



**It is wrong to hurt him even if he is a Jew- an experiment in changing hostile normative beliefs about Jews among Muslim youth.**

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Three events have caused concern among moderate Muslims regarding attitudes and perceptions towards other religions; September 11, July 2005 and the recent cartoon controversy. This concern has provided motivation for an inter-faith dialogue initiated by a small group of Pakistani, American and British scholars and clergy but the efforts to change the beliefs among general population have been minimum. The reason for this lack of initiative can be located in the attitude of the Muslim psychologists themselves who support the same stereotypes and biases as general public. Particularly the most hostile and negative perceptions are found for Jews not only in media but in the content analysis of group discussions in Psychology class (Amjad, 2005). Furthermore this is a sensitive area and anyone, psychologist or policy maker advocating a positive view of Jews is suspect at best and an agent at the worst. An experiment was designed to explore the possibility of modifying normative beliefs about aggression towards Jews through modifying the perceptions of Jews. A preliminary test of perceptions of Jews was carried out in a Psychology classroom. Students (10 males, 20 females) were asked to write the first word that came to their mind when names of different nationalities and religious groups were flashed on screen. It was found that most negative adjectives were associated with Jews (evil, conspiring, mean, shrewd, enemy) as compared to other groups. Extremely negative adjectives were also associated with Hindus but to a lesser degree than Jews. Following this an experimental study was designed to test the assumption that the perceptions of Jews are associated with the sanction of aggression against Jews. A further assumption was that providing positive historical information on Jews can decrease negative perceptions of Jews and also decrease normative beliefs sanctioning aggression against Jews. The study was quasi-experimental in nature; a talk had already been announced by a Psychology visiting Professor on Perceptions of Jews among Muslims as part of the annual Mental Health week in the Government College University, Lahore, Pakistan. The perceptions were assessed through a ten item measure designed for the study. The sanction of aggression was measured through an 8-item scale. An additional measure was a consent form for enlisting as a member of Muslim Youth Army (a fictitious organization). The sanction and perceptions questionnaires were given to the participants (42 post-graduate students, less than half of the total people who attended the talk) before and after the talk. The consent form was only given after the talk to participants and also to a control group randomly selected from the students' cafeteria. The talk addressed following points: cordial relations between Jews and Muslims in time of Prophet Muhammad, sharing of knowledge between Muslim and Jew scholars in history, Muslims and Jews both as descendents of Abraham, and a history of victimization of Jews. The analyses confirmed that negative perceptions of Jews were associated with sanction of aggression against Jews. The negative perceptions showed a significant decrease after the talk however the difference in pre and post talk sanction of aggression was only marginally significant. The most intriguing finding was that the experimental group was less willing to enlist for a Muslim Youth Army than the control group. These results suggest that a long-term intervention using positive and empathetic information may help reduce the perceptions and beliefs against Jews among Muslims although this process may take more than one generation.