

# Gender-empathic Constructions, Empathy, and Support for Compromise in Intractable Conflict

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## Abstract

The goal of the present study was to investigate how empathy and gender-empathic constructions affect the levels of support for political compromise in an intractable conflict. Gender-empathic constructions relate to perceptions that individuals hold about self or others as having feminine-empathic gender traits. We hypothesized that empathy will be positively associated with support for compromise, but that perceiving one's own group as feminine empathic will be negatively associated with such attitudes, with empathy being a significant mediator. Data were collected through a public opinion survey conducted with a representative sample of Israeli-Jewish adults ( $N = 511$ ). The findings supported our hypotheses, thus indicating that perceiving one's own group as having feminine-empathic traits and empathy toward opponents made significant contributions to explaining Jewish-Israeli willingness to compromise with Palestinians. The implications of our findings for understanding the role of gender-empathic constructions and of empathy in conflict resolution are discussed.

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By the end of the twentieth century, armed conflicts had taken their toll mostly on civilian populations. Conservative estimates indicate that 75 percent of war casualties were noncombatants, while 80 percent of the world's refugees were women and children (Skjelsboek and Smith 2001). One of the most difficult categories of armed conflicts are intractable conflicts that are violent, revolve around goals viewed as existential, perceived as having a zero-sum nature and being irresolvable, occupy a central position in the societies involved in the war, require immense material and psychological investment, and last for at least twenty-five years (Bar-Tal 2013; Kriesberg 1993). Although these political conflicts are real and create heavy material losses, it is difficult to explain why they remain protracted and resistant to peaceful resolution without addressing their underlying social-psychological mechanisms (Bar-Tal 2011; Bar-Tal and Halperin 2013). Psychological and social constructs, such as gender and emotions, have been highlighted in the last two decades as factors that can substantially contribute to understanding conflict dynamics and conflict-related attitudes (Halperin 2016; Sjoberg 2013; Skjelsboek and Smith 2001).

Emotion is considered to be a multidimensional phenomenon that involves cognitive appraisal, affective, and behavioral components. The emotional goal, and subsequent tendency toward action, creates the basis for its potential influence on conflict-related attitudes, as they reflect the motivational and behavioral adapted reactions of individuals to the stimulus underlying the emotion (Frijda 2004; Frijda, Kuipers, and Ter Schure 1989). The concepts of group-based emotions and intergroup emotions are also highly relevant for the current discussion regarding emotions in intractable conflicts and their potential political impact, since these phenomena refer to emotions that are felt by individuals as a result of their membership in a certain group and target another group, seeing the other as a homogeneous entity (Mackie, Devos, and Smith 2000; Mackie and Smith 2015). Studies from the last decade provide empirical evidence that emotions have significant effects on public opinion concerning conflict-relevant issues (e.g., Halperin 2011; Maoz and McCauley 2005, 2008; Rosler, Cohen-Chen, and Halperin 2017). Empathy in specific has been widely discussed in this context (Kelman 1998, 1999; Kriesberg and Dayton 2012; White 1984), since it is related to relieving the suffering of the other group caused by the conflict. However, only a few empirical studies explore the ways in which empathy can promote processes of resolving political conflicts (Maoz and McCauley 2005, 2009; Pagano and Huo 2007; Rosler, Cohen-Chen, and Halperin 2017).

Within the fast-growing literature on gender, conflicts, and negotiation, accumulated evidence shows the effect of gender and gender-related expectations and perceptions on political attitudes concerning conflicts, such as support for militant

actions and compromise (David and Maoz 2015; David et al. 2016; Eichenberg 2003; Maoz 2009; Tessler and Warriner 1997). The affective social role of women as empathic and other concerned is suggested as a possible factor that can explain the gender-related difference with regard to negotiation (Olekalns 2014; Pelligra 2011). However, to the best of our knowledge, previous empirical research has neither examined the effect of affective-gendered constructions, in general, nor explored feminine social constructions mediated by empathy on conflict-related political attitudes, in specific.

Past studies have also focused on the impact of individual self-constructs—such as political ideology, malleability beliefs, and emotions (e.g., Halperin et al. 2011; Maoz and McCauley 2005; Pliskin et al. 2014)—on conciliatory attitudes in the context of intense intergroup conflicts. Only a handful of recent empirical studies (David and Maoz 2015; Rosenberg and Maoz 2012) examine the association between group perceptions and conflict-related attitudes. Nonetheless, all of them refer to the perception of the out-group, thus leaving the question concerning the effect of perceptions of one's own group in conflict contexts unanswered. Therefore, there is a need to empirically examine the combined effect of these two seemingly conciliatory-oriented constructions, self-conception of group femininity and empathy, on actual political attitudes in the context of intractable conflict. Such an examination can expand our understanding of the influence of empathy and gender perceptions on support for conflict-related policies and on the psychological underpinnings of conflict resolution processes in troubled conflict zones.

In what follows we present a short overview of previous findings regarding empathy, gender-empathic constructions, and conflict-related attitudes. This lays the foundation for our hypotheses regarding the potential effect of collective feminine-empathic perceptions and empathy on willingness to support political compromise. Then, we describe the method and results of the empirical investigations we carried out in order to examine the attitudinal associations between the three constructs. Finally, we discuss the study's contribution to the fields of emotions in conflict and gender and conflict resolution as well as noting directions for future studies.

## Literature Review

### *Empathy and Support for Compromise*

*Empathy* is an other-oriented emotional state comprised of cognitive elements such as perspective taking or knowing another person's cognitions and emotions (Frith and Frith 2012; Ickes 1993; Stotland 1969; Zaki 2014). Empathy also includes affective components that reflect the observer's emotional reaction to the situation of the other person or group (Singer and Lamm 2009). In the latter sense, it can involve affective sharing or "feeling with" the other, hence taking on their perceived emotional state (Singer and Lamm 2009; Stotland 1969). It can also involve "feeling

for” or concern about the other, hence evoking emotions such as sympathy, compassion, and tenderness in response to another person’s appraised distress (see Batson [2009] for elaboration).

An important subcomponent of empathy, widely referred to in the research literature, is empathic concern or prosocial concern, which reflects the motivation to alleviate the suffering of another (Batson 2011; De Waal 2008; Waytz, Zaki, and Mitchell 2012; Zaki and Mitchell 2013). Empathic concern has been found to be significantly and positively associated with altruistic motivation and behavior, on the one hand (e.g., Batson and Coke 1981; Eisenberg and Miller 1987; Knight et al. 1994; Waytz, Zaki, and Mitchell 2012), and strongly and negatively related to any kind of aggression (Kaukiainen et al. 1999; Mehrabian 1997; Richardson et al. 1994; Shechtman and Basheer 2005), on the other hand.

During intractable conflicts, the deep animosity toward the other side, coupled with past grievances and zero-sum perceptions, almost inevitably deteriorates to outbursts of violence, which in most cases hurts mainly noncombatants, either intentionally or unintentionally (Bar-Tal 2013; Pruitt, Rubin, and Kim 2004). Since empathy involves perspective taking and either feeling for or feeling with the other, especially concerning civilians who have been hurt due to the conflict’s escalation, it may create personal distress among empathic individuals. Therefore, the main emotional goal of empathy in this context will be to alleviate the observer’s personal distress by assisting him or her to stop or reduce the suffering of the other caused by the conflict. The subsequent action tendencies associated with this motivation will be based on empathic concern and result in helping behaviors. Relevant political actions may include opposing militant actions against the other group or supporting provision of humanitarian aid or political compromise in the framework of a peace process.

Indeed, previous studies in the context of the intractable Israeli-Palestinian conflict found that feelings reflecting empathic concern toward the other side predicted support for political compromise (Maoz and McCauley 2005, 2009). Therefore, we expect to find a similar effect in our study and suggest that empathy toward the out-group will be significantly associated with support for political compromise with it, while lower empathy toward out-group will predict decreased support for political compromise with the out-group.

### *Gender-empathic Constructions and Support for Compromise*

The construct of gender, which goes beyond the biological makeup distinction between males and females, relates to the sociocultural expectations that follow from differences between women and men. The socially constructed category of gender and the effects of gender construction on social structures and interactions have received increased research attention and have been extensively discussed (e.g., Butler 1990, 1993; Tate 2014). Early gender distinctions in psychology related to personal and social implications of awareness to physiological differences

between men and women (e.g., Stoller [1968] 1974). Beginning in the mid-1970s, the approach emphasizing the distinctions derived from endorsing specific roles, behaviors, and traits that are stereotypically considered masculine or feminine became dominant (e.g., Bem 1981b; Eagly and Wood 2011). Stereotypical masculine traits largely reflect agentic or instrumental attributions, such as assertive, forceful, and self-reliant, while stereotypical feminine traits mostly reflect communion or expressiveness, such as sympathetic, affectionate, and warm (Bem 1981b; Judd et al. 2005; Spence and Halmreich 1978; Wood and Eagly 2015). Accordingly, gender differences are constituted by social schemes following socialization processes and internalization of gender-based social expectations by individuals. Therefore, our approach in the current study is based on socially driven gender constructions relating to perceptions that individuals hold about self or others as having feminine-empathic gender traits.

Furthermore, when members of a social group share similar perceptions regarding the gender roles and desirable practices of men and women, they can be characterized as having cultural values that have been historically associated with “masculinity” or “femininity” (Nelson et al. 2006). Specific gender cultures have developed in different countries through protracted social and historical processes. Thus, for example, Scandinavian countries most notably developed “feminine” cultures in which the social roles of men and women overlap (Hofstede 2001). Countries and societies engulfed by protracted conflicts, such as Israel, for example, tend to develop gendered binary narrative and social mechanisms or a “masculine” culture. These societies are characterized by clearly distinctive gender roles, where men are supposed to fight the “battle front” while women are supposed to fight the “home front” (Aharoni 2016; Herzog 1998; Sasson-Levy 2011).

Moreover, Nelson and her colleagues (2006) reported data that were consistent with the perception of cultural construction of gender and its implications for moral obligation for helping behaviors as independent from the actual biological sex. They found that prosocial messages did not resonate with males in masculine cultures. However, when cultures were perceived as feminine, such messages activated among men a sense of moral obligation for altruism. In another study, David and Maoz (2015) found that perceiving out-groups as having stereotypical feminine traits (POSFT) and lower perception of threat from Palestinians predict increased levels of support for compromise. In the current study, we wish to further examine collective gender constructions by investigating how perceiving one’s own group as having feminine-empathic traits (POFET), rather than perceptions of the out-group, and levels of empathy to the out-group are associated with support for political compromise with the out-group.

The relationship between gender and conflict resolution, in general, and between gender and support for compromise, in specific, was formerly articulated by the “women and peace” hypothesis. Although studies on the relationship yielded mixed empirical results, this hypothesis suggests that women are more oriented toward peace, constructive negotiations, and compromise than men and are less supportive of militant

policies (Aharoni 2014; Caprioli and Boyer 2001; Maoz 2009; Aoláin 2009). While originally the hypothesis related to sex-based differences, it was found early on that perceptions regarding gender roles and equality account for the variance in conflict-related attitudes (Tessler and Warriner 1997). Recent studies describe situations of conflict, warfare, and terrorism as following normative gender dichotomies in which power, aggression, and warfare are associated with masculinity while submissiveness, passiveness, the need to be protected, and feeling for others are associated with femininity (Del Zotto 2002; Nacos 2005; Rosenberg and Maoz 2012; Sjoberg and Gentry 2007). Furthermore, the traditional social role of women, connected to empathy and nurturing, has been previously linked to greater relational concern and a more moderate approach to relations among social groups (Olekalns 2014; Tessler and Warriner 1997). Therefore, it stands to reason that similar to empathy toward the out-group and feminizing them, perceiving one's own group as possessing feminine-empathic traits could be associated with support for compromise with the out-group.

However, protracted violent conflict leads to a clear perceptual distinction and intense competition between the in-group and the out-group. While positive characteristics, values, goals, norms, and behaviors are attributed to the in-group coupled with positive emotions such as pride, negative emotions such as anger and hatred are directed toward the out-group and negative characteristics and malicious intentions are attributed to it (Bar-Tal 2013; Baumeister and Hastings 1997; Halperin 2016; Kelman 1999). This distinction raises the important question of whether perceiving *one's own group* as feminine empathic will lead to empathic concern and compromising attitudes toward *the out-group*. The research literature has not directly addressed this question which is the focus of this article.

## Theory

### *In-group Gender-empathic Constructions in Intractable Conflict*

We suggest that severe conflict over identity and resources, alongside a history of animosity and violence between social groups, may lead individuals with collective feminine-empathic perceptions to distinct views and reactions toward their in-group versus the out-group (see Cikara, Bruneau, and Saxe 2011; Dovidio et al. 2010; Ginges and Atran 2009; Leach and Spears 2009). Self-perception of one's own group as feminine empathic in the context of a threatening intergroup conflict reflects care and deep identification with its members. This is coupled with strong in-group cohesion in opposition to the rival group. As J. K. Choi and Bowlest (2007) have asserted, the norm of assisting in-group members in need and the motivation to even sacrifice oneself in order to secure group survival have probably coevolved in humans with hostility toward rival ethnic or national groups.

In a similar manner, Cikara and her colleagues suggest that "people with the most empathy for members of their ingroup may thus experience the most *schadenfreude*<sup>1</sup> toward a threatening outgroup" (2011, 151). Recent studies have found that individuals

higher in empathic concern exhibit harsher reactions and less empathy only for out-group perpetrators (Dovidio et al. 2010). In another study, participation in the most violent collective actions within a conflict was motivated by high levels of altruistic empathic concern exclusive for own group's suffering (Ginges and Atran 2009).

The distinct—if not reverse—attitudinal and behavioral reaction we propose in this article toward one's own group and rival group following high empathic-feminine perceptions can also be explained by the effects of the hormone associated with feminine and empathic behaviors. Oxytocin, which has been found to initiate feminine-maternal bonding and nurturing behaviors (Feldman et al. 2007; Grewen et al. 2005; Uvnäs-Moberg 1998) as well as upregulate neural and behavioral expression of empathy (Hurlmann et al. 2010; Keri and Benedek 2009; Perry et al. 2010; Riem et al. 2011), exerts an almost opposite effect on reactions to members of the in-group versus those of a rival out-group (De Dreu 2012; De Dreu, Greer, Handgraaf et al. 2010; De Dreu, Greer, Van Kleef et al. 2011). For in-group members, oxytocin was found to motivate in-group favoritism as well as altruistic and cooperative reactions similar to those characterizing empathic concern. However, higher levels of oxytocin in the context of intergroup conflict motivated participants to express defensive reactions of noncooperation and competition toward out-group members and even to act aggressively toward an out-group threat in order to protect their in-group (De Dreu, Greer, Handgraaf et al. 2010; De Dreu, Greer, Van Kleef et al. 2011; Ten Velden et al. 2014).

Following this evidence, we presume that in the context of an intractable conflict, feminine-empathic perceptions and their associated neural mechanisms may lead to caring and cooperative reactions for in-group members but to hostile and defensive reactions to rival out-group members. Relevant political actions may take the form of opposition to conciliatory policy toward the out-group—policies that may threaten one's own group's interests. Therefore, we hypothesize that POFET will be also associated with decreased support for political compromise with the out-group.

### *Perceiving One's Own Group as Having Feminine-Empathic Traits (POFET Scale)*

In order to measure the feminine-empathic traits of one's own group, we constructed the *perceiving one's own group as having feminine-empathic traits scale*. The POFET scale is based on four items: *sympathetic*, *gentle*, *tender*, and *compassionate*, which were derived from the Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI) femininity scale (Bem 1981a). The BSRI provides independent assessments of masculinity and femininity in terms of the respondent's self-reported possession—characteristic of socially desirable, stereotypically masculine, and feminine personality characteristics (Bem 1981a). It is one of the major scales used to directly measure femininity and masculinity and to successfully predict gender-congruent behaviors (Wood and Eagly 2015). BSRI's two-dimensional structure received substantial empirical support (e.g., N. Choi, Fuqua, and Newman 2007), and it has been—and currently still—

highly popular in gender research (see Donnelly and Twenge [2016] for meta-analysis). To select the four items included in our measure, the following criteria were employed: (a) items were selected from Bem's (1981a) shortened version and (b) we selected items with the highest loadings and communality value in previous exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses conducted in various contexts and in different countries with the complete BSRI (e.g., Fernández, Ángeles-Quiroga, and Del-Olmo 2006; Kopper and Epperson 1991; Ozkan and Lajunen 2005; Vafaei et al. 2014). Furthermore, these four items are highly relevant for the meaning of femininity within the context of an intergroup conflict and have been previously found to be associated with conflict-related gender attitudes and activities (Kotef 2011; Maoz 2009). The original BSRI (Bem 1981a) assesses *individual* self-perception as feminine or masculine; however, our goal in the current study was to assess the extent to which one's own group is perceived as feminine. Consequently, we used the following adaptation of the original BSRI phrasing "Some attributes can be sometimes described as characterizing ethnic or national groups. To what extent do you view each of the following attributes as generally characterizing Jewish-Israelis?"

### *Motivated Empathy as a Mediator*

The suggested nonintuitive (negative) direct association between POFET and support for political compromises seems to require further theoretical elaboration. How come attitudinal implications of perceiving one's group as feminine empathic does not cross over to a rival group? The actual experience of empathy might serve as a key "gatekeeper" or a mediator between POFET and support for compromises. If individuals perceive their group as characterized by feminine-empathetic traits and accordingly experience empathy toward a specific social group, they may support conciliatory actions toward it, as suggested earlier. However, if contextual or social determinants hold them back from feeling empathy toward that group, they will presumably not support compromising policies even if they generally see their own group as feminine empathic. Such an indirect path can potentially become even more powerful if the factors that motivate downregulating empathy are fueled and enhanced by POFET. We suspect that the competitive and threatening nature of intractable conflicts will serve as such determinant factor and motivate avoidance of experiencing empathy toward rival, hence making empathy a mediator between increased POFET and decreased support for compromise.

While empathy was found to directly affect prosocial behavior and intergroup attitudes, on the one hand, it has been suggested that social perceptions and culturally shared beliefs influence psychological and neurobiological processes of empathy, on the other hand (Cheon, Mathur, and Chiao 2010; Cheon et al. 2011). Furthermore, increasing empirical attention has been given to empathy as an important mediator between social perceptions or intergroup attitudes and behaviors (Dovidio et al. 2010). Our study therefore extends previous research by examining



both the direct effect of empathy on conflict-related attitudes and its effect as a mediator between collective social perceptions and conciliatory attitudes.

An innovative line of work introduced by Jamil Zaki (2014) proposes an explanation for the complex association we offered above between empathy and inter-group attitudes and for empathy's role as a mediator. He suggests that "*empathy is often a motivated phenomenon*, in which observers are driven to either experience empathy or to avoid it" (Zaki 2014, 1608). In other words, experiencing empathy will probably lead to prosocial behavior. However, the question is whether the characteristics of the context and relevant social perceptions will motivate experiencing empathy or encourage avoiding it altogether.

Intractable conflict promotes in-group favoritism and out-group exclusion and holds powerful situational features that potentially create motivation to avoid engaging with the other sides' emotions through multiple regulatory strategies (Gutsell and Inzlicht 2010; Mitchell et al. 2009; for elaboration on regulatory strategies, see Zaki 2014). One such feature is the high costs associated with political compromise in intractable conflict, and the interference that empathizing with the out-group might create in the context of future negotiations (Cameron and Payne 2011; Shaw, Batson, and Todd 1994; Zaki 2014). Since intractable conflicts revolve around existential goals, compromise aimed at resolving them are associated with elevated political costs. As suggested earlier, POFET can heighten the sense of in-group versus out-group conflict, hence increasing the motivation to avoid costly political compromise by reducing empathy toward out-group members.

Another characteristic of intractable conflict that can be intensified by POFET is zero-sum perception. Anticipation of the highly competitive negotiation process and its perceived zero-sum nature, together with heightened in-group favoritism, might also create motivation among individuals to avoid feeling empathy toward the rival group. This is due to its potential to interfere with the negotiation's outcomes and the threat it carries to in-group's needs and goals (Cikara and Paluck 2013; Galinsky et al. 2008; Zaki 2014).

Based on this current line of research of empathy as a motivated phenomenon, we propose that POFET, with subsequent in-group favoritism and out-group hostility, may bolster the impact of intractable conflict's threatening and competitive characteristics. This can motivate individuals to downregulate empathy, which in turn can reduce the willingness to compromise with the opponents, hence turning empathy into a powerful mediator. Thus, we expect that the (reduced) empathy toward out-group members will significantly mediate the association of POFET with (decreased) support for political compromise with the out-group.

## The Present Study

In the present study, we aimed to investigate whether empathy and POFET will affect the levels of support for political compromise in an intractable conflict. We

also examined whether the level of empathy toward the out-group mediates the effect of POFET on willingness to support compromise. Such an empirical examination can promote a better understanding of the gender-constructed motivational aspect of empathy, and the role it plays in the reality of intractable conflicts. In addition, it may contribute to the attempts to promote constructive political agreements, by addressing specifically two psychological constructs—POFET and empathy—that can potentially advance political attitudes supporting compromise. We examined our projections in the context of the intractable conflict between Israelis and Palestinians.

## Hypotheses

**Hypothesis 1:** Empathy toward Palestinians and POFET will be significantly but conversely associated with support for political compromise with Palestinians. Higher empathy toward Palestinians but lower POFET will predict increased support for political compromise with Palestinians.

**Hypothesis 2:** Empathy toward Palestinians will significantly mediate the association of POFET with (decreased) support for political compromise with Palestinians.

## Method

### Survey Design and Participants

Results of our study are based on a nationally representative random interview survey of 511 Jewish-Israeli adults (age eighteen and older), which was conducted by a professional polling agency in Israel during the summer of 2013. The response rate in surveys of the Jewish-Israeli population, including this one, is estimated at between 20 percent and 30 percent. The survey was conducted in Hebrew, but items are translated here into English. The demographics of this sample were comparable to those of the general Jewish-Israeli population.

### Measures

Below follows a brief description of the measures used in our analyses (see Table 1 for means and standard deviations [*SDs*] of the measures and the intercorrelations between them).

#### Independent variable

*Perceiving one's own group as having feminine-empathic traits (POFET) scale.* Respondents were presented with the following four items derived and adapted from the BSRI (Bem 1981b; see Theoretical Framework section for more details on the construction and adaptation of this scale): sympathetic, gentle, tender, and

**Table 1.** Means (SDs) and Intercorrelations of Perceiving One's Own Group as Having Feminine-empathic Traits (POFET), Empathy Scale, Support for Political Compromise Scale, Hawkishness, and Demographic Items.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	Mean (SD)
1. Support for political compromise (three items)	.82						2.5 (0.9)
2. POFET (four items)	-.32*	.83					4.7 (1.3)
3. Empathy toward Palestinians (two items)	.56*	-.20*	.67				2.9 (1.2)
4. Hawkishness	-.56*	.27	-.41				6.0 (2.1)
5. Gender	-.00	.04	-.03	-.00			1.6 (0.5)
6. Education	.08	-.09	.07	-.05	.02		14.7 (3.4)
7. SES	.10*	-.12*	.11*	-.13*	-.07	.18*	2.8 (1.3)

Note:  $N = 511$ . Correlations on the diagonal are Cronbach's  $\alpha$ s of the corresponding scales. Empathy toward Palestinians was based on a 1 to 6 scale, POFET on a 1 to 7 scale, support for political compromise on a 1 to 4 scale, hawkishness on a 1 to 9 scale, and SES on a 1 to 5 scale. Gender was a binary scale and education is measured in number of years of formal education. \* $p < .05$

compassionate. For each of the items described, respondents were asked to rate the extent to which, in their opinion, it characterizes Jewish-Israelis on a seven-point scale ranging from (1) *never* to (7) *always*. Ratings on these four items were averaged for each respondent to form the POFET scale, where higher scores mean higher perceiving one's own group as having feminine-empathic traits. Cronbach's  $\alpha$  coefficient for these items was .83 (see Table 1).

**Dependent variable.** *Support for political compromise scale* was based on three items that were rated on a four-point scale ranging from *strongly agrees* (1) to *strongly disagree* (4). In our data analysis, we recoded this scale, so that higher scores represented higher support for political compromise. Responses to the three items were averaged for each respondent to create one scale, where higher scores mean higher support for political compromise. The three items were: "Do you support or oppose the solution based on the establishment of a Palestinian state alongside Israel, known as the two-state solution"; "To what extent do you support or oppose dismantling most of the settlements in the territories as part of a peace agreement with the Palestinians"; and "There is a proposal that there will be a mutual recognition of Israel as the State of the Jewish people and Palestine as the state of the Palestinian people. Do you support or oppose this proposal." Cronbach's  $\alpha$  coefficient for these items was .82.

**Mediator variable.** *The empathy toward Palestinians scale* was based on two items rated on a six-point scale ranging from (1) *not at all* to (6) *a very high extent*. Responses to these items were averaged for each respondent to create one scale, where higher scores mean higher empathy toward Palestinians. The two items were:

“I feel understanding toward Palestinians” and “I feel sympathy toward Palestinians.” Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  coefficient for these items was .67 (see Table 1).

*Covariates. Hawkishness*—respondents were asked to place themselves on a nine-point “Hawk–Dove” scale as follows: “In the scale presented to you, ‘1’ represents full identification with left-wing (dovish) attitudes, ‘9’ represents full identification with right-wing (hawkish) attitudes, and ‘5’ represents middle/center attitudes. Where would you place yourself on this scale?”

*Level of Education* was measured by asking respondents to indicate their number of years of formal schooling. Socioeconomic status (*SES*) was measured by asking respondents to rate their average household monthly expenditure relative to the average household monthly expenditure in Israel on a five-point scale ranging from 1—a lot below the average to 5—a lot above the average, with “3” representing the average. *Gender* was a binary scale in which 1 was scored as a male and 2 as a female.

## Results

### Descriptive Analyses

From Table 1, we see that the data indicate that Jewish-Israelis expressed low empathy toward Palestinians ( $M = 2.9$ ,  $SD = 1.2$ ); only 24 percent of our respondents indicated that they feel empathy toward the Palestinians (ratings of 4, 5, or 6 on the 1 to 6 scale). Additionally, the data indicate that Jewish-Israelis expressed low POFET ( $M = 4.7$ ,  $SD = 1.3$ ), with 40 percent of the respondents perceiving Israelis as having a feminine-empathic traits (ratings of 5, 6, or 7 on the 1 to 7 scale). Respondents also expressed a medium level of support for political compromise with Palestinian ( $M = 2.5$ ,  $SD = 0.9$ ), with 42 percent expressing support for such a compromise (ratings of 3 or 4 on the 1 to 4 scale).

### Hypotheses Testing Using a Regression Models

Our predictor scales showed strong zero-order correlations with the support for political compromise (Table 1):  $r = .56$ ,  $p < .001$ , for empathy toward Palestinians and  $r = -.32$ ,  $p < .001$ , for POFET. To test our hypotheses, we conducted a series of regression analyses.

### Empathy and POFET as Predictors of Support for Political Compromise

Our first hypothesis stated that empathy toward Palestinians and POFET would be significantly associated with support for political compromise with Palestinians, with higher empathy toward Palestinians and lower POFET predicting increased support for such a compromise. To test this hypothesis, we conducted a regression model using the empathy toward Palestinians and the POFET scales to predict

**Table 2.** Predictors of Support for Political Compromise Scale, Standardized Coefficient Values (and Significance of  $p$  Values).

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
POFET	-.23 (.000)	-.15 (.000)	-.16 (.000)
Empathy toward Palestinians	.51 (.000)	.38 (.000)	.38 (.000)
Hawkishness	—	-.36 (.000)	-.35 (.000)
Gender	—	—	.00 (.996)
Education	—	—	.03 (.494)
SES	—	—	-.01 (.893)
Adjusted $R^2$	.36	.47	.46

respondents' scores on the support for political compromise scale. The regression model produced a statistically significant (adjusted) result:  $R^2 = .36$ ,  $F(2, 369) = 106.3$ ,  $p < .001$ . As hypothesized, both of our scales made significant contributions to the overall explanatory power of the model. Respondents with higher scores on the empathy toward Palestinians scale ( $\beta = .51$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and respondents with lower scores on POFET ( $\beta = -.23$ ,  $p < .001$ ) showed increased support for political compromise (see Table 2, model 1).

### *Empathy and POFET Predicting beyond Hawkishness and Demographics*

We conducted further tests to assess the robustness of our findings, adding to the prediction model four relevant variables: hawkishness and the three demographic variables of gender, education level and SES. These four variables have been found to predict support for compromise among Jewish-Israelis in previous studies (e.g., Gordon and Arian 2001; Maoz and McCauley 2005, 2008; Shamir and Shamir 2000; Shamir and Shikaki 2010; Yuchtman-Yaar and Herman 1997). In order to determine whether our current variables—POFET and empathy toward Palestinians—remain significant predictors of support for compromise when hawkishness and demographic variables are added to the model, we performed two additional regression analyses.

*Hawkishness and support for political compromise.* First, we added to the regression model 1 the item that reflected hawkishness, as a predictor alongside the empathy toward Palestinians scale and POFET scale (see Table 2, model 2), the resulting regression coefficients indicated consistency with findings from previous studies (Maoz and McCauley 2008, 2011; Shamir and Shamir 2000; Shamir and Shikaki 2010; Yuchtman-Yaar and Herman 1997). Hawkishness was significantly associated with less support for political compromise with opponents, with higher hawkishness predicting decreased support for compromise ( $\beta = -.36$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Empathy toward Palestinians ( $\beta = .38$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and POFET ( $\beta = -.15$ ,  $p < .001$ ) remained significantly associated with attitudes toward political compromise even when

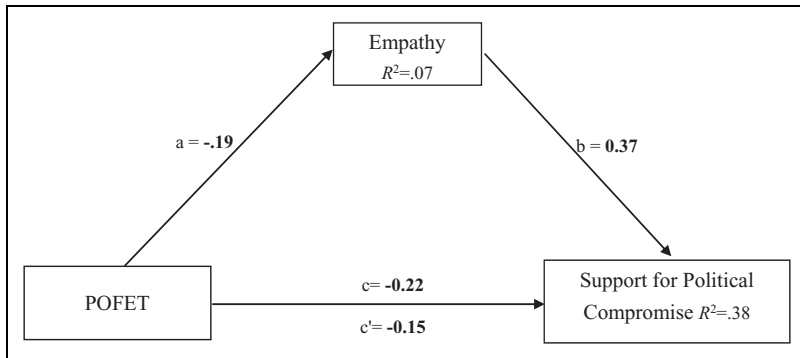
hawkishness was added to the model. Adding the level of respondents' hawkishness in the second step of our regression produced a significant increase in (adjusted)  $R^2$  from .36 to .47,  $F$  change (3,357) = 106.1,  $p < .001$ .

*Demographic items and support for political compromise.* Second, we added to the regression model 1 the hawkishness and the demographic variables of gender, educational level, and SES as predictors of support for political compromise. The resulting regression coefficients indicated (see Table 2, model 3) that empathy toward Palestinians ( $\beta = .38, p < .001$ ) and POFET ( $\beta = -.16, p < .001$ ) still had significant effects on support for political compromise, when hawkishness ( $\beta = -.35, p < .001$ ), gender ( $\beta = .00, p > .05$ ), education ( $\beta = .03, p > .05$ ), and SES ( $\beta = -.01, p > .05$ ) were added to the model. Adding the level of respondents' hawkishness and the demographic variables to our regression model did not significantly affect the (adjusted)  $R^2 = .46, F$  change (6,321) = 47.7,  $p < .001$ . In conclusion, our additional analyses indicate that POFET and empathy strongly predicted support for political compromise even when we controlled for hawkishness and the demographic variables.

### Mediation Analysis

Hypothesis 2 predicted that empathy toward Palestinians would significantly mediate the association of POFET with (decreased) support for political compromise with Palestinians. To test this hypothesis, we used PROCESS (Hayes 2013), an SPSS macro that utilizes an ordinary least squares (OLS) regression to probe interactive effects and test for the significance of the mediation effect. Hayes's model 4 was used with support for political compromise with Palestinians as the dependent variable, the POFET scale as the independent variable, and the empathy toward Palestinians scale as a mediator. The model used to test these hypotheses is described in Figure 1.

To establish mediation, three conditions must be fulfilled (Baron and Kenny 1986). First, the independent variable POFET scale must be significantly associated with the mediator (in our case, empathy toward Palestinians). As Figure 1 indicates, POFET significantly correlated with (decreased) empathy toward Palestinians ( $B = -.19, \text{standard error } [SE] = .05, p < .001$ ). The second condition for mediation is that the mediator (in our case empathy toward Palestinians) must be significantly associated with the dependent variable (support for political compromise). As Figure 1 indicates, empathy toward Palestinians significantly correlated with support for political compromise with Palestinians ( $B = .37, SE = .03, p < .001$ ). The third condition for mediation is that the mediator must affect the association between the independent variable (in our case POFET) and the dependent variable (support for compromise), when controlling for the predictors. As Figure 1 also indicates, the total effect of the independent variable (POFET) on the dependent variable (support for political compromise) is significantly reduced when controlling for the



**Figure 1.** Empathy toward Palestinians mediates the association of perceiving one's own group as having feminine-empathic traits (POFET) with support for political compromise.  $n = 336$ . Unstandardized OLS coefficients and corresponding standard errors calculated using Hayes's (2013) PROCESS SPSS Macro (Version 2.13.2) are reported. Coefficients in bold are  $p < .05$  (two-tailed).

predictors. In our case, the direct effect of POFET on support for compromise with Palestinians was significantly reduced when controlling for the predictors ( $B = -.15$ ,  $SE = .03$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

Our model was tested using the PROCESS (Hayes 2013), an SPSS macro that utilizes an OLS regression to probe interactive effects. This macro uses linear regression analysis to test individual paths as well as indirect and moderated paths, and it produces bootstrap confidence intervals (CIs) for testing the indirect effect. As such, a mediation analysis was conducted to examine the indirect effect of empathy toward Palestinians on the association between POFET and support for political compromise. The macro PROCESS (Hayes 2013) was employed to examine the indirect effect of empathy toward Palestinians on the association between POFET and support for political compromise. A significant indirect effect was detected, point estimate =  $-.07$ ,  $SE = .02$ , 95 percent CI [ $-.11$ ,  $-.03$ ] (95 percent bias-corrected bootstrap CIs based on 10,000 resamples). All analyses controlled for demographic variables.

### Additional Analyses

We conducted additional tests to assess the robustness of our findings relating to the association between gender-empathic constructions of own group and support for compromises by controlling for variables that were previously found to be influential. Furthermore, the items used in this study are derived from a data set that was also used in a previously published paper (David and Maoz 2015). This previous study mostly focused on different items and examined the extent to which another measure of gender construction: POSFT, together with threat perception from

**Table 3.** Linear Regression of the Support for Political Compromise Predictors Standardized Coefficient Values (and Significance of  $p$  Values).

	Model 1	Model 2
POFET (one's own group)	-.22 (.000)	-.17 (.000)
Empathy toward Palestinians	.44 (.000)	.24 (.000)
Perceiving out-groups as having stereotypical feminine traits (opponents)	.19 (.000)	.08 (.131)
Threat perception	—	-.39 (.000)
Adjusted $R^2$	.38	.45

Palestinians, predicts support of Jewish-Israeli respondents for a compromise solution. In order to assess the relationships between the items included in this study and the items included in the previous study within a prediction model, we performed two additional regression analyses. These analyses included the items from the previous study, alongside the items from this study, as predictors of support for political compromise so to determine whether our current predictors, POFET and empathy toward Palestinians, remain significant predictors of support for political compromise when perception of threat and POSFT is added to the model.

Our predictor scales showed strong zero-order correlations with the support for political compromise:  $r = -.32, p < .001$ , for perceiving one's own group as having feminine-empathic traits (POFET);  $r = .56, p < .001$ , for empathy toward Palestinians;  $r = .39, p < .001$ , for POSFT; and  $r = -.63, p < .001$ , for threat perception.

### Analysis One: Adding POSFT to the Prediction Model

First, we added to the regression model POSFT as a predictor of support for political compromise. The resulting regression coefficients indicated (see Table 3, model 1) that empathy toward Palestinians ( $\beta = .44, p < .001$ ) and POFET ( $\beta = -.22, p < .001$ ) remained significantly associated with attitudes toward political compromise when POSFT ( $\beta = .19, p < .001$ ) was added to the model. Adding the level of respondents' POSFT to our regression model produced a small increase in (adjusted)  $R^2$  from .36 to .38,  $F$  change (3,307) = 95.0,  $p < .001$ .

Second, we added to the regression model POSFT and threat perception from Palestinians as predictors of support for political compromise. The resulting regression coefficients indicated (see Table 3, model 2) that empathy toward Palestinians ( $\beta = .24, p < .001$ ) and POFET ( $\beta = -.17, p < .001$ ) still had significant effects on support for political compromise, when POSFT ( $\beta = .08, p > .05$ ) and threat perception ( $\beta = -.39, p < .001$ ) were added to the model. Adding the level of respondents' POSFT and threat perception from Palestinians to our regression model produced a significant increase in (adjusted)  $R^2$  from .38 to .45,  $F$  change (4,299) = 63.6,  $p < .001$ . In conclusion, our additional analyses indicate that POFET and



empathy strongly predicted support for political compromise even when the additional items were added to the regression model.

## Discussion

Our study was designed to learn more about the extent to which empathy toward opponents and POFET can predict attitudes toward political compromise, in an intractable conflict, such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The regression model strongly supports our expectations that higher empathy toward opponents and lower POFET predict increased support for political compromise with opponents. In addition, and in line with our hypotheses, our study indicates that the association of POFET with decreased support for political compromise with Palestinians is mediated by a decrease in the empathy toward the opponent.

Previous findings suggest that the tendency to express more care and higher identification toward one's own group may create hostility and decrease cooperation with the out-group (J. K. Choi and Bowles 2007; Cikara, Bruneau, and Saxe 2011; De Dreu, Greer, Handgraaf et al. 2010; De Dreu, Greer, Van Kleef et al. 2011). Other findings suggest that heightening the in-group versus out-group competition may decrease willingness to support threatening and costly political compromise in the context of intense conflict through reducing empathy toward the out-group (Cameron and Payne 2011; Cikara and Paluck 2013; Galinsky et al. 2008; Shaw, Batson, and Todd 1994; Zaki 2014). The data reported here from our research extend these findings by examining directly and systematically empathy toward opponent reduction as an underlying mechanism that mediates the association between feminine-empathic stereotypes toward one's own group and Jewish-Israeli support for political compromise with Palestinians.

### *Predicting Support for Compromise Solutions in Conflict*

In the last decade, an increasing amount of research has been devoted to uncovering psychological, ideological, and demographic factors that predict support for compromise solutions in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Our study continues this line of research and is consistent with previous studies in showing that intergroup feelings and attitudes, such as empathy toward the opponent in conflict, have a substantial role in explaining support for a peaceful solution (Maoz and McCauley 2005, 2009; Halperin 2011; Rosler, Cohen-Chen, and Halperin 2017).

However, much less research attention has been devoted to examining if and how perceptions of attributes of self or of one's own group are associated with support for compromise solutions. Previous studies have demonstrated that perceiving the out-group as feminine or having stereotypically feminine attributes is associated either with higher levels of sympathy toward the other side (Rosenberg and Maoz 2012) or with higher support for a compromise-based solution in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (David and Maoz 2015). However, our study is innovative in that it demonstrates that

also gender perceptions and constructions of one's own group in conflict are associated with intergroup emotions and can predict attitudes toward compromise solutions. Our study makes an important step toward exploring this understudied terrain of groups' gendered self-constructions and their implications for policy support.

### *The Empathy Paradox: Underlying Mechanisms, Limitations, and Directions for Future Research*

Situations of intergroup conflict are often characterized by dichotomous perceptions in which ones' own side is viewed as good, moral, and well intentioned and the other side is viewed as bad, immoral, and untrustworthy (Bar-On 2008; Bar-Tal 2011, 2013; Maoz and McCauley 2005, 2009). Previous studies indicate that empathy may have the potential to soften this dichotomy by engaging affectively and cognitively with the internal state of the other side (Kelman 1998; Staub 1996; Steinberg and Bar-On 2002). Our study is innovative in indicating there might be a systematic, seemingly paradoxical association in which the more we see our side as empathic, the less we see the other side in conflict as deserving of empathic concern.

Despite the importance of our findings, the correlational nature of our study does not enable us to determine relations of cause and effect and to uncover the underlying mechanisms by which seeing ones' own group as empathic leads to lower empathy toward the out-group in conflict. Previous research and theorizing allows us to consider several possibilities including the ones outlined here below.

*Cognitive consistency.* Underlying mechanisms for this reversal of empathy phenomenon might relate to the concept of cognitive consistency. That is, if our side is sympathetic and considerate, but the conflict between the sides is still ongoing and seemingly intractable, then there is the perception that the other side must be in the wrong and not deserving of empathy (Rosenberg and Maoz 2012).

*Contextual motivation.* The harsh and intense characteristics of an intractable conflict, which include perceptions of zero-sum nature, existential goals, and the sense that it is irresolvable (Bar-Tal 2013; Kriesberg 1993; Maoz and McCauley 2005), increase the usage of opposing regulatory strategies to avoid or experience empathy (Zaki 2014). Therefore, perceiving one's own group as empathic can create motivation to engage with the suffering and needs of one's own group in the context of an intractable conflict, while conversely motivating avoidance of engaging with those from the rival group.

*From the gender perspective.* Our findings may be seen as reflecting a process in which the more people see their own side as feminine, gentle, trusting, and by implication, as more vulnerable and threatened (Eidelson and Eidelson 2003), the less they can afford to feel empathy toward the other side in conflict. Clearly, further study, using experimental paradigms, is required in order to clarify the underlying processes and increase our understanding of the seemingly paradoxical effect that we found in this study.

Our findings may highlight the need to examine the women and peace hypothesis from a different perspective. Rather than empirically testing the differences between the attitudes of women and men toward conflict resolution, it could be beneficial to investigate gender constructions of groups in conflict and their implication on peace supporting attitudes and practices. Additionally, the association between stereotypical gender perceptions and attitudes toward conflict resolution opens up another avenue for future research in the field. Understanding the processes that underlie the creation of specific gender constructions in societies involved in difficult conflict can potentially assist in moderating gender stereotypes and consequentially affect conflict-related attitudes.

## Conclusions

The importance of our findings is in questioning or even reversing the presumed association between seeing one's group as having soft and caring attributes that are related to being empathic and actually feeling concern and sympathy toward the other side in conflict. As in previous findings regarding the principle–application gap (Maoz and McCauley 2011), our findings indicate that ascribing empathic and feminine attributes to one's own group does not predict or is even inversely related to actually feeling empathy toward an out-group that is our “enemy” or supporting reconciliatory policies. Therefore, our findings may help to further understanding why and how dehumanizing others does not come with the cost or with the warning signs of seeing oneself as less moral or less human. Furthermore, our findings may also help explain the persistence and the resistance to change in dehumanizing and delegitimizing out-groups in conflict (Bar-Tal 2011, 2013; Maoz and McCauley 2008). For if we can feel low (or no) empathy toward the out-group and still (or even more) feel that our own group is empathic, the incentives for change that could be related to seeing oneself as less moral because of lower empathy toward the out-group are markedly reduced.

## Authors' Note

The authors, however, take full responsibility for the contents of this article.

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## Note

1. Schadenfreude relates to a sense of pleasure at another's person misfortune or pain (Smith et al. 2009).

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