

# Emotional Oppositions: The Political Struggle over Citizens' Emotions

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**Abstract** The last decades saw a growing interest in the ties between emotions and politics, but while governments' attempts to impose different emotional styles were thoroughly documented, social movements' responses to such attempts have so far been underexplored. This study aims to fill this gap by focusing on a political struggle over citizen's emotions. The article concentrates on a struggle following the attempt of Israeli Parliament Members to shape the emotional responses of Israeli citizens to the Palestinian seminal disaster—The Nakba—by legislatively prohibiting public expressions of mourning and grief with its regard. Based on participant observation, this study follows a group of Israeli political activists—“Psychoactive”—in their struggle against the bill. As a political movement that consists of mental health experts, Psychoactive is shown to use its members' professional means in order to oppose the bill and warn against the emotional style it seeks to dictate, and to simultaneously disseminate an oppositional emotional style that focuses on emotionally processing the Palestinian disaster. This emotional style is shown to have effects on the ways people feel about their history, their nationality and even their close family, and to paradoxically offer political empowerment to Palestinians by pathologizing their historical disaster. Thus, this article sees emotions as an active and highly contested political battleground, where emotional boundaries are actively drawn and redrawn by politicians and political movements.

**Keywords** Emotions · Politics · Social movements · Israel · Palestine

Emotional responses to political events are tightly bound to our national or ethnic belonging. Even when the facts are relatively undisputed, people would probably feel differently about a violent incident, depending on the nationality of the perpetrator and its victim. Accordingly, the mere notions of “perpetrator” or “victim,” and the emotions attached to them, change dramatically in light of the national or ethnic belonging of the speaker. However, it would be

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erroneous to claim that nationality dictates emotion, or that belonging to a certain ethnic or national group necessitates a particular emotional reaction to certain violent events. As will be demonstrated below, citizens' emotions form a vibrant political battleground, in which politicians, legislators and political movements struggle, trying to shape how citizens feel.

While previous research has shed considerable light on governments' attempts to shape citizens' emotions (Delvecchio Good and Good 1988; Jenkins 1991; Pantti and van Zoonen 2006), social movements' responses to such attempts have so far been overlooked. Additionally, while the last decades saw a proliferation of studies on social movements and emotions (Benski and Langman 2013; Flam and King 2005; Goodwin and Jasper 2006), and while scholars have skillfully shown how movements emotionally reframe reality to promote their causes (Flam 2005; Gould 2009), citizens' emotions are still mainly seen as means towards political ends (e.g. to stop the use of nuclear energy [Flam 1994]), rather than as ends in themselves. This study aims to fill these gaps by asking: Are there political actors who negotiate state-imposed emotional changes? How do they debate politically drawn emotional boundaries? How do they oppose state-led constructions of affect? And in what ways do they promote alternative ways of feeling?

This article focuses on a struggle of an Israeli left-wing political movement—“Psychoactive”—against politicians' attempts to shape how Israeli citizens feel towards the Palestinian seminal disaster—The Nakba—by legislatively prohibiting expressions of mourning and grief in regards to it. Psychoactive is shown to use its members' therapeutic expertise to oppose this legislation, and to disseminate an oppositional emotional style that focuses on emotionally processing the Palestinian downfall. This style is shown to affect the way people feel about their history, their nationality and even their close family, and to paradoxically offer political empowerment to Palestinians by pathologizing them. Thus, this case study presents emotions as a highly contested political battleground, where legislation, expert knowledge and political activism are used to emotionally reframe the national past.

## Political Emotions

The last decades have witnessed a growing interest in the socio-cultural aspects of emotions. Since the late 1970s, anthropologists have skillfully questioned the universality, naturalness and innateness of emotions, and have offered to view them as relational and dynamic social constructs, embedded in and constituted by specific cultural contexts (Abu-Lughod 1990; Lutz 1988; Obeyesekere 1985; Rosaldo 1980; Scheff 1977; Scheper-Hughes 1992; White 1990).

With the poststructuralist turn of the early 1990s, Catherine Lutz and Lila Abu-Lughod offered to treat emotions as discursive practices that are deeply informed by cultural circumstances and themes, have considerable social effects, and play a crucial role as cultural idioms (Lutz and Abu-Lughod 1990). Accordingly, they argued that emotions must be interpreted as “in and about social life, rather than as veridically referential to some internal state” (11).

William Reddy aimed to bridge the gap between cultural and psychological views of emotions. According to him, emotions are processes of translation that are internal *and* external, somatic *and* social. Reddy coined the term “emotives” to describe emotional expressions that are exploratory and self-altering, and are thus influenced by, and actively change, what they refer to (Reddy 2001, 128).

But even if emotives are self-exploratory, communities have a considerable stake in how people use them. According to Reddy, different emotives can be prescribed together into

“emotional regimes,” with related emotional norms, rituals and practices, and such regimes usually characterize large political entities, like nation states. Reddy argued that while emotional regimes can be strict or loose in the level of “emotional liberty” they give to people, they are “essential elements of all stable political regimes” (Reddy 2001, 55, 124–126). Additionally, emotional regimes are far from homogenous, and such regimes usually contain “emotional refuges”—“a relationship, ritual, or organization...that provides safe release from prevailing emotional norms” (Reddy 2001, 112–137).

While Reddy’s theory mainly refers to nation states, and sees the possibility of “emotional refuge” as an exception to the emotional norm, Barbara Rosenwein argues for a wider plurality of emotions. Rosenwein coined the term “emotional communities” to refer to the ways different groups, in different historical eras and geographical locations, share different emotional norms or styles (Rosenwein 2002, 2006). According to Rosenwein, emotional communities can change over time, and people can move from one community to the next. Moreover, even if some emotional communities are more dominant than others (as Reddy’s theory suggests) they can co-exist alongside more “marginal” ones, and those in turn can gain dominance (Rosenwein 2006).<sup>1</sup>

Writing about the rise of therapeutic culture, Eva Illouz similarly used the term “emotional style” to show how emotions diachronically change according to different socio-political contexts, prevalent discourses and economic traditions (Illouz 1998, 2007). Others have stressed the conflictual or competitive nature of emotional styles (Gammerl 2012; Skeggs 2012); the role of political contexts in the constitution of emotions (D’Aoust 2014; Lupton 1998; Schepher-Hughes 2008); and the moral and political implications of emotional discourses (Fassin 2008; Friedman-Peleg and Goodman 2010; Katriel 2004; Kidron 2003; White 1990). Thus, emotions are seen to be formed “by and in the shapes of the...political economies in which they arise” (Lutz and Abu-Lughod 1990, 13), and emotional styles, norms, or regimes are accordingly subject to political influence.<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, different scholars have demonstrated the ways in which politicians explicitly deal with emotions, and the role emotions play in national and international political systems. Writing only a few years after the ousting of the Shah, Delvecchio-Good and Good (1988) have shown how the Islamic Republic of Iran institutionally redefined the meaning and legitimacy of specific emotions. Thus, sadness was hegemonically constructed as the appropriate demeanor for Iranian citizens and the paradigmatic emotional tone for Iranian life; and grief came to be seen as a sign of a desirable religious and political commitment. Jenkins has similarly shown how the state-controlled Salvadorian media dictated the normative affective sensibilities of Salvadorian citizens, and how, by repeatedly linking stories about guerrilla organizations to emotions like fear or anxiety, the Salvadorian state not only emotionally established a political ethos, but participated in the construction of emotions for those who dwelled in it (Jenkins 1991).

<sup>1</sup> See Plamper (2010) for a discussion on the differences between Reddy’s “emotional regimes” and Rosenwein’s “emotional communities.”

<sup>2</sup> The terms emotional regime (Reddy 2001), emotional community (Rosenwein 2002) and emotional style (Illouz 2007; Middleton 1989) are all very useful in pointing at the social bases of emotion and the power relations that constitute them. But as Gammerl (2012, 163) notes, the term “emotional style” implies a higher degree of fluidity and malleability, and is thus more useful in describing the political construction of emotions. Therefore, from this point on I will use the term emotional styles to describe “the experience, fostering, and display of emotions [that] oscillate between discursive patterns and embodied practices as well as between common scripts and specific appropriations” (Gammerl 2012, 163). See also Middleton (1989) and Illouz (2007).

Similarly, focusing on the television coverage of the death of Right wing Dutch politician Pim Fortuyn, Pantti and Wieten (2005) argued that an enhanced representation of mourning, and a re-articulation of political outrage as personal anxiety, created a “nationwide bereaved community.” Pantti and van Zoonen (2006) highlighted the ways in which the emotionalization of the public sphere dictates desirable modes of emotional citizenship. Plotkin-Amrami has shown how the state-led absorption of new Jewish immigrants in Israel has actively taught new emotional skills (Plotkin-Amrami 2008), and Brown (2014) highlighted the use of emotion management in teaching immigrants in Germany the “normative civic emotion.”

Others have focused on the role emotions play in the pursuit and exercise of political power. Scheff and Retzinger (1991) have famously shown how Adolf Hitler’s use of pride and shame in his speeches lead to nationalist anger and aggression. Ost (2004) depicted the ways politicians gain political power by mobilizing hatred towards their opponents, and Perry (2002) argued that the use of “emotion work” (Hochschild 1979) and a heightened attention to emotional mass mobilization played a pivotal role in the 1949 Chinese Communist Revolution (Perry 2002).<sup>3</sup>

These lines of study have significantly contributed to our understanding of the ways in which nation states monitor, control and even change the feelings of their citizens. They highlight the political origins of different emotional styles and the ways in which states mobilize and disseminate desired emotional behaviors. Nevertheless, as was seen earlier, emotional regimes do not operate in a vacuum, emotional styles stem from ever-evolving power relations (Ahmed 2004; Fox 2015; Scheer 2012; Skeggs 2012), and the success of a specific emotional community (dominant as it may be) is only ever partial, and always contested (Gammerl 2012; Rosenwein 2006).

Therefore, it needs to be asked: Are there political actors who negotiate state imposed emotional styles? How do they debate politically drawn emotional boundaries? How do they oppose the state-led construction of affect? And in what ways do they promote alternative ways of feeling?

While the last decades saw a proliferation of studies on social movements and emotions (Benski and Langman 2013; Flam and King 2005; Goodwin et al. 2001; Goodwin and Jasper 2006; Klatch 2004; Ruiz-Junco 2013), only a few studies have specifically focused on the ways social movements question or challenge state-led emotional styles, or use emotions to bring about social change. For example, Flam (1994, 2005) showed how anti nuclear activists spread fear of nuclear energy and sow distrust and anger at the authorities to promote their cause. Gould (2009, 239) demonstrated the ways activists in the Aids Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) “turned grief into anger” and emotionally reframed AIDS “from death caused by deviance or virus, to murder by government neglect.” Lutz (1988, 108; see also Plamper 2015, 108) depicted the ways in which the Black Panther Party used anger for emancipatory political projects, and Whittier (2001) showed how activist survivors of child abuse demonstrated grief, fear and shame in order to legitimate their claims.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Political scientists have also focused on emotions and global politics. Bar-Tal, Halperin and Rivera exhibited the role of emotions in creating, preserving and resolving international conflicts, and argued that collective emotions play a pivotal role in shaping individual and societal responses to conflict related events (Bar-tal et al. 2007). Saurette, writing about the impact of emotions on post 9/11 American policy, argued that the American attack on Iraq stemmed from a “global policy of counter-humiliation” (Saurette 2006); and Bleiker and Hutchison stressed the role of compassion and empathy in states’ reactions to global catastrophes (Bleiker and Hutchison 2008).

<sup>4</sup> See also Jasper (2011, 1412–1413), and Flam (2005).

Thus, social movements are seen to use emotions to promote their causes by emotionally re-framing reality, by mobilizing people's emotions, or by challenging prevalent emotional styles or norms. However, these attempts to change emotional styles are usually seen as a means towards political ends (e.g. to stop the use of nuclear energy [Flam 1994], rather than as political ends in themselves. Additionally, while governments' attempts to impose state-led emotional styles were thoroughly documented by scholars (Delvecchio Good and Good 1988; Jenkins 1991; Lutz and White 1986; Whittier 2001), social movements' direct responses to such attempts have so far been overlooked.

This article aims to fill these gaps by focusing on the case study of a specific Israeli political movement—Psychoactive—and its reaction to politicians' attempts to legislatively constitute citizen's emotions. I will start by examining the ways in which members of the Israeli Parliament (the Knesset) sought to legislatively shape the way Israeli citizens feel towards a Palestinian key historical event—The Nakba. Subsequently I will turn the focus on Psychoactive's opposition to this bill, and will highlight their struggle to bring about an oppositional emotional change. This case study will serve to shed light on the political battles over citizens' emotions, and will point at the specific discursive practices (Lutz and Abu-Lughod 1990) and power struggles (Ahmed 2004; Scheer 2012) that take part in such battles.

Formed in 2004, Psychoactive is a Left wing Israeli political group whose activists are primarily mental health professionals. Psychoactive consists of approximately 300 psychologists, psychotherapists and psychoanalysts, most of whom are Jewish-Israeli women. While the group takes part in different political struggles, it predominantly focuses on opposing the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza.<sup>5</sup>

Most of Psychoactive's activities involve its members' professional expertise, by deliberately enmeshing the political and the psychological together, and explicitly attempting to "expand [the] therapeutic discourse and practice to include the social and political contexts of our lives" (Psychoactive 2010). That is, Psychoactive's members intentionally strive to promote political change using their therapeutic expertise. To that end, the group's members conduct conferences, publish articles and op-eds, organize joint workshops with Palestinian colleagues, hold vigils and demonstrations, offer subsidized therapy to other Left-wing activists, and more. These activities are all characterized by a deliberate and extensive use of often intense emotional discourse, as well as detailed therapeutic discourses *about* emotions.<sup>6</sup>

This article focuses on Psychoactive's reaction to a bill introduced to the Israeli Parliament (The Knesset) in April 2009, prohibiting the marking of Israel's Independence Day as a day of mourning. In the following sections I will explore the political and historical circumstances that have led to the introduction of the bill, analyze the bill, and examine the emotional style it sought to dictate. I will continue by focusing on Psychoactive's political reaction to this legislation, and their attempts to discursively constitute an oppositional emotional style. Based on this case study, I will discuss the implications of a struggle that not only revolves around the veracity of a historical narrative (Bar-tal and Teichman 2005), or the civil rights of an ethnic minority, but around the political constitution of emotions as well.

<sup>5</sup> For a detailed description of Psychoactive's first years, written by one of its founders, see Avissar (2008).

<sup>6</sup> While humanitarian organizations tend to consist of mental health experts, and their actions are seen to have different political and moral implications (Rousseau et al. 2001; Hughes and Pupavac 2005; Fassin 2008), Psychoactive significantly differs from such organizations by the fact that its members explicitly link politics to emotions, and knowingly try to bring about political change.

## Methods

The study is based on a larger ethnographic research conducted between April 2010 and March 2012 on Psychoactive's different activities in Israel and the West Bank. I participated in the group's bi-monthly meetings (10 meetings, three hours each), that took place at activists' homes and usually included around 30 of the most active group members. I also attended 15 meetings of different working groups that revolved around specific projects (conferences, workshops, think-tanks, etc.). The frequency and length of the meetings, as well as the number of participants, varied. Additionally, I joined Psychoactive in a number of PTSD workshops with Palestinian mental health experts from the west bank (four meetings, three hours each), in two demonstrations, and in three conferences conducted by its members.

Psychoactive's main channel of communication was their vibrant mailing list, averaging 350 e-mails a month. The activists used this list to update all members on upcoming activities, to discuss practical, political or professional issues, to exchange drafts of articles and to offer emotional support to one another, usually after violent clashes between Israel and its neighbors. I participated in their e-mail discussions and documented them.

The study also relies on an analysis of dozens of documents written by the group—articles (and drafts of articles), TV and radio interviews, online posts from Psychoactive's website (Psychoactive 2010), banners and slogans from demonstrations and more. I also held countless informal conversations with the group's members and interviewed 10 prominent psychoactive activists (nine women and one man).<sup>7</sup> The interviews were semi-structured (Silverman 2006, 109–152), and took place in activists' homes or offices.

All data were transcribed, coded and analyzed using the thematic analysis method (Braun and Clarke 2006). I read and reread the materials in chronological order, identified recurrent themes and major concepts, and clustered similar materials together. Subsequently, I categorized the different clusters according to their content.

Following the thematic clustering, I highlighted and analyzed illustrative quotations using discourse analysis (Van Dijk 1993), and according to an interpretive-constructivist approach (Heikkinen et al. 2000). This view relies on the assumption that discourse is more than a merely descriptive apparatus, but a text that dynamically constructs and reconstructs social realities and subjectivities (Foucault 2005).

## From the Political to the Emotional (and Back)

### “The Nakba Bill”: A Legislative Construction of Emotions

Al Nakba, Arabic for “The Catastrophe,” is the Palestinian term depicting the devastating consequences of the 1948 war, in which hundreds of Palestinian villages were depopulated and destroyed, approximately 700,000 Palestinians forcefully or frightfully fled their homes to become refugees, and those who remained were forced to live under Israeli military regime for almost two decades (Morris 1987; Sa'di and Abu-Lughod 2007).

<sup>7</sup> At the time of my research, of the 300 activists in Psychoactive 240 were women, and out of the 40 most active members, only two or 3 were men. This difference can be explained by the fact that over 70 % of mental health practitioners in Israel are women (Israeli Ministry of Health 2012), and that Israeli Left wing activists also tend to be women. For a discussion on gender and Israeli left wing political movements see Helman and Rapoport (1997); Svirsky (2004); Kotef and Amir (2007).



Palestinians traditionally commemorate the Nakba on May 15, the Gregorian date marking the establishment of the state of Israel following the war. However, Israel's Independence Day is traditionally marked by Israelis on its Hebrew date (5th of Iyyar), and many Palestinians (in and out of Israel), as well as Israeli Jewish left wing activists, commemorate the Nakba on that day. The Nakba Day and Israel's Independence Day symbolically represent two contrasting narratives surrounding the 1948 war. While the Nakba Day is usually framed as a day of mourning highlighting the Palestinian seminal disaster wrought by the (soon-to-be-formed) State of Israel, Israelis usually frame the 1948 war as the War of Independence, a heroic victory over multiple Arab enemies, that had ensured the establishment of their state, and is celebrated on their Independence Day.

For many years, the Palestinian narrative, and the key Palestinian term “Nakba,” were considered a taboo among the majority of Israelis. The Israeli narrative of victory was practically the only one depicted by the Israeli state and media, while the Palestinian one was actively and systematically forgotten (Ram 2009; Shapira 2007). Nevertheless, the last decades saw a gradual lifting of this taboo. Since the 1970s different Israeli artists, researchers, intellectuals, politicians and social activists have begun to challenge the prevalent Israeli narrative, and to gradually bring the Palestinian narrative, with its key symbol—the Nakba—into Israeli consciousness (Pappe 1997; Ram 2009, 384–389). By the early 2000s, the memory of the 1948 war among Jewish Israelis had become increasingly contested, and even though the Palestinian narrative was never accepted by most Israelis, the Nakba narrative had become widespread like never before (Epp-Weaver 2007). Specifically, different Israeli Left wing movements have begun to commemorate the Nakba on Israel's Independence Day, and some have attempted to consolidate the two narratives by conducting “Nakba-Independence” events (*Nakba-Atzmaut*), often characterized by a distinctly emotional and often therapeutic discursive style.<sup>8</sup>

Following the re-emergence of the Nakba into Israeli discourse, in 2009 a group of Right wing Knesset members introduced an amendment to the 1949 “Independence Day Bill,” headlined “A Prohibition of Marking Israel's Independence Day, Or the Foundation of the State of Israel, as a Day of Mourning.”<sup>9</sup> The amendment prohibited Israeli citizens from “regarding, or conducting events that regard, to Israel's Independence Day, or the foundation of the state of Israel, as a day of mourning or a day of grief (k'yom evel o k'yom tza'ar),” and included a penalty of up to three years in prison. The bill explained:

Immediately after the foundation of the State, the Independence Day Bill was passed (1949) in order to fortify the status of [Israel's] Independence Day as a state holiday (*hag medina*) and a day of rest. In those days, so it seemed, the Independence Day was seen as a national holiday to be publicly celebrated by all (*b'rov am*). Therefore, it is offered to outlaw actions that mark the Independence Day, or the foundation of the State, as a day of mourning, and to heavily penalize those who take advantage of the democratic and progressive (*na'or*) nature of the State of Israel in order to destroy it from within. (Miller et al. 2009)

Ignoring the ways in which Israel's Independence Day is currently being marked, the amendment contrasts the original and desirable interpretation lawfully given to Israel's Independence Day as a day of celebration and joy, with another, contemporary interpretation,

<sup>8</sup> For journalistic accounts of Nakba-Independence events see Inbari's (2008) and Stromza-Kusnir (2010) reports.

<sup>9</sup> All Hebrew excerpts were translated by the author.

deemed highly illegitimate. Accordingly, it outlaws public expressions of specific emotions—mourning and grief—with regard to the foundation of Israel, deeming them criminal and treacherous acts. While the term “Nakba” is poignantly missing from the text, the bill was unanimously understood as a direct attempt to shape public expressions of emotions in regard to the Palestinian seminal disaster, and was accordingly known as “The Nakba Bill” (*hok hanakba*).

Thus, in a legislative act that reminisces other repressive attempts to re-construct and restrict citizens’ emotions (Delvecchio Good and Good 1988; Jenkins 1991; Reddy 2001), and in light of the Nakba’s emergence in Israeli discourse, the bill clearly saw emotional identification with the Palestinians as a threat to the state. It was widely understood as a direct attempt to legislatively regulate the ways in which Israelis feel about the downfall of their country’s so-called enemy.

The Nakba bill came in the midst of a growing public debate in Israel about how Israelis feel towards the Palestinians, and the legitimacy of those feelings. Periods of violence are usually accompanied by intense attempts to draw and redraw the boundaries of emotional legitimacy, attempts that not only point at the “right” feelings Israelis should feel towards “the enemy,” but mark specific emotions (like empathy or grief) as inappropriate, illegitimate, or even treacherous. While such debates can usually be found on different TV shows, daily newspapers or social networks, the Nakba bill was the first attempt to give them a formal-political interpretation, and to legislatively affect the way Israelis feel towards the Palestinians.

However, the road from the house of legislators to the hearts of citizens is never short, nor easy, and legislations do not so readily affect the way citizens feel. In fact, the amendment popularly named the “Nakba bill” created a heated public debate, evoking a wide range of responses from different journalists, politicians and activists, and was merely another move in the political struggle over the emotions of Israeli citizens.

### **Emotional Oppositions: The Psycho-Political Response**

The introduction of the Nakba bill came as a shock to Psychoactive’s members. As Stella,<sup>10</sup> a central activist in the group, told me in an interview:

We participated in one of those Nakba-Independence events, and as we drove off we heard a news report on the radio about this bill prohibiting the commemoration of the Nakba. And I thought that it’s something we [Psychoactive] must act upon.

And indeed, the bill, and the emotional style it sought to dictate, led Psychoactive’s members to conduct different events and activities aimed to publicly oppose it. The central event organized by the group was a big conference held at the Tel Aviv University on February 2010, entitled: “Following the Bill Prohibiting the Commemoration of the Nakba: A Discussion on Trauma, Memory and Forgetting.” The invitation stated:

In this conference we will focus on the Nakba and its’ consequences for the Palestinian and Jewish societies. We wish to create a space for testimony and memory, and for a recognition of the traumatic aspects of the Nakba within the Palestinian society. We will attempt to provide a place for contemplating the emotional and social reactions evoked in the Israeli society by the term “Nakba,” and will conduct an open discussion in a big

<sup>10</sup> I have used pseudonyms for all individuals mentioned in this article.



group, allowing participants to openly express their emotions, attitudes, questions and thoughts regarding this sensitive event.

The invitation presents the conference as a direct response to the Nakba bill and a deliberate attempt to challenge it. Not only is the conference portrayed, through its title, as a commemoration of the Nakba that declaratively recognizes its disastrous effects, but it also stresses that it would have a distinctly emotional style, referring to the bill's emotional prohibitions. Correspondingly, the conference is described as offering a place for people to “openly express their emotions” about the Nakba, and to purposefully and symbolically break the yet-to-be-passed bill.

In addition, based on the bill's preoccupation with emotions, the invitation introduces Psychoactive's main asset in the struggle over Israeli emotions—therapeutic discourse. By highlighting the “traumatic aspects” of the Nakba and the need to emotionally react to it, the invitation signals that Psychoactive's response to the bill would be much more than mere provocation. As we shall briefly see, the talks in the conference strongly reinforced this message.

One of the central talks, given by Rina, a psychotherapist and central activist in the group, elaborated the emotional and therapeutic implications of the Nakba bill:

As a psychotherapist I frequently encounter the horrific implications of the denial and silencing of trauma. As a Jew and an Israeli, I often think that it is my duty to know what happened here, to make a conscious and deliberate effort to know how and over what ruins my state was established, and who paid the price for the independence of my people... The complex social discourse regarding that pivotal year (1948) reflects the emotional processes (*tahalichim nafshyim*) experienced by both peoples inhabiting this land, processes that we wish to examine in today's conference. The legislations, the silencing, denials and prohibition of memory, have led us in Psychoactive to think that it is necessary to talk about the Nakba.

In her opening remarks Rina moves back and forth between an emotional discourse and a socio-political one. She offers to see the Nakba as more than a merely historical event, which occasionally evokes emotions, but as a psychological trauma, reflected in different “emotional processes,” and violently silenced by the newly introduced Nakba bill. That is, she pathologizes the bill, linking it to psychological processes of silencing and denial, and warns against its “horrific implications.” Highlighting her clinical training and professional expertise (“As a psychotherapist...”) allows her to signal that this is more than merely her personal and biased opinion.

In a later panel, Amina, an Israeli-Palestinian psychotherapist and researcher, similarly said:

As mental health practitioners we know that when you silence a trauma, and prevent it from expressing itself, it stays. It moves from a traumatic state to a post-traumatic state, and that's the reality of most of the [Palestinians] I study, or those I hear talk about what had happened in 1948. As Palestinians we experience... as researchers we see it among the first generation, as well as among the second—the silencing—people were afraid to talk [about the Nakba] because they were not allowed to. People could not express their real trauma.

Amina portrays the emotional consequences of the Nakba and significantly extends the trauma narrative offered by Rina by claiming that the traumatic Nakba has been continuously

silenced by Israel long before the introduction of the bill. Accordingly, she warns against the consequences of such trauma, and particularly against silencing traumata that may in turn evolve into “post trauma.” Thus, she implicitly uses a therapeutic discourse, focusing on Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, and highlights her expertise as a mental health practitioner to stress that the Nakba was not just a historical event to symbolically mourn about, but a dire mental condition, worsened by Israeli attempts to politically silence it.

Portraying the Nakba as a trauma experienced by Palestinians and made pathological by Israel’s political actions was a recurrent theme in Psychoactive’s conference. Hence, the conference directly responded to the Nakba bill by deliberately and publicly practicing what it prohibited. But more importantly, they specifically responded to the emotional restrictions of the bill by reframing the Nakba as more than merely a historical event. According to the narrative laid out by Psychoactive’s members, the Nakba was a psychological trauma that has caused, and is still causing, dire mental consequences to generations of both Israelis and Palestinians, and is perpetually made worse by Israeli political silencing. Accordingly, the newly introduced Nakba Bill was seen as a psychological mechanism responsible for the denial of the trauma that is bound to have adverse psychological effects.

Drawing an audience of hundreds, mostly mental health experts, the conference was seen by Psychoactive as a great success. However, wishing to spread their message much farther than their professional circle, and reach much wider audiences, Psychoactive decided to turn to other, much more public media.

In March 2010, following the Palestinian Land Day,<sup>11</sup> Oksana, a psychologist and activist, gave an interview to Channel 9, the Russian speaking Israeli TV Channel, known for its Right wing orientation. The interview started with Oksana expressing Psychoactive’s opposition to the Nakba bill, stating that such bills belong in “totalitarian regimes” not “free societies,” and by that she reminded the viewers, mostly immigrants from the former Soviet Union, of similar policies from their countries of origin. Later during that same interview, a video of a pro-Palestinian demonstration that took place the preceding day in the Israeli Arab city of Sakhnin was shown, and the interviewer asked:

**Interviewer:** The mayor of Sakhnin, who gets paid by the state, organized a demonstration in which protesters are waving banners with the picture of Hassan Nasrallah, leader of Hezbollah. Should such a thing happen in the Israeli society? In a democratic state?

**Oksana:** Firstly, let me explain why we, as a professional association of psychologists, social workers, psychiatrists and psychotherapists, oppose the [Nakba] bill. We are working with people who go through serious emotional traumas, and based on our work we know that if you prohibit someone who is traumatized from talking and thinking about his trauma, the traumatic memories will not go away. On the contrary – in such cases normal reactions such as mourning and bitterness will be joined by less-than-normal reactions, like aggressiveness, vengefulness and physical violence. These reactions will continue to worsen under a prohibition banning the expression of grief.

<sup>11</sup> The Land Day (*Yom al’Ard* in Arabic) is marked on March 30 by Palestinians around the world, to commemorate the 1976 expropriation of vast tracts of Israeli-Palestinian land, and the subsequent killing of six Israeli-Palestinians in a demonstration that same year. The protests include a general strike and large demonstrations. As Wolfsfeld, Avraham and Aburaiya have shown, Israeli media tend to exaggeratedly depict these events as violent and threatening to Jewish Israelis (Wolfsfeld et al. 2010).

In this country there are many people, many civilians, who have, or their families have, gone through very difficult events in 1948. These people had lost their homes, their villages, their relatives, and their ways of living. Their families got split and separated. It is extremely important for the mental health, not only of this group, but of the entire [Israeli] society, that they could articulate and symbolically express these experiences.

**Interviewer:** But conducting violent demonstrations, or waving the portrait of Hassan Nasrallah—can that be considered a symbolic expression?

**Oksana:** As long as the oppression intensifies, we will see more extreme expressions, and less healthy processing of the traumatic experience.

The interviewer's questions link the mourning over the Nakba to other public expressions of the Palestinian narrative, using the demonstration as a case in point. By emphasizing the use of Hassan Nasrallah's portrait, seen by many Israelis as their country's archetypal enemy, she interprets the demonstration as a violent threat, as well as a potential act of treachery. Namely, much like the Nakba bill itself, the interviewer insinuates that letting Palestinians publicly (and emotionally) protest their cause poses a threat to the state. Oksana's response similarly links the Nakba bill to public expressions of Palestinians' emotions, but offers a completely different scheme, tightly weaving the emotional and political together.

Like the talks from Psychoactive's conference, Oksana's response starts with highlighting Psychoactive's symbolic capital, embodied in its members' professional knowledge and expertise and their unquestioned authority over emotional matters. She bases her argument on the logics of trauma theory (Fassin and Rechtman 2009; Young 1995), and claims that forcing people to ignore their trauma elicits difficult responses that are "less-than-normal," and are bound to worsen with the prohibition of grief.

Thus, without mentioning the explicit name, Oksana talks about the Nakba and the consequent suffering of Palestinians ("lost their homes"), and states that "It is extremely important for their mental health...that they could articulate" their suffering. That is, she authoritatively parallels the hypothetical traumatic process described in the beginning of her response to the concrete Palestinian catastrophe, and the emotional peril of failing to properly express a trauma to the Nakba bill.

Bearing in mind that Oksana's interview appeared on a popular TV show, with a mainly Right wing audience, it is interesting to note that her argument goes even further than the ones discussed above. After establishing that the Nakba was a trauma silenced by the Nakba bill and by similar Israeli policies over the years, she portrays the "symptoms" that stem from such a silencing as a threat posed to *all* Israelis—Jews and Arabs alike. Accordingly, the Israeli Palestinians' "aggressiveness," "vengefulness" and "physical violence" provocatively mentioned by the interviewer as examples of unlawful behavior, get discursively re-conceptualized as emotional symptoms, stemming directly from Israeli policy.

Thus, Oksana differentiates between two distinct emotional styles: a public expression of emotions versus silence and denial, signaling that the former is not only better than the latter, but is also healthier, both individually and socially.

A similar appeal to the Israeli public was made in an article published by Psychoactive in the op-ed section of Ynet, Israel's most popular news website.<sup>12</sup> The article was titled "The Nakba Bill Will Only Perpetuate the Trauma" and it outlined the group's opposition to the bill:

<sup>12</sup> Like most of Psychoactive's texts, the op-ed was presented by one of the members to the group's mailing list, discussed, revised and finally approved by the members.

As mental health experts, and based on decades of trauma research, we know that traumatic memory is not something that simply disappears. Denying the event that had triggered the trauma, and blocking processes of mourning, will not only fail to erase it, but on the contrary, it will bring about turmoil in the darkness of the unconscious; intergenerational transfer of trauma; and will perpetuate feelings of rage, accusation and revenge. In contrast, the ability to heal the trauma and continue to lead a normal life depends on acknowledging the blow, consciously processing the traumatic memory and connecting to the feelings that accompany the traumatic event.

Much like previous Psychoactive texts examined here, this article stressed the writers' professional status and presented a therapeutic model that treats the Nakba as emotional trauma, and the Nakba bill as a dangerous denial of that trauma. However, by treating the Nakba as an intergenerational trauma (Frankish and Bradbury 2012; Kidron 2003; Scharf 2007), the authors widen the circle of traumatized sufferers to include not only the Palestinians who had personally experienced the Palestinian disaster, but also their children and children's children. Additionally, they describe the symptoms caused by the systematic denial of this trauma as perpetuated "rage, accusations and revenge."

As Hodgkin and Radstone have shown, symptoms can serve as "empirical evidence, presupposing a clear chain of cause and effect: the presence of a given effect allows us to deduce a given cause" (Hodgkin and Radstone 2003, 98). That is, somewhat tautologically, specifying the Nakba's symptoms empirically proves its occurrence as well as its traumatic nature. In addition, mentioning these specific symptoms entails a clear message: Rage, accusations and revenge can all be seen as threatening to Israeli Jews, and as such they signal to the Hebrew Speaking readers that the Palestinians will not be the only ones suffering from forcefully denying the Nakba.

Additionally, in opposition to the repressive emotional style dictated by the bill, the writers offer another, salutary style. They assert that acknowledging the adversity, processing the traumatic memory and connecting to ones' emotions can heal the trauma and significantly alleviate its symptoms. Thus, in stark contrast to the prohibition of publicly mourning the Nakba, Psychoactive marks the therapeutic emotional style (Illouz 2007) as the befitting response to the Palestinian catastrophe, and the only "right" way to emotionally react to it.

The remaining parts of the op-ed emphasize the professional authority behind this assertion:

Lamentably it seems that these universal processes were overlooked by those advocating the Nakba Bill. They have lost sight of the fact that in the Palestinian acceptance to move toward a symbolic acknowledgment of grief, they take a step toward processes of reconciliation and acceptance (*piyus v'hashlama*); while the bill may conversely lead to processes of radicalization and to perpetuate feelings of rage, revenge and accusation.

The writers explain that their claims do not only represent a political opposition to the Nakba bill, nor do they solely express an arbitrary preference of one emotional style over the other. The advantages of the emotional responses promoted by Psychoactive, as well as the dangers of the alternative emotional style, are portrayed as universal truisms, accurate and reified depictions of the emotional consequences of politics, which are ignorantly overlooked by the legislators and their supporters, but are clearly visible through the writers' therapeutic gaze. In other words, they argue that their professional capital allows them to shed light on hidden layers of knowledge through which they can decisively identify the emotional and

political dangers embodied in the Nakba bill, as well as the overwhelming advantages of the emotional style that they promote.

Thus, through a series of public activities, and an intensive use of therapeutic discourse, Psychoactive has reframed the Nakba as an emotional trauma that has affected and still affects Palestinians and Israelis of all ages, and the Israeli policy, culminating in the Nakba Bill, as a dangerous denial of that trauma. By repeatedly highlighting their expertise, Psychoactive members have stressed the emotional and societal damage these policies bring about, and have offered an alternative emotional style that promised to have ameliorative effects, not only individually and emotionally, but also socially and politically.

That is, Psychoactive's struggle is more than merely a political one, held against the exclusion of the Palestinian seminal disaster from Israeli discourse. It is a struggle over citizens' right to feel and express their feelings; it is about the political meaning of emotions, as well as the emotional implications of certain political acts.

Eventually the Knesset approved a slightly softened version of the Nakba bill, according to which the Ministry of Finance can fine state-funded groups for marking the Nakba or mourning over it (Knesset 2011). That is, the version of the bill that finally passed focused on official institutions, as opposed to NGOs or other non governmental organizations. But more importantly, while it still included a prohibition to mourn over the Nakba, the bill focused solely on state funded organizations, and hence, it significantly scaled down its emotional implications. Given this, can Psychoactive's campaign be deemed successful? The bill was satisfactorily softened, but did the group succeed in encouraging people to feel differently towards the 1948 war? Returning to the closing event of the Psychoactive conference can shed light on the psycho-political effects of Psychoactive's emotional style.

### **The Psycho-Political Effect: The Realization of the Trauma**

As aforesaid, the Nakba conference ended with an open discussion between the conference's attendees, intended to allow participants "to openly express their feelings, attitudes, questions and thoughts." The discussion was moderated by three Israeli psychotherapists, two Jews and one Arab, and the attendees were invited to share their feelings and relate to the conference's talks. These kinds of discussions take place in almost every Psychoactive conference and gathering, and they are usually characterized by an intensive therapeutic discourse, designed to let the audience emotionally process what they have just heard.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, these discussions allow the passive recipients of Psychoactive's message to actively practice their proposed emotional style, in a discussion discursively reminiscent of therapeutic support groups.

After the moderators explained the aim of the discussion, different members from the audience took turns in sharing their experiences. I will focus on a comment made by one attendee that provides a fascinating glimpse into the effects Psychoactive's emotional style might bring about. The speaker is an Israeli Palestinian, around 40 years old that had sat through the entire conference:

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<sup>13</sup> Psychoactive's proposed emotional style is usually practiced by its members themselves. The group's periodic meetings and particularly the discussions in the group's mailing list are often characterized by a highly emotional discourse encouraging activists to openly express their feelings concerning different political incidents. Public events like the Nakba conference allow non-members to experiment with this discursive style, with the activists' guidance.

My name is Samir and I'd like to tell you about the gift I received today. I come from a family...I'm a second generation (*dor sheni*) in a family that has gone through the Nakba, that were refugees, and I was astounded by the fact that I never thought about my family as post-traumatic! [Laughs in the audience]. And I'm a doctor! And I treat many [patients with] post-trauma—Jews of course—and I've never noticed that my family had so many symptoms of post-trauma. In the Arab mentality we tend to belittle... or maybe because it's so traumatic we are not made aware that... that we need therapy! And it lets me [feel] much more love towards my parents, it opens my heart to them...I want to say, to raise the awareness that yes, we *do* need therapy, as a people. Because if this trauma exists in my family, it exists in many other families, and we are not...at least I am not aware of the daily existence of trauma. On the other hand, there is a very high awareness to trauma in the Jewish side, so thank you.

Samir explains that Psychoactive's conference made him realize that the Nakba was a traumatic event, and that following this event his parents suffer from serious mental pathologies. That is, Psychoactive's emotional discourse led him to reframe the connection between the Nakba and his parents' emotions, and to accept the fact that the Nakba was a dire psychological trauma. However, this is more than just a theoretical understanding or a way to metaphorically talk about the Palestinian disaster. The conference led him to re-interpret his parents' behavior and to retroactively diagnose them with PTSD, and this re-conceptualization has even led him to reframe the way he feels toward his parents ("it opens my heart to them").

Samir additionally highlights his and other Palestinians' ignorance about the emotional and traumatic aspects of the Nakba, and stresses his wish to raise awareness to the fact that Palestinians, "as a people", need therapy. That is, he not only adopts Psychoactive's emotional style, acknowledging the traumatic nature of the Nakba, and the superiority of discussing a trauma over silencing it, but he also offers to personally disseminate this newly introduced emotional style.

Inspired by Psychoactive's discourse, Samir's words move from the political (the Nakba) to the emotional (his family's and his own emotions), and then back to a wider collective and political level. When he says: "We do need therapy, as a people," he refers to the entire Palestinian society as suffering from the pathology originating from the Nakba and its forced repression. Referring to a more collective level allows him to compare the Palestinian seminal disaster with that of the Jews—the Holocaust. Presenting himself as "a second generation (*dor sheni*)" he implicitly refers to the prevalent discourse about Jewish-Israeli descendents of Holocaust survivors (Kidron 2009). Similarly, when he contrasts the lack of awareness to the Palestinian trauma with the heightened awareness to the Jewish one, he uses the prevalent pathologization of the Jewish disaster (Alexander 2002) to compare it to the newly pathologized Palestinian one. That is, by contrasting the emotional suffering of the two peoples, and the legitimacy given to Jewish suffering with the illegitimacy of the Palestinian suffering, he uses emotional talk to highlight political injustice.

Thus, we see that Psychoactive's political activity, and particularly the ways in which their discourse enmeshes the political with the emotional, can significantly affect people's innermost perceptions of themselves by invoking processes of subjectification (Foucault 2005). In the case before us, Samir spoke immediately after eight hours of lectures, and it's particularly impressive to see how quickly he moves from understanding the new emotional style, to integrating it into his personal and familial narrative, and finally to wishing to disseminate it



himself. Moreover, even though he is both a practicing physician who treats people with PTSD, and a Palestinian from a family of refugees, it was Psychoactive's discourse that had woven these two discursive threads together for him, and allowed for their swift integration into his personal narrative.

## Discussion: An Empowering Victimization

The struggle over the Nakba bill offers a unique glimpse into the ways in which social movements directly react to repressive, state-led emotional changes, and to the ways in which activists use their professional means to actively disseminate their preferred emotional style. However, examining the exact power relations in this struggle will help elucidate its ramifications.

First, the struggle before us is a struggle between two kinds of power: the repressive power of the state, that uses legislation to create a somewhat "strict emotional regime" (Reddy 2001), and Psychoactive's "looser" disciplinary power (Foucault 1977) that rests on the groups' professional expertise. Second, while Psychoactive mostly consists of Jewish-Israeli therapists, the objects of their therapeutic gaze are mostly Palestinians. Psychoactive uses its members' disciplinary power and their mastery in emotional and therapeutic discourses to pathologize the Palestinian disaster and to mold the Palestinians into a trauma based "disease model" (Kleinman 1988; Young 1995).

Hence, one could argue that such a pathologization victimizes the Palestinians, disempowers them and depicts them as docile patients rather than potent political agents (Hughes and Pupavac 2005; Rousseau et al. 2001). It may also be argued that the state only benefits from the individuation and de-politization that characterizes the therapeutic discourse (Illouz 2007). Indeed, these might be unavoidable consequences of the work of such disciplinary power (Foucault 1977). However, a more nuanced understanding of the exact types of victimhood that stem from Psychoactive's activity paints a different picture.

First, by victimizing the Palestinians, Psychoactive seeks to deconstruct the dominant objectifying view that sees Palestinians as unidimensional "enemies," "terrorists" or "dangerous others." Instead, seeing Palestinians as traumatized victims, and their actions as justifiable symptoms, not only makes them less frightening for Jewish Israelis but also offers an opportunity for empathy, dialogue and mutual understanding.

Additionally, as Didier Fassin has shown, therapeutic discourses are playing a growing role in global politics of testimony. Expert-activists give voice to supposedly voiceless Palestinians, and the vocabulary of psychology sensitizes the world to their misfortune (Fassin 2008). Hence, trauma theory can authenticate the suffering of victims, portraying emotional suffering as unequivocally objective or ontologically "true" (Breslau 2004), and trauma can appear not only as a clinical category but also as a political argument (Fassin and Rechtman 2009; Fassin 2008). Thus, in an age rich with multiple, contested and malleable historical narratives, when it is nearly impossible to claim that one narrative is closer to the truth than the others, re-framing a narrative as an emotional one renders it authentic, and hence, true. In other words, Psychoactive's emotional discourse, accompanied by their professional authority, shifts the political issue from the highly contested historical sphere, into another, allegedly "truer" epistemological sphere, in which the lines between victim and perpetrator are clearer than ever.

Moreover, as was insinuated by Samir in the last quote, in contemporary Israel, being a trauma descendent entails considerable power. As Carol Kidron has shown, Holocaust

descendants' traumatic "emotive scar" is often interpreted as a Jewish-Israeli valorized form of commemorative remembering—"a sacrificially worn badge of honor" (2012, 732, 739). In this light, it is safe to argue that rather than disempowering the Palestinians, Psychoactive's victimizing discourse is in fact aiming to elevate the "emotive scar" of the Nakba to an honorary and empowering status.

Hence, while Psychoactive's victimization may stem from an almost unavoidable, multi-layered power structure, with professional, ethnic and national foundations, it also makes a strong, empowering case for Palestinians' right to memory, testimony and commemoration, and a relatively loud response to the legislative power of the state.

## Conclusion

This article focused on a political struggle over citizens' emotions. It demonstrated how a group of Israeli Parliament Members tried to shape the emotional responses of Israeli citizens to a pivotal historical event—the 1948 war—and to the downfall of their Palestinian foes. To that end they introduced a bill aimed not only at prohibiting the commemoration of this war as a Palestinian disaster, but also at monitoring the expression of emotions with regard to this war, by prohibiting public expressions of mourning and grief. The bill made clear that a positive emotional response was the only appropriate (and legal) response to the events of 1948, and while it poignantly ignored the Palestinian Nakba, it prohibited expressing negative emotions in its regard, comparing their expression to unlawful acts of treason.

While the Nakba bill echoes previous findings, in demonstrating how politicians attempt to enforce specific emotional styles (Delvecchio Good and Good 1988; Jenkins 1991), Psychoactive's response to the bill illustrates the ways in which political movements can directly oppose and challenge state-led constructions of emotions.

It was shown that Psychoactive's activists not only strived to publicly break the yet-to-be-legislated bill, but promoted and disseminated an alternative emotional style. Through a carefully articulated therapeutic and emotional discourse, and relying on its members' professional capital, Psychoactive reconstituted the historical event in question—the Nakba—as an emotional trauma, and the Israeli policy, with the Nakba bill as its latest manifestation—a forced repression of that trauma, to be followed by adverse emotional consequences. Thus, Psychoactive's members have argued that the bill is problematic not due to the restrictions it puts on the freedom of speech, or the rights of ethnic and political minorities, but due to the perilous emotional style it dictated.

Accordingly, an alternative emotional style was offered, highlighting the paramount importance of emotionally processing the Nakba, and the necessity to express mourning, grief and empathy towards the Palestinians. This style was depicted as not only more democratic, but also as offering health over illness, sanity over insanity, both to individuals (Jews and Arabs) and to the Israeli society as a whole.

It was demonstrated that Psychoactive's psycho-political action can make people feel differently about their national history and alter the ways in which a person understands him or herself, their family, and the way they feel towards their closest of kin.

Lastly, it was argued that while Psychoactive's disciplinary power unavoidably victimizes the Palestinians by pathologizing the Nakba, this victimization can be seen as a humanizing and empowering strategy that not only makes a case for Palestinians' right to remember and commemorate, but that also loudly opposes the repressive power of the state. Accordingly,

Psychoactive's oppositional emotional style was seen to uniquely elevate the "emotive scar" of the Nakba to a politically empowering status.

Thus, as this case study shows, emotions form an active and highly contested political battleground, and their boundaries are dynamically drawn and redrawn by politicians and political movements. Our feelings towards our history, our nationality and even our "enemies" are perpetually constructed, contested and reconstructed, and changing citizens' emotions can be more than a means toward different political ends, but a political end in itself.

This analytical framework can be used in other geographical and cultural contexts, in which activists, experts and politicians struggle over the ways citizens feel. For example, it can be fruitful to examine the struggles over emotions in Armenian and Turkish debates between politicians and activists regarding the 1915 events, in experts' and activists' involvement in the Truth and Reconciliation Commissions in South Africa, in civil society initiatives for collective emotional healing in Latin America and more. Extending the scope of this study to new geographical and cultural domains could shed new light onto the complex, multidirectional and fascinating ties between history, politics and emotions.

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