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The Group as a Community Social Change Agent: The Case of the Bedouin

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The Bedouin community in the southern Negev desert in Israel is a population in transition. The article describes how deliberate intergroup dialogue enhanced the ability of a group of teachers from the community to discuss the complexities of the transition within a supportive group setting as a starting point to facilitate social change.

KEYWORDS Bedouin, Israel, group work, social change, gender, diversity, international group work

The article describes work with a group of Israeli Arab and Bedouin, Muslim teachers in the southern Negev desert of Israel. The work was conducted within the context of a unique neophyte training program aimed at preparing schoolteachers to serve as facilitators for parenting groups within the Bedouin population. Parenting groups were identified as one medium capable of mediating the enormous social change taking place in the Bedouin population in the region. Teachers from within the community as well as Arab teachers from the North of Israel working in the Bedouin community were identified as potential change agents to facilitate the social change process.

Early on in the training program the trainers recognized that one of the foremost questions concerning the group members was not how they would gain the knowledge and skills to become group facilitators for parenting

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groups, but rather how they could use the training program to discuss change within the traditional Bedouin community and their ability to cope with the change. The group members conveyed their desire to create a “safe space” to explore their own perceptions and feelings about the community to prepare them for their work as group facilitators.

An analysis of the work suggests that this group of facilitators in training can be seen as a microcosm of issues of class, gender, and culture transition inherent in the broader Israeli Arab and Bedouin community. The trainers decision to allow for the use of the group as space for what An-Na’im (1992) referred to as “internal cultural dialogue” and what others refer to as “dialogue” (Bohm, 1996; Schatz, Furman, & Jenkins, 2003), and “intergroup dialogue” (Dessel, Rogge, & Garlington, 2006), enabling the group members to differentiate from and reconnect to the community through the creation of a safe space for diversity of thoughts and ideas, became the most powerful theme of the course. That theme and the potential of the group dialogue to nurture a process of social transformation in the broader community in periods of transition is the focus of this article.

The article begins with a description of the Bedouin population and a brief discussion of the changes occurring in the community in contemporary Israeli society. The group work facilitators training program for parenting groups that served as the context for the dialogue work is then described. Finally, the theoretical framework for the group dialogue is detailed, and the role of the group as a medium to discuss and impart social change is delineated together with illustrations from the group content and process.

THE BEDOUIN POPULATION IN THE NEGEV REGION OF ISRAEL

The Bedouin population in the southern Negev region of Israel is a Muslim minority estimated at approximately 180,000 members. Traditionally a seminomadic people, the Bedouin are undergoing dramatic changes as they adopt a more sedentary, Westernized lifestyle (Raz, Atar, Rodnay, Shoham-Vardi, & Carmi, 2003).

In the mid-1960s the Israeli government initiated a “resettlement-induced socioeconomic transition” (Dinero, 1997, p. 248) through the creation of a town program or “recognized villages” for the Bedouin community that heretofore resided in outlying and less developed frontier regions. The planned urban environments house approximately one-half of the entire population of the community in the Negev region. An additional 80,000 Bedouin continue to reside in outlying “unrecognized villages”; villages that lack basic services such as running water, electricity, health clinics, schools, and more; villages considered illegal by the Israeli government (Human Rights Watch, 2008; Swirski & Hasson, 2006).
Resettlement in the urban environment has led at one or another time to opportunities for growth and development for some members of the community, and occasion for family and community crisis for others. Changing gender roles, growing discrepancies in class status, and shifting cultural traditions, all part and parcel of the modernization processes experienced by the community, are common to the villages.

The transition from a seminomadic and agricultural society to an urban setting has left many of the Bedouin in poverty, unable to adapt to their economic dislocation (Bailey, 2000; Swirski & Hasson, 2006). Furthermore, as Bailey (2000) noted:

> The contrast between the strict social conventions and values of the traditional Bedouin life and those of the new urban life, with its great exposure to modern, Western values, creates confusion among many urbanized Bedouin regarding their identity and values, and the role and status of women in society. (p. 26)

Relationships among the Bedouin who have moved to the recognized villages, and those remaining in the unrecognized areas are also affected. It is common to hear Bedouin from the villages refer to those in the outlying areas as “primitive and more traditional.” Changing gender and intergenerational roles, growing economic despair, and shifting cultural norms and practices have exposed the need for assistance to cope with the impact of “progress” and the societal schisms in its aftermath. The Bedouin group work facilitators training program for parenting groups was developed as one such intervention.

**THE BEDOUIN GROUPWORK FACILITATORS TRAINING PROGRAM FOR PARENTING GROUPS**

The Bedouin group work facilitators training program for parenting groups was developed by The Center for Parents, Families and Community in The Kaye Academic College for Education, in partnership with the Ministry of Education and the Bernard Van Leer Foundation. The Kaye Academic College, located in the southern Negev region, serves a large Bedouin student body. Recognition of the issues facing the students and their families led to the initiative to develop a program attuned to the unique characteristics and challenges facing the community.

**Guiding Principles**

Five major principles governed the development of the program. The first principle was that of relevance. The program was committed to ensuring
that the participants deepen their connection to the Bedouin tradition while recognizing the challenges facing the community within the predominantly Western Israeli context.

The second principle that governed the training program was partnership. Program participants were identified as the experts in regard to Bedouin tradition. To make the training program relevant, their knowledge and experience in regard to issues of culture, taboo, custom, and the like were integral to the development of new approaches to parenting.

The notion of multiculturalism framed the third principle behind the program. Here the focus was on understanding and legitimizing not only other cultures within Israeli society, but also more importantly on legitimizing different points of view and perspectives within the Bedouin culture.

The fourth principle focused on social and family awareness and aimed at assisting the course participants to identify the relationship between changes within the family unit and larger changes affecting the Bedouin community, among them changes in traditions, lifestyles, women’s roles, and social-economic status.

The fifth and final principle, strengthening the family as a primary site to support change, was viewed as the central-most vehicle to strengthen roles and relationships amidst the changing reality.

Program Structure and Participants

The 3-year training program combined 2 years of theory and one year of field practice. During the first 2 years program participants studied for a total of 8 weekly hours. Program content included Bedouin family psychology, developmental psychology, law, including traditional Bedouin family law, Islamic law and Israeli law, drug prevention, prevention of violence in the family and the community, Adlerian concepts of communication, and the group work course.

In the 3rd year of study the practicum combined 40 hours of field experience in establishing and facilitating parenting groups, with 80 hours of supervision. Graduates completing the course requirements were awarded certificates from the Israeli Ministry of Education. Certification enabled the graduates to conduct parent training groups within a variety of settings—formal and nonformal in governmental, private, and nonprofit institutions.

Sixty male and female teachers participated in the program over a 4-year period. Participants ranged in age from 23 to 45. Some of the participants were married whereas some were single. Some were religious and some secular. Some were lighter in color and some darker in color. Some wore traditional Bedouin costume and some did not. The fact that men and women, younger and older, married and single, participated together in
INTERGROUP DIALOGUE AND SOCIAL CHANGE – THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

According to Dessel et al. (2006) “intergroup dialogue work is a process designed to involve individuals and groups in an exploration of societal issues about which views differ, often to the extent that polarization and social conflict occur” (p. 304). An-Na’im (1992) noted that,

Dominant groups or classes within a society normally maintain perceptions and interpretations of cultural values and norms that are supportive of their own interests, proclaiming them to be the only valid view of the culture. Dominated groups or classes may hold, or at least be open to, different perceptions and interpretations that are helpful to their struggle to achieve justice for themselves. (p. 20).

This internal struggle for what An-Na’im (1992) called the clash for “control over the cultural sources and symbols of power within the society” (p. 20) can be volatile. On the other hand internal struggle can lead to enlightened perceptions of the values and traditions of one’s culture and concomitantly to social development and social change. Creating a forum for what McCoy and Scully (2002) referred to as “deliberative dialogue . . . to build relationships, solve problems and address policy issues” (p. 117) and linking opportunities for intergroup dialogue to broader community organizing efforts can make the difference in assisting communities to weather the tides of societal transition and change (Kacen & Soffer, 1997).

Intergroup dialogue is a facilitated process that is geared toward collaboration, connection, relationship building, openness, active listening, mutual respect, inquiry, and reflection (Nagda & Zuniga, 2003). Intergroup dialogue takes on a nonadversarial approach (Dessel et al., 2006). Schatz et al. (2003) noted that “dialogue groups seek to create a sense of community and wholeness” (p. 483). At the same time dialogue groups seek to raise complex issues of social power and control, oppression, and values, challenging the legitimacy of these and the societal norms that allow for the maintenance of the status quo. The purpose of the dialogue is not to push to solve or resolve the issues at hand, but rather to create a space where ideas and ways of being are challenged and reflected upon through varying lenses and paradigms (Schatz et al., 2003). This mutual process of exchange in and of itself creates possibilities for individual transformation and cultural revolution (Bohm, 1996; Dessel et al., 2006; Schatz et al., 2003). McCoy and Scully (2003) noted that it is in the process of connecting personal experience with
public issues that individuals begin to develop a sense of agency and this sense of agency enables individuals and groups to become actively engaged in addressing community issues.

Intergroup dialogue among the Jewish majority and the Arab minority within Israel is common (Abu-Nimer, 1999; Maoz, 2001). Unprecedented however is the notation of this type of dialogue within the Bedouin population itself: a population often seen as far more monolithic and homogenous than is actually the case. Divided by tribal and family origins the population is wrought with internal divisions of its own. Exposing the schisms and addressing them in a secure environment was unusual and innovative and was the basis for the work with the teachers in the group work course of the training program.

THE GROUP AS A COMMUNITY CHANGE AGENT – THE BEDOuin
GROUP EXPERIENCE

The group work component of the group facilitators training program constituted a total of 200 hours in the first 2 years of the program. Each 4-hour weekly session included a facilitated group process, a process for debriefing, inquiry and reflection on the group experience, and a theoretical link to group work to create a cognitive framework for the group experience.

During the first year of the program the course trainers facilitated each aspect of the learning. By the 2nd year group members were planning and leading the group process while the course trainers continued to facilitate the debriefing, inquiry, and reflection process as well as the theoretical component.

Over the course of the first year the group members began to recognize their unique role within the context of the Bedouin community. All had studied in institutions of higher education within Israeli society, institutions that reflect a Western hegemony. As such the group members found themselves at a junction between the traditional values of the culture and competing values predominant in the broader Israeli society that were filtering into the Bedouin community at large. These challenged the status quo within Bedouin society and became issues of contention within the group.

Each issue raised by the group members juxtaposed traditional and modern values. For many, the recognition of how community values on issues of gender, class, and culture hindered the growth of the individuals and subidentity groups within the community could no longer be silenced. At the same time group members deeply acknowledged their desire to preserve the distinctiveness of the Bedouin tradition.

Recognizing the power of the group to facilitate dialogue that enabled them to cope with their own feelings and thoughts about critical issues in a safe space away from the community, the group members brought “taboo”
topics to the table, among them: polygamy, early marriage, and female high school dropout; the emphasis on the familial collective as opposed to individualism, including notions of family honor; the use of physical force with children in the home and in school, sex education, or lack thereof; poverty and social status stratification among the different tribes of the Bedouin community; and finally, patterns of coping with death. Some of these issues are elaborated upon as they emerged in the group process.

Gender Issues

According to Dinero (1997) the urbanization of the Bedouin community has led to shifting roles and status of Bedouin women. Urbanization has contributed to the growth in education of female children, expanding attendance in academic institutions and entrance into the work force, heightened freedom of movement without a male chaperone, opportunities to meet males outside of the family tribe, changing marriage patterns, declining fertility rates, and divorce.

At the same time, these changes challenge traditional Bedouin values, still prevalent among Bedouin in the recognized villages, and particularly among those residing in the unrecognized areas. Traditional values view women’s predominant role in the home, within the tribe, in the realm of reproduction and protected by male kinsmen and hence securing her family’s honor. For many young women entrance into adolescence signals the end of participation in the education system that is predominantly mixed gender. The fear that the intermingling with males could result in a relationship that would harm the notion of family honor leads more traditional families to remove their daughters from the education system. These realities and perspectives were reflected in the group dialogue.

Mohammad attended the group together with his wife, Amal, in and of itself an illustration of the Bedouin community in transition. Amal worked as a nursery school teacher in her recognized village whereas Mohammad was employed at an elementary school in an unrecognized village. The two arrived at one of the meetings barely able to wait for the opportunity to speak. They relayed to the group that the night before they had attended the sixth-grade graduation ceremony at Mohammad’s school. After the ceremony they had turned to some of the female graduates to hear about their thoughts as they would now move into the junior high school. The girls told them that their fathers would not allow them to go on to the junior high and that they had now completed their education and would soon marry.

A sense of despair filled the room. Amal and Mohammad were deeply pained. They expressed their sense of entrapment. Mohammad said that he would go to visit the fathers and convince them to allow their daughters to continue their schooling. A discussion unfolded detailing the pros and cons
of approaching a traditional family around the issue of female education. Some of the group members stated that they feared for Mohammad’s life as he would be seen as an intruder, disloyal to the Bedouin tradition.

Although there were no clear “answers” the discussion enabled the group members to share their thoughts about family honor and the price that women pay to ensure family honor. They discussed the notion of trusting women as the basis to ensure their honor while allowing women to leave the home to continue their education. One participant suggested that if a family has raised its female children well that they will have an inner boundary that provides them with clarity of judgment. Hence there will be no need to keep them within the physical boundaries of the home.

In a second example Amin, a young man in his late twenties shared with the group that he was about to marry. He spoke of the fact that he had been a free man and shared some of his concerns regarding marriage. He told the group that it is well known that “women are snakes. They are the cause of sickness.” What followed was immense. The women in the group were taken aback and expressed so. The men in the group were somewhat silent. It was an older male member of the group who changed the nature of the dialogue about women. He told the group his personal story. He had lost his mother while young and had grown up without her. He spoke of how losing his mother had enabled him to recognize the significance of women in one’s life. The room was transformed. Members of the group began to talk about women’s strengths, their abilities as leaders. The fact that it was a Bedouin man of considerable status who spoke about the positive qualities of women gave the group permission to continue. Some expressed to Amin their sense of sorrow for men who do not have the opportunity to understand a woman’s significance. Weeks later and after the marriage Amin returned to the group to thank the members and to share his sense of how wrong his thinking had been.

Finally, Zenab shared with the group her thoughts and feelings about male–female relations during municipal elections in the Bedouin villages. According to Zenab it has traditionally been the case that the men of the village have told the women whom to vote for. She expressed her anger at the men and the women who took part in this façade. She noted that though it might be true that women knew less about the elections they still had their own ideas and they should have the freedom to decide who they would like to see in power. The group discussed the issue and recognized that it would be extremely difficult for the women of the village to tell the men that they wanted to vote for the candidate of their choice. This could lead to conflict. On the other hand, Zenab noted later in the conversation that the women could decide that once they went behind the veil they could in fact vote as they wished and no one would every know. As such she identified the changing roles and power of Bedouin women in the public sphere.
Class and Cultural Issues

Class relations were also raised in the group. Miriam discussed her fear of not being accepted by the parents that she would facilitate in her parenting groups given the fact that her family was of considerably less economic means and social status than other families in the village. She spoke of her concern that her ability to establish her role as some type of an authority would be challenged consistently given her socioeconomic standing.

Suleiman continued. He discussed the notion of honor within the patriarchal Bedouin family structure. Within this structure it is the father who decides for the family. In the absence of the father it is the eldest brother who makes critical decisions regarding the life of the family and its members. Suleiman shared with the group his apprehension around challenging that structure. What if, for example, he was to suggest something in his parents group that would be interpreted as an attempt to defy an older brother? How could he possibly be responsible for change in the community and for challenging its traditions?

One of the main issues raised in the group process was that of polygamy. Early in the program group members discussed how the Islamic consent to the marriage of up to four wives unfavorably affects parenting skills and abilities. The practice of polygamy is common among Bedouin (Al-Krenawi, 2001; Al-Krenawi & Graham, 1999). A significant percentage of the population continues to live by the practice even today. The group ventured to discuss how this “common practice” has social, psychological, and economic repercussions on the community. They noted the following:

- Polygamy renders a situation whereby the father is oftentimes away from home visiting with his other wives and their children. While the father is away the burden of child care falls upon the mother.
- Oftentimes the father prefers a particular wife. This leaves the other wife or wives and their children at a disadvantage.
- In cases where there is a poor relationship between the wives, the children have poor relationships with their [half] siblings.

The group participants discussed how each of these scenarios affects the ability of the parents to work as a parental unit. They expressed on the one hand the notion that polygamy is part of the Bedouin culture. On the other hand they foresaw great difficulty for the future of families and the community given this practice.

One final example demonstrates in a vivid manner the tug of war between the forces of tradition and those of modernity. Toward the end of the program the group members arrived at the meeting directly after an automobile accident that took the lives of three members of the Bedouin community and among them two young children. As the discussion around
the accident and its aftermath unfolded it became clear that members of
the community, who had witnessed the accident or arrived soon after, had
contacted the family of the dead immediately. This as opposed to allowing
the appropriate professionals, be they doctors, social workers, and/or the
police to do so. The group members questioned the appropriateness of this
action, a common practice in the community. Why do individuals take the
responsibility of notifying the family? What are the repercussions of doing
so in a nonprofessional manner? Is it better for the family to hear such news
from a family member or a stranger? This discussion based upon an event
of the “here and now” revealed how the struggle between the past and the
current are present in every aspect of the lives of this unique community.

ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION

The Bedouin are a subculture within Israeli society. The group dialogue
exhibited the challenges facing a culture that is on the one hand attempt-
ing to preserve its particular identity and at the same time attempting to
assimilate into a larger socioeconomic and political context. More specifi-
cally the dialogue exposed some of the internal issues facing a community
in transition.

The use of the group as a public space to debate some of the complex-
ities and divisions within the Bedouin community enabled the members to
view the issues and themselves differently. This section pinpoints some of
those changes.

New Perspectives on the Issues Facing the Community

The intergroup dialogue enabled the members to recognize the discourse
on the traditions, norms, and values of the community as an occasion to
transform reified phenomena into opportunities to advance social change.
Indeed the issues raised provided the members with a prism to comprehend
how some of the issues reinforced the status quo within the community.
What had heretofore been seen as personal or private woes within the family
became a public issue to be addressed to assist the community to promote
and mediate social change.

Intergroup dialogue has the potential to create a constructive context
that facilitates growth. Eliasoph (1996) called this “the very act of getting
together ... this is the power to make the public” (p. 36). The very act
of getting together enabled these group members to reconstruct meanings,
meanings systems, and community messages and norms. Recognizing the
relationship between the Bedouin community in general and the Bedouin
family in particular advanced the perception of the group members of their
role not only as facilitators for parenting groups but also as social change agents as well.

New Perspectives on the Role of the Group Members Within the Community

The intergroup dialogue process was significant in assisting the group members to conceptualize their role in the community. In that the process addressed issues that could easily lend to conflict in the community they were faced with questions surrounding personal values and professional identity. Allowing for a dialogue that raised complex issues and invited a myriad of perspectives and that did not foster group reprisal was a new experience for many. We found that the group members became better listeners over time and that the very act of dialogue improved the relationships between them and their sense of individual and collective power.

Resistance to the group leaders, a common phenomenon in group work, was not met with the retaliation that the teachers were accustomed to in their own professional and community hierarchies. This enhanced their ability to speak openly and share their feelings and emotions. Group members who had been angry at one another learned to apologize without seeing this as a sign of weakness. Men and women who had heretofore sat at opposite sides of the room joined the circle sitting side by side. These are messages that will hopefully be carried on not only to the parenting groups but also into the classrooms.

The group members expressed the significance of the process in the final meeting. “The group experience is something that we can model ourselves after.” “It was the well that we can drink from when we are thirsty.” “This is the correct way to bring success to our community.” “The group has given us important messages.”

Kacen and Soffer (1997) suggested that the support group can be useful in situations of societal transition, serving as a “lever for social change” (p. 277). We found that the use of the group as a space for intergroup dialogue served to anchor this group of teachers and galvanized them to create similar forums among others within their community.

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NOTES

1. Retrieved from preparatory program document – The Center For Parents, Families and Communities, The Kaye Academic College For Education.
2. Identifying information has been changed to protect the identity of the group members.
3. Zenab was referring here to the curtain of the election booth yet named it the “veil” perhaps hinting at her ability and that of other Bedouin women to expand the significance of the traditional hijab.

REFERENCES


