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Is there peace within Islamic fundamentalists? When Islamic fundamentalism moderates the effect of meta-belief of friendship on positive perceptions and trust toward outgroup

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Article Info

Abstract

On the basis that religious fundamentalists have a strong bond to their religion, we hypothesized that Islamic fundamentalism would moderate the effect of ingroup meta-belief of friendship on positive perceptions and trust on Christians. The results of the research involving 147 Muslim participants showed that the effect of ingroup meta-belief of friendship on positive perception and trust was significant among participants with high Islamic fundamentalism. It indicates that Islamic fundamentalists may become the ones who stand at the forefront to build a good relationship with other religions when they think their religion sees a particular outgroup as friendly.

Introduction

More than half a century ago, Allport (1954) introduced the contact hypothesis which suggested that contact between members of different groups leads to create positive intergroup relations. For the record, however, there are certain conditions for the potency of intergroup contact to increase positive intergroup relations. In short, one of these successful conditions is by making meaningful and repeated cross-group friendship. Previous studies have documented extensive evidence to the development of cross-group friendship in reducing prejudice as well as in increasing positive perceptions on outgroups (Pettigrew, 1997; Van Dick et al., 2004; Wright, Aron, McLaughlin-Volpe, & Ropp, 1997). Even in the context where the relationship between ingroup and outgroup has a long history of conflicts, such as between the Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland, building close friendship with other groups may reduce anxiety of intergroup interactions (Paolini, Hewstone, Cairns, & Voci, 2004). Moreover, other research conducted by Husnu and Crisp (2010) found that in the context where intergroup contact is unlikely or less, Turkish Cypriot participants who repeatedly imagined positive contact with Greek Cypriots demonstrated greater intentions to engage in future contact.

A question arises as to whether the success of intergroup friendship can be applied to Islamic fundamentalists; whether or not Islamic fundamentalists can be influenced to have positive perceptions on outgroup members. The present study extends the works of intergroup friendship ideas by proposing that beliefs that ingroup members seeing ingroup and outgroup as friendly in high Islamic fundamentalists may increase positive perceptions and trust toward outgroup members. In the following, we will present theoretical explanations of our proposal.

Literature Review

Belief and Meta-Belief

A belief is a unit of knowledge that is "often labeled as an idea, cognition, thought, or opinion…" which "may refer to any object, attribute, or relationship between them in varying levels of complexity. Beliefs are held by individuals; their contents, however, are not only significant for themselves as individuals, but also for groups in which they are members." (Bar-Tal, 1990, pp. 11−12).

According to Bar-Tal (1990) beliefs can be differentiated into three types, which are personal beliefs, common beliefs, and group beliefs. Personal beliefs are unique to individuals where the representation of the belief is private. Group beliefs are considered to be shared by group members for whom these beliefs may provide the core description of group identity, values, ideology, norms, tradition, history, goals, or myths. Moreover, common beliefs are units of knowledge that can be shared by family members, organization members, friends, members of a society, or even by humans globally. In this regard, group beliefs are understood as a small portion of common beliefs (Bar-Tal, 1990).

As people have a perspective-taking ability (Goldstein, Vezich, & Shapiro, 2014; Long & Andrews, 1990; Quintana, Ybarra, Gonzalez-Doupe & De Baessa, 2000), which is the ability to look at things from another's point of view, individuals are able to differentiate between their personal beliefs and others' beliefs. They also may categorize which beliefs are in line with their values as well as with their own group values. In this sense, individuals are, then, able to know what others believe in (Putra, 2014, 2016). To this point, we call this mechanism of beliefs as meta-belief.

Taking into account group stereotypes, people who have lived for a long period in a particular context can differentiate between their own stereotypes and the society or the majority group stereotypes toward a particular group. Augoustinos and Rosewarne's (2001) study found that the ability to differentiate between personal beliefs and other beliefs emerges from childhood, at around 8−9 years old.

It has been demonstrated by Putra (2014) that people's beliefs about how their ingroup sees a particular outgroup and how their ingroup is perceived by outgroup play a key role in influencing intergroup relations and perceptions. In the context of prejudice, Putra's study showed that ingroup meta-prejudice (how group members believe that their own group negatively sees particular outgroups) and outgroup meta-prejudice (what group members think outgroup members negatively think of their own ingroup) were strong predictors of prejudice. On the other hand, it was found that ingroup meta-prejudice mediated the effect of outgroup meta-prejudice on prejudice.

In another study, Putra (2016) showed that the effects of ingroup and outgroup meta-prejudice on prejudice were moderated by ingroup self-evaluation. Ingroup self-evaluation is perceptions of ingroup members toward their own group, whether negative of positive. The findings revealed that under the condition of high (but not low) positive ingroup self-evaluation, ingroup and outgroup meta-prejudice tend to be strongly related to prejudice.

Putting the findings from Putra's studies (2014, 2016) and relating them to the context of intergroup friendship, it is plausible that ingroup and outgroup meta-belief of friendship—which is how individuals believe their ingroup sees particular outgroup as friendly, and how individuals view that outgroup members see ingroup members as friendly—can be a strong factor to predict positive perceptions and trust toward outgroup.

Religious Fundamentalism and the Way They Perceive Others

The emergence of religious terrorism in the past decade has sparked an interest in the social sciences (Bandura, 2004; Kruglanski & Fishman, 2009; Moghaddam, 2006, 2008). Previous studies have suggested that religious fundamentalism contributes to religious terrorism and violence (Pech & Slade, 2006; Taylor & Horgan, 2001). Religious fundamentalists are those who are fanatical regarding their religion. They believe their religious norms and values as well as their sacred text are the absolute truth (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1992; Hood, Hill, & Williamson, 2005). Usually, violent acts performed by religious fundamentalists are based on a holy book which supports acts of violence in specific contexts where the condition is interpreted as a state of war.

Because of the fanaticism with religion, religious fundamentalists tend to have a high ingroup favoritism (Johnson, Rowatt, & LaBouff, 2012) and a high sense of union (Putra & Sukabdi, 2013). They also have a greater tendency to help ingroup members and someone they know (Galen, 2012); in an intergroup conflict context, participation to help will be stronger if it also stimulates a sense of collective victimhood (Bar-Tal, Chernyak-Hai, Schori, & Gundar, 2009; Schori-Eya, Halperin, & Bar-Tal, 2014). For example, in the case of inter-religious conflict in Indonesia, the conflicts that occurred in Ambon and Poso between Muslims and Christians triggered a number of Muslims from other regions in Indonesia to voluntarily participate in fighting against Christian groups (Putra & Sukabdi, 2014). In the Israel−Palestine conflict, the same phenomenon is occurring, where many Muslims from other countries are getting involved in assisting Palestine to fight Israel.

To some extent, a question arises as to whether there is a condition that may cause religious fundamentalists to have positive perceptions toward other religious members. At this point, we see that a strong bond and a high ingroup favoritism (for example, religious fanaticism) among religious fundamentalists can be a useful tool to lead their perceptions toward outgroups. It seems plausible that when religious fundamentalists see their group perceive an outgroup as friendly, they can be the ones who stand at the forefront to positively perceive and trust the outgroup.

The Present Study

We focused on the phenomenon of religious fundamentalism in Indonesia, particularly Islamic fundamentalism. In Indonesia, Islamic fundamentalist groups have

been connected to terrorism and violence (Putra & Sukabdi, 2013, 2014). Therefore, testing our predictions in Indonesia is considered relevant. There are at least 6 religions which are recognized by the State, with Islam being the largest, followed by Christianity. Historically, conflicts between Muslims and Christians have been higher in terms of numbers, compared to between Muslims and other religions. In our study, we limited the target of religious groups to Christian groups.

On the basis that religious fundamentalists have a strong bond to their religion, we hypothesized that Islamic fundamentalism would moderate the effect of ingroup meta-belief of friendship on positive perceptions (hypothesis 1) and trust (hypothesis 2) on Christians. With regard to outgroup meta-belief as a predictor, Islamic fundamentalism would moderate the effect of outgroup meta-belief of friendship on positive perceptions (hypothesis 3) and trust (hypothesis 4) on Christians. Moreover, as non-fundamentalists (also called religious moderates) tend to see other religious group members to be positive, we predict that at a low level of Islamic fundamentalism, the effect of ingroup/outgroup meta-belief of friendship on positive perceptions (hypothesis 1a; hypothesis 3a) and trust (hypothesis 2a; hypothesis 4a) on Christians would not be significant, as the level of positive perceptions and trust had been found high either at the low or high level of ingroup meta-belief of friendship. On the other hand, at a high level of Islamic fundamentalism, we predict that ingroup/outgroup meta-belief of friendship would be significantly related to positive perceptions (hypothesis 1b; hypothesis 3b) and trust (hypothesis 2b; hypothesis 4b) to Christians.

Method

Participants and Procedure

Muslim students from the State Islamic University of Yogyakarta (UIN Sunan Kalijaga) and University of Gadjah Mada were approached to participate in the study, presented as research about religion and society in Indonesia. The questionnaire was in the Indonesian language. One hundred forty-seven Muslim students living around Yogyakarta, participated in the study (male = 93, female = 54) aged from 17 to 32 years (M = 20.780; 11 did not report their age). The participants took part in this research voluntarily, in exchange for no rewards. Upon finishing the questionnaire, participants were debriefed.

Measures

The study used four measurements which will be described further. The measurements used 6-point scales. Scales were created by averaging the items.

Islamic Fundamentalism

To test religious fundamentalism in Islam, we used the Islamic fundamentalism scale developed by Putra and Sukabdi (2014). It consists of nine items (examples are "The Quran is the perfect guidance so no one should question any of its element" and "Only by applying the Prophet Muhammad's governmental system will people find prosperity"); the participants were asked to respond within the range of either disagree or agree to the statements in each item. The scale reported as strongly reliable, $\alpha = .753$ (corrected item–total correlations ranged between .477 and .709).

Ingroup Meta-Belief of Friendship

We used one item of a bipolar adjective scale ("Do you think that in Indonesia Muslims perceive Christians as…"), that is, hostile versus friendly, taken from one part of a six-item, meta-prejudice scale developed by Putra (2014, 2016).

Trust of Christians

We measured trustworthiness of the outgroup using one item of a bipolar adjective scale to respond to whether outgroup Christians are threatening or trustworthy ("you think a Christian is…") adopted from Wagner et al. (2010).

Positive Perceptions Toward Christians

To measure positive perceptions toward Christians, we used four items created by the authors for the present study (see appendix for detailed items). The scale obtained a reliable scale, $\alpha = .804$ (corrected item–total correlations ranged between .575 and .736).

Results

Preliminary Analysis

The mean score of ingroup meta-belief of friendship was 4.248 (SD = 1.090); trust on Christians was 3.939 (SD = 1.142); positive perceptions toward Christians was 4.499 (SD = .770). Inspection of independent *t*-tests showed that no sex differences occurred on all key variables, except on Islamic fundamentalism (t (134) = .2614, $p < .005$) where the score of female (M = 4.479, SD = 1.1017) was higher than male (M = 3.944, SD = 1.172). In doing so, we decided to include gender differences as a control variable in the moderated regression analysis.

Moderated Regression Analysis

In this section, we first present the role of Islamic fundamentalism in moderating the effect of ingroup meta-belief of friendship on positive perceptions and trust, and afterward, the role of Islamic fundamentalism in moderating the effect of outgroup meta-belief of friendship on positive perceptions and trust. To examine the role of Islamic fundamentalism in moderating the effect of ingroup meta-belief of friendship on positive perceptions and trust, we used the Probing Interaction Procedure as suggested by Hayes and Matthes (2009). To avoid the effect of multicollinearity, all predictors were mean centered. In the analysis of moderated regression, ingroup meta-belief of friendship (focal predictor/F), Islamic fundamentalism (moderator/M), and their cross product (F × M) were entered as predictors in predicting positive perceptions and trust.

Putting positive perceptions as the dependent variable, the overall analysis resulted in a significant regression equation (R^2 = .182, F (4, 127) = 7.060, p < .001). This analysis also revealed that ingroup meta-belief of friendship and Islamic fundamentalism significantly interacted to affect positive perceptions on Christians (B = .138, SE = .051, t = 2.24, p < .01, 95% CI [.038, .238]). A simple slope analysis (see Figure 1) demonstrated that among participants with low Islamic fundamentalism (-1SD below the mean), ingroup meta-belief of friendship did not significantly predict positive perceptions on Christians (B = −.001, SE = .068, t = −.082, p = .935, 95% CI [-.141, .130]). As shown in Figure 1, it is understandable because the level of positive perceptions on Christians was high at either the low or high level of ingroup meta-belief of friendship. However, the relationship between ingroup meta-belief of friendship and positive perceptions did show a significant effect among participants with high Islamic fundamentalism (+1 SD above the mean; B = .319, SE = .096, t = 3.335, p < .01, 95% CI [.130, .508]). These findings support hypothesis 1 (1a and 1b) in predicting that Islamic fundamentalism moderated the relationship between ingroup meta-belief of friendship and positive perceptions.

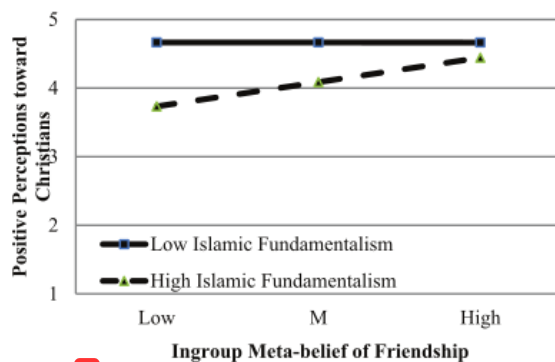Furthermore, putting trust as a dependent variable, the general analysis resulted in a significant regression equation (R^2 = .251, F(4, 130) = 10.882, p < .001). The interaction effect between ingroup meta-belief of friendship and Islamic fundamentalism was also significant (B = .147, SE = .061, t = 2.403, p < .05, 95% CI [.026, .269]). A simple slope analysis (Figure 2) revealed that among participants with high Islamic fundamentalism, ingroup meta-belief of friendship was significant and higher in predicting trust (+1 SD above the mean; B = .591, SE = .115, t = 5.148, p < .001, 95% CI [.364, .818]) than among participants with low Islamic fundamentalism (−1 SD above the mean; B = .252, SE = .091, t = 2.760, p < .01, 95% CI [.071, .432]). As seen in Figure 2, the results explain the level of trust of Christians was high at either the low or high level of ingroup meta-belief of friendship. Overall, these findings corroborated hypothesis 2 (2a & 2b), specifying that Islamic fundamentalism moderated the relationship between ingroup meta-belief of friendship and trust on Christians.

Subsequently, we examined the role of Islamic fundamentalism in moderating the effect of outgroup meta-belief of friendship on positive perceptions and trust. The results revealed that Islamic fundamentalism did not significantly moderate the effect of outgroup meta-belief of friendship on positive perceptions (B = .55, SE = .05, t = 1.17, p = .24, 95% CI [.65, −.36]) and trust (B = −.03, SE = .19, t = −.15, p = .51, 95% CI [.51, −.08]). The results, thus, did not provide support for hypothesis 3 and hypothesis 4. We will elaborate on these findings in the discussion section.

Discussion

The present study examined the role of ingroup and outgroup meta-belief of friendship and Islamic fundamentalism on positive perceptions and trust on Christians. The findings demonstrated the moderating role of Islamic fundamentalism taking on the effect of ingroup meta-belief of friendship on positive perception and trust. Thus, the findings provided evidence for our hypotheses 1 and 2. As seen from the result section, non-Islamic fundamentalists were consistently found to see other religious members as more positive whereas Islamic fundamentalists positively see other religious group members only when they perceive fellow group members as having positive perceptions toward other religious members.

Figure 1 The effect of ingroup meta-belief of friendship on positive perceptions toward Christians among participants with low and high of Islamic fundamentalism
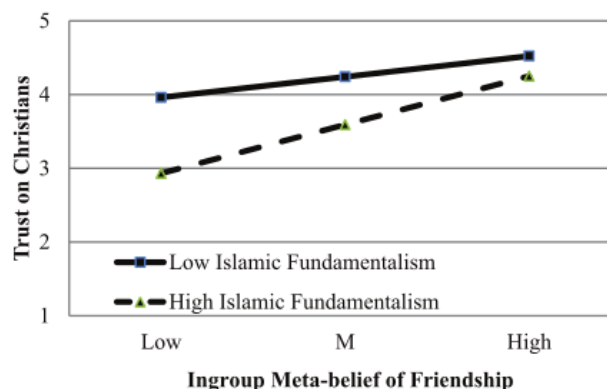

Figure 2 The effect of ingroup meta-belief of friendship on trust toward Christians among participants with low and high of Islamic fundamentalism

Several previous studies have shown that Muslims tend to have high scores of religious fundamentalism (Muluk, Sumaktoyo, & Ruth, 2013; Putra & Sukabdi, 2014; Rothschild, Abdollahi, & Pyszcynski, 2009). Even in Indonesia, known as the third largest democratic country, a representative national survey conducted in March 2010 by the Indonesian Survey (in Muluk et al., 2013) reported a similar indication. It seems to indicate that being a fanatic who believes that Islam is the only true religion while regarding other religions as false is a common belief among Muslims. Thus, it likely explains that an attempt to reduce religious fundamentalism in a majority Muslim country will take a lot of effort. In doing so, what is considered realistic and viable is finding a way to make Islamic fundamentalists have a positive perception toward other religions.

The present study provided evidence that the strong bond with Islam can be a useful tool to lead Islamic fundamentalists to have a positive perception and trust toward Christians. Previous studies have demonstrated the conditions in which Islamic fundamentalists may refuse to support violent acts (Putra & Sukabdi, 2013; Rothschild, et al., 2009). However, their findings are limited to an explanation through which religious fundamentalists may support or reject violent acts. It is plausible that in spite of their rejection of the use of violence, they may keep their negative perceptions toward other religions. Likewise, previous studies did not give strong evidence on how religious fundamentalists may support positive perceptions. Thus, the present study has fulfilled the absence of how to influence religious fundamentalists to have positive perceptions toward other religious members without having to change their ideology to be moderate.

Moreover, in the present study we also expected that putting the belief that the outgroup has an intention to build friendship with ingroup members among high identifiers of Islamic fundamentalism also potentially affects positive perceptions (hypothesis 3) and trust (hypothesis 4) toward Christians. However, the findings did not support our expectations. These findings explain that how Islamic fundamentalists see outgroup perceive their ingroup is not influential on how they see outgroups. This means that even when Islamic fundamentalists see outgroup members as friendly, if their ingroup does not see the outgroup as a friend, then their view toward the outgroup will still be negative. This explains why building positive shared knowledge about the outgroup within ingroup members is very important. The effect of positive shared knowledge will lead ingroup members to be more positive in thinking about and interacting with the outgroup.

Even though outgroup meta-belief of friendship did not relate to positive perceptions and trust toward the outgroup in the high condition of Islamic fundamentalism, our findings can lead to an understanding that there are conditions that can make Islamic fundamentalists tolerant to outgroup members. One of those is by making them believe that their religion sees outgroup members as friends. We believe that there are other conditions that can make Islamic fundamentalists to be more tolerant to other groups. Future research is needed to find and test other conditions.

The present study has several implications in shaping a positive outlook of Muslims toward other religions. First, as most Indonesians are required to attend religious classes starting from primary school to university, we suggest that building knowledge and activities about inter-religious friendship can be effective when given in such classes. For example, the teacher can be asked to teach about inter-faith friendship and ask students to make friends across groups and explain positive stories they had. If such further research can be conducted, then it can study how inter-faith friendship and inter-religious harmony can be maintained across generations. Second, as most religious fundamentalists are active in attending weekly religious sermons or propagation, we suggest that it is important that the preachers give a sermon about how to live in harmony among religious groups. Instead of giving a sermon about inter-religious conflict, describing the times when inter-religious harmony existed and may possibly happen seem to be more powerful in leading the congregation to perceive people from other religions as friends or potential friends. We argue that these two suggestions have give positive effects in building positive inter-religious relations in Indonesia and can be implemented in other countries as well.

Conclusion

The present study has answered questions on when and how religious fundamentalists may potentially support positive perceptions and trust toward other religions. We have provided evidence that ingroup belief of friendship will highly relate to positive perception and trust on Christians among Muslims with high Islamic fundamentalism. This indicates that when religious fundamentalists believe that their religion has positive perceptions on outgroups, they will be at the forefront in building a relationship with other religions. On this matter, future research is needed to strengthen the present findings and their implication.

Conflict of interest

None declared.

Appendix

Positive perceptions toward Christians scale

1. In my opinion, the presence of Christians in Indonesia brings so many positive sides.
2. I like to make good friends with everyone, even with Christians.
3. The presence of Christians in Indonesia is truly beneficial for Muslims.
4. The presence of Christians in Indonesia brings more positives than negatives.

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