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The impact of political news on German students' assessments of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict

Kurzfassung: Unter Anwendung des experimentellen Designs einer Studie von Peleg & Alimi (2005) wird untersucht, wie unterschiedlich geframte Berichte über die Zustimmung der Knesset zur israelisch-palästinensischen "Road Map" die Beurteilung des Nahostkonfliktes seitens deutscher Studenten beeinflussen.

Die Ergebnisse der Studie bestätigen unsere theoretische Annahme, wonach der Effekt von Informationen, die in politischen Nachrichten präsentiert werden, über die Einschätzung der explizit angesprochenen Themen hinausreicht und auch die Einschätzung anderer Themen berührt, die über die Struktur der mentalen Modelle damit verbunden sind, in welche die Rezipienten die Information integrieren. Entsprechend ist der Einfluss politischer Nachrichten auch nicht einheitlich, sondern er hängt von den mentalen Modellen ab, welche die Rezipienten bereits zuvor entwickelt haben. Diese *a priori* Modelle können deshalb stärkere Prädiktoren für Medieneffekte darstellen als Variablen wie die politische Orientierung der Rezipienten, ihre persönlichen Ansichten oder die Relevanz, welche sie dem Konflikt zuschreiben

Abstract: Employing the design of a prior experiment by Peleg & Alimi (2005), the present study examines how differently framed texts about the Knesset's approval of the Israeli-Palestinian 'Road Map' influence German students' assessments of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The results of the study confirmed our theoretical hypothesis that information presented in political news reports influences more than just recipients' assessments of the specifically mentioned issues. In addition, it also affects their assessments of issues related only via the structures of the mental models into which they integrate information. Moreover, the influence of political news is not uniform, but rather varies with differences in the mental models recipients have previously formed. These *a priori* mental models, therefore, can be more powerful predictors of media effects than variables such as recipients' political orientations, their personal views or the relevance they attribute to a conflict.

1. Introduction

That the media are capable of influencing public opinion was recognized very early in media history, and the history of propaganda is as old as the history of the press. Nonetheless, there is still no agreement as to whether or not media can exert influence, and if they can, in what ways.

While early empirical studies attributed great influencing power to the media (Lasswell, 1927), later studies portrayed the media as exerting little influence on recipients' views (Klapper, 1960). In the meantime, a consensus has arisen that mass media and their audiences interactively affect each other in a wide variety of ways (Früh & Schönbach, 1982). After more than seventy years of media effects research, there is a strong trend to not attribute media effects solely to the facts reported in the media, but rather to assume that there are various ways that media can influence public social constructions of reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1969). In this process, media serve not only as mediators, but also as constructors of social realities (Tuchman, 1978; Cohen & Wolfsfeld, 1993). News reports merely provide raw material for recipients' reality constructions. Presented in de- and re-contextualized form, they reflect the reporters' reality constructions. Through cognitive processing by recipients, these constructions are then integrated into recipients' subjective realities. To maintain their cognitive balance (Heider, 1946, 1958; Festinger, 1957), people accept parts of offered reality constructions, while they discount, suppress and/or reject others. With regard to conflict coverage, this process is affected by a number of interrelated factors.

1.1 Level of conflict escalation

One of these factors is the level of conflict escalation, which progresses from self-centered divergence of perspectives via competition to struggle and climaxes in open warfare (Glasl, 1992). Inter-group conflict strengthens intra-group solidarity. Group members can thereby hope to increase their social status by taking a strong stance in opposing the enemy. Group members tend to identify more strongly with their own group and its positions, and the more escalated the conflict, the more strongly they do so.

Thus Blake & Mouton (1961, 1962) already showed that group competition encourages increased solidarity within groups, greater group identification and a shift toward conflict-oriented leadership. At the same time, competition encourages people to increasingly see the other group as unlike themselves and stimulates an increase in blanket negative judgments of the others. Where group competition is high, negotiations to resolve conflict are characterized by (1) a tendency to overrate proposals by one's own group and to reject those of the opponent, (2) a tendency to mutual misunderstandings, whereby shared values are ignored and differences overemphasized, (3) a tendency to focus more on gaining advantages than on making progress toward agreement, so that negotiating partners who display a willingness to compromise are treated as disloyal, and inflexible negotiating partners are admired as brilliant statesmen, (4) a tendency to discount neutral third parties whose recommendations would not benefit one's group, as well as (5) a tendency to frequently block negotiations instead of trying to develop proposals satisfactory to both sides. In experimental psychological negotiation research these findings have very frequently been confirmed, fine-tuned and differentiated.

Conflict parties tend toward the mistaken assumption that their interests are incompatible with their opponents' (Thompson & Hastie, 1990; Thompson & Hrebec, 1996). Negative framing of a conflict situation reduces the willingness of conflict parties to compromise (Bazerman et al., 1985; Bottom & Studt 1993; Lim & Carnevale, 1995; De Dreu & McCusker, 1997; Olekalns, 1997), and because conflict parties are obsessed with their relative gains and losses, they pass up opportunities to end their conflict to the advantage of both sides (Bazerman et al. 1985; Thompson & Hastie, 1990; Thompson & DeHarpport, 1994; Fukuno & Ohbuchi, 1997).

Conflict parties tend to overestimate the probability of their winning a conflict settlement more favorable to themselves (Bazerman & Neale, 1982; Kramer et al., 1993; Lim, 1997; Bazerman et al., 1999) and are likely to persist in following a confrontational conflict strategy even when a cooperative strategy would be more advantageous to both sides (Bazerman & Neale, 1983; Bizman & Hoffman, 1993; Keltner & Robinson, 1993; Bazerman, 1998; Diekmann et al., 1999). The opponent's perspective is typically disregarded (Samuelson & Bazerman, 1985; Bazerman & Carrol, 1987; Carrol et al., 1988; Valley et al., 1998) and his concessions minimized (Ross & Stillinger, 1991; Curhan et al., 1998).

Facts that strengthen one's own position are usually the ones remembered more vividly (Thompson & Loewenstein, 1992), and ethical standards for the evaluation of conflict behavior are subordinated to group interests (Messick & Sentis, 1979; Babcock & Olson, 1992; De Dreu, 1996; Dieckmann, 1997; Diekmann et al., 1997). Conflict parties often consider themselves as more just than the other side (Tenbrunsel, 1998) and defend the use of unethical tactics as necessitated by the threat to their very survival (Shapiro, 1991).

They tend to overestimate their own success chances and attribute any failures to the opponent's unfairness (Kramer, 1994). Ideological differences are overestimated, and the opponent's views are perceived as more extreme than they really

are (Robinson & Keltner, 1997). Even the mere attempt to reach a negotiated settlement is rejected as unethical as soon as hallowed values seem threatened (Tetlock et al., 1996).

Asymmetric conceptualizations of a conflict situation begin to coalesce after even just a little interaction (Thompson & Hastie, 1990; Pinkley, 1990; Messick, 1999) in a collective script with "interlocking roles" (Pruitt & Carnevale, 1993), and this creates a social reality that seemingly confirms conflict parties' expectations. Conflict parties treat their assessment of the opponent as obviously true, and opponents' reactions seem to confirm this.

1.2 Mental models and societal beliefs

Although rarely mentioned in the most recent negotiation research, a theoretical perspective that can integrate these findings was already offered by Deutsch (1973). Based on his understanding that people do not react to the (objective) properties of things in their environment per se, but rather to the (subjective) meanings they attribute to them (Blumer, 1973), Deutsch saw that conflict escalation and the accompanying group processes are not inevitable, but rather result from the cognitive-emotional framework within which conflict is interpreted. According to Deutsch's theory, which has gained great influence in the field of conflict management (cf. Fisher & Brown, 1989; Glasl, 1992), conflict is open to interpretation as either a competitive or a cooperative process, depending on whether it is respectively framed within a win-lose or a win-win model. Although Deutsch himself doesn't yet use the term *mental model*, he regards this interpretive framework and the resulting misperceptions as the motors of conflict escalation and de-escalation.

Combining Deutsch's theoretical approach with Glasl's escalation model (1992), Kempf (1996, 2002a) has developed a typology of mental conflict models which describes them in terms of the dimensions of (a) the conceptualization of conflict as a win-win, win-lose or lose-lose process, (b) the assessment of parties' rights and aims, (c) the evaluation of their actions and behavior, and (d) the emotional consequences of these interpretations, which ultimately transform outrage at war into outrage at the enemy.

Translating this typology into content analytical methodologies (Kempf, Reimann & Luostarinen, 1996; Bläsi, Jaeger, Kempf & Möckel, 2004), Kempf's cognitive escalation/de-escalation model has been confirmed by numerous cross-national studies of media coverage during the Gulf War (Kempf & Reimann, 2002), the post-Yugoslavian civil wars (Bosnia, Kosovo and the aftermath) (Kempf, 2002b; Sabellek, 2001; Jaeger & Möckel, 2004; Annabring & Jäger 2005a; Bläsi, Jaeger, Kempf, Kondopoulou & Paskoski, 2005), German-French relations after World War II (Jaeger, 2005) and the German-French conflict over the presidency of the European Central Bank (Plontz, 2006). Based on these findings, finally, the influence of escalation- vs. de-escalation oriented media frames on recipients' assessments of reported events has been investigated in experimental studies by Annabring, Dittmann & Kempf (2005), Kempf (2005), Schaefer (2006) and Spohrs (2006).

Summarizing the results, it can be said that (a) journalists tend to frame conflict reports using the same types of mental models that predominate in the respective society and/or conform with its political agenda. (b) Journalists adapt the mental models with which they interpret conflict to changing political conditions and, in turn, (c) the escalation vs. de-escalation oriented framing of conflict coverage affects the public assessment of conflict in the same direction.

According to Entman's (1993, 52) definition: "To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment recommendation for the item described." When it comes to framing effects, however, the literature portrays a rather complex range of possibilities (cf. Tuchman, 1978; Entman, 1993; Nelson et al., 1997; Scheufele, 1999; Druckman, 2001). Although there is still disagreement on the precise action mechanisms, and although conceptual differences make it hard to achieve a unified theory, a few main tendencies can nevertheless be identified. Not everyone reacts to a given frame in the same way, and the offered frames are not simply adopted by recipients, but rather are judged in terms of their presuppositions, the perceived trustworthiness of the source and/or the availability of alternative frames.

With respect to conflict coverage, it can also be assumed that the effects of news and its framing depend on audience involvement in a conflict, which will be greater the more the public is outraged by enemy atrocities and the more it feels committed to one of the conflict parties in historical, political and cultural terms. The more it feels affected, the more an audience will tend to identify with one of the parties, and the more it will tend to interpret the conflict according to the mental model accepted by the party it favors.

According to Bar-Tal (1996), it is especially likely that in long-term, intractable conflicts such mental models will harden into *societal beliefs* shared by (nearly) all members of a society, become part of the society's ethos and contribute to society members' sense of identity. Intractable conflicts impose heavy burdens, cause great psychological and social stress, and are painful, exhausting and costly, in both human and material terms. They force society to develop psychological mechanisms to facilitate successful coping, and societal beliefs fulfill an important role in creating these mechanisms.

Since they are both part of a society's ethos and a crucial factor in enduring the burdens of war, they tend to persist in post-war society, and, moreover, the transition from war to peace arouses increased feelings of insecurity in a new situation to which society members have not yet adjusted.

Although in wartime countries try to create and maintain these beliefs by means of propaganda, they are not just an ideology imposed on society members by outsiders or their political leaders, nor do they merely result from deceptive propaganda. They arise from a long history of experiences with concrete conflicts at a high level of escalation and constitute themselves as a generalized interpretation of these conflicts. Once such beliefs have emerged in a society, they provide a framework that literally interprets every interaction with the opponent as still another episode in a grand historical drama where the "good" struggle against the forces of "evil." And once a conflict event has been interpreted in this way, it seemingly confirms the very stereotypes and prejudices that initially created this interpretation.

The influence exerted by media coverage, in general (Hypothesis 1), and media frames, in particular (Hypothesis 2), on the public's assessment of conflict can therefore be expected to be weaker the more the public has committed itself and the more societal beliefs have hardened.

The effects of political news and its framing are not the same for all recipients (Hypothesis 3), however, but can be expected to correlate with recipients' political views, their political knowledge, etc. (Hypotheses 4a–4d).

If the effects of news coverage arise from an interpretive process where recipients integrate information into their mental model of a respective topic, it can be further expected that their a priori mental models will be even more powerful predictors (Hypothesis 5).

We regard mental models as complex networks of elements balanced somewhat like iron filings in a magnetic field. Any change in the position of one of the elements will upset the balance, unless there are compensatory changes in the positions of all other elements. Consequently, it can be assumed that information integrated into recipients' mental models not only affects their assessments of issues directly relevant to the information, but also their assessments of other issues related only via the structure of the model (Hypothesis 6).

2. Method

2.1 Experimental design

This paper describes a pilot study for a forthcoming cross-cultural project based on the design of an experiment by Peleg & Alimi (2005). They showed that pro- vs. anti-Palestinian state framing of a news article about the Knesset's approval of the Road Map influenced Israeli students' assessments of whether or not they saw Palestinian territorial continuity as a threat to Israel. While the majority of participants who read a pro-state text were divided between "approval" and "approval/disapproval" of a statement claiming that continuity was non-threatening, the category "disapproval" dominated among participants who had read an anti-state text.

Adopting the experimental design used by Peleg & Alimi, the experiment was structured in three phases:

1. Pre-test
2. Reading the text
3. Post-test

The pre-test consisted of two questionnaires:

- 1.1 A general questionnaire requesting information such as the participants' age, gender, citizenship and religion, as well as their political orientation and personal views, etc.
- 1.2 An attitude scale asking for the participants' assessments of issues like whether the right of return was the crucial hurdle in resolving the conflict, or whether a comprehensive solution was preferable to an interim solution, etc.

The text material consisted of three different versions of the same news article.

- 2.1 A non-framed (neutral) report about the Knesset's approval of the Road Map.
- 2.2 A (pro-state) version of the same text framed by a headline and subheadings that underlined those contents of the following paragraphs, which argued for establishing a Palestinian state.
- 2.3 An (anti-state) version of the same text framed by a headline and subheadings that underlined those contents of the following paragraphs, which argued against establishing a Palestinian state.

The post-test consisted of four instruments.

- 3.1 A memory test which asked the participants to repeat as literally as possible what they remembered from the text they had read.

- 3.2 A categorization test asking the participants to group a number of issues mentioned in the text into meaningful categories.
- 3.3 A text assessment questionnaire asking the participants to indicate whether the events were reported accurately, etc.
- 3.4 An attitude scale asking for the participants' assessments of issues like whether a moratorium on founding new settlements would improve the prospects for further negotiations and whether the vision of peace was realistic, etc.

The text material and most of the pre- and post-test instruments were the same as in the Israeli study and are documented in Peleg & Alimi (2005). The general pre-test questionnaire was adapted to the German situation, and, in addition, the post-test text-assessment questionnaire, which dates back to a study by Bläsi et al. (2005), was not included in the original experiment.

2.2 Hypotheses

The aim of the study was to investigate the influence of the experimental procedure on German readers' assessments of the conflict and to test the following hypotheses:

- 1. The influence of a report about the Knesset's approval of the Road Map on Israeli participants' assessments of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict will also be found in a German sample.
- 2. The influence exerted by different media frames on Israeli participants' assessments of the conflict will also be found in a German sample.
- 3. The influence of the reports will not be uniform.
- 4. The influence will depend on inter-subject factors such as:
 - a. participants' political orientations with respect to foreign policy (left vs. right),
 - b. participants' personal views in general (liberal vs. conservative),
 - c. the relevance participants think the Israeli-Palestinian conflict should have for German foreign policy,
 - d. participants' self-estimated knowledge of the conflict,
- 5. but participants' a priori mental models, into which reported information is integrated, will be even more powerful predictors.
- 6. The reports will affect more than just assessments of issues directly touched on by the information.

2.3 Operationalizations

In order to test how the experimental procedure affected participants' assessments of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the present paper focuses on two issues. The first issue – whether Palestinian territorial continuity threatens Israel – is more or less directly relevant to the Road Map: For the Knesset to approve a peace plan leading to the creation of a Palestinian state, the threat must be calculable. In contrast, the second issue – whether or not the essence of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is religious – is not directly relevant to approval of the Road Map, but is linked to it only via the structures of the recipients' mental models, which may foresee better or worse chances of achieving a political settlement of the conflict.

These two issues were included in both the pre-test and the post-test attitude scales and thus allow a direct measurement of the influence exerted by the experimental procedures on participants' assessments. The exact wording of the respective statements in the two questionnaires is shown in Table 1.

	Pre-test	Post-test
Religious conflict	The Palestinian-Israeli conflict is religious in essence	In essence, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is about religious issues
No threat to Israel	Palestinian territorial continuity is not a threat to Israel	A continuous Palestinian territory is no essential threat to Israel

Table 1: Wording of the analyzed items

Two other statements, included only in the pre-test attitude scale, were used as indicators for the participants' a priori mental models:

- 1. The conflict can only be resolved by a political settlement, and
- 2. Palestinians are incapable of managing their own affairs.

These statements are far from sufficient to enable us to reconstruct participants' mental models in detail. Nevertheless, they at least suggest whether or not participants frame the conflict with a de-escalation oriented model (political settlement needed and Palestinians as possible partners in this process).

Each of the above statements was to be evaluated on a 5-point scale with the categories "agree," "rather agree," "unde-

cided," "rather disagree" and "disagree." Since some participants did not respond to the items, a sixth response category, "no answer," was added.

2.4 Statistical methods

In order to test our hypotheses, both classical statistical methods and Latent Class Analysis (LCA) were applied to the participants' responses to the respective items of the pre- and post-test questionnaires.

Hypotheses 1 and 2 were tested with a t-test for repeated measurement and Analyses of Variance, with the experimental factors *pre-post* and *text version* and the responses to the *religious conflict* and *no threat* statements used as dependent variables. For these analyses, the "no-answer" responses were treated as "undecided," producing a five-point scale with the endpoints "agree" and "disagree."

Hypothesis 3 was tested by entering the pre- and post-test responses to the *religious conflict* and *no threat* statements into a LCA, thus identifying different types of change between the pre- and post-test assessments of these issues.

Hypotheses 4a–4d were tested using contingency analysis, relating these types of change to the respective questions from the general questionnaire. As well, the questions were correlated with the direction of pre-post change in agreement with the *religious conflict* and *no threat* statements (0 = change towards disagreement, 1 = no change, 2 = change towards agreement).

Hypothesis 5 was tested by classifying the participants' a priori mental models with an LCA of the responses to the *political settlement* and *Palestinians incapable* items and relating the resulting classes via contingency analysis to the types and direction of pre-post change.

In the LCAs, the "no answer" responses were treated as a response category of its own, and – due to the rather small size of our sample – model selection was based on the AIC Index rather than using BIC or CAIC, which are suitable for large samples only, where AIC bears the risk of choosing over-parameterized models.

2.5 Complexity of the experimental procedure

The remaining items included in the attitude scales were not used as data for the present study, but mainly served to conceal the fact that the participants had to respond twice (during pre- and during post-test) to the same (*religious conflict* and *no threat*) statements.

Moreover, these items and the other instruments not used as data stimulated participants to think in various ways about the information presented in the text and to integrate it into their mental models. Already during the pre-test they had to respond to questions about their political and personal views, about their position regarding Israel and about their understanding of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. After reading the texts, they had to recollect and recontextualize the information, evaluate its quality, and again give some indication of their understanding of the conflict. All these activities stimulated the integration of the information into the participants' mental models of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and may have influenced how and to what extent they did so.

Consequently, we were measuring not just the influence of the texts and their framing, but also the influence of a complex process of coming to terms with how the Israeli-Palestinian conflict might be understood.

3 Results

3.1 Sample characteristics

The experiment was conducted between February 15 and December 6, 2005. The study participants were 227 students from the University of Konstanz who were randomly assigned to the three experimental conditions.

The students' ages ranged between 18 and 47 years ($M = 23.03$; $SD = 4.95$). They had been enrolled for between 1 and 14 semesters ($M = 3.11$; $SD = 2.97$). 70.5% were female; 29.1% male; 0.4% did not specify. 89.4% were German citizens; 8.8% other nationality, 1.8% did not specify. 40.5% were Catholic; 30.4% Protestant; 4.0% other; 22.5% no religion; 1.8% did not specify. 79.3% were psychology students; 19.8% other; 0.9% did not specify.

The majority of the participants described their personal views as in general liberal (14.1%) or rather liberal (55.1%), and their political orientation with respect to foreign policy as located in a range between left (5.3%), rather left (35.9%) and moderate (34.2%), 13.7% felt indifferent to foreign policy.

95.6% had never visited Israel or the Palestinian territories, and the majority of the participants described their knowledge of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as moderate (32.5%) or limited (36.8%).

Not surprisingly, several of the students had never heard of "Eretz Israel" before and didn't understand the term, which is rarely used in German discourse. The students' general political knowledge seemed rather limited, as several also admitted to being unfamiliar with the term "interim solution." Nonetheless, the majority of the students affirmed that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict should have moderate (53.4%), high (27.4%) or even very high (5.65) relevance for German foreign policy.

During the experiment, the participants were randomly assigned to the experimental groups, and the comparison of the participants' pre-test responses to the variables "Religious conflict" ($F = 0.518$, $df = 2$, $p = 0.597$) and "No threat to Israel" ($F = 0.086$, $df = 2$, $p = 0.918$) confirmed that there were no significant *a priori* differences between the experimental groups with respect to the participants' assessments of these issues (cf. Table 2).

Text framing	n	Pre-test responses			
		Religious conflict		No threat to Israel	
		M	SD	M	SD
Neutral	77	1.73	1.108	1.81	0.932
Pro-state	75	1.60	1.053	1.80	0.944
Anti-state	75	1.56	1.017	1.75	1.001
Total	227	1.63	1.058	1.78	0.956

Table 2: *A priori* differences between the experimental groups

3.2 Over-all influence of the experimental procedures

In order to form an initial picture of the influence exerted by the experimental procedures on participants' assessments of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the pre- and post-test scores on the two items were compared. The results showed that:

- participants' agreement with interpreting the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as essentially religious declined significantly ($t = -3.599$, $df = 226$, $p < 0.001$), and
- participants' agreement with the *no threat* statement significantly increased ($t = 4.101$, $df = 226$, $p < 0.001$)

after reading the text about the Knesset's approval of the Road Map (cf. Table 3). Hypotheses 1 and 6 were thus confirmed.

	n	Religious conflict		No threat to Israel	
		M	SD	M	SD
Pre-test	227	1.63	1.058	1.78	0.956
Post-test	227	1.81	1.124	1.56	0.964

Table 3: Mean differences between pre- and post-test scores

3.3 Framing effects

In contrast to the Israeli study (Peleg & Alimi, 2005), which demonstrated a clear effect of text frames on participants' attitudes towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, such an effect was not found among the German students.

Text framing	n	Differences between pre- and post-test responses			
		Religious conflict		No threat to Israel	
		M	SD	M	SD
Neutral	77	-0.18	0.790	0.36	0.826
Pro-state	75	-0.15	0.672	0.15	0.849
Anti-state	75	-0.20	0.753	0.17	0.844
Total	227	-0.18	0.738	0.23	0.842

Table 4: Differences between the experimental groups

There were no significant differences between the experimental groups with respect to how they changed their response to the two items from pre- to post-test ("Religious conflict": $F = 0.101$, $df = 2$, $p = 0.904$; "No threat": $F = 1.515$, $df = 2$, $p = 0.222$) (cf. Table 4). Accordingly, Hypothesis 2 must be rejected.

Relating this result to those reported in sections 3.1 and 3.2, we can thus conclude that there is a significant main effect between pre- and post-test, but neither a significant main effect of the text version nor a significant interaction between the two experimental factors. This conclusion is also confirmed by two-way ANOVA (see Table 5).

Factor	Religious conflict			No threat		
	F	df	p	F	df	p
Pre-Post	11.173	1	p = 0.001	22,006	1	p < 0.001
Text version	0.691	2	p = 0.502	0.152	2	p = 0.859
Interaction	0.252	2	p = 0.777	0.559	2	p = 0.211

Table 5: Two-way Analysis of variance

3.4 Types of response patterns

Since it cannot be assumed that the experimental procedure affected all participants in the same linear way, LCA was used to analyze the participants' response patterns in a more detailed way. According to the AIC criterion, this analysis made possible the identification of five latent classes or types of response patterns (cf. Table 6) which correlate with the participants' (self-estimated) knowledge of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Chi-Square = 22.94, df = 12, p < 0.05) (cf. Figure 1). Both Hypotheses 3 and 4d are thus confirmed. The mean membership probability with which the participants could be assigned to the latent classes was p = 0.91.

h	ln(L)	n(P)	AIC
1	-1324.09	20	2688.18
2	-1240.98	41	2563.97
3	-1193.03	62	2510.07
4	-1167.94	83	2501.87
5	-1139.17	104	2486.33
6	-1121.16	125	2492.32

Table 6: Goodness of Fit Statistics for the Latent Class Models (h = Number of Classes)

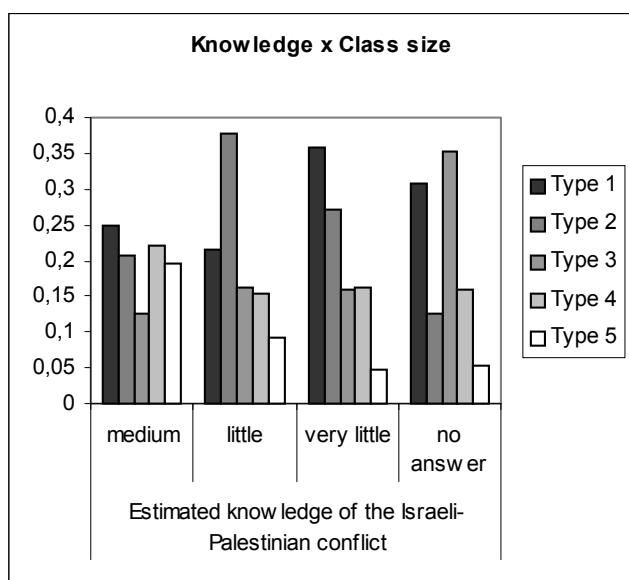


Figure 1: Class sizes within knowledge groups

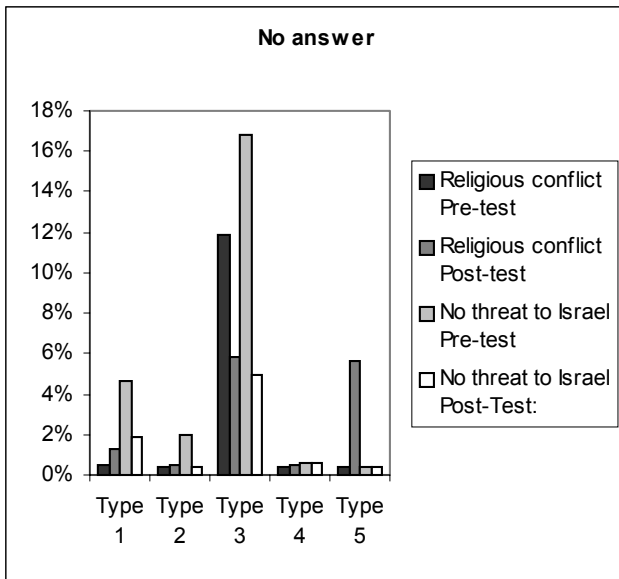


Figure 2: Frequency of "no answer" responses

Describing the classes in terms of their (mean) response tendencies and the ambivalence of the responses (standard deviations), we observe that *Type 2* (27.3% of the Ss) and *Type 5* (8.6%) tend to disagree *a priori* with the religious character of the conflict and to see no threat in Palestinian territorial continuity. After reading the texts, both these tendencies were strengthened (cf. Figure 3).

- *Type 5*, which is over-represented among participants who estimated their knowledge as moderate, however, is *a priori* more ambivalent about both issues than *Type 2*, which is over-represented among those participants who estimated their knowledge as limited.
- Although this ambivalence declined after reading the texts, *Type 5* also remained *a posteriori* ambivalent about the *no threat* issue.

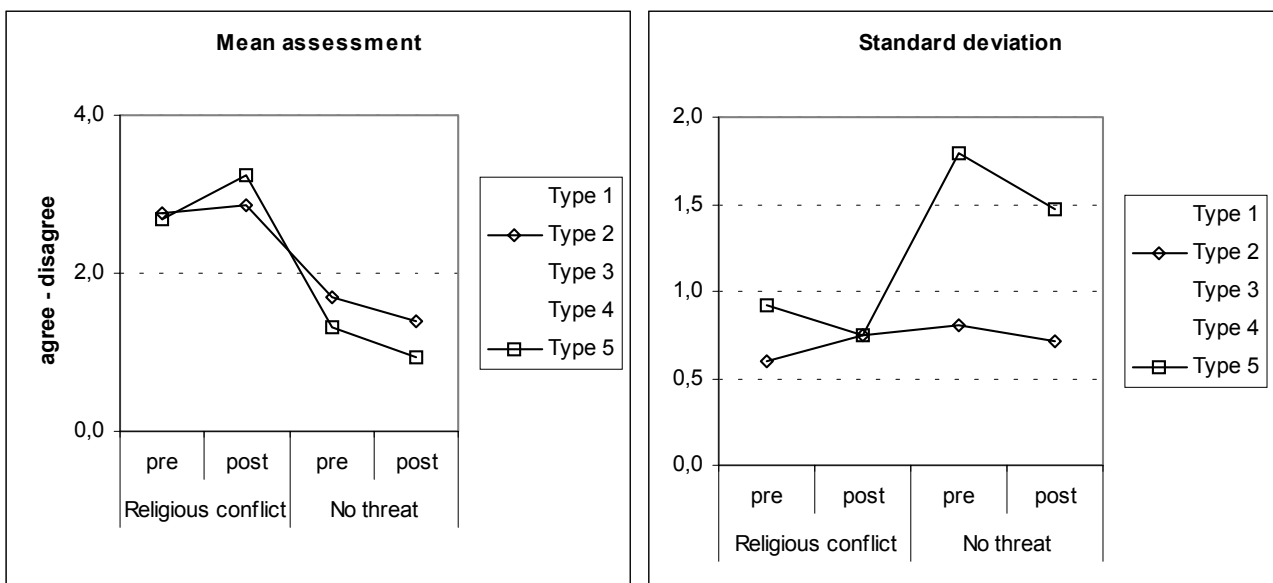


Figure 3: Mean and standard deviation of the latent distributions of Type 2 and Type 5

Type 1 (28.6%) and *Type 4* (16.8%) both tend to agree *a priori* with the religious character of the conflict (cf. Figure 4).

- While for Type 4 this tendency declines after reading the texts, this is not the case for Type 1, which is over-represented among the participants who estimated their knowledge as very limited or didn't answer the question at all.
- Moreover, Type 1 shows a weak *a priori* tendency to disagree with the no threat claim, whereas this is not the case with Type 4, which is over-represented among those participants who estimated their knowledge as moderate. Although Type 4 is *a priori* more ambivalent about this issue, it clearly tends to agree with it.
- While Type 1 becomes more undecided and ambivalent about this issue *a posteriori*, Type 4 increases its tendency to see no threat and becomes less ambivalent about it.

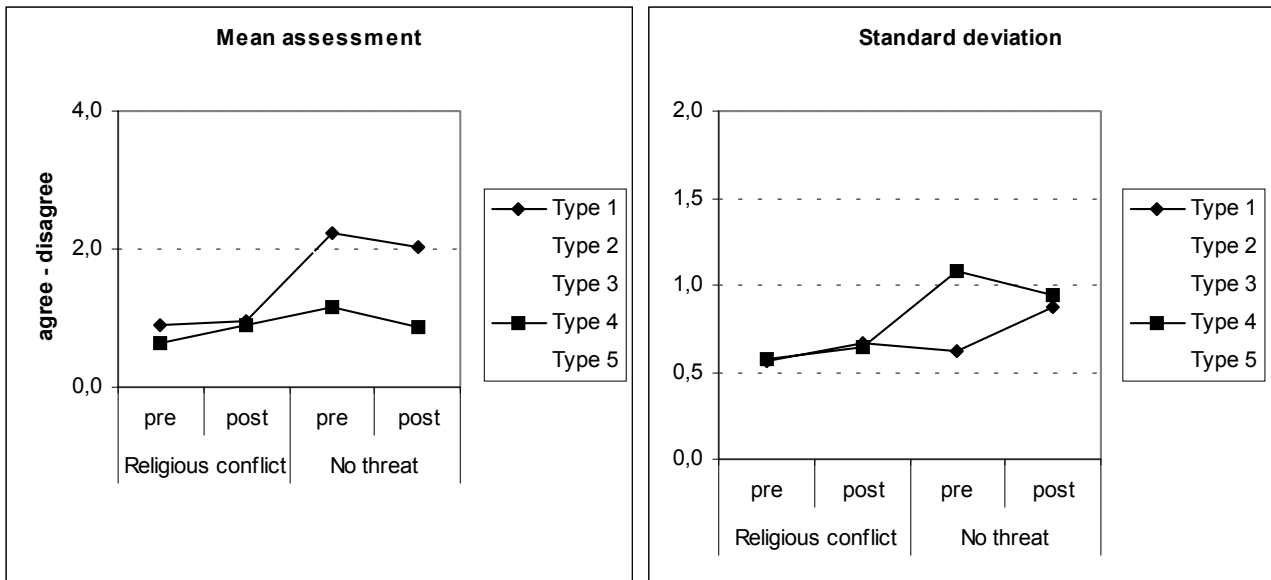


Figure 4: Mean and standard deviation of the latent distributions of Type 1 and Type 4

Type 3 (18.7%), finally, is over-represented among those participants who didn't answer the question on their knowledge about the conflict and also shows a high frequency of "no answer" responses on the *religious conflict* and *no threat* issues (cf. Figure 6). While this type shows some tendency to interpret the conflict as religious, it is undecided about the *no threat* issue (cf. Figure 5).

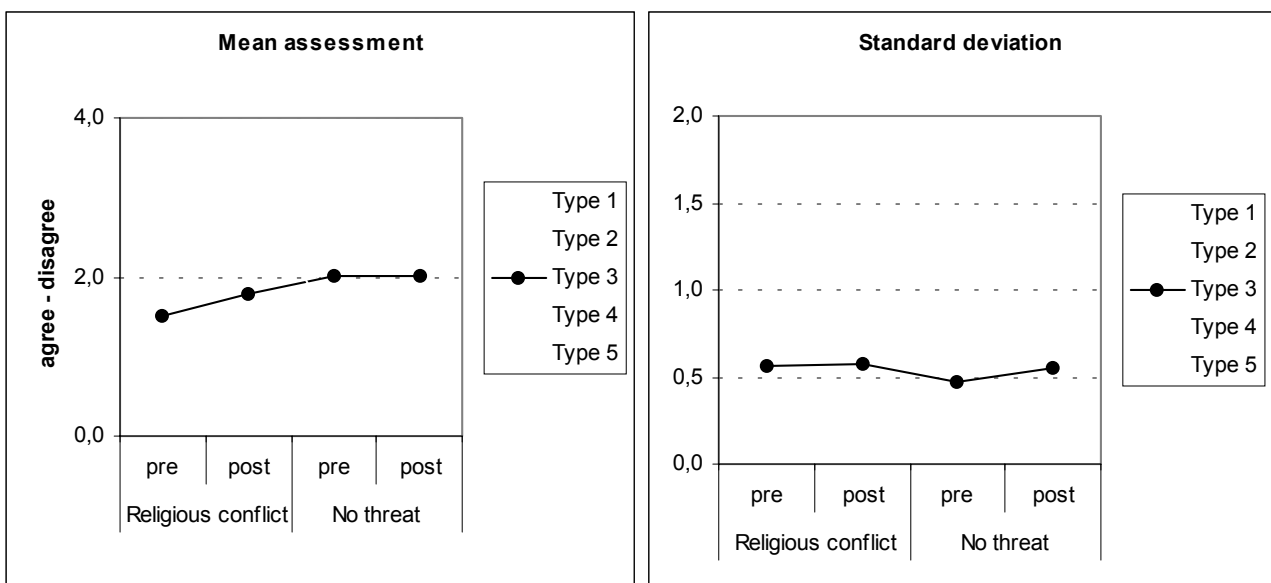


Figure 5: Mean and standard deviation of the latent distribution of Type 3

- *A posteriori*, the frequency of "no answer" responses declines on both issues, and the tendency to interpret the conflict as religious also declines.
- With respect to the *no threat* issue, however, this type – which is the least ambivalent about both issues during pre- and post-tests – remains as undecided as before.

Summarizing these results, we may conclude that reading texts about the approval of the Road Map influenced not only participants' response tendencies, but also the ambivalence of their responses. Moreover, not all types shifted towards interpreting the essence of the conflict as less religious and Palestinian territorial continuity as less threatening to Israel.

- Type 1 did *not* reduce its tendency to interpret the conflict as religious, and
- Type 3 did *not* shift towards more support for the *no threat* statement, but instead remained as undecided as before.

Relating these types of response patterns to the experimental groups did not demonstrate a significant correlation between the participants' class membership and the experimental groups to which they belonged, however (Chi-Square = 8.98; df = 8, $p > 0.25$). Hypothesis 2, therefore, must also be rejected on the basis of this more detailed analysis: text frames affected neither the pre-post differences among participants' responses, nor the various classes into which they could be grouped according to their response patterns.

3.5 Effects of inter-subject factors

Moreover, membership in the various classes is also independent of the participants' estimates:

- of their political orientation with respect to foreign policy (grouped into "left or rather left," "in-between," "right or rather right" and "indifferent or no answer": Chi-Square = 22.82, df = 24, $p > 0.5$),
- of their personal views (grouped into "liberal," "rather liberal," "neither liberal nor conservative" and "rather conservative, conservative or no answer": Chi-Square = 7.55, df = 20, $p > 0.99$), and
- of the relevance they think the Israeli-Palestinian conflict should have for German foreign policy (grouped into "very high or high," "medium" and "low, very low or no answer": Chi-Square = 22.71, df = 20, $p > 0.25$).

Hypotheses 4a – 4c, therefore, must be rejected.

3.6 Grouping of participants with respect to their mental models

Latent Class Analysis of the responses to the pre-test *political settlement* and *Palestinians incapable* items produced three latent classes (cf. Table 7), two of which indicate that the participants framed the conflict with a de-escalation oriented mental model. The mean membership probability with which the participants could be assigned to the latent classes was $p = 83$.

h	ln(L)	n(P)	AIC
1	-612.53	10	1245.07
2	-588.21	21	1218.41
3	-576.80	32	1217.61

Table 7: Goodness of Fit Statistics for the Latent Class Models (h = Number of Classes)

Class 1 (62.05%) and *Class 2* (33.34%) tend to agree that conflict resolution can come about only via political settlement and to disagree with the Palestinians' inability to manage their own affairs (cf. Figure 6).

- While *Class 1* is relatively more uncertain about the need for a political settlement, however,
- *Class 2* is more uncertain about Palestinian (in)ability.

Class 3, finally, is a very small class of participants (4.61%) who obviously lack a stable mental model with which to interpret the conflict.

- Many of the participants in this class leave the respective questions unanswered (cf. Figure 7),
- and the rest are undecided about the need for a political settlement and extremely undecided about Palestinian (in)ability (cf. Figure 6).

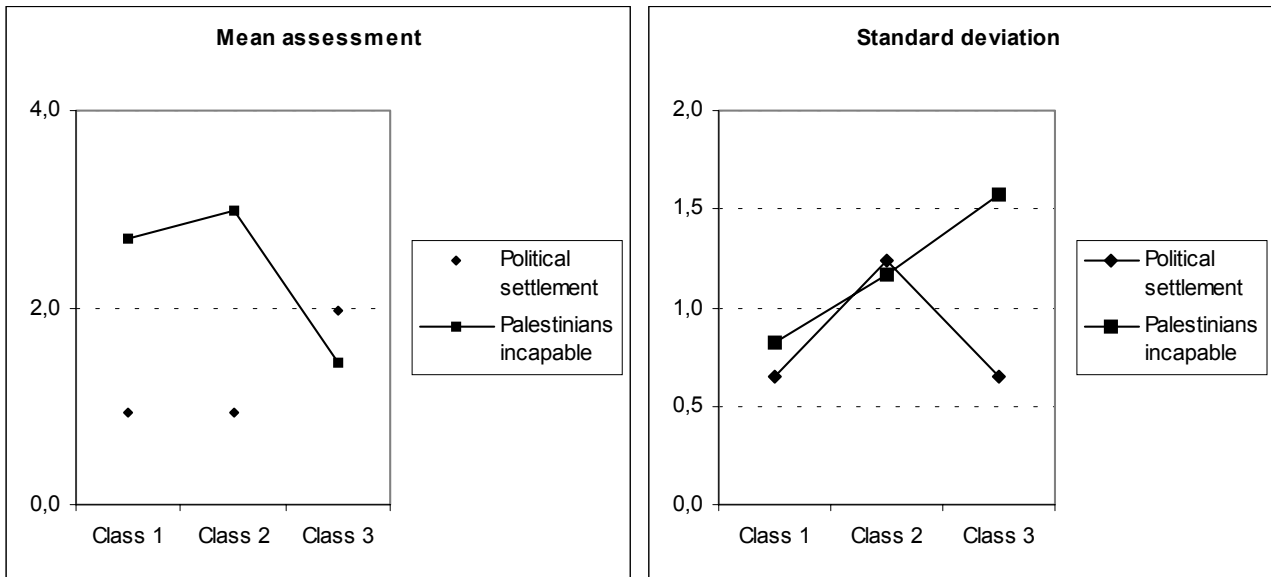


Figure 6: Mean and standard deviation of the latent distributions

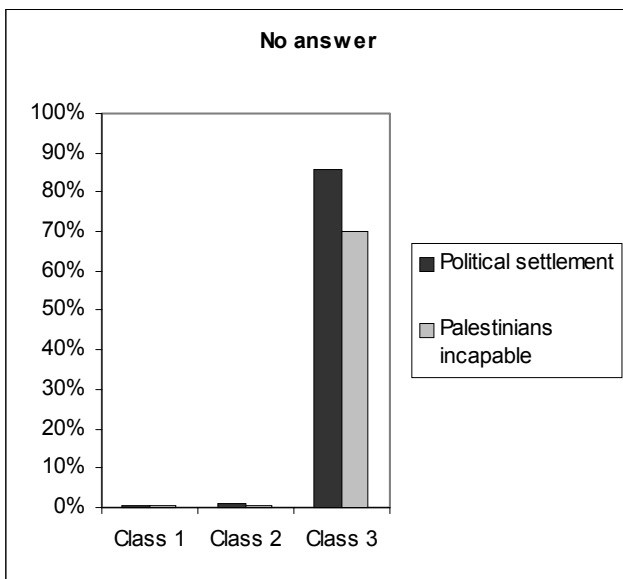


Figure 7: Frequency of "no answer" responses

3.7 Influence of mental models on pre-post response patterns

Cross-tabulating these classes with the types of pre-post response patterns identified in section 3.4 revealed a significant correlation ($\chi^2 = 16.757$; $df = 4$, $p = 0.002$) (cf. Figure 8). Since the number of participants in Class 3 was too small, however, the Pearson χ^2 -statistic was only computed for the first two classes ($n = 217$).

- The response pattern which strengthened tendencies to both interpret the conflict as *non*-religious and Palestinian territorial continuity as *not* threatening (Type 2) was over-represented among participants who interpreted the conflict within a de-escalation oriented mental model (Class 1 and Class 2).
- Among these, the response pattern which strengthened its tendency to interpret the conflict as *not* religious but stayed ambivalent about the *no threat* issue (Type 5) was over-represented among participants more undecided about Palestinian (in)ability (Class 2), whereas

- the response pattern which did not reduce the religious interpretation of the conflict and became undecided and more ambivalent about the *no threat* issue during the post-test (Type 1) was over-represented among those participants who were more ambivalent about the need for a political settlement (Class 1), and
- the response pattern which reduced its acceptance of the religious interpretation of the conflict and strengthened its tendency to see no threat (Type 4) was over-represented among those participants who were relatively less undecided about the need for a political settlement (Class 2).
- The response pattern that gave many "no answer" responses and was undecided about the threat during both pre- and post-test (Type 3), finally, was over-represented among the participants lacking a stable mental model with which to interpret the conflict (Class 3).

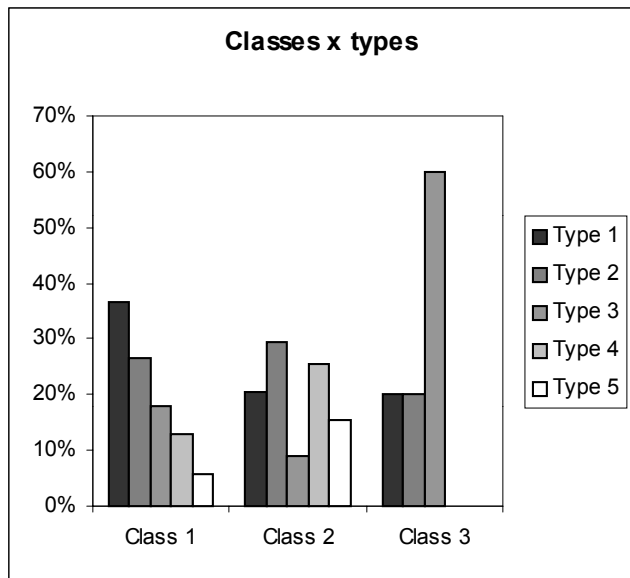


Figure 8: Response types within classes

3.8 Influence of mental models on the direction of pre-post change

Cross-tabulating the mental models with the direction of pre-post change produced significant results only for the religious interpretation of the conflict ($\chi^2 = 17.46$, $df = 4$, $p < 0.005$) (cf. Figure 9).

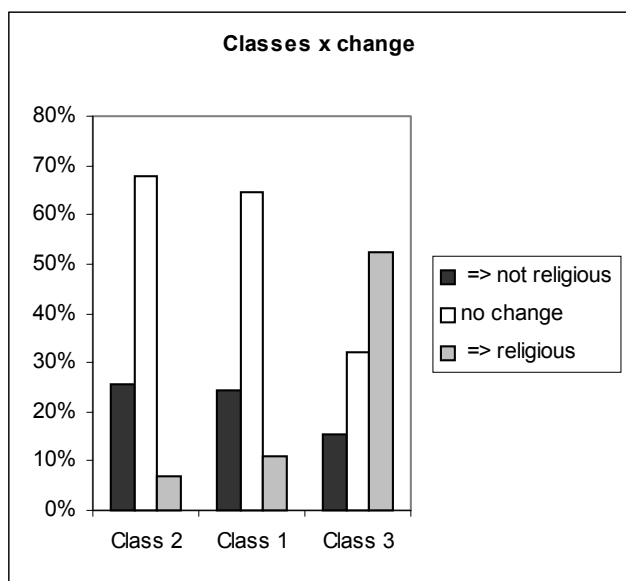


Figure 9: Change of religious interpretation within classes

- While the majority of the participants who framed the conflict within a de-escalation oriented model didn't change their assessment of this issue (Class 2: 67.7%; Class 1: 64.7%), or changed it towards *less* religious (Class 2: 25.4%; Class 1: 24.2%),
- the effect was quite the opposite with participants who lacked a stable mental model (Class 3). While only 32.2 % of these participants didn't change their assessments, 52.3% shifted towards *more* religious.

Examining the participants' post-test interpretation of this issue (cf. Figure 10), however, shows that this was mainly a shift from (rather) religious towards undecided or no answer (67.6%). During the pre-test, 73.8% of the participants lacking a stable mental model had (rather) disagreed with the religious interpretation of the conflict. Now they became confused about this issue as well.

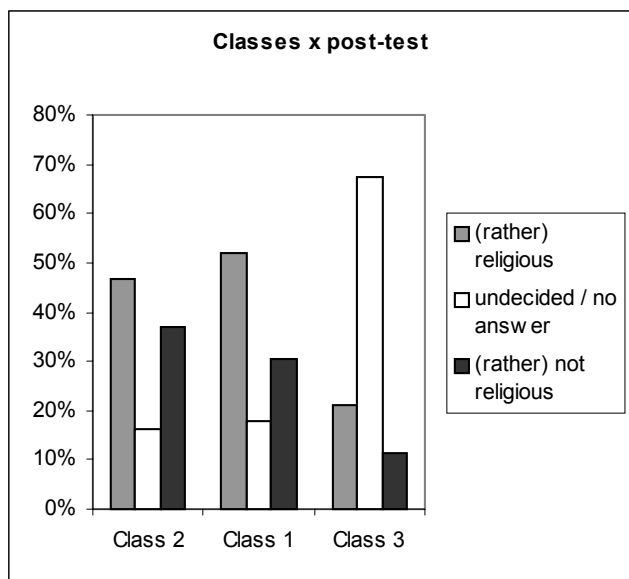


Figure 10: Post-test religious interpretation within classes

With respect to the perceived threat, there was no significant correlation between pre-post change and the participants' mental models ($\chi^2 = 8.91$, $df = 4$, $p > 0.05$).

3.9 Influence of inter-subject factors on the direction of pre-post change

Correlating the direction of change with the participants' political orientation toward foreign policy, their personal views in general, the relevance they think the Israeli-Palestinian conflict should have for German foreign policy and their self-estimated knowledge of the conflict produced no significant results for either the *religious conflict* or the *no threat* issues (cf. Table 8). Hypotheses 4a–4d can thus be rejected.

	Political orientation	Personal views	Relevance	Knowledge
Religious conflict	$r = -0.051$ $p = 0.443$	$r = -0.041$ $p = 0.535$	$r = 0.116$ $p = 0.082$	$r = 0.070$ $p = 0.293$
No threat	$r = 0.006$ $p = 0.930$	$r = -0.019$ $p = 0.777$	$r = -0.019$ $p = 0.777$	$r = 0.041$ $p = 0.537$

Table 8: Correlation of the direction of pre-post change with the inter-subject factors

Relating these results to those in sections 3.7 and 3.8, we conclude that Hypothesis 5 is confirmed with respect to the participants' response patterns, but only partially confirmed with respect to the direction of pre-post change.

4 Discussion

Because it repeated an experiment whose design and instruments were not open for modification and used as subjects German students, who are traditionally rather peace-oriented and similar in their political views, the limitations of the present pilot study cannot be ignored. In particular the assessment of the participants' a priori mental models by means of

only two items can create doubts about the reliability of the results. Due to the reasonably high membership probabilities with which the participants could be assigned to the latent classes, these doubts can be dispelled, however.

Moreover, since the data from the Israeli study were not available to the author, this is not a cross-cultural study in the true sense of the word, and the possibilities for cross-cultural comparison are limited to comparing the results with the earlier work by Peleg & Alimi (2005). Nonetheless, the results confirmed some of our theoretical assumptions and suggested a number of further hypotheses which should be addressed in the forthcoming project.

1. The results confirm the hypotheses that if participants read texts and integrate the presented information into their mental models, this will affect (Hypothesis 1) their assessment of both issues directly touched on by the information presented in the texts (*no threat*) and issues related to it only via the structure of the participants' mental models (*religious conflict*) (Hypothesis 6).
2. As expected, this effect is not uniform (Hypothesis 3), but depends on the participants' a priori mental models, which, therefore, prove to be more powerful predictors of how participants change their assessments than inter-subject variables such as their political orientation, personal views, relevance attribution and knowledge of the conflict (Hypothesis 5).
3. Participants' political orientations, their personal views and the relevance they think the Israeli-Palestinian conflict should have for German foreign policy did not prove useful as predictors (lack of support for Hypotheses 4a – 4c), but this may be due to the relative homogeneity of the sample with respect to these variables.
4. With respect to the participants' (self-estimated) knowledge of the conflict (Hypothesis 4d), the results are not unequivocal. Nonetheless, knowledge of the conflict seems to be a crucial factor in determining whether or not participants have a mental model of the conflict.
5. In contrast to the Israeli study by Peleg & Alimi (2005), the present study failed to demonstrate any effect of text framing, however (lack of support for Hypothesis 3).

There may be various reasons for the differences. One might be that the text framing was too weak. The texts themselves were neutral and (nearly) identical. Only the headlines and subheadings anticipated some of the information in the following paragraphs and thus underlined its relevance.

But if the framing was too weak, how could Peleg & Alimi have demonstrated framing effects using the same material we used in the present study? One possible explanation is that the participants in our study – mainly psychology students – had too little political knowledge, both in general and about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in particular.

The previous state of research on the links between political sophistication and susceptibility to being influenced by media frames is, however, complex. While some studies find that less well-informed participants are more strongly influenced by media frames (e.g., Haider-Markel & Jocelyn, 2002; Haack, 2007), others reach the opposite conclusion (e.g., Nelson, Clawson & Oxley, 1997).

Another possibility might be that – in contrast to Peleg & Alimi, who worked with Israeli students – our participants were too remote from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and their mental models of the conflict were therefore less flexible. This explanation would be in accordance with a finding of Bläsi et al. (2005) that presumably less personally involved German and Greek journalists modified the mental models with which they interpreted the conflicts in former Yugoslavia after the fall of Milosevic much less than did Serbian journalists.

If this explains why we failed to demonstrate framing effects in the present study, we will have to reconsider our basic theoretical assumptions, drawing on the work of Bar-Tal (1998). Instead of postulating a linear negative relationship between the degree of involvement and the flexibility of the mental models with which conflict is interpreted, we would have to assume that the relationship is non-linear, with the highest degree of flexibility among moderately involved subjects. There would be less flexibility when the subject is disinterested than when involvement is high.

This explanation is not very plausible, however. At least in the most violent stage of a war, we would expect that those most directly involved and affected will be the most rigid and their mental models the least flexible.

But the situation is different in Israel (as it was also different in Serbia after the fall of Milosevic). Regardless of its failings, Israel has been engaged in a peace process for a dozen years, and it can be assumed that (like many Israelis) the Israeli participants experienced a sort of inner conflict between competing mental models, interpreting the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as either a win-lose or a win-win process.

Both of these models are associated with positive and negative emotions, with emotions of security and threat. The escalation-oriented (win-lose) model permits holding onto the behavioral strategies that preserved the Israeli state during past decades (security), but implies continuing war and violence (threat). The de-escalation oriented (win-win) model promises an end to war and violence (security), but implies a change in behavioral strategies whose effectiveness in guaranteeing the survival of Israel has not yet been demonstrated (threat).

Taking this into account, we may assume that the framing effects observed in the Israeli study were due to the selective activation of these different mental models by different frames.

To the German Ss, on the other hand, only one (if any) mental model was available. Since they are not directly affected by the conflict, they simply tried to understand the Israeli-Palestinian conflict one way or another and – due to the lessons of the Third Reich ("No more war, no more fascism") – they tended to interpret the conflict within a de-escalation oriented (win-win) model.

In the author's opinion, this is the most plausible explanation of the differences between the Israeli and the German findings, and we may summarize the results of our study by formulating two further hypotheses that should be addressed in a cross-cultural study:

1. News recipients do not always have a mental model. Consequently the influence of political news is not solely dependent on their having a particular kind of mental model, but also on whether they have such a model at all.
2. The influence of framing is mediated by the activation of different mental models and, therefore, should be the strongest in cases where competing mental models are available to recipients.

If we proceed from these assumptions, we arrive at similar prognoses as Zaller (1992), who explains contradictory findings on the linkage between political sophistication and susceptibility to being influenced by media frames with a two-step model of attitude change: While information absorption (Step 1) is a positive function of prior knowledge, dissonant frames are only rejected (Step 2) if the subject disposes of sufficient prior knowledge to recognize dissonance. Consequently, subjects with the greatest previous knowledge are simultaneously both those most likely to absorb information and those least likely to be influenced by it, so that a curvilinear relationship arises between prior knowledge and attitude change: Subjects with moderate prior knowledge will be the most strongly influenced, because they are more likely to absorb information than those with little prior knowledge and also because they are more likely to be persuaded than subjects with more prior knowledge.

The above-formulated hypotheses make Zaller's model more specific, in the sense that: (1) information is only absorbed to the extent that it is meaningful, which requires, on one side, a certain amount of prior knowledge, and, on the other side, the availability of a mental model in the light of which information can be interpreted. (2) While the same preconditions also apply for the rejection of dissonant frames incompatible with the respective mental model, an additional presupposition is also added for susceptibility to being influenced by dissonant frames: the availability of an alternative mental model which is congruent with this frame. (3) The availability of alternative models is inversely proportional to how strongly the respective model is both supported by knowledge and emotionally anchored.

Recipients' susceptibility to being influenced is therefore a function of not only their previous knowledge, but also their emotional ambivalence regarding the issue of concern.

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