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Emotions in conflicts: understanding emotional processes sheds light on the nature and potential resolution of intractable conflicts

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In recent years, researchers have been making substantial advances in understanding the central role of emotions in intractable conflict. We now know that discrete emotions uniquely shape policy preferences in conflict through their unique emotional goals and action tendencies in all stages of conflict including conflict management, conflict resolution and reconciliation. Drawing on this understanding, recent research also points to emotion regulation as a path to reduce conflict and advance peace, exploring both direct and indirect strategies of emotion regulation.

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Introduction

Emotions are always important, but they are especially potent and influential in contexts of ongoing intergroup violence, in which people feel their core beliefs and identities as well as their very existence is under threat. In such contexts, emotions such as fear, anger, and hatred powerfully shape public support for policies relevant to all stages of intergroup conflict, including conflict management, conflict resolution and reconciliation. Emotions also influence people's relevant personal action tendencies such as motivation for contact with the adversary and engagement in conflict-related collective action. The effect of emotions across these diverse conflict-related domains remains meaningful even after accounting for more 'traditional' predictors such as political ideology, socio-economic status and conflict related personal experiences (e.g., [1,2]).

In this review we focus on the way emotions influence the public rather than the leaders of the sides, recognizing the importance of bottom up processes in this context. As such, the emotions of interest are often group-based emotions — that is, emotions people feel as a reaction to an event which happened to others in their group [3]. According to Intergroup Emotion Theory [4], group-based emotional reactions like anger, guilt and even despair are contingent, first, on people's identification with their group, and second, on their unique appraisal of the specific event at hand (see also [5]). In contexts of intractable conflicts, when the identification with the group is high and the intergroup animosity is at its peak, group based emotions are often experienced simultaneously by a wide share of society. As such, these emotions, originally emerging in response to specific, short term events, diffuse into the climate of the relevant societies and turn into collective, long term sentiments of fear, anger and despair [6].

Scholars in recent years have been advancing the understanding of the role that emotional processes play in shaping public opinion in intractable conflicts in two main ways, which will constitute the two different parts of this review paper: 1. How do discrete intergroup emotions influence people's attitudes and behavior regarding concrete policies in the context of intergroup conflict? And 2. How emotional change, through emotion regulation processes, can help promote more harmonious intergroup relations of societies involved in long-term conflicts.

Discrete intergroup emotions and policy support

People differ in their reactions to social and political events. We see intergroup emotions as the critical motivating junction that determines and shapes these distinct social and personal reactions. According to the Appraisal Based Framework of emotions in conflict [6,7] prior ideological and emotional dispositions and past conflict related experiences shape conflict related appraisals, and, interdependently, one's dominant subjective emotional experience and motivational goals. These discrete intergroup emotions, particularly their associated emotional goals and action tendencies, lead to distinct reactions to specific social and political events. As such, the emotion encapsulates cognitive (appraisals), affective (subjective emotional experience), and motivational (emotional goals and action tendencies) factors, each measured separately, but conceived of as interdependent and synchronized. For example, a violent attack on the ingroup by an

outgroup member, depending on the target's prior ideological dispositions and emotional orientation toward the outgroup, may be appraised as testimony to the outgroups' permanent evil nature and thus to the subjective experience of hate. The subjective experience of hate, would then evoke the hate-corresponding emotional goal of eliminating the source of threat and hate-corresponding action tendencies such as support of violent retaliation. In what follows we review the literature on the role¹ of discrete group-based emotions for each of the followings: conflict management, conflict resolution, and reconciliation

Conflict management entails strategies to contend with conflict while it is expected to continue, including choices about how to respond to violence, as well as how to treat civilians and civilian causes among the adversary. Two dominant emotions that have received much attention in the current literature as impacting policy preferences in this context are anger and fear. Anger is associated with appraising the outgroup's behavior as unjust and the ingroup as strong and able to successfully contend with risk and confrontation with the other [4]. Anger is further associated with the motivational goal of taking action and setting right the outgroup's perceived wrongdoing (e.g., [8]). Correspondingly, in the context of conflict management, anger most often leads to justification of and support for confrontation and use of violence against the outgroup (e.g., [9–12]). Fear, in turn is associated with the appraisal that one is under threat and lacks sufficient strength or control to overcome the threat; and is characterized by the motivation to defend and protect oneself [8]. These lead to action tendencies focused on minimizing risk, which may take the form of either 'fight' or 'flight' depending on what seems most effective for threat reduction. Indeed, while in some violent conflicts fear has been found to decrease support for military action (e.g. [9,12]), in more intractable conflict, where 'flight' seems less possible, fear leads to defensive aggression increasing support for aggression toward the outgroup (e.g. [13]).

Conflict resolution entails the formal steps related to end of conflict including reaching a negotiated agreement; and necessitates openness to new information, and most importantly a willingness to compromise on cherished assets. People living under long term conflict often acknowledge that such compromises are necessary for the promotion of peace yet often do not endorse them. Emotions modulate such support, with some emotions presenting a barrier and others facilitating it.

One of the most powerful emotional barriers to conflict resolution is that of hate. Hatred is driven by the appraisal that the outgroup is inherently and unchangeably evil, thus people who are dominated by hate unequivocally reject any compromise toward changing relations between the groups

because it is deemed futile [14,15]. The impact of anger and fear for conflict resolution is more complex in that they may drive either opposition or support for political compromise depending on how such compromise is construed. The appraisals of anger, namely, seeing the outgroup as unjust and the ingroup as strong and able to successfully contend with risk [4], often leads to opposition to compromise (e.g., [9,12,13,16]). However, when correction of outgroup wrongdoing is deemed possible through conciliatory action (for example if education and mass media campaigns are perceived effective in inducing change in outgroup behavior), anger can increase support for compromise [1,17,18]. Fear (and by extension, anxiety or angst), on the other hand — given that it is shaped by the appraisal that the magnitude of threat is greater than one's ability to overcome it, and characterized by the motivation to avoid risk and restore security — often presents a meaningful barrier to support for conciliatory policies [19–21]. However, to the extent that compromise can be construed as the path to establish security, fear is likely to increase willingness to compromise [13,22]. Finally, hope, an emotion characterized by positive affect coupled with an expectation for further positive outcomes, is a meaningful facilitator of conflict resolution. Hope increases openness to and active search for new information [19,23], and increases creative thinking about solutions, and support for compromises [24*–26].

A further important force relevant for conflict resolution is engagement in collective action, such as participation in demonstrations or signing petitions, to advocate for or oppose conciliation or compromise. Anger has been identified as the most relevant emotion motivating collective action [27,28]. To a lesser degree, guilt also motivates participation in collective action in support specifically of reparations to the outgroup for harm caused by the ingroup [29,30*]. Hope has also been proposed as a meaningful predictor of collective action, stemming from its goal-driven action-orientation and the belief in the possibility of a brighter reality [31,32*].

Reconciliation goes beyond the formal resolution of the conflict by focusing on steps to address the psychological needs of the sides and to transform their relationship; such as acknowledgment of and support for compensation of past outgroup suffering, willingness to extend apologies, and to accept them and forgive. A dominant emotion shaping people's willingness to acknowledge and compensate outgroup suffering is guilt. Group-based guilt stems from appraisals of ingroup responsibility for illegitimate harm to the outgroup [33,34*], and is associated with the motivation to correct the wrongdoing, and to be forgiven by the outgroup. Group-based guilt has been found to increase support for compensation across different conflicts (e.g., [35–37]), and is also associated with support for the extension of official apologies to the outgroup for past moral transgressions [38,39].

Another relevant self-targeted emotion stemming from the appraisal of responsibility for harm inflicted on others is shame. However, unlike guilt, it is coupled with the appraisal that the wrongdoing is indicative of the perpetrator's defective nature [40,41]. Correspondingly, shame is characterized by the motivational goal of validating the ingroup's image [35,42]. Hence, in the context of reconciliation, shame has been found to increase both support for reparations and defensive avoidance [35,43,44], likely depending on the extent to which the damaged group-image is deemed reparable [45]. Finally, empathy — the experience of a congruent emotion to that of another — plays an important role in reconciliation, especially in how recipients of intergroup apologies respond to it. Consistent with empathy's motivational goal of alleviating the discomfort or suffering of the other [46], several studies have found that empathy is associated with willingness to forgive the opponent for past transgressions, (e.g. [47], Tam *et al.*, unpublished manuscript).

Emotion regulation in intractable conflicts

Recognizing the unique characteristics and ramifications of each group-based emotion unveils potential for working toward peace through emotion regulation [48]. Indeed, over the last few years, the coupling of conflict research with the field of emotion regulation has shed new light on avenues to reduce conflict and advance peace [7,49]. Below we discuss several approaches that have recently been found effective for this purpose, including direct emotion regulation, communicative emotion regulation, and indirect emotion regulation.

Emotion regulation in its direct meaning refers to self-driven, intentional efforts to change the intensity with which an emotion is experienced [48]. In the context of intractable conflict, one strategy that has received substantial attention is cognitive reappraisal — the modification of meaning-giving to different situations aimed at shifting one's emotional reactions to them. In one example [11,22], researchers trained participants in the skills of cognitive reappraisal (unrelated to the context of conflict), and compared those participants to those of a control group. Equipped with the skills of cognitive reappraisal, participants reacted with less anger to a real political anger-inducing event, leading participants to demonstrate greater support for conciliatory policies, both one week and five months after training (see also [50]). Clearly, training in emotion regulation skills can enhance peace-oriented reaction to political events. The challenge with training in direct emotion regulation, however, is that it hinges on people's motivation to regulate their emotions in a direction conducive to peace promotion [51], which, especially in the context of intractable conflict, is often not the case (e.g. [52]).

An additional path to emotion regulation — communicative emotion regulation — draws on the perspective of

emotions as social information [53]. This line of work shows that people's emotions can be impacted through exposure to others' emotional expressions. In one set of studies in the context of intractable conflict [30], when participants were exposed to outgroup expressions of disappointment, they were likely to feel greater guilt — the complementary emotion of disappointment, and, in turn, were more likely to support and engage in collective action protesting ingroup actions against the outgroup. Similarly, learning that the outgroup feels hope [54] induced ingroup feelings of hope, and greater support for concessions in the context of conflict resolution. Despite the promise of the responsive path to emotion regulation, it too is contingent on motivation, shifting emotions only among ingroup members who are open to the outgroup's perspective to begin with (e.g. [30,55]).

Indirect emotion regulation can be used to overcome the limitations of both direct and communicative emotion regulation, by offering a path which bypasses motivation. By identifying the appropriate discrete emotion targeted for regulation, interventions tailored to change the emotion's characteristic appraisals outside the context of the conflict, have been found to impact the emotional reactions to subsequent events, and corresponding political preferences. For example, indirect emotion regulation of hate would suggest first identifying its core appraisal — in the case of hate, that the outgroup is inherently and unchangeably evil [14]. It would then suggest identifying an intervention to combat this appraisal such that future evaluations of compromise will be met with lesser hatred and thus resistance. Such an intervention would need to be independent of the context of the specific intergroup conflict, to avoid reactance. This is exactly what some researchers did [1]. Introducing an established manipulation to increase people's belief that groups in general do change, they were able to reduce hate across a number of different conflicts, with corresponding increase in support for compromise. Similarly, when targeting indirect emotion regulation of guilt, researchers found support for their expectation that a self-affirmation intervention [56] would increase willingness to acknowledge ingroup responsibility for wrongdoing, and correspondingly to support reparations [36]. The indirect path to emotion regulation holds special promise in the context of intergroup conflict, because by changing targeted cognitive appraisals outside the context of the conflict at hand, one bypasses not only the common lack of motivation needed for direct or communicative emotion regulation, but also possible defensiveness and reactance.

Conclusions and future directions

Emotions fuel conflict therefore, the rapid developments in the field of affective sciences can dramatically enrich our understanding of conflict processes and potentially provide us with better tools to cope with this critical social challenge. Such integration between these two

disciplines can also contribute to the understanding of more basic affective processes as it provides us with an ultimate lab for testing intense emotional processes. Yet, intersecting these two research domains constitute a significant challenge that requires both awareness, knowledge transfer and conceptual and methodological adjustments on both sides. At the same time, success can result in much more effective conflict resolution interventions on the one hand, and in much more influence of affective sciences on real world social problems, on the other hand.

Despite its importance and recent developments, research on emotional processes in violent, long term conflicts, is only in its fledgling stages. Future work should go beyond the emotional 'immediate suspects', taking into account other group-based emotions, such as (but not limited to) schadenfreude, admiration and contempt. It should also study other emotion regulation strategies besides cognitive reappraisal, while taking into account more seriously aspects unique to intergroup conflicts such as power relations, traumatic experiences and identity complexity. Finally, from a methodological point of view, the integration of neurophysiological studies, on the one hand with large scale field experiments, on the other hand, seem like the next step in the study of emotions in conflict.

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