



Implicit theories block negative attributions about a longstanding adversary: The case of Israelis and Arabs

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HIGHLIGHTS

- ▶ An incremental theory mutes the impact of attributions on attitudes and preferences.
- ▶ Exposure to situational attributions has positive effects for entity theorists.
- ▶ An attribution have a different meaning and impact depending on implicit theories.
- ▶ Blocking dispositional attributions toward a long-time adversary is possible.

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ABSTRACT

Attributing the negative behavior of an adversary to underlying dispositions inflames negative attitudes. In two studies, by manipulating both implicit theories and attributions, we show that the negative impact of dispositional attributions can be reduced. Both studies showed that inducing an incremental theory (“traits are malleable”) in Israelis kept negative attitudes toward Arabs low (Study 1), and political tolerance and willingness to compromise for peace high (Study 2), even when people were oriented toward dispositional attributions. Thus an incremental theory blocked the negative effect of dispositional attributions. Inducing an entity theory (“traits are fixed”) had a negative effect on attitudes, tolerance, and compromise when dispositional attributions were salient but not when situational attributions were made salient. These findings have important implications for promoting intergroup relations and conflict resolution.

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Protracted conflicts between ethnic or religious groups typically include provocative, often aggressive, actions on both sides. Notable examples are the Catholic–Protestant conflict in Northern Ireland, the Bosnian–Croatian conflict, and the current Israeli–Palestinian conflict. Such actions can increase the negative attitudes of one group toward the other (Bar-Tal & Halperin, 2011), and these negative attitudes are often amplified by cues suggesting that the negative actions of the opposition stem from dispositions embedded in their nature. Therefore, one of the main challenges for those who wish to improve intergroup relations is to restrain the potentially destructive influence of cues that foster dispositional attributions. In the current research we propose a new way to temper these negative influences.

We suggest that when people hold an incremental theory—the belief that people can change—their attitudes and behavior toward out-group members will be less influenced by cues that foster dispositional or situational attributions. With the belief that people can

change, even negative acts that reflect on the outgroup member's current character do not serve as a good basis for longer-term attitudes. Thus, we predict that when people hold an incremental theory, their negative judgments and their preference for aggressive policies toward outgroup members, including basic civil rights infringement, will be less influenced by cues that foster short-term attributions.

However, when people hold an entity theory—the belief that people cannot change—short-term attributions should have a pronounced effect on their judgments and their preference for punitive actions toward outgroup members. That is, for entity theorists it should matter a great deal whether an adversary's current behavior is driven by an internal, disposition (in their view unchangeable, Chiu, Hong, & Dweck, 1997; Molden, Plaks, & Dweck, 2006), or by an external (typically more changeable) factor. Hence, orienting entity theorists toward situational attributions will steer them away from dispositional attributions and thereby have more positive effects.

In the present research, we used well-established experimental manipulations of both implicit theories (Chiu, Dweck, Tong, & Fu, 1997) and attributions (Stewart, Latu, Kawakami, & Myers, 2010) and examined their impact on the judgments and preferences of Jewish Israelis toward Arabs. In this way, we tested the hypothesis that an incremental theory would diminish the effect of dispositional

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vs. situational attributions on negative judgments and policy preferences toward an outgroup in a longstanding conflict. However, we hypothesized that entity theorists' judgments and policy preferences would be more influenced by dispositional or situational attributions, such that negative judgments and preference for punitive actions would be stronger following a dispositional attribution.

Implicit theories and attributions: an integrative perspective

Research by Dweck and colleagues (see Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Dweck & Molden, 2005) has focused on implicit theories about the nature of human attributes. Whereas people who hold an entity theory believe that human attributes are fixed, concrete, internal entities, those who lean toward an incremental theory believe that human attributes are more dynamic qualities that can be changed and developed.

Hence, an incremental theory leads people to see dispositions, as well as situations, as malleable, but also to focus more on non-dispositional factors. For example, incremental theorists, who view intelligence as malleable, use information about their own performance more to make inferences about their own effort or task strategies, and less to make inferences about their innate capabilities, compared to entity theorists (Blackwell, Trzesniewski, & Dweck, 2007; Chiu, Hong, Dweck, Lin, & Wan, 1999). More important for the purposes of the current study, those holding an incremental theory are less likely to attribute perceived wrongdoing of others to a fixed nature (Chiu, Hong, et al., 1997; Erdley & Dweck, 1993; Gervey, Chiu, Hong, & Dweck, 1999; Levy & Dweck, 1998), are less likely to recommend punishment and retaliation for a wrongdoer (Erdley & Dweck, 1993; Gervey et al., 1999), and are more likely to recommend negotiation and education rather than punishment (Chiu, Dweck, et al., 1997). Therefore, we predict that salient attributions (dispositional and situational) will have little, if any, effect on judgments and preferences following an incremental theory manipulation.

Conversely, an entity theory leads people to focus on fixed dispositions as causes of behavior and to neglect situational factors (Chiu, Dweck, et al., 1997; Chiu, Hong, et al., 1997; Erdley & Dweck, 1993; Levy & Dweck, 1998; Molden et al., 2006). Furthermore, and of importance to the current study, entity theorists tend to treat those whom they perceive as wrongdoers more harshly, that is, they mete out harsher punishment (e.g., Chiu, Dweck, et al., 1997; Erdley & Dweck, 1993; Gervey et al., 1999). It could have been the case that entity theorists' belief in fixed traits would lead to more *lenient* punishment, since fixed dispositions are seen as the causes of behavior and since people are not seen as capable of change. Instead, in their view, wrongdoers are bad people (Chiu, Dweck, et al., 1997) and bad people deserve more punishment, and although punishment cannot change them, it can perhaps act as a deterrent (Dweck, Chiu, & Hong, 1995). Therefore we expected that entity theorists would be highly influenced by salient attributions (dispositional and situational) when forming their judgments regarding others' behavior. A dispositional attribution bolsters entity theorists' natural tendency to rely on dispositions in making judgments about others, while a situational attribution is necessary to remind entity theorists that although people's attributes are fixed, their behavior is influenced by factors other than their stable personality.

These differences between entity and incremental theorists are especially relevant in conflicts in which harmful behaviors are frequently being enacted on both sides and labels are being hurled back and forth (Halperin, Russell, Trzesniewski, Gross, & Dweck, 2011; Yeager, Trzesniewski, Tirri, Nokelainen, & Dweck, 2011). Past research has shown that inducing a incremental vs. entity theory of groups in participants involved in the Middle-Eastern conflict (i.e., Israeli-Jews, Israeli-Palestinians and Palestinians in the West-Bank) decreased their levels of negative attitudes toward members of the rival group, which, in turn, led to greater willingness to make major compromises with that

group for the sake of peace (Halperin, Russell, Trzesniewski, et al., 2011).

Following the rationale presented above, even in those situations of violent intergroup rivalry, we suggest that an incremental theory leaves open the possibility for hope and change, regardless of whether the individual makes a dispositional or situational attribution for a particular action of the outgroup. In contrast, an entity theory leads people to make and reinforce dispositional attributions each time a negative action occurs. Thus we suggest that for entity theorists a situational attribution is necessary to remind them that even the behavior of those they perceive as "bad people" is influenced by factors other than their stable personality. For this reason, for entity theorists we expect decreased levels of negative judgments toward members of the rival group, greater support for civil rights, and more willingness to compromise with that group following a situational attribution as opposed to a dispositional attribution.

The Present Research

The current studies were conducted among Jewish Israelis and, as noted, examined their judgments and their preferences toward Arabs, who are considered the ultimate outgroup for the Israeli Jewish population. Given that stereotypes about Arabs are so entrenched among many Israelis (Bar-Tal & Teichman, 2005), influencing them poses a formidable challenge. Hence, the current research constitutes the first attempt to investigate the interplay of implicit theories and attributions, and to do so with individuals who are involved in a long term, intractable conflict.

In two studies, implicit theories (entity vs. incremental, Chiu, Hong, et al., 1997) and attributions (dispositional vs. situational, Stewart et al., 2010) were manipulated in a way that made no mention of Arabs or their actions. Following this, participants were asked about their endorsement of negative traits toward Arabs (Study 1), their levels of political tolerance toward Arabs (Study 2), and their willingness to make compromises in the service of Arab-Israel conflict resolution (Study 2).

Study 1

The goal of Study 1, as noted, was to examine the combined effect of implicit theories and attributions on endorsement of negative traits toward an outgroup in the context of the Israeli-Arab conflict.

Method

Participants

Sixty Jewish-Israeli university students from different disciplines (50% female, $M_{\text{age}} = 24.87$) voluntarily participated in the study.

Procedure and measures

Participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions in a 2 (Implicit Theory: Entity, Incremental) by 2 (Attribution: Dispositional, Situational) experimental design.

Implicit theories manipulation. Participants read a short *Psychology Today*-style scientific article in Hebrew (the well-established implicit theories manipulation, Chiu, Hong, et al., 1997; Levy, Stroessner & Dweck, 1998) that presented research suggesting that personality is either fixed (entity condition) or malleable (incremental condition) (Chiu, Hong, et al., 1997; Levy et al., 1998). Both articles were similar in format, structure, and word count and participants rated the two articles as equally clear, interesting, and convincing (all p 's > .10).

Attribution training/manipulation. Drawing on a manipulation used by Stewart et al. (2010), participants read a brief description of attribution theory and then were presented with 7 pictures of people. Each was presented on a page that also included a short description of a stereotypical behavior for that person (e.g., low SATs for a fashion model) and two possible explanations for this behavior, one dispositional and one situational. Participants were instructed to choose the same explanation for all 7 images, either the dispositional explanation (e.g., she is unintelligent) or the situational explanation (e.g., she was given bad news before the test), according to their experimental condition. No mention of Arabs was ever made.

Endorsement of negative traits. Participants were given a list of eight traits and were asked to endorse the extent to which these traits applied to Arabs on a scale of 0 (not at all) to 10 (very much). The list included stereotypical negative traits, exploiters, greedy, competitive and violent, and stereotypical negative traits that were presented in their positive form (and reverse coded), intelligent, clean, reliable and hard-working, $\alpha = .81$.

After completing the questionnaire, participants were fully debriefed and thanked. As in prior research (e.g., Levy et al., 1998), no participant reported thinking that the manipulations were relevant to the measure assessing the endorsement of negative traits.

Results and discussion

To test our hypothesis, we conducted a 2 (Implicit Theory: Entity, Incremental) by 2 (Attribution: Dispositional, Situational) ANOVA analysis with participants' trait ratings as the dependent variable. Both main effects were significant. Specifically, following practice with dispositional attributions participants reported higher levels of endorsement of negative traits towards Arabs ($M = 5.26$, $SD = 1.45$) than following practice with situational attributions ($M = 4.38$, $SD = .93$, $F_{(1, 56)} = 9.28$, $p < .01$). Furthermore, following an incremental theory manipulation participants reported lower levels of endorsement of negative traits towards Arabs ($M = 4.53$, $SD = 1.21$) than following an entity theory manipulation ($M = 5.11$, $SD = 1.31$, $F_{(1, 56)} = 3.99$, $p = .05$).

More importantly, the two-way interaction was significant ($F_{(1, 56)} = 7.57$, $p < .01$, see Fig. 1). Simple effects analyses revealed that following an entity manipulation, participants reported more endorsement of negative traits after the practice with dispositional

attributions ($M = 5.95$, $SD = 1.16$) than with the situational attributions ($M = 4.27$, $SD = .83$, $F_{(1, 56)} = 16.80$, $p < .01$). However, following an incremental manipulation there was no difference in agreement with negative traits between those who practiced dispositional attributions ($M = 4.57$, $SD = 1.41$) and those who practiced situational attributions ($M = 4.49$, $SD = 1.03$, $F_{(1, 56)} = .04$, n.s.). There was no difference in agreement with negative traits between those who practiced situational attributions following either an incremental or an entity manipulation ($F_{(1, 56)} = .28$, n.s.), suggesting that priming with situational attributions eliminated the difference between the entity and incremental conditions in their endorsement of negative traits.

The results of Study 1 suggest that a belief in the malleability of human nature can perhaps neutralize the potential effects of exposure to dispositional attributions on endorsement of negative traits. Furthermore, exposure to situational attributions may neutralize the potential effects on endorsement of negative traits and negative attitudes that a belief in the fixed nature of traits often leads to.

Study 2 had two purposes. The first was to take the dependent measures out of the realm of judgments and into the realm of support for important civil rights and support for critical compromises for peace. The second purpose was to rule out a possible alternative explanation for the results of Study 1.

A possible alternative explanation for the results of Study 1 may be that entity theorists, who showed differential levels of endorsement of negative traits following exposure to dispositional and situational attributions, were influenced by a preference that cognitions be consistent with one another (Cialdini, Trost, & Newsom, 1995). Thus, although the attribution practice did not mention Arabs, perhaps entity participants who were asked to choose the situational explanation for stereotypic figures' behavior, thought about them in a less stereotypical way, and remained consistent and reported relatively lower stereotypes toward Arabs than entity participants who were asked to choose the dispositional explanation. To rule out this explanation, in the next study participants were asked to report their preferences for policies, for which consistency motives are expected to be much weaker (e.g., Halperin, Russell, Trzesniewski, et al., 2011).

Study 2

In Study 2 we test the hypothesis that our effects go beyond the realm of judgments to affect political tolerance toward Arabs (that is, the withholding or granting of civil rights) and willingness to support compromises that are critical to eventual peace between Israelis and Arabs.

Method

Participants

Sixty three psychology students (80% female, $M_{age} = 22.88$) participated in return for course credit. Four participants who failed to follow the attribution manipulation instructions were excluded from the analysis. (However, the results described below remain significant when these participants are included.) Because of the known influence of political ideology on political judgments, participants were asked to position themselves according to their political orientation on a 1 (extreme right wing) to 7 (extreme left wing) scale. Of the sample, 43.3% defined themselves as left wing, 13.3% as right wing, and 43.4% as centrists.

Procedure and measures

The procedure was the same as Study 1 except that following the manipulations participants were asked to report their levels of political (in)tolerance toward Arabs and their willingness to support major compromises for the sake of future peace with Palestinians.

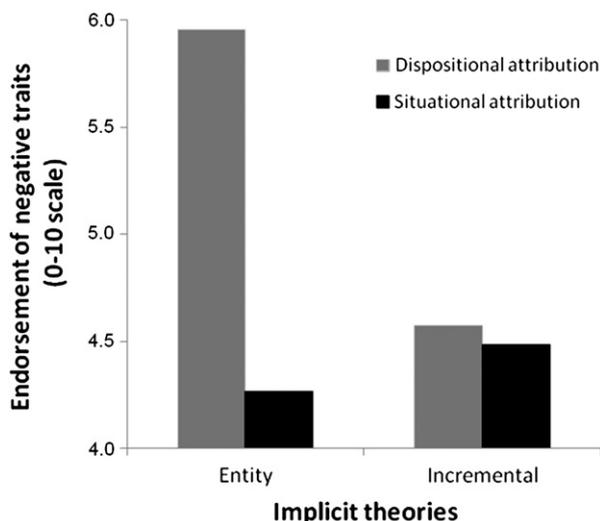


Fig. 1. Endorsement of negative traits as a function of implicit theory and attribution conditions (Study 1).

Political Intolerance was measured by a four-item scale based on the classical political intolerance measure (Sullivan, Shamir, Walsh, & Roberts, 1985). The scale, which was adapted to Israeli society (Halperin, Canetti-Nisim, & Hirsch-Hoefler, 2009; Shamir & Sagiv-Schifter, 2006), specifically asks Jewish Israelis about their support for civil rights for Israeli Arabs (1–not at all, 6–very much). The items were:

“Israeli Arabs should not be allowed to appear on TV or give speeches”; “Israeli Arabs should get equal civil rights (reversed)”; “Israeli Arabs’ parties and organizations should be outlawed”; “The right of Israeli Arabs to vote in elections should be revoked” ($\alpha = .79$).

Support for Compromises with the Palestinians was assessed with three items, each representing a key aspect of potential Israeli compromise within upcoming negotiations (Halperin, Russell, Dweck & Gross, 2011). Participants indicated to what extent (1–not at all, 6–very much) they supported territorial compromises (withdrawal of Israel to the 1967 borders), compromise about the status of Jerusalem as the capital of the future Palestinian state, and general support for Israeli compromises during the upcoming negotiations with the Palestinians ($\alpha = .85$).

Results and discussion

Unlike Study 1, no main effects were found for either implicit theories or attribution (all $ps > .20$). However, the two-way interactions were again significant (political intolerance: $F(1, 55) = 5.70, p < .05$; willingness to support compromise: $F(1, 55) = 4.23, p < .05$; see Figs. 2, 3). Simple effects analyses revealed that following an entity manipulation, participants reported higher levels of political intolerance toward Arabs after a dispositional attribution manipulation ($M = 2.27, SD = .23$) than after a situational attribution manipulation ($M = 1.46, SD = .23$); $F(1, 55) = 6.25, p < .05$. However, following an incremental theory induction there was no difference in levels of political intolerance expressed by those in the dispositional attribution condition ($M = 1.77, SD = .25$) and those in the situational attribution condition ($M = 2.02, SD = .21$); $F(1, 55) = .75, n.s.$ In addition, those who practiced situational attributions following an entity manipulation expressed marginally less political intolerance than those who practiced situational attributions following an incremental manipulation ($F(1, 55) = 3.58, p = .06$). This means that those experiencing the entity manipulation tended to be *more* tolerant about civil rights for

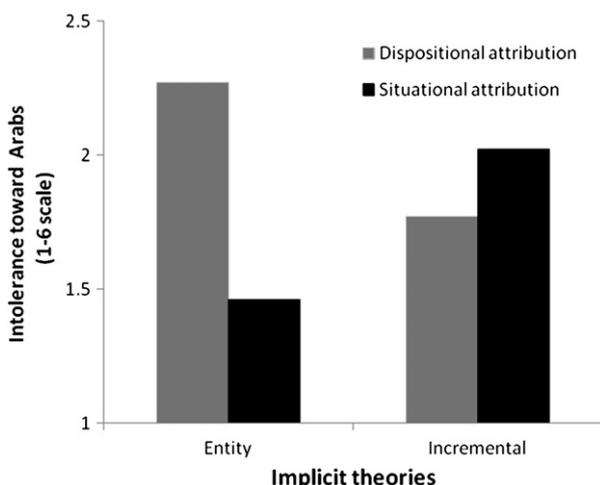


Fig. 2. Intolerance toward Arabs as a function of implicit theory and attribution conditions (Study 2).

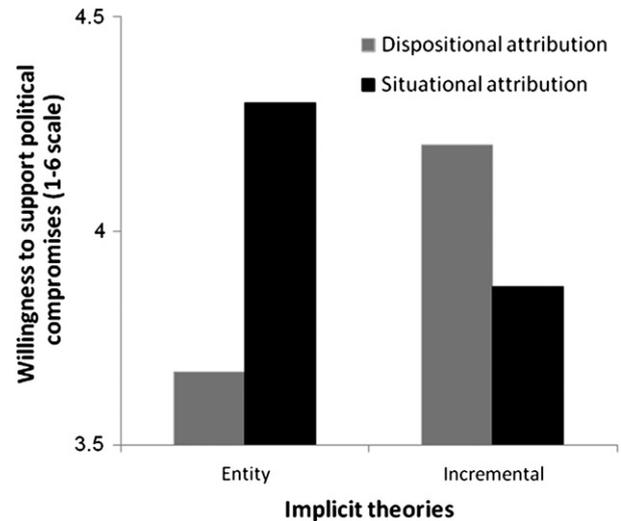


Fig. 3. Willingness to support political compromises as a function of implicit theory and attribution condition (Study 2).

Arabs than those experiencing the incremental manipulation when they were oriented toward situational attributions. This trend is discussed below.

Simple effects analyses further revealed that following an entity manipulation, participants reported marginally less willingness to support compromises after a dispositional attribution manipulation ($M = 3.67, SD = .23$) than after a situational attribution manipulation ($M = 4.30, SD = .23$); $F(1, 55) = 3.81, p = .06$. However, following an incremental theory induction there was no difference in willingness to support compromises between participants in the dispositional attribution condition ($M = 4.20, SD = .24$) and those in the situational attribution condition ($M = 3.87, SD = .21$); $F(1, 55) = .89, n.s.$ In addition, there was no difference in willingness to support compromises between those who practiced situational attributions following either an incremental or an entity manipulation ($F(1, 55) = 1.90, n.s.$), again suggesting that priming situational attributions eliminated the difference between entity and incremental theorists in their willingness to support compromises.

In summary, Study 2 showed the predicted interaction of implicit theories and attributions on support for important, concrete policies like civil rights for Israeli Arabs or compromises for peace, and these effects were obtained above and beyond the effects of political views.

General discussion

Negative attitudes, judgments and stereotypes are often amplified when people view negative actions as emanating from an underlying disposition of others. The major goal of the current studies was to examine whether the belief that personality is malleable could block the negative effects of such dispositional attributions. We tested this with Israeli participants as we monitored their endorsement of negative traits toward Arabs, as well as their support for civil rights for Arabs and their support for important compromises that could pave the way to peace.

We found that when people were taught a fixed (entity) theory and dispositional (vs. situational) attributions were made salient, this led to more endorsement of negative traits and less support for rights and compromises. However, this did not occur for people who learned an incremental theory, the idea that personality can be changed and developed. That is, inducing an incremental theory indeed blocked the negative effects of dispositional attributions—even toward a longstanding adversary.

What about those oriented toward an entity theory, which has been found to foster dispositional attributions? Looking at the data from a different perspective, we showed that for entity theorists' endorsement of negative traits and preferences for aggressive policies toward outgroup members can be muted by highlighting situational attributions. Above and beyond the effect of political views, orienting people toward situational attributions (as opposed to dispositional attributions) brought to the fore more positive judgments and greater political tolerance toward Arabs, as well as greater willingness to make compromises in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict.

Taken as a whole, the current results highlight the importance of the belief that change is possible in the dynamic of intergroup conflicts in general and intractable conflicts in particular. Specifically, when people believe that other outgroup individuals can change, a particular attribution (or misattribution) about a specific behavior does not really influence their general views of the group or their positions regarding possible solutions to the conflict with that group. From our results we can deduce that the attribution people make for particular behaviors of outgroup members is chiefly relevant to the extent that it reflects on the more enduring perceptions of these groups. Hence, a dispositional attribution for a particular negative behavior may not lead to more negative judgments, less intolerance and less willingness to support compromises if people believe that there is hope that their adversary can potentially change in the future.

On a more theoretical level we showed that the implicit theory approach might help to further broaden the attributional approach in suggesting that not all people use attributional information in the same way. The current research showed that incremental theorists' belief in the malleability of human nature is quite hardy and can withstand the priming of dispositional attributions. Even when dispositional attributions are made by incremental theorists, they may still believe in the possibility of change since they view personality as malleable.

At the same time, situational attributions seem to have a slightly stronger (though not significantly stronger) effect following an entity theory rather than an incremental theory manipulation in toning down the endorsement of negative traits, intolerance toward Arabs and the unwillingness for compromises. Although not predicted, it is possible that situational attribution training can make entity theorists more positive than incremental theorists. One potential explanation is that this result stems from entity theorist's tendency to be more "all or nothing" (Plaks, Stroessner, Dweck, & Sherman, 2001): A person is judged by them as either having or not having a certain trait. Consequently, not only might the situational attribution reduces entity theorists' endorsement of negative traits, intolerance toward Arabs and their unwillingness for compromises, it may make them even more positive than incremental theorists. This is an interesting topic for future research. Taken together, our findings advance past research that proposed that implicit theories create a meaning framework that favors different attributions (Hong et al., 1999). The current work takes this a step further by suggesting that even the same attribution can have a different meaning and impact in the context of different implicit theories.

The current research offers several implications. First, an incremental theory may break the vicious cycle of escalation in in-group–outgroup conflicts. Prior research has shown that attributional biases lead to different evaluations of the same behavior performed by an in-group versus out-group target (Chatman & von Hippel, 2001; Struthers, Eaton, Santelli, Uchiyama, & Shirvani, 2008). For example, a behavior that may be interpreted as aggressive will probably be interpreted as such when performed by the outgroup, while a behavior that may be interpreted as kind will probably not be interpreted as such when performed by the outgroup. We showed however in the current research that following an incremental-theory induction, attributional priming had little if any impact on trait judgments. If this can be taken to mean that promoting an incremental theory

attenuates attributional biases, then encouraging an incremental theory of others may play an important part in toning down the negative interpretations of outgroup behaviors, and in improving relations between groups.

Another important implication relates to the consequences of holding an entity theory. Years of research have shown that holding an entity theory can bring unwanted consequences such as more generalized, stereotypical and extreme trait judgments of others (Erdley & Dweck, 1993; Levy & Dweck, 1999; Levy et al., 1998), less empathy toward others (Erdley & Dweck, 1993), more helplessness to personal setbacks (Dweck et al., 1995; Hong et al., 1999; Mangels, Butterfield, Lamb, Good, & Dweck, 2006) and even decreased performance in important contexts such as IQ assessment (Cury, Da Fonseca, Zahn & Elliot, 2008). To the extent that negative judgments, opposition to civil rights and unwillingness to compromise with outgroup members can be viewed as undesirable, the current research offers a bypass, namely situational attributions, that may help entity theorists avoid some of these undesirable consequences. Future research should look into the influence of situational attributions on entity theorists' attitudes, judgments and preferences in different domains.

Our studies have several limitations. First, we tested only one population (Jewish Israelis) with regard to one ongoing conflict (the Israeli–Palestinian conflict). Furthermore, our samples, which were student samples, may differ somewhat from the general Israeli population, being more liberal than the electorate. However, in previous studies (e.g., Halperin, Russell, Dweck, et al., 2011; Halperin, Russell, Trzesniewski, et al., 2011) the effects of implicit theory manipulations on attitudes toward the outgroup and on willingness to make major compromises did not differ as a function of political ideology. In other words, it had very similar effects for both leftists and rightists. Future research, however, should examine our effects for other groups and other conflicts. Second, in our studies, implicit theories were manipulated. However, past research has also shown stable individual differences in implicit theories (e.g., Hong, Chiu, Dweck, & Sucks, 1997). Future research should thus look into the influence of attributions among "natural" incremental and entity theorists. Despite these limitations, however, our findings point to promising directions for future research, and demonstrate that an incremental theory may prove to be a valuable concept for research on intergroup relations.

Conclusion

One of the main challenges in any intractable conflict is to unfreeze hearts and minds and to make people look at the opponent in more generous ways (Bar-Tal & Halperin, 2011). As is well demonstrated in the psychological literature, people tend to over-weight internal or dispositional attributions, especially when they evaluate the negative behavior of outgroup members (Ross, 1977). That tendency is even more common when the in-group and the outgroup are in the midst of an ongoing conflict (Ross & Ward, 1995). The results of the current studies are exciting because they suggest that blocking dispositional attributions, even toward a long-time adversary, is possible.

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