Self-Censorship as a Socio-Psychological Barrier to Peacemaking

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Many different intergroup conflicts are raging worldwide, but intractable conflicts receive the most attention because of their serious and harsh implications, first and foremost for the societies involved, but also for the international community (see Azar, 1990; Coleman, 2003; Vallacher, Coleman, Nowak, & Bui-Wrzosinska, 2010). The ongoing conflicts in Kashmir, Chechnya, and the Middle East, for example, constitute prototypical cases of intractable conflicts. They are all characterized by a lasting resistance to their peaceful resolution and, consequently, by the persistence of their vicious cycles of violence in which socio-psychological repertoire about the conflict of the participants feeds the courses of violent actions and these, in turn, strengthen their worldviews. These and other intractable conflicts share several common characteristics, especially in their peak periods. They are conflicts over goals that are perceived as existential, of zero-sum nature, and irresolvable. Furthermore, they are violent, occupy a central place in the lives of the societies involved, demand significant material and psychological investments, and last at least a generation (Bar-Tal, 2013; Kriesberg, 1993).
Intractable Conflicts and Their Socio-Psychological Repertoire

It is assumed that societies involved in intractable conflicts develop a conflict-supporting socio-psychological repertoire that enables them to cope with the challenges of the intractable conflict (Bar-Tal, 2013; Bar-Tal, Oren, & Nets-Zehngut, 2014; Lavi, Canetti, Sharvit, Bar-Tal, & Hobfoll, 2014). This repertoire consists of two elements pertaining to the continuum of time from past through present and into the future (Bar-Tal, 2013). First, *Ethos of Conflict* as a narrative defines the particular dominant orientation of a society toward the conflict, which illuminates its present state of affairs and its conditions and sets a direction as well as goals for its future (Bar-Tal, 2013). Ethos of conflict, then, combines dominant societal beliefs in a particular structure, and gives meaning to the societal life of a particular society in the context of intractable conflicts. Second, *Collective Memory* refers to the narrative about a conflict’s eruption and its course, providing a coherent and meaningful picture of the past (Paez & Liu, 2011). In addition, the repertoire includes collective emotional orientation that refers to societal characterization of an emotion that is also reflected in tangible and intangible societal symbols such as cultural products or ceremonies (Bar-Tal, 2001, 2013; Bar-Tal, Halperin, & de Rivera, 2007).

The cognitive part of the repertoire consists of two major complementary collective narratives that justify the outbreak of the conflict and its maintenance and therefore are called collective conflict-supporting narratives. A collective narrative denotes a social construction that coherently describes, and explains or justifies, an event or issue based on collective experience that preoccupies the collective, providing sequential, systematic, and causal story that is relevant to the collective agenda, becomes embedded into the societal belief system, and may represent a collective identity. Of focal importance in the collective conflict supportive narratives are eight themes constructed with societal beliefs: justness of one’s own goals, security, delegitimized image of the opponent, positive collective image, self-collective victimization, patriotism, unity, and peace. We will now elaborate on each of these themes.

*Societal beliefs about justness of the ingroup goals* outline the goals in conflict, indicate their crucial importance, and provide their explanations and rationales. In addition, the societal beliefs negate and delegitimize the goals of the rival group. These societal beliefs play a crucial motivating role because they present the goals as existential.

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1 Societal beliefs are defined as shared cognitions by the society members that address themes and issues that the society members are particularly occupied with, and which contribute to their sense of uniqueness (Bar-Tal, 2000).

2 The detection of the eight themes is based on extensive systematic studies in the Israeli-Jewish society involved in intractable conflict (see Bar-Tal, 2007). In addition, these themes were found to be dominant in other societies engaged in intractable conflict such as among Serbs, Kosovars, Albanians, Croats, and Bosnians (MacDonald, 2002), among Hutus in Rwanda (Slocum-Bradley, 2008), and among Greek and Turkish Cypriots (Hadjipavlou, 2007; Papadakis, 1998).
Societal beliefs about security refer to the appraisal of threats and dangers and to the difficulties of coping with them in situations of intractable conflict, as well as to the importance of living in security and of the conditions that facilitate its achievement (Bar-Tal & Jacobson, 1998). These beliefs are essential because intractable conflicts involve violence that poses various threats to individuals and collectives alike. Their most important function is to satisfy the basic human need for safety (Burton, 1990; Maslow, 1970).

Societal beliefs of delegitimizing the opponent concern beliefs that deny the adversary’s humanity (Bar-Tal & Teichman, 2005; Holt & Silverstein, 1989; Opotow, 1990; Rieber, 1991). Specifically, they indicate that the rival group should be outside the boundaries of commonly accepted groups, should be excluded from the international community as a legitimate member worthy of basic civil and human rights, and thus deserves inhumane treatment (Bar-Tal, 1990; Bar-Tal & Hammack, 2012). These beliefs explain the causes of the conflict’s outbreak, its continuation and the violence of the opponent, and have a special function in justifying the ingroup’s own aggressive acts against the rival group.

Societal beliefs of positive collective self-image concern the ethnocentric tendency to attribute positive characteristics, values, norms, and patterns of behavior to the ingroup (Baumeister & Hastings, 1997; Sande, Goethals, Ferrari, & Worth, 1989). These beliefs frequently relate to courage, heroism, or endurance as well as to humaneness, morality, fairness, trustworthiness, and progress. These beliefs allow for a clear differentiation between the ingroup and the rivals and supply moral strength and a sense of superiority (Sande et al., 1989).

Societal beliefs of ingroup victimization concern presentation of the ingroup as the victim of unjust harm, evil deeds, and atrocities perpetrated by the adversary (Bar-Tal, Chernyak-Hai, Schori, & Gundar, 2009; Mack, 1990; Volkan, 1997). They provide the moral incentive to seek justice and oppose the opponent as well as to mobilize moral, political and material support from the international community.

Societal beliefs of patriotism generate attachment to the country and society, by propagating loyalty, love, care, and sacrifice (Bar-Tal & Staub, 1997; Somerville, 1981). Patriotic beliefs increase social cohesiveness and dedication.

Societal beliefs of unity refer to the importance of being united in the face of the external threat. These beliefs strengthen the society from within, develop a consensus and a sense of belonging, increase solidarity, and allow the society’s forces and energy to be directed at coping with the enemy.

Finally, societal beliefs of peace refer to peace as the ultimate goal and desire of the society and to society members as peace loving. Such beliefs serve the function of inspiring hope and optimism. They strengthen positive self-image and positive self-presentation to the outside world.

In essence, the collective conflict-supporting narratives serve as an ideology that constitutes a basis for the perception and interpretation of reality in the context of intractable conflict (Bar-Tal, 2013; Shils, 1968). As an ideology these narratives provide a worldview about the conflict that refers to its past, present, and future with
the aim to create a closed systematic conceptual framework, which allows the participants to organize and comprehend it and to act in accordance with this standpoint (Bar-Tal, Sharvit, Halperin, & Zafran, 2012; Eagleton, 1991; Shils, 1968; Van Dijk, 1998). Thus, they serve important functions in times of violence and war (Bar-Tal, 2013; Hammack, 2011). In sum, they provide a meaningful picture of the conflict situation, justify the behavior of the society, facilitate mobilization for participation in the conflict, differentiate between the ingroup and the rival, and enable maintenance of positive social identity.

Eventually, the narratives supporting the conflict become well institutionalized and disseminated and serve as a foundation for the development of a culture of conflict that dominates societies engaged in intractable conflicts (Bar-Tal, 2013). It is usually this type of culture that gives rise to a political climate that discourages the dissemination of information contradictory to the conflict-supporting collective narratives because it is seen as harming the group’s cause (Bar-Tal et al., 2014).

**Barriers to Conflict Resolution**

The described collective conflict-supporting narratives are functional for coping with the challenges of the intractable conflict when there is no light at the end of the tunnel to solve them peacefully. But when the window of opportunity opens for resolving the conflict peacefully, the conflict-supporting narratives in the culture of conflict become barriers to the peacemaking process (Bar-Tal & Halperin, 2011; Porat, Halperin, & Bar-Tal, 2015). These barriers can function on the societal level, where various mechanisms are used to block alternative information from entering the social discourse, and to reject them if they do enter (Bar-Tal et al., 2014). This alternative information can humanize the rival and shed a new light on the conflict; suggest that goals can be compromised; that there is a partner on the other side with whom it is possible to achieve peaceful settlement of the conflict; that peace is rewarding, while the conflict is costly; that the continuation of the conflict is detrimental to the society; and may even provide evidence that the ingroup is also responsible for the continuation of the conflict and that has been carrying immoral acts.

But the socio-psychological barriers function also on the individual level, because individuals’ behavior is embedded within the societal context with its special conditions. On this level they are defined as “an integrated operation of cognitive, emotional and motivational processes, combined with pre-existing repertoire of rigid conflict supporting beliefs, world views and emotions that result in selective, biased and distorting information processing” (Bar-Tal & Halperin, 2011, p. 220). The context of intractable conflict with the societal processes and mechanisms is influential because it not only provides the space in which society members can act cognitively, emotionally and behaviorally, but also provides the stimulations, opportunities, and limitations of these actions. The more open the space is, with more stimulations and opportunities and less limitations, the more society members can flourish and provide new, creative, and innovative ideas. Thus, we can turn now to the discussion of the functioning of the societal mechanisms that
determine the climate of the context and therefore influence the way society members think, process information, and act.

**Control of information** refers to a mechanism of selective dissemination of information about the conflict within the society by formal and informal societal institutions (e.g., state ministries, the army, and the media) that provide information which sustains the dominant conflict-supportive narrative while suppressing information that may challenge it. This is done, for instance, by selecting friendly sources for the dissemination of information, by establishing a central organization that is in charge of the dissemination of the official conflict-supportive narratives, and by preventing journalists or monitoring NGOs from entering particular areas of fighting (Dixon, 2010).

**Discrediting of counter-information** encompasses methods that attempt to portray information that supports counter narratives and/or its sources (individuals or entities) as unreliable and as damaging to the interests of the ingroup. Occasionally these methods reach the level of delegitimization of individuals and organizations that originate this information (Berger, 2005).

**Monitoring** as conducted by formal and informal societal institutions refers to the regular scrutiny of information that is being disseminated to the public sphere (e.g., school textbooks, NGO reports, mass media news, studies of scholars, etc.) to identify information that contradicts the conflict-supportive narratives, expose the sources of such information, and sanction them so that they stop disseminating such information (Avni & Klusstein, 2009).

**Punishment** or sanctions may be employed when individuals and entities challenge the hegemony of the dominant narrative. These sanctions can be formal and informal, of social, financial, or physical nature, and are aimed at discouraging these challengers from conducting their activities and thereby in effect silencing them (Carruthers, 2000).

**Restricting use of archives** aims to prevent the public exposure of documents stored in archives (especially state archives) that may contradict the dominant narrative (Brown & Davis-Brown, 1998). Usually, such documents are evidence of misdeeds of the ingroup including atrocities, missed opportunities to make peace, or, alternatively, information that may contradict the negative image of the rival group as depicted in the conflict-supportive narrative, for example, evidence of a sincere peace proposal put forward by these rival groups. The prevention of access to archived documents can be comprehensive, applying to all people and all documents, or may be selective.

**Censorship** refers to the prohibition on publication of information in various products (e.g., newspaper articles, cultural channels, and official publications) that challenge the themes of the dominant conflict-supportive narratives. These products typically must be submitted to a formal institution for approval before they become public (Peleg, 1993).

**Encouragement and rewarding mechanism** uses a "carrot" for those sources, channels, agents, and products that support the psychological repertoire of the
conflict. Authorities may reward and encourage various sources that provide information, knowledge, art, and other products which transmit and disseminate the repertoire of conflict. In the case of mass media, for example, the particular correspondent may receive exclusive information or interviews. In the case of cultural products, the writer or painter may get a prize for their creative work that supports the culture of conflict. The goal is to show that those who follow the line reap benefits and rewards.

The described societal barriers provide illumination of the context in which society members function on the individual level. When the collective conflict-supporting collective narratives are held as an ultimate truth, they have a major influence on information processing, and this prevents opening up to new perspectives that may facilitate peacemaking (Bar-Tal & Halperin, 2011; Hammack, 2011). Studies have shown that conflict-supporting narratives result in selective, biased, and distortive information processing that obstructs and inhibits the penetration of new information (Halperin & Bar-Tal, 2011; Porat et al., 2015). Eventually these societal and individual processes are conducive to the development of socio-psychological mechanisms such as self-censorship, conformity, or obedience.

In the present chapter, we focus on a socio-psychological mechanism, namely, self-censorship, that is a result of macro societal processes that create political climates. We argue that this mechanism helps to maintain the dominant collective conflict-supporting narratives in societies involved in an intractable conflict by blocking free flow of information and thus preventing the formation of alternative narratives.

Self-Censorship

Self-censorship is a broad and general socio-psychological phenomenon that is ubiquitous and is manifested in different forms and contexts. As a phenomenon, self-censorship has been observed in families, as secret keeping (Petronio, 2010), and it has also been studied in organizations, focusing on whistle blowers who break the norms of self-censorship within malfunctioning organizations (e.g., Gundlach, Douglas, & Martinko, 2003). Finally, on the societal level, several qualitative studies show that self-censorship is practiced by gatekeepers and ordinary individuals in the mass media or other societal-cultural agencies, such as the army or the Ministry of Education (e.g., Ben-Ze'ev, Ginio, & Winter, 2010; Nets-Zehngut, Pliskin, & Bar-Tal, 2015; Ngok, 2007).

As already suggested, the context of intractable conflict is one of the most conducive to the development of wide-scale self-censorship, even in democratic societies. In this context, self-censorship is often viewed by authorities and segments of a society as a necessary socio-psychological mechanism that protects the ingroup by blocking the dissemination of information that is perceived as detrimental to the society's goals and interests (Bar-Tal, 2013, 2017). Its practice enables the maintenance of the society's collective conflict-supporting narratives and prevents the disclosure and dissemination of alternative information that may present the society

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in a negative light. Many believe that if such information is exposed, it might jeopardize the mobilization of society members to participate in the conflict and reduce support from the international community. In addition to the use of previously described societal mechanisms to prevent its exposure, societies also propagate norms that encourage self-censorship, such as subordination of the value of freedom of expression to security related considerations, and use social sanctions to enforce them (Bar-Tal, 2017). Under such conditions, these norms are internalized by some society members.

Accordingly, self-censorship in times of intractable conflict can be viewed as a socio-psychological barrier to peacemaking. Along with the biases in information processing investigated in previous research (Halperin & Bar-Tal, 2011; Porat et al., 2015), self-censorship should be seen as a barrier that has both individual implications—as it indicates that an individual is, or would be, inclined to process conflict-related information in a selective, biased, and distorted manner—and also societal implications. By blocking alternative information and allowing the maintenance of conflict-supporting narratives, self-censorship contributes directly to the continuation of intractable conflicts. Society members in these cases voluntarily, intentionally, and consciously prevent the diffusion of new information, even if they believe that this information is valid, as they prefer to avoid negative sanctions or try to protect their ingroup (Bar-Tal, 2017).

In spite of the importance of the practice of self-censorship, to our knowledge very few empirical studies were done. Mostly this societal phenomenon is noted and described in its use (Antilla, 2010; Branche & House, 2010; Kenny & Gross, 2008; Lee & Chan, 2009; Maksudyan, 2009; Nelkin, 1995). In the present chapter, we report on a number of empirical studies carried out in Israel with the Israeli-Jewish population, which is one of the prototypical societies engaged in intractable violent conflict with the Palestinians.

**Self-Censorship in the Israeli-Jewish Society**

Research using qualitative methodologies reveals that self-censorship operates as a societal-psychological mechanism in the context of intractable conflicts, which is nourished by the collective conflict-supporting societal narratives, specifically collective memory, but also takes part in the process of their construction and maintenance (Ben-Ze'ev et al., 2010; Nets-Zehngut et al., 2015). For example, Nets-Zehngut et al. (2015) interviewed 33 key individuals, who worked in formal institutions responsible for the creation and dissemination of the collective memory (the National Information Center, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF)/army, and the Ministry of Education), about historical information on the 1948 Palestinian exodus. This exodus is one of the key events in both the Israeli-Jewish and the Palestinian collective narrative of the conflict, although each side holds a different narrative regarding the causes of, and who is to blame for, the exodus.

Of the 33 interviewees, 20 were found to have practiced self-censorship, with the majority admitting to this practice explicitly. This practice was determined
unequivocally on the basis of either explicit use of the term "self-censorship" by some of the interviewees or on the basis of their indicating a decision not to present the critical narrative in the publications. All these 20 interviewees admitted they knew that expulsions had taken place but they did not want to expose this fact voluntarily. They did so despite the fact that at the relevant times in the past they were not given explicit orders to censor the critical narrative and even though they were all aware of the critical narrative and viewed it as the true historical account. As one of the interviewees, who worked in the National Information Center, said very explicitly: "The topic of expulsions was not mentioned [...] we practiced self-censorship about what could have been written and what not. We practiced self-censorship about controversial topics." And another working in the Chief Education Officer's Headquarters said: "The general premise was that we all do not deviate; we are all patriots, all Zionists, do not want to admit that we expelled refugees."

In addition, content analysis of the interviews identified the following five major motivations for the self-censorship reported by the interviewed officials in the three institutions: (1) protection of Israel's positive image, aiming to protect the ingroup and specifically to prevent negative use of the information by the Arabs, as well as maintaining a positive image of Israel in the international community; (2) mobilization of the Israeli-Jewish citizens, intending to protect the ingroup, this time within Israeli society; (3) protection of the Zionist ideology by not presenting contradictory information; (4) institutional norms, indicating identification with the institution that one works for, and thus internalizing its views; and (5) fear of sanctions, which reflects the wish to protect oneself, and thus preemptively practice self-censoring, thinking that they might be sanctioned by dismissal, denunciation, and ostracization.

In a similar vein, Elbaz and Bar-Tal (2017) examined the practice of self-censorship during the Second Lebanon War in 2006, done based on the finding that during this war the Israeli media presented mainly the official narrative of the government and the army (Elbaz & Bar-Tal, 2016). The study consisted of 30 in-depth interviews with current and former prominent Israeli journalists, who were responsible for covering the military and political domains of Israel. As gatekeepers they were asked to illuminate the manner in which self-censorship is practiced. Quantitatively, of the 30 interviewees, 18 talked explicitly about practicing self-censorship. Twelve other interviewees referred to this practice indirectly by citing similar journalistic practices such as providing misinformation or withholding truthful information. A content analysis of the interviews revealed the existence of an all-embracing media support framework for the political and military elites. From the very beginning, even before the IDF entered Lebanon, journalists urged the government to initiate a military operation that would restore quietness to the regions of the northern border. The media ignored essential and important questions, and thus harsh criticism was found only at the margins of media coverage and failed to stimulate public debate.

Elbaz and Bar-Tal (2017) identified five motivations for self-censorship during the war in Lebanon, three of them pertaining to the protection of the ingroup: (1) maintaining national consensus, intending to rally the public to support the military campaign and not to divide it by presenting information that could lead to
disagreement with the governmental decision to go to war and then to implement it; (2) mobilizing citizens for active participation and not to cause harm when the war challenges were so serious; and (3) fear of harming motivation among the soldiers who were conducting the dangerous mission, and their motivation was crucial for the success of the war. The other two motivations referred to self-protection: (4) fear of personal sanctions aiming at self-protection in face of possible sanctions of their superiors or the public; and (5) fear of harming relationships with sources of information within the government and the military elite, as it is understood that to receive information from governmental and military sources, journalists have to report the sources’ narrative, otherwise they would be punished and disconnected from their sources of information.

Support for Self-Censorship in the Israeli-Jewish Society

Importantly, as already noted, in most cases, self-censorship is practiced within a particular political climate that develops norms limiting the flow of information (Ngok, 2007). Whether the result of internalization of these norms or fear of negative social sanctions, a significant portion of society may support self-censorship as a method of restricting the flow of information to protect the ingroup. Therefore, the attitudes that society members hold toward self-censorship are an important factor that may explain and predict the actual practice of self-censorship in a given society (Bar-Tal, 2017).

This key question about the public’s view about practicing self-censorship was examined in a study that was carried out by Hameiri et al. (2016), who longitudinally investigated views of a large sample of Jews in Israel between February 2012 and January 2013, during which another cycle of violence in Gaza Strip erupted in November 2012. In this study, a number of indices for the support of self-censorship were employed: General Support of Self-censorship (e.g., “The media should publish reliable information regarding immoral actions of governments or militaries, even if this information might harm the society or state in which this information is being published”); Support of Self-censorship regarding Israel’s Operation “Pillar of Defense” in the Gaza Strip (e.g., “To what extent do you think that the soldiers who participated in the operation should have passed on reliable information regarding harm to Palestinian civilians?”); Support of Self-censorship in Other Nations—this index measured the participants’ support of self-censorship practiced in other nations, such as Russia and the United States, rather than Israel (e.g., “The media in other nations, such as Russia and the United States, should publish reliable information regarding immoral actions performed by the government”).

The findings suggested that armed confrontation significantly increased the support of self-censorship regarding the military operation, in comparison to times of relative peace. Hence, the support of self-censorship is derived from the desire to protect the society at times of conflict, by blocking the dissemination of
information, which is viewed as damaging to a society that is threatened by the rival group and is coping with acute challenges in a violent conflict. This increased support reflects the very general phenomenon of rallying behind the leaders during violent confrontations. When a society struggles to prevail in a violent confrontation, society members feel obliged to refrain from criticizing the official narrative and disseminating information that might hinder the general efforts. This norm is well established in Israel, where there is an ongoing governmental campaign to silence critiques regarding the State’s conduct in the conflict, and especially silence those individuals and NGOs that provide information about wrongdoings by the Israeli army (Lomsky-Feder & Ben-Ari, 1999; Oren, Nets-Zehngut, & Bar-Tal, 2015). Furthermore, although there was an increase in the support of self-censorship regarding the military operation, during the operation, general support of self-censorship did not change over time. Thus, self-censorship was constantly supported to a moderate extent in Israel, against the background of the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian/Arab conflict.

In addition, the findings revealed that personal characteristics (i.e., authoritarianism, ethnocentrism, siege mentality, and political orientation) predicted support of self-censorship, which, in turn, mediated the effect of personal characteristics on support of peace negotiations with the Palestinians and of providing humanitarian aid to the suffering residents of Gaza. The findings thus indicated that the support of self-censorship serves, in this sense, as one of the expressions of conservative political ideology, which supports the maintenance of the conflict (Bar-Tal, 2013). Indeed, our findings demonstrated that support of self-censorship assessed during the period of violence predicted reduced support of negotiations and humanitarian aid to the Palestinians 3 months after the military operation. These results suggested that the support of self-censorship is not merely a byproduct of an ongoing conflict, but a significant process that acts as a barrier to conflict resolution. It is a mechanism of closure that aims to block information which may potentially shed new light on the conflict and the rival and thus lead to a change of views by society members and possibly a change of policies regarding the conflict.

Finally, of interest in this study is the finding that Israeli-Jews supported self-censorship less in other societies, such as the US or Russia, probably because they realized that self-censorship jeopardizes the functioning of the democratic system by preventing free flow of information. This finding reflects double standards and moral hypocrisy, whereby individuals expect other people and groups to uphold certain moral standards while excusing themselves and their own groups from upholding the same principles, based on various rationalizations (Ashmore, Bird, Del-Boca, & Vanderet, 1979; Valdesolo & DeSteno, 2007). Individuals tend to apply different standards of judgment while evaluating similar behaviors by their own society versus another society. Although the behavior of the ingroup is judged positively, the same behavior by another group is often judged negatively (Oskamp, 1965; Sande et al., 1989).
Self-Censorship as a Barrier

Self-Censorship in Israel: Antecedents

In the developed conceptual framework, Bar-Tal (2017) has suggested that the actual practice of self-censorship, as a societal phenomenon, is influenced by the following contributing factors, or antecedents: (1) the context of the group (e.g., whether the group is engaged in a conflict or in time of peace); (2) personal characteristics of the person who has the information; (3) type (content) of the information that is in question, and its potential impact; and (4) circumstantial factors (e.g., the individual holding the information role, or the possible information recipients). Hameiri et al. (2016) examined the contextual effect of a violent military operation on support for self-censorship, as well as several personality characteristics that may predict this support. This realization that individuals may differ in their inclination to practice self-censorship as well as in their motivations for doing so led Sharvit et al. (2017) to develop an instrument to assess individuals’ Self-Censorship Orientation (SCO).

Results from exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses revealed that individuals’ orientations toward restricting or expanding the dissemination of information vary along two distinct but related dimensions. The first dimension, labeled “self-censorship,” reflects the tendency to self-censor and conceal information that is seen as threatening (items such as “People who disclose credible information to external sources, which exposes my group to criticism, should be condemned” and “Exposing credible information which presents our group in a negative light is playing into the hands of our enemies”). The second dimension, labeled “disclosure,” reflects the tendency to disclose and disseminate critical information (items such as “If I would encounter problematic conduct among my group members, I would feel responsible to bring that information to light” and “It is important to expose let-downs by group members in order to learn from them and improve”). This attitude may reflect the fact that both dimensions reflect taking some kind of action regarding the information that one possesses, whether the action aims to conceal the information or reveal it. The low end of each dimension may reflect a preference to remain passive and not take any action to reveal or conceal the information.

The Sharvit et al. (2017) findings also confirmed that the measure of SCO is distinct from other measures of similar constructs. Importantly, the findings indicate that the two SCO factors had only low correlations with the Willingness to Self-Censor (WTSC) measure developed by Hayes, Glyan, and Shanahan (2005), affirming the distinction between the present conception of self-censorship, which focuses on self-censorship of information, and the definition proposed by Hayes et al. (2005), which focuses on self-censorship of opinions. In addition, the SCO factors had moderate correlations with conformity, supporting the contention that although related, self-censorship and conformity are distinct phenomena.

Sharvit et al. (2017) also found that the self-censorship dimension was positively related, and the disclosure dimension negatively related, to variables reflecting commitment to one’s group, such as blind patriotism, and to variables reflecting conservatism and adherence to accepted ideas and norms, such as Right-Wing
Authoritarianism (RWA). Conversely, the self-censorship factor was negatively related, and the disclosure dimension positively related, to variables reflecting commitment to freedom of information and expression, such as universalistic and democratic values, and to variables reflecting willingness to be critical of one's group, such as constructive patriotism. This attitude corresponds with Bar-Tal's (2017) conceptualization such that the major motivations for self-censorship of information, other than self-interest, are protection of the group to which one belongs, protection of beliefs and ideas to which one is committed, and the protection of others.

Finally, the findings of Shavit et al. (2017) affirm the predictive validity of the SCO scale dimensions in a longitudinal study. The disclosure dimension predicted the willingness to disseminate information that was critical of one's ingroup and portrayed it negatively. The self-censorship dimension predicted the willingness to conceal such information. Both dimensions predicted their respective outcomes above and beyond all other relevant predictors. Hence, the SCO scale may be a useful in predicting individuals' intentions to conceal or reveal information that may have negative implications for their group. As mentioned earlier, the readiness to conceal or reveal information in any particular situation may be a function not only of one's general disposition but also of various situational factors, including, for example, the nature of the information, the role and accountability of the person possessing the information, and the role(s) of the person(s) to whom the information might be revealed.

This description was examined in three studies (Shahar, Hameiri, Bar-Tal, & Raviv, 2016). Specifically, these studies examined the effect of the following factors: the characteristics of the potential audience, the type of information that pertains to the social role of the parties involved in the relevant event, and whether the information at hand was or was not critical toward the ingroup. The research employed an experimental role-playing method, in which the extent of the participant's willingness to self-censor was assessed as a dependent variable. In the first study, Israeli-Jews were ostensibly asked to evaluate the clarity of different news that presented Israelis (i.e., the ingroup) in a negative way. Following this evaluation, they were given a hypothetical option to share the provided information with four categories of recipients, who differed with regard to their proximity to the participant. The results showed that the participants' willingness to self-censor was the strongest in cases of outgroup audience (i.e., outgroup NGOs) and significantly weaker in cases of ingroup close recipients (i.e., family and close friends). Thus, it seems that reporting ingroup transgressions to outside individuals, organizations, or authorities is often considered a serious violation of the implicit rule that group members should refrain from criticizing their ingroup in front of outsiders. As Elder, Sutton, and Douglas (2005) noted:

…it seems that an in-group critic speaking to an in-group audience is seen as 'clearing the air' by highlighting the group's weaknesses, thereby promoting growth and improvement..., but when speaking to an out-group audience, he or she is perceived to be 'airing the group's dirty laundry (pp. 240–241).
In the second study, Israeli-Jewish males were asked to read a vignette that described an individual who witnesses harm done by Israelis to Palestinians. The participants were then asked to try and step into the shoes of that individual—"to try experiencing what he feels and thinks when he witnesses the described events." In each vignette, the authors manipulated the role of the actors (i.e., the Israelis committing harm to Palestinians), who could be civilians or IDF soldiers, and the role of the observer (i.e., the role-playing target), who could be a civilian or an IDF soldier. Then, the participants were asked about their willingness to reveal the observed event. The results revealed two significant effects of the social role of the people involved in the event (that is, the content of the information). First, the participants were significantly more inclined to self-censor the information when they played the role of a soldier observer in comparison to when they played the role of a civilian observer. Second, the participants were also significantly more inclined to self-censor the information presented in the vignette when the actors in the scene were soldiers in comparison to civilians. This effect confirms a well-established phenomenon, granting soldiers and security forces a unique and meaningful status in the Israeli society, as a society involved in an intractable conflict (Lomsky-Feder & Ben-Ari, 1999). One can assume that jeopardizing the soldier's image will be strongly perceived as a direct damage to the ingroup image and stance against rival groups, because the soldiers perform a formal role representing the state.

In the third study, Israeli-Jewish participants were seemingly asked to help a group of researchers in the validation process of a curriculum concerning the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Specifically, the participants were presented with a series of images that portrayed this conflict. Some images represented the conflict-supporting narrative, presenting the ingroup (Israeli-Jews) as moral and the outgroup (Palestinians) as vicious and immoral; others were presenting the opposite mirror-image of the first group of images, thus criticizing the ingroup. Each participant was then asked to decide whether or not each presented image should appear in the planned curriculum (checking the participants' willingness to self-censor the information), which would be presented to different audiences. As expected, the findings suggested that the willingness to self-censor is influenced by the type of information presented. Thus, participants in the study were more willing to self-censor critical information in comparison to information that depicts Israelis as the victims of the conflict. These findings showed the desire of the ingroup members to protect their image and to actively block information that sheds negative light on the ingroup.

In another experimental study by Shahar, Hameiri, and Bar-Tal (2014), participants were exposed to a story about Israel's violation of human rights of Palestinian children (which was revealed at that time), and were asked to evaluate the informers (Israelis who worked in the Israeli detention center) under different conditions. It was found that the participants viewed more negatively ingroup members who informed a non-Israeli organization (UNICEF) about ingroup immoral acts than when they informed an Israeli organization (The Israeli Council for the Well-Being of Children). In addition, it was found again that the participants were more willing to censor negative information about the ingroup when the audience was more

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distantly related (NGOs and media) than when the audience was closer (friends and family). This study showed that in a society involved in intractable conflict, individuals who reveal information to outgroups are not appreciated, and are viewed as jeopardizing the ingroup’s image and goals.

Consequences of Self-Censorship

Self-censorship practiced by society members has a number of effects that can be detected on the individual and collective levels. With regard to the negative effects on the individual level, self-censorship may cause personal distress, as the person may be aware that the withheld information is relevant to the well-being of his/her society, or that norms of free flow of information are violated by hiding it. In addition, the content of the information may itself be stressful, and withholding it prevents healing or dealing with the traumatic experience (Harber & Pennebaker, 1992; Kubey & Peluso, 1990). Individuals may feel guilt and shame for not revealing the information, which may come from different sources, evoked by moral values, patriotic feelings, and/or adherence to certain values.

On the collective level, self-censorship blocks relevant information, and thus decreases access to information and reduces the free flow of information. It leads to ignorance of the public regarding issues of importance to society, and later leads to impaired decisions, based on missing information. Self-censorship impoverishes the public debate; it jeopardizes transparency, blocks critical views, and thus blocks changes and at the same time reinforces the reproduction of particular dogmas, norms, and practices, which could have been changed had the information not been withheld; it may also lead to moral deterioration, because it prevents information about societal misdeeds being seen (see Hameiri et al., 2016).

A study by Bar-Tal, Hameiri, and Shahrar (2013) investigated the perceived consequences of practicing self-censorship. The researchers provided a vignette about an anonymous state in South America called X (no name was noted), supplying the same information about this state to all the participants, yet half of them were told that the state had a norm of self-censorship (describing it properly in line with the definition), while the other half was told that it had a norm of openness. Participants were then asked to evaluate the particular state on different characteristics related to societal consequences. The results showed that when self-censorship was instituted, the participants noted the shortcomings of the system on different scales. They noted that a state with self-censorship has significantly fewer democratic values, less openness, and less pluralism than the state without it. Thus, it can be assumed that when society members decide to adopt self-censorship, they are also aware of the costs that a society might pay for their practice.

Nevertheless, there are also positive consequences of self-censorship. It allows the maintenance of a positive image and a positive social identity that prevents potential damage to the ingroup from outside parties, and increases unity and solidarity by preventing disagreements, controversies, and schisms. Those are important
consequences, which often motivate society members to practice self-censorship and withhold what they consider to be potentially damaging information.

Conclusions

Literature and theory reviewed suggest that self-censorship seems to be an outcome of a well-entrenched ideology supporting continuation of the conflict, which is intensified in violent periods. In these contexts, individuals may voluntarily practice self-censorship with regard to alternative information to the hegemonic conflict-supporting narrative, for the fear that it may lead to negative consequences for the group or the self. This practice closes society members to alternative information that may change their views about the rival and the conflict and thus possibly advance peaceful resolution of the conflict. Under these circumstances, when free flow of information is restricted, it is a considerable challenge to lead societies involved in a protracted and violent conflict to negotiations and eventually to an agreement, as the case of Israelis and Palestinians demonstrates. Self-censorship was shown to have a detrimental role in past conflicts, as in the Vietnam War, or the Algerian War of Independence, preventing exposure of the general public to crucial information that might have led to a timelier end of these wars and avoidance of many unnecessary deaths (Bar-Tal, 2017). If we consider the possibility that in the context of intractable conflicts self-censorship is prevalent on both sides, together with other socio-psychological barriers reviewed in this chapter, it is possible to understand why such conflicts are not resolved easily.

References


Self-Censorship as a Barrier


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