

Engaging "Fuzzy" Conflict: The Role of Action Evaluation

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August 1998

(I wish to thank the ARIA Group
for its support of this Action Evaluation project)

Introduction

The objective of this paper is to inquire into the role of action evaluation in engaging community conflict. Traditional approaches to conflict resolution focus on either preventing conflict or on reaching settlements or agreement that mark the end of conflict (e.g. Fisher & Ury; Walton). Conflict "engagement" draws on more recent, "identity-based" approaches to conflict (succeed (Burton, 1990; Folger and Bush, 1995; Lederach, 1995; Rothman, 1997; Rupesinghe, 1995), which view conflict as an opportunity for learning and building community. According to this approach, conflicts **mean** something. By getting at these meanings, parties can use conflict to discover new ways of meeting their needs.

In many cases a major obstacle to engagement is the "fuzziness" of conflict itself. Stereotypically community conflict involves distinct groups openly confronting each over concrete issues. However, in diverse, complex communities individuals may identify with a variety of groups and there may be a multitude of interrelated issues. In such communities people feel that conflict exists without it being clear who is against whom or about what. They may experience fear, suspicion, and feelings of hostility towards other groups in the community (and vice versa) but feel powerless to do anything about these feelings. This fuzziness makes it very difficult to engage conflict until it breaks into open confrontation. Then, however, people tend to polarize and information becomes distorted, making it even more difficult to engage process of joint inquires into the underlying meanings of the conflict. Furthermore, open conflict creates pressure for concrete solutions that usually leave the underlying identity issues undiscussed.

This paper will illustrate how action evaluation can be used to promote conflict engagement under conditions of fuzziness. It is based on a case study of the "Zichron Forum", an on-going attempt to create community building in a small Israeli town with a high potential for divisive conflict. As will be see, action evaluation can play an important role in structuring the conflict engagement process, providing focus under conditions of fuzziness.

Zichron Jacob: Trouble in Paradise

Zichron Jacob is both one of the oldest Jewish communities in modern Israel and a reflection of the diversity and the deep tensions that characterize Israeli society. Located on a hilltop overlooking the Mediterranean Sea, it was founded as an agricultural village in 1882 by pioneers from Eastern Europe, who received financial and technical backing from the Baron Edmund de Rothschild. Their descendants, and those of families that arrived in Zichron before independence in 1948, are considered to be the "veterans". Today most of them live in the older part of town, which lies at the center of a growing network of new neighborhoods.

In the 1950's new immigrants, mostly Sephardic Jews from Turkey, Kurdistan, Persia, Iraq, and Morocco were settled mostly in neighborhoods to the south and the north of town. These "new immigrants" were mainly workers and small merchants whose socioeconomic level was markedly below that of the inhabitants of the veterans. Large numbers of ultra-orthodox Jews began moving to Zichron in the 1970's, creating their own neighborhoods and educational institutions also along the southern edge of town.

In the early 1980's Zichron was "discovered" by artists and professionals attracted by its physical beauty, village-like character, and proximity to the major cities. This trickle of newcomers eventually became a wave, stimulating the development of new neighborhoods all around the periphery of the moshava. Within ten years the population of Zichron grew from 2,000 to 7,000 inhabitants. Unlike previous settlers of Zichron, who arrived in groups, the newcomers have come as single, nuclear families from all walks of Israeli life. Most of them work outside of Zichron and enjoy a relatively high socioeconomic level. Today they far outnumber all the other groups combined--and their numbers are steadily growing.

There have always been tensions resulting from the social, economic, and cultural differences and inequalities among the various sub communities in Zichron Jacob. However, these tensions were contained by the daily struggle for survival and by a stable pattern of relationships that evolved over the years. The radical changes over the last decade, however, disrupted the old patterns and created new potential for conflict between groups. For example:

The rapid shift from a small, agricultural town to a town of commuters led to conflicts between the remaining farmers, who always kept their equipment and animals in their courtyards, and new neighbors who valued order and quiet. Members of the veteran community, who felt that they had lost "their" Zichron, felt deeply embittered and considered leaving and setting up a new community outside of town.

Development and the growth of an active tourist industry transformed Zichron from a sleepy little town to a center of intense activity. While this activity was good for local merchants and some residents, other residents were disturbed by the noise and traffic, especially around the old synagogue on the Sabbath.

There were a series of small conflicts among the ultra-orthodox, orthodox, and secular elements of the community. Although the founders of Zichron and the new immigrants were orthodox Jews, most of their descendants lived relatively secular lifestyles, though some still kept kosher homes and attended synagogue on the Sabbath or on holidays. The vast majorities of the newcomers were secular and feared the influence of ultra-orthodox community. Fueled by events in Israeli society in general, tensions surfaced in conflicts over the closing streets on Shabbat, opening a special Jewish studies program in the secular schools, and plans to build a synagogue in one of the new neighborhoods.

The influx of affluent newcomers threatened to create a wider and more visible gap among the socioeconomic and

ethnic groups in Zichron. The opening of a new school on the northern edge of town, for instance, raised questions as to whether it would be a neighborhood school drawing on the wealthier, primarily Ashkenazi on the northern end of town or whether it would be integrated with students from the less affluent Sephardi neighborhoods to the south.

The rapid development of Zichron was perceived as a threat to the environment and the very quality of life that attracted the newcomers in the first place. Veterans and newcomers look with horror as fields, hilltops, forests, and open spaces are cleared away for the construction of new housing developments all promising a high quality of life in a "village" atmosphere.

Taken together these tensions amounted to what could be called a "fuzzy" conflict. There were no dramatic confrontations and it was not clear exactly who was against whom or about what. Even without being directly involved in a specific conflict, almost everyone was affected by each of these tensions, which were experienced as fear, suspicion, prejudice, and sense of potential loss. The existence of fuzzy conflict was particularly ironic given the fact almost all the inhabitants came to or stayed in Zichron precisely because of the quality of life and its peaceful, idyllic atmosphere.

The Zichron Forum: An Attempt to Engage Conflict

In the summer of 1996 Moishik Lerner, a local educator and town councilor, and I began discussing the possibility of initiating some kind of process to address these tensions. Our feeling was that we should try to proactively deal with these issues rather than allowing them to fester. Many of these tensions were being fed by trends in Israeli society over which we had not direct control. By addressing them at the community level, however, we hoped to find ways of constructively managing these conflicts. We envisioned applying Rothman's (1996) ARIA model in order to create a process of conflict engagement that would lead to improved co-existence and conscious, proactive community building among the various sub-groups.

At this initial stage the fuzziness of the conflict made it difficult to communicate our vision and mobilize other community members. However, an incident in March 1998 temporarily focused attention on the explosive situation. Because the center of Zichron had become a major tourist attraction on Saturday, there were growing tensions between members of the orthodox religious establishment and local merchants, who began opening their shops on the Sabbath despite official prohibition against doing so. In response a political leader of the ultra-orthodox community parked the town's hearse up against the door of one of the shops in order to make it inaccessible on the Sabbath. This incident brought hundreds of secular demonstrators into the streets, attracted both the press and national politicians.

Although this incident was quickly resolved (the ultra-orthodox backed down and acquiesced to the opening of shops), it raised tensions and anxieties to a fever pitch. Taking advantage of the general sense that "something needed to be done", Moishik and I met with a "think tank" of local social scientists that suggested creating a conflict resolution group representative of the various sub-groups in Zichron. Members of this "core group" would first define the overall issues and then go back to their sub-communities to clarify the underlying concerns and needs. These needs and concerns would be addressed through concrete projects carried out by mixed teams (consisting of members of the different subgroups) and supervised by the core group.

Among the participants in the think tank was Dr. Reuven Gal, former Chief Psychologist of the Israel Defense Forces, and director of the Carmel Institute, a social science research institute located in Zichron. Reuven also possessed expertise in conflict resolution and became one of the "conveners" of the project, along with Moishik and myself. The three of us agreed that, while the core group should be reflective of the diversity of the community, the members should be independent and as non-political as possible. We were looking for concerned citizens rather than official representatives. However, it was not at all clear who exactly should be in the group and how to recruit them, so we began by randomly inviting acquaintances from the various sub-groups to talk about the idea.

During these meetings, we presented our idea and asked the participants to respond to following questions: Is there a need for such a process? Does the idea itself make sense? What else should be done? Who should be involved? Among the participants there were wide differences of opinion about the answers to almost all of these questions. For instance, some participants said that there were deep divisions between subgroups while others claimed that the problem was just among a small group of politically interested troublemakers. Some said that the process should focus on the religious-secular conflict, while others felt that it should focus on tensions between the affluent and poorer neighborhoods. Some felt that there was a need for conflict resolution and concrete solutions, while others said that the real need was for individuals to get to know each other. Nevertheless, there was consensus on three points: (1) something needed to be done, (2) the overall goal should be improving the quality of community in Zichron, and (3) this group should begin by being a "forum" in which community members could talk to each other. The proceedings were recorded by hand and a protocol of each meeting was then sent to the participants.

During the initial series of meetings very few participants came back for a second time. The turning point came in July 1997 at a meeting in which many of the earlier participants returned and expressed their commitment to participating in an on-going process. This core group, which emerged almost randomly, included twenty-two representatives from almost everyone of the sub-groups: secular, orthodox, ultra-orthodox, veterans, newcomers, Sephardim, Ashkenazim, the neighborhoods, merchants, educators, etc. Finally there was a palpable "we-feeling" among people in the core group, who began to talk about themselves as members of the "Zichron Forum". From July 1997 through June 1998 the Forum met regularly once a month. The boundaries of the group remained relatively open. Anyone was welcome to participate in the meetings and there were no formal attempts to either widen or restrict membership. Participation waxed and waned, but there were never fewer than ten people at a meeting. Throughout the year the meetings were planned, organized, and moderated mostly by the original conveners (Reuven, Moishik, and myself), who also distributed a written protocol. Group membership was informal and an entirely self-selecting process; anyone who attended the meetings could become a Forum "member". The conveners actually did little to create the group other than providing a very loose framework in which people could come together regularly. Features of the Forum such as the agenda, the protocols, moderation, and even the name itself occurred spontaneously and then became institutionalized. Over the year other members of the forum began to gradually take more responsibility for setting the agenda and organizing the meetings.

The Problem of Fuzziness

The emergence of the group immediately presented a puzzle that reflected the fuzziness of the conflict. The awareness of conflict and a deep desire to do something to improve their community were strong enough to lead the Forum members to come together regularly over the course of the year, but it was not at all clear to them what they should be doing or talking about. The open conflict over the shops on the Sabbath, which had originally

mobilized the Forum members, was no longer a live issue, though the underlying fears and concerns remained. A wide range of general issues and ideas were brought up during the initial meetings, but there was no specific conflict or issue on the table. The members of the Forum had no specific claims against each other and it seemed artificial, if not absurd, to raise a "hot" issue just so that people could confront each other.

Early in the process Reuven suggested that each participant should state his or her "vision" of Zichron. It did not take long for this discussion to produce a confrontation between the ultra-orthodox and the secular members of the forum. These confrontations dealt with general, ideological issues rather than specific conflicts in the community. The idea of vision was quickly left behind as each side became defensive and began pointing their finger at the other side. The Forum presented a rare opportunity for both sides to directly express strong pent-up feelings, so the discussion often escalated into highly emotional shouting matches.

Although the discussion usually ended with both sides shaking hands and affirming a continued desire to work together, the two sides experienced the experience differently. For the secular participants it was mostly a catharsis--an opportunity to confront the other side and to express themselves. For the ultra-orthodox, who were outnumbered and not on their "home turf", these heated discussions confirmed many of their feelings of being misunderstood and even hated. After a few meetings some of them decided to not to come back.

For a while these adversarial discussions were very exciting and aroused great interest. However, once the arguments began to repeat themselves with no visible progress, members expressed frustration. Some said that the situation was hopeless, that discussion was a waste of time, and that the group should move on to something else. Others said that they had had enough of talking and that it was time to start "doing something". Others felt that the discussions were important and that they should continue. The conveners made attempts at facilitating the discussions, asking group members to reflect on their own needs and desires rather than pointing the finger at the other. However, these attempts failed to move the group beyond the adversarial dynamics. The initiators also suggested that group members undergo formal training in conflict resolution, but the participants rejected this suggestion as well.

The conveners sensed that the group was stuck but that the participants were not yet ready or committed enough to go more deeply into the issues. There was building pressure to move from talk to action, but it was not at all clear what actions should be taken and about what. Unsure as to how to move forward, the conveyors decided to circumvent the problem by taking up a different issue--drug use among youth. Two members who represented the perspective of less affluent neighborhoods had raised this issue in an early meeting.

The Forum members agreed to "study" the drug issue and invited youth workers, educators, and even the police to address its meetings. After a number of such talks, many members felt that the Forum should take action to help the community prevent the spread of drug use. However, when asked if someone would take responsibility for the issue, no one in the group responded. Shortly thereafter a number of Zichron youths from "good" homes were arrested for drug use. This incident spurred Forum members to devise a concrete plan for disseminating information and to volunteer to carry it out. During the same period an intense conflict between ultra-orthodox and secular erupted in a neighboring community. A mixed "delegation" (orthodox and secular) from the Forum went to study the situation and later reported their findings to the rest of the membership.

Increasingly members expressed dissatisfaction the Forum's overall lack of focus. A number of them, including all of the ultra-orthodox, simply drifted away from the Forum. In January 1998 the group came up with a written statement for the first time (see Appendix 1), but the sense of fuzziness and drift continued. There was also an on-going tension between the desire to talk and the desire to take action. At first the participants agreed that central

activity should be dialogue, but this quickly led to a growing sense of frustration and a demand for action. However, the Forum repeatedly experienced difficulty doing anything besides talking.

The Action Evaluation of the Zichron Forum

From the very beginning the conveners conceived of the conflict engagement process as a kind of action research. Although we were guided by models such as ARIA (Rothman, 1996) and "Town Meetings" (Volpe), we felt we were engaging in an experiment. We openly stated our intention of studying the process both for the purpose of determining its effectiveness and for the purpose of developing a model from which other, similar communities could learn. From the outset members of the Forum expressed strong support for such research activity.

Given the sense of fuzziness, the conveners decided to engage in a process of action evaluation as a way of both conducting research/ evaluation and of achieving greater clarity of focus. A proposal was prepared, using a paper by Rothman (1997b) as a guide. The proposal stated that "because the Zichron Forum is meant to represent the community as a whole, it is critically important that a set of common goals emerge from the different needs and desires of the various participants." The objectives of the action evaluation were stated as follows:

- 1 Forming clear and agreed-upon goals among the various stakeholders of the Zichron Forum.
- 2 Creating a basis for designing interventions, training, and other projects for achieving the goals.
- 3 Clarifying criteria for determining the success of the Zichron Forum.
- 4 Creating a basis for on-going monitoring, evaluation, and redefinition of goals and activities.
- 5 Forming a basis for developing models of conflict resolution and community building that can be applied to other settings.

The proposal also included a graphic description of the action evaluation process (see Appendix 2). This proposal was presented at a meeting of the Forum and was accepted by the members with no objections. I took it upon myself to conduct the action evaluation and received instruction on the methodology from ARIA Associates, which agreed to include the Zichron Forum as one of its projects.

Conducting an action evaluation of the Zichron Project presented a number of technical problems. With a few exceptions members of the forum lacked the proficiency in English and/or the computer technology to enter their own data directly into the database in ARIA associates web site. Therefore, we decided to interview all of the Forum members using an interview schedule similar to the action evaluation format (see Appendix 3). A written questionnaire was first sent to the members of the Forum. Members who did not respond in writing were interviewed by a telephone. The interviews were conducted by a research assistant and recorded by hand. Seventeen of the Forum members responded in writing or were interviewed.

The raw data from the interviews were translated into English and entered directly into the ARIA associates web-site database by another research assistant (a native speaker of English). These data were processed by ARIA associates and compiled into a list of the conveners' goals (what?), a list of the participants' goals, a composite list of the conveners' motivations (why?) and action recommendations (how?), and a composite list of the participants' motivations and action recommendations. The processed data were analyzed and summarized with the help of Prof. Jay Rothman, who was in Israel at the time, and myself.

In analyzing the data it was decided not to treat the conveners as a separate group for both practical and substantive reasons. It was not possible for the conveners to meet independently on their data before the feedback

session with the entire Forum. Also the sample of the convener group was very small and showed such a high degree of agreement that such a meeting did not seem critical. More importantly the conveners did not want to be treated as a separate group. Because we played this role informally, we felt that such a treatment might reify a distinction that we were hoping to eliminate as members of the group took on more leadership and responsibility. We preferred to have our perspective integrated within the analysis of the overall data of the Forum participants and not as a separate category.

The composite data on the shared goals of the Forum members was as follows:

- 1 Communication and mediation between polarized groups such as secular-religious, veterans-newcomers, etc. (12 respondents)
- 2 Improving facilities and activities for youth and youth movements. Education in issues such as drugs, road safety, etc. (12 respondents).
- 3 Open and on-going dialogue that involves more and more members of the community. (4 respondents).
- 4 Improving the quality of life of the population involving the environment, help for the needy, emergency services, etc.). (2 respondents)
- 5 Being a forum with power and social influence (in the community) (2 respondents).
- 6 Influencing the political system in order to pressure it to meet social needs. (2 respondents)

The analysis of these data clearly illustrated that the vast majority of Forum members shared two main goals: (1) resolving conflicts between groups in the community and (2) improving the quality of activities and facilities for youth in the community. A minority of members also saw on-going dialogue and political action as important goals. A deeper analysis of the data showed that all of the stated goals could be subsumed under these six points, so no truly unique goals were identified. There was only one contrasting goal, which emerged from the statement by one of the interviewees that the Forum had been unsuccessful in dealing with religious-secular tension and that ethnic conflict did not really exist. The analysis of the motivations ("why?") and ("how?") data will be discussed later.

The data were summarized into a eight-page report in the format of an overhead presentation which included the six goals, the "Why? How? Who? When?" for each goal, and a final page entitled "Comments and Suggestions about the Forum". Jay and myself presented this report to the members of the Forum at a meeting in March 1998. At first it seemed as if the action evaluation simply reflected what everyone already knew. Everything that appeared in the report had been said in some form or another during the previous meetings of the Forum. The action evaluation appeared to add little new information other than clearly showing that there was broad consensus only around the goals of conflict resolution and youth work.

Jay, however, focused the discussion on these two goals. The fact that most members stated these goals did not necessarily indicate that they held the same meaning or weight for each individual. He asked the group members whether one objective took clear priority over another. A few members raised their hands and Jay asked if one of them whether he would be willing to explain why he felt so "passionately" about that particular goal.

One of the participants volunteered and spoke about the experience of growing up in one of the poorer, mostly Sephardi neighborhoods (immigrants from the 1950's). He talked of strong desire to do something that would help the younger generation in that neighborhood so that they would not become a "lost generation". For many of the participants, including myself, this member's speech was very moving and lent new meaning and importance to the goal itself. In addition it clarified why this individual had often termed the religious-secular issue a "waste of time" and had encouraged the group to focus on other issues. This process was then repeated with a different member

describing why dealing with the religious-secular conflict was so personally important to him.

After these members spoke, Jay asked each individual to choose which of the two issues was the priority for them. About ten people chose the youth/neighborhoods issue and five chose the religious conflict issue. The two groups then met separately for about 45 minutes to begin clarifying their own objectives and action plans.

The "youth" group discussed the growing gap between the older, less affluent neighborhoods and the newer, more affluent ones. It became clear that it was not enough for the Forum to deal with drug awareness or to push for more activities and facilities for young people. Rather it needs to do within a larger context of creating closer ties mutual responsibility between the different neighborhoods and social groups within Zichron.

The religious-secular group members asked themselves why the Forum had failed to retain its ultra-orthodox members. Based on discussions with those who had quit the Forum, the participants concluded that it had been a mistake to try to address this issue in a large, open forum-particularly since the ultra-orthodox had felt outnumbered and in hostile territory. This group suggested adopting a quieter, subtler strategy for gaining the participation their participation. Rather than trying to recruit ultra-orthodox members informally, it would approach the local ultra-orthodox establishment in order to gain its "blessing". It would then try to arrange a series of small group discussions within the ultra-orthodox community.

Subsequently the two groups reconvened and briefly reported on what had been discussed. Having divided along the lines of the forced choice between the two main goals, the Forum members then had to decide how to go on from there. Most of the members expressed opposition to either choosing one goal or permanently splitting the Forum into two groups. Rather a consensus formed around the idea that each group would take responsibility for developing its priority, while involving all the Forum membership in its activities. The monthly meetings would serve as opportunities for engaging in activities related to both goals, for reporting back on outside activities, and for planning future strategy.

In the aftermath of the action evaluation it decided to hold a meeting of the Forum in the youth center of one of the poorer neighborhoods (until then all of the meetings took place at a local hotel or the research institute of one of the conveners). Five residents met with members of the Forum and talked about their experience growing up, living in, and raising a family in the neighborhood.

One of the key issues that emerged from this discussion was that residents felt trapped in a bind between their desire to take responsibility for their own fate and a deeply ingrained sense of passivity that had been fostered by years of dependence on the establishment and its patronage. This meeting was probably the first time in the history of Zichron Jacob that a group of residents from the more affluent neighborhoods met with residents of the poorer neighborhood simply for the purpose of hearing what they had to say. The Forum's objective was neither helping out (patronization) nor pushing some agenda (exploitation), but simply to engage in dialogue and to learn.

A short time later one of the Forum members received a tip about an impending crisis between a secular and an ultra-orthodox group in the town. He immediately contacted the other members of the religious conflict group and decided to form a "team" to look into the problem and to mediate if possible. He then contacted one of the former ultra-orthodox Forum members, who agreed to join the team. The team intervened with both sides and helped the two sides arrive at an agreement. At the time of this writing the team is still working to ensure that the agreement will be implemented.

The ability of these individuals to quickly form a team and take action in a sensitive situation was clearly based upon their possessing an expressed common purpose, their organizational infrastructure, and their knowing and

trusting each other. These conditions would probably not have existed without the many hours of talk through which the group was formed. In addition the team was able to draw on the Forum itself as an influential network involving all the sub-communities in Zichron. In this way the team kept the issue out of both the secular and the ultra-orthodox press and mobilized resources for solving the problem. For the ultra-orthodox members this episode illustrated both the importance and the real agenda of the Forum - about which they had had many doubts. As a result, they reaffirmed their commitment to the Forum and began thinking about involving other members of their community.

Action Evaluation: Strengths and Weaknesses

Looking back at the stated objectives for the use of action evaluation in the Zichron Forum (p. 12), it is evident that the process helped formulate "clear and agreed-upon goals among the various stakeholder groups." Although the Forum began as a kind of mosaic reflective of the diversity of the community, the action evaluation helped the various stakeholders form around two central goals. The action evaluation also helped create a basis for "designing interventions, training, and other projects for achieving the goals" and for "monitoring" and "evaluation". In this sense it was an extremely useful tool for the "formative" aspect of evaluation (Rothman, 1997c).

The action evaluation played an important role in helping the Zichron Forum focus and structure its attempt to engage a fuzzy conflict. Protocols from the early meetings reveal that significant differences in priorities were present from the very beginning. The actual agenda emerged and changed in response to a variety of factors such as decisions by the conveners, individual members pulling in their own direction, and responses to opportunities presented by outside events.

The difference between the general goal statement generated at a meeting on January 1, 1998 (Appendix 1) and the action evaluation is instructive. The goal statement represented an important statement of mission, but it did not reflect the differences in the priorities that characterized members of the Forum. By methodically obtaining a goal statement from each individual member, the action evaluation provided a more finely grained picture of both the goals themselves and how they were distributed among members of the group.

In this sense the methodology of action evaluation for formulating group goals represents a significant advance over doing so through an on-line group process. Because of time pressures and the natural tendency to work towards consensus, group process is likely to blur important fine distinctions and remain at a high level of generalization. Furthermore, the more vocal and articulate members of the group are more likely to have greater influence on the outcome of group process.

The fact that action evaluation focused on both the "why" and the "how" questions are also significant. If it had only clarified the participants' objectives, it would simply have confirmed what everyone implicitly felt but never really stated. Members more or less knew who wanted what, but the action evaluation process provided an opportunity for members to explain why their preferred objective mattered so much to them. The action evaluation process also enabled them develop a deeper understanding of the issues themselves and the motivations of other members.

The action evaluation also resulted in a significant structuring of the Forum. Rather than splitting the group, the action evaluation provided an opportunity for openly discussing these differences and organizing the Forum so as to manage them more effectively. Instead of seeing itself as a single, amorphous group, the Forum now clearly saw itself as two "teams" each with its own objectives and leadership. In this regards it is important to note that the

conveners all chose the religious-secular group while the majority of the other participants chose the "youth" group. Rather than creating tension or a split between the conveners and the other participants, the action evaluation process created an opportunity for other members to take responsibility.

The use of action evaluation by the Zichron Forum also revealed a number of potential problems with the methodology. The results of the evaluation were extremely general and did not really "clarify criteria for determining the success of the Forum." It is, perhaps, unfair to attribute this failure to the methodology itself. Nothing prevented us from taking the action evaluation deeper other than our perception that the members of the Forum appeared ready to move on with their agenda. However, the participative nature of the methodology makes heavy demands on participants that may be unrealistic in many situations. While the action evaluation process was interesting and useful, it was not considered to be a central activity of the Forum, which met only once a month and was purely voluntary. There appeared to be little interest in investing additional time and energy in order to arrive at levels of clarity and explicitness that could serve as a formal baseline for summative evaluation. In the case of the Zichron Forum there was no outside pressure to do so since the project had no formal sponsors to whom it was accountable.

The use of the information technology and the data analysis in the ARIA associates web site was not necessarily an advantage. In addition to the technical problems of language and computer literacy, there was a clear gap between the raw data and the results of the initial processing done by the ARIA associates staff. Most of these gaps were the result of misinterpretations of the raw data due to translation problems or a lack of familiarity with the context. As a result, much of the data had to be reanalyzed manually. These problems could largely be overcome if on-site researchers did the analyses.

The fact that the action evaluation follows a very clear, structured format and interview schedule represents both strength and a weakness. It facilitates the collection of large amounts of standardized qualitative data that can then be relatively analyzed and compared. On the other hand it may inhibit action evaluators from engaging in a deeper process of "inquiry" (Argyris & Schon, 1996; Dewey, 1938; Schon, 1993) that does not fall into the formalistic rubric of "What? Why? How? Who? When?".

The answers to these questions in the action evaluation of the Zichron Forum illustrate how the structured questionnaire may have missed the point. For instance, the question of why it was important bring polarized groups together (Goal #1) elicited responses such as to "create tolerance and understanding". Similarly the question of why it was important to promote activities and facilities for youth (Goal #2) elicited responses like "to ensure the future of the state and the next generation". While these responses were very reasonable, they seemed little more than obvious and failed to get at the deeper, more interesting individual motivations.

The experience of the Zichron Forum indicates that collecting, analyzing, feeding back, and discussing the data may not be enough for obtaining the full benefit of the action evaluation. The need for skillful facilitation may also be critical. Jay's deep probing into the "why?" question and his emphasis on the underlying feelings ("Who feels **passionately** about this issue?"), uncovered a deeper strata of meaning that was crucial for the group's learning and the effectiveness of the action evaluation process.

To the best of my knowledge this kind of facilitation has yet been made specific component of the model nor has this kind of skillfulness been translated into what Chris Argyris called "actionable knowledge" (Argyris, 1993). This problem is also related to the fact that the respondents themselves enter the data. Without the probing of a skilled "inquirer", it may be difficult for many participants to make their deeper motivations and ways of seeing the situation explicit (Schon, 1985). In this sense there may inherent contradictions between structure and process

of action evaluation methodology (particularly its use of information technologies) and the conditions for inquiry, which is inherently interpersonal and open-ended. These potential contradictions may limit the contribution of action evaluation to "developing models of conflict resolution and community building that can be applied to other settings."

The weaknesses of action evaluation should be viewed in light of the fact that the methodology itself is still in development. It is clearly a flexible tool that can be adjusted and suited to many purposes. In addition the action evaluators in the Zichron Project were learning how to use the methodology as we were doing it. A second round of action evaluation, which is planned for the fall of 1998, offers opportunities to test ways of dealing more effectively with the problems described above.

Conclusion

Traditional approaches to conflict resolution focus on the outbreak of open confrontation and the finding of solutions. Inherently conflict is perceived as a problem to be solved. Conflict engagement views conflict as an opportunity for discovering what deeply concerns members of a community and what needs they feel are threatened. If handled skillfully, conflict engagement can lead to new ways of meeting needs that foster co-existence and cooperation. However, many conflicts, especially in communities, are fuzzy. They are complex, involving overlapping identities and concerns, and exist long before they erupt into open confrontation. Because fuzzy conflicts are difficult to define and locate, concerned community members and interventionists may not be able to "get their hands on it" before unnecessary damage is done. The experience of the Zichron Forum illustrates the usefulness of action evaluation in dealing with this fuzziness. In a troubled community action evaluation can help provide the focus and structuring critical for translating the feeling that "something needs to be done" into viable conflict engagement process.

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Appendix 1: Goals and Objectives of the Zichron Forum

General

Zichron Jacob aspires to preserve and improve its high quality of life in terms of the environment, education, welfare, and relations between its citizens. One of the key problematic issues has been tension between polarized groups and other areas in which the efforts of municipal officials are insufficient. The inhabitants themselves must take a more active role in preserving the desired quality of life.

Goal

The goal of the Forum is to conduct activities that contribute to understanding, bridge gaps between polarized groups, and relax tensions in Zichron Jacob. In the long term the goal of the Forum is to create a model for involving citizens in promoting co-existence and tolerance among different groups within a community.

Objectives

Members of the Forum will constitute a learning group: They will learn from each other, from analyzing cases, from experts, and from discussions--about the meaning of tensions in a community, about possible ways of solving

them, about ways of getting more involved, and about co-existence.

The Forum will serve as a place for dialogue among different groups in the community: religious and secular, veterans and newcomers, inhabitants of more and less affluent neighborhoods, farmers and business people, etc.

The Forum sees its role in locating potential sources of deterioration in the relationship between religious and secular and in acting as a mediator or bridge between the sides.

The Forum will initiate activities among its members in the different neighborhoods in connection with its objectives. The aspiration is that the Forum's activities will stimulate additional activist among community members. The Forum will act as a kind of steering committee for this activity.

Structure

The Forum is a strictly voluntary framework. Participation is contingent primarily upon willingness to participate in its activities.

Appendix 2: The Action Evaluation Process

Shared Goals

Individual Goals

Criteria

Action Planning

Evaluation

Implementation

Monitoring

Individual goals: Discovering and analyzing the goals of different individuals and groups involved in the process.

Shared goals: Through a process of analysis and discussion, defining as clearly as possible a set of goals common to all, or most, of the ZF participants. This step determines what we want to achieve and what we see as the desired or ideal outcome of the ZF's activities?

Criteria: Clearly identifying specific criteria for determining progress towards the shared goals articulated in the previous stage.

Action planning: Designing specific strategies for moving towards the vision (e.g. interventions, training, projects, etc.) and determining the who, what, when, and where.

Implementation: Carrying out the action plan.

Monitoring: Periodically evaluating the progress of the action plan through interviews and observation. Checking what is going on in the "field".

Evaluation: On the hand the evaluation tries to gauge whether the action plan is "working". It raises the following questions about the strategies and the goals of the ZF: Are the strategies working? Are we making progress? What additional strategies might we use? What obstacles and dilemmas are we encountering? What strategies can we devise to deal with them. Is this where we really want to be going? Have we developed some or new or different goals in the process so far? If so, what strategies can we use to achieve them?