International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (Ed.)

Research in Teaching and Learning about the Holocaust

A Dialogue Beyond Borders

Edited by Monique Eckmann, Doyle Stevick
and Jolanta Ambrosewicz–Jacobs

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Content

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Intergroup Encounters in the Context of Teaching and Learning about the Holocaust

1. Introduction: Intergroup Encounters and Basic Concepts

Youth encounters focused on confronting the history and memory of Nazi crimes started soon after the Second World War. Organized encounters between youth from different countries were initiated by the Franco-German Youth Office (FGYO)[1] in 1963 to carry out exchange programs to promote intercultural understanding and reconciliation. Since 1983, international youth camps have taken place annually at the Dachau Concentration Camp Memorial Site to encourage reconstruction and dialogue.[2]

Encounter programs are an important tool for dealing with the history and memory of the Second World War. They often focus on the legacy of the Holocaust and have been developed with the work undertaken by Dan Bar-On and his colleagues with young Germans and Israelis (Bar-On et al., 1997), a work that paved the way for many educators and researchers. The authors linked encounter programs and research conducting seminars within the university curriculum. In these seminars, the students first confronted their own family memories of the Second World War and the Holocaust; then the research team set up encounters between Israeli and German students, first in Israel and then in Germany, in 1991 and 1994 (Bar-On, Brendler, & Hare, 1997). These encounters usually included visits to memorial sites. One could call this a model that links biographical work, visits to memorial sites and encounter programs.[3] In multiple ways, these elements of an encounter model have expanded globally in a number of

1 The FGYO (OFAJ in French, DFJW in German) was founded in 1963 under the auspices of the Franco-German Treaty on Franco-German cooperation. See http://www.ofaj.org/english-version (accessed 15 August 2016).

2 For international encounter projects at memorials, see several contributions in Ehmann et al. (1995).

3 See also Chapter 11.

educational projects and met with increasing interest from the academic and heritage-tourism communities. Here, we review the empirical research conducted as a result of these encounter projects (for site visits, see Chapter 11).

The Encounter Model and its Basic Concepts

The encounter model draws on the social psychological concepts of *intergroup relationships*, *intergroup contact* and *social identity* (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) and deals with latent or open conflict situations. These concepts have been developed in the field of social psychology. They address intergroup hostility and intergroup competition and form the background for many experiences. The concept of intergroup relationships is based on the crucial role of one's social identity and the strong feelings towards both one's own group and others. The concepts have been useful in peace education (see, for example, Salomon, 2002; Bar-Tal, 2002) and antiracist education, because they are intended to overcome intergroup hostility. Thus, intergroup encounters are based on the hypothesis that direct contact between estranged groups provides better mutual understanding, furthers empathy and reduces prejudice (Allport, 1979; Pettigrew, 1998).

The encounter process is grounded on two basic premises. The first is an acknowledgment of an existing categorization between "us" and "them," also called in-groups and out-groups. These categories can refer to ethnonational differences, but also to cultural, religious or other distinctions. The second is the "contact hypothesis," according to which direct interaction and encounters are necessary but insufficient: as Hewstone and Brown (1986) put it in their classic article on the subject, "Contact is not enough." There are a number of necessary conditions for the encounter model to be likely to affect a change in participants' attitudes, including equality in status, common goals, cooperation and support from institutions and authorities—which might also include educators (Allport, 1954). Studies have also shown that other factors, such as the quality of the encounter, whether contact is enjoyed and the duration of contact, as well as the context and the co-moderation of encounters by leaders or mediators of both groups, also play a role.

Some other encounter programs have shown that the moment of direct interaction is not sufficient for change. Instead, a process that consists of at least three phases is required: pre-contact preparation; the contact and

encounter itself; and post-contact elaboration and reflection—what can be called a *pedagogy of conflict elaboration* (Eckmann, 2014). It is often only in the post-encounter phase that the real change in students' attitudes occurs. When analyzing the effects of encounter projects, these dimensions of the pedagogical setting should be carefully researched as well.

Encounter and Interaction in Various Contexts and Settings

Encounters have been carried out in various contexts, which can be distinguished according to the stage of hostility or conflict at which they occur:

- As a tool for prevention, i.e., in order to prevent a possible conflict; this approach is sometimes used in intercultural or antiracist education.
- As a tool for reconciliation in the context of settled conflicts, i.e. in dealing with past conflicts that continue to have an impact upon people today. This model was first carried out (without the component of the Holocaust) by the FGYO, which was created to foster relations between French and German youth; since then, it has been replicated and developed in many other contexts in which conflicts often relate to competing memories, including relations between Germans and Poles, Poles and Jews and Germans and Israelis. It was also implemented as trilateral encounters between Jews, Poles and Germans.[4]
- As a tool to address ongoing conflicts, i.e. between hostile groups in contexts such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, as well as in lingering conflicts, as in the Balkans. In these contexts, encounters are usually used as tools for peace education.

One can also distinguish encounters in rather peaceful contexts—between groups that either do not know each other or have negative views of each other—and in conflictual contexts, where "the Other" is the clearly designed antagonist of one's own group.

We could also distinguish between direct and indirect contact. Encounters are at first sight always linked to direct interaction, meeting face to face with persons of the other group. However, there is also another kind of contact, which we will call *indirect* intergroup contact, with diverse

4 See Jugendwerk, http://www.2lozamosc.pl/260-polsko-niemiecko-izraelska-wymiana-mlodziezy-spotkanie-w-zamosciu-1-6-lutego.html (accessed 23 August 2016).

mediations and without meeting face to face: contact can be established through the internet, or by exchanging letters or when two school classes interact about a book they both had to read and discuss (see, for example, Hoffmann, 2011, comparing German and Polish students' reception of Mirjam Pressler's novel *Malka Mai*[5]).

The encounters discussed in this chapter are *constructed* or deliberate, not naturally occurring meetings. They are also often combined with field visits or visits to memorials. But encounters can also happen naturally, in which case they are not conducted as pedagogical activities.

Encounters can also deal with diversity issues and can involve immigrants and locals or minorities and majorities. In the field of education about the Holocaust and National Socialist crimes, this issue seems to be relevant to many educators who try to address the specific needs of various groups. There is also an assumption that learning about the Holocaust means dealing with painful history and memories, and it can therefore be an identity challenge for learners, thus provoking strong emotions. This possibility is even more salient in intergroup encounters, which touch upon strong feelings regarding both groups. These strong emotions, which can be negative or positive, and that are linked to the identification with or distance from one's own group, can be a great challenge for educators who deal with the past, whether it be a past of victimhood, perpetration or passive non-intervention of bystanders.

2. Research Findings in Various Settings

We located empirical studies of encounter programs, based on both qualitative and quantitative research methods. The basic research questions of these studies are as follows. Does the encounter process really change attitudes towards "the Other"? How does dealing with the past influence the way participants deal with present-day conflicts or antagonisms? And do encounter projects that deal with the Holocaust help or hinder the process of reconciliation?

Research on intergroup encounters dealing with the Holocaust has focused primarily on encounters between Israeli Jews and Germans, between

5 These experiences and the research conducted in connection with them are discussed in Chapter 10.

Poles and Jews (i.e. non-Polish Jews)—settings referring to post-conflict or post-genocide situations—and on encounters between Israeli Jews and Palestinians—settings referring to the context of an ongoing conflict and aiming at peace building initiatives.

Jewish Israeli-German Encounters

As mentioned above, Bar-On and his colleagues set up encounters between young Germans and young Israeli Jews in the 1990s (Bar-On et al., 1997). Their work can be considered the starting point for Holocaust-related encounter projects. Bar-On and his team brought together descendants of both perpetrator and victim societies. Their work dealt with the cognitive, emotional and attitudinal aspects of these encounters. The participants, mostly young adults, first engaged in separate seminars in their home country before meeting in person elsewhere. In these seminars, students dealt with their conflict-loaded memories and family narratives. The in-person encounters went through various stages, allowing students to gain a new degree of historical consciousness and feeling of personal responsibility. The process was monitored and evaluated through interviews, questionnaires and interventions. Bar-On and his team found that students needed to recognize both sides' difficulties in order to integrate the historical events into contemporary life, needed to process their personal experiences and needed to deal with the effects of historical consciousness and historical knowledge on identity-building (Bar-On et al., 1997). The researchers also emphasized that the research and educational team needed to undergo the same process *(idem)*.

Since the end of the 1990s, many joint Israeli-German journeys and exchanges have taken place. Davidovich and colleagues (2006) have analyzed the joint journeys organized by the Israeli-German Rehabilitation Association. Over the past decade, there have been eighteen delegation exchanges between Israel and Germany.

One of the objectives of this association is to form a communicational bridge between intellectuals in Germany and Israel so that they may discuss the lessons learned from the Holocaust. The research discusses the motives of the participants to join the delegations and the views they develop as a result of partaking in them. A number of other projects of this kind have taken place, but many of these encounter tours have not been systematically analyzed by researchers.

Polish-Jewish Encounters

In Poland, much of the research on Holocaust education focuses on intergroup meetings and responses as well as intergroup relationships; this includes Polish-Israeli encounters and encounters between Poles and Jews from other parts of the world. Michal Bilewicz is perhaps the foremost scholar in this area of research. For the purposes of this chapter, we will confine ourselves to examining his research on American, Israeli and Australian Jewish students and Polish (mostly non-Jewish) students. In a set of publications in 2007, Bilewicz et al. (2013) observed student interactions during structured conversations between Poles and Jews from the US, Israel and Australia who were in Poland as part of the March of the Living tours (tours in which Jewish students from all over the world visit former death camps in Poland).[6] The researchers observed in-group discussions and out-group attitudes, as well as intergroup discussions, and found that the groups' positive attitudes towards each other increased most when they discussed contemporary rather than historical issues. Bilewicz et al. argued that discussing present-day issues allowed participants to view each other as more similar. When students focused on historical issues, the results were the opposite.

In a qualitative study one year later, approximately 1,000 Polish and Jewish high-school students were asked to submit some questions they wished to ask each other. Polish students most often wanted to know why (they thought) Jewish students still accused Poles of participating in the Holocaust with questions such as: "Why do Jews think that we allowed and helped Germans to build Auschwitz?" or, more explicitly, "Why do you still blame Poles for the Holocaust?" (Bilewicz, 2008; Wójcik, 2008).

In 2013, Bilewicz and Jaworska attempted an intervention that "was [meant] to reconcile young Poles and Israelis by presenting narratives that could change stereotypical thinking about the past" (Bilewicz & Jaworska, 2013, p. 162). They "hypothesized that life-stories of heroic helpers could play an important role in restoring the moral image of current Poles … This could then enable descendants of the bystander group to restore their moral image and make them feel accepted by descendants of victims" (p. 167). The aim of their study, then, was to help Polish youth feel better about the past.

6 In contrast to these studies, Romi & Lev (2007) conducted a study on Jewish participants who went to Poland without ever meeting Polish youth.

This study was conducted with the help of Dialogue among Nations, a non-profit organization that focuses on bringing Israeli Jewish youth and Polish youth together to talk about the past in Poland. Bilewicz observed 259 high-school students, 122 of whom were Israeli and 137 of whom were Polish. The students read descriptions of those who helped Jews during the Second World War and also met a "heroic helper" in person during the encounter. The study showed that Polish students came away feeling much more positive and much more similar to the Israeli youth after the activity, while Israeli youths' attitudes towards Poles did not change as significantly.

In another study, Bilewicz, Stefaniak and Witkowska (2014) surveyed 700 Polish high-school students who lived in fifteen small towns about their knowledge of and attitudes towards Jews. The survey found that, for the most part, these Polish individuals would not want a Jewish boyfriend/girlfriend, but might not mind going to summer camp with a Jew. In order of significance, the students self-reported that they learned about Jews from television, school and their grandparents. The authors believe that Polish education focused on bringing together Poles and Jews through the non-profit organizations that specialize in intergroup education is the most important "pathway towards reconciliation."

Israeli-Palestinian Encounters dealing with the Holocaust and Peace Education

Inspired by encounter projects, peace education and Holocaust education, a number of projects have linked the topic of learning about the Holocaust to the topic of furthering dialogue between groups experiencing historical antagonism.

For example, a study by Schechter, Ferchat and Bar-On (2008) analyzed a joint journey of Israeli Arabs and Jews to the Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and State Museum. The purpose of the research was to attempt to break the Israeli consensus regarding Arabs and their connection to the Holocaust. Many encounter programs of this kind were conducted in the late 1990s and early 2000s, but they were more often documented than studied. Schechter, Ferchat and Bar-On (2008) continued some of this work through the 2000s. Similarly, Schechter (2002) and Schechter and Salomon (2005) conducted research with Israeli youth and examined their reactions after returning from the Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and State Museum. The researchers investigated whether the visit to this site helped Israelis

have empathy towards Palestinians. Three hundred students participated in the research: 150 went to the Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and State Museum, while 150 did not. The authors found that those who came with preconceived notions about "the Other" were less likely to change over the course of the trip: while some students developed more empathy towards Palestinians during the study trip, the trip tended to exacerbate the previous feelings of those students who visited this site with more negative attitudes towards Palestinians.

An experimental encounter program between Israeli Jews and Palestinians from Israel, led by the Van Leer Jerusalem Institute (VLJI),[7] was researched by Eckmann, who investigates learning about the Holocaust and intergroup encounters. The program was built on the concepts of encounter pedagogy, peace education and Holocaust education, and it included historical lectures about the Holocaust and an encounter process. The program brought together teachers, facilitators and community workers from both groups over the course of a year, and it included a study trip to Berlin at the end. The research attempted to understand how the participants dealt with the history of the Holocaust, with the confrontation with "the Other" and with learning together about the Holocaust and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Eckmann 2009; 2013). The study was based on three sets of interviews with the participants. Eckmann argues that the students engaged in a process of identity-building, a recognition of victims' experiences rather than victim's identities some distancing from the own group, while facing some dilemmas that came up regarding the history of the Holocaust. The research points to the importance of a culture of mutual recognition, without denying the asymmetrical character of the situation. The author argues that it is important not to compare sufferings or equate historical facts, and that focusing on perpetrators and bystanders, rather than only on victims, can lead to common insights for both sides and deepen the understanding of the other group's past and present situation.

To conclude this section, we refer to two authors who have researched encounters in conflict settings in Cyprus and Israel, Zvi Bekerman and Michalinos Zembylas. Although they only deal with the Holocaust in some of their studies, we include their work here because it is relevant to the research on intergroup encounters in conflict contexts. They deal with

7 VLJI is a leading intellectual center for the interdisciplinary study and discussion of issues related to philosophy, society, culture and education.

education and historical traumas, and with the teaching of contested narratives and the potential for reconciliation (Zembylas & Bekerman, 2008; Bekerman & Zembylas, 2011). Their ethnographic observations, carried out in mixed Israeli-Palestinian schools in Israel and in mixed schools in Cyprus, lead to a discussion about identity, memory and reconciliation processes. Indeed, the "witnessing of the Others' suffering" (Zembylas & Bekerman, 2008) constitutes a challenge, according to the authors, but also an opening. Indeed, the "pedagogical responsibility of educators is to create spaces in which students may explore collectively what it means to bear witness to the Other" (Zembylas & Bekerman, 2008, p. 148), so that the classroom becomes a place of work through their affective connections to others and to their own group, and "can be useful in the development of shared meanings created through intersubjective encounters" *(idem)* and in developing critically shared meanings.

However, these pedagogical interventions must recognize the power of emotions and a deeper understanding of the complex interplay between emotion and historical narratives (Bekerman & Zembylas, 2011).

3. Concluding Remarks

Intergroup encounters take place in contexts of conflict, often even intractable conflict (Bar Tal, 2007), and also post-conflict or post-genocide contexts, and bring together groups living with conflicting historical experiences or with antagonistic narratives. In addition, the place of encounter might add an important dimension to the encounter dynamics, as some of the projects happen in memorial places. Encounters between Israelis and Arabs, for example, could happen anywhere, but the fact that they can happen at a memorial site like Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and State Museum adds another layer of complexity. Some of the projects occur in several locations, including at Yad Vashem and the Ghetto Fighters Museum in Israel, but also at memorial sites in Berlin, thus confronting not only the victims' past, but also the perpetrators' history, the way that memorialization is dealt with in Germany and the way heritage is dealt with in a multicultural society (Eckmann, 2013, p. 139).

Does research provide evidence that encounters modify the representations of "the Other" and deepen the mutual understanding? According to these studies, it seems that most projects help further the understanding

of the "other side," increase empathy with "their" past experiences and diminish the distinction between "us" and "them." But it also appears that encounters do not produce the same effects for both sides and might not change their perceptions of each other equally (as Bilewicz's study on Poles and Jews shows, for example). This fact might relate not only to the way history is taught and understood in students' countries (the history of the Holocaust in particular), but also to a lack of analysis and awareness regarding power relations within the current contexts between the groups involved in such studies, because the dominant and dominated groups do not experience the encounter process the same way.

The findings also reveal that it is difficult to find a balance between, on the one hand, the witnessing of the Others' suffering as a result of learning to see, feel and act differently and becoming a witness and not simply a spectator (Bekerman & Zembylas, 2008, p. 145), and, on the other, overcoming competition and the comparison of sufferings. This is a challenge, and in the case of competition over recognition, the past can be an obstacle to furthering better understanding. However, some projects seem to point to an opening: learning about history and encounters means dealing not only with victims, but also with the position and dilemmas of bystanders and perpetrators, which offers the potential for the development of shared meanings.

Another challenge is maintaining a balance between historical learning and the encounter process. The findings demonstrate that it can be difficult to deal with precise historical learning and carry out an encounter process; thus, in some encounter education programs, history is often less salient, and the process deals rather with memory than with history; nevertheless, encounters form an important tool and contribute to mutual understanding, and perhaps even facilitate reconciliation.

Encounter processes are expensive, because they require facilitation, which includes co-moderation by mediators from both groups, extensive preparation for each group, professional guidance through the process and careful post-encounter elaboration. In addition, these projects are often linked to field trips. So a necessary condition for high-quality encounter projects is sufficient means for a correct historical *and* pedagogical setting, including history experts and experts in group facilitation.

One could ask whether the energy, institutional support and funds required for such projects linking historical learning and intergroup encounters are worth the investment. The answer depends on the goals of

the project. Encounter projects involving historical learning *in fine* deal with *contemporary* conflicts relating to the past. So, because the goal in encounter projects is to further mutual understanding *today* and to engage in reconciliation processes, it is useful and worthwhile to provide the means necessary to carry out these challenging projects, and to improve the pedagogical settings and tools through experimentation and research.

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