Effects of Humor on Intergroup Communication in Intractable Conflicts: Using Humor in an Intergroup Appeal Facilitates Stronger Agreement Between Groups and a Greater Willingness to Compromise

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Overcoming sociopsychological barriers within intergroup communications may bring forth new, practical methods for conflict resolution, particularly crucial for groups engulfed by intractable conflict. This article examines the use of humor—an extremely effective technique of persuasive communication—as one potential route whose potency in resolving intractable conflicts has thus far been neglected. In Study 1, Palestinians who read a message from an "Israeli representative" (conveying the Israeli narrative of the conflict) agreed more with the Israeli perspective once three short humorous asides were added to the original statement. When these humorous asides targeted Jewish-Israelis, Palestinian-Israeli participants were more willing to compromise on various aspects of the conflict. In Study 2, Jewish-Israelis who read a message from a "Palestinian representative" were more agreeable to the Palestinian message (portraying the Palestinian narrative) once three short humorous asides were added to the original statement. When these humorous asides were general in nature (but not when they targeted Palestinian-Israelis), Jewish-Israeli participants were more willing to compromise on various aspects of this intractable conflict. These findings further demonstrate the power of psychological barriers in intractable conflicts and the potential of humor to overcome them. Implications and limitations of the current research are discussed.

KEY WORDS: humor, intergroup communication, psychological barriers, psychological interventions

Intractable Conflicts Are No Laughing Matter, But Perhaps They Should Be?

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has become synonymous with despair; a never-ending dispute which leaves a bloody trail for generations to follow. Although most Israelis and Palestinians may agree on a compromise to resolve this conflict in theory, powerful psychological barriers—forged by decades of intergroup violence and threats—are standing in their way (Bar-Tal, 2007). Finding ways to overcome these barriers is categorical to bring about an end to the conflict. Israeli Palestinian animosity is just one prototypical example of severe intergroup disputes, usually defined as "Intractable Conflicts."

Intractable conflicts are an acute type of intergroup tension, chronically resistant to peaceful resolution, as both sides can neither prevail nor resolve the conflict by mutual agreement (Azar, 1990; Coleman, 2003; Kriesberg, 2009). Members of groups in intractable conflicts experience a variety of threats, both physical and psychological, stemming from the nature of these violent and chronic disputes (Coleman, 2003). In order to reduce these threats, people adopt and enhance sociopsychological constructs, biases, and attitudes aimed at preserving their well-being and positive self-image. They "integrate cognitive, emotional and motivational processes, combined with a pre-existing repertoire of rigid conflict supporting beliefs and emotions, that result in selective, biased and distorted information processing" (Bar-Tal & Halperin, 2009, p. 220). These sociopsychological constructs are not the disagreements themselves, but rather the psychological factors that result in the inhibition of progress towards peace. They induce a mental closure, which resists new information that may lead to resolution (Hameiri, Bar-Tal, & Halperin, 2014). Thus, rather ironically, the psychological armors developed to deal with the threats of intractable conflicts become a major cause of their continuation. Reducing the parties' mental closure by increasing openness in intergroup communication is key to ending intractable conflict.

In recent decades, various attempts have been made to develop effective psychological interventions aimed at overcoming these barriers and facilitating a constructive dialogue between groups engaged in intractable conflict (for a review, see Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). One of the most popular routes is focused on exploring the characteristics of intergroup contact and its influence on intergroup dynamics (Al Ramiah & Hewstone, 2013; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). However, contact-oriented interventions have various limitations in the field of intractable conflicts—headed by the difficulty to engage conflict groups in such "prescribed" interaction. Since the reality of intractable conflicts inhibits the exchange of intensive and meaningful intergroup information, the focus of these efforts should lay on simple interventions addressing life-like intergroup communication. These can be found in various studies following Walton's approach (2014) to "Wise Psychological Interventions," where "specific psychological processes contribute to major social problems" (p. 1). For example, Nadler and Liviatan (2006) found that exposing Israelis to an outgroup message which empathized with ingroup suffering induced a greater willingness to compromise among those who trusted Palestinians. In a study conducted by Gayer and colleagues (2009), it was shown that exposing group members to information about potential conflict-related losses increased their willingness to compromise with the outgroup. Changing the perceived malleability of the outgroup was also found to increase conciliatory approaches towards the conflict (Halperin, Russel, Trzesniewski, Gross, & Dweck, 2011).

In line with the "Wise Psychological Interventions" approach, the purpose of this current research is to offer a simple yet practical intervention to be utilized in conflictual intergroup communication. We wish to do so by examining the use of humor in overcoming sociopsychological barriers of intractable conflicts and promoting their resolution.

Humor as a Psychological Intervention

The Oxford dictionary defines "humor" as the "quality of being amusing or comic, especially as expressed in literature or speech." Humor is a universal human manifestation that can be traced back to the beginning of civilization (Apte, 1985) and has a dramatic influence on human emotions, cognitions, and behavior (Martin, 2010). Humor has a substantial role in emotion regulation, positive framing, information processing, personal well-being and even health (Gross & Muñoz, 1995). Humor was found to help in overcoming emotional and cognitive barriers in psychological therapy and consulting (Gelkopf & Kreitler, 1996), decreasing negative emotions such as fear and anxiety in the face of acute threat (Ventis, Higbee, & Murdock, 2001), and can be used as an effective tool in interpersonal negotiations (Emerson, 1969).

Some initial indications regarding the potential effects of humor in the context of intractable conflicts were previously found in research conducted in Gambia (Davidheiser, 2006), demonstrating how joking relationships and humor can play an important role in providing a space and process to address social conflicts: "The ritual space created through joking relations and their social capital make them effective even in cases resistant to other mediation attempts" (p. 848).

Humor also serves as a powerful persuasion tool, widely and effectively utilized in marketing, advertising, politics, education, medicine, and more (Markiewicz, 1974). Lyttle (2001) elaborates the three major paths by which humor may lead to persuasion. First, humor manifests a positive mood, which leads to more flexible processing of new information and general agreeability. However, the effect of positive mood on persuasion is bound to matters of medium or low involvement and importance (Yoon & Tinkham, 2013), which is not the case for intractable conflicts. Therefore, we suggest that the mere induction of a positive mood may not suffice to change long-held attitudes by opposing group members (we shall revisit this issue in Study 2).

Second, humor increases the perceived credibility (Mettee, Hrelec, & Wilkens, 1971) and likeability of the information source (Weinberger & Gulas, 1992). According to Petty and Cacioppo's elaboration likelihood model (1986), processing of new information is deeply affected by the perceived credibility of its source. In various studies, humor was found to increase the perceived credibility and likeability of the information source, leading to stronger persuasion (Mettee et al., 1971). In a study conducted by O'quin and Aronoff (1981), buyers were willing to pay more when the sellers used humor in their pitch. Promoting the credibility of the source is especially valuable among groups in intractable conflicts, where outgroup distrust inhibits the processing of new and constructive information.

And finally, humor inflates the sense of commonality with the information source. As previously noted, humor is a socially based phenomenon, underlying common perceptions which allow different individuals to share it. The sociologist G.A. Fine (1983) proposed that humor serves an evolutionary and social role in the development of societies and groups, by forging a sense of commonality between members. Humor manifests a positive mood (which increases likeability to the fellow group members), helps to clarify and enforce ingroup norms (by targeting the offenders), and allows group members to criticize each other in a less confronting manner (McGhee & Goldstein, 1983, pp. 159–181). A study conducted by Flamson and Barrett (2008) found that humor induces sense of commonality by serving as a form of communication that evolved to broadcast information about the self and to obtain information about others by honestly signaling the fact of shared common knowledge. Their model populates that humorous utterances provide evidence that the producer holds knowledge which is also held by the receivers, thus rendering humor as a means of assessing shared underlying knowledge, attitudes, and preferences.

Indeed, various findings demonstrate that the use of humor encourages humanization and decreases alienation (Tapley, 2006), facilitates social attraction in intergroup context (Sherman, 1988), and strengthens the sense of closeness between strangers (Sunaoshi, 2003). To ensure the humor utilized in the current research is indeed based on common knowledge and perceptions, we have used humorous asides, rather than independent jokes, as the latter may be indifferent to the context of the intergroup content.

Since humor facilitates both trust and a sense of commonality with the source, it may serve as an effective antidote to intergroup distrust and alienation present in intractable conflicts. We therefore postulate that the use of humor will have a positive effect on intergroup communication in intractable conflicts by increasing the perceived outgroup credibility (and agreement with its message) and by strengthening the sense of intergroup commonality.

The Special Case of Self-Humor

The possible effects of humor on intergroup communication in conflict, as described above, may be especially significant in the case of self-humor; which targets one's self (including one's social identity). Since self-humor is self-deprecating, and in the context of intergroup communication may target one's ingroup identity, it entails an element of self-criticism—which is especially relevant in overcoming intergroup barriers.

There are several findings that demonstrate the positive effect of self-criticism on persuasion: Agents who express a position contrary to their self-interest or that of their group are perceived as more credible (see Walster, Aronson, & Abrahams, 1966), and persuasive arguments, which include both pros and cons (two-sided messages), are mostly more effective in changing attitudes (see also Wegener, Petty, & Smith, 1995). Self-criticism was also found to increase willingness to compromise among groups in intractable conflict. Saguy and Halperin (2014) have found that adding internal criticism to an outgroup appeal increased the willingness of the ingroup members to compromise; even when that criticism did not directly address conflict-related contents. Since self-humor inherently consists of such internal criticism, it may facilitate an even stronger willingness to compromise compared to the use of general humor. For the purpose of this research, and in order to draw a clear line between self- and general humor, general humor shall be defined as a humorous aside which does not explicitly target the spokesperson or his group.

Finally, when it comes to groups with a different power status—which is often the case in intractable conflicts (Kriesberg, 2008)—self-humor may serve as a proximity tool for "breaking the distance" between groups and strengthening the sense of intergroup commonality. A study examining the dynamics between cadets on a firefighters' training course, which included a number of classes and participants, found that the use of self-humor—either targeting the person himself or his ingroup—led to greater proximity between the intergroup members and increased cooperation (Terrion & Ashforth, 2002). In "The Psychology of Humor," Jeffrey H. Goldstein (2013) posits that when an outgroup member uses self-humor, targeting his group, it is likely to "minimize differences and accent a larger grouping" (p. 123) among the ingroup.

Thus, self-humor may serve as a particularly effective intervention in intergroup conflict: In addition to promoting a positive mood, and increasing source credibility and commonality, it contains an element of self-criticism, which further promotes intergroup commonality and willingness to compromise. We therefore posit that the use of general humor asides (not targeting the spokesperson nor his group) in an outgroup appeal shall increase the ingroup members' agreement with its message (through source credibility) and their willingness to compromise (via increased sense of commonality), compared to an identical appeal which lacks humor. We further predict that when these humor asides shall explicitly target the outgroup or its speaker (self-humor), the ingroup' willingness to compromise (via stronger sense of commonality) shall be significantly higher, compared to the use of general humor (humorous asides not targeting the speaker or his ingroup) in an outgroup appeal.

The Present Research

To bring these hypotheses to the test, two experimental studies were conducted in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In Study 1, Palestinian-Israelis participants were presented with a fictitious message from a Jewish-Israeli outgroup representative—conveying the Israeli perspective of the conflict. Participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions: The Humor condition—where three short, general humorous asides (not directly targeting the Jewish-Israeli representative or his group) were added to the outgroup message; the Self-Humor condition—where three short humorous asides, targeting the Jewish-Israeli representative or his ingroup, were added to the outgroup message; and the Control condition—where the outgroup message lacked any humorous appeal. Participants

were later requested to rate the perceived credibility of the outgroup source, their level of agreement with the message, their sense of commonality with the outgroup, and their willingness to compromise on various aspects of this intractable conflict. Study 2 replicated this procedure among Israeli-Jewish participants (exposing them to a fictitious message from the Palestinian-Israeli outgroup). In order to rule out some alternative explanations, the second study included a fourth experimental condition (the Positive Mood condition)—where participants were asked to rate jokes prior to reading the outgroup message (which was identical to that of the control condition).

STUDY 1

The goal of Study 1 was to examine whether involving humor in an outgroup message will increase agreement with its perspective and the willingness to compromise towards conflict resolution among the ingroup. Palestinian-Israeli participants were presented with a fictitious statement from an outgroup representative (a Jewish-Israeli official), which conveyed a standard Israeli perspective of the conflict. Participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions, each exposing them to a different version of the outgroup spokesperson's message written in the participants' mother tongue (Arabic). Whereas the control condition presented the original statement, lacking humorous appeal, the two humor conditions added three short humorous asides to that statement which were either general in nature (Humor condition) or targeted the Jewish-Israeli representative or his group (Self-Humor condition). After exposing participants to one of these conditions, we measured their perceived credibility of the outgroup representative, their agreement with the message, their sense of commonality with the Jewish-Israeli outgroup, and their willingness to compromise on various aspects of the conflict.

In line with our hypotheses, we predicted that in both humor conditions (compared to the control condition), participants will perceive the agent as more credible, leading them to further agree with the message, and will be more willing to compromise with the outgroup (via increased intergroup commonality). We further predicted that in the Self-Humor condition, participants' sense of commonality will be even stronger than of those in the Humor condition, leading to a greater willingness to compromise.

Method

Participants

One hundred and forty-two Palestinians holding Israeli citizenship were paid to participate in an online survey (henceforth we shall address them as "Palestinian-Israelis"). To verify that participants read the full outgroup message, we presented them with four statements at the end of the survey that were either included in or absent from the outgroup message. Twenty-nine participants failed the reading check and were subsequently excluded from the analyses, leaving 113 participants; 69 women and 44 men (M_{age} = 34, SD_{age} = 10.36)—out of whom 76% defined themselves as Muslims and 24% as Christians. Participants were presented with a nine-item ingroup identification measure ranging from 1 to 7, which validated their ingroup identification as Palestinians (Midentity = 4.72, SDidentity = 1.7, α = .88).

Procedure

After filling in demographic questions, which included political-party affiliation, participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions, exposing them to different versions of the outgroup representative's message.

Outgroup message. The message was designed and presented as an open letter to the Palestinian public, allegedly published by an Israeli official, in light of an upcoming peace summit. A two-minute timer was set to prevent participants from skipping the page before being sufficiently exposed to the message.

Participants in the *control condition* were presented with the Israeli representative's message, calling upon Palestinians to renounce terror and incitement as a categorical step towards peace:

> I'm reaching out to you, the Palestinians, from the understanding that at the end of the day our fates are intertwined. There are no saints when it comes to inter-group conflicts. Each side has a certain responsibility for the continuation of the dispute. However, the cessation of violence and incitement is a primary condition to reinstating the trust that will enable real change. When a nation is under constant threat, pummeled by rockets and attacked by terrorists who often target innocent civilians just for being Jewish-Israelis, it's hard to establish the trust needed for full reconciliation (as was the case with Israel and the British Mandate in the past). The majority of Israelis strive for peace and are not opposed to a Palestinian state. Yet they aren't willing to take the risk of living next to a terrorist state that will attack Israel from it's very borders. Israelis acknowledge the Palestinian right to self-definition, but seek to first ensure the safety of their children. Two states for two nations is in Israel's interest just as it is in the Palestinian interest. If the Palestinians wish to bring an end to the conflict and see the establishment of an independent state, they must first act to constrain incitement and terror, and be willing to participate in a regional peace summit. Genuine and positive contact between both sides, together with the cessation of terror, will be mutually beneficial to bring about an end to the conflict.

Participants in the Humor condition were exposed to the same statement, with an addition of three short humorous asides that were integrated in the original message. The humorous asides were generic and intentionally skirted the nature of the conflict and the outgroup:

> If you agree with this message, it is because I devoted a lot of thought and passion into it. If not—blame Google translate… a relationship that shall lead to reconciliation (Like our past conflict with the British Mandate—just with better food) … will be mutually beneficial in ending this conflict (And if you would teach us to make Baklava, it would help solve the conflict).

Participants in the Self-Humor condition were exposed to the same statement as the control condition, with an addition of three short humorous asides targeting Jewish-Israelis. The humorous asides were created and chosen by a small focus group of Palestinian-Israelis and were based on popular stereotypes projected onto Jewish-Israelis by Palestinians:

> We Jewish-Israelis are as cheap with words as we are with money, so I'll try to make it short and simple… Only true and positive contact between both sides…will be mutually beneficial in ending this conflict (If you would teach us to cook food with flavor it would also help solving the conflict). Trust me, if my wife and I can get along; so can we.

Manipulation check and source credibility. After reading one of the message versions (Control/Humor/Self-Humor), participants assessed the outgroup speaker on an 11-item polar scale. Two of these polar attributes measured the perceived humorousness ($r = .83$, $p < .01$) of the speaker, ranging from 1 (*Not Funny, Unamusing*) to 7 (*Funny, Amusing*), and the remaining nine paired polar attributes (e.g., trustworthy-untrustworthy) ranking from 1 (*high agreement with a noncredible attribute*)

to 7 (*high agreement with a credible attribute*); assessed the perceived credibility of the outgroup speaker (based on McCroskey and Teven (1999) credibility scale), (α = .96). We have combined these two measures to make the humor element of the research less salient to our participants.

Commonality and agreement. Participants proceeded to rate their agreement with the outgroup spokesperson's message on a simple scale ranging from 1 (*completely disagree*) to 7 (*completely agree*). To assess the sense of commonality with the outgroup, participants rated their agreement (on a scale of 1 to 7) to four separate statements regarding their perceived commonality with the outgroup spokesperson and with the outgroup in general: two high commonalty items ("The spokesperson and I have a lot in common"; "Palestinians and Israelis have a lot in common") and two reversed items ("The spokesperson and I have nothing in common"; "Israelis and Palestinians have nothing in common"), (α = .90).

Willingness to compromise. The last dependent measure assessed the participants' willingness to compromise in order to end the conflict. Participants were asked to rate their agreement with four statements, each portraying a different type of compromise, on a scale of 1 (*Strongly oppose*) to 7 (*Strongly Support*). These compromises included: willingness to divide Jerusalem (West Jerusalem to the Israelis and East Jerusalem to the Palestinians), willingness to waver the Palestinian right of return (the principle that hundreds of thousands of refugees to return to Palestine), willingness to forfeit territorial claims outside of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, and a general willingness to compromise (α = .82). These compromises were chosen based on the four core issues of the Israeli-Palestinian dispute.

Results

A bivariate correlation analysis revealed a significant and positive correlation between the hypothesized mediating and dependent variables, where credibility was found to have the strongest connection to the remaining variables (see Table 1 for the means, *SD*s and the zero-order correlations between the measured variables). We then ran an ANOVA and a post hoc Sheffe test on our manipulation check and the four mediating and dependent variables, with condition as the independent variable.

Manipulation Check

There were significant differences between the conditions in the perceived humorousness of the message (F (2,110) = 7.83, *p* < .01, η^2 = .12). Post hoc comparisons using the Scheffe test indicated that participants in both humor conditions perceived the message as significantly funnier compared to those in the control group (*M*control = 2.9, *SD*control = 1.9, *M*humor = 4.7, *SD*humor = 2.3, *p*s < .01. *M*self-humor = 4.5, *SD*self-humor = 2.4, *p*s < .01). No significant difference in the perceived funniness was found between the two humor conditions (*p*s = .89). Hence any differences between these conditions in the dependent variables cannot be explained by one being funnier than the other.

Table 1. The Means, *SD*s, and the Zero-Order Correlations Between the Measured Variables in Study 1

	Mean	*SD*	1	2	3	4
1. Agreement	4.58	2.01	–			
2. Credibility	4.83	1.71	.71***	(.96)		
3. Commonality	4.90	1.72	.70***	.60***	(.91)	
4. Willingness to compromise	4.19	1.71	.65***	.51***	.62***	(.82)

***p < .001.

Credibility and Agreement

The ANOVA revealed significant differences between conditions in the perceived credibility of the outgroup spokesperson F (2, 110) = 9.58, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .15$, and in levels of agreement with the message F (2, 110) = 7.56, ps $< .01$, $\eta^2 = .12$. The post hoc Scheffe test revealed that participants in both humor conditions perceived the outgroup source as significantly more credible than participants in the control condition (Mcontrol = 4, SDcontrol = 1.88, Mhumor = 4.99, SDhumor = 1.57, ps $< .05$, Mself-humor = 5.57, SDself-humor = 1.23, ps $< .01$), and expressed greater agreement with his message (Mcontrol = 3.68, SDcontrol = 2.17, Mhumor = 4.81, SDhumor = 1.5, ps $< .05$, Mself-humor = 5.32, SDself-humor = 1.94, ps $< .01$). No significant differences were found between the two humor conditions in the perceived credibility (ps = .85) or agreement (ps = .50) with the message.

Commonality and Willingness to Compromise

In line with our initial hypotheses, there was a significant effect of the condition on both commonality: Fcommonality (2,110) = 7.43, ps $< .001$, $\eta^2 = .12$, and on the willingness to compromise: Fwillingness (2,110) = 7.15, ps $< .001$, $\eta^2 = .11$. The Scheffe post hoc tests revealed that participants who were exposed to the Self-Humor condition, compared to participants in the control condition, expressed a greater sense of commonality with the outgroup (Mself-humor = 5.64, SDself-humor = 1.24, $MD = 1.44$, ps $< .01$) and were more willing to compromise (Mself-humor = 4.84, SDself-humor = 1.73, MDself-humor/control = 1.38, ps $< .01$). Participants in the Humor condition also expressed a stronger sense of intergroup commonality and willingness to compromise, compared to participants in the control group; but these differences were not significant (for commonality: ps = .15, for willingness to compromise: ps = .07). No significant differences were found between the two humor conditions in the perceived intergroup commonality (ps = .14) nor in the willingness to compromise (ps = .40). Figure 1 presents the average means of our dependent variable and mediators, across the three conditions.
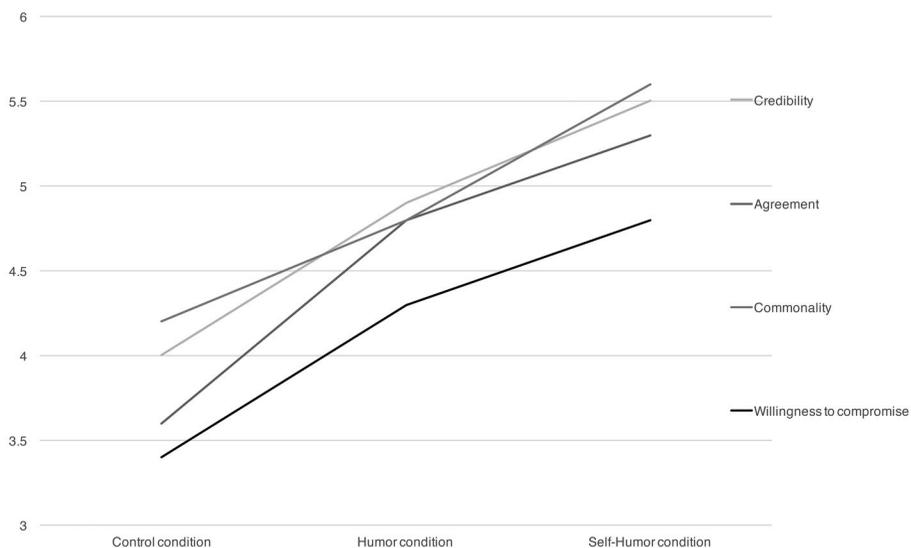

Figure 1. Means average of the dependent and mediating variables among Palestinian participants in each condition.

Interactions

To test whether gender or political-party affiliation have a moderating effect on the connection between the conditions and the dependent variables, four TWO-WAY ANOVA analyses were conducted; revealing that gender and political-party affiliation did not moderate the connection between the condition and the dependent variables.

Mediational Analysis

A mediation model was examined using Hayes (2013) bootstrapping Process for SPSS (Model 4). The first module used a dummy variable contrasting the control condition to both humor conditions (Control vs. Humor and Self-Humor) as the independent variable, credibility as a mediator and agreement as the outcome variable (Path 1). The results indicate that the humor conditions predicted higher credibility of the source ($b = 1.28$, $SE = .32$, $t = 4.06$, $p < .01$) and higher agreement with the message ($b = 1.39$, $SE = .38$, $t = 3.71$, $p < .01$) as compared to the control. However, the effect of the condition on agreement was nonsignificant once the mediator (credibility) was entered to the module ($b = 0.37$, $SE = .30$, $t = 1.24$, $p = .22$), revealing a mediation effect of humor on agreement through source credibility (Sobel $Z = 3.7$, $p < .01$, [CI] = [0.02, 0.23]).

A second mediation model analysis was conducted (again using model 4 in Hayes's [2012] PROCESS Macro) to examine the direct and mediating effects of humor on willingness to compromise, via commonality (Path 2). Since there was no significant influence of the regular Humor condition on commonality and willingness to compromise, the analysis compared participants in the Self-Humor condition to participants in the Control condition. The Self-Humor condition predicted higher commonality with the Israeli outgroup ($b = 0.72$, $SE = 0.20$, $t = 3.68$, $p < .001$) and greater willingness to compromise ($b = 0.69$, $SE = 0.19$, $t = 3.65$, $p < .001$) as compared to the control condition. When commonality was placed as a mediator, the direct effect of self-humor on the willingness to compromise was reduced to non-significant ($b = 0.28$, $SE = .17$, $t = 1.68$, $p = .10$); exposing once more a significant mediation effect (Sobel $Z = 0.41$, $p < .01$, [CI] = [0.03, 0.28]).

Discussion

Our first study revealed a significant positive effect for the use of humor on the perceived credibility of the outgroup source, which in turn increased the agreement with its message. Once three short humorous asides were combined in an outgroup agent's statement, participants perceived him as more credible and agreed more with the outgroup's perspective of the conflict; that is, Palestinian-Israelis agreed more with a statement describing their own nation's violence as the main barrier for peace when a humorous appeal was added to the Israeli representative's message. This finding may reinforce a common yet valuable cliché in the field of conflict resolution where lack of trust is a fundamental barrier in resolving conflict.

Moreover, the analysis revealed a significant positive effect of self-humor on the sense of commonality with the outgroup, which in turn led to higher willingness for political compromise. By merely adding some short stereotypical humorous asides at the expense of Jewish-Israelis and their representative, we increased Palestinian-Israelis' willingness to compromise and concede on various sensitive aspects of this intractable conflict. This effect was found only among participants in the Self-Humor condition, which entails (as opposed to the Humor condition) some self-criticism, and was previously found to increase commonality and willingness to compromise in the context of intractable conflicts (McDonald 2018; Saguy and Halperin 2014). Another explanation of this effect may involve self-humor's proximity function ("breaking distance"); when a strong outgroup admits to having shortcomings, they may be perceived as more accessible, especially by a weaker outgroup. We shall revisit this issue in our general discussion.

However, there are more questions, limitations, and alternative explanations which demand consideration. For instance, it may be that humor induced greater agreement and willingness to compromise simply by priming a positive mood, which promotes agreeability in general. Moreover, since there are usually essential differences and power asymmetries between groups engaged in intractable conflict (Rouhana & Korper, 1996)—and very much so in the Israeli-Palestinian context—could the effects found in Study 1 be replicated among the stronger group as well?

STUDY 2

Study 2 was designed to address these queries by adding another experimental condition to the research design of Study 1 and conducting it among Jewish-Israeli participants. Study 2 included a larger sample, additional measures (such as political stance) and a fourth experimental condition—the "Positive Mood" condition—in addition to our initial research design.

Jewish-Israelis were presented with a fictitious message from a Palestinian representative conveying the Palestinian narrative of the conflict. All versions of the message (each condition) were written in the participants' mother tongue (Hebrew). As in Study 1, participants in the control condition were exposed to the outgroup message devoid of any humorous asides. Participants in the humor conditions were exposed to the same message as in the control condition, with an addition of three general humorous asides (Humor condition) or three humorous asides targeting the Palestinian representative or his group (Self-Humor condition). Participants in the "Positive Mood" condition were asked to rate six jokes by their perceived funniness before being presented with the outgroup spokesperson's message (which was identical to the control condition). These jokes were completely unrelated to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and were designed to manifest a humor-induced positive mood among the participants, irrelevant to the outgroup message.

Participants then continued to fill in the measured variables, which were identical to those presented in Study 1. We hypothesized that in both humor conditions, as compared to the control, participants will perceive the Palestinian agent as more credible, leading to a stronger agreement with the message. We further predicted that participants in the Self-Humor condition (but not in the Humor condition) will demonstrate a greater sense of commonality with the outgroup, which will lead to a greater willingness to compromise as compared to participants in the control condition. Finally, we predicted that results from participants in the "Positive Mood" condition will not significantly differ in any of the measured variables from the ones in the control condition.

Method

Participants

Two hundred and fifty-eight Jewish-Israelis participated in an online survey for a monetary reward. Thirty-three participants failed the reading test of our manipulation and were therefore excluded from the data, leaving 225 participants; 125 men and 100 women, (Mage = 44, SDage = 16, Political stance: 30% political right, 23% centrists / moderates, and 46% political left, consisting of a relatively leftist sample compared to the political distribution in Israel).

Procedure

To explore the potential moderating effects of political ideology and ingroup identification, we added a political stance measure; a single-item scale ranging from 1 (*Extreme left*) to 7 (*Extreme right*), which measured participants' political attitude ($M = 3.7$, $SD = 1.7$). Participants proceeded to fill in an ingroup-identification measure, weighing their agreement to nine statements on a scale of 1 (*Low ingroup identification*) to 7 (*High ingroup identification*). This measure was based on

Luhtanen and Crooker's (1992) identification scale, which was translated and adjusted for the present research *(M*identity = 4.84, *SD*identity = 1.09, α = .88).

The outgroup message. After completing the demographic measures, participants were randomly assigned one of the four conditions, three of which were identical to the design in Study 1. We shall begin by describing the new and fourth condition that was added to the current study.

The Positive Mood condition. The effect of the humor conditions on our measured variables in Study 1 could be alternatively explained by the mere positive mood which humor induces. Putting this alternative explanation to the test, we added a "Positive Mood" condition, where participants engaged in a humorous task prior to exposing them to the outgroup spokesperson's message. These participants (*N* = 58) were presented with a list of six short jokes, extracted from Facebook under the criteria of having at least 1,000 likes to ensure their funniness, and were asked to rate them in order of their humorousness (Fearman, 2014). This task was intended to generate a positive emotional effect, unrelated to the message of the outgroup's spokesperson. After completing this short task, participants were presented with the outgroup representative's message, which was identical to that of the control. If indeed participants agreed more with the outcome variables simply due to humor manifesting a positive mood, we should expect significant differences between this condition and the control condition in our measured variables.

Control condition. Participants in the control condition (*N* = 51) were presented with "An open letter to Israelis," allegedly written by a Palestinian representative, in light of an upcoming regional peace summit. The message conveyed a standard Palestinian narrative of the conflict: holding Israel responsible for the conflict and considering the Israeli occupation as the main obstacle to peace.

> I'm reaching out to you, the Israelis, from the understanding that at the end of the day our fates are intertwined, but also because I believe that the main responsibility and power to end this conflict, lies in Israel's hands. There are no saints when it comes to inter-group conflicts. Each side has a certain responsibility for the continuation of the dispute. But in the case of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the blame is not symmetrical. Israel is an established state, with an army that controls the lives of millions of Palestinians, revoking their right to self-definition. When people are stripped of their basic rights, from their ability to govern themselves, from having a reasonable quality of life, along with a systematical theft of their land: it births frustration and violence—which fuel the conflict (as was the case between Israel and the British during the Mandate). If Israel truly wishes to end this conflict, it must engage in sincere acts that shall improve the quality of life for Palestinians and to enable real Palestinian autonomy, all the while ending the systematic plunder of our lands. Millions of Palestinians are currently living under Israeli occupation, directly and indirectly, withholding basic human rights, a reasonable quality of life, and a decent education. Only meaningful and positive contact between both sides, together with a dramatic shift in Israel's policy towards recognizing a Palestinian State, will be mutually met by the Palestinians and lead to the end of the conflict.

Humor condition. Participants in the Humor condition (*N* = 56) were exposed to the same message as the control participants, along with three general humorous asides which were combined in the original message (two of them were identical to those in Study 1). The humorous asides were general and did not directly target the speaker or his group:

> If you agree with this message, it is because I devoted a lot of thought and passion in to it. If not—blame Google Translate… it births frustration and violence—which fuel the conflict (as was the case between Israel and the British mandate: just with better food) ... Only a meaningful and positive contact between both sides (truly meaningful—not a Tinder contact: we are looking for a long term partner),

Self-Humor condition. Participants in the Self-Humor condition ($N = 60$) were exposed to the original message, along with three short humorous asides targeting the speaker and his group (Palestinians) combined in the original message. These humorous asides were selected based on popular Palestinian stereotypes held by Jewish-Israelis:

> We Palestinians can't pronounce the letter P, so I'll skip the prologue and go straight to the bottom line… withholding them of basic human rights, a reasonable quality of life, and decent education (So any typos in this text are your fault!) … lead to the end of this conflict (Trust me; if my wife and I can get along—so can we).

Measurements. After exposing participants to one of the four conditions, they proceeded to fill in our measured variables, which were identical to those of Study 1: Participants were asked to assess the humorousness of the outgroup message ($r = .72$, $p < .01$), their perceived credibility of the outgroup source ($\alpha = .93$), their agreement with his message, and their sense of commonality with the Palestinian source and his group ($\alpha = .91$).

Willingness to compromise. The last dependent measure assessed the participants' willingness to compromise, in order to bring an end to the conflict. Since each side of this conflict faces different demands and concessions on its part, we adjusted our scale of compromises to address relevant compromises by the Israeli ingroup. Participants were asked to rate their agreement with six statements, each portraying a different compromise, on a scale of 1 (*Strongly oppose*) to 7 (*Highly willing*). These statements included: Gestures towards the Palestinian leadership, freezing settlement expansion, withdrawing from the Occupied Territories, withdrawing from the entire West Bank, accepting a limited number of Palestinian refugees, and a general willingness to compromise ($\alpha = .94$).

Results

A bivariate correlation analysis revealed significant and positive correlations between all of our hypothesized mediating and dependent variables. As in Study 1, credibility had the strongest connection to the rest of our measured variables (see Table 2). We ran ANOVA and post hoc Sheffe tests on our manipulation check and the four dependent and mediating variables, with condition as the independent variable.

Manipulation Check

There were significant differences between the conditions in the perceived humorousness of the message: $F (3,221) = 15.07$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .17$. Post hoc comparisons using the Scheffe test indicated that participants in the two humor conditions perceived the message as significantly more humorous compared with the control group ($M_{control} = 2.6$, $SD_{control} = 1.7$, $M_{humor} = 4.02$, $SD_{humor} = 2.1$, ps < 0.01, $M_{self-humor} = 3.7$, $SD_{self-humor} = 1.7$, ps $< .01$). No significant difference in perceived

Table 2. The Means, *SD*s, and the Zero-Order Correlations Between the Measured Variables in Study 2

	Mean	*SD*	1	2	3	4
1. Agreement	4.32	1.99	–			
2. Credibility	4.47	1.53	.77***	(.93)		
3. Commonality	4.09	1.58	.69***	.64***	(.91)	
4. Willingness to compromise	4.30	1.75	.77***	.68***	.70***	(.94)

***$p < .001$.

humorousness was found between the two humor conditions ($ps = .89$). Moreover, there was no significant difference in the perceived humorousness of the message between participants in the "Positive Mood" condition and those in the control condition (Mjokes = 1.9, SDjokes = 1.5, $ps = .24$). The jokes rating task did not affect the perceived humorousness of the outgroup message.

The Positive Mood Condition

The jokes rating task examined an alternative explanation to our findings, by which humor increases general agreement simply by manifesting a positive mood. However, the ANOVA and post hoc Sheffe tests showed no significant difference between the Control condition and the Positive Mood condition, in any of the measured variables (for credibility: F (3,221) = 9.65, MD = 0.75, ps = .06, η^2 = .11; for agreement: F (3,221) = 5.18, MD = 0.52, ps = .56, η^2 = .06; for commonality: F (3,221) = 5.47, MD = 0.47, ps = .60, η^2 = .06; for willingness to compromise: F (3, 221) = 5.35, MD = 0.39, ps = .69, η^2 = .06). We shall revisit this issue in our general discussion.

Since the Positive Mood condition yielded no significant difference from the Control condition in any of our measured variables and for statistical considerations (by which relaying on three groups in our analyses allows us to be more consistent with the analysis of Study 1), we excluded the Positive Mood condition participants from the rest of our analyses and ran an ANOVA and a post hoc Scheffe test on the four dependent variables, with the remaining conditions (Control/Humor/Self-Humor) as the independent variable.

Credibility and Agreement

The ANOVA revealed significant differences between conditions in the perceived credibility of the outgroup spokesperson: F (2,164) = 15.77, $p < .001$, η^2 = .16, and the agreement with his message: F (2,164) = 7.6, $p < .01$, η^2 = .08. Post hoc comparisons using the Scheffe test indicated that participants in both humor conditions perceived the outgroup source as significantly more credible than participants in the control condition (Mcontrol = 3.64, SDcontrol = 1.48, Mhumor = 5.12, SDhumor = 1.41, $ps < .01$, Mself-humor = 4.65, SDself-humor = 1.25, $ps < .01$) and agreed more with his message (Mcontrol = 3.57, SDcontrol = 2.17. Mhumor = 4.98, SDhumor = 1.77, $ps < .05$. Mselfhumor = 4.53, SDSelfHumor = 1.85, $ps < .05$). No significant differences between the two humor conditions were found in credibility ($ps = .38$) or agreement ($ps = .67$).

Commonality and Willingness to Compromise

There was a significant effect of the condition on both commonality, Fcommonality (2,164) = 7.87, $p < .001$, η^2 = .06, and willingness to compromise, Fwillingness (2,164) = 8.09, $p < .001$, η^2 = .06. But contrary to our hypothesis, no significant differences were found between the control condition and the Self-Humor condition in the perceived intergroup commonality ($ps = .68$) or in the willingness to compromise ($ps = .33$). However, participants in the Humor condition expressed significantly higher sense of commonality with the outgroup, (Mcontrol = 3.6, SDcontrol = 1.6. MHumor = 4.75, SDHumor = 1.62, $ps < .01$) and a stronger willingness to compromise as compared to the control condition (Mcontrol = 3.7, SDcontrol = 1.9. MHumor = 5.05, SDHumor = 1.44, $ps < .01$). These findings contrasted those of Study 1, where self-humor (but not humor) increased commonality and willingness to compromise compared with the control condition. Figure 2 presents the average means of the dependent and mediating variables in each condition.

Interactions

To test whether gender or political stance has a moderating effect on the connection between the conditions and the dependent variables, four two-way ANOVA analyses were conducted for each variable, revealing that gender and political stance did not moderate the connection between conditions and the measured variables.
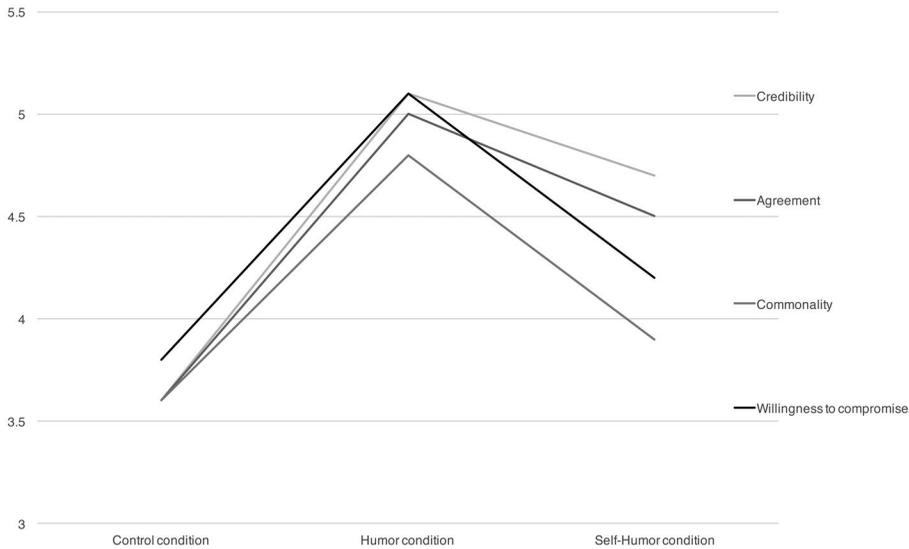
Figure 2. Means average of the dependent and mediating variables among Israeli participants in each condition.

Mediational Analysis

A mediation model was examined using Hayes (2013) bootstrapping Process for SPSS (Model 4). The module used a dummy variable contrasting the control condition to both humor conditions (Control vs. Humor + Self-Humor) as the independent variable and credibility as a mediator and agreement as the outcome variable (Path 1). The results indicate that the humor conditions predicted higher credibility of the source ($b = 1.23$, $SE = .23$, $t = 5.27$, $p < .01$) and a higher agreement with the message ($b = 1.18$, $SE = .32$, $t = 3.68$, $p < .01$), compared to the control. The effect of the condition on agreement was nonsignificant once the mediator (credibility) was entered to the module ($b = -0.06$, $SE = .24$, $t = -0.27$, $p = .79$), revealing a mediation effect of humor on agreement through source credibility (Sobel $Z = 4.92$, $p < .01$, [CI] = [0.01, 0.18]).

A second mediation model analysis was conducted (again using model 4 in Hayes's, 2012 PROCESS Macro) to examine the direct and mediating effects of the Humor condition on willingness to compromise, via commonality (Path 2). The Humor condition predicted a higher sense of commonality with the Palestinian outgroup ($b = 1.14$, $SE = 0.31$, $t = 3.63$, $p < .001$) and greater willingness to compromise ($b = 1.28$, $SE = 0.33$, $t = 3.91$, $p < .001$), compared to the Control condition. The direct effect of the Humor condition on the willingness to compromise was reduced to nonsignificant, once commonality was placed as a mediator ($b = 0.38$, $SE = .23$, $t = 1.68$, $p = .10$), (Sobel $Z = 3.46$, $p < .001$, [CI] = [0.03, 0.25]).

Discussion

Study 2 replicated the main effect found in Study 1, where the inclusion of humor (regardless of its type) in an outgroup appeal led to a stronger agreement with the outgroup perspective, via increased credibility of the message source (path 1). By conducting Study 2 among Jewish-Israelis, while using a bigger sample, we expanded the external validity of our initial findings. Whether they were Palestinian-Israelis or Jewish-Israelis, ingroup members agreed more with the outgroup perspective once three short humorous asides were added to its message. This effect was not moderated by political stance or gender.

Study 2 has also ruled out an alternative explanation of our findings by demonstrating that the mere inducement of positive mood by humor did not significantly affect any of our measured variables compared to the Control condition. These results undermine such a competing explanation, along with the difficulty in explaining the variance between the two humor conditions in some outcomes—but not in their perceived humorousness. A positive mood was not sufficient to change participants' core views regarding this intractable conflict.

However, the effect of humor type on the sense of intergroup commonality and the willingness to compromise (Path 2) differed between samples. Whereas among Palestinian-Israeli participants, self-humor (but not regular humor) increased willingness to compromise (via stronger intergroup commonality), among Jewish-Israeli participants it was regular humor (but not self-humor) that increased their intergroup commonality and their willingness to compromise. We shall address these issues further in our general discussion.

General Discussion

The goal of the current research was to examine the use of a simple psychological intervention in overcoming sociopsychological barriers that inhibit the resolution of intractable conflicts. We did so by using humor, a widely utilized persuasive communication technique, in the context of conflictual intergroup communication.

As hypothesized, by merely adding a few short humorous asides to an outgroup message, both Palestinian-Israelis and Jewish-Israelis perceived the outgroup source as more credible and agreed more with the outgroup perspective. Inclusion of humor in the outgroup appeal also led to a stronger willingness to compromise (via increased sense of intergroup commonality) among both high- and low-power groups in conflict. However, the effect of humor type on intergroup commonality and willingness to compromise differed between samples. Whereas Israelis utilizing self-humor (but not general humor) increased Palestinian-Israelis' sense of commonality and willingness to compromise with the Israeli outgroup, in the case of Jewish-Israeli participants, it was general humor (but not self-humor) that boosted their intergroup commonality and willingness to compromise. This finding suggests that some group characteristics may have a moderating effect on the connection between humor types and intergroup commonality and willingness to compromise.

A possible explanation of this contrasting finding, which we briefly addressed in our introduction, may be due to the power asymmetries between groups in intractable conflicts (Saguy, Tropp, & Hawi, 2013). These asymmetries may create a paradoxical effect of humor, and especially of self-humor, on the perceived commonality with the outgroup. Commonality is based on the perceived similarities between groups on several dimensions, which may include, among other things, power status (Kriesberg, 2009). We suggest that when the high-power group utilizes self-humor, which addresses its weaknesses, it "breaks the distance" with the outgroup by increasing its own vulnerability and thus is perceived as more accessible by the weaker group. But when a low-power group targets itself, its weaknesses are more salient to the stronger group, making the power asymmetry even greater. Further empirical evidence for our reasoning can be found in Greengross and Miller's (2008) research on the effects of status and self-deprecating humor on attraction. The authors have found that utilizing self-deprecating humor by high-status presenters (but not by low-status presenters) increased long-term attractiveness for both sexes. Thus, we propose that when a high-power group is using self-humor in intergroup communication, it may reduce the perceived power distance by the outgroup, thus seeming closer to it. Whereas for the weaker group, the use of self-humor may increase the perceived power gap among the stronger outgroup, leading to a weaker sense of commonality.

The findings of the current research may have various theoretical and practical implications. First, they demonstrate once more the categorical impact of sociopsychological barriers on intractable conflict, which may become more dominant in the preservation of the conflict than the actual disagreements. In our studies, the content of the outgroup message did not differ between conditions, nor did the compromise items (which addressed sensitive core aspects of the conflict). Yet people were significantly more agreeable with the outgroup message and more willing to compromise with the outgroup once its spokesperson was perceived as more credible (hence, in our current context, trustworthy) and more akin to their own community. It seems that intergroup distrust and alienation, forged by psychological barriers of intractable conflict, are especially destructive in resolving such conflicts—even when both sides can reach an agreed upon resolution (Alon & Bar-Tal, 2017). If groups engaged in conflicts perceive their outgroup as unreliable, any offer to end the dispute will encounter hostility and suspicion. In contrast, if we succeed in fostering intergroup trust, groups will be more inclined to accept tough compromises on their part.

Secondly, the findings of the current research suggest that variances in groups' characteristics, such as power asymmetries, may generate different effects of intergroup communication among each group; this should be taken into account. Specifically, admission of ingroup weaknesses may lead to a stronger sense of intergroup commonality among the weaker group, but not so among the stronger group. This last finding demonstrates the importance of "tailor-made" interventions, which address the relevant context of the groups in play rather than attempting to generate generic interventions, which are blind to such crucial circumstances.

And finally, in line with Walton's (2014) approach to wise psychological interventions, the current findings further demonstrate that a small organic intervention, potentially easy and elegantly utilized in various occasions of intergroup communication, may induce a more constructive, conciliatory dialogue — even between groups engaged in an acute intractable conflict. We believe that the focus of intractable conflict-related interventions should address the characteristics of constructive intergroup communication that may be implemented in organic, life-like scenarios. However, as the aim of the current research was to first establish the possible effects of humor on intergroup communication in conflict, future studies are needed to examine if and how a humor-based intervention is indeed more beneficial and practical than other forms of interventions. This last point leads us to some potential practical implications of these findings and their limitations.

The current research may also offer potential practical implications that may facilitate a better communication between groups in intractable conflicts. We believe that psychological interventions aimed at encouraging conflict resolution should focus on real-life opportunities, where a small shift in public opinion may be the difference between cessation or continuation of the conflict. In the violent reality of intractable conflicts, there are occasions which offer solid opportunities to bring about reconciliation or engage in meaningful negotiations: peace summits, for example, a referendum on a peace plan, dramatic intergroup gestures by groups' leaders, negotiations and other such prospects. These intersections pose great potential for such wise interventions. We postulate that, in light of the present findings, groups' leaders should focus on reinstating their perceived credibility among the outgroup and marking the commonalities between groups prior to addressing the actual intergroup disputes. We further suggest that the outgroup should use humor (but not necessarily self-humor) in its appeal, as a "heuristic" means to overcoming sociopsychological barriers and reinstalling reliability. These principles can be utilized in various intergroup communication venues: speeches, media interviews, social media targeting the outgroup, diplomats conducting negotiations, and more. However, there are various limitations to the current research that must be addressed before utilizing such tactics.

Naturally, the current study has also several limitations. Most importantly, its preliminary nature prevented us from fully rejecting all possible alternative explanations of the findings. For example, one could argue that, given that some of the content related to intergroup contact was integrated with the current humor conditions, effects might be driven by that, rather than by the humor itself.

This claim should definitely be tested in future studies, but, given that the message across all conditions and studies has included a direct call for positive contact between the warring parties ("Only meaningful and positive contact between both sides"), we presume that adding humorous asides that may infer an additional positive contact between sides (for example, "If you would teach us how to make Baklawa it would also help") should not create a meaningful confound to the current work.

Another limitation of the current research is that the differences between the humor conditions could have possibly been due to the specific asides used in the studies and not to the nature of the humor itself (i.e., general vs. self-humor). At least regarding one instance, the "Google translate" appeal, the distinction between humor and self-humor is allusive, as this appeal may infer self-criticism by the speaker. We believe that, taken in context ("If you agree with this message, it is because I devoted a lot of thought and passion in to it. If not—blame Google Translate"), this appeal does not explicitly target or criticize the speaker or his ingroup, but rather playfully corresponds to the fact that the message was translated into Arabic (or Hebrew). Other possible confounding factors may regard the specific humorous asides' content, such as targeting pronunciation versus asides addressing group members' traits as cheapness (the fact that no significant difference in humorousness were found between the humor condition in each study may weaken such considerations), or that some of our asides targeted the speaker himself, and not only his group. Our decision to use humorous asides which do not directly address the nature of the conflict should also be taken under further empirical scrutiny. Further studies are needed to rule out such explanations: addressing the content, the distinction, and the target of these humorous asides, which may expand, or confound, the effects of our research.

We would also like to address the fact that humor is a complicated method of communication, especially in the context of intractable conflicts, where it might be as potentially harmful as it may be beneficial. As we have mentioned in our theoretical framework, humor can also serve as group-bounding mechanisms through targeting outgroup members. Hence, our hypotheses in the current research addressed very certain conditions in which such intervention may serve positively for warring parties' future interaction. Further studies are necessary to expose the mediators and boundaries which distinguish between an effective and positive use of humor in intergroup communication and a potentially harmful utilization of a humorous intervention.

Another examination should focus on generalizing these effects via additional samples as well as in other contexts. Security issues and political reasons have prevented us from sampling Palestinians living outside of Israel in our current research, and therefore we have used a sample of Palestinian-Israelis who hold Israeli citizenship. Since Palestinian-Israelis are a part of the Palestinian nation and culture and identify as Palestinians (Ghanem, 2002)—as we have also validated in the current research sample—we believe that the effects found in Study 1 should be relevant to Palestinians who do not hold an Israeli citizenship. Nevertheless, future studies including samples of Palestinian participants without Israeli citizenship would elicit these possible confounding factors. The last point also applies in regard to assessing humor-based interventions among more samples of groups involved in intractable conflicts—other than the Israeli-Palestinian dispute—which may expand, or bound, the external validity of our findings.

These explorations may yield various practical implications that shall either expand or constrain the external validity and boundaries of our findings. They may also further demonstrate the power of simple sociopsychological interventions in ending intractable conflicts, which amass a terrible toll on the millions of people around the world who are living in their shadows.

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