



Experiencing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict: children, peace communication and socialization

by Y. Warshel, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2021, Etextbook: US \$80, ISBN-13: 978-1108485722, ISBN-10: 1108485723

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BOOK REVIEW

Experiencing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict: children, peace communication and socialization, by Y. Warshel, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2021, Etextbook: US\$80, ISBN-13: 978-1108485722, ISBN-10: 1108485723

Sesame Street serves as one of the most well-studied and prominent children's television programs we have witnessed in the United States (U.S.). While the global aspirations of this production may reflect noble intentions, the implementation of this communication intervention illustrates the serious fissures in its reception. Learning from failed attempts will lead not only to improving strategic communication, but also will strengthen our ability to engage in meaningful and impactful social change. Warshel's (Pennsylvania State University) impressive book, *Experiencing the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: Children, Peace Communication and Socialization* (2021), offers important reflections on the failure of this project to achieve its goals.

The central research question guiding this project explores how media might contribute to peace, certainly a critical issue to our global communities and not just our academic projects. This study is relevant to those involved in scholarship and praxis in peace communication, strategic intervention, and social change. Warshel clearly indicates the limits of strategic communication when she writes that "social change is difficult, and communication is a relatively weak tool" (p. 59). Yet the hope and dedication she brings to this work is evidenced in the many years she devoted to the larger research project (2001–11). Very few scholars have the language skills and cultural familiarity to be able to conduct a comparative case study such as this with such sensitivity. And although this may not have been an explicit goal of this research, there is value in her illustrations of complexity in conflict.

Warshel explores the context of production, recognizing the importance of the post-Oslo Accord time period as a moment of optimism for some, though certainly not all Palestinians or Israelis. The Oslo Accords refers to official agreements and negotiations between the Palestinian Liberation Organization and the government of Israel in 1993 and 1995. Following these Accords, the *Sesame Street* production ran for two seasons, each followed by televised reruns. The second season included a Jordanian version. With official and visible support, this *Sesame Street* extension was meant to model cooperation and friendship across Israeli and Palestinian children, produced though in two separate sites, positioned in territories governed by Palestinian Authority and Israeli authorities.

While in many ways this research engages a classic comprehensive methodological approach, considering the intentions guiding this children's television production, the programs as texts, and audience reception through the perspectives of five-to-eight year-old children and their parents, Warshel brings an additional contribution with her studied and thoughtful attention to broader conditions. She carefully explains not only the context in which children watch this program, in heartbreaking detail, but also the context in which this project was conceived and implemented, during an unusual historical post-Oslo Accord moment, through separate Palestinian and Israeli professional production teams.

Recognizing that case study design is not meant to reflect generalizable results, the three sites selected share some key features, particularly restricted mobility, yet differ distinctly in terms of their positions of power. The most complicated set of restrictions is that of East Barta'a, the Palestinian site functioning technically as part of the designated Area A, under

the jurisdiction of the Palestinian Authority, yet blocked from easy access to their constituencies. The second site, Umm al-Fahm, hosts Arab/ Palestinian children living in Israel, also experiencing restricted mobility. Although Jewish Israeli communities tend to have more ease of movement within the broader territory, Warshel selects a settlement, Alfei Manashe, for the third case, located in Area C in the West Bank, with material and official structures clearly separating this community from the Palestinians around them.

While the third case is clearly unlike other Jewish Israeli communities that are not settlements, and even more secular than many of the other settlements, its relatively restricted mobility offers a confined space in which children watch and interpret this program. It is important to recognize that these case studies work well for this research project, but do not represent the broader communities of Palestinians either, living in a variety of jurisdictions and conditions within Gaza, West Bank, Jerusalem, and Israel, as well as in a complicated set of administered areas (designated Areas A, B, C) determining access, mobility, surveillance, and enforcement.

These case studies are strengthened by the longitudinal range and in-depth quality of observations Warshel engages, in addition to extensive interviews and surveys. Particularly striking is her observations of children playing and snacking, illustrating the trenchant nature of the conflict as well as the commodities that are incorporated into everyday lives. The book concludes with a welcome chapter following up on what she terms a “tweenage” audience in 2011, who had been subjects of her 2004–06 study. This was a welcome addition, in that earlier chronicles raise interest and wonder about what had happened to these children since the time of her more intensive study. This conclusion is also disheartening given that very little has changed, in sentiment or circumstance, and conflicts continue to cause great harm to many, including children.

Resonant with the official intention of this project, two production studios created two distinct programs, each foregrounding a street as its own idealized space for citizenship, at a local level. Warshel describes this as a more open- than closed text, overly ideal and therefore not realistic to their current conflicts and challenging conditions. She addresses this concern through her analyses of the program’s reception as well as her subsequent recommendations.

Toward the end of this book, Warshel recognizes the value of direct collaboration across production teams when feasible, which worked in the first season but not the second. Reminiscent of the peace communication models she describes earlier in this book, she concludes by bringing attention to valuable unintended consequences, such as enabling the building of television and nongovernmental organizations, as well as contributing to economic development and participatory governance.

Despite the professed goals of the program, its official support and funding, this communication intervention failed. But the lessons learned are worth contemplating. Warshel divides her analysis into a study of three case study groups, Palestinians constituting a stateless nation, Arab/Palestinian Israelis a state minority, and Jewish Israelis a state-bearing nation, the latter with the privilege of assuming their power is normal and neutral.

Palestinian children in the first studied site imagined themselves as part of a broader community with other Arab children, including those living in the Israeli state, but did not “see” the Jewish characters who were intentionally included in the Sesame Street narrative. Warshel illustrates this point with powerful quotes, supported by children’s interpretations of the characters as speaking English but not the portrayed Hebrew. In another site, Jewish Israeli children neither “saw” Palestinians in the text, nor did they recognize Arabic as their spoken language. Despite the explicit inclusion and language of characters from these competing cultures, children did not understand these depictions, assuming that anyone in

the opposing group would be dangerous, and thus not relevant to narratives with kind characters and cooperative actions.

Warshel shows that these children not only missed the cues within the television text, but also did not recognize individuals from other cultural communities present in their everyday lives. While the intermediary group of Arab children living in Israel could understand both Hebrew and Arabic as languages present in the dialogue, and considered many of the characters to be good and realistic, they sustained derogatory attitudes toward both Palestinians and Jewish Israelis in real life. A strength of this work is in situating attitudes in observed practices, showing how everyday experiences structure children's interpretations of mediated texts.

Warshel's schematic framework nicely illustrates the central themes across these communities. She describes the Palestinian East Barta'a site as "pursuing justice," from "the prism of the stateless national narrative" (p. 240) in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian ethno-political nationalist conflict. In contrast, Jewish Israelis in the Alfei Manashe settlement are "pursuing security," conflating many different Arab communities, including Israel's political allies in Egypt, into a monolithic threat in the context of the intertwined Arab-Israeli multi-state conflict.

The intermediary group of Arab/Palestinian children residing in Israel then are "pursuing equality" in the confined area of Umm Al-Fahm. Their sense of identity appears to juxtapose connections with Palestinians with jurisdictions through Israel, seeing themselves as neither one nor the other, being "not just stumped but flustered" (p. 323) in responding to questions about their identity, fighting against "binary logic" (p. 324). Warshel asks then whether this more nuanced set of interpretations would allow this group to serve as a "bicultural mediator," suggesting that "their bodies and beings ... are more powerful than tools of media ... in mediating" (p. 403). This is an intriguing question, though her later concern that we should not expect children to do what adults cannot is important here as well.

The strategic intent of this *Sesame Street* production failed. Children would not be able to integrate the projected collaboration across cultural groups if they could not recognize these groups in the text in the first place. While the strategic intervention itself may have failed, this research has succeeded in demonstrating the essential need to understand media within a broader communication landscape, which includes dominant norms as well as dominating structures.

Warshel concludes her reception analysis with the important point that this audience of children did not "misunderstand" the text (p. 343); they did not "accept" the text given the dominant norms governing their local communities. She suggests that the text itself may have been too open, allowing disengagement. But given limited experience as well as lack of mobility outside of their own neighborhoods, these children had little in their worlds to reference as alternative possibilities. Accentuating the potency of cultural norms, communities create meanings faced with their material structures, such as walls and roadblocks. These meanings may inhibit imagination needed to consider different ways of engaging.

Media may matter, but strategic entertainment-education programs will be limited through the communication landscape in which they are situated. Media reception may need to be explored beyond immediate psychological effects to consider social norms, economic constraints, and political conditions. This book offers strong evidence that context matters. Lack of equality in everyday life, coupled with serious constraints to physical and economic mobility, make a projected attempt at cross-cultural friendship a sadly romanticized and unrealistic projection.

Interventions designed to promote peace require institutional resources and policies that support these goals if they are to even begin to change the narratives that pose challenges to collaboration.


Warshel concludes that one way to improve strategic communication for social change focused on peaceful outcomes is to rely on evidence and bring in peace and conflict scholars for discussion in planning and evaluation. While this is music to any academic's ears, the *Sesame Street* enterprise is one of the most well studied programs in our field, at least in terms of children and media scholarship. But while this enterprise may do very well in conducting formative research informing their productions as well as evaluations to understand their impact, there is a role specifically for critical academic research. The focus needs to be on the broader communication context that includes conflict, posing critical questions that allow attention to differences in privilege and power. The strength of this research is in illustrating the endurance of sentiments over time, and their resonance with everyday experiences and broader norms.

We need then to consider collectively what we do with analyses such as these. Warshel suggests we not avoid the reality of conflict, but address tensions directly in children's programming. I defer to friends and colleagues expert in media and children (such as Amy Jordan, Ellen Wartella, and Dafna Lemish) to comment on how we might present dissonance and discord effectively, yet also ethically, not to inspire trauma or reinforce anti-social responses. Some of the work considering the role of a *Sesame Street* character with HIV in the South African production might be of value in this conversation. But for children living in conflict zones, perhaps not recognizing their problematic conditions limits our ability to reach and resolve.

While these results may dampen our interest in promoting strategic intervention to reduce prejudice, they remind us that we need to understand media not as a mirror, reflecting reality, but as a prism, refracting our aspirations and challenges. This study inspires us to explore more deeply what we can do to change prejudice as well as promote empathy. We need to do so, considering these sentiments and acts as part of a communication landscape, through critical inquiry that considers historical as well as cultural context that creates and sustains inequitable conditions. We need to study the problem not just the project if we have any hope of contributing past the limiting parameters of the prism.

Warshel's contribution in this volume is relevant beyond the scope of this television program. The hubris that inspires media intervention can shift quickly to heartache, when the idealism engaged obscures audience connection with projected characters and collective behaviors. Mediated interventions serve as one manifestation of strategic programs for social change. Without understanding and then navigating communication as landscape, as complex resource, and as accentuating power as well as leveraging resistance, we will continue to be blinded by our myopic perspectives.

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