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 role[1] 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].