

COMMUNICATION & LANGUAGE at work

Analysing group agency through narrative interviews – Cooperation and crisis in coexistence education organizations in Israel

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Abstract

The basis of cooperation is recognition and a common agenda. Cooperation is part of the agency of social groups in a professional setting. Working together for a common goal implies a shared concept. Especially in organizations with an educational or social agenda, agency refers to shared knowledge and empowerment.

This article focuses on the reflection of societal power structures and the impact of the minority-majority relationship in the analysis of agency. Social conflicts not only play a role in political commitment in general, but are also a constant source of difficulties in a work context in which colleagues are comrades and friends. By analysing narrative interviews with actors in Coexistence Education in Israel this article discusses the premises of group agency.

Keywords

Agency, Interaction, Israeli society, Narrative interviews, Reconstructive analysis

1 Introduction

The Israeli society is a prime example of a polarized and “divided society” (Smootha, 2002; Harel-Shalev, 2010). The conflictual relationship between Jewish and Palestinian Israelis and their claims on the territory are not the only dividing factors. The society is also polarized due to religious, socio-economic and political differences. Political debates about solutions differ along political lines such as “right” and “left” which increases potential conflicts (Sprinzak, 2001). Opposing historical experiences and narratives stand between Jewish and Palestinian Israelis and are part of the conflict.

The relation between the minority and the majority in a polarized country, especially along ethnic lines is played out in different areas in Israeli society. In the field of education for example, separation is a principle political concept: kindergartens and schools are divided into Jewish and Arab institutions (Agbaria, 2016). Although schools could play a major role when it comes to fostering integration and mutual understanding, the principle of separation works against that goal.

In this article I focus on Jewish and Palestinian Israelis *cooperating* in non-profit educational organizations. My interest lies in cooperation and the direct act of recognition and encounters in a conflictual field. This professional

mission of the organizations has been referred to as *Coexistence Education* (Abu-Nimer, 2002). Berlowitz underlines three aspects for Coexistence Education in Israel I want to stress as important for this paper: Interaction as an indispensable means of communication; friendship as an expression of recognition and respect, and political cooperation as a condition for joint action in society (2012, p. 15).

After the Six-Day War in 1967 and the Yom Kippur War in 1973, groups such as Peace Now emerged. These extra-parliamentary initiatives meant that discussions about war and peace could be conducted outside of official government institutions (Bar-On, 1996, p. 103). For the first time Jewish and Palestinian Israelis got together in dialogue groups (Abu-Nimer, 2002, p. 408) that stand for the beginning of coexistence work.

Salomon sees the recognition of the narratives as a necessary prerequisite for peace education. He wrote about the topic of peace education in Israel, which he conceptualized as a pathway towards peaceful coexistence in strongly polarized societies and especially in conflicts “with a real ethnic, racial or national adversary” (2001, p. 68). In principle, Israeli-Palestinian programs agree on the importance of acknowledging the history of the other, e.g. the Holocaust or Al Naqba¹ (Bekerman et al., 2012, p. 4).

My interest is in the conditions of cooperative action in these organizations. Using narrative interviews, I take an empirical approach to investigate questions of agency and crisis in education NGOs in Israel. My study gave rise to two questions for further research. First, how can we transfer the “extreme” Israeli case with regard to minority-majority relations and separation to questions of cooperation in migration societies in Europe where participation, empowerment and access are equally important subjects. Secondly, how can we measure group agency empirically by reconstructive research. By reconstructing agency and agentic processes out of narrative interviews from actors in the field of intercultural education in Israel the question arises what forms of cooperation and conflict are dealt with in the interview segments. This in particular points to a research gap that will be outlined in the following chapter.

The article concludes with a discussion of the implications for group agency in a polarized society and the methodological issues that emerged from my research.

2 Agency and Narrativity

Collective narratives and histories determine the notion of others in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Rouhana, 1997; Roberts, 2013). Narrative inquiry involves analysing narratives as “storied ways of knowing and communicating” personal experiences (Riessman, 1993, p. 25). The material used for this paper was collected for a study on forms of belonging and agency in the field of coexistence education in Israel (Kahle, 2017). I follow Schütze’s approach of analysing process structures out of auto-biographical texts (Schütze, 2006). Through narrative interviews, these “storied ways” can be analysed to reveal both individual perspectives and social and collective structures.

2.1 Agency

In a free hour, With the sociological analysis of the relationship between the individual and society, the connection between social structures and the ability to act becomes relevant. The increased research in the concept of “agency” is rooted in the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s in the Anglo-American world. The term became one of the central concepts in political and theoretical debates in the social sciences (Ahearn, 2010, p. 28). The discussions are revived in view of changing structures in late capitalist societies, economic crises, globalization, and the questioning of traditional structures e.g. by global migration processes (McNay, 2000, p. 1).

Acting beyond structure – social, ethnic, and cultural configurations – can be analysed through individuals and their forms of negotiating their position in society. Giddens’ theory of structuring and Bourdieu’s concept of Habitus are often applied to the question of the relationship between structure and action (Bourdieu 1972, Giddens 1976). Theoretical research on agency however is not offering clear definitions: “the term ‘agency’ is quite slippery” (Hiltin & Elder, 2007, p. 170). Despite the vagueness of the term agency, the difficulties involved in analysing the relation between autonomy and structure also indicate the concept’s flexibility. Ahearn offers a “provisional definition” that refers to the interdependence of structural bondage and subjective reflection: agency refers to the socio-culturally mediated ability to act (2010, p. 28). In their essay *What is Agency?* Emirbayer and Mische focus on action theory and develop their own approach explaining the relationship between agency, action and structure. Commonality and differentiation within this relationship show that the capacity to act is always connected to the reflective subject (1998, p. 1003) and thus refers to the relational character of the term (ibid., p. 981). Furthermore, empirical research opens up

¹ Al Naqba is Arabic and means catastrophe. The term refers to the flight and expulsion during the Arab-Israeli War in 1948/1949.

the possibility of investigating the relationship between the individual and the collective – precisely through the inseparability of action and structure. It is the degree to which this relationship can be changed that must be considered in empirical studies by showing how social actors behave differently from the social world (ibid., p. 1003ff.).

Joas et al. refer to personality, biography and values as dispositions of “agentic decisions” that appear through an interactionist approach. In the interaction process, “novelty and creativity” are consequences of unpredictable possibilities for action (2007, p. 78). Human action is fundamentally capable of creativity, founded in “desiring, for forming intentions, and for acting creatively” (Sewell, 1992, p. 20). For the understanding of agency, therefore, not only the interactionist method is helpful, but also the method of analysing narrativity, because the creativity of decisions and actions is realized in the narrative process. Action can be reconstructed from narratives – considering social influences as a producer of self-description. Agency emphasizes the ability to react to the circumstances in the process of action without reproducing them.

The social-theoretical discourse on how agency is conceived is quite broad. In contrast, empirical surveys mediating between theory and praxis are not common. As Kristiansen states with reference to Hitlin and Elder (2006) “agency can be viewed as an empirically measurable concept that individuals vary in [...]. Specifically, this view entails measuring the perceptions and beliefs about the ability to influence one’s own life.” (Kristiansen, 2014, p. 10). However, the interest in *group* agency remains on a theoretical level. “Shared agency” (Roth, 2017) is the philosophical equivalent of the sociological interest in group agency. Interrelation and interaction “of the participatory intentions if they are to account for the coordination and cooperativeness we find in shared or joint activity” (ibid.). Even though the theory is elaborate, there is no empirical insight at this point. A synthesis of theoretical and empirical research is necessary to fill this gap

2.2 *Narrativity and Interaction*

Interaction and the experience of the self are crucial in narrative processes and for shared agentic processes. Anthias states: “it is best to allow subjects to talk about themselves, their lives and their experiences, and their ‘identity’ will emerge through this narration” (2002, p. 492). Butler also calls this form of talking about oneself accountable to others. Thus, narration is also always about a relationship to others and to society (Butler, 2007, p. 21).

Strauss is a scholar of symbolic interactionism. The concept of “search for identity” (2008, p. 11) presumes face-to-face interaction between people similar to what takes place in a play. In certain games, appropriate roles have to be played, for example, between doctor and patient or lawyer and client. However, invisible figures and social groups such as family or friends also appear and influence the role and its expectations (ibid., 58). According to Strauss, the emergence of identity in interaction is a dynamic process (ibid., 91).

Action-theory means that social reality is produced by human action. Symbolic interactionism assumes that the human being is capable of interpreting social reality. As Blumer notes, “the use of meanings by the actors occurs through a process of interpretation” (Blumer, 1969, p. 5). This interpretative approach opposes a normative paradigm that determines interaction and assumes that individual action takes place in social spaces in which roles are already pre-structured by value systems (Abels & König, 2010, p. 11). Riessman states, in the context of interactional analysis in qualitative narrative inquiries, that “an interactional approach is useful for studies of relationships between speakers and diverse field settings.” (1993, p. 26)

Schütze, a German scholar in sociology, worked with Strauss on trajectories and life course interviews. He focused on the method of narrative interviews and the textual analysis of biographical interviews. He showed, through the study of an impressive amount of interviews and empirical material, that by recollecting the past in biographical narrative storytelling, the interviewee conveys a basic order to his or her life: “Narrative rendering of one’s own life deals not just with the outer events that individuals experience but also with the inner changes she or he has to undergo in experiencing, reacting to, and shaping (and partially even producing) those outer events.” (Schütze 2006, p. 8)

In the interviews for this study, actors in the field of coexistence education refer to their life stories, to interaction with co-workers social structures and political events. The interactional approach offers the possibility to identify cooperation as well as failed forms of agency in the professional setting. Moreover, it makes it possible to reconstruct the relation between society and individual as an intertwined relationship.

3 Three Cases of Group Agency

3.1 *Analysing Narrative Interviews*

Schütze and Strauss assume that spontaneous narrations are most likely to reproduce (structures of the time) by recapitulating experiences (1987, p. 14).

Schütze justifies this connection with the fact that when the narrative communication scheme is used, the so-called “constraints of narration” are most likely to occur, encouraging the interviewees to comprehensively recapitulate what they have experienced. The interviewee is urged to make their explanations as detailed as possible from beginning to end, so that the interviewer can follow and experience the story as coherent (Kallmeyer & Schütze, 1977, p. 162). In contrast, argumentative and evaluative forms of the presentation of facts are more strongly related to the present (Schütze, 1987, p. 149).

Briefly summarized, this method contains three basic steps. The first step of the “formal textual investigation” is an investigation of the material and its textual form, e.g. narrative, argumentation, description or evaluation (Schütze, 2006, p. 17). These different sorts of texts indicate certain implication with the text as a whole. “The second step of the interpretive analysis of a single case autobiographical text material is the sequential structural description of the textual presentation, i.e. its sequence of presentational units.” (ibid.). It is equally important to analyse the communication features in the text, as well as text markers and other structuring forms. To do so, the interview transcript needs to be quite detailed. The third step requires finally abstraction to create theoretical models.

Based on the empirical material, hypotheses and subsequent hypotheses are developed, which in some cases require sequential text analysis (Rosenthal, 2008, p. 60). In this way, the analysis generates hypotheses about possible patterns or structures as well as theoretical aspects that were not previously included in the cognitive process. Theoretical assumptions do not contradict the abductive procedure of interpretative social research – the extraction and verification of hypotheses in individual cases. The abductive procedure is opposed by the induction and deduction procedures. The inductive procedure applies the case to the theory and thus only determines a value; the deductive procedure develops theoretical consequences from a case and thus proves a thesis (Pierce, 1976, p. 163).

I analyse three cases by concentrating on the process of entering the field of coexistence education where the process of cooperation and “shared agency” implicitly starts. All three narrative processes were sparked by a moment of national conflict and crisis: the beginning of the Second Intifada in the year 2000.

Yotam, Roni and Yasmeen are Jewish and Christian Palestinian Israelis. They are from different age groups and they work in different organisations. The remarkable similarity in the experiences of the two Jewish Israelis can be found in forms of group agency and later in a moment of failure or frustration. For the Palestinian Israeli woman, social power relations play an immense role for her life decisions and self-presentation. At the same time, creativity is a crucial aspect for her agentic play. In all three cases, the crisis and conflict in society evolve in their narrative that clearly affects agency.

3.2 *Yotam*

In his lifetime, Yotam experienced several political conflicts in Israel. But the uprisings in 2000, which preceded the official beginning of the Second Intifada, were for him the moment of change and the beginning of his work in non-governmental dialogue groups. He used to work as a teacher, but stopped working in schools due to his commitment in dialogue groups. The following segments describe his initial decision to make this change.

“I felt: well I was of course like everybody very=very surprised and disturbed by the fact that the riots took place here ((gently hits the table)) in Israel (2) but the: my-my reaction was: wa-was not well it brought me actually my surprise and reaction brought me to be: eh among the founders of a civic action group to promote Jewish Arab dialogue (2) we affiliated ourselves to a national NGO (1) which is a quite well known association that (.) that its object is to bring to awareness especially to the Jewish awareness the=the gaps between Jews and Arabs the discrimination and stuff” (Kahle, 2017, p. 164).

Coming back from holidays, he is shocked that the riots take place “here in Israel”. He seems to be referring to the region in the north where he lived and worked, a region that is known for relative peaceful coexistence of Jewish and Palestinian Israelis. This suggest that he may not have noticed problems until then. Yotam depicts a rather condensed

process of change by adding that the surprise motivated and activated him to react and commit himself to dialogue. His lack of orientation and his shock stand for a change in the narrative process in which he has clearly followed a course.² In contrast to the previous part of the introductory narrative of the interview, this narrative refers abruptly to the events of 2000. In retrospect, however, it becomes clear that his intention was to make it clear how the educational institution in which he now works accepted him. He delves into more detail in describing his role in establishing an NGO noting that his “surprise and reaction brought” him to this decision. It is noticeable that the surprise is told from the first-person perspective, whereas when he talks about setting up the NGO, he switches to the “we”-form.

Yotam theorizes his reaction, the founding of the NGO, and reveals his knowledge of social conditions and access in coexistence education. Yotam’s left-Zionist notion of coexistence and mutual recognition also fundamentally determines his reaction to the uprisings: he wants to promote Jewish-Arab dialogue and move away from actions based on fear and shock.

“that reaction was that this is a crisis and it shows that eh: our neighboring co-existence was a very thin layer (2) and eh: we have now to be very active and work to (meant) the=the contact and practically (.) there were some people who (.) kind ki-eh quite spontaneously eh: eh: (.) started initiative of a: (1) dialogue tents for example (.) they put up a tent in the middle of M-Area (1) it was it was the days of the holiday Sukkot=are you familiar with that holiday? //yes yeah// so it kind of fits in with the culture of that eh=holiday where eh: we built a sukkot tent and e:verybody is invited to be our guest (.) so the idea was /lets meet here and just talk/ ((knocks on the table with every word)) (1) Jews and Arabs from the area (1) because this-what happened here (.) there is no: you can’t live like that and eh: so that that was the first reaction let’s just talk about it (2) eh: and then: came the second wave to which I belonged (.) this incidents shows: (.) that there are bad things under the surface (2) we have to do something about it (.) and it since we are the majority ehm: (1) it is more our responsibility to act (.) upon the problems (2) and that’s the logic behind bringing behind the idea of bringing the Jewish public to awareness of the wrong things that are in minority=majority relations here concerning the Arabs and things like that ehm: (2) you know for dialogue for coexistence (2) /and you know/ ((quite)) that things we are talking about here (.) I mean of course the inter-interpretation of our side (1) eh: in opposition to the: (.) to the oth-to the militant side they interpreted it as when it comes to the moment of truth (.) they are more Palestinians than Israelis //okay// (2) and if there is a conflict with the Palestinians (.) there is a conflict with them too (1) and the only way to confront it is eh: is eh let’s say: to frighten them to be strong (.) so that they won’t attack us //okay// (1) our interpretation was that eh: the events showed how much frustration alienation (.) anger (2) despair there is under the surface (.) because of discrimination (.) because of the gaps etcetera-etcetera and the solidarity with the Palestinians doesn’t necessarily imply being our enemies but (.) you know (.) they have problems with their identity and we can’t solve them it is not in our hand to solve the conflict with the Palestinians that’s the big policy (.) but it is in our hands to provide a better (1) equality and you know a better sense of of of citizenship of belonging” (Kahle, 2017, p. 166).

In this excerpt, Yotam presents an argument based on self-assessment by trying to provide a reason for why he was on the side of the “non-militants”. He himself assessed it as a psychological reaction which he cannot explain. After this brief personal interpolation, he continues his depiction of this reaction, again explaining quite precisely thoughts and actions. His personal involvement is obvious given that the description is detailed and the scenery becomes very visual. Symbol for his view of coexistence is the festival Sukkot. With his words “everybody is invited to be our guest”, Yotam seems to be outlining the relationship between Palestinian and Jewish Israelis in a subtle, yet cynical way. Even if this was not his intention, it becomes clear who has the sovereignty of interpretation in this conflict, that is, Palestinian Israelis are invited to be guests in the house of the Jewish Israelis. Later, this unequal relationship is unconsciously reproduced again when Yotam says that while it cannot be in the hands of Israelis to solve the identity problem of Palestinians in Israel, it is the task of Jewish Israelis to ensure equality and a better sense “of citizenship of belonging”. It seems to be implicitly stated here which side acts and is active and which side is passive and tolerated.

His involvement is due to the fact that this kind of conflict does not match his idea of living together. Yotam elaborates on his position and once again underscores that he was on the side that aims for coexistence and not on the side that advocates militant reactions. He clearly uses personal and possessive pronouns to illustrate his activity. His narrative is clearly structured by the background construction of the argumentative description. In addition to the

² In the interview, Yotam created a structured chronology of his life history. He told the story of his childhood, the army, university and work. As he began to discuss the events of 2000 the narrative became less structured. The textual change corresponds with change in his life.

narrative development of the event, Yotam lays out attitude as an argument. At the beginning of the segment, he reiterates to which side he belongs and then makes his political position clear. His assessment of the situation, that there are problems in co-existence and frustration prevails, leads to the practical consequence that “we, the majority” must take care of the problem. He sees it as part of his responsibility in a democracy to take the first steps. In doing so, he presents his theory of majority and minority positions in society, which he and his comrades-in-arms want to make understandable to the Jewish majority. Yotam is concerned with a balanced position in that he shows or outlines the concerns of the opposite side. It can be assumed that “the others” for him are not strangers, distant acquaintances, or an opinion in the media, but that one can find these different positions in the same family or in the neighbourhood. Yotam’s account remains on the level of theory and knowledge, and counter-positions are included in his argumentation. He argues factually, rationally and with confidence. Yotam knows the different levels of confrontation, but has remained true to himself, since the position corresponds to his basic biographical orientation as a kibbutz member. His own concept of belonging is not questioned or challenged.

The rationalization of political activism is also a narrative process that runs throughout his thematic field. Yotam was at first “disturbed, shocked” and then he began to theorize his position. By doing so, he validates it with knowledge in order to place the narrative of his political activism into a functional context with his professional activity. Although he seems to refute the thesis of a process of change, this only happens by controlling the structure of his narrative.

However, as can be seen in the course of the interview, Yotam is confronted over time with both internal (his changing relationship to the Shoah) and external (his Palestinian-Israeli colleagues) confrontations. This new process structure does not immediately make sense to him and he therefore loses a sense of control over the narrative. The process structure can be reconstructed in the following thematic field on Yotam’s relationship to the Shoah.

“I’ve been thinking a lot about the deep meanings of what we experience I mean the explanations (.) the circumstantial explanations (.) like Gaza especially Gaza (1) are clear but I’ve been asking myself a lot and I’m not sure I have very good answer what can we learn from the fac-from the f-(1) I mean (1) is there a lesson? that goes beyond eh the: the: temporary circumstances (.) I mean here in Israel in the Middle East (.) there is crisis every now and then anyway (1) but (.) what happened especially around Gaza is a deep (.) shock and eh (6) I think we are: (2) we are kind of testing the: (2) we are testing the limits (.) of a: (3) of a (2) intercultural (1) bi-national (2) co-work ((yeah)) I’m not sure (.) I’m not sure we can: (1) I can’t promise that we provide an eh a proof that it’s possible //yeah// (2) ’cause it seems sometimes I feel (.) as Jewish (1) worker here that the: ((short interruption)) (...) as a Jewish participant-eh Jewish staff //yeah// (4) given all the weights (.) on us (.) I mean the political situation=nanana (.) sometimes (.) I have the feeling (.) that simply (4) I’ll be now-I’ll talk now only from my perspective (1) if I won’t pretend to be objective (2) that ehm: (1) if I want-that there is not enough distance-that any distance I will go (.) towards (.) my towards my my (.) Arab-Palestinian (1) comrades (1) without giving up some of my: (1) basics (.) is not enough” (Kahle, 2017, p. 169).

In the last part of the interview, Yotam reflects on the cooperation between Jewish and Palestinian co-workers in the face Israel’s bombing of Gaza in 2008/2009 after Hamas continued its rocket bombardment of Israel’s southern regions. Yotam’s experience in his own team has obviously led him to explore the cooperation and form of coexistence work, and he expresses this on an abstract level before addressing his own personal position. The Gaza offensive had been a shock to the staff and had also affected the NGO participants. Yotam had clearly reached his limit, but still uses a generalized “we-form”, e.g. “we are testing the limits” (of bi-national education). He formulates his words carefully and emphasizes his uncertainty; he takes many breaks and is obviously uncertain about his own theory (“I’m not sure (.) I’m not sure we can: (1) I can’t promise”). He communicates a pessimistic take on the future. He cannot promise that coexistence education will work. He sees the problem – and here it becomes clear that he is talking about himself – in the ongoing political differences between Jewish and Palestinian Israelis, as long as the Jewish side does not abandon its principles – “basics”. Later, Yotam emphasizes once again what “basics” he is talking about: the importance of the Shoah for him personally and also for Jewish-Israeli society. What is also expressed in his theory about the future of cooperation is his frustration. His willingness to “[go] any distance”, in reference to his Palestinians comrades, is not enough. His “basics” on the one hand and his efforts to cooperate are not recognized – “there are not enough”, as he puts it.

In this thematic field about the early days of his activism, crisis is also a part of it, and is expressed in a phase of frustration and a certain sense of hopelessness. In Yotam’s narration, political events become a moment in which the crisis is increasingly expressed and it forces Yotam to position himself. At first, his political agenda and his counterpart, the militant conservative Israelis, were clear, whereas in the end, his partners are at the same time his sharpest critics.

3.3 Roni

To take Roni's narrative orientation is clearly focused on a process of change that turns out to be an insight on her discovery of coexistence education. She introduces this process of change by depicting her lack of political commitment as a young person.

"I had a boyfriend: then: and I did this and went there and I went with a friend from the army to abroad: (.) took a trip: (.) came back and I went to the university and in all of that I wasn't active and in a way I wasn't (1) not very political (...) and: I went to the university and I wanted to study psychology and I needed to take another subject so I took sociology (1) as a second major (1) just because it was there: not eh: not for any other reason (.) I'm saying this because my master is in sociology now so //mhm// but @³ (.)@ eh: I began with psychology (.) and I met a few friends in the university: and in the first year there: a friend of mine came to me=he knew my political views in general but not (1) he said there is a meeting of Jewish and Arab students=you wanna come? I said na: I don't have the time (1) he said no: but come I don't want to go alone please come with me: >whatever< and I came (.) I didn't have much motivation (.) and: it's like in a few seconds I was wshshshd into: like a trip of into it (.) I didn't spend much time in class that year" (Kahle, 2017, p. 198).

Her time after the army and before university is dealt with in vague terms, without going into any detail: she "did this and went there", travelled and finally began to study. The way in which she narrates an unspecified sequence underlines the insignificance of her activities, which she measures relevant as being "politically active" and "in all of that I wasn't active and in a way I wasn't (1) not very political". The journey is unimportant, the friends from that time are nameless. She begins to study psychology and sociology as a minor, only to then drop off an explanatory insert that she is currently completing her Master's degree in sociology. Her statement hints at how much she has changed since the beginning of her studies.

Here she relates her experience in the first year of her studies, which is what led to a change. A friend of hers tells her about a meeting of Jewish and Palestinian students. At first, she was not motivated to go and then, after her friend persuaded her, she was quickly fascinated by the meeting: "and: it's like in a few seconds I was wshshshed into: like a trip of into it." The sound *wshshshed* stands for a pull. In order to underline the meaning and the consequences of the meeting, she closes this narrative with a comment: "I didn't spend much time in class that year."

Her moment of change can be worked out through language, for example, the narrative flow before and after as well as the temporality. Her narrative had shifted from un focused and slow: "I had a boyfriend: then: and I did this and went there and I went with a friend from the army to abroad: (.) took a trip: (.) came back and I went to the university." This form of long drawn-out and almost aimless narration was observed earlier and stands in stark contrast to the period after the first dialogue meeting. It seems like a sudden realization and insight into her own affiliation. The onomatopoeic depiction through the expression "wshshshed" depicts the moment of "recognition" of falling into something. From this point on, the narrative is more dynamic. Friends have names, and the activities are explained and filled with meaning and a sense of content.

"I was very: much with the group that began I think a month or two before I joined=it was a dialogue group but eh very quickly it became an active group //okay// it was the time of >I think< 2001? so all the Second Intifada was very much active very much there (...) the operation inside Djenin (.) Rafiah all the things that happened=I don't know whether all the things I'm saying makes sense or not (.) I can tell the events more specifically but it began eh: (2) protest activities inside the university and we became a very very active group //mhm// (2) we had a eh: protest tent in front of the university all the time: and then a /protest tent in Djenin and then a tent of house demolition in Rafiah and then a protest tent in and this and this and whatever/ ((very fast)) and stands and demonstration and: (.) I don't remember exactly the month I joined but I remember by March I was organizing things there and very I don't remember but we organized something on Purim >I remember that< eh: (...) it became an active group there was no dialogue meetings just what we were doing (.) and I learned: (1) a lot during this time (.) I think my dialogue process was without a dialogue=without an organized dialogue (1) but: (.) I remember standing in a tent in a protest tent=we spent days there sitting in a tent talking to people=sitting in a tent with

³ In the transcripts "@" stands for laughing.

Palestinian partners //mhm// and they were talking about something and they were saying Naqba (1) I never heard the word before //oh okay// I didn't know (1) I thought okay I need to sit quietly and listen (1) and it brought a lot of concepts and I think I learned then (.) I think I was Zionistic=I was eh: when I: I'm sure I was when I began this activity=a few month later I wasn't (1) and: without: eh: direct (1) teaching or dialogue it was acting together feeling that is the right thing to do and rolling from one thing to another thing and then: being surprised and the next day saying okay (.) that's how it goes: and then being surprised: again:" (Kahle, 2017, p. 200)

Roni is now part of a group, which is now her central place of action. She quickly lists the political events with which they were confronted as an active community with a resounding voice. At the same time, the importance of this social circle is reinforced by talking in the *we-form*: "we became a very very active group //mhm// (2) we had a eh: protest tent in front of the university all the time: and then a protest tent in Djenin and then a tent of house demolition in Rafiah and then a protest tent in and this and whatever and stands and demonstration". In contrast to her narration of life before being politicized, a lot seems to be happening at once. Spontaneous joint action creates the basis for the group's first experiences and learning processes with binational dialogue: "but more it became an active group there was no dialogue meetings just what we were doing (.) and I learned: (1) a lot during this time (.) I think my dialogue process was without a dialogue=without an organized dialogue".

From her current perspective, she sees dialogue as an important element of direct action. She describes her own experience in a documentary narrative of a political transformation process: The moment in which she sits in a tent and hears her Palestinian partners talking about Al Naqba challenges her previous political understanding. Perhaps it was this one event that prompted Roni to question her previously held political ideas. But perhaps this rather paradigmatic content on Al Naqba also serves as a metaphor for her learning process.

Spontaneity and non-intentional action are central for Roni. She is feeling that it is "just right". This underlines the immediacy of the process of knowledge that emerges with change: "and: without: eh: direct (1) teaching or dialogue it was acting together feeling that is the right thing to do and rolling from one thing to another thing." The transformation is part of an educational biography in which the learning process is emphasized, and from which something new and good emerges. A strong group-related self-realization, which emerges beyond institutional processes and expectations, dominates Roni's biographical process after this initial experience. Coincidences guide her story and she herself is surprised by the course of events as she stumbled from one day to the next. The common action is her learning process. She now grants others an important role in her biographical presentation, those who assisted her in the realization and confirmation of her process. These people serve as motivation and are central for Roni's decisions and actions.

Roni's process of change and rediscovery of her own potential prompt her to co-found an organisation focusing on political education. She is intensely involved with her colleagues who are also her friends. Still, in the end of the interview Roni seems to be exhausted by the constant reminder of power relations inherent in this well-functioning example of working and acting together.

"bi-national is being: always prove yourself worthy //yeah// (1) always (.) it's part of the reason why I'm happy with the break I did=I'm not running away (.) I'm coming back but I @needed a break@ eh: (...) It is very hard (1) it depends of course of the person but you sometimes need a few years to proof yourself (.) and what means to proof=do I wanna proof? Today I have the dilemma (.) do I wanna proof myself? Do I need to proof myself? Isn't it enough what I do?" (Kahle, 2017, p. 256).

Roni just had her second child when we met for the interview and she is "happy [about] the break". The reason is a possibility to escape the "bi-national" arena where she feels the need to prove her worthiness and reliability as a white, Jewish member of staff – a member of the dominant group in Israeli society – in dialogue settings. Roni does not object to the necessity to reflect on her own interplay with social power structures, but also knows that there is no escape from them. She argues that it is "hard" work to be accepted by co-workers and critics.

3.4 *Yasmeen*

Yasmeen comes from a political Palestinian family in Israel. She was still in school when the Second Intifada began. Her school was one of the few schools in Israel in which Palestinian Arabs were taken. For Yasmeen's political commitment, the Second Intifada may not be a moment of insight or an event that triggered a process of change, but for her it was a clarification of the fronts and the scope of racism and discrimination with which not only she, but the Palestinian-Israeli minority in Israel in general, is confronted.

“And during my high school years the Second Intifada broke (...) like December 2000 I started my last year (.) in school (2) and it was a disaster (2) because (1) it was like also inside school the dynamics that started to-to come to the surface=it is not that before we didn’t have disagreements but it was sort of you know like okay daily life of a conflict place sometimes we have issues if there is the Independence Day then there is an argument and so on (.) but you know it was (.) ordinary (.) but in the-this last year 2000=and 2000 December 2000 (.) also when=when thirteen young eh (2) youth like Palestinian youth from inside Israel were killed on demonstrations (.) it was a really=I don’t know if it was a shock because it wasn’t the first time demonstrators were killed and it wasn’t a surprise that they were killed (.) but it was a serious thing it was an issue ehm: and it also=it made things clear more clear to me (.) eh in the sense of who are we here in Israel as Palestinians what is our role (.) what do we have to do what is the the: (.) the relation that is good to have with Jews (.) because also I had Jewish friends in high school and we were in our last year they were all signing up for the army (.) which was obligatory but they could still refuse eh: (2) but eh (3) but most of them didn’t (1) only one did @ (1) @ ehm so it wa-it was (1) yeah I-I don’t know (.) like it was: (.) I think if I haven’t been going through this experience (.) I wouldn’t be the same (.) person (.) as I am in the sense of understanding the Jewish society and understanding this dynamics (.) and also having the confidence of-of having this dialogue with the-with the Jewish mainstream and the Jewish community (.) because I know them really well (1) and ah (.) I know (.) what they think how they feel what they claim and I know how to answer this and how to deal with this (.) so yeah this this was a very important part” (Kahle, 2017, p. 225).

Yasmeen underscores the importance of the Second Intifada. This narrative also underlines the influence her school had on her. For Yasmeen, the Second Intifada and its consequences shaped her as a member of the Palestinian minority in a Jewish-Israeli school, given that the conflicts was reflected in the microcosm of the school For Yasmeen, it was especially the uprisings in autumn 2000 when 13 young people were shot dead at a demonstration in northern Israel that changed her understanding of her status in society and influenced her reflections on the question: “what do we have to do”. The transition from a critical but self-evident acceptance of the realities of Palestinian life in Israel to seeking concrete change is expressed at this point: “it wasn’t the first time demonstrators were killed and it wasn’t a surprise it made things clear more clear to me”. In the following sentences this clarity is still limited to the we-group and is then argued by Yasmeen with regard to her own situation: “what is the relation that is good to have with Jews”. She asks herself about the relationship to Jewish Israelis, stressing that she is an actor in an everyday conflict and social conflict. Her Jewish classmates become collaborators in Israeli politics, as Yasmeen makes clear by their obligatory examination and registration for the army service, which begins after high school. The military is the symbol of the enemy, and her classmates correspond to her construction of a collective other: “they could still refuse eh: (2) but eh (3) but most of them didn’t”. She downplayed the difficulties of refusal, which implies little empathy with the other. But equally little empathy was shown to her. An evaluation follows with a theory about her own self: “if I haven’t been going through this experience (.) I wouldn’t be the same (.) person”. Yasmeen explains in what way she is another person – in the sense of understanding Jewish society. She takes a quasi-anthropological perspective, whereby she also promotes essentialization of the other. What is interesting here is that this essentialization only functions as a demarcation from a collective majority, from which she feels oppressed and discriminated. Her personal experiences and contact with others do not correspond to this binary view. It is precisely in her political commitment, which begins shortly afterwards at the university, where experiences of cooperation dominate. This is where her social situation changes: she is no longer a political outsider, but part of a group of similarly critically minded students *beyond* origins. At the university her social activity takes place outside of her studies. Yasmeen quickly became politically active.

“I can say that the studies weren’t my main focus interest in the university period @ (.) @ I was living next to the University in the dorms: (.) and eh (...) I very very quickly I found my political activities @that I-I liked@ ehm (.) oh yeah I had diff-different stuff we established like some Palestinian students from different places (.) we established a group called (Sheikh XY) named after the village the University is built on its ruins //ah okay// and we did some activities: (.) like cultural activities movie screenings and stuff like this (.) so this is one and then I joined a group which was called the dialogue group (2) eh: which was like we had Jews and Palestinians in the group (.) trying to do political awareness=activities for other students (.) and it was also it was a it was a period of of a lot of a lot of violence was happening but not only violence you know it was a very intense period ’cause it was 2002 (...) the occupation all over the Westbank and then in 2003 it continued and the massacre in Jenin and the bombings of Gaza and

you know (.) it was three years that were-even more that were very significant political-wise (1) and so I: I was doing this also during also university (.) and I got to know most of my current friends from university (.) the high school friends they just they just you know (.) (disappeared) (.) because it was a collection of people you know coming from so many different places from so many different backgrounds (1) the Jews they went to the army the Palestinians went each to another University so I didn't have really relationship that stick (.) and (.) I think in the university it was it was a great period it was really: (1) you know I got to-most of the people I know today I met them through in this three years in University” (Kahle, 2017, p. 227)

Yasmeen laughingly notes that her studies were not the focus of her interest. This suggests that there was something different, more interesting and more satisfying. Yasmeen shows the ability to seek alternatives and solutions in potentially crisis-ridden situations and not to succumb passively to them: “very very quickly” she begins to get politically involved. She laughs as she talks about what she did what she liked. Here too, the *I* turns to the *We* and points to the social aspect of engagement. With this group, she organizes events and film screenings dedicated to different political issues around the relationship between Jewish and Palestinian Israelis. She joins a dialogue group and her commitment is not limited exclusively to a collective, as initially assumed. She inserts a description of the political situation, which at the same time refers to the political conditions with which the group is confronted. Yasmeen introduces the conditions with “a period of a lot of violence” and describes the time span as an “intense period”. This description of the Second Intifada is vague, but in the linguistic representation and repetition it is expressed as a huge challenge. She lists the political events that were significant for her during the Intifada. She concludes this narrative with her political commitment. One does not know exactly what she did, but afterwards the social aspect of this period is emphasized again in contrast to her school days. In the dialogue group at university, she gets to know friends with whom she is still in contact, whereas she lost contact with her former classmates for different reasons: “you know I got to- most of the people I know today I met them through in this three year in University.” The university is the starting point of an important time for her, and this period also affects her professional decisions. She remembers this time positively without exception, in contrast to the actual political situation shaped by “a lot of violence”.

In her narrative, Yasmeen offers little insight into her private life. Her close contacts, family members, or her husband do not appear in her narrative. Except for her parents, she does not mention any significant other that influenced her or helped her in certain situations. Other people only appear in her narrative as “We” or a “Collective”, and serve as contrasting foils or cooperation partners.

Yasmeen mentions three aspects that she considers to shape her personality: her family's political commitment, her school years in Jerusalem, and the conflicts and events that followed the Second Intifada. She outlines these three events and clearly follows an action-chemical process structure.

During her social engagement she seeks cooperation and social contacts, whereas in her studies and professional life she does things on her own. Here the personal pronoun “I” dominates the narrative. Yasmeen repeatedly separates narrative chains of professional duty fulfilment from an independent process of becoming an activist. Ultimately, she combines both by becoming the boss of an organization for political education, a field of work she is also interested in privately.

Institutional patterns are juxtaposed with parallel social situations, her social commitment and friends. She is determined to take on all socio-economic hurdles, first the boarding school and then the renowned study program, as she explains in the demand section. In both places she is again one of the few Palestinians among a number of Jewish Israelis and manages to survive, even if this means taking on the role of the “troublemaker” at school, for example. Immediately after her studies, she gets a job at a well-known large company and is ultimately the managing director of an organization whose work she greatly appreciates. It is not only the story of social mobility, but also a story about a Palestinian girl who is not like the others. Yasmeen is successful and conveys this in her narrative: a clear scheme of action, structured institutional procedures and the almost professional separation of work and private life or political commitment. Her feminist and political convictions, which were already communicated to her at home, coincide with her determination and her positive turn of the school years. She knows “what I can achieve and what I can do: or where I can get to”

4 Discussion

The interviewees are involved as actors in coexistence-oriented educational work in Israel, whose normative settings, idealistic references and ideas of a society are relevant for their decisions in their social and political environment. They work in a field in which one of the region's central conflicts has to be negotiated on a professional and personal level. These three cases selected here exemplify the facts of joint work and cooperation as well as crises and potential for failure. The conflict as a starting point for change and activism is an overarching moment. In all three cases, group action and cooperation based on a common agenda and political understanding is satisfactory. As colleagues and friends creative interactive situations are established and a common ground for agency is negotiated.

Differences can be seen in the detail: Yotam is put to the test because his idea of cooperation does not work in the face of new violent conflicts and dissent among colleagues. The recognition of his own experiences and history plays an important role since the Holocaust is part of his family's history and it is not recognized by his colleagues. For Yasmeeen, too, recognition is a basic motivation for her actions and the starting point of her activism. As a Palestinian girl at a Jewish-Israeli school, she experiences subtle exclusion, she is able to redirect until the Second Intifada. Although her activism gives her security during her studies, recognition and success are central to her narrative. She completes her studies with top marks, works in a large company and ultimately becomes the head of an educational organization. It is from this social position that group agency and cooperation work, as she holds a respected and safe position.

Roni's commitment has long been a social anchor for her and opens her up to friendships, recognition, and the ability to act. Her commitment is a learning process, but after a few years it seems she accepts the limits of what is possible. She acknowledges the need to constantly reflect on her own position in a society in which the relationship between majority and minority is conflictual and structural exclusions are evident.

In principle, joint action means sharing common ideas and ways of acting as well as participation in group processes. The actor experiences recognition in the group, which I was able to reconstruct as a central moment of joint action. Agency as a group process is perhaps easier to gain and to keep. On the other hand, agency for a common cause in a group release power relation between minority and majority in society. Social conflicts do not only play a role in the personal process of change or for political commitment in general, but are also a constant source of difficulty within working contexts. It is precisely the social relevance of these professional and political spaces, in which colleagues are also comrades and friends, that makes dealing with conflicts more difficult.

Conflicting cooperation, frustration and, in some cases, hopelessness are not only evident in the interviews in the face of violent events such as the Gaza Offensive of 2009. In conflictual cooperation, the Jewish or Palestinian colleagues become the "others" before whom one has to prove oneself. Roni's and Yotam's case show that social conflict is also reflected in their own work. It is precisely by addressing one's own position and the privileges it entails that the Jewish-Israeli side often feels they have to "prove" themselves (Roni) or feel that "it is never enough" (Yotam). Yasmeeen expresses her own difficulties with the dialogue work. Her criticism of her Jewish colleagues is justified by their overall superior position in society and the experiences of racism and discrimination. Although the actors share an agenda, they are confronted with their own positions in the Israeli society. They all play a role outside the mainstream within their community by engaging in a form of dialogue. They must, however, tolerate the factual differences brought to the surface by social conflict and integrate them into their work and actions. The permanent process of critical examination, questioning and being questioned is exhaustive, just as being excluded and discriminated as a minority in the society. This confrontation is challenging for agency and seems hard to bridge.

5 Conclusion

Theoretical connections to the results of the empirical study can be drawn from the considerations on the significance of the interaction process for agency. The qualitative approach by analysing narrative interviews allowed to reconstruct creative ways to act and at the same time allowed us to reveal power structures and their individual handling. Especially in the process of negotiation and interaction with the "other" can decision-making take place. Belonging emerge from interaction with others and thus play an important role in cooperative action. Significant others are, on the one hand, the counterpart and, on the other hand, independent identities in themselves due to their significance as significant others, helping friends, colleagues, or family members. "The constitution of the other as a self, a social object" (Vaitkus, 1991, p. 14) is a necessary precondition for a social group and is thus related both to the self-image (of the story teller) and to

the necessity of recognition in the interaction process. Cooperation arises here through a common positioning as “the others” and thus the same.

The transfer of the “extreme” Israeli case is possible, however, by adapting the minority-majority relation to current social challenges in European states. Also, in Europe the possibility to interact, to negotiate, and share agency by finding creative paths is needed. To show that social actors behave differently than the social world around them can only be done through surveys that focus on the acting subject and his/her agenda. But it became obvious that a common ground to build cooperation on is not easily reached but needs to be seriously and constantly negotiated.

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