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Competitive victimhood: a review of the theoretical and empirical literature

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Competitive victimhood (CV), which is a tendency to see one's group as having comparatively suffered relative to an outgroup, has been gaining attention in social psychology. An increasing number of researchers have begun to address CV, both directly and indirectly. The present review organizes the literature related to CV around three themes: intractable conflict, structural inequality, and intra-minority intergroup relations. Although literature related to CV is diverse, CV has been consistently linked to important aspects of intergroup relations (e.g., continuation of and resistance to resolving conflict) and intrapersonal processes (e.g., biased memory and self-perception). This review highlights the pervasive and impactful role of CV, while also drawing attention to cultural developments that explain the rising interest in CV in contemporary research.

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After the premiere of the trailer for the new *Star Wars* film, a Twitter event erupted: the hashtag 'white genocide' proliferated in response to the film's failure to include any White males in leading roles [1]. Why would objectively high status individuals go so far as to insinuate attempted genocide against their ingroup in response to a mere commercial film? In what kind of moral climate does such intergroup rhetoric make sense?

'Hashtag white genocide' is an example of competitive victimhood (CV): groups competing with each other for claims to relative victim status for their ingroup. Since Noor and colleagues [2,3] introduced this construct to the social identity literature, there has been a rapidly growing body of relevant social psychological research, showing the influence of CV on a variety of group processes. It is important to recognize, however, that this construct has also been discussed in other disciplines, including history [4], political science [5], political psychology [6], sociology [7,8], and the humanities [9]. In general, it seems that CV is a phenomenon that is both increasingly common in the world today and increasingly recognized by a range of scholars.

Indeed, although groups in conflict have engaged in CV for centuries, many scholars [10,11•] note that this is a largely contemporary phenomenon that must be understood against the backdrop of contemporary global culture. Friedrich Nietzsche [12] remains the first and best theorist of CV — he proposed that historical developments in Western culture, ranging from Judeo-Christian ideology to the Enlightenment, have led to a 'reversal of values' whereby old notions of 'might makes right' have been transformed. Today, our knee-jerk reaction to powerful groups is to assume they are immoral, corrupt, or cold [13], whereas victims and members of victimized groups are often seen as innocent and expected to be morally superior [14,15]. There is thus a clear divide between pre-modern understandings of victimhood (in which power was equated with righteousness) and modern (i.e., post 1800 A.D.) understandings. This transformation of human moral notions has a complex history linked to the emergence of several other sociocultural phenomena in the 20th Century, such as identity politics, the concept of 'crimes against humanity,' and group reparations and apologies [10].

CV research is diverse and often overlaps with related literature on intergroup relationships (e.g., intergroup reconciliation [2]), and builds on the rich history of literature on groups and social identity [e.g., 16,17]. Broadly speaking, CV manifests in three basic types of intergroup relationships: intractable conflict, structural inequality, and intra-minority intergroup relations [18]. This review will be structured around these three categories. A comprehensive (though not exhaustive) overview of the extant literature is presented in Table 1.

Intractable conflict

Noor and colleagues [2,3,19] observed that CV is often implicated in the continuation of intergroup conflict. This research commonly relies on modeling techniques to test whether CV, defined as 'the subjective claims made by each group in a conflict that it has suffered more than the out-group' [2] (p. 102), is reliably related to subjective evaluations of past violence, willingness to forgive outgroups, and other conflict-relevant antecedents and

Table 1

Summary and classification of publications related to competitive victimhood.

Type of research	Intractable conflict	Structural inequality and historical conflict	Intra-minority intergroup relations
Experimental	Bilali and Vollhardt (2013) [43]	Mashuri *et al*. (2015, Study 2) [35]	Craig *et al*. (2012) [38]
	Branscombe *et al*. (2015) [15]	Moscovici and Perez (2009) [10]	Craig and Richeson (2012, Studies 2–5) [39]
	Saguy *et al*. (2013, Study 2) [34]	Phillips and Lowery (2015) [32•]	
	Shnabel *et al*. (2013) [29]	Rotella and Richeson (2013) [31]	Craig and Richeson (2014, Study 2) [40•]
	Shnabel *et al*. (2009) [44]	Shnabel and Nadler (2008) [21]	Vollhardt (2013) [42]
	SimanTov-Nachlieli *et al*. (2015) [24•]	Sullivan *et al*. (2012) [11•]	Warner *et al*. (2014) [41•]
			White *et al*. (2006) [45]
Non-experimental	Andrighetto *et al*. (2012) [28]	Leach *et al*. (2007) [33]	Craig and Richeson (2012, Studies 1a and b) [39]
	Noor *et al*. (2008) [2]	Mashuri *et al*. (2015, Study 1) [35]	Craig and Richeson (2014, Studies 1a and 1b) [40•]
	Noor *et al*. (2008) [3]	Saguy *et al*. (2013, Studies 1a and b) [34]	
Qualitative	Ferguson *et al*. (2010) [25]		
	Pilecki and Hammack (2014) [23•]		
Theoretical and review	Bar-Tal *et al*. (2009) [46]	Oaten (2014) [36]	Vollhardt (2015) [47]
	Klar *et al*. (2013) [37]		
	Nadler and Shnabel (2008) [20]		
	Shnabel and Noor (2012) [22]		

consequences. Emphasizing the role of CV in conflict resolution, Noor and colleagues provide evidence for a negative relationship between CV and willingness to forgive the outgroup, as well as a positive relationship with more positive evaluations of past violence. Additionally, these relationships were found to be mediated by variables such as ingroup identification, outgroup trust, and empathy [2,3]. For example, this research suggests that CV is often positively associated with ingroup identification, but negatively with outgroup trust and empathy. Of these three mediators, ingroup identification was found to be negatively associated with intergroup forgiveness, whereas out-group trust and empathy were positively associated with intergroup forgiveness [2].

Expanding on the basic function of CV, theorizing based on the Needs-Based Model of Reconciliation [20–22] describes how CV allows groups to satisfy the psychological needs associated with intractable conflict. This model identifies two conflict roles (victim and perpetrator), unique psychological deficiencies associated with each role (power and moral image, respectively), and ways in which groups can relieve the needs that these deficiencies create. Interestingly, CV can prove adaptive for both victim and perpetrator groups: depending on their needs (i.e., a need for power or moral image, respectively), groups can unilaterally achieve greater group cohesiveness, provide justification for violence performed in the past, reduce feelings of responsibility for harmdoing, increase perceived control through the elicitation of social guilt from the outgroup, and elicit support from third parties [18]. Corroborating the view that CV functions among groups in different positions within a power hierarchy, an analysis of discussions between Arab Israeli and Jewish Israeli individuals suggests that the utterances of members of both groups include statements regarding their group's victimization [23•].

In another examination of CV [24•], researchers manipulated whether Jewish and Arab participants saw messages suggesting that their group had 'won' victim status by telling them that their group had objectively experienced more suffering. This research indicates that winning victim status leads to more willingness to forgive the outgroup, more willingness to reconcile, and less pessimism about the nature of the conflict. Additional qualitative evidence [25] suggests that the development of a sense of victimhood is a highly nuanced process. Specifically, interviews with individuals engaged in the Troubles of Northern Ireland suggest that, while group-level victim status can be desirable, individuals prefer to be seen as 'survivors' rather than 'victims' because the term 'survivor' is less threatening to their individual-level sense of agency.

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