Rethinking intergroup encounters: rescuing praxis from theory, activity from education, and peace/co-existence from identity and culture

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Focusing on the Palestinian–Israeli case, this article critically reviews some central issues which burden the field of intergroup encounters. More specifically it considers some of their foundational historical and educational roots. I point to the reified concepts of self and identity, the history of schooling and its practices, and the coming into being of the political organization of nation-state which, though hidden from present theorizing, has a profound influence on the educational paradigms and strategies that guide intergroup encounters and their possible outcomes. Last, while considering post-national and post-positivist realist perspectives, I offer alternative educational options to strengthen the potential of intergroup encounters to support co-existence and reconciliation efforts given the critiques and paradigmatic dilemmas discussed.

Introduction

For many years now, I have been involved in the research of educational efforts towards co-existence, conflict resolution and peace education in Israel, and though I might lack conclusive empirical research to affirm my impressions, I have a strong sense that these efforts do not seem to work—not that data is totally unavailable, but, as is the case for many other unresolved issues in the social sciences, research results are not definitive (Walter & Paul, 2004).

Below I will offer some insights concerning the history of these encounters, the different perspectives which sustain them, and my critique of these approaches. I will also explore some possible solutions specifically related to one case I documented recently, check these against the pertinent theoretical perspectives and inquire why

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they seem not to work in the specific case. All in all, I will attempt to focus critically on some of the central issues which burden the field of peace education while encouraging a critical reappraisal of these, and call for the introduction of educational theorizing guided by socio-historical perspectives to enter the scene of peace educational thinking.

It is in the nature of studies that address issues in broad strokes to sometimes slip into debatable generalizations. While I am aware of this danger, I believe the issues raised in this paper need to be accounted for even by those initiatives which might not fully fit the patterns discussed. I am well aware that the concerns I will raise follow from my observations in the Israeli Jewish–Palestinian scene. Still, through the many formal conferences and informal meetings I have had with colleagues working on similar settings in a variety of geographical areas—Bosnia, Northern Ireland, South Africa—it has become apparent that the concerns raised might be useful in any critical reappraisal of similar educational efforts in multiple societies suffering conflict.

Some points regarding the history of intergroup encounters

Stephan and Stephan (2001) suggest a strong relationship between the need to improve interethnic relations in the USA following the Second World War and the beginning of theoretical and practical efforts to come to grips with intergroup conflict and relations. It is at this time that Allport (1954) and Adorno et al. (1950), amongst others, laboured on their seminal work on contact theory and prejudice.

This was the time when the USA was agitated by serious racial issues which brought about radical changes initiated through legal action, for example the 1954 Brown versus the Board of Education of Topeka decision on school segregation. The era of the 1960s and early 1970s was similarly troubled by the civil rights struggle, an era that witnesses the enactment of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Throughout this period, theorists worked on these issues of prejudice and contact.

Up to this point, political work and structural change propelled historical events. It was only at the beginning of the 1970s, when the Civil Rights Movement receded, following a long and rather successful struggle, that the first dialogue encounters took place. In a sense, these dialogue programmes can be seen to be the social sciences’ answer to the slowing down of the progress made in intergroup relations through the use of law and politically initiated structural change.

Stephan and Stephan (2001) also note that, following the partial success of the civil rights struggle, the expression of prejudice disappeared somewhat from the public sphere. Researchers at that time interpreted this phenomenon as its ‘hiding’ from public discourse rather than its disappearance, while it reappeared on the individual/personal level. Last but not least, Stephan and Stephan mention that the second wave of efforts toward intergroup dialogue in the USA in the 1990s was related to developments that seriously challenged affirmative action programmes.

It is important to note that affirmative action programmes are similar in kind to the Civil Rights Movement struggle, that is to say political/legal action directed (and relatively successful) at achieving structural change. Thus it seems as though, somewhat
surprisingly, both rounds of intergroup dialogues encounters/interventions appeared at times when political structural activity was receding, and they thus might have served as a placebo for the lack of change or an affirmation that the struggle for equality was not over. Thus when social processes for change entered a phase of moratorium after achieving some success, the social sciences initiated a process of dialogue building towards cognitive rather than structural change. We will return later to the cognitivist turn when discussing the foundational perspectives of intergroup encounters and modernity.

In Israel it was only in the mid-1980s that intergroup encounters, designed to overcome distrust and hostility and contribute to co-existence, were initiated (Helman, 2002). The immediate stimulus seems to have been the publication of a survey (Zemach, 1980) disclosing anti-democratic attitudes and feelings among Jewish Israeli youth towards the Palestinian minority (Helman, 2002; Maoz, 2004). This disclosure, added to the growing popularity of the racist ideology of the Kach Party, fanned fears that Israeli society might reject its democratic character (Katz & Kahanov, 1990; Maoz, 2000a), and brought about the formation of what Rabinowitz (2000) defined as the ‘coexistence sector’ which focused on the development of formal and informal educational dialogue activities, geared towards the recognition of otherness and co-existence (Suleiman, 1997; Maoz, 2000b, 2002). In the era of the 1990s the efforts towards educational co-existence activity strengthened with the Oslo Accords, but they have recently suffered a setback with the renewal of violence in the second Palestinian revolt for independence (Intifada). It is not yet clear how the disengagement policy implemented unilaterally by Israel and the recent elections of a Hamas government in the Palestinian Authority will influence future activities.

If we were to contrast the development of the intergroup activities in the USA and Israel, we could say that in both cases they seem to follow the receding of declared social values, in the USA those related to the Civil Rights Movement’s struggle towards equality, and in Israel those related to the sustainability of democratic values and/or those related to the Palestinian efforts to achieve full recognition, independence and equality. Moreover in Israel these educational initiatives seem to reflect the political mood, being strengthened with the signing of the Oslo Accords and retreating with their failure to secure peace. It is worth emphasizing that in Israel, those promoting and retreating from these initiatives are, for the most part, Jewish Israelis, who appear to be seeking to prove their dedication to bettering the lot of Palestinian Israelis through education rather than through structural change.

Paradigmatic perspectives supporting the intergroup encounters initiatives

The encounters approach has been sustained and developed on the basis of somewhat constrained theoretical approaches. Encounters are based on psychological and psychodynamic perspectives on individual and personality development (Katz & Kahanov, 1990) or, when they stress individual change through intergroup relations, on sociological and socio-psychological premises. Lacking from these underlying perspectives is any reference to educational theorizing.
Since the development of the ‘contact hypothesis’ (Allport, 1954), numerous strategies of intergroup intervention have been developed and implemented in a variety of structured and semi-structured settings. Contact hypothesis in its different disguises suggests that intergroup contact might help to alleviate conflict between groups and reduce mutual prejudices (Gaertner, Dovidio & Bachman, 1996; Horenczyk & Bekerman, 1997; Wood & Soleitner, 1996). For this to be achieved, contact should take place under the conditions of status equality and cooperative interdependence while allowing both for sustained interaction between participants and for the potential forming of friendships (Allport, 1954; Amir, 1976; Pettigrew, 1998).

Recently Hewstone (1996) has carefully analysed the theoretical bases and possible outcomes of the different ‘contact’ strategies at hand, pointing to their potential benefit when they allow for an increase of complexity in intergroup perceptions.

Halabi and others (Sonnenschein, Halabi & Friedman, 1998; Halabi & Sonnenshein, 2000) have argued for the need to strengthen group identity and achieve minority empowerment, and Abu-Nimer (1999) has made a case for the empowerment of all groups involved in the encounter so as to increase their ability to critique their environment while emphasizing at the same time that encounters in and of themselves are not a substitute for structural change.

A central dilemma that often appears in planned peace/reconciliation-aimed contacts between members of groups in conflict is the problem of identity and identifications. Thus for the most part in intergroup encounters we can sense moves or negotiations between two poles of identity and identification: (1) high emphasis on individual identity with low emphasis of national or ethnic group identification; and (2) high emphasis on national or ethnic group identity with low emphasis of individual identity. A few studies have indeed described contact situations as characterized by tension between individual and group identities and as moving between interpersonal and intergroup interactions (Suleiman, 1997; Bar-On, 1999; Halabi & Sonnenshein, 2000).

In terms of the options suggested by Hewstone (1996), the two central educational assumptions guiding Jewish–Palestinian encounters in Israel seem to move in two different directions. The first seeks to overcome gaps by creating familiarity, acceptance and recognition of cultural differences or rapprochement by creating new harmonizing categories—e.g. we are all students. The second seeks to emphasize group differences, hoping to empower the minority so that it may become better positioned in the power struggle and hopefully—now with more pride—regain some ground. Irrespective of the assumptions adopted, psychological premises guide all this activity in one way or another (for reviews, see Weiner, 1998; Abu-Nimer, 1999). But for a few exceptions (Maoz, 2000b; Bekerman, 2002; Helman, 2002), these educational interventions in the form of intergroup encounters have been widely and mostly uncritically acclaimed. The optimism on which these theories are predicated is far from proving itself justified. The rather low number of existing studies on the effects of these encounters may possibly suggest a low level of success and/or a low level of critical interest. Traditional contact paradigms seem to have assumed that encounters could be conducted in isolation, removed from external tension and, as
such, could have healing effects which would ultimately impact the outside world (Maoz, 2000a, b; Bekerman & Maoz, 2005). However Maoz (2000b) has raised doubts about the possible benefits of this approach when implemented in sites of actual conflict reflecting asymmetrical relations of power. Abu-Nimer (1999) questions whether the encounters as developed today are not misleading, especially for Palestinian students, since they neither aim at nor produce political change. Others (Halabi & Sonnenshein, 2000) have pointed to the fact that the traditional approaches to intergroup encounters may contribute to sustaining further the present imbalance of power relations between the groups involved. In a previous paper (Bekerman, 2002), I have uncovered the inherent and often constraining influence of nation-state ideology on present perspectives on intergroup encounters.

To counter these weaknesses, these theoreticians suggest a variety of strategies. Maoz (2000b) points to the potential of the interactive problem-solving approach (Kelman, 1998), in particular when the issues are problems simultaneously important to both groups involved. Notwithstanding Maoz’s (2000b) commendable effort, present critiques, though certainly uncovering basic problematic issues in educational encounters, fall short of offering new theoretical paradigms through which to approach these activities.

This statement is true at two levels. Firstly, intergroup encounters fail to go beyond an essentialist approach to identity; and second, beyond merely noting the influence of external forces in encounter situations, they neglect to account for the tight relationship between this essentialist perspective of identity and the larger sociopolitical context—i.e. the nation-state. In my own writing (Bekerman, 2002), I have pointed out that what is similar in both perspectives is that they work on the premise of the existence of clearly differentiated identities and cultures. These perspectives fail to recognize that these distinctions are generated under the present conditions. These conditions have been shaped by the nation-state’s experience and character which has moulded the problem that initiators of cross-cultural encounters—and their theories—seek to overcome.

Recent studies (Bekerman, 2002; Helman, 2002) have started to account for these issues. Helman’s interpretative analysis of a year-long intergroup dialogue between Israeli Jewish and Palestinian students showed how it reproduced and solidified monological discourses on identity and culture, thereby further legitimizing power differentials and structural inequalities. For my part (Bekerman, 2002) I have identified and analysed, in similar peace educational contexts, the two central discourses which are allowed to evolve in the dialogue experience: the discourse of nation and the discourse of culture. I show how, for the most part, both discourses reify concepts of identity and culture, though at times they may allow for new interpretative twists which can compel participants to review current assumptions regarding cultural identities in general and, more specifically, the functioning of cultural identities in particular nation-state settings. These are just fleeting moments, quickly forced, by powerful existing national labels enacted in law, to regress into the familiar universe of given categories. And yet these moments have the power to point to the inconstancy of cultural/national/ethnic/identities.
As we will show below, these two issues—the concept of self and identity and the coming into being of the political organization of nation-state—are intimately related and should be taken into serious consideration when trying to understand the possible outcomes of the educational encounters as well as the educational strategies that should be adopted to better them.

Critique of paradigmatic perspectives supporting intergroup encounters initiatives

Identity, culture and the nation-state

Undertaking a long critique of the concept of identity in its traditional positivist psychological meaning is unnecessary as a great deal of academic work has been devoted to this issue (Potter & Wetherell, 1990; Gee, 1992; Harre & Gillett, 1995; Bakhurst, 1995; Watt, 1997). These studies point to the relatively modern appearance of this concept and its close connection to sociohistorical and philosophical developments in the last 400 years of western intellectual history. Identity as a unitary and autonomous construct has come under attack as being a product of exclusionary power relations (Bhabha, 1994; Hall, 1996), a monologic posture which tries to overcome through domination that which is ‘by nature’ dialogic: the self and identity (Mead, 1934; Bakhtin, 1981; Gee, 1992; Sampson, 1993). Similarly social identity and its constitution have been analysed as the products of power relations which establish dichotomous hierarchies (Laclau, 1990). In these the powerful attain the status of essentiality while the weak are reduced to the rank of an unfortunate but necessary accident (i.e. man/woman; black/white; Jew/Arab). Regarding this second point, it is worth recalling that recently historian, sociologists, culturalists and even psychologists (Gellner, 1983; Giddens, 1991; Smith, 1992; Billig, 1995) have expounded on the radical influence of the slow but steady development of the most universal of modern structures and ideologies: the ‘nation-state’ and ‘nationalism’ on long-standing and important conceptions of ‘identity’.

The powerful machinery developed by the nation-state, mostly in the shape of massive educational efforts which market universal (anonymous) literacy, has been successful in making seem natural or banal, as Billig (1995) would have it, the detailed practices through which nation-states become almost invisible settings in which we ‘mistakenly’ hold a sense of individuality—an individuality always measured against a contingent other (Laclau, 1990) and the modern court of human appeal: the ‘high’ culture of the nation state (Williams, 1961).

Theoreticians have identified the national structure as one of the cruellest systems on the historical scene (Bhabha, 1990; Mann, 2004). For the community to be imagined in its national oneness (Hobsbawm, 1983; Anderson, 1991), borders had to be widened and groups lumped together through homogenizing efforts; culture had to be reified and the individual—and his relation to the sovereign—strengthened so as to undermine the power of smaller communal identifications. Concealed behind the
promise of universal equality was the sovereign’s demand to have none other than an individual, stripped of any group affiliation, under his rod (Mendus, 1989).

The nation-states scheme has become so powerful that, like language in the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis, nationalism seems to shape and direct our most basic paradigmatic conceptions, both of society and individual identity. When these elements are not accounted for in peace educational efforts, they risk consolidating that same reality they intended to overcome.

Institutionalized education

Nevertheless our critique needs to go further if it wants to uncover the ‘true’ problems of educational activities geared towards co-existence. The critique needs to confront educational structures (the most traditional of which is western schooling which was universalized through the colonialiation process). This path is necessary because, as we will see, formal educational efforts themselves are also strongly related to the historical developments which brought about the reifying conceptual tyranny of the nation-state, thus consolidating our critique as one which cannot be easily discounted.

The development of mass education, through schooling, is tightly related to the industrial revolution and the development of the nation-state (Gellner, 1983; Smith, 1998; Bekerman & Silberman, 2003). Both were in need of recruiting masses to their service; masses with basic cognitive and behavioural skills which could serve the needs of the nation-state and its economic structure. Thus schools are in no way disinterested arenas within which neutral knowledge or skills are transmitted from the minds of specialists to those of passive individuals. In the modern era, schools have served as the primary means by which sovereigns have unified the different local groups inhabiting the areas they were successful in subordinating to their power, under one flag, one language and one narrative. With this in mind, it is already surprising that peace-searching elements in society have so often chosen school-like educational structures to secure their co-existence aims. Yet it could be argued that though adopting existing structures, peace-searching educators turn them into structures which serve their purposes and not just the sovereign under which they reside.

However, the central lynchpin of formal schooling’s success is its structure and its functionality, both based on and expressive of a particular paradigmatic perspective which we doubt can be beneficial for peace-making. Schools are the central conduit for the transmission of two interrelated beliefs of the modern western world: the first, the belief in the individual self; and the second, the outside existence of knowledge which this self can absorb if properly guided.

These above-mentioned elements have been in the making for centuries in the functioning of schools. Over 5000 years ago, when the first schools were created in order to produce a cast of scribes able to sustain the bureaucratic needs of growing, powerful, centralized, urban, economic human enterprises, they developed the three central characteristics which hold to this day (Goody, 1987; Cole, 1990):
• the student was trained by strangers, separated from his kin and family;
• the knowledge slated for transmission was differentiated and compartmentalized into fields of specialization; and
• learning took place outside of the contexts of its intended implementation—i.e. students rehearsed knowledge ‘out of context’.

If indeed the goals of liberal peace-searching elements in society are finding ways to strengthen and enliven recognition and co-existence and the individuals’ affiliation to them, as well as an understanding of peace-making and recognition as a living tradition able to offer a variety of answers to real present sociocultural-political issues, institutional educational structures and their foundational practices may not be the setting in which to achieve these aims.

While some peace educators might want to point to the rather different settings within which they function, less formal and not necessarily school-dominated, it would be difficult to validate the claim that intergroup encounters are free from the influence of the historical development of institutional education in their approach which is still basically structured on educational schooling premises. It is worth remembering that present research shows informal educational settings to have been invaded by school practices (Bekerman & Keller, 2004; Bekerman, Silberman-Keller & Burbules, 2006).

Let us again ponder the questions: can a framework that is premised on distancing the individual from the family and community core serve to engender peace perspectives which challenge those accepted in society? Can a structure that conceives of and imparts knowledge in differentiated and compartmentalized chunks (history, physics, civics, etc.), serve in the cultivation of peace and co-existence in the world as a comprehensive whole? And, last, is it feasible to expect that learners raised under the spell of school education would find what they learn relevant if they are ‘educated’ in environments in which the acquisition of knowledge is segregated from the places in which this knowledge can be functional (and in which the knowledge transmitted does not reflect the knowledge exercised by the community itself in the world outside)? These are obstacles that are common to formal schooling and peace/encounter group frameworks, and are perhaps even more blatantly problematic in the latter given their more starkly ‘out-of-time, out-of-place’ character.

Universal values and individualism

The above is not enough for our analysis and we need to consider two additional elements. These bring about the turn that connects so tightly this critical segment on modern educational strategies with the one we raised above regarding the theoretical blindness which prevents seeing the connection between the support of reified perceptions of (individual) identity and culture as in intergroup encounters.

These two elements are paradigmatic features which, if left untouched, will not allow for the system to be reformed and thereby to become beneficial to those wishing to sustain a level of independence so as to compete in the interpretative work which
takes place when shaping the world they inhabit. These paradigmatic features, at which I have hinted above, are what modernity has come to call ‘universal values’ (for the most part localized and restricted western conceptualizations universalized through colonialization) and their appointed recipients, the ‘autonomous individuals’ (also a western restricted and localized concept) and their assumed identities (Bekerman, 2000; Bekerman & Neuman, 2001).

This not being the place to expound on a full-fledged critique of these paradigmatic western bases, it will suffice to say that both culture, as a reified identifiable cast of behaviours and beliefs, and the individual as autonomous and universal, have been the focus of a long and wide theoretical controversy within high and post modernity which has successfully demonstrated the link between these features and many of the world’s current maladies (Giddens, 1991; Sampson, 1993; Taylor, 1994).

It is worth mentioning that these theoretical developments have pointed inter alia at two central issues related to our present understanding of culture and individual identity which are relevant to education. The first is that culture must be understood as a verb and not a noun; as something which grows, evolves and intermittently becomes when executed, to be promptly dissolved again into the doings of human activity which might, or might not, be able to reproduce it again in similar or different ways (Bauman, 1999). Second, individual identity must be conceived as a similar dialogic (verb-like) process of becoming and shaping, mostly through the use of the most human of human tools: language (Harre & Gillett, 1995; Holland et al., 1998). Thus both culture and individual identity have come to be conceptualized as evolving processes widely dependent on languaging (Wittgenstein, 1953).

It is doubtful whether not exposing these ruling paradigms of a reified individual’s identity and culture, together with the practices through which these paradigmatic perspectives are framed and constructed within school-like educational initiatives, can be helpful to the education of individuals towards peace and co-existence. The individual, conceptualized as separate and in isolation, might be a good subject for domination, but is a less worthy one for social (and/or communal) change. Culture and identity, reified and segregated, might be a good means of offering cheap recognition by politically correct multiculturalists, but they serve equally to justify and perpetuate the ongoing suffering of minorities, now recognized but with their structural subordination left fully intact (Bekerman, 2003, 2004).

Thus far we have discussed what we believe to be the unchallenged principles that define and support present peace educational efforts, thereby explaining our conviction that peace and co-existence education, in spite of its growth, will not necessarily help groups in conflict to achieve at least their declared goals of strengthening a vital and active peace perspective so as to make peace and co-existence a life option.

**Possible solutions**

In this section I want to consider options to strengthen the potential of peace education to support co-existence and reconciliation efforts given the critiques and paradigmatic problems we considered above.
While always taking seriously the declared objectives of intergroup educational efforts, i.e. recognition, inclusion, co-existence, we could first consider whether these objectives might not be better achieved if the emphasis on separate identity and culture is somewhat relaxed. We could reminded shareholders that we find it difficult to believe that any educational initiative which so strictly reflects, at central symbolic crossroads, the separation/segregation regnant in the larger society, could in any way change the reigning paradigm and offer change.

We could try also to call the attention of educational agents to the replicating nature of educational activity (its segregationist attitude in all that relates to identity/culture). In line with critical perspectives (Carspecken, 1996; Willis, 2000), we could point at this replicating power and try to make educators aware that they were falling prey to the nation-state scheme. We could encourage them to at least think about overcoming the hegemonic power of the nation-state. While these suggestions do offer possible alternative approaches that could serve our objectives well, we unfortunately believe they might easily be written off as irrelevant, given present political contexts.

Alternatively we could try a different approach, one in line with poststructuralist perspectives that emphasize the constructed nature of identity and culture. We could point at the fact that Israel, like many (all) other nation states, in order to be a state and create a people, has worked hard to homogenize its populations. Israel, in order to become what it is today, has denied the diversity of Diaspora Jews and invented the cohesive essential Jewish people (Kimmerling, 1994), and that, mirroring these developments, the new/old Arabs denied the diversities of their own and created Palestinians in direct dialogue with Jewish negations of diversity (Bekerman, 2000), a process already partially elaborated in Rouhana’s (1997) analysis of accentuated Palestinian identity in Israel.

Pointing in these directions, though at times liberating, might seem to both sides to be ultimately threatening. For Jews, such perspectives might momentarily offer a brief respite to those who have been marginalized in the system (Sefardic and Ultra-orthodox), but for the most part they would be seen as threatening those presently holding hegemonic national power (Ashkenazi/western/Zionist). For Palestinians these perspectives, though allowing them, for a moment, to regain some pride and see the enemy disintegrate (in its own subdivisions), might also be threatening because they point at the inconsistencies that threaten their own unity (Muslim/Christian, traditionalists/modernists) or threaten their collective sense of Palestinian identity which, given the present sociopolitical situation, they truly believe should not be endangered. Thus both Israeli Palestinians and Jews strongly oppose these perspectives that imply that concoction is the secret of cultural continuity, as opposed to ‘divide and rule’ which is the secret of national continuity and security (Boyarin & Boyarin, 1995; Eagelton, 2000).

The theoretical solutions presented above might be considered differentially by Jewish and Palestinian shareholders in intergroup encounters. The first, the one which calls for an effort to overcome reified perspectives of identity and culture, could nonetheless be agreed upon by both groups as conducive to in-depth revisions of present positions, which might propel participants onto paths as yet untried and
untrodden. Where these potential new paths would take us is unknown, but they might be considered potentially helpful.

The second option, the one which calls for an attempt to overcome the nation-state, is conducive to a more radical change which would imply surrendering the present existential definition of the state of Israel as Jewish, and thus creates some understandable commotion. Many Jews might honestly and courageously admit to their difficulties in accepting this analysis. From their perspective, though the position might be theoretically valuable, present and recent historical trajectories of the Jewish people do not allow it to become practical. Palestinians, as already mentioned, might see in it an impediment to their own national aspirations and thus also find it unacceptable until such time as that they might renounce nationalism after having achieved their own nation-state (i.e. only after they have their own nation-state could they consider a perspective that seeks to overcome it).

Still, as we will see in the following, I unexpectedly found this post-national position expressed in an event I recorded while researching an intergroup encounter in a leading university in Israel. The event allowed me to follow the rhetorical work such a stand can produce in the encounter situation, and the reactions it induced. It is to a short description of these events that I now turn. (For a full rendering of the events see Maoz et al., 2004.)

**Short characterization of the post-national position**

As stated previously, as part of a recent research effort, I followed an intergroup Jewish–Palestinian encounter and found myself tracing events which, in a sense, reflected the post-national stance I asked readers to considered above. Offer and Amit, two of the Jewish participants, seemed to put my claims into practice in the dialogue encounter context. Specifically, they tried to deconstruct the encounter group’s essentialist approach to national identities and present an approach that goes beyond nationalities and the conflict between them, an approach that devolves on the participants’ shared identities as human beings in a post-national reality.

While the above critique and analysis might imply that I advocate this approach as the one to be sought after, when examining it in practice in the context of a Jewish–Palestinian dialogue encounter, its redemptive potential was brought into question. It became clear that while the deconstruction of essentialist national identities was something to which some Jews might aspire, none of the Palestinians harboured such aspirations. Furthermore, the Jewish quest to de-essentialize national identities had the effect of silencing the voices of the Palestinian participants in the dialogue process, and of treating them as objects rather than as subjects (Maoz et al., 2004). Hence it became apparent that the effects of this effort at post-national discourse were detrimental to the encounter because they silenced dialogue. The last section of this paper thus questions what might be the future of such a stance when taking into account the debilitating and negating effects it had, in this instance, on the Palestinian cohort. Below I shall reconsider what the ‘real’ issues are, bringing into the discussion the analysis and critique from the first part of this paper.
Discussion

I have mentioned two central issues: firstly the reified conceptualizations of identity and culture which guide the psychological perspectives that gave birth to the intergroup encounters activity; and second, I pointed at the historical trajectory of school-based education in the West which aimed at separating the individual from his community and abstracting knowledge from the immediate reality so as to shape the individual (now citizen) in its own favoured shape. I connected both lines of critique when indicating that state educational institutions were historically a central tool in the hands of the sovereign powers used to unify its masses through universalized concepts and categories of culture and identity.

From the above it becomes apparent that the post-national manoeuvres of the Jewish participants, whether intended or not, could be nothing other than detrimental to the dialogue encounter and considered anathema by almost all participants, particularly the Palestinians within them. The position taken by Amit and Offer was fully abstracted from the outside reality and thus inconsequential given present realities. As such it could only be interpreted as a new turn of Jewish denial of the Palestinian cause or, in the eyes of the Jews, as dangerous self-denial. Amit and Offer were easily able to adopt this theoretical position in a setting which they knew to be inconsequential to the outside reality. One could argue that there is relevance to raising theoretical issues as heuristics to expand the mind and challenge present perspectives. While this is undoubtedly valid in some cases, it seems that in order for this to happen, a much greater parity is needed between the power relations of those involved in the educational activity, and that there be less distance between the suggested and outside realities as these are interpreted by those involved in the educational experience.

If so, there is no doubt that Amit and Offer, though utilizing an approach considered theoretically feasible, could only achieve failure in its implementation. If this is the case, what other strategies can be suggested?

I have recently considered what has come to be called post-positivist realism (Bekerman & Maoz, 2005). This view, though acknowledging poststructuralist critiques, recognizes that goods and resources are still distributed according to identity categories. It recognizes that theoretical conceptualizations, though valid, might not influence the world as much as the constructed perspectives of hegemonies. Poststructuralism might be theoretically correct; that is to say, it might offer a good description of an empirical world, but it is not stronger than the powerfully ‘constructed’ reality of a consequential hegemony which significantly affects our lives and sets the limits for where we can live, whom we can marry, and what educational and employment opportunities are available to us (Mohanty, 1997). If so, acknowledging reality (nation-state and its invented identities and culture)—though epistemologically erroneous—might be the best way to start. The one thing of which we might want to be careful is not to allow this reality to confuse the educational aim. This in itself is a serious problem we must confront.

By this I mean that we should try not to allow the reality to confuse us as to what the problem is: the problem is not only the segregated/marginalized minority, but also
the majority that marginalizes, or in our, case the Jews. Problems are not qualities of individual minds, nor do they belong to specific groups; they are shaped in dialogue between individuals or groups.

But even before this process is started, we need some criteria which can be accepted by all and in this ‘all-sense’ is ‘objective’, thus not resting on the positivist underpinnings of positivism. Such criteria could relate to issues such as: who is exploited? Who is powerful or powerless? Which cultural patterns carry symbolic power and the like? The process is similar to that described by Freire and Macedo (1995) who argued that critical education, or *concientizacao*, entails learning ‘to perceive social, political and economic contradictions and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality’ (p. 381). It is worth noting that Freire’s call is not only one of cognitive alertness but also one aimed towards practical activity, thus seeking to overcome the educational institutions’ traditional inclination to abstract knowledge from reality, that is to say, to segregate knowledge from social activity.

The move suggested is similar to that taken in anthropology (Varenne & McDermott, 1998) when examining central paradigmatic perspectives in general education—its study and practice. It starts by restoring the concept of identity/culture to its historical sources; follows by developing the restored meaning into a methodology—cultural analysis—which allows for a shift from the individual or the socializing group as the crucial unit for educational analysis to the production of cultural contexts; and last, it leads to a new articulation of major policy issues related—no longer to identity/culture and its components, individual, texts—but to the analysis of particular identities/cultures in the particular context of particular societies. Looking at the world seriously and critically means being open to finding new criteria through which to name it and its phenomena. The process could be liberating in that it could bring about the understanding that identity/culture are not necessarily the optimal or correct criteria through which to describe the world—not that they do not necessarily exist or are only hegemonic constructs but that, though they are legitimate, they do not necessarily imply conflict. Freeing identity from its tight historical political connections to the development of nation-state could reinstate identity as an enriching difference.

But then we could ask what they might bring to light, if successful. They might expose the primacy of social and economical structures and how these shape the ideologies which they serve, those foundations on which legal and political structures are built and to which definite forms of social consciousness (identity/class/culture) correspond. Though we favour these processes—for they also imply the predominance of the social over the ideological and thus open minds to the potential of collaboration towards individuation and concoction (the true secret of human/humane work, i.e. culture) as opposed to the establishing of policed borders (which are the bases for the maintenance of elites, national, ethnic, or other)—we doubt whether they might, if identified, be allowed to be implemented by the participants in the educational initiative.

Paradoxically it is the discourse of co-existence and its corollary—the implied premise that in order to achieve co-existence one needs to strengthen identity/
culture—that help to camouflage that which seems truly to stand behind the exclusive educational intergroup encounter initiatives. Their participants are, for the most part, members of sociocultural elites—students, politicians, middle upwardly mobile classes, whose current power is truly indebted to and sustained by the positivist paradigm; that particular paradigm that the educational perspectives I have been discussing purport to be striving to overcome.

At this point we might either despair or try to challenge present realities and theoretical understandings by attempting to redirect educational activities from their dealing with cognitive categories to their work towards changing the relations of power through active participation in the world. This step could be adapted to different levels of interpretation of what is presently wrong and to different levels of risk-taking and commitment according to the sociopolitical settings in which peace education programmes are implemented. Each setting calls for, and may allow for, the implementation of different and various practical activities which can be decided upon by educational agents knowledgeable about local conditions and circumstances. In Israel changes in the educational activities could imply very basic verbal behaviours, e.g. desisting from all-inclusive categories to nominate the ‘other’, the organization and participation in political demonstrations and activity and/or the creation of regional people forums in which to discuss and locally negotiate land redistribution. These might be considered small steps, but when compared to the present products of inter-group encounters, they may be seen as extraordinary and contributing to real change in a really confused world. We would do well to remember Buber’s (1957) perspective ‘Only through working on the kingdom of man (is it possible to work) on the kingdom of god … That which is merely an idea and nothing more cannot become holy’ (pp. 137, 142).

It’s time to rescue praxis from theory, activity from education, and peace/co-existence from identity.

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