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# Socio-psychological barriers to peace making: An empirical examination within the Israeli Jewish Society

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## Abstract

Socio-psychological barriers play a major role in the continuation of intractable conflicts. They are responsible for the socio-psychological closure that resists and prevents the entertainment of alternative information that could potentially facilitate the acceptance of ideas advancing peacemaking processes. In an attempt to validate a process model that depicts the functioning of the socio-psychological barriers to conflict resolution, an empirical study was conducted among a nationwide representative sample of Jews in Israel, within the context of the Middle Eastern conflict. The reported study utilized a large scale survey, based on a nationwide representative sample of Israeli Jews who were asked to respond to a questionnaire which included the model's selected variables. As hypothesized, the results showed a path leading from general worldviews (e.g. General values, Right Wing Authoritarianism, Implicit theories about groups) to openness to new information and readiness to compromise through the mediation of the conflict-related societal beliefs (e.g. victimhood, delegitimization). These results indicate that closure to new information that may shed new light on both the rival and the conflict emerges as a crucial factor in the maintenance of society members' non-compromising views. The theoretical as well as the applied implications of the findings are discussed.

## Keywords

barriers, conflict, conflict resolution, freezing

It is well established that socio-psychological barriers hinder the resolution of harsh and lasting conflicts. They pertain to an integrated operation of cognitive, emotional and motivational processes, combined with a pre-existing repertoire of rigid conflict supporting beliefs, world views, and emotions that result in selective, biased and distorting information processing. These socio-psychological barriers are additions to the genuine disagreements that lead to the conflict's eruption and eventually must be resolved. They are responsible for the socio-psychological closure that resists and prevents the entertainment of alternative information that could potentially facilitate the acceptance of ideas advancing

peacemaking processes. Consequently, they play a major role in the continuation of the conflict.

Through the years, a number of approaches have been proposed to describe the nature of the socio-psychological barriers (see Bar-Tal & Halperin, 2011 for review). As an illustration of these approaches, we would note the important work of Lee Ross and his colleagues (Ross & Ward, 1995; Mnookin & Ross, 1995; Maoz et al., 2002) who focused on the cognitive and

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motivational online processes that serve as pivotal barriers during times of negotiation. According to this view, socio-psychological barriers are 'cognitive and motivational processes that impede mutually beneficial exchanges of concessions and render seemingly tractable conflicts refractory to negotiated resolution' (Ross & Ward, 1995: 254). Examples of these processes include cognitive dissonance, loss aversion, reactive devaluation, optimistic overconfidence, naïve realism, and divergent construal (Ross & Ward, 1995).

Another approach centers on emotional factors underlying many conflicts (see Halperin, Sharvit & Gross, 2011; Halperin, 2008, 2011). In this view, some discrete emotional sentiments like fear (Jarymowicz & Bar-Tal, 2006) or hatred (Halperin, 2008, 2011; White, 1984) fuel the continuation of conflicts by hindering attempts to normatively process new ideas and proposals that could potentially contribute to the resolution of the conflict. These individual or group-based emotions do so by leading to selective, biased and distorted information processing (see Halperin, 2011).<sup>1</sup>

Another notable approach focuses on societal beliefs related to conflict. This approach attempts to elucidate a list of these beliefs which feed the conflict's continuation and prevent its peaceful resolution. Among other things, these beliefs include the denial of the other group's identity, the expression of an extremely negative and monolithic view of the adversary (also defined as delegitimization), self moral glorification, a sense of victimhood, strong feelings of patriotism, helplessness and so on (see, as examples, the early work by Kelman, 1965 and White, 1970 and more recent work by Coleman, 2000; Eidelson, 2003; Maoz & McCauley, 2008).

We (Bar-Tal & Halperin, 2011) recently introduced a general, integrative theoretical framework of socio-psychological barriers to conflict resolution that integrates cognitive, motivational and emotional elements, proposed in different approaches, into one process model. In this article, we would like to present an empirical study, conducted among Jews in Israel within the context of the Middle Eastern conflict. This study serves as the first empirical examination regarding some parts of this integrative framework. To this end, we will first briefly describe the proposed integrative model, portray the context of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, and then present the particular study.

## Integrative model of socio-psychological barriers

The model integrates different kinds of barriers and can be described as a process model (see its extensive elaboration in Bar-Tal & Halperin, 2011). The integrated operation of all the model's components leads to closed-mindedness and biased processing of new information that could potentially reduce the conflict's fundamental disagreements and induce support for compromises.

The process description begins with *General worldviews* which are not directly related to the conflict in terms of content, but which sharpen the disagreements. They interact with conflict-supporting societal beliefs and also have a direct effect on information processing and conciliatory beliefs. The list of these general worldviews may be long, but among the more distinctive ones, the following examples should be noted: political ideology (Adorno et al., 1950; Altemeyer, 1981; Jost, 2006; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999), specific values (Schwartz, 1992), religious beliefs (Kimball, 2002), and theories regarding human characteristics (Dweck, 1999).

These worldviews influence how society members perceive the conflict disagreements and form ideological beliefs about the rival, one's own group, and the conflict. Some of the general worldviews support prejudice and delegitimization of the rival, boost ethnocentrism, reinforce xenophobia, sharpen the black and white picture, and thus support the adherence to conflict perpetuating positions. Other worldviews may, on the contrary, advocate openness, reflective thinking, tolerance or acceptance of the other, and thus facilitate peaceful conflict resolution (see for example Beit-Hallahmi & Argyle, 1997; Dweck & Ehrlinger, 2006; Feldman & Stenner, 1997; Golec & Federico, 2004; Guimond et al., 2003; Jost et al., 2003; Kossowska, Bukowski & van Hiel, 2008).

According to the proposed model, the general worldviews are closely associated with the second group of barriers, the societal beliefs. Societal beliefs (Bar-Tal, 2000) evolve during the conflict, are directly related to the conflict, and preserve and feed its continuation. The first category of these beliefs is a cluster called long-term *ideological conflict-supporting beliefs*. These comprise the ethos of conflict (Bar-Tal, 2000, 2007) and include eight themes: (1) societal beliefs about the justness of one's own goals, (2) societal beliefs about security, (3) societal beliefs of positive collective self image, (4) societal beliefs of one's own victimization, (5) societal beliefs of delegitimizing the opponent, (6) societal beliefs of patriotism, (7) societal beliefs of unity, and (8) societal beliefs of peace. These general

<sup>1</sup> Although the other causal direction (i.e. cognition–emotion) is also feasible.

themes are not context specific, that is, they can be found in all societies involved in intractable conflicts. Their content usually provides a biased and one-sided view about the nature of the mutual relations, presents the rival in very negative ways, and portrays their own group using positive and glorifying labels.

The second category of societal belief themes is *circumstantial supporting beliefs of conflict* which are short-term, widely shared beliefs that evolve as a result of particular conditions that appear in the specific conflict (for example, the leader of the rival group is weak and therefore is perceived as unable to implement the potential peace agreement). Nevertheless, all the supporting societal beliefs serve as explicit barriers to the peace process by providing an epistemic basis for the conflict's continuation (Bar-Tal, 2007).

Finally, a third category of barriers presented in the integrative theoretical model includes *negative intergroup emotional sentiments towards the adversary*, which also play a pivotal role in preventing progress towards peaceful conflict resolution (see for example Scheff & Retzinger, 1991; White, 1984; Halperin, 2008, 2011; Halperin et al., 2011a). However, in-depth discussion and empirical investigation of the proposed model's affective aspects are beyond the scope of the current empirical study that focuses mainly on the cognitive dimensions included in the original model.<sup>2</sup>

We suggest that general worldviews, together with conflict-related events, provide the basis for the evolution of supporting (ideological and circumstantial) societal beliefs and negative emotional sentiments. In turn, these beliefs and sentiments provide a prism through which individuals perceive and interpret the reality of the conflict. They are responsible for the selective, biased and distorted processing of new information and experiences. This processing, while preserving, reinforcing, and confirming information, rejects and inhibits any alternative information that may lead to the peace process. Thus, it prevents the entertaining of ideas that suggest

compromises, which are necessary for the peaceful resolution of the conflict.<sup>3</sup>

## The present study

The main goal of the study was to empirically validate some aspects of the introduced integrative process model of socio-psychological barriers. We carried out the study in the context of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict after the conflict had openly re-erupted following years of peaceful negotiations in the 1990s. The violent confrontations between Israeli Jews and Palestinians that broke out in 2000 constituted a major setback to the peace process and had an important influence on the deterioration of the intergroup relations between Jews and Palestinians. The study was conducted in the summer of 2008, a year after the Annapolis Summit (November 2007) which aimed to produce a document resolving the Israeli–Palestinian conflict along the lines of President George W Bush's Roadmap for Peace.

When designing the study, in line with our proposed process model, we assumed that the ideological and circumstantial supporting beliefs of the conflict would mediate the effects of general worldviews on openness to alternative information regarding ways to resolve the conflict. Furthermore, we assumed that the effect of all above-mentioned psychological factors on concrete positions towards compromises would be mediated by levels of openness to new alternative information. Nevertheless, we recognize that it is impossible to include all variables that should potentially appear in the model. Therefore we had to select only a number of key variables from each category of barriers that could altogether demonstrate the validity and the usefulness of the proposed process model.

### General worldviews

The list of constructs that fall into the category of *General worldviews* is a very long one and we decided to use three different characteristics that have been found to play a role in the way conflict is perceived in various studies. Since we only try to demonstrate the effect of the general worldviews, we selected one characteristic from

<sup>2</sup> One of the obvious limitations of the current empirical model is the absence of the affective and emotional factors. That is mainly due to the space limitations within the nationwide survey that did not allow including proper emotional measurement. Yet, indications about the role played by negative intergroup emotions as barriers to conflict resolution can be found in studies we and others have published recently (e.g. Halperin et al., 2008; Halperin, Canetti-Nisim & Hirsch-Hoefler, 2009; Halperin, Sharvit & Gross, 2011; Halperin, 2008, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> It is important to note that the model recognizes that information processing is also amplified by universal cognitive and motivational biases that characterize all human beings in general, in every context. Among these are cognitive heuristics, automatic cognitive processing, and various motivations such as ego-enhancement (see, for example, Jarymowicz, 2008; Kunda, 1990; Nisbett & Ross, 1980). Discussion of these is beyond the scope of the present article.

the domains of values, one from the general sociopolitical orientation, and one from the group perception domain. The first construct refers to values, as conceptualized and operationalized by Schwartz (2007). The selection of values is based on the widely shared view that they constitute the most central feature of a culture (Hofstede, 1980; Inglehart, 1997; Schwartz, 2007; Weber, 1958). Values express conceptions of the cultural ideals – what is good and desirable. According to Schwartz (2007), values are beliefs that refer to desirable goals, transcend specific actions and situations, and are prioritized by importance and behavior guidelines. We considered three values to be the most relevant to the perception and evolution of conflict situation and the accompanying supporting beliefs: *Traditional values*, the *Value of conformity*, and the *Value of universalism*.

*Traditional values* cherish respect, commitment, and acceptance of the customs and ideas that represent society's shared experiences and fate; and in the case of conflict, these are the societal beliefs of ethos of conflict and collective memory. They symbolize the group's solidarity, express its unique worth, and contribute to its survival (Durkheim, 1912/1954; Parsons, 1951). The *Value of conformity* maintains actions that are in line with social expectations or norms, inhibiting inclinations that might disrupt group functioning and its system (e.g. Kohn & Schooler, 1983; Parsons, 1951). This value provides the basis for maintaining conformity to the institutionalized supporting societal beliefs of conflict.

In contrast, the third selected *Value of universalism* focuses on the understanding, appreciation, tolerance, and protection of the welfare of *all* people, as well as equality, social justice, broadmindedness, and world peace. This value leads to the acceptance of others who are different (including rivals), their just treatment, and the support for justice and peace. Relevant to the current model, studies show that while conformism leads to prejudice and the tendency to continue the conflict, universalism is related to relatively positive attitudes towards the other (Jugert & Duckitt, 2009; Sagiv & Schwartz, 1995; Schwartz, 2007).

The second construct refers to implicit theories that are concerned with the way people form their ideas about malleability of individuals (Dweck, 1999) and groups (Halperin et al., 2011b). The theory suggests that individuals differ with regard to the theories that they hold. While some hold 'entity theory', which posits that group qualities are fixed and unchangeable, others hold 'incremental theory', suggesting that group qualities are malleable and can be developed. This distinction has an effect on how society members evaluate and judge the rival

collective in the conflict. While the former group forms a rigid negative impression of the rival that does not allow for change as required by peace processes, the latter group views the rival as more flexible, and as a collective that may change in a positive direction (Dweck & Ehrlinger, 2006).

The third construct is *Authoritarianism* as conceptualized by Altemeyer (1996). Authoritarianism is a relatively old concept that was developed by the Frankfurt school, which later conceptualized the seminal contribution of the 'authoritarian personality' (Adorno et al., 1950). In essence, Right-wing authoritarianism (RWA) refers to a type of personality that advocates a conservative view of the world, including adherence to traditional values and closure to new ideas, rejection of minorities, anxious veneration of authority and convention, and vindictiveness toward subordinates and deviants (Altemeyer, 1981, 1996). A number of studies have shown that RWA is associated with and also leads to prejudice against the other (e.g. Kossowska, Bukowski & van Hiel, 2008; Whitley, 1999). This tendency is expressed especially against rivals in conflict (Cohrs & Asbrock, 2009). Therefore, it can be assumed that this worldview supports the societal beliefs, which feed the conflict and prevent its peaceful resolution.

The study also assessed the general political orientation towards the conflict on the left–right continuum. This major political dimension has crystallized through the years in public discourse and in polls (Arian, 1995; Peleg, 1998). On one end of the spectrum are doves, called in Israel 'leftists', who propagate a division of the land into two states (Israel and Palestine), with a return to the 1967 borders and a division of Jerusalem. On the other extreme are hawks, called 'rightists', who object to these compromises and advocate retaining the entire land for the Jewish people. Not surprisingly, studies have shown that this political orientation is well related to the ideological *societal beliefs* as well as to the compromising positions (Halperin et al., 2008).

### *Societal beliefs*

We used two of the most powerful ideological beliefs supporting the conflict: societal beliefs about delegitimization of the rival and societal beliefs about collective victimhood. Both themes were found to be related to uncompromising positions regarding the peaceful resolution of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict (Halperin et al., 2008; Hammack et al., 2009; Maoz & McCauley, 2008; Schori, Klar & Roccas, 2009; Zafran, 2002). No study, to our knowledge, has simultaneously investigated

the relationship between these variables and general worldviews, on the one hand, and openness to information in times of conflict, on the other.

*Delegitimization* is one of the strongest psychological mechanisms, which not only maintains conflict but also leads to violence. Through delegitimization, a society places the opponent 'into extreme negative social categories which are excluded from human groups considered to be acting within limits of acceptable norms and/or values' (Bar-Tal, 1989: 170; Bar-Tal, 1990) in order to deny the adversary's humanity (Bar-Tal & Teichman, 2005; Holt & Silverstein, 1989; Rieber, 1991). Delegitimization, as a wide-range concept that includes different categories (e.g. dehumanization), describes an explicit, open, and normative process of categorization and differentiation that becomes institutionalized in settings characterized by intractable conflict and/or ethnocentrism (see Bar-Tal & Hammack, in press, for elaboration). Underlying conflict delegitimization are distrust, animosity, hatred, and the justification of one's own hostile acts against the rival group. Delegitimization of Arabs, including Palestinians, has been widely practiced in Israeli Jewish society and has served as one of the major content barriers to launching and conducting peace processes (Bar-On, 2000; Bar-Tal & Teichman, 2005; Oren & Bar-Tal, 2007).

A sense of *collective victimhood* is a major theme in the ethos of conflict identified within societies involved in intractable conflicts and is a fundamental part of the conflict's collective memory (Vollhardt, in press). It results from 'a perceived intentional harm with severe and lasting consequences inflicted on a collective by the rival in conflict, a harm that is viewed as undeserved, unjust, immoral and one that the group was not able to prevent' (Bar-Tal et al., 2009: 238). Societal beliefs about victimization of one's own society lead to the reduction of feelings such as guilt and empathy, responsibility and accountability (e.g. Cehajic & Brown, 2008; Wohl & Branscombe, 2008).

In addition, an imperative aspect of the collective victimhood is that a collective may experience this sense in the present as a result of harm done even in the distant past, as noted by Staub & Bar-Tal (2003): 'Groups encode important experiences, especially extensive suffering, in their collective memory, which can maintain a sense of woundedness and past injustice through generations' (p. 722). Within this vein, Israeli Jews have also maintained their sense of victimhood on the basis of past experiences, such as the long history of anti-Semitism (Poliakov, 1974) and especially their chosen trauma of the Holocaust (Ofer, 2003; Segev, 2000; Vollhardt, 2009), which is unrelated to the Israeli–Arab conflict.

The memory of the Holocaust has become a central part of the Jewish identity and has had an immense effect, both on the way Israeli Jews view the Israeli–Arab conflict and on how they act within it (Zertal, 2005). This memory serves as a major barrier to resolving the conflict peacefully (Hareven, 1983; Schori, Klar & Roccas, 2009).

We used two *circumstantial beliefs supporting the conflict*: the first pertains to the perspective of time and the other to the standing of Israel in the international community. It is assumed that societies involved in intractable conflicts continue the struggle based on the premise that time serves their purpose and that in the future they will at least have the capacity to improve their present position, and may even win the conflict. Additionally, in the Israeli case the unequivocal support of the United States and the relatively noncritical position of the international community at the time of the study provided a context that increased self-satisfaction. A previous study showed that these kinds of circumstantial beliefs reduce readiness to entertain alternative information that propagates peace processes, as well as reducing support for compromises required during the course of negotiations in order to achieve peace (Gayer et al., 2009).

#### *Openness to new information and support for compromises*

As dependent variables, we decided to use the 'readiness to be open to alternative information' that may illuminate the conflict and show the adversary in a different light, as well as 'support for compromises on issues that stand at the core of the disagreement'. The first variable directly assesses the readiness to be open to new information that may contradict the supporting conflict beliefs. The second variable captures the level of support for compromises a person is ready to make on key issues at the core of the Israeli–Palestinian negotiations.

In sum, based on our proposed theoretical process model, we hypothesized that the selected societal beliefs (ideological and circumstantial) will mediate between general worldviews and the readiness to be open to alternative information. The latter variable then would be a predictor of support for compromises.

## Method

### *Sampling and sample characteristics*

To examine the theoretical model, we conducted a nationwide representative survey among Jews in Israel. Phone interviews were conducted by an experienced and

computerized survey institute in Israel (the Dialogue Institute) during August and September 2008. Interviewers were trained in telephone survey methodology and conducted interviews in the interviewee's native language of Hebrew or Russian. At the onset of the interview, oral informed consent was obtained.

A random sampling within stratified subgroups was used to obtain a representative sample of Jews living in Israel at the time of the survey administration. Questionnaires were translated into Russian and carefully back-translated.<sup>4</sup> Interviews were conducted by fluent speakers of Hebrew or Russian. The order of the questions throughout the entire questionnaire was counterbalanced, and there was no effect of order.

The final interviewed sample included 500 individuals (246 men, 254 women) who could be reached and who agreed to participate, yielding a final cooperation rate of 50%. The mean age of the participants was 45.5 years ( $SD = 16.49$ ), and the distribution of main sociodemographic variables represented that of the Israeli Jewish adult population at the time of the survey. Regarding political orientation, 41% of the respondents defined themselves as rightists, 29.2% as centrists, and 18% as leftists (11.8% refused to answer that question). Of the respondents, 31.6% estimated their family income as below the average in Israel; 25.7% earned the average income; and 42.6% earned above the average.

We used a structured questionnaire drawn from several measures, which was completed by most participants in approximately 25 minutes. The questionnaire included the aforementioned measures of general worldviews (i.e. values, implicit theories, authoritarianism, and political orientation), societal beliefs concerning the Palestinians and the conflict (i.e. delegitimization, victimhood, and circumstantial beliefs), openness to new information regarding the conflict, and support for compromises required for the conflict's peaceful settlement. The distinctiveness of all scales was confirmed based on both exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis operations.<sup>5</sup> All items were answered on a scale from 1 (very strongly disagree) to 6 (very strongly agree).

Sociopolitical information was obtained regarding participants' income (1 = much below average; 5 = much above average), level of education (1 = elementary, 2 = high-school, 3 = post-high school (non-university/

college), 4 = university/college student, 5 = university/college degree), religiosity (1 = secular, 2 = traditional, 3 = religious, 4 = very religious) and political orientation (1 = extreme left/dovish to 5 = extreme right/hawkish).

### Measures

#### *Independent variables – general worldviews*

*Universalistic values* were assessed by a four-item measure adapted from the work of Schwartz (2007) regarding values, in which the scale was found to have broad, cross-cultural applicability (see also Schwartz & Boehnke, 2004). Following Schwartz's (2010) rationale, the measure consisted of the four key values of universalism – equality, social justice, broadmindedness, and world at peace. The items are formulated in terms of one's beliefs (e.g. 'He/she thinks it is important that every person in the world be treated equally' and 'He/she believes everyone should have equal opportunities in life'). The measure procured acceptable internal reliability ( $\alpha = .65$ ).

*Traditional values* were assessed using a three-item measure also based upon the original work of Schwartz (2007). The measure includes three items from the original traditional values scale (e.g. 'Religious beliefs are important to him/her' and 'He/she tries hard to do what his/her religion requires'). The internal reliability of the measure was  $\alpha = .62$ .

*Conformist values* were also assessed with a three-item measure that was based on the seminal work of Schwartz (2010) (e.g. 'It is important to him/her always to behave properly' and 'He/she wants to avoid doing anything people would say is wrong'). The internal reliability of the measure was  $\alpha = .52$ .

*Implicit theories* about groups were measured using a four-item scale (see Rydell et al., 2007). The scale consisted of two general items adapted from Plaks et al. (2001) (e.g. 'Groups can't really change their basic characteristics') and more specific items that focused on the unique context of intergroup conflict (e.g. 'Groups that are characterized by violent tendencies will never change their ways') (see Halperin et al., 2011b). Internal reliability of the scale was  $\alpha = .77$ , and the four items were averaged, with higher scores indicating entity theories about groups.

*Authoritarianism* was assessed using a two-item abbreviated version of the original RWA scale of Altemeyer (1996). The shorter version of the scale was used mainly due to space limitations embedded within the nature of a complicated nationwide survey. The items included in the scale were: 'Obedience and respect for authority are the most important virtues children can learn' and 'In

<sup>4</sup> There are currently 1.2 million (16%) new immigrants from the former Soviet Union who speak Russian.

<sup>5</sup> The presentation of all these analyses is beyond the scope of the current article, but all data are available upon request from the first author.

Table I. Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations between all research variables

	Mean (SD)	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.
1. Support for Compromises	2.60 (1.50)	–									
2. Openness	3.28 (1.36)	.39**									
3. Political Orientation (Left+)	3.49 (1.34)	.59**	.36**								
4. Universalistic Values	5.02 (.86)	.09*	.26**	.16**							
5. Traditionalistic Values	3.62 (1.33)	-.31**	-.15**	-.41**	.23**						
6. Conformist Values	4.57 (.99)	-.18**	-.11*	-.16**	.31**	-.46**					
7. Entity Theories	4.09 (1.21)	-.26**	-.15**	-.26**	-.01	.22**	.18**				
8. Authoritarianism	4.09 (1.31)	-.26**	-.13**	-.27**	.06	.34**	.32**	.35**			
9. Victimhood	4.33 (1.22)	-.48**	-.29**	-.49**	.03	.34**	.25**	.28**	.32**		
10. Delegitimization	4.64 (1.33)	-.45**	-.32**	-.43**	-.07	.19**	.19**	.30**	.26**	.57**	
11. Circumstantial Beliefs	3.07 (1.42)	-.31**	-.02	-.31**	.01	.25**	.12**	.25**	.16**	.31**	.28**

\*Significant at the  $p < .05$  level; \*\*significant at the  $p < .0001$  level (two-tailed significance).

order to educate children it is occasionally necessary to give them a small spanking'. The selection of the items was based on previous uses of abbreviated versions of that scale (see Feldman & Stenner, 1997; Huddy, Feldman & Cassese, 2007) and the measure yielded an internal reliability of  $\alpha = .60$ .

#### Mediating variables – societal beliefs

To assess *collective victimhood* we used a three-item measure. Following the conceptual and empirical work by Bar-Tal and his colleagues (Bar-Tal & Antebi, 1992; Bar-Tal et al., 2009), the measure consisted of two items that reflect a general sense of victimhood (i.e. 'The Holocaust is not a one-time event – it will happen again if we do not protect ourselves', 'The history of the Jewish people is characterized by continuous existential threat') and one item focusing on victimhood that is directly related to the context of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict ('Throughout the years of the conflict, Israel has been the victim and the Palestinians have been the perpetrators'). According to Schori, Klar & Roccas (2009), these items complement each other as the general sense of collective victimhood is related to the sense of victimhood in the specific context of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. The measure yielded an acceptable internal reliability of  $\alpha = .66$ .

*Delegitimization* of Palestinians was measured using a two-item measure, based on Halperin et al. (2008), that was composed of extreme stereotypes that are frequently attributed by Israelis to the Palestinians. The items express highly negative stereotypization, as well as complete mistrust ('Palestinians do not really care for human lives', 'Palestinians should never be trusted' – see Bar-Tal & Teichman, 2005). The internal reliability of the

measure is  $\alpha = .78$  and higher scores indicate higher levels of delegitimization.

Two items that were based on the work of Gayer and her colleagues (2009) were used to assess the *circumstantial belief* according to which, at the current time, Israel had no real incentive to promote the peace process and to compromise either on realistic or symbolic issues. The first item dealt with the time dimension, suggesting that 'Time is on the Israeli side – as time goes by, Israel's position in the negotiations gets better and better'. The second item focused on the international dimension – 'Israel's positive image within the international community enables it to avoid making compromises at the moment'. The two-item measure yielded an internal reliability of  $\alpha = .62$ .

#### Dependent variables – results of psychological barriers

*Openness to new alternative information about the conflict* was measured using a new four-item measure created especially for the purposes of the current study. The new measure's main goal was to assess the participant's willingness to be exposed to alternative information about the conflict, information that could potentially contradict their standing views and knowledge. The first two items dealt with willingness to be exposed to: (a) Palestinian newspaper articles about the conflict and (b) Palestinian cultural products (e.g. books, movies) that reflect the Palestinian perspective of the conflict. The third item asked about the 'willingness to personally meet Palestinians and hear their views about the conflict', and the last item asked about 'the tendency to seek alternative information about conflict-related events (e.g. peace talks, war) in foreign media channels'. The internal reliability of the measure was  $\alpha = .72$  and higher scores indicated higher levels of openness.



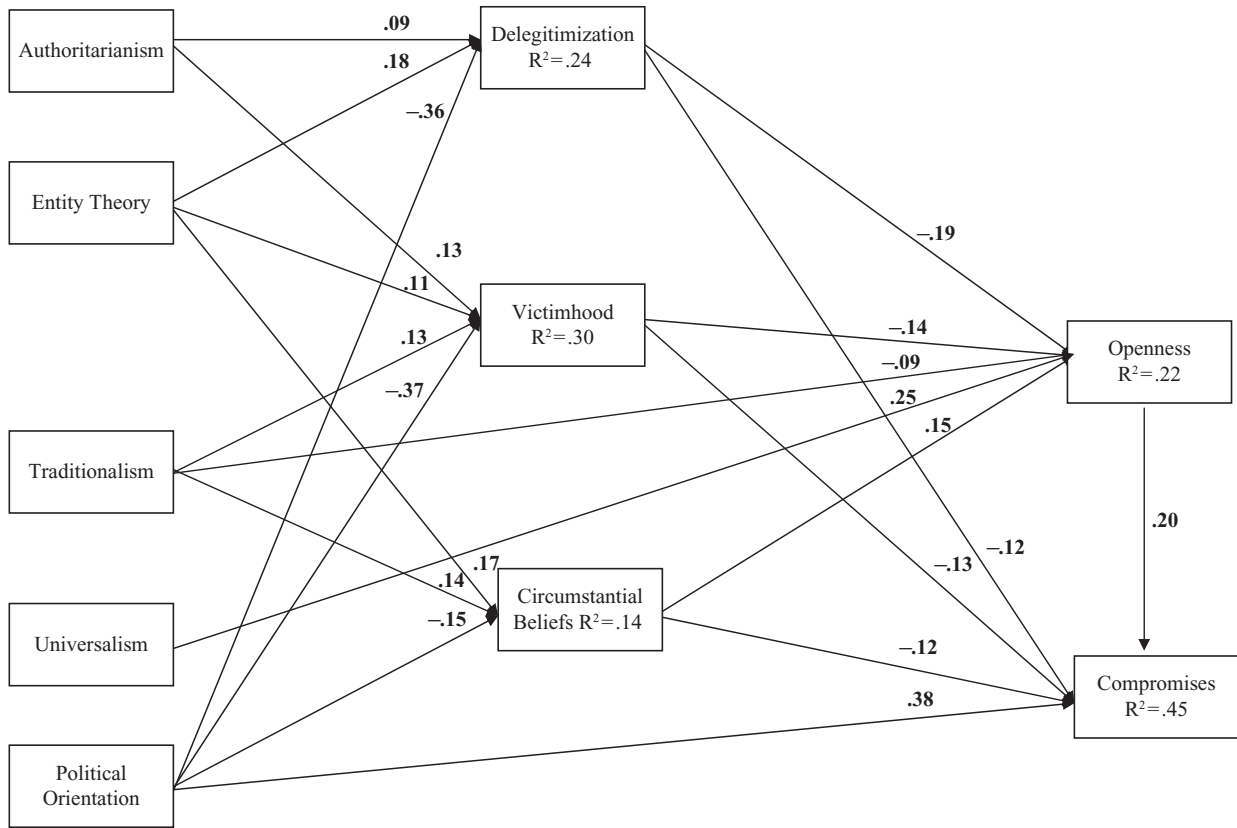


Figure 1. General worldviews and societal beliefs predicting openness and support for compromises: Results from a structural equation model

Finally, to measure *support for compromises*, participants responded to three items, each representing a unique aspect of potential Israeli compromise regarding key issues within the upcoming negotiations. Participants were asked to indicate to what extent (1: not at all, 6: very much) they support each of the three following compromises: territorial compromise, symbolic compromise on the status of Jerusalem, and compromise on the status of Palestinian refugees. The internal reliability of the scale was  $\alpha = .75$  and higher scores indicated higher willingness to compromise.

## Results

### *Bivariate correlations by categories of barriers*

Table I presents descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations between all research variables. Given the desperate situation of the peace process in the Middle East at the time of the survey, we were not surprised to find that the level of support for compromises was relatively low ( $M = 2.60$ ,  $SD = 1.50$ ), the level of openness was slightly below the mid-point of the scale ( $M = 3.28$ ,  $SD = 1.36$ ), and the correlation between these two

variables was high and positive, suggesting that people who are open to new alternative information about the conflict tend to be more supportive of compromises.

To guide the analysis of the data, we will now present correlations between variables in each category of barriers on the one hand, and variables representing the results of the barriers (i.e. dependent variables – openness and support for compromises) on the other.

*General worldviews, openness and compromises:* As anticipated, leftist political orientation is positively correlated with both openness and support for compromises. Also as expected, while universalistic values are positively associated with both openness and support for compromises, traditionalistic and, to a lesser extent, conformist values are negatively correlated with both variables. People who hold entity theories about the malleability of groups tend to be less open to new information and less supportive of compromises. Finally, those with more authoritarian characteristics tend to be less open-minded to alternative information and express lower support for compromises required to achieve peace.

*Societal beliefs, openness and support for compromises:* All in all, the correlations between the societal beliefs and

Table II. Alternative models: Fit indices and model comparison

	<i>N</i>	$\chi^2$	<i>d.f.</i>	<i>CFI</i>	<i>IFI</i>	<i>NFI</i>	<i>RMSEA</i>	<i>ECVI</i>	<i>AIC</i>
<b>Tested model</b>	<b>500</b>	<b>22.4</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>.99</b>	<b>.99</b>	<b>.98</b>	<b>.03</b>	<b>.25</b>	<b>124.34</b>
Alternative model 1	500	101.4**	8	.92	.92	.92	.15	.46	215.44
Alternative model 2	500	102.1**	17	.92	.92	.91	.10	.40	198.12
Alternative model 3	500	250.1**	20	.80	.80	.79	.15	.68	340.09
Alternative model 4	500	148.4**	18	.86	.89	.88	.12	.49	242.37

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ .

the dependent variables are high. The belief in the victimhood of the Jewish people is highly (and negatively) associated with support for compromises and moderately negatively associated with openness levels. Similar patterns were found with regard to the association between the delegitimization of Palestinians and these two variables. Not surprisingly, the circumstantial beliefs that time is on Israel's side and that Israel's positive image within the international community enables it to avoid compromises are both negatively correlated with support for compromises. Interestingly, they have no significant correlations with level of openness.

#### *Assessment of the general theoretical model*

The bivariate correlation analysis provides a preliminary look into the relations between different types of psychological barriers and the psycho-political results (i.e. openness and support for compromises). Nevertheless, such analysis does not provide substantial insights about the relative effect of each barrier or about the nature of the general process. To address this limitation and examine the complex hypothesized relationships among the variables, we used structural equation modeling (SEM), using version 6 of the AMOS program which enables a full information maximum likelihood procedure (Arbuckle, 2003).

Owing to the large number of parameters, we used path modeling with indices as indicators. The tested model and parameter estimates are presented in Figure 1, with bivariate correlations and error terms omitted for simplicity. Despite its complexity, the model fit the data very well. The chi-square statistic was not significant,  $\chi^2(14, N = 500) = 22.4, p = n.s.$ , and the other indices showed very good fit: normative fit index (NFI) = .98, incremental fit index (IFI) = .99, comparative fit index (CFI) = .99, and root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = .03. In order to clarify the model's presentation, we describe its details along with the findings.

The six variables representing general worldviews (i.e. political orientation, traditionalism, conformism, universalism, entity theories, and authoritarianism) were specified as exogenous variables in the model, predicting support for compromises through societal beliefs (i.e. delegitimization, victimhood, and circumstantial beliefs) and through levels of openness to new information concerning the conflict. Since conformist values were not significantly associated with either the mediating or the dependent variables, this variable was omitted from the model presented in Figure 1.

As hypothesized in our theoretical model, the results presented in Figure 1 show close associations between different general worldviews and specific societal beliefs. More specifically, people with rightist political orientation, authoritarian personalities, and entity theories about groups' malleability tend to express higher levels of delegitimization of the opponent and a higher level of collective victimhood. Interestingly, traditional values also predict collective victimhood, but not delegitimization of Arabs. Finally, the circumstantial beliefs are positively associated with rightist political orientation, traditional values, and entity theories regarding groups.

Also as hypothesized, the results show that support for compromises is predicted by openness to new conflict-related information. Modification indices led to the incorporation of the direct paths between political orientation and compromises as well as between all three societal beliefs (i.e. delegitimization, victimhood, and circumstantial beliefs) and support for compromises. In general, the results showed that people with rightist political orientation, those who tend to delegitimize Palestinians, and those who see Israel as the ultimate victim are less supportive of compromises.

Of special importance are the findings clearly showing that a large group of psychological factors increases closed-mindedness in people within the context of the conflict. As predicted, delegitimization of the opponent and collective victimhood both decrease openness to new alternative information. Interestingly, modification indices led to the

addition of two other direct paths between individuals' values and levels of openness. While traditional values tended to decrease openness, universalistic values led to more openness. Surprisingly, the acceptance of circumstantial beliefs slightly increased levels of openness. Integration of these results with the previous findings leads to the understanding that people's general values, as well as their specific beliefs about the conflict and opponent, influence levels of support for compromises, both directly and through the mediation of openness to new alternative information.

### *Alternative models*

In order to reaffirm the suitability of the model, we compared it with four alternative models liable to gain some theoretical merit. The fit measures of these four models are presented in Table II. The first was a 'direct model', in which mediation paths were omitted and only direct paths were specified (i.e. societal beliefs and openness were converted into exogenous variables). In a second alternative model, we reversed the causal direction between openness and support for compromises, suggesting that people who highly support compromises tend to become more open-minded to new information. In a third alternative model, we omitted the direct paths between societal beliefs and compromises, in order to examine whether a model in which openness fully (and not partially, as in the original model) mediates the effects of societal beliefs on support for compromises would fit the data better. Finally, in the fourth alternative model, we reversed the causal direction between general worldviews and societal beliefs.

As Table II illustrates, all fit measures of the hypothesized-tested model were better than their parallels in the alternative models. Comparisons of chi-square differences between the tested model and all four alternative models yielded significant results of  $p < .001$ . Given that two of the alternative models (i.e. alternative models 2 and 4) were not nested within the original model, we used two additional fit measures – AIC and EVIC, that are commonly used to compare non-nested models which include the same set of variables (Kumar & Sharma, 1999). As presented in the table, AIC and EVIC are lower in the hypothesized model compared to all alternative models, indicating that this model fit the data better than the others.

## **Discussion**

We began our study by proposing a theoretical process model of socio-psychological barriers. It describes the selective, biased and distorted information processing

which takes place as a result of an integrated operation of cognitive, emotional and motivational processes, combined with a pre-existing repertoire of worldviews supporting conflict beliefs as well as emotions. These elements join together to obstruct any penetration of new and positive information or proposals into the individual and societal cognitive sphere. Thus, for example, peaceful gestures initiated by the adversary, new information about the humanness of the rival and his suffering or even new information about one's own wrongdoing may not receive proper attention and consideration. As a result, basic disagreements are preserved and reinforced (see details in Bar-Tal & Halperin, 2011).

The results indicate that unwillingness and refusal to absorb alternative information was directly fed by the selected societal beliefs about delegitimization and collective victimhood, combined with the circumstantial beliefs. Delegitimization, as an extreme type of negative stereotyping, magnifies the difference between groups in conflict, homogenizes the delegitimized group as one entity, automatically arouses strong negative emotions, and supplies rigid, persistent and durable categories that are unlikely to change while the conflict lasts and even after the conflict's resolution (Oren & Bar-Tal, 2007). The sense of collective victimhood is based on continuous perceived harm and it is possible that a major traumatic event to which a group was subjected may become the cornerstone for the construction of a new reality. The more the society experiences harm (especially human losses) in the conflict, the greater the collective sense of being the victim becomes prevalent and entrenched (Bar-Tal et al., 2009; Vollhardt, in press).

As stated, the results reaffirmed the general process model. Yet some deviations from the proposed theoretical framework were also revealed. For example, holding circumstantial beliefs slightly increased levels of openness. It is feasible that those who hold these beliefs could be especially sensitive to the changes in context precisely because of changing circumstances. In contrast, those who believe that the circumstances do not favor Israel do not need to be open to new information. It is possible to deduce that perception of changes in the context may lead to openness and thus to more willingness to compromise to achieve the peaceful resolution of the conflict. The study by Gayer et al. (2009) indeed provides empirical support for this hypothesis. It shows that exposure to information regarding losses inherent in the continuation of the conflict induces willingness to acquire new information about possible solutions to the conflict, willingness to re-evaluate current position, and support for compromises. This openness does not preclude the

possibility that people who hold circumstantial beliefs that favor Israel are less supportive of compromises. As long as, in their view, the circumstances favor Israel, there is no point in changing their positions about key issues related to the conflict's resolution that require compromise.

Results of the study reaffirmed the hypothesis that the five variables representing general worldviews have an effect on one's openness through the more concrete societal beliefs. However, the study also showed that individuals' values had a direct effect on their willingness to be open to new information. This finding is well rooted in the conceptual and empirical literature. On the one hand, people who hold traditional values tend to adhere to dominant social norms and respect prevailing societal beliefs. On the other, people who hold universalistic values understand, care for and protect the welfare of *all* people, including rivals (Schwartz, 2006).

The results of the study show that unwillingness to be exposed to new information that may contradict already-held views about the conflict restricts the views of society members and ultimately supports the continuation of the conflict. These members tend to use superficial analyses of incoming information and search for information consistent with already-held knowledge (Kruglanski, Webster & Klem, 1993; Kruglanski & Webster, 1996). In our view, closed-mindedness is the key mechanism of human stagnation. Without exposure to new or alternative information that refutes their held beliefs, human beings usually have difficulty in changing their already-established repertoire (Kruglanski, 2004). We assume that this closure occurs because of the freezing that ideological and circumstantial conflict-supporting beliefs go through, as a result of rigid structure and motivational and emotional factors. In addition, the conception clearly recognizes that the context's situational threatening characteristics may lead to cognitive closure. This means that harsh and prolonged conflicts with evolved repertoires tend to 'close minds' and facilitate tunnel vision, thus precluding the consideration of alternative approaches to resolution of the conflict (see also Jost et al., 2003).

From a methodological perspective, we wanted to investigate how the aforementioned conceptually associated variables relate to one another in the real world. Given our focus on stable individual differences as predictors of ideological beliefs, openness to new information, and support for compromises, our approach has suited our goals. Because the data are correlational, causality can only be inferred. However, the theoretical rationale we have presented strongly supports the causal

direction we chose to examine. Based on past research, we anticipated that general worldviews would predict more specific ideological beliefs, which in turn would lead to closed-mindedness and opposition to concrete compromises. To explore causal relations further, future researchers could manipulate variables in the model. For instance, manipulations that prime certain values or induce beliefs in collective victimhood have been used before (e.g. Schori, Klar & Roccas, 2009) and can be beneficial for further examination of the current model as well.

In sum, the study has successfully demonstrated the process through which general worldviews and societal beliefs join together to inhibit peacemaking. In this process, a special role is played by societal, ideological and circumstantial beliefs which constitute a well-entrenched ideology. These two sets of beliefs constitute a coherent system that has a rigid structure with teleological basis. The described repertoires function as socio-psychological barriers that reinforce the disagreements and close society members to alternative information that may change their views about the rival and the conflict and thus advance peaceful resolution of the conflict. Under these circumstances, overcoming the basic disagreements is a very difficult challenge as society members continue to support non-compromising positions that do not advance peacemaking processes. If we take into consideration the fact that the same types of socio-psychological barriers work on both sides, it is possible to understand why conflicts are not resolved easily.

We end this article with an optimistic note and propose that the effect of socio-psychological barriers is not deterministic. It is possible to overcome them under specific conditions. At least one way to unfreeze the widely held societal beliefs that perpetuate the continuation of the conflict is to introduce instigating beliefs which show incompatibility between the desired future, on the one hand, and the emerging future and/or the current state and/or the perceived past, on the other hand (see Bar-Tal & Halperin, 2009). In other words, motivation to evaluate these accepted beliefs and entertain alternative beliefs is based on the understanding that the continuation of the current situation of the conflict will not lead to a better or desired future, but may instead hurt (or even may already be hurting) the society's fundamental goals and/or needs (Bartunek, 1993; Gayer et al., 2009). Because conflict begins in the human mind, the resolution and ending of the conflict must also be initiated in the same mind. The involvement of the society members and their interpretations and understandings of the conflict must

be challenged and changed in order to actualize the resolution of the conflict.

### Replication data

The dataset, codebook, and do-files for the empirical analysis in this article can be found at <http://www.prio.no/jpr/datasets>.

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