



Intergroup Forgiveness: The Interplay Between Who We Are and What Tales We Tell

15

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Introduction

There is no doubt that we live in a vengeful world. But that is not the full story. If, following a hurt, vengefulness were the only force to govern our social relations, how could this account for Gill Hicks, who lost both her legs due to standing next to one of the London tube suicide bombers in 2005 yet lives without hatred and refuses to seek revenge; or how come that Bassam Aramin chooses dialogue and non-violence as the main means to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, despite an Israeli soldier shooting and killing Bassam's 10-year-old daughter outside her school; and how come that on hearing the tragic news of her 28-year-old son, an Israeli soldier, being shot dead by a Palestinian sniper, the first words that came out of Robi Damelin's mouth were: 'Do not take revenge in the name of my son'? While maybe absent from the news headlines, there are many more such individuals, like Gill, Bassam, and Robi, around the world. You can find out about their real-life stories in the work of the London-based charity *The Forgiveness Project* (www.theforgiveness-project.com, see also www.theforgivenessstool-box.com), whose aim is to collect and document the lived experiences of ordinary people who have managed to overcome their hatred and resentment towards their perpetrators and to develop working relationships or even profound friendships with their former perpetrators.

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What is noteworthy is that the individuals responsible for the above atrocities neither knew their victims personally nor had any prior direct interactions with them. What gave rise to these atrocities was the fact that the aggressors saw their unknown victims as representatives of particular groups with whom the aggressors had fundamental disagreements. It is probably a safe bet to assume that part of the motivation that leads individuals to harm others is to do with the aggressors themselves feeling aggrieved and victimised. Thus, correcting the wrongs victims may have experienced directly or vicariously (i.e. seeing their fellow ingroup members being harmed) can rather ironically cause previous victims to become future victimisers and feed the endless cycles of revenge. Can forgiveness disrupt such destructive cycles?

Although forgiveness has mainly been discussed and practised in the realm of interpersonal relationships, in this chapter, we focus on forgiveness and its utility for repairing damaged intergroup relationships. Specifically, we will analyse intergroup forgiveness through the lens of traditional and recent theoretical frameworks, such as the social identity approach and victim beliefs, while attempting to formalise the interplay between such theorising and their implications for societies emerging from ethnopolitical violence. We will conclude by highlighting how forgiveness can transform fractured intergroup relations into peaceful co-existence at a practical level.

Collective Suffering: Hurting Me Versus Hurting Us

Naturally, being hurt means being robbed of control over one's life. Indeed, following a hurt, what may attract millions of people to revenge is the desire to restore their diminished sense of control. But is revenge the only path to restoring control? And can forgiveness provide an alternative and less explored route to such control restoration? Before discussing the concept of intergroup forgiveness, it is important to understand what constitutes collective suffering.

Definition Box

Collective Suffering: (also referred to as *collective victimisation*) This results from collective victimization which involves the objective infliction of harm by one group against another. The psychological experience and consequences (e.g., affect, cognitions, and behaviors) of such harm is referred to as collective victimhood (WHO, 2002, p. 215; see also Noor, Vollhardt, Mari, & Nadler, 2017; Vollhardt, 2012)

Experiences of suffering are heightened to the collective level because of the clashing group memberships with which the harmdoer and his/her victim identify. As detailed by Scheepers and Ellemers in this volume (Chap. 9; see also Tajfel & Turner, 1979), people divide the social world into social categories, such as religious beliefs, political or sexual orientation, race, etc. Individuals form groups on the basis of these categories and identify with them because such categories can help us understand who we are and because these categories enable us to coact with others, invoke solidarity, and provide us with protection against different types of threats. Thus, a key defining feature of collective suffering is that the motivation to harm others was driven by the perpetrator's group membership and his/her choice of victim was equally determined by the victim's particular group membership (Noor et al., 2017).

Another feature of **collective suffering** is that it can affect the target group across several dimensions, including the physical dimension (e.g. physical well-being, quality of life, physical injuries, deaths), the material dimension (e.g. destruction or loss of property, ability to build wealth), and the cultural dimension (e.g. threat to one's worldview, cultural continuity, norms, language), and each of the foregoing dimensions, by themselves or combined, can lead to the psychological dimension of suffering (e.g. trauma or distress)

(see Noor, Shnabel, Halabi, & Nadler, 2012; Noor et al., 2017, for reviews).

The plethora of ways in which one group can harm another gives rise to the third feature of collective suffering, namely, the impact of the suffering extends to group members who did not experience the harmdoing directly. In fact, the more group members identify with the group, the more they feel the impact of the harm vicariously, even though they may have been in different geographical locations from the direct ingroup victims or born several decades after the harmdoing (e.g. Lickel, Miller, Stenstrom, Denson, & Schmader, 2006; Noor, Brown, Gonzalez, Manzi, & Lewis, 2008; Wohl & Branscombe, 2008; Wohl & van Bavel, 2011). To illustrate, research investigating how the traumatic consequences of collective victimisation resulting from the Jewish Holocaust get transmitted across generations found that there was a positive correlation between the Holocaust descendants' degree of Jewish identification and symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. This correlation was negative for non-Holocaust descendants (Wohl & van Bavel, 2011). That said, an important caveat must be highlighted here. Identification with a victimised group can also serve as a buffer against poor psychological well-being. Supporting evidence for this claim has been provided by studies examining the association between pervasive discrimination of target groups (e.g. Black Americans, Latino/Americans, the elderly) and their psychological well-being (Branscombe, Schmitt, & Harvey, 1999; Cronin, Levin, Branscombe, van Laar, & Tropp, 2012; Garstka, Schmitt, Branscombe, & Hummert, 2004). Interestingly, these studies demonstrated that ingroup identification with the target groups suppressed the association between discrimination and poor well-being. This suggests that identification with a victimised group need not always foretell negative outcomes for the group members.

So far, we have explored how groups vested in their social identities may be motivated to harm one another, across multiple dimensions, and

how readily the suffering can spread to other ingroup members who did not experience the harmdoing directly. Although understanding collective suffering through the lens of the social identity approach offers important analytical insights into why some conflicts persist, in the next section, we complement these insights by drawing attention to the recent theorising about **victim beliefs** – the stories groups tell about their suffering – and consider their impact in terms of intensifying or reducing conflict.

Definition Box

Victim Beliefs: Subjective interpretations of a group's victimisation (Vollhardt, 2012)

Victim Beliefs: The Stories We Tell about Our Suffering

Stories are powerful, especially if they are stories about the collective suffering of one's own group. Such stories enable people to make meaning of what happened, remind future generations of the ingroup's victimisation, and instil a powerful sense of common fate and solidarity with their fellow ingroup members. Consequently, the stories of a group's collective suffering are representational and can shape the group's identity in general. What is intriguing is that people can tell very different stories about the same experience. In other words, people can construe the same victimhood event very differently, which in turn can have a differential impact on people's understanding of their collective suffering and who they are as a group, but also on how they relate to other groups. Recent theorising has reasoned that the way a group's narrative of their suffering is construed is partly determined by their victim beliefs (Noor et al., 2012; Vollhardt, 2012, 2015; see also Noor et al., 2017).

Box 15.1 Zooming In: Whose Story Counts?

As you can imagine, one controversy around victim beliefs is about which group's story is believed or perceived as true. This is in part due to the subjective nature of victim beliefs, which are asserted by one group and challenged by their adversarial group. As a result, many historical narratives about a collective victimisation remain contested (Vollhardt, 2012) (e.g. Palestinian vs. Israeli stories of suffering, Hammack, 2009). Note also that both disadvantaged groups and the advantaged groups (e.g. Black as well as White Americans) can develop victim beliefs. Crucially, another consequence of victim beliefs is that sometimes objectively true victimisation of one group may be suppressed or ignored (e.g. the Genocide of Herero and Nama in Namibia by Germany in the nineteenth century, Onishi, 2016), while at other times false victim beliefs of another group may be fabricated (e.g. Nazis' perceived victimisation, Herf, 2006).

serial group (Noor et al., 2012; Noor, Brown, & Prentice, 2008). This competition can focus on both the quantity and quality of suffering. Groups can compete over their share of suffering across different dimensions, including the physical dimension (e.g. death toll or injuries), the material dimension (e.g. loss of resources), the cultural dimension (e.g. giving up one's way of life and language), the psychological dimension (e.g. trauma and poor psychological well-being), and the moral dimension (e.g. perceived illegitimacy of suffering).

Competitive victimhood arises from the motivation of conflicting groups to establish that the ingroup has suffered more than the outgroup. Here, the emphasis is not only placed on the quantity of the suffering but also on the unjust quality of the suffering. At first glance, such competition over victimhood may appear counter-intuitive, especially because the victim status is often associated with weakness and humiliation. However, when viewing victimhood as a psychological resource which can serve groups with key psychological and social functions, competitive victimhood no longer appears counter-intuitive.

To illustrate, assuming the role of the 'bigger' victim can entitle groups to justify ingroup violence against other groups (Noor, Brown, & Prentice, 2008). From a leadership perspective, strategically portraying one's groups as the (greater) victim provides leaders with powerful narratives which they can utilise to bolster ingroup cohesiveness and identification with the ingroup and ultimately mobilise their ingroup to take actions against the outgroup. In the post-conflict setting, competitive victimhood can enable groups to avoid negative emotions for their ingroup wrongdoings during the heightened phase of the conflict and help them deny responsibility and any material compensation. Consequently, an inverse relationship can be expected between competitive victimhood and forgiveness. That is, the stiffer the competition over victimhood among conflicting groups, the less likely conflicting

Comparative Victim Beliefs

One central set of victim beliefs are the comparative victim beliefs. Such beliefs orient groups to think about their suffering by comparing it to other groups' suffering. Unfortunately, given groups are prone to compete with one other, especially over as sensitive a topic as their suffering (Noor et al., 2012), such a comparative belief has been observed to give rise to groups engaging in the phenomenon of **intergroup competitive victimhood**.

Definition Box

Intergroup competitive victimhood: Refers to the effort by group members involved in conflict to claim that their group has suffered more than their adver-

groups are to consider forgiving one another (Noor, Brown, Gonzalez, et al., 2008; see Noor et al., 2012, for a review).

The opposing victim belief to competitive victimhood is **common victimhood** (Noor et al., 2012, 2017; Schnabel, Halabi, & Noor, 2013), also referred to as *inclusive victim consciousness* (Vollhardt, 2015).

Definition Box

Common Victimhood: This belief is based on the premise that despite the clash between two conflicting groups (e.g. Israelis and Palestinians), they can come to agree that the conflict involves negative consequences for both groups' lives (insecurity, unstable economy, etc.). This belief is expected to transform the adversaries' perceptions from rigid and mutually exclusive victim-versus-perpetrator category into a more inclusive 'we' (i.e. both parties are victims of the conflict).

This belief draws both group's attention to their common suffering due to the (regional) conflict and thereby succeeds in acknowledging that, similar to the ingroup, the outgroup has suffered as well, albeit possibly in different ways from the ingroup. For example, consider the lives of Israelis and Palestinians in the Middle East. Clearly, compared to Palestinians, Israelis are in an advantageous position militarily, among other respects. However, despite such an obvious advantage, it is difficult to discard the fact that irrespective of their position, Israelis' quality of life has been adversely affected by the regional war, be that in terms of mental health, economically and across other social dimensions. Put differently, if the urge to engage in competitive victimhood generally arises from the motivation to receive sufficient acknowledgement for one's ingroup suffering, common victimhood provides such an acknowledgement for both conflicting groups right at the outset, thereby potentially diffusing unnecessary competitiveness, tension, and

hostility between the conflicting groups. As such, a positive relationship between common victimhood and forgiveness can be expected.

Box 15.2 Zooming In: The Parents Circle-Families Forum (PCFF)

The reality and practice of common victimhood beliefs are powerfully demonstrated by an Israeli-Palestinian NGO *The Parents Circle-Families Forum* (PCFF), which was formed in 1995. Crucially, each family has endured a loss of an immediate family member in the ongoing conflict. Thus, PCFF fosters building rare bridges across the divide by drawing attention to the similar suffering endured by both Palestinian and Israeli families. Moreover, PCFF utilises these stories of common suffering for educational purposes in schools, public meetings, etc. Today, PCFF consists of over 600 Israeli and Palestinian families (visit: http://theparentscircle.org/en/about_eng/).

We Are Our Beliefs

As is apparent from the previous discussion, there is an important interplay between a group's victimhood beliefs and their social identity. In fact, in part the very beliefs about their victimhood may provide the content of groups' social identities, and indeed the level of inclusiveness of these identities may vary as a function of such (competitive vs. inclusive) victimhood beliefs. Specifically, construing one's ingroup suffering through the competitive victimhood mindset may indicate that the group is likely to operate from a narrower and more exclusive social identity category, and therefore the group's focus and concerns extend to its fellow ingroup members only. By contrast, applying an inclusive victim belief to making sense of one's ingroup suffering entails that the group's awareness of suffering is elevated to a superordinate and more inclusive social identity category, and therefore the group's

focus and concerns expand beyond seeking acknowledgement for the suffering of one's own group and attention is paid to the suffering of the outgroup as well.

Box 15.3 Zooming In: Hierarchy of Grief in Northern Ireland

The violent conflict between the Protestant and Catholic communities in Northern Ireland is epitomised in the dissensus concerning each community's desires for Northern Ireland's constitutional future (Dixon, 2001; Hewstone et al., 2004). The Protestant community, who are the historically advantaged group, wishes for Northern Ireland to remain part of the UK. By contrast, the Catholic community, who are the historically disadvantaged group, desires the reunification of Northern Ireland with the rest of Ireland, thus aiming to undo the partition which took place in 1921. As a result of this dispute, a violent conflict has been fought for more than three decades, claiming almost 4000 lives (Fay, Morrissey, & Smyth, 1999). Even in today's post-peace agreement era, Northern Ireland is characterised as a divided society displaying intermittent episodes of sectarian violence, intergroup distrust, and high levels of social segregation (Connolly & Healy, 2003; Darby & MacGinty, 2000; Dixon, 2001; Hewstone et al., 2008; Schubotz, 2005). Although in theory the notion of a common victimhood should benefit the conflicting groups in Northern Ireland, a recent event triggered by a recommendation put forward to the Northern Irish government reveals the challenges when attempting to put the concept of common victimhood into practice. The recommendation was for the government to pay £12,000 in compensation to the families of everyone who had lost their lives due to the conflict. Crucially, this compensation was to be offered to victims from both sides of

the conflict – regardless of whether the victim was an innocent bystander, a British soldier, police officer, or a member of a paramilitary organisation. In other words, the recommendation was proactively aimed at promoting the notion that 'there is no difference in a mother's tears' and that there can be no 'hierarchy of grief' over the loss of her loved ones. As well intended as such a recommendation was, it entirely backfired. Both sides of the conflict were outraged by the compensation being extended to the 'other side', especially to their violent members such as paramilitaries or armed forces. Such reactions highlight that in certain contexts conflicting groups may not easily give up their tendency to engage in competitive victimhood in order to embrace the notion of common victimhood, thereby acknowledging their mutual suffering (Anger of Troubles payment plan, 2009).

Having reviewed traditional and recent theorising about how and why groups' collective suffering may become among the most thorny and divisive dimension defining intergroup relations, in the next section, we explore forgiveness and its utility for transforming seemingly intractable conflicts.

Intergroup Forgiveness

Notwithstanding the benefits revenge can offer to victimised groups (see Box 15.4), there are a number of fundamental problems associated with revenge. To begin with, all human perceptions are subjective and often non-veridical. This is especially true when it comes to perceptions of suffering and its severity, which systematically vary as a function of victim-perpetrator roles (Baumeister, 1996; Kearns & Fincham, 2005; Zechmeister & Romero, 2002; see also Hornsey, Okimoto, & Wenzel, 2017). That is, relative to perpetrators, victims often view the suffering as intentional and severe. Consequently, the question

of what might constitute a fair punishment becomes rather divisive. Often, victims are likely to view the punishment as too lenient, while perpetrators perceive the same punishment as too harsh. The basis for such self- or ingroup-serving biases is rooted in perspective divergences that tend to give rise to differential causal attributions and evaluations between actors and recipients of aggressive actions (Mummendey, Linneweber, & Löschper, 1984; see also Noor, Kteily, Siem, & Mazziotta, 2018). Consequently, such perspective divergences can contribute to a role reversal in that the original perpetrators may feel a profound sense of victimhood as a result of perceiving the punishment as excessive, while the initial victims become bloodthirsty; thereby both parties contribute to further harming and deepen their initial enmity (Minow, 1998; Noor et al., 2012; Noor & Cantacuzino, 2018).

Box 15.4 Zooming In: The Benefits of Revenge

Taking revenge as a strategy may provide victims with a number of advantages: first, revenge enables victims to get even. Getting even is often about correcting the wrong the victims experienced, thereby achieving a sense of justice. However, perhaps more importantly, getting even also serves victims in a symbolic way by teaching the perpetrator group a lesson that they will not forget (Gollwitzer & Denzler, 2009), thereby protecting victims from future harms. All of the above, psychologically speaking, can help to restore victims' sense of control and agency which may have been diminished by being harmed in the first place (Noor & Cantacuzino, 2018).

Revenge also faces the problem of scale, particularly in contexts of intergroup mass violence. That is, societies such as those in Rwanda or South Africa are left with hundreds of thousands of perpetrators and with an even larger number of victims. Such sheer scale of perpetration and

suffering demonstrates the decreased value of revenge as a strategy to break through the chaos of intergroup violence and restore order in society (Tutu, 2012). Perhaps the most compelling point highlighting the futility of revenge is the fact that revenge cannot reverse the damage that was initially done (Noor & Cantacuzino, 2018).

Box 15.5 Zooming In: When Victims Become Killers in the Rwandan Context

One of the most challenging questions to answer relates to why those who have endured great suffering may become involved in harming and indeed killing others. 'When victims become killers' is part of the title of a book by Mahmood Mamdani (2001) in which the author attempts to provide an answer to this question in the context the Rwandan genocide in 1994. Despite having endured a mass killing in 1972, the Hutu majority killed an estimated 800,000 of the Tutsi minority and moderate Hutu. Mamdani seeks to trace back such tragedies to their historical roots such as arbitrary land boundaries and racialised status differences between Hutu and Tutsi introduced and nurtured by the European colonisers, coupled with a poor economy.

Given the outlined shortcomings of revenge and the catalysing effect of major world events, such as the collapse of totalitarian regimes in South Africa, Chile, and Eastern Europe and the ongoing violent conflicts, new ways of transforming divided societies into peaceful co-existing ones are much sought after. Conflict transformation also requires finding adequate ways to address trauma and loss both at personal and collective levels. It is for these reasons that attention has been drawn to the utility of forgiveness as a strategy to bring about the much desired peaceful transformation both in societies with ongoing intergroup conflict and in post-conflict societies.

Definition Box

Intergroup Forgiveness: The decision for a victimised group to suppress their desire to seek retaliation against, or to avoid, members of the perpetrator group

Although our understanding of **intergroup forgiveness** continues to evolve, recently Noor (2016) has embarked on developing an integrative approach to conceptualizing forgiveness. Accordingly, the process of forgiveness involves making a conscious decision which is determined by multiple factors. First, the decision to forgive hinges on the extent to which the victimised group can regulate their negative emotions and thoughts about the perpetrator group. Second, a group's forgiveness is further determined by the extent to which the victimised group values their relationship with the perpetrator group (Burnette, McCullough, Van Tongeren, & Davis, 2012), as well as the extent to which they view the perpetrator group as a continued source of threat. That is, forgiveness is likely to occur when the perpetrator group is viewed as a potentially valuable partner and perceived as nonthreatening (Noor, Shnabel, Halabi, & Doosje, 2015). Finally, the decision to forgive may in part also depend on the extent to which the victimised group can imagine that the perpetrator group is capable of changing their hostile traits and behaviours (Wohl et al., 2015).

Although this multi-faceted approach to understanding intergroup forgiveness demonstrates the complexities associated with forgiveness, the different dimensions point to a common denominator that can be viewed as the key prerequisite for forgiveness, namely, forgiveness requires transformation involving (a) how the victimised group perceives the perpetrator group; (b) how the perpetrator group behaves, especially with regard to how they treat the victimised group in the future; and (c) the contextual factors (e.g. economic disparity) that may have given rise to the initial wrongdoing (Noor, 2016; Noor & Cantacuzino, 2018).

Thus, the decision to forgive at the intergroup level involves a bigger conversation than in the interpersonal context, which necessarily involves negotiating with your fellow ingroup members and assessing the degree to which forgiveness may be consistent with your ingroup moral values and norms.

Box 15.6 Zooming In: Measuring Intergroup Forgiveness

Modelled on existing measures of interpersonal forgiveness (McCullough et al., 1998), Noor et al. (2008) have developed an intergroup forgiveness measure based on six items, used in both ongoing and post-conflict settings, such as Israel-Palestine, Northern Ireland, and Chile:

1. 'I try not to hold a grudge against the other group for their misdeeds'.
2. 'Getting even with the other group for their misdeeds is not important to me' (reverse-coded).
3. 'I am prepared to forgive the other group for their misdeeds'.
4. 'I hold feelings of resentment towards the other group for their misdeeds'.
5. 'I have ill thoughts about the other group for their misdeeds'.
6. 'I am able to let the other group off with their misdeeds'.

Having described the process involving the decision to forgive a group, in the remainder of this chapter, we focus on real-life interventions based on the theories discussed earlier in this chapter. For each intervention, we first outline its theoretical rationale, briefly sketch the intergroup context, and summarise the major findings of the interventions. Although psychological interventions can vary in scale and scope (Paluck & Green, 2009), below we report studies that have tested psychological models in contexts of past or ongoing intergroup conflicts.

Interventions: How Victim Beliefs and Identity Interact

As established earlier, both direct and vicarious victimhood episodes are psychologically potent experiences and will affect our understanding of the self and other groups. More specifically, it is plausible that when groups construe their victimisation through the comparative lens, it is likely to lead to competitive victimhood ('we have suffered *more* than the outgroup') among the conflicting groups (Noor et al., 2012). Moreover, drawing on the social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), it is also plausible to predict that such a competitive construal of one's victimhood is likely to strengthen one's identification with the ingroup, because a bolstered ingroup identification could serve individuals with protection against future threats. Crucially, an emboldened and protective bond with one's ingroup could also reduce our propensity to forgive perpetrator outgroups.

To test these predictions, a study was conducted in the context of the sectarian intergroup conflict between Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland. Although Northern Ireland has enjoyed relative peace over the last decade, this conflict has continued to claim lives. To date, the death toll is close to 4000 lives in a population of 1.7 million. In 2008 when the Northern Irish conflict was still hot, researchers indeed found evidence in support of the above theorising, using cross-sectional data. That is, after considering the suffering of their ingroup (relative to the outgroup), both Catholic and Protestant participants reported a tendency to engage in competitive victimhood, which in turn predicted positively their strength of identification with their respective ingroups. In turn, strength of identification predicted negatively forgiving the outgroup (Noor, Brown, & Prentice, 2008). As predicted by the social identity approach and victim beliefs, it appears that construing one's groups' suffering through exclusive and competitive victim beliefs bolsters ingroup identification. A narrow and strong identity in turn suppresses generosity in the group and therefore makes forgiving the adversary group for their wrongs less likely. The inverse

relationship between strength of ingroup identification and lack of forgiveness was replicated among Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland in a later study, as well as among the proponents and opponents of the military regime in the post-Pinochet Chile (Noor, Brown, Gonzalez, Manzi, & Lewis, 2008, Studies 1 & 2). That is, the more individuals identified with their partisan ingroup, the less forgiveness they displayed towards the outgroup.

Box 15.7 Zooming In: Chile in the Wake of a Military Dictatorship

Following the end of Pinochet's military rule (1973–1990), Chilean society was left to deal with the legacy of his authoritarian regime, a division of the society into those with an ideology of the political Right and those with an ideology of the Left. The political Right, being in support of the Pinochet regime, viewed the military intervention by Pinochet as necessary for combating against Communism in Chile. To achieve this goal, the military regime engaged in systematic political violence against its opponents, which did not shy away from torture, executions, kidnappings, and other human rights violations. Consequently, the Left remembers the military regime as destructive of democracy and gross violations of human rights in Chile (Valenzuela & Constable, 1991). However, the regime's opponents also claimed their victims through their campaigns of political assassinations, bombings, and kidnappings. Even today, there is considerable debate about addressing the human rights atrocities that marked this historical period in Chile. Inevitably, these contrasting viewpoints have opened up controversial issues relating to the establishment of the truth, official apologies, and requests for forgiveness. To illustrate, shortly after receiving the first commission report into the human rights violations

during the military regime, Pinochet's elected successor President Patricio Aylwin stated, 'This is why I dare, in my position as President of the Republic, to assume the representation of the whole nation and, in its name, to beg forgiveness from the relatives of the victims' (Roniger & Sznajder, 1999, p. 101).

Providing experimental evidence for the link between the different levels of one's social identity (i.e. narrow vs. inclusive) and victim beliefs, Wohl and Branscombe (2005) examined these factors in the context of the Jewish Holocaust while focusing on the intergroup relations between contemporary Germans and North American Jews. Specifically, the researchers found that framing the Holocaust in concrete (vs. abstract and thereby more inclusive) terms, involving concrete group identities of the victim and perpetrator, led North American Jews to expect today's Germans to experience more guilt for the Holocaust atrocities. Crucially, participants were less willing to forgive Germans. However, when the Holocaust was framed as an example of atrocities that human beings inflict on one another (i.e. evoking a social category more inclusive than the narrow ingroup category, that of all humanity), Jewish participants assigned less guilt to contemporary Germans for the Holocaust and were more willing to forgive them. Although the effects of this rather simple intervention are impressive, one could argue that the efficacy of such abstract interventions may be due to the lack of intense conflict and relative peaceful co-existence between Jews and Germans in the contemporary world. In other words, would such an intervention work in contexts of ongoing and violent conflict?

To answer this question, Schnabel et al. (2013) investigated the viability of framing one's group's victim identity into a more inclusive one as an intervention tool to reduce the tensions between Israelis and Palestinians as a result of their ongoing conflict in the Middle East. Specifically, the researchers wanted to know whether such an

intervention could reduce both groups' motivation to engage in competitive victimhood and to foster their intergroup forgiveness attitudes (see Box 15.6).

The rationale for Schnabel and colleagues' intervention was to evoke an inclusive identity (see Gaertner & Dovidio, 2014; Dovidio, Gaertner, & Saguy, 2009; see also Scheepers & Ellemers, Chap. 9) that would allow room to acknowledge the suffering endured by *both* Palestinians and Israelis due to the regional conflict. To do so, these researchers drew the conflicting groups' attention to their *shared* suffering in one experimental condition (i.e. *common victim identity*) by asking participants in this condition to read a short article reminding participants that *both* Jews and Palestinians are victims of the prolonged conflict. The article justified this perspective by referring to alleged recent research concluding that each party had experienced substantial individual and national losses in human life, property, trust, and hope (Schnabel et al., 2013, Study 1). Alternatively, in the control condition, participants read a neutral text about aircrafts that was not related to the regional conflict. Finally, the researchers created a third condition (*common regional identity*). In this condition, participants read a text highlighting recent archaeological research revealing that ancient Middle Eastern peoples, including Palestinians and Jews, shared a common primordial culture that is still evident today in highly similar traditions, cuisines, and mentalities.

Results of this intervention showed that, relative to the control condition, inducing *common victim identity* among Palestinians and Israelis successfully reduced both groups' motivation for competitive victimhood and, crucially, lead to increased willingness to forgive. By contrast, relative to the control condition, inducing *common regional identity*, corresponding to interventions traditionally utilised within the identity recategorisation framework (Dovidio et al., 2009; Gaertner & Dovidio, 2014), neither lead to the reduction of competitive victimhood nor did it lead to an increased level of forgiveness among the conflicting groups.

A number of important insights can be extrapolated from the above findings. First, these results yet again point to the important interplay between identity and victim beliefs. The findings demonstrate that when collective suffering is framed in identities that are inclusive enough to allow room for acknowledging *both* the ingroup's suffering and that of the outgroup's, the motivation for competitive victimhood can be decreased and the propensity to forgive one another can be increased. Second, fostering such inclusive victim identities provides researchers and practitioners with one of the few intervention tools that promises to be sufficiently robust and efficacious, even in contexts of ongoing and violent intergroup conflicts. Finally, these results also reveal that any such inclusive victim identity interventions must address the pressing needs of conflicting groups for acknowledgement of their mutual suffering. Otherwise, as seen in the generic *common regional identity*, such interventions may have little or no positive impact.

What Would Third Parties Think of Us?

Recent research has further advanced our understanding of the boundary conditions of victim beliefs, especially of inclusive victim beliefs (a.k.a. common victimhood). Specifically, given the positive impact of inclusive victim beliefs on rival intergroup relations, what might prevent groups from utilising this strategy to promote peaceful co-existence? Theoretically, we know, for example, that one reason why conflicting groups may be motivated to compete over their share of victimhood is to attract the moral and material support from third party groups (Noor et al., 2012). Remember that at times of active war, third party's support and interventions increase the likelihood that the supported group will win the conflict, at least, militarily (Balch-Lindsay, Enterline, & Joyce, 2008). Thus, undoubtedly third parties can play a key role in intergroup conflicts. To demonstrate this, researchers recently investigated the hypothesis that one reason why conflicting groups' may not

be willing to readily acknowledge the suffering of their outgroups may have to do with the conflicting groups being concerned that such public acknowledgment may reduce the level of support they could receive from international third parties (Adelman, Leidner, Ünal, Nahhas, & Shnabel, 2016). Thus, the idea that was tested in this research was the extent to which a group's concern over losing a third party's support may influence the group's willingness to acknowledge the harm they had caused the outgroup.

Again, this research was conducted in the context of the Israeli and Palestinian conflict (Adelman et al., 2016, Study 1). The researchers employed an experimental paradigm, whereby Israeli participants either read a victimhood narrative highlighting exclusively the suffering of Israelis due to the regional conflict (*competitive victimhood narrative*) or a narrative that drew attention to the suffering of both Israelis and Palestinians as a result of the conflict (*inclusive victimhood narrative*). Interestingly, the way participants felt about the conflict and their collective suffering was revealed by the fact that the competitive victimhood narrative resonated with participants significantly more than the inclusive victimhood narrative.

However, irrespective of participants' preference for the specific narrative, the researchers observed several significant interaction effects on their key dependent variables, namely, motivation for competitive victimhood (e.g. 'Throughout the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Israelis suffered more than Palestinians', Adelman et al., 2016, p.1419) and support for aggressive policies against the outgroup (e.g. 'Israel should withhold tax money from the Palestinians if they don't fight terrorism', Adelman et al., 2016, p. 1419). First, for participants who were presented with the inclusive victimhood narrative, the less they were concerned over losing third party's support due to the ingroup's acknowledgment of the outgroup's suffering, the less they were motivated to compete over their share of victimhood. By contrast, for participants who were presented with the competitive victimhood narrative, no significant relationship between their concern over losing third party's support and motivation for

competitive victimhood was observed. Regarding participants' support for aggressive policies against Palestinians, a similar pattern to the one above emerged. That is, among participants who were less concerned, the inclusive victimhood narrative decreased their support for aggressive policies, relative to the competitive victimhood narrative.

Taken together, the outlined research provides interesting evidence in support of the important role of third parties and how they may influence conflicting groups regarding what victim beliefs they adopt. A broader point to take away from this research is that often as researchers we simplify the dynamics of intergroup conflict by reducing our analysis to the ingroup and outgroup protagonists only. However, as the present research demonstrates, conflict maintenance (vs. reduction) is rarely a matter of disagreements between two groups in a social vacuum.

Can They Ever Change?

Victim beliefs can also be influenced by their beliefs about the perpetrator outgroup and about human nature more broadly. In other words, individuals' beliefs about what their enemy group might be capable of can shape how they would behave towards such enemy groups. This line of reasoning is anchored in the *implicit theories of change* (Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Dweck, Chiu, & Hong, 1995; see also Bernecker & Job, Chap. 12). The underpinning rationale here is that people vary in their beliefs about human beings' potential for change. On the one hand, you may believe that as human beings we all have the potential to change our personal characteristics and behaviours. On the other hand, you may perceive stability in human nature and expect that our individual traits and behaviours are rather resistant to change. Such differential beliefs entail important consequences for how you behave towards others, especially towards your outgroups.

In a study conducted with Israeli train passengers living in Tel Aviv, Israel, researchers experimentally manipulated participants' malleability

beliefs about human nature by presenting them with bogus newspaper articles on recent research revealing alleged scientific evidence in favour (vs. against) such malleability (Wohl et al., 2015). To illustrate, in the pro-malleability condition, participants read alleged research findings revealing that the nature of groups in general could change, while in the non-malleability condition, the research findings revealed that the nature of groups would be fixed. In a purportedly unrelated second study, all participants were asked to read a bogus outgroup apology offered by the Palestinian leadership for the killing of innocent Israelis. Finally, participants were then asked to indicate the extent to which they were willing to forgive Palestinians, as well as the extent to which participants endorsed to reciprocate the Palestinian apology with one from the Israeli side.

The researchers found that they had successfully manipulated participants' malleability beliefs about Palestinians in the predicted direction. Importantly, the results showed that, relative to participants in the low malleability condition, those who were led to believe that groups' nature is malleable were not only more forgiving of Palestinians, but they were also willing to support the apology reciprocation (Wohl et al., 2015, Study 2).

What is striking about this intervention is that it extends the importance of victim beliefs to beliefs about perpetrators, thereby providing further intervention strategies for researchers and practitioners. Also of note is that the researchers observed this positive impact of the beliefs about perpetrators' malleability to also influence participants' willingness to reciprocate the outgroup's apology. Past literature has pointed out that the link between apology and forgiveness at the intergroup level is at best a tenuous one (Hornsey & Wohl, 2013). Thus, to observe the above effect in such a context is indeed very promising.

In the forgoing sections of this chapter, we were primarily concerned with summarising theoretical and empirical evidence to make a case in support of the social- and conflict-reducing utility of forgiveness. However, no case would be

complete without problematizing the limitations and unintended consequences of forgiveness, which we will address next.

The Limitations and Unintended Consequences of Forgiveness

Often forgiveness is considered as a gift given by victims to their perpetrators (Noor & Cantacuzino, 2018). Although the motivation behind such generosity may vary across victims, scholars generally agree that forgiveness tends to lose its power when we make it a duty. This is referred to as *forgiveness boosterism*, which involves praising and pushing forgiveness as a universal prescription (Lamb & Murphy, 2002). Clearly, the intention to write this chapter and dedicate our research careers to studying forgiveness are not served by referring to forgiveness as a panacea for resolving intergroup conflict.

Box 15.8 Question for Elaboration: Is Forgiveness Always a Good Thing?

So far in this chapter, forgiveness has been framed in terms of its utility at fostering peaceful co-existence between groups who are either currently engaged in conflict or who have a shared history steeped in hostile relations. However, can you think of any circumstances when forgiveness may not be the best strategy for groups to adopt? It might be particularly useful when thinking about this question to consider the relation between unequal groups in the long term.

In fact, forgiveness has been shown to be accompanied with some important unintended consequences. To illustrate, empirical research by Greenaway, Quinn, and Louis (2011) framed the atrocities White Australians have committed against Australian Aborigines as a common humanity tragedy (rather than the outcome of concrete hostile intergroup relations) with the

intention to induce a *common humanity identity* among Australian Aborigines to foster intergroup forgiveness (closely modelled on Wohl and Branscombe's research discussed earlier, 2005). As predicted, the recategorisation efforts had the effect of soliciting intergroup forgiveness. However, the research also revealed that this process had the effect of reducing the Aborigines' willingness to demand restitution for the injustices they have endured at the hands of White Australians. Put differently, the same intervention that led to increased willingness to forgive also suppressed justice demands among Aborigines.

In a similar vein, Wenzel and Okimoto (2015) found that, when participants of a laboratory-created group were encouraged by their fellow ingroup members to forgive an outgroup transgressor, this reduced anger and increased sympathy towards the transgressor among the participants. Crucially, these forgiving participants also perceived less injustice than those who were not prompted to forgive.

Although a rigorous test of the causal relationship between forgiveness and justice demands has not yet been conducted, the above findings point to interventions that, while on the surface are aimed at fostering forgiveness, may have serious sedative effects on justice-related outcome variables. Thus, both researchers and practitioners ought to exercise extra caution when promoting intergroup forgiveness and pay particular attention to justice concerns, which are considered key to a meaningful and robust conflict resolution infrastructure.

Summary

- The propensity to suffer can transcend from the individual to the group level when suffering is inflicted as a consequence of one's particular group membership.
- Groups are able to construe such suffering from discrete and powerful narratives into a shared sense of collective victimhood.

- This dynamic (and obstructive) interplay between group identity and victimhood can act as a barrier to intergroup forgiveness.
- When interventions are instigated that target mutually destructive suffering and focus groups' attention upon their *common suffering*, intergroup forgiveness is more readily endorsed.
- Intergroup forgiveness can be achieved and is a viable strategy to impede perpetuating cycles of revenge. Ultimately, this has the effect of reducing the net amount of suffering.

Recommended Reading

- Greenaway, K. H., Quinn, E. A., & Louis, W. R. (2011). Appealing to common humanity increases forgiveness but reduces collective action among victims of historical atrocities. *European Journal of Social Psychology, 41*, 569–573.
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Guiding Answers to Questions in the Chapter

1. Question with Box 15.8: Is Forgiveness Always a Good Thing?

A: The empirical evidence reviewed in this chapter demonstrates that when conflicting groups are reminded of their common suffering, such groups are more likely to forgive one another, thus fostering intergroup harmony. However, such an intervention may also reduce the anger and identification with one's own group. Such dispositions are paramount when mobilising disadvantaged groups to rally for social change in the wake of such disadvantage (e.g. see Wright & Lubensky, 2009; and also Greenaway et al., 2011). Though having a curing impact on fractured relations, forgiveness may come at the cost of normalising objective group-based inequalities (see Morton & Postmes, 2011). In the long run, this is particularly problematic, for without the desire for social change, such inequalities are given the opportunity to fester without the challenge of redress from those people who should be most motivated to challenge the status quo – those in the disadvantaged position. This critique of forgiveness is touching on a much bigger and unanswered question, namely, how does forgiveness relate to justice?

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