



## The roles of personality traits and perceived threat in the attitudes of Israelis toward peace with the Palestinians



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### ABSTRACT

The purpose of the present study was to examine the associations between personality traits (i.e., honesty-humility, emotionality, extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, openness, narcissism, psychopathy, Machiavellianism, and spitefulness) and the attitudes of Israelis toward peace with the Palestinians in a sample of 2631 Israeli community members. The possibility that the associations between personality traits and attitudes toward peace with the Palestinians would be moderated by the extent to which Israelis viewed the Palestinians as a potential threat to their safety and security was also examined. The results revealed that the perceived threat posed by the Palestinians moderated the associations that certain personality traits (i.e., openness, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism) had with the negative attitudes of Israelis toward peace with the Palestinians. For example, low levels of openness and high levels of psychopathy were associated with relatively negative attitudes toward peace with the Palestinians even when the perceived threat posed by the Palestinians was believed to be relatively low. These results are consistent with the broader perspective that personality traits tend to have stronger associations with outcomes when situational forces are relatively weak.

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Basic personality traits – such as the Big Five personality traits (i.e., extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and openness) – are related to intergroup attitudes (e.g., Sibley & Duckitt, 2008). Previous research has consistently shown that openness (i.e., the tendency to be open-minded, intellectual, and flexible) and agreeableness (i.e., the tendency to be cooperative, trusting, forgiving, and sympathetic) have strong associations with intergroup attitudes such as prejudice and tolerance for outgroup members. Similarly, previous research has shown that personality traits – especially low levels of openness to experience – are associated with the perception of the world as being a dangerous place (e.g., Duckitt & Sibley, 2010). This tendency for individuals with low levels of openness to feel threatened may be at least partially responsible for the consistent negative association that openness has with ideological outcomes such as right-wing authoritarianism (e.g., Duckitt & Sibley, 2010), traditional

values (e.g., Roccas, Sagiv, Schwartz, & Knafo, 2002), and political conservatism (e.g., Carney, Jost, Gosling, & Potter, 2008).

The present study examined the associations between personality traits and the attitudes of Israelis toward peace with the Palestinians. Further, the possibility that the associations between personality traits and attitudes toward peace would be moderated by the extent to which Israelis viewed the Palestinians as a potential threat to their safety and security was also examined. The idea that perceived threat may play a role in the associations between personality traits and attitudes has been proposed in previous work (e.g., Sibley, Osborne, & Duckitt, 2012) but the present study is the first to apply this idea to understanding the attitudes of Israelis toward peace with the Palestinians. Personality traits are often more strongly related to outcomes in relatively “weak” situations (e.g., Snyder & Ickes, 1985). That is, individuals who believe that they are under considerable threat are likely to have negative attitudes toward the group whom they perceive to be threatening them regardless of their personality traits. In contrast, individual differences in personality traits are likely to influence attitudes toward outgroup members when the level of perceived threat is relatively low. Openness, psychopathy, and spitefulness are three personality traits that are likely to influence Israeli attitudes toward peace with the Palestinians when perceived threat is low. These personality traits

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were the focus of the present study because openness and psychopathy have been shown to have clear associations with negative intergroup attitudes and behaviors (Hodson, Hogg, & MacInnis, 2009; Sibley & Duckitt, 2008). In contrast, spitefulness has the potential to play an important role in intergroup attitudes even though research concerning this construct is still in its nascent stage and no existing studies have examined this possibility. Other basic personality traits from the HEXACO model of personality (i.e., honesty-humility, emotionality, extraversion, agreeableness, and conscientiousness) – which is similar to the Big Five personality traits but the HEXACO model also includes a sixth dimension referred to as “honesty-humility” (Ashton & Lee, 2009) – and dark personality traits (i.e., narcissism and Machiavellianism) were included for exploratory purposes.

The first hypothesis concerned low levels of openness because this personality feature has drawn attention for its role in some of the cognitive processes that are believed to be connected with authoritarianism and prejudice (e.g., Kruglanski & Webster, 1996). More specifically, low levels of openness are believed to function as a “seize and freeze” mechanism such that individuals with low levels of openness display a tendency to be more accepting of information that is consistent with their previous beliefs and resistant to new information that may contradict their existing beliefs (e.g., Sibley et al., 2012). Individuals with low levels of openness may develop more authoritarian attitudes due to their heightened attentiveness to information that may signal danger from outgroup members as well as being more reactive to this sort of information (e.g., Duckitt & Sibley, 2010; Sibley & Duckitt, 2008). The present study adopted a similar motivated social cognition perspective by proposing that individuals with low levels of openness will have relatively negative attitudes toward peace with the Palestinians due to their heightened sensitivity to the potential threat and danger posed by these outgroup members. More specifically, it was expected that individuals with low levels of openness would tend to perceive the Palestinians to be especially threatening. Further, it was expected that individuals with low levels of openness would report relatively negative attitudes toward peace with the Palestinians and that this association would be most evident when the situational forces were relatively weak (i.e., the perceived threat posed by the Palestinians was relatively low).

There has been considerable interest in the darker aspects of personality during recent years (e.g., Zeigler-Hill & Marcus, 2016). The most popular conceptualization of dark personality traits is the Dark Triad (i.e., narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism; Paulhus & Williams, 2002) but it has been argued that the range of dark personality traits is actually much broader and includes spitefulness among other traits (Zeigler-Hill & Marcus, 2016). Dark personality traits have been found to be associated with a wide range of outcomes including intergroup attitudes (see Furnham, Richards, & Paulhus, 2013, for a review). For example, Hodson et al. (2009) found that psychopathy and Machiavellianism were associated with prejudice toward immigrants even when controlling for the Big Five personality traits. In contrast, Jonason (2015) found that the Dark Triad personality traits had little direct association with prejudice but these aspects of personality were associated with perceptions of the world as being a dangerous and competitive place. Based on these past findings concerning the links between the Dark Triad traits and intergroup attitudes, it was expected that individuals with high levels of psychopathy would report relatively negative attitudes toward peace with the Palestinians even when they perceived the threat posed by the Palestinians to be relatively low. In contrast, psychopathy may not be associated with attitudes toward peace with the Palestinians when they were perceived to be highly threatening. The rationale for this hypothesis was that psychopathy has consistent links with impulsivity (e.g., Ray, Poythress, Weir, & Rickelm, 2009), aggression (e.g., Feilhauer, Cima, Korebrits, & Kunert, 2012), and the desire for revenge following a transgression (e.g., Brewer, Hunt, James, & Abell, 2015; Massari, Winters, Lenz, & Jonason, 2017) but that the

influence of psychopathy on attitudes toward peace with the Palestinians may be attenuated in a “strong” situation such as perceiving another group as being a threat to one’s own safety and security (e.g., Snyder & Ickes, 1985).

Spitefulness is characterized by the willingness of an individual to incur a cost in order to inflict harm on someone else (Marcus, Zeigler-Hill, Mercer, & Norris, 2014). Spiteful individuals may act against their own self-interest if they believe that other individuals are behaving immorally or unfairly. It is important to note that individuals with high levels of spitefulness have been found to have difficulties understanding the mental states of other individuals which may prevent them from empathizing with their struggles (Ewing, Zeigler-Hill, & Vonk, 2016). Therefore, it was expected that individuals with high levels of spitefulness would oppose peace with their perceived enemies following conflict, even when these enemies were not seen as a significant threat to their own safety and security.

In summary, it was expected that openness would be positively associated with attitudes toward peace with the Palestinians, whereas psychopathy and spitefulness would be negatively associated with attitudes toward peace with the Palestinians. The perceived threat posed by the Palestinians was included as a potential moderator of these associations because it was expected that the associations between certain personality traits and attitudes toward peace would be strongest when the situational forces were relatively weak (e.g., openness may have a stronger association with attitudes toward peace when participants perceive the threat posed by the Palestinians as being relatively low). In contrast to the predictions for openness, psychopathy, and spitefulness, there were no clear predictions regarding the other basic personality traits (i.e., honesty-humility, emotionality, extraversion, agreeableness, and conscientiousness) or Dark Triad personality traits (i.e., narcissism and Machiavellianism) but these personality traits were included for exploratory purposes.

## 1. Method

### 1.1. Participants and procedure

Participants were a community sample of 2760 Israelis who responded to requests asking for volunteers to take part in a study concerning “personality.” Participants were asked to complete measures concerning their personality traits, the perceived threat of the Palestinians, support for peace with the Palestinians, support for compromise with the Palestinians, and support for the establishment of a Palestinian state. All of the questionnaires used in the present study were administered in Hebrew after being translated from the original English versions using the back-translation method. Data were excluded for 129 participants who had an extreme score (i.e., more than three standard deviations away from the mean) for at least one variable. The final sample consisted of 2631 adult participants (1157 men, 1474 women) who had a mean age of 27.70 years ( $SD = 9.52$ ) and their average number of years of formal education was 13.05 ( $SD = 1.91$ ). In addition, the final sample was largely Jewish (97%), heterosexual (94%), and politically conservative (66%).

## 2. Measures

### 2.1. Basic personality traits

Basic personality traits were assessed with the HEXACO-60 (Ashton & Lee, 2009) which is a 60-item measure designed to assess basic personality using six dimensions: *honesty-humility* (10 items; e.g., “I wouldn’t use flattery to get a raise or promotion at work, even if I thought it would succeed” [ $\alpha = 0.79$ ]), *emotionality* (10 items; e.g., “I sometimes can’t help worrying about little things” [ $\alpha = 0.75$ ]), *extraversion* (10 items; e.g., “In social situations, I’m usually the one who makes the first move” [ $\alpha = 0.75$ ]), *agreeableness* (10 items; e.g., “I rarely hold a

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