The Relationship between Religious Symbols and Intergroup Attitudes among Majority Group Members

Lipaz Shamoa-Nir, Irene Razpurker-Apfeld

Abstract--- Precursors of intergroup tension have been researched in divided societies in an aim to understand social problems. It seems that negative attitudes towards the out-group stem from a combination of two contrasting processes, in-group preference and out-group derogation. As research has progressed, a growing interest has been shown in understanding the emergence of negative out-group attitudes while focusing on variables such as intergroup threat, contact between groups, social norms and religion. This study investigated whether priming of religious concepts influences prejudices and threat perceptions of Jewish majority members towards Arab minority members in Israel. We attempted to find priming effects of religious content on prejudice and perceived threat with religiosity as a moderating variable. Religious words were primed via search puzzles, and were then followed by questionnaire filling. Priming effects were not found for prejudice or threat perceptions, probably due to social desirability effects. Although this is a preliminary investigation, this paper highlights the importance of studying the contribution of religious content to intergroup attitude formation for majority group members toward minority members.

Keywords--- out-group attitudes, prejudice, religious, Israel, threat, minority/majority

I. INTRODUCTION

When do majority groups endorse negative attitudes toward religious minority members, and what factors are involved in these perceptions? Research has found complex relationships between religious measures and inter-group attitudes (Bohman, & Hjerm, 2014). Findings indicate that religious beliefs may be a fertile ground for growing motivations and reasons for reinforcement of prejudicial stereotypes (e.g. Shamoa-Nir, 2017), violent conflicts and social suppression of religious out-groups (e.g. Ramsay et al., 2014). Yet, more empirical research is needed to understand the social world of various minorities, particularly in their interactions with out-group members.

The aim of this research is to examine how exposure to religious symbols affects majority attitudes towards minority members. The focus on the attitudes of majority members draws heavily on the contradictory evidence in literature showing that, a multicultural context promotes out-group ethnic tolerance but at the same time decreases acceptance of minority ethnic groups (e.g. Deaux & Verkuyten, 2014). Moreover, in light of the complexity and challenges that stem from variety of cultures and religions in Israel (Shamoa-Nir, 2014), attitudes of Jewish majority towards ethnic out-groups should be explored more thoroughly.

Lipaz Shamoa-Nir, Zefat Academic College, Israel
Irene Razpurker-Apfeld, Zefat Academic College, Israel

1.1 Priming religious content

The present research uses exposure in order to investigate the influence of conscious religious content on intergroup attitudes. Priming refers to an increased sensitivity to certain stimuli due to prior exposure to them or to other stimuli associated with them. It has been shown that, on the one hand, priming of religious concepts induced prosaically behavior (Pérez et. al.,, 2008; Pichon et al., 2007), however on the other hand, following priming of in-group Christian or Buddhist religious concepts there were significantly more prejudice and negative emotions towards Afro-Americans or other cultural minority out-groups, compared to conditions in which neutral concepts were primed (Ramsay et al., 2014).

Several recent studies have linked religion content and intergroup relations (Johnson et al., 2012; Ramsay et al., 2014; Razpurker-Apfeld & Shamoa-Nir, 2013; Razpurker-Apfeld & Shamoa-Nir, 2015a; Razpurker-Apfeld & Shamoa-Nir, 2015b; Razpurker-Apfeld & Shamoa-Nir, 2018; Shamoa-Nir, 2019; Shamoa-Nir & Razpurker-Apfeld, 2019), claiming that evoking religious content contributes to negative attitudes towards the out-group. However, these findings raise some open issues which deserve further investigation and will be addressed in the current research. First, in some studies the participants' awareness of religious content may have contaminated the process thereby producing social desirability effects. Second, in different studies participants were exposed to different content (e.g. in-group or out-group religious symbols). Third, different effects may occur when testing the exposure to religious content on minority participants and majority participants.

It should be noted that although negative attitudes to out-groups have been positively correlated with religiosity, religious priming effects have been reported to remain after controlling for religiosity (Johnson et al., 2012). Hence, in the present study too, religiosity was controlled. Moreover, several studies highlight the need to distinguish between out-group and in-group contents (Johnson, et al., 2012; Ramsay et al., 2014; Razpurker-Apfeld & Shamoa-Nir, 2015). Thus, this study uses two types of religious priming, in-group or out-group religious symbols.

1.2 Intergroup attitudes and Threat Perceptions

Our social judgment and intergroup attitudes sometimes lead to biases in the perception of similarities and differences between members of in-groups and out-groups. In particular, people in conflict relations, tend to develop overly-negative images towards the out-group (De Dreu et al., 1995), and their decisions and actions can be biased, even consciously. In addition, several moderating conditions were found in studying inter-group attitudes: national context (Guimond et al., 2014), level of intergroup conflict (Correll et al., 2008), intergroup anxiety (Stephan, 2014), and in-group identification (Morrison et al., 2010).

Relying on the integrated threat theory this research will focus on the association between threat perceptions and out-group attitudes. According to Stephan and colleagues (2009) there are three types of threats of the in-group that lead to stereotypes and prejudices towards out-groups: realistic threat (physical welfare and resources), symbolic threat (system of values and beliefs) and interpersonal threat (fear of encounters with the out-group which might provoke rejection, feelings of inferiority and fear of exploitation and degradation) (Stephan & Renfro, 2002). As for the Israeli-Arab conflict, Stephan et al. (2009) have illustrated that for Jews living in Israel, realistic threat may refer to terrorism, and for Arabs living in Israel – being civilian casualties.

The above four sources of prejudice do not necessarily have similar psychological implications. For example, it has been found that symbolic and realistic threats have differential predictive value, since stereotypes and symbolic threats, but not realistic threats, predicted prejudice towards Muslims in the Netherlands (Velasco et al., 2008). Stephan (2014) focused on intergroup anxiety and argued that it can activate negative out-group cognitions including negative attitudes and negative beliefs about the out-group. Indeed, many studies showed that intergroup anxiety was associated with negative out-group attitudes (for review see, Riek et al., 2006). However, not much is known about the relationship between intergroup threat perceptions and accessibility to religious content by indirect exposure to them. In this study we examined the Jewish group in Israel which is the dominant majority. According to Stephan and Renfro (2002), the dominant group may experience an increased sense of threat from the out-group, due to a threat to its power and privileges. In accordance, we hypothesized that exposure to out-group religious concepts should increase perceived realistic and symbolic threats experienced by Jewish group (*Hypothesis 1A*).

Moreover, it is important to examine whether religious priming affects the behavioral responses towards out-group members since studies have indicated that intergroup anxiety has an impact on a variety of behaviors (for review see, Stephan, 2014). Intergroup contact, which included meetings and social interactions, was suggested as a way to reduce perceived threats and undermine stereotypes and negative behaviors (for a meta-analytical review, see Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008). Therefore, in light of these findings, we hypothesized that the priming effects should be reflected in the dimensions of prejudice and intergroup anxiety towards the out-group (*Hypothesis 1B*).

In summary, this study examined whether evoking religious content influenced out-group attitudes and perceived threat, and whether religiosity would moderate the effects. However, it is important to note that this is a preliminary exploration of the relationships between the variables. Participants completed a word search puzzle that served as a priming task, and then filled questionnaires measuring their out-group attitudes, behavioral intentions and threat perceptions.

II. METHOD

2.1 Participants

In this study 70 Jewish undergraduate students from Israel participated (61 female, 7 male, 2 – did not fill in the gender question). Their mean age was 28 years with a standard deviation of 8.7. Age range was 19-51. Religiosity was measured on a 1-10 scale. Mean reported religiosity was toward the religious side of the scale ($M = 6.6$, $SD = 3.4$).

2.2 Materials and Measures

Word Search Puzzle. A Hebrew version of priming presented Jewish, Islamic and neutral concepts in a context of a word search puzzle (Razpurker-Apfeld & Shamoa-Nir, 2015). This was based on previous forms of word search puzzles (Bargh et al., 2001; Pichon et al., 2007). Each version presented 7 target words in a 9X12 letter matrix. Three of the words were critical and the others were fillers. The 7 words could be found in any of the following directions: right-left, left-right, up-down, down-up or diagonally. The filler words (flower-pot, telephone, rice, train) appeared in all versions in the same locations. The critical words in the Jewish version were: yarmulke,

mezuzah, Torah. In the Islamic version: veil, Koran, mosque. In the neutral version: pencil-box, table, computer. The critical words in all versions were positioned in the same locations in the matrix.

The following measures are based on Hebrew versions (Tur-Kaspa & Schwarzwald, 2003) of Stephan and colleagues' (1999) measures.

Prejudicial Attitudes. Fourteen items presented emotional descriptions (e.g., rejection, hatred, hostility) toward Muslims. Using 1-10 scales, Jewish participants evaluated the extent to which they felt each specific emotion toward Muslims (α=.904). Scores were averaged, so that higher scores represented more prejudice.

Realistic Threats. Thirteen statements measured realistic threat perceived from Muslims on 1-10 scales. Participants referred to statements such as: "The Muslims endanger the existence of the Jews in the country", "The standard of living of Jews is damaged because of the Muslims". These statements concerned welfare and social security services, politics and economics (α=.97). Averaged scores indicated higher realistic threat.

Symbolic Threat. Thirteen statements measured the gap in beliefs and values between the Jewish participants and their Muslim out-group on 1-10 scales (α=.916). For instance, "The Muslim lifestyle damages the values of tradition as perceived by Jews" and "The family values of Jews and Muslims are very similar". Higher averaged score indicated higher symbolic threat.

Intergroup Anxiety. Thirteen emotions (e.g., humiliation, anxiety, embarrassment) were presented and participants indicated how much they had experienced them when encountering Muslim people on 1-10 scales (α=.864). Higher averaged score reflected higher intergroup anxiety.

2.3 Procedure

Participants were randomly assigned to one of the three priming versions ($N = 24$ in Jewish priming, $N = 23$ in Islamic priming, $N = 23$ in neutral priming). After marking the words in the puzzles, the participants filled the above questionnaires and provided the following details: sex, age and religiosity. Each participant was experimented individually.

III. RESULTS

The following analyses aimed to find priming effects on prejudice and on the threat measures. The results are plotted in Figure 1.

Prejudice. In the following analysis of covariance (ANCOVA), after controlling for religiosity, there was no effect of priming on prejudice [$F < 1$]. Across the three priming conditions it was found that the more religious the Jewish participant was, the more reported prejudice emerged ($r = .702$).

Realistic, Symbolic and Intergroup Anxiety Threat Measures. Controlling for religiosity, priming effects on the combined measure of threat perception was examined using a one-way multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA). Priming effects were not significant [*Hotelling's Trace = .052, F < 1*]. Further analyses indicated that all three types of specific threats were positively correlated with religiosity across all priming conditions – the more religious the person was, the higher were the threat perceptions. Religiosity positively correlated with realistic

threat, $r = .619, p < .0009,$ with symbolic threat, $r = .626, p < .0009,$ and with intergroup anxiety, $r = .384, p < .002.$

Figure 1:   Prejudice towards Muslims and perceived threats after religious priming. Adjusted means are presented after controlling for religiosity. Panel A refers to prejudice and Panel B refers to threat perceptions. Error bars represent standard errors.
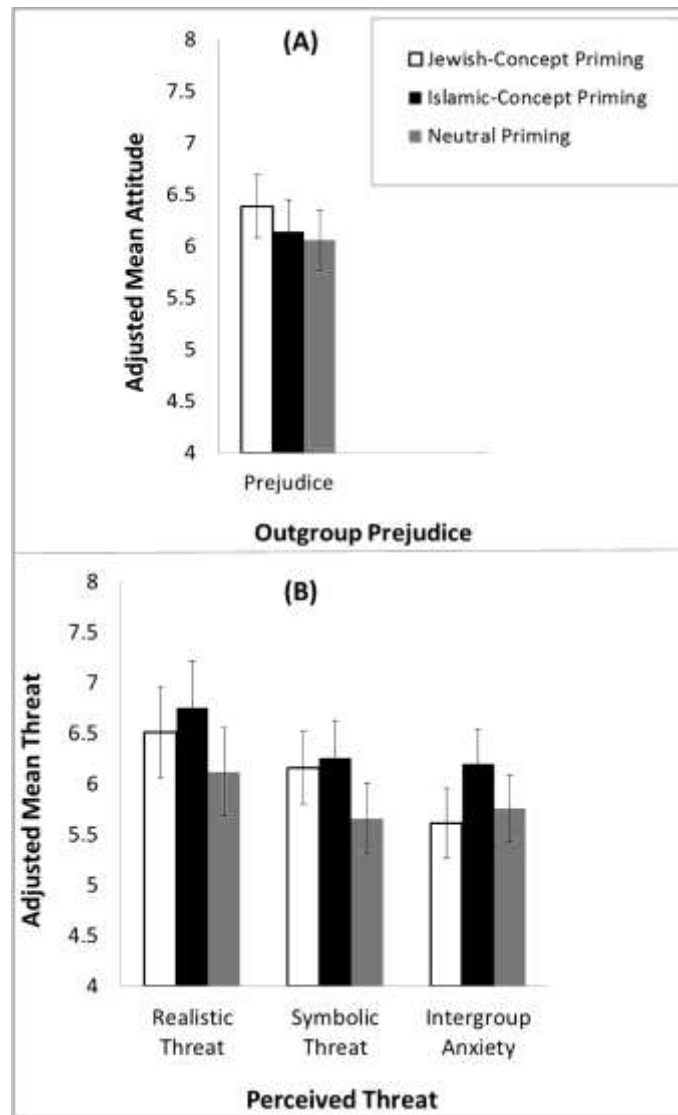
IV. DISCUSSION

In this study we investigated the impact of religious priming on inter-group attitudes of a majority group towards a religious minority. Religious content was primed via search puzzles, and were then followed by questionnaire filling. The results show that exposure to religious words do not have influence on out-group attitudes among majority group members.

Even though this priming technique has demonstrated robust priming effects in previous experiments with Muslim participants (e.g. Razpurker-Apfeld & Shamoa-Nir, 2015), it seems that exposure to religious content, at least supraliminal exposure, does not have an impact on attitudes of a majority group towards a religious minority out-group possibly due to social desirability effects. Being aware of the religious concepts, the Jewish participants did not allow their out-group attitudes to be revealed, and thus we did not find a difference between neutral and religious priming. It seems that in order to bypass social desirability effects, the religious concepts should be presented outside of conscious awareness. Thus, participants' motivation to control attitudes may be reduced.

4.1 Limitations and future research

Due to the nature of this research, which is a preliminary study, there are some limitations worth noting. First, since the possibility that participants were aware of the research manipulation; subliminal priming should be tested, in order to decrease social desirability effects. For example, using Wittenbrink et al.'s concept priming procedure (Wittenbrink et al., 2001), may automatically elicit attitudes that are influenced by religious content.

Second, we examined Jewish participants studying in a multicultural college, which has been recognized to be a challenging social context (Shamoa-Nir, 2014). Although we have examined participants under a religious intergroup conflict in order to study the process of evoking religious cognitive schema, it should be acknowledged that further research involving other religious groups could possibly lead to different outcomes, especially, since differential priming effects were reported for various religious groups drawn from the same multicultural setting (Shamoa-Nir & Razpurker-Apfeld, 2013).

A future research should examine the Muslims' attitudes. Moreover, while examining the effects of priming religious symbols, the situational status should also be investigated, namely, the quality of contact between groups, and the effect of the group's personal experience and knowledge of out-groups or the relative status.

V. CONCLUSION

Taken together, our results strengthen the view that religious content is important in evoking threat perceptions in group relations. Although we have not found that priming of religious concepts affect intergroup attitudes, the importance of exploring different conditions of exposure to religious content was emphasized. In particular, our findings may help to build a justification for continuing developing the theoretical framing to conceptualize religious cognition in the field of social psychology. Furthermore, there is an encouraging start for those who are concerned with the dyadic influence of relations between members of different religious groups on their mutual attitudes.

REFERENCES

[1]   Bargh, J. A., Gollwitzer, P. M., Lee-Chai, A., Barndollar, K., and Trotschel, R. (2001). "The automated will: Nonconscious activation and pursuit of behavioral goals," Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, vol. 81, pp. 1014-1027.
[2]   Bohman, A., and Hjerm, M. (2014). "How the religious context affects the relationship between religiosity and attitudes towards immigration," Ethnic and Racial Studies, vol. 37(6), pp. 937-957.
[3]   Correll, J., Park, B., and Allegra Smith, J. (2008). "Colorblind and multicultural prejudice reduction strategies in high-conflict situations," Group Processes & Intergroup Relations, vol. 11(4), pp. 471-491.

[4]   Deaux, K., and Verkuyten, M. (2014). The social psychology of multiculturalism: Identity and intergroup relations. In V. Benet-Martinez & Y. Y. Hong (Eds.), The Oxford handbook of multicultural identity: Basic and applied psychological perspectives (pp. 118-138). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

[5]   De Dreu, C. K., Yzerbyt, V. Y., and Leyens, J. P. (1995). "Dilution of stereotype-based cooperation in mixed-motive interdependence," Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, vol. 31, pp. 575-593.

[6]   Guimond, S., de la Sablonnière, R., and Nugier, A. (2014). "Living in a multicultural world: Intergroup ideologies and the societal context of intergroup relations," European Review of Social Psychology, vol. 25(1), pp. 142-188.

[7]   Johnson, M. K., Rowatt, W. C., and LaBouff, J. P. (2012). "Religiosity and prejudice revisited: In-group favoritism, out-group derogation, or both?" Psychology of Religion and Spirituality, vol. 4, pp. 154–168.

[8]   Morrison, K. R., Plaut, V. C., and Ybarra, O. (2010). "Predicting whether multiculturalism positively or negatively influences White Americans' intergroup attitudes: The role of ethnic identification," Personality and social psychology bulletin, vol. 36(12), pp. 1648-1661.

[9]   Pérez, D., Salas-Fumas, V., and Saurina, J. (2008). "Earnings and capital management in alternative loan loss provision regulatory regimes," European Accounting Review, vol. 17(3), pp. 423-445.

[10]   Pettigrew, T. F., and Tropp, L. R. (2008). "How does intergroup contact reduce prejudice? Meta-analytic tests of three mediators," European Journal of Social Psychology, vol. 38, pp. 922-934.

[11]   Pichon, I., Boccato, G., & Saroglou, V. (2007). "Nonconscious influences of religion on prosociality: A priming study," European Journal of Social Psychology, vol. 37, pp. 1032-1045.

[12]   Ramsay, J. E., Pang, J. S., Shen, M. J., & Rowatt, W. C. (2014). "Rethinking Value Violation: Priming Religion Increases Prejudice in Singaporean Christians and Buddhists," International Journal for the Psychology of Religion, vol. 24(1), pp. 1-15.

[13]   Razpurker-Apfeld, I., and Shamoa-Nir, L. (2015a). "The influence of exposure to religious symbols on out-group stereotypes," Psychology, vol. 6(05), pp. 650-663.

[14]   Razpurker-Apfeld, I., and Shamoa-Nir, L. (2015b). Are out-group stereotypes influenced by exposure to religious content? In A. M. Columbus (Ed.) Advances in psychology research (vol. 113, Chapter 6). New York: Nova Science Publishers.

[15]   Razpurker-Apfeld and Shamoa-Nir, L. (2018). "Religious content in intergroup relations: the influence of exposure to religious symbols on mutual stereotypes of Jews and Muslims," Megamot, vol. 53(2), pp. 217-248. (in Hebrew)

[16]   Riek, B. M., Mania, E. W., and Gaertner, S. L. (2006). "Intergroup threat and outgroup attitudes: A meta-analytic review," Personality and Social Psychology Review, vol. 10, pp. 336-353.

[17]   Shamoa-Nir, L. (2014). "Defining resilience from practice: Case study of resilience building in a Multi-Cultural College," Procedia Economics and Finance, vol. 18, pp. 279-286.

[18]   Shamoa-Nir, L. (2017). "The Window becomes a mirror: the use of the Johari windows model to evaluate stereotypes in intergroup dialogue". Israel Affairs, pp. 1-20.

[19]   Shamoa-Nir, L. (2019). Investigating Stereotypes Among Minority Group Members in Israel: The Role of In-group and Out-group Symbols. Proceedings of the XVI European congress of psychology, Moscow, Russia, pp. 1468-1468.

[20]   Shamoa-Nir, L., and Razpurker-Apfeld, I. (2013). The Influence of Exposure to Nationality Concepts on Stereotypes among Jews and Arabs in Israel. Proceedings of the Jerusalem International Conference on Neural Plasticity and Cognitive Modifiability, Jerusalem, Israel, pp. 123-125.

[21]   Shamoa-Nir, L., and Razpurker-Apfeld, I. (2019). "Investigating stereotypes towards the out-group: The role of religious concepts and group membership," Basic and Applied Social Psychology, vol. 41(3), pp. 188-200.

[22]   Stephan, W. G. (2014). "Intergroup anxiety theory, research, and practice," Personality and Social Psychology Review, vol. 18, 239-255.

[23]   Stephan, W. G., and Renfro, C. L. (2002). The role of threat in intergroup relations. In D. M. Mackie & E. R. Smith (Eds.), From prejudice to intergroup emotions: Differentiated reactions to social groups (pp. 191–207). New York: Psychology Press.

[24]   Stephan, W. G., Ybarra, O., and Bachman, G. (1999). "Prejudice toward immigrants: An integrated threat theory analysis," Journal of Applied Social Psychology, vol. 29, pp. 2221-2237.

[25]   Tur-Kaspa, M., and Schwarzwald, J. (2003). "Perceived threat and prejudice in three domains of intergroup tension in Israeli Society," (in Hebrew). Megamot, vol. 42, pp. 549-584.

[26]   Velasco González, K., Verkuyten, M., Weesie, J., and Poppe, E. (2008). "Prejudice towards Muslims in the Netherlands: Testing integrated threat theory," British Journal of Social Psychology, vol. 47, pp. 667-685.

[27]   Wittenbrink, B., Judd, C. M., and Park, B. (2001). "Evaluative versus conceptual judgments in automatic stereotyping and prejudice," Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, vol. 37, pp. 244-252.