The Power to be Moral: Affirming Israelis’ and Palestinians’ Agency Promotes Prosocial Tendencies across Group Boundaries

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Based on recent extensions of the needs-based model of reconciliation, we argue that in conflicts characterized by mutual transgressions, such as the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, group members prioritize their agency-related over morality-related needs. Optimistically, however, two studies conducted among Israeli Jews (Study 1) and West Bank Palestinians (Study 2) found that addressing group members’ pressing need for agency by affirming their in-group’s strength, competence, and self-determination brought their moral considerations to the fore, leading to stronger prosocial tendencies across group boundaries. These studies suggest that group members need to feel secure and agentic in order to allow their otherwise unprioritized moral needs to come into play. Practically, our insights regarding the positive effects of agency affirmation can be used in the planning of interventions by dialog group facilitators, mediators, or group leaders who wish to encourage members to relinquish some power in order to exhibit greater morality toward their out-group.

One of the main messages of the present volume is that due to the widespread conception of groups as inherently “tribal” (Hawkins, 1997), as well as the influence of historical events such as the Second World War, the traditional focus of social psychological theorizing and research has been on negative intergroup processes, while positive intergroup processes remained relatively overlooked (Siem,
Stürmer, & Pittinsky, this volume). Also evident in related disciplines such as anthropology (Fry, 2006), this predominantly negative view of intergroup relations has overshadowed key processes such as attraction and curiosity for foreign cultures, as well as intergroup helping and cooperation (Siem et al., this volume; Tropp & Mallett, 2011).

One of the resulting lacunae has to do with the role of morality in intergroup relations (Leach, Ellemers, & Barreto, 2007). Indeed, prominent social psychological theories designed to provide a general framework for understanding intergroup relations, including social dominance theory (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999), group position theory (Blumer, 1958), and realistic group conflict theory (LeVine & Campbell, 1972), have stressed groups’ competition over status, dominance, power, and control over valued resources at the expense of groups’ need for morality. Even when this theorizing did acknowledge groups’ moral motives and behavior, these have often been viewed as subservient to the need for power and dominance rather than reflecting an authentic motivation. For example, Saguy, Dovidio, and Pratto (2008) found that in a situation of intergroup contact between Ashkenazi and Mizrahi Jews, Ashkenazi Jews (representing the advantaged group) preferred to talk about the commonalities rather than the differences between the groups. This preference was interpreted as a strategic attempt to obscure group-based power inequality by fostering a false sense of harmony. However, an alternative explanation—that Ashkenazi Jews’ preference reflected a genuine wish to behave in a communal way toward the Mizrahi group—has not been examined (see Shnabel & Ullrich, 2013, for a discussion of this research).

This relative deemphasizing of group members’ authentic need for morality may be partially responsible for these theories’ failure to satisfactorily account for the phenomenon of “solidarity-based collective action” (Becker, 2012), namely, advantaged group members’ readiness to act to promote the just cause of other groups, even at the expense of their own group’s power and privilege (e.g., Harth, Kessler, & Leach, 2008). A striking illustration of this possibility is the growing recognition of animal rights (e.g., Singer, 1975) and related legislation.

Arguably, group members have a genuine need for morality, with evolutionary roots in nonhuman primates (de Waal, 2006), which is not just of disguising their “real” motivation for power. In line with this argument, Leach et al. (2007) demonstrated in a series of studies that morality was perceived by group members as the most important dimension of their in-group’s identity—essential to their pride in and psychological distance from or closeness to it. They concluded that “recognizing the importance of morality to in-group membership may be an important first step toward understanding its importance in intergroup relations” (Leach et al. 2007, p. 248).

The needs-based model of reconciliation (Nadler & Shnabel, 2008), the theoretical framework that guides the present research, integrates Leach et al.’s (2007) theorizing with the more traditional social psychological emphasis on
power-related needs. Our framework suggests that group members have both morality- and power-related needs. Yet, the degree to which each of these needs influences group members’ tendency to behave prosocially across group boundaries is determined by their in-group’s role (victim vs. perpetrator) within the given social context. We now turn to a detailed review of this model, which seeks to explain the dynamics between conflicting groups.

The Needs-Based Model of Reconciliation: An Overview

The “Big Two” theory (Abele & Wojciszke, 2013) suggests that there are two fundamental content dimensions along which group members perceive their own and other groups: the agency dimension, representing traits such as power, competence, influence, and self-determination; and the moral–social dimension (also called the communion dimension), representing traits such as morality, warmth, and trustworthiness (see also Fiske, Cuddy, & Click, 2007). Building on this theorizing, the needs-based model argues that transgressions cause asymmetric threats to the identities of victim and perpetrator groups (SimanTov-Nachlieli, Shnabel, & Nadler, 2013). Victims, who feel inferior in terms of power, control, and honor (Scheff, 1994), experience threat to their agentic identity. In contrast, perpetrators experience threat to their moral identity, and are concerned with being excluded by other groups due to their breaching of common moral standards (Tavuchis, 1991).

Importantly, based on the argument that when a given in-group–out-group distinction is salient, people define themselves in terms of prototypical attributes of their in-group rather than in terms of their individual characteristics (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987), group members may experience these identity threats due to historical or contemporary events in which their in-group has been involved, regardless of their personal involvement. For example, U.S. Americans may experience threat to the agency dimension of their identity when reminded of 9/11, and threat to the morality dimension when reminded of Hiroshima—even if they had no personal role in these events.

The needs-based model further posits that because group members wish to maintain their in-group’s positive identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), experiencing identity threats brings about different motivational states among members of victim and perpetrator groups. Victims experience a need to restore their sense of agency (i.e., respect and ability to determine their outcomes). Consequently, they often exhibit heightened power-seeking behavior (Foster & Rusbult, 1999) and even take vengeance as a means to restore status and agency (Frijda, 1994). Perpetrators, by contrast, experience the need to restore their positive moral identity and regain acceptance in the community from which they feel potentially excluded due to their wrongdoings. Sometimes, perpetrators cope with their culpability through moral disengagement (i.e., minimizing the severity of the harm done or blaming
the victims for bringing it upon themselves; Bandura, 1990). Yet, perpetrators’ need to gain moral–social acceptance may also lead them to seek forgiveness (Shnabel & Nadler, 2008) and show heightened helping behavior toward others, including their victims (Dovidio, Piliavin, Schroeder, & Penner, 2006).

Finally, the needs-based model argues that restoring the agentic and moral identities of victim and perpetrator groups may address these group members’ unmet needs and thus open them for reconciliation. Supporting this argument, a message from Jewish representatives that conveyed moral acceptance toward Germans at the opening of the Berlin Holocaust memorial was found to increase German participants’ readiness to reconcile with the Jews, whereas a message from German representatives that conveyed empowerment toward Jews (e.g., acknowledgment of their right for self-determination) increased Jewish participants’ readiness to reconcile with Germans. Positive messages that failed to address group members’ specific identity-related needs (i.e., an empowering message for Germans, or a message conveying moral–social acceptance for Jews) were relatively ineffective in promoting conciliatory tendencies (Shnabel, Nadler, Ullrich, Dovidio, & Carmi, 2009).

While the German–Jewish relations represent a context in which the roles of victims and perpetrators are clear-cut, many conflicts, including the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, are characterized by mutual transgressions (Bar-Tal, 2013), even if not on the same scales. A recent research that explored conflicts characterized by such blurred, “dual” social roles (SimanTov-Nachlieli & Shnabel, 2014) revealed that when Israeli Jews were reminded of incidents in which their in-group was victimized by Palestinians, they experienced enhanced motivation to restore their in-group’s agency (expressing greater wish for a “strong Israel”) and showed less prosocial tendencies toward Palestinians (e.g., willingness to provide humanitarian aid to Gaza). When they were reminded of incidents in which their in-group victimized Palestinians, on the other hand, they experienced enhanced motivation to restore their in-group’s moral identity (expressing greater wish for a “moral Israel”) and showed more prosocial tendencies. When reminded of incidents of both victimization and perpetration, Israeli Jews experienced heightened needs for both agency and morality; in terms of behavior, however, they exhibited reduced prosocial tendencies, resembling participants in the victim rather than the perpetrator condition.

This finding, which was replicated in other contexts (see SimanTov-Nachlieli & Shnabel, 2014), suggests that in conflicts characterized by mutual transgressions, group members’ agency-related needs exert more influence on their ultimate behavior than their morality-related needs. Nevertheless, this should not be viewed as contradicting Leach et al.’s (2007) theorizing regarding the role of moral motivations. Rather, consistent with the logic of Maslow’s (1943) classical model of human needs, we theorized that once conflicting group members’ pressing need for agency is addressed through an affirmation of their in-group’s agency, their
morality-related needs would come to fore and exert greater influence on their behavior. This hypothesis is consistent with findings that individuals who enjoyed greater agency exhibited less aggressive behavior following transgressions (Ward, Williams, & Cairns, 2006). It is also consistent with findings that the experience of power predicted more altruistic behavior when one’s care for moral issues (i.e., “moral identity”) was strong (DeCelles, DeRue, Margolis, & Ceranic, 2012)—as is the case in dual conflicts in which group members wish to restore their in-group’s moral identity (SimanTov-Nachlieli & Shnabel, 2014). The present research tested this theorizing in the context of the dual Israeli–Palestinian conflict.

The Present Research

Despite the extreme power asymmetry between Israeli Jews and Palestinians (e.g., Palestinians are subjected to Israeli occupation in the West Bank), the conflict between these groups may be viewed as dual because both sides have transgressed against each other and often compete over the status of the conflict’s “real” victim (Shnabel & Noor, 2012). While this duality leads Palestinians and Israelis to experience the needs to restore both their agency and morality (Shnabel, Halabi, & Noor, 2013), addressing one need comes, or is perceived to come, at the expense of the other. To illustrate, Israel’s attacks on Gaza may prove its power superiority but impair its moral identity, whereas restraint may bolster Israel’s morality but be viewed as eroding its strength and deterrence; a similar “damned if you do, damned if you don’t” catch characterizes the Palestinians’ (in)actions.

Tragically, because the conflict poses an acute threat to Palestinians’ and Israeli Jews’ security (Bar-Tal, 2013), they often feel entitled to behave aggressively toward each other (Klar, Schori-Eyal, & Klar, 2013). However, we theorized that Israelis and Palestinians are relatively inattentive to moral considerations not because they simply do not at all care about being moral toward the out-group (i.e., perceive it to be outside the “scope of justice”; Clayton & Oppotow, 2003), but rather because they are preoccupied with their agency-related need to feel that their in-group is a powerful social actor able to control its outcomes. In line with this reasoning, the present research tested the hypothesis that addressing Israelis’ (Study 1) and Palestinians’ (Study 2) pressing need for agency by reminding them of their in-group’s strength, competence, and resilience would increase their willingness to relinquish the misuse of power for the sake of moral considerations, leading to prosocial behavior across group boundaries.

Our theorizing was based on Sherman, Kinihas, Major, Kim, and Prenovost’s (2007) research, which extended self-affirmation theory (Cohen & Sherman, 2014; Steele, 1988) to the group level. Sherman et al. (2007) demonstrated that the negative effects of identity threat on group members’ motivation, attitudes, and behavior may be alleviated by affirming the positive aspects of their in-group’s identity.
Agency Affirmation Promotes Prosociality

Building on this research, as well as on findings that such affirmations effectively promote prosocial tendencies in conflict contexts only if they focus on the specific identity dimension impaired due to the transgression (Woodyatt & Wenzel, 2014), we developed an *agency affirmation*. This affirmation exposed group members to short texts that highlight their in-group’s agentic identity, namely, its strength, competence, resilience, and control over outcomes. We predicted that Israelis and Palestinians whose in-group’s agency was affirmed would show greater willingness to relinquish the use of power for the sake of moral considerations, and that this, in turn, would lead to greater prosocial tendencies across group boundaries.

In addition, we tested the effect of a *moral threat* manipulation on Israeli Jews’ and Palestinians’ mutual prosocial tendencies. Based on previous findings suggesting that group members view morality as the most important dimension in their in-group’s identity (Leach et al., 2007) and may respond to threats to their in-group’s morality by increased helping tendencies (Dovidio et al., 2006), such a threat could be assumed to increase Israelis’ and Palestinians prosociality. An alternative prediction, however, was that the exposure to moral threat would fail to affect Israelis’ and Palestinians prosociality because the experience of such threat (e.g., boycott initiatives against one’s in-group due to its immoral acts; condemnations of terror attacks) becomes chronic in intractable conflicts (Bar-Tal, 2013). As conflicting group members become inured to such threats (Bleich, Gelkopf, & Solomon, 2003), they might become unresponsive and resort to their “habituated course of action” (Bar-Tal, 2001, p. 620) even in response to new inputs. This habituated response to moral threats was illustrated in a speech by Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu: “There is a new campaign against us . . . but this is not new. Boycott campaigns against Jews have always existed” (“Netanyahu: Boycott campaign is anti-Semitic,” 2014). We therefore had a bidirectional prediction pertaining to the effect of moral threat on prosociality. Importantly, finding that agency affirmation—but not moral threat—increased prosociality would support our theorizing regarding the need to address conflicting groups’ pressing need for agency before their moral needs can come into play.

**Study 1**

Israeli Jewish participants were randomly assigned to one of four experimental conditions using a 2 (moral threat [yes, no]) × 2 (agency-affirmation [yes, no]) between-subjects design. Following the experimental manipulation, participants reported their readiness to relinquish power for the sake of moral considerations, as well as their prosocial tendencies toward Palestinians. While we expected the main effect of moral threat (to which group members may have become habituated) to be either positive or null, we predicted a positive main effect for the agency-affirmation condition, such that agency affirmation would increase participants’
willingness to relinquish power for the sake of moral considerations, which would, in turn, increase their prosocial tendencies toward Palestinians.

Method

Participants. One-hundred-and-seven Israeli Jewish students registered in the subject pool of a large Israeli university. To avoid disproportionate influence of outlying observations (McClelland, 2000), three outliers (with studentized residuals > 2.5) were excluded. Hence, the final sample included 104 participants (71 women, $M_{\text{age}} = 25.35$, $SD = 3.19$; 35.7% rightists, 35.5% leftists, 28.8% centrist).

Materials and procedure. In response to online materials, the participants provided demographic information including political orientation ($1 = \text{radically rightist}$ to $7 = \text{radically leftist}$) and were then randomly assigned to one of four conditions. Participants assigned to the agency-affirmation condition read a text that affirmed Israel’s agency (see Derks et al., 2011, for group affirmation through the reading of short texts):

> Israel is considered one of the strongest nations in the world. [...] Israel’s military industries develop advanced technologies that contribute to its security, strength and resilience. [...] It ranks first in terms of economic viability and crisis resilience, and in investment in research and development. Seven Israelis have won the Nobel Prize for their contributions to humanity, and Israeli medical and agricultural developments are a source of pride and strength [...].

In the moral-threat condition, participants were exposed to a text challenging Israel’s morality:

> Every nation needs a moral compass that will guide its actions. [...] Israel must act ethically toward the Palestinians, otherwise we might find ourselves denying who we are and crumbling from the inside because of the loss of faith in our righteousness, as well as outcast from the outside. [...] While in the past Israel had been perceived as moral, since the 80s (the First Intifada) this image was greatly tarnished [...].

The agency-affirmation-and-moral-threat condition combined both texts, whereas the control condition included none.

We next administered the dependent measures, which used a seven-point Likert scales ($1 = \text{not at all}$ to $7 = \text{very much}$). Following manipulation checks confirming text comprehension, participants indicated their agreement with two items measuring their willingness to relinquish power for morality (e.g., “Israel must give up its power superiority in order to be just and fair with the Palestinians,” $r(104) = .59$, $p < .001$). The purpose of these items was to capture participants’ actual readiness to make sacrifices in terms of power superiority out of moral considerations (rather than for other reasons, such as the ineffectiveness of using power). Finally, six items measured participants’ prosocial behavioral tendencies
### Table 1. Covariate Corrected Means and Standard Errors (in Parentheses) for Studies 1 and 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study 1 (Israeli Jews)</th>
<th>No affirmation</th>
<th>Agency affirmation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No threat</td>
<td>Moral threat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$(n = 28)$</td>
<td>$(n = 25)$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$(n = 26)$</td>
<td>$(n = 25)$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prosocial tendencies</td>
<td>4.07a (.173)</td>
<td>4.17a (.182)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relinquish power for morality</td>
<td>3.11a (.226)</td>
<td>3.06a (.238)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study 2 (West Bank Palestinians)</th>
<th>No affirmation</th>
<th>Agency affirmation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No threat</td>
<td>Moral threat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$(n = 17)$</td>
<td>$(n = 14)$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$(n = 17)$</td>
<td>$(n = 12)$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prosocial tendencies</td>
<td>4.47a (.301)</td>
<td>4.70a (.331)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relinquish power for morality</td>
<td>3.35a (.449)</td>
<td>3.89ab (.495)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Pursuant to statements toward Palestinians (e.g., “Israel must provide humanitarian aid to Gaza”; “Israel must invest substantial financial resources for the betterment of the Palestinians”; $\alpha = .83$). Upon completion, participants were thanked and debriefed.

### Results

Given the strong association between political orientation and behavioral tendencies toward Palestinians (a leftist orientation significantly increased prosociality, $p < .001$), we controlled for political orientation in all analyses reported below. This allowed us to isolate the experimental conditions’ unique effect on prosocial tendencies. Means and standard errors of the dependent variables are presented in the upper part of Table 1.

A two-way ANOVA revealed the predicted main effect of agency affirmation: affirmed participants showed greater prosociality, $F(1,99) = 4.80, p = .031$, $\eta_p^2 = .046$. The main effect of moral threat was nonsignificant, $F(1,99) = 0.79, p = .376, \eta_p^2 = .008$, as was the two-way interaction, $F(1,99) = 0.09, p = .761, \eta_p^2 = .001$. An additional ANCOVA revealed that affirmed participants showed greater willingness to relinquish power for morality, $F(1,99) = 4.25, p = .042, \eta_p^2 = .041$. Again, the main effect of moral threat was nonsignificant, $F(1,99) = 0.89, p = .348, \eta_p^2 = .009$, as was the interaction, $F(1,99) = 1.25, p = .267, \eta_p^2 = .012$. Figure 1 presents the results of a bootstrapping mediation analysis (1,000 resamples): as predicted, the indirect effect of agency affirmation on prosociality through willingness to relinquish power for morality was significant, $b = .05, SE = .03$, 95% CI [0.005, 0.147].
Study 1 revealed a positive effect of agency affirmation on Israeli Jews’ prosocial tendencies toward Palestinians. Moreover, in line with our theorizing, this effect was mediated by increased readiness to give up some power out of moral considerations. In addition, consistent with previous theorizing that parties involved in an intractable conflict become habituated to moral threats (Bar-Tal, 2013), our threat manipulation failed to promote prosociality. As always with null effects, this failure might stem from various methodological limitations, such as lack of sufficient statistical power or the manipulation’s weakness. For example, perhaps, extreme moral threats (e.g., images in which in-group members torture out-group members, as in the Abu-Ghraib photos) would have led to stronger prosocial tendencies even in the absence of agency affirmation. Thus, while our findings should not necessarily be interpreted as proving the ineffectiveness of moral threats, they should be viewed as demonstrating the effectiveness of agency affirmation in increasing Israeli Jews’ prosociality toward Palestinians.

Study 2

Although Study 1 supported our hypothesis, it was important to show that its results did not stem from the unique status of Israelis as the stronger party in the conflict. Therefore, Study 2 was designed to test our theorizing among Palestinians who, as the weaker party, might be less susceptible to agency affirmation. Moreover, because Palestinians are often perceived as the victim group—a social role associated with superior morality (Shnabel & Noor, 2012)—they may experience a comparatively less pressing need to restore their moral identity. Thus, even if their agency is successfully affirmed, they might fail to respond by increasing their attentiveness to moral considerations as in the Israeli group.
Demonstrating the effectiveness of agency affirmation among Palestinians was also important for establishing that the increase in prosociality following such affirmation reflects group members’ genuine moral considerations, rather than impression management concerns. Specifically, members of dominant groups sometimes help their out-group strategically, as a means to boost their image as kind and moral while at the same time reasserting their dominance (Nadler, Halabi, & Harpaz-Gorodeisky, 2009). If so, it is possible that the heightened prosociality observed among affirmed Israeli Jews in Study 1 reflected a “noblesse oblige” response, whose real purpose was to reassert their superiority. This possibility, however, would not account for an increase in prosociality among Palestinians who were never dominant to begin with.

Method

Participants. Sixty-one Palestinian students from the West Bank were recruited to participate in an online study in exchange for payment. One outlier (studentized residuals > 2.5) was excluded. Hence, the final sample included 60 participants (24 women, $M_{age} = 24.66$, $SD = 4.45$; 73.4% were religious, 6.7% secular, 16.7% neutral, and 3.2% have not indicated their religiosity).

Materials and procedure. The design and procedure were identical to Study 1; materials and measures were translated to Arabic and adjusted to the Palestinian context. Participants were randomly assigned to the four experimental conditions. The text in the agency-affirmation condition affirmed the Palestinians’ strength, self-determination, and resilience:

The Palestinian people are known worldwide for resiliency and inner strength. The Palestinian nation is strong and cohesive, standing firm in the face of many challenges. The Palestinian economy is on the rise. [. . . ] Palestinians have growing intellectual and cultural influence, as the number of Palestinian intellectuals, athletes, lecturers and scientists in universities gradually increases [. . .].

The text in the moral-threat condition read:

Every nation needs a moral compass that will guide its actions. Despite the occupation and oppression the Palestinians must act ethically toward the Israelis, otherwise we might find ourselves denying who we are and crumbling from the inside because of the loss of faith in the legitimacy of the struggle, as well as outcast from the outside. [. . . ] While in the past the Palestinian people had been perceived as moral, since the 2000s (the Second Intifada) this image was greatly tarnished [. . .].

The agency-affirmation-and-moral-threat condition combined both texts, whereas the control condition included none. Following the manipulation checks for text comprehension, two items measured participants’ willingness to give up the misuse of power out of moral considerations (e.g., “Even at the cost of relinquishing the use of force, the Palestinian people must act morally toward the
Jews,” $r(60) = .56, p < .001$). Six items measured participants’ prosociality (e.g., “Palestinians should not hesitate to provide logistical support to Israel in cases of natural disasters such as the Mount Carmel fire”; “The Palestinian Authority must help Israel in environmental projects such as waste and sewage treatment,” $\alpha = .74$). Upon completion, participants were thanked and debriefed.

**Results and Discussion**

Means and standard errors are presented in the lower part of Table 1. A two-way ANOVA revealed a marginally significant agency-affirmation effect on prosociality, such that affirmed Palestinians tended to exhibit greater prosocial tendencies, $F(1,56) = 3.47, p = .062, \eta_p^2 = .060$. The effect of moral threat, $F(1,56) = 0.30, p = .582, \eta_p^2 = .005$, and the two-way interaction, $F(1,56) = 0.03, p = .867, \eta_p^2 < .001$, were nonsignificant. The effect of agency affirmation on willingness to relinquish power for morality was in the expected direction, yet failed to reach significance, $F(1,56) = 2.11, p = .121, \eta_p^2 = .036$. The effect of moral threat, $F(1,56) = 0.10, p = .732, \eta_p^2 = .002$, and the two-way interaction, $F(1,56) = 0.64, p = .427, \eta_p^2 = .011$, were nonsignificant. Figure 2 presents the results of a bootstrapping (1,000 resamples) mediation analysis. Importantly, the indirect effect of agency affirmation on prosociality through relinquish-power-for-morality was significant, $b = .10, SE = .08, 95\% CI [.004, .317]$. These findings demonstrate the generalizability of the effectiveness of agency affirmation across two groups who face substantially different circumstances.

**General Discussion**

Two studies demonstrated that whereas moral threats did not influence participants’ prosocial tendencies, the affirmation of Israeli Jews’ (Study 1) and

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1Due to the power asymmetry between Israelis and Palestinians, we used different items to measure the two dependent variables in the two groups (e.g., it made no sense to ask Palestinians about their willingness to provide humanitarian aid to Israel). Despite the difference in operationalization, the dependent measures for both groups were conceptually similar.

2The marginality of the total agency-affirmation effect on prosociality may be due to the small sample size, which interferes with the ability to replicate results across studies (Schimmack, 2012). We could not proceed with data collection due to a dramatic exacerbation of the conflict, which was expected to critically affect participants’ response set. One approach to boost statistical power (see Schimmack, 2012) was to collapse the data across Studies 1 and 2 ($N = 164$). When the two studies were entered into a single analysis, a clear pattern supporting our hypotheses emerged, such that the main effect of agency affirmation on both prosociality, $F(1,156) = 6.55, p = .011, \eta_p^2 = .040$, and readiness to relinquish power for morality, $F(1,156) = 5.77, p = .017, \eta_p^2 = .036$, was significant, as was the indirect effect of agency affirmation on prosociality through readiness to relinquish power for morality, $b = .13, SE = .06, 95\% CI [.026, .253]$. 
Palestinians’ (Study 2) in-group agency allowed their morality-related needs and considerations to come to fore, leading to stronger mutual prosocial tendencies. The conclusion derived from these studies—that group members need to feel secure and agentic before their morality-related needs can come to the fore—is consistent with the finding of Burhan and van Leeuwen (2016) that the removal of perceived threat is a prerequisite for fostering support and hospitality toward immigrants among host society members. Our conclusion is also consistent with Leach et al.’s (2007) argument that in its emphasis on power-related needs in intergroup relations, traditional social psychological theorizing has overlooked the importance of morality. As mentioned in the Introduction, Leach and colleagues have urged social psychologists to explore the role of morality in intergroup relations. Consistent with this call, the present research aimed to reach a better understanding of the conditions under which group members’ moral needs can be mobilized to promote positive intergroup relations, even in the context of an intractable conflict.

From a broader theoretical perspective, the current research extends the existing research on intergroup helping, which has typically focused on factors located either in the nature of relations between groups that provide and receive help, or in the help recipients’ identity as perceived by help providers. To illustrate the former, the intergroup-helping-as-status relations model (e.g., Nadler & Halabi, 2015) has...
examined how the security of the status relations between groups (the extent to which group disparity is perceived as stable and legitimate; Tajfel & Turner, 1986) affects the type of help (autonomy- vs. dependency-oriented) in-group members choose to offer to or are willing to accept from out-group members. As for the latter, Lotz-Schmitt, Siem, and Stürmer (2015) examined how group members’ prosocial behavior toward an out-group member in need is influenced by evaluations of his or her trustworthiness, competence, and sociability. The contribution of the present work lies in underscoring the importance of internal processes of identity restoration among help providers. Our work suggests that regardless of the out-group’s characteristics (e.g., the extent to which its members are perceived as trustworthy) or the nature of relations with it (e.g., the extent to which intergroup hierarchy is perceived as stable), the extent to which group members perceive their own identity to be secure critically affects their prosocial tendencies.

Our findings have also major practical implications. First, the insights about the positive effects of agency affirmation can be used in the planning of interventions such as dialog groups (i.e., encounters between members of conflicting groups in educational settings), designed to open adversarial groups to reconciliation. Existing interventions often stress the importance of empathy. For example, interventions based on the contact hypothesis (see Davies & Aron, this volume; Paolini, Wright, Dys-Steenbergen, & Favara, this volume) encourage cross-group friendship because they promote outcomes such as empathy, warmth, and positive regard for the out-group (see the outcome variables examined by Davies & Aron, this volume). Also, Pittinsky and Montoya (this volume) pointed to the potential role of empathic joy experienced as the result of taking the out-group members’ perspective in promoting positive intergroup relations; and Maoz and Bar-On (2002) developed the to reflect and trust (TRT) intervention highlighting mutual recognition of suffering (empathic sorrow) among members of conflicting groups such as Jews and Germans. Without detracting from the importance of empathy, we argue that interventions that focus exclusively on the facilitation of empathic joy or sorrow might leave the conflicting group members’ pressing need for agency unmet. Hence, their empathy and moral concern toward the out-group, even if successfully increased due to the intervention, could fail to translate into prosociality. Thus, existing interventions may benefit from affirming the agency of participants’ in-group as a central or at least additional aspect in their programs.

In addition, expressions of empathy and recognition of suffering are effective in bringing about reconciliation only when offered by representatives of the conflicting out-group (Harth & Shnabel, 2015), whereas the agency-affirmation intervention does not require such direct dialog between the conflicting groups. This is an important advantage because direct intergroup communication is often difficult to achieve in contexts of intractable conflicts (Bar-Tal, 2013). Thus, agency affirmation can be a useful tool for mediators who try to convince group leaders to promote conflict resolution and peace. Affirming their in-group’s agency
can also be used by the group leaders themselves, if they seek to encourage their
groups to relinquish control, influence, strength, or dominance for the sake of
being fair and moral toward their out-group.

Agency affirmation can also be implemented in restorative justice
procedures—practices that focus on rectifying relationships damaged by violent
transgressions, rather than on punishing the perpetrators (Wachtel & McCold,
2001) and may include structured encounters between the victims and the per-
petrators and the latter’s involvement in determining, or at least influencing, the
appropriate punishment and/or compensation. These practices are used in interna-
tional peacemaking tribunals such as the South African Truth and Reconciliation
Commission (TRC) as well as in the criminal justice system, schools, social
services, and communities (Boyes-Watson, 2008). Our findings suggest that em-
powering and affirming the victims’ agency as part of these procedures may, at
least to some extent, provide them with “the power to forgive” and thus contribute
to their success.

Despite its potential implications, the current research is not without limi-
tations. One methodological limitation is that participants in the four conditions
were exposed to different lengths of text. Another limitation is that the outcome
variables were self-reported measures, rather than actual behavior such as peace
activism. An even more critical limitation is that an implicit assumption that un-
derlies our work is that group members perceive out-group members as entitled
to (at least) basic human rights. However, in contexts of mass, violence members
of the conflicting out-group are often subjected to “moral exclusion and dehu-
manization,” as they are perceived to be “outside the scope of justice, barred from
the protections of community membership” (Janoff-Bulman & Werther, 2008,
p. 148; see also Clayton & Opotow, 2003, and Wenzel, 2000, for the link be-
tween categorization processes and perceptions of justice and morality). In such
countexts, bringing morality to the fore—the process facilitated by the agency
affirmation—cannot be expected to promote prosocial tendencies toward the con-
flicting out-group. On the contrary, behaving prosocially toward the out-group
might be interpreted as immoral (e.g., as betrayal of the in-group). If so, perhaps,
among extremely radical group members who exclude out-group members from
“the scope of justice,” agency affirmation would lead to increased antisocial ten-
dencies toward the out-group. This possibility should be examined in the future
research.

Bearing in mind the bounding conditions of our conclusions, the present
research found positive effects for agency affirmation, among both Jews and
Palestinians. Based on these findings, and in the spirit of this special issue, we
propose that even in the context of a prolonged and hopelessly intractable conflict
characterized by cycles of mutual violence, addressing conflicting groups’ need
for agency has the potential of stopping the downward spiral of aggression (Staub,
2003) and foster prosocial behavior across group boundaries.
References


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