The Relationship between Social Identification, Ethnocentrism, Threat, Prejudice and Discrimination Among Diverse Groups of Israeli Adolescents

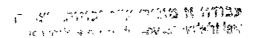Esther Evelyn Gross

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Abstract

Most of the scientific literature shows a positive relationship between strength of identity with a group an individual belongs to, the in-group, and negative attitudes towards social groups to which one does not belong, out-groups. However, some studies have shown precisely the opposite; the higher the identification with the in-group the more positively one relates to out-groups. Understanding these conflicting results served as the starting point for this study.

Based on social psychological theories in general and Integrated Threat Theory (Stephan & Stephan, 2000) specifically, this study examined the function of threat as a mediating variable between in-group and out-group attitudes.

Four purposes guided the research. The first purpose was to check if in-group ethnocentrism moderates the relationship between strength of in-group identification and perception of threat from out-groups. The second purpose was to check how four different threat types mediate between in-group and out-group attitudes in the context of religious and national conflicts. The third aim was to examine two different levels of discrimination – personal and group – as indicators of out-group attitudes. Lastly, an attempt was made to find a model that best describes intergroup relations on the basis of Integrated Threat Theory (Stephan & Stephan, 2000).

Hypotheses based on the aims of this research were tested among 654 high school juniors and seniors in three educational sectors – public, religious/public and Arab – in Israel. The data was gathered and analyzed from questionnaires the students filled out. The results are presented here in two sections: results regarding the religious conflict between secular and religious Jews, and results regarding the national conlict between Jews and Arabs.

Results showed some similarities regarding intergroup relationships between the nationally-based and religiously-based conflicts. First of all, in-group ethnocentrism, and not strength of in-group identification, served as an antecedent variable for perception of threat from the out-group. Secondly, threat was found to mediate the relationship between ethnocentrism and prejudice. Thirdly, prejudice mediated the relationship between threat and two levels of discrimination; against the 'other' as an individual and against the 'other' group.

On the other hand, the results found some interesting differences between groups involved in the two different conflicts. In the religious identity conflict both realistic and symbolic threat influenced attitudes toward religious Jews among public school students, while only symbolic threat was involved in attitudes toward secular Jews among public/religious school students.

Additionally, public/religious school students were found to discriminate against secular Jews at the group level more than public school students against religious Jews. On the other hand, public school students held more prejudicial views, and were more discriminatory on the personal level, toward religious Jews than public/religious school students were toward secular Jews.

In the context of the national identity conflict, it was found that only prejudice mediated between in-group attitudes and discrimination against secular and religious Jews among Arab school students. Both threat *and* prejudice mediated between in-group attitudes and discrimination against Arabs among public and public/religious school students.

The findings in this study fill in theoretical educational and psychological knowledge gaps regarding intergroup relations. The *way* a person identifies with one's in-group, and not the *strength* of that identification, influences attitudes toward outgroups. The similarities and differences within and between the groups involved in the two major conflicts in Israeli society shed light on the psychological mechanisms involved in the tendency to discriminate against out-groups.

In addition, the results of the study can help toward the development of culturally relevant educational programs geared toward promoting social values that both cultivate strong in-group social identities *and* instill respect for others.