



Help that hurts? Perceptions of intergroup assistance



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 9 November 2015

Received in revised form 10 March 2016

Accepted 23 May 2016

Available online 3 June 2016

Keywords:

Group misunderstanding

Group status

Intergroup helping

Intergroup relations

Social identity theory

ABSTRACT

The current research, guided theoretically by the Intergroup Helping as Status Relations Model, explored how high and low status groups (Israeli Jews and Israeli Arabs) perceive offers of help from the high to the low status group. Ninety-three Arab and Jewish participants were asked to imagine and evaluate offers of help from Jews to Arabs in Israel. Consistent with the hypothesis that members of high and low status groups would have different perspectives and goals in their relations, Israeli Arabs viewed help by Israeli Jews more as a way to reinforce existing hierarchy and as a way of asserting the higher groups' domination. Recognizing the different orientations of members of high and low status groups to potentially conciliatory actions, such as helping behavior, can enhance understanding of the dynamics of intergroup relations and conflict and reveal factors that might fuel intergroup misunderstandings and tensions, which can represent a critical step to improving intergroup relations.

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1. Introduction

Whereas research on helping over the past four decades has focused primarily on help-giving between individuals and its consequences (Nadler, 2015; Penner, Dovidio, Piliavin, & Schroeder, 2005), more recent research has considered the role of group membership in these processes (Halabi & Nadler, 2010; Levine & Crowther, 2008; Nadler, 2002; Nadler & Halabi, 2006; Stürmer, Snyder, & Omoto, 2005). The present research, conducted within the Jewish-Arab context in Israel, examined helping relations as an intergroup phenomenon. Relations between Israeli Jews and Israeli Arabs are complex and distinctive: Israeli Arabs are citizens of Israel and have regular contact with Israeli Jews; at the same time, they have ethnic, religious, and cultural connections with Palestinians outside of Israel, who are frequently in military conflict against Israel and Israeli Jews. Only a limited number of studies have investigated the role of helping in this context (Halabi, Dovidio, & Nadler, 2012; Halabi, Nadler, & Dovidio, 2008; Halabi, Nadler, & Dovidio, 2013). Yet, perceptions of intergroup assistance may be particularly important, practically as well as theoretically, in understanding the intergroup dynamics in this relationship. Specifically, we investigated how potentially prosocial actions, such as intergroup assistance, by Israeli Jews (a high status group) directed toward Israeli Arabs (a low status group) may be perceived in different ways by members of the two groups.

Understanding the potentially divergent perceptions of seemingly benevolent actions of the high status group can enhance understanding of the dynamics of intergroup relations and conflict and reveal factors that might fuel intergroup

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misunderstandings and tensions, on the one hand, and factors that may help to ameliorate the negative perceptions of the high status group's motives, on the other hand.

Members of high and low status groups perceive intergroup relations and interactions in divergent ways (Demoulin, Leyens, & Dovidio, 2009). In particular, members of high status groups view intergroup relations as more favorable and their behavior toward low status groups as more benevolent than members of low status groups do. In Israel, for example, in a survey conducted in 2011 (<http://www.brookings.edu/research/reports/2011/12/01-israel-poll-telhami>), 53% of Israeli Jews perceived that relations reflected full equality between Jews and Arabs, whereas only 3% of Israeli Arabs characterized relations this way. Conversely, 36% of Israeli Arabs reported that relations represented an apartheid relationship; 7% of Israeli Jews shared this perception. Considering relations between Israeli Jews and Arabs generally, Bar-Tal, Halperin, and Oren (2010) indicate how conflict-supporting beliefs and perspectives represent significant barriers to peaceful reconciliation.

One specific consequence of the divergent perspectives that Israeli Jews and Israeli Arabs have about their intergroup relations generally is that Israeli Jews and Israeli Arabs may perceive the intentions of seemingly positive acts, such as assistance offered to Israeli Arabs, in different ways. Indeed, whereas 81% of Israeli Jews believe that the state of Israel provides "good things" to Israeli Arabs, only 42% of the Israeli Arabs agree (Smootha, 2013). With respect to intergroup helping relations, Israeli Arabs perceive help offered by Israeli Jews more negatively and with more suspicion than the same assistance provided by Israeli Arabs (Zuckerberg & Halabi, 2015). The current study aimed to investigate further the potentially different perceptions of help offered by Israeli Jews to Israeli Arabs in order to contribute to better understanding of intergroup helping relations, generally, as well as relations between Jews and Arabs in Israel, specifically.

Drawing on Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) as well as research on interpersonal helping as power relations between helper and recipient (Nadler & Fisher, 1986), the Intergroup Helping as Status Relations Model proposes that, when group membership is salient, helping relations with the outgroup constitute a means to establish, reinforce, or challenge existing social hierarchy (Nadler, 2002; Nadler & Halabi, 2006, 2015). Research derived from this model has revealed that high status groups often help low status groups to reinforce their relatively advantaged status especially when facing a destabilized status relations (Nadler, Harpaz-Gorodiesky, & Ben-David, 2009). By contrast, members of low status groups often openly display negative reactions to receiving assistance from high status groups (Halabi & Nadler, 2010).

The current study extends work on social identity and helping (Levine & Crowther, 2008), generally, and the Intergroup Helping as Status Relations Model, specifically, by examining in the context of Jewish-Arab relations in Israel the potentially divergent perceptions of the same, ostensibly prosocial, action by the advantaged group. Specifically, whereas the previous research on the Intergroup Helping as Status Relations Model has demonstrated these systematic differences in behaviors and reactions (Halabi, Nadler, & Dovidio, 2011), the present research directly examined the different ways members of a high status group, Israeli Jews, and a low status group, Israeli Arabs, construe the motivations for assistance offered by the high status to the low status group.

As noted earlier, members of high and low status groups often have divergent perceptions of the same event. This divergence occurs, in part, because of the different goals, perspectives, and motivations that they bring to the situation (Demoulin et al., 2009; Fiske, Harris, Russell, & Shelton, 2009). In general, members of high status groups seek to be liked and be seen as moral, whereas members of low status group are more concerned about respect and empowerment (Bergsieker, Shelton, & Richeson, 2010; Shnabel, Nadler, Ulrich, Dovidio, & Carmi, 2009). As a consequence, members of a high status groups may perceive their group giving assistance to a low status group as reflecting positive intentions and consequences, which are consistent with their goal to be liked and morally affirmed. By contrast, members of a low status group may perceive the same act by the high status group more negatively out of concerns that this assistance may be intended by the high status group to undermine the low status group's power and autonomy. Indeed, previous research on the Intergroup Helping as Status Relations Model has found that low-status group members react more negatively to help from the high status group (e.g., Nadler & Halabi, 2006). Furthermore, this research suggested that these negative reactions occur because low-status group members perceive this help as a manipulative tool used by the high status group to assert its superior position and increase the dependency and subordination of the low status group.

The present research directly investigated differences in the attributions that members of a high status group, Israeli Jews, and of a low status group, Israeli Arabs, have when they are asked about assistance offered by the high status group to the low status group. Specifically, we examined the ways offers of assistance made by Israeli Jews to Israeli Arabs are perceived by Israeli-Jewish and Israeli-Arab participants. In this study, we purposely did not constrain Israeli-Jewish and Israeli-Arab participants to respond to a specific, concrete example of helping: In order to examine how Israeli-Jewish and Israeli-Arab participants generally construe Israeli Jews' offers of assistance to Israeli Arabs, participants were simply asked to imagine a situation in which an Israeli Jew offered help to an Israeli Arab. One advantage of this approach is that it assesses responses to incidents of helping that spontaneously come to mind for participants from the different groups, rather to a specified event that may have less inherent relevance to participants. A limitation is that these events may be of a different type or quality for members of the different groups and for respondents within each group. We chose to allow participants to generate their own example in response to our prompt to imagine a situation of help because believed that it would be more informative about the particular intergroup context we were studying, between Israeli Jews and Israeli Arabs.

We hypothesized that, because members of high status and low status groups have different perspectives and goals in the relations (Bergsieker et al., 2010; Demoulin et al., 2009; Shnabel, Nadler, Canetti-Nisim & Ullrich, 2008), they would construe help offered by the high status group (Israeli Jews) to the low status group (Israeli Arabs) in different ways. In particular, given previous work on Israeli Arabs' negative responses to assistance from Israeli Jews, particularly when accepting the help

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