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Psychological Barriers to a Peaceful Resolution: Longitudinal Evidence from the Middle East and Northern Ireland

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ABSTRACT

Does individual-level exposure to political violence prompt conciliatory attitudes? Does the answer vary by phase of conflict? The study uses longitudinal primary datasets to test the hypothesis that conflict-related experiences impact conciliation. Data were collected from Israeli Jews, Palestinians, and Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland. Across *both* contexts, and among both parties to each conflict, psychological distress and threat perceptions had a polarizing effect on conciliatory preferences. The study highlights that experiences of political violence are potentially a crucial source of psychological distress, and consequently, a continuing barrier to peace. This has implications in peacemaking, implying that alongside removing the real threat of violence, peacemakers must also work toward the social and political inclusion of those most affected by previous violence.

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The past two decades—and particularly the period since 2001—have seen a large number of studies examining the effects of terrorism and political violence on political attitudes. Some studies have shown that experiencing higher levels of terrorism increases individuals' tendency to vote for right-wing candidates and to engage in risk-seeking behaviors.¹ The bulk of these studies examines the impact of political violence and terrorism at the level of the general populace. For example, experiences are measured at the community or national level and the consequence of these communal experiences assumed to predict individual sentiment. It is much rarer for respondents to be asked about their direct exposure to political violence, whilst also being questioned about their attitudes and perceptions. This has meant that studies have not always been able to take into account the participants' own individual suffering as a result of the conflict.²

That said, the sufferings of individuals directly exposed to prolonged conflict are likely to create psychological scars as well as societal ones. An emerging body of studies now show an impact of individual-level exposure to political violence (EPV) on several political attitudes, including: support for combatants in Afghanistan,³ support for exclusionism⁴ or intragroup

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retaliation in Israel,⁵ conservatism in the United States,⁶ perceptions of intergroup threat in Northern Ireland,⁷ and right-wing voting and risk-seeking behaviors.⁸ To date the effect of EPV on attitudes toward reconciliation and peace-building has received little to no attention. This study is based on the premise that mental health is key to understanding the impact of conflict on peace/war attitudes (e.g., conciliatory attitudes). This study breaks new ground by utilizing an original comparative dataset from four groups with EPV—Israeli Jews, Palestinians, and Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland. The study offers important insights into two of the most glaring case studies of violent protracted conflicts; both of which, although at different conflict-phases, fall short of attaining a stable peace. Uniquely, this comparative analysis benefits from a longitudinal design, allowing for the testing of causal claims about the impact of EPV at time 1 on time 2 attitudes to peace and compromise. Harnessing the power of this longitudinal design, the study controls for prior (time 1) attitudes and tests the direct impact of EPV on subsequent political attitudes (time 2).

Exposure to Political Violence and Conciliatory Attitudes

Convergent evidence suggests that political violence has many costs. As well as testing the hypothesis that EPV is linked to attitudes concerning peace and compromise, this article considers two consequences of EPV that are frequently viewed separately.⁹ Literature on the mental cost of EPV is well established in psychology and psychiatry, as is the attitudinal consequence of violence in political science. Recently, scholars have begun to integrate the political and psychological foundations of conflict, with social psychologists utilizing the study of emotions,¹⁰ societal norms,¹¹ racial prejudice,¹² identity,¹³ and terror management theory.¹⁴ Empirical work by Hirsch-Hoefler et al.,¹⁵ suggests that psychological constructs such as psychological distress and threat perceptions may be important drivers of the relationship between EPV and civilians' willingness to compromise for peace and support for diplomatic negotiations aimed at ending a prolonged conflict. Similarly, Lyall, Blair, and Imai¹⁶ found that individual-level outcomes were key micro-foundations of conflict in the Middle East.

Despite these recent studies, scholars are still in the dark as to *how* EPV influences conciliatory attitudes in different phases of the conflict process. In the context of prolonged conflicts, garnering support for conciliatory policies is exceptionally challenging. It is therefore imperative that studies further explore the processes that act as either pathways or barriers to peace-building. The current study empirically examines the possibility that individuals exposed to political violence in intractable conflicts are likely to adopt more intransigent attitudes due to the effects of *psychological distress* and *threat perceptions*. Psychological distress is a well-established mental-health consequence of EPV. Associated symptoms include heightened anxiety, depression, and subjective insecurity. Unsurprisingly, the severity of psychological distress tends to rise with the severity of the EPV, as reflected in the extent to which the victim experiences disruption, loss, injury, or the death of a loved one.¹⁷ Threat perceptions, while related to psychological distress, is an independent construct which can be seen to operate in situations of political violence at least, at the group level. Threat perceptions refer specifically to appraisals of danger posed by the “other,” or outgroup, because of one's group identity. Therefore, although the distress may be experienced individually it arises due to perceptions of ingroup security and as a result of identification with that group (i.e., sociotropic threat).¹⁸ Psychological distress and threat perceptions can arise from acute

incidents of political violence, such as NYC 9/11, Madrid 3/11, London 7/7, or Oslo 7/22,¹⁹ as well as from repeated violence over prolonged periods.²⁰

Perceptions of threat may differ across the group's party to the conflict and across time in any given conflict. Available studies seem to be unable to sufficiently or precisely determine the political effect of individual-level EPV across *different* conflict settings.²¹ Most studies were carried out during ongoing conflict or postconflict periods. Therefore, they fall short of providing a comparative perspective of the effect of EPV on conciliatory attitudes during different phases of the conflict process, and what impact this may have on the prospects for peace-making. This study resolves this shortcoming by addressing a key theoretical question: What does looking at two phases of conflicts *in tandem* teach us about the broad consequences of conflict exposure and the prospects for future conflicts and peace negotiations? By examining two conflicts in different phases at the same time, the study is able to gain insight into the impact of EPV at different phases of conflict, and its broader impact on conflict resolution.

During peace-building, cease-fires, and political agreements may weaken existential security threats; but the legacy of violence and animosity embedded in the collective identity and fostered by long-lasting psychological distress²² can powerfully maintain the perception of threat from the rival. Even during post-agreement phases of peace-building these perceptions may be transformed into symbolic threats to collective identity, and its social and political manifestations.²³ Therefore it is expected that high levels of psychological distress and threat perception will persist in both minority and majority groups, regardless of the phase of the conflict. Given the asymmetrical power relations in both conflicts, the minority group would feel their security threatened by the majority group. On the other hand, the majority group would also experience increased threat perception, especially during times of increased conflict. It is hypothesized that this is a result of the psychological distress garnered from the potential loss of symbolic and material resources due to the conflict.

In essence, the study argues that at any stage of the peace-building process, perceptions of threat resulting from psychological distress can evoke conflict-supporting beliefs that can function as group-level threat buffers. Thus, individuals who have been exposed to political violence may be less supportive of conciliatory policies *throughout* the process of peace-building.

In short, the study hypothesizes that across both contexts (i.e., an ongoing conflict vs. postconflict), and among individuals on both sides of each conflict (i.e., minority group vs. majority), psychological distress and threat perceptions will mediate the (negative) relationship between EPV and conciliatory attitudes. The research model is presented in [Figure 1](#).

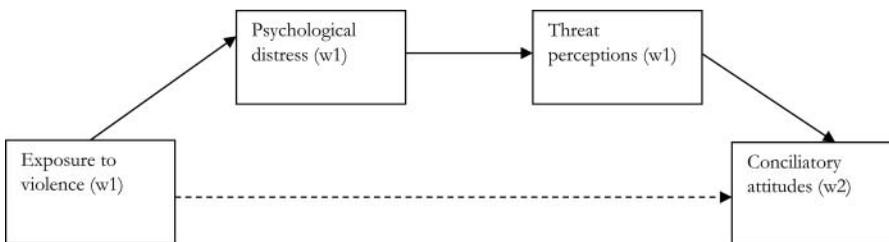


Figure 1. Hypothesized model explaining changes in attitudes toward peace as a result of exposure to ongoing conflict.

Violence and Peace-building in Israel/Palestine and Northern Ireland

This study draws on unique longitudinal data from two regions where EPV has been both substantial and prolonged, namely Israel/Palestine (IL-PA) and Northern Ireland (NI) conflicts. Over the past two decades, the two conflicts have been coupled together in the literature as classic examples of protracted, intractable ethno-national conflicts.²⁴ Both began turning toward peace-building during the 1990s, but where NI reached a conflict settlement (although it continues to confront challenges to building sustainable peace), the IL-PA conflict is still in a pre-agreement phase, oscillating between escalation and de-escalation.

NI's conflict between British Protestants and Irish Catholics had claimed over 3,500 fatalities by the turn of the century, more than half of them civilians,²⁵ and over 30,000 civilians were injured between 1969 and 2003.²⁶ Many people continue to live with long-term disability and poor health as a consequence of the conflict, and few citizens have not been personally affected by it to some degree.²⁷ The peace-building process in NI has taken a rocky road. The highly acclaimed Belfast (Good Friday) agreement, which symbolically ended the conflict in 1998, was partially suspended for several years until several major difficulties were overcome in 2010.²⁸ Although levels of violence dropped dramatically following the Belfast agreement, memories of past atrocities remain powerful, occasionally threatening the fragile political arrangements and the reconstruction of social relations.

In IL-PA, the 1993 Oslo Accords failed to evolve into a lasting peace agreement, and political violence continues to affect the lives of both Israeli Jews and Palestinians. Since 2000 alone, 6,580 Palestinians have been killed by Israeli security forces, and 1,097 Israeli Jews have been killed by Palestinians²⁹—the latter mostly through suicide bombings during the Al Aqsa Intifada in 2001. Even during periods of negotiation, Palestinians experience the daily stress of occupation, and Israelis are constantly vigilant of suicide bombings or rocket attacks. This takes its toll on ordinary individuals' mental and physical health,³⁰ with heightened levels of distress and threat perceptions present in both populations.³¹

In choosing these two conflicts, this study examines the consequences of EPV on conciliatory attitudes in a comparative perspective on different phases of peace-building following intractable conflict (Figure 1). The power of this comparative study is enhanced by the representativeness of its samples in both location and the cross-conflict context, which enables it to generalize our results. Additionally, the longitudinal data permit causal and inferential analyses about the impact of political violence on conciliatory attitudes across time.

Research Design and Method

The study captures the political effect of EPV by examining four groups: Israeli Jews ($N = 167$), Palestinians ($N = 124$), and Protestants ($N = 61$), and Catholics ($N = 68$) in NI.

Sample and Procedure

In the Israeli Jewish sample interviews were conducted by an experienced, computerized survey institute in Israel using trained telephone-survey interviewers. The response rate among eligible responders was 53 percent. This compared favorably with studies in the United States, especially given that the dialing methods in Israel, unlike the United States, include business phones (approximately 10 percent), which cannot be removed and are treated as

failed attempts, and that the higher rates in U.S. studies typically do not include non-answered phones.³² Those who agreed and were available were surveyed again approximately six months later (80 percent re-interview rate).

The Palestinian sample was based on adult Palestinians living in the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and East Jerusalem. We employed a stratified three-stage cluster random sampling strategy. First, 60 clusters were selected with populations of 1,000 or more individuals (after stratification by district and type of community—urban, rural, and refugee camp) with probabilities proportional to size. Next, 20 households in each of the chosen clusters were selected. The third stage involved selecting one individual in each household using Kish Tables (these tables provide within-household randomization of participants). After complete description of the study to the participants, written informed consent was obtained and they were paid the equivalent of about \$5 USD. Of the original sample, an attempt was made to reach the 999 people who agreed to be contacted at 6-month follow-up. This sample yielded a response rate of 89 percent.

In the NI sample, respondents in Wave 1 were recruited face to face in respondents' homes, using a paper-based questionnaire. A quota sampling mechanism was employed that considered the levels of violence experienced in the electoral ward, the religious composition of its residents, as well as levels of deprivation.³³ Additionally, although the study refers to the "Northern Ireland" sample, and uses as its main point of contrast "Catholics" and "Protestants," it must be acknowledged that the process of labeling categories has had a contentious and complicated history during the conflict and subsequent peace. As Whyte³⁴ discusses, although principle distinctions in NI are often made on ethno-religious background, the conflict is over national jurisdiction (with Unionists supporting NI within Britain and Nationalists arguing for the claim of the Republic of Ireland). While the religious and political orientations of the population are roughly synonymous (Protestants/Unionist/British and Catholic/Nationalist/Irish) this can lead to a minority of Catholics and Protestants taking nontypical political positions.³⁵

Measures

A closed-ended questionnaire was designed to incorporate four measures: EPV, psychological distress, threat perceptions, and conciliatory attitudes. Due to the different contexts, we have used slightly different items; however, all scales were previously validated and tested. To overcome possible weaknesses in the cross-conflict comparison caused by the different conflict settings we kept, for each variable, the original context and meaning so that the answers will reflect the original meaning of the respondents.

Individual-level EPV: was assessed using three items previously utilized by Lyall and colleagues.³⁶ Respondents were asked whether they had experienced any of the following conflict-related events: (1) the death of a family member or friend; (2) witnessing an attack or being present at a site where there were injuries or fatalities; and/or (3) injury to oneself, a family member, or a friend. Responses were coded as 0 ("Not exposed to any of these events") or 1 ("Exposed to at least one event"). In the NI sample, the above three items were broken up into seven specific items to enhance the likelihood of recollection. As the final measures here too were dichotomous variables, the measures pertain to the exact same construct. The respondents were asked whether they had experienced any of the following conflict-related events: (1) caught in a bomb explosion; (2) caught in a shooting; (3) caught

in a riot; (4) a witness of violent acts against others; (5) injured as a result of any incident; (6) affected by serious handicap/injury; (7) bereaved as a result of the Troubles.³⁷ Responses were coded 0 if all seven items were answered “No” (i.e., “Not exposed to any of these events”), or 1 if any of the items received a “Yes” (i.e., “Exposed to at least one event”). As one kind of EPV does not necessarily preclude another, internal reliability was not calculated.

Psychological distress: was assessed using a 17-item scale of posttraumatic stress symptoms. This format demonstrated 86 percent sensitivity and 78 percent specificity when compared to clinician interviews (PSS-I).³⁸ It has been used in non-Western, low income regions,³⁹ and within the Israeli (including both Palestinians and Jews) and NI populations previously.⁴⁰ Respondents were asked to report on the frequency of symptoms over the preceding month either in the context of the Troubles in NI or the violence in the Israeli–Palestinian context, respondents were asked about symptoms such as experiencing repeated dreams or nightmares. Scores were calculated as the average of all 17 responses. As the response scales for the various samples differed, the answers of each respondent were normalized to a score on a scale from 0 (“Not at all”) to 1 (“Extremely frequent”). Cronbach’s alpha for the scale in the current study was 0.87 for Israeli Jews, 0.84 for Palestinians, 0.96 for Catholics, and 0.96 for Protestants.

Threat perceptions: were measured based on studies conducted in the United States,⁴¹ NI, and the IL-PA context,⁴² using items related to the most pertinent current and future threats at the national level.⁴³ For Israeli Jews and Palestinians the study asked respondents how concerned they were about the possibility that they, or a family member, might be hurt in an attack on the state of Israel/the Palestinian Territories. For the NI samples (Protestants and Catholics) the study asked respondents to what degree do they agree with the statement: “In certain areas I would be afraid of being identified as a Catholic/Protestant.” Further, the answers of each respondent were normalized to a single threat perceptions score from 0 (“Not at all concerned”) to 1 (“Extremely concerned”) due to scale differences (Israeli Jews and Palestinians were measured on a four-range scale, while the NI sample on a five).

Conciliatory attitudes⁴⁴: The study referred to the specific context of the conflict for each sample. In IL-PA, the study measured attitudes toward compromise with the other side at the cost of a major concession. For Israeli Jews, this concession was accepting certain border arrangements. And for Palestinians, the concession was forgoing certain conditions such as sovereignty over parts of Jerusalem and return of refugees into Israel. In NI, the study assessed the degree to which respondents supported the Stormont Assembly—a key institution arising from the 1998 Good Friday agreement whose suspension from 2002 through 2007 led to political uncertainty. Again, differing scale ranges necessitated a normalization of the scale. For all four samples, answers ranged from 0 (“Strongly oppose”) to 1 (“Strongly support” the relevant conciliatory policy). Across both conflicts the items measuring conciliatory attitudes related to a transition phase in the conflict, one that could be expected to change (in IL-PA), or did in fact change (in NI), a temporary and unstable status quo into a presumably more permanent resolution.

Covariates/Control Variables: The study accounted for a number of variables that have been shown to be related to conciliatory attitudes in order to see the extent to which conciliatory attitudes were impacted by political violence above and beyond these control variables. The study controlled for sex (coded 1 = male, 2 = female), age (years), and conciliatory attitudes at wave one.

Data Analysis

The AMOS 6⁴⁵ statistical program was used to conduct a multigroup structural equation modeling (SEM) analysis. Multigroup analysis allows testing for equivalence across groups simultaneously in one model.⁴⁶ Multigroup analysis is based on the analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) structures⁴⁷ while testing the invariance across groups. Moreover, this SEM method shows mediation or direction of causality by comparing them to their possible alternatives (i.e., inverse causality or a direct relationship instead of mediation).

To examine the invariance or variance of political outcomes among the four conflict-exposed groups, the study calculated maximum likelihood estimates for all models. These were evaluated by: (1) fit measures, namely χ^2 and degrees of freedom, NFI, TLI, and CFI in combination with RMSEA and ICA⁴⁸; and (2) comparisons of nested models⁴⁹ based on χ^2 differences for constrained and unconstrained models. In all cases, political outcomes at time 2 were predicted while controlling for time 1 values on the same measure.

Results

Levels of EPV were high in the samples, with 58 percent of the respondents experiencing at least one type of exposure assessed. Table 1 presents descriptive statistics of the main research variables across the four groups. As can be seen in Table 1, conciliatory attitudes are higher for Catholics and Protestants than for Israelis and Palestinians in waves 1 and 2 (.77, .73, .50, .26 and .80, .70, .48, .29, respectively). Interestingly, over time, conciliatory attitudes were higher for Israelis and Protestants, but not for Catholics and Palestinians.

Exposed vs. Not Exposed

Table 2 presents means and standard deviations of the research variables by EPV. As expected, respondents who reported exposure to violence scored significantly higher on psychological distress and threat perceptions than those who had not been exposed. Exposed individuals were also less likely to exhibit conciliatory attitudes.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of research variables, and comparison between Israeli Jews, Palestinians, and Northern Ireland Catholics and Protestants.

Variable	Israeli Jews (N = 167)		Palestinians (N = 124)		Protestants (N = 61)		Catholics (N = 68)		f test	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	f	P
Exposure to violence (W1)	.47	.50	.65	.48	.59	.49	.69	.46	4.82	<.001
Psychological distress (W1)	.08	.10	.32	.12	.06	.13	.09	.16	107.84	<.001
Threat perceptions (W1)	.74	.25	.74	.25	.69	.22	.71	.24	.707	<.001
Conciliatory attitudes (W2)	.50	.30	.26	.12	.73	.19	.77	.15	100.06	<.001
Gender (%)	45.5% (male)		53% (male)		50% (male)		57% (male)			
Age (years)	46.6	16.64	35.8	12.71	49.8	15.44	46.8	15.17		
Conciliatory attitudes (w1)	.48	.29	.29	.18	.70	.17	.80	.13		

Table 2. Comparison between exposed and non-exposed participants, entire sample.

Entire sample Independent variables	Exposed to political violence (N = 243)		Not exposed to political violence (N = 177)		t	P
	M	SD	M	SD		
Psychological distress (W1)	.18	.18	.10	.13	4.76	<.00
Threat perceptions (W1)	.75	.25	.70	.23	2.16	<0.05
Conciliatory attitudes (W2)	.49	.30	.54	.28	-1.68	<0.10

Multigroup Model

The study examined the role played by psychological distress and threat perceptions as mediators between EPV and conciliatory attitudes across the four samples. A multigroup analysis was employed to examine the proposed model in the four groups. First, the study examined whether the constrained model (assuming invariance of regression paths across the four groups) fit the data better than a free model, which assumed that no single structure fit all four groups. Next, the study presented robust analysis and examined alternative paths between the research variables to validate and reinforce the results, and to reject alternative explanations.

Multigroup Analysis

First, the study examined a fully constrained model (all regression coefficients were constrained to be equal) in comparison with a fully free model (all regression coefficients varied across the four groups) to check for invariance in the model variables for all four groups. The results suggest the two models adequately describe the data (Fully free model: $X^2 = 34.88$, $df = 28$, CFI = .966, TLI = .898, RMSEA = .024; regression weights constrained to be equal across groups: $X^2 = 44.21$, $df = 37$, CFI = .964, TLI = .919, RMSEA = .022). However, the analysis found the difference between the regression-weight constrained model and the fully free one to be non-significant, suggesting that there is invariance between the two models, and the four groups are similar in their paths ($\Delta x^2 = 9.33$, $\Delta df = 9$, $p = .407$). This led to the assumption that similar processes are at work among the four groups (see Figure 2).

Next, the study tested for mediation using bias-corrected percentile bootstrapping (1,000 bootstrap samples). The results show that psychological distress mediated the relationship between EPV and threat perceptions ($\beta = 0.02$, SE = .006, CI = 0.01–0.03, $p = 0.00$), and that threat perceptions mediated the relationship between psychological distress and conciliatory attitudes ($\beta = -.0042$, SE = .018, CI = -.08 – -.017, $p = .00$).

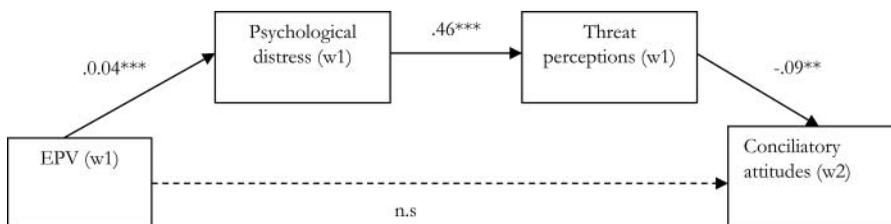


Figure 2. Psychological distress leading to threat perceptions leading to more negative conciliatory attitudes (unstandardized coefficients).

Robust Analysis

To eliminate the effect of other possible factors on the explained paths, the study constrained each path separately across all four groups (allowing the others to be free). As the general variance of the model does not relate to each path, but rather to the total model, constraining each path it strengthens the claim that the four groups are equal in their paths. It was found that each path (EPV to psychological distress, psychological distress to threat perceptions and threat perceptions to conciliatory attitudes) is similar across the four groups, as there is no significant worsening of the model fit (Table 3).

Finally, the study examined whether alternative models provide a better fit for the data. To do so, an alternative model was considered where EPV leads to threat perceptions leading to psychological distress, which then affects conciliatory attitudes (Model 2). The regression coefficients are presented in Figure 3. As can be seen, the model fits the data poorly, and psychological distress does not affect conciliatory attitudes (Table 4).

The analyses largely supported the hypotheses, and described the significant effect of EPV on psychological distress and threat perceptions at time 1. This led to decreased conciliatory attitudes at time 2 in all four populations studied. The alternative model examining different paths of influence between EPV and conciliatory attitudes showed a poor fit for the data, reinforcing the suggested model.

It should be noted that the analyses cannot rule out potential confounding effects from two factors which differ between the two case studies: (a) the time elapsed since exposure to violent incidents and (b) the degree of symmetry in power relations between the two sides. With respect to the first, at least a decade passed between the end of most conflict-related violence in NI and the data collection, while in IL-PA the violence remains ongoing. It is not unreasonable to imagine that the passage of time could have tempered the association between EPV and psychological distress in Northern Ireland. However, no significant differences were found among the four groups regarding our hypothesized theoretical model, implying that exposure to conflict-related violence continues to affect political attitudes during the long process of peace-building even after a political agreement is achieved.

The asymmetrical nature of the IL-PA conflict can explain the higher levels of EPV in the Palestinian sample (see Table 1). The findings also support earlier work indicating similar levels of threat perceptions between Israeli Jews and Palestinians. With respect to symmetry in power relations, one might presume that their status as the stronger party⁵⁰ would give Israeli Jews a greater sense of control, leading to lower perceptions of threat. In NI, threat among the Protestant majority group might be presumed to be higher than the minority group. However, previous research has shown that despite the asymmetrical power relations Israeli Jews exhibit high threat perceptions, especially during times of intense violence,⁵¹ as did Protestants in NI.⁵² This perceived threat can be linked to potential loss of symbolic status and resources that majority groups experience during conflict. Importantly, this

Table 3. Goodness of fit indices and model comparison across paths (constrained separately).

Path	CFI	ΔX^2	Δdf	<i>P</i>
EPV to psychological distress	.96	2.70	3	.440
Psychological distress to threat perceptions	.96	4.18	3	.243
Threat perceptions to conciliatory attitudes	.96	2.44	3	.485

EPV = Exposure to violence.

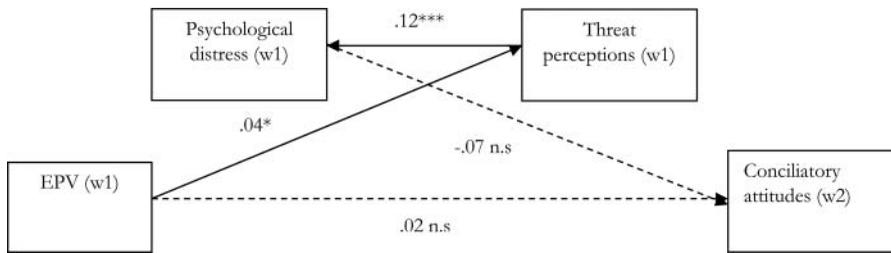


Figure 3. Regression path for all alternative models.

Table 4. Goodness of fit indices of alternative model.

Model	χ^2	Df	CFI	RMSEA	$\Delta \chi^2$ (compared with fully free)	<i>P</i> (compared with fully free)
exposure → threat perceptions → psychological distress → conciliatory attitudes	57.76	37	.897	.0037	12.861	.169

Note. EPV = Exposure to violence

perception reflects the fact that the threat, as measured here, is a collective threat to the majority group—in this case the Protestants and Jews. In this regard, perceived collective threat is very much a link between individual psychological distress because of political violence at the micro level, and wider macro-level social and political attitudes.

Discussion and Conclusion

The political science literature aimed at understanding the psycho-political impact of exposure to violence on citizens in conflict zones is limited and ambiguous in its findings. This article emphasizes the centrality of personal exposure to political violence—an aspect of human experience often ignored in political scholarship—and reaffirms the need for psycho-political approaches to the study of how political violence affects the politics of peace. The study argues that, in any given context, individuals differ in their experiences of conflict, their levels of psychological distress and threat perceptions, and, consequently, their political attitudes. In short, the study displays that greater conflict exposure amplifies psychological distress, which in turn increases threat perceptions and thereby makes individuals less likely to adopt conciliatory attitudes.

Drawing on data from four samples representing two case studies, the study examines psychological distress and threat perceptions following citizens' exposure to violence in IL-PA and NI. Across both contexts, and among individuals on both sides of each conflict, the cross-lagged model shows that EPV increases psychological distress and threat perceptions, and that threat perceptions reduced willingness to support peace-building. To put it succinctly, "violence begets violence." This is contrary to the view often promulgated by both state and nonstate actors that violence is a necessary condition for political solutions.⁵³ The current data provide powerful evidence that in situations of prolonged political conflict, EPV will reduce conciliatory attitudes and therefore the possibility of building peace. These findings contribute to the emerging literature on barriers to peace,⁵⁴ which highlights how

conflict-related violence continues to affect political attitudes during the long process of peace-building, even after a political agreement is achieved and the violence has stopped.

These findings accentuate the key role played by collective threat perceptions, and reaffirm the importance of *individual* exposure to violent events in forming subsequent political attitudes. One potential explanation for this strong connection between exposure and political views is the “shattered assumptions” approach.⁵⁵ According to this theory, traumatic events challenge many of the basic assumptions individuals hold about the world or themselves. These challenges trigger enhanced perceptions of the world as threatening, and a correspondingly strong desire to reduce this threat (and the fear it induces) through increased militancy towards the perceived source of threat—the conflict outgroup.

The findings also contribute to the growing literature on barriers to conflict resolution. Recent work by Bar-Tal, Halperin, and their colleagues⁵⁶ elaborates on both the mechanism and the effects of sociopsychological barriers (i.e., ideological conflict-supporting beliefs and intergroup emotions on conflict-related attitudes). While that emerging line of research focuses mainly on cognitive and emotional phenomena, this study’s findings point to the powerful role of *conflict-related experiences* (specifically EPV) as a potential barrier to peace-building. Indeed, the fact that EPV continued to be a source of psychological distress and threat perceptions among the sample in NI ten years after a political agreement, exemplifies how the effects of conflict may continue to interfere with progress towards peace despite official settlements. Furthermore, this reaffirms that minimizing threat perceptions between groups is central to the development of stable peace and reconciliation.

On the practical level, this study’s findings highlight the importance of efforts to help victims of conflict cope with pervasive traumatic experiences despite significant separation in time from occurrence. This study points to the importance of the experiences of those most affected by political violence for the development of peace in intractable conflict. This study’s findings suggest that those who are most exposed to political violence are also those who are likely to feel most threatened by the outgroup, and therefore the least likely to engage in compromise or reconciliation. Moreover, a further consequence of this is that these groups can also feel both socially and politically isolated from those seeking resolution of the conflict. Thus, while removing the real threat of violence is crucial to progress, it is not sufficient. Peace-making also requires ensuring the social and political inclusion of those who have been most affected by the violence through acknowledgment and legitimization of their losses.

Indeed, recent history in both NI and IL-PA⁵⁷ shows that agreements must be accompanied by people-to-people dynamics that both reflect and engender social and psychological change.⁵⁸ Put differently, peace depends on a social infrastructure capable of sustaining formal political agreements, which must itself be based on recognition of EPV’s psychological and political toll.

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Notes

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