Tracing the Long-Term Impacts of a Generation of Israeli–Palestinian Youth Encounters

Karen Ross & Ned Lazarus[*]

Abstract

Since the 1980s, thousands of Israeli Jews, Palestinian citizens of Israel and Palestinians from the occupied Palestinian territories (oPt) have participated in intergroup dialogues, often referred to as 'encounter programmes'. In the same historical span, the Israeli–Palestinian conflict has proved thoroughly intractable. Given this political reality, what has been the impact of such initiatives, on direct participants and the conflict context? This article assesses the long-term impact by tracing the post-encounter peacebuilding activity and the evolving perspectives of former participants in three prominent encounter programmes – Seeds of Peace (SOP), Sadaka Reut (SR) and Peace Child Israel (PC) – over periods ranging from a few years to over two decades. Data is drawn from parallel studies conducted by each of the individual authors, encompassing research on 899 programme alumni. The article presents the results of complementary qualitative and quantitative analyses of the long-term peacebuilding engagement of graduates of these three programmes. The organizations profiled employ distinct methodologies, allowing for comparative analysis of interpersonal contact, social identity and critical theoretical approaches. The studies found 183 alumni – approximately one in five surveyed – active in peacebuilding and social change efforts as adults, often 10 or more years after initial participation in encounters. Crucially, long-term peacebuilding engagement was more common among alumni of programmes that explicitly address issues of intergroup conflict and social justice, as opposed to a 'non-political' cultural approach. Findings illustrate the potential of intergroup encounters to inspire sustained peacebuilding engagement at the individual level – even in a context of ongoing violent conflict – while highlighting dilemmas imposed by asymmetrical social contexts, and the limitations of micro-level strategies in effecting broader political change.

Keywords: encounters, Israel-Palestine, impact, peace building, dialogue.

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1   Introduction

In a February 2015 speech, Lior Finkel-Perl,[1] then executive director of the Peace NGOs Forum in Israel, explained her original inspiration for becoming a peace activist:

> My 1996 Seeds of Peace experience was one of those times that everything connected for me and suddenly my life path became very clear. At camp was the first time I realized what is meaningful to me, what I want to achieve and what I am going to fight for… in hindsight, this is the moment that started it all.

At the time 19 years had passed since she had attended SOP International Camp in Maine, USA, together with other youth from Israel, the oPt and neighbouring Arab countries. Needless to say, Finkel-Perl's personal context had changed dramatically since 1996. Nonetheless, she attributed an enduring influence to her participation, as an adolescent, in a two-week intergroup encounter programme. This is all the more remarkable when political context is acknowledged: Finkel-Perl's generation grew to maturity during the *Al-Aqsa Intifada* – the most lethal period of direct Israeli–Palestinian violence since the war of 1948. Her long-term commitment to peacebuilding, and the attribution of her motivation, are not to be taken for granted – indeed, they highlight the potentially transformative effect of participation in intergroup encounters, even in a context of ongoing conflict.

Since the 1980s, thousands of Jewish and Palestinian youth have engaged in cross-conflict encounter and peacebuilding programmes. Over the same historical span, the Israeli–Palestinian conflict has proved thoroughly intractable, lurching between failed negotiations and violent escalation. This, along with growing alienation between Israeli Jewish and Palestinian societies, has led to questions regarding the relevance and effectiveness of intergroup encounters (Economist, 2007); one journalist has twice stated that "[Israeli-Palestinian encounters] have not produced a single peace activist" (Kalman, 2008; 2014), an assertion that the present research contradicts. Upon empirical examination, such scepticism appears to be based on the broader entrenchment of macro-conflict dynamics, rather than any systematic study of what has actually become of youth whose faces once illuminated the brochures of NGOs and donor organizations.

This article represents an empirically grounded response to the question of long-term encounter impact, drawing on findings from two separate, long-term studies of former participants in three distinctly different types of intergroup encounter programme. Our findings illustrate the potential of intergroup encounters to inspire participants towards sustained engagement in peacebuilding and social change activism, even in a context of ongoing violent conflict – yet simultaneously highlight the limitations of such micro-level interventions in effecting broader political change.

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1   Throughout this article we use the real names of public figures; pseudonyms (indicated by the use of a single name rather than first and last names) are used for other research participants.

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2 Historical Overview of Intergroup Encounters in the Israeli/Palestinian Context

The original 'Arab–Jewish coexistence' programmes began bringing together young Jewish and Palestinian citizens of Israel in the mid-1980s (Abu-Nimer, 1999). In the 1990s, the signing of the 'Oslo Accords' inspired a second wave of encounter programmes promoting dialogue between Israeli youth and Palestinians living in the oPt, associated with the expansion of 'people-to-people' projects aimed at generating grass-roots support for the official peace process (Herzog and Hai, 2005).

In mid-2000 the eruption of the Al-Aqsa *Intifada*, or Palestinian uprising, against Israeli rule in the oPt led to five years of Palestinian militant attacks and Israeli military assaults. This resulted in more than 1,000 Israeli and 4,000 Palestinian fatalities, culminating in the Israeli government's construction of the 'Separation Barrier', fragmenting and encircling Palestinian population areas in the West Bank. These drastic developments dealt severe setbacks to advocates of peace. According to some estimates, roughly half of the peacebuilding projects active in 2000 ceased to function in the first year of the *Intifada* (Hai and Herzog, 2005). Dozens of others persevered, however, thanks to strategic changes and adoption of new approaches to match post-Oslo political realities (Gawerc, 2012; Lazarus, 2015a). Among these were numerous intergroup encounter programmes, which remain integral to the peacebuilding field.

3 Theoretical and Empirical Research on Intergroup Encounters

Existing intergroup encounters within Israel and in the Israeli/Palestinian contexts embrace a variety of models. While Allport's (1954) Contact Hypothesis guided initial encounters, more recent programmes draw on Social Identity Theory (Hewstone and Brown, 1986), responding to the lack of focus on collective identities in the Contact Hypothesis approach (Abu-Nimer, 1999). Today, Maoz (2011) classifies encounters into four models: "coexistence" and "joint projects" models, based primarily on the Contact Hypothesis; the "confrontational" model, drawing largely on Social Identity Theory; and an indigenous approach referred to as the "narrative model", developed by the late Dan Bar-On (Bar-On and Kassem, 2004). In practice, however, substantive encounter programmes typically incorporate aspects of all four approaches (Maddy-Weitzman 2005; Lazarus, 2011; Ross, 2013).

Scholarship on intergroup encounters in conflict contexts has largely focused on the question of whether and how such programmes change the perceptions of participants. This research emphasizes issues such as changes in beliefs about peace (Biton and Salomon, 2006), legitimacy granted to the narrative of the 'Other' (Braun-Lewensohn and Kitain, 2015), willingness to engage in social contact (Maoz, 2004) and the influence of cross-conflict friendship formation on attitudinal change (Schroeder and Risen, 2014). Additional research addresses issues such as identity development among encounter participants (Hammack,

2006; 2011; Litvak-Hirsch *et al*., 2003) and the quality of interactions between participants (Helman, 2002; Maoz *et al*., 2002; Steinberg and Bar-On, 2002).

Taken together, these studies illustrate different perspectives regarding whether, and under what conditions, encounters successfully promote individual change (Bar-Tal, 2004; Salomon, 2006); however, they are limited by their focus on short-term attitudinal shifts. While longer-term perspectives – tracking participants over a few years – exist (Hammack, 2006, 2011; Liyanage and Malhotra, 2005; Maddy-Weitzman, 2005; 2007), they are few. More important, existing studies have yet to empirically examine the link between encounter participation and engagement in broader peacebuilding activity; they have also not yet addressed the potential influence of encounter content and methodology on programme outcomes.

This sets the stage for this article, which examines individual change within the context of the diverse approaches utilized by three leading encounter organizations – SOP, SR and PC. Our analysis focuses primarily on the *long-term peacebuilding and social change engagement* of former participants in activities implemented by each of the organizations. We define 'peacebuilding' as voluntary involvement in non-violent, joint activity aimed at transforming perceptions and/or sociopolitical relations between Israeli Jews and Palestinians and contributing to resolution of the conflict. This broad definition encompasses a wide spectrum of social action forms, in concert with international recognition that diverse activities contribute to conflict transformation, violence reduction and the building of more just and peaceful societies (Smith, 2004). We focus on joint activity because such activity is exceptional and often inherently controversial in current Israeli and Palestinian social contexts. One Israeli Jewish SOP graduate described the mainstream Israeli perception of cross-conflict dialogue itself as a radical act:

> It is normative activity, it's not going and taking drugs or I don't know what, tearing up iron walls in the territories, but from the point of view of the majority of people… it's more similar to going to tear down walls… it's perceived as something extreme Leftist… not just the organization, the act of meeting itself, it doesn't matter how apolitical it is, every encounter… is understood as something that Leftists do, principally radical Leftists of the extreme sort. Something that's really at the outer limits of the scale.

Thus, intergroup encounters are often seen as controversial or outside the Israeli norm, even when ostensibly framed as 'non-political', as in the case of PC (Lazarus, 2011; Gawerc, 2012; Hai and Herzog, 2005).

We define 'social change activity' as activity aimed at addressing systemic social injustices, without an explicitly cross-conflict focus or emphasis on transformation of relationships. This definition includes activities that PC, SR and SOP graduates have engaged in that challenge dominant discourses and norms in their society in multiple ways, including: engagement with organizations addressing social issues aside from the Jewish–Palestinian conflict, engagement with organizations aimed at Palestinian empowerment, military refusal or selective refusal,

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and more. We contrast these activities with peacebuilding activities for several reasons. First, these activities are illustrative of alumni emphases on multiple sociopolitical issues that may not be related (directly or even indirectly) to peacebuilding between Israeli Jews and Palestinians. Second, our definition of peacebuilding activity, as discussed above, does not include work carried out in uninational contexts (that is, without a joint component). Finally, this term is consistent with the viewpoint expressed by many of our interviewees that their focus is not on 'peace' but on 'justice'.

4   Research Methods

Data for this article comes from two separate studies, one focusing on SOP and the other examining SR and PC. While undertaken separately by the two authors, the studies share the goal of understanding long-term change as well as an emphasis on assessing micro–meso linkages by examining continued peacebuilding and social change activity. Moreover, the combined focus of these studies on these three veteran organizations allows for a comparative analysis of programme models that covers nearly the full range of approaches utilized for implementing encounters. Thus, while the studies differ somewhat methodologically (as detailed below), we believe that they nonetheless offer a coherent framework for understanding the long-term impact of participation in intergroup encounters.

To assess programme impact, each study utilized approaches aimed at understanding change from the perspective of participants, ensuring coherence between the *focus* of research on peacebuilding endeavours and a research *approach* empowering individuals taking part in the study. In the first study, semi-structured interviews were conducted in 2006-2010 with 70 adult alumni of SOP, who were asked to articulate the programme's impacts on their lives in open-ended terms, following the Most Significant Change evaluation methodology (Davies and Dart, 2005). The second study utilized life history interviews, conducted in 2010-2011 with 73 former PC and SR participants, in which they were asked to contextualize programme experiences within their overall life stories. Interviews were conducted by the authors, a Jewish American (study 1) and a Jewish Israeli–American (study 2)[2] up to 15 years post participation for SOP alumni, and up to 25 years post participation for alumni of SR and PC. Both studies utilized snowball sampling techniques, but aimed to achieve a balance in numbers of Jewish/Israeli and Palestinian interviewees (as well as, in the case of the second study, gender balance and parity in the number of interviewees from the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s). In both cases, data was analysed using an open, "grounded" approach (Carspecken, 1996; Charmaz, 1990), allowing each author to reconstruct the *meanings* of programme impact as articulated by participants; likewise, interpretations in each case were supported by standard validity techni-

2   For deeper discussions of the way our identities shaped the research studies, please *see:* Lazarus (2011), Razon and Ross (2012) and Ross (2013).

ques (Lincoln and Guba, 1985), including: prolonged engagement, triangulation via multiple sources and multiple methods and peer debriefing.

In addition to utilizing interview data, the SOP study engaged in a quantitative exploration of impact, tracing peacebuilding activity over periods of 8-15 years *among all 824 Israeli and Palestinian participants from the first decade of SOP programming* (1993-2002). Each graduate's level of peacebuilding activity was classified at different stages of personal development (the first year after SOP participation, in high school, post high school and as an adult), according to a three-point scale: *Active* graduates engaged frequently in peacebuilding activities; *In-touch* graduates engaged occasionally in such activities; *Out-of-touch* graduates were not involved.

5   The Cases[3]

In this section we present an overview of SOP, SR and PC. These descriptions trace the history, and, more importantly, the distinct methodology of each organization, highlighting important structural and programmatic differences that, as we argue later in the article, are central to understanding variations in programme impact as articulated and exemplified by former participants.

5.1   Peace Child Israel

From its establishment in 1987 until it closed its doors in 2011, PC was one of Israel's longest-running encounter organizations, founded with the goal of using theatre as a tool for bringing together Jewish and Palestinian citizens.[4] Although the organization underwent shifts over the years, owing to both expansion and a change of leadership in 1998, its overarching approach and goals remained relatively stable over its life span. Each year, Jewish and Palestinian Israeli youth from neighbouring communities joined groups of 20-25 participants, using theatre to achieve the organization's mission of developing "friendly relations and mutual respect" and "tolerance and empathy towards the other".[5] In addition to weekly role-playing and improvisation activities, participants rehearsed and performed a play in Hebrew and Arabic for audiences in their communities.[6] Through these activities and the development of partnerships in the rehearsal and performance process, PC sought to foster interpersonal connections among participants, to raise questions among participants and audiences regarding dom-

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3   Case descriptions are based on diverse data sources, including interviews, observations, internal organizational documents, promotional materials and organization websites.

4   Note that the encounters implemented by SR and PC bring together Jewish Israelis and Palestinian citizens of Israel; SOP encounters primarily involve Jewish Israelis *and* Palestinians from the occupied territories, as well as smaller numbers of Palestinian citizens of Israel and youth from Arab countries.

5   <www.mideastweb.org/peacechild/mission.html>.

6   Initially, these plays were written by the group; during the last several years of Peace Child's work, existing plays emphasizing intergroup conflict but not directly focused on the Jewish–Palestinian case were chosen *a priori* by staff and adapted for participants.

inant cultural norms and to help participants develop a nuanced understanding of intergroup similarities and differences.

Over the years PC primarily maintained a cultural rather than a political emphasis, focusing on interpersonal relationships without a systematic discussion of structural issues underlying the conflict. Nor did the organization explicitly encourage continued activism among its graduates. With its emphasis on binational engagement in theatre, PC's approach fits what Maoz (2011) refers to as the "joint projects" encounter model.

5.2   Sadaka Reut

SR was founded in 1982 by a group of Jewish and Palestinian university students, with an explicit focus on bringing together and fostering equality among Jewish and Palestinian citizens. While initially the organization emphasized interpersonal relationships, the focus shifted, particularly after the eruption of the Al-Aqsa *Intifada*, towards an explicit emphasis on systemic social injustices and power asymmetry. In recent years a greater emphasis has also been placed on uninational activity, reflecting SR's view (as stated by the Palestinian co-director in 2010) that "the real work of consciousness raising happens in uninational meetings" and that binational meetings reinforce power asymmetries unless preceded by extensive uninational work.

Despite these shifts, two principles have remained consistent for SR. First, SR explicitly focuses on educating youth for social engagement, both by fostering critical questioning of the status quo and by providing participants with tangible skills. Each group develops and implements an action agenda as part of SR programming; an expectation of the organization is that participants will carry forward the skills they develop through continued engagement with their sociopolitical environment. Second and above all, SR emphasizes the importance of Jewish–Palestinian partnership as a tool for confronting systemic inequalities in Israeli society, an emphasis reflected in the organization's joint leadership at all levels. With these principles, SR's approach most closely resembles what Maoz (2011) calls the "confrontational" model of intergroup encounters.

5.3   Seeds of Peace

Despite their differences, SR and PC are both local Israeli NGOs, facilitating encounters between Jewish and Palestinian citizens in Israel. SOP, by contrast, is an American organization bringing together youth from across the Middle East and other global conflict regions. The entry point for participants is SOP's International Camp programme in Maine, USA, where participants spend three weeks living together, engaged in daily dialogue sessions and American summer camp activities – followed by year-round follow-up programmes in their home regions.

Since its establishment in 1993, the SOP camp has hosted over 5,000 participants from 27 countries. Nonetheless, SOP is primarily known for its Middle East programme, which has involved more than 3,000 youth from 12 Middle Eastern countries – the vast majority Israelis and Palestinians. Even in its Israeli–Palestinian aspect, however, SOP remains distinct from PC and SR, given that the encounter is conceived as 'cross-border' – between Israeli Jews and Palestinians

from the West Bank, Gaza Strip and East Jerusalem, rather than between citizens of one country. Palestinian citizens of Israel attend SOP as a minority within the Israeli delegation; their struggles were initially overshadowed by the 'cross-border' Israeli–Palestinian conflict before becoming recognized in the wake of the tragic events of October 2000 in Israel.[7]

Methodologically, SOP espouses what Maddy-Weitzman (2005) calls a "mixed-model encounter", combining substantial emphasis on interpersonal relationships with "confrontational" dialogue (Maoz, 2011). The extended, intensive camp programme allows for a holistic approach, including daily interpersonal engagement, 'joint projects' activities and facilitated "dialogue between identities" focused on core conflict issues (Halabi and Sonnenschein, 2004). SOP regional programmes are designed to reflect the same blend of contact and conflict content. Within this framework, the post-*Intifada* era has brought increased emphasis on empowerment, social action and uninational dialogue alongside cross-conflict encounters. Both trends at SOP are consistent with the evolution of SR methodology, and with trends in the wider Israeli–Palestinian peacebuilding field (Lazarus *et al*., 2014).

6   Programme Impact at an Individual Level

These three encounter organizations differ substantially in terms of political orientation, programme structure and participant populations. Nonetheless, our research indicates that each has had a profound and lasting impact for many participants. In this section, we highlight findings from our studies in two ways. First, we provide a quantitative summary of participants' subsequent engagement in peacebuilding and social change activity. Second, we draw upon narratives from alumni interviews in both studies to illustrate the nuances of programme impact in terms of continued peacebuilding/social change engagement and other aspects of personal transformation.

6.1   *Quantifying Long-Term Peacebuilding Engagement*
In the cases of both SOP and SR, a majority of alumni interviewees engaged in social change and peacebuilding activity through adolescence, and significant numbers into adulthood. Twenty-nine out of 45 SR alumni interviewed (65%) were active in peacebuilding/social change activities at the time of their interviews, spanning anywhere between two years and two decades following original encounter participation. Of the remaining SR interviewees, another eight expressed critical perspectives on policies perpetuating systemic injustice within Israeli society. Nearly all interviewees attributed the origin of their critical consciousness to participation in SR, indicating the effectiveness of the organization's explicitly politicized and activism-focused approach. In the case of PC, with

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7   Aseel 'Asleh, a 17-year-old Palestinian citizen of Israel and a highly active member of SOP, was one of 13 Arab citizens killed by Israeli police during a wave of demonstrations that erupted in Arab towns in Israel during the first month of the Al-Aqsa *Intifada* (Judicial Authority of the State of Israel, 2003; Lazarus, 2011).

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its cultural/non-political focus, only 9 of 30 interviewees (30%) were engaged in peacebuilding or social change endeavours – fewer than SR, but a significant number nonetheless.[8]

PC and SR alumni interviewed are only a small sample drawn from several thousand alumni of both programmes, and are not a representative sample of all participants.[9] Data from the SOP study, however, includes the entire participant population of the programme's first 10 years – 824 Israelis and Palestinians. Through longitudinal tracking of each graduate's peacebuilding activity at different life stages, this study identifies clear patterns over time. Large majorities of SOP alumni were highly active during the first year after camp, and 52% remained active or in touch through the remainder of high school – evidence of high initial motivation sparked by the camp programme and often sustained for two to three years through regional follow-up activity.

Ages 18-21, by contrast, were defined by the compulsory military enlistment of Israeli Jewish graduates and consequent disillusionment of many of their Palestinian counterparts, correlating with sharp declines in activity, with 62% of alumni becoming out of touch.[10] For some graduates, these years constituted an end to peacebuilding engagement. Others, however, *returned* to cross-conflict activity as adults after, in one graduate's words, "three years of disconnection". The percentage of highly active Israeli graduates rose nearly 6% at the adult stage, indicating that motivation for peacebuilding engagement endured for some alumni after periods of inactivity. Ultimately, the study found 144 adult graduates – 17.5% of alumni aged 21-30 – actively engaged in diverse forms of joint work, for more than 40 different peacebuilding initiatives – 10 years, and several wars, after their original encounter participation (Lazarus, 2011; 2015b) (Table 1).

Table 1   *SOP alumni peacebuilding activity, by identity and personal context*

	First-Year (%)	HS (%)	Post-HS (%)[a]	Adult[b] (%)
PCI[c] (n = 87)			*n = 64*	
Active	36	27	15	16.2
In-touch	32	20	21	n/a
Out-of-touch	32	53	64	n/a
Israeli (n = 425)			*n = 367*	
Active	50	34	11	16.7
In-touch	25	24	27	n/a
Out-of-touch	25	42	62	n/a

8   The nature of the second study means that it is not possible to present a quantitative summary of peacebuilding activity over time with the same detail as is possible for SOP.

9   To date, over 5,000 youth have participated in SR programmes; PC alumni are estimated to number at least 3,000, although no records exist to confirm this.

10   For a detailed treatment of the experiences and perspectives of Israeli SOP graduates with compulsory military service, and reactions of Palestinian graduates, *see* Lazarus (2011, chapters 5 and 6).

Table 1   ***(continued)***

	First-Year (%)	HS (%)	Post-HS (%)[a]	Adult[b] (%)
Palestinian (*n* = 312)			*n* = 282	
Active	46	25	20	18.9
In-touch	24	24	29	n/a
Out-of-touch	30	51	51	n/a
All Alumni (*N* = 824)			*N* = 713	
Active	44	29	15	17.5
In-touch	27	23	27	n/a
Out-of-touch	29	49	58	n/a

As of August 2011.

[a] The Post-HS number represents total graduates aged 18-21 at the time of original coding (2003-2004).

[b] For adult graduates (ages 21-30), data was available only for 'active' graduates, not 'in-touch.'

[c] Palestinian citizens of Israel.

Together, these findings indicate that the SOP camp experience was initially inspiring for a majority of participants, that the intractable context gradually eroded the impact for many but that follow-up activities restored or sustained motivation among a core group, who displayed long-term commitments to peace-building.

6.2 Diverse Methods of Peacebuilding and Social Change Activity

Crucially, intergroup encounter alumni who remained active over the long term frequently contributed to multiple initiatives, involving diverse methods of peacebuilding and social change activity. SOP, SR and PC alumni have worked with at least 50 different civil society NGOs; most active alumni have contributed to multiple initiatives over time. Typically, an active graduate might organize campus activities while a student, train in conflict resolution skills, facilitate dialogue for multiple organizations *and* engage in advocacy and/or protest under other auspices. One Jewish Israeli SOP alumna had, by the age of 30, served as a parliamentary aide for an Arab member of Knesset (the Israeli legislature), and worked professionally for SOP, Peace Now, the Peres Center for Peace, eventually becoming Israeli co-director of the Middle East Education through Technology initiative (MEET). Although the Israeli–Palestinian 'peace camp' has long been divided between advocates of dialogue/education and those of explicitly politicized approaches (Halper, 2011), she described these forms of activism as complementary rather than contradictory, stating, "I received insights from [dialogue], but … there's a limit to what you can achieve. It's essential, it's the beginning… but you reach a stage that you want to do more".

The complementary framing of diverse forms of activism is likewise reflected in the testimony of Palestinian SOP graduate Mahmoud Jabari, who in 2011, at the age of 17, was arrested by Israeli Border Patrol officers while photographing

an anti-occupation protest in Hebron. Jabari first attended SOP camp in the summer of 2007, then became intensively engaged in multiple forms of activism. By the age of 17 he had become the Palestine reporter for the *World Youth News* website, sponsored by the International Education and Relief Network (iEARN), produced a film with Israeli and Palestinian teenagers through the 'Peace it Together' programme in Canada and delivered speeches to the World Economic Forum and the UN Security Council.

Alumni engagement was not limited to activism in civil society NGOs. A number of graduates engaged and continue to be involved in entrepreneurial forms of cross-conflict educational work. One Jewish SR graduate, for instance, teaches critical pedagogy to Jewish and Palestinian university students. Two Israeli Jewish SOP graduates, fluent in colloquial Arabic, independently teach language courses in Jerusalem – Arabic for Jews and Hebrew for Palestinians. An Arabic-speaking, Jewish Israeli SOP graduate established a venture entitled CodeM3lim.com, the first online tech school teaching software coding in Arabic; his initiative grew to feature a mixed team of Israeli and Palestinian instructors teaching students from Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE (Code M3lim). SOP graduates have also served in government as parliamentary aides and Supreme Court clerks, and participated in Track One negotiations. In the 2008 Annapolis negotiations between Israel and the Palestinian National Authority, for example, SOP graduates served as assistants to each of the three principal negotiators.[11]

Alumni from the three organizations are also engaged in myriad initiatives beyond those characterized as peacebuilding activities. For instance, alumni work with organizations addressing animal rights, refugee resettlement and gender empowerment. One SR graduate, a Palestinian citizen, founded a centre for women and children in his rural village; another Palestinian SR graduate founded an organization aimed explicitly at working with Palestinian citizen youth.

6.3   Encounters as Catalyst: Awareness, Efficacy, Activism

It is important to emphasize that the large majority of SOP and SR interviewees active in peacebuilding traced their motivation directly to their original encounter experiences – in Jabari's words, "It was the beginning of peace activism". One Israeli SOP grad explained, "If you look at my resume, it's really like a building where Seeds of Peace is at the bottom and everything grows and branches out of that." Another Israeli SOP alumnus, who served as a chief assistant to Israel's foreign minister in the Annapolis negotiations, explained that "precisely as someone coming from the Right-wing... without [SOP], I would not have reached the consciousness that I did regarding the Palestinian issue".

Even many alumni who have turned away from dialogue, or joint peacebuilding activity altogether, still highlight the importance of intergroup experiences in their personal development. For example, one Palestinian SOP graduate, who has ceased engagement in joint activities since the Al-Aqsa *Intifada*, nonetheless cited his youthful participation in SOP as the source of his adult intercultural communication skills:

11   Israeli PM Ehud Olmert, Israeli FM Tzipi Livni, Palestinian FM Ahmed Qurei'a (Abu Ala'a).

> This was something that helped myself and my career, and I had the choice, and I was brave enough to say, this is the time I can do it, this is the time I can stop it… I joined in the right time, and I left in the right time. But I heard a lot, and it helped me a lot in my life. It helped me to study [in Europe]… You feel that you got advantages from this experience. In [European city], you hear 150 languages in the streets everyday, among them Jews, among them Arabs, and this experience helps you communicate with all of them.

A Jewish Israeli SOP graduate, who eventually abandoned dialogue in favour of explicitly politicized 'joint struggle', attributed her activist consciousness to experiences and relationships derived through the programme: "It *did* have a meaningful effect on my political consciousness, because I didn't grow up with Palestinians. It was my entrance… I grew up in a typical Israeli family, so I really needed a real live [Palestinian] person talking to me for it to get through."

Our research findings include detailed examples of *how* SOP, PC and SR provided a foundation and motivation for peacebuilding and social change activity. For example, the majority of active SR and SOP alumni describe their encounter experiences as sparking awareness of sociopolitical issues and of existing initiatives. While SOP does not itself organize demonstrations or train participants in civil disobedience or protest politics, many politically active graduates ascribed their motivations for activism to insights derived through programme experiences. Likewise, among SR alumni, more than two-thirds attributed their sociopolitical awareness to the organization. One Palestinian alumnus, Butrus, summarized his previous ignorance by saying,

> Before [joining SR], I was not at all politically aware, I barely took any interest in politics. I *hated* politics…and, and then I arrived [at SR]…I started to become more interested in politics…I started simply to get to know more. We met with many different organizations, like Machsom Watch, like the Coalition of Women for Peace, and in addition to that…our facilitators always, simply helped us to organize all of these thoughts that got mixed up in our heads.

Another Jewish graduate simply said, "My family never took interest in anything political. I started to go to demonstrations when I was in Sadaka."

All three programmes also played an important role in providing participants with the belief in their potential to effect change. Bayan, a young Palestinian woman and former SR participant, explained that opportunities provided through the organization were crucial in shaping her sense of self-efficacy: "They give you the feeling of, you want to change things, change them. *Yalla*. You have every opportunity." Dafna, a Jewish SR participant, said, "I think that [SR] formed for me many things… not to fear leading battles, I wasn't afraid of doing new things … the knowledge of how to organize demonstrations, the knowledge of what to do when you have an idea and you want to make it happen." Tali, a Jewish Israeli SOP graduate, stated that "we always felt… that we're very special and we were very empowered… we felt that we could make peace (laughter). Even

today, I feel like I'm a person that can make changes—I matter. I count. That's the strongest feeling SOP gave me. That I matter". Yumna, a Palestinian SOP alumna from a starkly different background – a refugee camp in the oPt – likewise ascribed to encounter participation her record of exceeding expectations and breaking boundaries:

> I don't think I would have imagined where I would be if I had not joined SOP. It significantly empowered me as a person, as a woman and a Palestinian. They put us through serious negotiations, through serious dialogue sessions, offered me training... helped me get a scholarship to study in the USA... For someone coming from my background, from the refugee camp... I wouldn't be where I am now, working for international organizations in Palestine, doing different things that I feel very passionate about.

Among Jewish alumni, at least 15 SOP, 9 SR and 2 PC participants in our studies challenged dominant norms by making the decision not to enlist for compulsory military service at the age of 18; most cited encounter participation as integral to their decision to go against the grain and challenge the dominant ethos in Jewish Israeli society. Additionally, among Israeli graduates who did enlist, many testified that their encounter experiences played a crucial role in their decisions regarding where and how to serve while in the military (Lazarus, 2011). Indeed, in all of the aforementioned cases, alumni linked their adult accomplishments to profound senses of empowerment and opportunities derived through their encounter programme experiences.

It is important to note that such positive retrospective assessments of encounter impact were not universal among our interviewees. Numerous adult graduates spoke of alternating between phases of activity and inactivity, of being sometimes positively disposed towards intergroup peacebuilding activity and at other times alienated. A few interviewees expressed bluntly negative assessments. Rashida, a Palestinian SR graduate now engaged in uninational Palestinian activity, testified that her experiences "pointed me in the direction of, that there isn't anyone to speak with, at the end of the day, I left with a feeling that there isn't a partner... so there's no coexistence to speak of, actually, we need to speak about existence". Salima, a Palestinian SOP graduate now engaged in explicitly politicized joint struggle, asserted that her adult activism was "in spite of [SOP], not because of it". Yet the overwhelming majority of alumni attributed value to their encounter experiences, whatever their adult level of engagement. As another Palestinian SOP graduate, now focused on explicitly anti-occupation joint activities, declared, "I do not regret joining Seeds of Peace and when I have kids in the future I will send them, 'cause I want them to get that experience... SOP changed my life and if it's not for [SOP]... I don't think I would have accomplished what I have accomplished in my life."

It is also important to note a contrast here between graduates of the more explicitly political SOP and SR programmes, on the one hand, and alumni of the PC, with its predominantly cultural focus. PC alumni active in peacebuilding and social change activities attributed their motivation primarily *to factors outside of*

their encounter experiences, such as family or community encouragement or dramatic events in the sociopolitical sphere. Two Jewish alumni, for example, traced the start of their sociopolitical involvement to the assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in 1995. Among Palestinians, several pointed to activist family members as motivating their own sociopolitical involvement.

6.4 Beyond Activism: Inspiring Long-Lasting Transformation

Beyond social change and peacebuilding activity, our research indicates that ongoing encounter programmes can result in long-lasting individual transformation more broadly. The nature of this transformation differs from individual to individual, but the examples we present here highlight the intensity of encounters and the way they shape individuals' views and actions, years, and in some cases decades, post participation.

Earlier in the article we discussed the development of a sense of self-efficacy as an important element of motivating continued social change and peacebuilding activity. Even in cases when this sense of self-efficacy did not lead to activities explicitly defined within the peacebuilding or social change sphere, it provided evidence of the enduring influence of encounter participation. For instance, Nasiha, a young Palestinian PC alumna, stated of her experience: "I didn't just gain knowledge. I also learned how to think in a different way and to understand my own opinion." Nasiha attributed much of this change to the theatrical element of Peace Child's work, saying, "It enabled me to open up, to feel…that I can do what I want to do…now it's easier for me to stand in front of an audience, it's easier for me to speak, to state my opinion…"

The importance of this sense of self-confidence is reflected in multiple ways beyond continued peacebuilding activity. In Nasiha's case, its salience is illustrated by her decision, after graduating from high school, to engage in *Sherut Leumi*, Israeli national service. Nasiha attributed this decision, which goes against the prevailing consensus of the Palestinian community in Israel, to her participation in Peace Child:

> If I hadn't gotten into this project I wouldn't think the way I think now… now I am doing *Sherut Leumi*, which from the perspective of the Arabs it's like, 'Wow, how are you doing *Sherut Leumi*?' It isn't accepted, it's prohibited and that, but I said, no, I want to contribute my piece to my country… I think to myself if I hadn't been in this project I wouldn't do something like this.

Another critical transformation these encounters enable is a shift in the way participants view the nature of relationships between Jews and Palestinians, and, in particular, the premium placed on maintaining 'cross-conflict' relationships. For instance, Akil, a Palestinian SR alumnus from the mid-1990s, said about the relationships he formed through the organization,

> We are friends. That's the starting point. It's at a level where, say…I lived with them, I mean, I don't know, it's hard for people from outside to understand those things. After a certain point and after everything we've been

> together, *halas*, it doesn't matter anymore, Jew or Arab… Friends, these are people who accept me for who I am, it's not political any more, and there's no agenda. It's something else altogether.

Through SR, Akil established relationships that have lasted over two decades; he and friends from SR continue to live in the same neighbourhood, in a community that transcends ethno-national divisions. Efrat, a Jewish SR graduate, expressed plans to buy apartments in a building with other Jewish *and* Palestinian friends, to establish an intentional, binational community. For these two alumni, contexts of binational partnership and community have become the norm. The potential power of cross-conflict friendship is echoed by a recent study of three cycles of SOP camp participants, which found intergroup friendship to be the most significant predictive factor for lasting positive attitudinal change towards the outgroup (Schroeder and Risen, 2014).

Even for interviewees who did not maintain strong personal relationships, the importance of Jewish–Palestinian engagement and of 'differentiation', that is, seeing those from the other side as individuals, remained salient long after the encounter. For instance, Neta, a Jewish PC alumna now in her early 40s, stated, "When I need to say Jews and Arabs, it's difficult for me – this differentiation of, to take a group and categorize it". She attributes this view largely to her encounter participation, where she found the Palestinian children in her group were "like me, like the rest of the [Jewish] children". Tali, a Jewish SR alumna, also emphasized the importance of learning to see beyond categories. She noted,

> Look, what [the encounter] did for me and I hope for others, is to not catalog people. It's not *Arabs*, it's Mohammad, it's Akil, it's people that I know personally, and to know that…that not all Arab Israelis or Palestinian Israelis, as they call themselves, are the same. Each one has his own definition.

7 Discussion

Our findings provide strong evidence that effectively structured intergroup encounters can have a lasting impact on the attitudes, actions and choices of participants, even in contexts of intractable conflict. Moreover, our findings indicate that youthful intergroup encounter participation inspired significant numbers of participants towards sustained engagement in peacebuilding and social change initiatives. Such outcomes were not universal, of course; hence we conclude by highlighting methodological choices that appear to enhance levels of long-term engagement in peacebuilding and social change among participants in intergroup encounter programmes.

First, our findings emphasize the importance of post-encounter follow-up, especially for participants in international programmes. Alumni who joined SOP after 1997, when the organization initiated year-round activities in the Middle East, evinced much higher rates of long-term peacebuilding activity than did previous participants – as did alumni who were selected to return to SOP camp a sec-

ond time (Lazarus, 2015b). Thus, our findings echo conclusions of previous studies that "re-entry" to the conflict context exerts an "erosion effect" against peacebuilding motivation (Hammack, 2006); yet they also affirm that follow-up activity can sustain or restore motivation for participants.

Second, our findings also point to an important link between programme content and peacebuilding outcomes. Graduates of all three programmes studied testified that encounter experiences led to a lasting influence on their adult perspectives. However, programmes focused explicitly on core conflict issues (SOP) or critical approaches to social injustice (SR) inspired greater degrees of long-term peacebuilding or social change *activity* among alumni than PC, with its focus on interpersonal/cultural change. Moreover, while most PC alumni attributed enhanced self-confidence to their encounter experiences, those PC alumni engaged in peacebuilding attribute the motivation for their activism to other sources, such as family or contextual events. In contrast, the vast majorities of SOP and SR alumni directly connect their adult activism to intergroup encounter experiences. This suggests that encounters with an explicit methodological focus on core conflict issues and/or power dynamics are more likely to contribute to sustained engagement in peacebuilding or advocacy for social-structural change. Indeed, SOP and SR alumni typically evinced greater awareness of diverse methods of peacebuilding and social change action than PC alumni, who commonly asserted that if only enough individuals experienced intergroup encounters, peace would be achieved – as one participant asked, "Why can't we just get adults to meet the way we do?" In contrast to former PC participants whose current peacebuilding endeavours are themselves mostly related to some form of encounter, SR and SOP alumni have engaged in a wide range of peacebuilding and social change activities, typically aimed at addressing core conflict issues and/or systemic societal inequalities.

What this suggests is that intergroup encounters of *all* kinds can influence alumni significantly in ways that are sustained over years and decades, but that the encounter model utilized is important to consider in terms of the potential motivation for continued activity in the peacebuilding or social change realms. In particular, to the degree that encounter programmes aim to shift the status quo, it is important for the programme content to explicitly address issues at the core of the conflict.

We acknowledge that our categorization does not reflect the actual multidimensional nature of all three programmes. Nor do our results account for potential differences between *participants* in the three programmes that might provide alternative explanations for engagement in peacebuilding/social change activity. However, the goal of these studies was to contribute to theoretical and conceptual explorations of intergroup encounter impact, rather than to make causal or generalizable statements. Future studies might address these limitations through a randomized study.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of the impact of civil society activism in the contemporary Israeli–Palestinian and larger Middle East contexts. The collective activities of all encounter alumni have obviously proven insufficient for bringing about peace or deep structural change in any immediate

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way – yet the same can be said about myriad attempts at conflict resolution in the Middle East by the world's most powerful actors, and is thus hardly an appropriate standard for a small number of youth programmes. Our findings illustrate that intergroup encounters constitute an effective educational method to challenge entrenched societal beliefs among youth participants, even in a time of conflict irresolution, and thereby contribute to the ranks of Israelis and Palestinians engaged in the ongoing struggle for conflict transformation and social justice.

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