

Role-Taking and Attitude Change in a Computerized Simulation of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: Direct Party vs. Distant Party

Ronit Kampf

Tel Aviv University

ronit.kampf@gmail.com

Abstract

The experiment compared attitude outcomes between players who assumed the roles of an Israeli, Palestinian or Western reporter in Global Conflicts, a computerized simulation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The former two represent directly involved parties to the conflict, while the latter represents a more distant party to the situation. 240 Israeli-Jewish and Palestinian undergraduate students participated in the experiment, randomly divided to play one of the three roles or not playing them. They filled in questionnaires measuring attitudes before and after playing the game. Results suggested that participants who played the role of a distant party to the conflict became more balanced regarding the situation (i.e., being able to look at the conflict through the lenses of both sides) than those who played the roles of directly involved parties. In addition, participants who played the role of the "other" side became more balanced regarding the conflict than those who played the role of their own side. The results show that the role assumed by Israeli-Jewish and Palestinian players in a computerized simulation of this conflict is crucial in determining whether they will become balanced regarding the conflict or not.

Keywords: Games for Change, Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, Attitude Change, Computerized Simulations, Perspective Taking, Role Taking.

Introduction

Ethnocentric attitudes play a crucial role in decisions that perpetuate conflicts (Halperin, Sharvit, & Gross, 2011); they do so by mobilizing public support for aggressive actions (Cheung-Blunden & Blunden, 2008) and hindering progress toward conflict resolution (Halperin, 2011). Given that ethnocentric attitudes have negative implications for conflict resolution, there is reason to assume that decreasing such attitudes could have important benefits.

How might this be done? Research suggests that changing the meaning of a situation to change the attitude response to it (e.g., Halperin et al., 2013), might be effective at decreasing ethnocentric attitudes (e.g., Halperin & Gross, 2011). The goal of the research reported here was to examine the idea that the abovementioned cognitive reappraisal could play a role in reducing ethnocentric attitudes and, in doing so, increase balanced viewpoints on conflict-related issues. The study focused on the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict – a highly charged real-world situation.

Research in the conflict resolution field asked participants to respond to such charged situations objectively and analytically – to try to think about the situation in a cold, balanced and detached manner (Richards & Gross, 2000). Such cognitive reappraisal decreased ethnocentric attitudes and increased balanced perspectives regarding emotionally charged situations like the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (e.g., Halperin & Gross, 2011). Such an indirect approach of reappraisal intervention may be particularly valuable for reducing ethnocentric attitudes, because in charged

intergroup contexts individuals may not be open to direct attempts to persuade them to change their intergroup attitudes (Bar-Tal & Rosen, 2009).

However, these studies did not use role-playing computerized simulations like this study does. Role-playing computerized simulations may provide a natural and intuitive setting to perform cognitive reappraisal and develop a balanced perspective regarding the situation, particularly in the context of intractable conflicts like the Israeli-Palestinian situation, for a few key considerations. First, such games are better than other intervention methods (e.g. face-to-face or textual) (Adwan & Bar-On, 2004; Maoz, 2011) in enabling people to be exposed to information about the other party to the conflict, because playful activities can reduce the tension and charged atmosphere around this issue (Amichai-Hamburger & McKenna, 2006; Ellis & Maoz, 2007; Hasler & Amichai-Hamburger, 2013; Weiss et al., 2011). Second, play is naturally conducive to learning, focusing on learning by doing and learning by experiencing, which were found preferable as inter-group intervention methods (Salomon, 2008; Walther, 2009). Finally, computerized simulations are both engaging and interactive in a way that is fun for the players, so they can more easily and effectively generate new learning about the parties to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, particularly about the "other" (Kampf, 2014).

This study compares attitude outcomes between Israeli-Jewish and Palestinian undergraduate students who assume the role of a Western reporter in a computerized simulation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and those who assume the role of an Israeli or a Palestinian reporter. The former is regarded as a distant party to the conflict who may find it easier to look at the situation in a cold and balanced manner as required by cognitive reappraisal, while the latter are regarded as direct parties to the conflict who may find it harder to look at the situation in this objective manner. Previous studies have suggested that assuming the role of a more distant party to the conflict in emotionally charged situations like the Israeli-Palestinian conflict may increase exposure to contradicting information, because it can reduce the tension and charged atmosphere around such loaded issues. As a result, it is easier to be exposed to alternative information about the situation (e.g., Stanovich et al., 2013). Yet these studies did not use role-playing computerized simulations like this study does. Such simulations may be a platform to naturally and intuitively perform cognitive reappraisal without providing participants with direct instructions to do so (Halperin et al., 2013; Halperin et al., 2014).

Research hypotheses

H1: The effect in attitude change will be greater for participants assuming the role of a distant party to the conflict than for those assuming the roles of directly involved parties to the conflict.

H2: The effect in attitude change will be greater for participants assuming the role of the "other" side in the conflict than for those assuming the role of their own side in the conflict.

Methodology

Participants

240 Israeli-Jewish and Palestinian undergraduate students from the Departments of Communication and Political Science in Tel Aviv University and in Al-Quds University participated in the study.

90 Israeli-Jewish students and 90 Palestinian students played the roles (experimental group), while 30 Israeli-Jewish students and 30 Palestinian students did not play them (control group). The experimental and control groups did not differ in key characteristics that could provide alternative explanation for the results (Table 1).

Table 1. The key characteristics of the experimental and control groups

	Age M(SD)	Male (%)	Political attitudes Left (1) to Right (10) M(SD)	Religiosity: Religious (1) to Secular (10) M(SD)	Playing a digital game in the last 6 months (%)	Interest in the conflict: Not at all (1) to very much (4) M(SD)
<u>Israeli Role</u>						
Israeli-Jews	26.1 (1.15)	35%	5.12 (2.35)	6.6 (1.27)	43%	3.56 (0.46)
Palestinians	20.5 (1.09)	34%	4.95 (2.16)	6.2 (1.18)	38%	3.91 (0.35)
<u>Palestinian Role</u>						
Israeli-Jews	27.4 (1.18)	34%	5.47 (2.27)	6.59 (1.25)	46%	3.36 (0.55)
Palestinians	20.7 (1.2)	38%	5.13 (2.01)	5.99 (1.09)	35%	3.85 (0.25)
<u>Western Role</u>						
Israeli-Jews	26.9 (1.13)	31%	5.38 (2.19)	6.55 (1.32)	47%	3.27 (0.49)
Palestinians	20.45 (1.09)	36%	4.98 (2.21)	6.12 (1.13)	31%	3.89 (0.31)
<u>No Role</u>						
Israeli-Jews	27.3 (1.15)	33%	5.23 (2.21)	6.38 (1.26)	45%	3.48 (0.51)
Palestinians	20.76 (1.12)	38%	4.88 (2.25)	6.19 (1.23)	30%	3.91 (0.28)

The game Global Conflicts

Global Conflicts is an award-winning educational game developed in 2010 by Serious Games Interactive in Denmark (<https://school.seriousgames.net/>).

This study selected the Checkpoint scenario suggesting a narrative that represents the hardships of both Israeli soldiers and Palestinian civilians at a checkpoint in the Palestinian territories, presenting them as individual people who are stressed for their security and suffering from the impossible situation. This scenario was selected because a previous study (Author, 2016) indicated that it produced more positive learning outcomes than the Military Raid scenario, which also deals with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in this game.

In the game, the player is represented by the avatar of a Western reporter who arrives in Jerusalem for her journalistic assignment. Given that this study also included the role of a Palestinian reporter and the role of an Israeli reporter, when the participants opened the study website, they were presented with instructions regarding the role they were supposed to assume in the game. The site was programmed to randomly assign participants to play one of the three

roles. They were then instructed that their task was to write a news report for a Western newspaper describing the hardships of both Israeli soldiers and Palestinian civilians at a checkpoint in the Palestinian territories based on the interviews they conducted with various characters in the checkpoint. The game also provides the options to write a news report for an Israeli or a Palestinian newspaper. This study preferred assigning players to a Western newspaper over an Israeli or a Palestinian newspaper, because the former is supposed to be a more neutral assignment for both Israeli-Jewish and Palestinian participants compared to the latter two. This assignment tries to examine the situation from both perspectives by taking into consideration the hardships of both sides in the conflict. After presented with instructions about the role assumed in the game, the newspaper assigned and the journalistic assignment, the participants could start playing the game.

Design and procedure

The experiment was conducted as part of classes in qualitative research methods and participants were randomly divided to play one of the three roles or not playing them. The participants received credit for their participation. The data were collected in the first week of June 2016. No major event happened during this period that could provide alternative explanation for the results.

The experimental condition took three hours and included four parts. First, participants were introduced to the Global Conflicts game and played a short demo. Second, they filled in a short questionnaire. Third, the participants played the roles in the Checkpoint scenario. Finally, after playing the game, the participants again filled in a short questionnaire.

The control condition took three hours and included three parts. First, participants filled in a short questionnaire. They were then given a lecture about unobtrusive methods of studying digital natives (not related to the conflict). Finally, they again filled in a short questionnaire.

Measures

The attitude measure examined the 'rightness' of each side on key issues in the conflict including water, refugees, borders, settlements, Jerusalem, and security, using the following scale: 1. Palestinians are absolutely right, 2. Palestinians are somewhat right, 3. Both sides are equally right, 4. Israelis are somewhat right, and 5. Israelis are absolutely right. After conducting a factor analysis, the average of answers given on the six key issues was used as a measure of attitude change regarding key issues in the conflict before and after playing the game. This measure has already been used in previous studies conducted with the games Global Conflicts and PeaceMaker (Cuhadar & Kampf, 2014; Kampf & Cuhadar, 2015).

Statistical procedures

Table 2 shows a Repeated Measures ANOVA used to test the research hypotheses, investigating the effects of role type (Israeli, Palestinian, Western, No role) and nationality (Israeli-Jewish or Palestinian) on attitude values at two separate time points: before and after the game intervention. Several measures were used as covariates, including gender, religiosity, political ideology, frequency of news consumption about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and interest in the conflict.

Results

Role type and attitudes toward key issues in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict

Before playing the roles, Israeli-Jewish participants held a pro-Israeli view, while Palestinian participants held a pro-Palestinian view (Table 3).

Participants playing the role of a distant party got closer to thinking that both Israelis and Palestinians are equally right regarding key issues in the conflict compared to those playing the role of the "other" side (Table 3). Therefore, hypothesis 1 is confirmed.

Participants playing the role of a distant party got closer to thinking that both Israelis and Palestinians are equally right regarding key issues in the conflict compared to those playing the role of their own side (Table 3). Therefore, hypothesis 1 is confirmed.

Participants playing the role of the "other" side got closer to thinking that both Israelis and Palestinians are equally right regarding key issues in the conflict compared to those playing the role of their own side (Table 3). Therefore, hypothesis 2 is confirmed.

During the same time, no change in attitudes regarding key issues in the conflict was found in the control group, and they retained ethnocentric attitudes toward the conflict (Table 3).

Table 2. Nationality and role type effects on attitudes toward the conflict (ANOVA)

Effects	MS	F	Partial eta squared
Time	0.19	0.25	0
Time * Nationality	18.12	11.12*	.05
Time * Role Type	26.26	16.7**	.19
Time * Nationality * Role Type	6.11	6.43*	.03
Time * Gender	0.01	0.23	0
Time * Religiosity	0.14	2.13	0.02
Time * Political Ideology	0.01	0.07	0
Time*Consuming News about the Conflict	0	0.06	0
Time * Interest in the Conflict	0.26	3.75	0.01

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .0001$

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics of Nationality and role type effects on attitudes toward the conflict

	Pre-Game Intervention M(SD)	Post-Game Intervention M(SD)
<u>Israeli-Jews</u>		
Israeli Role	4.35(0.59)*	4.29(0.31)*
Palestinian Role	4.22(1.06)*	3.67(1.05)*
Western Role	4.21(1.05)*	3.01(1.07)*
No-Role	4.25(1.08)*	4.05(1.05)*
<u>Palestinians</u>		
Israeli Role	2.15(1.03)*	2.66(1.09)*
Palestinian Role	2.17(1.08)*	2.24(1.04)*
Western Role	2.20(1.05)*	3.25(1.08)*
No-Role	2.29(1.07)*	2.38(0.99)*

* $p < .05$

Conclusions and Discussion

The findings are preliminary, but suggestive. This experimental study found that participants assuming the role of a more distant party to the conflict (i.e., a Western reporter) acquired a more balanced perspective regarding the situation compared to those assuming the roles of directly involved parties to the conflict (i.e., a Palestinian reporter or an Israeli reporter).

Interestingly, this study suggested that participants playing the role of the "other" side in the conflict became more balanced regarding the conflict than those playing the role of their own side in the situation. Previous studies suggested that direct parties to the conflict who were asked to think about the situation through the lens of the "other" side decreased the use of "other" side information (i.e., became less balanced) and increased negative emotions and attitudes toward the "other" party in the conflict (e.g., Pliskin & Halperin, 2016; Porat et al., 2016). However, these studies used face-to-face or written interventions for this purpose rather than game-based interventions like Global Conflicts. The findings of this study suggest that computerized simulations may be a preferable setting for exposure to contradicting information about the "other" side. Further research is required to understand how Global Conflicts achieves its attitude and perspective taking outcomes, by singling out different dimensions of the game in order to provide a more in-depth analysis of its impact.

These findings are considered preliminary, yet provocative. Political positions in conflict situations are generally rigid, entrenched and driven by ideological considerations. It is therefore surprising to see shifts in these attitudes following such minimal intervention, especially with regard to Israeli-Jewish and Palestinian participants who are directly involved parties to the conflict with strong attitudes on the issues which are more resistant to change (e.g., Eagly and Chaiken, 1998).

A practical implication of this study may be that designers of computerized simulations focusing on intractable conflicts like the Israeli-Palestinian situation should pay close attention to game character development in order to increase the likelihood of a balanced perspective taking. This study indicated that a more distant party to the conflict may be preferable in this case over a direct party in developing a balanced perspective regarding the situation.

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