

MINI REVIEW

Development of positive intergroup emotions amongst youth in contexts affected or threatened by conflict

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Abstract

Social-psychological research has established the importance of positive emotions for creating and maintaining positive intergroup relations in contexts affected or threatened by conflict (intergroup reconciliation). Building on existing body of evidence, we conceptualised intergroup reconciliation as a process aimed at regulating negative intergroup emotions such as hatred and creating more positive and relationship functional emotions such as trust. This review presents theoretical and empirical insights into the emotion regulation perspective on intergroup reconciliation. Regulation of negative intergroup emotions amongst youths affected by conflict is feasible through social-psychological interventions.

KEYWORDS

intergroup conflict, intergroup reconciliation, positive emotions, social-psychological interventions, youths

1 | INTRODUCTION

How to build positive and conflict-resilient relationships between different social groups has been the research focus for decades in the field of social sciences. This question is relevant for any society. Evidently, it is relevant for conflict and post-conflict societies. However, the demand to understand intergroup relations in increasingly multicultural and globalised world is applicable even for societies that have not been in conflict for a substantial amount of time. Such reasoning is embedded in the assumption that no country, no society and hence no social group are immune to threats of conflict. Consequently, understanding processes that could facilitate either sustainability of positive intergroup relations or re-building of broken relations constitutes an important scientific and social demand.

Furthermore, it is important to note that intergroup conflicts amongst races, cultures, religions and nations flourish around the globe.¹ Importantly, one-fifth of children and youths are negatively affected by conflict² and 60% of conflicts in early 2000s have

relapsed within 5 years.³ Even for countries such as Sweden, which has marked 200 years of peace in 2014,⁴ the demand to understand how to maintain positive intergroup relations has been accelerated by the recent immigration wavemaking Sweden a more diversified and culturally heterogeneous society.

2 | WHAT IS INTERGROUP RECONCILIATION?

Achieving reconciliation between social groups in conflict or maintaining positive intergroup relations in the face of conflict threat is indeed a strenuous, demanding and complex process involving both structural and psychological changes.⁵ From a psychological perspective, understanding intergroup reconciliation has been approached from several angles. Even though these outlooks on reconciliation are not exclusive of each other, each of them emphasises a specific social-psychological process as being the key ingredient at

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both conceptual and empirical levels. Some scholars conceptualise intergroup reconciliation as a process of establishing cooperative relations.⁶ Other scholars view reconciliation primarily as a process of identity change⁷ or satisfaction of specific needs.⁸ Each of these approaches has received empirical support pointing to the validity of each of these perspectives but also to the complexity and intricacy of this process.

Our understanding of intergroup reconciliation is grounded in research demonstrating and accentuating the importance of emotions in conflict and post-conflict societies. Research has shown that peoples' emotions towards social outgroups powerfully shape peoples' responses to conflict-related events.⁹ Additionally, such intergroup emotions influence the formation of intergroup attitudes towards reconciliation,¹⁰ motivate support for certain policies¹¹ and thus can undermine or support important reconciliation-oriented processes.¹² Furthermore, research indicates that the effects of emotions are independent of other prominent factors such as ideology¹⁰ and socioeconomic conditions.¹³ Our own research also shows that the presence of negative intergroup emotions amongst youth undermines intergroup reconciliation efforts.¹⁴

For example, the consequences of intergroup hatred, as a more specific and negative intergroup emotion, have been extensively studied. Empirical research has identified that intergroup hatred can propel people to violence and lead them to obstruct any positive change in post-conflict societies.¹⁵ Furthermore, in an intergroup context, hatred is often directed at harming or destroying an outgroup and acts as a major barrier to peace and reconciliation-oriented processes.^{10,15} Living in contexts affected or threatened by conflict can also shape children's identities¹⁶ and their emotions towards social outgroups making them less likely to share resources with an outgroup member in an intergroup conflict setting.¹⁷

Based on the above, we conceptualised intergroup reconciliation as an emotion regulation process¹⁸ with the aim to understand conditions and processes which would enable the regulation of negative and destructive emotions such as hatred and promotion of more positive and reconciliation-functional emotions (Figure 1).

3 | THE PROCESS OF REGULATING EMOTIONS TOWARDS SOCIAL OUTGROUPS

Conceptualising intergroup reconciliation as an emotion regulation process draws upon the process model of emotion regulation and its subsequent implementation to intergroup emotions.¹⁹ According to the process model of emotion regulation, emotions can be regulated at any point of the emotion generation process: situation selection or modification; attention deployment; cognitive appraisal or emotion response. Research on emotions in reconciliation processes has primarily focused on cognitive change or appraisal as a way of regulating emotions between social groups. Furthermore, Halperin et al. have made an important distinction between direct and indirect emotion regulation processes^{10,15} outlining a path process in facilitating indirect emotion regulation in intergroup conflict contexts.

Key Notes

- Intergroup conflicts affect young people worldwide.
- This review presents social-psychological research on the importance and ways of creating positive intergroup emotions and in that way contributing to conflict resolution and intergroup reconciliation.
- Recent evidence suggests that the moral exemplar intervention can create positive emotions towards social outgroups and in that way facilitate the creation of positive and conflict-resilient intergroup relations.

The first step in facilitating indirect emotion regulation is to identify the desired outcome associated with intergroup reconciliation such as facilitating higher levels of intergroup forgiveness. The next step would be the identification of the discrete emotion associated with the desired outcome such as trust. After identifying the target emotion, the next step would entail the identification of a concrete message or content that would enable the regulation of that specific emotion. In other words, the goal would be to search for the emotion's core appraisal theme²⁰ which constitutes the basis for its motivational and behavioural implications. The emotion regulation perspective on intergroup reconciliation assumes that by changing the core appraisal theme, the associated emotion can be regulated, leading to transformation in action tendencies related to intergroup reconciliation.¹⁸ The question that remains largely untapped is what social-psychological interventions have the capacity to change core appraisal themes associated with a range of negative emotions in intergroup conflict contexts and in that way facilitate positive intergroup reconciliation processes. In particular, changing perceptions of outgroups as being homogenous,²¹ unchangeable¹⁰ and immoral²² has been identified as one of the core appraisal themes associated with intergroup reconciliation. Below I will review evidence of a novel social-psychological intervention aimed at changing a specific perception of outgroups, namely perceptions of outgroups' immorality.

4 | THE MORAL EXEMPLAR INTERVENTION: A NEW APPROACH TOWARDS CREATING POSITIVE INTERGROUP EMOTIONS

The starting assumption behind the moral exemplar intervention is that morality judgements are fundamental in the evaluation of social groups with an impact on intergroup behaviour.²³ We proposed that learning about moral exemplars is an effective approach for changing biased beliefs about group morality. People tend to believe that their own group is more moral than other social groups.²⁴ Additionally, in intergroup conflict situations, outgroups' immoral behaviour can promote inferences that they, outgroups, cannot be

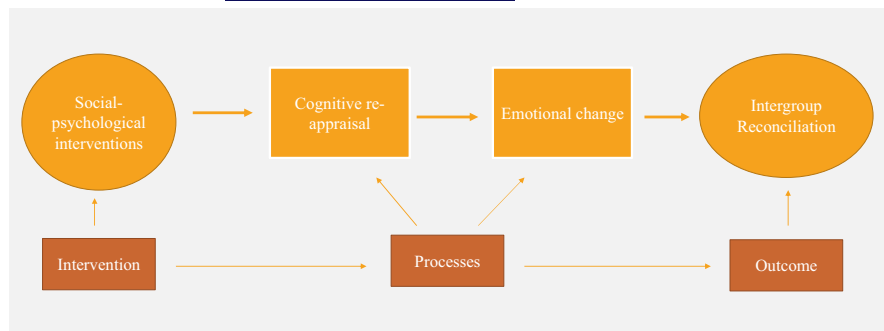


FIGURE 1 Intergroup reconciliation as an emotion regulation process

moral and that we, the ingroup, are morally superior.²⁴ Such attributions further feed into the vicious cycle of destructive emotions and discriminatory behavioural tendencies. In our work, we argued that changing judgements about group morality is one important way to change negative and destructive intergroup emotions and ultimately contribute to the development of more positive intergroup relations.²⁵ We proposed that learning about moral exemplars could be an effective way of changing judgements about outgroups' morality and in that way contribute to improved intergroup relations.

Moral exemplars are individuals who have risked some important aspects of their life to save the lives of outgroup members.^{22,25} The moral behaviour exhibited by these individuals which is sometimes referred to as heroic behaviour simultaneously includes two elements: outgroup helping and risk-taking. Work by Franco et al.²⁶ on heroism is relevant to research on moral exemplars as both forms of behaviour simultaneously include elements of helping and risk-taking. However, important differences between these two lines of work ought to be mentioned. First, their approach²⁶ to understanding conditions and implications of heroic behaviour is more universalistic bridging across a range of different fields and contexts. Work on moral exemplars is primarily set in contexts which have been either affected or threatened by the prospect of intergroup conflict. Furthermore, and unlike Franco's work on heroism, research on moral exemplars is explicitly concerned with understanding and changing relationships between specific social groups in conflict. In conclusion, context specificity, intergroup dimension and relevance of social groups constitute an inherent aspect of research on moral exemplars, whereas work on heroism is more concerned with universal processes bridging across a wide range of contexts.

We designed the moral exemplar intervention with the goal to challenge peoples' beliefs about outgroup's immorality by exposing them to stories of outgroup moral exemplars. Development of the moral exemplar intervention was also inspired by research in education²⁷ demonstrating that stories can serve as models for behaviour change. Furthermore, learning about others' morally admirable behaviour has the tendency to elicit inspiration and awe, an emotional response termed as moral elevation²⁸ as well as other positive and outgroup directed emotions such as warmth and trust.²² As argued by the emotion regulation perspective on intergroup reconciliation, induction of positive intergroup emotions is an important step towards the creation of positive and prosocial intergroup relations. Furthermore, induction of moral elevation through exposure to

moral exemplars is important because it minimises the potential risk of psychological tension which can be triggered when peoples' beliefs are challenged. Indeed, our recent evidence is suggesting that learning about morally admirable behaviours performed by relevant outgroup members does indeed elicit a sense of moral elevation whilst having no significant effects on reported tension.

5 | YOUTHS AND INTERGROUP RECONCILIATION

Research on intergroup reconciliation reviewed above has mainly been conducted with youths living in contexts affected by conflict. Focusing on intergroup attitudes and behaviours amongst youth populations is important for at least two reasons. From a developmental perspective, influencing attitudes and associated behaviours is a more likely occurrence at specific developmental age. In this way, both children and youths are understood as active contributors and important carries of positive social changes such as reconciliation.²⁹ Approaching children and youths as potential contributors to reconciliation expands the understanding of children's and youths' role from mere recipients to potential contributors. Typically, psychological research has studied children and youth attitudes including behaviour more at the interpersonal level. If and how children's and youths' attitudes and behaviour can impact intergroup processes has been less examined. Recently, Taylor³⁰ proposed a novel Developmental Peacebuilding Model which places the developmental perspective into a larger peacebuilding paradigm viewing children and youths as potential contributors to peacebuilding, social cohesion and reconciliation. Such an expanded understanding recognises the potential children and youths can have in contributing to positive social changes including peace and reconciliation.

6 | CONCLUSION

The goal of this review was to argue and demonstrate the centrality of emotions for research on intergroup relations. In particular, social situations characterised by intergroup conflict and a demand for improved intergroup relations call for a focus on understanding peoples' emotions towards social outgroups. The research reviewed above demonstrates an important impact of emotions on

intergroup attitudes and behaviours. Specifically, research denotes that in intergroup conflict situations, the role of negative intergroup emotions becomes central to understanding and predicting peoples' behaviour towards others. A range of negative emotions ranging from anger to hatred can undermine attempts and success of rebuilding positive intergroup relations and consequently feed into cycles of intergroup avoidance and discrimination. Building on the existing body of evidence on the centrality of emotions in intergroup relations research, we conceptualised intergroup reconciliation as a process of regulating negative intergroup emotions and creation of more relationship functional emotions. A growing field of research on social-psychological interventions aimed at establishing intergroup reconciliation suggests that a route to developing more positive emotions towards social outgroups might be precisely through stories about morally admirable behaviours performed by others.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest in terms of the production or publication of the article.

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