Jewish facilitator trained in either a coexistence or confrontational approach to dialogue. Each dialogue session was recorded using a digital voice recorder. Either the first or second author was present at each session to record observational notes.

In Session 1 for both dialogue conditions, participants constructed and presented (in uninational groups) posters that listed the most important events in the history of the conflict. In Session 2, open discussion about the posters and presentations occurred. Given our interest in discourse deployed in intergroup interaction, only utterances which occurred in intergroup dialogue were recorded and analyzed. That is, uninational conversations were not examined.

### Analysis

We coded utterances reflecting historical content according to the themes outlined in Bar-Tal’s (2007) sociopsychological infrastructure.<sup>1</sup> Because of their position outside the immediate context of intractable conflict, utterances by U.S. participants were not coded. We also did not code utterances made by facilitators. Our sample thus consisted of 2,726 utterances across both dialogue conditions. Disagreements regarding coding were resolved through discussion and consensus. Guided by the findings of our initial coding, we then employed an interpretive, hermeneutic approach (Tappan, 1997) to discern the meaning that participants constructed within the dialogue setting. This aspect of our analytical strategy was inductive, given the emphasis on thick description and the constructionist epistemology framing the research (Creswell, 2007).

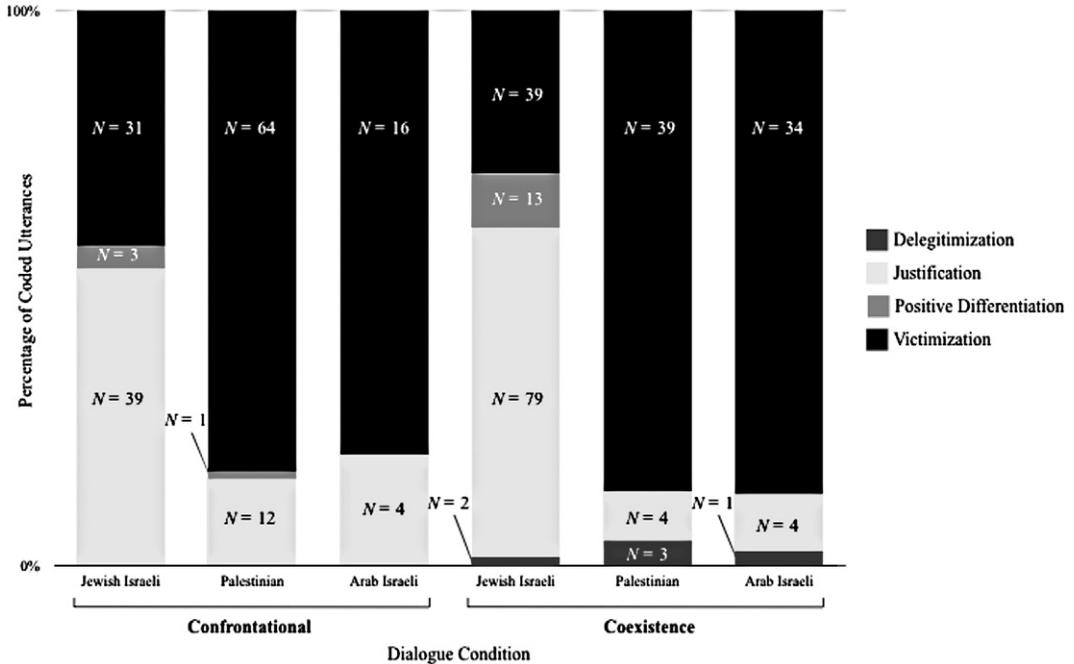
As in previous interpretive research (e.g., Bekerman, 2009), transcripts were read multiple times with the aim of uncovering common themes and patterns of interaction in dialogue. We employed a discursive analytical framework (Gee, 1999; Potter & Wetherell, 1995) that focused on the semantic content and rhetorical organization of social categories constructed in conversation (Billig, 1985; Edwards, 1991). Lastly, we analyzed the construction of social categories in terms of their use in social competition. Specifically, we examined how in-group categories were constructed in a manner that positively differentiated them from the out-group category (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Within the hermeneutic approach, validity is determined through consensus (see Tappan, 1997). Thus, at each step issues of interpretation were resolved through agreement as the coauthors analyzed utterances and interactions. This approach allowed us to observe how thematic content emerged within the sessions we analyzed, as well as how this thematic content was utilized for purposes of social action (i.e., social competition).

### Results

We compare the emergence of sociopsychological infrastructure (Bar-Tal, 2007) thematic content among utterances within the *coexistence* and *confrontational* dialogue conditions. Building upon these findings, we then present a more detailed account of how this content is used to construct in-group and out-group national categories. We also address the use of these categories for the purposes of social competition as well as the role of U.S. participants within the dialogue.

Regarding the emergence of sociopsychological infrastructure content, we found that 14% ( $N = 387$ ) of all analyzed utterances reflected the themes outlined by Bar-Tal (2007). Examining the frequencies of sociopsychological infrastructure thematic codes across national groups and dialogue conditions (see Figure 1), we observed a similar thematic pattern among utterances within national groups regardless of dialogue condition. *Justification* emerged as the most frequently theme among Jewish Israeli utterances in both the confrontational ( $N = 39$ ; 53%) and the coexistence ( $N = 79$ ; 59%) dialogue conditions. The theme of *victimization* also featured prominently among Jewish Israeli utterances, accounting for 42% ( $N = 31$ ) of coded utterances within the confrontational condition and 29% ( $N = 39$ ) of coded utterances within the coexistence condition. Among Palestinian utterances, *victimization* was the most frequently coded theme in both the confrontational ( $N = 64$ ; 83%) and the coexistence ( $N = 39$ ; 78%) dialogue conditions. *Victimization* likewise emerged as the most frequently coded theme among Arab Israeli utterances in both the confrontational ( $N = 16$ ; 80%) and coexistence ( $N = 34$ ; 87%) dialogue conditions. Because a similar pattern of themes emerged in both Palestinian and Arab Israeli utterances, they were combined into a single national group in all subsequent analyses.

<sup>1</sup> Definitions and examples of coded utterances are provided in Table 1, which can be found at [www.andrewpilecki.com/home/Supplement](http://www.andrewpilecki.com/home/Supplement).



**Figure 1.** Frequencies of thematic codes and proportions of themes among coded utterances by national group and dialogue condition.

Our analysis was concerned not only with the thematic content deployed by Palestinian and Israeli youth in dialogue about history but also with how this content was employed through *interpretive repertoires*, which represent the background knowledge from which versions of actions, self, and social structures are manufactured through talk (Potter & Wetherell, 1995). Interpretive repertoires represent a resource for making evaluations, constructing factual versions of events and performing particular actions. The next step in our analysis was thus to examine how the thematic content of historical utterances were employed as interpretive repertoires through which in-group and out-group national categories were constructed and positioned within a historical context. Moreover, we examined the potential role these categories served in facilitating social competition among Jewish Israeli, Arab Israeli, and Palestinian participants within the dialogue setting.

This part of our analysis relied upon a hermeneutic approach to the transcripts in which we examined utterances in relation to one another, rather than as static units reflecting particular themes (as presented above). Our analysis revealed that only two themes—*justification* and *victimization*—were employed consistently as interpretive repertoires throughout both dialogue conditions. Jewish Israeli utterances reflecting *positive differentiation* emerged primarily when Jewish Israeli participants in both dialogue conditions presented their historical posters. As the historical discussion progressed, however, *positive differentiation* emerged sporadically and not consistently employed as an interpretive repertoire. Utterances reflecting delegitimization were rare in the coexistence condition ( $N = 6$ ) and absent in the confrontational condition (see Figure 1). In contrast, *justification*—and to a lesser extent *victimization*—emerged consistently among Jewish Israeli utterances while *victimization* emerged consistently among Palestinian/Arab Israeli utterances *within both dialogue conditions*.

The *victimization* utterances made by Palestinians/Arab Israelis converged to form a distinct victimization-based historical narrative that featured a *Palestinian-as-Victim* in-group category con-

struction juxtaposed against a *Jewish Israeli-as-Aggressor* out-group category construction. It was clear from our analysis that *justification* utterances made by Jewish Israelis in both dialogue conditions came as a response to the victimization-based narrative put forward by Palestinians and Arab Israelis and the category constructions contained therein. In an effort to mitigate Israeli responsibility for the acts of victimization described in Palestinian and Arab Israeli utterances, Jewish Israelis put forward an in-group category construction based on the repertoire of “righteous” victimhood (Morris, 2001). This *Jewish Israeli-as-Righteous Victim* category construction was positioned vis-à-vis a *Palestinian-as-Justified Victim* out-group category through which Palestinian victim claims were not denied but rather subsumed within a historical narrative that emphasized Jewish Israeli victimization and the right to self-defense.

The *Palestinian-as-Victim* category is grounded in historical claims of Palestinian dispossession at the hands of Jewish Israelis (i.e., destruction of Palestinian homes). In response, the *Jewish Israeli-as-Righteous Victim* category is asserted in which Palestinian victim claims are not denied, but placed in an interpretive framework of Jewish victimization that morally justifies the use of military force against the Palestinians.<sup>2</sup> Specifically, *if* Jewish forces did act unjustly, it was due to Arab aggression that precipitated the 1948 war (i.e., “it was us or you”). Therefore, while admitting that they may have expelled Palestinians from their homes in 1948, Jewish military forces are framed as ultimately not responsible for the condition of refugees. Jewish Israeli actions are further justified within a victim framework as Palestinian claims to the land are minimized in light of the desperate conditions of Jewish refugees following the Holocaust.

Our analysis showed that these category constructions were employed by Jewish Israelis and Palestinians/Arab Israelis across dialogue conditions for the purposes of social competition. According to social identity theory, members of low-status groups will attempt to achieve positive group distinctiveness by forming comparisons with relevant groups on dimensions in which the in-group is viewed favorably (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Interpreted from this framework, national category constructions made by Palestinian and Arab Israeli participants—*Palestinian-as-Victim* and *Jewish Israeli-as-Aggressor*—represented an attempt to achieve positive group distinctiveness along a moral dimension (Bar-Tal, 1998). In response, Jewish Israeli participants constructed national categories—*Jewish Israeli-as-Righteous Victim* and *Palestinian-as-Justified Victim*—in order to mitigate Jewish Israeli culpability for Palestinian victimization, thereby maintaining a positive in-group identity. In both dialogue conditions, competition between the *Palestinian-as-Victim* and the *Jewish Israeli-as-Righteous Victim* category constructions became evident in contestations over the meaning the 1948 war represented for both groups.

It is important to note that the conversations observed and analyzed in this study were actually “dialogues” consisting of Palestinian, Israeli, and U.S. participants. The role of third parties within the dialogue setting has been addressed elsewhere. Rouhana and Korper (1997) argue that by identifying with the goals of the high-status group, a third party could potentially facilitate the reproduction of asymmetrical power relations within the dialogue setting. In contrast, Ross (2000) contends that the presence of a third party can be helpful in facilitating agreement between conflicting groups. Nevertheless, though silent through the majority of both sessions, the influence of the U.S. participants can be measured in their presence rather than words.

Specifically, U.S. participants represented the audience towards which historical narratives and national categories constructed in Israeli and Palestinian utterances were directed. For example, in closing the historical presentation session, the Jewish facilitator in the *coexistence* condition reflected that “When the Palestinians presented, they never looked in the eyes of the Israelis, and when the

<sup>2</sup> An interaction illustrating both the *Palestinian-as-Victim* and *Jewish Israeli-as-Righteous Victim* category constructions is provided in Table 2, which can be found at [www.andrewpilecki.com/home/Supplement](http://www.andrewpilecki.com/home/Supplement).

Israelis presented, they never looked into the eyes of the Palestinians.” Both the Israelis and Palestinians directed their presentations of history to the U.S. youth in the room, as revealed in their eye contact.<sup>3</sup>

Further evidence of the significance of U.S. youth as audience was our finding that Israeli and Palestinian participant utterances often revealed concern over whether the U.S. participants understood the points that they were trying to make. For example, after the presentation of the Jewish Israeli historical poster in Session 1, a Jewish Israeli in the confrontational dialogue condition asked, “For the American people, you, like, understand everything?” Similarly, in Session 2, a Palestinian utterance reveals the importance of the U.S. participants as an audience: “. . . I want to clarify things for the American group, because they don’t really get it.” These exemplary utterances revealed a pattern of concern among Israeli and Palestinian participants that the U.S. participants *understood* the narratives being expressed during dialogue. Namely, the U.S. participants represented an audience to be “won over,” and it was toward this end that Jewish Israeli and Palestinian historical narratives and categories were constructed within the dialogue space.

### Discussion

The goal of our study was to compare the thematic content of utterances in Israeli-Palestinian dialogue as outlined in Bar-Tal’s (2007) *sociopsychological infrastructure* and their use in the rhetorical construction of in-group and out-group national categories across two paradigms of contact: one based on the *coexistence* model and one based on the *confrontational* model (Maoz, 2011). Our study addresses a crucial gap within the intergroup contact literature in that it compares the effect of contact model (Maoz, 2011) on the process (Pettigrew, 2008) and meaning (Dixon et al., 2005) participants make during contact. Moreover, although there is substantial evidence that the themes outlined by Bar-Tal (2007) are prevalent in settings of intractable conflict, no research has examined the way in which they are deployed in discourse in intergroup encounters. To explore the emergence of these themes and their use in the rhetorical construction of national categories (Billig, 1985; Edwards, 1991; Reicher & Hopkins, 2001a), we analyzed dialogic exchanges between Palestinian and Israeli youth participating in an existing U.S.-based contact program.

Informed by a constructionist view of social categories as produced in talk, consistent with perspectives in rhetorical and discursive social psychology (e.g., Billig, 1985, 1987; Durrheim, 1997; Durrheim & Dixon, 2005; Reicher & Hopkins, 2001a, 2001b), we discovered a consistent pattern of thematic historical content irrespective of contact paradigm. The utterances of Palestinian and Arab Israeli youth were characterized almost exclusively by the theme of *victimization*. By contrast, the utterances of Jewish Israeli youth were characterized primarily by themes of *justification* and *victimization*. It is noteworthy that the order in which historical narratives were initially presented varied across groups, given that facilitators allowed participants to choose the order of presentation. Thus, regardless of which group presented its narrative first and regardless of facilitator interventions designed to either challenge or affirm narratives, thematic content was largely identical, revealing the centrality of this thematic content to the two national groups.

Elaborating this finding further, our qualitative analysis focused on how this thematic historical content was drawn upon to construct and position in-group and out-group social categories. Palestinian and Arab Israeli participants drew upon the repertoire of *victimization* to construct a *Palestinian-as-Victim* in-group category that was contrasted with a *Jewish Israeli-as-Aggressor* out-group category. In contrast, Jewish Israeli participants drew upon a repertoire of *justification* and *victimization* to construct a *Jewish Israeli-as-Righteous Victim* in-group category that contrasted

<sup>3</sup> It should be reiterated that the program took place in the United States under the auspices of a U.S.-based contact program and that all dialogue occurred in English, the native language only of the U.S. youth.

with the *Palestinian-as-Justified Victim* out-group category. In terms of the categorization goals of each contact model, our findings suggest that the goal of subcategorization (Brewer, 1996) into distinct national categories was achieved within the *confrontational* condition. However, despite the efforts of the facilitators in the *coexistence* condition, a common in-group category was not evident in participant utterances. Overall, our findings suggest that utterances were marked by the mutual differentiation (Hewstone & Brown, 1986) of national categories. That is, within dialogue dealing with historical content, Palestinian and Israeli participants reproduced monolithic, mutually exclusive national categories *regardless of the facilitation model employed*. We suggest that these category constructions reflect a classic case of social competition in intergroup interaction (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Our interpretation of these findings is therefore anchored in consideration of the psychological functions that narratives fulfill in terms of *relative power* and, specifically, how victimhood is employed within these narratives in order to enhance power within the dialogue setting.

Victimhood served the function of enhancing the relative power of Palestinians in a number of ways. First, victimhood allowed Palestinians to explain their low status within the conflict by framing it as a product of Jewish Israeli aggression (see Bar-Tal, 2007; Eidelson & Eidelson, 2003). Second, by seeking acknowledgement of their suffering, Palestinian participants sought to establish a moral debt that as perpetrators Jewish Israelis would subsequently owe (Shnabel & Nadler, 2008). Third, Palestinian victimization constituted a means through which the support of U.S. participants could be mobilized as a third party (see Noor et al., 2012), thereby enhancing the relative power of the Palestinians within the dialogue setting while also isolating the Jewish Israeli participants.

Jewish Israeli utterances revealed the construction of social categories—*Jewish Israeli-as-Righteous Victim* and *Palestinian-as-Justified Victim*—that served the purpose of mitigating Jewish Israeli culpability for Palestinian victimization. In doing so, Jewish Israeli participants were able to maintain a positive social identity in the face of the moral inferiority implicated within the perpetrator role that they were placed in by the Palestinians. By emphasizing their own victimization, Jewish Israeli participants sought to reestablish their moral status while also engendering sympathy and understanding for Jewish Israeli actions. In other words, if Jewish Israelis did harm Palestinians, it was done so only in self-defense that was otherwise precipitated by Palestinian/Arab aggression. Moral justification—the “righteous” element of the Jewish Israeli in-group category construct—is thus grounded in the victim claims revealed in Jewish Israeli utterances, as Palestinians were construed as legitimate targets of Jewish Israeli actions within a moral framework of self-defense.

The utterances deployed by Jewish Israeli participants to maintain a positive social identity within the microcontext of intergroup contact reflect macrolevel social processes present within Israeli society (Rouhana, 2004). The need for security against the existential threat that Israel faces is a major facet of Israeli identity (Bar-Tal, 1998; Bar-Tal & Antebi, 1992; Hammack, 2009b, 2011). Specifically, the theme of self-defense is invoked to justify Israel’s continued occupation of the Palestinian territories (Halperin, Bar-Tal, Sharvit, Rosler, & Raviv, 2010; Rosler, Bar-Tal, Sharvit, Halperin, & Raviv, 2009). By doing so, Israel can sustain an occupation without having to be an “occupying” society and thus maintain a positive collective self-image. Jewish Israeli utterances thus revealed aspects of the Jewish Israeli master narrative of the conflict within the dialogue in order to meet the threat posed by the Palestinian narrative and the category constructions contained therein.

### *Narrative and the Reproduction of Conflict*

Our findings revealed the way in which master historical narratives that construct fixed categories based on mutually exclusive victimhood claims are reproduced in talk. Thus intergroup dialogue can serve a reproductive role with regard to the rhetoric that maintains and exacerbates conflict.

Across both dialogue conditions, the victimization described in one narrative resulted in the diminishing, or even outright denial, of the victimization described in the other narrative. The exclusive claims to victimhood evident in Israeli and Palestinian utterances reflect larger processes of mutual identity denial (Kelman, 1999) and delegitimization (Oren & Bar-Tal, 2007) found within Israeli and Palestinian historical narratives of the conflict (Rouhana & Bar-Tal, 1998; Vollhardt, 2009).

As such, our study illustrates the limitations of intergroup contact within contexts of ongoing conflict (Hammack, 2006, 2009a, 2011) and reveals how discourses of history are used to engage in competitive victimhood within the microcontext of intergroup dialogue. These findings are consistent with Bekerman (2002b), who found that during contact Israelis and Palestinians reproduce an essentialist discourse in which boundaries between national groups are reified and clearly demarcated (see also Helman, 2002). Established through talk, these category constructions become fixed within the dialogue setting as participants resist either transgressing them or exploring alternatives (Bekerman, 2002b). Similarly, in utilizing national discourses marked by their mutual exclusivity, the utterances produced in our study reproduced fixed victim-based categories from which the rival was noticeably excluded. Moreover, utterances rarely indicated an attempt to reject this type of configuration or adopt alternatives despite the effort within the *coexistence* condition to challenge such exclusive identity configurations.

From the standpoint of Shnabel and Nadler's (2008) needs-based model of reconciliation, the consistency of our findings across dialogue conditions illustrates the role of narrative in the reproduction of conflict in constraining the effectiveness of contact interventions. According to the needs-based model, victims and perpetrators have distinct emotional needs that must be met for reconciliation to occur. For victims, there is an enhanced need for power, which is sought via the acknowledgement by the perpetrator that they have wronged the victimized group. Such an acknowledgement incurs a moral "debt" that must be paid in a manner decided by the victim group, thereby enhancing the power of the victim group. Conversely, because their actions have harmed another group, perpetrators risk exclusion from the moral community; thus, perpetrators have the emotional need for social acceptance. According to Shnabel and Nadler (2008), only when these emotional needs are met—power for victims and social acceptance for perpetrators—can reconciliation be obtained.

Nevertheless, within contexts of intractable conflict in which groups have inflicted multiple acts of violence against each other, *victim* and *perpetrator* designations are not clearly defined. Namely, as evidenced in the dialogue examined in this study, Israelis and Palestinians can draw upon their historical narratives to put forward instances in which their group was the victim. From the standpoint of social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), given the moral superiority inherent in the *victim* role and the moral inferiority inherent in the role of *perpetrator*, there is little incentive for Israelis or Palestinians to relinquish the power inherent in the former role by assuming the latter role without a clear sign that such a gesture will be reciprocated. In other words, there is power inherent to being the victim, particularly within contexts in which there is a third party (i.e., U.S. participants) from which one can draw support (Noor et al., 2012).

Ultimately, the contact setting is inherently limited in the degree to which it can fulfill the emotional needs of groups, especially in contexts where the immediate conflict has not been resolved and thus reconciliation between groups is difficult (see Bar-Tal, 2000). As revealed in our findings, the contact situation—regardless of facilitation approach—emerges as a forum of *social competition* between distinct groups (Halabi & Sonnenschein, 2004a, 2004b; Hammack, 2009a). The master-narratives groups in conflict provide the content from which categories are constructed (see Van Dijk, 2006), and social competition is facilitated, within the intergroup encounter. Using a narrative approach to the analysis of intergroup contact, our findings specify the mechanism by which competition occurs and, unfortunately, reproduces the social psychological conditions of conflict (Hammack, 2011).

*Implications for Dialogue-Based Interventions: History as War Maker or Peace Maker?*

As revealed by the findings of our study, discussions that feature historical narratives facilitate the mutual differentiation of groups and the reification of mutually exclusive, antagonistic national categories. This pattern of results was consistent across dialogue groups using different facilitation models. Confronting history and forming a narrative that integrates and legitimizes the historical experience of groups in conflict is essential to intergroup reconciliation (Bar-Tal, 2000). Thus, confronting clashing historical narratives is critical for any dialogue-based peace-education intervention. However, in light of our study and previous research (Bekerman, 2002b, 2009), the question must be posed: How can individuals transcend fixed national identities that make competing, mutually exclusive victim claims?

Within the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, efforts to create such a narrative have been undertaken. Noteworthy are bilingual education programs that present, and thus legitimize, both Jewish and Palestinian historical experiences in the conflict (Bekerman, 2002a, 2005) as well as efforts to create an integrated historical account of the conflict in Israeli and Palestinian textbooks (Adwan & Bar-On, 2004). Kolikant and Pollack (2009) note that the inclusion of secondary historical sources within the encounter may facilitate a more critical examination of history among Israeli and Palestinian participants. In terms of intergroup contact, Bargal (2004) asserts that “making the past ‘bearable’ ” (p. 612) by moving away from a dichotomous victim-perpetrator view of history, such as the one evident in utterances examined in this study, is essential to any intervention that aims to be transformative and promote reconciliation.

However, interventions employing a curriculum that aims to construct a common historical narrative (e.g., Adwan & Bar-On, 2004) may not adequately meet the emotional needs that—as both victims and perpetrators of violence—Israelis and Palestinians have with respect to the history of the conflict. A more effective strategy may be to develop an integrative historical narrative that fosters the formation of a common victimhood identity (Noor et al., 2012). This historical narrative might recognize both the unique victim experiences of Israelis and Palestinians *as well as* the suffering that conflict inherently brings to both groups. We nevertheless contend that the potential for history to bring Israelis and Palestinians together, rather than keep them apart, remains limited so long as a state of intractable conflict persists (Bekerman, 2002a). Our findings suggest that, in the absence of dialogue designed to foster critical awareness of historical narratives (e.g., Zembylas & Bekerman, 2008), youth are likely to appropriate the polarized discourse of conflict and thus to participate in its reproduction.

In terms of the role of the U.S. participants in our study, it is unclear whether their presence facilitated the construction of mutually exclusive historical narratives. Previous research has shown that the presence of a third party can potentially exacerbate (Rouhana & Korper, 1997) or mitigate (Ross, 2000) differences between groups. The concern that Palestinian and Israeli participants displayed regarding whether the U.S. participants understood their respective narratives may indicate that the desire to “win over” the U.S. participants may have facilitated the construction of monolithic narratives. Nevertheless, further research on the impact of third parties in the construction of historical narratives is needed.

*Conclusions, Limitations, and Future Directions*

Limiting the present study is the fact that only conversations specifically about history were analyzed. Comparing discussions of historical to contemporary events was beyond the scope of this study. Nevertheless, it would be beneficial for future research to examine how history emerges within dialogue when it is not the explicit topic of focus. Our study was also limited by its analysis of the utterances of a relatively small group of Israeli and Palestinian youth who are motivated to pursue intergroup contact. Yet, it is not our intent to offer generalizable findings about Israeli-Palestinian

conversations. Rather, consistent with the aims of qualitative research (e.g., Marshall, 1996; Mays & Pope, 1995), we sought to closely interrogate a particular phenomenon in the context of an existing setting. Thus our aims were largely descriptive and concerned with contributing to theory and practice in social psychology and peace building.

It is noteworthy that the utterances we analyzed were produced in English, which is not the native language of either Israelis or Palestinians. The privileging of Hebrew has been shown to facilitate power asymmetry between Jewish Israelis and Palestinian within the dialogue context (Halabi & Sonnenschein, 2004b; Halabi & Zak, 2004). Thus, we view having the sessions conducted in English, which represents a secondary language for members of both groups, as eliminating a potential confound in the study of power relations between Jewish Israelis and Palestinians.

In spite of these limitations, our study offers a novel, innovative contribution to the literature on the social psychology of intergroup contact. Rather than focusing on the outcome of such endeavors, our aim was to interrogate the process of contact and the meaning and role of particular utterances produced, thereby addressing identified gaps in the empirical literature (Dixon et al., 2005; Pettigrew, 1998, 2008). Following social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), we sought to investigate the way in which youth use narrative as part of a larger strategy of social competition designed to enhance the positive distinctiveness of their social identity. In this way, our study offers a preliminary window into the mechanism by which individuals utilize such a strategy in intergroup settings, providing much-needed “thick description” (Geertz, 1973). We view the strength of the study in light of this larger theoretical and descriptive contribution to the literature. Most importantly, our study compared these processes across two models of contact, thereby adding to a growing body of research on the effect of facilitation model on intergroup contact (Maoz, 2011).

In addition to this important contribution to theory and research in the social identity tradition, our study is the first to examine empirically Bar-Tal’s (2007) notion of the sociopsychological infrastructure of conflict in the context of intergroup dialogue. We analyzed utterances of youth according to themes outlined by Bar-Tal (2007), discovering the dominance of victimization as a key theme among Palestinians. Although justification was a key theme of the discourse of Jewish Israeli youth, victimization was also central to the content of their discourse. Considered within the framework of discursive psychology (Potter & Wetherell, 1995), we revealed the way in which utterances reflect competing interpretive repertoires of victimization to vie for legitimacy.

This investigation of Israeli-Palestinian discourse is situated within broader conversations in the social sciences—particularly psychology, history, and political science—on the role of narrative in the maintenance and reproduction of intergroup conflict (Hammack & Pilecki, 2012). While narrative may represent a cognitive and linguistic tool to make meaning of the chaos of conflict, it also serves a divisive function in its ability to contribute to processes of intergroup differentiation. While this function may initially seem to be a negative, it should also be viewed through the lens of two fragile national identities, struggling to achieve recognition and security from both one another and global political institutions. In this context, a dialogue between two differentiated identities may be beneficial for promoting the recognition, legitimacy, and understanding required for peace and justice.

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