

# An Intervention Program Cultivating Emotional Social Skills in Israeli Arab Adolescents

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## **Abstract<sup>1</sup>**

*Arab society in Israel is a traditional patriarchal culture holding collectivistic, interdependent values. Arabs in Israel receive basic human rights and privileges, but the Israeli society treats them as a separate minority group. The basic premise of the current study was that improving the emotional intelligence and the empathy abilities of adolescent Arabs in general – through a uni-national group program – would result in stronger empathy towards Jews in Israel – a change that would improve the Arab participant's attitudes and behaviors towards the Jews in Israel.*

*The research accompanying the implementation of the program was quasi-experimental. The main goals of the current intervention were to improve the intra-personal, interpersonal and inter-group skills and functioning, to strengthen awareness and skills in identifying and understanding emotions in themselves and other people – their causes and effects, to improve emotion regulation and ability to manage other people's emotions, to improve empathy towards members of the in-group (Arabs) and the out-group (Jews), to reduce stereotypes against minority groups, and to improve Jewish-Arab relations.*

*The sample included 172 Arab 10th and 11th grade adolescents in northern Israel. The main research hypotheses were: 1) The participants' emotional intelligence and empathy towards Arabs will be higher at the end of the program than at its beginning; 2) The participants' empathy towards Jews will be higher at the end of the program than at its beginning.*

**Keywords:** *Intervention Program, Emotional Social Skills, Emotional Intelligence, Empathy, Arab Society.*

## **1. Introduction**

At the end of 2015, 1,757,800 Arabs lived in Israel - 20.8% of the Israeli population (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2017). The ratio between Israeli Jews and Arabs has hardly changed over time despite extensive growth of the Jewish population

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particularly following immigration (Landaw, 1981, 1993). About half of the Israeli Arabs are male, and 42.9% are under the age of 18. A large percentage of them (42.1%) live in northern Israel. 84.7% of them are Muslims, 7.4% are Christians, and 7.8% are Druze. 47% of Arab families live in poverty – compared to 14% of the Jewish families (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2017).

Since the establishment of the State of Israel (in 1948), this conflict evolved into armed conflicts between Israel and its Arab neighboring nations and the Palestinians (Bar-Tal & Teichman, 2005). Israel is defined as a Jewish state as manifested in its language, symbols and institutions. Arabs in Israel receive basic human rights and privileges, but the Israeli society treats them as a separate minority group (Ghanem, 1998). They experience discrimination and prejudice against them, which affect them in all spheres of life – including employment, social services, lands, health and education (Ghanem, 1998; Smoocha, 2010). In addition, Israeli Arabs need to cope with an identity conflict between the Palestinians they feel they belong to and their aspirations for a Palestinian state – and the country they live in, which is in conflict with the Palestinians (Ghanem, 1998). Because they belong to the same ethnicity and culture as Israel's enemies, they were never truly perceived as equal citizens of Israel – and they have to prove their loyalty to the state to get equal rights and opportunities (Rodnizki, 2014). The negative perception of Arabs as a separate population living in Israel is often apparent in leaders' speeches, in the news, books, and even school textbooks (see review: Oren & Bar-Tal, 2007). As a result of the way Arabs are treated in Israel, they feel a need to construct and experience a separate defined ethnic identity – with their own culture and way of life (Abu-Rayya, 2006). Many of them see themselves as an 'indigenous minority' with a continuous geo-historical presence in the Land of Israel – before Israel had ever existed (see literature review: Rekhess, 2007).

Arab society in Israel is a traditional patriarchal culture holding collectivistic, interdependent values. In this culture, community or family goals and interests are more important than personal ones. Family relationships are based on duty and

loyalty, and conformity and obedience to authority are strongly encouraged (Seginer et al. 2007; Smootha, 2010). In order to preserve the family's harmony, expression of personal feelings, opinions and needs is discouraged (Peleg-Popko et al., 2003).

### **1.1. Emotional Intelligence and Empathy**

Emotional intelligence is defined as an ability to process emotional information accurately and efficiently in the self and others (Mayer & Salovey, 1997). Some of the models in this field, perceive emotional intelligence as a "mixed model" of both ability and personality characteristics (Zeidner, Matthews, & Roberts, 2008). The current study is based on the model designed by Mayer and Salovey (Mayer & Salovey, 1997). According to this model, emotional intelligence is composed of four emotional abilities: perceiving emotions accurately through perception of verbal and non-verbal information and expressing them appropriately; using emotions to promote thinking or cognitive processes; understanding emotions of the self and others; and effective regulation of positive and negative emotions (Mayer & Salovey, 1997). The issue of how an intervention that fosters emotional intelligence can affect inter-group relationships has not been tested in the past. However, when a group member feels strong negative emotions (i.e., anger) – they will express more extreme negative behaviors and prejudice against members of their out-group, because these feelings will intensify their perception of them as a threat, and will strengthen their differentiation between their in-group and outgroup (DeSteno et al., 2004).

The second avenue of the current intervention program was to foster empathic abilities in order to improve Israeli Jews and Arabs relationships. Empathy is strongly correlated with emotional intelligence, and is in many respects a part of it. Empathy is defined as a person's ability to identify and understand the emotional experience of the other person and personally experience his/her inner world as their own (Salovey, & Mayer, 1990). The model that the current study was based on is called 3R – Resonance, Reasoning, Response.

Peoples' ability to empathize is crucial to the establishment of positive mutual interactions and reduction of hostility and hate. Thus, the ability to look at the situation from the view point of other people changes the basic egocentric perception – a change which can improve interpersonal relationships (Davis et al., 1996). Specifically, the empathy a person feels towards an out-group member was found to reduce his/her prejudice and stereotypes against the out-group, to increase motivation to help them, and improve the relationship between them (Dovidio et al., 2010; Eisenberg et al., 2010; Shih et al., 2009).

## **1.2. The Current Study**

The basic premise of the current study was that improving the emotional intelligence and the empathy abilities of adolescent Arabs in general – through a uni-national group program – would result in stronger empathy towards Jews in Israel – a change that would improve the Arab participant's attitudes and behaviors towards the Jews in Israel.

The research accompanying the implementation of the program was quasi-experimental. It did not include sampling of participants or randomization in the groups they participated in. Instead, it was conducted with students in specific high school classrooms during school hours

## **1.3. Research Hypotheses**

The following research hypotheses were determined based on the literature:

1. The participants' emotional intelligence and empathy towards Arabs will be higher at the end of the program than at its beginning.
2. The participants' empathy towards Jews will be higher at the end of the program than at its beginning.
3. The participants' attitudes, images and willingness for contacts towards Jews will be higher at the end of the program than at its beginning

## **2. Methodology**

### **2.1. Research Methods**

The research accompanying the implementation of the program was quasi-experimental.

### **2.2. Participants**

172 Arab adolescents studying in 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> grades in northern Israel participated in the intervention in five groups. 33.1% were boys, and 66.9% were girls; 96.9% were born in Israel; 90.8% were Muslims, and 9.2% were Christians; 56.9% live in an Arab city, 0.8% live in a Jewish city, 31.8% live in a mixed Jewish-Arab city, and 39.2% live in an Arab village; 6.9% defined their socioeconomic status as high, 85.5% defined it as mediocre, and 7.6% defined it as low; 10.7% see themselves as Arabs, 27.5% see themselves as Arab-Israeli, and 31.3% see themselves as Arab-Palestinians living in Israel.

### **2.3. The Intervention Program**

The main goals of the current intervention were to improve the intra-personal, interpersonal and inter-group skills and functioning, to strengthen awareness and skills in identifying and understanding emotions in themselves and other people – their causes and effects, to improve emotion regulation and ability to manage other people's emotions, to improve empathy towards members of the in-group (Arabs) and the out-group (Jews), to reduce stereotypes against minority groups, and to improve Jewish-Arab relations.

The intervention program included 12 sessions lasting an hour and a half that were moderated by one Arab educational consultant. The program had a predetermined syllabus. In the first two sessions, emphasis was put on creating a group contract,

which referred to active listening, dialogue, providing feedback, discipline, and rules of safe discussion. In the following sessions topics included: Emotional intelligence skills (e.g., awareness of emotions, emotion identification, self-reflection, emotion regulation, expressing emotions appropriately, identifying and understanding the emotions of other people); managing stressful situations – through problem solving and decision making, acceptance of the other and reducing prejudice – through understanding the similarities and differences between people and different groups in society; learning and practicing empathy resonance through taking the perspective of a person of another social group (boys/girls, religious/secular, Arab/Jew) in order to develop empathic concern; identifying emotions related to the Arab-Jewish conflict and their effects; briefly learning about Jews and their history. The sessions included different teaching methods such as arts (drawing, sculpture, psychodrama – including role playing and photography), watching relevant movies, exposure to personal stories of Jews, and group discussion.

## 2.4. Tools

The participants filled out three self-report questionnaires in Hebrew before they started the program, and then again immediately after they finished it.

1. **Emotional Intelligence – the SSRI scale** (Schutte et al., 1998). The questionnaire included 33 items pertaining to different aspects of emotional intelligence: evaluation and expression of feelings by self and others, regulation of self and others' emotions, and using emotions to solve problems. Participants were asked to rate each item on a five-degree Likert scale describing their level of agreement with it (between 1 – "do not agree at all" to 5 – "fully agree"). The validity and reliability of this questionnaire, as measured in adults in previous studies, was not consistent (Ciarrochi et al., 2001; Saklofske et al., 2003; Schutte et al., 1998). However, its internal

reliability was high when it was tested with adolescents ( $\alpha=.83$ ) (Zeidner et al., 2008).

2. **Empathy.** The questionnaire used was developed by Zisman (2009) to measure inter-group empathy. It includes 20 items measuring the three empathy ingredients: resonance, reasoning and reaction. The participants in the current study filled out this questionnaire twice – first in relation to other Arabs, and then focusing on their empathy towards Jews. In the original study, Zisman (2009) found high structure validity and internal reliability.

3. **Inter-group Relationships.** The questionnaire used was developed by Kupermintz et al. (2007) at the Center for Peace Education at the University of Haifa. This questionnaire contains three different scales: willingness for contact, stereotypes and images, and emotions. The first subscale measured how willing one is to do specific activities with an Israeli Jew (meet, host at home, live in the same neighborhood, be friends with). In the second subscale, which was taken from Rosen (2006), the participants were asked to rate the degree that certain positive and negative attributes (such as smart, violent) characterize Israeli Jews. In the third subscale, which was based on the study by Ybarra and Stephan (1994), participants were asked to rate the degree they feel certain positive and negative feelings (such as hate, sadness) towards Israeli Jews. On each of the items in the three subscales, participants were asked to provide their answer on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ("not at all") to 5 ("very highly"). The internal reliability for these three scales in the current study were: Willingness for contact:  $\alpha=.90$  before and  $\alpha=.81$  after; images:  $\alpha=.77$  before and  $\alpha=.84$  after; and emotions:  $\alpha=.68$  before and  $\alpha=.73$  after.

### 3. Results

This section presents the statistical analyses conducted to examine the research hypotheses. Two statistical tests were used – t-tests to compare differences in each of the variables between before and after the intervention, and Pearson correlations to test the relationships between the variables.

The t-test conducted to examine changes in emotional intelligence measured following the intervention found that the program improved the participants' emotional intelligence – both on the general measure and each subscale. Table 1 presents the results of this analysis. The first hypothesis was supported (see Table 1).

**Table 1: Comparing Emotional Intelligence Towards Arabs Before and After the Intervention (N= 172)**

	<b>Before</b>	<b>After</b>	<b>t</b>	<b>D</b>
	<b>M (SD)</b>	<b>M (SD)</b>		
<b>Evaluation and expression</b>	3.67 (.77)	4.07 (.63)	***-3.88	.57
<b>Resolution of feelings</b>	3.57 (.80)	4.04 (.67)	***-4.26	.64
<b>Using feelings</b>	3.95 (.95)	4.23 (.79)	*-2.27	.32
<b>General measure</b>	3.73 (.81)	4.11 (.66)	** -3.48	.51

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

The t-test conducted to examine changes in empathy towards Arabs following the intervention found that the program improved the participants' empathy towards Arabs – both on the general measure and the specific subscales. Table 2 presents this analysis.

The second hypothesis was supported.



**Table 2: Comparing Empathy Towards Arabs Before and After the Intervention (N= 172)**

	<b>Before</b>	<b>After</b>	<b>t</b>	<b>D</b>
	<b>M (SD)</b>	<b>M (SD)</b>		
<b>Resonance</b>	3.52 (.70)	4.06 (.52)	***-6.02	.87
<b>Reasoning</b>	3.48 (.74)	4.07 (.76)	***-5.30	.78
<b>Reaction</b>	3.74 (.78)	4.11 (.62)	***-3.60	.52
<b>General measure</b>	3.58 (.63)	4.08 (.56)	***-5.68	.83

\*\*\* $p < .001$

The t-test conducted to examine changes in the empathy towards Israeli Jews following the intervention found that the program improved the participants' empathy towards Israeli Jews – both in the general measure and the specific subscales. Table 3 presents this analysis. The third hypothesis was supported.

**Table 3: Comparing Empathy Towards Jews Before and After the Intervention (N= 172)**

	<b>Before</b>	<b>After</b>	<b>t</b>	<b>D</b>
	<b>M (SD)</b>	<b>M (SD)</b>		
<b>Resonance</b>	2.61 (.96)	3.4 (.77)	***-6.18	.90
<b>Reasoning</b>	2.52 (.98)	3.49 (.96)	***-6.74	.99
<b>Reaction</b>	2.6 (1.19)	3.44 (.95)	***-5.32	.78
<b>General measure</b>	2.58 (.93)	3.44 (.83)	***6.61	.97

\*\*\* $p < .001$

The t-test conducted to examine changes in the three measures of relations with Israeli Jews following the intervention found that the program improved the participants' willingness for contact with Israeli Jews, images of Israeli Jews, and

emotions towards Israeli Jews. Table 4 presents this analysis. The fourth hypothesis was supported.

**Table 4: Comparing Relations with Israeli Jews Before and After the Intervention (N= 172)**

	<b>Before</b>	<b>After</b>	<b>t</b>	<b>d</b>
	<b>M (SD)</b>	<b>M (SD)</b>		
<b>Willingness for contact</b>	3.08 (1.17)	3.62 (.92)	** -3.54	.51
<b>Images</b>	2.86 (.65)	3.49 (.62)	***6.63	.99
<b>Emotions</b>	2.97 (.52)	3.31 (.51)	***-4.44	.66

\*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

#### 4. Discussion

The current study examined the changes Arab adolescents exhibited following a uni-national intervention fostering emotional intelligence and empathy. First, according to the research findings, the intervention was able to improve the emotional intelligence of the participants and their empathy towards other Arabs. In other words, it fulfilled its intended direct goals, and was able to foster these emotional capabilities in the participating adolescents. Second, as hypothesized, the participants' empathy towards Israeli Jews increased following the intervention. These findings might be a result of different aspects of the intervention. This is possibly a result of the participants' improved emotional intelligence. As participants were better able to manage and regulate negative feelings, they felt less threatened by members of the other group, and thus felt less of a need to perceive them as a separate "enemy" group. In addition, their new emotional capabilities following the program, and the knowledge they acquired about the history of the Jewish people, helped them understand what Jews were feeling and experiencing, and why they

behaved the way they did. As a result, they felt less alienated from them and more similar to them (DeSteno et al., 2004; Dovidio et al., 2010; Vescio et al., 2003).

The aspect of the intervention that had a direct effect on the improved empathy toward Jews was learning and practicing empathy skills – how to resonate with another person and adopt their perspective in order to understand what they are going through. These findings are important as, in contrast to previous studies, participants were taught general empathic abilities, and were not encouraged specifically to empathize (or take the perspective) of members of the other group (Jews). In other words, even learning empathic skills in general – not directly towards a specific group – can improve empathy towards out-group members. As such, it is definitely possible that without including several sessions in the intervention focusing on learning and practicing emotional intelligence skills – the effects of the empathy section would have been smaller.

The second important finding in the current study was the significant improvement in the participants' images, feelings and willingness of contact with Jews – following the program. The improved empathy of the research participants towards Israeli Jews was manifested in a change in the way they perceived Israeli Jews, and how they felt towards them. Previous studies found a similar relationship between the empathy a person feels towards out-group members from different out-groups – and how they perceive them and feel about them (Dovidio et al., 2010; Eisenberg et al., 2010). The current intervention program was unique in showing that even when the participants learn emotional intelligence and empathy skills in general – not directed at a specific out-group – it is enough to create a change in attitudes, feelings, and willingness for contact. This is an important finding that opens up many more possibilities when the goal is to change attitudes or relationships with members of other groups (Schroeder & Risen, 2014). Specifically, as it relates to the Israeli-Arab conflict – inside and outside of Israel, it was shown that even when the two groups are in an intractable conflict with each other, and perceive members of the other group negatively as an enemy and a threat, learning empathic skills can

reduce tensions between the groups and create more openness for contact (Pickett et al., 2014). This finding supports the "education for peace" approach that states that strengthening general emotional skills and democratic values, without a direct discussion of the conflict – its causes, history or specific ethos – can create the necessary base to changing the Jewish-Arab relationships in Israel (Bar-Tal et al., 2010; Ramsey & Latting, 2005). The current study showed that one of the important skills that needs to be taught in such interventions is empathy. It was found that fostering an empathic stance – of looking at reality from the other person's view point – can help a person understand and feel what the person from the other group is experiencing, thus reducing tension and hostility between the two groups.

## **5. Conclusions**

According to the findings of the current study, a uni-national intervention focusing on fostering emotional intelligence and empathy may result in an improvement in the attitudes, feelings and willingness of Israeli Arabs to be in contact with Israeli Jews. As such, this type of intervention can help overcome the limitations and difficulties previous interventions focusing on the Israeli-Arab conflict have had in creating direct Arab-Jewish encounters that do not result in escalation of mutual attitudes and feelings. The current intervention program, which was conducted separately with Jews and with Arabs, was able to avoid these obstacles. It was found that even without direct contact or even a thorough discussion of the Israeli-Arab conflict, following their program participation, Arab adolescents expressed less negative extreme views of Jews, and were more open to having contact with them. This intervention can be seen as a preliminary step. After the participants (in both national groups) have learnt emotional skills – including empathy – and were open for contact with the other, it seems appropriate to conduct joint direct encounters. This second step would allow the two groups to work together on shared goals and to get closer to each other.

A number of elements in the program contributed to its success, and are thus recommended in future intervention programs. First, the intervention was conducted in the school environment during school hours, and did not require the participants to relinquish their personal time. This setting probably increased the students' willingness to participate in it, and their involvement during the intervention. Another important contributing factor was the use of different activities such as discussion, disclosure of personal stories of the participants and Jewish and Arab mothers, movies, and group activities.

Another important element that contributed to the success of the program was that the groups were relatively homogenous (religiously, politically, and place of residence), which helped the participants to feel safe to open up and to share. As such, it is recommended to conduct the intervention with a group that is as homogenous as possible, and thus increase the participants' cooperation and reduce tensions between them. In addition, the program – its specific content and implementation methods – should be adapted to the specific group – i.e., the participants' emotional abilities, cultural norms regarding self-disclosure, and intragroup relations.

In conclusion, a uni-nation intervention program focusing on fostering emotional intelligence and empathy can change Israeli Arab adolescents' empathy, attitudes and feelings towards Israeli Jews, and their willingness to be in contact with them. This type of program can reduce tensions between Jews and Arabs in Israel, and increase a co-existence that can benefit both groups.

## **6. Limitations and future research**

The current study had a number of limitations that should be taken into consideration. The intervention was conducted with Arab Israeli adolescents that were not chosen randomly. As such, they might not represent Arab adolescents

living in Israel in general. Future intervention studies will need to be conducted with more diverse samples in order to examine the generalization of the current findings, and assess the effects of specific demographic characteristics on the implementation and effects of the intervention. In addition, the intervention program was conducted during a specific historical period of time and thus could only manifest the effects of such an intervention taking into consideration the Israeli-Arab conflict incidents that happened at that time. As terrorist attacks and other incidents related to the Jewish-Arab or Jewish-Palestinian conflict influenced the emotional process and level of involvement in the program of the intervention participants – this is an issue that should probably be examined further. It would be important to conduct a similar intervention at different points of time, and compare their implementation and effects when taking into account any active conflict events that happen at the time of the program, and asking the participants in what way they were affected by them. Such research can provide information that will help determine whether the program should be adapted in some way to current events in order to provide the participants not just with general emotional tools but also with specific coping methods to deal with terror, discrimination or other issues that come up following these events.

Another important question that should be addressed in future studies relates to the long-term effects of this type of program on Jewish Arab relations and the Arab adolescents' attitudes, feelings and willingness for contact with Israeli Jews. Since the last section of the program focused on some level on the Israeli (Jewish)-Arab conflict, it is possible that some of the program's effects were a short-term result of these group sessions. With the passage of time, when group members might be exposed to prejudice and hostility as part of their regular everyday experiences as Israeli Arabs – the program's effects might diminish. It is important to examine whether the program results in a longer-lasting change in the way the participating adolescents perceive Israeli Jews and their interaction with them. It would also be important to examine the factors that influence the long-term effects of the program – such as family attitudes towards Jews, or family socioeconomic status.

Understanding these factors might help build future interventions that can address these issues directly in order to increase their continued effects.

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