

## The useful past in negotiation: Adolescents' use of history in negotiation of inter-group conflict

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### Abstract

Much of the concern with young people's historical knowledge centres on factual attainment or disciplinary skills. However, relatively little attention is paid to the relevance that young people attribute to history and how they use the past, and various social representations of history, to relate to the present. Research in this realm tends to emphasize the impact of collective memory narratives on individuals, rather than individuals' agency in using them. In this article, I will examine the ways 155 Jewish and Arab Israeli adolescents related the past to the present as they discussed the Jewish–Arab conflict and its resolution. Discussants made diverse references to the past: from family history, via biblical allusions and collective memories, to formal, schooling-based historical documents. Individuals used these references to the past to negotiate the present and future of inter-group relations. Furthermore, they made strategic use of references to others' narratives. Thus historical knowledge and collective narratives, which are usually perceived as constraining and structuring learners' perceptions, can be seen as repositories of resources and affordances.

**Keywords:** useful past; inter-group relations; Israeli–Palestinian conflict; collective memory; history teaching

### From not knowing to using the past

Public discourse about youths' historical knowledge often centres on what our youths do not know about the past (Hess, 2008; Ravitch and Finn, 1988). Even when shocked denunciations of the drastic decline of historical knowledge give way to realistic appraisal of the constants of mediocrity (Whittington, 1991), the focus is still on declarative knowledge of prescribed fact lists. While basic factual history may be important, no less important is the way ordinary people relate to history, how they view its relevance and use it. Research done in the last two decades has shown that individuals engage in past-related activities, relate to history through life and family stories and create their own histories in meaningful ways. Individuals report detachment from national narratives and school history while, in contrast, they note their meaningful engagement with local or community histories. This tendency is more pronounced among minorities (Clark, 2016; Conrad *et al.*, 2013; Rosenzweig and Thelen, 1998).

Even when they do not 'get the facts right', individuals have an essential need to use history or narratives of the past to discuss the past and engage with the present (Barton, 2009). These narratives stem from social representations of the past, transmitting collective memory in ways that are oriented to present interests and collective needs in increasingly diverse and dialogic

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ways (Halbwachs, 1992; Olick, 2008). These social representations of the past are not only used by individuals, but also influence individuals, framing their views and commitments. Prominent events, documents and narratives turn into 'historical charters', which serve as common reference points, justify collective institutions or actions and bind people together (Hilton and Liu, 2008).

Learners are exposed to social representations of history through formal schooling but also through various other trajectories. Field trips and visits to memorial sites, which serve as 'realms of memory', echo collective narratives (Nora, 1998). Feldman (2002) showed how Holocaust memorial journeys form an experiential merging with the past and mould attitudes towards the surrounding world in the present. Popular culture and media also frame learners' understanding of the past, at times in ways that are more influential than formal history teaching (Porat, 2004; Wineburg *et al.*, 2001). Individuals merge family stories and religious and community narratives into their notions of continuity and change (Epstein, 1998; Rosenzweig and Thelen, 1998).

The past should essentially be seen as a 'foreign country' in terms of discipline-oriented historical understanding (Lowenthal, 1985; Wineburg, 1999). Still, it is usually perceived by laypersons and learners as close enough to supply useful guidance, support and identity in the present (Lowenthal, 2015). When using the past to engage with the present, for example to make sense of the news, learners might make use of their classroom history and be influenced by teachers' perspectives on the relationship of history to the present (Mosborg, 2002). However, they may also draw on a host of other 'useful pasts' to cope with current social problems, especially those whose roots are still alive in collective memory (Goldberg *et al.*, 2008). This may be especially true when young people try to explain the causes of an ongoing inter-group conflict and deliberate over the way to solve it.

In times of inter-group conflict, collective historical narratives usually legitimize each adversary's stance, helping maintain resilience in the face of adversity but also fuelling and protracting conflict (Bar-Tal and Salomon, 2006). However, individuals and societies may use social representations of history for reconciliation, to express and invoke empathy (McCully, 2011; Paez and Liu, 2011). Young people might cling to collective narratives to buttress themselves and delegitimize others' perspectives, as Jewish and Arab Israeli adolescents appear to do (Sagy *et al.*, 2011). They could also rely on historical knowledge to position themselves in a critical relation to their group's history, or attempt to relate to both sides' perspectives. These stances towards the other's historical perspective may depend on the curricular options that are accessible (Barton and McCully, 2010; Goldberg and Ron, 2014). The connections learners make between history and the present and the ways they apply the 'useful past' are another aspect, which may be influenced by different approaches to teaching the history of conflict.

McCully (2011), in his discussion of the possible contribution of history teaching to reconciliation in the context of conflict, focuses on two promising curricular approaches: critical inquiry and empathetic acknowledgement. A critical inquiry approach focuses on impartial analysis of conflicting sources and adversaries' testimonies, in an attempt to minimize and neutralize the biasing effect of relating the past to the present (Goldberg and Ron, 2014). Empathetic teaching also engages learners with the perspectives of both sides to a conflict, but does so on the assumption of an inherent permeation of the past into the present through collective narratives – the mutual acknowledgement of which is essential for reconciliation (Bar-On and Adwan, 2006). By contrast to the former two approaches, conventional history teaching approaches commonly rely on official narratives transmitted in authorized textbooks. These present a single authoritative narrative, frequently using the past to justify the nation's present stance in a conflict, implying a strong connection of past to present (Bar-Tal and Salomon, 2006).

As we see, young people may engage with the past in different ways, both on their own and through various curricular approaches. They may relate history to the present in ways that influence and are influenced by the conflicts in which their collectives are engaged. It is then both interesting and important to explore young people's uses of the past in the deliberation of conflict. On what sources of knowledge, formal and informal, do they draw? To what ends do they use it, and in what ways do they connect the past to the present?

## **Method**

### ***Participants***

The data was gathered as part of a wider research project, focusing on the effect of various history teaching approaches on students' understanding of an inter-group conflict and on inter-group negotiation (for further details see Goldberg and Ron, 2014). Participants were 75 Jewish (32 female, 43 male) and 80 Arab (45 female, 35 male) Israeli high school students (aged 16–18) from nine Israeli high schools. The Israeli education system is segregated on the basis of language and ethnicity, which means students came from schools consisting only of their ethnic (national) group. Three of the five Arab schools were state-run and two were private. Two of the four Jewish schools were state-run and two were private. Over 90 per cent of Arab participants were Muslims and about two-thirds came from rural or semi-urban areas. Most of the Jewish participants were secular and all of them came from urban areas.

Jews are the majority group in the state of Israel, numbering 81 per cent of its population. Of these, over half are considered secular or 'traditional', rather than orthodox, as indicated by the fact that 43 per cent of all Israeli students are registered in the Jewish secular public schools, to which our participants belong. Curriculum in these schools lays a strong emphasis on the promotion of Jewish national consciousness. This is demonstrated by the fact that over half of the teaching hours in history are devoted to Jewish history (of which, in high school, a third is allotted exclusively to the Holocaust. This is a topic for which both teachers and students show great enthusiasm; studies combine formal teaching, witnesses and trips to memorial sites (Cohen, 2013)). In addition, students in the Jewish secular schools study the Old Testament, mainly as critical national history and literature, rather than as holy texts (Israeli Ministry of Education, 2015; Israeli Ministry of Education, 2016). The seventh-grade curriculum includes a family history project designed to connect the family and the nation (Israeli Ministry of Education, 2017). National consciousness is also promoted through field trips and especially through commemoration days for the Holocaust and for the fallen in Israel's wars (Ben-Amos and Bet-El, 2005).

Arabs are Israel's largest minority group, numbering about 19 per cent of Israeli citizens and a quarter of all Israeli students. Although Israeli Arabs commonly identify with the Palestinian people, the Arab schools' curriculum does not focus on promoting local Arab or Palestinian identity, nor do their commemorative activities. In fact, commemoration of Palestinian trauma – the 'Naqba' (Arab for 'catastrophe', denoting the defeat in the 1948 Jewish–Arab war) – is officially forbidden, as is writing a family history project focused on the topic (Talmor and Yahav, 2009). Nor do Arab schools usually commemorate the national Israeli memorial days mentioned above, because these are considered to relate to the Jewish people (Roffe-Ofir, 2008). Arab schools' history curriculum includes a strong Middle East component, a European component and a strong focus on Zionist history and the Holocaust, usually stopping short of the 1948 war and the establishment of Israel (History Superintendent for the Arab schools, 2011; Israeli Ministry of Education, 2014). Arab students study the Hebrew language from third grade, while

for Jewish students Arabic is not a mandatory subject, though it is an official language. Thus the Arab educational sector may be seen to experience a compulsory one-sided multiculturalism (Al-Haj, 2002). In both educational sectors all high school curriculum is mandatory; it is enforced through centralized evaluation by means of high-stakes matriculation exams.

Jewish and Arab citizens of Israel are involved in protracted inter-group conflict in two arenas. In the internal arena, Arab citizens are an underprivileged minority, suffering from the effects of decades of neglect and discrimination in the allocation of resources and accessibility to power, as well as from widespread prejudice. This ongoing situation is acknowledged by both sides and the government, fuelling tensions and distrust but not open violence. In the external arena, since Arab citizens are affiliated and increasingly identified with the Palestinians in the occupied territories and abroad, the Israeli–Palestinian conflict also influences Israeli Jews and Arabs' relations (Ali and Inbar, 2011; Smootha, 2017). Israeli Arab citizens also bear the historical consequences of the 1948 war, in which the state of Israel was established. About a quarter of them are descendants of families that were displaced in that period, and most Arab citizens saw some of their land confiscated in the years that followed (Cohen, 2000).

### **Procedure**

Participants were invited to volunteer for 'interesting research about the past and present of the Jewish–Arab conflict'. As an additional motivation for participation, a sum of \$20 was donated to students' end-of-year grade party for each participant completing the research intervention. Participants were informed of the full process of the intervention in advance and signed a consent form (parent signature was required for participants under 18). Confidentiality and anonymity were promised and kept. The research was approved by the institutional review board.

Participants were randomly allocated (Jews and Arabs in equal proportions) to one of four conditions of learning about the 1948 war and the birth of the refugee problem. The first condition involved studying conflicting Jewish and Palestinian historical accounts in a critical disciplinary approach. The second condition relied on listening empathetically both to Palestinian and to Jewish narratives. The third, more conventional condition centered on reading an excerpt from an exam-oriented authorized textbook, while the fourth condition did not entail studying any text but simply writing a personal opinion on the topic. Following the learning phase, Arab participants visited Jewish schools where they were matched with Jewish participants, according to learning condition, to form small discussion groups. These amounted to 60 in all; 18 discussion groups in the critical disciplinary condition, 15 in the empathetic condition, 13 in the textbook condition and 14 in the no-text condition. Pairs (and, in a few of the cases, triads or fours) received the texts they had studied in their initial learning group, and a bilingual instruction sheet instructing them to discuss and try to reach agreement on two questions: (1) 'Who is responsible for the creation of the Palestinian refugee problem?' and (2) 'How should the refugee problem be solved?'. Participants were given audio recorders, dispersed to quiet spaces, and recorded their self-led discussions. Discussions lasted 10 to 30 minutes, and were conducted in Hebrew without the aid of translators. When faced with communication difficulty, participants could approach research assistants who spoke both languages. Recordings of the 60 discussion groups were transcribed and cases in which Arab participants switched into Arabic were translated into Hebrew.

## **Analysis**

Discussions were analysed and coded using Atlas.ti software. Analysis followed two phases. In the first, we coded all references to sources of knowledge about the past and to specific historical or political documents. We marked the occurrence of a type of reference in a discussion (as 0/1) rather than the number of references within a discussant's turn of speaking and noted whether Arab or Jewish discussants initiated the topic. Of the 60 discussion transcripts, 12 received independent simultaneous coding by the author and by a research assistant as a means to validate the coding. Inter-rater agreement was 89 per cent; disagreements were solved in discussion. The remaining 48 discussions were coded by a single coder. In the second phase, we selected from among the references to the past those that bore upon the present or future by means of direct or implicit connection. Such a connection could be the persistence of a situation ('to this very day'), an emotional response ('he cries when he remembers/I get excited when I learn about it'), a claim ('we were here first so it belongs to us'), a lesson ('we should have learned from it'), etc.

## **Findings**

### ***Accepting all currencies: Variety of sources and epistemological tolerance***

Discussants made explicit references to various sources of historical knowledge. In all, 48 of the 60 discussion group transcripts featured at least one type of these references. Within each discussion, explicit references to sources of knowledge about the past were not frequent, and in most discussions (57 per cent,  $n=34$ ) there were no more than one or two references. There was no significant difference in the frequency of references to historical knowledge across learning conditions.

The explicit references included the sources students had studied during the activity, previous history lessons, famous historical documents, family histories, scripture and school trips. Discussants also sometimes simply stated 'I heard' or 'I know' as the source for an account. None of these references were mutually exclusive. Explicitly cited and critically assessed formal sources resided comfortably alongside hearsay and myth. Discussants would sometimes refer to a historian's account, a family history and the Bible within one discussion. Although these types of reference could be seen as differing in reliability, only rarely did students challenge each other as to the source of their knowledge or its reliability. The rare challenges students did raise as to a source's reliability referred to the sources they had previously studied during the first learning phase. This occurred more frequently in the critical inquiry condition, in which students had already critically evaluated and challenged the sources.

Discussants' references in which they related past to present are presented in an order that starts with the least formal and most particularistic knowledge – family history and faith-based narratives. We proceed to those reflecting a more institutionalized encounter with the past and representing commonly shared formal learning. Descriptive statistics are presented and examples from the transcripts subjected to the qualitative analysis. The study did not set out in advance to explore the impact of learners' ethnic identity or learning conditions on the tendency to relate past to present; however, as both these factors proved salient and are assumed to be influential, inferential statistics are presented when significant effects appeared. For the effect of ethnicity, we look at the proportion of participants from each ethnic group who made the references. To track the effect of learning condition we look at the proportion of discussion groups in each condition in which a reference was made.

The main findings are as follows. When relying on informal knowledge of the past, participants made references to family histories and holy texts, while reference to popular media was notably absent. Arab participants made more use of family histories than their Jewish peers did, while the latter made more references to holy texts in relating the past to the present. Learning conditions had contradictory effects on the frequency of both types of reference. The role of local commemorative sites and physical remnants as connectors of past and present appeared infrequently. However, reference to the Holocaust, both as it is represented in formal knowledge and in commemorative trips to Poland, was used in moral reasoning about the present. Arab discussants' reference to the Holocaust and Jewish discussants' references to Palestinian historical perspectives demonstrated the role of engagement with the other's narrative as a gesture of empathy and reciprocity. Formal history education was evident mainly in participants' reliance on historical charters for the deliberation of the present.

### **Family histories: Expatriation and immigration**

**Table 1:** Discussants and discussion groups making reference to family histories, by ethnic group and learning condition

<b>Arabs</b>	<b>Jews</b>	<b>Critical</b>	<b>Empathetic</b>	<b>Conventional</b>	<b>No-text</b>
14%	3%	39%	13%	8%	21%
(n=11)	(n=2)	(n=7)	(n=2)	(n=1)	(n=3)

Arab discussants shared family histories at a much higher frequency than Jewish discussants (14 per cent (n=11) of all Arab discussants compared with 3 per cent (n=2) of their Jewish peers ( $\chi^2(1)=5.24, p < .05$ )). It is also worth noting that discussions featuring family histories occurred more frequently in those conditions of learning in which discussants encountered competing perspectives (totalling 39 per cent (n=7) of discussions in the critical disciplinary condition, 13 per cent (n=2) in the empathetic condition, 8 per cent (n=1) in the textbook, and 21 per cent (n=3) in the non-learning conditions; the difference did not, however, reach statistical significance). All family stories bore some relevance to the present, whether through the sense of an ongoing trauma bearing upon the narrators' lives, or as an unfinished story in which the narrator played some part. Sharing a family story may have also served to foster a sense of intimacy between the discussants. Arab discussants referred to grandparents and parents' stories of forced deportation or of being deceived into temporary evacuation of villages, which turned into permanent displacement. The rare Jewish family histories referred to immigration, though as a considerably less traumatic experience. As an Arab discussant told his Jewish peer:

Listen, I have this story with my family. My grandma and her sister were deported. Soldiers entered the village and called the 11 most important people, lined them up and shot them in the middle of the village, in front of all the people. There's a monument for them now ...

(Arab student in discussion with a Jewish peer)

These stories include specific details, which lend them authenticity and a sense of direct experience, overriding the fact that these are essentially mediated memories. The mention of the monument existing 'now' anchors the story geographically and connects it to the present. A similar connection to the present was made when an Arab discussant ended the story of her family's deception and dislocation, saying her grandparents 'never returned. And they still have the key to their home, although it's ruined!' Another Arab discussant explicated his relation to the past: 'I was born in 1995, so let's say, what's my connection to 1948? I hear from my

grandfather and grandmother that the Israelis conquered the Arab villages and forced them to leave; I hear this and I get excited ... .’ This connection made the past of the family an on-going presence and obliged the grandson, as a carrier of the story, to disseminate it: ‘... whoever tells me something, I have to convince him of what my grandfather told me.’ The discussant stressed the emotional intensity of these mediated memories and their ongoing burden for the grandparent, and summed up the account with what seems like an expression of empathy for Jewish dislocation: ‘my grandfather, he cries when he remembers that he left the country for Lebanon ... he cries when he remembers leaving grandpa’s land. This is hard also for Jews.’ This invoked his Jewish peer’s empathetic response, ‘absolutely, to anyone evacuated from home!’ Here, the Arab discussant reconnects to the present: ‘you speak 100 per cent [well], but we must find a place [for the refugees].’

As may be noted, perhaps due to this sense of intensity and intimacy, Arab discussants attributed family histories higher reliability and authority than all other sources of historical knowledge. It is interesting that Jewish discussants seemed to treat their Arab peers’ family histories with similar reverence and noted their acceptance or empathy.

While Arab family histories usually referred to the main topic of discussion, the Palestinian refugee problem, the only two Jewish family histories that were shared focused on seemingly unrelated immigration stories. Thus, a Jewish-Russian discussant unfolded her family’s story of expatriation and immigration: ‘My family story begins with my great grandmother who lived in France, and after the Nazi rise to power we moved to Russia ... but ... if you’re a Jew, wherever you go, they pick on you ... so [a few years ago] the family decided to immigrate to Israel.’ These histories, which contained references to antisemitism, apparently implicitly stressed the need for a Jewish nation state. As, indeed, the discussant added: ‘Because this is the Jews’ place, there’s no other place in the world, like we don’t have these thousand Arab countries ... like you know Arabic, you could move to Egypt or something ... Jews have no other place where they speak Hebrew.’

Thus the reliance on family narrative, which intertwines Holocaust, expatriation and antisemitism, led to the justification of the Jewish state and the discussant’s place in it. The discussant’s narrative also implicitly minimized Palestinian refugees’ suffering, since, as Arabic speakers, they should have had no problem adjusting to Arab countries. This added an ironic twist to the story of the speaker, who, as a Russian immigrant, had of course learned Hebrew as a second language upon her coming to Israel. This irony was evident as she proceeded to touch upon her alienation, which continued even in the ‘Jews’ place’: ‘if you’re a Jew in Russia they call you a stinking Jew, and if you’re in Israel, a Jewish immigrant from Russia, they call you a Russian.’

## **We have the Bible**

**Table 2:** Discussants and discussion groups making reference to holy scriptures, by ethnic group and learning condition

<b>Arabs</b>	<b>Jews</b>	<b>Critical</b>	<b>Empathetic</b>	<b>Conventional</b>	<b>No-text</b>
5%	18%	11%	7%	54%	29%
(n=4)	(n=12)	(n=2)	(n=1)	(n=7)	(n=4)

References to the Bible, religion or holy texts were made in 14 of the discussion groups, by 16 discussants, of whom 4 were Arabs ( $\chi^2(1)=4.83$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Ethnicity was not the sole factor that may have affected reference to the Bible. Apparently, learning condition (or lack thereof) also

affected the frequency of references to the Bible. Discussions in the textbook teaching approach and the no-text group featured a higher frequency of reference to the Bible (54 per cent (n=7) and 29 per cent (n=4) of discussions respectively) than those in the empathetic or critical disciplinary conditions (7 per cent (n=1) and 11 per cent (n=2) respectively; ( $\chi^2(3)=10.81$ ,  $p<.05$ ).

Most references to religious sources occurred in relation to justifications of ownership over the holy land or of the Jewish people's return to it. In most cases, discussants mentioned the Bible briefly as an additional or primal 'charter'. In response to his Arab partner's claim that Israel was established over what should have been the Palestinian state, a Jewish discussant stressed, 'But like, we have the Bible, it's very important for us ... why did the world accept it [the establishment of Israel]? Because it is also written in the Bible.' However, in a rare case, the holy writ was used to predict the future, when a Muslim discussant muttered, 'the solution, in my opinion ... in a year or two Palestine would be liberated from occupation, it is also written in the Kor'an.' It is noteworthy that this reference was made in hushed Arabic in response to a Druze discussant, a student of the Jewish school who had set himself up as translator and go-between. The remark was not translated for the benefit of the Jewish participants and the transaction may hint at a measure of self-censorship regarding religious references among the Arab participants.

Jewish discussants initiated the majority of these references (all but the one mentioned above). This is a fact worth noting, as the Jewish students appeared far less religious than their Arab peers and as the Israeli and Palestinian Islamic movements emphasize the holy status of Palestine based on Muslim scripture. When an Arab discussant questioned the choice of place for the Jewish state – 'but why in Palestine?' – his Jewish partner's response demonstrated an ambivalent reference to religious narrative. He first referred to religion: 'this place is also sacred for me'; then referred to archaeology: 'they did find tombs here and there, this is the place my [biblical] ancestors lived.' He then attempted to contextualize religious faith, distancing himself from it: '... I'm saying it according to back then ... I'm not religious and I don't observe the laws of Jewish religion.' He ended by exposing the hidden competition and dialogicity behind the seemingly one-sided reference to religious sources: 'The Palestinian thinks it is a sacred place for the Palestinian people, it's also a sacred place for the Jewish people, I can't tell you it's not your land and you can't say it's not my land.' This balance appeared to be in fact an attempt to find a way out of the clash of the mutually exclusive claims. In the speaker's view, if religious claims are acknowledged, they could not be used for mutual exclusion.

In other cases, discussants embedded the biblical allusions in a short historical narrative. A few of these narratives simply summarized the biblical events as a proof of the right to the land. As a Jewish discussant tried to establish common ground, she asked her Arab peer: 'you believe in the Bible, right? Are you Christian or Muslim?' Following the peer's affirmation that he was Christian, and had read the Bible, the Jewish partner launched on a concise (and not altogether accurate) biblical-historical exposition:

It's written that in the beginning, the Jews were here and then Babylonians, or whoever, drove the Jews abroad ... for two thousand years. In the meantime, there were Arabs, tribes and nations, so ... God said the land belongs to the Jews.

(Jewish discussant in conversation with Christian Arab peer)

Prompted by her Arab peer, she mused, 'I understand, like on one hand, according to history, to the Bible, God said it's ours, on the other hand two thousand years Arabs lived here, they had their home here.' This reflection contrasted two ways of connecting the past to the present, through biblical-historical narrative, versus through the historical presence of Arab settlements. As in the references to tombs or monuments mentioned above, this reflection pointed to the



importance of physical remnants and sites in the relating of past to the present. This was a relation borne out by references to trips and pilgrimages.

### ***Extra-curricular experiences of site and sight***

There was little evidence in discussions of the conflict for the influence of popular media, or other extra-curricular sources such as field trips, monuments or memorials (the very low frequency makes statistical comparisons redundant). When learners cited such informal experiences, they could be easily traced back to more institutional initiators such as the school. Thus, for example, an Arab discussant, in her advocacy for the resettlement of Palestinian refugees in the state of Israel, noted the existence of ample vacant space in Palestinian 'villages from 1948 [the year of Israel's establishment and the refugees' expatriation], like Lifta, which are deserted, don't you know? ... lots of deserted villages with no-one in them, to this day'. In response to her surprised Jewish partner, who confessed, 'the truth, I didn't know this story about empty places', she explained her knowledge: 'We, in school, go on trips, on every Naqba day [the Palestinian memorial day for the defeat in the 1948 war], to every village.' The student noted, 'our school is unique', as indeed it is, being a private school supported by liberal left-affiliated Jewish citizens and NGOs. Such yearly pilgrimages to sites of loss and memory serve to preserve the past loss as an ongoing presence. As we see, they inspire attempts at shaping the future through the proposed return of refugees. However, it should be noted that the specific school in question (a Jewish–Arab coexistence-oriented institute) is described as unique by the Arab discussant. Indeed, none of the four other Arab schools mentioned such trips.

The ongoing presence of physical remnants of loss or absence serves as an anchor to memory and as a bridge to deliberation of the present. A similar connection occurs as, in another reference to a trip, this time a pilgrimage to Holocaust sites in Poland (the 'March of the Living'), a Jewish discussant draws a line between the Holocaust and the ongoing Israeli–Palestinian conflict (see below). This connection of loss and trauma to the present abounded in the references discussants made to the Holocaust.

### ***Summoning the Holocaust: Between self-justification and self-criticism***

The Holocaust, by far the most prominent constituent of Jewish collective memory and identity, was mentioned by (only) eight Jewish and five Arab discussants in a total of 11 discussions, with no significant differences across ethnicity or learning condition. The Holocaust dominates Jewish high school history (up to a third of the mandatory matriculation curriculum's teaching hours). However, none of the Jewish participants mentioned formal studies about the Holocaust, demonstrating the self-evident nature of knowledge about the topic and its embeddedness in collective memory. In some cases, the Holocaust was enlisted to serve current affairs, such as maintaining the unique Jewish characteristics of Israel in the present (which caused the Arab discussants to feel alienated). Thus, following the Arab discussant's demand 'to add something that will represent the Arabs and refugees. The 'Hatikva' [Jewish national anthem] represents the Jews. Right?', the Jewish discussant considered options and added, 'there should still be Israeli state symbols representing the Jewish character, for which we fought for sixty-five years and strove for since the Era of Abraham. And the Jewish people went through atrocities as you know, the Holocaust for example.'

Most of the Arab participants who referred to the Holocaust mentioned it explicitly as part of their history classes. Indeed, Arab learners encounter the Holocaust mainly as a mandatory topic for the matriculation exams (this mandatory status is quite controversial among Israeli

Arabs, mainly due to the fact that Palestinian collective trauma is banned from their curriculum (Associated Press, 2010)). However, it is worth noting that Arab discussants seem to have turned this constraint also into an asset. Some of the Arab discussants referred to the universal human rights lesson of the Holocaust, claiming that the Jews, as victims of atrocities, should have known better than to inflict suffering onto others. An Arab discussant admonished her partner: 'Germany treated the Jews with the Gestapo ... you Jews and Israel should treat Arabs and Palestinians better because you experienced it with Germany.' Her Jewish peer rejected the claim, or at least the historical parallel he assumed it implied: 'First of all, don't compare the attitude of Germany to the Jews to the attitude of Israelis now towards the Arabs ...'. While indeed there is no parallel between the German persecution of Jews and Israeli actions in the occupied territories, this does not seem to have been the Arab discussants' claim. Still, the Jewish discussant's reaction appears to imply that drawing a current human rights lesson from the Holocaust makes the Holocaust itself parallel to any breach of human rights. Arising from this logic is the feeling that any nation breaching human rights is immediately compared with Nazi Germany. Thus, it seems that the Jewish participant implies this type of connection between past and present is out of bounds (or perhaps not to be used by a non-Jewish discussant?).

However, Jewish discussants in other discussion groups did initiate references to the human rights lesson of the Holocaust. Thus, a Jewish discussant summed up his criticism of Jewish actions in the 1948 war with the claim 'About the aggression against Palestinian refugees ... Jews, with everything that happened in the Holocaust, that, really we were deported and put in very bad conditions, I think, should have learned from this and understand you shouldn't do such things.' Another Jewish discussant offered an even bolder (and quite ahistorical) analogy, the type of which the speaker mentioned in the paragraph above did not allow his Arab peer to make: 'I was in Poland ... in the camps [on a school delegation] and I thought "just a minute. We're doing the ... we passed the Holocaust, which is terrible, and now we're doing this to the Arabs somehow ... right, not concentrate and burn but all the wars and hatred".' It is a rare example, in the Israeli context, in which reference to the quintessential encounter with Jewish victimhood ('March of the Living' trips) aligns with compassion and guilt over the other's victimhood.

The Holocaust was invoked not just for justification or criticism of the actions of Jewish Israelis, but also as a trajectory to a shared identity and inter-group empathy. An Arab discussant may have attempted to foster a sense of shared victimhood by noting that both Jews and Palestinians could be seen as victims of the Germans: 'yes, I'm exactly against Hitler. If Hitler had continued, he'd have entered and killed the Arabs too.' A sense of shared consciousness or of caring was also hinted at by Arab discussants' direct reference to their own experience of learning about the Holocaust as part of the narrative of their Jewish peers. Making references to engagement with the other's narrative of the past, as an act in itself and a way to show empathy and improve inter-group relations in the present, is a phenomenon that will be discussed in the next section.

### **Reciprocating narrative engagement**

References to engagement with the other's perspective were quite rare (made by three Arab and three Jewish discussants, in a total of four discussion groups). While the low frequency makes statistical inference redundant, it is worth noting that these instances occurred only in the critical and empathetic learning conditions. Arab discussants expressed their interest in learning about the Holocaust as a formative aspect of Jewish and general history. Thus they turned the mandatory study of the other's collective trauma into a voluntary gesture of empathy towards

their out-group peer. An Arab discussant shares his experience of engagement with Jewish history: 'I gave a presentation in class about Jews in Second World War ... he [Hitler] killed them even on [the Jewish holiday of] Atonement Day ... I like learning history.' His account demonstrated both his acquaintance with Jewish culture and holy days, and an interest in the Jewish history of trauma. This is an interest that most Jewish students share enthusiastically.

These gestures can be seen as part of a specific dialectic suggested by a few Arab discussants, in which learning the other's history should put the Jewish 'other' under a moral commitment to reciprocate. Indeed, two discussants claimed explicitly that the fact they study Jewish history obliges their Jewish peers to learn Palestinian history. An Arab discussant who later made extensive reference to the lessons of the Holocaust (mentioned above) challenged her Jewish partner: 'We in school ... study Jewish history, the Irgun and all these Jewish undergrounds, but you don't study Arab history. Why?' Her peer attempted to distance himself from the issue by confessing: 'Call me narrow, but studying something related to me didn't create interest. It doesn't matter to me what kind of history ... I did it for the exam.' However, the Arab discussant rejected this detachment, while expressing her interest in the other's history and demanding reciprocity: 'I didn't! Even when I study Jewish history, to know all this is good, it's nice that I study it more and more, but I study Jewish history and I want others to study mine.' Her claim was eventually accepted (though hesitantly) by her peer, who assented: 'To some degree I agree with you on this part, I wouldn't mind studying another kind of history. There were Palestinians here ...'.

In two other cases, Jewish discussants initiated the idea of learning Arab history and culture as a gesture of goodwill and commitment to coexistence. A Jewish discussant concluded her suggestion for future solution of the conflict, saying: 'we shouldn't learn only about Zionism and Jewish history, we should learn also about Arab culture because in my opinion ... there's hatred between Jews and Arabs because we simply don't understand each other.' We should note that these demands and gestures present a nuanced twist in the notion of the 'useful past'. Discussants did not rely only on the contents of historical narratives to negotiate the present. They also used engagement with narrative in itself as a gesture for improving current inter-group relations and negotiating the emergent character of a shared society. This view about the utility of learning history as part of reconciliation stands in stark contrast to another Jewish discussant's despair over the detrimental effect of engaging with history: 'Arabs and Jews, they don't connect because of all these things from the past, that are actually only history now, and we focus so much on history, instead of trying to make up and live together.'

### ***'At first they declared': Reference to historical charters***

Historical charters are events or documents (whether real or mythical) that achieve widespread acknowledgement, and are assumed to serve a formative role in the relations between groups or individuals. In the case of Jewish–Palestinian relations, two such charters are the Balfour Declaration of 1917, the British endorsement of the establishment of a Jewish commonwealth in Palestine, and the United Nations Resolution 181, which decreed the partition of Palestine into a Jewish state and an Arab state.

Arab discussants referred in their explanations of the cause of the Palestinian exodus to the Balfour Declaration at a significantly higher frequency (14 per cent (n=11)) than their Jewish partners (5 per cent (n=4),  $\chi^2(2)=10.88$ ,  $p < .01$ ). On the other hand, Jewish discussants referred more frequently to the United Nations resolution on the partition of Palestine into two independent Jewish and Arab states (27 per cent (n=20)) of the Jewish discussants initiated discussion of the UN partition resolution, as opposed to 7.5 per cent (n=6) of their Arab peers

( $\chi^2(1)=10.19$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Frequencies of reference to either charter did not differ significantly across conditions.

**Table 3:** Frequency of reference to historical charters, by ethnic group

	Jewish	Arab
Balfour Declaration	5% (n=4)	14% (n=11)
UN Resolution	27% (n=20)	7.5% (n=6)

Arab discussants were those who initiated the topic of the Balfour Declaration, frequently referring to it as shared formal knowledge apparently because it is a mandatory topic of study in all educational sectors (as one of the Arab discussants noted, ‘the Balfour Declaration ... yesterday I did an exam on this stuff’, while another Arab discussant prompted her Jewish partner: ‘Don’t you know the Balfour Declaration?’). From the Jewish Zionist perspective, the Balfour Declaration is considered a classical historical ‘charter’, justifying the establishment of a Jewish state and structuring its benevolent relation to non-Jewish inhabitants. In the Arab discussants’ view, the declaration reflects the colonial interests of the British Empire, which handed a territory it did not yet rule to a people who did not yet inhabit it. As an Arab discussant contended, ‘but Balfour gave them land which had people on it, the land of Palestine.’

Criticizing the declaration as an unjust charter helps undermine the current legitimacy of Israel, presenting it as an offspring of British colonialism. Thus, when the Jewish discussant claimed the Palestinians were not harmed by Israel because, ‘before Israel the Palestinians had nothing [in terms of political institutions]’, his Arab partner reached back to the Balfour Declaration: ‘the British mandate was here because of Balfour’s promise to establish Israel, the promised land. Then, Palestine passed from one conquest [British rule], to another... that of Israel. So it couldn’t work out ... how could they have institutions passing from conquest to conquest?’ The reference to this historical charter, formerly used to justify the present state of affairs, is used here as a way to criticize Israel as being part of an ongoing ‘conquest’. This criticism then serves as a justification for current Palestinian political disorganization. It is perhaps telling that, in a parallel connection of past to present, as the article was submitted, the Palestinian Authority launched a highly publicized campaign demanding a British apology for the Balfour Declaration (Mandhai, 2016).

Jewish discussants, by contrast, tended to refer more often to the United Nations partition resolution. Seeing the resolution as a ‘just charter’ serving as the basis for the establishment of a Jewish (and an often-unmentioned Arab) state, the Jewish discussants assumed that the resolution was common formal knowledge and were surprised not all Arab discussants studied it. As a Jewish discussant sets out to discuss the solution of the refugee question by relying on the UN resolution says, ‘In 1948 the UN declared Israel as a state belonging to the Jews, and it should be a state whose population is Jewish.’ As we can see, the discussant remembered the resolution just to the extent it served her preferred view of her nation. A few moments later, in an afterthought to her evasion of the fact that the resolution decreed also the establishment of an Arab state, she added, ‘At first they declared something like an equal division, the UN said like, say 50 per cent to Jews 50 per cent to Palestinians who were here first. They [Palestinians] didn’t accept it, then the Independence war broke out and we conquered more territories.’

The UN decree in fact allotted 55 per cent of the land to the Jews, who numbered only a third of the population (but were expected to absorb masses of Jewish immigrants). Arab discussants in other discussion groups cited this disproportionate allocation of land as a cause for Palestinian rejection of the UN resolution. An Arab discussant presented the partition plan thus: ‘Let’s say [the Arabs got] 40 per cent, and by contrast Arabs in Palestine were 80 per cent or 70 per cent ... the Arabs thought, why should the Jews get the higher percentage when

they are a minority? ... it's unfair. That's why the war started.' As we can see, each side adjusts the proportion of land to suit its interests. In the Jewish discussant's historical representation, the higher proportion allotted to the Jews became the result of the Palestinian rejection of the UN resolution rather than its cause. Thus, the current territorial advantage of Israel over the Palestinians is framed as a just price Palestinians have to pay for their historical rejection of the just historical charter.

I conclude the set of findings about discussants' references to formal documents, derived from formal schooling, with a short report of the use they made of the texts they had at hand in three of the learning conditions. In many groups, discussants referred to the texts they studied (52 per cent, or 24 of the 46 relevant discussion groups; no significant difference in frequency between conditions or ethnicities). It is interesting to note that hardly any of these references were used to relate past to present. Students mainly mentioned the texts to outline factual details or to evaluate their reliability in the critical disciplinary condition.

## **Discussion**

As we have shown, Israeli Arab and Jewish adolescents used their pasts in various ways to discuss their present and attempt to shape their future. Many of them drew on family and faith, memorial sites and formal teaching, and did not seem to think, like the rare critic of history among them, that 'all these things from the past are actually only history now'. Even if their knowledge of the past would not necessarily be adequate to pass standardized tests, they felt that the past justified them, that they 'should have learned from it' and that it places obligations upon them or their adversaries. In this our findings align with those of earlier work concerning historical charters and the uses of the past (Clark, 2016; Conrad *et al.*, 2013; Hilton and Liu, 2008).

We should note that Jewish and Arab discussants' useful pasts were more closely related to national grand narratives than those of respondents in North American and Australian contexts, perhaps due to the rallying effect of the conflict as a context and topic. It appears that the threat that conflict poses to the individual fosters the need for social cohesion and support, which collective narrative fulfils (Bar-Tal and Salomon, 2006; Paez and Liu, 2011). Thus it may be that, in general, a context of inter-group conflict may encourage the use of the past to bear on the present. However, the fact the sources about the conflict that discussants had at hand and had studied systematically were not harnessed in the negotiation of the present is puzzling. It may hint that treating the past through structured historical practices gives it its due distance as a 'foreign country' and decreases the tendency for a manipulative and biased use of history (Lowenthal, 2015; Wineburg, 1999). However, it raises questions as to the relevance learners may find in these practices as they deny the needs that history serves (Barton, 2009).

Adolescents' identity apparently guided their references to the past as well as its use and content. As we have noted, Arab minority members (and Russian immigrants) tended more than Jewish discussants to share family histories. These were accounts of dislocation and threat (immigration and antisemitism in the Jewish case, deportation and atrocity in the Palestinian). We should note that, essentially, all Jewish participants could have referred to family histories of persecution, dislocation and immigration. Over 95 per cent of Jewish Israelis belong to families that immigrated in the twentieth century, in the wake of antisemitism or tensions with majority populations. The curriculum for seventh grade in Jewish schools even includes an extensive family history project relating to family immigration (Israeli Ministry of Education, 2017). Lack of reference to these histories is intriguing. It appears that it is not the existence of a family history of displacement, but rather the current sense of discrimination or marginality that gives rise

to the use of family history to bear upon the present. This aligns with former research on the popular relevance of history, which showed minorities attribute higher relevance to community and family history (Epstein, 1998; Rosenzweig and Thelen, 1998).

Minorities may also have recourse to family and oral history not just due to a sense of alienation, but also because their history is excluded from more formal sources. Family histories are in many ways an alternative to formal history teaching and may serve as a source of counter-narratives. The Israeli history curriculum (both in the Jewish and in the Arab schools) represents mainly the official narrative of the Jewish majority (Al-Haj, 2002). It is perhaps no wonder that the discussants who turned to their family as an alternative source were mainly from the Arab minority. They used these stories of dislocation and victimization to orient themselves, evoke empathy from Jewish peers and advocate solutions. That Arab family history constituted a 'useful past' is attested by the fact it appeared to enlist Jewish discussants' acknowledgement, contrary to the general findings about Jewish adolescents' tendency to delegitimize the Palestinian narrative (Sagy *et al.*, 2011). This shows the effectiveness of personal counter-narratives in negotiation of the past and the present, perhaps due to the sense of immediacy and intimacy they emanate. Jewish participants' receptive reaction to family histories may also stem from the cultural responsiveness to testimony and witnessing that Holocaust education fosters (Cohen, 2013).

Jewish majority members referred to faith-based narratives of the past more frequently than Arab discussants. Students did not relate to the academic biblical history studied in secular schools, but rather simply used the Bible as a historical charter. They relied on divine promise or biblical evidence of Jewish existence in the land of Israel as warrants of the Jewish right to statehood. The fact that non-observant Jews made use of religious references to the past may point to the instrumental rather than transcendental role of these references. However, it also underscores the role of 'sacred' history even in secular Jewish modern consciousness. It is worth noting that discussants were sometimes aware that holy writ clashed with other narratives, making it a potentially less useful charter. This hints that the optimal use of the 'useful past' is as a consensus builder or an authoritative argument.

The reference to two modern historical charters – the Balfour Declaration and the UN resolution – also underscores the role of useful past as a consensual source of authority. However, the differential preference Arab and Jewish discussants showed for each of the charters reveals the charters' changing image and influence (Hilton and Liu, 2008). In fact, it appeared these official charters, although quite widely shared and appropriated by participants due to formal teaching, did not lead to consensus.

References to collective memory of the Holocaust reveal a complex picture. The memory of the Holocaust is definitely brought up as a source of authority and consensus but its implications vary greatly. Some Jewish discussants referred to the Holocaust for self-justificatory ends, to account for the establishment of a Jewish state or advocate for the maintenance of its current Jewish character. Others, however, summoned the memory of the Holocaust as a human rights 'lesson' and used it for self-critical moral deliberation about their nation's role in the current conflict. This finding seems to contradict critical studies of Holocaust education (Feldman, 2002). The fact that Arab discussants both acknowledged the Jewish collective trauma and used it to demand more humane treatment of their own group demonstrates the flexibility of learners' application of the 'useful past'. Holocaust education was imposed on the Israeli Arab minority as part of the majority's narrative of victimhood and righteousness. Rather than deny the Holocaust, as competitive victimhood in conflict has led others to do (Paez and Liu, 2011), minority members rely on this narrative as shared common knowledge, to invoke a shared consciousness, empathy and righteous conduct. Majority members may want to limit this

subversive flexibility, as we have seen. However, they are also drawn into its dialectic, thereby increasing the dialogicity of the voices of the past (Olick, 2008).

Acknowledgement of the Jewish narrative of suffering was offered as a gesture of inter-group empathy or goodwill. Furthermore, Arab discussants referred to their learning Jewish history as a basis for demanding that their Jewish discussants learn the Palestinian perspective. Similarly, some Jewish discussants suggested learning Palestinian history as a gesture to promote coexistence. These instances highlight an original aspect of the 'useful past' as an asset in negotiating the present. It is not just the content of narratives or of historical knowledge that is used to shape the present, but also the activity of knowing and learning. Individuals offer and demand active acknowledgement or engagement with the (other's) past as part of the inter-group transaction of negotiating the present. This appears to be an instance of the politics of social representation as well as a unique use of history in conflict resolution (Bar-Tal and Salomon, 2006; McCully, 2011).

In sum, the adolescents described in this study brought the 'useful past' to bear upon the present as a source of authority and a consensus builder. This may reflect the influence of inter-group negotiation of conflict as the context of learning and discussion. This is a context that calls for consensus building but may also motivate learners towards particularistic self-justification. Participants drew on various available resources, selecting and representing aspects of the past in ways that correspond with current needs and sensibilities. Thus learners' versions of the past may indeed be useful resources for negotiating a conflict, just as they may impede its negotiation. Still, a historical perspective achieves its worth as a resource only when taken up by the adversary. This appears to be the reason why engaging with the other's historical experience becomes a gesture of goodwill and basis for demanding reciprocity and, thus, historical engagement in itself constitutes a useful measure in negotiation.

While the study did not set out to test the impact of history teaching on learners' uses of the past, learning conditions appeared to affect them. The fact the family histories occurred most frequently in the critical disciplinary approach, rather than in a condition with no learning materials at hand, begs interpretation. Could it be that it was the engagement with both perspectives and the challenge to authority fostered by critical inquiry (Barton and McCully, 2010) that facilitated Arab discussants' sharing of family stories? Faith-based references featured most frequently among learners who used the authorized textbook (though it contained no reference to the Bible). Could it be that non-critical reliance on one authoritative narrative made the non-critical use of another authoritative narrative more accessible? And could structured critical analysis reduce the relevance of texts to everyday lives? These findings echo to some degree the effect of history teachers' approaches on learners' uses of history noted by Mosborg (2002).

The educational implications of this study are varied. On the one hand, the findings point to the rich use learners make of the historical knowledge they have acquired to negotiate conflict. Hence, they imply that teaching in the context of controversy and collective memory debate adds to the relevance and significance of history and motivates learners to build upon their own historical knowledge. However, the findings also point to the importance of schooling in imparting shared historical knowledge that serves as the basis for consensus building. Such shared consensual knowledge may be hard to reach through the teaching of controversial issues or of critical inquiry. The study also implies that history educators should attempt to build the capacity of their students to engage with, or at least to acknowledge, the other's historical perspective. Such capacities may serve as assets in interpersonal and inter-group deliberation even when achieving historical consensus is unlikely.

## Notes on the contributor

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