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Engaging complex diversity in academic institution: The case of "triple periphery" in a context of a divided society

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Abstract

This research examines how faculty members working in complex sociopolitical context cope with campus diversity. Through 20 focus groups comprised of faculty members representing all of the departments at one academic institution, we investigated the participants' experiences with student diversity. The findings show that the protracted Israeli–Palestinian conflict seeps into classroom interactions. This infiltration of the protracted conflict is particularly salient during escalations of the conflict. The participants feel they are unable to address these difficulties, experience isolation, fear, and a lack of support. The study expands understanding of how employees cope with political tensions in a real-life setting.

KEYWORDS
academic institution, diversity, divided society, inter-group conflict, real life

1 | INTRODUCTION

The 21st century features growing diversification of organizations and communities in most parts of the world due to migration trends and globalization (Kristeva, 1991). In most societies, this transition occurs concomitantly with existing or emerging intergroup tensions, social divisions, and inequalities—widening the gaps among the privileged social groups and the excluded ones (Geiger & Jordan, 2014; van Laer & Janssens, 2011). Understanding the ramifications of the complex social relations on diversity management in organizations constitutes an important

research endeavor in the current era (Desivilya et al., 2017; Holck, Muhr, & Villesèche, 2016; Raz-Rotem, Desivilya Syna, & Maoz, 2019).

Yet, the domain of diversity management praxis, evolving in real-life settings characterized by social divisions and intergroup tensions, remains largely understudied (Arieli, 2019; Desivilya Syna, 2015; Desivilya Syna, 2020; Friedman, Arieli, & Aboud-Armali, 2018; Hargie, Dickson, & Nelson, 2003; Janssens & Zanoni, 2014; Raz-Rotem et al., 2019; Roos & Zanoni, 2016). How do organizational members conceptualize, experience, and actually manage diversity in their organizations? What theoretical frameworks underlie diversity management? How does the specific organizational context inform the practical approaches to diversity management, especially the design of interventions attempting to improve organizational capacities to deal with social, cultural, and political complexities? Extant responses to the preceding queries are scant.

The current paper sheds light on these pertinent issues, drawing insights from an action research project, designed to promote the capacity of an academic institution, operating in a divided society to manage diversity. The aim of this paper is to examine the experiences of academic staff (tenured and adjunct staff) in coping with diversity that characterizes the student body. It tackles the implications of social divisions and diversity for institutions of higher education in complex sociopolitical contexts. The specific context of this case affords a unique opportunity for studying a timely and scantly studied phenomenon of intricate power relations among organizational actors in a peripheral institution and its ramifications on organizational practices (Desivilya et al., 2017; Desivilya Syna, 2020; Prasad, Pringle, & Konrad, 2006; Raz-Rotem et al., 2019; Zanoni & van Laer, 2015).

The article builds on a case study situated in an academic institution with socially and culturally diverse student population, positioned in "triple periphery." The notion of "triple periphery" denotes three layers of the faculty's positioning:

1. Faculty employed in an organization located in a socio-geographic area populated by a high percentage of low-socioeconomic status residents, minority citizens, and immigrants from the former Soviet Union and from Ethiopia;
2. Academic staff employed in the Israeli higher educational system, who aspire to be a part of a hegemonic, mainstream "western" academia, under pressure to embrace the European and American standards of excellence including the priority of the English language;
3. Faculty at a college rather than a university, controlled by the universities and enjoying less prestige as a higher education institution.

We focus on intervention with the main employees of the organization—the academic staff. This research expands the knowledge base in theoretical and practical realms. In the conceptual domain, it promotes understanding of the phenomenon that is dealing with diversity in intricate sociopolitical contexts, while focusing on complex power relations. On the practical level, the study nourishes evidence-based policies and actions, aimed at enhancing the organizational capacity to engage with diversity in ways that foster inclusion while maintaining distinctiveness—allowing organizational members to express their diverse voices (Leonardelli, Pickett, & Brewer, 2010).

1.1 | Engaging diversity in divided societies

Studies on organizational diversity have drawn on two main orientations: the essentialist (etic) approach, based on social-psychological perspective, and the emic approach, derived from social

constructionist perspectives (Knights & Omanović, 2016). The essentialist orientation conceptualizes diversity as differences in a wide range of group members′ characteristics, including demographic features, such as age, gender, race, and ethnicity but also features such as values, attitudes, learning capabilities, professional competencies, and expertise.

The etic approach stems mainly from *social categorization* and *social identity* (SIT) models and the concept of *faultline* (a dividing line between the groups; Lau & Murnighan, 1998; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). The SIT theory posits that individuals develop their social identity by differentiating themselves from the "other" through their group affiliation. Interaction with members of other social groups spurs categorization and inclination to view the in-group more positively in comparison to the out-groups (*in-group favoritism*). This tendency is usually pronounced in heterogeneous groups, curtailing "out-group" members′ influence. High salience of the intergroup differences enhances the polarization between them (*faultline*).

Organizational research driven by the etic approach focuses on fixed gender, race, and ethnic categories, often ignoring internal variations and intersections of social categories. This orientation underscores objective differences while overlooking contextual influences reflected in implicit power asymmetries and hidden overtones largely orchestrated by social institutions (Becker, Kraus, & Rheinschmidt-Same, 2017; Desivilya Syna, 2020; Desivilya et al., 2017; Holck et al., 2016; Knights & Omanović, 2016).

By contrast, the emic counterpart, inspired by Foucault (1996) and Derrida (2000), focuses on the construction of intergroup power relations, controlled through discourse by dominant social actors, such as central formal authorities, elite organizations, and national majorities. These social construction processes privilege the dominant social forces while marginalizing the other social players (Dhanani, Beus, & Joseph, 2018; Geiger & Jordan, 2014; S. M. Jones, 2014).

The emic approach also underscores the influence of the specific context of the everyday practice on the development of social relations (Braedel-Kühner & Müller, 2015; Holck et al., 2016; Knights & Omanović, 2016). In our research, this pertains to social divisions and the "triple periphery" position of the organization. We analyze the experiences of the academic staff according to the etic approach, which "mainly focuses on individual motivations, perceptions, emotions, behaviors and intergroup dynamics" (Desivilya Syna, 2020, p. 43). Alongside the essentialist approach, we explicate the faculty′s experiences drawing on the critical (emic) approach, "which captures intergroup tensions as an organizational phenomenon, intertwined with regular work practices and routine activities [...] The social construction of intergroup tensions links them with organizational power dynamics" (Desivilia Syna 2020, p. 43). Furthermore, we illuminate how the context of the protracted Israeli–Palestinian conflict trickles down into the experiences of the academic staff (Desivilya Syna, 2020).

In sum, in order to grasp engagement with diversity in a real-life setting at the individual, group, and organizational levels in connection with the societal level, we embrace a complementary perspective integrating the essentialist and critical approaches to diversity. Such an orientation also allows a comprehensive explication of the contextual features (Brannon, Carter, Murdock-Perriera, & Higginbotham, 2018; J. M. Jones & Dovidio, 2018).

1.2 | The setting: Contextual characteristics

The article focuses on academic staff working in a public college located at the northern periphery of Israel and teaching a highly diverse student body. The college's social fabric represents a microcosmos of Israel's divided society and reflects considerable tensions among various social groups.

A *divided society* purports to profound intergroup ruptures piercing the social fabric where each group emphasizes its distinct identities (Hargie et al., 2003). The diverse identities almost eliminate considerations of shared intergroup interests (Schaap, 2006).

The divided context presents significant professional challenges to the lecturers. Beyond this intricacy, the faculty are positioned in triple layers of a periphery:

1. Faculty at a college located in a socio-geographic periphery, a region with many residents with relatively low socioeconomic status and populated by a high percentage of minority members, including the Palestinian minority citizens (about 50%), as well as Jewish and non-Jewish Russian native speakers from the former Soviet Union and native speakers of Amharic, immigrants from Ethiopia;

2. Faculty employed in the Israeli higher educational system aspire to be a component in a hegemonic, mainstream "western" academia, pressuring the academic staff to pursue the European and American standards of excellence including the priority of the English language. All the lecturers in the college gained their advanced degrees (PhD or equivalent) at research universities either in Israel or abroad, with most aspiring to engage in research, albeit formally given a mandate by the Council for Higher Education (CHE) to focus on teaching duties. This central authority imposes sanctions and monitors the content and methods of instruction (Yassour-Borochowitz, Syna, & Palgi, 2015). The hegemony of the central and formal authority over the production and dissemination of knowledge forms a fundamental facet of the lecturers' peripheral status (Yat & Lo, 2011). This poses significant limitations on their teaching practices while encountering complex intragroup and intergroup relations at a diverse campus in an intricate sociopolitical setting;

3. Faculty at a college rather than university are employed in an academic system controlled by the universities and enjoy less prestige as a higher education institution.

One of the most salient features of that context constitutes the students' diversity. The student body comprises Jewish and Palestinian residents of cities, towns, and rural settlements in Israel. The students come from different faith backgrounds (Judaism, Islam, Christianity, and Druze faith) and represent different degrees of religiosity, ranging from highly religious to nonreligious. The differences among the students stem from both cultural as well as language-related backgrounds, as for many of them Hebrew (the official language) is not a native language. The students vary in their socioeconomic backgrounds. Most are in low socioeconomic strata, coming from families where they are first-generation students. They finance their academic studies through part-time work and at times also support their families. Some students come from a strong socioeconomic background (families and communities). The disparities among the students also reflect the level of preparedness for higher education, which is related to the quality of high-school education in their respective communities. These result in wide gaps in students' learning capabilities and skills to succeed in academia.

In contrast with the diversity of the student body, the academic staff is highly homogeneous. The vast majority are Jewish, born in Israel. Palestinian citizens of Israel and Jewish immigrants from the former Soviet Union and from other countries constitute a minority. Most faculty members have doctoral degrees, gained at Israeli universities, universities in the United States and Europe.

The relationships among students and between students and academic staff at the college reflect complex issues of power and inequality. These involve tense relationships among social groups, mainly between Israeli Jews and Palestinians due to the protracted Israeli–Palestinian

conflict with quite frequent eruptions of violent escalatory episodes. Moreover, the internal variety within each of these groups creates subdivisions, and consequently tensions among them (Desivilya et al., 2017).

1.3 | The action research

The action research launched in the college aims to explore how the academic staff construe, experience their professional roles, and cope with the challenges they encounter. The ultimate goal of this project is to develop a comprehensive, system-level model of intervention designed to promote the academic staff's and the organization's capacity to engage diversity in a constructive way, affording voice to the diverse organizational members. The three authors of the article were members of the research team. The first author was a PhD candidate, the second author was a senior lecturer, and the third author was an associate professor. In other words, the researchers represented most of the academic ranks of the academic institution where the research was carried out.

The college management and the institutional ethics committee approved the research. All the research participants gave their consent to take part in the project. The familiarity of the research participants with the researchers and vice-versa enhanced the formers' trust and cooperation. In fact, many of them expressed gratefulness for the opportunity to participate in the study and relay their experiences.

The first component of this venture examined through individual semi-structured interviews with staff members their experiences and coping strategies at diverse campus situated in a complex, divided society (Desivilya et al., 2017).

Two main themes emerged from the interviews: (a) "Diversity Awareness" pointing at varying levels of recognition and sensitivity to the intricate social context in the college. The second theme—"Practices"—portrays the implementation of the educational beliefs in teaching practice. Some faculty concentrate on the educational content, stressing the use of uniform teaching methods with regard to all the students. Others attempt to tailor their educational practices to the diverse students' needs. Some lecturers experience difficulties in dealing with events emerging in the course of academic studies as a result of the protracted Israeli–Palestinian conflict or special needs of the students.

The first phase of the action research highlighted the challenges encountered by the academic staff in their everyday practice: attempting to manage diversity in a complex sociopolitical context. We concluded that open dialogue, discussions, and debates by the academic staff are necessary to enhance awareness of diversity and experimenting with alternatives modes of engaging its complex nature (Desivilya et al., 2017). This led to the design of the first intervention phase, which carried a double-purpose: (a) fine-tuned need assessment of each department to allow later development of tailor-made training; () to provide department-based support network facilitating the faculty's engagement with the challenges they face.

2 | METHOD

The study is based on appreciative inquiry (Bushe, 2011). It involves a qualitative method, using the interpretive approach. The latter tracks social processes and conceptualizations of phenomena using empirical data (Shkedi, 2003; van Manen, 1990). Data collection entails delving into

the realm of those creating it, in lieu of direct contact with reality not facilitated by language and preconception (Orlikowski & Boroudi, 1991). The interpretive approach is highly applicable for this study, as its main goal was to trace and chart the experiences of the academic staff while teaching a diverse student population in a socially and politically complex setting (Ricoeur, 1981; van Manen, 1990; Walsham, 1993).

Our main tool was a focus group, conducted by two facilitators in 20 departments. The participants in the focus groups were the department chairs, the students' advisors, and/or members of the academic committees. We endeavored to learn about the unique experiences, issues, and needs in each of the departments.

Specifically, the objectives of the focus groups were as follows: (a) identifying the characteristics of the various departments and the issues that the academic staff face, stemming from the social diversity of the student population; (b) raising awareness of diversity among the academic staff; (c) building cooperation within the departments in order to establish ongoing work among the staff eventually developing diversity-related training program, tailored to the needs of the various departments.

The participants are affiliated with all of the college departments: Human Services; IT; Economics; Nursing; Sociology & Anthropology; Communication; Social Work; Behavioral Sciences; Psychology; Social Sciences; Education; Criminology; Political Science; Organizational Development and Consulting; Health Management Systems (B.A. and M.A.); Educational Psychology; Guidance Counseling, Graphic Design and Visual Communication (GDVC), and Pre-academic programs. Everyone we approached agreed to be part of the focus group.

At the meeting, the head researcher (one of the facilitators) explained the study and briefly presented previous findings on the subject. Then, representatives of the various departments were asked to describe their respective departments vis-à-vis the student population, the instructors, and issues that arise in class and in the department that are related to the department's diversity. They were asked to give actual examples of incidents that had occurred in the past.

In order to enable the participants to reflect on their experiences and to share them in the group, the facilitators encouraged and fostered open dialogue. The focus groups lasted 1.5–2 hr. Their content was fully documented, transcribed verbatim, and subsequently content-analyzed.

The first author of this paper conducted the initial analysis of the focus groups that included reading and analyzing the record of each focus group separately, the objective of which was to find main themes arising from the groups' explicit content (Berg, 2004; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Shkedi, 2003). This type of analysis on the one hand enables breaking down each group's content into distinct subtopics while maintaining the ability to see them in their original contexts and, on the other hand, it enables the identification of a large number of categories that arise from every incident shared. Later, the number of categories was reduced by consolidating similar categories and focusing on those relevant to the study's topic. The two other authors subsequently reexamined the emerging themes, inserting their perspectives and comments concerning the analysis. At the final stage, the three authors met and discussed the findings in an attempt to reconcile the differences, thereby enhancing the credibility and validity of the findings.

After the completion of the initial analysis as described above, we attempted to find common themes through integration of findings, which emerged from various group interviews. The findings were examined once more based on the level of repetition of the identified themes (centrality testing), their relevance to the theory, and central questions explored in the proposed

study (Shkedi, 2003). This analysis led to main themes that constituted the body of data of the present study.

In order to demonstrate our choice of themes and concepts, we provide several instances of each of the themes by quoting from the group interviews. The quotations constitute examples, yet are representative of descriptions and perceptions that reappeared in other focus groups, conducted in the current study.

The data collection procedure was carried out in accordance with the ethical guidelines; namely, the objective of the study was explained to the participants, who affirmed that their participation was voluntary and they were free to quit at any time. The participants were guaranteed confidentiality and anonymity.

3 | FINDINGS

This phase of the action research corroborated the main findings derived from the individual interviews; namely, pointing at the challenges encountered by the academic staff pursuing their educational practice in a highly diverse and complex sociopolitical context reflecting a triple periphery: geographic, social, and academic. The focus groups revealed a major intricacy underlying the lecturers' educational practice—coping with the social divisions, in particular the Jewish–Palestinian split. This predicament accentuates the need to address the complex power relations in the academic staff's work at the college. An experience of loneliness accompanies the latter challenge presumably due to the lack of support network. We address first the main intricacy encountered by the academic staff.

3.1 | Searching for a bridge across troubled waters: The intricacies of power relations

The lecturers experience the classrooms as largely divided, composed of subgroups with distinct characteristics. Each of the subgroups forms its own unit with no attempts to connect with the other subgroups. The most prominent division is between the Jewish and Palestinian students, accentuated by political and socioeconomic cultural and language differences and reflecting constant tensions on the verge of eruption.

Beyond this dichotomy, there are other divisions, some of them within the groups such as Muslim and Christian Palestinians; residents of urban neighborhoods versus residents in rural communities; women and men.

Among the Jewish students, there are the Israeli born and the new immigrants. In addition to the within groups subdivisions, there are also groupings, crosscutting these categories such as religious students versus nonreligious. The multidimensional diversity, including numerous intersections and the ensuing tensions, pose for the lecturers frequent pedagogic and personal dilemmas.

These dilemmas reflect two main aspects, with the most salient one surrounding the "elephant in the room", that is, the Israeli–Palestinian conflict and its effect on the classroom. The second aspect pertains to the dilemmas revolving around navigating the triple periphery—the complex relations between the privileged, the not so privileged, and the non-privileged altogether.

3.2 | The elephant in the room: The omnipresence of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict in the classroom

The lecturers′ accounts show the infiltration of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict into the class sessions, particularly in courses wherein topics related directly thereto are discussed. At the same time, even in courses that are unrelated to the conflict, the "elephant" appears in the room. Moreover, the lecturers reported that episodes of escalation in the protracted Israeli–Palestinian conflict (e.g., clashes between the Israeli Defense Forces and Hamas and local population in the Gaza Strip) have an impact on the class sessions. Staff members′ words reflect the complexity underlying the asymmetric power relations between the Jewish majority and Palestinian minority groups, which manifests in their day-to-day classroom management as demonstrated by the following quotes.

Maya and Millie reported on grappling in courses wherein the conflict was part of the course content. They stressed the difficulty arising among the students that places a challenge to their teaching. Maya described a situation wherein Jewish students resisted hearing the Palestinian narrative, manifesting unwillingness to take part in the classroom discussion.

> This course...touched the core of the [Israeli-Palestinian] conflict. I presented the theoretical sections, and the experience was bad, really bad. They attended because they thought it seemed like a "nice" topic." They didn′t have any intentions of "getting to know the other", and ever since I′ve had this fear. I saw other women who were just looking for an easy grade, and you tell them that we′ve got a conflict, we′ve got bigotry, and they don′t want to talk about it. It′s not always appropriate. [Behavioral Studies]

Milly retorted the difficulty in raising the subject of the conflict and effecting a change in consciousness vis-à-vis the other. She describes fear facing the obligation (in her view) to present both sides′ narratives.

> My dilemmas as an instructor are related to...the course, which is hard, critical, touches on inherent schisms. The dilemma is whether to touch the heart of the issue, the essence of the conflict, or to soften the edges, yet be less than true to oneself. And if we do touch on difficult content like the national schism, should we touch concepts? Do we mention the [early 1960s] military rule [that Palestinians citizens of Israel lived under]? Do we analyze it? In other words, do we take on the hard stuff? And then...how can we not??? I have constant palpitations, every year during the spring semester we go there. The first dilemma is pedagogical: Where do I place the boundary in order to effect change in awareness? And on the other hand, do so without the classroom "blowing up? [Human Services]

Various instructors cited how the protracted conflict enters class discussions even when it is not a part of the course content, elevating the tension between the Jewish and the Palestinian students in the course, and spoiling the overall classroom atmosphere.

Oren of the Psychology Department depicts:

> In one class session, I asked the students to give me an example of happiness. A Jewish student said, "I′m happy when we demolish terrorists′ houses." I told him

that this was inappropriate. After class, an Arab student approached me and said, "Are you going to report him [the Jewish student] to the Disciplinary Committee?" I replied, "No." The student said, "And if I were to say that I'm happy when a Jew is stabbed? That was hate speech." I replied that I'd say the same thing to him that I said to the Jewish student, and I would not report him to the Disciplinary Committee.

Leon and Yonatan corroborated Oren's experience regarding intolerance and insensitivity displayed by Jewish students to Palestinian students:

> Leon: As a Mizrahi,[1] I'm very sensitive to students. In the course that I taught, students made presentations in which [the Palestinian students] occasionally mispronounced Hebrew, for example, saying "Naboleon" instead of "Napoleon".[2] It's a language thing. Everyone laughed. No sensitivity to the other. Of course, the Arab students are weaker language-wise than the Jews. I got mad. Supposing they had to present in English?! Another example: When I served as department head, we had a student who wore a hijab [headscarf]. Another student photographed her and posted it on Facebook with a bigoted caption. I found the perpetrator and he took it down. Sometimes there's no sensitivity. [Organizational Development & Consulting]

> Yonatan: An Arab student who defined herself as a Palestinian activist showed graphs that showed abuse and oppression of Arabs by the Jewish establishment. A discussion ensued that stopped being about the report itself, and became a discussion of the specific data. It led to a quarrel that continued outside of class that included cursing and incitement. It began when a Jewish student challenged her and it escalated from there. I called both of them in for a meeting and realized that we'd hit a wall. She said that until he apologized, she wouldn't and then he started in with, "If you don't report her to the Disciplinary Committee, I'm going to lodge a complaint and quit school"... it was a microcosm of the actual conflict. [GDVC]

Lecturers emphasized the conspicuousness of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict during escalation and crisis periods. It enters the discourse and the atmosphere in the classroom grows tense.

Hava from GDVC, said, escalating tensions due to the conflict create especial difficulty for the instructors in light of the sharpening of enmity between Jewish and Arab students. In a similar vein, an instructor in the Human Services Department described a change in the atmosphere and the challenge that occurred in the classroom during an escalation in the conflict:

> Now that all the students have phones, everyone has to know what's happening in real time, so even in class, there were times when students would react to terror attacks, and when soldiers were being stabbed, they'd be checking Ynet...and then suddenly someone would comment aloud, and that's it! It's an issue that we need a way to address.

Oren added: There was this period of tension [countrywide], terror attacks, retaliations by the IDF, and discussions arose. We encourage critical thinking, and friction arose between Jewish and Arab students, as well as among Jewish students. Most of the students avoid talking about it, but leads to the students criticizing one another (GDVC).

Importantly, the academic staff repeatedly raised the complexity of the power relations in their descriptions of situations wherein Jewish students view their majority status as a weakness facing minority students who receive benefits that the Jewish students do not. The findings underscore the Jewish students' sense of resentment, discrimination, and disruption of their majority status due to the privileges granted to their Arab counterparts. Anne, a new lecturer, cited distrust and a sensation of discrimination conveyed by Jewish students:

> I had two Jewish students who were angry and frustrated... It emerged that they suspected the Arab students of not answering all of the questions, yet despite this, scoring higher than the Jewish students. They demanded to see the Arab students' exams. The instructor was shaken up and didn't respond. The interviewee felt that the instructor should have shown the complainants the exams just to reassure them. The posting of scores and grades raises tension between the two groups... every such situation leads to tension and clashes. If it wasn't two differing national groups, perhaps it wouldn't be this way. [Sociology]

Lia, of the Health Systems Administration Department, said that in her department, the majority of the students are Palestinian citizens of Israel. In her view, whoever is in the majority numbers-wise makes their voices heard, leading to tension in the classroom. Lia said that the power balance in the country as a whole is flipped in the classroom, making it difficult for the instructors to address various matters that arise, both in the department as a whole and in the classroom, creating disciplinary problems:

> There are discipline problems in the classroom! Some classes are 100% Arab, so they're the majority, and therefore it's a problem because the minority in the country is the majority here. [Where ordinarily] Arabs are a little timid, they're not here...they're not intimidated.

In sum, the protracted Israeli–Palestinian conflict infiltrates into the classrooms and poses challenges to the lecturers' educational practice. It is particularly salient in courses touching on related topics and during escalation and crisis episodes. However, it sneaks into the classrooms also in courses supposedly unrelated to this continuous national discord and in periods of relative tranquility. The main challenge for the academic staff is how to navigate the complex power relations between Israeli Jews and Palestinians in their daily teaching.

The second central element that emerged from the needs assessment phase relates to navigating the triple periphery, which is mainly reflected in the learning capabilities of the students. In most lecturers' view, many of the students lack learning capabilities, required in higher education that would enable them to meet the academic standards they expect them to have.

3.3 | Navigating the triple periphery: The relations between the privileged academic staff and the disadvantaged students in an underprivileged academic institution

The college from which the findings were drawn differs distinctly from a university as per Israel's CHE. It is defined as an institution serving the peripheral community according to three conditions: it is located distant from Israel's center, in a geographically outlying area in the

north that is beset by social and economic woes. It also constitutes a secondary institution in terms of scientific development and research. The declared purpose of the college is to make higher education accessible to a population that is largely the first generation in their families to obtain post-secondary education. Therefore, the emphasis is on teaching.

However, the instructors are graduates of universities, and their professional advancement is conditioned upon recognized research and publishing. Thus, realization of the college's declared aim interferes with the faculty members' need to advance professionally. They experience difficulty in reconciling their own need to keep university level standards with the need to attend to the students' educational needs.

Indeed, the academic staff portray difficulties in the preparedness of the students to academic studies, resulting in frustration and psychological strain. A classroom is often composed of students with disparate learning capacities: some with very low and some with very high abilities. This heterogeneity further exacerbates the experience of stress of the ill-prepared students to meet the academic standards.

The following discourse underscores the dilemmas in this domain, as expressed in the Behavioral Sciences focus group:

> Eyal: In research methods, the problem isn't only with the Muslims. We have dyslexics and dyscalculics, who are unable to read and comprehend the assignments; they have language disabilities. It's not necessarily Muslims. Actually, in second year, it's the Muslims who earned the high grades.
>
> Deganit: What I'm saying is that you need to gear the instruction to them, to identify the difficulty and adapt to it. And I can't give...
>
> Jacqueline: So then the change won't come from the instructor. For the instructor to make a change, it has to come from the institution.
>
> Deganit: The instructor has to be aware of it, and receive tools. If not, she'll get frustrated and think that it has to do with her...

Yael of the Economics Department concurs with the difficulty in teaching the students:

> Some of the students don't know how to study; they think they're still in high school. They don't know how to study, how to cope with lots of assignments, how to organize their time, planning...). They don't understand what we want from them, if an exam question isn't worded exactly as in their textbook, they get stressed, some even start crying. Every year I'm asked, "Do we write on lined or unlined paper?" Introductory courses are quite heavy; I find myself teaching them how to study. Before each exam, I devote time to talk about it: You must come prepared. I hand out a list of dos and don'ts for exams. I tell them, "Read this; think about how to plan your time." The students are under a lot of stress.

Faculty members report wide gaps in knowledge and ability between students. Amìt [GDVC] described these in terms of exposure or lack of exposure to knowledge that is relevant to her department. The lack of exposure leads to wide gaps between students, making it different for

the class to advance. In her view, the solution lies in developing study skills, and students filling in their knowledge gaps independently.

> I once referred to impressionism and referred them to independent study [for more information]. I can't do more than that. I can't feed them culture intravenously.

> I try to teach them to learn independently, to read online or offline...to catch up with their classmates. Among the Russian speakers, there are those who could changes places with me and teach the class. They have the cultural background. Utterly different than the others...

Yarón concurred:

> Last year, we had a big clash between groups in our department, and it lead to social issues. It's like this: We have strong students and weak students, and a few in the middle. We try to hit the sweet spot for everyone. (Information systems)

The faculty recounted their efforts to cope with this intricacy but often with no avail, as demonstrated below:

> I sometimes ask them 'are you ok with the course? Do you have any questions?' I remind them that they can come and see me in office hours. Sometimes they ask me about private lessons... I say to them 'before you run to private lessons there are other forms of help, try and use them'". But they rarely come to office hours; they have no courage to ask any questions...

Another predicament of the lecturers' pertains to serious problems of language proficiency: first, in Hebrew, which is the official language of instruction and academic writing; second, English proficiency—the main basis of academic reading assignments.

Ruti demonstrates this predicament:

> I'm always having to weigh how much consideration to extend to those whose mother tongue is not Hebrew. Should a Hebrew speaker have to hand in written work at a higher level? Should I go easy on a non-Hebrew speaker? I don't know how to help the non-Hebrew speaker. I don't know what can be done. [Sociology].

The following demonstrates the difficulties with reading assignments in English:

> The main problem is the disparate language levels. All of the instructors find it difficult. For example, in my epidemiology course, I want them to read an article written in English. I want them to get familiar with the terminology. I don't require my undergrads to read in English; I do require my grad students to do so. [Health Systems Administration]

Another aspect of the academic staff's challenge revolves around the need to reconcile the cultural and religious values and prescribed lifestyle with academic freedom, encapsulated mainly in Western standards of education and individualistic values. The faculty members testify to the

fact that in a socially diverse classroom, there are gaps between Western and traditional views that manifest in degrees of openness and academic freedom. These gaps lead to awkwardness between students and difficulty in understanding certain behaviors and ways of thinking. Moreover, the faculty members point out that the aforementioned tension affects the curriculum and compels showing sensitivity in order not to offend those present. The following excerpt is an example of awkwardness that certain GDVC students felt at seeing a nude model:

> It very much depends upon the individual's background and where s/he comes from. The Christians connect to it more; it's more in their understanding of Western culture. Also the urban Muslims, as opposed to those from the villages. For some of the latter, it's their first time leaving the village; they undergo culture shock. For example, a nude model: A naked woman is standing there, right in front of them. Even for the Jewish students it's discomfiting. And the Arabs...it goes without saying. We don't require them to participate, but most do. They learn to compartmentalize.

Instructor's account from the Human Services Department is consistent with the rest vis-à-vis taking care not to offend students.

> Dariya: When I speak about economic issues for example poverty... I have research based data on various sectors such as the orthodox, the Arab society, but I have a barrier, I need to consider how to say things in order not to offend anyone... I want to present and explain things but I am afraid that this will start political debates, and I don't want to get into such debates in class.

In sum, the second major challenge encountered by the academic staff purport to the intricacies involved in navigating the triple periphery. This means attending to the students' lacking learning capabilities, which makes it difficult for the academic staff to keep the academic standards required and regulated by the central, formal higher education authority. Importantly, the lecturers are keen to follow the central academic yardsticks as they are used for their own promotion, thus maintain their academic status. In addition, the lecturers need to grapple with dilemmas revolving around the emerging contradictions between the Western values encapsulated in academic freedom and openness and the values prescribed by traditions and religion.

Beyond the nature and pervasiveness of the challenges, the most prominent feeling of the academic staff that emerged from the diagnostic phase of the intervention was a sense of lonesomeness accompanied by lack of backing from the top and paucity of internal lecturers' support network. The lecturers' fear not to ignite the already tense relations with the students and not to enhance actual students' complaints further augments their sense of loneliness. The next section addresses this predicament.

3.4 | The "lonely hearts club" of the academic staff

The instructors expressed feelings of isolation, fear, and lack of support for the issues described in the aforementioned themes. They believe that it is very important to raise these matters, related to diversity, and to create a support network that assists them in addressing the issue. In the Sociology Department, one instructor concretized the importance of the issue:

When I began teaching here, we had no tools to face a mixed classroom. I talked to other instructors, and I feel that the topic is silenced; no one talks about it. I didn't realize that it was permissible to talk about inter-ethnic relations; I made mistakes along the way. Once I mentioned in class that the Arab students' academic levels were lower, and some of them went to the department head and accused me of racism and embarrassing them in class. The road to hell is paved with good intentions.

Iris admitted her fear of dealing with these issues and indicated that it was important that the college have someone who teaches the instructors to address it and find solutions for such incidents as the ones described here.

My course doesn't address diversity, but here and there I have contacts with Arab students. But, because the course doesn't entail it, I fear that someone will play the victim or the victimizer. So we need someone to teach us what to do in such a case, and...I'm afraid that something will arise and I'll [inadvertently] say something that will spark an outburst in class. So either I avoid it, or I gloss over it quickly, or I say "We'll talk about it later", and keep on going. [Human Services]

Karìn and Sagìt concurred with Iris:

Karìn: We have neither tools, knowledge, nor ability to respond with sensitivity, professionally, adequately, or appropriately. As staff members, we weren't trained or prepared to teach a diverse student enrollment. Moreover, we have neither knowledge nor expertise to recognize a student's distress. The focus of teaching is on pedagogy and curriculum. We guide students...it's a lot of responsibility... there're a lot of emotional problems...and scholastic difficulties...we can offer scholastic assistance, but [diversity] is a bigger responsibility, and we have no tools for it...we need professionals in this area [Economics]

Sagìt: Many staff members need to be exposed to [teaching a diverse student body], particularly as it comes with the territory here. We need to sharpen our awareness. It's super-important. For instance, we need to use examples in class not only from the dominant culture.

Differences can be on the surface, or below the surface. If you can't see it, you're not aware of it...I gave a mid-term in Developmental Psychology. There was no makeup date. One student wrote me that she'd undergone treatment [on the exam date]. Another one wrote me that her sister got married [on the exam date]. I let those two students write papers, but there might've been others who needed assistance or who didn't feel comfortable asking for it. This awareness is being put on the table, but I don't know what each instructor does. [Psychology]

The instructors also raised the issue of inadequate resources while teaching disadvantaged students and adhering to their special needs (with low learning abilities):

There's pressure from above to admit more students, but the teaching resources haven't increased concomitantly: Decrease in human resources, changes in

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instructional methods. Systemic factors make our jobs difficult. There're not enough positions and resources, the demands on us are high, burnout and stress are on the increase, motivation is down. It's a struggle for survival. Demands from above constantly increase: "Give the students your phone numbers." I already hold more office hours than what I get paid for. There's no compensation. They really come down hard on us. [Economics]

In sum, the lecturers expressed their frustration and helplessness in coping with the intricacies revolving around the divisions, notably the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, other tensions, and diversity issues, partly due to lack of appropriate resources and backing from the management.

4 | DISCUSSION

This paper focused on the domain of diversity praxis, evolving in real-life settings characterized by social divisions and intergroup tensions (Arieli, 2019; Desivilya Syna, 2015; Friedman et al., 2018; Hargie et al., 2003; Janssens & Zanoni, 2014; Maoz, 2011; Raz-Rotem et al., 2019; Roos & Zanoni, 2016; Syna-Desivilya, 1998). We examined how organizational members conceptualize, experience, and actually engage diversity in their educational practice.

Moreover, we zoomed in on the role of the specific sociopolitical and organizational context informing the lecturers' coping patterns with diversity, underscoring the protracted Israeli–Palestinian conflict. The current research expands the knowledge base in theoretical and practical domains. At the conceptual level, it enhances understanding of the phenomenon of diversity engagement in intricate sociopolitical contexts, while highlighting complex power relations. On the practical level, the study nourishes evidence-based policies and actions, designed to foster organizational capacity to deal with diversity in ways that promote inclusion while sustaining distinctiveness—giving voice to diverse organizational members (Leonardelli et al., 2010).

Extant findings clearly point at the salience of power relations construction—asymmetry and inequality—encapsulated in the socially divided context and the "triple periphery." Unsurprisingly, the national majority-minority division emerges as the most prominent challenge for the lecturers (Arieli, 2019; Desivilya et al., 2017; Friedman et al., 2018). Despite the seeming autonomy of the academic staff to manage their teaching environment, the protracted Israeli–Palestinian conflict infiltrates into the classrooms and affects their educational practice. This effect is particularly salient in courses touching on conflict-related topics and during escalation and crisis episodes (Desivilya & Raz, 2015; Desivilya Syna, 2020).

Notably, it sneaks into the classrooms also in courses supposedly unrelated to this continuous national discord and in periods of relative tranquility. Thus, the main challenge for the academic staff is how to navigate the complex power relations between the Israeli Jews and Palestinians in their daily teaching. Regardless of the academic staff's efforts to maintain equality in managing their classrooms, Jewish and Arab students alike convey their sense of victimhood and discrimination vis-à-vis the other group.

Remarkably, social class and its intersections with other divisions constitute another significant predicament the faculty encounter in their educational practice at the college (Desivilya et al., 2017; Zanoni, 2011; Zanoni & Janssens, 2004). This involves attending to the needs of students who lack learning capabilities and resources to fully devote themselves to academic studies. The latter exacerbates the instructors' difficulty to keep the academic standards required and regulated by the central, formal higher education authority. Yet, they strive to follow the central academic yardsticks, which are used for their own promotion, thus maintaining their

academic status. In addition, the lecturers need to grapple with dilemmas revolving around the emerging contradictions between the Western values encapsulated in academic freedom and the values prescribed by traditions and religion (Özkzanç-Pan & Calás, 2015).

In conclusion, the findings indicate that the intricacies of power relations as manifested in navigating the triple periphery go beyond the diversity management phenomenon as reflected in the essentialist approach. This maneuvering requires awareness and capacities to deal with the intersections of divisions, tensions, and differences, which evolve and transform in a particular local setting, but are foreshadowed by the wider sociopolitical context (Anthias, 2008; Holvino, 2010; Zanoni, Janssens, Benschop, & Nkomo, 2010).

The complexity of navigating the triple periphery engenders feelings of isolation, fear, and helplessness among the academic staff and reveal the necessity of institutional support, internal peer support network, and training to gain skills to deal with the challenges of their complex educational practice (Desivilya et al., 2017; Friedman et al., 2018).

The subsequent phases of the action research entail tailor-made, fine-tuned, and evidence-based interventions, taking into consideration real-life complexities: divided context, within groups variations and intersections, and incorporating research–practice nexus. The ultimate goal is to develop a model of practice, which creates a sustainable change in engaging diversity at the organizational level with future impacts on the societal level through incremental transformations at the local, regional, and national levels of higher education institutions. The college is among the first academic institutions embracing such a comprehensive, multilevel perspective (Özkzanç-Pan & Calás, 2015). The latter component constitutes another phase of the action research.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data available on request due to privacy/ethical restrictions.

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ENDNOTES

[1] Jews who emigrated from Asian and African countries.

[2] Palestinians have difficulty pronouncing the "p" consonant, as it does not appear in Arabic.

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