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'Getting to know 'them' changed my opinion'*: intercultural competence among Jewish and Arab graduate students

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine the impact of intercultural encounters with the Other (between Jews and Arabs) during graduate studies, at colleges of education and university education departments, on the level of intercultural competence reported by them. Intercultural competence means a long-term change in the level of knowledge, feelings, attitudes and actual behavior that enables positive interactions with members of other cultural groups. In the study, 436 graduate students, completed survey questionnaires, which included mostly closed-ended questions. The findings indicate that the experience of encounter has a significant impact on the development of intercultural competence: A perceived inclusive atmosphere, positive interactions among students, and particularly contents acquired in the institution, which had an impact on all components of intercultural competence for both Jews and Arabs, but to a higher degree among Arabs. All that, alongside with off-campus interactions with 'others' and positive attitudes towards multiculturalism. The importance of this study is in its possible contribution to the body of knowledge regarding encounters with 'others' in higher education institutes (universities and colleges) and to developing policy trajectories towards intercultural competence among graduate students, including those who experience deep political conflicts in their countries.

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Introduction

Globalisation offers opportunities for political, social and economic collaboration. These opportunities could be further improved by preparing students to be culturally competent. Higher education institutions can serve as key players in successful social change, by preparing culturally competent professionals who are able to critically engage in socially diverse topics (Spitzberg and Changnon 2009; Wilson 2018). For instance, Western students who were exposed to different Asian cultures believed that this exposure would enhance their personal understanding of the world and enable them to be more competitive in their future professions (Anderson 2016).

Another distinction, relevant to intercultural encounters between cultural subgroups in any given society, is between 'ingroup' and 'outgroup'. The 'ingroup' exacts esteem and loyalty from its members, while individuals usually feel competition or opposition towards the 'outgroup'. These distinctions are based on the premise that the 'ingroup' possesses superior characteristics that are lacking in the 'outgroup'. All 'ingroup's and 'outgroup's interact on the principle that 'we' have valued characteristics that 'they' lack, thus fostering loyalty as well as generating tension and conflict (Macionsis 1997). 'Ingroup' and 'outgroup' interactions conform to cultural and social codes and boundaries,

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*A citation of a Jewish female student from one of the colleges.

whether real or symbolic, to identify who is included and who is excluded. Recognition of otherness comes along with specific rights in the public domain of fundamental rights (Kastoryano 2010). In situations of conflicted groups, belonging to an ‘ingroup’ or to an ‘outgroup’ could also represent being part of the majority versus the minority. Members of one group tend to create negative stereotypes regarding the members of other groups, who are conceived as enemies (Maoz 2000).

In this context, ‘otherness’ is the process of attaching moral codes of inferiority to difference, thus generating discrimination against and exclusion of individuals on the basis of their belonging to marginalised groups. Hence, the Other refers to a group of people, which the dominant group excludes, due to their otherness. The ‘ingroup’ determines the group’s boundaries, so that whoever does not fall within those boundaries is excluded by the group and labeled as the Other, a label often connoting inferior status (Krumer-Nevo and Sidi 2012).

Multicultural contemporary societies are comprised of diverse groups, which differ from each other in their ethnicity, race, culture, social class and gender. In this context, the term ‘multiculturalism’ has various meanings and definitions. Some refer to the demographic pluralist, *multiculturalized* aspect, namely instrumental interactions between the dominant culture and minorities (Appiah 1998; Katz 1998). Others (Sarup 1986; Zolberg 1996) address the structural power relations between cultural subgroups and the egalitarian distribution of the country’s resources among them. However, the concept of ‘multiculturalism’ has a more common meaning which is ideological, and may become a policy, namely, the acknowledgment of existing differences between cultural-ethnic groups in a given society, and formally addressing and accepting them as legitimate (Ben-Rafael 2008). Most contemporary societies are multicultural to one extent or another and are populated by different sociocultural groups. This has led to the development of the concept of multiculturalism as ideology or policy in Western societies and to assigning importance to cultural specificity and cultural groups (Ben Rafael and Peres 2005).

A multicultural society by definition aspires to equality and inclusion of the Other’s culture. Societies of this kind developed in Western countries against the backdrop of minority group discomfort with liberal democracy in which the dominant culture had an obvious advantage over everyone else. Multicultural policy and ideology have led to the notion of multicultural education, which has been defined as being

at least three things: an idea or concept, an educational reform movement, and a process. Multicultural education incorporates the idea that all students – regardless of their gender; sexual orientation; social class; and ethnic, racial, or cultural characteristics – should have an equal opportunity to learn in school. (Banks and McGee Banks 2001, 2)

In Israel, the democratic system confers advantages primarily to those affiliated with the Jewish ethnic group. In this sense, Israeli society can be described as more ‘multi-cultured’ than multicultural, though Arabs and Jews do have some points of cultural intersection between them, such as the Hebrew language and Israeli citizenship (Ben Rafael and Peres 2005; Peri 2007). This cultural basis implies several dividing lines within each national group and between the two national groups (Jews and Arabs). It includes religious faith and traditions, language and food. While cultural basis involves authentic and stable cultural differences, social segregation creates fundamental separation between communities in towns, neighborhoods, schools, the army, civil society, political parties, shopping areas and centers, and, on a large scale, at work places (Smootha 2013).

Unlike elementary, middle and high schools, institutions of higher education in Israel are open to everyone. Given this reality, young Israelis from different ethnic groups often come in contact with each other for the first time at these academic institutions (Al-Haj 2003; Mula 2013). Within this reality, the institutions of higher education in Israel have the potential to serve as a unique arena for intercultural experience (Lev Ari and and Laron 2014).

What role can Israeli institutions of higher education play in facilitating a possibly meaningful encounter between Jews and Arabs? Can such an encounter create awareness, positive feelings and genuine multicultural behavior towards the Other namely, intercultural competence? Thus,

the purpose of this study was to examine the impact of intercultural encounters with the Other (between Jews and Arabs) during graduate studies on the level of intercultural competence, controlling for ethnic group affiliation. The study, based upon *original new* quantitative and qualitative data, was conducted at three colleges of education and two university education departments, among Jewish and Arab graduate students. This study is the third in a row, following two previous separate studies (see Lev Ari and Laron 2014; Lev Ari and Mula 2016).

Encounters with the Other in institutions of higher education and intercultural competence

The democratisation of higher education facilitates encounters, sometimes for the first time, between groups of young people from different parts of the world and from diverse ethnic communities (Rothman, Lipset, and Nevitte 2003). In intercultural encounters on campus, students interact with others who do not share their culture or ethnicity. These encounters broaden not only their knowledge of the Other but their own cultural openness as well (Chang 2005; Gurin et al. 2002).

For students – chiefly undergraduates in their twenties – intercultural encounters on campus are immensely important, as they enhance further intercultural encounters within higher education institutions, compared with those offered in their origin communities (Pascarella and Terenzini 1991; Whitla et al. 2003). Such encounters are likely to yield positive results in terms of the development of democratic values and civic unity (see, for example, Guarasci and Cornwell 1997). In class, faculty members must give some thought to the contents of their lectures and to strategies for dealing with intercultural encounters (Milem 2001).

From the psychological perspective, researchers and practitioners have speculated about the potential for intergroup contact to reduce intergroup prejudice (Pettigrew and Tropp 2006). The ‘intergroup contact theory’ (Allport 1954; cited in Pettigrew and Tropp 2006, 752) maintained that ‘reduced prejudice will result when four features of the contact situation are present: equal status between the groups in the situation; common goals; intergroup cooperation; and the support of Authorities’. Generally, influence of intergroup contact is more significant among students who belong to the majority, namely, the dominant social and political group (in a specific country) than among minority groups (Pettigrew and Tropp 2000).

However, future longitudinal analysis is needed to learn about the persistence of contact effects and to consider both positive and negative factors in the contact situation, along with individual, structural, and normative antecedents of the contact; the analysis will greatly enhance researchers’ understanding of the nature of intergroup contact effects (Pettigrew and Tropp 2006).

For intercultural encounters to succeed, institutions of higher education must address several issues, among them achieving compatibility between formal and informal curricula, training lecturers for teaching in a multicultural environment and continuing to examine, reflect upon and evaluate the active intentional process of creating an inclusive campus (Leask and Carroll 2011). Therefore, it is important to have a strong leadership policy which will promote and instill intercultural competence among students, teachers and communities in high education institutions (Saleem 2017).

One potential positive outcome of intercultural encounters with regard to the Other is ‘intercultural competence’. In the last two decades, efforts have been made to measure the components of intercultural competence (Spitzberg and Changnon 2009). The term refers to the effective management of interactions between people from different nationalities, ethnic backgrounds or religions. In the present study, we chose the following working definition of intercultural competence: an ongoing process involving cognitive awareness and knowledge, emotional attitudes and behavioral skills that facilitate positive social interactions with members of other cultural groups (Deardorff 2006; 2009; Dignes and Baldwin 1996; Otten 2003; Spitzberg and Changnon 2009). A broader conceptualisation of intercultural competence includes context (situation, environment, culture) and outcomes (perceived appropriateness, understanding) (Spitzberg and Changnon 2009).

In the next section, we introduce previous findings regarding intercultural encounters between Jews and Arabs, in Israeli institutions of higher education.

Intercultural encounters between Arabs and Jews, in Israeli Institutions of Higher Education: previous findings

Israel's current population totals 8.694 million people. Of this total, 75 percent are Jews (6.496 million) and 21 percent are Arabs (1.809 million). Other religious groups account for the remaining four percent (389,000) (Israel Central Bureau of Statistics 2017). Jews and Arabs are divided along geographical lines. Ninety percent of the Arab citizens of Israel live in separate peripheral cities, towns and villages, while the remaining ten percent who dwell in mixed cities live in separate neighborhoods. Almost two-thirds (60%) of Arabs live in the Galilee, the northern part of Israel (Kofman et al. 2014).

Beginning in elementary school, Arab citizens learn about the Other – Jews, Jewish society and the state. Arab pupils are educated to perceive Jewish citizens as collective owners of the land and thus to see Israel as a shared homeland. In contrast, Jewish pupils are not required to study Arabic, nor are they required to learn about the religion, literature or even the history of the Palestinian people or the Arab nations. Jewish students are given only a general overview of the history of Islam. They do not learn that Palestinians have any historical attachment to the land of Israel and they are not taught that Palestinians are equal citizens of the state (Al-Haj 2003; Mula 2013).

Studies in Israel, regarding intercultural encounters on campuses have focused primarily on undergraduate students. A study at the University of Haifa (Hertz-Lazarowitz et al. 2010) found that both Jewish and Arab students described the inclusive atmosphere at the university as positive. Compared with the attitudes of Jewish students, the attitudes of Arab students, especially Muslims, towards the university were more negative, though at the same time Arabs expressed interest in integration and even feelings of equality with the Jewish majority, particularly in the university context. The findings of this study indicate that the university experience is significant in terms of forming opinions and finding ways of relating to the Other. Davidovitch, Soen, and Kolan (2006) studied social interactions among Jewish and Arab students at two regional college campuses and found that social relationships between the groups were generally positive. Most students at both colleges referred positively to day-to-day cooperation among students in fulfilling their assignments.

Unlike previous studies focusing on undergraduate students, two other studies conducted at colleges of education focused on *graduate* students (Lev Ari and Laron 2014; Lev Ari and Mula 2016). These students were older than undergraduates and had already worked in the field of education for several years. The first study (Lev Ari and Laron 2014) was longitudinal (first and second year) and was conducted in one college of education; it found that graduate studies over the course of two years had positive effect on reinforcing attitudes towards multiculturalism. The results also indicated that programs focusing on educating specific populations, such as educational counseling or leadership education, were more likely to involve close social interactions with others than programs focusing on particular subject areas. At the end of the first year of graduate studies at the college, students' attitudes towards multiculturalism were positively affected by a high degree of satisfaction with the academic experience (in addition to ethnic group affiliation). At the end of the second year of studies, positive perceived sociocultural inclusive atmosphere among the students at the college became an increasingly significant factor contributing to changes in attitude towards multiculturalism. This result was apparently due to the extended academic and sociocultural experience at the college (Lev Ari and Laron 2014).

The second study (Lev Ari and Mula 2016), which was conducted in four colleges of education in Israel at the end of the first year of graduate studies, found that intercultural encounters among educators from different disciplines generated the opportunity to make the college experience significant in terms of intercultural competence. On Israeli campuses, intercultural encounters occurred particularly within the segregated structure of Israeli society, which had been reinforced in the

educational system since childhood. Hence, the use of the term ‘intercultural competence’ necessitates full awareness that the reality of national, religious, and cultural conflict in Israel is complex and unique compared with that in other Western societies (Lev Ari and Mula 2016).

In the current study, which is based on new and original data (see next section for further details), our main research hypothesis was that academic, social and cultural interactions among Jewish and Arab graduate students would serve as significant variables (alongside background characteristics, discipline of studies, off-campus interactions with the Other and attitudes towards multiculturalism), which would explain the level of intercultural competence among graduate students. Intercultural competence would comprise a combination of cognitive, emotional and behavioral components (based on Chang 2005; Gurin et al. 2002) regarding the Other, as reported by the students.

The study

Research population and sample

Academic institutions in Israel can generally be categorised as either universities or academic colleges. This distinction reflects both the budgetary policies of the Council for Higher Education (CHE), which clearly differentiate between universities and colleges, and the public image of the institutions. Universities are perceived as surpassing colleges in their academic level and as having a more theoretical emphasis; they are thought to provide better opportunities on the job market (Getz and Lev Ari 2016).

Based on the classification used in a large number of research studies of Israeli higher education (e.g. Ayalon 2008; Guri-Rosenblit 1999), colleges can be divided into four types: (1) specialist colleges that focus on a single field of study; (2) private colleges that are not funded by the CHE and that charge higher tuition fees than the other institutions; (3) regional colleges that are by definition multidisciplinary; and (4) colleges of education that focus on training teaching personnel. All three colleges in our sample belonged to the fourth category, since we were interested in graduate students who were teachers and educators, and as such, they served as socialisation agents for their pupils.

We differentiated between two types of universities: (1) elite universities and (2) target universities (based on Yogev 2000). In the current study, University Z was selected as an elite university, while University Y was chosen as a target university. In both universities we focused on *the education faculties*, in order to compare their graduate students to those from the three colleges of education.

Purposive sampling was used in this study: three colleges of education – two in the northern part of Israel and one in the center – were sampled since they all had significant numbers of both Jewish and Arab graduate students. All the students at each of these colleges were sampled. The university faculties of education were sampled after mapping the number of Arab students in them. Programs were randomly sampled within each faculty. The colleges were very willing to cooperate with us. This was not the case at the universities, so their overall representation in the sample was lower than in reality.

Research participants included 436 students from three colleges of education (A B C) and two universities’ (Y Z) faculties of education, all in their final year of studies. Most participants were from colleges of education: B (38%), A (31%) and C (15%). The remaining participants were from the universities: Z (14%) and Y (2%).

The majority of respondents were female (89%) and their mean age was 37.36 (SD 8.3 years). Most of the students (69%) were Jews, while 31% were Arabs. The highest percentage of Jews (88%) was at University Z, followed by College C, University Y and College B with 79%, 78% and 72% Jews respectively, and College A with 50% Jews.

The largest portion of students (42%) studied in programs connected to educational leadership. Forty percent (40%) were enrolled in programs focusing on teaching special populations, including those for teaching youth at risk, programs for teaching students with learning disabilities and

educational counseling programs. The remaining respondents (18%) studied in programs that focused on specific teaching disciplines such as mathematics, science, or languages.

Research method, design, tool and variables

The current study used a quantitative cross-sectional design. In this type of research design, researchers ask a sample of people to respond to a set of closed-ended questions. Through statistical analysis of the data, researchers try to describe the pattern of relations between the variables (Frankfort-Nachmias and Nachmias 2008).

The study was conducted during 2015. First, we contacted the heads of the research authorities at the universities and colleges for permission to conduct the study. Next, we administered our questionnaire to a sample of 30 students to validate our research tool. After making corrections and adjustments to our research tool, we constructed the samples at each institution and administered the questionnaires face-to-face during the middle of the academic year, in classes, towards the end of the lessons. The questionnaires were administered by graduate students from other institutions, trained by the researchers for this assignment.

The study research tool that we used were questionnaires. The questionnaires were mostly based on previous ones (Lev Ari and Laron 2014; Lev Ari and Mula 2016) with some changes in background questions, the 'open' questions and new questions regarding feelings toward the Other. The questionnaires included primarily closed-ended Likert-scale questions addressing the research questions and hypotheses. Most of the variables are measured along a Likert scale, where 1 = *not at all* and 5 = *to a very large extent*. The answers to these questions provided the quantitative data.

The questionnaire included background variables (for elaboration see the in the 'Research Population and Sample' section above). Other independent variables were: (1) meeting the Other off-campus through five questions ($\alpha = 0.71$) referring to meetings in work place, neighborhood and leisure activities; (2) Attitudes towards multiculturalism, which were measured through ten questions ($\alpha = 0.76$), such as: is it important to keep the values of democracy? Should minorities be equal to the majority? (3) Institutions' perceived inclusive atmosphere was measured by seven questions ($\alpha = 0.831$) such as: do the lecturers address the students from the two sectors (the students were informed at the introduction to the questionnaire that the Other mean either Jews or Arabs – depends on the ethnic origin of the respondent) in an equal manner? (4) Interactions with the Other at the institution were measured by seven questions ($\alpha = 0.841$) asking, for example, about meeting the Other during study breaks, familiarity with students from the other ethnic group, corporation in preparing academic projects. (5) Contents acquired at the institution were measured by eight questions ($\alpha = 0.936$), referring to familiarity with the Other culture and history, reinforcement of cultural identity and acquisition of contents to become a cultural change agent in one's community.

The dependent variables and the questions measuring them are described in the next section, 'Descriptive Findings' (see also Tables 1–4).

In addition, the questionnaires included two open-ended questions that constituted the *qualitative component* of the research:

1. 'How have your current graduate studies contributed to your actual behavior regarding your attitudes, knowledge and willingness to engage in intercultural encounters among different cultural groups?'

Table 1. Knowledge regarding the Other (means, standard deviations: 1 = not at all –5 = to a very large extent).

Knowledge	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Knowledge of the other group's language (Hebrew or Arabic, respectively)	2.62	1.53
Familiarity with at least two names of important writers from the other group	2.59	1.47
Familiarity with at least two central values of the other culture	3.35	1.19
Studied a subject related to the other group in the past	3.08	1.36
($\alpha = 0.869$) Summary index	2.91	1.18

Table 2. Feelings regarding the Other at the college/university (means, standard deviations: 1 = not at all –5 = to a very large extent).

	M	SD
1. Hatred	1.23	0.61
2. Affection	3.54	0.95
3. Aversion/rejection	1.25	0.58
4. Fear	1.45	0.82
5. Understanding	3.64	0.98
6. Anger	1.59	0.90
7. Appreciation	3.62	0.96
Negative feelings 1; 3; 4; 6 ($\alpha = 0.794$)	1.38	0.58
Positive feelings 2; 5; 7 ($\alpha = 0.817$)	3.60	0.82

Table 3. Changes in attitudes and behavior towards the Other as a result of graduate studies (percentages and change rates: 1 = less than in the past; 2 = similar to the past; 3 = more than in the past).

	M	SD	% less than in the past	% similar	% more than in the past	More/less ratio
Defend the Other when described in a negative and generalised way by a member of your group	2.22	0.52	5%	68%	27%	5.4
Willing to host and visit the Other	2.23	0.50	4%	70%	26%	6.5
Willing to visit and spend time in settlements where the Other lives	1.99	0.43	10%	81%	9%	0.9
Willing to live near the Other	1.96	0.46	12%	79%	9%	0.8
Willing to develop social ties with the Other	2.23	0.55	6%	65%	29%	4.8
Increased willingness to trust the Other	2.16	0.56	9%	66%	25%	2.8
There are values in the Other’s culture you would adopt in your own culture	2.08	0.54	11%	71%	18%	1.6
Willing to develop lasting work ties with the Other	2.21	0.52	5%	69%	26%	5.2
Judge people according to their actions and not their national, cultural or religious affiliation	2.20	0.52	5%	69%	26%	5.2
Treat the Other equally	2.21	0.50	3%	73%	24%	8.0
Summary index ($\alpha = 0.885$)	2.15	0.36	–	–	–	–

2. ‘In your opinion, what should be improved at the college/university where you are currently studying in order to reinforce students’ positive attitudes, knowledge and actual behavior in the educational field with respect to encounters between members of different cultural groups?’

The quantitative data were processed to include descriptive statistics, which examined the distribution of variables, means and standard deviations. Inferential statistics was used in order to build on the descriptive findings and test the research questions. We constructed additive indices on the basis of Cronbach’s alpha testing, and used forced-steps regression analyses to examine the research hypotheses.

The responses to the open-ended items underwent qualitative analysis. We analysed the contents of the open-ended questions by grouping main themes into common topics that were meaningful for the research questions. We aggregated the response to the open-ended questions to six main themes (Creswell 2014).

Table 4. Activities in the educational field (means, standard deviations: 1 = not at all – 5 = to a very large extent).

	M	SD
Nonjudgmental teaching about the Other	3.83	1.15
Challenge your <i>students</i> regarding how they deal with those who are different from them	4.03	1.05
Challenge your <i>colleagues</i> regarding how they deal with those who are different from them	3.77	1.15
Consider leading multicultural education in the future within the educational setting you are involved in	3.58	1.36
Practice multicultural education	3.26	1.38
Summary index ($\alpha = 0.870$)	3.71	0.99

Descriptive findings

This section describes the research findings for the entire sample. First, we discuss the *dependent variables*, followed by details on the *independent variables* other than the personal background variables. We provide detailed tables to describe some of the dependent variables. The independent variables are described verbally, and the mean, standard deviation and Cronbach's alpha values for each measure are noted.

The dependent variable: intercultural competence

Intercultural competence included three sets of questions: (1) knowledge of the Other; (2) feelings and changes in behavior and attitudes towards the Other; and (3) multicultural educational activities in the field.

The findings pointed to a general intermediate level of *knowledge of the Other* ($M = 2.91$, $SD = 1.18$, $\alpha = 0.86$). The highest mean values were for familiarity with at least two central values of the other culture and previous studies of a subject related to the other group. The mean values for knowledge of the other group's language and familiarity with important writers from the other group were even lower (Table 1).

With respect to *feelings regarding the Other*, the means of the respondents' report regarding positive feelings – affection, understanding and appreciation – were generally high. Expressions of negative feelings – hatred, aversion, fear and anger – were minor. In contrast, for almost all the negative feelings the variability measures were lower than for the positive feelings. Thus, while feelings regarding the Other were more positive than negative, the variability in the respondents' answers with respect to hatred, aversion or fear was lower than that of their answers regarding the positive feelings. This leads us to infer homogeneity in the group with negative feelings. Positive feelings were marked by greater variability, indicating that some felt positive affection for the Other but others did not (Table 2).

In addition to the closed-ended questions, the participants were asked to describe, in their own words how learning experience affected their feelings and attitude towards the Other. A female Arab student, from one of the colleges, wrote, 'The learning experience facilitates cooperation in social interactions – during courses and the practicum – particularly with respect to social/friendly aspects'. In contrast, another female Jewish student from one of the colleges wrote, 'At the college there is no discussion at all with regard to multiculturalism, on the contrary – there is aversion'.

In order to balance the picture, we presented the negative feelings as well, though they were fewer than the positive. Maybe negative feelings resulted from disappointment with the institute that did not invest in multicultural education.

Changes in attitudes and behavior as a result of graduate studies

Changes in attitude and behavior towards the Other and towards multiculturalism constitute an important aspect of intercultural competence. It is impossible to know for sure whether these changes derive directly from the educational experience or were based upon. However, examination of the ratio between past, pre-graduate studies, and present points to aspects in which the change was particularly positive. For example, positive attitudes towards treating the Other equally than before graduate studies, and willingness to host and visit the Other rose significantly. An increase also occurred in willingness to protect the Other from slander, willingness to develop work relations with the Other, ability to judge people by their deeds rather than by their cultural affiliation, and willingness to develop social ties with the Other. Areas that showed little change compared to the past, included willingness to visit the towns where the Other lived and willingness to live in the same neighborhood.

Thus, we can cautiously conclude that the distribution of the respondents' answers regarding their behavior, which at least partially resulted from studying together at the colleges and universities, pointed to a positive change in actual behavior towards the Other, willingness to cooperate with the Other and a more respectful and accepting attitude (high intercultural competence). Moreover, it is important to note that none of the components of attitude and behavior towards the Other that were examined here worsened as a result of graduate studies (Table 3).

The students reported the changes in their own words. A female Jewish student from one of the colleges wrote, "The joint study experience which turns the other group into people with faces and personal stories makes them less intimidating, more human and possibly, even true friends." A male Arab student from one of the universities addressed the contribution of intercultural encounters from a broader perspective: "... better knowledge of the Other, understanding things that one side does not know about the Other. (I) think that knowing these issues will reinforce the sociopolitical relationship."

On the other hand, a female Jewish student from one of the colleges wrote,

The experience of learning with other groups different from mine did not have any effect on my attitudes. From the outset, I thought that multiculturalism is essential in our country. I think it did not affect us; eventually, each student held the same attitudes he/she arrived with.

The students referred to the changes they experienced in institutes of higher education on a spectrum: while some reported positive changes regarding intercultural competence, others felt that there was hardly any change or that they even experienced a negative change towards the Other.

Activities in the educational field in the multicultural context

One of the components of intercultural competence was related to the students' report of their activities in the educational field today (87% of the respondents reported currently working in education). In general, their reports on their actual behavior pointed to a relatively high level of intercultural competence, primarily with respect to transparency in coping with those different from themselves (students and colleagues) and being nonjudgmental when learning about others. Willingness to lead change in light of multicultural education and implement its components were assessed to be at an intermediate level (Table 4).

In addition, a female Arab student from one of the colleges stated that "during this current year of studying I initiated a joint project with one of the (Jewish) students from the college for both our schools. The project is still in its planning stage."

A female Jewish student from one of the universities wrote, 'Since there are many Arab people with me in class, I'm more motivated to work more closely with them and get to know them, and, in addition, to teach my students about multiculturalism'.

It seems that the student from the college had higher intercultural competence, since she described an already actual behavior, while the one from the university was still at an earlier stage, namely, of the willingness to know the Other. We will further elaborate this pattern in the next section.

When we compared the indices according to ethnic groups (t-test analysis), the most significant difference was found in knowledge regarding the Other: Arabs' knowledge about Jewish culture is much higher than Jews' knowledge about Arab culture. Another difference was also significant in changes in attitudes and behavior regarding the Other. In this context, Arabs reported higher positive changes they went through as a result of their intercultural encounter with Jews in the course of their graduate studies. Finally, the last significant difference was found in negative feelings toward the Other which were very low in general, but stronger among the Arabs (Table 5). Thus, although Arabs reported greater knowledge regarding the Jewish culture and positive changes in their attitudes and behavior towards Jews as a result of their encounters with them during graduate studies, a small portion of them had negative feelings towards Jews. When we analysed the explanations for these

Table 5. A comparison in the summary indices between Jews and Arabs (Independent samples *T*-test, means and standard deviations: 1 = not at all –5 = to a very large extent).

Summary indices	Jews (N = 295)		Arabs (N = 135)		<i>t</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
Knowledge regarding the Other	2.37	0.88	4.08	0.84	–18.793**
Positive feelings regarding the Other	3.60	0.85	3.57	0.75	0.347
Negative feelings regarding the Other	1.33	0.57	1.49	0.59	–2.748*
Changes in attitudes and behavior towards the Other as a result of graduate studies	2.11	0.33	2.24	0.40	–3.107*
Activities in the educational field	3.68	1.02	3.77	0.92	–0.847

p* < 0.01.*p* < 0.001.

stronger negative feeling among Arabs, it was related to their religious definition: a quarter of those who defined themselves as ‘religious’ reported negative feelings towards Jews while only 13% among a similar group of Jews reported negative feelings towards Arabs. In the next section we will further analyse the impact of various independent variables on the intercultural competence.

Summary model: variables explaining intercultural competence

The summary model (Table 6) shows the concluding stage of all the regression equations. Due to the significant differences between Jews and Arabs, we decided to control for ethnic group. By doing that, we have a better opportunity to explore the different variables which affect intercultural competence.

The variable of *knowledge of the Other* was affected differently among Jews and Arabs, even though the total explanation (R^2) of the regression equation was not high and almost similar in both groups (slightly higher among Arabs). Among Jews knowledge regarding the Other was affected by meeting the Other off-campus, positive interactions among the students in campus, positive attitudes towards multiculturalism, and among those who studied in the universities.

Among Arabs, also off-campus interactions with the other had a significant positive impact on knowledge regarding the Other, particularly among those who studied in Educational Leadership programs (compared to those participating in teaching disciplines programs) as well as by contents acquired in the institution.

Table 6. Summary model, forced steps regression: variables explaining the level of intercultural competence (Beta coefficients and percentage of explained variance).

	Knowledge		Positive feelings		Negative feelings		Multicultural education activity	
	Jews	Arabs	Jews	Arabs	Jews	Arabs	Jews	Arabs
	N = 284	N = 128	N = 283	N = 128	N = 283	N = 128	N = 266	N = 126
Higher education institutions (0 = Colleges; 1 = Universities)	.13*	.03	–.05	.12	–.05	–.14	–.03	–.16*
Studying in programs for teaching special populations (vs. educational leadership)	–.09	–.06	–.16**	.03	–.00	.10	–.06	–.02
Studying in programs for teaching disciplines (vs. educational leadership)	–.08	–.26*	–.05	–.00	.09	.26*	–.11*	–.16*
Meeting the Other off-campus	.21**	.30**	–.02	.19*	.08	–.09	.06	.30**
Attitudes towards multiculturalism	.14*	.04	.32**	.07	–.31**	.13	.38**	.20*
Perceived institution inclusive atmosphere	–.07	–.02	.09	.26**	–.22**	–.23*	.02	.18*
Positive interactions with the Other at the institution	.21**	.03	.24**	.17*	–.08	–.17	–.01	–.11
Contents acquired at the institution	.03	.18*	.12*	.20*	.15**	–.09	.21**	.33**
R^2	.16	.19	.25	.34	.21	.33	.23	.33

p* ≤ .05.*p* ≤ .01.

Positive feelings towards the Other were affected among Jews mainly by positive attitudes which they hold towards multiculturalism, while among Arabs it was the institution's inclusive atmosphere that had the largest impact. In both groups two additional in-campus variables had an impact as well: positive interactions among students (mainly among Jews) and contents acquired at the institution (mainly Arabs). Finally, Jews who studied in Educational Leadership programs reported on having positive feelings toward the Other, while among Arabs it was meeting the Other off-campus. The total explanation (R^2) of the regression equation was higher among Arabs.

Negative feelings towards the Other were affected significantly, among Jews, by their own negative attitudes towards multiculturalism, perceived non-inclusive institution atmosphere and by contents they acquired in their institution. Among the Arabs, there were two variables which affected their negative attitudes toward the Other, both related to their experience in their institution: studying in programs for disciplines teaching and perceived negative institution atmosphere toward inclusion. The total explanation (R^2) of the regression equation was higher among Arabs.

Finally, *multicultural activity in the educational field* is the manifested reported behavior which constitutes a major component of intercultural competence. Some similarities and some differences were found for each ethnic group. The similarities included positive attitudes towards multiculturalism (particularly among Jews), contents acquired in the institution (particularly among Arabs) and to some degree, studying in Educational Leadership programs. Other three additional variables which affected multicultural education activity were found primarily among Arabs. Intensive off-campus meetings and two in-campus components: Arab students who studied in colleges and reported on inclusive institution atmosphere were more involved in multicultural education activity. Again, the total explanation (R^2) of the regression equation was higher among Arabs.

Thus, in line with our hypotheses, the academic study experience at institutions of higher education made a major contribution to the explanation of the level of intercultural competence. Knowledge regarding the Other and multicultural education activity were affected by type of institution, and in a different manner for Jews and Arabs: Jews who studied in Universities reported on having a better knowledge regarding the Other, while Arabs who studied in colleges reported more intensive multicultural education activity. Studying in educational leadership programs affected positive intercultural competence among Jews and particularly Arabs. Other in-campus components such as perceived inclusive atmosphere, positive interactions among students, and particularly contents acquired in the institution had impact on all components of intercultural competence for both Jews and Arabs, but higher among Arabs. All that in addition to off-campus interactions with the Other (Arabs) and positive attitudes regarding multiculturalism (Jews).

Summary and conclusions

The purpose of this study was to examine the impact of intercultural encounters with the Other (between Jews and Arabs) during graduate studies on the level of intercultural competence, along with other variables, such as ethnic group, higher education institute, educational program of studying, off-campus encounters and attitudes towards multiculturalism.

The main research findings indicated that both formal and informal encounters on campus played a significant role in almost all variables of intercultural competence, particularly attitudes and feelings towards the Other and the actual practice of multicultural education. These encounters also affected change in how graduate students behaved towards the Other.

Aside from the experience at the institution of higher education, Arabs knew more about Jews and reported more positive changes with respect to actual behavior emerging from their academic experience than Jewish students did. As a minority in Israel, Arabs could benefit from the multicultural approach and intercultural competence, since it would allow them to express themselves more broadly, through an ongoing dialogue with the majority group and its culture (see also Dignes and Baldwin 1996; Lev Ari and Laron 2014).

When we analysed the different experience of Arabs and Jews in their graduate studies, both groups reported that in-campus experience had an impact on all components of intercultural competence, but for the Arab students these encounters were more significant. This finding is contradictory to that of Pettigrew and Tropp (2000), who claimed that influence of intergroup contact is more significant among students who belong to the majority. A possible explanation for our findings could be found in the particular, unique situation in Israel regarding Jews (majority) and Arabs (minorities). Arabs, as minorities in Israel, experience initial cultural encounter within higher education institutes, which enables them to meet Jews in more inclusive and equal terms compared with off-campus reality. As a result from positive interactions, atmosphere and academic contents in their campuses, they develop intercultural competence which is mainly expressed in their actual multicultural education work.

However, some negative feelings toward the Other aroused among few students (mainly Arabs), as a result of in-campus encounters, which should be considered as well. The respondents also made a number of critical comments with respect to changes and improvements that should be introduced at colleges and universities. They noted that teaching methods should become more culturally sensitive, that study contents should be enriched with knowledge and content related to becoming familiar with the Other and the teaching staff should be diversified by hiring more Arab lecturers.

This study had a number of limitations. The research was conducted at one point of time due to ethical and logistic difficulties in tracing the participants in two points of time. Thus, it was impossible to trace longitudinal change in behavior (see also Pettigrew and Tropp 2006). Another limitation was the focus on those engaged in teaching and education who were studying for a master's degree. Comparison to areas of study that are not related to education and teaching is likely to yield broader results. In addition, this research began with a gender bias, as most current and future teachers are women.

The importance of this research, however, lies mainly in its potential contribution to the body of knowledge related to encounters with the Other at higher educational institutes, and to the development of intercultural competence among students. Higher education institutes can intentionally navigate their curriculums and contents of studying among students. They can also initiate informal cultural encounters with the Other by exposing the students through special study days and educational tours (see also Saleem 2017). These activities among all students, particularly those who study disciplines such as sciences, might improve the development of intercultural competence. Higher education institutions can serve as key players in successful social change, and impact their students to become culturally competent professionals who are able to critically engage in socially diverse topics (Wilson 2018).

As Brewer (1996) rightfully claimed that contact with people from other cultures is not sufficient to translate intercultural encounters on campus into intercultural competence. These encounters must include critical learning components that reveal the structural reasons for the current reality and find expression in personal and social experiences with people from different cultures (Otten 2003).

The development of intercultural competence has the potential to reduce prejudices and stereotypes regarding the Other, as well as alienation and even violence often accompanying intercultural encounters in Israel between Jews and Arabs, and worldwide. In this manner, positive attitudes, feelings and actual behavior can be intentionally built first among these graduate students, but in the future this construction of reality might affect positive relations between majority and minority members, even among those who experience conflictual political encounters. For a large portion of graduate students, this is often their first (and maybe last) significant encounter with the Other, who may thus become less threatening than in the past. Graduate students, from the majority and minority groups, who are teachers and educators serve as socialisation agents for the younger generation, who in the future might act upon their communal and social circles. Thus, they might facilitate a change in the field of education and construct a society that is truly multicultural rather

than multicultural, particularly in societies such as the Israeli, which is characterised by deep historical, political, social and cultural conflicts.

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