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Reports

Moral judgments of the powerless and powerful in violent intergroup conflicts

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ABSTRACT

The present research examined observers' moral judgments of groups in conflict. Study 1 found support for the prediction that actions are interpreted as more moral in the context of low power. People judged the violent actions of a fictitious group as more moral and justifiable when done by a smaller, less powerful country compared to a larger one. However, a second study found that violence may undermine the moral advantage accorded underdog groups. People reading about Israeli construction of settlements in Palestinian territories judged the Israeli actions to be more moral when Palestinians resisted violently compared to when they used non-violent resistance tactics. Together, these studies demonstrate how moral judgments of the actions of groups in conflict are influenced by contextual factors independent of the actions themselves.

"Between a high, solid wall and an egg that breaks against it, I will always stand on the side of the egg." — Japanese novelist Haruki Murakami, commenting on the Israeli offensive in the Gaza Strip, upon receiving Israel's Jerusalem Prize for literature in 2009.

Groups in conflict often fight two battles simultaneously. The first is the direct physical battle with an adversary. The second, less obvious but perhaps equally important battle is in shaping the perceptions and sympathies of outside observers. In an increasingly connected world, winning the "hearts and minds" of the global public can be critical to the long-term success of one's cause. This has always been true, but it is becoming more important as the media's reach is deeper, more immediate, and less filtered than ever before. The rise of television during the War in Vietnam brought daily images of conflict to homes around world in a way not seen previously. More recently, the internet has greatly expanded the global public's access to information about conflicts. As we will argue in the present research, public, non-combatant perceptions are especially important when considering conflicts between adversaries with unequal power or resources. When viewing these conflicts, do people favor, like Murakami, the powerless egg over the powerful wall?

This paper considers how power disparities impact judgments of the morality of groups in conflict. Traditional definitions of power have focused on the ability to modify others' states by providing or withholding resources (Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003), and having power (in the form of size or resources) is an obvious benefit to a group enmeshed in conflict with an adversary. However, while control over resources is important, it is not the only way to conceptualize power. To the extent that power also encompasses the ability to influence and mobilize others (see Turner, 2005; Turner, Reynolds, & Subasic, 2008), those lacking strength and resources may have other means to win the support of others. We propose that groups lacking size, strength, and resources can use their lack of power as an advantage in influencing third-party judgments. If third parties come to sympathize or identify with a weaker minority, this can create solidarity against a more powerful adversary (Subasic, Reynolds, & Turner, 2008). In particular, consistent with research on the appeal of underdogs (Vandello, Goldschmied, & Richards, 2007), we propose that observers will judge the actions of less powerful groups as more moral than the same actions committed by more powerful groups (tested in Study 1).

At the same time, being perceived as 'disempowered' can be a fragile status. We propose that the use or non-use of violence may impact perceptions of a group's relative disadvantage. While groups of low power may be granted greater 'moral license' (Miller & Effron, 2010) to use violence as a strategy, exercising a violent response may also undermine a group's underdog status. Thus, in Study 2 we also explore how the use of violent or non-violent resistance by a less powerful group affects perceptions of both its status and morality and also perceptions of its adversary.

The importance of context in moral judgments

As research on morality has proliferated in recent years, our understanding of moral judgment has shifted. In contrast to early

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theories (e.g. Kohlberg, 1969; Piaget, 1932) that viewed a mature morality as decontextualized, rational, and deliberative, recent scholars of morality have deemphasized rational or effortful cognition and reasoning, suggesting that moral judgments are largely emotional and intuitive (Damasio, 1994; Greene, Sommerville, Nystrom, Darley, & Cohen, 2001; Haidt, 2001; Hoberg, Oveis, Keltner, & Cohen, 2009; Shweder, Much, Mahapatra, & Park, 1997). Cultural values, induced emotional states, and ingroup affiliations can strongly impact moral judgments. Consistent with this view, we argue that contextual features independent of a group's actions or intentions can and do influence observers' moral judgments of the group.

The disconnect between the belief that moral judgments should be free from context and the reality that social and emotional factors nonetheless filter into our moral judgments is well-illustrated by attitudes in intergroup conflicts. Parties in conflict are guided by moral rules, many of which are universal or nearly universal, about what constitutes acceptable and unacceptable actions (for example, the Rules of War codified in the Geneva Conventions). Despite the existence of shared principles, people apply different standards of morality to ingroups and outgroups. Through processes of moral disengagement and dehumanization, people may reinterpret inhumane acts as acceptable when perpetrated against adversaries (Bandura, 1999; Haslam, 2006).

For the above reasons, standards of morality can change when applied to outgroups vs. ingroups. However, moral standards may shift even when third parties judge events from afar. For instance, an actor's actions are seen as more aggressive and inappropriate as consequences to a victim worsen, independent of the actor's intentions (Berkowitz, Mueller, Schnell, & Padberg, 1986). Similarly, research on the halo effect demonstrates that the same act is judged as more moral when committed by an attractive compared to unattractive person (Alicke, Smith, & Klotz, 1986; Nesdale, Rule, & McAra, 1975). Thus, social factors can shift moral judgments even in the absence of any self-interested motives of the judge.

The present work considers an additional influence on third-party perceptions of morality in group conflicts: the relative power of the conflicting parties. In most group and international conflicts, one side enjoys superior size, military strength, and resources. We propose that power disparities will influence the way outsiders perceive groups and react to aggression by either side. In particular, we argue that disempowered groups will have greater moral license (Miller & Effron, 2010) than powerful groups to use violence. Why should the morality of low power groups be judged differently than those with greater power?

System justification and the enhancement of underdogs

People tend generally to be averse to inequalities (Fehr & Schmidt, 1999; Messick, 1995; Tricomi, Rangel, Camerer, & O'Doherty, 2010), which threaten the belief in a just world (Lerner, 1980). Just World Theory (Lerner, 1980) argues that power disparities can arouse justice concerns which may be resolved by rationalizing the disparity. If a disadvantaged group is seen as responsible for its disadvantage, the threat to just world beliefs may be resolved by blaming the group, but if the group is seen as unfairly disadvantaged, people may be motivated to compensate the group (Haynes & Olson, 2006). Similarly, recent research on system justification (Kay et al., 2007; Kay & Jost, 2003) suggests a general preference to perceive balance such that those with some disadvantage (e.g. poverty) are often believed to have some complementary positive attribute (e.g. virtue). These tendencies to enhance disadvantaged entities with compensating virtues are strongest for traits that are causally unrelated to their disadvantage (Kay, Jost, & Young, 2005). To the extent that power disparities between antagonistic groups are perceived to be unrelated to the character of the groups, this suggests that people may be motivated to compensate the less powerful group with some perceived virtue. While low power groups may be compensated on any number of character traits, we suggest that perceived moral superiority will be an especially likely outcome for two reasons. First, morality is a central dimension by which we judge others and the self (Leach, Ellemers, & Barreto, 2007; Wojciszke, Bazinska, & Jaworski, 1998). Second, within the context of intergroup relations and intergroup conflict, moral judgments are particularly salient.

Consistent with this view, recent research suggests that people tend to sympathize with and support entities more when they are perceived as underdogs (Goldschmied & Vandello, 2009; Kim et al., 2008; Vandello et al., 2007). In one study (Vandello et al., 2007), people expressed greater sympathy and support for Israel when it was portrayed as small relative to its neighbors in the Middle East, but they expressed greater support for Palestinians when the Palestinian Territories were portrayed as small relative to Israel. Conversely, groups that have an advantage in size or power may trigger negative feelings. For instance, the experience of *schadenfreude* (taking pleasure in others' pain) is closely related to feelings of resentment toward groups that are perceived to have an unfair advantage (Feather & Shermann, 2002; Leach, Spears, Branscombe, & Doosje, 2003). Based on this logic, we expected that less powerful entities would enjoy a strategic advantage when engaged in intergroup hostilities: a perception of moral superiority in the eyes of non-partisan observers. Observers may be thus less condemning of violent tactics used by less powerful groups compared to their more powerful adversaries.

While underdogs may have greater moral license to use violence, the choice to use violence may also undermine a group's underdog status in the eyes of observers. A less powerful group that enjoys support and sympathy from its allies may risk losing some of this support by committing aggressive acts. Above and beyond the ambivalence people may feel in supporting aggressive acts (even if they deem them legitimate), the use of aggression may signal an implicit message about a group's relative disadvantage. Aggression is associated with perceptions of power and status (Schaller & Abeysinghe, 2006; Vaillancourt & Hymel, 2006) and so using aggression may create a perception that an otherwise low power group is not in fact disadvantaged, shifting sympathies to the more powerful adversary. Conversely, the choice to respond to an adversary's provocations with passivity or non-violence can convey a powerful moral message. To take one example, during the American Civil Rights movement in the mid-20th century, some of the most emotionally stirring images of the era were of police officers using water cannons to disperse crowds of Black demonstrators, who stood stoically without retaliating. These disturbing images, televised around the world, undoubtedly bolstered the view of African Americans as underdogs, turned sentiment against White southern segregationists, and hastened the end of Jim Crow era segregation in the United States. In our second study, we explored this dynamic of action and response in intergroup conflict by measuring moral judgments after manipulating a disempowered group's response to a provocation.

Overview and hypotheses

The present studies examined moral judgments in the context of conflicts involving groups of unequal power. In our first study, we presented participants with a story about a conflict between two fictional nations, one of which was larger and much more powerful than the other. Participants rated the morality of a violent act that was committed by either the powerful or less powerful group. We predicted the violent act would be rated as more moral and justifiable when committed by the less powerful nation. In the second study, we explored how moral judgments are impacted by not only a group's actions, but its adversary's response. Participants read about a provocation that was met with violent or non-violent resistance.