

Identity, Religion and Intergroup Conflict: the Role of Religious-Secular Discourse in Self-Investigation

Lipaz Shamo-Nir, Zefat Academic College, Israel

IAFOR European Conference on Psychology & the Behavioral Sciences 2017
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

This paper explores the logic and implications of secular-religious discourse and group processes in exploration of individual and social identity. The theory argues that intergroup discourse can create a safe environment that encourages individuals to engage in self reflection and in discourse with 'the other'. Qualitative thematic content analysis was used to analyze the final papers of eight-three Jewish college students who participated in a semester-long dialogue course. Content analysis found that students came into the dialogue with low willingness to engage in self-exploration, and had difficulty discussing their personal identities. The majority of the students did not report on a change occurring during the dialogue, but rather engaged more in an attempt to settle their self-perceptions in comparison to the out-group members (Arad students). The contribution of this research lies in investigating how identities are shaped within a context of intergroup conflict and minority-majority relations. Moreover, the paper proposes several hypotheses and questions to advance research in this field.

Keywords: identity investigation, religion, intergroup conflict, secular, discourse, self-exploration

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Introduction

An individual's identity, which can be described in terms of the individual's self, develops in a continuous process of interactions among individuals and their surroundings (Erikson, 1963; 1968). The identity development occurs during teenage years, but continues all through life and is prone to social influences (Erikson, 1963; 1968). This process reflects two needs: the need to maintain personal uniqueness and the need to belong to a group (Brewer, 1991). Hence, identity formation is based on personal exploration and commitment. At first, a search and exploration of alternatives takes place, and, following extended exploration, the appropriate identity is finally attained (Marcia, 1980). On the other hand, according to Tajfel & Turner's social identity hypothesis (1986) the definition of self-identity relies on one's sense of belonging to a group and can only be fully defined in the presence of others, perhaps resulting from individuals' perceptions of themselves in a specific context (Beijaard, Meijer & Verloop, 2004).

However, when it comes to the formation of a religious identity, it seems difficult to point out the existence of an orderly process. As it was proposed that self-exploration mostly occurs during early adulthood (age 18-25) (Arnett, 2002; 2006), the individual's worldview is explored and general questions are asked on the meaning of life, along with specific questions on religious values and beliefs. In most cases, the process includes an examination of whether their personal worldviews differ from those of their parents (Arnett, 2006) and in thought regarding their belief systems, and religious questions, even when the individual is not living in a religious home environment (Arnett & Jensen, 2002). Yet, the findings are unclear as to whether there are certain contexts or social processes in young adult lives that accelerate identity exploration, and thus these opportunities should be explored. In looking at these issues in more detail, this research aims to investigate self-exploration undertaken in a dialogue course among undergraduate students.

This research suggests a discourse dealing with intergroup religious conflict functions as an opportunity for both a meaningful process on a personal level and self-exploration. The literature points to two sets of processes within the intergroup dialogues: the psychological processes that occur within individuals (Dovidio, Gaertner, Stewart, Esses, ten Vargart, and Hodson, 2004), and the communication processes that occur among individuals (Nagda, 2006). Intergroup dialogues have been implemented in international, community and academic settings, and research indicates that positive results have emerged in all these settings (Dessel, Rogge & Garlington, 2006). Finally, and despite being their few in number, previous studies have indicated that intergroup dialogue is a framework in which participants are exposed to issues related to their identity, which encourages participants to explore and even reshape their identities (e.g. Shamo-Nir, 2017a).

According to Tajfel and Turner (1986), significant psychological processes can occur in social situations especially in situations of inter-group conflict. On the one hand, it was found that participants who were exposed to the content of the out-group showed negative attitudes towards them (Razpurker-Apfeld & Shamo-Nir, 2015). On the other hand, several studies support the positive impact of intergroup dialogue on communication and psychological processes (Gurin-Sabnd, Nagda & Osuna, 2012). It was found that groups with a history of conflict or tension can foster intergroup

communication, mutual learning and self exploration through participation in intergroup dialogue (Dessel & Rogge, 2008). Yet, there are very few studies in which identity exploration among students has been investigated. These higher education studies indicated that participating in intergroup dialogue encourages participants to understand their own and others' experiences in society (e.g. Nagda, 2006).

This research

The dialogue course that was examined in this article is greatly based on the contact hypothesis (Allport, 1954; Amir, 1969), and is facilitated by those knowledgeable on the Jewish secular-religious conflict (Shamoa-Nir & Hellinger, 2015) who were trained to lead the discussions (Miller & Donner, 2000). Moreover, the research was conducted in a unique context of inter-group relations that provides a scientific investigation – a multicultural college in which Arab and Jewish students study together and are engaged in academic and social activities on a daily basis (Shamoa-Nir, 2014). This particular research context was chosen because of its potential to clarify issues that are related to identity construction and that can be acknowledged only as a result of the discourse itself. In particular, confrontation with 'the other' (Jewish participants) while coping with the out-group members (Arab students), was considered to be a unique opportunity for learning regarding both personal and social identities.

The identity exploration processes which occurred during the discourse were investigated using a thematic content analysis. This paradigm was used because self-exploration processes may be difficult to study and qualitative data may be the best route for exploration. In a previous study, it was found that the presence of out-group members affects attitudes, contributing to the in-group and to the process of defining identities (Shamoa-Nir, 2017a). This issue will be examined again in this study: in particular, the difficulty of discussing identity issues and the role of this discourse in promoting Jewish identity construction and in revealing conflicts regarding the Arab out-group.

Method

Participants and procedure

Eighty-three undergraduate college students participated in the research (ninety-two students participated in the dialogue course, but 5 students did not submit a summary paper and 4 did not agree to participate in the research) of which fifty-four were women and twenty-nine were men. Seventy-eight were born in Israel. Twenty-three defined themselves as being secular, twenty-seven as being religious and thirty-three as traditional.

The distinction between the religious affiliations of the participants was based upon their self-definition. In general, religious and secular affiliations are not limited to Israeli society; however traditional affiliation requires an explanation. Traditional Jews see themselves as practicing some aspects of Jewish religion without strictly maintaining all of Judaic law. Typically, traditional Jews maintain traditional customs of Jewish law that are considered symbolic and significant, out of solidarity with the Jewish people.

A content analysis was undertaken on summary papers submitted by students. The final papers were written personally, as part of their obligations for course credit. The papers were submitted two months after the course ended, and included a description of student experiences during the course. All students were notified of the intention to use their work for research, and they were assured that a refusal to participate in the research would not affect their grades in any way. The students' identities remained confidential and all demographic information was deleted from the papers in order to protect student anonymity.

Dialogue course as research context

The Dialogue course lasted one semester (13–14 weekly encounters of 4 academic hours each), each group comprising between 18 and 23 students. All students participated voluntarily and underwent an acceptance interview. Acceptance criteria included: personal ability and motivation to take part in discourse (acceptance rate was 95%). The groups were heterogeneous and included Jewish students (religious, traditional and secular students). The Arab students at the college were offered participation in a dialogue course between Jews and Arabs.

The course comprised workshops in various subjects, based on three levels of content: 1. The first three encounters were devoted to getting to know one another and to group consolidation, and included discussions of the following issues: stereotypes, tolerance and pluralism, and relations with the 'other'. At the end of these encounters, the students participated in a weekend review for all dialogue groups, including group activities for the entire program, (running from Friday morning until Saturday night), as well as lectures, workshops and consolidation activities moderated by the students, and shared meals and prayers – for those students interested. It is important to state that the joint activities took place without violating the Sabbath (the Jewish Saturday), but in their free time, each student was free to act according to his/her own beliefs and path. 2. The middle portion of the course was devoted to discussion on Jewish-Israeli identity and relationships between religion and State, Judaism and democracy, relations with non-Jewish citizens, especially Arabs. At this stage, a meeting was held with a Haredi (ultra-orthodox) rabbi from Safed to provide exposure to the worldviews of ultra-Orthodox Jews and their attitude towards the state. 3. The third portion of the semester comprised workshops on significant personal, general and social issues (which are not necessarily related to religion), such as military ethics, relationships and marriage, the status of women and education.

Coding procedure and analysis

The final papers included participants' open answers to a number of questions on their experiences in the dialogue course. In the first stage, the author and a former facilitator analyzed an initial set of 9 final papers (3 secular, 3 religious and 3 traditional), in order to formulate themes and decide upon which ones to pursue (Interrater agreement- 93%). After deciding how to identify those themes in the students' papers, based on study and comparison of our notes, we developed a coding scheme for the major themes. We also coded the subthemes. This aspect of the coding process followed qualitative analysis procedures delineated by Bryman (2001). The coding scheme was used to analyze all the papers and the presence or absence of relevant themes in each paper was marked. Then, two research assistants' students

performed a separate blind coding and we compared the agreement of their codes with the author's codes. The coding results had high reliability (Interrater agreement ranged from 89% to 95%). The analysis reported in this research is based on the author coding.

Results

Most of the participants (92%) came to the dialogue course with high levels of willingness to participate in a discourse with other Jewish students, but these participants had low willingness to engage in self-exploration. Three themes emerged to explain how or why the participants expressed willingness to participate in the intergroup dialogue, but had difficulty discussing their personal identities.

Who is 'the other'?

The first theme is that most of the participants (90%) expressed confusion about who was 'the other' in the discourse. Throughout the papers it seemed that the participants had difficulty in dealing with conflicts with Jews, religious or secular, since, in the broader context of everyday reality in the college, the relations between Jews and Arabs are always present. In the context of strained relations between Jews and Arabs, the Jewish participants automatically referred to the Arab students as 'others', instead of referring to the other Jews in the dialogue group. This attribution made it difficult for the participants to divide into the different groups within the Jewish group of students, and as a result, the discourse in the workshops shifted from discussion of personal and Jewish identity to discussion on relations with Arabs. For example, Yael wrote:

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

Indeed, most of the participants (among 87% of the participants) expressed a personal need to hold the dialogue within a homogeneous group that comprises only Jews. Yet few of the secular participants (15%) expressed disappointment at the unwillingness of the participants (especially the religious and traditional participants) to relate to 'the other', within Jewish society. Even though they recognized the need for a safe space for dialogue, these participants described the atmosphere in the workshops as "artificial homogeneity", which did not allow for an authentic discussion about the differences between the Jewish members to occur.

Aspects of self-exploration through the reflection of the intergroup conflict

The second theme centered on the implications of a broad social context on the discourse.

The workshops were held in a multicultural college in which Jewish-Arab relations are encountered on a daily basis. Even though some of the participants presented personal dilemmas, they focused on difficulties stemming from being part of a multicultural reality, and expressed a desire to use the dialogue framework to deal with these contents, as David wrote:

"I decided to join the dialogue course, after two years of studying in this college and after I got to know some Arabs. Now I am in a place of uncertainty. This is why I entered the dialogue course, mostly to sort out my head a little. This might be the right place and time to ask questions about relations between Jews and Arabs, questions that can be asked only in a group without the presence of Arabs."

It seems that not only the nature of the relationship between Jews and Arabs interfered with the internal dialogue among the Jews. The process of self-investigation was also impaired. Indeed, more than half of participants wrote that these conditions "make it difficult" for them to understand who they are and explore themselves. Moreover, the majority of the students did not report on a change occurring during the dialogue, but rather engaged more in an attempt to settle their self-perceptions in comparison to the out-group members (Arad students). Nonetheless, in a few papers the participants presented a situation or an event in which an intercultural conflict occurred, from which they learned something about themselves. For example, in Leon's paper:

"I know that not all of the Arabs are against Jews, but it is difficult for me to trust them or to be their friend. Only during the discussion on stereotypes, when we had to tell a personal story, did I realize that my opinions can change, and that I can be more tolerant towards Arabs. I know only now that in order to experience good relations with Arabs, I need to be more open to them and trust them."

Conditions that encourage self-investigation

The third theme is related to the conditions that contributed to the participants' self-exploration during the dialogue course. Findings revealed that there were two main conditions which encouraged participants to persevere in their self-investigation process. The first is support outside the dialogue group; participants (30%) referred to social support and reinforcement from their families, which helped them cope with the discourse and helped them process personal contents that came up in the workshops. The second condition that contributed to the process was what the participants (20%) referred to themselves as "being in the middle of a process", that is, the dialogue process accompanied other personal, ongoing processes. These participants reported that they were in the midst of a life stage of indecision ("not sure about themselves"), as to worldviews and their desired values. Some of the participants wrote that the discourse was a fulfilling experience which encouraged them to learn more about themselves and about 'the other'. For example, Sara wrote:

"I believe that the discourse has given me a serious push forward towards my ongoing introspection because I am in a period in my life where I am in some sort of dialogue with myself. Participation in this course was a significant experience for me, and enriching, from both personal and social aspects. It came at just the right time for me."

I have always wanted to talk about my religion, beliefs and values, particularly in this stage in life, before I graduate from college and enter real life."

Discussion

This research investigated aspects of self exploration in a dialogue course which took place in a multicultural environment. A content analysis was used to analyze the final papers of Jewish college students who participated in a semester-long dialogue course. The findings revealed that even though the students expressed a high willingness to participate in the dialogue, they did not value opportunities for identity investigation through a discourse with 'the other'. It seems that above all, the participants were engaged more in an attempt to settle their self-perceptions in comparison to Arab students, although the discourse, in which they participated, was an internal dialogue for Jewish students. Hence, dealing with the Arab-Jewish intergroup conflict contributed to the difficulty of participants to engage in self-exploration. Moreover, it appears that the homogenous composition of the dialogue group (being only Jewish participants) and the supportive atmosphere among group members were not found to be encouraging conditions for identity investigations, but rather factors that inhibited exploration processes.

The above findings can be explained by the desire of participants for positive interpersonal contact and thus, throughout the discussions they were addressing and highlighting what they had in common. Moreover, it is possible that the homogeneity and consensus were viewed by participants as being necessary for the existence of a successful process, and they nurtured interpersonal relationships over a presentation of opposing views, even at the price of missing out on the potential for meaningful discourse on their identities. Moreover, the participants referred to their personal and social identities mainly through a comparison to the Arab out-group members, and this might be the explanation for participant reports on difficulties occurring during the dialogue. It appears that the participants were not striving for change from monolithic perceptions to seeing a complex identity, but rather engaged more in an attempt to settle their attitudes in the face of conflicts between Jews and Arabs.

Researchers argued that intergroup dialogues are an ideal context to study the mutual impact of multiple identities (Sanders & Mahalingam, 2012). Hence, it was expected that the discourse would focus on the identities of the secular and religious participants, particularly in the current setting and because religion plays a central role in individual and social identity in Israeli society. Surprisingly, the findings did support this hypothesis. It should be noted, however, that the desire of the participants to discuss the conflict between Jews and Arabs is consistent with the argument according to which interreligious group dialogue can provide a safe environment to voice insights that may be taboo outside the dialogue (Sanders & Mahalingam, 2012). Moreover, this pattern may be explained by Tajfel and Turner's model (1986), which emphasizes the centrality of group identity, and therefore the social identity of participants received much attention in the discourse.

In previous studies (Shamoa-Nir, 2017b) investigating how the presence of out-group members affects the attitudes among the in-group, it was found that the minority group in the dialogue (the religious participants) expressed more favoritism towards their group members; in this study, all the participants expressed favoritism towards

their own group, with no significant difference between religious, secular, and traditional leanings. The explanation for this finding may lie in the unique setting for this study. It is possible that the participants in this discourse did not relate 'the other' as being within the dialogue group, but rather the Arab students at the college, and thus they were affected more by the Jewish-Arab majority-minority relation in Israel instead of distinctions among the Jews. This also may explain why the finding that being aware of out-group members contributed to the process of defining identities (Shamoa-Nir, 2017b) was not fully replicated. Hence, it is recommended that this issue continue to be studied in future.

This research may be limited in its ability to provide a comprehensive evaluation of the identity investigation process undergone by the students because it was based on an analysis of papers submitted at the end of the course, and did not include a methodical examination of the concept of identity through the use of designated tools, as has been done in other dialogues (e.g. Maoz, 2004). Furthermore, these processes should also be evaluated during a later stage in participants' lives (e.g. a longitudinal study).

Conclusion

This research provided a glimpse into a process that engages in exploring individual and social identity in a double intergroup context, within the in-group and with the out-group. The dialogue that was investigated has focused on recognizing the self-exploration benefit of analyzing the individual's relations towards 'the other' in a dialogue. However, the findings illustrated the complexity and challenges of identity research within a context of intergroup conflict and majority-minority relations.

Acknowledgements

The author thanks to the facilitators and students who participated in the dialogue course.

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Contact email: lipaznir@zahav.net.il