

APPLICATION FOR A HALBERT CENTRE WORKSHOP GRANT

TITLE

Remembering the Future: Building Consensual Historical Memory in Israel and Palestine

ABSTRACT

The proposed workshops, one in Jerusalem, the other in Ramallah, will enable the participants to develop a funding strategy, design the methodology and plan a publication protocol for a field experiment on the prospects for building consensual historical memory among Israelis and Palestinians. The project will proceed in three stages: (1) We will conduct sample surveys in Malcha (a Jerusalem suburb and previously a Palestinian village whose inhabitants were forced to flee in 1948, during Israel's War of Independence) and Bethlehem (the city where many of Malcha's residents sought refuge). The surveys will measure knowledge about, and attitudes toward, the resettlement; determinants of respondents' hopes and fears concerning Israeli-Palestinian reconciliation; and forecasts of future developments. (2) We will seek to mobilize current Jewish-Israeli residents of Malcha and former Palestinian residents and their descendants now living in Bethlehem for a campaign to erect a memorial plaque in Malcha's neglected Palestinian cemetery outlining a consensus view of the events that transpired in Malcha in 1948. (3) Six months after the campaign begins, and regardless of its outcome, we will re-survey the same people to measure change (if any) in the cognitive and attitudinal variables that the first survey tapped. By surveying the respondents, recording the unfolding of the campaign through the use of participant-observation and newspaper content analysis, and seeking to stimulate and measure on a small scale the readjustment of historical memory that will be required by both sides in any lasting large-scale reconciliation, the research will highlight the social-psychological opportunities for, and roadblocks to, peace in one of the world's most intractable conflicts.

SUBJECT OF THE WORKSHOPS

Research on Ethnic Reconciliation

It is a truism of international diplomacy that everyone knows the solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict but no one knows how to get there. A 2009 poll found that fully 74 percent of Palestinians and 78 percent of Israelis are willing to live alongside one another in separate states (Haaretz, 2009). However, as of this writing, intermittent talks have failed to resolve even one of the fundamental issues that divide the two sides.

Many scholars recognize that a degree of mutual understanding between conflicting parties is a prerequisite of peace building processes. In the field of international relations, the study of “transitional justice” mechanisms focuses on precisely this problem. Transitional justice mechanisms include truth commissions designed to establish a consensual historical record of past wrongdoing and reparations to victims of past abuse. These and other methods for reconciling conflicting ethno-national groups have been adopted in many countries, including South Africa, Rwanda, Kosovo, Bosnia, Serbia, Croatia, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, El Salvador, Haiti, Guatemala, Chile and Nicaragua.

Research on the effects of transitional justice mechanisms is in its early stages (Thoms, Ron and Paris, 2008). Nonetheless, it is remarkable how lightly the study of transitional justice has touched the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. As a result, we know little about the social-psychological barriers that must be overcome to effect reconciliation between Israelis and Palestinians. We can only speculate about the cognitive content of those barriers, their salience, their resilience, their weak points and the conditions that might facilitate their erosion. The proposed workshops in Jerusalem and Ramallah will take a crucial first step towards adding substance to our knowledge by laying the groundwork for a research project on this subject.

Extant research on ethnic reconciliation in Israel is deeply indebted to Gordon Allport’s “contact hypothesis.” Allport proposed that a reduction in prejudice may be achieved through interpersonal contact between members of different ethnic groups who enjoy equal status, share common goals, engage in cooperative activities and benefit from the support of authorities, law or custom (Allport, 1954). Israeli researchers enthusiastically took up this idea (Amir, 1998). However, testing conditions were hardly optimal. In the first place, small-group experiments and “coexistence education programs” typically involved Israeli Jews and Israeli Arabs, not Palestinians living in the West Bank and Gaza. This circumstance made it impossible to generalize results to contact between antagonists who are often engaged in violent interaction. Second, the experiments created highly artificial situations that hardly mirrored conditions in the real world and therefore lacked external validity. Third, external power relations inevitably permeated group dynamics. Israeli Jews and Israeli Arabs are of unequal status, have a history of competition and hostility, share few goals and often confront opposition to cooperation. This situation generates low empathy, negative stereotyping and a failure to decrease anxiety about intergroup contact, let alone create a superordinate group identity (Halabi, 2004; Maoz, 2004; Stephan, Hertz-Lazarowitz, Zelniker and Stephan, 2004). On balance, therefore, it seems warranted to treat this branch of research with some scepticism.

The Proposed Project

The foregoing overview highlights the need for research on a real-world cooperative project aimed at achieving consensus between Israeli Jews and Palestinians on a politically significant issue. The proposed workshops will enable such a project. In the following, we first outline the larger project and then sketch what the workshops will accomplish.

In effect, the envisaged project will tap into, characterize and seek to learn the constraints on modifying the “historical memory” of Israeli Jews and Palestinians. Historical memory serves as a guide to future action by providing people with a sense of collective identity, a means of distinguishing “us” from “them,” a record of glorious collective achievements and an inventory of wrongs that need to be righted. In this sense, people “remember” the future (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998; Kratochwil, 2006). The way we imbue the past with meaning opens some opportunities for future action and closes others. Historical memory does not determine how we act, but it does incline us to act in particular ways and influences how freely we may choose different courses of action.

Diverse views of the 1948 Palestinian exodus lie at the very core of Palestinian and Jewish-Israeli historical memory; no single issue therefore recommends itself more eagerly for research on the prospects of national reconciliation. Accordingly, the proposed project will survey current Malcha residents and former residents of Malcha and their descendants now residing in Bethlehem. In part, it will focus on knowledge about, and attitudes towards, the exodus of Palestinians from Malcha in 1948.¹ To achieve minimally acceptable sampling error, the goal will be to interview 500 adult residents of each community. Professional polling firms will be contracted to conduct the surveys.

The survey will also examine determinants of respondents’ hopes and fears concerning national reconciliation. A recent, unique but small (n=217) survey of Jewish-Israeli university students makes clear that historical memory is only one among many such determinants (Halperin et al., 2008). Eran Halperin and his associates measured nine attitudinal and sociopolitical variables that could potentially explain variation in collective fear, personal fear, collective hope and personal hope. The variables include depth of historical memory, delegitimization of Palestinian national rights, living with a Holocaust survivor, suffering a personal or family injury in a terrorist attack, serving in the army in the occupied territories, participating in organized encounters with Palestinians, having a right-wing political orientation, level of education and level of religiosity. Measuring similar variables among Malcha residents and appropriately modified but homologous variables among Bethlehem residents will permit an assessment of the determinants of hope and fear among a much more diverse population than was polled by Halperin and his associates, thus permitting the qualification and generalization of their findings.

In addition, the survey will tap respondents’ visions of the future by asking them their opinions about the prospects for peace and the desirable and likely contours of a peace agreement. In this connection, the survey will determine whether respondents think there is room for a common Israeli-Palestinian understanding of the events that took place in Malcha in 1948 and whether they might be interested in working toward such a common understanding. Respondents who express interest will be asked for their contact information.

Stage two of the project will involve mobilizing Malcha and Bethlehem residents for a campaign to erect a memorial plaque in Malcha’s neglected Palestinian cemetery. Maximally, the plaque will outline a consensus view of the events that transpired in Malcha in 1948. Minimally, it will acknowledge the existence of a Palestinian cemetery in Malcha. Recognizing the obstacles that stand in the way of such a venture, we will seek the advice of *Search for Common Ground*, a Washington-based NGO with experience in building consensus between Muslim and Western groups.

We will invite survey respondents who express interest in working on the project to attend initial meetings in both communities. Five committees will be struck: a media committee to publicize the project, a finance committee to raise funds for the plaque, a membership committee to recruit additional participants through personal networks, a legal committee to secure

permission from the Municipality of Jerusalem to erect the plaque and a consensus committee to work out mutually agreeable text for the plaque in Arabic, Hebrew and English. Project co-investigators and graduate research assistants will attend the initial meeting and all subsequent committee meetings to offer guidance and record the participants' activities. They will also content-analyze the public response to the campaign as it is reflected in major Israeli and Palestinian newspapers.

Regardless of the outcome of the campaign, the second round of the survey will go into the field six months after it begins. It will repeat questions from the first wave. The survey will be longitudinal, with the same respondents participating in both waves (minus those who drop out because of normal attrition).² Conducting a longitudinal survey will permit the measurement of change in knowledge and attitudes over a ten-month period including the six-month campaign.

What the Workshops Will Accomplish

The proposed workshops will give participants the opportunity to plan a funding strategy for the research project, develop a research methodology and division of labour, prepare detailed research proposals for submission in September 2011 and outline a publication protocol. The workshops will involve researchers from the University of Toronto, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, the Ruppin Academic Center and Arab World for Research and Development (AWRAD) in Ramallah. AWRAD is an NGO funded by the World Bank, the Japan International Cooperation Agency, the Willy Brandt Center in Jerusalem, USAID, the United National Development Program, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and others.

Preliminary discussions suggest the following potential funders for the research project: the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, the Guggenheim Foundation, the Ford Foundation and the United States Institute of Peace. During the workshops, we will review funding criteria from each of these agencies, decide which to pursue and write an outline of a master proposal that we will later flesh out and adjust to fit the specific criteria of each organization.

Methodological discussions will comprise a large part of the workshops. Specifically, we intend to (1) outline pre- and post-campaign questionnaires for the Malcha and Bethlehem surveys, (2) contact polling firms in Jerusalem, Tel Aviv and Ramallah to discuss sampling procedures and request cost and feasibility estimates, (3) plan participant-observation research in Malcha and Bethlehem for the period of the plaque campaign, and (4) discuss the format for content analyses of press coverage of the campaign. We will also decide on the division of responsibilities among project participants.

Finally, the workshops will allow participants to work out a publication protocol. Preliminary discussion suggests that deliverables will include a series of journal articles in English, Hebrew and Arabic; several graduate theses; and a book consolidating the project's findings, also in English, Hebrew and Arabic. While our English-language publications will be submitted to internationally recognized publishers and journals (in the fields of sociology, political science, anthropology and international relations), we are eager to disseminate our findings in regional languages too. To that end, we will give equal priority to Hebrew and Arabic publications.

Conclusion

In April 2010, Jews and Arabs in six Israeli locations organized joint meetings and ceremonies to discuss and commemorate Yom ha-Atzma'ut and al-Nakba - the Independence Day that Israelis typically celebrate and "The Catastrophe" that Palestinians simultaneously mourn (Kushmir-Strumtza, 2010). These spontaneous efforts to reach a common understanding of transformative historical events in the lives of both peoples are more than cause for hope that ethno-national

reconciliation is possible. They are testimony to the need for better social scientific research on the social-psychological obstacles to such reconciliation and the conditions promoting it. The proposed research promises to explore these issues in a novel and revealing way – by conducting a field experiment that will allow social scientists to examine how Israeli Jews and Palestinians struggle to reach a common understanding of their past in a natural social setting. If the Halbert Foundation generously funds the proposed workshops, it will help lay the foundation for this exciting project.

Notes

¹ Such knowledge and attitudes are bound to be more heterogeneous within each community than is commonly imagined. In a 2008 survey of Jewish Israelis, 8 percent of respondents acknowledged that the reason for the departure of Palestinians during the War of Independence was that the Jews expelled them. Another 39 percent said the Palestinians left for a combination of reasons, including “fear, calls of leaders and expulsion by the Jews.” Only 41 percent took the official Israeli view and rejected the notion that expulsion played a role in the exodus (Nets-Zehngut and Bar-Tal, 2009). Even in the absence of a similar survey on the opposing side, it is doubtful that Palestinians would entirely discount the influence of fear and Arab exhortations for their temporary removal, both of which historians have thoroughly documented (Morris, 2004).

² With their permission, we will record respondents’ addresses, thus enabling us to re-survey them.

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