

ARTICLE

Turning the lens in the study of precarity: On experimental social psychology's acquiescence to the settler-colonial status quo in historic Palestine

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Abstract

This review examines the coloniality infused within the conduct and third reporting of experimental research in what is commonly referred to as the 'Israeli-Palestinian conflict'. Informed by a settler colonial framework and decolonial theory, our review measured the appearance of sociopolitical terms and critically analysed the reconciliation measures. We found that papers were three times more likely to describe the context through the framework of *intractable conflict* compared to *occupation*. Power asymmetry was often acknowledged and then flattened via, for instance, adjacent mentions of Israeli and Palestinian physical violence. Two-thirds of the dependent variables were not related to material claims (e.g. land, settlements, or Palestinian refugees) but rather to the feelings and attitudes of Jewish Israelis and Palestinians. Of the dependent measures that did consider material issues, they nearly universally privileged conditions of the two-state solution and compromises on refugees' right of return that would violate international law. The majority of the studies sampled Jewish–Israeli participants exclusively, and the majority of authors were affiliated with Israeli institutions. We argue that for social psychology to offer insights that coincide with the decolonization of historic Palestine, the discipline will have to begin by contextualizing its research within the material conditions and history that socially stratify the groups.

KEYWORDS

Israel, modernity/coloniality, Palestine

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INTRODUCTION

Scholars have defined precarity as ‘life without the promise of stability’ (Tsing, 2015, p. 2). It is a profound insecurity or disorientation in which people lack the material and epistemic resources for self-definition, self-direction, and coherent day-to-day existence. At the same time, scholars emphasize that precarity is a social product, a form of structural violence, a ‘politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death’ (Butler, 2009).

This article considers a situation of precarity—the historical and ongoing dispossession and displacement of Palestinian people as a result of the Israeli settler-colonial project—that would seem ripe for social psychological analysis as an exemplary case of precarity. Indeed, there is a notable body of social psychological research on Palestinian-Israeli relations. However, the emphasis of this research is generally not the experience of (Palestinian) precarity; instead, research in mainstream social psychology—especially in its dominant experimental form—typically examines Palestinian-Israeli relations as an exemplar of ‘intractable conflict’ (e.g. Bar-Tal et al., 2010; Magal et al., 2016).

The present research examines the ways that social psychological researchers construe Israeli settlement and occupation of Palestine in their experiments and the extent to which the resulting research obscures, denies, or treats as unremarkable (and thereby naturalizes or legitimizes) Palestinian precarity. We focus in particular on experimental literature in the field, given that the experimental method is often touted as a core pillar of the discipline and portrayed as the scientific gold standard for the field (Jost & Kruglanski, 2002; Reddy & Amer, 2022; Wilson, 2002). As such, the experimental literature sets a disciplinary norm for other research within social psychology. Rather than conduct a social psychological analysis of precarity in the context of Palestine, we reverse the analytic gaze to consider the extent to which experimental social psychological research on the Palestinian context contributes to precarity, through its very denial of Palestinian precarity.

A cursory overview of the social psychological literature on the Palestinian context suggests that, like other intergroup relations research, mainstream social psychology wishes to present its empirical insights as contributing to peace and reconciliation, not war and conflict. But if we engaged in more than a cursory overview of the literature, and scrutinized the implicit definitions of peace and reconciliation, what would we learn about the normative approach to the social psychological study of the ‘Israeli-Palestinian conflict’?

To answer this question, we first draw upon settler colonial studies to identify the potential contradictions between the historical material reality in Palestine and its common construction in mainstream experimental social psychology. Next, we draw upon decolonial theory to frame the relevance of proper contextualization. We then use these frameworks to guide our critical analysis of a series of published articles. To put it in terms of the current special issue, how adequately does mainstream experimental social psychology live up to the ethical task of engaging with precarity as a politically induced structural condition in Palestine?

The settler-colonial past and present of the ‘Israeli-Palestinian conflict’

To situate Palestinian precarity in its historical material reality, we follow a framework that defines violence and dispossession in Palestine through the wars that colonial powers have waged on Palestinians since the British mandate until the present day (see Khalidi, 2020). We take historical events (e.g. declarations of war, forced displacement, the building of settlements) as the material frame of reference against which we characterize and understand precarity and the violence that settler colonialism continuously inflicts on Palestinians. In doing so, we follow a story of violence that is defined by the material consequences of imperialism and settler colonialism.

Explicit acknowledgement of this settler-colonial project is evident from the works of early architects of the Zionist project themselves:

Zionist *colonisation* ... can proceed and develop only under the protection of a power that is independent of the *native* population—behind an iron wall, which the *native* population

cannot breach. [...] Every *native* population in the world resists *colonists* as long as it has the slightest hope of being able to rid itself of the danger of being *colonised*. That is what the Arabs in Palestine are doing, and what they will persist in doing as long as there remains a solitary spark of hope that they will be able to prevent *the transformation of 'Palestine' into the 'Land of Israel'*.

(Jabotinsky, 1923, as cited by Khalidi, 2010, emphasis added)

Quigley (1990) notes that Theodore Herzl, a founder of the Zionist project whose ideas were realized through the establishment of the state of Israel, approached British arch-colonialist Cecil Rhodes to seek British support for a Zionist state because it was 'the first to recognize the need for colonial expansion', and 'the idea of Zionism, which is a colonial idea, should be easily and quickly understood in England' (p. 7). These ideas provided the conceptual foundation for the Balfour declaration¹ in 1917, initiating the establishment of the formal settler colonial project in Mandate Palestine.

The core of this settler colonial project is not only the mass immigration of European Jewish settlers from Europe to Palestine but also a spiral of violent events that stretch until the present day. These include such infamous past events as the Nakba of 1948, which refers to the ethnic cleansing and forced exile of an overwhelming portion of the non-Jewish Palestinian population—more than 700,000 Palestinians forcibly expelled to Gaza, the West Bank and neighbouring countries of Jordan, Lebanon and Syria after the destruction of their villages and forcible denial of return (Pappe, 2007). They also include such current manifestations as the continuous building of settlements, ongoing annexation of land and a system that international human rights organizations consider a form of apartheid: the imposition of laws that restrict or ban Arabs from entering 'all-Jewish' land, formalized theft of private and collective property of the non-Jewish population, and denial of rights of displaced non-Jewish Palestinians to return to their homes while granting citizenship rights to Jewish settlers coming from anywhere in the world (B'Tselem, 2021). The important contribution of this perspective from settler colonial studies is to construct the situation of Palestine not as a battle between Israeli and Palestinian ethnonational groups, but rather as a context of precarity in which settler colonial displacement and dispossession deprives the indigenous population of the material basis for self-determination and coherence (Hawari et al., 2019).

Recognizing Palestinian precarity as a situation of settler colonialism entails a further recognition that the cure for this precarity is decolonization and liberation, rather than micro-political resolutions that either merely protect a Palestinian ethnic minority or establish a limited Palestinian sovereignty (Salamanca et al., 2012). Accordingly, one focus of our analysis is the extent to which this perspective is evident in experimental social psychology. In particular, we examine the extent to which this research considers outcomes that express decolonial aspirations (e.g. recognition of full Palestinian right of return as established by UN resolution 194) rather than exclusively focus on resolutions like the two-state solution.

Decolonial theory and the geopolitics of knowledge production

If the modern world is constituted by a colonial difference, if there is no modernity without coloniality and, therefore, we live in a modern/colonial world, then, knowledges are not produced from a universal neutral location and we need to epistemologically account for the geopolitics of our knowledge production

(Grosfoguel, 2002, p. 209)

Perspectives of decolonial theory emerged from epistemic perspectives of the Global South and are a key source of inspiration for our argument. Most germane to the present analysis, *the coloniality of knowledge* offers a lens through which to understand the inextricable link between epistemology and history in social

¹Arthur Balfour, British secretary of state for foreign affairs, declared that his government supported the "establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object" (Balfour, 1917).

science (Mignolo, 2011; Tuck & Yang, 2012). This perspective rejects an 'epistemology of the zero point' that positions the researchers as removed from the content of research and its normative consequences (Reddy & Amer, 2022). Instead, the coloniality of knowledge connects the history that brought about the world with its implications for researchers studying in the present (Adams & Estrada-Villalta, 2017). For instance, the standard psychological model of the atomized subject, abstracted from context and unconstrained to pursue limitless personal growth, reflects and reproduces exploitative ways of being characterizing the Global North, which exacerbate global inequality and overconsume the Earth's resources (Adams et al., 2018; Grosfoguel, 2002). Drawing closer to the present case, how does colonial violence manifest in knowledge production about conflict?

To unsettle the 'view from nowhere', social psychologists studying oppression and resistance are necessarily tasked with rethinking objectivity (Fine, 2006), inviting a situated knowledge production that 'work[s] aggressively through their own positionality, values and predispositions' (p. 89). We engage with the precedent set by feminist and critical psychology literature on the situatedness of knowledge (Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1991) and acknowledge that our positionalities are neither forms of bias to be excised nor inherent sources of liberatory knowledge. Rather, we reflect on how our research questions and search for evidence emerged from a locus of enunciation, and not a geopolitical vacuum (Decolonial Psychology Editorial Collective, 2021; Grosfoguel, 2016).

In writing this paper, we principally situated ourselves based on the epistemological and political decolonial commitments that we collectively hold. Our different identities and experiences place us at different proximities from the violence that Israeli settler colonialism has introduced to the land and lives of Palestinians and the inhabitants of neighbouring countries. With that, our personal trajectories to this project converge in some respects and diverge in others. For some of us, the precarity that accompanied Israeli violence is known through lived experience and is embedded in the (Palestinian, Lebanese, Arab...) identities that we hold, our collective memory, and the history of our land. This '*way of knowing*' precarity emerges as a cornerstone for our insistence on producing scholarship that works against whitening out the settler-colonial reality of the Zionist project.

This precarity is also present within our positions as scholars in the respective academic institutions we are affiliated with. For some of us currently at universities in the Global North, we find ourselves having to navigate relations with governments, namely the United States and the United Kingdom, that have long enabled colonial violence in Palestine and the Middle East more widely. This historical alliance between colonial/imperialist powers and the Zionist project is replicated inside the walls of academic institutions. The academy and its disciplines' function as a *handmaiden of colonialism* partly operate through the surveillance, defamation and silencing of academics who hold commitments that challenge colonial systems, including the Zionist project. This reality, in our case, is realized through the systematic efforts directed against Palestinian and allied academics to constrict pro-Palestinian knowledge production. The most recent example of such attempts can be observed through the adoption of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's working definition of antisemitism, which equates it to anti-Zionism, thereby blatantly censoring speech that is critical of Israel (Abdallah et al., 2020; Gould, 2022).

With that, academics are forced to consistently negotiate political commitments to Palestinian liberation and their job security (for recent examples, see Alqaisiya, 2022; Abusalama, 2022). We, then, write this article with the knowledge that the positions we occupy at our academic institutions are precarious and our livelihoods are constantly threatened by anti-Palestinian repressive policies that directly interfere with our everyday professional, political, and personal lives.

The decolonial commitments we hold lead us to reject the pernicious tendency for psychological science to abstract from context as a key manifestation of colonial violence in knowledge production. In the quest to study 'pure psychology', and to reduce phenomena into what is most essential, researchers often disregard defining contextual features (Hook, 2005). This racism (Malherbe et al., 2021) or hubris (Castro-Gómez, 2021) of the zero-point presumes the possibility of a positionless observation of intergroup relations. This research conveys a positionless approach in two senses. The first sense is that researchers aspire to approach their object of study with a supposedly neutral gaze. The second sense is that the discipline conveys prestige on a distant analysis as an inherently more rational form

of inquiry, rather than one drawing upon the cumbersome particulars (Decolonial Psychology Editorial Collective, 2021; Smith, 2012). Importantly, the coloniality of knowledge illuminates how studies of peace, conflict, justice, or reconciliation within psychological science are not the product of measured reasoning attuned equally well to all parties in conflict; rather, they always occur in relation to the inherited colonial reality.

For example, abstraction from context in the study of the dispute over historic Palestine occurs in the application of a framework like *intractable conflict* (Bar-Tal, 2007). This framework explores enmeshed intergroup conflict, with a particular focus on attempting to understand the psychology of the Palestinians and Jewish Israelis. According to this perspective, such intractable conflicts are constituted by a combination of psychological and sociohistorical factors. Psychological investment is demanded of members of the groups involved in the conflict given their exposure to and experience of persistent violence. Zero-sum claims and perceptions of conflict as irresolvable permeate the lives of group members and observers alike. These realities facilitate and are reproduced by a 'sociopsychological infrastructure' of conflict that afford members a route to coping with the stresses of the conflict and confronting the 'enemy' with the moral high ground (Bar-Tal, 2007).

A corollary of *intractable conflict's* abstraction is its *bothsidesism*. By studying intergroup relations in ahistorical terms, this perspective constructs conflict as identitarian disagreements, in which the parties can harm each other equally in the quest to fulfil the ingroup's cause. These patterns of abstraction and bothsidesism narrowly conceptualize the sociopolitical context. In an attempt to operate from a general theory of intractable conflict, researchers often overlook the colonial parameters defining the Palestinian context (Reddy & Gleibs, 2019). Instead, intractable conflict ignores the indigeneity of the Palestinian population and affirms assumptions about two equal and rigid national narratives (Veracini, 2019).

The present investigation

To address the coloniality in the psychological study of Palestinian precarity, we follow the imperative to build theory from the perspective of the marginalized (Malherbe et al., 2021); that is, we take the dispossession of Palestinians and their ongoing resistance as the foundation upon which any analysis, social psychology or otherwise, should rely. Operating from this standpoint, we reviewed experimental research in social psychology to investigate the extent to which it contributes to Palestinian precarity in three related ways. First, we consider the extent to which research abstracts intergroup relations in Palestine from their defining colonial determinants. Second, we consider the extent to which research frames intergroup relations in terms of equipotential harm to both sides of conflict. Third, we consider the extent to which mainstream experimental social psychology operates within the paradigm of asymmetric intergroup conflict that ignores realities of settler colonialism, shifting the focus of research away from a historically informed decolonization (Rouhana, 2018) to the pursuit of compromise or reconciliation between Zionist and Palestinian national movements.

METHOD

The present analysis is a critical review of experimental research on the Palestinian context in a selection of mainstream social psychology journals. In contrast to a more standard review, in which the purpose is to summarize and integrate findings in a research domain, the purpose of the present analysis is to consider the context and content of the research questions. In other words, the focus is more on the *how* of research than the *what*.

Selection of articles for review

The selection of articles for review began with a search of nine leading social psychology journals that publish empirical work, including *British Journal of Social Psychology*, *European Journal of Social Psychology*,

Group Processes & Intergroup Relations, Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, Political Psychology, Psychological Science, and Social Psychological and Personality Science.

In the initial step, we used Google Scholar to search within each of the above journals for any one or more of the terms 'Israel', 'Palestine/Palestinian' or 'Israeli-Palestinian conflict' to appear within the title or text of articles. We were interested in recent research and accordingly restricted our review to articles published between 2005 and 2020. We built an initial database after reviewing each article's abstract for indications of an experimental design.

This initial search yielded 112 potential articles. We restricted our final articles for analysis based on two criteria. The first criterion was that the paper reported at least one experiment. If a paper reported more than one experiment, we coded each separately. The second criterion was that at least one of either the independent or the dependent variables bore some relation to the Israeli-Palestinian political context. This restriction excluded research that applied the context merely as a setting for examining an ingroup/outgroup phenomenon. For example, we excluded an article on helping behaviour between members of asymmetric groups, with Jewish Israelis and Palestinian citizens of Israel as participants (Chernyak-Hai et al., 2014). Note that this criterion constituted a conservative approach to the review, in that it restricted the critical analysis to only those papers with explicit reference to psychological correlates of the decades of dispute over historic Palestine. In other words, the procedure excluded work that more explicitly performed the abstraction of research from historical context that is the subject of current critique. We identified further potential sources from the reference sections of the included articles; we added other such articles to our list if they occurred in the timeframe that met the inclusion criteria, including those published in journals not listed above.

The final dataset included a total of 92 published journal articles reporting 149 experiments that met the inclusion criteria. Of these 149 experiments, 136 (91.25%) were conducted exclusively with Jewish-Israeli participants. Of the 13 experiments with Palestinian participants, seven were conducted in parallel with studies adjusted for Jewish-Israeli participants; Palestinians—either citizens of Israel, or living in the West Bank or Gaza—were the exclusive participants in six studies. Given the colonial context, it would be sensible to explore distinctions in studies that include one or both groups. However, given the paucity of studies with Palestinian samples through which we could explore distinct trends, the analysis that follows incorporates all the papers and studies.

Given the relevance of our own positionality in this meta-theoretical review, we also considered ways to summarize the positionality of the researchers who authored papers in the current review. This is an endeavour admittedly limited by several factors, not least of which is that researchers of diverse ideological commitments and backgrounds, both Jewish Israeli and Palestinian, could be affiliated with Israeli institutions. Still, any stark trends in affiliations would be important to document for consideration given the relevance of power in our review.

We counted a total of 324 researchers listed as authors across the 92 papers, inclusive of researchers who co-authored multiple papers included in the review. Of these 92 papers, 34 (37.00%) reported multiple authorship exclusively by researchers affiliated with Israeli institutions; only 7 (7.61%) papers did not have any authors affiliated with an Israeli institution. Sixty (65.22%) of the first authors were affiliated with Israeli institutions. Zero papers reported authorship by a Palestinian researcher based in the West Bank or Gaza.

Analytic framework

We analysed the content of articles based on principles of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). CDA engages representations of social reality with a direct, evaluative critique 'of power relations and ideology in society at large' (O'Regan & Betzel, 2016, p. 2), particularly through language that normalizes specific social representations of history (Albhour, 2019). In the present case, the volumes of text produced by social psychologists are presumed to not only convey neutral observations about Palestine but also

to emanate a cumulative ideological charge. That is, this approach takes us beyond a summary of the content, towards gleaning insights into how the literature achieves a particular social representation (Amer & Howarth, 2018), in this case, the normalization of the liberal Zionist status quo.

We thus analysed the published journal articles as representations of the material reality that is the Israeli occupation of Palestine (see Pilecki & Hammack, 2015, for a similar approach within social psychology). The first step in the analysis, at the level of explicit linguistic practice, was to search the entire text of articles for specific terms that researchers used to construct the context. This step focused primarily on assessing the extent to which researchers abstract from the concrete historical situation of Palestinian precarity by describing the context in a bothsidesist fashion as one of *intractable conflict* or by constructing Palestinian resistance primarily in terms of *terrorism/terrorists*, rather than using phrases—specifically, *occupation, settlements/settlers or Zionism/Zionist*—that recognize the settler-colonial character of the situation.

The second step of the analysis, at the discursive and contextual levels, was a search for themes that constitute ideological frameworks for examining Israel/Palestine. In CDA terms, this extends the analysis from explicit linguistic practice to the political assumptions that language signifies (Fairclough, 2013). More specifically, we considered that as a discursive tool, the experimental paradigm makes claims about independent variables as causes of dependent variables or relevant outcomes (Adams & Stocks, 2008). The outcome variables that researchers seek to influence through the manipulation of independent variables suggest what it is that authors view as central for understanding, explaining, or influencing the Israeli-Palestinian context. We, therefore, analysed the dependent variables with the aim of evaluating the extent to which authors' concerns are rooted in conflict resolution efforts or interethnic reconciliation rather than decolonization or material outcomes. To this end, the first author coded all the dependent variables in terms of whether they focused on *affect or attitudes* (towards ingroup, outgroup, or about the conflict generally) or *support for policies*. Within this second category of policy-oriented outcomes, we specifically focused on the measurement of orientations toward final-status vs. non-final status issues. Final-status issues refer to core issues on which Israel and the Palestinian Liberation Organization agreed to defer negotiation—central among them borders, settlements, Jerusalem, and Palestinian refugees—after the Oslo accords created the Palestinian Authority, whom Israel recognized as the representative of the Palestinian population and with whom said negotiations would occur (United Nations, 2022). We focused our analysis on the extent to which social psychological experiments seek to understand dependent variables that align with the internationally recognized rights of occupied and displaced Palestinians.

A second coder (the second author) selected a random third of the dependent variables and independently coded them within the established themes. The independent coding yielded sufficient agreement (Cohen's kappa = .66). The coders met to discuss and resolve discrepancies. A spreadsheet listing the articles, the frequency of terms, and the coding of dependent variables is available on OSF: https://osf.io/wyv58/?view_only=1bb5a91cc39240ad90ba601a87ee3c9d

RESULTS

How does research in mainstream experimental social psychology construct the Israeli-Palestinian situation? We consider this question via an analysis of words used to construct the problem and in DVs that researchers used to measure important outcomes.

Naming the phenomenon under investigation

Only a fifth of articles mentioned occupation ($n = 18, 19.57\%$) and a fourth mentioned settlements ($n = 23, 25.00\%$). When looking at the occurrence of either word in an article, we find that only thirty-three articles (35.87%) used either word. That is, the majority of articles in mainstream experimental social psychology that we sampled fail to characterize the situation in Israel and Palestine as one of occupation and/or settlements. Even fewer articles ($n = 7, 7.61\%$) referred to Zionism, the social force distal in origin but proximal in consequence.

We also examined the occurrence of the word *terrorism*, since such a focus could suggest a construction of the problem as legible through its instances of illegitimate violence, often at the hands of deviant actors, who disrupt an otherwise legitimate and non-violent peace. This focus, which locates the source of violence in Palestinian actors and facilitates an abstraction of the problem from historical and material context, was evident in over one-quarter of the sample articles ($n = 27, 29.35\%$). For example, one article provided context for the research by describing a ‘terror attack by Palestinians on a bus in an Israeli city, which is, unfortunately, a fairly common threat that Israelis have had to face’ (Sharvit, 2014, p. 254). Another article described research assessing participants’ preference to respond to Palestinian aggression by ‘demolishing homes of those involved in terrorist activities’ (Idan et al., 2018, p. 6). It is important to add here that in theory, the term ‘terrorism’ can be used to refer to the tactic of attacks on civilians as a means of achieving political ends while qualifying the occurrence in the context of anti-colonial resistance by a disadvantaged group. What is problematic in the literature we reviewed, however, is the failure to mention such acts as occurring in the context of resistance against occupation and a national liberation struggle, and the failure to characterize practices of violence by a settler-colonial state as instances of state terrorism. This practice suggests double standards in the treatment of violence, which ignore power dynamics and locate the source of the problem in those trying to resist state violence and settler colonialism rather than in state violence and settler colonialism themselves.

The most frequent framing of the Israeli-Palestinian context as revealed by the keywords that we investigated was the adjective *intractable*, generally used as a modifier of *conflict*, which appeared in 69 (75.00%) of the sample articles. The use of this word implies a construction of the conflict as irreconcilable, zero-sum, and all-consuming (Bar-Tal, 2000). The concept implies a conception of Israelis and Palestinians as enduring enemies (Halperin, Russell, Dweck, et al., 2011; Halperin, Russell, Trzesniewski, et al., 2011; Schori-Eyal et al., 2017), stuck in a lamentable quagmire with a long history of failed resolution: ‘a constant source of tension...seen by many as one of the most enduring and pressing threats to world peace...with an almost obligatory mandate to support one side or the other’ (Flade et al., 2019, p. 8).

One consequence of this construction is to transform the object of study from the case of a powerful entity dominating another to one of two groups in an already-there, zero-sum enmeshment of bidirectional violence. For instance, one article described the conflict as ‘generally marked by a duality of social roles, in the sense that both parties transgress against each other and compete over the role of the “true” victim’ (Harth & Shnabel, 2015, pp. 9–10). This construction of an intractable conflict characterized by bidirectional violence makes it sensible to mention transgressions of each party interchangeably. More generally, it represents an instance of *bothsidesism*, or portraying two groups in an asymmetric conflict as in fact equal in their ability and responsibility to diffuse conflict (Shupak, 2018).

Bothsidesism: Symmetric responsibility and suffering despite asymmetric power

The bothsidesism implicit in construction of the ‘conflict’ as intractable was also evident in other features of the articles. Often, authors framed the research as occurring in the context of recurring episodes of mutual military escalation, obscuring the settler-colonial context and the national liberation cause as the driver of Palestinian resistance. Remarkably, the research would also disregard or conceal the big asymmetry in violence experienced by the two sides of the conflict. Examples include mentions of how in 2008, Israel waged Operation Cast Lead to ‘stop Palestinian rockets fire into Israel’ in a three-week ‘confrontation’ (Nasie et al., 2014, p. 1555), or the 2012 ‘Israeli-Palestinian war’ with a ‘major flare-up in violence that directly affected both the residents of Gaza and Israelis living in the range of Palestinian missiles’ (Pliskin et al., 2014, p. 1689), or in 2014, during Operation Protective Edge, during which ‘ Hamas fired rockets and mortar shells into Israel, and the IDF bombarded targets in the Gaza Strip with artillery and airstrikes’ (Schori-Eyal et al., 2015, p. 81). Other instances of bothsidesism include, more abstractly, the dilemma of competitive victimhood wherein ‘Palestinians feel victimized by the Israeli occupation, yet are condemned worldwide for terrorist attacks, which they consider a legitimate form of resistance, or

when Israelis are rocketed yet condemned for bombing Gaza, which they consider a legitimate form of self-defense...’ (SimanTov-Nachlieli et al., 2015, p. 144).

One paper acknowledged that the conflict involved ‘two parties with asymmetric powers’, but then qualified this asymmetry in subjective terms, ‘where the State of Israel is *perceived* as the powerful sovereign’, and the Palestinians are the ‘*so-called weaker party*’ (Nasie et al., 2014, p. 1548, emphasis added). Authors often portrayed violent flare-ups as the result of tit-for-tat provocations rather than the broader structural context—for instance, illegal occupation or land theft (as can be seen currently in Sheikh Jarrah, Hawwash, 2021). Similarly, authors described the situation of bidirectional violence either via a summary statement (e.g. ‘rife with fierce violence by both parties’; Roccas et al., 2006, p. 701) or via recitation of specific offences by each party, one after the other: ‘ Hamas fired rockets and mortar shells into Israel, and the IDF bombarded targets in the Gaza Strip with artillery and airstrikes’ (Schori-Eyal et al., 2015, p. 81); or ‘[violence] included massive Israeli operations in the Gaza Strip and Palestinian rocket fire on Israeli towns’ (Schori-Eyal et al., 2017, p. 540). One paper described a period following the 2014 Gaza War, ‘in which more than 2200 people were killed, of whom the vast majority were Palestinians in Gaza...’ and then characterized the event as one that ‘directly affected the residents of Gaza, as well as Israelis living under the missiles of Hamas’ (Solak et al., 2017, p. 1114). Another paper cited statistics about harm during a 2008–2009 flare-up of violence in a way that equalized effects of asymmetric power, noting that, ‘...in response to rocket fire from the Hamas-controlled [Gaza] Strip ... 1398 Palestinians were killed by Israeli strikes and over a million Israelis lived within range of Hamas rockets, routinely running to bomb shelters as air raid sirens rang overhead’ (Wayne et al., 2015, p. 1479).

DVs: Which outcomes matter?

The choice of dependent variables provides insight into what researchers deem the most relevant social psychological phenomena worthy of study in the Israel/Palestine situation. Importantly, because the ‘conflict’ is ongoing, the choices that academic researchers make in the concrete operationalization of abstract concepts like *reconciliation* or *peace* in public discourse have political implications. Whose standpoint do these choices reflect? Whose interests do they serve?

An inductive analytic approach to the dependent variables suggested a distinction between two primary categories, namely *affect and attitudes* on one hand, and measures of *policy change* on the other hand. Tellingly, the first category, that of *affect and attitudes*, constituted the overwhelming focus of researchers, present in about two-thirds of all dependent variables. By contrast, the second category, that of policy change, which relates more directly to material considerations in historic Palestine, received visibly less consideration from researchers, constituting slightly more than one-third of all dependent variables. We detail each of these categories below; specific frequencies by primary category and subcategories are presented in Table 1.

Affect and attitudes

The first primary category of *affect and attitudes* consisted of feelings and thoughts (measured through self-report or behavioural methods) towards either the *outgroup*, the *resolution of the conflict*, and the *ingroup*.

TABLE 1 Frequencies of dependent variable categories, by total number of DVs and studies

Outcome domain					
Affect/attitudes			Policy support		
Category	Total DVs	Studies	Category	Total DVs	Studies
Ingroup emotion/attitude	64 (18.99%)	30 (32.61%)	Final status	47 (13.95%)	31 (31.52%)
Outgroup emotion/attitude	84 (24.93%)	44 (47.83%)	Non-final status	67 (19.88%)	32 (36.96%)
Conflict orientation	75 (22.26%)	40 (43.48%)			
	(66.17%)			(33.83%)	

Note: Numbers in parentheses are percentages out of a total of 337 dependent variables and 149 studies.

The most common subset of outcomes within this primary category were measures relating to *the outgroup* (24.93% of DVs). These included measures of general bias against the outgroup (Levy et al., 2016, Study 1); anger towards Palestinian citizens of Israel who criticize Israel (Shuman et al., 2017, Study 2); empathy (Gubler et al., 2015, Study 1); trust (Bruneau & Saxe, 2012, Study 2); humanization (McDonald et al., 2017, Study 2); perceptions of Palestinian openness to listen to the Israeli side of the conflict (McDonald et al., 2018, Study 2); common ingroup identity with the outgroup (Levy et al., 2017, Study 4); compassion (Kahn et al., 2016, Study 2); cooperation (Goldenberg et al., 2016); and willingness to forgive Palestinians who acknowledge past or present Jewish Israeli suffering (Andrighetto et al., 2018, Study 1).

The next most common set of outcomes were measures of affect and attitudes towards *the resolution of the conflict* (22.26% of DVs). These included hope for peace or generalized hope (Cohen-Chen et al., 2013, 2015, 2016); willingness to reconcile (Harth & Shnabel, 2015); malleable beliefs about conflict (Kudish et al., 2015, Study 3); openness to the outgroup narrative (McDonald et al., 2018, Study 1; Nasie et al., 2014, Study 1); expectations regarding future relations between Israelis and Palestinians (Nadler & Liviatan, 2006, Study 1); zero-sum beliefs (Shnabel et al., 2016, Study 2); pessimistic view of the conflict (SimanTov-Nachlieli et al., 2015, Study 1); and belief in the likelihood of resolution (Leshem et al., 2016, Study 1).

The least common set of outcomes were measures of affect and attitudes towards the *ingroup* (18.99% of DVs). These included such measures as group-based/collective guilt (Roccas et al., 2006, Study 2; Sharvit et al., 2015, Study 3); and ingroup glorification (McLamore et al., 2019, Study 1).

Policy support

The second primary category of policy support consisted of measures of preferences, whether attitudinal or (intended) behavioural, regarding implementation of two different types of concrete strategies.

The most common set of policy change measures was related to *non-final status policies* (19.88% of DVs), that is, policies that do not tackle the desired final resolution of the conflict. This set included preferences for such measures as withholding tax money from Palestinians as punishment for failure to curb terrorism (Adelman et al., 2016, Study 1); support for reparations, conciliatory actions, or apologies following Israeli harmdoing towards Palestinians (Čehajić-Clancy et al., 2011, Study 2; Goldenberg et al., 2014, Study 4); willingness to negotiate a prisoner exchange (Halperin, Porat, Wohl, et al., 2013; Halperin, Porat, Tamir, et al., 2013, Study 1); support for empowering policies (e.g. proportional allocation of resources to Arabs, Shnabel et al., 2016, Study 3); and perceived legitimacy of a recent Gaza War (Solak et al., 2017, Study 1).

The second set of policy change measures was related to *final status policies* (13.95% of DVs). It included self-report preferences regarding potential borders, Jerusalem, and/or the status of Palestinian refugees (detailed further below). It also included several measures of collective action intentions towards general resolution of the conflict (e.g. physically confronting soldiers/officers in opposition to Israel's 'disengagement' from Gaza, Hirschberger & Ein-Dor, 2006, Study 1).

Studies that considered final status policies deserve further comment. In the few studies that considered such outcomes, researchers generally measured support for a variant of the two-state solution or for compromises upon which to build such a solution. These included several studies measuring support for a return to 1967 borders, with several cases qualifying the return to 1967 borders with exchanges of territory (e.g. Kudish et al., 2015); a few studies measuring support for an end to future settlement expansion, and even fewer studies measuring support for dismantling existing settlements, all of which are illegal under international law (e.g. Canetti et al., 2018; Cohen-Chen et al., 2015, 2016; Kimel et al., 2016; Levontin et al., 2013). Also common among these dependent measures was support for general compromise on Jerusalem or more specific support for a division of Jerusalem into an Israeli and Palestinian capital, another common pillar of the two-state solution (e.g. Idan et al., 2018).

One of the unmet demands of Palestinians, enshrined by UN Resolution 194, is the right of refugees to return to their homes. Given Israel's historic expansionism and discriminatory favouring of immigrants

of Jewish descent, the right of return has understandably been one of the most stubborn roadblocks in negotiations. Only one study measured support for Palestinians' full right of return consistent with UN Resolution 194: 'I am for the return of Palestinian refugees to Israeli borders' (Idan et al., 2018). All other remaining studies that alluded to right of return assessed support for partial measures: 'Monetary compensation for Palestinian refugees and recognition of their right to return to Israel but would not include actual right of return for refugees' (Cohen-Chen et al., 2013, p. 69); 'to allow a limited number of Palestinian refugees to enter Israel and receive Israeli citizenship' (Hameiri & Nadler, 2017, p. 560); 'financial compensation of Palestinian refugees but no collective "right of return"' (Kahn et al., 2016); and "symbolic compromise about the refugee issue" (Gayer et al., 2009, p. 959)'.

DISCUSSION

The central argument of this paper is that experimental social psychology, as featured in the hegemonic Anglophone journals in the field, contributes to Palestinian precarity. The evidence supporting this claim emerged from an analysis of how researchers study and subsequently write about the Palestinian context. With only a highly condensed historical framework in place, we intentionally set our attention not to the Palestinian experience of precarity per se, but rather to a kind of epistemological precarity, or to the way that knowledge produced about Palestine lubricates the gears of colonial politics and thinking (for scholarship on Palestinian precarity, see for example Hammami, 2015; Harker, 2020; Joronen, 2017; Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2016). This review, therefore, follows in the footsteps of social psychologists embracing a 'return of history', positioning the events of 1948 as the central culminating moment to understanding historic Palestine today (Rouhana & Sabbagh-Khoury, 2019). Rather than emphasizing 1967 or Oslo parameters of 1993—or even ignoring history altogether—an analysis of coloniality must tackle the culmination and consequences of Zionism's explicit colonial ambitions. The analysis focused on coloniality in both its formal political and epistemological manifestations as they occur in mainstream experimental social psychology.

The vast majority of social psychological experiments failed to characterize the context as one of occupation and settlements. Instead, most articles described the context as one of *intractable conflict*. Describing the context as an intractable conflict naturalizes cycles of mutual aggression as self-explanatory, having no overarching or original aggressor. Indeed, rather than contextualize relations as occurring between members of a colonizing state and that land's native inhabitants, authors typically provided details of illustrative violence portraying the two parties as alternating transgressors.

Importantly, an examination of the dependent variables, which implicitly reveals what researchers are interested in explaining or manipulating, shows that most experiments did not seek to influence Jewish Israeli or Palestinian participants' orientations toward material decolonial considerations in the conflict, focusing instead mostly on their feelings and attitudes in relation to the ingroup, outgroup, or the broader idea of their intergroup conflict. Of the dependent measures that did focus on more tangible outcomes, they nearly universally normalized the two-state solution and Israel's efforts, in violation of international law, to restrict Palestinian refugees' right of return. We should note here that an interest in affect and attitudes among psychologists should not be blameworthy in itself; our trouble lies with the concomitant abstraction from context, such that the study of affect and attitudes reinforces a misrepresentation of intergroup relations rather than offer insights into how the settler colonial reality is unfolding.

We argue that experimental social psychology, published in leading Anglophone journals in the field, acquiesces to and reproduces a colonial conceptualization of the 'Israeli-Palestinian conflict' in that it: (a) emphasizes the symmetry of narratives, and (b) de-historicizes the asymmetry of power. The emphasis on the symmetry of narratives occurs not through a focus on 'narrative' research per se, but rather through a reflexive bothsidesism that concentrates its efforts on understanding subjective aspects of the conflict that are true to all parties (Hammack, 2011; Hammack & Pilecki, 2015). The dehistoricization of the power asymmetry occurs when experimental social psychology contextualizes the 'Israeli-Palestinian conflict' in terms of Israel's position of relative strength, but without contextualizing colonized Palestinian land as, *in practice*, the historical *instantiation* of that power asymmetry. Instead, experimental social psychology prefers to illusorily abstract itself from any political positions besides what is agreeable to a modern liberal sensibility based on

negative peace, or the absence of violence or war (Galtung, 1969; Leshem & Halperin, 2020). On the ground, however, are not two competing narratives, but the standard consequences of a settler-colonial project.

It is this very historical material reality that urges us to problematize, reject, and categorically oppose the imposition of frameworks that attempt to uproot the ‘study of Israeli-Palestinian conflict’ from the history and material reality that grounds and surrounds it. Through tracing the historical trajectory of the Zionist project, we follow a framework that defines violence and precarity as natural by-products of settler colonialism. Results of the current analysis suggest that research in experimental social psychology systematically obscures this violence and precarity of settler colonialism by constructing the situation in overwhelmingly dehistoricized and depoliticized terms of ‘conflict’.

Principles of a decolonial turn in the social psychology of the Israeli-Palestinian context

Our analysis draws inspiration from perspectives of decolonial theory, which emphasizes how standard forms of knowledge in the global academy have as their foundations an epistemic standpoint associated with Eurocentric global modernity. The allure of the zero-point epistemology is its supposed objectivity, seeking to understand psychological processes devoid of noisy particulars (Castro-Gómez, 2021). Instead, our analysis shows that, rather than a view from nowhere (Decolonial Psychology Editorial Collective, 2021), experimental social psychology inherits a settler-colonial gaze, evident in the naming of the problem and on ‘peace’, liking, and status-quo normalizing solutions rather than liberation, justice, and the internationally recognized rights of Palestinians.

Our findings do not come as a surprise when we take into account that systems of scientific knowledge production are embedded within power structures that favour historically dominant groups (e.g. Alatas, 2003; Keim, 2008). Israel is high on the list of research producers in the world, with psychology being one of the most productive fields (Lemarchand et al., 2016). Western countries that produce the most (psychological) research in the world are also allies of Israel, with Israel being the largest cumulative recipient of U.S. foreign aid since World War 2 (Congressional Research Service, 2022). Meanwhile, the psychologies and narratives of people in the Global South remain typically marginalized in the international literature on social psychology (Bou Zeineddine et al., 2022; Nyúl et al., 2021). From the current review, it is difficult to make any direct claims on the connection between these sociopolitical factors and the knowledge produced in experimental social psychology. However, our finding that almost all papers (85 out of 92) included at least one author affiliated with an Israeli institution certainly invites those authors to offer greater reflexivity. What forms of knowledge production are shaped by affiliation with an academic institution that is complicit in the occupation (Keller, 2009)? For Jewish Israeli authors who have completed mandatory military service, how does past combat unit experience motivate research on reducing violence? Just as we shared the epistemological and decolonial commitments guiding this review, social psychologists can transparently share their understanding of how they are situated within a historical, moving, and oppressive sociopolitical current.

One potential reason for the general dismissal of the structural conditions in the experimental literature is the underrepresentation of Palestinian participants and researchers who are positioned to identify the victimizing consequences of Israeli settler colonialism, occupation, and apartheid. Still, conducting research within the same conceptual and sociopolitical confines but with greater parity in participant representation would not challenge the coloniality of knowledge; recruiting Palestinians to participate in quantitative experiments studying their attitudes about the intractable conflict within which they are mired still presumes an ‘intractableness’. Moreover, the entire enterprise itself is often distasteful to native populations who remember how research bolstered the onset of their colonization (Rua et al., 2022; see also Bhatia, 2002, Tuck & Yang, 2014) And many Palestinians resist collaboration with Israeli researchers who are based at complicit institutions as a form of normalization that cannot occur as a true partnership so long as the occupation persists (Albhour et al., 2019). Instead, conceptual decolonization will require new theories that integrate and inform collective action efforts among Palestinians and their allies struggling for freedom, justice, and equality (e.g. Hasan-Aslih et al., 2020). Rather than *intractable conflict*, a deeper receptiveness to the Palestinian reality could generate theorizing on the Israeli-Palestinian context as the contested site of an

unrelenting and expanding *colonial project*, in which life in historic Palestine is principally threatened by the implementation of a settler-colonial regime, and not by any deep-seated Jewish Israeli-Palestinian animosity.

This relative non-acknowledgement of the occupation in the experimental literature may be a form of unknowing, or 'knowing not to know' (Geissler, 2013). That is, in other venues, researchers acknowledge and perhaps denounce the occupation and its deleterious effects. For instance, one review paper offers a specific theoretical model, based on the Israeli case, on the social psychology of enduring, justifying, and ending occupation (Halperin et al., 2010). But in the experimental literature, the enduring intergroup domination is euphemized with terms like 'asymmetry'. That the inclusion of terminology and structural considerations could switch between experimental and theoretical literature raises a relevant point on the study of precarity. Among those who work from institutions in the Global North and who are personally opposed to the occupation, this stance is expressed in only one form of disciplinary output. Yet the conventions of experimental social psychology may be so amenable to zero-point abstraction that those same researchers can treat the occupation as a public secret that does not factor into their empirical approaches. When the occupation is less central as a social-psychological feature, the chance to understand Palestinian precarity is overshadowed by the wealth of intergroup conflict research for which Palestine is constructed as a perfectly suited site of study.

CONCLUSION

As we mentioned in the introduction, one valuable contribution of decolonial perspectives for the topic of this special issue is to orient social psychological analyses to their role in the production of global precarity. A decolonial perspective belies triumphal modernist claims of a steady march toward progress and enlightenment by noting the colonial precarity inherent in Eurocentric modernity: a situation of ontological insecurity constituted not only by material uncertainty but also by an existential uncertainty associated with the destruction of historically viable ways of living. From this perspective, the underdevelopment and precarity of Palestinians, Indigenous Peoples in other settings, and others who endure similar physical and psychological dispossession is the necessary, not coincidental, by-product of the physical and psychological development or security that settlers gain via occupation of land and being (Bulhan, 2015).

The focus of our analysis has been another contribution of decolonial perspectives for the topic of the special issue, related to the coloniality of knowledge and the epistemic violence of experimental social psychology, which we argue is entwined with the colonial violence inflicted on Palestinian land and people in real time. Rather than reproduce the idea of social psychology as an inherently noble or progressive platform for analysing or resisting precarity, we turn the analytic lens on the field of social psychology as a site for the production of precarity. If we assume that (most) social psychologists who conduct research on Israeli-Palestinian relations do so, at least in part, out of a genuine and heartfelt desire to promote sustainable peace and prosperity for all parties concerned, our findings highlight how the investigation of the context can carry a colonial standpoint that reflects and serves interests of ongoing domination. A more effective social psychology of precarity, in the case of Palestine or elsewhere, requires greater attention to such dynamics of the coloniality of knowledge. We offer our work as a step in this direction.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Nader Hakim: conceptualization, methodology, investigation, data curation, writing – original draft; **Ghina Abi-Ghannam:** conceptualization, investigation, data curation, writing – original draft; **Rim Saab:** conceptualization, writing – original draft; **Mai Albzour:** writing – review & editing; **Yara Zebian:** data curation, investigation; **Glenn Adams:** writing – original draft.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

All authors declare no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available on the Open Science Framework and linked in the manuscript.

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