

# Diversity Management in Places and Times of Tensions

Helena Desivilya Syna

**Diversity  
Management  
in Places and Times  
of Tensions**

Engaging Inter-group Relations  
in a Conflict-ridden Society

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macmillan

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The Max Stern Yezreel Valley College  
Yezreel Valley, Israel

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*In memory of my mother Rajna Syna whose wisdom and remarkable  
resilience throughout her trying life has taught me the value of humanity  
in all its diversity.*

*To my husband Izy and my children Noa and Roi—may you continue  
experiencing life in all its diversity.*

# Foreword

In 2019, I had a pleasure to visit Max Stern Yezreel Valley College with a group of international psychology students. In the remote location, outside of large urban settings, Arab and Christian students study together in a friendly and empowering academic setting. The college is located between two towns severely affected by ethnic and religious conflict: Nazareth and Afula. In Nazareth, Muslims and Christians clash over the holy sites close to the Basilica of the Annunciation where Muslim community wanted to build a large mosque. In Afula, local Jewish population blocked Arab population from entering the public park and organised rallies against selling homes to Arabs. The dense atmosphere in both locations between the two towns, in a calm Max Stern Yezreel Valley College campus, Helena Desivilya Syna teaches Arab and Jewish students about the dynamics of intergroup conflicts and managing diversity in organisational settings. For most of her students, college time is the first moment of integration: after attending segregated high schools and having different pre-college experiences (most Jewish students would be drafted to the army right after their high school completion, which is not the case for the Arabs) students from both groups have learned how to communicate and how to coexist

in an educational setting. The Center for Diversity and Intergroup Conflict Studies, chaired by Helena Desivilya Syna, is a response to these pressing needs.

The experiences of managing diversity in an academic setting in Israel, together with very wide research interests, allowed Helena Desivilya Syna to write a powerful account of the contemporary conflicts in Israel and the tensions between high- and low-status groups. It is important to note that such book could be written only in a country that is immersed in multifaceted conflicts and inequalities. The Jewish-Arab conflict, probably known to most readers, is by far not the only one. Christian-Muslim tensions (like in Nazareth), Sephardi-Ashkenazi divide, hawkish-dovish political conflict, as well as class struggles create a unique laboratory for social researcher of conflict and diversity. Helena Desivilya Syna takes the reader for an inspiring tour of contemporary Israeli society where intergroup tensions affect people's everyday life: the medical staff working in large hospitals and small clinics; inhabitants of the large city Haifa, known for its ethnic and religious diversity; students of small academic college in Yezreel Valley. She shows that diversity looks differently from the high-status group side—and differently among the low-power groups. When analyzing these microcosms, she finds out how vulnerable are they when facing the intensification of conflict 'out there', in the political world. The reality of Israeli-Palestinian intractable conflict affects everyday contacts within organisations; it makes difficult the everyday cooperation of Arab and Jewish medical staff or students. In the words of her own model, macro-level factors (global and local forces) affects what she calls meso-level contexts that are focal to this book: organisations and communities trying to manage their diversity as constructively as possible in everyday intergroup contacts.

This book is also another important theoretical voice in psychology and beyond that points to the limitations of our discipline. The narrow look at intergroup contact, harmony, and diversity in—what Helena Desivilya Syna calls essentialist social psychological perspective—overlooks some important power issues that are critical for better understanding of intergroup relations. In this, she joins other social psychological thinkers, such as John Dixon in the UK, Kevin Durrheim in South Africa, or

Tamar Saguy in Israel, who point to the ‘irony of harmony’ paradox. She finds this paradox in many aspects of her work. For example, in the City of Haifa, globally known for its diversity, in fact Arab and Jewish communities live in a relative societal segregation in which status issues still play a big role. Jewish and Arab students in the same college have completely different view on diversity: Jewish declare the feeling of comfort in their ethnically diverse college, whereas Arab students (both Christian and Muslim) still see much differences between their situation and the situation of Jewish students, which decreases their sense of comfort.

Although it is clear to the reader that the author is trained within the ‘essentialist social psychology’ tradition, she does her best to explore the perspectives offered by other disciplines, such as sociology, anthropology, and philosophy. This interdisciplinary approach is visible not only in terms of mixed methods used to study the issue of conflict and diversity (this book is a good mixture of quantitative analyses and in-depth interviews), but also in problematising the issues of power and addressing societal-level processes that affect both organisational practices and everyday experiences of her participants.

The conflicts within Israeli society are obviously difficult to resolve. Taking into account the international context of complex relations of Israel with neighbouring countries, as well as the populist tendencies in local politics, one could become very pessimistic about the future of this society. On the other hand, Helena Desivilya Syna shows how people can manage with diversity even in the times of tensions and intensification of political conflict. She shows how to build organisational settings that allow to maintain peaceful real-life encounters between people who live and work together. Her own model of ‘managing diversity in paradoxical reality’ includes building partnerships, developing models of practice, implementing actions, and monitoring implementation of practices that bring more sensitive culture and allow for multi-perspective view of the conflict, engaging with ‘otherness’ and creation of common spaces. This proposal is a promising hint to everyone working with intense conflict settings, be it in the Middle East, Europe, or the United States. Of course, it is mostly applicable to the Israeli context.

Taking it all into account, I believe that this book will be an exciting read not only for researchers looking at intergroup conflict and diversity management, but also for all the readers who are curious to learn more about current Israel and its everyday problems.

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