

# Addressing Israelis' and Palestinians' Basic Needs for Agency and Positive Moral Identity Facilitates Mutual Prosociality

Ilanit SimanTov-Nachlieli and Nurit Shnabel

## Introduction

A famous quote of Israel's first **Prime Minister** David Ben-Gurion is that "The fate of Israel depends on two things: its strength and its righteousness." This quote points to two basic resources that are perceived by many Israelis as critical for their in-group's survival and prosperity, namely, its power and its morality (i.e., righteousness). However, in societies involved in intractable conflicts (for definition of such conflicts, see Bar-Tal, 1998; Kriesberg, 1993, Sharvit, Chap. 1) such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, attaining one of these resources is often perceived to come inherently at the expense of the other. This trade-off is reflected in two other quotes of Ben-Gurion, who, on the one hand, stated that "Israel will be tested not through its material wealth, military might or technical achievements, but in its moral character and human values" yet, on the other hand, said that "If all the great ideals in the world were placed on one tip of the scale, and Israel's existence was placed on the other, I would choose the latter."

According to Bar-Tal's (2007, 2013) theorizing, Israelis' attempt to "square the circle" and satisfy their strong motivation to protect both their in-group's strength and its positive moral identity simultaneously often translates into rigid beliefs regarding Israel's urgent need to defend itself at any cost and the unquestionable righteousness of its way. Such rigid beliefs are characteristics of societies involved in intractable conflicts (Bar-Tal & Halperin, 2011), whose members become frozen in their self-defense and self-righteousness (Bar-Tal, Halperin, & Oren, 2010) due to a *sociopsychological infrastructure* that both reflects and perpetuates these beliefs. As explained in detail by Sharvit (Chap. 1; see also Bar-Tal, 2007, 2013),

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I. SimanTov-Nachlieli (✉) • N. Shnabel  
School of Psychological Sciences, Tel Aviv University, Tel Aviv, Israel  
e-mail: [ilanits@post.tau.ac.il](mailto:ilanits@post.tau.ac.il); [shnabeln@post.tau.ac.il](mailto:shnabeln@post.tau.ac.il)

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this infrastructure is comprised of three elements: *collective memories*, the *ethos of the conflict*, and *collective emotional orientations*, which feed the experience of urgent need for self-defense and justify the in-group's self-righteousness, "thus becoming part of a vicious cycle of intractable conflict" (Bar-Tal, 2007, p. 1430).

The goal of the present chapter is to integrate Bar-Tal's theorizing with the logic of the needs-based model (Nadler & Shnabel, 2008; Shnabel & Nadler, 2008) whose main tenet is that groups' unaddressed psychological needs serve as barriers to reconciliation. Focusing on the Middle East conflict, we propose that Israelis and Palestinians become frozen in their self-defense and self-righteousness beliefs because the involvement in the conflict chronically threatens their ability to address their fundamental psychological needs for *agency* (i.e., strength and ability to protect their security and pursue their goals) and *positive moral identity* (i.e., ability to maintain a just and humane image of their in-group). Palestinians' and Israelis' strong clinging to these beliefs reflects a psychological strategy that allows them to deal with the frequent threats posed to their in-group's agency and positive moral identity. Optimistically, however, and in line with the logic of the needs-based model, we provide empirical evidence suggesting that addressing Israelis' and Palestinians' fundamental needs can defreeze their rigidity and open them to reconciliation. To achieve our goal of integrating these two lines of research (i.e., Bar-Tal's theorizing and the needs-based model), we now turn to describe the main principles of the latter.

## The Needs-Based Model: A Brief Overview

The needs-based model has been proposed in an attempt to explain the dynamics between victims and perpetrators and point to ways to improve it. It suggests that transgressions pose asymmetric threats to victims' and perpetrators' identities. In particular, transgressions impair victims' sense of agency, namely, they threaten their identity as powerful, autonomous social actors who are able to determine their own outcomes. Consequently, victims are motivated to restore their agency and strength (e.g., by taking revenge, Frijda, 1994). Perpetrators, in contrast, experience impairment to their moral identity. Because the sanction imposed upon those who violate their community's moral standards is their social exclusion (Tavuchis, 1991), perpetrators are motivated to restore their positive moral identity and reassure their (re)acceptance by meaningful others in their community. In terms of "Big Two" theorizing, which argues that there are two fundamental content dimensions along which people judge themselves and others (Abele & Wojciszke, 2013), victims can be said to experience threats to the dimension representing constructs such as competence, respect, power, and agency, whereas perpetrators experience threats to the dimension representing warmth, love, communion, and morality. Consequently, conflicting parties experience a psychological need to reaffirm their impaired identities (SimanTov-Nachlieli, Shnabel, & Nadler, 2013).

Building on human needs theory (Christie, 1997), which argues that conflicts can be managed through the satisfaction of basic human needs such as the need for security and positive identity, the needs-based model further argues that victims' and perpetrators' unaddressed needs block the path to reconciliation. Yet, addressing these needs through a reciprocal exchange of messages between victimized and perpetrating groups can remove these emotional barriers and facilitate reconciliation. To examine this claim, in one study Shnabel, Nadler, Ullrich, Dovidio, and Carmi (2009, Study 1) exposed Israeli Arabs and Jews to two speeches allegedly given by their out-group's representative on the 50th anniversary of the 1956 Kafr Qasim massacre, in which 43 unarmed Arab civilians were killed by the Israeli border patrol. In line with the needs-based model's rationale, Arab participants showed greater willingness to reconcile with the Jews following an empowering (compared to an accepting) message conveyed by a Jewish representative (i.e., a message that reaffirmed Arabs' right for pride and self-determination). By contrast, Jewish participants showed greater willingness to reconcile with the Arabs following an accepting (compared to an empowering) message from an Arab representative (i.e., a message expressing sympathy, understanding, and brotherhood toward the Jews).

While this experiment supports the logic of the needs-based model, its contribution to our understanding the dynamics between Israelis and Palestinians *in general* has remained limited because it focused on a specific episode in which the social roles of victims vs. perpetrators were distinct and clear-cut. However, the conflict as a whole—despite the undeniable power differences between Palestinians and Israelis—is characterized by mutual transgressions. That is, because Israelis and Palestinians repeatedly aggress against each other, the conflict as a whole is marked by a “duality” of social roles in the sense that both groups serve as victims in some situations and as perpetrators in others. Our recent research (Shnabel & SimanTov-Nachlieli, 2015; SimanTov-Nachlieli & Shnabel, 2014, 2015) aimed to amend this shortcoming of previous work within the needs-based model's framework through investigating how the experience of such duality influences the psychological needs and consequent behaviors of Palestinians and Israelis.

## Duality of Social Roles: The Primacy of Agency Effect

In line with the logic of the needs-based model, we hypothesized that group members who feel as both victims and perpetrators at the same time would experience heightened needs for *both* agency *and* positive moral identity. To examine this hypothesis, we conducted an experiment (SimanTov-Nachlieli & Shnabel, 2014, Study 2) in which Israeli Jewish participants were randomly assigned into three different roles: “pure” victims, “pure” perpetrators, and “duals.” Using a recall task developed by Mazziotta, Feuchte, Gausel, and Nadler (2013), participants assigned to be victims were asked to recall and write about two incidents in which their in-group was victimized by Palestinians (e.g., the Passover massacre of 2002 in which

30 unarmed Israeli civilians were killed by a suicide bomber). Participants assigned to be perpetrators were instructed to recall and write about two incidents in which their in-group victimized Palestinians (e.g., the 1994 Cave of the Patriarchs massacre in which 29 unarmed Palestinian civilians were killed by an Israeli settler who opened fire inside a Mosque). Finally, participants assigned to be duals were instructed to recall and write about one victimization and one perpetration episode.

Note that due to the conflict's nature, it was impossible to ask participants to recall neutral (control) incidents within the conflict: cooperation between Israelis and Palestinians (e.g., a friendly football match) constitutes a positive rather than a neutral episode, and a period of quiet cannot be considered "an incident." To overcome this obstacle, we used bipolar scales for our dependent variables with neutral levels represented by their midpoints. These midpoints represented no change in participants' needs and behavioral tendencies and, thus, corresponded to a control condition such that scores lower or higher than the midpoint represented respective decreases or increases in needs and behavioral tendencies, which were our main dependent variables (note that the pattern of results reported below was replicated in another study that used a real control condition, see SimanTov-Nachlieli & Shnabel, 2014, Study 1).

We found, consistent with previous findings obtained within the needs-based model's framework, that victims, but not perpetrators, showed an increased need for agency (e.g., "I would like Israel to demonstrate more power"), whereas perpetrators, but not victims, indicated heightened need for positive moral identity (e.g., "I would like Israel to act more morally"). Correspondingly, victims showed increased vengefulness (e.g., "Israel must use unrestricted force against any act of terrorism"), whereas perpetrators showed increased helpfulness (e.g., "Israel must provide humanitarian aid to Gaza"). Of most interest, however, were participants in the dual condition, because this condition corresponds to the dynamics that generally characterize the Israeli-Palestinian conflict more closely than the conditions of "pure" social roles. We found that similar to victims, duals showed a heightened need for agency, and similar to perpetrators, duals showed a heightened need for positive moral identity. However, in terms of behavior, duals resembled victims: like victims, they showed heightened vengefulness, whereas unlike perpetrators, they did not show increased helpfulness. These findings suggest that even though duals are motivated to restore both their agency and positive moral identity, they place greater priority on addressing the first need (i.e., restoring agency through using force) rather than the latter need (i.e., restoring positive moral identity through increased helping behavior).

This finding contradicts current social-psychological theorizing, which points to morality as the most important dimension in in-groups' identity—the one that was most important to group members' pride in their in-group and psychological closeness to it (Leach, Ellemers, & Barreto, 2007). This finding is highly consistent, however, with Bar-Tal's (2007) theory about the collective fear orientation that develops in societies involved in intractable conflicts, as part of their unique socio-psychological infrastructure. Due to this emotional orientation, acute security threats become chronically salient, and beliefs about dangers to society members

and to society as a whole become embedded in societies' collective memory and ethos. This set of beliefs "justifies and legitimizes the most immoral acts and allows the attribution of one's own immoral behavior to the rival's violence and external-situational factors" (Bar-Tal, 2007, p. 1441).

Bar-Tal's perspective is consistent with Maslow (1970) who viewed security as one of the basic needs that has to be satisfied for the well-being of humans. This perspective thus explains why even though duals in our study experienced enhanced needs for restoration of both agency and positive moral identity, the first need received primacy in determining their behavior toward Palestinians (as opposed to participants in Leach, Ellemers, & Barreto's, 2007 research mentioned above, which was not conducted in a context of an intractable conflict). Bar-Tal's perspective also offers insights that may explain why our dual participants did not experience a pressing need to remove the threat posed to their in-group's moral identity. It is possible that Israelis, who chronically experience moral threats (e.g., in the form of economic and academic boycott initiatives; see Shnabel & Noor, 2012), become habituated to them and continuously repeat their "habituated course of action" (Bar-Tal, 2001, p. 620) without considering alternative responses. Such a habituated response may be illustrated in a recent speech of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin 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). Admittedly, participants in the perpetrator condition responded to the experience of moral threats by increased helpfulness. Nevertheless, perhaps the experience of simultaneous agency and morality threats made participants in the dual condition revert to a habituated, dismissive response toward the moral threats, similar to the one expressed by Netanyahu.

## The Agency Affirmation Intervention

Although our above findings pessimistically revealed that duals show heightened levels of aggressiveness and vengefulness, we reasoned that the fact that they did show an enhanced need for positive moral identity (as opposed to "pure" victims who did not exhibit a similar enhancement) leaves some room for optimism. In particular, we theorized that addressing Palestinians' and Israelis' urgent need for agency may allow their need for restoration of positive moral identity to come to the fore and exert its positive effect on their mutual behavior toward each other. To examine this possibility, we developed a novel "agency affirmation" intervention in which Israeli and Palestinian participants were exposed to a text that reassured their in-group's strength, competence, and resiliency. We hypothesized that once group members would be reminded of their in-group's agency, they would be more willing to relinquish some power for the sake of moral consideration. This greater willingness, in turn, would lead to their lower vengefulness and greater helpfulness toward each other.

We tested the effectiveness of this agency affirmation intervention in a series of four experiments. In the first experiment (Shnabel & SimanTov-Nachlieli, 2015,

Study 1), which focused on Israeli Jewish participants, we pitted the agency affirmation intervention against a moral threat manipulation, which was found to increase prosocial tendencies in various interpersonal and intergroup contexts (e.g., Carlsmith & Gross, 1969; Hopkins et al., 2007; see also Dovidio, Piliavin, Schroeder, & Penner, 2006). Thus, our experiment used a 2 (agency affirmation [yes, no]) $\times$ 2 (moral threat [yes, no]) between-subjects design. Participants assigned to the agency affirmation condition were exposed to a text that affirmed Israel's strength, self-determination, and resilience (i.e., reminding participants that Israel is a strong nation that has proved its strength and resilience in many domains such as economy, technical achievements, and military might). Participants assigned to the moral threat condition were exposed to a text that portrayed Israel in a way that undermined its positive moral identity (i.e., reminding participants that since the 1980s [the onset of the first Intifada, in which the violent military oppression of the Palestinian uprising by the Israeli Defense Force severely tarnished Israel's moral image], many nations including the Palestinians perceive Israel as immoral). Participants assigned to the agency affirmation and moral threat condition were exposed to a text that combined both agency affirmation and moral threat, whereas control participants read no text. We found that compared to the control condition, the exposure to agency affirmation significantly reduced Israeli Jews' aggressiveness against Palestinians while increasing their helpfulness toward them. By contrast, the exposure to a moral threat did not affect Israeli Jews' aggressiveness or helpfulness tendencies. As expected, the positive effect of agency affirmation was mediated by participants' 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").

While the above experiment was conducted during a relatively calm period of the conflict, the onset of a military operation in Gaza provided us with a (hopefully) unique opportunity to test the effectiveness of our agency affirmation intervention during wartime. During this operation, the Israeli Defense Force's (IDF) air force bombed more than 1500 sites in the Gaza Strip, including rocket launch pads, weapon depots, government facilities, and apartment blocks, while Hamas and other Palestinian militant groups fired over 1500 rockets into highly populated areas in Israel including the cities [Rishon LeZion](#), [Beersheba](#), [Ashdod](#), and [Tel Aviv](#). On the sixth day of the operation, we recruited Israeli Jewish participants to take part in an online experiment, in which they were randomly assigned either to a control, no-text condition or to the agency affirmation condition, which exposed them to a text based on the previous study, yet with specific adjustments to better fit the war context. For example, the text referred to the effectiveness of the Israeli Iron Dome anti-rocket defense system, which was used for the first time during the operation and proved to be highly effective. Interestingly, the positive effect of agency affirmation was replicated even under these extreme conditions of security threat: Participants in the agency affirmation condition showed significantly greater willingness to relinquish power for the sake of moral considerations (e.g., "Israel should restrain its operations in Gaza to maintain its positive moral image in the world"), which in turn led to less vengefulness (e.g., "Israel must protect its citizens even at the cost of harming many Palestinian civilians in Gaza") and greater helpfulness

(e.g., “When the operation ends, Israel must make substantial financial investments to improve the situation of Gaza’s civil population”). An alternative explanation—specifically, the reduction of existential threat—was ruled out, and all the effects reported above persisted when controlling for political left-right orientation and in-group identification (SimanTov-Nachlieli & Shnabel, 2015, Study 4b).

After establishing the effectiveness of agency affirmation among Israeli Jews, we turned to examine whether it would have similar effects among Palestinians (Shnabel & SimanTov-Nachlieli, 2015, Study 2). We were concerned that it would be harder to replicate the positive effects of agency affirmation among Palestinian (compared to Israeli) participants for two reasons. First, we reasoned that as the party who is often perceived worldwide as the David rather than the Goliath in the Middle East conflict, Palestinians may experience a less pressing need to restore their moral identity compared to Israelis. Even more importantly, we also thought that as the weaker party in the conflict, Palestinians might be less susceptible than Israelis to an affirmation of their in-group’s agency (i.e., it might be harder to effectively affirm Palestinians’ agency, due to their in-group’s relative inferiority in terms of military force, economically, etc.). Notably, despite the power asymmetry, the obtained pattern of results generally corresponded to the one obtained among Israeli Jews. Using a 2 (agency affirmation [yes, no]) $\times$ 2 (moral threat [yes, no]) between-subjects design, we randomly assigned Palestinians from the West Bank into the four experimental conditions. Once again, the exposure to moral threat (i.e., a reminder that since 2000 [the onset of the second Al-Aqsa Intifada in which the killing of Israeli civilians by suicide bombers severely tarnished the Palestinians’ moral image], many nations including the Israelis perceive the Palestinians as immoral) did not affect participants’ prosocial behavioral tendencies. Yet, in line with expectations, exposing Palestinian participants to a text that affirmed the Palestinians’ strength and resilience (i.e., reminding participants that the Palestinian nation is strong, cohesive, and known worldwide for its inner strength and resiliency) increased their willingness to relinquish power for morality (e.g., “The Palestinians must give up the use of violence in order to be just and fair in the conflict against the Jews”). This, in turn, led to greater helping tendencies toward Israelis (e.g., “Palestinians should not hesitate to provide humanitarian aid to Israel in cases of natural disasters such as the Mount Carmel fire”).

As the final step in our research program, we turned to establish that the effectiveness of agency affirmation did not result merely from the general reassurance of in-group *positive* identity, regardless of particular *content*. Specifically, we aimed to establish that to increase prosociality in contexts of dual conflicts, the affirmation must focus on the specific identity dimension about which conflicting groups are most concerned, namely, their agency. For this purpose, we assigned Israeli Jews to one of three conditions: a control, no-affirmation condition, the agency affirmation condition, and a corresponding morality affirmation condition, which assured Israel’s moral identity (i.e., reminding participants that Israel is a moral nation that has proved its morality in various ways such as sending teams to aid countries facing natural disasters). We chose morality affirmation for comparison because, first, the needs-based model consistently points to agency and morality as the two

fundamental identity dimensions that are impaired among conflicting groups. Second, according to the social labeling literature (Kraut, 1973; Strenta & Dejong, 1981), an affirmation of a group's morality, which labels the in-group as moral, can activate group members' self-perception of themselves as moral people and consequently lead to prosocial behavior consistent with this label. Nevertheless, we did not expect morality affirmation to exert positive effects on prosocial behavior in the present context, given our general reasoning that in dual conflicts the restoration of agency is a prerequisite for moral needs to come into play. Although the two affirmations were perceived as equally positive (i.e., presenting Israel in a positive light), consistent with previous findings, agency affirmation increased prosociality (i.e., decreased actual donations to an anti-Palestinian organization and increased donations to a pro-Palestinian organization), whereas the morality affirmation failed to increase prosociality (SimanTov-Nachlieli & Shnabel, 2015, Study 4a).

In summary, the series of four experiments described above revealed that an affirmation of the in-group's agency led to greater prosocial tendencies and behaviors. It is interesting to note that in another series of experiments, Shnabel, Halabi, and Noor (2013) also found evidence of positive effects of agency affirmation. Specifically, Shnabel et al. (2013) exposed Israeli Jews and Palestinians to a text that highlighted that both parties are equipped with lethal weapons and have actively inflicted substantial harm upon each other. The exposure to this text was found to increase Palestinians' and Jews' sense of in-group's agency (e.g., their belief that their in-group has the power and resources to solve the conflict) compared to a control, neutral-text condition. The increase in agency, in turn, translated into reduced engagement in competition over the victim status and greater forgiveness tendencies. It seems, thus, that drawing group members' attention to their in-group's strength, even through a reminder of how this strength was *misused* against the out-group, can address their pressing need for agency. Addressing this need, in turn, can contribute to more constructive relations even between groups involved in intractable conflicts.

## Summary and Conclusions

For several decades, Bar-Tal's research has been devoted to identifying the components of the sociopsychological infrastructure that blocks societies involved in intractable conflicts from coming to terms with each other. His legacy for us, the new generation of researchers, is to find ways to disassemble this infrastructure and defreeze the conflicting groups' rigid conflict-related beliefs. In this chapter, we argued that Israelis and Palestinians experience an inherent dilemma between their need to protect their security and agency, on one hand, and their need to maintain a positive moral identity, on the other. We have reviewed empirical evidence suggesting that, sadly, the first need, which dictates revenge and aggression, has a greater impact on group members' behavior than the latter need, which pulls behavior into prosocial directions. Optimistically, however, we also showed that an affirmation of their in-group's agency allowed Palestinians' and Israelis' need for positive moral identity to come into play and exert

its positive influence on their mutual prosocial tendencies and behavior. Thus, removing the threat to Palestinians' and Israelis' sense of agency can “defreeze” their rigid clinging to aggressive defensiveness and self-righteousness.

Our endeavor joins the efforts of other researchers whose work tries to disassemble the harmful sociopsychological infrastructure identified by Bar-Tal's work. These include dialogue group interventions aiming to “work through” the conflict by developing empathy and mutual recognition of suffering (Maoz & Bar-On, 2002; Maoz & Ron, Chap. 16) or increasing group members' insights regarding how their conflict-related beliefs serve its perpetuation (Sonnenschein, 2008). Laboratory-based interventions that build on Bar-Tal's legacy include emotional regulation techniques (Halperin, Porat, Tamir, & Gross, 2013) and interventions intended to change Israelis' and Palestinians' beliefs regarding groups' malleability (Halperin, Russell, Trzesniewski, Gross, & Dweck, 2011). We hope that our joint efforts will build a large body of knowledge that may contribute to our understanding of how to remove the sociopsychological barriers to enduring peace.

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