

# Creating a Partner

A Qualitative Study of Political Extremists and Ex-Gang Members Who Have Chosen the Antiviolence Path

Rony Berger  
Philip Zimbardo  
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## About the Authors

**Rony Berger** is a senior clinical psychologist and a family and child therapist who is an internationally recognized expert in dealing with the psychological preparation for and aftermath of terrorism and other major disasters. Dr. Berger is on the faculty of emergency medicine at Ben Gurion University and a senior member of the PREPARED center for emergency response research, and is also on the faculty of the Stress, Crisis, and Trauma program at Tel Aviv University. He is the director of the Disaster Relief and Rehabilitation Unit at Brit Olam, an Israeli international relief organization, and a fellow with Psychology Beyond Borders, a humanitarian organization that aims to alleviate psychological suffering in the aftermath of traumatic events.

**Philip Zimbardo** is an internationally recognized scholar, educator, researcher, and media personality who has won numerous awards and honors in each of these domains. He has been a Stanford University professor since 1968, and taught previously at Yale, NYU, and Columbia. Zimbardo's career is noted for giving psychology away to the public through his popular PBS TV series, *Discovering Psychology*, along with many text and trade books that are among his three hundred publications. He was recently president of the American Psychological Association.

## *INTRODUCTION*

Stanley Milgram's obedience studies and Zimbardo's Stanford Prison Experiment are arguably the most well-known social psychological studies to have affected the field of psychology and steered public debate regarding human nature. The haunting images of the subjects "administering dangerous electric shocks" and the degradation imposed by Stanford University students simulating prison guards have raised questions about how ordinary people can be transformed into immoral evil-doers. Furthermore, these studies have also provided some understanding for seemingly inexplicable events such as the Holocaust and Abu Ghraib.

While much of the debate has centered on the issue of "how good people turn evil," the fact that a small minority of subjects (over 30 percent) resisted imposing harm on others was somewhat ignored. Who were the defiant subjects that showed empathy? What allowed them to break the norm and become what Zimbardo termed "ordinary heroes"? Are there some circumstances that made them act so extraordinarily or was it their unique personalities?

A similar phenomenon has emerged outside the laboratory, in real life, among two different populations: one in the Middle East and the other in U.S. urban areas. The first group is the small number of Palestinians and Israelis who have chosen the unconventional path of promoting peaceful coexistence in spite of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Unlike the majority of Israelis and Palestinians who were exposed to terrorism and consequently tended to adopt political extremism and exclusionist attitudes, this unique group seems to have transcended this "natural" tendency to reject "the other," instead becoming involved in nonviolent dialogue with their former "enemies." The second special grouping is composed of ex-gang members who decided to leave their violent groups, adopt a peaceful position, and risk their lives by becoming active in gang prevention in the areas where their former gangs were still operating. Thus, it appears that these former extremists have defied their own people and have chosen an antiviolence path, often at a significant personal risk and condemnation by those who were close to them: family, friends, and colleagues.

This study focuses on identifying the nature and characteristics of members of these two groups and exploring the underlying processes that led them to take this courageous path. It aims to decipher the "psychological code" of former extremists. We want to discover if there is a common transformational experience shared by most members in these two unique groups. How can we account for the mental and behavioral switch from being a socially violent gang member—or even leader—to becoming an agent for positive social change? Or from suffering hardships and abuse by members of a group considered to be a national enemy to then advocating for reconciliation rather than revenge? Our interest is more than academic curiosity; we expect to develop effective anti-radicalization programs derived in part from the insights gained from these deeper understandings of heroic young men and women in the Middle East and the urban ghettos of the United States.

## *THEORETICAL BACKGROUND*

We can identify three major theoretical perspectives that attempt to understand all human behavior, including dealing with violent ethnic or national conflicts: the dispositional, or characterological, approach; the situationist approach; and the interactionist, or systemic, approach.

The dispositional approach posits that the way individuals react toward conflict depends on their genetic makeup, temperamental nature, personality traits, or early patterns of behavior developed during childhood, rather than on contextual pressures. Among the dispositional theorists, one can find evolutionary biologists such as Martin Daly and Margo Wilson, who suggest that desire for revenge is a built-in feature of human nature and is experienced by people in all cultures. A similar yet more optimistic view about human nature has been proposed by Christopher Boehm, who suggests, based on discoveries in the fields of anthropology and primatology, that though “we may have a deeply rooted instinct to exert power over others, we also have what may be an equally strong aversion to abuses of power.” A different brand of dispositional theories suggests that for some people there is a pervasive disposition to help others, and that they possess what some term “altruistic personality.” Similarly, psychoanalytically oriented scholars argue that people’s behavior is predicated by early childhood experiences that form personality structures based on defense mechanisms, such as Kaplan’s “altruistic surrender” or Adorno’s “authoritarian personality.”

The situationists remove dispositional factors from their central role, rather suggesting that the situational circumstances interact with one’s personality to generate behavioral outcomes. This appears especially true in conflictive situations. Zimbardo, a representative of this school of thinking, contends that both profound evils and moral behavior “emerge in particular situations at particular times, when situational forces play a compelling role in moving individuals across the line from inaction to action.” Other social psychologists have attributed altruistic, or pro-social, behaviors to situational factors such as social rewards, social norms, modeling, group pressures, personal distress, and empathic concern. Some situationists occasionally recognize the role of personal characteristics in shaping pro-social behavior; however, they also maintain that these proclivities exert minor influence on people’s behavior during conflicts when compared to the pervasive power of specific situational forces. They argue that this is especially true when people are immersed in new, unfamiliar behavioral contexts where habitual response patterns are less likely to be elicited.

There is also a long tradition among social psychologists of espousing interactional models that perceive collective behaviors as a function of both situational and individual dispositional factors. A notable example is Ervin Staub, who studied both genocidal and altruistic behavior. Staub suggests that a pro-social orientation interacts with contextual factors (e.g., the nature of stimulus and the degree of need for help, the assumption of personal responsibility, and the cost of helping to name just a few situational factors) to determine whether an individual will act pro-socially.

Finally, the interactionalist, or systemic, approach argues that human predispositions dictate the scope of pro-social behavior while also giving equal weight to situational and cultural factors. For instance, some biologists, such as Edward Wilson, emphasize the strength of our hardwired qualities (“biology holds us on a leash”), while others note that behavioral plasticity can erase even a millennia of genetic predisposition. Another interactionalist, former lieutenant colonel and psychologist Dave Grossman, dispelled the myth of human beings as “natural-born killers,” instead suggesting that human beings have an innate revulsion toward killing other humans. Meanwhile, he argues, our social institutions, such as the military, have devised sophisticated methods to overcome that resistance to kill. As such, systems have the power to create, justify, and legalize some situations, thereby directing individuals’ behavior within them.

Though in the past several decades social psychologists and other social thinkers have devoted much effort to studying the process and nature of evil behavior—perhaps due to the bloody and gen-

ocidal nature of the twentieth century—there has been little attempt to explore virtuous behavior in the face of ethnic, religious, and national conflicts. The seminal work of the Oliners on righteous gentiles; the work of Erwin Staub on “altruism born in suffering” (ABS); and most recently the work of Zimbardo on the “banality of heroism” are rare exceptions.

Samuel and Pearl Oliner, in their Altruist Personality Project, interviewed over seven hundred rescuers, nonrescuers, and rescued survivors in various countries under Nazi occupation, which provided a rare view on this unique group of heroic individuals. They found that rescuers have the propensity to be more attached to significant others, to experience more sense of responsibility toward society at large, and to adopt the perception of a shared common humanity compared to non-rescuers. In other words, they suggest that rescuers have “a strong attachment to the people in their immediate environment, as well as one that indicated a linkage to the broader world.” Based on their work, the Oliners proposed eight processes that facilitate altruistic orientation. The four processes that strengthen attachment are bonding, empathizing, learning caring norms, and participating in caring behaviors. Meanwhile, four other processes promote inclusiveness: diversifying, networking, reasoning, and forming global connections.

A commonly held view is that altruism and pro-social behavior originate in positive experiences, whereas violence and antisocial behavior are often rooted in negative life experiences. Indeed, much of the research on the effects of trauma and victimization has pointed to the adverse consequences of such experiences, including physical and psychiatric pathology, compromised well-being of the survivors, social maladjustment, and violent and antisocial manifestations. However, Erwin Staub, who studied the roots of genocide, observed that adversity and suffering may not only contribute to further violence and antisocial behavior, but also may enhance the motivation to help others. He coined this phenomenon, ABS, and suggested that some individuals transform the meaning of past suffering and promote psychological change in the direction of caring for others rather than turning against them. The theoretical focus of Staub and his colleagues is on the experiences before, during, and after suffering that give rise to altruism. These positive experiences include healing processes in the aftermath of trauma, loving connections, and social support before and after victimization, altruistic models during the situation, and being active in helping others. Along with these conditions that promote ABS, other psychological changes are expected to result from these experiences, such as awareness of suffering, increased perspective-taking, empathy toward others, identification with victims, and a willingness to become responsible for others’ suffering. Given the fact that ethnic and national conflicts carry a risk of perpetuating large-scale cycles of violence and revenge, Staub and his colleagues suggest that facilitating the development of ABS may have significant implications for the prevention of collective violence. They propose interventions that include cognitive elements such as understanding the roots of violence and fostering meaning and engagement with one’s experience as well as behavioral elements such as the provision of opportunities for individuals who have suffered to be able to help others.

Zimbardo, who for decades studied the conditions and social pressures under which ordinary people can be transformed into perpetrators of evil, or what Hannah Arendt called “the banality of evil,” has recently focused on the opposite phenomenon, where ordinary people act selflessly and heroically on behalf of others. He and Franco call this phenomenon “the banality of heroism.” This idea dispels the myth of the hero as a “super human,” instead suggesting that we all harbor the potential for becoming heroes given the right circumstances. Most heroes are ordinary people who under

emergent conditions take action, stand up, and speak out against injustice, corruption, fraud, and passive inaction, thereby behaving in extraordinary ways. Zimbardo challenged us to conceive of a reverse-Milgram paradigm by which we can promote virtuous behavior in people by utilizing basic principles of social influence such as the “foot-in-the-door” tactic, social modeling, and self-labeling of helpfulness. Additionally, he outlined a ten-step program to resist unwanted influences and a broad social experiment to facilitate pro-social behavior by stimulating the heroic imagination in everyone.

Canetti-Nissim and her colleagues, drawing insights from social psychology, clinical psychology, and political science, proposed a stress-based model of political extremism in which psychological distress and threat perceptions mediate the relationship between exposure to trauma—in their case, terrorism—and exclusionist attitudes toward minorities. They argue that the personal exposure to political violence that results in psychological distress exacerbates threat perceptions, which in turn invokes “threat buffers” such as political exclusionism. They also found that education, religiosity, and prior political attitudes also affect the degree of perceived threat. Indeed, studies in the United States showed that individuals exposed to the 9/11 terror attacks adopted out-group hostility, ethnocentric attitudes, and increased authoritarianism. Similarly, research in Israel demonstrated that the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict resulted in prejudicial perceptions toward adversaries as well as exclusionism and antidemocratic attitudes. These results were also found among Israeli children and adolescents.

Though our present study has been influenced by each of these theoretical formulations, we decided to take a qualitative exploratory approach to the study of transitioning from violent extremism to antiviolenace reconciliation. To the best of our knowledge, there is no theory that adequately accounts for this important phenomenon of such a dramatic behavioral and psychological transformation. It is our hope that this study will contribute to understanding the processes of transformation from extremism into peaceful reconciliation or gang prevention, and thereby help to promote this path for other extremists and make the world safer for all of us.

#### *GOALS OF RESEARCH*

- To explore the impact of dispositional factors (e.g., temperaments, personality characteristics) and childhood patterns (e.g., nature of attachments, family structure, family values and norms, family ethos and legacy, religious beliefs, and inspirational figures during childhood) on denouncing violence and adopting an antiviolenace position.
- To explore the impact of situational factors (e.g., significant events, current affiliation patterns, identity formation styles, personal and collective values and norms, and exposure to other world views) on denouncing violence and adopting an antiviolenace position.
- To identify the dispositional childhood patterns and situational factors that influence participants’ involvement in antiviolenace activities or in reconciliation endeavors.
- To learn which processes maintain participants’ motivation in being involved with antiviolenace activities or in reconciliation endeavors.
- To design anti-radicalization programs aimed at preventing youth involvement in violent activities based on the above empirical findings and to promote coexistence, reconciliation, and tolerance among groups in conflict.

## METHOD

### Subjects

Our subjects consisted of three convenience samples: Palestinian, Israeli, and U.S. citizens. The Palestinian group is composed of eighteen Palestinian adults—sixteen men (88.8 percent) and two women (11.2 percent)—ranging in age from twenty-four to fifty-two, with an estimated mean age of thirty-six. All the Palestinians came from the West Bank and were involved in violent political activities. They were members of organizations such as Hamas, Islamic Jihad, Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade, Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), and the Popular Resistance Committees (PRC). Most of them were incarcerated in Israeli prisons from a few months to twelve years for their militant and political activities. Currently they are involved in peace initiatives through Palestinian-Israeli organizations promoting peace and coexistence, such as the Israeli-Palestinian Bereaved Families for Peace; Combatants For Peace, made up of Palestinian and Israeli ex-militants and Israeli Defense Force (IDF) soldiers; Wounded Xrossing Borders, comprising Palestinians and Israelis who were wounded by the conflict; and Eretz Shalom, a social organization of Jewish settlers and Palestinians for the advancement of peace and dialogue.

The Israeli sample consists of twenty-two adults—eighteen men (81.8 percent) and four women (18.2 percent)—ranging in age from twenty-six to sixty-one, with a mean age of thirty-nine. Almost all the Israelis had served in the army, and 64 percent were involved in either direct combat or in policing missions with Palestinian civilians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, but they are no longer involved with the IDF. The Israeli sample was drawn from four organizations: Israeli-Palestinian Bereaved Families for Peace, Combatants for Peace, Wounded Xrossing Borders, and Eretz Shalom.

The U.S. group is composed of forty ex-gang members primarily from California. The sample consists of thirty-two men (80 percent) and eight women (20 percent) ranging in age from twenty to fifty-one, with the estimated average of thirty-one. They all were of minority backgrounds: Hispanic American, African American, and Filipino American. Some came from big gangs, such as the Crips, Bloods, Nortenos, and Surenos, and others came from small turf gangs that represent allegiance to a certain street or block. The ex-gang members were recruited from organizations such as Barrios Unidos, United Playaz, the Tariq Khamisa Foundation, and 2nd Call.

Selection criteria of subjects to the study were similar for the three samples. Participants were required to have made a significant political transformation toward the Palestinian-Israeli conflict (for Palestinians and Israelis), to have ceased their membership in the militant organization (resistance organization or membership in a gang), and to be involved in peace and reconciliation efforts (for Palestinians and Israelis) or gang/violence prevention (for the U.S. participants). Additionally, all subjects agreed to either record, via tape or video, their interviews for research purposes. Those who refused to sign the consent form were excluded from the study.

### Procedure

All the participants were recruited by study assistants who interviewed them on the phone in order to ascertain fitness of selection criteria. Once they were recruited, subjects were assigned to local trained interviewers in each country who spent between three and five hours conducting structured interviews according to specific guidelines designed by the researchers (see section on instruments be-

low). The interviews were conducted for the most part in two sessions at a place convenient to the interviewee (at their organization, office, or home). Before starting the interview, each subject signed a written consent form agreeing to participate in the study and to the interview being recorded or videotaped for research purposes.

The interviewers were master's-level psychology students with a background in qualitative research. Their twelve-hour training by principal researchers included lectures, observing a videotape of an interview by the principal researcher, and simulations of interviews. At the end of the interview, subjects completed a battery of pencil-and-paper questionnaires (see list below).

### **Instruments**

Interviews were conducted using a semi-structured format that was constructed by the principal researchers (see Appendix 1). The six areas we addressed were:

- *Life story and family of origin*: Relationships with parental figures and between family members, roles in family, significant events and transitions periods, family ethos, inspirational figures, family traditions, political/social activities of family members, values and norms within the family, and views toward the other
- *Joining and being in the gang/resistance organization/army*: Involvement in gang-activity, role in gang, significant events in gang activity (positive and negative), personal crisis during gang involvement, views toward members and others
- *Leaving the gang/resistance organization/army*: The process of transformation. Pivotal events and their influence on the decision to leave the gang, thoughts about exiting the gang, influential figures, losses and gains from leaving gang activities, involvement in gang prevention, role as a gang interventionist
- *Perceptions before and after the transformation*: View of the world, perception of self, view of the other, view of gang violence, view of the conflict and its resolution
- *Personal characteristics*: Five personal characteristics, examples of the manifestation of these characteristics, tracing the origin of these traits
- *Lessons learned*: Takeaways from the process of transformation, advice regarding prevention of gang or militant activities

Additionally, at the end of the interview subjects were self-administered a 108-item questionnaire that was built from six validated questionnaires:

- Demographic questionnaire—seventeen items<sup>1</sup>
- Interpersonal Reactivity Index—twenty-eight items<sup>2</sup>
- Heartland Forgiveness Scale—twenty-four items<sup>3</sup>
- Posttraumatic Stress Disorder Checklist—seventeen items<sup>4</sup>
- Posttraumatic Growth Scale—twenty-one items<sup>5</sup>
- Sense of Coherence Scale—thirteen items<sup>6</sup>



## RESULTS

### Israeli Sample

Our open coding derived from the twenty-two interviews was the basis for constructing a preliminary axial coding that helped us to identify central themes relevant to the goals of this study. We will present the variables that facilitated transformation from violent militarism toward peaceful reconciliation under three categories: childhood patterns, situational factors, and dispositional tendencies. We will provide the major themes in each category and demonstrate them with quotes from the interviews.

#### *Childhood patterns*

The first category that appears to stand out in all the interviews is the relationship between our subjects and their parents. The most prominent pattern among the sample was a very close, warm, and unique relationship with at least one parent, and often both parents, which was found among the majority of our subjects (63.6 percent). Six subjects described an ambivalent relationship with their parents (27 percent), and among those a few had a close relationship with another family member (an uncle or an aunt).

The subjects who reported having a very strong attachment to their parent/parents often carried this relationship into adulthood and described it as one of the most influential parts of their lives. As one of the participants (#2), a forty-three year-old physician, portrayed it: "My mother was greater than life. She was and still is always available for me. She knew what I needed and was there for me even if I did not ask for her. She was a wonderful person not just for me but also for all my family members as well as our neighbors. Her love and empathy was beyond imagination." Another participant (#11) described his relationship with his parents as "Very, very, very warm. My parents always supported me and provided whatever I needed. My mother and I are like twins . . . we think alike and act the same way. When she was not there for me, my father took her place. Though he did not share the same political views of my mother and all of us, I always knew he supported me and is proud of me." In a few cases (#5, #8, and #18), participants expressed similar feelings toward other family members, such as a grandfather or an aunt, who served as surrogate parents for them.

The subjects who described ambivalent relationships with their parents often expressed anguish and pain over it. Some of them worked through these feelings and claimed that they found ways to deal and compensate for this lack of emotional contact, while others substituted their lack of parental closeness for that of another family member. One participant (#10) related that: "I had to raise myself up because my parents were too busy struggling. I guess I turned my grandmother, who lived with us, into a parent. Whenever I needed love and support I turned toward her." Another female participant (#14) rationalized her situation by suggesting that raising her younger siblings following her mother's postpartum depression gave her the valuable ability to care for others. "We became like a little family. The love that I gave them and received from them was very important to me as my parents were not as available."

A significant number of the participants (68.2 percent) described their childhood as somewhat complex and difficult due to being marginalized or encountering special family circumstances. Some participants (#1, #2, #5, #7, #13, #14, #19, and #20) explained that their parents, who had immigrated to Israel from other countries, experienced significant reduction in status and acculturation problems as well as some degree of discrimination and prejudice. Others (#5, #9, #11, #13, #17, #18, and #22) had experienced personal tragedies such as the loss of a sibling or a parent or chronic or terminal illness of a family member. The way our participants and, in turn, their families reacted to

these circumstances may have affected the participants' future coping styles. For instance, participant #5 described the shame he felt toward his parents: "They came from Iraq and acted like Iraqis . . . my father dressed like an Arab, talked Arabic, and listened to Um Kool Thum (a well known Egyptian singer) . . . everybody in our neighborhood laughed at my father! I was so ashamed of him that I refused to bring any of my friends home during my childhood for fear they would ridicule me. Later I learned to appreciate his culture and heritage." Another participant (#20) remembered the "nightmare I experienced when we came here from Russia." She described how lonely she was and how difficult it was for her to learn Hebrew. Finally, she adjusted, and in retrospect reflected: "Maybe this period enhanced my awareness and sensitivity toward others who do not share the mainstream culture." Participant #18 described the sudden loss of his father at a young age: "'It was a shock to all of us. My entire family fell apart. My mother was a mess and my siblings were devastated. I was not doing well too . . . I was crying a lot and refused to go to school . . . however, since I was the oldest, I felt I needed to take charge . . . who else would have done it? So finally I got my act together and helped my mother and young siblings . . . It was not easy . . . at times I was miserable . . . but it showed me that I have inner strength . . . It taught me a lesson in dealing with difficult challenges and for that I am grateful." Perhaps the most extreme example of these tragedies was related by participant #17 whose mother committed suicide by jumping, with his younger brother, to her death. "While on the one hand it was a very painful experience, as I always looked for my mother, it also gave me an opportunity to accept other people like my stepmother and relatives who took care of us," he told the interviewer, adding, "I guess that turned me to be a giving person. If you are unable to get what you need, you can give to others and that way you get, too."

Another theme that was prevalent among the Israeli interviewees was the open-mindedness and pluralistic attitudes of many of their families toward their children as well as toward others in the community. Even among religious families who come from a more rigid ideological structure, we found families who were tolerant toward other lifestyles and belief systems. For instance, participant #11, who came from a religious family residing in a settlement in the West Bank, described his parents this way: "My mother and father were very sensitive to the needs of others, irrespective of whether they were Jews or Arabs. Despite the fact that they were Orthodox Jews, they accepted the secular lifestyles of my secular friends and were very pluralistic." Another participant (#16), whose family lived in one of the most right-wing, ideologically oriented settlements in the West Bank, where Arabs were often considered "Sons of Satan," described how his father, the settlement's chief rabbi, used to take care of an elderly Arab couple who lived near them. When asked by his son why he treated "these people" so well, he was astounded to hear his father answer, "All human beings are the divine creation of God and therefore should be treated with utmost respect." A beautiful depiction of this humanistic approach was portrayed also by participant #19, who described how his grandfather, a Hasidic Jew, who was an open-minded and generous person, established such close relationships with all his gentile neighbors that he became one of the most popular people in his small Ukraine town. During World War II, just before the Nazis came to his town to search for Jews, he was unanimously voted to be a commissar; thus avoiding being sent to a concentration camp and saving his and his family's lives. Several participants highlighted the fact that their families (parents and siblings) have been very tolerant of the choices they have made, whether political, educational, religious, or even concerning sexual orientation (participants #2, #4, #6, #11, #12, #16, #20, and #22). A good example was provided by participant #21, who described how his parents agonized over the fact that he, the elder son of a family with a long history of religious tradition, decided at the age of sixteen to pursue a secular lifestyle. "I knew it killed them that I decided to leave the religion . . . I had even seen my father cry and pray over me . . . yet they never rejected or disowned me. On the contrary, they encouraged me to pursue my own choice."

Some interviewees (#4, #7, #10, #13, #14, #15, #16, and #21) described having inspirational figures during their childhoods that they believe left a significant mark on their development. Among these inspirational figures were family members, neighbors, educational figures, religious leaders, and even intellectuals (e.g., writers and artists). A good example was provided by participant #21, who described how his teacher, a religious person, encouraged him to examine his views and to develop a more humanistic perspective. “Despite the fact that we lived in an ideological settlement, he helped us challenge the view that the West Bank is our ancestor land and therefore belongs only to us. He had the courage and integrity to encourage us to examine other Jewish values that might have conflicted with the notion of returning to our homeland and to assess whether we are morally justified to do what we were doing. Eventually he got fired and I lost contact with him, but even today I often think about him and feel that he has had an enormous influence on my thinking.” Another participant (#16) related a more personal story about being emotionally supported by a neighbor, an old lady, with whom he developed a special relationship: “I was considered a very naughty boy and was always in trouble. I probably suffered from attention deficit but no one diagnosed or treated it. My parents did not understand me at all and they were very critical of me. The only person with whom I got some solace was our old neighbor, who really spoiled me and comforted me. She was willing to hear my stories and was very empathetic. She often told me that I reminded her of herself as a kid. I guess she taught me how to be a good listener and to develop empathy towards others.”

Finally, a family pattern that was found among about half of our interviewees was the tendency of family members, particularly the parents, to give to the other and to contribute to the benefit of the community at large by helping the poor and the disadvantaged, supporting minorities, or organizing community activities and rallies. Perhaps the most extreme example of that pattern was related by participant #15, who said, “My family was very involved in the community. We hosted poor people at our home, we supported new immigrants, we volunteered to help terror victims, the elderly and mentally retarded, etc. . . . I can tell that almost each day during my childhood there was someone new at my home that I did not recognize but knew that it was a person in need that my family supported.”

#### *Situational Factors*

The most common experience shared by our interviewees (77.2 percent) was significant abuse of power by Israeli authorities (e.g., Israeli Defense Forces, police, Israel Security Agency, Israeli prison system) that they had experienced either as perpetrators or bystanders. These experiences, which most interviewees described as traumatic events that haunted them for long periods of time, included mistreatment and harassment of innocent civilians, abuses toward terror suspects, inadvertent killing of innocent people—what is now called “collateral damage”—and at times even shooting at innocent people. Most of our interviewees suggested that these experiences placed them in conflict with their basic value system (e.g., raised in them issues like equality, freedom, justice, etc.) and started a long and reflective process of self-examination that ended in changing their political position and taking an active stance toward peaceful reconciliation. Participant #17 related to the interviewer the following story: “One time we raided this neighborhood in Nablus searching for terror suspects. We entered the suspect home and ransacked his home. His family was extremely frightened and his older parents started to cry and pleaded not to hurt them. His young kids started to sob and my unit soldiers shouted at them to shut their mouth. One child was so frightened that he wet his pants. Two of the soldiers who witnessed it started to laugh at him. I saw it and was totally shocked and ashamed. I could not even talk about it. Few days later, I decided to complain to my chief commander about their behavior but he dismissed me saying this is part of our job. I knew then that I could not go on with this any longer.” Another example was given by a combatant soldier who was in one of the most prestigious military units and had lost his best friend during a failed military operation: “Our unit

wanted to show the enemy that this tragic incident has not broken our spirit and therefore sent us for stupid dangerous operations. We were supposed to provoke the locals so that they will start firing at us and then we will have an excuse to kill them and take revenge over our deceased comrades. They did not care what price we would pay for it. It was then that I realized that I am a small pawn in their stupid game. This started my process of slowly changing my views that eventually led to my signing the letter of refusal to serve in the army.”

Several of the interviewees (#5, #9, #11, #12, #13, #16, #18, #21, and #22) described personal or familial traumatic events or crises such as losing a family member to a terror attack or military operation, the sudden death of a family member, an unexpected heart attack, experiencing sexual harassment, and a family member’s incarceration.

For instance, participant #9, who eventually joined the Israeli-Palestinian Bereaved Families for Peace, described when he lost his beloved daughter in a terror attack: “I could not do anything for two months except for sobbing uncontrollably. I wanted to die and saw no point in living. Then I began to feel rage and wanted to take revenge at those who killed my daughter. I was so enraged that I actually planned to go down to the site of a new building where many Arab laborers worked and kill some of them. Luckily, I realized that executing my plan would not bring back my daughter and only perpetuate the killing. It was then that I decided that these crazy killings have to be stopped and I joined the family circle.” Another participant (#21) lost his father to a sudden violent illness. He told the interviewer, “I was extremely close to my father, who was a role model for me. When he died, it was as if the ground fell under my feet and I was totally grief stricken and confused. It took me over two years to figure out who I was and what I wanted for myself. It forced me to evaluate my belief system and my values. At the end of this process, I decided to study what I really loved, which was theater, and I slowly began to leave the religion and change my political views.” Finally, participant #7, whose brother was, in her view, unjustly convicted and incarcerated for white collar crimes described how traumatic this event was for her: “When my brother was unfairly convicted, I was devastated. I lost all faith in the legal system and began to ponder about other injustices. I guess it planted in me the seed of mistrust toward the system. In an odd way, I began to identify with others who experienced injustices, including Palestinians.”

Another important experience that may have contributed to the process of transformation that was related by almost all the participants is the encounter with the other in a neutral context. Some of the participants had such an encounter during their service in the army, intelligence services, or prison correction system; several were introduced to Palestinians through their professional careers, a few shared with them dialogue groups, and yet others met those who were their neighbors. A fascinating example was given by a jail warden who befriended one of the main leaders of a Palestinian resistance organization who was incarcerated for more than fifteen years. He said, “At first I did not trust him and was hesitant to get close to him. However, eventually I realized that we share a similar background. The more we got to know each other, the more we found that we have the same thoughts, desires, and dreams. When he first came to my jail I looked at him as a dangerous and hostile adversary who needed to be controlled. After spending four years with him, I came to see that he is a sensitive human being like me who happens to be on the other side. It was a surprising revelation that opened my eyes and changed my mind. If I can be a friend of him, why can we not find a way to befriend all the Palestinians?” Another riveting story was told by an IDF lawyer (#14) who was assigned to prosecute a Palestinian young woman who had planned a suicide mission in Israel and was arrested before she was able to carry out this act. The more the two women got to know each other, the closer they became. “Reading about her life story and getting to know her real well, I realized that we are very similar in many ways. What separated us was the fact that she lived under occupation and was determined to serve her country by making this incredible sacrifice, while I was serving my own

country by devoting my career to the army. In fact, under different circumstances we could have been good friends. This painful realization regarding the similarity between us completely threw me off and eventually changed my perspective regarding the conflict and the Palestinians.” Most of our interviewees went through a process of becoming familiarized with the other through dialogical meeting organized by peace organizations. Almost all of them testified that this experience left an indelible mark on them that propelled them to take an active part in the reconciliation process. One participant (#15) aptly described this experience: “My first meeting with Palestinians was very difficult and at the same time moving. In the beginning, I was very apprehensive, tense, and suspicious. The Palestinians who attended the meeting seemed at first hostile and threatening and I was concerned as to how this meeting will unfold. It felt as if I was placed in a boxing ring and was prepared for a tough fight. However, midway through the meeting, the ice broke and I found myself feeling comfortable and getting close to some people. When we went home, I was very excited and I would even say elated. This was the first of many meetings that I attended that opened my eyes and showed me the human side of the ‘enemy.’ Since then, I have made good friendships with members of this group. We have visited each other’s families, spent time in our homes, participated in celebrations and sad events, and stayed in contact even during the most difficult periods like military operations. Without these meetings I could have not been involved in the process of reconciliation. I believe that if both Israelis and Palestinians could have the opportunity to know each other, the conflict would have been resolved.”

#### *Dispositional Tendencies*

Dispositional tendencies of our interviewees were derived from their own stories, particularly their early childhood experiences, as well as from their own perceptions regarding their personal characteristics. While we discovered that our subjects came from very diverse backgrounds and seem to have different personality styles, some commonalities between them were identified. In fact, two rather different personality styles emerged from the descriptions of our sample. About half of our interviewees can be portrayed as the “Good Samaritan” who went beyond the call of duty to help others and who was well liked by all. The other half can be depicted as the classical iconoclasts who from an early age were self-reliant, socially independent, and were willing to go against the stream. Additionally, many of the subjects in our sample described themselves as “natural leaders” who had manifested this tendency from young age.

A dramatic example of the Good Samaritan style was portrayed by participant #15, who described himself as “. . . the guy that everyone turned to when they needed help. I always helped teachers to organize events in school, I help kids who had learning difficulties, and I played music in ceremonies in schools and in national events. In fact I was totally identified with mainstream Israel, with Zionism and Jewish tradition to the point that I actually thought at time that I am like my country . . . my identity was mixed with the identity of Israel.”

An opposite example is participant #22 who from young age described himself as an *enfant terrible* who challenged his parents, family members, educators, and religious mentors. “Once when I was young, maybe twelve, our school principal, who was a well-respected Rabbi in our community that most kids feared, asked us to leave school and attend a political demonstration. Though at that time I identified with the political cause, I felt that it was not right to use his authority to get children out of school and force them to participate. I stood up in front of all the students and teachers and told him that it was wrong and that I will therefore not embark the bus. Everybody thought I was crazy challenging this man in front of the entire school and disobeying him, but I would not give up despite knowing that I will be punished. When my mother was later invited to school, she told the principal

that there is nothing that she could do, and that since young age, when I made my own mind there was nothing anyone can do to change it. This is indeed true, and I admit I like it this way.”

Finally, a depiction of “inborn leadership qualities” can be found in the interview of participant #6, who described herself as follows: “My mother thought that I will be the Israeli prime minister, as I was always the leader in every system that I attended from kindergarten through school, the army, and the company that I have established. I guess she saw it in me from young age.”

### Summary Results for the Israeli Sample

Based on the set of variables identified from all the interviews in each of the three categories, namely childhood patterns, situational factors, and dispositional tendencies, we can construct a narrative—or perhaps several narratives—that may explain the process of transformation from violent militarism toward peaceful reconciliation.

It seems that a substantial number of interviewees who shifted their political orientation and who adopted peaceful reconciliation toward the Israeli-Palestinian conflict grew up in families that were very warm and nurturing and had very close relationships with their parents and siblings. Parents in these families were generally open-minded and pluralistic, encouraging critical thinking and tolerating different lifestyles. They often engaged in caring and giving to the needy and contributed to the community at large. Additionally, many subjects experienced hardships during their childhoods due to either marginalization or difficult family circumstances. Nonetheless, for the most part, our subjects claimed that they managed to cope with these difficult situations and at times even thrived because of them. Though a minority of our interviewees came from distant families who didn’t readily provide for their needs, they seem to have had inspirational figures that partially compensated for their yearnings to be understood or nurtured. In terms of their personal characteristics, our subjects were either Good Samaritans or classical iconoclasts. Also, some of our subjects reported having had leadership qualities from an early age. There was no indication in the interviews whether these characteristics represent environmental influences or temperamental/personality proclivities, and this is still, so far, unclear.

However, situational factors played an even more dominant role in the lives of our subjects. The vast majority of them reported experiencing significant traumatic situations either as perpetrators, eyewitnesses, or victims; situations that have left indelible scars in their minds. Apparently, dealing with these difficult circumstances allowed our participants to take time out from their daily routines, to evaluate their value systems, and to reexamine their lifestyles, including their political and social positions. In so doing, these events set the stage for the processes of value reassessment and self-transformation.

No less important to the process of transformation were personal encounters with the other, which have led many of our Israeli subjects to significantly change their perception toward Palestinians. From initially conceiving of them as dangerous and hostile adversaries, they came to see them as pleasant human beings and potential friends who also experienced daily hardships.

### U.S. Sample<sup>7</sup>

As with the Israeli sample, our open coding derived from the ex-gang members’ interviews was the basis for constructing a preliminary axial coding that helped us to identify central themes. However, we have so far analyzed only twelve interviews. We will present the variables and processes that facilitated transformation from being a gang member to becoming involved in gang/violence prevention

under three categories: childhood patterns, situational factors, and dispositional tendencies. We will provide the major themes in each category and illustrate them with quotes from the interviews.

### *Childhood Patterns*

Despite the fact that interviewees in the U.S. sample had complex and ambivalent relationships with their parents or parental figures, many of them related that early in their childhoods they experienced love and care that seemed to be very meaningful for them in their later development. For instance, participant C described his relationship with his mother, stating, "I'm pretty much a mama's boy. She was very close to me and gave me everything I wanted. Though we later had a falling out with each other, I always remember her love and care, which gave me lot of strength in the toughest moments in my life." Another participant, R, related his relationship to his parents, saying, "My mom used to give to me because she had a good heart, and I love her for that. If she had to, she'd give up the jacket off her back to give it to me." He also described his relationship with his father: "My father never said to me, you know, 'I love you.' But I always knew deep inside that he loved me, and now that I am older I understand that things he was doing was love, because he never said it."

Another pattern that was prevalent among the subjects was the maintenance of family structure and order early in childhood. Though most of the interviewees came from disorganized families in which the parents eventually were unavailable or dysfunctional, they were able to hold some semblance of order and discipline. Describing his early childhood, D told the interviewer, "As a kid I knew right from wrong and like I said, my parents raised me well. You know people used to compliment us, 'Look how good your kids are acting at restaurants' or whatever it was. And then, I never really fought with my parents either. I used to get disciplined, you know, I believe in that. I don't regret anything they did because that's what made me who I am today and whatever I got, I deserved. I respected my parents. I honored them. I never talked back." Another example was provided by S: "My father raised us to be tough. He raised us strong; this is our way of being men. You know, you don't cry. You don't let nobody push you around. And you stand up for what you believe in. You respect others. You know, when we be wrong, he kicked our butts so we would mess up no more." A similar example was also given by R, who said, "My father was one of the first Filipino sergeants in a white man's army. So him being in that position, when he came home, he brought that same philosophy into our house. How to be soldiers. . . . Yeah, I was a soldier. I did what I was told to do. I played my part."

Several of the interviewees stressed that they learned basic values during childhood, values that they abandoned and then turned back on during their transformation. C told his interviewer, "We always raised up as Christians, and I always knew who God was and all that. We would go to church and I knew right from wrong. I mean, I would mess up some things, but then felt sorry because I knew I was wrong. Then when I stopped being in the hood, I went back to God." A female participant, K, described how her aunt talked to her about how to be a woman. "She told me 'You gotta respect yourself and respect others too. Don't lie, don't cheat, and don't steal from others. You are a lady, treat people as a lady. Don't put people down, give them compliments and treat them nice, so they treat you nice. Gossip no more!' It ain't good, she said. Lookin' back, I feel bad I didn't hear her because I'd be out of trouble. I'm glad I still remember what she taught me."

Finally, another experience that may have been valuable to the process of leaving the gang and choosing a different lifestyle was having a positive role model early in childhood. A participant that seemed to have been influenced by early role models was D. He told his interviewer that he actually had two significant role models during childhood who were instrumental in changing his life and leaving the gang: "My basketball coach, he kind of helped me in a way. He always came by my home and drove me in his nice car. I looked up for him. He was a kind of father to me. When I decided to

stop messing around, he was the first I told. . . . Also my Uncle Tush was a good example. He got out of the gang and he flipped his whole life around. He got married and now have good job. I kinda look up for him, you know.” Another participant’s influential role model was “the lady that, you know, the director of UP (United Playaz) out there. She played a big role in my life. She always helped me out, you know. Uh, whenever I had issues in my family or anything, you know, she was there. If I needed money to eat, she gave me money to eat, you know what I’m saying? If I needed a ride home because I was stuck in the wrong neighborhood, she would come get me, you know what I’m saying? She helped me, she helped me a lot to not, you know what I’m saying, retaliate, you know?”

#### *Situational Factors*

Though childhood experiences played a role in the process of leaving the gang culture and getting involved in gang prevention, even more prominent in our sample were situational factors, such as experiencing traumatic events related to gang activities, personal crises, taking more responsibilities, becoming exposed to different lifestyles, and broadening one’s social affiliations. Almost every participant in our study experienced multiple traumatic events due to his or her involvement in gang activities, which set up a process of self-evaluation. A participant in his early twenties related: “Getting actually shot and knowing that I had a very high risk of dying, a professional doctor told me, you know, I’m sorry, but I don’t think you’re going to live through this. That was a rude awakening. That was part of my life that I was like, I knew it was real, but this pretty much confirmed it. So I would say getting shot, understand that this is the life I chose and this is the life that I am going to continue to the last day of my life, I decided no more. I wanted to live and do something with my life.” Another participant, J, said, “The next week we went to a party in the TL (Tenderloin neighborhood in San Francisco), that’s when I got stabbed. When I lay in the hospital only a couple friends came to see me. You have hundreds of friends, you know what I’m saying, but only a few come to visit you. This is the people that I’m fighting for? This is the people that I was down for? And your family goes to you—they all cry. I knew then this shit is not for me, you know. I need to get out.”

Another significant transformative event for our subjects was experiencing personal crises due to the loss of a person or separation from a partner. D described how painful it was for him to hear that his beloved grandmother was dying: “I realized that I lost a lot of time with her by getting into trouble and spending time in jail. When my sister told me she is dying, I felt bad that I did not make her proud and now she is dead. I was angry at myself, and promised her I would do good from now. That is when I decided to stop being with the gang.” A similar experience was depicted by a participant who lost his father and stated, “So, that life, hanging out with my friends, kind of fucked up my life with my father. I should’ve spent more time with him, and I didn’t. You know? That’s why when he passed away, I got closer to all my sisters and my family, because if something might happen to me now, they’ll understand that we hung out more.” Another participant decided to go to AA and start a new life: “The last time I was arrested I actually don’t remember any of it. I woke up in the cop car and it was that point where I realized I had a drinking problem. But up to that point, I had no intention of stopping. But that got me to where I was, every time I got into trouble, I was under the influence of alcohol, so maybe alcohol is the problem. Every time I drink, I break out in handcuffs.”

Maturational processes in the form of having more social responsibility may have also played a role in the transformation process of some of our interviewees. Some participants were pressured by their partners to change their lifestyle, and others wanted to have family but did not want to expose their children to their gang lifestyle. For instance, K, a young woman in her twenties, explained, “When my eyes were open—I was around fourteen or fifteen, and I was having to deal with all those continual losses—is when I started to wonder: is this how I want to end? I really didn’t think I was going to make it to eighteen because of all the things that had happened to me inside the gang, outside



the gang. For me, to have my children was a blessing because I didn't think I was going to live to be a parent. But once my eyes were open, I started to figure out how can I still love them and still separate myself from them." Another participant related a similar story: "I would say what really changed my life was knowing that my girlfriend was pregnant at the time I was still 'gang banging.' I stopped, paused, and looked at everything that was around me, everything that I was doing. And then, I saw my friends with their own kids. There are a lot of people who got jumped into the gang, there was a lot of people who get introduced to the gang. But being born into the gang, totally would be different. And I didn't want my son going through that. I didn't want my son having to prove that he's a big time shot caller in the gang. That's what changed my point of view. And what I wanted to do at that point." Another participant told his interviewer, "I began a relationship, so I had a girlfriend now. But my girl had two kids, you know what I'm saying? So now I kinda became, you know what I'm saying, a street nigger to a dad—to a stepdad. Now it's like, damn, I can't be doin' this shit. I got these little kids now, you know what I'm saying, looking up to me too. I got a girl at home, you know what I'm saying? Depending on me, you know?"

For some of our participants, the decision to leave the gang was a utilitarian one based on circumstance they were facing, particularly related to the threat of long jail sentences. C is a good example for this type of motivation. He reported, "I didn't want to go to prison. So I made sure I went presentable. I was articulate enough. I wrote a letter to the judge. I had, they told me it was a good idea to get about three letters of reference to show to the judge. I ended up having like twenty from people that knew me. So all those things impressed the judge, basically, and all the stuff I was getting involved with at T.K.F. I had already talked to, like, two schools, so I was able to get a letter from them to show how helpful I am outside of jail and that I'd be more productive as a member of society and not in jail. I got a second chance again." A similar story was told by S, who said, "I was facing two life sentences. That was the important part, that it was so normal for individuals in there to be facing two, three life sentences. That was not normal for me. I'd go to jail and the most I'd be facing was sixteen months, two years, I know where to begin that. They offered me thirty-four-years-to-life followed by another six years, so a total of forty years. I wouldn't know where to begin to do forty years at thirty-five years old. So I looked to get out of the gang and get involved in other things."

Several participants were exposed to alternative life experiences that shifted their perspectives. Some were exposed to religious practices and others were exposed to cultural and social education. For instance, T stated, "I started getting introduced to something that was spiritual, Jehovah. There were people in my life showing me that they cared regardless that I was fucked up in the head. You know what I mean? And they gave me opportunity. And then I started to like it. I started, excuse me, to once again to love to live." Participant S also reported, "I can say that my bail was a quarter-million dollars, and I had eight charges against me and I did a little bit of time for that, and that was one of the times I read the Bible again. That was one of the turning points for me because, like I said, I went back to my roots." An interesting experience was related by participant R, who explained, "So I started to take classes. I was taking classes about things I was living. I said let me take this class about social work counseling. And I was doing it; I was getting educated about who I was, about my culture, my nationality. So education played a big piece of me evolving and become a man, because I started figuring out who I was and I started to like the person I was."

Finally, an important factor in the process of transformation is adopting a new reference group that would substitute for the gang. Some participants joined, as we indicated above, religious groups; others formed affiliations with anti-gang groups; and many turned to their families and to their roots. C, for instance, elicited support from several sources: "So I have a really good support group now and my family and brother and sister, they're all cool now . . . I had the pastor of my church go to speak on my behalf. I had gotten a sponsor through AA, this guy that I'm really close to who's like a father to

me and someone, like I said, I would not have associated with in my past, a white supremacist guy, looking like big biker, huge white guy.” Another interesting depiction of forming a new support group was related by K: “I’m the little sister. I don’t know how it happened, but the gang-reduction movement is very much male dominated. There are some women in the movement, but there are not too many female gang interventionists. And I am part of another group over here that is trying to change that and get our voices heard. Because it is male dominated I have a lot of big brothers, and they are very protective and supportive of all avenues . . . It was right for me to want a family and it was right for me to want that kind of unity, that love, that protection, that acceptance, but I went about it the wrong way (by seeking it in gangs).”

### **Dispositional Factors**

Like in the Israeli sample, dispositional tendencies were derived from the subjects’ stories as well as from their own perception regarding their personal characteristics. Though subjects depicted these personality styles as inborn characteristics, it is entirely possible that these qualities were acquired through observation and modeling. Two characteristics seem to surface from a young age: the angry rebel and the natural leader. The rebel was nicely depicted by D, who stated, “I was pretty much a rebel from day one. I remember leaving the house for two or three days. My little brother used to want to come with me; I used to kick him back out. I had a lot of respect for my mom and dad, but I would try to do my own thing anyway.” T described himself this way: “I am a competitive person. When I was younger I just didn’t want to lose, I just wanted to win and that was it. Now I am a competitive person, but I would never close a door behind me and not help no one else who is behind me even though I want to be the leader. And I would never kick another man down once to the floor. But I am a very competitive person and I like to show my abilities. That’s what I like to do.” Another participant who felt he was a natural leader was R, who said, “I became the leader not only because I was tough, because there were tough guys in the gang, but I thought maybe because I was a thinker. I would rationalize instead of just attack and I became the leader at a young age.”

### **Summary Results for the American Sample**

Based on the initial set of variables identified from all the interviews in each of the above three categories, we can construct a narrative that may explain the process of transformation from involvement in the gang culture and engaging in criminal and violent activities to leaving the gang and becoming active in gang/violence prevention. Most of our participants were raised in households that were eventually disorganized, with parents who became unavailable or dysfunctional. Nevertheless, it appears as if a tentative core of attachment was formulated in many of the participants through some care and nurturance provided by functional parents or parental surrogates. Additionally, families were able to maintain some degree of structure and discipline when attempting to teach positive values to their kids. A number of our participants recalled meeting positive role models during childhood, but they apparently were unable to change their antisocial behavior regardless. The inability of our subjects’ families to exert significant positive influence on their early development coupled with the strong environmental pressures to gain a sense of safety, respect, and affiliation led our participants to join the gang. It was only when they confronted personal threats of losing their freedom or dying or experienced significant traumatic events or circumstances that forced them to take time out from gang activities (being in the hospital or in jail) that they started to reevaluate their choice of being in the gang and reexamine their value system. Furthermore, they were exposed repeatedly to other sources of knowledge and alternative support systems, which further facilitated this process and

eventually led to leaving the gang and abandoning the gang culture. Having social responsibilities, such as being in a relationship or becoming a parent, further accelerated this process and led some participants to change their priorities. Being exposed to alternative lifestyles might have also stimulated their imaginations to adopt a different way of being, which was supported by both gang-prevention groups and the community at large. Perhaps their natural tendencies to think critically and to lead others gave them an opportunity to find an important role among gang members but also a similar influential role in gang-prevention groups.

### Summary Results for Both Israeli and U.S. Samples: Differences and Commonalities

Before we start comparing the results between the three populations, it is important to note the striking difference in the context within which these groups are struggling. While the Palestinians and Israelis are dealing with a violent national conflict embedded in a larger geopolitical context, U.S. inner-city gang violence seems to be more related to local economic and ethnic turf wars. Thus, the delineation of in-group/out-group in the Middle Eastern context is clearer than in the U.S. context, where in-group/out-group reflects division both between rival gangs and between the gangs and society at large. Furthermore, the Israeli and Palestinian participants in our study come primarily from educated middle and upper-middle classes in their respective societies, whereas most of the ex-gang participants are poor minorities who come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Nonetheless, despite those significant differences, all our participants have gone through a similar process of transformation from being involved with militant organizations that use force/violence to achieving their goals within organizations that promote antiviolenence reconciliation. They have all struggled with the decision and consequences of leaving their previous lifestyles and their longtime support systems, often paying a very high personal price. The question, therefore, is: Have these dissimilar people undergone similar psycho-social processes of personal transformation? Are there similar variables that influence their choice of the antiviolenence path?

In examining the preliminary data presented above, we can identify some differences as well as some similarities. Significant differences were found between Israeli and U.S. participants in terms of family relationships, parenting styles, and family involvement in the community.

While many of the Israeli participants came from warm and nurturing families whose parents were open-minded and pluralistic in their educational approach, most ex-gang members came from disorganized families in which parents were either unavailable or dysfunctional and discipline was rigid and inconsistent. Given the social background of our participants, these differences are not surprising. It is also perhaps important to note that, despite these differences, even in the relatively disorganized families of the ex-gang members, some tentative core attachment was found between parents and children and some semblance of structure and order was maintained. Another prominent difference between the Israeli and U.S. families was the degree of involvement with the needy and with the community at large. Living in harsh social and economic conditions, ex-gang families struggled to survive, and therefore barely had time to meet the basic needs of their own members. Israeli families were much more intact and economically comfortable and were therefore able to care for others and to invest in their own communities.

However, a closer examination of the forces that propelled Israeli extremists and U.S. ex-gang members to adopt a new lifestyle reveal surprising commonalities. First, traumatic experiences and personal crises seemed to have played a pivotal role among our participants. Apparently, experiences that presented an existential threat or a moral crisis—difficult as they may have been—provided our participants space and time to reexamine their lifestyles and to reevaluate their value systems, thus setting the stage for personal change and growth. It is also possible that maturational processes that

presented our participants with new social responsibilities (e.g., building a family or parenting) further contributed to the reevaluation of their life's goals and priorities. These experiences influenced most of our participants to pursue a life-transformation process, especially when coupled with the opportunity to be in personal contact with their adversaries and gain knowledge about them that was previously unavailable and to be inspired by role models who present an alternative lifestyle. There may have been some ex-gang members whose choice to change their lifestyles was motivated by utilitarian reasons, such as avoiding jail sentences—unlike the Israeli participants, who were by and large ideologically motivated—however, they seem to be the minority.

Finally, we also found some similar personal characteristics between the Israeli and U.S. participants; namely, being an iconoclast and having leadership qualities. It is indeed possible that these natural proclivities also contributed to the process of transformation.

## *DISCUSSION*

Our preliminary results based on the Israeli and U.S. interviews suggest that an interactionist model may best explain the process of transitioning from violent extremism to actively pursuing peaceful reconciliation and gang/violence prevention.

First, it appears that the nature of early childhood relationships between our participants and significant others in their lives (primarily parents or parent surrogates) played some role in laying the ground for this process. This observation is in line with attachment theory, which posits that early relationships between children and parental figures provide not only the foundation for all adult relationships, but also the capacity of people for emotional self-regulation and their ability to deal with stressful and traumatic events. Thus, attachment theory predicts that individuals with secure attachments have a better potential for resolving conflicts peacefully and developing empathy toward the other. Although in our samples, certainly the U.S. sample, some participants did not seem to have fully developed secure attachment, a tentative core of such a process was still present in almost all of them. Perhaps, given the right circumstance, this core attachment enabled them to better deal with traumatic situations, to reevaluate the impact of their behavior, and to adopt a more empathic attitude toward other people.

Another early childhood family pattern that was found among Israeli and American participants was the presence of pro-social, inspiring people who later served as models for the transformers. In the Israeli sample, the parents or other family members who cared for the needy or acted on behalf of the community served that role, while in the American sample it was more often educational or religious figures. Social learning theory suggests that human behavior is acquired through observational learning, and that those exposed to pro-social models develop internal representations of the model's actions. It is therefore possible that transformers acquired the seed of change observing social concern by others that then was activated later in their development.

Despite the fact that early childhood patterns may have exerted some influence over our participants, traumatic experiences and personal crises seem to have played an even more important role in triggering the transition process for our participants. How can we account for it? Generally, it is expected that individuals and groups who are confronted with violence or survival threat are more likely to exclude others as well as engage in preemptive, violent "self-defense." However, in recent years there has been more focus on the positive consequences that can evolve in the aftermath of violence, such as empathy for other victims and pro-social behavior on their behalf. Alluding to this phenomenon, Staub and his colleagues use the concept of "altruism born of suffering" to explain that people facing adversaries and experiencing pain and suffering undergo psychological changes that help them strengthen their sense of self, develop a positive orientation toward people, and obtain a sense of per-

sonal responsibility. Indeed, many of our participants who experienced difficult circumstances, such as facing death or a long jail sentence or losing a family member, described how they discovered “my true self.” Now they could identify with families of their own victims and realize the damage they were perpetuating on their communities. In other words, changing their lifestyles and doing something for the community was their way of healing from their own personal traumas and finding meaning in these difficult experiences.

Finally, another way of understanding the transformation of our participants and the various factors that influenced this process is by using the concept of “significance quest.” The quest for personal significance has been proposed by several theorists as a major motivational force in human behavior. They suggest that human beings are motivated to enhance their personal significance, restore it when they experience significance loss, and make every effort to prevent further losses. Thus, membership in an extremely patriotic organization or even in a locally known gang may initially arise from a perceived opportunity for an immense significance gain. Since reminders of mortality (e.g., mortality salience) often convey one’s potential insignificance, many of the extremists attempt to augment the quest for significance by committing what their in-groups consider acts of supreme bravery that hold the promise of enhancing their sense of significance. However, when extremists face increasingly traumatic experiences and personal crises, which represent significance loss, they are motivated to seek significance restoration. If they are no longer able to do so through their militant organizations and if they are presented with a different way of seeking restoration—such as peace organizations or gang/violence prevention groups—they are likely to pursue it and thereby gain a new sense of self-significance. When one reads the interviews of our participants, this is precisely how they describe the process of transformation. This process is accelerated when they are presented with inspirational figures who represent to them the ideal model for the quest for significance and who stir their imaginations. In that sense, Franco and Zimbardo are correct in proposing to help “ordinary people” by stimulating their heroic imaginations to put their newly discovered best selves in service to humanity.

### *PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS*

We have described the preliminary results that emerge from trying to unravel our participants’ process of transformation from violent extremism to actively pursuing peaceful reconciliation and gang/violence prevention. The question remains: What can we learn from our former extremists that can help to inform us in devising new psycho-educational programs that will prevent radicalization and enhance pro-social behaviors?

First, if indeed transformers are more securely attached to significant others and have a greater sense of responsibility toward society at large as suggested by our data, it is imperative that we facilitate the process of attachment by emphasizing it in parent education programs. The Oliners propose creating bonding and empathic environments not only between parents and children, through parents’ education, but also in educational settings and workplaces. They also suggest that teaching kids and adults caring norms and encouraging them to participate in acts of caring may be beneficial. Additionally, the Oliners recommend that people diversify their relationships, get to know people with whom they usually do not interact through learning or direct contact, and create global connections through virtual Web-based communities.

Secondly, given the impact of childhood inspirational figures among our participants, it may be useful to provide youth with influential models via stories, movies, the Internet, and direct experience. Programs that employ sports superstars, famous musicians, and movie celebrities in the context of school as well as after-school programs may exert the influence needed to stir youth in the pro-

social direction. A popular television program like *American Idol*, which will promote heroic altruistic behavior and encourage children to follow in their heroes' and heroines' footsteps by doing small pro-social acts, may prove to be extremely beneficial.

Addressing the issue of dealing with violence and traumatic experience and promoting altruism born of suffering, Staub and Vollhardt propose a variety of techniques geared toward healing, such as therapy, creative writing or writing about painful experiences, finding social support and significant human connections, and learning about the causes and consequences of violence. Additionally, they also suggest that dealing with collective trauma in systemic new structures, as in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, may contribute to societal reconciliation.

Another effort to promote pro-social behavior and encourage "ordinary heroism" was offered by Zimbardo, who outlined a ten-step program to resist unwanted influences. This program includes suggestions to encourage people to acknowledge their own mistakes and to take personal responsibility, to become more observant and mindful, to assert one's individuality and developed critical thinking, to respect just authority and oppose unjust systems, to rebel against injustices, and to balance one's time perspective. Zimbardo also suggests encouraging individuals, particularly children, to perform small altruistic acts on a daily basis, to provide them with role models and facilitate their self-perception as helpful individuals.

Finally, based on the insights provided by this study, we designed a comprehensive educational program called Enhancing Resiliency Among Students Experiencing Stress and Promoting Pro-Social Behavior (ERASE-SPS) that involves teachers and parents. The purpose of this project was to help children reduce stress-related symptoms, develop resilience, and promote pro-social behavior and tolerance toward the "other." The ESPS intervention consists of sixteen classroom sessions of ninety minutes in length, held weekly by the teachers. An important feature of this program is parental involvement through the students' homework assignments. All sessions include warm-up introduction, experiential exercise, psycho-educational material, a learned skill, and a closure exercise followed by a new homework assignment. Perhaps the most important feature of this program is its emphasis on learning to respect the enormous variety of stress reactions and coping styles and to accept people irrespective of their ethnic background, race, or nationality. The topics covered in the program are: getting started, strengthening your personal resources, developing independent and critical thinking, knowing your own biases and prejudices, learning body-oriented resources, knowing your feelings, controlling your emotions with your mind, knowing your group biases and prejudices, dealing with fears, dealing with personal anger and hate, dealing with collective hate, coping with grief and loss and learning to accept the other, and building your social shield and avoiding group discrimination. Boosting one's self-esteem comes in part from turning crisis into an opportunity and promoting coexistence and seeking a better future (see Box 1).

Our first empirical evaluation study—utilizing a quasi-randomized control trial with Jewish and Arab students exposed to war—showed the efficacy of the ERASE-SPS program in reducing post-traumatic symptoms, anxiety, and somatic complaints, as well as in improving the general level of functioning. More importantly, other results of ours have shown that this intervention is also effective in reducing the level of discriminatory tendencies and stereotyping toward the other, in this case true for both Arab and Ethiopian children. Should such evidence be replicated and maintained over time, ESPS might prove to be an important intervention technique for reducing prejudiced attitudes, hostile values, and their corresponding discriminatory behaviors.

## APPENDIX 1

**Creating a Partner: Instructions for the Interviewers in the United States**

Hi my name is \_\_\_\_\_ and I will be the one who will interview you today. (*Mention other person present to do recording.*) The goal of our interview is to track the process you underwent from being involved in gang activity to the time you decided to quit and thereafter got involved in antiviolence activities. Our interview focuses on your life story as it unfolded from early childhood up till now, but more specifically, on the changes you have experienced and decisions you made from being involved in a gang to leaving behind this life and being involved in gang prevention. At times we may touch on difficult and upsetting experiences and I want you to be prepared that you might experience some degree of distress. Is that OK with you? (*Pause.*) We will also focus on significant people and events in your life and in the decisions you have taken, learning what led you to be at the place you are at now. From time to time, I will stop you and ask specific questions regarding pivotal events in your life that may be of significance. It's important for me to emphasize that there are no right or wrong answers and that I am not looking for particular answers. What I am interested in is to learn from you how people who have engaged in violent gang activities have left this behind them and began to engage in gang prevention. If you do not understand a question, please let me know and I will ask it again or reword it. If any question makes you uncomfortable or uneasy, you do not need to answer it. Do you have any questions at this point? (*Pause.*) Well, if you have any questions later, I will be glad to answer.

I will first ask you to sign an agreement to videotaping (or audiotaping) this interview. (*Explain the reason for videotaping. Should the subject refuse there will not be an interview.*) The purpose of this interview is for research only. If we decide to use your audio tape or video tape for educational or media purposes we will ask for your approval. Let us begin . . .

**Life Story and Family of Origin**

(*Name of interviewee*) I'd like to know more about your life story. Can you please start by telling me who is in your family, and what are their names, ages, gender and ethnic background? (*Interviewer, please create a three-generation genogram on the attached form.*)

Can you please tell me about yourself and your family from early childhood until early adulthood? (*Interviewer, please do not stop the story too often but note topics that are missing [see table below] and then get back to explore them. Remind people to talk about the different stages in their lives: early childhood, childhood, adolescence, early adulthood.*) I suggest starting general and vague and then make it more focused based on the questions below!

<b>Life Story and Family of Origin: Question Areas</b>
Relationships in your family: between family members in general and between you and others ( <i>note close, distant, and/or in conflict</i> )
Roles in family ( <i>boss, caretaker, rebel, etc.</i> )
Tell me about transition periods ( <i>going to school, having siblings, siblings leaving home, etc.</i> )
Describe how you and the family dealt with pivotal events ( <i>positive and negative</i> )
Who were the inspirational figures for you in your family or immediate environment? ( <i>including extended family, acquaintances, neighbors, teachers, and even cultural heroes</i> )
What were family traditions that have been important in your life?

What were the values that were stressed in your family? How did they manifest?
What were the family members' views toward violence and antisocial activities?
How did your family perceive others from different backgrounds ( <i>ethnic, national, etc.</i> )( <i>examples</i> )
Any other issue that might be relevant . . .

Can you please tell me what your most significant childhood experiences were in your perception?  
(*Interviewer, please do not repeat stories that you have already heard.*)

### **The Process of Transformation: From Being a Gang Member to Getting Involved in Gang Prevention**

Can you describe how you became involved in gang activity and what led you to become a core gang member? (*Interviewer, please do not stop the story too often, but note topics that are missing and then get back to explore them. Also look for good times and bad times.*)

Can you please briefly describe what your views and attitudes were toward members in your gang, other gang members, and people in general when you were a gang member and what activities you were a part of?

Can you describe what events were meaningful for you during the period you were a core gang member? (*Interviewer, please explore both positive and negative traumatic experiences.*)

What was the worst thing you personally did during that time?

What was the best thing you personally did during that time?

Were those pivotal events part of the reason you decided to quit the gang and start engaging in anti-violence activity?

Can you share your thinking and feelings about leaving the gang? (*Interviewer, please explore both positive and negative thoughts and feelings.*)

Have you considered what you have lost by leaving the gang (*Specific examples*)

How did the other gang members react? (*Specific examples*)

How did their family or other important people in their lives react? (*Specific examples*)

Different people respond in different ways to the events that you have just described. What is it about these events that led you to do what you did? (*Leave this open at first. Be silent.*)

What have you gained from leaving the gang?

Some gang members quit their activities in the gang but do not get involved in gang prevention. What led you to take such a course of action?



Can you describe the process that led you to get involved in gang prevention? (Interviewer, please do not stop the story too often but note topics that are missing [see table below] and then get back to explore them.)

<b>The Process of Becoming Involved in Gang Prevention: Question Areas</b>
Pivotal events that triggered it <i>(There may be several events or one significant one!)</i>
How these events have been influencing you <i>(explore it in depth)</i>
Tell me about a time it was the hardest for you to be involved in gang prevention.
Tell me about a time when you felt you were happy that you are involved in gang prevention. A time you that you are doing the right thing or are in the right place?
How has your involvement in gang prevention impacted (positively and negatively) your ability to cope with the traumatic events in your life?

If we divide (even if it is a bit arbitrary) your life into two periods: one before your involvement in gang prevention and the other after, can you please describe what were the differences between your attitudes and perceptions in these two periods on different areas/issues that are relevant to you . . . (you before and after, what stayed the same and what changed) *(Free talk—things they find significant add to the next table)*

	<b>Before</b>	<b>After</b>
<b>World View</b>		
<b>Perception of Self</b>		
<b>View of the Other</b>		
<b>View of the Conflict</b>		
<b>Political View</b>		
<b>Role Models</b>		

If you were asked to describe five of the most representative character traits of yours at this time, what would they be? *(Please do not interrupt the interviewee! Wait until he mentions the five traits and then ask these questions for each trait.)*

If you were asked to describe five of the most representative character traits of yours earlier in life when you first joined the gang, what would they be? *(Please wait until interviewee mentions the five traits and then ask these questions for each trait.)*

What is the meaning/definition you give to each of these traits?

Please give me an example as to how these character traits manifest in your daily life.

What do you think or guess is the origin of this trait? Based on your experience, what do you think might help young people avoid gang involvement? What would help a gang member to quit? What would make them get involved in gang prevention?

Thank you very much!

**Box 1: Enhancing Resiliency Among Students Experiencing Stress and Promoting Pro-Social Behavior (ERASE-SPS)**

- *Session 1: Getting started.* The session focuses on a ceremonial opening of the program by the school principal followed by an overview of the program by the teacher. The participants and the teachers will delineate the ground rules for creating safety and mutual respect focusing on accepting diversity. Thereafter, the teacher will discuss the stress continuum and reactions to stress with focus on accepting diversity and promoting pluralism.
- *Session 2: Strengthening your personal resources.* This session identifies students' personal resource profiles and provides them with new coping skills. Students will learn how to enhance their coping repertoire via a resiliency model (MOST BASIC MODEL). Focus will be placed on acknowledging different resiliency strategies and respecting them.
- *Session 3: Developing independent and critical thinking.* In this session students will learn “mindful” ways of taking responsibility, admitting to mistakes and acting deliberately rather than impulsively. They will learn techniques of critical thinking and apply them in ambiguous situations. They will learn how to formulate their independent opinions on rational thinking as well as on their own value systems.
- *Session 4: Knowing your own biases and prejudices.* Students will be acquainted with their own biases and prejudices and will explore the underlying reasons for these attitudes. They will be encouraged to develop ways to raise doubt and allow flexibility within their belief system. They will also acquire knowledge as to how to identify stereotypical attitudes in themselves and others.
- *Session 5: Learning body-oriented resources.* Students will learn how stress is manifested in their bodies and how a body's survival mechanisms work. They will focus on the connection between bodily sensations and feelings and learn to understand the various survival functions of bodily reaction during stress. Sensory-motor skills will be taught and practiced. Focus will be placed on different styles (personal and cultural) of body expressions.
- *Session 6: Knowing your feelings.* This session will focus on how to identify feelings and how to connect sensory-motor input to emotions. We will explore the diversity of emotional expression and influences of culture, gender, and religion on emotional expression. Students will explore various ways they express feelings and understand the importance of emotional expression in coping with stress.
- *Session 7: Controlling your emotions with your mind.* This session focuses on the connections between the three ingredients that shape behaviors, namely sensations, thoughts, and feelings. Students will learn how they generate negative and nonproductive thought patterns about themselves and others and will acquire cognitive coping skills and practice them during the session.
- *Session 8: Knowing your group biases and prejudices.* Students will be acquainted with group biases and stereotyping and explore how and why they are formulated. They will then learn how to challenge those attitudes and how to respect other values and traditions.
- *Session 9: Dealing with fears.* The role of fear in human development will be discussed. Various ways to cope with fears will be explored and normalized. Students will explore how fear leads to personal and group biases and learn new ways to cope with fears and to create an inner sense of safety.

- *Session 10: Dealing with personal anger and hate.* This session will help students confront anger and rage and give them an opportunity to express them in a more constructive manner. Students will learn the differences between assertiveness, nonassertiveness, and aggression and learn to become assertive.
- *Session 11: Dealing with collective hate.* They will explore the underlying social reasons for collective stereotypes and prejudices and how those attitudes have the potential to lead to ethnic violence and genocide. Students will explore ways to deal with the negative impact of groups they belong to and ways of dealing with them.
- *Session 12: Coping with grief and loss and learning to accept the other.* Students will gradually explore their grief and loss experiences and will be given an opportunity to express these feelings within a safe context. They will then learn how to be empathetic to the losses of others and how to bear witness to their pain.
- *Session 13: Building your “social shield” and avoiding group discrimination.* Students will explore their social needs and the ways they are satisfied within their current support system. They will learn how group pressure has the potential to discriminate and dehumanize the other and how to resist such pressures.
- *Session 14: Boosting your self-esteem.* This session helps students explore their self-image and the way it impacts their ability to cope with stressful situations. Students will be given an opportunity to accept their deficits, acknowledge their strengths, and learn how to affirm themselves. They will also learn how to avoid feeling good about themselves at the expense of others.
- *Session 15: Turning crisis into an opportunity and promoting co-existence.* In this session students will focus on how to see the “full glass” even in difficult situations. They will then learn resiliency strategies for reframing a crisis and transforming it into a growth opportunity. Additionally, they will explore how to stretch and grow by learning to accept people who come from different traditions.
- *Session 16: Seeking a better future.* Students will explore their future dreams and fantasies and will learn ways to develop optimism. They will be introduced to examples of “ordinary heroism” and will learn how to acknowledge the bravery of whistleblowers and those who fight injustices. Finally, there will be a review of the program and acknowledgment of the group’s contributions.

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