

# The Emergence of Counseling in Traditional Cultures: Ultra-Orthodox Jewish and Arab Communities in Israel

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**Abstract** The introduction of school counseling services into traditional communities that are unfamiliar with counseling is a complex multidimensional process that involves considerable ideological tensions, disputes and obstacles... This paper considers the different trajectories of the recent development of counseling services within two distinctive minority groups in Israel-Arab and the Ultra-Orthodox Jewish communities. The dynamics of the change process for these traditional communities within the current Israeli social-political context lends support for the advancement of the international counseling community's vision to promote human welfare and fairness as well as the healthy development of children and youth within diverse cultural contexts.

**Keywords** School counseling · Israeli Arabs · Ultra-Orthodox Jews · International counseling initiatives

## Introduction

The postmodern world is a heterogeneous, multicultural mosaic of groups that differ in religions, cultures, values, beliefs and lifestyles. Despite increasing interactions among such groups, the cultural distance remains considerable. This reality presents many challenges to leaders in professional counseling as they attempt to develop counseling services in countries, societies and sectors that have never been exposed to the profession, have never used its services, and certainly have never been faced with the challenges of training professional counselors.

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The introduction of counseling into traditional communities that are unfamiliar with the profession, by definition entails a major second-order change that affects the very foundations of the culture's basic paradigms (Watzlawick et al. 1979). Going beyond first-order change that modifies cultural paradigms while still maintaining continuity, second-order change represents an alteration of the perceptions, values, beliefs, norms, structures and/or goals held by individuals and social systems. Second-order change "conflicts with prevailing values of norms" and "requires individuals or groups to learn new approaches" (Watzlawick et al. 1979, p. 37).

The fundamental core ideas underlying counseling may be alien if not severely at odds with traditional communities' social practices and belief systems. Often perceived as a profession stressing "modernity", freedom of will, individualism and western values, counseling may be seen as a threat to established values in traditional societies. Thus, it is inevitable that professionals implementing or shaping counseling services in such communities will face opposition and rejection.

In the face of such anticipated resistance, counseling leaders should consider seriously as to whether they should even develop counseling services in such cultures. What might be the motivation to encourage social systems that have never been exposed to counseling to adopt such services despite explicit and implicit opposition? The answer, suggested here, is moral in nature—upholding notions of morality as universal nonarbitrary features of social relations pertaining to matters of human welfare and fairness (Turiel 1983, 2002), counselors accept universal obligations to protect and promote human functioning and dignity (Nussbaum 1999). It is the moral obligation of counselors to take action within communities manifesting need, to both prevent behaviors that may have irreversible ramifications for vulnerable groups in general and for children and youth in particular and also to support their healthy development. Especially in more hierarchical or collectivistic communities, the voices most heard, those in power, may overwhelm weaker voices within the culture (Okin 1999; Turiel 2002), being those who usually could do with more support and counseling assistance.

The promotion of counseling in such traditional communities entails a constant tension between respect and acceptance of cultural differences and concern for the well being of individuals and groups within that cultural context. There is a need to consider how counselors can achieve "a multiculturalism that effectively treats all persons as each other's moral equal" (Okin, 1999, p. 5). Counseling within different cultures requires a coordination of judgments between moral concepts, such as welfare, harm, fairness and rights, and concepts about social conventions that are contextually dependent and agreed-upon social rules of a given social system (Turiel 1983). Today, where asocial behaviors like drug abuse, juvenile delinquency, violence and youth pregnancies are more prevalent in "closed" traditional societies than in the past (Biglan et al. 2004; Capuzzi and Gross 2004), counseling services should be offered as a moral commitment in order to diminish risk factors and to provide children and youth with options for positive growth (Delgado 2002; Lerner et al. 2002).

The current paper focuses specifically on examining the development of the counseling profession in two minority communities in Israel—the Arab and the Ultra-Orthodox Jewish sectors. Arabs in Israel represent a minority among a Jewish majority and Ultra-Orthodox Jews represent a minority within a basically secular Jewish population. These two traditional religious sectors function within the mainstream, postmodern, westernized Israeli culture that makes regular use of psychological and counseling services.

Only recently has something of a revolution occurred in the establishment, entry and training of school counselors into the respective education systems within both minority sectors. Over a short period, the number of school counselors in the Arab education sector

within Israel has grown three and a half times (from 100 to 350) and in the Ultra-Orthodox sector from almost none to more than 300. These recent dramatic changes need to be examined and understood within the current Israeli social–political context.

## Israeli Society

Israel is basically an immigrant state. Israel's 1948 Declaration of Independence provides a guarantee that the nation "shall be open to Jewish immigration and to the ingathering of the exiles." This "open gate" policy has attracted Jews from all over the globe and has created a mosaic society of culturally different groups. Yet, even within this diversity, both Israeli Arabs and the Ultra-Orthodox Jews stand out as unique in their virtual separateness from mainstream Israeli society. Each of these minorities maintains a separate, distinctive and authentic culture that differs considerably from mainstream Israeli culture. The two minorities jealously preserve their traditional and religious cores in addition to their geographic isolation and separate institutions. The State has officially recognized their right to maintain unique social identities and independent educational systems. Both have a low socioeconomic status (Cohen 2006; Haidar 2005; Levy 1990; Sivan and Kaplan 2003).

Despite these basic similarities, distinctive differences characterize the two sectors:

- The Israeli Arabs represent a distinctive national cultural group, whereas Ultra-Orthodox Jews represent only one of a variety of streams within Judaism.
- Ultra-Orthodox Jews have consciously chosen to remain a separate and distinct minority, whereas Israeli Arabs have remained so unwillingly and they strive to be a fully accepted part of Israeli society (Cohen 2006; Super 2005).
- Official policy with respect to the two groups differs. For the Ultra-Orthodox Jews, government policy promotes ties by means of enlarged (if not inflated) budgetary allocations and preservation of a religious status quo. In contrast, policies of exclusion towards Israeli Arabs result in discrimination and deprivation in every sphere of life.

As a result of these distinctions the change processes in the development of school counseling within the two minority sectors have followed different trajectories, as outlined below.

## Israel's Arab Sector

The Arab sector constitutes 20% of Israel's 6.8 million population (Central Bureau of Statistics 2004). Formally, Israeli Arabs are full citizens of the State of Israel, but de-facto they face discriminatory governmental practices, prejudice and marginality (Dayan 2005; Hamiasi 2005). Arab life is characterized by strict adherence to traditional values, including religious observance (77% are Moslems; 14% Christians, and 9% Druze). The majority of Israel's Arab citizens live within patriarchal extended families, or clans, that play a central role in communal life and preserve an essentially conservative lifestyle. The majority of Israeli Arabs (65%) live in villages; 35% live in cities (of whom 27% are in mixed cities and 73% in exclusively Arab cities) (Central Bureau of Statistics 2004).

The identity of Israeli Arabs is largely based on nationality and citizenship; they view themselves as Arabs and as part of the Palestinian people, but at the same time also as Israelis. The Arab community in Israel has maintained relations with the greater Arab

world, a world in constant tension with the State of Israel. This situation has led to persistent antagonism and suspicion between the Arab minority and the Jewish majority. Yet, Israel's Arab population has accepted the existence of the State and, due to the State's democratic, politically stable and modern lifestyle, would prefer to continue living within its borders, rather than in Arab countries (Dayan 2005).

### Education in the Arab Sector

Arab education has, in effect, been marginalized since the establishment of the State of Israel. Institutional factors, such as resource allocation and policy, are responsible for the educational gap between Arabs and Jews. The 600 schools in the Arab sector are marked by crowded classrooms, low eligibility for the matriculation diploma that opens a possibility for higher education (half of that among Jews), poorly trained teachers, a high dropout rate (over 70% in the ninth grade) and a low rate of pre-kindergarten attendance.

Counseling services have begun to develop simultaneously in both the broader Jewish sector and the Arab sector since the late 1960s. Counseling has been positively accepted by the Arab society, as it has been perceived as representing equality in educational resources and as a means to overcome their weak educational system. However, the established inequality experienced by the Arab sector has hindered the development of counseling services as well, mostly due to the lack of well trained counselors. The cycle of low eligibility for matriculation diplomas on the one hand, combined with high acceptance requirements from higher education institutes on the other, has been problematic and has remained unresolved for several decades. The number of counselors active in the Arab sector was low until the end of the last century: about 100 counselors provided services to only 20% of the sector's schools (in contrast to 80% in the Jewish sector; Erhard 1998). Furthermore, the counselors who were involved rarely held degrees in counseling; most being teachers who had obtained only a counseling certificate.

However, a dramatic change occurred in the year 2000. In a government-sponsored affirmative action measure, each of Israel's four universities accepted a group of Moslem and Christian Arab students (about 25 per university) into already existing graduate programs in counseling. The number of students in the programs doubled, creating equal numbers of Jewish and Arab students. In the following year, two universities expanded their programs to include Bedouins and Druze students. Graduates were immediately absorbed into the school system. Today, more than 350 counselors who serve the Arab population hold master's degrees in counseling, among them, 40 counselors are from the Bedouin sector, the most deprived sector of Israel's Arab communities.

### Conditions that Supported Change

The chief condition stimulating policy change related to the region's geopolitical processes, specifically the peace process. Hope permeated the region after the signing of the Oslo Agreements in 1993 (Hirschfeld 2000). At that time, Yitzhak Rabin's Ministry of Education put the issue of Arab inequality on the Ministry's agenda and took firm steps to begin to narrow the gap between the sectors. Not only were plans designed to close gaps, but also, unlike before, notable budgetary resources were allocated to execute these plans. These allocations included subsidies to the universities to support admission of an unprecedented number of Arab students. Thus, the vehicle for change was mostly a political top-down process, to which the professional community responded positively.

Unfortunately, this highly publicized move evoked two obstacles. First, many of the Ministry of Education's permanent administrative staff did not agree with the new policies and practices, and they intentionally acted to impede implementation. Second, the Education Ministry's Arab supervisors, despite their apparent cooperation, argued that it was unnecessary for Arab counselors to hold a masters degree and that a counseling diploma would suffice. As well, the Arab sector supervisors were uncomfortable with the idea that a normative academic process of selecting candidates would be conducted by the university rather than by them.

### Issues Associated with Arab Counselor Training

Three main challenges confronted those participating in the experience of training counselors from the Israeli Arab sector, with three being salient. The first of these pertained to the effects of the external political realm on the internal daily functioning of the universities. The *Intifada* (Palestinian uprising) broke out in September 2000, a month before the start of the program's first academic year. The following years during the evolution of the counseling program were marked by numerous terrorist attacks, mainly on the Jewish population, resulting in heavy-handed police and military action in the West Bank and Gaza Strip that inflicted great suffering on the Arab civilian population. Both sides suffered a high death toll. In the universities, all of the faculty and students, Arab and Jewish alike, were in great distress as a result of the intensity of these events.

The second challenge involved unanticipated relationships that emerged between the Arab students and the faculty. Arab students, unlike Jewish students, viewed faculty members as sources of advice, support and guidance during personal crises in their private lives; such as, whether to get married or divorced. It appears that the workshops and fieldwork, which exposed students to new degrees of closeness, trust and introspection, accelerated emotional processes that had been previously denied within their traditional culture. The workshops also led to direct and painful confrontations with inter-cultural conflicts between traditional and modern lifestyles. Severe conflicts arose in the families of many of the Arab students because of changes the students underwent; for example, in their attitudes toward women's position in the family and society. This strife between the students and their families greatly preoccupied the faculty and often raised the question of whether the "price" of interpersonal as well as intrapersonal conflicts, which the Arab students paid for entry into the profession, was justified.

The last challenge pertained to the controversy surrounding the affirmative action policy adopted toward the Israeli Arab students who had weaker academic backgrounds. Israel's prestigious universities perceive themselves as research institutions and uphold extremely strict academic standards. Quotas are never implemented, even involving Israel's educationally weak Jewish sectors. The Arab students' initial performance was of a lower standard than that of their Jewish peers, partly because of the language barrier and partly due to poor academic preparation. This raised questions about whether to lower the demands and expectations of these students and whether grades should reflect effort rather than outcomes.

Each faculty and each university coped differently with the aforementioned difficulties and dilemmas, but common to all were high cultural sensitivity, the expression of respect for the Arab culture, and the constant tension between the professional values and conceptual ideas of trainers and trainees. Concepts like welfare and civil rights, as well as questions on the meaning of healthy development and well-being, were constantly debated vis-à-vis contextual cultural values and principles.

## The Ultra-Orthodox Jewish Sector

The dominant cultural characteristics of Ultra-Orthodox Jews in Israel, who comprise 10% of Israel's Jewish population, reflect the intensity of their religious beliefs. Study of the Bible is viewed by them as the most exalted task and as an end in itself, and piety is seen to be the medium through which human beings can communicate with the 'Almighty'. In addition to strict ritual observance and normative conservatism, extreme Ultra-Orthodox Jews do not recognize Israel as a nation-state: they are awaiting the Messiah and His establishment of the Kingdom of Israel. They refrain from speaking Hebrew in their daily affairs (reserving it as a holy language to be used mainly for ritualistic purposes) and reside in insulated communities and neighborhoods (Levy 1990). Their cultural values and political acumen have resulted in the Ultra-Orthodox community's ability to avoid many civil obligations, such as undertaking the mandatory military service or entering the job market (Gorovitch and Cohen-Castro 2004). They subsist on welfare support, private donation and government funding acquired through ultra orthodox political party maneuverings. This lifestyle, focused as it is around males' intense Bible study, manifests itself in significantly lower average family income. Another interesting feature of this community is that they are not subject to the general legal system, but only to the religious courts associated with their own particular sects (Gorovitch and Cohen-Castro 2004).

### Education in the Ultra-Orthodox Sector

The Ultra-Orthodox educational system contains approximately 800 schools. The large number of schools relative to the population size results from each school's small student body and close affiliation with a specific "Court" of the community's preferred rabbinical sage. This separate education school system is free of any intervention or supervision from the Ministry of Education.

The Ultra-Orthodox school system is an authentic replication of a Jewish education model tracing back to the First Temple period starting about 1000 B.C. and the Second Temple period ending in 70 A.D.. Its purpose is to preserve the Lord's name and commandments in all their purity. The system also follows regulations regarding the course of studies and class composition. Class size is limited to 15 students, the proper number according to the Talmudic commentary of Baba Batra. The school day is twice as long as that in mainstream secular schools, and summer vacation is much shorter. Gender segregation is total—boys and girls study at different institutions and follow different curricula. Girls are not required to study the Bible to the same extent as boys; girls' education is more practical and allows for occupational training. Occupational training schools for boys do exist (maintaining Bible study as the core curriculum) but are accompanied by stigma suggesting that they cater to weaker students.

Counseling originally found no place in the Ultra-Orthodox school system for several reasons. First, community members believe that Jewish law (*Halacha*) represents the ultimate and undisputed source of guidance for every area of life (Levy 1990). Second, inasmuch as teachers are carefully chosen for their scholarship and spirituality, the student is considered to have no need for other role models. Third, the community tends to deny the existence of any problems requiring external counseling, relying on faith to cope with adversity. For example, perceiving disability as God's will prevents the Ultra-Orthodox from acquiring adequate services for a child with disabilities (Gorovitch and Cohen-Castro 2004). Fourth, in this tightly interwoven culture, exposure of personal problems is feared because it may undermine the family's status in the community. For example, children with special needs may be

“hidden” to avoid staining the family’s reputation and decreasing other siblings’ “marriage value” (Levy 1990). Finally, the Ultra-Orthodox community closes ranks against outside influences that may pose a threat to their traditional education of the new generations, and for them professions such as counseling and psychology bear the imprint of a non-Jewish lifestyle that can be seen as jeopardizing major values in Judaism.

Despite its rather adamant oppositional position, however, this sector has witnessed a revolution in counseling since the Millennium. There are now about 300 counselors active in the sector’s schools, and five Ultra-Orthodox colleges train counselors targeted for its schools. However, many schools keep the presence of counselors secret, assigning them such titles as “supervisor” or “principal’s assistant.”

### Conditions that Supported Change

During the second half of the 1990s, the Ultra-Orthodox sector reached the peak of its political and economic power. Yet, pressure from within as well as from outside threatened its stability. Internal tensions appeared when the largest sect’s community spiritual leader of over 50 years passed away, leaving a leadership vacuum. Also, growing national criticism emerged concerning this sector’s non-fulfillment of civil responsibilities. Heated public debate ensued in the media at this time regarding demographic issues affecting the country’s constricted resources, such as the substantial welfare and social security payments allocated to this sector by the State (something they do not in fact recognize!) due to their large average family size (nine children), the high rate of unemployment (due to religious study) among the male members, leading to an extremely low contribution to the country’s income tax reserves, and males’ dispensation from military service.

Over time, there had also been a growing number of Ultra-Orthodox male adolescents who dropped out of religious seminaries and found no available educational alternatives. These teenagers mixed with marginal youth, were no longer accepted by their families who could not tolerate such deviation, and fell into alcohol and drug abuse. Similarly, homosexual youngsters, who face absolute rejection by the Ultra-Orthodox community, sought refuge in appropriate organizations. Consequently, the lack of sufficient support for emotional, familial, and social needs within the Ultra-Orthodox community became a major issue.

Furthermore, profound developments in the treatment of children with special needs in Israel slowly penetrated the Ultra-Orthodox community. Gradually, with permission from religious leaders, families began to consume modern medical services and services to children in need. The need for assessment and diagnosis of such children opened a window for counseling and psychological services into the Ultra-Orthodox community.

Therefore, unlike the change process within the Arab sector, the Ultra-Orthodox community underwent a second-order change regarding counseling services. The motivation to expand counseling came mostly from slow, bottom-up, internal as well as external processes.

### Issues Associated with Ultra-Orthodox Counselor Training

The issues the counseling profession has faced within the Ultra-Orthodox community differ markedly from those within the Arab sector. Rigid gender segregation as practiced by the Ultra-Orthodox community prevents participants from attending the existing counselor training programs offered at the country’s major universities. Consequently, it was necessary to develop specifically designated training programs for this sector, founded on strict gender segregation not only of students but of faculty as well. Three Ultra-Orthodox teacher-training institutions have created counselor training programs for women

and two for men. At present, these programs admit experienced educators and comply with Ultra-Orthodox norms but do not award an academic degree. The graduates can practice only in the sector's schools. It is unclear how long such a situation can prevail, where this sector in Israel receives special authorization to allow a less than graduate level of education for counseling professionals.

The sector's demand for segregation between the genders leads, too, to the professional isolation of Ultra-Orthodox counselors from the highly qualified professional counseling community. This rule makes it impossible for Ultra-Orthodox counselors to attend professional meetings, seminars or conferences. They work in isolation and are excluded from the dialogue of the profession.

This professional isolation also effects the quality of training. Inasmuch as counseling is a new profession in the sector, no experienced Ultra-Orthodox counselors or faculty, or other faculty who are intimately acquainted with the community are qualified or allowed to teach in the program. In addition, there are few opportunities for novice counselors to undergo an internship period to gain practical experience or to consult with colleagues in secular institutions. The dilemma facing today's counseling leadership is how to transfer and adapt the knowledge, methods, techniques, resource materials and experience accumulated within the secular sector to the narrower religious one, while maintaining respect for the different beliefs and values held by the religious community. The future invites creative solutions for establishing effective and respectful contacts between the mainstream secular and Ultra-Orthodox counselors and training settings.

The rigid gender segregation touches also upon the male counselor's unique status in the community. Only men who are unable to pursue religious studies turn to teaching and counselor training and, because they do not embody the highest ideals of the biblical scholar, men who study for a profession are not seen as role models. The situation is different for women, who enter training with great motivation and ability. These women will not, however, be able to work in schools for boys. Thus, another dilemma concerns how gender stratification can be avoided in counseling within the Ultra-Orthodox sector. In light of the aforementioned issues, the training institutions in the Ultra-Orthodox sector as well as the counseling departments in the universities must develop creative and ethical ways to productively collaborate for the mutual benefit of both sets of stakeholders.

## Discussion

The beginning of this century has witnessed dramatic developments in the training and implementation of school counseling in two marginalized, low status communities in Israel. In the Arab sector, a top-down change occurred due the external geopolitical situation. As a result of official affirmative action, the considerable gap between Jewish and Arab systems' counseling services has substantially diminished. The largely bottom-up change process evident within the Ultra-Orthodox sector, however, represents the eruption of internal processes occurring beneath the surface. This sector has slowly moved from a nearly absolute denial of children's and adolescents' needs to an acknowledgment of the insufficiency of the extended family and religious authority alone. Definite objections transformed into acceptance and counseling, a previously outcast profession, is now experiencing a tremendous upsurge in its development. Thus, the Arab and Ultra-Orthodox sectors have shown large differences in their processes of counseling development, in accordance with the dimensions of change described by Watzlawick et al. (1979).



Nevertheless, enormous obstacles as well as negative reactions that stemmed from anxieties and oppositions have characterized change processes in both communities. A tremendous effort has been required to confront the challenges posed on the training institutions and the individuals who were “pioneer” school counselors in each sector. The training process as well as the implementation of the new profession into the school systems confronted the new professionals with constant conflicts between moral issues pertaining to the welfare and rights of children and youth on the one hand, and cultural practices and social conventions of the specific cultural context on the other. Counselors were often required to consider and coordinate opposing ideas and actions.

Not surprisingly, the newly trained counselors in both sectors faced suspicion and pressure daily from those around them in school and in the community, especially within the Ultra-Orthodox sector. As one of the Arab counseling students reported, “Every day, when I enter the school where I work, I feel as if I am entering a lion’s den. There is the feeling that someone is going to attack me and eat me up!” Another counselor from the Ultra-Orthodox community described her experience: “When at school, I feel as if I am walking on eggs—carefully, carefully, carefully. I do not know if I am making any headway or if I am treading water.”

Despite counselors’ trepidations, reports from the hundreds of counselors already operating within these communities suggest a tremendous demand. In addition to normative developmental issues, many problems such as sexual abuse, homosexuality, and suicidal thoughts are evident, which until recently were culturally taboo topics. Professional relationships between school counselors and other role partners within the school are beginning to form, even with less anticipated partners such as school rabbis. School principals, who were previously ambivalent about accepting such professionals within their schools, are now expressing a demand for counselors and applying pressure to governmental agencies to receive this service. From the rapid absorption and expansion of counseling services in the two communities, it can be concluded that counseling indeed serves to satisfy an existing need, and that previous inattention may have impeded children’s healthy development and well being.

The far-reaching repercussions of establishing school counseling services in communities that have not previously had that benefit, the conceptual and practical dilemmas, challenges and issues accompanying this process, as well the personal emotional strains experienced by the pioneer counselors have, in all, raised many ideological as well as practical questions for the veteran counseling community. To what degree and in which matters should counselors initiate change? Should we respond reactively to a need or proactively point out problems? What can mainstream counseling contribute to those new counselors in the vanguard? Have we properly assessed our capacity to help? Does mainstream counseling empower or weaken those caught in the process of change? How should counselors treat issues that may go against cultural practices or values that affect the individual’s well being? How can new counselors be best prepared to cope effectively with introducing change in such contexts?

Although many of these question will remain open, and many issues will continue to accompany the attempt to promote counseling and well being, the evident need of children and youth for support and guidance in a complex reality suggests that providing counseling services, despite the challenges and objections, is an ethical responsibility. It seems that the words of Nussbaum (1999) are directed *inter alia* to counselors around the world and to organizations such as the International Association of Counseling: “I believe that individuals have moral obligations to promote justice for people outside their national boundaries....The universal obligations to protect and promote human dignity through the

international human rights movement and through support for international agencies...at least a beginning is by thinking about the facts of human inequality in basic life chances, and by attempting to remedy some of these through domestic and private strategies” (p. 7).

Counselors and organizations such as The International Association of Counseling share a vision to promote human development and believe that counseling contributes most uniquely to the enhancement of this development. Therefore, the IAC is making an intensive effort to introduce counseling in countries, societies, and sectors that have never been exposed to or benefited from the profession’s services and certainly have never faced the need to train counselors. The counseling community must deepen its critical thinking to discuss and explore these challenges, questions and dilemmas for the purpose of harnessing social action to promote human welfare and fairness, human functioning and dignity, and individuals’ well being within diverse cultural contexts.

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