



# Social relations between students from two groups in conflict: Differences in stereotypes and perceived social distance between Jewish and Arab nursing students

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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** The heterogeneous nature of the nursing profession generates encounters between members of different groups. Thus, nursing education should include programs focusing on cultural sensitivity to enhance cultural competence. Due to the ongoing conflict between Arabs and Jews, Israel is an appropriate setting for examining cultural sensitivity programs.

**Aim:** This study explores how Jewish-Israeli and Arab-Israeli nursing students studying together perceive their social relations by examining attribution of stereotypes (positive and negative) to members of the other group and willingness to engage in social interactions with individuals from the other group.

**Setting:** The Department of Nursing at the Max Stern Yezreel Valley College.

**Participants:** 180 Jewish and Arab nursing students at two different points in their studies, beginning students and those at more advanced stages.

**Methods:** The students completed questionnaires examining their perceptions of the social relations between the two groups. The questionnaires measured stereotypes and perceptions of social distance regarding members of the other social group.

**Results:** More positive stereotypes and fewer negative stereotypes were found among the Jewish students than among the Arab students. Nevertheless, the Jewish students exhibited less willingness to reduce social distance. No differences were found between beginning students and advanced students with respect to stereotypes, though advanced students expressed greater willingness to reduce social distance than did beginning students.

**Conclusions:** The findings show that perceptions of social relations are influenced by two different contexts: the students' specific context (joint studies and joint work in the future) and the broader general context of relations between the groups. The findings indicate that programs aimed at developing cultural sensitivity and improving relations in a divided society should provide differential responses for each group and should focus on willingness to cooperate and reduce social distance rather than attempting to eliminate stereotypes.

## 1. Introduction

This paper examines how nursing students studying in a context of conflict perceive their mutual social relations. The study focuses on a group of Arab and Jewish Israeli citizens who are studying nursing at an academic college. The aim of this study was to explore how these students perceive their social relations by examining their mutual stereotypes and their reported social distance from those in the other social group. The study examined perceptions of social relations among two groups of students with different seniority in their studies—those at the beginning and those at the end—in order to determine whether these perceptions change over the course of their academic studies. The paper

presents the main findings and discusses their educational implications.

### 1.1. Studying nursing in a situation of conflict

Growing ethnic and racial diversity in the nursing profession and at nursing schools in most Western countries has generated a challenging working and learning environment (Chan et al., 2016; Noble et al., 2014). Research has found that nursing education programs should include educational interventions intended to increase cultural competence and cultural sensitivity (Smit and Tremethick, 2013). Researchers have also recommended adjusting teaching policies and strategies to address the challenges of diversity (Chan et al., 2016;

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Noble et al., 2014; Smit and Tremethick, 2013).

The challenges of diversity are even greater when the groups involved are engaged in an ongoing conflict. Such a conflict reflects a situation in which the tensions and differences between the groups continue over a period of many years and affect every aspect of the lives of those involved (Hadar-Shoval and Morag, 2017). Ongoing conflicts lead to a sharp division into ingroups and outgroups that is marked by the development of negative stereotypes toward the outgroup as well as perceived social distance and tensions between the two groups (Berger et al., 2015; Berger et al., 2016).

Studies examining the challenges of teaching in nursing programs in divided societies marked by conflict, such as Israel, should address the tensions and conflicts between the groups studying in the program (e.g., Arieli and Hirschfeld, 2010; Arieli et al., 2012; Arieli and Friedman, 2013). They should focus on the mutual relations between the nursing students from both groups, as collaboration, teamwork and cultural sensitivity during their studies are crucial for them to become proficient nurses in the future.

Assessing nursing programs with a focus on these aspects entails examining the social relations between the members of the groups (Berger et al., 2015; Berger et al., 2016). The current study explores the social relations among students from two groups in conflict by examining their mutual stereotypes and their readiness for contact with individuals from the other social group.

### 1.2. Background: local context

Jewish-Arab relations in Israel are the product of an ongoing conflict and are characterized by stereotyped negative perceptions and mutual suspicions (Bar-Tal and Alon, 2016; Hadar-Shoval and Morag, 2017). Although Jews and Arabs live in the same country, they have practically no contact with one another in their everyday lives. This is because for the most part Arab and Jewish citizens live in separate communities or neighborhoods and study in separate public education systems. Consequently, until they begin academic studies, members of the Jewish majority have almost no points of contact with members of the Arab minority.

Nursing education is the first situation in which most nursing students have direct and long-term contact with people from the other group (Arieli and Friedman, 2013). These encounters between Jewish and Arab nursing students during their education and initial socialization into the nursing profession present a significant challenge. The health care system in Israel entails constant contact with patients and other health care professionals from all groups in society. Close cooperation and teamwork are required, especially at times when intergroup tensions are highest, such as wartime (Arieli et al., 2012). Establishing relationships based on mutual understanding and trust is an essential part of nursing education. Therefore, the social relations that nursing students develop with their peers during their years of study, and the meanings they ascribe to these contacts, affect the success of their nursing careers.

In view of the above, nursing studies in Israel also include programs focusing on developing the ability to work in a divided society in general and on cooperative work between Arabs and Jews in particular. Various research studies have described academic programs that focus on these aspects (Arieli et al., 2012; Arieli and Friedman, 2013; Noble et al., 2014). Continued development of such programs requires defining and gaining an in-depth understanding of the nature of the social relations between the two groups. Examination of these social relations must take into consideration that they are subject to change due to the cumulative influence of these programs throughout the students' academic studies. The expectation is that the further along the students are in their studies, the better the relations between the members of the two groups.

### 1.3. Research aims

In the current study we explore participants' perceptions of the social relations between the two groups by examining attribution of stereotypes (positive and negative) to members of the other group and willingness to engage in social interactions with individuals from the other group (Bar-Tal and Labin, 2001; Hadar-Shoval and Morag, 2017; Teichman et al., 2007). The study has two hypothesis:

**H1.** Group affiliation (Jews, Arabs) will be related to perceptions of the relations between the two groups, as manifested in attributions of positive and negative stereotypes and willingness to reduce the social distance between the two groups.

**H2.** Academic seniority (beginning students, advanced students) will be related to perceptions of the relations between the two groups, as manifested in attributions of positive and negative stereotypes and willingness to reduce the social distance between the two groups.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

The research participants included 180 undergraduate students (79 beginners and 101 advanced) enrolled in the Department of Nursing at the Max Stern Yezreel Valley College, Israel. Of these, 111 were Jewish and 69 were Arab.

### 2.2. Instrument

The data in this study are part of a comprehensive research study examining relations between students in the Department of Nursing. The current study focuses on two aspects: stereotypes and social distance.

#### 2.2.1. Stereotypes (attribution of characteristics)

The stereotypes questionnaire that was developed by Teichman et al. (2007) examines the stereotypes held by participants regarding members of the other group by means of a list of 18 adjectives, both positive and negative (see Table 1). Participants were requested to estimate "what percent of Jews/Arabs possess the following characteristics" on a scale from 1 to 5 (1 = 0%, none; 2 = 25%, a minority; 3 = 50%, half; 4 = 75%, most; 5 = 100%, all). Cronbach's alpha was 0.859 for positive characteristics and 0.89 for negative characteristics.

#### 2.2.2. Social distance

The social distance questionnaire was borrowed from Sabo (2002) and adapted for the present study, with Jewish students asked about Arab students and vice versa. The questionnaire included seven statements expressing different levels of willingness to interact with members of the other group. Table 2 shows the seven statements. For each item, participants had to rate their willingness to engage in this behavior on a scale from 1 (definitely no) to 10 (definitely yes). Cronbach's alpha was 0.807. The score on this questionnaire was determined by the calculated mean for each participant.

**Table 1**  
Stereotypes questionnaire.

Positive stereotypes	Negative stereotypes
Good; smart; clean; beautiful; strong; educated; loyal; hospitable; sociable	Thief; terrorist; lazy; rude; stinky; liar; cruel; coward; violent

**Table 2**  
Social distance questionnaire.

1.	I am willing that an Arab/Jewish student from the nursing department be a close friend of mine.
2.	I am willing to marry an Arab/Jewish student from the nursing department.
3.	I am willing to work with an Arab/Jewish student from the nursing department.
4.	I am willing for one of my family members to marry an Arab/Jewish student from the nursing department.
5.	I am willing to host an Arab/Jewish student from the nursing department in my home.
6.	I am willing to develop intimate relationships with an Arab/Jewish student from the nursing department.
7.	I am willing to live next door to an Arab/Jewish student from the nursing department.

### 2.2.3. Demographic details

Participants' year of study in the program and sector (Jewish/Arab).

### 2.3. Procedure

Questionnaires were distributed in class, and class time was allotted for completing them. The participants were told that the research sought to explore perceptions of Jewish-Arab relations and were assured that the questionnaires would remain anonymous and that there were no right or wrong answers.

### 2.4. Ethical considerations

The college ethics committee granted ethical approval for the study (approval number EMEK2015-40). The participants were informed about the nature of the study and gave their consent to participate in the research. The questionnaires were anonymous.

### 2.5. Statistical analysis

First, Internal reliability tests were conducted for each questionnaire that yielded satisfactory reliability values (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.80$  and above). Then, a correlations test was conducted among the three aspects of perception of social relations (the dependent variable): positive stereotypes, negative stereotypes, and social distance. To examine the research hypothesis, a two-way MANOVA was conducted, with sector (Jewish, Arab) and seniority (beginning students, advanced students) as independent variables and perceptions of social relations as the dependent variable (as measured by positive stereotypes, negative stereotypes, and social distance).

## 3. Results

Correlations were found between the aspects of perception of social relations: positive stereotypes, negative stereotypes, and social distance. Table 3 shows that these three aspects are significantly related to each other.

A two-way MANOVA was conducted, with sector (Jewish, Arab) and seniority (beginning students, advanced students) as independent variables on perceptions of social relations, as measured by positive stereotypes, negative stereotypes, and social distance. Table 4 shows the main findings.

A multivariate effect of sector on the three dependent variables was found [Wilk's lambda = 0.73,  $F(3, 174) = 21.14$ ,  $p < .001$ ;

**Table 3**  
Correlations between the three aspects of perception of social relations.

	Positive stereotypes	Negative stereotypes	Social distance
Positive stereotypes			
Negative stereotypes*	***-0.66		
Social distance**	**0.31	***-0.25	

\*  $p < .05$ .

\*\*  $p < .01$ .

\*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

$\eta_p^2 = 0.26$ ). Each dependent variable was subjected to a further ANOVA to examine whether the trend was the same for each aspect of perception of social relations. For positive stereotypes, the difference between Jews and Arabs was significant [ $F(1, 176) = 6.57$ ,  $p < .01$ ;  $\eta_p^2 = 0.03$ ], with Jewish participants reporting more positive stereotypes than Arab participants (see Table 4). For negative stereotypes, the difference between Jews and Arabs was also significant [ $F(1, 176) = 6.507$ ,  $p < .01$ ;  $\eta_p^2 = 0.03$ ], with Jewish participants reporting fewer negative stereotypes than Arab participants (see Table 4). Furthermore, for social distance, the difference between Jews and Arabs was also significant [ $F(1, 176) = 30.36$ ,  $p < .001$ ;  $\eta_p^2 = 0.14$ ], with Jewish participants reporting less willingness than Arab participants to reduce social distance (see Table 4).

A multivariate effect of seniority was found for the three dependent variables [Wilk's lambda = 0.93,  $F(3, 174) = 3.76$ ,  $p < .01$ ;  $\eta_p^2 = 0.06$ ]. Each dependent variable was subjected to a further ANOVA to examine whether the trend was the same for each aspect of perceptions of social relations. For social distance, the difference between beginning and advanced students was significant [ $F(1, 176) = 8.43$ ,  $p < .01$ ;  $\eta_p^2 = 0.04$ ], with beginning students reporting they were less willing to reduce social distance than students further along in their studies (see Table 4). However, positive stereotypes and negative stereotypes failed to reach statistical significance [ $F(1, 176) = 0.05$ ,  $p > N.S$  for positive stereotypes and  $F(1, 176) = 0.09$ ,  $p > N.S$  for negative stereotypes].

A multivariate effect was found for the interaction between sector and seniority on the three dependent variables [Wilk's lambda = 0.95,  $F(3, 174) = 3.05$ ,  $p < .01$ ;  $\eta_p^2 = 0.05$ ]. Each dependent variable was subjected to a further ANOVA to examine whether the trend was the same for each aspect of perceptions of social relations. None of the variables reached statistical significance [ $F(1, 176) = 2.68$ ,  $p > N.S$  for positive stereotypes,  $F(1, 176) = 0.55$ ,  $p > N.S$  for negative stereotypes and  $F(1, 176) = 0.02$ ,  $p > N.S$  for social distance].

## 4. Discussion

This paper examines perceptions of social relations among students studying nursing in a context of conflict. The research focuses on a group of nursing students comprising Arab and Jewish citizens of Israel studying at an academic college. The aim of this study was to explore these students' perceptions of their mutual social relations by examining their reported stereotypes and perceptions of social distance regarding members of the other social group. Moreover, the study examined perceptions of social relations among students at two different points in their studies—beginning students and those at more advanced stages—to determine whether perceptions of social relations differ at the different stages.

In accordance with the first research hypothesis, the findings reveal differences between Jews and Arabs in their perceptions of their social relations. The Jewish students reported more positive stereotypes and fewer negative stereotypes than did the Arab students. Nonetheless, the Jewish students demonstrated less willingness to reduce their social distance than did the Arab students.

These differences can be attributed to the balance of powers between the two groups, which leads to a difference in attitude toward the other group (Berger et al., 2015). The Jewish students who belong to

**Table 4**

Means and standard deviations for effects of sector and seniority on perceptions of social relations (positive stereotypes, negative stereotypes, social distance).

	Jewish				Arab			
	Beginning students		Advanced students		Beginning students		Advanced students	
	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.
Positive stereotypes	3.5	0.6	3.3	0.5	3.1	0.6	3.2	0.5
Negative stereotypes	2.1	0.7	2.0	0.6	2.3	0.9	2.3	0.6
Social distance	4.6	1.7	5.4	1.8	6.1	1.4	6.8	1.6

the powerful majority group feel less obligated to defend their group by harboring a negative attitude toward the other group. As members of the majority group, they do not feel threat to their identity or risk to their self-esteem. Therefore, they are able to relate to the Arab students more positively and to think about them in positive rather than negative terms. In contrast, the Arab students who belong to the minority group feel their group identity is threatened. Therefore, to boost their own self-esteem and group status, they attempt to relate to the other group in negative terms that will lower its status. That is, they attempt to show the members of the Jewish group in a more negative light by thinking of them less in positive terms and more in terms of negative stereotypes, in accordance with the theoretical approach described by [Tajfel and Turner \(1986\)](#). In addition, to improve their social status the members of the minority group attempt to integrate into the majority group, thus explaining their desire to reduce social distance. In contrast, the members of the majority group, whose status is already high, feel no need to reduce social distance.

The second research hypothesis examined whether beginning nursing students and those at more advanced stages of their studies differ with respect to the stereotypes they hold and their willingness to reduce social distance. The findings revealed no differences in either positive or negative stereotypes based on seniority of studies, but they did reveal a difference in willingness to reduce social distance. The study's findings indicate that students at more advanced stages are more willing to reduce the social distance between themselves and students from the other group. This finding can be explained by [Allport's \(1954\)](#) "Contact Hypothesis", according to which contact with individuals belonging to groups in conflict can reduce tensions and hostility between the groups and encourage future cooperation. Because nursing studies constitute a setting that facilitates contact between Jews and Arabs and that includes special programs focusing on cultural sensitivity, students further along in their studies had more ongoing contact with members of the other group. Thus they are more willing to reduce social distance. In addition, the advanced stages of nursing studies also entail practical experience in the health system, during which the students have more exposure to the reality of the workplace and experience the mutual dependence between members of the two groups. Indeed, advanced students must work with staff and patients from both national groups. Thus, contact between the two groups is enhanced in the later stages of their studies. Not only do students at these later stages have more prolonged contact with members of the other group in the educational setting, they have also apparently internalized the fact that their professional futures will involve ongoing contact with the other group. Hence, they appear to be more open to the notion of reducing social distance.

Despite the students' willingness to reduce social distance, this study's findings also indicate that the stereotypes one group holds toward the other do not change during the course of their studies. These findings imply that the two measures of the nature of the social relations between the groups—stereotypes and willingness to reduce social distance—operate differently. The measure of willingness to reduce social distance is influenced by the specific context and the practical circumstances of the ongoing contact between the groups during their studies. In contrast, the stereotype measure is apparently not influenced

by the specific situation but rather by broader power relations between the groups in the general context. These stereotypes apparently derive from deeper perceptions that are influenced by power relations in society. The fact that these two measures operate differently underscores the importance of using both measures to examine the social relations between the students in this study.

#### 4.1. Study limitations

This examination of differences between students at different stages of their studies was based on a between-subject comparison of perceptions of social relations. That is, the perceptions of students with differing seniority in their nursing studies were compared at the same point in time. This method was chosen due to the dynamic nature of Arab-Jewish relations in Israel emerging from the ongoing Jewish-Arab conflict. Examining the students' perceptions at the same point in time enabled us to assume they all were influenced by the reality at that moment. Yet this method also has a limitation in that it compares different students. It does not examine changes in individual students' perceptions of social relations as they advance in their studies, as would be the case using a within-subject design. Future longitudinal studies are needed to examine changes in mutual perceptions by monitoring perceptions of the same students as they progress through their studies.

## 5. Conclusions

The current study's findings are in line with those of previous studies exploring the challenges of teaching nursing in divided societies that are marked by ongoing conflict between social groups. The findings clearly reflect existing differences in perceptions of social relations between Jewish and Arab students deriving from the balance of power between them. The findings imply that perceptions of social relations are influenced by two different contexts: the specific context of students studying together and working together in the future, and the broader general context of the relations between the groups.

Today nursing education aspires to include programs in the nursing curriculum that focus on cultural sensitivity and cultural competence so as to create a more positive atmosphere in environments characterized by divided societies. Hence, the results of the current study can help identify the proper focus for such programs. The study's findings suggest that in order to focus on cultural sensitivity and cultural competence, the nursing curriculum should train the students to recognize and be aware of their own perceptions and feelings toward students from other social groups and teach them how to regulate these thoughts and feelings. That is, given that the broader context cannot be changed and that stereotypes exist in both groups, such programs should focus on willingness to reduce the social distance between members of the different groups rather than on trying to change the stereotypes. The programs should work on increasing each student's willingness to cooperate with and become closer to members of the other group despite their mutual stereotypes. In addition, due to the differences between the groups, such programs should provide a differential response to each group based on its specific perceptions of the mutual social relations.

## Disclosure

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