

"I Felt that the World Belonged to Me": The Significance of Civic Engagement among Palestinian University Graduates in Israel

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ABSTRACT

The current study identified factors that characterize the significance of civic engagement in 24 Palestinian university graduates in Israel who were involved in extra-curricular civic-engagement programs as students. Using an interpretative phenomenological analysis of semi-structured interviews conducted five to 10 years after completing their higher education, three themes emerged. The first is related to the expansion of the graduates' identity primarily as regards acquiring new skills and self-knowledge as well as greater self-competence. The second theme covers civic engagement as a vehicle for developing a political identity and social awareness. The third theme depicts activism as providing relief, especially from their studies. The findings are discussed within the framework of identity exploration.

Keywords: civic engagement, Palestinians, students, community development, identity

EMERGING ADULTHOOD

Emerging adulthood (ages 18-30) is a special developmental period that differs from late adolescence or late adulthood. Relatively free of the dependence on parents that characterizes adolescence and from the responsibility associated with social roles that characterize adulthood and is influenced by technological and globalization processes, this period enables young adults to devote time to an intensive exploration of their identity. At the end of this period, young adults are expected to make significant decisions about critical life domains such as education, employment, and relationships. Similarly, during this period, worldviews are examined including values, norms, ethical standards, political and social attitudes (Arnett, 2007; Flanagan & Levine, 2010; Padilla-Walker et al., 2008).

Nevertheless, the exploration of identity and the transition to young adulthood are conditioned by social circumstances which have a decisive effect on young adults' ability to postpone their entry into adulthood and devote time and psychological and financial resources to exploring facets of their identity (Barnett, 2000; Bynner, 2005; MacDonald, Shildrick, Webster, 2005). As such, membership in minority groups that have less access to political and economic resources and enact cultural practices different from those of the dominant society also affect young adults' opportunities for identity exploration, thus curtailing this period considerably. These young adults are expected to transition into adult life immediately after adolescence without any time for identity exploration (Arnett, 2000; Nelson, Badger, & Wu, 2004; Rose, Daiches, & Potier, 2012). Data for Israel show that whereas only 7% of secular Jewish young men aged 18-

25 are married and parents, many Arabs of the same age are married, and 35% are even parents (Kahan-Strawczynski, Amiel, & Constantinov, 2016).

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Developmental psychological theories of thriving and Positive Youth Development (Lerner, 2004; Lerner, Fisher, & Weinberg, 2004) have pointed to the importance of civic engagement as a mechanism to promote identity exploration and personal development, especially among marginalized-socially excluded populations and minorities (Flanagan & Levine, 2010). In the current article, we use the term “civic engagement” in a broad sense, to mean “individual and collective actions designed to identify and address issues of public concern” (APA, 2012). This can take many forms, from individual volunteering to group organizational involvement, to voting (Adler & Goggin, 2005). By referring to both personal and collective actions addressing issues of public concern, this definition sets civic engagement on a continuum between the political and the civic realm. Engagement can lead to a sense of connection, interrelatedness, and commitment to the community at large (Adler & Goggin, 2005; Youniss et al., 2002).

In an attempt to promote young adults’ civic engagement, in the past twenty years, there has been a dramatic proliferation of civic engagement programs in higher education around the world. These efforts reflect the traditional perception of the role of universities as the “bastion of democracy” in promoting democratic values, increasing active citizenship, developing pluralistic values, as well as promoting students’ personal growth (Butin, 2010; Flanagan & Levine, 2010; Harkavy, 2006). This tendency is revealed in the growing numbers of service-learning courses and extra-curricular civic-engagement programs which have gained prominence in higher education during the past fifteen years across a wide range of fields of study (Bringle & Hatcher, 2009; Flanagan & Levine, 2016; Johnson Butterfield & Soska, 2013). For instance, in the USA, over 950 member colleges and universities, representing approximately five million students, participate in service-learning initiatives (Kenworthy-U’Ren, 2008).

Nevertheless, this tendency remains anchored in a traditional and even privileged mode of thinking. In response, the terms “community engagement” or “campus-community partnership” have recently been coined to reflect more egalitarian, critical, and radical thinking about civic engagement. These terms draw on Paulo Freire’s critical philosophy (Freire, 1968/2000) that promotes processes of social justice and social consciousness through a critical examination of the concealed inequities in society and praxis (Einfeld & Collins, 2008; Gerstenblatt & Gilbert, 2004; Mulroy, 2008). At the same time, feminist theories (e.g., Lather, 2001; Lee, 2007; Weiler, 1991, hooks, 1994) suggest that the central components of civic engagement are related to the opportunity to give voice to muted voices within society, engage in equal dialogues with key figures in the community, and promote women’s needs to diminish the traditional dichotomy between the personal and the political (Lee, 2007). In this way, individuals become social and political agents of change who can empower themselves and society mutually (Cornwall, 2000, 2003).

In Israel, vast resources have been assigned annually by the Council of Higher Education of Israel to advance service-learning partnership learning courses (Golan & Rosenfeld, 2015). Yonder these curricular activities, most institutions of higher education have established Civic Engagement Units that are jointly by several foundations as well as the Council for Higher Education of Israel. These programs employ thousands of students to participate in these extra-curricular civic-engagement activities in exchange for a partial scholarship (Golan & Rosenfeld, 2015; Golan, Rosenfeld, & Orr, 2017). In addition, and also supported by the Council for Higher Education of Israel, the nationwide “PERACH” program (the Hebrew word for

“flower” and the acronym of the tutoring and mentoring project) has paired approximately 22,000 university and college students every year over the last four decades in one-to-one and group mentoring programs to high-risk children and adolescents (Goldner & Golan, 2017).

Studies on students’ non-behavioral outcomes (i.e., attitudes, knowledge, and skills), behaviors, and behavioral intentions have reported fairly consistent positive effects for students’ civic engagement during their academic years (Bowman, 2011). For instance, students’ civic engagement was linked to a greater competency to create intimate adult-child interactions, forge personal skills, and the ability to incorporate knowledge taught in different courses (Bullen, Farruggia, Gomez, Hebaishi, & Mahmood, 2010; Hughes, Boyd, & Dykstra, 2010), increased self-esteem and leadership abilities (Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Yee, 2000; Simons & Cleary, 2006), critical thinking and positive attitudes toward diversity (Ahrari, Samah, Hassan, Wahat, & Zaremohzzabieh, 2016; Amerson, 2010; Golan & Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2014), as well as greater obligation to future civic engagement (Beaumont, Colby, Ehrlich, & Torney-Purta, 2006; Moely, McFarland, Miron, Mercer, & Ilustre, 2002; Nishishiba, Nelson, & Shinn, 2005; Payne & Bennett, 2000; Wellman, 2000).

Nevertheless, research in the United States points to the sub-representation of youth and young adults from minority groups in civic-engagement in general (Foster-Bey, 2008; Fridkin, 2006; Torney-Purta, Barber, & Wilkenfeld, 2006) and in higher education in particular (Checkoway, 2001). However, these studies also underscore the importance of encouraging minority students to participate in these activities (Checkoway, 2001; Flanagan, Cumsille, Gill, & Gallay, 2007). Specifically, it was suggested that civic-engagement programs in institutions of higher education can play a significant role in heightening students’ social/political trust, exercising their political voice, and developing civic competencies and social awareness (Beaumont et al., 2006; Flanagan & Levine, 2010; Reed, Jernstedt, Hawley, Reber, & DuBois, 2005). Considering Palestinian students are a minority group inside the state of Israel, which is underrepresented on campuses. In Israel, it is essential to examine the qualities, benefits, and opportunities social engagement programs offer to Palestinian students if any.

Palestinian Students in Israel

The experiences and benefits of Palestinian students’ civic engagement are best understood by first describing the context in which they live and study. Although 28% of all 15-19-year-olds in Israel are Palestinians, only 15.2% study in institutions of higher learning in Israel, of whom more than two-thirds are women (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2017). This disparity in academia can partially be explained by the lower budgets devolved by the State to the Arab education system in Israel, which hampers Palestinians’ chances of meeting the admission requirements for institutions of higher education. The psychometric exam, which for two decades now has been known to discriminate against Palestinian applicants (Golan & Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2017) also makes it difficult for Palestinian applicants to pass. The result is that most Palestinians applicants have to apply for programs that fall short of their aspirations, thus increasing the likelihood that they will drop out of the university in the future. Furthermore, most have difficulty with Hebrew and English, especially during the first year, since these are their second and third languages (Abu-Rabia-Queder & Arar, 2011). This may explain why Palestinian students in Israel often report a sense of detachment, difficulties in coping with Hebrew, and fear of losing their proficiency in Arabic. Moreover, different from Jewish students who sign up to higher education after 2-3 years of mandatory military service, Palestinian students, who do not demand to serve in the military, are usually younger when they enroll. The fact that Palestinian students are younger makes them stand out in the student landscape.

In addition, political alienation, exclusion, and animosity all affect their interactions with their Jewish counterparts (Golan & Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2017; Hendin, 2011). While Jewish students belong to the majority group, Palestinian students belong to an indigenous minority group that remained within the borders of the State of Israel after most of its members were uprooted during the Nakba in 1948 (Rouhana & Sabbagh-Khoury, 2015). Living under the circumstances of chronic political conflict, the inequality and gaps between Jews and Arabs in Israel are multidimensional, deep, ongoing, and exist in a wide range of areas, such as employment, income, housing, planning and construction, infrastructure and development, health, welfare and education (Golan-Agnon, 2006). The result is that many Arab students drop out of Israeli universities and apply to academic colleges with lower entrance requirements or opt for studies abroad, mostly in academic institutions in the occupied territories and Jordan and not in Israel (Abu-Rabia-Queder & Arar, 2011; Abu-Rabia-Queder & Weiner-Levy 2008).

In Israel, there has been controversy over the inclusion of young Palestinian citizens in Israeli National Service programs (civil volunteering programs that serve as a substitute for the army service. These programs are aimed at young Israeli adults who cannot serve in the army for health, religious, and security reasons). Lately, however, there has been a slight increase in the number of Palestinians in civic service programs, but the vast majority of Palestinian citizens of Israel do not sign up for these programs due to the budgetary connection of the programs with the Ministry of Defense and the symbolic identification with the Israeli state and military service (Golan & Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2014). Thus, participating in civic engagement in the context of Israeli university programs may be an alternative channel for Palestinian civic engagement. Therefore, drawing on the framework of identity exploration, the current study examined the significance of civic engagement to the development of Palestinians five to ten years after they graduated. This work is an extension of a previous study that examined the main factors contributing to the long-term perception of meaningful civic engagement in a sample of Israelis graduates who were involved in extra-curricular civic-engagement programs as students (Authors, 2018).

METHOD

Participants and Procedure

The sample was composed of 24 former Palestinian college students (21 (88%) females, 3 (12%) males) who were engaged in civic engagement in the following programs. Participants were recruited by e-mail from the Social Units of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and Ben-Gurion University of the Negev as well with PERACH on these campuses, and the AJEEC-leadership project at the Negev Institute for Strategies of Peace and Development. Approval was obtained from the Ethics Committee for Research on Human Subjects. All the participants were involved in two ($n = 16$) or three ($n = 8$) years of volunteering. Every year, all participants took part in 100-120 hours of civic engagement and 10-56 hours of supervision and received approximately \$1,500 annually in return for their involvement.

Fifty-seven percent of the participants were married ($n = 18$), and the others were single ($n = 6$, 43%). Thirty-eight percent of the participants had an M.A. degree ($n = 9$), and the remainder had a B.A. degree ($n = 15$, 62%). All participants were employed. Most of them are social workers or hold various positions in the field of education. Seven participants were active in PERACH. Three participants were engaged in the Units for Civic Engagement. Seven respondents operated within PERACH's Prevention of Violence Project, and seven participants were engaged in the AJEEC project.

The Interview.

After obtaining their written consent, the interviews were conducted in Arabic by a research assistant. Participants were asked to denote the influence of their activism, indicate the emotions that best summarized their period of activism and their studies, to describe a significant experience during their civic engagement, and assert in perspective what they would have changed in their activism. In conclusion, they were questioned if they were taking part today in civic engagement and whether this engagement was connected to their academic activism.

All the interviews were recorded, fully transcribed, translated into English, and analyzed based on the principles of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis as defined in the Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) guidelines. Each interview was handled separately, and the analysis began with a rigorous reading and re-reading of the interview transcript so that the researchers could become acquainted with the content. All significant meanings were noted. Once complete, the transcripts were re-read this time to detect evolving themes from the first notes that summarized the significance of the text. A preliminary list of initial themes was established from which a second list linking the themes was created that clustered these themes into a smaller number of higher-order themes. We rejected themes considered to make a minor contribution to appreciating the phenomenon to achieve parsimony.

FINDINGS

The analysis of the interviews revealed a process of maturation and self-development that was manifested in three central themes touching on the significance of civic engagement. The first theme deals with the expansion of participants' identity, mainly as concerns acquiring new skills and self-knowledge as well as greater self-competence. The second theme concentrates on civic engagement as a vehicle for forming a broader Palestinian political identity, whereas the third theme describes activism as providing relief, especially from their studies.

"I am no Longer the Same" - Civic Engagement as a Self-Formative Experience

Civic engagement was experienced as a self-formative experience which shaped the lives of the graduates through the acquisition of new self-knowledge, communication and leadership skills and enhancement of their sense of self-competence. For some, the experience of volunteering was accompanied by the transition to the university and leaving the family home, which, in turn, was experienced as a growth or a maturational experience. As volunteers, they needed to grapple with challenges and unexpected situations in new surroundings and had to show initiative and creativity, which promoted their sense of self-competence. The idea of engagement as accelerating a greater sense of self-competence appeared repeatedly in the participants' interviews. The graduates frequently underscored the significance of the positive feedback they received from the community as positive factors that built up their self-esteem. This feedback served as a validation and a reflection of their competency and was particularly relevant to the formation of their identity, especially given the age of the volunteers, who were younger than their Jewish counterparts.

For example, A. (M.A., PERACH) described her maturation process and the acquisition of self-competence by saying:

"I started volunteering when I was 19. I finished high school and moved from Sachnin (her village in the northern part of Israel) to Be'er Sheva (the city where the university is located in the southern part of Israel). It was like going to another world and volunteering increased my self-worth [...] when I did something and succeeded, and the coordinator praised me. I began to believe that nothing could stand in my way anymore, I'm not passive anymore, I'm no longer the same."

For others, civic engagement provided an opportunity to interact with people of different ages, social classes, and ethnicities from those they encountered regularly. These interactions generated questions regarding the graduates' sense of self and forced them to explore their strengths and weaknesses. Throughout their civic engagement, they actively searched for a more robust, specific, and sophisticated sense of subjectivity regarding who they were and how they fit into the social world in which they lived (Arnett, 2000). They stated: "I benefited so much from the engagement because I learned things about myself, my qualities and traits that I did not know I had before" (J. M.A., PERACH).

"I started volunteering by accident and learned many things. The civic engagement experience was the basis for where I am today. From then on, I knew that the field of youth was important and I learned how to coordinate and manage projects [...] You could say that volunteering helped me acquire knowledge and get to know new people, even new information. I can say that the project influenced me and shaped my leadership qualities" (H. B.A., PERACH).

As such, most of the graduates referred to the influence of civic engagement on their career choice and said it served as a springboard for their life goals and plans. For example, H. (B.A.) who volunteered in PERACH said: "I started to plan my life, my plan became more defined. You know what you want to do today and in the future and you cannot find this in an official setting." A. who volunteered in PERACH said: "I work today as a social worker with children with special needs. Through volunteering, I acquired many tools to deal with the children's parents, and it helps me now." S. (B.A., the Prevention of Violence Project) stated: "Obviously, my job is connected to my volunteering, since I work with socially excluded populations, not necessarily children with special education needs, but I am attracted to working with these kinds of populations." L. (M.A., Prevention of Violence Project) said that "After volunteering, I started to realize what my strengths and weaknesses are. I realized I could guide people, also my career orientation, I really wanted to work with women who were sexually abused, and that what I did. Working in the rape center was a decisive moment, a starting point in my life".

Finally, numerous graduates described the process of expanding their social networks and obtaining social capital. For example, H. (B.A., AJEEC) stated: "It gave me the chance to connect with the people around me, with people who are activists in the Negev and people I would not have had the opportunity to meet otherwise."

Forming a Broader Palestinian Political Identity- Leaving the Campus and Working with Palestinian Communities

For many of the graduates, civic engagement was their first encounter with Palestinians who lived in East Jerusalem. This encounter left a profound impression on them and served as a self-defining experience. The vast majority of the Palestinian graduates had moved to Jerusalem to study (except for two female interviewees who were born in East Jerusalem) from the north part of Israel. The status of the Palestinian residents of East Jerusalem is different from the status of the Palestinian citizens of Israel. While the Palestinian citizens of Israel are Israeli citizens, the Palestinian residents of East Jerusalem are considered permanent residents. This status grants them all the rights and obligations that apply to citizens of the state. However, unlike any other Israeli citizen, they are not allowed to vote for the Israeli parliament (the Knesset), carry Israeli passports, and their status of permanent residency which provides them freedom of movement can be easily deprived of them. In addition, they live under harsh living conditions that involve poverty and hardship when 73 percent of the population is defined as poor. They deal with demolitions and evictions and significant funding gaps (Ir Amim, 2018).

Although many Palestinians who live here in north part in Israel do not perceive themselves as part of historical Palestine, Palestinian graduates who came from the northern part of Israel and volunteered in East Jerusalem said that during their period of activism they developed a sense of belonging to the city of Jerusalem and the Palestinian community. They talked about becoming aware of the difficult circumstances of the Palestinians in Jerusalem while developing a sense of connection, solidarity, and caring for them. In many cases, and before they started volunteering, the graduates were unaware of the inherent inequality in the education system and their privileged status upon Palestinian in Jerusalem. A similar process occurred for graduates who volunteered in the Bedouin villages in the southern part of Israel. For example, G. (M.A.) a PERACH graduate said the following:

"I knew nothing about the problematic conditions people live in Jerusalem, but when I came and saw through PERACH what's going on there, I felt connected to these people, solidarity and I constantly contemplate about how I could improve their conditions, their life situation, small things."

A. (M.A.) a graduate of PERACH program, stated: "We, the Palestinians are detached from each other. I came to know more about the situation of Palestinian in East Jerusalem and the entire Palestinian struggle, the educational system, the curriculum, and the educational system in East Jerusalem by volunteering." R., an AJEEC graduate (B.A.), stated: "I was formerly R. from Tel Aviv, and today I am R. from the Negev."

Surprisingly, although the most of the participants A. (M.A.) were involved in a dyadic civic engagement such as mentoring, they spoke about their activism as a socio-political change, cited their contribution to the entire community, and voiced their desire to make a difference. They stated:

"This was my first confrontation with our economic, social reality, and the political situation. The experience was maturational for me. I encountered the harsh reality of East Jerusalem. I discovered the disparities. I began to see the picture more clearly. I took a stance and developed a critical view of life and the economic, social, and political situation. I developed a leadership spirit of giving and change. It was a difficult experience, but I felt full of energy" (H., M.A., the Civic Engagement Unit of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem).

"I think it was an important and constitutive experience in my life. This was the first opportunity to get to know Jerusalem in depth; I started my journey there. Today I am involved in political activity" (F., B.A., PERACH and Prevention of Violence Project).

It seems that for many of the participants, their civic engagement was the first opportunity to be related to their Palestinian identity and roots. Specifically, since that, no programs in the school system are designed by the state of Israel to help Palestinians engage with their identity. Through engaging within their community, they described how they divested themselves of their privileged position as the elite of Palestinian citizens of Israel in favor of a more critical and oppositional stance. In some cases, they described their insights with a sense of sadness and disillusionment.

One graduate said: "It made me socially involved in everything that was happening around me. I discovered a different explanation than what I was raised to believe. I learned to accept society and not just criticize it or be ashamed of it. Society is you, and once I feel part of society, I have to accept it and stop having an arrogant vision" (E. B.A. PERAC and Prevention of Violence Project).

In various cases, former students who volunteered mainly in the Civic Engagement Unit at the Hebrew-University described taking a position protesting Israeli political reality and attempts on the part of Israeli students to ignore the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the context of Israeli academia and to refer to the Arab students as disciplined and nice. These descriptions were often accompanied by either a sense of anger or sadness.

For instance, H. (M.A.) stated: "I began to develop my identity. No, I am not an "Arab pet" (a colloquial discriminatory term for assimilationist Arabs), I discovered myself, and sides of me that refused to go with the flow. I have something deeper than being nice. It made me appreciate and see myself differently."

The anger has also appeared in H's (M.A.) narrative:

"My identity was built under a charged atmosphere. I refused to do what is false, and I began to develop my identity. No, I'm not the good Arab woman and let's go eat hummus. I do not want to eat hummus. It encouraged me to build my identity. I discovered myself and sides of me that refused to go with the flow. I have something deeper than what you think. It made me appreciate and see myself differently."

Other students described a sad process of disillusionment in which they came to realize that the Israeli- Palestinian conflict is a deeply -enduring rooted conflict with no foreseeable resolution. This realization engendered an active psychological position and a commitment to change. For instance, H. (B.A. AJEEC) recollected and said:

"I had a fantasy that the Arabs and the Jews could live together in peace, two states for two peoples, but I began to realize through the activism that it was impossible, and I learned that if I wanted something I had to work to get it".

Another significant component of graduate women's engagement was related to gender and to the development of the ability to express their voice as Palestinian women. This was particularly true for women who worked in the framework of the Prevention of Violence Project with corporation with PERACH project.

The graduates stated: "When I look at what is happening around me, I examine it with a critical eye - how things affect me as a mother, as a woman, as everything I am. Even before volunteering, I considered myself opinionated and a fighter, but civic engagement gave me the language and tools to use and to think through." (A. M.A., Prevention of Violence Project).

"Today, I am more engaged in political activity, especially as regards the Occupation; gender is undoubtedly one of its components. Political and social issues are what motivated me in life today: politics and gender issues and the rights of Palestinian women. I try to apply things to try to change at least a little" (H. M.A., The Civic Engagement Unit at the Hebrew University).

"I Felt that the World Belonged to Me": Civic Engagement as Providing Sense of Relief

During the interviews, the graduates were asked to state one feeling that summed up their civic engagement. The majority of the graduates perceived their civic engagement as satisfying experience. Over and over they used terms such as "satisfying," "wonderful," and "enriching" to describe their activism and characterized their civic engagement as an experience that was full of positive energy, that recharged them and fueled them with power. For example, A. (M.A., volunteered in PERACH) said, "I felt that the world belonged to me. I would forget the fatigue and feel very happy and happy with what I was doing. I felt that I had value in society, I would prove my existence"; J. (B.A., PERACH) said: "The civic engagement was a change of atmosphere for me, it was free hours, and it helped me in my life. I would wait for those hours. To help someone and be part of his life to improve it"; L. (M.A. Prevention of Violence Project)

stated: "It was the light in my life, I remembered the joy I experienced during volunteering, a joy that I could make a difference to my society."

DISCUSSION

Identity achievement is a crucial developmental landmark. Erikson (1968) considered fidelity to be the cornerstone of this process, and pointed out that fidelity embodies engagement with an ideological agenda, which is manifested by having a purpose in life, a sense of belonging, and a commitment to others and society as a whole (Furrow, King, & White, 2004; Lerner, Dowling, & Anderson, 2003; Thoits, 2012). Thus, an ideological setting provides young people with well-defined beliefs, values, and worldviews that serve as a foundation for their identity and defines their societal roles (Damon, Menon, & Bronk, 2003; Erikson, 1968). The findings here show how participation in civic engagement constitutes identity on both the personal and ideological levels.

A young Arab's identity is shaped within a complex socio-political context (Smootha, 1992) caught up in a national and religious conflict. Several models have been put forward to explain how members of the Palestinian minority integrate their national (Arab or Palestinian) and their civic (Israeli) identities. The best accepted are the bipolar model (Tessler, 1977), the orthogonal model (Suleiman & Beit-Hallahmi, 1997), and the politicization model (Smootha, 1992). In the bipolar model, national and civic identities oppose each other because of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Identification with one side of the conflict inevitably refutes identification with the other. The orthogonal model posits that the Israeli and Palestinian components are independent, such that merger between the two is possible. The politicization (or integration) model (Smootha, 1992) suggests that together with the "Palestinization" process, Arabs in Israel are experiencing a parallel process of "Israelization."

In the current study, evidence for the orthogonal and the politicization models was found. In particular, the experience of the civic engagement left a deep impression on the participants that enabled them to break out of their "Israelization" process towards the development of a process of politicization. The encounter with the deprived Palestinian communities in East Jerusalem and in the Negev, which took place in social, gendered, and political contexts, enabled the graduates to perceive their volunteerism not only on the psychological level or as an act of goodwill but to analyze their experience from the standpoint of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as part of a power distribution and discriminatory practices of socio-political inequality. They explored aspects of their marginal and dominant identities while interrogating their social worldviews and furthering their understanding of the complexities of social inequality and power distribution. They understood that the discriminatory situation was neither random nor predestined, nor was it related to a flaw in character, but instead derived from institutional discrimination and inequality between Israelis and Palestinians.

This ability to analyze this problematic reality critically by unpacking the power relations of socio-political hierarchy and patriarchy enabled the graduates to move from passivity to action and from silencing and oppression to empowerment (Daoud, Shankardass, O'Campo, Anderson, & Agbaria, 2010; Tesoriero, 2005). Studies have reported that only civic engagement that deploys a critical analysis of the power relations embodied in the inequalities of the society in which they live can produce a mutative experience, social obligation and change (Cherry & Shefner, 2004; Zendell, Fortune, Mertz, & Koelewyn, 2007).

Furthermore, for many of the participants, civic engagement provided relief from their academic work and muted reality, probably because it was charged with the meaning of life. These positive feelings are especially striking and interesting given previous studies which

documented the alienating, draining, and frustrating experience of Arab students in Israel (authors, 2018) as well as the emotional and physical investment required to volunteer which demands freely giving large amounts of one's emotional and physical resources to provide for the welfare of others for nonobligatory reasons.

As suggested, a person's identity may be interwoven with one's purpose of life, which provides individuals with a crucial way to allocate their resources toward meaningful achievements that then provide a sense of well-being. The literature on highly diverse samples and different forms of data collection appear to converge to suggest that significant sources of meaning in life come from personal relationships, achievement, success, and altruism. The greater the variety of sources of meaning are experienced, the greater the sense of fulfillment from the time and energy devoted to the realization of personal potential, caring for others and the commitment to a broader societal or political context. In the current study, the findings strongly suggest that the participants had the opportunity to fulfill all three of these components.

On a personal level, the graduates had the opportunity to develop new abilities and skills. They explored possibilities and areas of interest while acquiring new knowledge of the self that helped shape their future orientation in a more coherent way (Duke, Skay, Pettingell, & Borowsky, 2009; Nelson & Eckstein, 2008). In this respect, the civic engagement may have served as a vehicle in acquiring social capital which is especially important for individuals from socially excluded minority groups that have fewer opportunities to be actively involved in identity exploration (Nelson & Eckstein, 2008; Strier, 2010; Putnam, Feldstein, & Cohen 2003). The engagement at the macro-level (connecting with other members of their community and understanding reality in broader sociological categories such as nationality, ethnicity, and gender) enables individuals to engage in a eudaimonic activity that targets something that is beyond the ego and mundane concerns. This association leads to self-realization and meaning that subsequently stimulates subjective well-being. Thus, the relief sensed by the graduates may have reflected their subjective well-being, which was derived from the acquisition of a sense of self-determination, meaning, sense of belonging, and competency that resulted from engaging in a conative social activity and breaking down the societal obstacles (Sheldon, 2018; Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006).

CONCLUSION, LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The current study suggests that cultivating a sense of purpose in life may be an important mechanism through which a stable identity contributes to well-being (Burrow & Hill, 20120). Hence, Palestinian students and students from minority groups should be encouraged by institutions of higher education to take part in civic engagement programs targeting aspects of ethnicity, nationality, and gender. Nevertheless, several limitations of the current study should be acknowledged. The current work was restricted to the narratives of Palestinian students in Israeli universities. Hence, further studies are needed to explore the experience of Palestinian students in Palestinian universities. Second, this study was conducted mostly among women and in the Israeli context, which is characterized by chronic political conflicts. Thus, future studies should examine the impact of civic engagement in both women and men students from other minority groups that do not necessarily experience political conflict.

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