New book critically examines anti-bias messaging in children's entertainment

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Experiencing the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

Children, Peace Communication
and Socialization

Yael Warshel

Arab/Palestinian Israeli tweens stand outside Jaffa's Sawalha Sweets. Credit: Yael Warshel

Can peace between Israelis and Palestinians be achieved, in part, through anti-bias messaging in children's educational entertainment? That is the subject of a new book by Yael Warshel, assistant professor of telecommunications and media industries at Penn State, titled "Experiencing the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: Children, Peace Communication and Socialization."

Published by Cambridge University Press, the book provides an in-depth study of communication interventions aimed at reducing intergroup bias among Israeli and Palestinian children. Specifically, the book critically assesses the effectiveness of Israeli and Palestinian versions of the children's television show "Sesame Street" in building and supporting the making and sustainment of peace.

The series offered a utopian vision of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In the show, Israeli and Palestinian children became friends and the conflict had already been resolved by the creation of two separate states: Israel and Palestine.

"The set design neglected to include the existing structural realities framing the audience's lives, focusing instead 'multiculturally' on changing individual-level intergroup attitudes," said Warshel. "For example, in one episode of the show, a Palestinian man named Adel says to his Muppet friend Haneen, "Yes, they eat falafel and hummus just like us," after Haneen learns that Israeli Muppet Dafi eats these same

foods.

"Existing literature has explored the contents or the production of peace entertainment, education and news messages aiming to mediate armed political conflict, but it has not assessed audiences' interpretations of these messages," said Warshel, also a research associate in the Rock Ethics Institute and an affiliate faculty member of international affairs, international and comparative education, Middle Eastern and African studies. "In my book, I explain how the audiences for Israeli and Palestinian "Sesame Street' interpreted the series' messages of peace and why they ultimately rejected it."

Warshel's research for the book included a three-year ethnographic study of Israeli and Palestinian communities. In addition, she randomly sampled and administered surveys to more than 320 five- to eight-year-old children and 230 corresponding parents comprising a total population of 550 Palestinians, Jewish Israelis and Arab/Palestinian Israelis. Finally, she conducted an in-depth audience reception analysis with 65 of the 320 children to whom she showed the "Sesame Street" series.

"Unfortunately, I learned that the children in my study had already been socialized in ways that led them to disregard "Sesame Street"'s attempted message of peace," said Warshel. "Peace is defined by each 'group' at an elite level as justice, security or equality. Those separate outcome goals for peace and associated structural realities and narratives that the children separately experience form the lens through which they actively re-create what they 'see' in their daily lives, and in turn what they 'saw' on the TV shows."

For example, when shown an episode where the cultural backgrounds of the characters were not referenced, the Palestinian children, when asked whether anyone Jewish Israeli or Jewish was included in the episode, responded that they did not see anyone dressed in military uniforms,

namely, an army, so there were no "Jews." Similarly, the Jewish Israeli children concluded that no Palestinians were included in the episode because they did not see any "terrorists." Even after seeing an episode where Palestinians and Jewish Israelis were shown cooperating with each other, the children did not change their opinions. Both groups concluded that the only way to resolve the conflict was to eliminate the other party culturally or physically.

"The children were so entrenched in their beliefs which "stemmed from their direct experiences living in conflict zones and interactions with artifacts and communication with and about those with older members from and in the specific village, town or city where they grew-up, that they could not 'see' what "Sesame Street" sought to model for them," said Warshel.

Interestingly, the third group Warshel studied, Arab/Palestinian Israeli children (Arab/Palestinian citizens of Israel), reacted more positively to the show's messages, suggesting that they could be considered an important asset. Practitioners should not only target them in their efforts to facilitate peace but encourage and support them with necessary resources to become peacebuilders to intervene in the conflict themselves, said Warshel.

Overall, however, Warshel noted that her findings demonstrate the inability of mediated messages, even those that represent the most carefully designed peace-building interventions internationally, to impact modern armed political conflicts easily, if at all.

Warshel said her findings may be applicable beyond just the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The design for her study draws from comparative large sample political conflict data and theory.

"Instead of having studied each 'group' as though existing sui generis I

studied them comparatively using world system derived categories," she explained. Her recommendations thus "serve as a starting point for designing and predicting how other stateless nations, statebearing nations and state minorities might interact with peace communication interventions elsewhere." Palestinians, Jewish Israelis and Arab/Palestinian Israelis, respectively, she argued, "contemporarily inhabit those modern world system categories of practice. The current world system, comprised of states rather than for example empires or city-states, privileges a merger between ethnopolitical 'group' identity and state-based citizenship rights. That merger is the salient cultural lens through which human beings filter incoming stimuli and make sense of their lives," she theorized.

She concludes the book with recommendations to improve "Sesame Street" and peace communication practice more generally. Applied broadly to conflict zones elsewhere or political conflict in a general sense, like in the U.S. today, she offers 17 recommendations. Among them, she advises incorporating the structural and narrative realities about a given political [conflict](#) into intervention designs, and when targeting [children](#), meeting them where they are at, not where adults presume they are.

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