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Morality in intergroup conflict

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Intergroup conflict encompasses a broad range of situations with moral relevance. Researchers at the intersection of social and moral psychology employ diverse methodologies, including surveys, moral dilemmas, economic games, and neuroimaging, to study how individuals think, feel, and act in intergroup moral encounters. We review recent research pertaining to four types of intergroup moral encounters: (a) value-expressive and identity-expressive endorsements of conflict-related actions and policies; (b) helping and harming in-group and out-group members; (c) reacting to transgressions committed by in-group or out-group members; and (d) reacting to the suffering of in-group or out-group members. Overall, we explain how sacred values, social motives, group-based moral emotions, and the physiological processes underlying them, shape moral behavior in intergroup conflict.

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December 16, 2014: As we are writing this article, CNN reports that Taliban militants slaughtered more than 140 children and their teachers in Peshawar, Pakistan. Terrorism, war, and genocide pervade the lives of millions of people throughout the world, spreading suffering and destruction. What motivates individuals to fight, kill, and die on behalf of groups? How do sacred values, moral emotions, and their underlying physiology, shape intergroup conflict? In recent years, scientists at the intersection of social and moral psychology have begun to provide answers to these theoretically and practically important questions.

Intergroup conflict encompasses a broad range of situations with moral relevance. The current review is organized around four types of moral encounters embedded in the context of intergroup conflict: (a) value-expressive and identity-expressive endorsements of conflict-related actions and policies; (b) helping and harming in-group and out-group members; (c) reacting to transgressions committed by in-group or out-group members; and (d) reacting to the suffering of in-group or out-group members. Addressing these four types of moral encounters, we discuss how sacred values, social motives, moral emotions, and the physiological processes underlying them, shape moral behavior in intergroup conflict.

Researchers use a diverse set of methodologies to study these distinct types of moral encounters. Research on value-expressive endorsements of actions and policies often surveys members of natural groups engaged in violent real-world conflict. Research on identity-expressive moral behavior typically elicits responses to hypothetical moral dilemmas. Research on helping and harming in-group and out-group members usually establishes ad-hoc experimental groups and employs economic games in which group members choose how to allocate their resources. Finally, research on reactions to transgressions by in-group or out-group members, as well as the suffering of in-group or out-group members, often uses self-report measures of emotional experiences alongside neuroimaging techniques. Our brief review cuts across these diverse methodologies.

Value-expressive and identity-expressive endorsements of actions and policies

Sacred values operate as moral imperatives that delineate which conflict-related actions and policies are right versus wrong, which, in turn, constrain and direct individual support for these actions and policies [1]. For example, individuals' support of war depends on their perceptions of the righteousness of armed violence, rather than the strategic efficacy of warfare [2]. In addition, people react with moral outrage when offered payment for self-sacrificial behavior during intergroup conflict, or when asked to consider tradeoffs between sacred and non-sacred issues in intergroup negotiation [3]. The power of sacred values is not lost on savvy groups, whose leaders use sacred values to motivate group members' self-sacrificial behavior and win public support for their cause [4]. Indeed, most suicide attacks are committed by insurgent organizations that use religious values and political messages in tandem to increase popular support [5].

Self-sacrifice has also been conceptualized as identity-expressive behavior. Individuals report willingness to self-sacrifice to save fellow group members when their fear of death is mitigated by strong feelings of embeddedness in the group [6,7]. For example, fused individuals — those whose personal identity completely overlaps

with their group identity — express greater willingness to self-sacrifice for fellow in-group members in classic trolley dilemmas. This willingness generalizes to members of extended in-groups, but not to out-group members [8]. When facing information about threat to fellow in-group members, strongly fused individuals experience negative emotions as if they themselves were under threat, and intuitively and swiftly express willingness to protect the group [9]. Linking the value-expressive and identity-expressive accounts of self-sacrificial behavior, research shows that encouraging fused individuals to believe that members of their group share certain core characteristics, such as genes or values, leads them to perceive familial ties with fellow in-group members, which, in turn, triggers a sense of duty to self-sacrifice to protect group members from harm [10•].

Helping and harming 'us' and 'them'

When group members participate in intergroup conflict, they invest time and effort, and risk injury or death on behalf of their group. Individuals can direct these costly contributions toward helping fellow in-group members, harming out-group members, or both. They can also direct their contributions toward helping out-group members. Research using economic games has found that, faced with a choice to help in-group members either with or without harming out-group members, most individuals prefer to help in-group members without harming out-group members [11]. In addition, helping in-group members without harming out-group members is rewarded with higher social status than helping in-group members while also harming out-group members [12•]. Interestingly, groups reward parochial helping more than universal helping. Individuals who help fellow in-group members are conferred higher status than those who use their resources to help both in-group and out-group members [13•]. Despite the robust preference for 'in-group love' over 'out-group hate', certain aggravating conditions spur harm to out-groups. For example, interactions with morality-based out-groups, such as the members of a fascist political party, have been shown to increase resource allocations aimed at harming out-group members [14].

Recent research documented the influence of hormones on intergroup behavior, with a particular focus on oxytocin, a hormone best known for its role in childbirth and social bonding. For example, compared with individuals receiving placebo, individuals receiving oxytocin (self-administered using intranasal spray) allocate more resources to benefit fellow in-group members and protect their in-group, but show no difference in resource allocation aimed at harming out-group members [15]. In a similar vein, individuals administered oxytocin show greater intergroup bias [16], an effect driven primarily by a heightened concern for and cooperation with in-group members, rather than antagonism for and competition against out-group members [17]. Oxytocin has also been shown to increase group-serving — but not self-serving — unethical behavior, such as cheating [18•].

The effects of oxytocin on intergroup behavior depend on the intergroup context. In highly cooperative intergroup contexts, individuals who received oxytocin were more likely to benefit both in-group and out-group members [19•]. By contrast, in highly competitive intergroup contexts, individuals who received oxytocin preferred to form an alliance with threatening in-group members, who were seen as capable of harming others and hence as useful allies in intergroup conflict, rather than with non-threatening in-group members [20].

Reactions to transgressions by 'us' and 'them'

Moral group-based emotions arise when group or intergroup events activate individuals' perceptions of right or wrong. Transgressions committed in the context of intergroup conflict often trigger group-based anger and guilt [21,22]. Individuals experience group-based anger in reaction to goal blocking and perceived injustice [23,24]. In turn, group-based anger prompts various action tendencies, which can be either destructive (consistent with anger's negative valence) or constructive (consistent with anger's approach orientation) [23]. Individuals who experience group-based anger show stronger support for retaliation [25], but also report greater willingness to engage in risky, non-aggressive political negotiations [22] and elicit stronger empathic responses from out-group members [26]. Evidence suggests that anger becomes destructive in the presence of other negative, avoidance-oriented emotions such as group-based hatred [23] or group-based contempt [26,27].

Individuals experience group-based guilt when they perceive that their group is responsible for a moral transgression. Guilt is intensified when group members believe that their group should and can make amends to restore justice. Taking responsibility for a moral transgression is potentially threatening to one's collective identity. One way to attenuate this threat is by self-affirming aspects of one's identity that are unrelated to the threatened aspect. Indeed, research in Israel and Bosnia found that self-affirmation increased individuals' willingness to acknowledge in-group responsibility for moral transgressions, their feelings of group-based guilt, and support for reparation policies [28]. In addition to increasing support for reparation [29•], group-based guilt also increases people's willingness to make symbolic gestures, such as apologizing for wrongdoing [30].

Group-based hope can increase individuals' support for actions aimed at resolving seemingly intractable intergroup conflict. Individuals experience group-based hope