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Emotion Regulation in Intractable Conflicts

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Abstract

It has long been apparent that negative emotions play a central role in intractable conflicts. Only recently, however, have scholars begun to use methods from affective science to test whether emotion regulation strategies can be used to influence conflict-related emotions in a way that would facilitate conflict resolution. To provide the context for this work, we begin by considering the roles emotions play in intractable conflicts. Next, we discuss how emotion regulation might be relevant to intractable conflicts, with a particular focus on cognitive reappraisal. We then review recent studies, conducted mainly in the context of the Middle East conflict, which suggest that cognitive reappraisal may be able to reduce negative emotions and promote public support for peaceful policies. We conclude by describing future challenges and opportunities for research in this area.

Keywords

emotion regulation, intractable conflicts, cognitive reappraisal

Violent conflicts sear disturbing images into our individual and collective memories: The twin towers in New York that collapsed in September 2001. The red brick school building in the northern Caucasus where more than a thousand children were held hostage for 3 days by Chechen terrorists. The machetes Hutu villagers used to kill their Tutsi neighbors in Rwanda. The streets of Tel Aviv littered with the bodies of young children wearing costumes, the gruesome remains of yet another suicide attack.

These images elicit powerful emotions in both participants and observers alike. Such emotions can lead people to war and guide their behaviors during wartime (Lindner, 2006; Staub, 2005). Even more devastating, perhaps, is the fact that these emotions constitute a barrier to peace because they motivate uncompromising positions that block repeated peace efforts (Halperin, 2011). The observation that violence produces negative emotions, and that these emotions hinder progress toward peace, prompts an urgent question: What can be done to break this apparently endless cycle of violence?

In this article, we describe a new answer to this age-old question, one that hinges on the idea that emotion regulation might be used to decrease negative emotions that lie at the heart of the cycle of violence. We first describe the roles played by emotions in intractable conflict. We then introduce the idea of emotion regulation

and consider its relevance to intractable conflicts. Next, we focus on the Middle East conflict and review a series of recent studies that have demonstrated the role of a specific emotion regulation strategy, cognitive reappraisal, in shaping people's attitudes. We conclude by describing future challenges and opportunities for research on this topic.

Emotions in Intractable Conflicts

Intractable conflicts are enduring—lasting at least a generation—and involve physical violence. They are perceived as being irresolvable and “zero-sum” in nature. Intractable conflicts are also “total,” because their goals are seen as existential—a matter of life and death—and central to the public agenda. As such, they demand significant societal investments (Bar-Tal, 1998; Kriesberg, 1993).

Anyone who has ever experienced an intractable conflict, such as the ones in the Middle East, Kashmir, Sri Lanka, Chechnya, or Rwanda, knows that they are fueled by high levels of negative emotions, including

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fear, hatred, despair, and anger. These emotions are evident on both personal and collective levels and can be found in the behaviors of people as well as in the public discourse, mass media, cultural products (e.g., arts, literature), and national ceremonies (e.g., Bar-Tal, Halperin, & de Rivera, 2007).

In the past 2 decades, scholars have begun to investigate the impact of emotions on conflicts. Their findings suggest that emotions play a causal role by forming attitudes, biasing attention and action, and shaping reactions to conflict-related events. It is noteworthy that the effects of emotions on aggressive and conciliatory political attitudes are evident above and beyond other prominent factors, such as ideology and socioeconomic conditions (e.g., Halperin, Russell, Dweck, & Gross, 2011; Spanovic, Lickel, Denson, & Petrovic, 2010).

Research suggests that negative emotions lead to the rejection of positive information about the opponent and lead people to oppose renewal of negotiations, compromise, and reconciliation (e.g., Halperin, 2011; Sabucedo, Durán, Alzate, & Barreto, 2011). Other studies have suggested that emotions such as fear and collective angst may lead to more right-wing inclinations (Hirschberger & Pyszczynski, 2011), strengthen ingroup ties (Wohl, Branscombe, & Reysen, 2010), and promote risk-averse political tendencies (Sabucedo et al., 2011). Research has also shown that negative emotions, mainly anger and hatred, increase support for extreme aggression and military actions aimed at harming or even eliminating the opponent (Halperin, 2008, 2011). Furthermore, although recent studies show that anger can sometimes promote conflict resolution (e.g., Halperin, 2011; Halperin et al., 2011; Reifen Tagar, Frederico, & Halperin, 2011), in most cases anger leads to the appraisal of future military attacks as less risky and more likely to have positive consequences (Lerner & Keltner, 2001).

Scholars have also begun to examine the role of positive emotions in conflicts. Hope, for example, has been found to play a constructive role in reducing hostility, increasing problem-solving in negotiations, and promoting support for conciliatory policies (Carnevale & Isen, 1986; Cohen-Chen, Halperin, Crisp, & Gross, in press). Furthermore, several studies conducted in the postconflict settings of Northern Ireland (e.g., Moeschberger, Dixon, Niens, & Cairns, 2005) and Bosnia (Cehajic, Brown, & Castano, 2008) reveal a positive relationship between empathy and willingness to forgive opponents for past wrongdoings.

Emotion Regulation

Given the pivotal role of emotions in intractable conflicts, it would seem desirable to develop interventions aimed at decreasing negative emotions and increasing positive

emotions. Such interventions would be predicated on the idea that even powerful emotions can be modified. This insight is at the heart of a relatively new field of research in affective science that is concerned with emotion regulation, defined as the processes that influence which emotions we have, when we have them, and how we experience and express these emotions (Gross, 1998, in press).

Because emotions are multicomponential processes that unfold over time, emotion regulation involves changes in the latency, rise time, magnitude, duration, and offset of responses in behavioral, experiential, or physiological domains (Gross & Thompson, 2007). Emotion regulation may increase or decrease the intensity or duration of negative or positive emotions. According to the process model of emotion regulation, it is possible to distinguish five families of regulation processes on the basis of the point at which one seeks to modify the developing emotional response. These are: situation selection, situation modification, attentional deployment, cognitive change, and response modulation (Gross, 1998; Gross & Thompson, 2007).

One particularly important form of emotion regulation is cognitive reappraisal, a type of cognitive change. Cognitive reappraisal (hereafter simply reappraisal) involves changing the meaning of a situation in a way that changes the emotional response (Gross, 1998). Reappraisal has been found to be more effective than response-focused strategies, such as expressive suppression (hereafter simply suppression; in short, a type of response modulation), which involves inhibiting ongoing emotion-expressive behavior (e.g., Gross, 1998). Compared with suppression, reappraisal is effective at decreasing emotional experience but incurs few, if any, of the physiological and cognitive costs associated with suppression (e.g., Gross & John, 2003; Richards, Butler, & Gross, 2003). On the interpersonal level, people who use reappraisal more frequently report less anger in response to an anger provocation and show more adaptive patterns of physiological responding (e.g., Mauss, Bunge, & Gross, 2007). In addition, when reappraisal was manipulated, participants who were led to reappraise an anger-provoking memory showed a significant decrease in anger experience over time (Ray, Wilhelm, & Gross, 2008). Finally, reappraisal has also been found to decrease aggression (Barlett & Anderson, 2011).

Most of the research on emotion regulation has focused on individuals or dyads. However, we argue that many of the insights from such research is applicable to the context of intergroup conflicts. Given that reappraisal allows people to appreciate the broader meaning of events (Ray et al., 2008), leading to a more balanced perspective (Gross, 2002), reappraisal has the potential to increase support for conciliatory attitudes by decreasing

the negative intergroup emotions associated with conflict-related events and broadening the constricted perspective through which people view the conflict. In Figure 1, we present a heuristic framework for analyzing how reappraisal might shape reactions to dramatic conflict-related events by changing emotional responses to these events. In the following section, we present studies that have been conducted to test this framework.

Emotion Regulation in Intractable Conflicts

The first evidence linking reappraisal with conciliatory attitudes was obtained in a correlational study conducted by Halperin and Gross (2011) in the midst of Operation Cast Lead, a war between Israelis and Palestinians in Gaza. A nationwide survey ($N = 200$) of Jewish-Israeli adults was used to test whether individual differences in the use of reappraisal were associated with political reactions during war. We first assessed individual differences in reappraisal use and then asked about the extent to which participants supported providing humanitarian aid to innocent Palestinian citizens in Gaza. We found that Israelis who used reappraisal more frequently were more supportive of providing humanitarian aid to Palestinian citizens.

To address whether reappraisal played a causal role, we conducted a pair of studies in which we manipulated, rather than measured, cognitive reappraisal and estimated its effects on emotional reactions and political attitudes related to a long-term intergroup conflicts (Halperin, Pliskin, Saguy, Liberman, & Gross, 2013). This time the political context was the ongoing internal conflict between the Jewish majority, the Palestinian minority within Israel (Study 1), and other minority groups in Israel (Study 2). We wanted to test whether reappraisal

would decrease Israelis' political intolerance: namely, the support for denouncing—or a willingness to denounce—the basic political rights of people who belong to a defined outgroup.

In Study 1, we presented Jewish-Israeli participants ($N=161$) either neutral or reappraisal instructions before they read a text critical of Palestinian Citizens of Israel (PCIs). The reappraisal instructions were based on those used by Richards and Gross (2000) and were as follows:

We wish to understand to what extent people are capable of controlling the way in which they process information. Thus, it is important to us that you try to adopt a neutral perspective while reading the excerpt. To do this, please read the excerpt from an exterior perspective, as if you were scientists examining it objectively and analytically, without assigning it personal or national relevance. Read the text thoroughly, and try to think of it in as cold and detached a manner as you can.

We then measured levels of induced emotion and political intolerance toward PCIs. We found that Israelis with a rightist political orientation (but not those with leftist orientation), which in Israel is linked with intolerance for PCIs, expressed lower levels of both negative emotion and political intolerance toward PCIs after reading reappraisal instructions (vs. a control group). Negative emotion mediated the effect of the reappraisal manipulation on levels of intolerance.

In Study 2, we asked participants ($N=171$) to select their least-liked political group in Israel and respond to a stimulus and questions specifically addressing their outgroup of choice. This allowed us to test our hypothesis among all participants and not just those with a right-wing ideology. Results were clear: We found lower levels

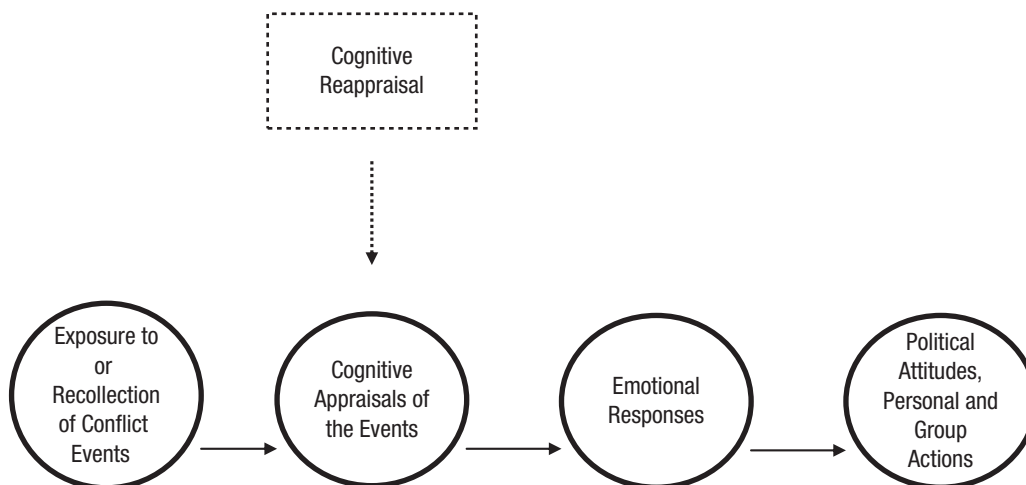


Fig. 1. An appraisal-based framework for studying emotion regulation in conflicts.

of political intolerance among participants in the reappraisal condition compared with those in the control condition. This effect was mediated by negative emotion and remained significant when controlling simultaneously for all other possible predictors of political intolerance and demographic variables.

These findings led us to wonder whether the effect of reappraisal would hold not only for an internal intergroup conflict but also for an ongoing intractable conflict. To address this question, we tested whether a reappraisal manipulation, this time in the form of an extended reappraisal training session, would decrease intergroup anger and lead participants to be more supportive of providing humanitarian aid to Palestinians in Gaza (Halperin, Porat, Tamir, & Gross, 2013, Study 1). In this study, Jewish-Israeli participants ($N = 39$) were randomly assigned to an experimental condition or a control condition. Participants in the experimental condition underwent a reappraisal training session of 15 to 20 minutes, whereas those in the control condition did not. All participants then watched a short presentation on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in Gaza that was likely to provoke anger. Next, participants rated their emotional experiences and indicated their positions regarding

Israel's response to the events depicted in the presentation. As hypothesized, we found that participants who were trained in reappraisal were significantly more supportive of providing humanitarian aid to Palestinians. This effect was mediated by decreased levels of anger.

These findings indicate that even in the context of an intractable conflict, reappraisal training can be effective in changing both people's emotions toward the outgroup and their positions regarding certain conflict-related policies. One question, however, is whether the effects of reappraisal training would persist over time and outside the laboratory, when people react to real-world conflict events.

To address this question, we conducted another study in which we provided reappraisal training (or not in a control group) to participants ($N = 60$) 1 week before a dramatic political event (the Palestinian United Nations bid in September 2011) and then measured emotional and political reactions 1 week and 5 months later (Halperin, Porat, Tamir, & Gross, 2013, Study 2). The results (Fig. 2) indicate that participants trained to reappraise (versus not) showed lesser negative emotion and greater support for conciliatory rather than aggressive political policies toward Palestinians 1 week and 5 months

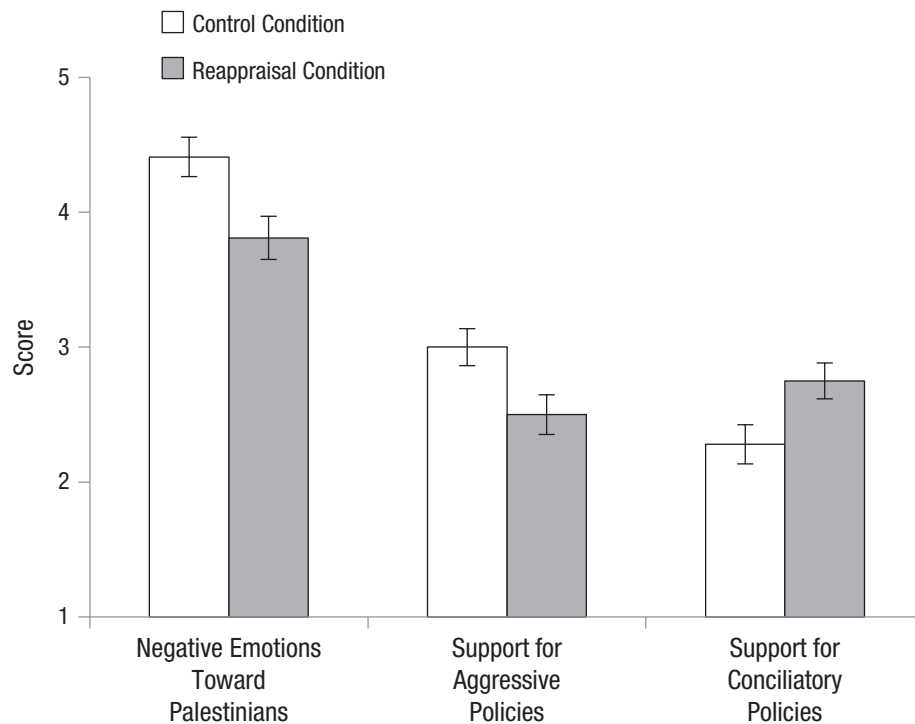


Fig. 2. Negative emotions toward Palestinians and support for aggressive and conciliatory policies 1 week after reappraisal versus control training session. Score represents the response to the different variables measured (emotional reaction, support for aggressive and conciliatory policies). For the emotional response, this ranged from 1 (*not at all*) to 6 (*very much*); for the aggressive and conciliatory policies, this ranged from 1 (*highly oppose*) to 6 (*very much in favor*). The error bars represent standard errors.

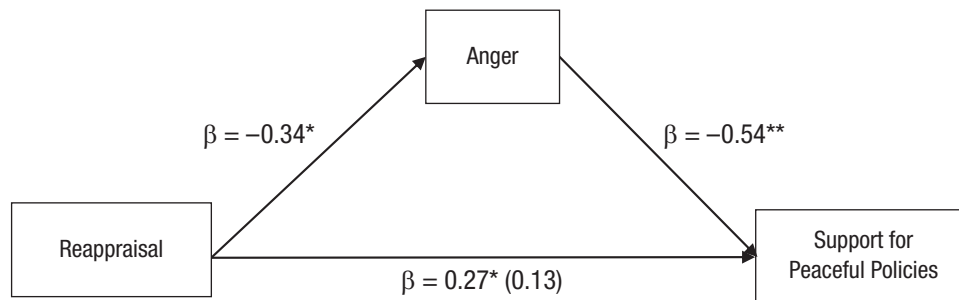


Fig. 3. Anger as a mediator of the effect of reappraisal on support for peaceful policies toward the Palestinians 5 months after the manipulation. The model controlled for social desirability, gender, and political stance, but these variables were omitted from the figure to simplify the presentation.
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .001$.

after training. The effects of reappraisal on support for peaceful policies 5 months later were mediated by changes in anger (Fig. 3).

Directions for Future Research

These results suggest that emotion regulation can affect not only emotional reactions but also political ones. Moreover, they indicate that reappraisal may be an efficient tool for regulating emotions even in the context of one of the most ideologically driven, intense, and highly emotional settings and in the face of an ongoing stream of negative information and events.

From an emotion-regulation perspective, one important direction for future research is to examine the impact of reappraisal on other target emotions, including positive ones, such as hope (e.g., Cohen-Chen et al., in press), as well as emotional responses that humanize the outgroup, such as empathy. Another important direction for future research is to examine other forms of emotion regulation. For example, Sheppes, Scheibe, Suri, and Gross (2011) have suggested that in high-intensity negative situations, people seem to prefer distraction to reappraisal; thus, it is possible that distraction may be preferred in some conflict-related contexts. Because these are the first studies of the effects of emotion regulation processes in conflict, future research will need to compare nonconflict and conflict contexts.

For conflict-resolution scholars, these results pave the way for possible interventions to reduce aggressive intentions and increase support for peace by reducing negative emotions. For example, it may be possible to construct interventions that teach people how to reappraise negative emotions. This might be done either through the educational system, through mass media, or even by using new media tools. These interventions could be direct, such as teaching people to reappraise

negative emotions in response to conflict-related events. These interventions could also be indirect, such as reappraisal training in which the relevant conflict is not directly discussed. Indirect approaches may be particularly valuable in charged intergroup contexts, where people may not be open to direct attempts to persuade them to change their attitudes (Bar-Tal & Rosen, 2009). Indeed, to apply a regulation strategy, people must be motivated to regulate their emotions (e.g., Tamir, 2009), yet little research has been conducted on emotional motivation in political contexts. Thus, whether such motivation varies across individuals as a function of their political ideology, and whether it effects the actual implementation of the regulation strategy, should be tested.

One important challenge for future research will be knitting together the relevant communities of scholars. Such an effort will involve educating conflict scholars about the potential contribution of the study of emotion and emotion regulation, while also educating emotion scholars about conflict studies. To understand and address complicated social problems, such as intractable conflicts, knowledge and methods from different disciplines are clearly going to be required. We are well aware that such integration of different research communities is difficult to implement because of differences in methodological, theoretical, and even epistemological approaches. From our perspective, therefore, this bridging of communities represents both a crucial challenge and an exciting opportunity.

Recommended Reading

- Barlett, C. P., & Anderson, C. A. (2011). (See References). A recent article showing the effects of cognitive reappraisal on aggression.
- Gross, J. J., & Thompson, R. A. (2007). (See References). A comprehensive overview of emotion regulation processes, including cognitive reappraisal and other regulation strategies.

Halperin, E., Sharvit, K., & Gross, J. J. (2011). Emotion and emotion regulation in conflicts. In D. Bar-Tal (Ed.), *Intergroup conflicts and their resolution: Social psychological perspective* (pp. 83–103). New York: Psychology Press. A general framework for examining emotion and emotion regulation in intergroup conflicts, followed by a comprehensive overview of the role of emotions in intractable conflicts.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared that they had no conflicts of interest with respect to their authorship or the publication of this article.

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