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The 'Parent Circle' Peace Education Program: Does it Make Any Change?

Orna Braun-Lewensohn[1] · Boaz Kitain[1]

Abstract   This study evaluated a peace education program facilitated by the 'parents circle family forum.' The program aims to expose Jewish and Palestinian-Arab adolescents to personal stories of bereavement as a result of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. One hundred and sixty-four Jewish twelfth-grade adolescents from schools throughout Israel filled out questionnaires before the start of the educational program, and 135 Jewish adolescents filled out the same questionnaire up to a week after it ended. Questionnaires included empathy, anger, and legitimacy toward 'self' and 'others' narratives. Results indicate that, overall, there were not any significant differences before and after the educational program with regard to adolescents' attitudes toward 'self' and 'others' narratives. However, when examining differences between subgroups in Israeli society, significant differences between 'secular' and 'traditional' adolescents emerged. The attitudes of secular adolescents favored narratives of the 'others,' while the attitudes of the traditional adolescents favored the 'self' narratives. After the program, these differences diminished, meaning that the program had a different impact on each subgroup. The traditional adolescents became more favorable to the 'others' narratives, while the secular adolescents became more favorable to their own narratives. Results are discussed on the basis of the theoretical foundation of psychological impacts of intractable conflicts.

Keywords   Peace education · Adolescents · Political conflict

Introduction

The aim of this study is to evaluate the effectiveness of a peace education program facilitated by the 'Parents Circle Family Forum' (PCFF). The PCFF is a membership organization of a few hundred Israeli and Palestinian families who have lost a family

✉ Orna Braun-Lewensohn
ornabl@bgu.ac.il

[1]   Conflict Management and Resolution Program, Department of Interdisciplinary Studies, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, POB 653, Beer Sheva, Israel

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member as a result of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Members explain that coping with their loss and pain led them to participate in this social and political activity with the goal of preventing others from having to experience bereavement. The PCFF members try to promote a non-violent dialogue of reconciliation and coexistence through social and educational activity in the Israeli and in the Palestinian societies (Paul and Shenhav 2008). The present study focused on one of the many activities of the PCFF—a peace education program. During this program, Jewish and Palestinian-Arab adolescents are exposed to Jewish and Palestinian members of the PCFF who tell their personal stories of bereavement. They focus on telling the story of their choice to deal with their bereavement through dialogue and not through revenge. This is a one-time 90-min meeting. After hearing personal stories, students have the opportunity to ask questions and hold an open discussion with the speakers. The PCFF members direct the discussion toward topics such as reconciliation, alternatives for change, and anger toward the other group. The meeting is not about political solutions and is free from political or party involvement. It focuses solely on the members' experiences as a result of their bereavement and their work to make the situation better.

The specific goals of this study are to evaluate whether there are any changes in adolescents' attitudes toward the Israeli and the Palestinian historical narratives as a result of this peace education program. In addition, we also compared subgroups in Israeli society, i.e., secular (non-religious) and traditional (religious lite) adolescents.

Peace Education in the Context of Intractable Conflict

One challenge for societies living with intractable conflict is the culture of conflict which evolves over time as a built-in aspect of the society (Bar-On 2005; Kelman 2004). Thus, it is important to promote multiple social identities and encourage peaceful attitudes and behaviors in order to promote culture of peace (Fry and Miklikowska 2012). In addition, a change in the social–psychological infrastructure of the society is a prerequisite for promoting the peace process (Bar-Tal 2007). Moreover, the ability to overcome the rigid sociopsychological repertoire that accompanies the conflict is one of the most important challenges for peace building (Sagy et al. 2011).

Additional requisites for peace building are wide support for the peace process, readiness of the society members for reconciliation and political support including ministerial support (Bar-Tal and Rosen 2009).

Direct 'peace education' indeed deals with the conflict issues and tries to change beliefs, attitudes, values and behaviors which relate to the culture of the conflict, relearning history in order to create a new emotional orientation in which fear and hatred are replaced with hope, trust, and mutual acceptance (Bar-Tal et al. 2010). Over the last decades, different approaches to peace education have emerged in order to address the above-mentioned needs. These include the coexistence model which emphasizes interpersonal similarities (e.g., Beckerman 2007), the confrontation model (e.g., Halabi and Sonnenschein 2004), and the narrative mode (Bar-On 2008). The different programs each have strengths and limitations (Maoz 2011); however, several studies have shown that peace education programs had a positive effect and resulted in the acceptance of the 'other,' positive feelings toward the other, and willingness to connect the other (Rosen 2009; Rosen and Salomon 2011).

The present study aims to address the PCFF peace education program which reaches thousands of Israeli youth every year, but has not been studied systematically. We will examine whether the attitudes toward the 'other' by the Israeli youth change after participation in the program.

Adolescents' Attitudes Toward Historical Narratives

Different researchers have studied adolescent attitudes toward self and others' historical narratives in terms of legitimacy, empathy, and anger (Sagy et al. 2002). Overall, it was found that adolescents do not perceive the others' narrative as legitimate, do not have much empathy toward it, and show a lot of anger. This is true for both Israeli and Palestinian adolescents and could be due to the long intractable conflict which has created and encouraged delegitimization of the narrative of the other. It has also led to building each side's identity on the basis of rejection of the other (Sagy et al. 2002, 2011). More specifically, when following adolescents for a few years, researchers found that there was a change in these parameters. During periods when there was a chance for peace, and peace negotiations were in process between the two peoples, most adolescents gave more legitimacy and felt more empathy toward the Palestinian narratives. However, these attitudes changed and became more negative (less legitimacy and empathy and more anger) once the intifada began and following the Second Lebanon War (Sagy et al. 2011). Thus, it can be concluded that when violence escalates and the threat of the conflict intensifies, acceptance of the others' narrative is weakened. This means that 'top down' processes have at least some impact on adolescents' attitudes toward the others' narratives.

Very few studies have examined subgroups in Israeli society regarding their attitudes toward the others' narratives (e.g., Ben-Ami-Shapski 2005; Yaar and Herman 2010). These concluded that the more religious the person, the more negative the attitudes toward the Palestinian narrative and the more positive attitudes toward the Israeli narrative (Tsemach 2010).

In sum, this study aimed to examine the effect of the PCFF peace education program on Jewish Israeli adolescents' perceptions of collective narratives. Qualitative data will be explored with regard to the contribution of the peace education program to adolescents' favoring the 'others' narratives. The following are our hypotheses based on the quantitative data:

1. There will be no change in adolescents' attitudes toward the others' narratives because of the social–psychological infrastructure which is constructed during adolescence. As a result, new knowledge which may threaten existing conceptions regarding the conflict is hard to accept (Bar-Tal 2007).
2. Similar to attitudes about the others' narratives, we expect that attitudes toward 'self' narratives would not change because of the social–psychological infrastructure (Kelman 2007).
3. We hypothesize that there will be a difference between the perceptions of collective narratives between secular and traditional adolescents. Traditional adolescents are expected to report more negative attitudes toward the others' narrative and more positive attitudes toward 'self' narratives before the peace education program (Tsemach 2010). Because of lack of research, no hypothesis has being made for differences after the peace education program.

Methods

Participants

One hundred and sixty-four adolescents filled out the questionnaire before the PCFF peace education program, and 135 filled the same questionnaire during the period of up to 1 week after participating in the program. The sample included adolescents from four different schools around the country which represent different types of communities—urban and rural. In each school, two classes were selected randomly to participate in the program. Girls accounted for 60.7 % of the respondents before the program and 51.5 % of those who completed questionnaires after the program; 55.2 % of the respondents defined themselves as secular before the program and 57.5 % of those who completed questionnaires after the program.

Procedure

All the ethical procedures applicable to this study were followed in accordance with the Israeli Ministry of Education requirements. Students completed the self-report questionnaires twice during regular classes in the 2009–2010 school year. The first time they filled out the questionnaires was a few weeks before the PCFF peace education program, and the second was a few days after they had participated in the program. Students were not told that the research was conducted on the program but rather that the research was interested in their thoughts and feelings. Participation was voluntary and anonymous; therefore, we cannot pair the pre- and post-questionnaires. Students were told that they were free to end their participation for any reason at any time during the questionnaire procedure.

In addition to questionnaire completion, three focus groups were created in three out of the four schools with 5–6 students in each group. The students were asked by their teachers to join the group, and teachers tried to select students with a variety of opinions. The group meetings were taped and transcribed. Identification was only by first names. During the transcription, transcribers used only the first letter of the name. In this paper, we have used pseudo-names before quotations. During the focus groups, students were asked questions which were prepared prior to the group session.

Measures

The Perception of Collective Narratives questionnaire was designed by a group of Israeli and Palestinian scholars (Sagy et al. 2002). The questionnaire included structured questions that presented adolescents with mainstream views of the Israeli Zionist and the Palestinian narratives concerning particular historical events in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The questionnaire in our study was comprised of seven events: the Balfour declaration, the Holocaust, the 1948 war, the assassination of prime minister Rabin, the October 2000 demonstrations, Al-Aqsa Intifada and the construction of the fence, and operation 'Cast Lead'—the Gaza war, which were presented from the points of view of the two collective narratives (Israeli, Palestinian). Each narrative was followed by four questions (legitimacy, empathy, anger, and knowledge). Responses were on a scale of 1 (very untrue) to 5 (very true). Cronbach alpha for the present study ranged from .78 to .89.

Results

In order to examine the first and second hypotheses, *t* tests for independent samples were run and results showed no significant difference before and after the educational program (Table 1).

One-way anova was run, and differences between the subgroups of secular and traditional adolescents before and after the educational session were revealed. Before the program, secular adolescents viewed the Palestinian narrative more favorably than their traditional counterparts, while traditional adolescents were more favorable toward the Israeli narrative.

After the session, these significant differences diminished. The traditional adolescents revealed significantly more empathy toward the Palestinian narrative and more anger toward their own narrative as compared to their attitudes prior to the educational session. The other scale of legitimacy did not show significant change among the traditional group, but there was a trend toward more acceptance of the Palestinian narrative. There was also a nonsignificant trend in the opposite direction toward the Israeli narrative in the secular group, and less empathy and legitimacy and more anger toward the Palestinian narrative (Table 2).

The qualitative data revealed a wide range of opinions during the conversation in the focus groups. It seems that most participants do not ignore the Palestinian narrative. Some of them reported a change in their comprehension of this narrative and their willingness to see it as legitimate. Changes in attitudes were reported, especially among girls who presented themselves as right wingers. For example, Hani presented herself as a settler with very right wing opinions. She also said that she has an Arab friend from her classroom and Arab partners in her after school job. Hani said that she went through a major change during the session. Her attitude toward Palestinians and their intentions became more positive, and she felt she could understand them and legitimize their narrative:

> I was happy with this session, yes it made a change changed… and it changed, and made a revolution in my head as if they, it is also a little bit… they defended their territory, and if I don't think it is their territory at least I have to accept that they think it is….

Table 1 Perceptions of 'self' narratives and 'others' narratives before and after the educational program

	Before PCFF program N = 164		After the PCFF program N = 135		*t*
	M	SD	M	SD	
'Self' narrative					
Legitimacy	3.75	.75	3.76	.77	−.28
Empathy	3.43	.77	3.49	.81	−.61
Anger	1.84	.58	1.83	.65	.11
'Others' narrative					
Legitimacy	2.40	.83	3.44	.83	−.42
Empathy	.96	.72	2.06	.73	−1.08
Anger	2.93	.92	2.92	.89	.11

Table 2 Perceptions of 'self' narratives and 'others' narratives before and after the educational program among secular and traditional adolescents

	Before PCFF program Secular (a) N = 85		Before PCFF program Traditional (b) N = 56		After the PCFF program Secular (c) N = 77		After the PCFF program Traditional (d) N = 50		F
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	
'Self' narrative									
Legitimacy	3.60	.80	4.08	.57	3.77	.81	3.79	.72	4.80***(ab)
Empathy	3.31	.78	3.75	.68	3.45	.83	3.60	.79	3.79***(ab)
Anger	1.92	.60	1.60	.49	1.77	.58	1.93	.75	3.48*(ab,bd)
'Others' narrative									
Legitimacy	2.58	.88	1.99	.56	2.48	.84	2.34	.82	6.57***(ab)
Empathy	2.16	.75	1.54	.45	2.06	.70	2.04	.78	9.82***(ab)**(bd)
Anger	2.73	.93	3.41	.81	2.84	.94	3.07	.78	7.48***(ab)

$* p < .05$; $** p < .01$; $*** p < .001$

Anat, from Haifa, reported that after the session, she understood the Palestinians' way of thinking better and granted legitimacy to their motivation to fight. She related to the Peace Education session, and said it was very powerful and had a significant effect on her ability to understand the other side:

> Personally, I better understood their side and their perception and the way they may, maybe a little bit, they think…

Asaf, from central Israel, participated in a focus group in which the members were mainly boys. These boys had difficulty in granting legitimacy to the Palestinian narrative. The peace education session validated this difficulty. It seems that the Israeli narrative dominates his thinking and does not allow for legitimization of the other side—the Palestinian narrative. In his opinion, the Palestinian narrative is a distortion of reality which the Palestinians adjust to their needs.

> I don't think that their narrative is right, I think that the Palestinian nation, or whatever it is, they know to distort the truth; they know to build the story so that it fits their needs. That it usually does not fit… I mean that you can take, they took the story and distort it….

From the conversations in the focus group, it seems that most of the participants, even those who were 'right wingers,' showed empathy toward the pain of the Palestinian member and that they viewed him/her as a person like themselves. Ziv, from Jerusalem, who stated that she is an extreme 'right winger,' relates with empathy toward the Palestinian pain as a result of the session. In spite of this fact, she says that her basic opinions have not changed. She feels the pain exists on both sides and wants to end it.

> I felt as if I can feel the pain of the other, not just our pain…Yes, he had pain, and I respect him even though he is an Arab… still, it is the pain of a human being… and I think that this pain must end for both sides.

Reference to anger regarding the Palestinians and their narrative by the participants was minor compared to the legitimization and empathy expressed toward this narrative. When relating to anger, they related indirectly by speaking about other students' attitudes—students from their class who were not part of the focus group. Perhaps the choice to bring up others' testimony was a reflection of an inner voice of those who brought it up. Tali: '…The minute they started to talk about the roadblocks and about his life there, there were many children that… it was very difficult for them to listen, and they sat as if they just wanted it to be over… sometimes they showed disrespect, sometimes they expressed anger…' And Gali added: 'Yes, they also expressed anger… there were some people who were really angry.'

The conversations in the focus groups did not focus as much on the Israeli narrative. However, some students related to the legitimacy of the Israeli narrative. It is very difficult to find direct reference to a change in attitude toward the legitimacy of the Israeli narrative as a result of the peace education program. However, it seems that openness toward the others' narrative also reflects a change in attitude toward the Israeli narrative to a certain extent. Asaf describes the Israeli narrative as a heritage embedded in stories from 'grandpa's home.'

> I have grown up on the story of the pioneers that came to build a country, and there were the Arabs, who opposed, and all these stories are coming, my grandpa tells me these stories. As if ok I am growing up with it…

Asaf then says that this educational program softened him to a certain extent and led him to be more critical toward the Israeli narrative while being more open to things he rejected in the past.

> I am a little bit less rigid, as if from not wanting to hear these opinions to say, it could be that we are also not 100 % right, because there are many stories of massacres of villages that it shouldn't have happened… Yes, things like this… are terrible things that we have done.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to examine the effect of the PCFF peace education program on Israeli adolescents' attitudes toward their own and toward the others' historical narratives. We examined these attitudes in terms of legitimacy, empathy, and anger.

Our findings were consistent with the first hypothesis; there were no significant differences in adolescents' legitimacy, empathy, and anger about their own and the others' historical narratives before and after the peace education program. One main explanation for these results is that during intractable conflicts, the social–psychological infrastructure builds mechanisms which enable individuals and the society to cope with the difficulties of daily life during the conflict (Bar-Tal 2007).The impact of the social–psychological infrastructure goes far beyond the treatment of information and the difficulty in accepting change. Adolescents, as part of their society, tend to look for and to internalize knowledge which is in accordance with the social–psychological infrastructure while eliminating or adjusting knowledge which contradicts this infrastructure (Kelman 2007). For adolescents who were participants in the PCFF peace education program, it seems that the embedded infrastructure which they acquired throughout their lives did not enable them to make change the program sought. The information which they heard during the program was

different and contradicted their previous knowledge of the Palestinian narrative. Thus, the way they perceived and processed this knowledge would be expected to defend existing knowledge and prevent possible change.

The qualitative data enabled us to examine adolescents' attitudes toward the others' narrative in more depth. Some of the adolescents were able to give more legitimacy and feel more empathy toward the Palestinians as a result of the educational session. Meeting a bereaved Palestinian person may have opened adolescents up to feelings of empathy toward him. Giving personal empathy to an individual and his/her family is easier than generalizing it to an entire society.

The second hypothesis was supported as well, with no significant changes in adolescents' attitudes toward their in-group historical narratives. Overall, adolescents' attitudes toward their self-narrative were positive. Support for this was also observed in the focus groups where there was strong and positive support for the Israeli narrative. Perhaps the social–psychological infrastructure which has been absorbed by these adolescents during their lives in an intractable conflict led to the adolescents retaining their attitudes toward the Israeli narrative (Rouhana and Bar-Tal 1998). The Israeli PCFF member seems to have represented a well-known narrative and an experience which is not new, in contrast to the Palestinian member to whom much more attention was given. This has also been supported by another study which was conducted on the PCFF peace educational program (Shenhav and Paul 2010).

Our third hypothesis related to subgroups in Israeli society. We hypothesized that traditional adolescents who are usually more 'right wingers' would favor the Israeli narrative and would reject the Palestinian narrative compared to their secular counter parts who usually hold more left wing attitudes (Tsemach 2010). Indeed, this hypothesis was supported. These results are in accordance with previous findings that indicated that religious adolescents oppose the Palestinian narrative more than secular ones (Ben-Ami-Shapski 2005).

Our main question related to the impact of the educational session on both subgroups. We found that there were significant changes in empathy toward the Palestinian others' narrative and in anger toward the Israeli self-narrative among the traditional adolescents. Thus, the significant differences between the two groups which characterized the data before the educational session diminished after the educational session with the Palestinian and the Israeli members of the PCFF so that the attitudes toward one's own narrative and the others' narrative were approximately the same after the session. This means that these groups became closer to one another in their attitudes toward the narratives after the program. The results in the traditional group can be explained in several ways. First, encountering bereavement, and the strong emotions which accompany it, could have opened an exceptional possibility for change. The respect and empathy common in Israeli society for bereavement is also given to the Palestinian member who comes together with the Israeli member to tell his story. The special status of the 'victim' which is part of the social–psychological infrastructure may have enabled the Palestinian to enter the hearts of these adolescents who identified them as bereaved families. Additionally, some of the adolescents personally know people from their environment who have experienced bereavement, sometimes family members, friends, and other relatives. Therefore, bereavement is an emotional experience which is close to them. As these adolescents will soon become soldiers, bereavement is a threat which may be only partially conscious (Bar-Tal 2007).

The present study combines components of emotions and cognition. Like other researchers, this study also suggests that the emotional component has demonstrated the most significant change (Bar-On 2010; Steinberg 2010). Thus, the recommendation that peace

education programs should include emotional components has been supported. Second, the presence of a Palestinian personal testimony intensified the strength of the emotional solidarity toward the Palestinian him/herself. The influence of the personal story could be very powerful since until they heard this story, the participants had not been exposed to Palestinian views in their own everyday environment. It seems that this program enabled adolescents with more radical political views to bypass their original attitudes which blocked them from taking in this type of information in the past (Kelman 2007). Third, the experience of the PCFF peace educational program is authentic. The Palestinian member tells his story in a straightforward, informal way which enables the story to be perceived as reliable. Previous studies have shown that hearing a personal experience can have a strong impact on empathy and change of attitude (Adwan and Bar-On 2004; LitvakHirsch 2006). Fourth, the Palestinian member also relates his story to the Israeli narrative. Even when he criticizes it, he legitimizes this narrative and sometimes even empathizes with it. Such relations toward the others' narrative could also impact adolescents' attitudes and their willingness to view them with more openness (Steinberg 2002; Zonenshein 2008). Fifth, the talk given by the Israeli member of the PCFF demonstrates to the youth that one can view the conflict with complexity: support peace and be a peace activist, be critical toward your own society, but still be a patriot. Clearly, the Israeli historical narratives are important to the Israeli member of the PCFF as they are important to the adolescents. Perhaps sharing this experience enabled the adolescents to develop this complex insight. This contrasts with the atmosphere which is aroused in times of conflict, when someone who understands the other side might be perceived as threatening and betraying his own group (Bar-Tal and Salomon 2006). Sixth, the collaboration between the Israeli and the Palestinian members models a mode of cooperation for the adolescents. Even though these are people who were hurt most by the other in the conflict, they have decided to work together to try to bring this conflict to its end.

Study Limitations

This is a small study with just over one hundred participants. Future studies should include a wider source of data. Moreover, the present study did not specifically ask for the political attitudes of the participants. It would be useful in future studies to include such questions in order to enable researchers to compare the sample on this dimension. This will assist researchers in providing a more in-depth examination of the components of the program which enable change in adolescents and those components which are obstacles and sources of opposition.

To summarize, overall, we can conclude that the one session the PCFF peace education program had a significant effect only on traditional (religious lite) adolescents. The qualitative study highlighted and emphasized the results of the quantitative part of the study in that change was found only among the traditional adolescents and showed that the program creates dynamics which enable openness to and readiness for change. The PCFF program dealt with social beliefs and emotional expressions that were received by the adolescents whose attitudes were already crystallized as a result of their psychological infrastructure which developed during their life in an intractable conflict. The dialogue during the session creates the potential for understanding the 'other.' However, sometimes during the dialogue, there are objections which promote ethnocentrism and prevent a deep and essential lasting change. The practical implications of the findings suggest that it is

important to expose adolescents from different backgrounds to these kinds of experiences. We can assume that a multi-session program of this nature could have a greater impact on adolescents.

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