

Justification of Intergroup Violence: An Exploratory Study within the Israeli-Arab Society

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Abstract

The aim of this exploratory study was to assess the level of justification of intergroup violence from the perspective of Israeli Arab minority group ($n=196$). The study analyzed the link between threat perception and justification of intergroup violence in Israel, which presents a suitable setting due to ongoing conflict between Arabs and Jews. Results indicate that symbolic threat is more salient among Israeli Arab participants compared to realistic threat. The study also found that females tended to perceive violence committed by Arabs against Israeli Jews as more justified than males suggesting that women are more prone to frustration due to intersectionality, leading to violence. In addition, a strong correlation between a person's support of the idea that frustration led to intergroup violence and their justification of such violence was found, supporting some of the frustration-aggression hypothesis. Results emphasize the need to emphasize understanding intergroup conflicts in international relations.

Keywords: intergroup relations, violence justification, intersectionality

1. Introduction

Intergroup violence refers to aggressive actions by one group against another that results in, or aims to cause, physical and/or psychological harm (Levine & Hogg, 2010). This type of violence occurs at the group level and involves individuals acting collectively based on group interests, rather than individually. Hence, intergroup violence is often large scale and affects numerous people. It can manifest as discrimination, deprivation, harassment, destruction of property, physical harm, or murder (Bar-Tal et al., 2007; Shalhoub-Kevorkian & David, 2016). Intergroup violence is common in diverse societies experiencing ongoing conflicts, power struggles, and resource competition (Stephan et al., 2000; Tajfel, 1982). In heterogeneous societies with minority and majority groups, the violence can be initiated by either group, with the minority targeting the majority that governs the country. This type of violence is often driven by the desire of subordinate or minority group members to resist domination and promote change, known as violence for social change or counter-dominance (Barlow et al., 2012; Gerber et al., 2018).

1.1 Intergroup Violence Causes

The literature focuses on understanding the structure of intergroup violence (Bar-Tal & Hammack, 2012), and its underlying causes. Causes of intergroup violence include resource competition (Thompson et al., 2017), intergroup anger triggered by an imbalance in resource distribution (Claassen, 2016), discrimination (Basedau et al., 2017), and hate (Craig, 2002). The role of threat as a facilitator of intergroup violence is also investigated. The Integrated Threat Theory (ITT; Stephan and Stephan 1996) is a leading explanation for intergroup tensions, which identifies four types of threats: realistic (competition for resources), symbolic (differences in values, symbols, and culture), intergroup anxiety (fear of the outgroup), and negative stereotypes (see Stephan, Diaz-Loving, and Duran 2000; Stephan, Ybarra, and Bachman 1999). Research has shown that realistic and symbolic threats are the primary predictors of prejudice towards outgroup members (Bahns, 2017; Riek et al., 2006; Rios et al., 2018). According to Lantos and Molenberghs (2021), in the context of intergroup violence, perceived threat may predict violence between social groups. This is because perceived threat can activate

psychological processes that overcome an individual's aversion to violence and participate in intergroup violence (Hirschberger et al., 2015; Lantos & Molenberghs, 2021).

Studies on the causes of intergroup violence examine motives (see Craig 2002), but often neglect the legitimization and justification of these motives. The literature supports the idea that the legitimization and support in violence and justification of the causes of violence act as a facilitator of violence (Treisman, 2021). Therefore, examining the justifications of intergroup violence may uncover causes that increase the likelihood of violence. Additionally, understanding the justification of intergroup violence is crucial as research in various contexts has shown that individuals who hold favorable attitudes towards using violence are more likely to engage in violent behavior themselves (Baumeister et al., 1996; Huesmann & Guerra, 1997; Markowitz, 2001). This is why the current study focuses specifically on the justification of intergroup violence.

Several studies have shown that social identity and threat perceptions related with intergroup violence justification (Ellemers et al., 2013; Gerber et al., 2018). Tarrent et al. (2012) showed that when crime was committed by ingroup members, participants described it more morally justified than when it was committed by outgroup members. In addition, people accepted more aggression against physically dangerous groups than against symbolically threatening groups (Faragó et al., 2019). Studies have found that frustration plays a role in supporting violence, as per the Frustration-Aggression Hypothesis (Williams, 2009). According to this theory, competition between social groups, whether real or perceived, can lead to frustration and aggressive behavior (Berkowitz, 1989).

1.2 Justification of Intergroup Violence in Israel

In Israel, there are two main ethnic groups - Jews and Arabs, with the former being the majority and the latter being the minority. The ongoing conflict between these two groups is a persistent source of violence (Canetti-Nisim et al., 2009; Halperin & Bar-Tal, 2011). This issue has become a major focus in the field of social categorization due to the negative attitudes expressed by both groups (Ayer et al., 2017; Rozmann & Levy, 2019). Although both Jews and Arabs are involved in ethnic-based violent acts that result in injuries and property crimes (Levy & Rozmann, 2023; Shalhoub-Kevorkian & David, 2016), studies on intergroup violence concentrate on identifying the causes rather than justifications for such violence (see Hunter et al., 1991). The study aimed to examine the justification of intergroup violence among Arabs in Israel with a focus on the impact of perceived threat.

1.3 Gender Differences in the Justification of Intergroup Violence

The basis for gender differences in the justification of intergroup violence is knowledge of gender differences in violent behavior. Research has shown that men tend to be more aggressive than women (Björkqvist, 2018; Smith et al., 2019). Specifically, it was found that men are more likely to engage in physical and verbal aggression than women (Tangney & Dearing, 2002). This trend is also evident in studies of political aggression, where women are less likely to perpetrate political aggression compared to men (Goldstein, 2003; Hudson et al., 2009). The consistent findings of greater male involvement in violence do not correspond with gender differences in support or justification of violence. Studies of intimate partner in Asia and Africa show that women often justify wife beating to a greater extent than men (Alabi & Ramsden, 2021; Haj-Yahia, 2002; Schuler et al., 2012), and found good reason to hit a wife more often than did men (Krause et al., 2016). Within the context of intergroup violence, women are generally less supportive than men of policies promoting the use of force in political situations (Haider-Markel & Vieux, 2008; Nincic & Nincic, 2002; Pratto et al., 1997), and less justified the use of violence than men (Conejero et al., 2014). However, in Israel, gender has a distinct impact on support for forms of political aggression, beyond other key factors predicting political aggression (e.g. political orientation and perceived threat), resulting in women being more supportive of socially distancing and excluding out-groups in conflict than men (Ben Shitrit et al., 2017).

1.4 The Current Study

While empirical research has examined gender differences in intergroup violence justification (Conejero et al., 2014; Flores-Camacho et al., 2022), little research has noted this difference among Israeli-Arab group members (minority group) in the context the protracted Jewish-Arab conflict. Due the importance of violence justification and perceived threat in shaping violent oriented attitudes, it is important to explore these correlations among Israeli-Arab group members in Israel. Specifically, the study hypothesizes that:

H1: Israeli-Arab men will justify intergroup violence more than do Israeli-Arab women.

H2: Perceived threat would be associated with intergroup violence justification.

H3: The extent of support in the opinion that frustration led to violence would be associated with the extent of intergroup violence justification.

2. Method

2.1 Participants

This study included 196 Israeli-Arab participants, of them 46.9% (n=92) were Muslim, 41.8% were Druze (n=82), and 11.2% (n=22) were Christian. Respondents' age-range was 18-74 (*mean*=30.03, *S.D.*=11.84). 38.8% percent of the respondents were male and 61.2% were female with 41.4% of the respondents being single and 58.5% married. More than half (59%) of the participants were religious, and 31% secular.

2.2 Measures

Demographic characteristics: The participants reported their gender, age, family status (single/married/divorced/widowed), and religiosity (secular/traditional/religious).

Realistic threats: To measure realistic threat, we used a modified version of the realistic threat scale developed by Stephan, Ybarra and Bachman (1999). The measure consists of nine items including such threats as crime, job loss, economic costs of health, education, and welfare, e.g., "Israeli-Jews increase the level of violence", "Israeli-Jews endanger the health of Arabs". The response format consisted of a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Cronbach's alpha was 0.8.

Symbolic threats: To identify the threats posed by perceived differences in values and beliefs between ingroup and outgroup members, we used eight items developed by Stephan et al. 1998. The items were rated on a 7-point Likert-type scale which ran from 1 (not likely at all) to 7 (very likely). Some examples of these items are "The values and beliefs of Israeli-Jews are basically different to those of most Arabs", "Israeli-Jews appreciate power more than Arabs". For this measure, the Cronbach's alpha was 0.75.

Justifying intergroup violence: To assess violence justification, we used a one-item scale (Conejero et al., 2014): "To what extent do you think the violence used by Arabs against Israeli-Jews is justified?". The question was answered on a Likert-type scale of 1 (not at all) to 5 (very justified).

Support in the opinion that frustration led to aggression: To assess whether participants agree with the frustration-aggression hypothesis, participants were asked "Regarding the following statement, please write how much do you agree with it: Jews in Israel who were exposed to violent acts between Jews and Arabs felt frustrated and therefore acted violently". The question was answered using a Likert-type scale of 1 (do not agree at all) to 5 (largely agree).

2.3 Procedure

Data collection: The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the college. The quantitative convenience study was conducted through an online questionnaire distributed on social network sites between January-February 2022. The study was distributed through Instagram, WhatsApp and Facebook groups. It was stressed that the questionnaire was anonymous, that participation was voluntary, that it was intended for research purposes only, and that participants could stop answering the questionnaire at any stage. It was also clarified that there were no correct answers to questions in the questionnaire, and participants were asked to express only their opinions.

2.4 Data Analysis

Analyses were carried out using SPSS version 28.

3. Results

3.1 Descriptive Statistics

A positive correlation was found between violence justification and the extent of support in the participants' opinion that frustration led to aggression ($r = .61, p < .001$), and between symbolic threat and violence justification ($r=0.15, p<0.05$). The overall level of perceived realistic threat was relatively low (*mean*= 2.66, *S.D.*= 2.5, *range*= 1-5), whereas the overall level of perceived symbolic threat was relatively high (*mean*= 4.58, *S.D.*= 3.35, *range*= 1-7). The negative correlation between realistic and symbolic threat was significantly for females ($r(119)=-0.18, p=.00$). For males, however, no correlation was found between realistic and symbolic threat ($r(76)=-0.007, p>0.05$). T-test result show significant differences in perceived symbolic threat between females (*mean*= 4.7, *S.D.*= 0.91) and males (*mean*= 4.4, *S.D.*= 0.93) participant, $t(193)=1.9, p<.05$). No differences were found in either religion, family status or religiously level for perceived threat (all $p's>0.05$). Also, females tend to perceive the violence used by Arabs against Israeli-Jews as justified (*mean*= 2.85, *S.D.*=

1.23), than did males (mean= 1, S.D.= 0), $t(116)=16.06$, $p<.01$). Along the same line, females were more likely to agree with the frustration-aggression statement that Arabs in Israel who were exposed to violent acts between Jews and Arabs felt frustrated and therefore acted violently (mean= 4.02, S.D.= 1.19), than males (mean= 1.83, S.D.= 1.35), $t(190)=11.78$, $p<.01$). No differences were found between Christian, Muslim and Druze regarding perceived threat, support of frustration-aggression hypothesis and justifying intergroup violence (all $p's>0.05$).

3.2 Model for Predicting Justifying Intergroup Violence

The multiple regression done for predicting intergroup violence justification included sociodemographic characteristics, symbolic and realistic threat, and frustration-aggression. As shown in table 1, the final model overall contribution to predicting violence justification was 53.7%. The contribution of gender (females; $\beta=.46$, $p<.01$), and support of frustration-aggression hypothesis ($\beta=.35$, $p<.01$), were statistically significant. The contribution of demographic characteristics to the prediction of violence justification was non-significant (all $p's<.05$).

Table 1. Multiple Regression Predicting Justification Intergroup Violence

	Violence Justification		
	B	SE B	β
Females	1.2	.19	.46*
Age	-.06	.09	-.05
Single	-.22	.22	-.08
Frustration-aggression	.28	.05	.35*
Secular	-0.1	.15	-.04
Muslim	.01	.11	.001
Realistic threat	.04	.09	.02
Symbolic threat	.12	.08	.08
R^2_{Adj}	.53		
F	22.84*		
df	8,154		

* $p<.01$

4. Discussion

The aim of this preliminary study was to assess the level at which intergroup violence is seen as justified from the perspective of Israeli Arab minority group. Understanding the justification and basis for intergroup violence is crucial, as simply identifying the causes of violence may overlook perceptions that not only trigger violence, but also justify it. Research indicates that legitimization and support for violence and its causes can facilitate violence (Treisman, 2021). Moreover, individuals with favorable views towards violence are more likely to engage in violent behavior (Baumeister et al., 1996; Huesmann & Guerra, 1997; Markowitz, 2001).

To investigate the justification of intergroup violence, the study analyzed the correlation between threat perception and justification of intergroup violence in Israel. Israel presents a suitable setting for this investigation due to its ongoing and persistent conflict, which has caused animosity between in-group and out-group members (Canetti-Nisim et al., 2009; Halperin & Bar-Tal, 2011; Nir & Sophie, 2018; Rozmann & Nahari, 2022).

Our results indicate that symbolic threat is more salient among Israeli Arab participants compared to realistic threat. It is worth noting that the prominence of symbolic threat in the experiences of Arab participants is not surprising given the repeated conflicts between Arabs and Jews in Israel over symbolic issues, such as the ownership of holy places like the Al Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem and the preservation of Muslim cultural identity in Jerusalem (Shalhoub-Kervorkian & Daher-Nashif, 2013; Shalhoub-Kervorkian, 2017).

These incidents could be perceived as existential threats, which may result in greater support for intolerance toward the perceived threatening outgroup. However, our results showed only a weak correlation between perceived symbolic threat and justification of intergroup violence. The Jewish majority in Israel might evoke

feelings of threat which are related but not strongly linked to the justification of intergroup violence. This finding aligns with social psychology research that highlights the significance of both realistic and symbolic threat perceptions in shaping negative attitudes toward outgroup members (King & Wheelock, 2007; Rios et al., 2018). It is important to note that this result provides modest support for previous studies that found symbolic threat to be a more significant predictor of negative attitudes toward outgroup members than realistic threat (Riek et al., 2006; Stephan et al., 2000).

This study sheds further light on the mechanism of intergroup violence justification as it was found that there is a strong correlation between a person's support of the idea that frustration led to intergroup violence and their justification of such violence. This finding adds to the ongoing support for the frustration-aggression hypothesis which posits that aggression is a result of frustration (Dill & Anderson, 1995; Williams, 2009).

The study aimed also to examine the gender differences in the justification of intergroup violence, with the assumption that males would exhibit greater justification compared to females. However, the hypothesis was not supported as results showed that females tended to perceive the violence committed by Arabs against Israeli-Jews as more justified than males. This result aligns with studies on intimate partner violence in Asia and Africa that have demonstrated that women tend to justify wife-beating to a greater extent than men (Alabi & Ramsden, 2021; Schuler et al., 2012), and find more valid reasons to hit a wife compared to men (Krause et al., 2016). This finding, that females tend to justify the violence committed by Arabs against Israeli-Jews more than males, contradicts prior research on intergroup violence. Previous studies have shown that women are generally less supportive of policies promoting the use of force in political situations and less likely to justify violence than men (Conejero et al., 2014; Haider-Markel & Vieux, 2008; Nincic & Nincic, 2002). However, in the context of Israel, gender has a unique effect on support for political aggression. Research has found that women in Israel are more supportive of socially distancing and excluding out-groups in conflict than men (Ben Shitrit et al., 2017). Similarly, females were more likely to agree with the frustration-aggression hypothesis that Arabs in Israel who experienced violence between Jews and Arabs acted violently due to frustration. This contradicts previous research that identified gender differences in aggression, with men being more aggressive and violent than women, especially in the context of frustration (Bettencourt & Miller, 1996; Denson et al., 2018).

The reason for the finding that females were more likely to agree with the opinion that Arabs in Israel who experienced violent acts between Jews and Arabs acted violently due to frustration is rooted in literature that suggests women are more prone to frustration due to gender-related factors. Intersectionality, as defined by Crenshaw, refers to the multi-dimensionality of marginalization experiences (Crenshaw, 2013). This intersectionality can lead to frustration and, in turn, to violence. Women often experience discrimination based on their gender (McIntosh, 2013; Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 1999), such as being marginalized in legislatures or being denied access to important resources that limit their effectiveness as legislators (Kerevel & Atkeson, 2013). Furthermore, in this study, Arab women perceived that, in addition to gender discrimination, they also experience discrimination in a patriarchal society where men are considered superior to women (Shalhoub-Kevorkian & Daher-Nashif, 2013; Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2017). Furthermore, they suffer discrimination from the Israeli Jewish majority, regardless of their gender (Ben David, 2019; Rouhana & Ghanem, 1998). Additionally, the higher score for perceived symbolic threat among women participants compared to lower perceived symbolic threat among male participants might also explain this finding. Gender discrimination can act as a symbolic threat for women, leading to high scores for symbolic threat (Jones et al., 2022).

5. Research Limitations

This preliminary explorative study has several limitations that should be addressed in future research. First, our sample was non-probabilistic and not representative of the Israeli population, which limits the external validity of our findings. To overcome this limitation, future studies should use a random, representative sample and compare the results with a control group of Israeli-Jews to assess the impact of threat perceptions on the justification of intergroup violence. Second, additional measures, such as self-identification and social distance, were not included in our study, and should be considered in future research to better interpret our results. Third, we used a single-item measure to assess justification of intergroup violence and support for the frustration-aggression hypothesis, which should be further examined using multiple-item measures to increase validity. Fourth, we collected data online, which may raise concerns about the control of participants' environments and the generalizability of our findings. Finally, it is important to note that intergroup relations may vary across different cultural contexts, and future studies should replicate our findings in other socio-political contexts.

6. Conclusions

This study adds to the field of social psychology by exploring the relationship between gender and intergroup violence justification. Previous research has established the importance of symbolic threat in shaping attitudes towards out-group members (Riek et al., 2006; Wirtz et al., 2016). This study supports the finding that symbolic threat, as opposed to realistic threat, is positively associated with the justification of intergroup violence. This knowledge is especially relevant in today's global context, where ethnic minorities and majorities are increasingly facing integration challenges. By understanding the impact of symbolic threat on attitudes towards out-group members, this study can inform government policies aimed at managing ethnic conflicts and promoting the integration of ethnic groups. Additionally, this study highlights the need for developing tools to reduce threat perceptions and negative attitudes towards out-group members.

Declarations

Funding: The current study was conducted without any funding.

Conflict of interests: There are no conflicts of interests.

Availability of data and material: The data will be sent upon reasonable request via corresponding author's email.

Ethics: The study was approved by the Ethical committee of the College.

Consent to participate: In accordance with APA ethical guidelines, all participants gave their informed consent to participate in this study.

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