

Study shows better cooperation amongst Israeli teenagers after learning people can change

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A recently published study supported by the EU EMOTIONS IN CONFLICT project has highlighted how Jewish and Palestinian-Israeli teens cooperate better after being taught that people can change.

As the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has now been running for decades, mutual distrust between Jewish-Israelis and Palestinian-Israelis has built to a point where the two groups often struggle to work cooperatively on solving common challenges together. However, a team of psychologists led by Stanford University and Israel's Interdisciplinary Center, Herzliya, have found that teaching Jewish-Israeli and Palestinian-Israeli teenagers that groups are generally capable of change – without mentioning a specific adversary – can significantly improve their ability to cooperate.

The study builds upon earlier research by two members of the team, Professors Carol Dweck and Eran Halperin, who was senior author on this study, which was recently published in the journal *Social Psychological and Personality Science*. Previously, they had found that Israelis and Palestinians expressed more favourable attitudes towards each other and were willing to compromise after they were presented with a news article arguing that groups could change.

'When you think people have fixed traits your job is just to figure them out and go from there,' commented Dweck. 'If you think people can develop and change, you don't tend to make blanket judgements.'

This latest study is the team's first attempt to bring Jewish-Israelis and Palestinian-Israelis physically together in order to test their ideas. The team conducted four sessions with 74 Jewish and 67 Palestinian-Israeli students, aged 13 and 14, from a Palestinian-Israeli school and a Jewish-Israeli school over a period of three months.

Each school's students were divided into two groups and over the course of three sessions, one group was taught about people's ability to change, whilst the other group learned about ways of coping with stress. In the fourth session, the Jewish and Palestinian-Israeli students met and were separated into mixed teams of 4 to 6 participants. They then completed several tasks which were used to measure their levels of cooperating with

each other.

One of the tasks saw the students using spaghetti, marshmallows and tape to build the tallest tower they could in ten minutes. The results showed that students who were taught the ideas about people's ability to change built towers that were 59 % higher and had more positive emotions towards each other in comparison to the groups in the control condition.

'We expected to see some change, but not such big changes,' said Amit Goldenberg, a graduate student and lead author of the paper. 'It's much easier to see changes in people's attitudes, but to actually see that these people are cooperating better is remarkable.' Now Goldenberg and his colleagues said the workshops' content could potentially produce positive outcomes if implemented more widely in Israeli and Palestinian schools.

The research team is currently conducting similar studies in adults, which they argue is important in order to show how long the change in attitudes might last.

In the meantime, they are excited about the implications of the latest study and their work with the teenagers. 'The Israeli-Palestinian conflict affects millions of lives every day,' Goldenberg said. 'Any contribution you can make to this problem is progress.'

The study was funded by the European Research Council (ERC) project EMOTIONS IN CONFLICT that is being led by the Interdisciplinary Center, Herzliya, and has received nearly EUR 1.5 million in funding. The project, which will run until January 2019, is studying how human emotion regulation can provide positive outcomes in conflict resolution.

More information: Project page:
cordis.europa.eu/project/rcn/192360_en.html

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