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# What is meaningful civic engagement for students? Recollections of Jewish and Palestinian graduates in Israel

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## ABSTRACT

The current study identified factors contributing to the long-term perception of meaningful civic engagement in a sample of Israelis involved in extra-curricular civic-engagement programs as students. Using a qualitative research method supported by quantitative analyses, we found that five to 10 years after completing higher education, most perceived their civic engagement positively. Nevertheless, it was not necessarily perceived as a personal transformative experience which led to future civic engagement. Three major factors that contributed to the establishment of a meaningful experience which lead to long-term commitment were identified: (1) Conceptualizing personal development as embedded in the socio-political context; (2) Experiencing peer-group civic engagement as a place for self-reflection, support, and meaning; (3) Continuity and a sufficient duration of civic engagement to generate a change in the community. Palestinian citizens of Israel reported that civic engagement was more meaningful than Jewish students, who constitute the majority in Israel.

## KEYWORDS

Civic engagement; higher education; students; community development; minorities

## Introduction

Civic engagement refers to the ways in which individual and collective actions aimed at identifying and addressing issues of public concern are undertaken to improve conditions for others and/or help shape a community's future. Engagement of this type can lead to a sense of connection, interrelatedness, and commitment toward the community at large. It can take many forms from individual volunteering, to organizational involvement, to voting (Adler and Goggin 2005).

In the past 20 years, there have been concerted efforts on the part of institutions of higher education to promote greater civic engagement among young adults through university–community partnerships. This proliferation of civic engagement programs can be seen in the growing numbers of service-learning courses and extra-curricular civic-engagement programs that students are encouraged to join (Flanagan and Levine 2010; Hurtado 2003; Ostrander 2004; Johnson Butterfield and Soska 2005).

For example, in the US more than 1200 universities and colleges have signed the Declaration of Civic Responsibility since 2000 and have taken concrete steps to help students take part in civic-engagement programs and 'service learning' courses with marginalized communities (Campus Compact 2000). These courses tended to be grounded in the experiential philosophy of John Dewey (1907) as well as the American democratic tradition (Cummings 2000; Harkavy and Hartley 2010) and reflect the notion that institutions of higher education in multicultural democratic societies play a significant role in heightening students' ethical democratic standards by increasing active

citizenship, developing pluralistic values, and promoting students' personal growth while integrating theory and practice (Reed et al. 2005; Beaumont et al. 2006; Flanagan and Levine 2010).

More recently, 'service learning' has been replaced by the concepts of 'community engagement' or 'campus–community partnership' which refer to 'the collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities (local, regional/state, national, global) for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity' (Driscoll 2008, 39). This trend is based on more egalitarian, critical, and radical thinking drawing on Paulo Freire's critical philosophy (Freire [1968] 2000) and feminist pedagogies (Weiler 1991; hooks 1994; Lather 1998, 2001). These pedagogies are centered on the processes of dialogue, praxis, and historical analysis and are aimed to promote social emancipatory change within the community by introducing students and community members with notions of critical thinking in the realm of social justice while identifying mechanisms of oppression and social power relationships (Gerstenblatt and Gilbert 2014).

Similarly, in Israel, in the last ten years growing resources have been allocated annually by the Council of Higher Education of Israel to develop campus–community partnership learning courses (Golan and Rosenfeld 2015). For instance, more than 100 community partnership learning courses in more than 20 institutions of higher education have been developed to foster collaboration and mutuality between institutions of higher education and the community. Beyond these curricular activities, most institutions of higher learning have Social Engagement Units that are co-funded by numerous foundations and which recruit thousands of students to take part in these extra-curricular community service activities in return for a partial scholarship. These social engagement units foster active citizenship and young leadership among students through a variety of projects that make issues of social justice and equality salient (Golan and Rosenfeld 2015; Golan, Rosenfeld, and Orr 2017).

Furthermore, the nationwide 'PERACH' project (the Hebrew word for 'flower' and also the acronym of the mentoring and tutoring project) which over the last four decades has matched approximately 18,000 university and college students every year in one-to-one mentoring programs with high-risk children and adolescents and paired some 4000 students to group mentoring programs (Goldner 2016). Similar to Social Engagement Units, the PERACH project is supported by the Council for Higher Education of Israel. However, the civic engagement approach is more conservative and concentrates mainly on promoting the mentees' development and reducing social disparities in Israeli society through supportive adult–child relationships.

These efforts, which involve thousands of students, are designed to help cope with the main challenges of Israeli academia such as furthering access to higher education and better career opportunities for young marginal populations, catalyzing diverse social and intellectual leadership and decreasing social alienation in disenfranchised communities (The speech of the Israeli President at the launching of 'Israeli Hopes in Academia,' 2016).

Empirically, longitudinal (e.g. Astin et al. 2000; Moely et al. 2002; Beaumont et al. 2006; Simons and Cleary 2006) and cross-sectional quantitative studies (e.g. Gallini and Moely 2003) supported by qualitative and case studies (e.g. Simons and Cleary 2006; Golan and Shalhoub-Kevorkian 2014) conducted in the USA, New-Zealand, Australia, and Israel have shown that students' civic engagement during their academic years, either in curricular or extra-curricular activities, was associated with a greater ability to forge intimate adult–child interactions, personal skills, and the ability to integrate knowledge taught in different courses (Jackson 2002; Fresko and Wertheim 2006; Bullen et al. 2010; Hughes, Boyd, and Dykstra 2010), increased self-competence, leadership skills, the choice of a service career (Astin and Sax 1998; Astin et al. 2000; Simons and Cleary 2006), greater cultural tolerance (Fresko and Wertheim 2006; Amerson 2010; O'Shea et al. 2013), social justice, pluralistic attitudes (Moely et al. 2002; Simons and Cleary 2006; Golan and Shalhoub-Kevorkian 2014), as well as greater commitment to future civic involvement (Payne and Bennett 2000; Sax 2000; Wellman 2000; Moely et al. 2002; Nishishiba, Nelson, and Shinn 2005; Beaumont et al. 2006).

Given these positive outcomes, researchers have suggested that the time was ripe to identify specific factors in civic engagement programs that show promise for increasing involvement among students (Beaumont et al. 2006). To answer this call, the current study drew on the social justice framework to examine the ways in which former students in Israel recalled their civic engagement 5–10 years after graduation, as a way to better delineate those factors of civic engagement that lead to long-term commitment and willingness to take part in future civic engagement.

Identifying these factors should thus contribute to heightening the short and long terms effects of civic engagement for both students and their communities. This is particularly significant in light of the growing numbers of civic engagement programs in institutions of higher learning around the world, the potential contribution of these programs, as well as the large sums of money invested in their implementation.

## Method

The sample was composed of 816 former college students who were active in civic engagement between 2005 and 2010 on three campuses in the southern and central parts of Israel: The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, and Sapir College. The study was designed and conducted in association with the Social Units on the three campuses as well with PERACH, the largest nationwide Israeli one-on-one and group mentoring program on these campuses. In addition, two small programs were studied as examples of group-run programs within PERACH which stand out because of their partnership with two other organizations: The Prevention of Sexual Violence educational program associated with the Jerusalem Rape Crisis Centers, and the AJEEC- leadership project at the Negev Institute for Strategies of Peace and Development. In total, the participants took part in 100–120 hours of civic engagement and 10–56 hours of supervision and received approximately \$1500 annually in return for their involvement. For the participants' demographic characteristics see Table 1.

Forty-seven percent of the participants took part in individual settings such as one-on-one youth or academic mentoring or tutoring, and received individual supervision; 30% of the participants took part in a group setting such as class tutoring, enrichment classes, after-school child care facilities for high-risk and special education children, hostels for mentally and intellectually disabled populations, street field work, help and rape crisis centers, and leadership clubs and received peer-group supervision. Finally, 23% of the participants were engaged in a mixed setting in which they took part in a

**Table 1.** Participants' demographics.

Variable		
Gender	Male	30%, <i>n</i> = 245
	Female	70%, <i>n</i> = 571
Origin	Israel	86%, <i>n</i> = 703
	Former Soviet Union	11%, <i>n</i> = 88
	Europe, the United States or South America	3%, <i>n</i> = 25
Ethnicity	Jewish	90%, <i>n</i> = 734
	Christians or Druze	10%, <i>n</i> = 82
Family status	Married	59%, <i>n</i> = 481
	Single	41%, <i>n</i> = 335
Education	Master's degree	44%, <i>n</i> = 360
	Bachelor's degree	54%, <i>n</i> = 440
	Professional diploma	2%, <i>n</i> = 16
Majored	Social sciences, arts and humanities	56%, <i>n</i> = 456
	Engineering, the exact and life sciences	23%, <i>n</i> = 188
	Medicine, health sciences, and social work	19%, <i>n</i> = 155
	Education	2%, <i>n</i> = 17
SES	Low	6%, <i>n</i> = 49
	Middle	91%, <i>n</i> = 742
	High	3%, <i>n</i> = 25

group activity such as group mentoring and tutoring as well as extra-curricular enrichment classes in the sport/health/sciences and received individual supervision. The former students chose the type of civic engagement they preferred.

Participants were recruited by e-mails sent by the organizations whose programs they had originally joined. The e-mail provided information about the goals of the study, a consent form to take part in the study and a link to an online questionnaire. Participants were assured of the confidentiality of their responses. In addition to the online questionnaire, we conducted 57 semi-structured in-depth interviews that adhered to a general script and covered a list of predefined themes (75% women, 58% Jewish). The interviews conducted with Jewish graduates were in Hebrew; the interviews with Arab graduates were in Arabic. Approval was obtained from the Hebrew University Ethics Committee for Research on Human Subjects.

## **Interviews**

The interviews were designed to shed light on the survey findings that required further in-depth examination. They were conducted with graduates who gave their written consent to be interviewed on the questionnaire. All interviews were recorded and fully transcribed and analyzed based on the principles of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis as defined in the Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) guidelines. Each interview was treated separately and the analysis began with an intensive detailed reading and re-reading of the interview transcripts and notes so the researchers could become familiarized with the content. All significant meanings were noted. Once complete, the transcripts were re-read this time to note emerging themes from the initial notes that captured the essence and importance of the text. A preliminary list of initial themes was created from which a second list connecting the themes was produced that clustered these themes into a smaller number of higher-order ones that were checked against participants' phrases to ensure they supported the connections made. A list of themes was then developed by assigning a name to the clusters of themes to form superordinate themes.

## **The written questionnaire**

The graduates were asked to complete a series of open and close-ended questions. The open-ended questions included questions such as: What feeling sums up your civic engagement? What feeling sums up your studies? What is your current occupation? Is it related to your former civic engagement? What meaningful experiences do you recall from your civic engagement? In retrospect, how would you change the civic engagement? Are you taking an active part today in civic engagement? The answers were analyzed using Atlas.ti version 6.5 software (GmbH, Berlin, Germany) to clarify the interview findings.

In addition, several closed questionnaires were developed to support and validate the qualitative data. The questionnaires dealt with participants' self-perceived contribution of activism to their self-development, participants' pro-civic attitudes and participants' frequency of activities in the political, volunteering, and ecological domains over the previous year (for the description of the questionnaire, sample items, Cronbach alphas of the scales, means, and standards deviations see [Table 2](#)).

## **Findings and discussion**

### ***Between positive and meaningful civic engagement experience***

The responses of the graduates as regards the experience of activism were coded as positive (i.e. enjoyable, satisfying, and valuable), negative (i.e. frustrating, characterized by 'lack of fulfillment,' a sense of disappointment or a missed opportunity to make a change) or mixed (containing both negative and positive descriptions) and showed that the majority of the graduates in the current study

**Table 2.** Description of the study measures.

The measure	Description	Sample items and Cronbach alpha	Mean SD
The civic duty subscale from the Civic Identity/Civic engagement scale (CICE; Bobek et al. 2009).	The civic duty scale assesses individuals' pro-civic attitudes and the desire and mindset to get involved with others to make positive contributions to society (12 items, $\alpha = .90$ ). Items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale. Higher scores indicated more positive attitudes toward involvement. The original study demonstrated convergent and discriminant validity. The scale was previously administered to college students with internal reliabilities (Cronbach's alphas) ranging from .73 to .91 (Bowman and Denson 2011; Voight and Torney-Purta 2013).	'I believe I can make a difference in my community.'	4.12 0.59
The self-perceived civic-engagement contribution questionnaire (Following the Volunteer Functions Inventory (VFI; Clary et al. 1998).	<p>The scale was designed specifically for this study. The construction of the scale was inspired by the Volunteer Functions Inventory (VFI; Clary et al. 1998). In the original scale volunteers expressed their agreement with reasons for volunteerism on six subscales that covered values, understanding, enhancement, career, social, and protection. The original scale demonstrated good internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients that ranged from .80 to .89 as well as a test–retest reliability of four weeks (Clary et al. 1998).</p> <p>In the current study we replaced these motivations by notions of self-perceived benefits in five of the above domains. The values contribution subscale was related to the former graduates' expressions of altruistic and humanitarian concerns for others (7 items, <math>\alpha = .86</math>). The understanding contribution subscale dealt with the extent to which they took advantage of the opportunity to utilize skills that might otherwise have gone unused as well as to acquire new skills and knowledge (3 items, <math>\alpha = .76</math>). The enhancement contribution subscale dealt with positive strivings of the ego and psychological growth (5 items, <math>\alpha = .84</math>). The career contribution subscale dealt with career exploration and enhancement (5 items, <math>\alpha = .90</math>). The protection subscale assessed the drop in former graduates' feelings of guilt associated with their own fortunate circumstances during the engagement (3 items, <math>\alpha = .78</math>). We also assessed the contribution of the civic engagement to the former graduates' interpersonal domain (6 items, <math>\alpha = .80</math>). Items were rated on a 1 (do not agree) to 5 (fully agree) Likert scale. Higher scores indicated a higher sense of contribution.</p>	'I felt it was important to help others.'; 'The civic engagement let me learn through direct, hands-on experience.'	2.80 0.86

(Continued)

**Table 2.** Continued.

The measure	Description	Sample items and Cronbach alpha	Mean SD
The behavioral questionnaire	Due to the high inter-correlations between the subscales ( <i>rs</i> ranging from .54 to .76), we used a composite contribution score dubbed 'general contribution.' The selection of the one-factor solution was validated using a SEM Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) [ $\chi^2/df = 2.08$ , CFI = .98, GFI = .99, and RMSEA = .05].		
	The current civic engagement behavior of the former graduates in the political (5 items), volunteer (5 items), and ecological (6 items) domains were measured using 16 items. Respondents were asked to state whether they had adopted certain behaviors over the previous year or at a certain time. Answers were summed separately for each domain. Higher scores on each domain indicated a higher number of behaviors.	The political scale: 'wrote a comment on political issues in posts/talkback/publications on social networks or websites'	2.96 1.30
		The volunteering scale: 'donated money to a person who is not a relative or a friend'	2.82 1.45
		The ecological scale: 'reported environmental hazards.'	3.93 1.45
	Previous studies have used a similar questionnaire to collect information on the frequency and type of volunteer involvement (Overdevest, Orr, and Stepenuck 2004; Zaff, Malanchuk, and Eccles 2008).		
	The three-factor construct was validated using a SEM Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) [ $\chi^2/df = 2.21$ , CFI = .91, GFI = .93, and RMSEA = .06]. Additionally, the three-factor solution was compared to a one-factor solution using the Akaike information criterion (AIC) (Akaike 1987). The results of the AIC index indicated that the three-factor model showed better fit (the AIC of the three-factor model was 298.60 compared to 342.56 for the one-factor model).		

described their student civic engagement activity as a positive experience even years after it ended. Specifically, 82% of the graduates described their civic engagement as a positive experience, and 10% of the graduates perceived their civic engagement in a negative manner (the inter-rater agreement between coders based on 211 reports was 95% [ $\chi^2(4) = 248.66$ ,  $p < .001$ ;  $kappa = .80$ ,  $p < .001$ ]). As can be seen in Table 2, the participants' level of perceived general self-contribution was rather moderate.

Nevertheless, despite recalling a general positive feeling only 34% of the graduates stated that they currently took an active part in civic engagement. Analysis of the open-ended questions in the questionnaire, which asked the graduates to describe a memorable experience revealed that approximately 9% of the graduates could not recall even one meaningful experience from their civic-engagement period ('didn't have,' 'don't remember'). These findings suggest that although graduates' experience in civic engagement was perceived as pleasant and enjoyable, it did not necessarily serve as a springboard for future activism.

To better identify the factors that constituted a meaningful activity for these graduates, we analyzed their recollections of what has been meaningful for them, from both the open-ended questions in the survey and the interviews. We pinpointed three factors which made civic engagement

meaningful to these former students: (1) contextualizing the civic engagement in the Israeli socio-political context, (2) participating in group reflection with their peers, and (3) continuity. The findings showed that these three factors were meaningful for the Jewish students, but even more so for Palestinian students who are the minority on Israeli campuses.

### ***First factor: conceptualizing personal action in the socio-political context***

For many graduates, civic engagement was their first opportunity to meet people from marginalized communities. This encounter made a profound impression on them and constituted as an essential component of their civic engagement experience. Graduates often used the verb 'to get to know' to characterize their encounters with these communities. For example: 'I got to know a new culture.' 'I was exposed to and learned about disadvantaged communities.' 'I became familiar with very different families than those I knew.' 'I got to know families in distress.' One graduate<sup>1</sup> of a PERACH group mentoring program talked about her encounter with Ethiopian Israeli girls: 'I got to know their difficulties, and this exposed me to a world I simply did not know [...] These are girls whose parents do not know the language, do not know what they learn at school.'

Fewer than 40% of Jewish young people and less than 20% of Palestinians in Israel enroll in universities or colleges (Blass 2017). There is a clear correlation between the socio-economic status of families and access to higher education (Golan-Agnon 2006). Thus, these encounters almost always involved interactions between more privileged students and members of more unprivileged communities. In Israel as in other parts of the world, getting to know disadvantaged communities and their day-to-day difficulties appeared to be crucial to the process of becoming an engaged citizen.

Nevertheless, many graduates described this encounter as shocking, overwhelming, and unprocessed. For instance, a graduate of a one-on-one PERACH mentoring project said: 'I remembered that the household was really facing difficulties [...] a lot of children, nine or ten, and one of them was blind and the family was poor. I was in shock.' In addition, the majority of the graduates described their assistance from a privileged standpoint and took a therapeutic, professional-like attitude that involved using phrases such as 'I was able to change a lost boy,' 'I gave,' 'I helped,' 'I set an example,' 'I improved,' 'I taught' to describe their contribution.

This privileged social status replicates the power distribution between the students and individuals with whom they work (i.e. children and families from low SES backgrounds) and may reflect their attempts to overcome their limited sense of ability to generate significant changes given the complex socio-economic and political circumstances of these families and their relatively short-term civic engagement. In addition, some of the graduates might not have been sufficiently encouraged during their supervision sessions to reflect on such issues as ethnicity, inequality, and cultural diversity (Moely et al. 2002). This was particularly true in the PERACH one-on-one mentoring program, which similar to other mentoring programs around the world, operationalizes therapeutic and hierarchical conceptualizations (Liang, Spencer, West, and Rappaport 2011; Spencer and Rhodes 2005) and a more traditional approach toward civic engagement in which older and wiser adults promote disadvantaged children. By concentrating on the quality of relationship between the mentor and the mentee, these programs tend to ignore the socio-political mechanisms that affect the mentee's condition and minimize their point of view in the dyadic relationship.

Although the inequality between institutions of higher education and the community is inevitable (Wiewel, Gaffikin, and Morrissey 2000), the former students' stance appears to be akin to the conceptualization of 'charity' which sometimes guides those involved in civic engagement who see the experience as one of giving based on values of compassion and altruism (Kahne and Westheimer's 1996). This stance also appears to run counter suggestions put forward in the literature regarding the need for civic engagement practitioners to build personal relationships with community members based on equality, mutual respect, joint activity and learning, while taking a definite moral stand against exclusion in order to help community members overcome the distance, solitude,



and estrangement that often creates an impasse between excluded populations and civic engagement practitioners (Beresford, Croft, and Adshead 2008; Muir et al. 2010; Strier 2013).

In fact, meaningful civic engagement tended only to be experienced when graduates related the construction of their personal development to a wide range of socio-political issues and understood the context of the lives of the families or children with whom they worked. The graduates who found civic engagement meaningful for their long-term commitment described their development of ethical-social and political awareness, as well as an ability to analyze the society they live in critically by adopting a social justice perspective that takes the power distributions and socio-political inequalities of Israeli society into account. This tendency aligns with the critical approach to civic engagement which views the main vehicles for personal and social change as the development of social and political awareness, in addition to the ability to identify the mechanisms of oppression in a society that create social inequality, and reflect on aspects of social justice, ethnicity, and cultural diversity.

For instance, a graduate who had taken part in a one-on-one PERACH mentoring program discussed her career identity in terms of power relationships and social justice. She stated: 'I am a family financial adviser, it's related; activism exposed me to the financial difficulties of families and I decided to switch from a career in science to helping families.'

A Palestinian citizen of Israel from the north part of the country, who studied at The Hebrew University of Jerusalem and mentored a Palestinian girl in East Jerusalem, described her experience: 'I felt that there was meaning to what I was doing, and I felt that I was contributing to the children of East Jerusalem.' She described the development of her political and national identity and her career as an educational psychologist in East Jerusalem today: 'I'm certainly engaged in socio-political issues. [...] We, the Palestinians, are disengaged from each other, but through PERACH I learned more about the situation in East Jerusalem and about the entire Palestinian struggle.'

These quotations reflect the ways graduates' personal explorations grew into political understanding. The process of identity construction is a complex and intersecting mosaic of states, where aspects of identity such as gender, socio-economic status, nationality, and ethnicity are multidirectional and mutually influence each other (Anthias 1998; Yuval-Davis 2006). The graduates' civic engagement that took place in social, economic, gendered, and political contexts enabled the graduates to examine variations and tensions within their central and marginal identities, challenge their prejudices and social worldviews while furthering their understanding of the complexities of social inequality and power distribution. Researchers have suggested that when civic engagement is detached from a critical investigation of its background, it cannot generate a transformative civic engagement experience that promotes a sense of solidarity, joint responsibility, and social change (Kahne and Westheimer 1996; Cherry and Shefner 2004). Thus, to maximize the impact of civic engagement and to shape graduates' personal awareness and social consciousness, there is a need for identity exploration related to social contexts. This kind of process may serve as a launch pad to form a solid basis for later political involvement and civic engagement.

### *Contextualizing civic engagement was even more meaningful for the minority graduates*

The analyses of the interviews showed that for Palestinian graduates, civic engagement was more meaningful than for Jewish students.

A Palestinian graduate said: 'I had heard about refugee camps, but I had never seen one until I mentored a girl in the Shuafat refugee camp.' Another graduate who participated in a PERACH mentoring project said:

I come from the north, and I knew nothing about Jerusalem or the difficult conditions people live in, but when I saw what's going on there through the mentoring, I felt a sense of solidarity with those families, and I still think about what could be done to improve their conditions, even a simple, small improvement.

Similarly, this sense of solidarity was present in the Bedouin Leadership program run by AJEEC. One male graduate said: 'Today I am no longer Ashraf from Tel Sheva but Ashraf of the South.'

Furthermore, Palestinian graduates (unlike Jewish graduates) recalled their social engagement in more positive terms than their academic experiences.<sup>2</sup> Whereas the terms they used the most to summarize their academic experience were 'tedious,' 'difficult,' and 'frustrating' they summarized their social engagement with expressions such as 'satisfaction,' 'personally rewarding,' and 'enriching.' Finally, Palestinian graduates reported higher levels of general self-contribution from their social engagement  $\{t(97.33) = 4.03, p < .001$ ; the mean difference was 4.21 with a 95% confidence interval ranging from .214 to .628; *Mean Jewish* = 2.76, *SD* = 0.84; *Mean Palestinian* = 3.18, *SD* = 0.90} and current volunteering behaviors  $\{t(94.60) = 2.71, p < .01$ ; the mean difference was .19 with a 95% confidence interval ranging from .075 to .3835; *Mean Jewish* = 2.78, *SD* = 1.42; *Mean Palestinian* = 3.23, *SD* = 1.66} compared to their Jewish counterparts.

These findings are inconsistent with previous findings in the United States which indicated a lower level of involvement in volunteer or community activities among blacks or non-English-speaking minorities than for whites and native Americans (Foster-Bey 2008). However, for most Palestinian graduates, civic engagement appeared to be a self-transformative and enriching experience and constituted an important opportunity to develop their Palestinian solidarity, national identity, and political awareness. Palestinian students make up 29% of all Arab young people and are considered the elite of the Palestinian citizens of Israel (Central Bureau of Statistics 2014). Thus, university civic engagement programs enable them to encounter Palestinian communities that differ greatly from the ones they are familiar with.

In addition, Palestinian students constitute a minority in academia in Israel, making up 12% of the total student body on Israeli campuses (Council for Higher Education 2013). Attending courses conducted in Hebrew, tending to congregate separately in classrooms, cafeterias, and public areas, and having very few Palestinian faculty members as role models (2–3% of the academic staff), Palestinian students report a sense of detachment, foreignness, and alienation on campus and classes (Golan and Shalhoub-Kevorkian 2017). Contrary to Jewish students who enroll in higher education after two to three years of military service, Palestinian students, who do not have to serve in the military, are usually younger when they enroll. The campus constitutes their first encounter with Israeli Jews, yet Jewish-Palestinian relations are rarely addressed. This age gap is sometimes supplemented by national alienation and enmity that also affect interactions with their Jewish counterparts (Golan and Shalhoub-Kevorkian 2014, 2017).

Consequently, in contrast to their academic experience, the civic engagement of Palestinian students was experienced as empowering because it was seen as an opportunity to strengthen their personal and national identities which are often muted, unrepresented or voiced on campus, as well to form ties of solidarity with other Palestinian groups. This made civic engagement an empowering process that countered their prevalent feelings of absenteeism and estrangement.

### ***Second factor: the group as a source of meaning for civic engagement***

The findings suggested that graduates who participated in programs involving group engagement and who met regularly in groups to reflect on their activism perceived their civic engagement as more meaningful than their peers who were involved in one-on-one civic-engagement or supervision. For instance, in response to the question 'How would you change civic engagement?' graduates from the PERACH one-on-one mentoring program wrote: 'Instead of individual civic engagement, social civic engagement would be better'; 'I would invest more in work that aims for widespread social change and a change of policy rather than work that aims to fix the injustices that the current policy has created'; 'The one-on-one mentoring felt a little redundant, because I didn't feel that I was making a difference.' A male graduate who participated in both the one-on-one PERACH mentoring program and a group leadership program at the Social Engagement Unit mentioned the differences between the two programs:

In the mentoring program the direction was mainly practical, it is a decent form of volunteering, but there was hardly any talk about social, class or ethnic consciousness [...] There was a child who needed a mentor, but no one asked why. Why do those kids need mentors? What is the larger picture behind it?

These statements may imply that dyadic engagement involving a student and one child was not perceived as part of a social movement that could generate social change. Specifically, the dyadic setting of the mentoring program, the use of psychological terminology, the lack of contextualization or references to social issues in the mentoring program, and the isolation inherent to individual activity may have undermined the graduates' perception of their civic engagement as socially significant.

Graduates who participated in peer activist-learning groups perceived the group as the most important factor providing meaning and constituting future engagement after graduation – even more so than the civic engagement itself. They described the group as a familial and a secure space which gave a sense of belongingness, support, and motivation. The group allowed them to exchange materials, advice, and ideas, overcome difficulties, and act in a more effective way. It also served as a venue where they could reflect on their personal backgrounds, identities, assumptions, and values while honing their ability to critically analyze and learn from their own civic engagement and that of others. When provided with group reflection and the tools to grasp the socio-political context of their actions, the experience of meeting young people from underprivileged communities in some instances became an empowering experience. Thus, graduates' self-discovery extended to the practical dimensions of skills when aspects such as context, ideology, power relations, and social structures were integrated into their learning process (Fisher, Fabricant, and Simmons 2004; Johnson Butterfield and Soska 2005; Nandan and Scott 2011).

For instance, a graduate who participated in group supervision said: 'We unpacked personal issues in the group and part of that involved self-reflection.' There was a feeling in the group of partnership and collective reflection. There was a sense of 'weness.' Another graduate of a leadership program recalled the following:

We were often preoccupied with issues that we discussed on a number of levels including our personal backgrounds, the backgrounds of people who came from the disadvantaged areas, and this was our springboard for teaching the students [...] There were very heated, lively discussions that involved questions of identity that were personal and could be translated into work with the students.

These findings on the significance of the group are consistent with the postulates of critical pedagogy which emphasize that meaningful learning processes occur via both active civic engagements as well as through the identification of oppressive mechanisms when connecting personal knowledge to power distribution and social injustice through rational discourse, reflection, and evaluation (Freire [1968] 2000; Giroux 2003). In addition, the findings align with feminist pedagogy that underscores the need for a range of voices and experiences to be heard and considered (hooks 1994; Lather 1998, 2001). Peer-group supervision that associated the personal experience of the participants with social knowledge enabled the participants to experience personal growth and development (Kallus and Shamur 2015). Hence, under group supervision, personal awareness became social consciousness and translated into a motivation to become socially involved.

### ***Third factor: continuity as an essential element in creating a sense of social change and meaning***

In Israel, students' civic engagement does not usually last more than one academic year (from November to June) and does not take place during the summer vacation. The graduates noted that the lack of continuity and fragmented engagement hindered the effectiveness of civic engagement for the community. Many suggested extending the period of civic engagement and noted the difficulties involved in establishing a strong, trusting emotional bond in a short period of time, which impeded their ability to produce meaningful change. They also expressed ethical concerns about the outcomes for the children and the community as a result of the short duration of their

civic engagement, which replicated past rejecting upsetting experiences, and did not allow relationships to develop. For example, many graduates of one-on-one mentoring suggested long-term mentorship: 'I would like to accompany the same child for a longer period, rather than just one year.' 'One-year civic engagement programs of four hours a week are not enough to create a significant commitment. I would ask for a higher scholarship to enable continuity.' '[I was] dissatisfied because the activism was cut short. There was not enough time to establish a connection.'

The influence of the length of the intervention on adolescent development has been noted in studies on youth mentoring exploring the forging of strong emotional bonds (Grossman and Rhodes 2002). The importance of consistent civic engagement in giving students a meaningful experience was pointed out by Golan and Rosenfeld (2015). Engaging for a few hours a week solely during the academic year hampered the necessary continuity to build a trusting relationship with the target population.

### *Two examples of best practices of civic engagement programs*

The graduates spoke highly about two programs which implemented all three factors. These programs educated students to contextualize their actions, provided peer-group supervision, and stressed continuity. The first program involved two Rape Crisis Centers, one Palestinian and one Israeli that trained the students to be facilitators in school workshops for the prevention of sexual violence. The second program at the Hebrew University is designed to empower students from marginalized, peripheral communities to be active in educational programs, reflect in groups about their actions, their North African identity, and multi-culturalism in Israeli society.

These programs are described briefly below since they are relevant to other campus–community programs in the world.

#### *The prevention of sexual violence program at the Jerusalem rape crisis center*

The prevention of sexual violence program run by the Jerusalem Rape Crisis Centers trains 10 Israeli and 10 Palestinian students to facilitate weekly workshops on the prevention of sexual violence in schools in Jerusalem. The Israeli Rape Crisis centers provide the training, supervision and access to schools in West Jerusalem. The Palestinian Center trains Palestinian students and has access to schools in East Jerusalem. PERACH monitors the activity and provides the scholarships.

Obviously, the initial levels of motivation of these students were relatively high. However, 74% of the graduates of this program continue to be actively engaged 5–10 years after graduation. They explained that their experience as students, learning about themselves and reflecting on their actions in the larger social and political context gave them self-confidence and prompted them to be active in various different fields. 'Today I am more engaged in political activity, especially the Occupation. Gender is undoubtedly one of its components.'

All the interviewees underscored the importance of the intensive group training and bi-monthly group meetings that provided a sense of partnership and meaningfulness while helping them to process the complex reality they were facing and to conceptualize the meaning of their activity. As one of the Palestinian graduates said 'I was considered opinionated and a fighter, but the advantage of the crisis center is that it gave me the tools and the language to use and to think things through.' Another graduate stated: 'The group training excited me. It was really different from my academic education. It was external but really close to my heart. It was my first opportunity to talk at the university about topics such as gender and politics.' This program also differs from others because many students continue to volunteer at the Rape Crisis Center for a period of three years. Unlike most civic-engagement programs in which students volunteer only for one year, in this program students chose to volunteer even once their one-year PERACH scholarship has ended.

### *ISEF (Israel scholarship education foundation) at the social engagement unit at the Hebrew University*

In most civic-engagement programs, students from privileged background meet marginalized communities. In this program, students from marginalized communities get access to the university and meet other marginalized community members through civic engagement. In a remarkable interview, a male principal of one of the best schools in Jerusalem recalled how important this setting was for him in terms of the learning and activism provided by the civic engagement unit:

For me, civic engagement was a way to connect the world of Dimona [a peripheral town with few facilities where he grew up] and the world of Jerusalem [the university]. I asked myself how to bridge between these two worlds [...] I had two contradictory emotional reactions. One was to alienate myself from the place I came from and say, okay, I'm ending this dark chapter in my life and entering a new world and getting adjusted to it. The other possibility was actually creating a synthesis between the two worlds, and asking myself, since I'm at the university, what does it mean for those who did not get into college and stayed behind? Is it a personal or a social problem? The program, which enabled both social consciousness and civic engagement, gave me the opportunity to reach some deep insights. Personally, it was clear that I was not going down the path of alienation.

Graduates clearly recalled that the discussions during the weekly group meetings about their culture, ethnicity, and power distributions in Israel helped to validate their cultural heritage and infused them with strength and support. In addition, graduates also talked about continuity. ISEF has been providing scholarships to students from marginalized communities for decades, as well as peer-group learning and opportunities for social activism during higher education as a whole. All the graduates of the ISEF program were active first as students, and then as student coordinators for three to five years at the Social Engagement Unit at the Hebrew University.

### *Conclusion, practical implications, and study limitations*

The current study has several theoretical and practical implications for the field of civic engagement in institutions of higher education. First, meaningful civic engagement is an important experience for students than can encourage the future social and political commitment and engagement of young adults. Second, models of civic engagement that embrace a social justice approach and provide group supervision which allow students to examine their values and beliefs through a socio-political lens should be adopted. Third, students need to be given the opportunity to take part in civic engagement programs that last long enough to foster feelings of meaning and social change. Finally, civic engagement is very meaningful for Palestinian students in Israel. In fact, we found that these students perceived civic engagement in more positive terms than their academic experience as a whole. As shown in other studies conducted in Israel, there is an underrepresentation of minorities in higher education in general, and in students' civic engagement programs in particular. Group activity and supervision constituted undoubtedly what both Israelis and Palestinians felt was most beneficial. Nevertheless, in Israel today, only a small number of Palestinian students sign up for civic engagement programs that combine both group activity and supervision. Thus, it is important to develop culturally tailored programs for minority students.

Note, however, that like most studies in the field, the current study has several limitations. First, this work was limited to graduates' retrospective self-reports and focused on the contribution of civic engagement to students. Further studies are needed to explore the long-term effects of students' civic engagement using a longitudinal research design integrating multiple reports such as from members of the community and representatives of the institutions of higher learning associated with the program. Second, the findings were obtained from students who were paid for their civic engagement. Future studies should examine the impact of civic engagement in student volunteers or students who receive course credits.

## Notes

1. Since most of our interviewees were women and Jewish, we only specify the gender or the ethnicity of the interviewee for males and Palestinian graduates.
2. The most common Hebrew term is social engagement, which is seen as a way to detach civic engagement from the politics of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict (Golan and Shalhoub-Kevorkian 2014). The term civic engagement has an especially problematic connotation since it is the term used by the Ministry of Defense for programs for Palestinian youth who cannot serve in the army, but are still required to do a two-year stint of community service.

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