Thinking groups: Rhetorical enactment of collective identity in three Israeli Kibbutzim

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The present paper reports a case study about public deliberations in three Israeli kibbutzim regarding a disputed school issue: whether to maintain a traditional in-kibbutz high school despite a heavy financial burden or to close it and send kibbutz youths to a public regional school The results served as a demonstration of a 'thinking group' (i.e. of how the collective aims of a group are achieved by the coordinated rhetorical behaviour of individuals according to the formal rules of the collective deliberations). First, video-recordings of six general assembly meetings in which the issue was discussed was analyzed as to their argumentative content. Second, the extracted arguments were presented to a sample of 342 kibbutz members to capture the distribution of opinions in the population. It is proposed that most kibbutz members were willing to preserve their collective living and saw the closure of their in-kibbutz school as a threat to their traditional collective identity. We observed a distinct form of public rhetoric during the deliberations in the general meetings which provides a podium for the disputed opinions, preserves the kibbutz shared identity representation and avoids social friction.

Key words: collective identity, inter-group conflict, rhetoric, social representation.

Introduction

The idea that individual behaviour only makes sense within its social context is commonsense in social psychology and other social sciences. In social settings, all involved actors usually relate to each other such that one individual's actions depend on and influence the others' behaviour. This is particularly evident when a group is involved in situations that threaten their central collective system of belief, which often happen during critical decision-making, problem solving and dealing with vital conflicts. In these cases, the group can be conceived of as an organized whole whose parts are functionally related to, and inseparable from, each other. The activity is calibrated.

'Thinking group' is the concept by which we describe and examine coordinated and surprising behaviours of the members of three kibbutzim in the case of a real-life conflict. Kibbutzim, as voluntary minority societies are institutions that convey to their members a strong sense of what their main creed is (i.e. their collective identity which plays a decisive role in their symbolic coping activities such as structuring the social setting, communicative action and forms of dispute and discourse). The issue of the dispute in question – the restructuring of the high school system in three Israeli kibbutzim – was raised by socially active kib-

butz members; that is, it came from within the community and was not imposed from the outside. Nonetheless, the proposed change meant replacing the unique kibbutz high school with a conventional model of an Israeli high school, thereby forfeiting a crucial part of the kibbutz institution which historically had been at the heart of the social identity of this relatively closed society. The kibbutz members discussed the dispute within a number of formal and informal settings and finally settled it in a secret poll. This chain of events, which involved a threat to the identity and integrity of the groups, was brought to the attention of one of the authors (Ben Asher). We used it as a case study demonstrating *in vivo* how groups' social representations provide them with means to maintain their identity by documenting and analysing the nature of the discourse and behaviour accompanying the deliberations regarding social change at the kibbutz general assembly. These data allow us to illustrate how a group as a collective unit thinks of its identity and how it manages its integrity despite threats. We begin by describing the kibbutz setting, followed by a theoretical exposition.

Kibbutz setting

The kibbutz is a voluntary, cohesive society that shares many of its values with the hegemonic Israeli society. There are a variety of kibbutzim in Israel with somewhat distinct styles of life and education. A typical kibbutz, which was very common up to the 1980s, gradually underwent change over the past 20 years, becoming more similar to non-kibbutz communities in Israel.

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A wire fence surrounds the kibbutz and a number of gates are open for all to get in or out during the daytime, but closed at night, and kibbutz members serve as gatekeepers in shifts. Beyond the fence, agricultural areas surround the kibbutz. Industrial and agricultural buildings are situated on one side of the fenced-in area, the apartments of members are situated on the other side, and in the middle are located community buildings such as the common dining room, library, laundry facilities, and so forth. Children's same-age homes are located in a special section. The entire compound looks like a large garden with vast lawns, trees and flowers. Up to the 1980s, children lived apart from their parents but spent time with them from the end of the work day (about 16.00 h) until bedtime, when their parents put them to sleep with other same-age peers. Today, until high school, children live with their parents. Youths, however, live in shared dormitories. In our sample, the unique kibbutz high school, called the *Mosad*, was shared by three kibbutzim, and was accepted as an integral part of the kibbutz system (Avrahami & Gez, 1994).

As the maintenance of the *Mosad* placed a heavy financial burden upon the kibbutzim, for a number of years the school accepted children from a neighbouring urban community whose parents paid tuition, thus sharing expenses. Unfortunately, this arrangement did not last and the urban parents decided to withdraw from this arrangement. At this point, the school management, which consisted of elected economic managers of each kibbutz and the school principal, decided to bring up the issue for public discussion with the aim of closing the historical *Mosad* and sending kibbutz adolescents to a more conventional and less expensive school. The issue became a central theme in informal social discussions in each kibbutz, and was also formally discussed in two separate general meetings in each of the kibbutzim and finally put to a vote in a secret poll, which took place in each kibbutz simultaneously during working hours. There were two options: (i) to maintain the traditional kibbutz high school with its collective egalitarian values; or (ii) to send their youth to a regional, non-kibbutz, conventional high school that emphasized individual, competitive values of academic achievement. The latter also meant abandoning the traditional shared dormitory where children were raised according to the collectivist egalitarian values of the kibbutz and raising youths, as in other sectors of Israeli society, within the family framework. The discussions up to the poll, and the poll itself, took on an ideologically and emotionally charged character due to the meaning of the *Mosad* for the kibbutz members as a symbol of their identity, as an instrument for identity reproduction and, consequently, for their survival as a kibbutz in the future (Ben-Refael, 1996).

This chain of events provided us with the opportunity to investigate, within a natural setting, the arenas and the means of 'rhetoric' by which a minority society maintains its 'integrity' and 'identity' under a demand for social change (Dar, 1995; Rosner & Gez, 1996).

Collective identity as a key social representation

A social group is an ensemble of people who share an identity. According to the Social Identity Theory, that part of the self-concept that results from the individual's knowledge and evaluation of his/her group membership is defined as social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). The term denotes the affective, motivational and cognitive state of individuals with respect to their group (Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992; Haslam *et al.*, 1999; Brewer, 2001). Alternative conceptualizations assert that the identity of a group transcends the level of individual minds and is also a collective phenomenon (Douglas, 1986; Breakwell, 1993, 2001). As such, they are largely shared by society members, refer to the group as a collective, are anchored within the representations of specific social groups, and express the group's unique, current and historical most central social issues (Duveen, 2001).[1] It is along this latter conceptualization that we want to follow and we refer to identity as 'collective identity'.

A collective identity as defined here is a core social representation, existing in every group. Social representations are defined as a field of symbolic products (i.e. consisting of the 'ensemble of thoughts and feelings being expressed in verbal and overt behaviour by actors within a social group') (Wagner *et al.*, 1999). They originate in daily life in the course of interindividual communications within groups as a means by which groups make sense of their reality (Moscovici, 1984, 1988, 2000; Wagner, 1998).

Individual members participate in group life by positioning themselves within the relational fabric among other members. Through this group-related activity each individual confirms and indeed 'reconstructs' the group as a functional and structural entity.

Collective identity in the present sense, then, is a coconstruction of meaning which encompasses the sum total of procedures and customs that relate individual members of a social group to each other in procedures and customs, in discourse and overt action. A collective identity unites those aspects of the representational system and is sensed by its members as most valuable, historically stable and signifying their unique character. The collective identity uniting a kibbutz group, distinctively from other more natural groups (e.g. a nation), is based on a contractual obligation, as kibbutz members voluntarily join the kibbutz after a time of probation and following a formal collective consent. But once they join, the contribution of the identity representations to one's life in the group is the sense of social integrity; that is, the ability of the group to act as an organized entity which runs its own distinct life.

Collective coping through public rhetoric

Any change in the living conditions of a group can pose a threat to its collective identity, and can be collectively coped with by different strategies, depending on the structure of the group. Groups or societies cope with the issue at stake, among others, by renegotiating their identity representations (Wagner, 1998; Orr *et al*., 2000) and it is the discursive form of how these negotiations go on that is also a crucial part of a social representation. In more or less autocratic communities the autocrat can impose a decision and identity can be redefined. In a more democratic group, such as a kibbutz, all members have a chance to contribute to an attempt at coping. The available means for coping are primarily rhetorical and communicative strategies (Billig, 1995).

In the kibbutz, aside from informal and interpersonal communications, it is the general assembly where disputed issues are formally discussed before the issue is subjected to a general poll. Indeed, the assembly serves as the main arena for formal deliberation regarding collective decisions (Argaman, 1997). A number of procedures apply to such meetings: they take place in the evening of a set weekday, always in the same public setting; kibbutz members elect the chairperson for a specific time span (usually 2 years); and his/her role is to let individuals take the floor and to set the time frame of the deliberation, but not to decide who speaks or what is to be said. It is the rhetorical actions unfolding in the general assembly in the wake of the high school dispute that is the topic of the current study.

In the present case, the proposed change in the educational system would have implied a radical shift in the lifestyle of kibbutz children and their parents. The change meant that the young would study outside the kibbutz and would no longer live together in a dormitory. The relatively small number of adolescents in each kibbutz would be separated from adolescents of neighbouring kibbutzim after school hours, and would not be able to act as a youth society as before. For parents and children alike, it meant changing their lifestyle, as the young would go back to living with their parents. Hence, the issue became highly relevant for parents and children in these kibbutzim. However, coming to terms with the issue would have been less prominent if there were not also an implied threat to the historical representation of kibbutz identity. This threat transcends the mere financial aspects of maintaining an expensive kibbutz school system. It undermines the very foundation of the idea of the kibbutz as a relatively closed and unique community that had largely founded its identity on its socially radical and expensive schooling system. Consequently, the proposed change implies renegotiation of the shared kibbutz identity of which the *Mosad* is an integral part.[1]

The motivation to this analysis derives from the particular findings in preliminary work on the data that revealed an unusual discussion style during the general assembly meetings. Normally, discussions during these meetings at this kibbutz involve dispute and friction where arguments and counterarguments are being aired sequentially and the pros and cons of an issue confronted until a voting settles the conflict. In the present case, the discussions deviated significantly from the usual confrontational style; this was unprecedented according to several informants familiar with kibbutz life. The authors took this to indicate that kibbutz members were trying to rhetorically cope with this particularly essential problem without threatening their collective identity as shown in the following analysis.

Note that this study is about a real-life issue with no experimental control over the events. It was conducted simultaneously with the events and the results illustrate but neither confirm nor refute *a priori* hypotheses. The results are interpreted after the fact, within the theoretical framework presented above.

Methods

The population of the research were the members of the three kibbutzim in the southern part of Israel who shared a high school and a dormitory (the *Mosad*). Data were systematically collected on two occasions: the kibbutz general assembly meetings and questionnaires administered to individuals by non-kibbutz members.

Survey sample

This sample consisted of 342 out of 1020 kibbutz members. They comprise about half of the population in two kibbutzim and about one-third in one kibbutz. This last kibbutz is larger than the others, and has a substantial number of elderly members who tended not to be responsive. Women and the 36–45 years age group were overrepresented across kibbutzim, 94% were parents and 47% had children in the high school, reflecting perhaps the interests of these sectors in the subject of education. A post hoc telephone survey indicated that 87% ($N = 47$) of those who had spoken publicly at the general meetings also filled out the questionnaires.

General assembly meetings

Approximately 40 kibbutz members attended each of the six documented general meetings (ranging from 32 to 45 attendees). On average, nine participants took active part in the debate and spoke publicly at each meeting. Those who spoke publicly (except one case) and the majority of those who attended (with a mean of 86%) were present at both meetings in their own kibbutz, but no-one spoke publicly twice. The majority of those who spoke were highly

educated (with a university education, as opposed to the modal high school education of the entire population), male (on average, seven males and two females per meeting), had a formal role in either the economic management of the kibbutz or within the educational system, and had children in the high school. In some of the meetings, a small number of high school students attended, and two of them, one in two distinct kibbutzim, spoke publicly once.

The general meetings in the kibbutzim were videotaped. Three undergraduate psychology students transcribed the videotapes of these meetings, and another three judged the text, categorizing the attitudes of each speaker (pro-kibbutz or pro-regional school). Inter-judge agreement regarding units and coding were above 90 per cent, and disagreements were resolved by discussion.

Two kinds of units were analyzed: (i) individual speakers, where the unit of analysis began with the speaker's first sentence and ended with his/her last one; and (ii) thematic units (judged according to content), where the unit began with a specific argument a speaker made and ended when he/she shifted to a new argument.

Questionnaire

An independent postgraduate social psychology student who was unaware of the research goals read and coded the transcripts of the videotapes. She was instructed to write down the arguments that were presented during the meetings in their original form, and then to sort them into four themes: values, financial problems, school-related arguments and child-rearing aspects. The list was judged by two additional students who deleted sentences with similar content leaving one sentence for each expressed argument. Thus, out of the original arguments, a list of 53 statements was included in the questionnaire in their original language and form, which represented the content of what had been said in the meetings. The questionnaire asked respondents to report their agreement to each statement on a 5-point scale from 1 'completely disagree' to 5 'completely agree' (The items and their kibbutz meeting source appear in Table 1).

The data were collected from September 1994, when the discussions regarding the future of the school system began, up to March 1995, when a poll was held and the final decision was made. The proceedings of the general meetings are usually videotaped for the purpose that kibbutz members, who are not able or not willing to attend, have an opportunity to watch. We do not know precisely how many were watching these meetings in their home on the CCTV, but from informal information we learned that a large majority of kibbutz members did watch it. The secretaries in each kibbutz provided us with the videotapes

Table 1 Pro- & anti-kibbutz school and pro- and anti-regional school arguments in each Kibbutz

	Kibbutz meeting		
Item #	1	2	3
Pro-kibbutz school arguments			
01 The present dormitory is unique; it is a natural preserve.	f	s	f
03 The dormitory is a home for our youth, and there is no substitute for that.	f		f
04 The dormitory provides the children with a better social environment than the kibbutz.	f	s	
09 The dormitory and the school are an integral unit.	f	s	
11 There are no drinking or drug problems in our dormitory.	f		
15 After the transition to a school without a dormitory, a very small group of youth will be left in each of the kibbutzim, thus severing their relations with other kibbutz adolescents.		s	f
17 In the dormitory children are brought up with values of humanity and mutual responsibility.		s	
18 The unique adolescent experience of sharing life in the dormitory remains a unique life-long experience.	f		
19 The problem is not how much money we spend, but what kind of children we bring up.			f
21 The end (educating children) justifies the means (money).		s	
23 Maintenance of the *Mosad* is an economic problem. If we had enough money, this discussion would not be taking place.			f
24 We should not weigh value considerations against economic considerations.		s	
26 Education is basically a negatively balanced economic activity.		s	
29 The quality of teaching depends on a large and expensive cluster of teaching hours.		s	
32 The financial calculations that were brought up at the meeting are based on invalid assumptions.		s	
35 Little by little, spiritual resources become materialistic ones.		s	
38 Children with an orientation to live the kibbutz life can grow only in the unique educational system of the kibbutz.	f		
41 In a condensed community there are limits to heterogeneity, and the society should promote the educational goals of the kibbutz.	f		
42 Societies which relinquish the educational system of their children are relinquishing their future.	f	s	
45 In the kibbutz one finds the soul of a unique and value-laden education.		s	

Table 1 Continued

	Kibbutz meeting		
Item #	1	2	3
49 The urban school does not enrich its students with desired values. Its goal is the enhancement of the social consensus.	f	s	
50 In the school at the kibbutz there is openness and support in teacher-student relationships.	f		
51 There is a bewildered rush after academic achievements and the accumulation of unnecessary cubes of knowledge. We should be educating them to be human beings.	f		
52 The greatness and uniqueness of the kibbutz is the investment of its most valuable resources in education.		s	
53 Only a school owned directly by the kibbutz can provide unique educational solutions to students who excel or who have special difficulties.	f		
Anti-kibbutz school arguments			
08 Closure of the dormitory will strengthen relations between children and parents.	f		
16 There is no sense in having a dormitory right next to parental homes.	f		
20 Nowadays the economic component is an important aspect of any decisions we are making.	f		
22 We need to make sure that children know how to live within their economic means.	f	s	
36 The economic consideration is just one of a whole network of considerations regarding the future of our school.		s	
39 A high standard of academic achievement should be more important in the educational system than social considerations.		s	
40 The development of cognitive skills implies the development of a world view.		s	
44 Getting together with a wider population has important value for the children of the kibbutz.		s	
Pro-regional school arguments			
02 With the transition to family-based sleeping arrangements, it is only natural that the dormitory will be dispensed with.		f	
05 Closure of the dormitory does not necessarily imply the collapse of our educational systems or a loss of control.	s	f	
06 Educating children to the kibbutz way of life doesn't have to be damaged by closure of the dormitory.		f	
07 Family values are the most important ones in education.		f	
08 Closure of the dormitory will strengthen relations between children and parents.		f	s
10 Children who were raised at home by their families will not be willing to live within the dormitory	s		
12 Most parents do not really know what goes on in the dormitory.	s		
13 It is possible to create a supplementary system of social education in our region.	s		
14 The social activities in the dormitory are often at the expense of academic activity.	s		
16 There is no sense in having a dormitory right next to parental homes.		f	
20 Nowadays the economic component is an important aspect of any decisions we are making		f	
25 Past experience proves that there is no possibility of budget management in the *Mosad*.	s		
30 High cost does not necessarily mean a better product.		f	
31 Any external student is an economic burden on the kibbutz.	s		
33 External students are not willing to pay the high cost of our educational system.		f	
34 The resources allocated to education were unlimited in the past. There are new undercurrents today and they are more critical.	s		
36 The economic consideration is just one of a whole network of considerations regarding the future of our school.	s		
37 It is possible to raise wonderful boys and girls in a non-kibbutz school.		f	
39 A high standard of academic achievement should be more important in the educational system than social considerations.	s		s
40 The development of cognitive skills implies the development of a world view			s
43 The *Mosad* is a romantic and nostalgic relic of an ending epoch.		f	
44 Getting together with a wider population has important value for the children of the kibbutz.			s
46 The 'value melody' is out of tune. It masks the fear of innovation and change.	s		
48 The kibbutz is becoming similar to general Israeli society, and the same is true of kibbutz education.	s		
Anti-regional school arguments			
11 There are no drinking or drug problems in our dormitory.		f	
24 We should not weigh value considerations against economic considerations.	s		
26 Education is basically a negatively balanced economic activity.	s		
27 You should invest all your economic resources in the education of your children.	s		
28 Whoever wants to make a million should not look for it at the *Mosad*.	s		
47 The experience of belonging that one finds in a small school is highly meaningful.			s
53 Only a school owned directly by the kibbutz can provide unique educational solutions to students who excel or who have special difficulties	s		

f, first kibbutz meeting; s, second meetings.

from the general assembly meetings. No outsider was present during the meeting, and those attending did not know that the videotapes would be handed to us. At the end of the study we received post hoc consent from all participants.

The questionnaires were administered 1 to 3 weeks prior to the poll. They were put in envelopes, and middle-school children handed them to 500 kibbutz members who were at home at the time. During the following week the children received 420 sealed envelops back. Of these, 342 were filled out and the rest were blank or had a large percentage of missing data. The group of children received a small sum of money (5 Israeli Shekels) as a reward for each returned envelope.

The structure of the attitudes reflected in the questionnaire can be assumed to mirror the attitudinal pattern in the kibbutz before and during the events at the meetings. That is, the questionnaire is assumed to probe the discursive repertoires that existed at the time of the meetings and the distribution of opinions regarding these arguments. We consider this to be a valid assumption, as affect-laden attitudes tend to resist change (Rosenberg, 1968). Therefore, we begin by presenting the analysis of the arguments in the questionnaire, followed by an analysis of the rhetorical events at the general meetings, and conclude with an analysis of the opinions expressed in the survey.

Results

Structure of the arguments

The questionnaire's 53 items were analyzed using factor analysis, Similarity Structure Analysis (SSA; Guttman, 1968, 1982), and cluster analysis. As similar results were obtained from each of these methods, only those of the factor analysis are reported here: A Varimax rotation yielded a total of 15 factors with Eigenvalues > 1. Of these, the first two factors explained 28% of the variance. The first factor captured the 29 pro-kibbutz school items with acceptable Cronbach alpha of 0.89; the second factor captured 24 pro-regional school items with Cronbach alpha of 0.84. The first factor, hence, can be called 'kibbutz school items' and the second 'regional school items'. Item load higher than 0.50 provided the criterion for inclusion and we did not find high loading items on two factors simultaneously.

The most characteristic in the first pro-kibbutz school items described the dormitory and the school as an integral unit (Table 1, Item 9) in which children are brought up with values of humanity and mutual responsibility (Item 17) and which secure the kibbutz's future (Item 42). But the *Mosad* is not only aimed at achieving group-egoistic goals for

children; that is, the unique adolescent experience of sharing life in the dormitory is maintained in its participants' minds as a unique life-long experience (Item 18). The regional school, in contrast, is depicted as the opposite of education in the kibbutz. The urban school does not endow its students with desired values; rather, its goal is enhancement of the social consensus (Item 49) and it is occupied with a bewildering rush for academic achievement and accumulation of unnecessary knowledge (Item 51). An additional subset of the 'kibbutz school items' was aimed at rejecting financial considerations for kibbutz education. Typical items assert that 'The problem is not how much money we spend, but what kind of children we bring up' (Item 19), and 'Little by little, spiritual resources become materialistic ones' (Item 35).

Typical items in the second factor (pro-regional school items) asserted the positive effect the closure of the dormitory will have on relationships between children and parents (Item 8), on the children's academic achievement (Items 14 and 39) and on their relationships with other population sectors (Item 44). Other items argued that the aim of raising children for a kibbutz life is not going to be damaged by the closure of the dormitory (Item 6) and that it is also possible to raise wonderful boys and girls in a non-kibbutz school (Item 37). The most extreme argument against the kibbutz school was in the name of social change and stated that the *Mosad* is a romantic and nostalgic relic of an ending epoch (Item 43).

Communication at the general meeting: Speakers

In order to characterize communication patterns during the two general meetings in each of the three kibbutzim, we used the individual unit of analysis to identify the speakers in favour of the kibbutz school and those in favour of the regional school (Table 2). The table shows that each of the meetings was dominated by speakers of one position, but that the two positions were balanced across meetings. If, during the first meeting in a given kibbutz, the pro-kibbutz school position dominated, then the second meeting was dominated by speakers in favour of the pro-regional school position, and vice versa. This phenomenon is even more striking when one compares the length of elaboration and speech style of the dominant position speakers in a meeting with those who argued for the opposite position. For instance, speakers in a dominant kibbutz-school position extended their arguments and elaborated them in detail (speaking for 5 to 10 minutes). Those who voiced the opposite opinion in favour of a regional school spoke briefly, said a sentence or two, asking brief questions or inserting short interruptions. We had only one instance, in all six meetings, of a relatively lengthy exposition of a non-dominant attitude. Also interesting was the finding that

Table 2 Number of speakers in favor of a Kibbutz or regional high school

Kibbutz	Kibbutz-school proponents		Regional-school proponents		Total	
	Meeting 1	Meeting 2	Meeting 1	Meeting 2	Meeting 1	Meeting 2
A	2 (29%)	5 (71%)	7 (78%)	2 (22%)	9	7
B	6 (75%)	2 (25%)	2 (29%)	5 (71%)	8	7
C	3 (27%)	8 (73%)	7 (70%)	3 (30%)	10	11
Total	26 (50%)		26 (50%)		52	

speakers tended to react to the general issue that was raised in a meeting, but only rarely responded directly to the arguments of a specific other speaker. Across meetings, however, both positions were presented with equal weight in each of the kibbutzim.

The differences between the two themes across the meetings touched upon several debated issues: (i) safeguarding and nurturing unique kibbutz values in a separate high school versus involvement with and closer proximity to the general Israeli society; (ii) underscoring the social agency of the kibbutz regarding education versus those of the family and parents; (iii) giving social and moral values a priority over academic achievement versus the opposite attitude; (iv) seeing the traditional *Mosad* as a gem that the kibbutzim should preserve versus perceiving it as an old educational system which has not adapted itself to recent social changes; and (v) differences in the weight given to economic considerations (lower in pro-kibbutz items than in pro-regional items). These issues indicate how these kibbutz societies structure their approach to the question of which school to prefer. Such an approach rests upon two frames of reference: the traditional kibbutz and the surrounding Israeli society.

This balanced and separate presentation of these arguments is a surprising finding, given that the issue at hand was an important one for the future organization of the kibbutz as an institution. Obviously, proponents of each position waited for the appropriate time (i.e. either the first or second meeting) to make their point, such that, in each kibbutz, the overt consensus in the first meeting was replaced by an opposite consensus in the second meeting.

The overtly opposite consensus in each meeting was not formed because individuals changed their minds from one to the next meeting. We did not find even one person who expressed opposite opinions during meetings or from one meeting to the next. The consensus appears to exist because those who spoke in a given meeting were people who tended to agree with those who spoke before them or perhaps those who usually tended to agree with each other. Further, no speaker offered a two-sided kind of argument. They were flatly either pro-kibbutz school or pro-regional school. Indeed, most people (with one exception) spoke only once during the two meetings.

On the assumption that this kind of communication was systematic and socially functional, it can be called 'pseudo consensus'. Its function, we speculate, is to avoid harsh social frictions in a meeting but, at the same time, allows for an exposition of opposite attitudes across encounters. The merit of this kind of communication is that, although a social friction is avoided, social development is not. A group is able to discuss traditional as well as new perspectives and yet maintain its integrity.

As stated in the introduction, our impression was that pseudo-consensus is not a usual feature of general meetings in kibbutzim. This impression, however, was confirmed by analysis made by the authors of two independent series of four assemblies taking place in two kibbutzim out of the three, two before and two after the present 'research assemblies'. In each of these, pro and con arguments were discussed in the same meeting. The issues on the agenda, however, were not identity-related issues.

Communication at the general meeting: Arguments

Analysis of thematic units of discourse indicates that the types of arguments presented during the meetings in the three kibbutzim show a similar pattern to that of the speakers. That is, each meeting is dominated by views that are clearly in favor of either the kibbutz school or the regional school. The arguments collated in Table 1 show the distribution.

The themes presented in the three kibbutzim were found to be highly similar, the main difference being in the order in which arguments were presented. That is, mostly pro-kibbutz school arguments were offered in the first meeting of Kibbutz A and of Kibbutz C, followed by mainly pro-regional school arguments at the second meeting, while in Kibbutz B the order was reversed. The following therefore focuses on the general meetings at Kibbutz A to exemplify these patterns.

In the first general assembly meeting of Kibbutz A (dominated by kibbutz-school advocates), the vast majority of arguments made a strong appeal to the identity of attendees as kibbutz members. The kibbutz school was defended by virtue of its uniqueness and meaning to children brought

up in the tradition of the kibbutz movement. Of the few arguments raised against keeping the kibbutz school, several referred to the integrity of family life as opposed to the existence of a separate dormitory for youth, while others referred to economic issues.

Proponents of the regional school, who dominated the second meeting of Kibbutz A, argued mainly that a regional school is a cheaper solution to the educational demands of the kibbutz. Alternatives such as taking in external students as a source of income were rejected as unrealistic.

It is interesting to note that in the second meeting of Kibbutz B (dominated by kibbutz-school adherents), alongside a long series of arguments appealing to kibbutz identity as crucially dependent on the existence of the *Mosad*, several financial arguments were obviously a delayed response to the claims that had been raised by proponents of the regional school in the previous meeting. This exemplifies how speakers waited for the 'appropriate' meeting in which to air their views.

Notwithstanding the ostensibly equal time devoted to each stance, be it pro-kibbutz school or pro-regional school, there is a clear difference in the quality of the arguments presented for each. Most of the pro-kibbutz school arguments positively relate to kibbutz identity as fundamental to kibbutz members, whereas the regional school is described in extremely negative terms: 'We would be sending our children [to the regional school] to be educated in a castrating environment that prevents them from taking an active social standpoint, that strangles emotions and that allows them to protest only in a weak voice in regard to consensual issues' (Kibbutz B, meeting 2). According to this line of thinking, the upbringing and education of children on the kibbutz plays a central role in guaranteeing the continued existence of the kibbutz ideology. Kibbutz life and the values of the kibbutz school are depicted as unique, meaningful and worthy of preservation. The economic pressure of abandoning the expensive *Mosad* is rejected by appeals to the social values that only a kibbutz-owned educational system can provide. These values are considered to be more important than any financial burden the kibbutz would need to endure to maintain the present system. The underlying theme of these arguments is loud and clear: abandoning the kibbutz school is akin to abandoning the kibbutz. This is, in fact, stated in no uncertain terms by several of the speakers: 'When a kibbutz does not wish to be a kibbutz, it does not need a school to educate children according to the kibbutz way of life'; 'Doubts about the *Mosad* indicate that kibbutz members are not sure whether they want a kibbutz' (Kibbutz A, meeting 1).

In sharp contrast, while regional-school proponents do challenge most of the traditional foundations of the kibbutz school, they seem to be careful not to pose a threat to kibbutz identity. Indeed, their style is quite low-key in criticizing the financial burden of the *Mosad* and the low aca-demic achievement of its students. They tend to underscore family values as being opposed to the traditional kibbutz system where children sleep and live most of the time outside of their parents' homes. This argument does not threaten the kibbutz identity, as children do live with their parents prior to adolescence. Indeed, the only argument raised that challenged the unique kibbutz identity was the one calling for closer relationships between kibbutz children and youth from other sectors of Israeli society. Overall, the regional-school supporters do not appeal to any new or out-group identity which could serve to replace the traditional kibbutz identity and lifestyle.

Distinct identities, however, were acted out in distinct contexts: adult speakers spoke in general terms, as members of the kibbutz, and did not assume the role of parents of high school students while arguing their case (the only exception was a woman from Kibbutz C who said her two daughters would enjoy an opportunity to socialize with urban friends). This is in strong contrast to results obtained in personal interviews, in which each of the eight interviewees described spontaneously their standpoints as parents and the school their children would have chosen. Instead, the wishes of children appeared in the general meetings as a covert theme. A small number of high school students attended the meetings, and in two cases they voiced a pro-kibbutz position, based on their desire to remain an adolescent society of three kibbutzim, as well as their worries that a small number of youths would remain in each kibbutz without the ability to develop a satisfying social life. Another speaker (in Kibbutz B) attacked the children's desire to maintain the historical kibbutz school and the adults' tendency to cater for those wishes: 'it reminds me of the tail wagging the dog', in the sense that the kibbutz should lead and control its children, and not the other way around. In this case, the children's choice became an issue for the general meeting, but, once again, a priority was given to the needs of the kibbutz as a collective. These observations seem to imply that, in the rhetorical context of the general assembly, the identity and integrity of the kibbutz are the main debated theme, while other seemingly relevant themes, such as children's choices and parental commitment, are illegitimate or inappropriate.

Individual preferences and polling outcome

What then was the distribution of preferences in the population as obtained from the survey? More than half the respondents gave higher scores to the pro-kibbutz items than to the pro-regional school ones. However, the grand mean of pro-kibbutz items was similar to that of pro-regional school items ($M = 3.13$ *vs* 3.11, $SD = 0.61$ *vs* 0.49, respectively). The correlation between them was moderately negative ($r = -0.40$, $N = 342$, $p = 0.01$). The distribution of these preferences within individuals and across the

Table 3 Distribution of Kibbutz-school (KS) and Regional-school (RS) survey scores across all three Kibbutzim

Groups	N (%)	KS items' mean (SD)	RS items' mean (SD)
1. Pro-kibbutz school: KS score $\geq$ KS mean + 1 SD	99 (29)	3.87 (0.30)	2.82 (0.37)
2. Balanced: (KS and RS) mean $-$ 1 $SD \leq$ (KS and RS) scores $\leq$ (KS and RS) mean + 1 SD	182 (53)	2.94 (0.50)	3.04 (0.36)
3. Pro-regional school: RS score $\geq$ RS mean + 1 SD	61 (18)	2.80 (0.37)	3.82 (0.30)
Overall	342 (100)	3.13 (0.61)	3.11 (0.49)

population is revealed by cluster analysis. No individuals were very low on one theme and very high on the other (Table 3). Fifty-three per cent favoured the kibbutz-school items and the regional-school items equally and, for those whose kibbutz-school preference was stronger (29%), their regional score was nevertheless close to the regional average. Equivalent findings appeared for those (18%) with a predominant preference for regional-school items.

The one-sided opinions that were found in the general assembly meetings were not replicated in the questionnaires, where two-sided, balanced opinions dominated. For instance, two randomly selected respondents fully agreed with the pro-regional school items: 'It is possible to raise wonderful boys and girls in a non-kibbutz school' (Table 1, Item 37) and 'Getting together with a wider population has an important value for the children of the kibbutz' (Item 44). Yet, they also fully agreed with the pro-kibbutz school items: 'The unique adolescent experience of sharing life in the dormitory remains a unique life-long experience' (Item 18) and 'Societies which relinquish the educational system of their children are relinquishing their future' (Item 42). Another respondent fully agreed with the pro-regional arguments: 'Nowadays the economic component is an important aspect of any decisions we are making' (Item 20) and 'We need to make sure that children know how to live within their economic means' (Item 22), yet also fully agreed with the pro-kibbutz items: 'The problem is not how much money we spend, but what kind of children we bring up' (Item 19) and 'Little by little, spiritual resources become materialistic ones' (Item 35). Similar findings could be extracted from the responses of almost any random respondent.

This balanced pattern was not affected by gender, the specific kibbutz, or individual's leadership roles in the kibbutz. This balanced pattern of individuals is in keeping with the overall balance of positions found at each pair of meetings (i.e. if we look at the general meetings as a whole).

The final poll about whether to maintain the kibbutz school system or whether to close the *Mosad* and send the high school students to a regional school showed a majority of 62% who voted for the status quo and the distribution was quite similar across kibbutzim. Hence, the results of

the final poll were quite similar to the distribution of individual preferences, in that preservation of the kibbutz school is favoured, but differences between the two positions are not vast.

About a year after the discussions and the poll regarding the future of their shared school took place, the findings were presented to interested kibbutz members in each of the three kibbutzim. To our amazement, they were surprised and no-one was aware of the special pattern of communication that was found at the general meetings.

Discussion and conclusions

Two types of rhetoric

Results revealed two distinct types of communication patterns: (i) under conditions of private questioning regarding one's opinions; and (ii) under conditions of deliberations in relevant social contexts. In the former case, kibbutz members were responding to the questionnaire, which was administered by an uninvolved, non-kibbutz stranger. This, together with the relative privacy of the setting, implied lower relevance to the collective identity compared to the general assembly. In the latter case, opinions were voiced during a televised public performance in the democratic institution of the kibbutz general assembly such that each speaker played a role in a unified concerted identity output. The questionnaire output, however, did not serve such a role, as individuals' outputs were not exposed publicly.

On a collective level, the speakers in each of the general meetings argued only in favour of one or the other alternative. Hence, the communication of each person at the general meetings only expressed part of his or her attitude (as revealed in the survey), apparently adapting his or her speech to the collective phenomenon of one-sided arguments in each meeting. It is also interesting to note that speakers tended to react to the general issue at hand without directly responding to the arguments of another speaker. The entire communicational system is more reminiscent of parliamentary proceedings than of an unofficial discourse where no official procedure for speaking and topic order

exists. This type of rhetoric seems to prevent direct and open conflict between participants, and thereby may diminish the threat of social disintegration. Our findings indicate that privately the kibbutz members were seriously weighing the pros and cons of the two options. The type of rhetoric in the general meeting, however, may be seen as a ceremony of affirmation of the kibbutz collective identity.

The participants in six general meetings taking place in these kibbutzim discussed the issue in a way that suggests that the speakers, even those who favoured a regional school solution, tried to avoid public conflict that could have severed the identity of kibbutz members. Instead of offensively rejecting the other group's arguments outright, each group took a stand at one of the meetings. The first speakers defined the agenda and the general preference expressed in each meeting. Particular care was taken to maintain a shared air of a kibbutz identity and to avoid any threat to the self-image of kibbutz members as a special group within the wider Israeli society. The regional school solution became an issue due to the financial restrictions imposed on kibbutzim as a result of wider economic developments in Israel. Nevertheless, only one issue was really discussed in the meetings: their collective identity as members of a historically founded, a generally successful, and a highly ideology-laden kibbutz movement. Promoters of the regional-school solution took pains not to let abandoning the *Mosad* appear as a threat to the traditional kibbutz life and were careful to disconnect their arguments from the collective identity issue by referring to financial burdens and family values. Their opponents, in contrast, focused on the overall threat to the kibbutz identity.

But, if a group wanted to maintain its integrity, would we not expect the counter-balanced pattern to be hyper-normative behaviour, rather than counter-normative behaviour? We maintain that this process can only be adequately captured under a major threat to the group's historical heritage which defines their core representations, and there and only there the phenomena of 'collective identity' and 'thinking society' take their fullest shape, and can be clearly tapped.

The rhetorical activity, that is the dominance of either one or the other preference in each of the two general meetings, reflects the facet of representational activity. Both 'traditionalists' and 'reformers' unfolded their arguments in separate meetings without confronting the other in an argument that risked open conflict. We know from the questionnaire data that preferences for the two courses of action were rather equally distributed in the population, no-one presented a one-sided attitude, and the potential outcome of a rhetorical confrontation was utterly undecided. Both factions could rightly have expected to score a victory in a public argument, but none took the step; and it should be noted that this was not controlled or discouraged by the chairperson. They themselves chose a behaviour that

expressed moderation and concern for avoiding a split in the community that would have threatened the unity and the collective identity of the kibbutzim and perhaps their sheer existence as a kibbutz.

The uneven distribution of the arguments and the course of rhetoric demonstrate the workings of collective identity at a societal level. This kind of phenomena should also be appropriately conceived of as the work of a highly sophisticated thinking, not of independent individuals but of an internally coordinated society. Societal thinking appears here in three forms: (i) in the repertoires of the two types of attitudes; (ii) in the shared knowledge of the rules of communication across a variety of distinct social situations; and (iii) in activity aimed at maintaining both groups' historical and democratic identity without losing its current integrity.

What is the role of the individual in such a collectively structured process? Of course, individuals were subjectively free to choose whatever position suited them; they were free to attend the general meetings or not, they were free to say whatever they chose to, when to speak up or when to remain silent, and even what to vote. However, it looks as if the participants took improvised roles in a predetermined play. Each discursive move by one actor delimits the possible actions of the others. Each actor's move is bounded by the presence of others and by their precedent moves. The sequence of discursive moves and rhetoric drives the unfolding of social events irrespective of individuals' idiosyncratic motivations. Hence, we could conclude that the present research shows that, notwithstanding the influence of individuals and particularly power-holders in the construction of the social world, the over-arching forces of collective entities cannot be disregarded. Clearly, our study demonstrates that collective entities exert their influence via the individuals' coordinated agencies, which make the fabric of the whole, that of a thinking society.

In summary, our theoretical claim is that a group's life consists of a series of collective symbolic coping with threats to its identity. The threat being a challenge to what group members conceive of as their most important, historical, identity-defining representations. Symbolic coping was demonstrated in our case by a sequential display of pseudo consensus by Israeli kibbutz members during a debate regarding the future of their unique historical system of education. This kind of deliberation, we claim, serves a number of functions to the group: (i) it displays the appearance of a strong solidarity, thereby strengthening the members' identification with the collective; and (ii) it permits the airing of opposing viewpoints without overt exhibition of conflict, thereby weakening the threat to the collective. We further maintain that this kind of strategy may be adopted when important meaning of the collective identity is threatened, and the group members are unwilling to dissolve the collective.

Acknowledgement

End note

1. Ironically, at the time (in contrast to the present), the kibbutzim were in financial straits and could hardly afford such a system.

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