

- Ruble, D., & Martin, C. (1998). Gender development. In W. Damon (Series Ed.) & N. Eisenberg (Vol. Ed.), *Handbook of child psychology: Vol. 3. Social, emotional and personality development* (5th ed., pp. 933-1016). New York: Wiley.
- Smetana, J. G. (1995). Morality in context: Abstractions, ambiguities and applications. In R. Vasta (Ed.), *Annals of child development* (Vol. 10, pp. 83-130). London: Jessica Kingsley.
- Smetana, J. G. (2006). Social cognitive domain theory: Consistencies and variations in children's social and moral judgment. In M. Killen & J. G. Smetana (Eds.), *Handbook of moral development* (pp. 119-154). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Smetana, J. G., & Asquith, P. (1994). Adolescents' and parents' conceptions of parental authority and personal autonomy. *Child Development*, 65, 1147-1162.
- Tidhar, C., & Schacter, A. (1986). *Children's responses to television segments conveying social tolerance as presented in Rechov Sumsum, the Israeli adaptation of Sesame Street*. Unpublished manuscript, Israel Educational Television, Tel Aviv, Israel.
- Tisak, M. (1995). Domains of social reasoning and beyond. In R. Vasta (Ed.), *Annals of child development* (Vol. 11, pp. 95-130). London: Jessica Kingsley.
- Turiel, E. (1983). *The development of social knowledge: Morality and convention*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Turiel, E. (1998). The development of morality. In W. Damon (Series Ed.) & N. Eisenberg (Vol. Ed.), *Handbook of child psychology: Vol. 3. Social, emotional and personality development* (5th ed., pp. 863-932). New York: Wiley.
- Turiel, E. (2006). Resistance and subversion in everyday life. In L. Nucci (Ed.), *Conflict, contradiction, and contrarian elements in moral development and education* (pp. 3-20). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Turiel, E., Killen, M., & Helwig, C. (1987). Morality: Its structure, functions, and vagaries. In J. Kagan & S. Lamb (Eds.), *The emergence of morality in young children* (pp. 55-243). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Zielinska, I. E., & Chambers, B. (1995). Using groups' viewing of television to teach preschool social skills. *Journal of Educational Television*, 21, 85-99.

## "AS THOUGH THERE IS PEACE"

### Opinions of Jewish-Israeli Children About Watching *Rechov Sumsum/Shara'a Simsim* Amidst Armed Political Conflict

Yael Warshel

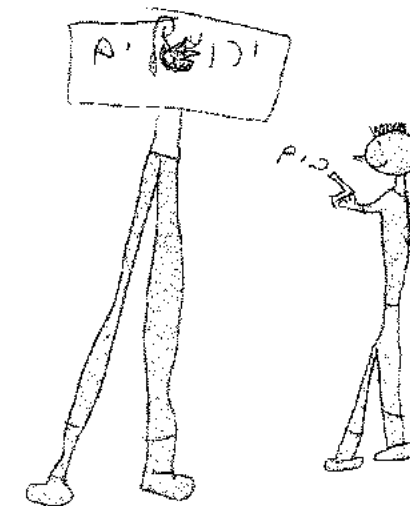


FIG. 15.1. Drawing depicting the Al Qsa Intifada period of armed political conflict (7-year-old Jewish-Israeli girl, December 2001). *Translation: sign reads, "Jerusalem" word coming out of gun reads "boom."*

A Jewish-Israeli boy is riding his bicycle and suddenly realizes he is lost. He took a wrong turn. He stops to get his bearings, only to discover that he also has a flat tire. Two Palestinian Muppets suddenly emerge and offer him assistance. They, along with a Palestinian man who arrives later, help the boy change his tire. In no time, the boy is on his way back home. This exchange occurs at the end of 2001, more than 1 year after the start of the Al Aksa Intifada, or second Palestinian Uprising. During this period, the Israeli army repeatedly made incursions into Palestinian stateless national territory and Palestinian militants directed, on an average, three terror attacks a day against Jewish-Israelis. Therefore, one might ask how or where did such a friendly exchange take place between a Jewish-Israeli and three Palestinians?

It took place on *Sesame Street*; that is, on the Palestinian street of the Israeli and Palestinian coproduction of *Sesame Street*. During this time period, *Rehov Sumsum/Shara'a Simsim (RS/SS)*, as it is called in its Hebrew and Arabic names, respectively, was being broadcast to Israeli and Palestinian children. The program represents an excellent effort at *peace communication*—a communication intervention that tries to mediate between people in conflict; in this case, by building peace between and among children who are part of the Israeli-Palestinian ethnopolitical conflict framed by the Arab-Israeli interstate conflict. This chapter analyzes in depth audience reception analysis interviews about *RS/SS* conducted during November and December of 2001 with Jewish-Israeli children who are in the position of the *statebearing nation*<sup>1</sup> partner to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

### INCLUDING CHILDREN'S OPINIONS ABOUT CHILDREN'S PEACE PROGRAMMING

Children's opinions, including those about TV and conflict, are typically ignored. When pollsters conduct so-called public opinion polls, they only sample adults (Livingstone, 2001), ignoring children as though they are not members of the public. Yet children, including those whose opinions I sampled, are capable of providing coherent and meaningful answers to important debates, including, in this case, about the utility of showing them peace communication programs under varying political contexts. In this chapter, I argue that children's opinions should be included in policy decisions made about peace communication programming for children.

In discussing children's ability to decipher TV codes and conventions, Buckingham (1997, 2000) argued that adults make the mistake of not only

characterizing, but also constructing childhood as though it were a condition of ignorance, irrationality, panic, and anxiety. Yet, like Buckingham, I found that when adults ask children their opinions, they do provide coherent and meaningful responses. Therefore, if adults want to create effective policy decisions about how to use communication to respond to children's needs during periods of armed political conflict, I suggest they begin by asking children what they need.

Despite adult concern about the impact of armed political conflict on children, indicated in the literature on the subject (Leavitt & Fox, 1993; Machel, 2001; Martin, 2002), adults often neglect to discuss armed political conflict with children. They may ignore the subject or only tell children "what they need to know," but not actually ask children what they think they need to know. Adults may think children are impervious to the constructs of conflict or in need of sheltering from it and so fear raising the subject.

However, children are not always naive to the constructs of conflict, nor are they its innocent victims in need of shelter. For example, in his study of intractable identity conflict in Northern Ireland, Cairns (1983) found that children there were cognizant of the troubles raging around them. More than a decade later, he argued, "most of the literature concerned with children and political violence portrays children as the passive victims of political violence. However children are not always passive victims, there is evidence that they can be politically active" (Cairns, 1996, p. 135). Children have played an active role in armed political conflicts around the world, including the Israeli Palestinian conflict (Aronson, 1999; Barber, 1997; Hasson & Ettinger, 2005; D. Kuttub, 1998; J. Kuttub, 1998; Rouhana, 1989; Totry, forthcoming). In this role, they have engaged in both nonviolent and violent political protests, and sometimes it has been unclear whether they have done so with or even in direct opposition to adult sanctions (Defense for Children International, 2004). Therefore, adults may be mistaken if they assume that asking children for their opinions about conflict will expose them to harmful events. They may already know about these events and even be involved.

Policymakers and media practitioners hoping to ameliorate conflict by attempting to alter children's attitudes and behaviors through the use of peace communication should treat children as actual members of the public and so, too, include their input in their decision-making processes. Because there is evidence that children can provide coherent and meaningful answers and can be, in any case, aware of and even involved in armed political conflict, I recommend adults find out how children feel and think when exposed to children's peace communication programming—especially when the point is to change their attitudes and behaviors, not those of adults.

## THE PEACEBUILDING INTERVENTION: RS/SS AND THE ORIGINAL SESAME STREET

In the early 1990s the American-based Sesame Workshop (formerly known as Children's Television Workshop), Israeli-Educational TV (IETV), and the Palestinian Al Quds Modern Media Institute embarked on the coproduction of *RS/SS*.<sup>2</sup> Modeled on the original *Sesame Street* produced by Sesame Workshop in the United States, it was first aired in April 1998 and included outreach materials for schools. However, it differed from this model in three fundamental ways. First, it was broadcast in a combination of two languages, rather than one. Hebrew comprised the bulk of the broadcast, with Arabic being the lesser portion thereof.

Second, in terms of set design, the action occurred along two separate streets, rather than a single "Sesame" street. The rationale for employing two streets was in response to changes in the political context brought about through *peacemaking* processes<sup>3</sup> that had in fact led to the development of the series. The series was created in response to increased momentum in the early 1990s on the Israeli-Palestinian front of the Arab-Israeli peace process. Producers hoped *RS/SS* could contribute to peacebuilding efforts between Israelis and Palestinians. As with many other *peacemaking* efforts, this project was one of many so-called people-to-people projects at the time that sought to create peace from the ground up between the local populations. When the idea for the series first germinated, after the signing of the Oslo Peace Accords between Israelis and Palestinians, peacebuilding was being used, on the one hand, to sustain the progress that had been made on the formal peacemaking level, and, on the other, to provide a base on which final status negotiations could be made and settled. Given this context, the set design of *RS/SS*, or its imagined geographical space, implemented the vision sought by the Oslo agreement—a two-state solution. Therefore, the set consisted of two streets: "Rechov Sumsum" and "Shara'a Sumsim." The former street symbolized the secured existence of the state of Israel and the latter the realization of Palestinian national aspirations for a state.

The third way in which *RS/SS* differed from American *Sesame Street* was in curriculum. In contrast to its American counterpart, *RS/SS* placed more weight on teaching mutual respect. In seeking to do so, the program worked both inwardly along civic lines—by seeking to foster respect among Israelis and Palestinians within each of their own civic societies—as well as outwardly, as the series developed cross-over segments. *Cross-overs* provided Israelis and Palestinians with the opportunity to visit one another's street to cultivate prosocial relations, as exemplified by the segment described in the opening of this chapter.<sup>4</sup>

## THE CONTEXT IN WHICH CHILDREN INTERACTED WITH RS/SS

By the time the program made its debut, 5 years had passed since the signing of Oslo. By this time, peacemaking had stagnated and become flustered by the major issues set aside for later negotiation in the Oslo process, including the status of "settlements, refugees and Jerusalem." Yet, despite disregard shown on both sides for adhering to the accords, *RS/SS* aired and managed to do extremely well in terms of ratings it achieved. Fifty-three percent of its target audience tuned in (Applied Research and Consulting LLC, 1999).<sup>5</sup> Of course, knowing that children viewed the program does not tell us whether by watching Jewish-Israeli children altered their attitudes and political preferences toward Palestinians and other Arabs and/or their desire to interact with them. Nor, similarly, does it tell us about changes to Palestinian and Palestinian-Israeli<sup>6</sup> children's political preferences and so forth.

A pioneering study carried out in 1998 by Sesame Workshop (Cole et al., 2003), following the first run-through of the series, sought to address some of these concerns. They found that after 4 months of exposure, Jewish-Israeli children demonstrated a significant increase in positive attitudes toward the concept *Arab*. Palestinian-Israeli children demonstrated the same with regards to *Jews*. However, Palestinian children demonstrated the exact opposite reaction—a significant increase in negative attitudes toward Jews.

Given all the usual caveats about the relationship between attitudes and behavior change, I interpret the Cole et al. results to mean that the program might have led its Jewish-Israeli and Palestinian-Israeli audience to intend to engage (or if they had the chance to actually engage) more prosocially in specific situations with Arabs and Jews, respectively. However, Palestinians might not intend to engage (or did not engage) prosocially in specific situations with Jews.

These different responses to the programs, I argue, were due to the different micropolitical contexts through which each categorical grouping<sup>7</sup> tuned into the show: The Jewish-Israelis viewed it through the lens of a statebearing nation, Palestinian-Israelis through the lens of state minority, and Palestinians through the lens of stateless nation. Depending on its relation to the unit of the state within the interstate system, the structure of each lens holds different potentials for expectations and goals with respect to the concept of peace and, therefore, peacebuilding. As a result, children who are members of these categories, contemporarily endowed with these respective lenses that delimit the nature of their daily existence, read this peace communication intervention differently and, in turn, were influenced by it differently. In short, to understand how an audience receives and is influenced

by peace communication, it is essential to understand the contexts through which the intervention is attempted and how audience members relate to those contexts.

In the case of *RS/SS*, the context originally envisioned for its broadcast, or even that which existed during the study in 1998 (Cole et al., 2003), had entirely changed by 2001 when I conducted my research. Already by 2000 the optimistic context in which *RS/SS* was supposed to air—the Oslo process—had entirely collapsed. Camp David had come and gone, and with it any hope for a peace that many had thought, or at least hoped, was just around the corner. Shortly thereafter, the Al Aqsa Intifada began in September 2000. Much of what had been developed through peacemaking and peacebuilding efforts failed to materialize and/or was now unraveling. In 2001, the violence continued and peacemaking collapsed entirely. During that period, re-runs of *RS/SS* were airing, as had been the case since it finished its first season at the end of 1998.

## METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

### Sample and Selection

To explore the meaning Jewish-Israeli children were making out of the program during this period, I selected a sample of 25 children and a corresponding parent for each child. The children were selected from two neighboring Israeli cities, Raanana and Herzliya, northern suburbs of Tel-Aviv where, among other places, Sesame Workshop had conducted its 1998 study. My sample was comprised of 6- to 10-year-olds who on average were 1 year older than the age of the mean viewer for *RS/SS*. The mean age of my sample was 7.92. According to the Sesame Workshop study, the mean viewing age was 6.7 (Cole et al., 2003).<sup>8</sup> To measure for any variation in response by age, I included children of varying ages. To be certain that my entire sample would be capable of meeting the demands of my very in-depth interview process, I chose to add older, rather than younger children.

Among the sample were a good mix of Jewish-Israeli children who ethnically were *Askenazi*,<sup>9</sup> *Mizrachi*,<sup>10</sup> or a mixture of the two. They were from secular or moderately observant religious families. In the 1999 elections for prime minister, 71% of their parents voted for Ehud Barak, leader of the left-of-center Labor Party. However, in the 2001 election, Barak lost 14% of the parents' support to Ariel Sharon, leader of the right-of-center Likud party. The decline in the number of votes for a candidate from the left together with the appearance of the Intifada, reflected changing vote patterns (*Haaretz*, 2001), and adult support and optimism for the Arab-Israeli peace process and the Oslo process specifically (e.g., Steinmetz Center Peace

Indices, posted on their Web site) throughout Israel during this same time period.

I selected the children who participated in the research through my network of affiliations with parents and nursery school teachers based in the two communities. In doing so, I was able to establish a research scenario that provided a more contextualized, detailed, nuanced, and *natural* picture of the children in my study. However, because I did not randomly select this sample, I cannot make generalizations to other communities in Israel. Nevertheless, these children's responses provide invaluable insights into what other children holding categorical membership in the Israeli statebearing nation might be thinking. This is particularly the case for those who engage in moderate to no religious practice and whose parents demonstrate similar voting behaviors and shifts like that of my sample during the 1999 to 2001 elections.

### Design

I spent several hours in the homes of each of the 25 children. During my visits, I interviewed each child in Hebrew individually with the help of a board game I created replete with *RS/SS* character game pieces. I divided my questioning into two sessions to ensure the child had a break. Between the two sessions, the child viewed an episode of the program alongside some relatives and friends with whom he or she normally watched TV. This viewing period served as a basis for asking the child questions about the program. Finally, during the period I was in the home, one or both of the child's parents completed a survey providing basic family demographic data.

### Research Scenario

I selected the children's naturalistic viewing environment—their home—as each child's individually tailored research site. Doing so enabled me to gain rich data to add to the valuable information collected by Cole et al. (2003) in their quantitative media effects study. By using the home as the research site, I avoided a problem of experimental research designs—namely, artificiality. I had the opportunity to interact with these children's friends and family, thereby gaining a better understanding of their lives and, for example, their relationship to the adults who care for them. As a result, I can situate their comments and interactions with the TV program and so more accurately interpret and evaluate my data.

## Interview

By conducting interviews in the home, I was able to engage the children in the environment in which they felt most at ease—specifically, in their bedrooms with their favorite toys at their disposal. The individual attention I gave each child and the enhanced degree of comfort this achieved removed some of the barriers that typically set a researcher apart from his or her subjects. Indicative of the children's comfort, they randomly engaged in game playing along with "show and tell" of their personal affects. Additionally, they explained that they found the interview process fun and interesting. One of the girls, Maya,<sup>11</sup> offered an explanation as to why this was the case: "It's not every Saturday that someone comes over and asks me my opinion" (8-year-old girl). Hence, a level of intimacy was established in the conversation that allowed me to probe relatively deeply with these children, thereby procuring more detailed and nuanced data that better enabled me to understand their opinions, some of which are presented next.

## Observation

By situating my observations of the viewing of the series in a group environment, in the home, I was better able to replicate the child's natural viewing environment. In her study of American toddlers viewing *Sesame Street*, Lemish (1987) found that the natural viewing environment influenced how children read *Sesame Street*. Among other factors, she explained, "the presence of siblings . . . [and] parent's attitudes and behavior—all effect the nature of the viewing situation" (p. 54). Due to the importance Lemish found that the viewing context of *Sesame Street* held in the American cultural context, I gathered that it would be important in the Israeli context and so situated my observations of the children's viewing of *RS/SS* in a group environment in the home.

According to data provided by Sesame Workshop's commissioned random sample across Israel, a majority (52%) of all Jewish children watched *RS/SS* in groups with their siblings, parents, or friends (Applied Research and Consulting LLC, 1999). To replicate this naturalistic viewing environment, I welcomed members of the child's family to view alongside him or her and asked parents to invite over one of the child's friends with whom he or she typically watched TV. The result of this effort was that, in comparison with the group viewing rate Sesame Workshop found to be typical, 76% of the children in my study were observed watching the episode of *RS/SS* in a group. Hence, although my study was more biased toward group viewing, I submit that it more closely resembled the natural viewing environment for the audience of *RS/SS* because the majority of children in my study also

watched the program in a group. Finally, although the rest of the children in my study viewed *RS/SS* alone, I wish to note a well-known research caveat about the concept *alone*. Children in my study who viewed the episode of *RS/SS* alone did so in my presence. Thus, although I tailored the research scenario to each individual child, like any research scenario, it was not entirely natural, but rather more natural.<sup>12</sup>

## Interview Questions

Questions asked in the interview of the children centered around four major themes. They alternated between a fixed format, which asked the children to place their game piece on one of several options on the game board, and open-ended questions, which allowed them to discuss whatever they wished. I encouraged them to express themselves through drawings if they had difficulty explaining themselves verbally or if they wanted to elucidate a verbal point. The themes covered included:

1. Their knowledge of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict (specifically of terror/freedom fighting) as a function of their experiences and perceived experiences with the conflict;
2. Their knowledge of and attitudes toward their partners in conflict—namely, Palestinians and other Arabs in relation to their own identity;
3. Their perceptions of characters portraying partners in conflict on *RS/SS*; and
4. Their perceptions of and attitudes toward the relations modeled between and among characters portraying partners in conflict on *RS/SS*.

This chapter focuses on the children's responses to questions related to Theme 4.

## The *RS/SS* Episode

The episode I showed the children, as a basis for discussion, was a modified version of *RS/SS*, approximately 40 minutes in length. It contained one episode that originally aired on IETV, to which I attached three peacebuilding segments from other episodes. As a result, the children watched four segments involving prosocial interactions similar to the one I described in the opening of this chapter.

## JEWISH-ISRAELI CHILDREN'S OPINIONS

### Knowledge of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

The overwhelming majority (92% of my sample) were aware that they were in the midst of armed political conflict. Typically, they characterized the situation as *war* or *terror*. The remaining 8%, or two children, although expressing some awareness, did not as readily articulate it in such precise form. These two children were 6 years old, suggesting, hypothetically, that this is the age when these children were gaining awareness and/or were becoming capable of articulating their awareness about armed political conflict. Because there were only four children 6 years of age in my study, and the other two fully demonstrated their awareness of the conflict, I cannot draw any conclusions about such a process. What is clear is that the majority of the children, including half of the 6-year-olds and all those above age 7 were aware of the context of armed political conflict surrounding them. This finding supports Cairn's (1983) conclusions from his study of children in Northern Ireland.

The children's comprehension of their environment was best summarized in the comment and drawing by Amit (7-year-old girl) that emphasized the Palestinian terror component of the conflict. She made reference to a suicide bombing that had taken place in the city of Haifa about 1 hour before we sat down together. She displayed anxiety and concern. I assumed this was because she was forced to imagine and contemplate consequences of the conflict, its trauma, and the threat of injury and unnatural death. She explained the depth of her awareness and experiences: "We have a brother of friends who lives in Haifa, but we don't know yet if he was in it." In her drawing, found on the opening page of this chapter (see Fig. 15.1), she depicted a Palestinian aiming a gun with the words *boom* coming out of it at a Jewish-Israeli in Jerusalem.

According to their responses to my question about all the sources from where they derived their knowledge of this conflict, the children listed TV (88%), radio (17%), newspapers or magazines (11%), and the Internet (11%) in regard to mass communication sources. Where interpersonal sources were concerned, they cited parents (44%), teachers (39%), friends (17%), and, in cases in which children had older siblings, siblings (17%). Thus, according to their self-reports, TV, followed by parents and teachers, were the most common vehicles through which these children became aware of the context within which they lived. Therefore, even if they or their loved ones had not directly experienced the violence, they had become cognizant of it through these communication channels. Notably, many children explained that, after an attack, their teachers provided them with something akin to a post-terror debriefing. As a result, if they had not heard news about the conflict elsewhere, they were certain to hear about it at school.

### Knowledge of the Role Played by Their Partners in Conflict

From among the 23 children who were fully aware of the political context in which they lived, 91% (21 children) all cited the Palestinians as their partner in war. The two exceptions were children who, when asked about "what or who a Palestinian is," responded blankly, demonstrating no familiarity with the category *Palestinian*. As a result, they substituted the term *Arab*.

Most illustrative of the majority's understanding of the nature of their conflict, and that they were in conflict specifically with Palestinians, were comments like Nitzan's (7-year-old girl), the Palestinians, they are "those that are at war with us—with Israel"—or, as stated in the reverse by Uzi (8-year-old boy), "We're at war with them."

When elaborating further about the nature of war with Palestinians, the children provided intimate details. In one negative generalization by a 6-year-old girl named Renen, Palestinians were described collectively as inhumane stone throwers and equated with treating Israelis as less than human. Explaining by way of an analogy, she said,

There was a zoo I went to with my friend and there was an hour you're not supposed to feed them. And there was a monkey standing there because the visitors fed him and they show you his bones, and a giraffe that—they threw an orange and it got stuck in her throat and so they showed the throat, and a crocodile. Some idiot guy wanted to see if the crocodile was alive. It was covered. He threw a rock on her head. She died . . . those are the Palestinians, they are mean. "We took their land." That's what they say, I'm certain that that is not correct. The same way the Palestinians kill us, it's like how we kill animals.

Comments like Renen's demonstrated that the children, even by age 6, defined their partner in conflict to be Palestinians, and clearly they knew that relations between them and Israelis were bad. As Amit explained, in ascribing a negative stereotype to those Palestinians she defined as "bad," their religion, she said, is "to shoot at us—the Israelis I mean."

### Attitudes Toward Their Partners in Conflict

Despite the negative descriptions provided of the war they had with Palestinians and the acts of terror Palestinians directed at them, the majority of the children actually ascribed either both negative and positive attitudes or solely neutral ones to Palestinians. As was common of the neutral attitudes ascribed, an 8-year-old boy named Ari explained to me that, Palestinians, "they speak Arabic." Typical of children who ascribed both negative and

positive attitudes were expressions about two kinds of Palestinians, who from their perspective are either bad or good. For example, Zohar proclaimed, "Just a few [Palestinians want peace] . . . well not exactly just a few, they also want like the Arabs—[Half want war, half want peace]. . . . I just remembered that the teacher at school said when they bring up Palestinians—that there are Palestinians who want peace. . . ." (7-year-old girl). As Maya said, "Just like there are more good Israelis and like there are more good Americans than there are more good [Palestinians]" (8-year-old girl).

Apart from their attitudes toward Palestinians, where other Arabs are concerned, it is of great significance to note that the majority of the children I spoke with distinguished Palestinians from Arabs. They defined the two as separate categories, viewing Palestinians as a distinct people or identity. Overall, the children expressed more positive attitudes toward the category Arab (including Palestinian-Israelis, whom they typically referred to as *Arab-Israelis* or *Arab-Jews*) and did not generalize these attitudes toward Palestinian Arabs. Neev (7-year-old boy) best clarified the distinction for me when talking about other categories of Arabs, specifically about Palestinian-Israelis. He said, "The Palestinians were born in Palestine. . . . The ones who want peace immigrate to Israel, those that don't, don't immigrate, they stay in Palestine." Hence, the partner in conflict toward whom Jewish-Israeli children hold the most negative attitudes, as clarified by Neev, are Arabs, who are Palestinian and who do not live in Israel. They live in Palestine. Meaning, they are Palestinian citizens. Shachar, an 8-year-old boy, summarized this best when he stated, most "[Palestinians] are bad, there are a few who are good. Arabs in contrast—a lot of them are good and they are not against Israel."

### RS/SS—A Utopian Intervention Amidst Dystopia

In contrast to the dystopian context of war about which these children spoke, they described the world of RS/SS as utopian. Neev stated this most succinctly when painting the utopian imagined landscape of RS/SS: "These are streets of peace." Like him, among those for whom data are available ( $N = 24$ ), 22 children (92%) described RS/SS as portraying a utopian vision. In their description, they pointed specifically to scenes in which good relations were portrayed between Jewish-Israelis and their partners in conflict.

From among the 22 children who read prosocial relations into the show, 20 (91%) explained that the show was unrealistic or portrayed relations that were plausible, but only happened on occasion. As Maya (8-year-old girl) explained, in contrasting interactions on the show to the world she knew, "If for instance, you were walking in the street and you saw someone with whom you have a war you wouldn't talk to him, you wouldn't say hi, you wouldn't even pay attention to him." Similarly, Shai (7-year-old boy)

exclaimed, "I wish it was like that." When asked why he wished "it was like that," he blurted out, "because the world is not like that!"

The majority of these children, therefore, understood that the show did not portray their lives accurately. They were able to separate fact from fiction, reconfirming earlier studies about children's ability to read TV (Hodge & Tripp, 1986; Jaglom & Gardner, 1981; Messenger-Davies, 1997). The two exceptions were a 6- and 7-year-old, the latter of whom, Yoav, displayed his disinterest in watching the program by running out of the room during parts of the viewing period, wandering around in circles, and playing with a toy. His disinterest helps explain why he did not read the show as the other children did—he simply was not interested in reading it at all. Thus, with the exception of the one 6-year-old girl, Tamar, the children found that RS/SS represented a certain point of view or commentary on the current situation, and, although not factual per se, did not have to be factual. That is, it could educate them about how the world could be, rather than just about how it is. As Danielle (8-year-old girl) put it, "It's not nice to see people screaming so I like it [RS/SS portrayal of reality] even if it's not like that in real life—it could happen." Therefore, although they understood that RS/SS' peace-building images were totally disconnected from the existing political context, they found another way to connect with it.

*Rational for Preferring the Alternative Provided by the Intervention.* These children argued in favor of RS/SS' depiction of their situation. They provided coherent justifications for why its version of relations between Jewish-Israelis and their partners in conflict was useful. From among the 20 who explained that the show was unrealistic or modeled what did not occur on a regular basis, 17 (85%) explained that they preferred RS/SS' version to reality (data were missing for the remaining 3). Said in another way, 100% of those who indicated that they recognized that the series portrayed positive relations between Jewish-Israelis and their partners in conflict ( $N = 22$ ) and that those relations were unrealistic ( $N = 20$ ), and for whom data are available ( $N = 17$ ), approved of the series' decision to depict these relations in a utopian manner.

Their rationale can be divided into three categories. First, according to them, RS/SS served as a model for how things should be. Its portrayal of their partners in conflict, including prosocial relations with them, represented the possibility of a better reality and, therefore, was comforting, either to them or their peers. They found it preferential because they were looking for an escape, for a different reality—a better one. They were hoping for a moment of catharsis, as demonstrated by Neev, who said, watching the show "makes me feel good . . . as though there is peace" (7-year-old boy). So, too, Merav (8-year-old girl) explained she preferred RS/SS' vision

because, "I want life to be like that." As Rafi (8-year-old boy) admitted, "I like it because it gives me a safer feeling. I don't want to think about someone carrying a knife to kill another. . . ."

Along the same lines, there were children who assumed *third-person effects*, explaining that, although not necessarily important for them, *RS/SS*' portrayal would comfort *other* children. Employing the mythologized categories of *Arab* and *Jew* as the supposed ethnopolitical national divisions that separate Palestinians from Jewish-Israelis, Maya (8-year-old girl) explained,

it is good to show it because then it can help, say when you walk in the street so you don't get scared. For children who are afraid, it helps—both Jews and Arabs. For me, I'm not scared so I don't pay attention to it that much. It's like watching any other show.

For their second rationale, the children assumed a type of *media effects*. They argued that audience members and actors in the program would learn from the show's demonstration of prosocial relations and, accordingly, change their behaviors. Michal (9-year-old girl) explained optimistically, "it might change people." Zohar (7-year-old girl), who also employed the categories of *Arab* and *Jew*, provided more details:

If one Arab sees it [*RS/SS*], he'll learn that you can talk with other people, and you don't always have to speak just with someone familiar. Jews will learn that someone can actually go to be between Arabs and to try to talk to them. It's better to show people together, even if they can't understand each other's accent because they are nice to each other. Even if they don't understand, they can try to speak in a language that they both speak. You can try to teach each other a little.

The third rationale offered was that the conflict would be prolonged if instead the series actually reflected reality. According to Keren (7-year-old girl), if the series did just that (i.e., demonstrated adverse relations), there "will be a lot more people who are mean than people who are good." As Uzi (8-year-old boy) said in responding to the same question, "It's not fitting for kids to see things that are bad. . . . Kids can learn to do good, because otherwise they can become criminals." Therefore, according to Keren and Uzi, mimicked violence would result from watching mediated violence.

## CONTRIBUTIONS OF JEWISH-ISRAELI CHILDREN'S OPINIONS

### Contributions to Peace Communication Interventions

*The Fate of RS/SS.* These children asserted their preferences for *RS/SS*' imagined utopia. Such assertions are notable, first, because a debate exists between how far a TV program attempting to create social change, in this case—build peace—can stretch the boundaries between reality and fantasy. In Summer 2002, the production companies decided to suspend the program in its original format due to such concerns (Kliener, 2002). They removed cross-over segments, arguing that the contemporary climate was not appropriate for broadcasting their message. As a result, they eliminated any possibility for a child to view a scene like the one with which this chapter opened and which the children in my study in fact praised.

According to the Project Director from Sesame Workshop, Shari Rosenfeld, "The possibility of finding an Israeli and a Palestinian on the same street is so far removed from reality, and imaginary, that we thought that kids wouldn't be able to connect with it" (cited in Gal, 2002). Sesame Workshop thought that the child audience would grow suspicious of the program if it continued in its original format (Gal, 2002). In addition, they feared that any future effort to use *Sesame Street* to build peace between and among Israelis and Palestinians would fail if children ceased to believe in the plausibility of the series.

The Palestinian and Israeli producers, assuming an even more direct stance from the perspective of their own ethnopolitical groupings, argued in a similar manner. Daoud Kuttab, on behalf of the Palestinian coproduction team, argued,

Children are a lot smarter than we think, and the Palestinian children are under a closure, where tanks of the Israeli Defense Forces are outside the home. Any effort to show the other side in a good light won't be believable, and we think the show will become the joke of Palestinian children. The gap between the series and reality is simply too big. (cited in Gal, 2002)

Meanwhile, Israelis argued that placing images of Palestinian and Israeli children playing together did not make sense, when in juxtaposition Israeli children were being killed by Palestinian suicide bombers, especially when some of the latter were as young as 14. Underlining this point, Lewis Bernstein, Director of Sesame Workshop's International Division at the time, recounted as early as November 1999 that, "an Israeli asked, 'What if you create a show where [Israeli and Palestinian] children were singing and



dancing together, and there was a bus bombing the same day" (cited in Hockstader, 1999). The answer to the question, as we now know, became, "you don't show Israelis and Palestinians interacting together pro-socially."

As a result, *RS/SS* was replaced by *Sippuray Sumsum*, and *Shara'a Simsim*<sup>13</sup> by *Hikayat Simsim (HS)*, "Sesame Stories" in Hebrew and Arabic, respectively. The former—a series separate from the latter—would be broadcast to Israelis, and the latter to Palestinians. Beginning their broadcast in late 2003, the aim of the programs was no longer to build peace between Israelis and Palestinians. Whereas *RS/SS* and *Shara'a Simsim* tried to get Palestinian and Israeli children to become friends, *Sippuray Sumsum* and *Hikayat Simsim* pulled back and tried to humanize and demystify Israeli and Palestinian identity through separate, but analogous, stories (Salamon, 2002; see also chap. 14, this volume).

*The Boundaries Between Reality and Fantasy were not Overstretched.* My reception study with Jewish-Israeli children reveals and illuminates differences in opinion. On the one hand, the producers concluded that the gap between the show and reality was problematic. On the other hand, the program's fictitious nature neither offended the children nor impaired the legitimacy of the program. Rather, the children favored *RS/SS* account of reality precisely because it was so far removed from reality. That gap is exactly what gave these children cause to connect with the program. The program made them happy—specifically because they were watching it in a period of crisis and stagnation on peacemaking fronts. This gap shaped the program into a useful artifact—if not the only artifact in their environment that embodied them with their partners in conflict through nonviolent relations. Therefore, producers' assumptions about what was best for Jewish-Israeli children during this political context were not necessarily correct. Again, this finding supports my claim that producers are best advised to include children's opinions when making important policymaking decisions, such as changing program format. Children, simply put, do not necessarily read TV the same way their adult counterparts do.

### Contributions to Peace

Second, these children's preferences for *RS/SS*' imagined utopia are notable because of the political context within which they expressed them. Despite the context, the children were neither upset by the program's contents nor, more important, did they express disinterest in peacebuilding. Quite the contrary, they expressed their enthusiasm for it, even under the micro-research context in which I asked them to observe an episode of the program, thereby making them a captive audience for it. Their enthusiasm, in marked

contrast to adult opinion, demonstrates the need to consider children's opinions, especially about peace communication programs trying to influence them. According to Mueller (1973), during "certain intense international events" (p. 208), public opinion moves causally in line with national leaders, which, if applied to the Israeli political climate at the time, would have resulted in a rallying around Prime Minister Sharon's national policies. Although his policies, along with his adult supporters, favored a freeze on peacemaking, these children instead evidenced their interest in continuing efforts to build peace. Thus, it seems, children may not think about peace the same way adults do.

The children I sampled were not necessarily reflective of all Jewish-Israeli children at that time. Most notably, they may not represent children of parents whose expressed political preferences were further to the right in 2001, even beyond the shift of many parents in my sample in that election. Nevertheless, these children could just as easily have shown disapproval for peacebuilding. They could have responded to my questions by saying, "Palestinians need to watch the show, not us," or "We are not the ones who need to change our attitudes—we want peace. It's *them*—the Palestinians who don't. They need to change their attitudes toward us, not the other way around." Further, as Zohar (7-year-old girl) made clear in a statement quoted earlier in this chapter, Jews can learn from the program, too. Hence, it remains striking that these children connected with the program despite assumptions about how they might otherwise receive its message amid the specific political context.

### Contributions to Research

As previously discussed, the partners in conflict toward whom these Jewish-Israeli children expressed the most negative attitudes were Palestinian citizens. Therefore, Jewish-Israeli children's attitudes toward Palestinian citizens should be the subject of emphasis and measure for *RS/SS* if it wishes to make inroads into the Israeli-Palestinian front of the Arab-Israeli conflict by focusing on individual intergroup attitude change.<sup>14</sup> We know from the Sesame Workshop study that *RS/SS* may have induced Jewish-Israeli children to engage more prosocially with Arabs. However, whether the same was true for Palestinians then, or when I conducted my reception study in 2001, remains an open question because it has never been measured.

## RS/SS: REDUCING STRESS LEVELS OF JEWISH-ISRAELI CHILDREN?

The children's reception of the program is vital for understanding its utility and, presumably, can also be used as a base against which to think about efforts to influence other categories of people in the position of statebearing nations around the world. Besides endorsing the program as a tool for building peace, the children argued it would elicit effects, and that these effects would also successfully build peace. Their argument, of course, in no way serves as evidence for effects. Because I conducted an audience reception analysis, not a media effects study, I cannot address the question myself. Instead, what I can claim is that, according to these children's opinions, the program is enjoyable. Therefore, I want to suggest another measure by which to judge the utility of peace communication programs during situations of armed political conflict: gratification.

A program's ability to gratify—to provide comfort and reduce stress during conflict—may be of value. Armed political conflicts lead to a rise in stress levels. This rise in stress leads to a deterioration in the overall mental health of a society, including a rise in domestic conflict and stress placed on the family unit (Cairns, 1996; Leavitt & Fox, 1993). Therefore, based on what the children explained, I offer the following: If children are provided with moments of comfort (i.e., if they are given an alternative through which to imagine the context within which they live, especially one that stresses nonviolence), it is possible that their own levels of stress may be reduced. If they are, then at the very least we might conclude that RS/SS worked indirectly to help these children cope with armed political conflict by helping them to better cope more generally with conflict-induced stress.

Support for this possibility was made evident by Neev's statement cited earlier in this chapter in which he explained that watching the show "makes me feel good . . . as though there is peace" (7-year-old boy). Similarly, it was made evident by Shachar (8-year-old boy), who explained that watching RS/SS' display of relations between him and his partners in conflict is "a good feeling because finally after all this time they are acting without violence." But most of all, it was made evident by Amit, the same girl who was waiting anxiously during our interview to hear whether the brother of family friends had been victimized by the terrorist attack. According to her, watching RS/SS, specifically during a period of anxiety, made her "feel good."

## RECOMMENDED APPLICATIONS FOR JEWISH-ISRAELI CHILDREN'S OPINIONS

### Recommendations for Media Practitioners

Notwithstanding the obvious difficulties involved in trying to create a peace communication intervention, I recommend the opinions of the Jewish-Israeli children I sampled be considered for the design of future peace communication programs, particularly those targeting children in the position of a statebearing nation. Specifically, with regard to RS/SS I recommend the following.

**Curriculum.** In light of the children's affirmation of RS/SS' peacebuilding messages, I question the decision to alter its format without consulting children. According to the children with whom I spoke, the boundaries between the program and reality had not been outstretched. In addition, the same format changes did not have to be applied uniformly to all of RS/SS' targeted audiences. Accordingly, the producers could have continued to employ the existing format only for broadcasts to Jewish-Israelis. If the said format was found to be inappropriate for Palestinian children due, among other reasons, to the negative attitudes they came to express toward Jews as a result of watching back in 1998 (Cole et al., 2003), producers could have adopted the new format only for the Palestinian audience.

**Dissemination Vehicles.** The program was shown on TV. This concurs with information the children in my study provided about the medium, among the mass media, through which they most often learned about the conflict. It is likely that this is the case because TV is the mass communication vehicle to which they tune into most often. Hence, the producer's decision to employ TV as their primary mass medium through which to expose Jewish-Israeli children to their message appears to have been a good choice. I recommend it be adopted by other communication efforts targeting this population.

Because the children pointed to teachers, in addition to parents, as the primary interpersonal communication vehicles through which they learned about the conflict, I recommend that RS/SS continue to provide outreach materials to schools. More important, it should, along with other peace communication efforts, train and encourage teachers to integrate such efforts into their curriculum, particularly in conjunction with the quasi debriefings that some teachers are apparently providing children following terror attacks. Finally, I recommend parents also be targeted because the children pointed them out as central to the conflict information-dissemination process, and so, presumably, they are also playing a central role in the

process of trying to alter or support the children's conflict-related attitudes and behaviors.

### Recommendations for Peace Communication Researchers

Where research is concerned, evaluations of *RS/SS*, as well as other peace communication programs, should measure target audiences' attitudes toward those whom the given target audiences define as their partner in conflict. Owing to the children's separation between the categories *Arab* and *Palestinian* and their construction of such terms as *Arab-Jews* to indicate Palestinian-Israelis, researchers should avoid using a fixed quantitative measure such as *Arab* or *Jew* to limit interviewees' answers. Such binding measurements harm internal validity and, therefore, applicability of research findings for making future policy decisions.

### THE UTILITY OF GRATIFICATION: STRESS REDUCTION?

As far as the mediated environment for children in my study was concerned, without shows like *RS/SS*, the alternative for observing mediated relations between Palestinians and Israelis was, for the most part, the news. News programming during the Intifada was, by and large, rooted in coverage of violence—coverage that inevitably resulted in the portrayal and, even more to the point, highlighting of bad relations between Palestinians and Israelis (Wolfsfeld, 2001). Thus, it does not seem at all strange that children in my study asked for an occasional opportunity for optimism. Rather, what is ironic is that, when asking for such an alternative, their requests were denied. It is ironic precisely because adults express so much concern about the impact of armed conflict on children and, in addition to this, concern about children being exposed to violence on TV. The children in my study found *RS/SS* useful as a break or a way to escape, if even momentarily, from their dystopic reality and visualize a utopian one. In the end, however, they were prevented from using the program for this purpose.

I recommend that practitioners creating future peace communication interventions for people in the position of statebearing nations living under similar political contexts take this point into consideration. Gratifying young statebearing audiences during periods of armed political conflict with positive images of prosocial interactions between them and their partners in conflict may be exactly what they need, especially if such periods are punctuated by negative portrayals of them and their partners in conflict.

### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A preliminary part of this research was included in the author's master's thesis, written under the direction of Professors Elihu Katz and Joe Turow for the Annenberg School for Communication of the University of Pennsylvania. The author wishes to thank Elihu Katz for his invaluable guidance, support, and assistance with research and writing of earlier drafts of this chapter; Ellen Seiter for helping shape initial analysis of research; Daniel Hallin, Carol Padden, Michael Schudson, Gershon Shafir, Giovanna Chesler, Dafna Lemish and Sesame Workshop (especially, Lewis Bernstein, Charlotte Cole, and Danny Labin) for their helpful comments and/or facilitation of research; and the Dorot Foundation and Annenberg School for funding assistance.

### NOTES

1. A *statebearing nation* is an ethno-political nationalist category of people who possess a state. See Brubaker's discussion of nationalizing states for an important discussion about nations that possess a state (Brubaker, 1996).
2. Alongside *RS/SS* that targeted Israelis (both Jews and Palestinians), a separate series was created in Arabic that was broadcast on Al Quds Television and its seven affiliates three times a week to children in the West Bank and limited parts of Gaza (Applied Research and Consulting LLC, 1999). Simply known by *Sesame Street's* name in Arabic, *Shara'a Simsim* (*SS*), this series is essentially the same as *RS/SS*, but was developed to target Palestinians, although Palestinian-Israelis also tuned in. Therefore, *SS* used Arabic almost exclusively. However, *SS* is not the subject of this chapter because I only sampled Jewish-Israeli children. Therefore, I note it here only to offer a clear outline of the *RS/SS* and *SS* peace-building interventions.
3. *Peacemaking* seeks to separate parties from political conflict through negotiation and signing of peace accords at the diplomatic level.
4. *RS/SS* also contrasts with its predecessor, *Rechov Sumsum* (*RS*), which began airing in 1983. *RS* adapted the curriculum of American *Sesame Street* for its Israeli audience (keeping more closely to the American version), was designed around "one street," and was produced exclusively in Hebrew (Cole et al., 2001).
5. This figure includes the target audience for *Shara'a Simsim* (please see note 2). Incidence rates among Jewish-Israelis were 41%, among Palestinian-Israelis 67%, and among Palestinians 57% (Applied Research and Consulting LLC, 1999).
6. Jewish-Israelis make up roughly 80% of the citizenry of Israel, whereas Palestinian-Israelis make up the majority of the remaining 20%.