


# Negotiating Reality: Conflict Transformation in Natural Spaces of Encounter

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## Abstract

This article develops theory to address a dilemma experienced as “resistance” to a conflict transformation process among Jewish and Arab nursing students in Israel. This dilemma is analyzed from two theoretical perspectives: (a) the “postcolonial approach,” which applies ideas of critical conflict theory and group dynamics to generate change in intergroup relationships, and (b) the “negotiating reality approach,” which applies ideas of social constructionism and action science to enable participants to jointly shape a space in which they feel free to express their complex individual and group identities. We propose that the postcolonial approach offers a powerful interpretive framework but would likely engender greater resistance. We present a negotiating reality intervention model designed to offer a way out of the dilemma and increase cooperation in critical reflection, learning, and change. The discussion compares the implications of the two approaches, setting forth propositions for guiding further research and practice.

## Keywords

conflict transformation, space, framing, constructionism, postcolonialism, action science, identity, negotiating reality

In writing about the practice and training of social workers in regions characterized by conflict, Baum (2007) pointed to the lack of literature on the effects of national conflict. She argued that professionals tend to avoid or ignore the issue of national conflict out of fear that it might disrupt relationships and professional practice. The

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goal of this article is to help fill this gap in the literature through a theoretical inquiry into a practice dilemma, what we call “the one big happy family fantasy.” This dilemma arose in an intervention carried out with Jewish and Arab-Palestinian students for the purpose of conflict transformation in an academic nursing program in Israel. Despite concrete evidence to the contrary, the majority of these students denied that there was any conflict between the two groups and argued that it was the facilitators themselves who were creating divisiveness.

This article builds on theory and research in the field organizational field of organization development and change that addresses conflict management/resolution (e.g., Lewin, 1948; Thomas, 1976; Tjosvold, 1991; Walton, 1987) and intergroup relations (e.g., Alderfer, Alderfer, Tucker, & Tucker, 1980; Alderfer, Tucker, Alderfer, & Tucker, 1985; Benjamin & Levi, 1979; Chen & Eastman, 1997; Lewin, 1948). There is a long history of attempts to overcome intergroup conflict through encounters that bring together members of conflicting groups, especially in the Israeli-Arab context (Abu-Nimer, 1999; Bar, Bargal, & Asaqla, 1995; Beckerman & Horenczyk, 2004; Benjamin & Levi, 1979; Halabi, 2000; Kelman, 1972). The early work of these group encounters was based on the “contact hypothesis,” which argues that significant improvements in relations between conflicting group members can take place when they interact over a sustained period of time under conditions of equal status and cooperative interdependence (Amir, 1976; Gawerc, 2006). Nevertheless, later works concluded that fostering interpersonal relations was insufficient and that such encounters need to deal explicitly with the political and structural context that shapes these relationships and creates inequality and injustice (Beckerman & Horenczyk, 2004). As a result, interpersonal encounters have been increasingly seen as processes of conflict transformation that focus on the underlying social, psychological, and economic sources of violent conflict so as to increase justice, reduce violence, and restore relationships (Gawerc, 2006; Rothman, 1997). Along with negotiation processes involving political leadership and social elites, grassroots encounters are considered to be an essential part of conflict transformation, especially in situations of conflict that involve asymmetries of power (Gawerc, 2006).

What made the situation described in this article somewhat unique, and particularly difficult, was that the attempt at conflict transformation took place in a “natural space of encounter” rather than a setting created explicitly and solely for the purpose of meeting and dialogue. Natural spaces of encounter are venues shared by people who on most other occasions self-segregate by residence, race, beliefs, values, socioeconomic status, or other factors (Valentine, 2008). In this case, the space of encounter was a required course involving an entire cohort of nursing students during the first year of a 4-year program. This space of encounter was different, and more challenging, than temporary groups composed of self-selected individuals who make a voluntary choice to participate. Here, the group members would be studying and working closely together for 4 years.

The intervention was carried out by the course instructor, who is one of the authors, and four facilitators. The other author of this article accompanied the process but was not involved in the actual intervention. As will be seen, the “one big happy family fantasy” confronted the facilitators with a significant dilemma that was not adequately

addressed in the actual event. To learn from experience and contribute to knowledge about intervention in these kinds of situations, we analyzed the dilemma from two theoretical perspectives. The first perspective, which we call the “postcolonial approach,” applies ideas of critical conflict theory and group dynamics to generate fundamental change in the relationships between groups. The second theoretical perspective, which we call the “negotiating reality approach,” applies ideas of social constructionism and action science to enable participants to jointly shape a space in which they feel free to express their complex individual and group identities. On the basis of this analysis, we set forth a number of propositions about interventions concerning conflict transformation in natural spaces of encounter.

The article begins by describing the critical incident, and the dilemma that emerged from it. We then present each theoretical perspective, how it would interpret this situation, and how it would guide action. We then suggest a model, based on the negotiating reality approach, that we believe offers a more effective response to the situation. In the discussion, we compare the two approaches and set forth a number of propositions that can be tested through further research on practice.

## **The Critical Incident**

### *The Setting*

The starting point for this theoretical inquiry was an attempt to generate conflict transformation within a cohort of 67 first-year nursing students in an academic training program at an institution of higher education in Israel. The class was composed of 50% Jewish and 50% Arab students, the latter of whom are Israeli citizens, descendants of the Palestinian Arab population that remained in Israel after independence in 1948. This group, which comprises about 20% of the Israeli populace, should be distinguished from Palestinians who live in the Occupied Territories (the West Bank [Samaria and Judea] and Gaza) and are not Israeli citizens. Arab citizens of Israel form a nonassimilated minority that differs from the Jewish majority in language, religion, and cultural orientation. Arab and Jewish citizens mostly live in separate communities or neighborhoods and study in a separate public education systems through high school. Relationships between the two groups have been heavily strained by the ongoing conflict between Israel, the Palestinians, and much of the Arab world. Arab citizens of Israel often experience structural discrimination, socioeconomic inequality, and exclusion relative to the Jewish majority. Fear, prejudice, ignorance, and anxiety adversely affect each group’s perceptions of, and feelings toward, each other (Bar-Tal, Halperin, & Oren, 2010; Baum, 2007; Mahameed & Guttman, 1983).

Academia is a natural space of encounter for Arab and Jewish citizens. It is a setting in which many Jewish and Arab citizens meet, often for the first time, under conditions of close physical proximity, shared activity, and sustained interaction. From its inception, and as part of an ongoing process of action research, the nursing program tracked the relationship between Jewish and Arab students through surveys, in-depth interviews with students and faculty, and periodic feedback and reflection with faculty. The

research carried out by the program revealed a pattern of relationship between Jewish and Arab students consistent with the literature cited above. This relationship received concrete expression in the fact that they seated themselves on opposite sides of the classroom. Arab students attributed this division to a lack of interest on the part of the Jewish students, describing the relationship as “humiliating” and even “racist.” Jewish students tended to fear the Arabs, whom they considered to be “Israel haters.” Students from both groups report that they interacted on instrumental matters but formed almost no friendships (Arieli, Friedman, & Hirschfeld, 2009). The Arab students were more troubled by the large social distance than the Jewish students and felt that it had a detrimental effect on their academic performance (Arieli, Mashiah-Eizenberg, & Hirschfeld, 2010). Surveys indicated that most of the students were in favor of limited faculty involvement in changing this situation (e.g., organizing the class into mixed work groups) but that the Arab students were in favor of more significant intervention, such as intergroup dialogue.

While the program faculty was pondering how to respond to these findings, the Gaza War (“Poured Lead”) broke out in January 2009, bringing tensions between Jewish and Arab students to a boiling point. After the war, relations continued to deteriorate until a number of students turned to the program director and asked her to do something about the situation. Following extensive consultation, the nursing program carried out a successful short-term intervention aimed at “improving the atmosphere in class” (Arieli, Friedman, & Knyazev, 2012). In light of this success, the program decided to initiate a process of dialogue for first-year students rather than wait for a crisis to occur. Since there was no room in the program curriculum for an additional course, it was decided to build this process into existing required social science courses because issues of identity, difference, and conflict are at the heart of these subjects.

The first platform chosen for this process was the “Introduction to Anthropology” (see Table 1), which took place in the second semester of the first year and consisted of a 2-hour weekly lecture and a 2-hour section meeting. It was decided that the section meetings would be designed as workshops that would include dialogue and experiential learning built on concepts from anthropology and intergroup dialogue. There were two workshop groups, each of which was cofacilitated by a Jewish facilitator and an Arab facilitator. One member of each facilitation team was a social science teaching assistant and the other an experienced facilitator of Arab-Jewish dialogue. The workshop facilitators faced the unique challenge of facilitating intergroup dialogue in the context of a required course. This fact was perceived as both a disadvantage, in that it might generate resistance but also as an opportunity, in that it would engage people who would not normally participate in intergroup dialogue. Prior to finalizing the course program, the instructor and facilitation team agreed that the opportunities offered by the course justified taking the risks.

The instructor and the four facilitators kept weekly individual diaries in which they documented and commented on what they observed in their groups. Protocols of team meetings, facilitated by one or both authors, were also recorded by hand. Two in-depth reflection sessions after the end of the course were tape-recorded and

**Table 1.** Intervention Design in the Context of the “Introduction to Anthropology.”

Stages	Method	Findings/outcomes
Identifying Conflict	Ongoing participative, formative evaluation of nursing program: interviews, questionnaires, observation	Discovery of underlying tensions Feelings of Arab students of being treated unfairly Desire for intervention by faculty
Building Intervention Team and Process	Combining teaching assistants with intergroup dialogue facilitators Designing the course using “Action Evaluation”: What? Why? How? (Friedman et al., 2004)	Setting team’s common goals set Understanding each team member’s underlying motivation/passion Action plan—“Course Syllabus”
Introducing Basic Concepts of Social Anthropology	Lecture Reading Experiential exercises in small groups with Jewish and Arab facilitators	Experiencing theory through personal and group action and reflection Acquiring a conceptual toolkit for engaging and discussing intergroup difference and conflict
Anthropological Self-Research	Each student researches key symbols of one’s own group through interviewing an “elder” Presenting findings in small group	Awareness of self as culturally condition Self-reflection Listening to the “other” Each student becomes a source of knowledge for others in class
Researching the Other	In mixed pairs, students interview each other in order to learn about one element or issue the other’s culture/group	Acquiring skills of inquiry Appreciative exploration Listening to and appreciating the “other” (difference)
Introducing Narratives of Identity	Presenting different group narratives (in lecture) Students reflect on and define the components of their identity (small group exercise)	Awareness of alternative narratives Awareness of different identities in class Making different narratives and identities discussable
Dialogue	Small group discussion in which students openly reflect on relationships in the context of difference and conflict	Making difference and conflict discussable while staying in relationship Joint problem solving

transcribed. These data were subjected to a thematic analysis by the authors, who identified four main themes (Arieli, Friedman, & Hirschfeld, 2012). Each of these themes emerged from critical incidents in the course that left the team wondering how it might function more effectively in the future. This article analyzes one of those four critical incidents, which was also the first in terms of chronological order of the group process.

### *The Event*

The course began with an opening lecture that provided an initial introduction to social anthropology and an “ice-breaker” exercise in the workshops. All four facilitators felt very satisfied with the session, reporting that the students “are very open and cooperative,” “show deep, personal interest,” and “enjoying themselves and laughing”—and that “it was an interesting workshop, an amazing meeting, and a good beginning.” Difficulties, however, arose during the second workshop session. To generate awareness of cultural difference, the team designed an exercise in which students would carry on brief conversations with classmates about issues of interest such as family, marriage, the elderly, food, pets, and so on. The plan was that the students would talk about one issue for 2 minutes with a partner from a different group and then change partners in order to discuss a different issue. In this way, the students would interact with students from other groups and also learn about cultural difference. The facilitators in the two workshops were free to decide how they would design the exercise. In one of the workshops, the facilitators simply asked the students to find partners from a different culture. In the other workshop, the facilitators used a “carousel” method in which they asked the students to stand in two concentric circles with the Jewish students on the inside facing the Arab students on the outside. After each brief paired discussion, the students rotated so that each one would be talking with a different student.

When the exercise was completed, the students in both workshops debriefed and discussed their experience. The carousel method, which had been meant to be nothing more than a practical method for facilitating the process of dialogue, was interpreted by some of the students as a deliberate attempt to divide the class into two different groups. One Jewish student said that

it was hard seeing the Jews sitting in one circle in the middle and the Arabs sitting in a circle on the outside. It made me feel that there are two groups and not one group of students who are equals.

During the next lecture, which included the students in both workshops, Jewish and Arab students criticized the teaching staff by saying,

Why are you turning the course into a political confrontation? Are you looking to expose what is being hidden “under the carpet”? Is that what you want? Why even create a division between the two national groups? What’s that got to do with anthropology?

Others, both Jewish and Arab students, joined into this criticism saying, for instance, “We don’t make distinctions like that among ourselves, so why force them upon us?” and “In our eyes, everyone is equal.”

When one of the Jewish students spoke up in favor of discussing the relationships between Jewish and Arab groups, saying, “What’s important in the workshop is the meeting itself and we shouldn’t ignore the reality of the situation,” a few of the Jewish students even questioned her “Jewishness” and the legitimacy of her opinion. A Jewish-Ethiopian student, on the other hand, defended her, rejecting the claim that “relationships among us are excellent” as “just hypocrisy and putting a pretty face on things.” Another Jewish student tried to raise discussion about the advantages of conducting an Arab-Jewish dialogue. According to the facilitator’s notes, many of the other (Jewish and Arab) students reacted to the discussion in a strong negative way, both verbally and in their body language. Most of the Arab students kept silent. However, one of the facilitators pointed out, it was a silence that “spoke very loudly.” The facilitators repeatedly encouraged the Arab students to speak up, emphasizing how important it was for everyone to hear their opinions. At one point an Arab woman student mumbled something so quietly that it could hardly be heard. When asked to repeat her comment so that everyone could hear it, she kept silent. Another Arab student began explaining why she did not want to talk about “politics,” but broke down in tears and left the room. The majority of Jewish and Arab students appeared very uncomfortable with this discussion, as inferred from their body language and the constant traffic in and out of the classroom. Here and there both Arab and Jewish students, speaking in low voices, suggested that the class should move on from this discussion. As one of the facilitator wrote,

The students, or at least most of them, do not want to recognize that there really are two groups and they are concerned that any sort of dialogue will create a confrontation with things that they do not want to, or are not ready to, deal with—that is, the conflict.

### *The “One Big Happy Family Fantasy”*

The dynamics that emerged in this incident reflect what we call “the one big happy family” fantasy. The act of dividing the class into two groups was experienced by some of the students as aimed at creating separation and generating conflict. The majority of students reacted as if the group were “one big happy family,” and as if the facilitators were threatening this sense of togetherness, equality, and harmony. Students who challenged this view were aggressively silenced by their classmates.

However, this claim to being undivided was clearly a fantasy because, from early on in the school year, the students had spontaneously divided themselves into two physically and socially separate groups, sitting in separate parts of the room and scarcely interacting. This self-segregation was a reality that every member of the class could easily observe but was never openly acknowledged, discussed, or questioned. When authority figures from the “outside” highlighted the division between Jews and

Arabs for didactic purposes, the students acted as if no such division existed and was being imposed on them. What was actually being imposed on the students, however, was awareness of the division, which many students found extremely uncomfortable.

### *The Dilemma*

The “one big happy family fantasy” confronted the facilitators with a dilemma. If they attempted to show the students that they were already divided and that conflict existed, they would confirm the students’ accusation and engender even greater resistance. On the other hand, if they attempted to avoid resistance by not addressing the clear division among the students, they would be going along with an avoidance of discussing conflict, leaving the status quo unchallenged. This dilemma was intensified by the fact that the intervention took place within a required course (a natural space of encounter). The facilitators were aware that they would have to gain the “buy-in” of a critical mass of the students if the process were to have any positive impact. They feared that the wrong response so early in the process might destroy the basis for future work.

This dilemma was never adequately resolved throughout the entire course. To find a way of dealing more effectively with this dilemma, we analyzed it, post facto, from two different theoretical perspectives: what we call the “postcolonial” and the “negotiating reality” approaches. Each approach provides a theoretical framework for interpreting the situation and prescribing action to deal with it. We have chosen these two approaches because both were implicit in the thinking of the facilitation team members themselves and guided their perceptions and actions. As will be seen, this analysis helped us gain deeper insight into what stymied the facilitation team and to discover a strategy that might enable facilitators to effectively work through the dilemma presented by the “one big happy family fantasy.”

## **A Theoretical Reflection**

### *The “Postcolonial” Approach*

In recent years, the concept of “postcolonialism” has come into good currency as an approach to understanding the “effects of colonization on cultures and societies” (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 1998, p. 186). Postcolonial scholars study the meanings of identities that are created in third spaces (Bhabha, 1994) or contact zones (Pratt, 1992)—places in which “disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination” (Pratt, 1992, p. 6). In this process, one of the groups typically wields power over the other.

In the context of intergroup dialogue, the postcolonial approach represents an application of critical theory to conflict resolution methods. Critical theory calls attention to power differentials stemming from gender, class, racial, ethnic, or other group membership. It explores how the voices of the oppressed are prevented from entering the societal discourse and considers this a form of violence (Foucault, 1994; Freire, 1997; Hansen, 2008). Practitioners of critical conflict resolution eschew neutrality and



take a proactive stance in assisting oppressed people in challenging oppression by encouraging a dialogue (Hansen, 2008). The goal of critical conflict resolution is to foster critical consciousness, which, according to Hansen (2008, p. 409), is “allowing them to become subjects in their world, actively and consciously co-creating it, rather than passive ‘objects’ who accept their social reality.”

To understand how the postcolonial framing guided our thinking and action in this situation, we examine a model developed by the “School for Peace” (SFP), an educational institution in Israel dedicated to bringing about a more just and egalitarian relationship between Arabs-Palestinians and Jews (Halabi, 2000; Oasis of Peace, 2008). The SFP model began more than 30 years ago with the application of group dynamics to overcoming stereotypes and improving interpersonal relations between Arabs and Jews in Israel. It developed a program of structured group encounters in which small groups of Jews and Arabs meet on a regular basis over a bounded period of time.

The SFP gradually evolved the belief that genuine dialogue could only occur between individuals who identify themselves as members of two groups, a majority and minority, with separate and clearly demarcated national identities under conditions of social inequality (Halabi, 2000; Halabi & Sonnenschein, 2000; Nadler, 2000). More recently, the SFP has explicitly adopted a postcolonial orientation that focuses on giving expression to marginalized and unheard voices (Oasis of Peace, 2008). This approach is based on the underlying assumption that

no people can control another without believing that it is morally justified. . . . The colonized must be seen as people who are to be saved and educated. To this end, intellectuals, the media, religious leaders and the Ministry of Education are mobilized to provide moral legitimacy for oppressive State policies. In this light, racism must be fought not merely by “getting to know the other” but by gaining an understanding of its role as a tool necessary in order to rationalize discrimination and to protect the status quo. (Oasis of Peace, 2008)

The SFP model attempts to achieve its goals through a process of group encounter that brings social identity, power relations, and inequities to the surface so that they can be observed and critically analyzed by participants (Bion, 1961; Halabi & Sonnenschein, 2000; Nadler, 2000; Suleiman, 2000). The group is seen as a microcosm of reality, representing the collective unconscious of its members, who themselves are regarded as spokespersons for the national groups to which they belong (Halabi & Sonnenschein, 2000). Recognition of power and dominance relations are the nexus through which greater understanding of the conflict between groups can be achieved, so intervention is aimed at enabling participants to genuinely and openly address power differences and inequality (Nadler, 2000). The dialogue is intended to be “a space in which Jewish participants can identify and struggle against the racism in their society and in themselves, while the Palestinian participants work towards making their voices heard” (Oasis of Peace, 2008). Thus, Jewish participants must struggle against the internal oppressor and feelings of superiority as members of the dominant, ruling group, and the Arabs (Palestinians) must deal with their feelings of inferiority and oppression as the controlled, dominated group (Halabi & Sonnenschein,

2000). Organizers of these workshops state clearly that this process can be very painful, but this pain is considered to be essential for giving people “a choice and the option to change and to be changed” (Halabi & Sonnenschein, 2000, pp. 56-57).

Viewed through the postcolonial approach, the emergence of the “one big happy family fantasy” early on in the process was hardly a surprise. Halabi and Sonnenschein (2000) noted that Jewish participants in SFP dialogue groups generally opposed their approach at first. They want to be treated as individuals rather than as members of a group and denied harboring racist attitudes. The Arab group, on the other hand, tends to accept it and urge a political discussion (Halabi & Sonnenschein, 2000). The reaction of the students in the critical incident described above can be understood in light of the SFP experience. The Jewish students claimed to hold no racist views, and they wished to clearly distinguish between relationships between Jewish and Arab students in class and relations on the outside. The postcolonial approach interprets this opposition as stemming first and foremost from the Jewish group’s feelings of discomfort at being confronted with a difficult reality for which they, as a group, are largely responsible. According to Halabi and Sonnenschein (2000), they employ conflict avoidance as a means of maintaining their hegemony. According to this approach, resistance to the division into two groups in the critical incident would be interpreted as attempt on the part of the majority to preserve its position of power by vetoing any direct discussion, or acknowledgment of conflict (Suleiman, 2000). The Jewish group is not necessarily aware of these motivations. Rather, the postcolonial approach attributes to them an “*unconscious wish* (our italics) to continue to protect the overall status quo” (Halabi, Sonnenschein, & Friedman, 2000, p. 64). The reaction of the majority of the Arab students can also be explained in terms of critical theory. Their discomfort—both with division and with taking an open stand that would contradict their Jewish classmates—can be seen as a form of denial which supports their own oppression.

In the postcolonial approach, the task of the interventionist is to unmask the unpleasant truths behind this fantasy. Participants must not only acknowledge the existence of two separate groups in relations of domination and inequality but also reshape their own personal identities based on these insights. These identities are most authentic when the Arabs see themselves as the oppressed and the Jews see themselves as the oppressors (Halabi & Sonnenschein, 2000). Individuals who do not conform to them are, according to this line of thought, in denial or have not yet reached critical consciousness and need to be shown the truth about who they are. According to the postcolonial approach, this process is essential for giving people the option to change.

The postcolonial approach was clearly implicit in the facilitators’ thinking about the situation. In fact, it was precisely the postcolonial analysis that created the dilemma that led them to feel stuck at that moment in the process. They interpreted the students’ behavior as “resistance” to making the conflict discussable for all of the reasons cited above and felt a responsibility for making the students see the “reality” of conflict and oppression implicit in their relationships. However, they feared that unmasking the ugly truth would make the Jewish students so defensive and resistant that dialogue would be impossible. Furthermore, they realized that the Arab students also had a

strong incentive to maintain cordial relations so as to make life bearable over the next 4 years of intensive studying and working together. On the other hand, if they did not confront the students with reality (as they saw it), they would be playing into the patterns of denial and protection through which the dominant group maintains power.

### *The “Negotiating Reality” Approach*

Negotiating reality is an emerging, applied social constructionist approach to engaging situations of cultural difference and intergroup conflict. “Social constructionism” views social reality as generated through historically and culturally situated processes of interaction (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Gergen, 2001, 2009; Gergen & Gergen, 2008). According to Gergen and Gergen (2008, p. 160), social constructionism can be distinguished from “social constructivism” in that the former focuses on relationships and the latter focuses on the cognitive processes as the origin of the construction process. Our use of constructionism brings the relational and the cognitive perspectives together, regarding neither as primary. Rather, the external world (e.g., relations) and the internal cognitive worlds of individuals are tightly linked, each one shaping the other in an ongoing, reflexive process of world-making and formation of self (Argyris, Putnam, & Smith, 1985; Friedman & Arieli, 2011; Bateson, 1972; Bourdieu, 1985, 1998; Lewin, 1948; Goffman, 1974; Sargent, Picard, & Jull, 2011). The unit of analysis, then, is neither the individual nor the group, but the relationship—defined as the causal loops that link the internal and external worlds. These loops trace the way people bring their thinking and feeling into the world through action, to the responses of others, and back again to the ways those responses are interpreted and shape what people think, feel, and do.

Within this reflexive, reinforcing loop between the inner and outer worlds, people tend to perceive social reality as given—“just the way things are.” A constructionist perspective, however, invites people to step out of this loop. If social reality is actually a product of people’s tacit thinking, feeling, and acting with others, then it can also be changed in a process of self-conscious and mutually reflective thinking, feeling, and acting with others. From the constructionist perspective, cultural diversity and tension offer particularly fruitful opportunities for discovery, growth, adaptation, and learning (Easley, 2010; Nan, 2011; Rothman, 1997; Sargent et al., 2011). Encountering people who hold different ways of perceiving reality potentially reveals gaps, anomalies, and conflicts in one’s taken-for-granted realities. It can lead people to challenge given views of reality and generate new ways of seeing, thinking, feeling, and acting. Sargent et al. (2011), for example, argue that conflict resolution is a learning process through which parties become aware of their own interpretive frameworks as well as those of others. The core of conflict resolution is shifting awareness beyond the boundaries that shaped the conflict and expanding the focus from self alone to include the other (Nan, 2011). Quoting from McGuigan (2006, p. 246), Nan (2011, p. 259) argued that “the conflict resolution field must wake up to the fact that conflict is an invented reality, a constructed world.”

Constructionism provides powerful analytic tools for “deconstructing” given social realities in ways that can free people from relationships that perpetuate institutionalized inequality, injustice, and oppression. Deconstruction alone, however, is insufficient; there is also a need for conscious processes of “reconstruction” aimed at forming relationships so as to create the world that people desire (Gergen, 2001). Negotiating reality, as we define it here, is a method for putting both deconstruction and reconstruction into practice.

Negotiating reality, as an intervention approach, was developed in an attempt to apply ideas from “action science” (Argyris et al., 1985; Friedman, 2001; Friedman & Rogers, 2008) to the field of intercultural conflict (Arieli, Friedman, & Agbaria, 2009; Berthoin Antal & Friedman, 2008; Friedman & Arieli, 2011; Friedman & Berthoin Antal, 2004, 2006; Rothman & Friedman, 2001). We suggest thinking of action science in general, and the negotiating reality approach, in particular as a kind of “applied constructionism,” which attempts to foster skills of reflection and discursive action that enable people to jointly deconstruct and reconstruct their realities as a part of everyday life.

The method of negotiating reality is based on the observation that social reality is constructed between people through processes that occur almost automatically and out of conscious awareness. Since these constructions are usually taken for granted, negotiating reality attempts to bring them into awareness, so that people can critically examine them and increase the degree of choice over the social world they construct together. The key is not only awareness to the fact that people inhabit many different realities but also awareness of the reasoning processes and actions through which reality is constructed. Within the causal loops that link the internal and external worlds, there are points at which people make choices about how to interpret reality, to feel, and to act—and these choices influence constructed reality. Making people aware of these choices, and providing a greater deal of volition over them, expands the realm of what is possible for them, for others, and for the social reality they enact together (Friedman & Arieli, 2011). Negotiating reality, however, cannot be done by the individual alone but only through relationships involving interactive and critically reflexive acts of inquiry and imagination.

Negotiating reality, then, is itself a meta-conversational process that puts into practice what Gergen (2009) called the three arts of coordination—synchronic sensitivity, affirmation, and appreciative exploration—as well as the action science strategies of inquiry and advocacy (Argyris et al., 1985; Rein & Schon, 1995). Synchronic sensitivity shifts the focus of conversation from content to process:

In most conversations participants focus on content as opposed to process. What we are talking *about* takes precedence over the *way* the result may lead to a rupture in relationship. . . . When someone’s comments carry content that is critical or insulting, we often fall into the familiar scenario of retaliation. . . . With synchronic sensitivity, however, different questions are asked: “Why did it make sense for him to call me that?” “If I retaliate, how will he respond?” “What kind of relationship would be ideal for us?” “How can I respond to what he has said in a way that might move us toward this ideal?” (Gergen, 2009, p. 166)

It should be added that these same questions could be directed toward oneself. To engage in negotiating reality with others, people need to ask themselves why it made sense for them to say what they had said, or how they will respond if the other person responds in a way experienced as retaliation.

Affirmation means investing meaning in the utterance of others rather than rejecting or denying that it has meaning (Gergen, 2009). Appreciative exploration (Gergen, 2009) involves inquiry into the other person's reality (Argyris et al., 1985)—not for the purpose of revealing it as mistaken but for truly seeing the sense in the reasoning and behavior of others as well as checking with others the sense in one's own reasoning. Advocacy involves clarifying one's own interpretations, goals, and actions so as to make the sense in them as transparent as possible (Argyris et al., 1985).

The concepts of "framing" and "reframing" are also useful tools for putting negotiating reality into practice. Frames of meaning are cognitive structures people use to organize and manage complex information and make sense of their experience and the behavior of others (Argyris et al., 1985; Goffman, 1974; Sargent et al., 2011; Watzlawick, Weakland, & Fisch, 1974). The way in which people frame situations significantly affects the way they perceive the actions of others and how they respond to them. Frames shape relationships as they become externalized through action. But people are often unaware of their frames, typically seeing their own responses as normal and appropriate, while viewing the responses of adversaries as unreasonable and even malevolent (Argyris & Schon, 1974; Sargent et al., 2011). The tendency of all parties to impose their frames onto others leads to struggles for control as well as to increased misunderstanding (Argyris et al., 1985). Negotiating reality aims at interrupting the almost automatic ways in which people act on their tacit frames so they can critically reflect on them. Discovering one's framing can be liberating because it allows for "reframing" in ways that open new possibilities for interpreting and acting. When people reconsider something they were formerly sure about, their perceptions of conflict can change significantly (Sargent et al., 2011).

All these action strategies involve choices that are usually tacit. Making people aware of these choices, and providing a greater deal of volition over them, expands the realm of what is possible for them, for others, and for the social reality they enact together (Friedman & Arieli, 2011). Negotiating reality, however, cannot be done by the individual alone but only through relationships involving interactive and critically reflexive acts of inquiry and imagination.

## **An Intervention Model for Negotiating Reality**

This article has been a theoretical inquiry into the "one big happy family fantasy"—a situation that we faced when attempting conflict transformation in a natural spaces of encounter. It involved a relatively large number of participants who claimed that there really was no problem and that, if it were not for the interventionists, no conflict would exist. As illustrated above, the "one big happy family fantasy" placed the facilitators into a difficult dilemma. We suggest that interventionists are likely to encounter a similar dilemma under the following conditions: (a) a group composed of people who

identify with different subgroups with a history of intense conflict and/or cultural difference, (b) a group that came together for a purpose other than dialogue, (c) a roughly equal number of members of each group, and (d) an expectation that group members will have to work together for an extended period of time.

In this section, we present an intervention model based on the negotiating reality approach that we believe provides a way out of the dilemma. Although we illustrate parts of the model by returning to the original case, our intention is to set forth a relatively abstract set of stages that can be adapted to interventions with any group characterized by similar set of conditions (see Table 2). The first stage of this intervention would be a general introduction to goals and methods of the intervention process. These goals would have to be defined specifically for each setting but, in general, they would include constructing a shared space in which (a) group members feel free to be fully themselves, (b) there is an ongoing effort to enhance equality and fairness, and (c) difference and conflict are engaged through on-going dialogue and learning.

Based on the case described above, we predict that any attempt to make conflict, or even difference, discussable would trigger the “one big happy family fantasy” or its equivalent. The second stage, then, would be to engage this fantasy rather than reject it as simply resistance. Negotiating reality, as a constructionist approach, would lead the facilitators to *affirm* it as a legitimate, alternative *framing* of the situation and consider the *sense* in it. In the case described above, the facilitators would be sensitive to the students’ desire to avoid the negative, divisive dynamics between Jews and Arabs outside the classroom. Indeed, they would affirm the “one big happy family fantasy” as the students’ *aspiration* of being a united group of equals, even if the observed reality told a different story. Viewing the “one big happy family fantasy” in this way offers the facilitators a possible way out of the dilemma. Rather than having to ignore, debunk, or accept the fantasy, facilitators could inquire into it and consider the opportunities it offers for moving forward.

To put this reframing into practice and begin a process of negotiating reality in the above case, the facilitators could have said:

When you say “we are one group and all equal,” what do you mean? Is it the aspiration for the reality you’d like to create for yourselves as students together in this program? We understand you as saying that you want to create a reality that is different from the outside world in which relations between Jews and Arabs are characterized by inequality, deep division, conflict, fear, and oppression. Do we understand you correctly? Can you describe the reality you desire?

Assuming that both Arab and Jewish students, or at least many of them, affirm this aspiration, it would create consciousness of this common objective among Arab and Jewish students, one which the facilitators wanted to encourage. This framing, however, may also imply that (a) the status quo in the class is just fine and (b) the preferred way of achieving the aspiration is not to talk about it. The facilitators had strong doubts about the first implication and an opposite view of the second. From the perspective of the negotiating reality approach, they might have advocated the following:

**Table 2.** Negotiating Reality: An Intervention Model for Natural Spaces of Encounter.

Stages	Methods	Findings/outcomes
1. Introducing the intervention goals and process	Presentation	“The one big happy family fantasy” or its equivalent
2. Engaging the “one big happy family fantasy”	Affirming Reframing Testing the reframing Making intentions explicit Inquiry into participant concerns	Openness to learning Building trust Creating a shared communicative space
3. Introducing constructivism	Exercises, lecture, and reflection	Awareness of reality as socially constructed Awareness of implicit choices in and potential errors in the construction process Interrupting automatic reactions and promoting reflectiveness
4. Investigating the current situation	Questionnaires/interviews Feedback	Awareness of gaps between aspiration and current reality
5. Jointly deconstruction of reality	Generating illustrative cases (from participants) Inquiry into specific cases Appreciative exploration Learning from success/ appreciative inquiry	Identify key points of divergence and the reasoning behind it Identifying what works and how to build on success Using divergence as a stimulus for inquiry, exploration, and testing rather than agreement or rejection Identifying sources of inequality, injustice, and oppression
6. Jointly reconstructing reality	Envisioning, designing, and enacting desired relationships and the shared space “Action Evaluation”: What? Why? How? (Friedman et al., 2004)	Addressing sources of inequality, injustice, oppression Generating new, self-conscious, shared norms
7. Ongoing experimentation and dialogue	Discussion in which students openly reflect on relationships in the context of difference and conflict	Staying in relationship Making different narratives and identities discussable Acquiring tools for making choices about individual and group identity Regarding differences and conflict as resources for ongoing learning and change

We share that aspiration and we offer this course as a place in which to look at the culture you are creating in your “mini-world,” so that you can shape it as you want. We invite you to use this course as an opportunity for learning how to do this. We also believe it will be important for you as professionals who will have to work with all populations in this country. Does this make sense to you?

Here the facilitators make their intentions explicit and open to the scrutiny of the students. To the extent that the students continue to be reticent about the process, the facilitators would have to inquire into the students’ concerns about opening up sensitive issues and the danger of damaging, rather than improving, relations.

What would happen if the students denied the facilitators’ interpretation? How could the facilitators respond if the students refused to consider the facilitators’ suggestion for moving into appreciative exploration? The facilitators had more formal power in this situation and could ignore what the students say they want, but imposing their will would unlikely lead to the kind of learning that they would like to produce. Rather, negotiating reality would oblige the facilitators to openly address the criticism of the students who saw the facilitators intending to force the students into political confrontation and uncover “what is under the carpet.” Together, they would have to negotiate a way of moving forward that makes sense and feels safe to most, if not all, of the participants. The facilitators might have to lower their aims for the course or adapt to the readiness of the students, but putting the cards on the table, taking the students’ perspective seriously, and being open to change would hopefully create a basis of genuine trust for the ongoing work.

The next stage of the intervention process would be introducing concepts of constructionism. The goal here is to provide the participants with conceptual tools that enable them to interrupt automatic reactions and to become aware of (a) how their views of reality are constructed rather than given, (b) the choices they make in constructing reality, and (c) the high potential for error or distortion in this process. These tools would include synchronic sensitivity, appreciative exploration, combining advocacy with inquiry, and reframing. The use of such tools can help enhance the psychological safety necessary for entering into this threatening territory (Friedman & Lipshitz, 1992).

The fourth stage in the intervention process would be to investigate the current situation in the space of encounter. The goal at this stage would be to generate data that provide a basis for comparing the “one big happy family fantasy” with current reality. Data collection could be carried prior to the intervention using anonymous questionnaires and/or interviews or it could be a part of the intervention process itself. The analysis of participants’ responses might reveal not only areas of common ground but also significant differences both between and within groups. The obvious advantage of data collection prior to the intervention is that it makes it possible to determine whether there is a need for intervention at all. It would provide a justification for inquiring more deeply into those differences and what they mean for the world they construct together.

The fifth stage would be to engage in jointly deconstructing social reality as characterized in the particular space of encounter. To the extent that participants discover



gaps, they could look at how, in their everyday interactions, they create, or fall short of creating, the world they want. They would be asked to write brief personal case studies, from their own experience, to illustrate both positive and negative aspects of their shared reality. These cases would not necessarily have to focus exclusively on intergroup relations but rather on the issues that most concern the participants. The assumption is that intergroup relations would be implicit in most, if not all, of the cases and that the cases would provide a way of identifying and addressing specific experiences of inequality, unfairness, fear, power, and domination through concrete examples. The goal here would be to use differing views of reality and disagreement as a stimulus for inquiry, exploration, and testing rather than agreement or rejection.

The sixth stage would be to jointly engage in reconstructing reality. The goal would be to take the insights produced in the previous stage as the basis for envisioning, designing, and enacting the kinds of relations participants want in their shared space. The basis of this stage would be "Action Evaluation," an action research method that asks stakeholders to a shared endeavor to respond to three questions: *What* is your definition of successful relations in this particular space (e.g., goals)? *Why* are these goals important to you (Why do you feel passionate about them?) *How* should we go about achieving these goals in this situation? (Arieli, Friedman, & Knyazev, 2012; Friedman, Rothman, & Withers, 2006). Action Evaluation involves data collection and analysis, dialogue, and action planning.

The seventh and final stage of negotiating reality would be a process of ongoing, interactive experimentation and dialogue. At this stage, participants in a natural space of encounter enact the new relationships, critically reflect on the outcomes, learn from their experience, and take action accordingly. Ongoing dialogue and the other goals outlined in the first stage should become an integral part of the shared reality in the natural space of encounter.

## Discussion

The postcolonial and the negotiating reality approaches to understanding this dilemma are not necessarily contradictory, but they lead to very different strategies of action and implications (see Table 3). In this section, we will address the implications of these two approaches in terms of the likely impact on conflict transformation. The argument we set forth here should be seen as propositions that can guide both research and practice.

The initial proposition is that natural spaces of encounter are likely to have a greater impact than workshops created solely for the purpose of meeting and dialogue (Gawerc, 2006; McCall, 2011). The latter face the problem of reentry into the "real world" and the transfer of the experience to others. Intervention in natural spaces of encounter, such as classrooms or the workplace, are carried out in settings where members of different groups meet and interact as part of everyday life. Such interventions potentially reach all of the members of a particular group or community. The fact that the such groups have an ongoing life of their own means that it is possible to track changes over time and to observe the robustness of change during periods of acute violence, an area that remains largely unresearched (Baum, 2007; Gawerc, 2006).

**Table 3.** Comparing the Theoretical Approaches.

	Postcolonial approach	Negotiating reality approach
Essence	Individuals can engage in genuine dialogue and create more just relationships when they accept themselves as group members in conflict under conditions of inequality and domination	Individuals can create more just and satisfying relationships through self-conscious critical reflection, engaging difference, openly testing views of reality, and jointly constructing shared social spaces
Intellectual origins	Critical theory (Foucault, 1994; Freire, 1977); “third space” (Bhabha, 1994); group dynamics (Lewin, 1948); the School for Peace Approach (Halabi, 2000)	Constructionism (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Gergen, 2001, 2009; Gergen & Gergen, 2008); action science (Argyris, Putnam, & Smith, 1985; Argyris & Schon, 1974, 1978); social space (Lewin, 1948); negotiating reality (Friedman & Berthoin Antal, 2006)
Central concepts	Intergroup dialogue, critical consciousness, group identity, internalized oppression, deconstructing/unmasking, choice	Awareness, reflection, inquiry, appreciative exploration, dialogue, synchronic sensitivity, reframing, affirmation, reconstruction, choice
Unit of analysis	Group	Relations
Implications for intervention in natural spaces of encounter	Imposing a compelling frame of power and domination, acknowledging defined identity, reifying difference, rhetoric of blame and guilt, more likely to produce resistance to the process	Generating awareness of the nature of relations without imposing an a priori framework, flexible definitions of identity, more likely to create a communicative space, may leave relations of power and domination undiscussed

Natural spaces of encounter, however, also pose special challenges because they involve people who have come together for purposes other than intergroup encounter or dialogue. One of the lessons from the “one big happy family fantasy” is that “resistance” may take unexpected forms and can occur at unexpected stages of the process. Therefore, interventionists need to consider how they intend to turn a natural space of encounter into a communicative or relational space (Bradbury, Lichtenstein, Carroll, & Senge, 2010; Kemmis, 2001; Wicks & Reason, 2009).

Communicative space is embodied in networks of people who raise issues or problems for discussion in ways that foster the democratic expression of diverse views and enable them to achieve mutual understanding and consensus about action (Kemmis, 2001). Wicks and Reason (2009) took up this idea of communicative space, arguing that a principal task for action researchers wishing to facilitate change processes is “opening communicative space” through “critical awareness of and attention to the obstacles that get in the way of dialogue” (p. 246). Bradbury et al. (2010) coined the term “relational space” to describe the collaborative process that formed among

participants in business consortium aimed at addressing global sustainability issues. They defined relational space as “a dialogical context of shared trust and learning that precedes the emergence of shared expectations or negotiated projects” (Bradbury et al., 2010, p. 111).

The second proposition is that the negotiating reality approach is more likely to foster a communicative-relational space than the postcolonial approach. The latter contends that change results from unmasking the “truth” behind relationships as well as from the refusal of the dominated to continue playing the game. It uses constructionist logic in challenging the status quo but leaves this logic behind by imposing a powerful alternative interpretive framework based on concepts of power, dominance, inequality, and oppression among conflicting groups. The SFP model, for example, contends that this particular version of reality and group identity must be acknowledged to build the grounds for true dialogue and cooperation toward a more equal society (Oasis of Peace, 2008). This kind of intervention, however, almost unavoidably generates a dichotomy between good and evil as well as rhetoric of blame and guilt aimed at one side or the other (Gergen, 2001; Gergen & Gergen, 2008). According to Gergen (2001), the response of the blamed may be incorporation (e.g., admitting the error of one’s ways) or antagonism (e.g., defense, hostility, and countercharge). Incorporation requires participants from both groups to be exceedingly open and self-critical, a rare occurrence even when people come together for the purpose of dialogue and creating change (Gergen, 2001). We propose that, in natural spaces of encounter, the postcolonial approach is likely to generate antagonism rather than openness to learning and change.

The negotiating reality approach also aims at deconstructing a given reality, but it leaves the content of alternative interpretive frameworks open to what the participants generate through the inquiry process. It does not take any account of reality for granted. Rather, it affirms the validity of different accounts while encouraging people to continually question their own accounts as well as those of others. Negotiating reality neither imposes an a priori interpretation onto relations among individuals and groups nor ignores power relations and institutional structures that perpetuate domination and oppression. Rather, it attempts to provide people with the means to become aware of and critically reflect on how these relations and the institutions in which they play an active part. Furthermore, negotiating reality potentially circumvents the frame of blame and guilt while enabling people to examine the historical, social, and cultural conditions that shape their social world—and of which they are a part. It focuses as much on the future as on the past by asking people to consider the world they would like to create—at least within the context of their own relationships. Therefore, we propose that, in natural spaces of encounter, the negotiating reality approach will generate less antagonism and more openness to learning than the postcolonial interventions. Furthermore, we propose that, rather than leading to polarization around a single version of reality, the negotiating reality approach will expand the space of possibilities, leading to the emergence of multiple and mutually constructed versions of reality.

In conflict situations people tend to define identity in narrow, mutually exclusive, and negative terms (Rothman, 1997). The postcolonial approach reinforces this trend

by strongly favoring certain voices or narratives as authentic and delegitimizes others as exhibiting false consciousness (e.g., Arabs who identify themselves as Israelis rather than Palestinian will be seen as having internalized the oppressor). Reducing individual and group identity to the issue of power and domination actually limits choice and reduces identity to a limited set of categories. In doing so, the postcolonial approach also exhibits the same need to “save and educate” that it criticizes. It risks forcing people into identity traps that reify group differences rather than opening the way for the joint construction of new realities (Gergen, 2001). Therefore, we propose that the postcolonial approach will lead to definitions of individual and group identity to become narrower and more simplistic.

Negotiating reality, on the other hand, creates space for exploring individual and group identity within the context of the conflict rather than being defined by it. As Nan (2011, p. 258) put it, people themselves are “larger than the conflict” and should have authorship over it rather than the other way around. Negotiating reality views conflict involving identity as rooted in threats to or the frustration of deep human needs such as dignity, recognition, safety, control, purpose, and efficacy (e.g., Rothman, 1997; Sargent et al., 2011). This kind of conflict cannot be engaged by bargaining or by dividing resources in creative ways, but rather on by forging relationships that enable these needs to be met. Negotiating reality leads parties to inquire into their own needs, values, and goals as well as those of others and to discover their mutual interdependence in meeting those needs. In the case of the Arab and Jewish students, negotiating reality might very well lead the students to many of the insights of the postcolonial approach, opening them to the possibility of discovering their own internalized oppressed-oppressor. At the same time, it leaves open the possibility of discovering entirely different aspects of their individual and group identities. The important insight for the students is that identity is formed through relationships involving diverse aspects of being—such as gender, age, race, religiousness (not just religion), and economic status. Therefore, we propose that the negotiating reality approach will lead people to develop more flexible, complex definitions of identity and to see identity as formed through relationship with others.

Although negotiating reality has a definite cognitive orientation, it encourages participants to both give expression to strong emotions and to question *why* they feel so passionate about their claims (Friedman et al., 2006). Parties are less likely to be ruled or trapped by their emotions when they become more aware and accepting of them in a conflict situation (Nan, 2011). Awareness of the discourse that shapes consciousness, and vice versa enables people to free themselves from hegemonic discourse and antagonistic power dynamics (Nan, 2011).

The potential strengths of the negotiating reality approach may also be its main weakness. Because it ultimately leaves the interpretation of reality up to participants themselves, it may unintentionally contribute to the ability of the dominant group to maintain power and perpetuate inequality while preaching coexistence (Gawerc, 2006). The danger is that the participants will continue to avoid the difficult, threatening, and painful issues. As a result, dialogue may enable oppressed groups to release tensions and the oppressor group to soothe its conscious—without leading to

any concrete change. The task for parties to a conflict is not only deconstructing oppressive realities but also jointly reconstructing them in ways closer to their true aspirations. Advocates of negotiating reality bear the burden for demonstrating that it does address critical and difficult issues rather than simply making people feel good.

Finally, it is important to consider the ethical issues involved in carrying out conflict transformation interventions in a natural space of encounter. The intervention described in this article received approval from the institution's ethics committee as action research aimed at the formative evaluation and improvement of the nursing program. In the opening lecture, and a number of times later on, the students were informed that this course was part of an action research process aimed at developing teaching methods for how best to deal with our reality of cultural difference and conflict. It was clarified that the goal of the research was *not* to study the students but to contribute to the development of a model on how best to learn and live within cultural diversity and conflict. Nevertheless, the fact that the intervention was carried out in the context of a required course meant that the students did not really have a choice about participation. There were two main considerations we believe justified this decision. The first consideration was that, as future nurses, the students needed to be prepared to treat and work with members of the other group under extremely stressful conditions (e.g., war, terror). As the director of the nursing program put it, "these issues are no less important to nurses in Israel than basic science." The second consideration was that previous experience had shown that *not* intervening also has consequences, because latent conflicts between Jewish and Arab students could break out into the open and make life in class almost unbearable.

## Conclusion

Easley (2010, p. 61) pointed to the "fragility" of the patterns of organizational life in culturally diverse communities and this is all the more true under conditions of intractable conflict. Interventionists in natural spaces of encounter need to respect this fragility *but not be paralyzed by it*. As the above propositions suggest, the powerful interpretive framing of the postcolonial approach may actually contribute to paralysis. They also suggest that negotiating reality offers a more promising strategy for engaging people in conflict transformation in such spaces. Testing and refining these propositions through ongoing research on practice in a wide variety of contexts may expand the realm of what is possible in conflict transformation and its integration into everyday life.

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