

COMPETITIVE VICTIMHOOD AND JUSTIFYING VIOLENCE

**Threatened Hence Justified: Jewish Israelis' Use of Competitive Victimhood to
Justify Violence Against Palestinians**

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Abstract

We theorized that competitive victimhood – the tendency to see one’s ingroup as having suffered more than the outgroup as a result of a prolonged conflict– may function strategically as a psychological mechanism to justify violent actions against the outgroup under high (versus low) realistic threat. Focusing on the Jewish-Israeli perspective in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the present study supports this argument by demonstrating the positive relationship between competitive victimhood and justifying both direct and structural violence against Palestinians following high (vs. low) realistic threat. Theoretical and applied implications for conflict resolution are discussed.

Keywords: Competitive victimhood, Direct violence, Integrated threat theory, Structural violence, Threat

Threatened Hence Justified: Jewish Israelis' Use of Competitive Victimhood to Justify Violence Against Palestinians

Societies involved in protracted conflicts are forced to live under challenging conditions often characterized by violence, physical danger, and loss of life (Bar-Tal, 2013; Oren & Bar-Tal, 2006). A consequence of these conditions is that conflicting group members view their ingroup as the *only* legitimate victims, while deeming the adversarial group as the illegitimate perpetrators of unjust and immoral injustices (Bar-Tal, Chernyak-Hai, Schori, & Gundar, 2009; Noor, Brown, Gonzalez, Manzi, & Lewis, 2008; Noor, Brown, & Prentice, 2008). The tendency to see one's own group having suffered more than the harmed outgroup can be psychologically powerful and lead to maintaining the conflict. This phenomenon, coined as competitive victimhood (CV; Noor, Shnabel, Halabi, & Nadler, 2012) and considered as a common form of conflict-specific exclusive victim consciousness (i.e., individuals' narrow focus on how their group has suffered in distinct and unique ways; Vollhardt, 2015, Vollhardt & Bilali, 2015; see also Noor, Vollhardt, Mari, & Nadler, 2017), has been shown to predict anti-social and anti-conciliatory intergroup outcomes in violent conflicts (i.e., physically harming other groups with intent) but also in structural conflicts (i.e., harming others as a result of systematic inequalities and injustices in society) across the world, such as Northern Ireland, the Middle East, Chile, and the U.S. (Noor, Brown, Gonzalez, et al., 2008; Noor et al., 2008; Shnabel, Halabi, & Noor, 2013; Sullivan, Landau, Branscombe, and Rothschild, 2012). Although there is a growing body of empirical work about the impact of CV on intergroup relations (Noor et al., 2012; Young & Sullivan, 2016), little is known about what motivates conflicting groups to engage in CV, especially in contexts of asymmetrical intergroup power relations and where conflicting groups are motivated to restore their power and

morality (Kahlon, Shnabel, Halabi, & Simantov-Nachleili, 2019). The present paper focuses on addressing this question from the perspective of the Jewish Israelis who in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict constitute the high-power side with superior access to military and economic powers, among others (Levanon & Raviv, 2007).

Competing over victimhood status may appear paradoxical, especially when considered from the high-power group's perspective. This paradox is apparent given that victimhood is typically associated with low agency, stigma, and humiliation (Gray & Wegner, 2009; Lindner, 2006; Noor et al., 2017). From this perspective, it may appear particularly odd for high-power groups to engage in CV. Past research has partially addressed this paradox by indicating that CV may serve both high- and low-power groups as a strategy to protect their ingroup from being accused of moral wrongdoings. Sullivan and colleagues (2012) showed that both, for example, men and women utilized CV when their respective ingroups were being accused of injustice, such as discrimination. In other words, these researchers demonstrated that CV may serve as a strategy to protect and restore the threatened moral identity of groups following accusations that they may have harmed other groups unjustly.

Notwithstanding the validity of this research, in the present study we argue that to guard against symbolic threat to one's moral identity is only one motivational source for group to engage in CV. In contexts of intergroup conflict marked by direct violence, however, realistic threats to one's person, family, and ingroup may constitute yet another important motivation for groups to compete over their victimhood. Indeed, because of the tangible nature of realistic threat, the suffering of one's own ingroup may not only appear as real and imminent, but such suffering in turn may also lead to perceptions of the outgroup as the provocateurs who are

deserving of ingroup's wrath and subsequent punitiveness (Noor et al., 2008). Past research has also investigated factors that might facilitate the reduction of CV. For example, Shnabel and colleagues (2013) demonstrated the importance of common shared victimhood – the notion that both conflicting groups have suffered equally – reduced both Israelis and Palestinians' tendency to engage in competitive victimhood and, in turn, lead to increased intergroup reconciliation attitudes. Similarly, Adelman, Leidner, Ünal, Nahhas and Shnabel (2016) showed that exposure to an inclusive narrative that acknowledged both ingroup and outgroup's suffering led a reduction in competitive victimhood and, in turn, reduced support for aggressive policies—but only when people were relatively less concerned that acknowledgment of outgroup suffering might risk loss of third-party support. We acknowledge the novel contributions of past literature, and intend to extend it in the current study by examining a factor (i.e., realistic threat) that may feed the need for competitive victimhood and fuel aggression against the outgroup.

Put differently, the present study expands past research by testing the notion that realistic threat may motivate high-power groups (Israeli Jews) to engage in CV, which in turn may motivate them to justify punitive, “no-choice” actions against their low-power outgroup (Palestinians). It is worth noting that our focus was on realistic threat because of the nature of our chosen research context, namely the ongoing violent intergroup conflict between Israel and Palestine. We reasoned that realistic threat would be a particularly relevant variable to influence competitive victimhood perceptions because such realistic threat would make the salience of harm inflicted by the outgroup on the ingroup potentially more real and tangible. Moreover, we expected that such tangible threats to the self, one's family, and ingroup members, would likely cloud and distort individuals' perception of their ingroup suffering in

spite of belonging to the high-powered side of the conflict and having inflicted more disproportionate harm onto the outgroup, thereby inducing competitive victimhood. To test this, we report an experiment in which we manipulated realistic threat and subsequently measured its effect on Israeli-Jewish participants' motivation for CV, as well as their endorsement of punitive actions against Palestinians.

According to integrated threat theory (ITT; Stephan & Stephan, 1985; 2000; Stephan, Renfro, & Davis, 2008), threat emanates from experiencing a challenge to one's goals and well-being. Reactions towards such threats are predominantly negative. Threat at the individual and intergroup levels may invoke negative behaviors towards its source that range from aggression, hostility and discrimination to warfare and other forms of open conflict (Stephan, et al., 2008; Stephan, Ybarra, Rios, 2015). ITT distinguishes between different categories of threat. Realistic threat typically involves risk of harm to one's physical well-being (e.g., physical attack and death), while symbolic threat poses harm to one's psychological well-being (e.g., anxiety, negative expectations, and uncertainty). Crucially, according to meta-analytical evidence, each type of threat uniquely predicts negative reactions toward the individuals and groups closely associated with the source of threat (Riek, Mania, & Gaertner, 2006). Although the relationship between threat and negative responses has been extensively studied (Stephan & Stephan, 2017), the current research focuses on CV, a relatively new construct, as a possible mechanism which may mediate this relationship between realistic threat and high-power group members' support for future punitiveness against the low-power group.

Indeed, past research has reported correlational evidence in support of the positive association between perceptions of victimization and threat against the ingroup and its violence towards the outgroup. For example, Bar-Tal and Antebi's

(1992) correlational study, conducted among Israelis, showed that increased threat and victimization perceptions were significantly and positively associated with exacerbating attitudes towards the conflict. That is, when feeling threatened, the high power group members, Jewish-Israelis, reported more fear and more de-legitimization of the Palestinians and their leaders, and, importantly, reported more tendency for self-perception of victimhood (see also Bar-Tal & Sharvit, 2008). Likewise, again among Israelis, perceived vulnerability of the ingroup was significantly and positively associated with support for extreme military actions against Palestinians in the West Bank (Maoz & Eidelson, 2007). Although the reviewed research is correlational, it does highlight that actual physical threat to one's group may foster an increased awareness regarding the collective belief that the ingroup has suffered more than the outgroup, and such threat may also predict support for future violence against the latter.

Building on past theorizing and research, the present work we pursued several aims. First, we intended to experimentally test that realistic threat might induce the high-power group with an increased sense of CV. Second, we also wanted to examine and replicate that realistic threat would lead to the endorsement and justification of harsh retaliatory aggression (Stephan et al., 2015). Third, a further contribution of the present work focused on investigating whether increased tendency for competitive victimhood might serve as a mediating mechanism in the relationship between realistic threat and justification of aggression against the outgroup. The present work was also informed by Galtung's (1969) differentiation of different forms of aggression and violence. That is, Galtung differentiates between *structural* violence-causing people harm by preventing them from meeting their basic needs - and *direct* violence- where conflicting groups repeatedly aggress against each other physically.

Based on this differentiation, we tested our predictions by operationalizing punitiveness in terms of structural as well as direct violent actions against the outgroup.

Method

Participants

One-hundred and sixty-one Israeli Jews (84 women and 77 men) were recruited through advertisements in various social media, using a convenience sampling method. Data of all participants were retained and used for the analysis resulting in zero exclusion. Ranging in age between 20 and 68 ($M = 27.67$), the participants were randomly assigned to one of the two conditions of high ($n = 75$) versus low ($n = 86$) threat. Our power analysis indicated (based on an *a priori* statistical power analysis using G*Power version 3.1; Faul, Erdfelder, Buchner, & Lang, 2009) that the model we intended to test required a sample size of $N = 128$ to detect medium-sized effects, $f = .25$ (Cohen, 1988) with 80% power and an alpha level of .05 (two-tailed). Thus, we had good power to test our key predictions.

Procedure

Participants were invited to complete an online survey about intergroup relations between Jews in Israel and Palestinians. In order to manipulate threat, participants in the high-threat condition were instructed in the following way:

“describe in your own words what you remember and how you felt, from a recent security situation in which you experienced threat (such as the 2014 Gaza War also called “Operation Protective Edge”, or the 2008-9 Gaza War, “Operation Cast Lead”, or any other military operation), and how this situation affected your daily life, your family and Israelis as a group”.

In contrast, participants in the low-threat condition were asked to “please try to recall a security situation in which you did not feel threatened or endangered and how this situation did not affect your daily life, your family and Israelis as a group”.

Measures

Following the realistic threat manipulation, participants filled out a series of measures, using a 7-point scale (1 = *totally disagree* to 7 = *totally agree*).

Manipulation check for Threat. To assess the effect of manipulation of realistic threat, participants indicated their agreement, on a 7-point scale, with the statements: (a) “following the recollection of that specific incident, to what extent you felt then that your life was in danger?”; and (b) “following the recollection of that specific incident, to what extent you experienced then stress and mental fatigue?” Although items were correlated ($r = .701, p < .001$), we examined the effect of the threat manipulation separately for each. We did so because, on face-value, the first item measured the impact of the manipulation on realistic threat more directly, whereas the second item focused more specifically on tapping psychological threat¹.

Competitive victimhood. Adapted from Shnabel et al. (2013), ten items on 7-point scale measured participants' competitive victimhood. In particular, participants were instructed, “indicate your agreement with the statement that Jews in Israel suffered greater injustice compared to Palestinians with regard to: physical suffering, number of casualties, psychological trauma, emotional pain, human rights, dignity, threats to their safety, stigma, economic loss, and political isolation”. Ratings were averaged to obtain a single measure of Competitive Victimhood (CV; Cronbach's $\alpha = .94$), with higher scores reflecting more engagement in CV.

Justification of structural violence against Palestinians. Participants, on 7-point scale, were instructed, “please indicate to what extent you endorse and justify

the following actions” (a) actions that could disrupt Palestinians’ daily lives, (b) actions that would require organizations such as the Red Cross to take action, (c) stricter inspections at checkpoints, (d) restrictions on maritime transportation, (e) imposing a total maritime closure, (f) imposing restrictions on supplying electricity, (g) restricting commerce, (h) restricting free movement in Palestinian areas, (i) house demolitions, (j) and banning demonstrations. These items were created based on the real-life punitive measures that Palestinians have endured, for example, in Gaza (B’Tselem, 2017). Ratings for all ten items were averaged to obtain a single measure of level of justification for structural violent actions against Palestinians with higher scores reflecting more justification (Cronbach’s $\alpha=.95$).

Justification of direct violence against Palestinians. Participants were asked, “report your agreement with the following statements”. The three statements represented severe, direct violent actions taken by Israeli forces against Palestinians (“Military action that could cause injuries”; “Military action that could cause loss of human life”; and “ Military action that could cause anxiety and PTSD reactions among civilians”). Similar to the structural violence actions, these items were created based on the real-life punitive measures that Palestinians have endured, for example, in Gaza (B’Tselem, 2017). Ratings for all three items were averaged to obtain a single measure of justification of direct violent actions against Palestinians with higher scores reflecting greater endorsement of such actions (Cronbach’s $\alpha=.95$).

Next, participants indicated their ethnicity, gender, age and political orientation; they were then thanked and debriefed.

Results

In order to examine the main effect of the realistic threat manipulation on the dependent measures, we conducted a series of the independent t-tests.

Preliminary Analysis

Threat manipulation check. Supporting the manipulation of realistic threat, analysis revealed that participants in the high realistic threat condition agreed more strongly to the statement that their personal safety was endangered than did participants in the low realistic threat condition, $M_{\text{high_threat}} = 3.64$ ($SD = 1.34$) vs. $M_{\text{low_threat}} = 2.16$ ($SD = 1.65$), $t(159) = 6.15$, $p = .001$, $d = .98$, 95% CIs [2.58, 3.11]. Further and as intended, participants assigned to the high realistic threat condition experienced greater stress than participants in the low realistic threat condition, $M_{\text{high_threat}} = 4.81$ ($SD = 1.67$) vs. $M_{\text{low_threat}} = 2.61$ ($SD = 1.85$), $t(159) = 8.58$, $p = .001$, $d = 1.24$, 95% CIs [3.32, 3.93].

Main Analysis

Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations and correlations of key variables.

Competitive victimhood. As expected, an independent t-test revealed that participants in the high realistic threat condition engaged significantly more in CV than did participants in the low realistic threat condition, $M_{\text{high_threat}} = 4.12$ ($SD = 1.30$) vs. $M_{\text{low_threat}} = 3.41$ ($SD = 1.54$), $t(159) = 3.10$, $p = .002$, $d = .49$, 95% CIs [3.51, 3.97].

Justification of structural violence. As predicted, analysis also revealed that participants in the high realistic threat condition endorsed structural violent actions significantly more than did participants in the low realistic threat condition, $M_{\text{high_threat}} = 4.50$ ($SD = 1.40$) vs. $M_{\text{low_threat}} = 3.95$ ($SD = 1.56$), $t(159) = 2.30$, $p = .023$, $d = .36$, 95% CIs [3.97, 4.44].

Justification of direct violence. Analysis revealed that there was no significant main effect of the threat manipulation on endorsing direct violent actions,

$M_{\text{high_threat}} = 2.73$ ($SD = 1.71$) vs. $M_{\text{low_threat}} = 2.72$ ($SD = 1.88$), $t(159) = .046$, $p = .964$, $d = .01$, 95% CIs [2.45, 3.01].

Mediational Analysis

Next, using the PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2012; Model 4), we tested for the hypothesized indirect path from the independent variable of threat, with the high (vs. low) realistic threat condition predicting increased engagement in CV (the proposed mediator), and this increased engagement in CV predicting greater support for structural violence against Palestinians (the dependent variable in the model; see Figure 1). The results of a bootstrapping mediation analysis (10,000 resamples) revealed, as predicted, the indirect effect of the realistic threat manipulation on support for structural violence against Palestinians through increased engagement in CV, $\beta = .47$ ($SE = .15$), $CI_{95} = [0.191, 0.786]$ (i.e., zero was not included in the 95% confidence interval).

Although no main condition effect was observed on endorsing and justifying direct violent actions, in an exploratory analysis (see Muller, Judd, & Yzerbyt, 2005) we examined the sequence in which induced threat (independent variable) would increase engagement in CV, which in turn would increase participants' support for direct violence against Palestinians (the dependent variable; see Figure 2). The results of a bootstrapping mediation analysis (10,000 resamples) revealed the indirect effect of the realistic threat manipulation on support for direct war actions, through CV engagement, $\beta = .42$ ($SE = .14$), $CI_{95} = [0.160, 0.750]$ (i.e., zero was not included in the 95% confidence interval)².

Discussion

Building on Noor and colleagues (2012) theorizing, the present research identified and tested realistic threat as a potent antecedent of intergroup competitive

victimhood. We reasoned that high-power groups would be motivated to compete with their low-power adversarial groups over their share of suffering following the salience of high (vs. low) realistic threat. The present findings lend support for this line of reasoning in the regional violent conflict between Israeli Jews and Palestinians. That is, as hypothesized, when Israeli-Jewish participants recalled a situation in which they felt endangered due to the ongoing regional war (vs. recalling a security situation in which they did not feel threatened), participants were more motivated to engage in CV and justify structural (but not direct) violence. Evidence was also found in support of CV mediating the relationship between threat and justification of structural violence on the one hand. Moreover, we also observed an indirect (but not total) effect between participant's threat perceptions and their justification for direct violence via CV. These results constitute an important contribution to the literature in that they not only integrate different disparate literatures (threat, competitive victimhood, and power/status) but also highlight the importance of realistic threat which to-date has not received sufficient attention in studies focusing on CV. Moreover, to our knowledge, past research has mainly focused on identifying CV's psychological consequences for intergroup relations and has therefore neglected to investigate its potential antecedents (for exceptions see a correlational study conducted in Kosovo by Andrighetto, Mari, & Volpato, & Behluli, 2012 and the experimental work conducted in the Middle East by Adelman et al., 2016 and Shnabel et al., 2013). The present study addressed this gap. Unlike recent research on minority or low-power groups reporting that CV reflected a strategic effort to empower and mobilize the ingroup (SimanTov-Nachlieli, Shnabel, & Halabi, 2016), the current research revealed that engagement in CV among Israeli Jews was associated with adopting a "helpless victim" stance to justify and endorse both structural and direct violent actions against

the outgroup. By focusing on Israeli Jews, the high-power group, we also explored the more counter-intuitive element of competitive victimhood, namely; what motivates groups with objectively high-power status to engage in competitive victimhood, such competition is understandable and rather intuitive among lower-power groups.

Another important contribution we make is to provide evidence in support of the mediating role of CV in the relationship between realistic threat and aggressions toward the outgroup. That is, the presents results revealed that the impact of high (vs. low) realistic threat salience on the justification of both structural and direct violent actions were facilitated via CV, albeit for the explicit (direct) violent actions such effects were indirect. One reason for such indirect effects may have been due to the rather explicit wording and nature of the violent actions, which participants may have been reticent to readily endorse. Nonetheless, our findings revealed that once our participants experienced heightened CV due to high threat, they were then even willing to endorse direct violence against the outgroup. Thus, CV appears to play a critical role in releasing high power group members from moral constraints to act aggressively against the outgroup.

The present research bears important practical implications for understanding the mechanisms maintaining prolonged, violent intergroup conflicts. The current study provides important insights into what maintains the cycle of intergroup violence from the high-power group's perspective, namely; heightened realistic threat seems to feed the motivation to engage in CV. In turn, fueled CV predicts why Jewish Israelis justify in structural and direct punitiveness against Palestinians. Hence, an important direction for future research could explore whether acknowledgement of group victimization (Vollhardt, Mazur, & Lemahieu, 2014; see also Adelman et al., 2016) could guard against the adverse consequences of experienced realistic threat,

especially given that threat appears to trigger action tendencies (Frijda, 1994; Frijda, Kuipers, & ter Schure, 1989) such as endorsement of harsh punitive actions against the outgroup, as shown by the current research. That said, acknowledging of high power group's victimization, for example, by a third party may inadvertently cause upset among the low power group, which in turn may lead to further conflict escalation.

Limitations and Future Directions

Whereas the present research focused on showing the impact of realistic threat on competitive victimhood, another important direction for future work would be to identify the impact of symbolic threat, a concern for group's values and belief systems (Stephan et al., 2008), and the extent to which it may less justify actions of both structural and direct violence.

While the focus in the present research was on high power groups, - because of the more counterintuitive nature of high-power groups engaging in CV - future research might still fruitfully consider the impact of different types of threat and engagement in CV in low power group. It may well be the case that threat may affect low-power groups differently in terms of their tendency for competitive victimhood and aggression, relative to what we observed in the present study among a high-powered group.

In sum, our findings demonstrate that realistic threat can serve as a potent antecedent of feeling vulnerable and therefore wanting to engage in competitive victimhood, even if one's group objectively belongs to the high-power group within the intergroup conflict. Fueled with CV, high power group members deem structural and direct violent actions against the low-power group members as legitimate, thereby contributing their share to maintaining the vicious cycle of violence. Unless the

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mechanisms of this cycle—such as CV—are better understood, the possibility to foster a climate of reconciliation, in which compassion and empathy between conflicting groups in the Middle East can develop, will be tragically limited.

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Footnotes

1. Collapsing these two items into a composite scale did not alter the conclusions about the effectiveness of the manipulation that were drawn from treating these items separately, i.e., $M_{\text{high threat}} = 4.22$ ($SD = 1.26$) vs. $M_{\text{low-threat}} = 2.38$ ($SD = 1.52$), $t(159) = 8.25$, $p = .001$, $d = 1.31$.
2. We also tested an alternative indirect path in which threat affects CV engagement through greater support for structural and direct violence against Palestinians. This model showed that threat had an effect on CV only through structural violence, $\beta = .295$ ($SE = .138$), $CI_{95} = [0.015, 0.498]$, but not for direct violence, $\beta = .001$ ($SE = .036$), $CI_{95} = [-.171, 0.119]$.

Table 1. Means, Standard Deviations and Correlations of Measured Variables.

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	(1)	(2)	(3)
(1) Competitive victimhood	3.74	1.47			
(2) Justifications for structural violence against Palestinians	4.21	1.51	.662**	-	
(3) Justification for direct violence against Palestinians	2.73	1.79	.461**	.576**	-

Note. $N = 161$. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

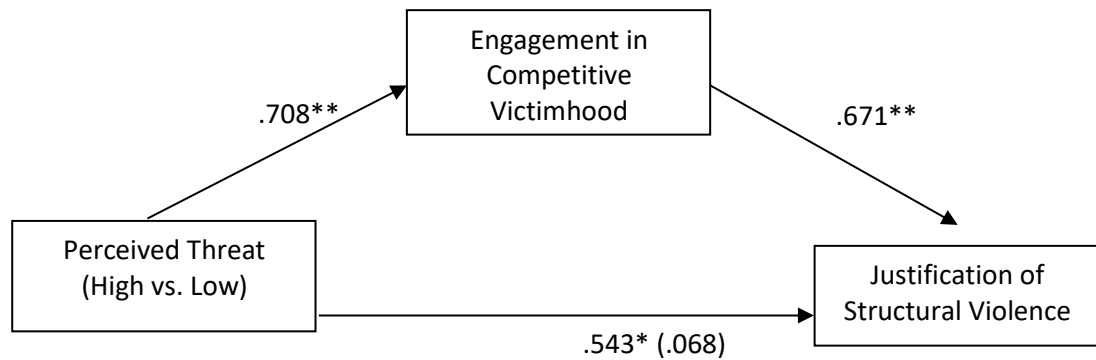


Figure 1. Mediation model with threat as the independent variable, increased engagement in competitive victimhood as the mediator, and justification for structural violence as the dependent variable. Unstandardized regression coefficients (betas) are presented. For the path between threat and justification of structural violence, the coefficients shown outside versus inside the parentheses represent the total and direct effects, respectively. Coefficients with one or two asterisks indicate beta weights' significance level of $*p < .05$ or $**p < .01$, respectively. The indirect effect was significant (see Results).

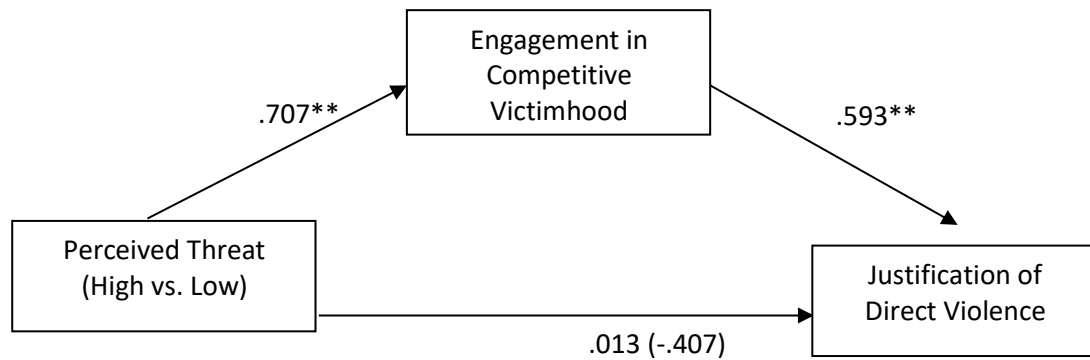


Figure 2. Indirect effect model with threat as the independent variable, increased engagement in competitive victimhood as the mediator, and justification for direct violence as the dependent variable. Unstandardized regression coefficients (betas) are presented. For the path between threat and justification of direct violence, the coefficients shown outside versus inside the parentheses represent the total and direct effects, respectively. Coefficients with one or two asterisks indicate beta weights' significance level of $**p < .01$, respectively. The indirect effect was significant (see Results).