



The Separation Fence within the Home: Professional Identity, Organizational Splitting, and Coping among Arab Psychologists in East Jerusalem after October 7

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Abstract

This qualitative study examines the professional experiences of Arab educational psychologists working in East Jerusalem within a binational municipal psychological service during the months following the events of October 7, 2023. Operating under conditions of intensified socio-political tension, these psychologists were required to navigate complex intersections of personal, national, professional, and organizational identities. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with five Arab educational psychologists, the study explores how heightened insecurity, fear of expression, and political polarization shaped their therapeutic work, relationships with clients and colleagues, and sense of organizational belonging. Thematic analysis revealed processes of internal and organizational splitting, characterized by ambivalence between loyalty to the municipal system and identification with local professional teams, alongside experiences of silencing and professional uncertainty. At the same time, participants described adaptive coping and healing processes that emerged within their home stations, including strengthened peer support, renewed professional meaning, and locally grounded practices that enhanced resilience under chronic stress. A reflexive component authored by senior organizational figures complements the empirical findings and situates them within broader psychodynamic and organizational perspectives. The findings highlight the challenges faced by minority professionals working within state institutions during periods of acute socio-political conflict and underscore the importance of organizational containment, culturally attuned support structures, and reflexive leadership in sustaining professional functioning. Beyond the specific geopolitical context, the study contributes to understanding how professional identity and organizational dynamics are reshaped under conditions of prolonged collective stress.

Introduction

Organizations that employ culturally diverse professionals face ongoing challenges in managing intergroup tensions while fostering an organizational climate in which diversity functions as a resource rather than a source of conflict. Ely and Thomas [1] examined why some organizations benefit from diversity while others experience tension or decline, proposing three diversity perspectives. Among these, the integration-and-learning perspective conceptualizes diversity as a potential source of organizational learning and enhanced performance, whereas the access-and-legitimacy and discrimination-and-fairness perspectives tend to emphasize representation or equal treatment without fully integrating diverse viewpoints into core organizational processes, which may contribute to latent tensions.

Classic social psychological theories further illuminate these dynamics. Allport [2] observed that relations between groups in conflict are often characterized by stereotyping and mistrust, and proposed through the Contact Hypothesis that cooperation under conditions of equal status, shared goals, and institutional support may reduce prejudice. Subsequent research, however, suggests that the effectiveness of intergroup contact is highly context-dependent and may be limited or challenged in settings characterized by ongoing or unresolved intergroup conflict.

Intergroup Dynamics in Jewish–Arab Relations

Empirical research consistently indicates that relations between Jewish and Arab groups in Israel diverge from patterns observed in more stable multicultural contexts, as interactions take place within a protracted political conflict marked by recurring periods of escalation. In such contexts, attempts to integrate Jewish and Arab narratives differ from conventional multicultural models, as national narratives are often experienced as incompatible and, at times, constructed in opposition to one another [3].

Studies of intergroup perceptions suggest that both Jewish and Palestinian narratives may frame social reality through dichotomous “us and them” distinctions, often attributing negative intentions or characteristics to the out-group. During periods of heightened tension, intergroup encounters may intensify polarization and competition over moral positioning and experiences of victimhood, rather than fostering mutual understanding [4,5]. Similar dynamics have been documented in cooperative professional and educational frameworks, including among Jewish and Arab social work students and in mixed medical teams, where shared professional goals do not necessarily mitigate mistrust, emotional distancing, or perceived threat during security-related crises [6,7].

Darr [8] argues that socio-political conflict may permeate mixed organizational environments even when everyday professional interactions appear functional. Under such conditions, open communication may become constrained, and emotional distancing may emerge as an adaptive response. One coping pattern identified in these settings is “split attribution,” whereby employees maintain relatively stable local working relationships while directing frustration or dissatisfaction toward broader institutional systems perceived as remote or inequitable.

Even in organizational or educational settings explicitly designed to promote dialogue, such as bilingual or integrated schools, research suggests that professionals often retain primary attachment to their national narratives rather than developing a fully shared interpretive framework [9]. For Arab professionals in particular, navigating personal, professional, and national identities may constitute a central challenge. Efforts to maintain professional neutrality in politically charged environments have

been associated with experiences of self-censorship, emotional vulnerability, and constrained dialogue, especially during periods of socio-political escalation [10,11].

Social Identity Theory offers a useful framework for understanding these processes. According to Tajfel [12], social identity becomes increasingly salient under conditions of threat, shaping perceptions of belonging, loyalty, and role expectations. During periods of intensified intergroup tension, professional identities may become closely intertwined with broader social identities, influencing how individuals experience their roles within organizations and negotiate competing demands [13].

Against this backdrop, the present study explores how educational psychologists working in East Jerusalem experienced and negotiated intersecting national, professional, and organizational identities during a period of heightened socio-political tension.

East Jerusalem in the Shadow of October 7

The sirens on Saturday, October 7 interrupted what had begun as a routine day in East Jerusalem, marking the onset of a period in which daily life was widely experienced as disrupted and uncertain. Initial interpretations of the events varied among residents, with some perceiving them as part of an ongoing cycle of armed confrontation, while subsequent reports conveyed the unprecedented scale and severity of the attack. For many Palestinian residents, long-standing ideological frameworks through which political violence had previously been understood came into tension with reports describing extreme acts of violence. This dissonance was often managed through selective exposure to media sources and competing narratives, reflecting broader patterns of mediated interpretation in conflict settings. At the same time, divergent media consumption and interpretations contributed to widening perceptual gaps between Jewish and Palestinian publics, further complicating mutual understanding during this period.

During the initial weeks of the war, two developments featured prominently in daily experience. One was continuous exposure to images of destruction and death in Gaza through Arabic-language media outlets. The other was a growing sense of threat in public spaces within Israel, as Arab and Palestinian individuals reported heightened vigilance and feelings of personal unsafety. Movement restrictions, including checkpoint delays and intermittent closures, rendered routine commutes unpredictable and, at times, unmanageable, resulting in some psychologists being unable to reach their workplaces consistently.

Under these conditions, many psychologists described experiencing a sense of professional isolation. While Jewish colleagues in other parts of the city were engaged in intensive



trauma-related work with evacuees amid widespread mobilization, psychologists working in East Jerusalem often remained at home for extended periods, citing fears related to travel, emotional exhaustion, and uncertainty regarding the boundaries of permissible expression. Familiar professional tools and emergency protocols were frequently perceived as insufficient for addressing a social reality characterized less by acute traumatic events than by chronic stress embedded within a highly politicized environment.

This atmosphere was further shaped by growing concerns related to public discourse and perceived scrutiny. Reports of questioning, phone inspections, and professional suspensions based on ambiguous allegations contributed to a pervasive sense of emotional self-censorship. Many residents of East Jerusalem and psychologists in particular described feeling constrained in articulating grief or distress related to events in Gaza or the West Bank. The sustained suppression of emotional expression emerged as a significant source of psychological strain and, for some, contributed to periods of professional inhibition.

Access to professional and supervisory support structures located in West Jerusalem was limited and, in some cases, experienced as emotionally demanding. Participants described implicit expectations to articulate specific moral positions or expressions of condemnation, which complicated participation in joint professional forums. As a result, several cross-regional meetings and supervisory sessions were postponed or cancelled, a decision supported by organizational leadership in recognition that effective supervision requires sufficient emotional availability and a sense of psychological safety.

In response to these challenges, East Jerusalem teams increasingly relied on localized autonomy and contextually adapted modes of practice. Defining the “circles of impact” of October 7 proved complex: although there were relatively few direct casualties or evacuees in East Jerusalem, fear, uncertainty, and distress were widely reported due to events unfolding in nearby neighborhoods, checkpoints, and shared public spaces. In cases involving loss, families were sometimes publicly labeled in ways that complicated professional engagement and heightened mutual caution between psychologists and community members.

Therapeutic and consultative interventions became particularly challenging when invitations to share emotions or engage in open discussion were perceived as unsafe. Heightened sensitivity to public scrutiny led some educators and parents to avoid verbal expression altogether, while frustration and anger were occasionally redirected toward psychologists as representatives of municipal authority. Consequently, standard dialogue-based and group-oriented intervention models were often suspended or substantially modified.

One professional domain that underwent notable change was suicide risk assessment. Educators, operating under heightened anxiety and concerns about potential repercussions, became particularly alert to expressions of anger, despair, or references to martyrdom, resulting in an increased number of referrals. At the same time, elevated ambient anxiety made it difficult to distinguish between reactive expressions shaped by the political context and indicators of acute suicide risk, placing psychologists in a complex and ethically demanding evaluative position.

In sum, heightened socio-political tension permeated therapeutic and organizational spaces, reshaping how psychologists understood and enacted their professional roles. Caught between the desire to provide psychological support and a shared tendency to avoid politically charged content, psychologists operated within a constrained emotional environment that constitutes the central backdrop of the present study.

Jerusalem’s Municipal Psychological Service as a Multicultural Organization

The municipal educational psychological service in Jerusalem comprises approximately 265 psychologists working across ten regional teams and serves the city’s diverse populations, including Haredi, general (Jewish and mixed), and Arab communities. The professional workforce is heterogeneous and includes Jewish psychologists from varied social and cultural backgrounds, as well as Arab psychologists, some of whom reside in East Jerusalem and others who relocated from northern Israel or received their professional training at universities in Israel or abroad.

In an effort to expand access to Arabic-language psychological services, the municipal system established a structured bridging program for graduates of universities beyond the Green Line and from neighboring Arab countries. The program includes supplementary academic coursework in educational psychology, intensive professional Hebrew training, and a supervised practicum in local schools. Upon completion, participants are eligible to begin a supervised internship within the municipal psychological service.

At the time of the study, the service employed approximately 55 Arab psychologists, including two Arab team directors and an Arab deputy director, together constituting roughly one-fifth of the professional workforce. The management structure operates as a unified and diverse leadership body across the city, supported by joint professional training, shared clinical and educational centers, mixed internship frameworks, and cross-team supervisory arrangements. These structures are designed to facilitate ongoing professional collaboration and interpersonal contact across teams serving different populations.

The Present Study

The present qualitative study focuses on Arab educational psychologists employed within Jerusalem's municipal psychological service who provided support to Palestinian communities in East Jerusalem in the period following the events of October 7, 2023. Drawing on anonymous semi-structured interviews, the study examines how these psychologists understood and enacted their professional roles during this period, how they experienced their position within a municipal organization characterized by Jewish–Arab diversity, and how they perceived the organization's responses to the challenges associated with heightened socio-political stress.

To contextualize the interview findings, the study incorporates a reflexive component authored by the three researchers, all of whom hold senior professional roles within the municipal service. While this approach departs from traditional assumptions of researcher neutrality, qualitative scholarship suggests that reflexive engagement by researchers may enhance interpretive depth, particularly in studies conducted within politically sensitive or emotionally charged contexts [14]. Accordingly, the study integrates empirical and reflexive perspectives to illuminate how Arab minority professionals and organizational leadership navigated a period of organizational and social instability.

Method

Participants

The study included five educational psychologists working in East Jerusalem during the period following the events of October 7, 2023. Participants ranged in age from 28 to 35 years. At the time of the interviews, two participants were completing their supervised internship, and three were licensed educational psychology specialists. All participants were employed within Jerusalem's municipal educational psychological service and were actively providing psychological services to Palestinian communities during the study period. Participation was voluntary, and all participants provided informed consent prior to the interviews. To protect confidentiality, identifying details were omitted or altered, and all interview materials were anonymized prior to analysis.

Procedure

Semi-structured interviews were conducted between February and April 2024 by two Arab master's-level psychology students enrolled in the child–clinical–educational psychology program at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. The interview guide included open-ended questions addressing participants' personal background (e.g., age range, family status), professional background (e.g., training stage, years of experience), and their

work experiences following October 7. Additional questions focused on the nature of psychological interventions provided during this period, perceived emotional and professional demands, challenges encountered in therapeutic and organizational contexts, sources of support, recurrent themes observed in clients' and educational staff's difficulties, strategies for coping with secondary traumatization, insights derived from working under conditions of heightened socio-political stress, and perceived needs in relation to supervision, management, and organizational support.

Analysis

Interview transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the guidelines outlined by Terry et al. (2017). Analysis proceeded through several stages. First, two researchers independently conducted an initial reading of the transcripts to achieve familiarization with the data and to generate preliminary codes. The researchers then met to compare coding decisions, discuss discrepancies, and collaboratively refine the coding scheme. Through an iterative process, codes were organized into broader themes that captured shared patterns across participants' accounts. Ongoing discussion between the researchers supported reflexive awareness and enhanced analytic credibility. Final themes were reviewed in relation to the full data set to ensure coherence and consistency with participants' narratives.

Results

The themes that emerged from interviews with psychologists from East Jerusalem can be grouped into five broad themes, each comprising smaller, more specific sub - themes.

Difficult Emotions Following the War

This theme captures participants' descriptions of intense emotional responses experienced in the aftermath of the events of October 7, both in relation to their personal reactions and to the emotional states they encountered among clients and educational staff. Psychologists reported heightened fear, anger, and emotional exhaustion, which they associated with the broader atmosphere of uncertainty and perceived threat during this period. One interviewee described her initial response:

“At first I was terrified; after a week my body collapsed. There's so much anger in me—abnormal anger. I get irritated by everything.”

Participants often linked these emotional reactions to what they perceived as an unsafe and restrictive external environment, characterized by ongoing exposure to violence, insecurity, and limited control over daily circumstances. As one psychologist explained:



“Foci of suffering-external reality and external constraints, violence directed at people from outside, lack of security, helplessness.”

Alongside these intense emotions, participants described a pronounced fear of speaking openly or sharing their distress, both in professional and interpersonal contexts. Several psychologists referred to internal and external barriers that constrained emotional expression. One interviewee noted:

“I encountered many barriers, internal and external, so there was tremendous fear of sharing or even addressing the subject.”

This sense of fear and constraint was not limited to the psychologists themselves. Participants reported observing similar patterns among Arab Palestinian clients and educational staff in schools, where avoidance of emotional expression became increasingly common. As one psychologist described:

“When we returned to the schools, the educational staff avoided speaking and feared expressing their opinions or talking about how they were coping during the war.”

Taken together, these accounts illustrate how heightened emotional distress, combined with perceived constraints on expression, shaped the psychological environment in which participants were required to operate. Within this context, providing psychological support and initiating therapeutic or consultative interventions were experienced as particularly challenging.

Professional Demands Around Interventions

This theme reflects participants' accounts of the professional challenges they encountered when attempting to intervene therapeutically during the early stages following October 7. Psychologists described an initial reliance on familiar intervention practices, particularly the creation of informal spaces for listening and emotional sharing, grounded in personal relationships and a sense of local safety. One interviewee described this approach:

“I really went in with no plan, no presentation, no materials. I would go and listen to people, and I felt it truly helped.”

Over time, however, participants reported growing doubts regarding the effectiveness of these approaches under conditions of sustained socio-political stress. Several psychologists questioned whether traditional therapeutic frameworks could meaningfully address a reality they perceived as shaped primarily by external social and political forces. As one interviewee reflected:

“Maybe we're developing a shared illusion that change can happen within such a reality. We don't need to change people; we need to change reality. Therefore, the therapeutic work is meaningless.”

Participants described increasing dissatisfaction with existing emergency protocols and expressed a perceived need to respond more directly to the broader social context in which psychological distress was unfolding. One psychologist articulated this perspective as follows:

“Social reality has a huge impact on the way the psyche is shaped and on the dynamics that occur. All the concepts-self-perception, anxieties, defenses, and so on-are highly affected by the situation. So we must address it in our work.”

Alongside these reflections, participants emphasized the need for theoretical flexibility and adaptation beyond established models. Several described a sense that existing professional frameworks did not fully capture the experiences of the populations they served. As one interviewee noted:

“We had to contend with new theories outside what is customary and accepted; something new had to be built that was adapted to the population.”

This perceived gap between available professional tools and local needs was often accompanied by frustration with organizational structures and expectations. Some psychologists described a growing emphasis on professional autonomy and locally driven initiative, rather than reliance on centrally developed guidelines. One participant explained:

“The war sharpened my need to develop unique coping methods for unique populations-and not to expect or wait for someone from above to do it.”

In this context, several interviewees reported drawing on earlier academic or professional training that emphasized community-based and culturally grounded approaches. One psychologist referred to prior studies in community psychology, describing them as offering conceptual tools that felt more relevant under current conditions:

“Something very important that will never be taught in Hebrew universities, because they talk about liberation psychology, the psychology of the oppressed, psychologies built on post-colonial cases after liberation, etc.-things that will never be made present.”

The intensification of socio-political tensions during this period further heightened professional identity dilemmas. Participants described a growing divide between what they perceived as dominant psychological models, often associated with Western academic traditions, and alternative frameworks grounded in experiences of marginalization. This perceived dichotomy contributed to an increased sense of distance from the broader organization and was associated with reduced participation in



centrally organized professional training and crisis-response initiatives.

The Home Station as an Anchor

This theme highlights the central role of participants' home stations as sources of emotional containment, professional support, and stability during a period of heightened uncertainty. Despite the multiple challenges described earlier, interviewees consistently emphasized positive experiences within their immediate work teams, which they identified as key protective environments. One psychologist described this process as follows:

"I felt the station gradually became a safe place for me, and this was reflected in my work. I began to feel more confident when entering a school and talking to someone about the subject."

Another participant similarly distinguished between the broader organizational system and the local station, emphasizing the latter as a primary source of security and support:

"Our station-not the larger system, our station-was the place that gave me a strong sense of security, and that affected my work. When we held team meetings and shared what we encountered in schools and in supervision, etc."

Participants described how shared experiences of distress and uncertainty fostered increased cohesion within station teams. The ability to openly share concerns, reflect collectively, and receive peer validation was frequently cited as a central coping resource. Peer groups, in particular, were described as playing a significant role in sustaining professional functioning. As one psychologist noted:

"The peer group we created was significant. It was central in addressing my difficulties and questions. There's something happening within this group in East Jerusalem that distinguishes us."

Another participant emphasized the relational quality of these peer-based spaces:

"What helped me were circles of discussion, reflection, and support with colleagues and professionals-nurturing interpersonal ties."

At the same time, participants continued to face ongoing professional demands, including preparation for specialist certification exams. Several interviewees noted that, during this period, formal supervisory support was limited due to increased workloads and emotional strain. In response, peers often assumed supportive roles, providing both academic and emotional assistance. One psychologist explained:

"My colleagues really helped me. I even ended up meeting with one colleague on Zoom to study together for the specialization exam and to talk a bit. I felt comfortable, not alone... this is a period and it will pass."

Station directors, who occupied a mediating position between the broader municipal system and the local teams, were also described as important figures in maintaining a sense of safety and flexibility. Participants expressed appreciation for directors' sensitivity and willingness to allow space for differing perspectives, even in the absence of full agreement. As one psychologist remarked:

"My team helped me, and so did the director-even if he didn't agree with many things, he allowed a lot"

Relations with the Larger Organization, Management, and Supervisors

This theme reflects participants' experiences of their relationships with the broader municipal organization, including management and supervisory structures, during the period following October 7. Many psychologists described a subjective sense of insufficient organizational support, particularly in the early stages of the crisis. This experience was often articulated as a feeling of emotional distance or lack of responsiveness on the part of the system. As one participant explained:

"We truly felt abandoned by our workplace. Maybe they did try to help us and give us tools, but it didn't help us. And I didn't really feel they tried-but if that's what they think, it still didn't help and didn't work."

Some interviewees demonstrated reflexive awareness of the emotional processes involved in these perceptions, explicitly acknowledging the role of projection in shaping their relationship with the organization. One psychologist noted:

"I was accompanied by so many feelings-disappointment, conflicts, limitations, and anger-that was easier to project onto the institution I'm affiliated with."

Participants also described growing emotional and interpersonal distance in encounters with Jewish colleagues, particularly within joint professional forums. These interactions were often experienced as emotionally demanding and, at times, alienating. One interviewee described this experience as follows:

"There's a joint group with Jewish psychologists where I felt a strong sense of distance and disconnection from my peers. Even being physically in West Jerusalem was hard for me."



Similar dynamics were reported within supervisory relationships. Several psychologists described supervision as a particularly challenging arena during this period, marked by feelings of being misunderstood or insufficiently recognized in their specific professional and personal positioning. One participant explained:

“Navigating the relationship with the supervisors was the hardest. There were so many dilemmas and conflicts. I felt they didn’t really understand me. I even found myself thinking a lot about how the supervisor sees me-as an Arab woman.”

Another interviewee emphasized the need for supervisory spaces that could accommodate their specific context and identity-related concerns:

“What I need is a safe and open space to express ourselves-supervision that also responds to my very specific needs as a Palestinian psychologist.”

Taken together, these accounts point to a heightened sense of polarization within professional relationships during this period. One participant summarized this experience in stark terms:

“There’s ‘us’ and there’s ‘them,’ and this split... they really did only see themselves; they were in great distress. We got to a place where my very existence threatens your existence.”

These narratives illustrate how broader socio-political tensions were experienced as entering professional and organizational spaces, shaping perceptions of trust, recognition, and safety even within established collegial and supervisory relationships.

Personal and Professional Identity Issues

This theme captures participants’ reflections on personal and professional identity dilemmas that intensified under conditions of sustained socio-political and occupational strain. Psychologists described questioning core aspects of their professional roles, values, and sense of purpose, as the boundaries between personal, national, and professional identities became increasingly blurred. One interviewee articulated this process as follows:

“I thought a lot about the question: ‘Whom are you serving? Which values do I represent?’ That question was shaken in me during the war.”

Several participants described experiences of profound confusion and disorientation, extending beyond professional uncertainty to encompass broader questions of moral positioning and self-definition. One psychologist expressed this sense of loss in deeply personal terms:

“What hurts me most is that I feel I lost who I am. I can’t understand who I am. What is a good person? Who is a good person in this place?”

For some interviewees, these reflections were accompanied by reconsideration of their relationship to the organization and their future professional trajectories. Participants described a growing desire for autonomy and control over their professional choices, often framed as a way to preserve integrity and agency within a complex institutional context. As one interviewee explained:

“I just want to become a specialist so I can be independent and decide whom it suits me to work with... without the institution that doesn’t represent me telling me what’s right and what’s not.”

Taken together, these accounts illustrate how the broader socio-political rupture was experienced as extending beyond immediate professional challenges, reshaping psychologists’ sense of identity, agency, and belonging. These identity-related tensions form an important backdrop for understanding participants’ professional experiences during this period and inform the interpretive framework developed in the discussion section.

Discussion

A central theme emerging from the interviews concerns the relationship between professional identity and national identity under conditions of heightened socio-political stress. Most participants described a process that began with uncertainty and confusion regarding the boundaries between these identities and gradually evolved into an increased awareness of their interconnection. This trajectory is consistent with theoretical accounts of identity salience during crises, which suggest that threatening or unstable contexts tend to intensify the prominence of social and collective identities [13].

Placing these findings in dialogue with previous research highlights both shared and context-specific dynamics. A parallel study of Jewish educational psychologists who worked with evacuees during the same period similarly identified an initial phase of professional and emotional disorientation [15]. However, that study also described a rapid consolidation of national identification within a broadly shared and socially supported framework. In contrast, participants in the present study described their national identity as a source of vulnerability rather than collective validation, often accompanied by feelings of insecurity and social marginalization. Differences in the surrounding social and organizational environments may help explain why indicators of distress were reported more prominently among Arab professionals during this period [16]. Together, these findings underscore how social positioning and minority status



shape the ways in which crises are experienced and integrated at the professional level.

Participants' accounts further illustrate how professional identity was reshaped through its entanglement with national belonging. Psychologists described occupying a dual position: providing psychological services to Palestinian communities while being employed within a municipal organization of the Jerusalem Municipality serving a diverse population of Arab and Jewish clients and professionals. Several participants perceived a mismatch between the psychological models in which they had been trained—often described as Western in origin and mediated through Hebrew—and the lived realities and needs of their communities. Similar tensions have been documented among Arab professionals in caregiving roles, including school counselors, social workers, and psychologists, who report experiences of identity splitting, mistrust within mixed professional settings, and limited applicability of dominant professional models in minority contexts [6,10,11]. The present findings closely align with this body of literature.

As the crisis progressed, participants described a parallel process of consolidation at the level of local teams. Home stations and peer groups emerged as primary sources of emotional containment and professional support, providing spaces in which a renewed sense of professional identity could be sustained. These local configurations enabled the development of practice approaches perceived as more responsive to contextual needs. Research on trauma and collective stress consistently highlights social support as a key resilience factor [17], particularly in contexts of collective trauma [18]. In the present study, shared peer spaces appeared to foster feelings of efficacy, mutual recognition, and professional pride, reinforcing participants' sense of in-group value. This process resonates with social identity research suggesting that positive in-group differentiation can enhance self-evaluation and perceived competence [19].

At the same time, participants reported a pronounced sense of organizational invisibility during the early stages of the crisis. Experiences of not being seen or acknowledged by the broader system were described as intensifying reliance on social and professional in-group identities. Findings from the parallel study of Jewish psychologists indicate a contrasting experience, characterized by a stronger sense of organizational recognition and personal safety [15]. Taken together, these studies suggest that while professionals across groups experienced the period as a crisis, perceptions of unsafety and invisibility—particularly at the intersection of personal and professional identity—were more salient among minority professionals. This pattern aligns with research indicating that minority identities tend to be more complex and multilayered, whereas majority identities are often experienced as more stable and cohesive [20].

In addition to identity-related tensions, participants articulated a range of intense emotional responses, including fear, anger, frustration, and helplessness. Some of these emotions were associated with direct exposure to crisis-related conditions in daily life, while others reflected features commonly associated with collective trauma. Collective trauma has been described as disrupting communal bonds and undermining a shared sense of belonging, often accompanied by efforts to reconstruct a collective “we” [21]. The recurrent search for collective meaning and affiliation observed in participants' narratives is consistent with this conceptualization.

Participants' emotional experiences also bear resemblance to processes of secondary traumatization. One indicator supporting this interpretation was the reported blurring between clients' emotional states and psychologists' own affective responses. Previous research emphasizes the protective role of organizational support, supervision, and collegial dialogue in mitigating secondary traumatization among helping professionals [22,23]. In contrast, participants in the present study described an initial phase marked by perceived insufficient organizational containment and disruption of supervisory frameworks. Only later did they report renewed support from local leadership, reconstruction of supervisory structures, and strengthened peer dialogue. It is therefore plausible that the temporary absence of organizational resilience factors contributed to heightened vulnerability to secondary traumatization during the early phase of the crisis.

A psychodynamic perspective offers additional insight into these dynamics. From a Kleinian framework, heightened anxiety may activate defensive processes characterized by splitting and projection, as individuals and groups attempt to manage overwhelming affect [24]. Menzies [25] extended this understanding to organizational contexts, suggesting that institutions under stress may become repositories for projected fear, anger, and helplessness.

This conceptualization resonates with participants' descriptions of their organizational experiences. The broader municipal system was often perceived as distant or insufficiently responsive, while local teams and peer groups were experienced as containing and supportive. This pattern also parallels Darr's [8] notion of split attribution in mixed workplaces, whereby negative affect is directed toward institutional structures in order to preserve functional relationships within immediate work groups.

Notably, strategies commonly recommended in crisis settings—such as creating open spaces for dialogue—were often experienced by participants as unfeasible during this period. Despite professional familiarity with concepts of integration and reflection, the intensity of anxiety led many to perceive such spaces as potentially



destabilizing rather than containing. This observation is consistent with research on Jewish–Arab professional and educational settings, which indicates that even sustained cooperation does not necessarily dissolve “us and them” distinctions, and that increased exposure may, under certain conditions, heighten perceived threat [6,7].

Winnicott’s concept of a potential space suggests that shared reflective environments can facilitate the differentiation between internal experience and external reality, thereby supporting integration [26]. However, Fischer [14] cautions that when anxiety becomes overwhelming, such spaces may transform into sites of emotional contagion [27] and regressive group dynamics. Within this framework, temporary reliance on defensive processes—such as partial withdrawal or symbolic distancing from the broader organization—may serve an adaptive stabilizing function. In the present study, granting East Jerusalem teams greater autonomy appeared to support short-term cohesion and, over time, enabled a gradual return toward more integrative organizational processes.

Reflexive Commentary and Integrative Conclusions

In this section, we offer a reflexive commentary intended to contextualize the empirical findings by drawing on the experiences of senior professionals who held leadership, supervisory, and research roles within the municipal psychological service during the period under study. These reflections are not presented as additional empirical data, but rather as an interpretive lens through which to examine how the organizational dynamics identified in the interviews—such as splitting, identity tension, emotional overload, and challenges of containment—were also experienced at managerial and systemic levels. In line with qualitative and organizational scholarship, reflexive engagement is understood here as a means of deepening analytic understanding in emotionally and politically complex contexts [14].

Dr. Zehava Rosenthal, Director – Navigating Personal, National, and Professional Roles

October 7 unfolded for me within a deeply personal context. Early that morning, my son called from the Gaza envelope, describing his attempt to escape imminent danger. Although he survived and returned home, the psychological impact was profound, and he soon rejoined his unit. At the same time, my husband entered extended reserve duty, and another son returned from abroad to support his military unit. Only gradually did the cumulative scale of loss within our broader community become apparent.

Alongside this personal reality, I was responsible for leading a large municipal psychological service during an unfolding emergency. Tens of thousands of evacuees arrived in the city, new

educational frameworks were rapidly established, and psychological services had to be mobilized under extreme time pressure. The urgency to act left little space for personal processing, and the boundaries between personal, national, and professional roles became increasingly blurred.

I experienced intense tension among my identities as a mother, citizen, professional, and organizational leader. In retrospect, I recognize how anxiety narrowed my capacity for mentalization. Attachment to my primary social identity as a Jewish Israeli made it difficult, at times, to simultaneously hold awareness of the distress experienced by Arab psychologists working in East Jerusalem. Social identity theory provides a useful framework for understanding this dynamic, suggesting that under conditions of threat, social belonging becomes more salient, often at the expense of integrative capacity [13].

Within these constraints, I granted East Jerusalem teams increased autonomy, relying on team directors to contain and address their teams’ needs locally. At the time, this decision represented a pragmatic response that enabled continued organizational functioning.

Several weeks later, it became clear that many psychologists in East Jerusalem experienced this period as one of emotional invisibility. This realization emerged during a joint Developmental Unit meeting attended by Jewish and Arab interns, specialists, and supervisors. Despite careful facilitation, participants from East Jerusalem articulated deep fear and distress:

“Why are we being asked to condemn? Do we ask you to condemn when an Arab is murdered? We are afraid-of our clients and of the authorities. Within our own people we are traitors; within our professional lives we are guilty.”

These expressions coexisted with empathy for Jewish suffering and acknowledgment of the magnitude of the collective trauma. The emotional range was wide and sincere, underscoring the difficulty—if not impossibility—of adopting a single organizational stance capable of encompassing such divergent experiences without causing further harm.

A subsequent visit to the Flowers Gate team was similarly charged. I entered with the intention of listening and mentalizing, yet I became acutely aware of a symmetry: my attention had narrowed toward my own group’s suffering, while theirs had narrowed toward theirs. This mutual constriction was painful but illuminating.

East Jerusalem team leaders occupied a particularly complex position, holding their own distress while representing their teams within management forums dominated by Jewish professionals’ experiences of crisis. Questions of loyalty—Where do I belong?



Whom do I represent? -became salient for all involved. Leadership under such conditions required tolerating ambiguity and resisting the impulse toward premature integration.

Dr. Anan Srour, Flowers Gate Team Director – Holding Dual Belonging

As a co-author, I chose not to read the interview transcripts, entrusting my colleagues with thematic analysis, given my direct managerial relationship with the interviewees during the war. This positioned me simultaneously as an insider and an observer.

Two moments illustrate this tension. The first followed the killing of a student by police near our station. When I contacted the team seeking support, no one agreed to accompany me. In that moment, I experienced a sense of abandonment and accused them of avoidance-an interpretation that, in retrospect, reflected my own helplessness. I went alone to the school, where anger was directed toward me as a representative of the municipal system, and dialogue was not possible.

The second moment occurred when I was invited to the funeral of a murdered hostage. Although deeply moved by the bereaved mother's acknowledgment of Palestinian suffering, I hesitated, fearing that my presence might be perceived as disloyal within my own community.

These experiences highlighted how, under acute identity threat, the professional self-often a stabilizing anchor-may become destabilized. As reflected in the interview data, familiar psychological tools felt insufficient to contain the emotional and moral complexity of the situation.

Dr. Evguenia Shilshtein , Head of the Research Unit – Between Splitting and Integration

For many years, I supervised psychologists working in East Jerusalem and was familiar with ongoing identity-related tensions. After October 7, I became involved in emergency efforts, drawing on my parallel work with Ukrainian psychologists since 2022, where splitting emerged as a necessary defensive response under conditions of extreme threat.

Shortly after the events of October 7, I reached out to Arab psychologists I had previously supervised. Their immediate reactions-fear, overwhelm, gratitude, and anger-left me uncertain whether continued engagement would be containing or destabilizing. Once again, splitting appeared to function as a temporary means of emotional survival.

Encounters of such intensity can blur professional boundaries and generate what Fischer [14] terms a “reversed potential space,”

characterized by emotional contagion [27] and organizational disintegration (Menzies, 1960). I sensed that further engagement at that moment risked exacerbating instability rather than fostering integration.

Integrative Reflection

Across these reflexive accounts, a shared pattern emerges: during periods of extreme crisis, identity boundaries may collapse, defensive processes such as splitting may temporarily dominate, and established professional tools may feel inadequate. At the same time, these dynamics point toward possibilities for repair. Acknowledging the coexistence of fear, pain, and identification across roles and identities may constitute a necessary foundation for organizational healing. Leadership in such contexts involves sustaining complexity long enough to allow new forms of connection and meaning to emerge, rather than prematurely resolving tension.

Summary and Implications

Two years after the events described in this study, the municipal psychological service has largely returned-at least structurally-to its pre-war functioning. Nevertheless, questions remain regarding the extent to which the splits experienced during this period have left enduring traces within the organization. Reflecting on this period offers an opportunity to identify lessons relevant to future crises.

The study and collaborative writing process represent an initial step toward developing a reflective organizational practice. In retrospect, several early responses-initially guided by intuition-proved theoretically grounded. Allowing East Jerusalem teams a period of localized focus and relative autonomy enabled a temporary adaptive split that provided containment and strengthened internal cohesion. Recognizing such processes may support a shift from reactive crisis management toward more deliberate, theory-informed organizational responses.

Looking forward, fostering deeper interpersonal familiarity across teams and cultivating psychologically informed reflective spaces may facilitate movement toward greater integration. From a psychodynamic perspective, this involves supporting a stance capable of holding ambivalence and complexity while maintaining a unified organizational framework that serves diverse communities.

From a practical standpoint, the findings point to several implications for organizations operating in politically divided contexts: the importance of culturally attuned supervision, the value of team-level autonomy during acute stress, and the need for

leadership reflexivity when managing diverse professional identities under conditions of collective trauma.

Despite profound challenges, organizations characterized by engaged-even emotionally complex-relationships may be better positioned for repair than those marked by disengagement or avoidance. We hope that this study contributes to a nuanced understanding of organizational functioning under socio-political stress and highlights pathways through which resilience, professional integrity, and shared purpose may be sustained even in times of deep uncertainty.

Sustaining collaborative professional work in a context as complex as Jerusalem can serve as an opportunity to strengthen the provision of culturally responsive psychological services to the city's diverse communities, despite ongoing tensions and structural challenges

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