



The positive effect of negative emotions in protracted conflict: The case of anger

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ABSTRACT

Extant research has demonstrated the destructive role that anger plays in the context of intergroup conflict. Among other findings, it has been established that anger elevates public support for aggressive and violent actions towards the outgroup. This finding has been explained by the unique cognitive appraisals, emotional goal, and response tendencies associated with anger, typified by appraised relative strength and high control, motivation to correct perceived wrongdoings, and willingness to engage in risky behavior. In the current work we examine an innovative assumption, according to which the apparent destructive implications of anger are a result of situational range restriction—namely, that anger as a group emotion has been examined almost solely at the escalation stage of conflict. Instead, we propose that the same unique characteristics of anger can bring about constructive political attitudes and support for non-violent policies in the context of systematic efforts to de-escalate a protracted conflict. To test this hypothesis we conducted two studies in which we examined the relationship between anger and the willingness to engage in positive risk-taking and support non-violent policies in the context of political negotiations between adversaries. Results indicate a significant positive relationship, supporting the hypothesis that anger is not an exclusively militant emotion, and its effects are situationally dependent.

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Over the last three decades, a growing body of literature has highlighted the importance of emotions in intergroup relations (Iyer & Leach, 2008; Mackie & Smith, 2002; Mackie, Smith, & Ray, 2008). At the same time, the central role of emotions in the dynamics of intergroup conflict is increasingly recognized by scholars in the fields of international relations and conflict resolution (Bar-Tal, Halperin, & De Rivera, 2007; Horowitz, 1985; Mayer, 2000; Petersen, 2002). Among other things, emotions influence support for specific policy preferences regarding an adversary (Halperin, *in press*; Halperin, Sharvit, & Gross, *in press*). For example, emotions contribute to decision making about reactions to terror attacks (Cheung-Blunden & Blunden, 2008; Huddy, Feldman, & Cassese, 2007; Lerner, Gonzalez, Small, & Fischhoff, 2003; Skitka, Bauman, Aramovich, & Morgan, 2006) and influence positions on negotiation, peace agreements, and reconciliation (Halperin, *in press*; Maoz & McCauley, 2009; Tam et al., 2007).

Anger is a central and prevalent emotion in the context of intergroup conflict (Bar-Tal, 2007; Halperin & Gross, *in press*). It is characterized by cognitive appraisals of strength and control and a willingness to engage in risky behavior, and it is linked to the emotional goal of “correcting perceived wrongdoing” (Halperin, 2008). In past literature, this goal has been found to be consistently pursued through increased support for aggression against an adversary (Cheung-Blunden & Blunden, 2008;

Huddy et al., 2007; Lerner et al., 2003; Skitka et al., 2006). However, we suggest that anger can also bring about constructive political attitudes, in the service of the same goal of correcting wrongdoing. In the current work, we argue that anger can promote support for positive, non-violent policies in the context of efforts to de-escalate protracted conflict, such as peace negotiations. Specifically, we suggest that the same characteristics (i.e., appraisals of relative strength and a willingness to engage in risky behavior) that make anger such a powerful aggression motivator when intergroup relations are belligerent can turn it into a powerful driving force towards resolution of the conflict in the context of attempts to de-escalate the conflict.

Group-based emotions and intergroup conflict: basic conceptualizations

Traditionally, affect has been conceptualized as an individual-level phenomenon (Arnold, 1960) in which specific emotions are linked up with specific goals, cognitive appraisals of costs, benefits, and risks, and action tendencies aimed at achieving said goals (Lerner & Keltner, 2000, 2001; see also James, 1884; Scherer, 1984; Zajonc, 1998). However, human behavior is not limited to the interpersonal context, and is greatly influenced by dynamics at the group level (Hogg & Abrams, 1999). In recent years, there has been growing interest in *group-based emotions*—emotions that individuals experience as a result of their identification with a group or social category (Mackie, Devos, & Smith, 2000; Smith, 1993, 1999; Smith & Mackie, 2008; Yzerbyt, Dumont, Wigboldus, & Gordin, 2003). *Intergroup emotion*

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theory extends this concept to group-based emotions targeted at other social groups (Smith, 1993, 1999; Smith, Seger, & Mackie, 2007). The theory posits that individuals for whom a social identity is salient and meaningful will experience emotions based on appraisals of the costs and benefits of a stimulus to the ingroup, even in the absence of direct relevance to the individual (Mackie & Smith, 1998; Mackie et al., 2000). Moreover, parallel with what is found at the individual level, group-focused appraisals associated with group emotions result in action tendencies towards outgroups (Smith et al., 2007).

The concept of group emotions is particularly pertinent when trying to understand the influence of emotions on public policy preferences in the context of intractable intergroup conflict. In such conflicts, members of the public are often influenced by events vicariously. Usually a few group members suffer or take part in an event directly, and this experience is transmitted to other group members through the mediation of leaders, the mass media, and interaction with other individuals (Halperin, Russell, Dweck, & Gross, *in press*; Halperin, Sharvit et al., *in press*). As such, group emotions evoked by these experiences become central to a group's broader reaction to conflict-related events.

Intergroup anger in intergroup conflict

Of all group emotions associated with intractable conflict, anger is one of the most significant. Anger has been understood as a reaction to events in which the actions of others are perceived to be unjust, unfair, or contrary to acceptable societal norms (Averill, 1982). Furthermore, anger is evoked in response to a negative event that frustrates a desired goal and is intensified when the event is caused by a specific agent and viewed as unjust or illegitimate (Lazarus, 1991). Accordingly, the emotional goal of anger has been defined as a desire to correct perceived wrongdoing, injustice, or unfairness (Fischer & Roseman, 2007; Halperin, 2008). Anger has also been shown to be an approach-related emotion, making people eager to act (Carver & Harmon-Jones, 2009; Davidson, Jackson, & Kalin, 2000; Harmon-Jones & Sigelman, 2001; Mackie et al., 2000). As such, it involves appraisals of relative strength and high coping ability (Mackie et al., 2000). Moreover, anger is linked to indiscriminate optimism about success (Fischhoff, Gonzalez, Lerner, & Small, 2005) and an increased willingness to engage in risky behavior (Lerner & Keltner, 2001; Rydell et al., 2008). Together, these characteristics usually lead to a tendency to confront (Berkowitz, 1993; Mackie et al., 2000) or attack the anger-evoking target (Frijda, 1986; Roseman, Wiest, & Swartz, 1994).

In line with these characteristics, previous studies in the context of real-world conflicts have consistently found clear and direct association between anger and attribution of blame to the outgroup (Halperin, *in press*; Small, Lerner, & Fischhoff, 2006). Other studies find that individuals who feel angry appraise future military attack as less risky (Lerner & Keltner, 2001) and forecast more positive consequences of such attack (Huddy et al., 2007). Accordingly, studies conducted in the U.S following the 9/11 attacks found that angry individuals were highly supportive of an American military response in Iraq and elsewhere (Cheung-Blunden & Blunden, 2008; Huddy et al., 2007; Lerner et al., 2003).

Anger-related action tendencies

The connection between anger and belligerence may thus seem intuitive. Nevertheless, we argue that this pattern is not the *only* action tendency associated with anger and that the emotional goal of correcting a perceived wrong may be served by constructive as well as destructive means. Specifically, a context in which one meets with the adversary and engages in negotiations aimed at de-escalation may present non-violent options for the pursuit of group goals. Such engagement entails a willingness to be pro-active and take risks.

Intergroup anger facilitates both of these things: the appraisal tendencies related to anger promote a sense of power and optimism about the ingroup's ability to handle the situation, coupled with a stronger approach orientation and openness to risk. As such, we argue that the usual psychological consequences of intergroup anger may stimulate a seemingly unusual outcome in the context of activities specifically aimed at de-escalating an ongoing conflict: namely, non-violent behavior towards the outgroup.

Three previous studies suggest that anger may not exclusively be an aggressive emotion. In an early study (Averill, 1982), when subjects were asked to report their action tendencies towards sources of anger in interpersonal contexts, non-aggressive responses were more frequent than aggressive responses. Following this study, Averill (1983) warned of interpreting anger as necessarily resulting in increased aggression. A second study of interpersonal relationships (Fischer & Roseman, 2007, Study 3) found that anger can be conducive to reconciliation and relationship improvement after some time passes from the original offense. While both of these examples are interpersonal rather than intergroup in nature, the notion that the manner in which the emotional goal of anger is pursued may differ across contexts within a broader conflict supports the idea that this may be true at the intergroup level as well.¹ In a third study that examined the difference between anger and hate in the context of attitudes of Israelis towards Palestinians (Halperin, 2008, Study 3), anger was associated with two seemingly contradictory response tendencies—support for violent action towards the Palestinians and support for educational channels to create perceptual change among Palestinians. This seeming contradiction suggests the plausibility of the hypothesis that anger can result in both aggressive and non-aggressive response tendencies (see also Halperin, *in press*).

To explore this hypothesis, the two studies reported here set out to explore the impact of intergroup anger on *positive risk-taking* when political negotiations are in view. In our usage, the term “positive risk-taking” refers to non-violent, diplomatic steps taken in the context of intractable conflict to promote one's own interests. This includes investment in non-violent persuasion attempts, demonstrations of good faith, and a willingness to reciprocate positive, cooperative acts from the outgroup.²

The current studies

We conducted two studies in two very different contexts. The first study examined the correlational relationship between anger and willingness to take non-aggressive policy risks in the context of political negotiations. This study, based on data from a representative survey of Israelis, was conducted in the context of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict on the eve of an important peace summit. The second study was a lab-based experiment which enabled us to examine causality in a conflict context that is relatively free of historic and ideological constraints. We constructed a conflict between the United States and Syria—borrowing from real components of U.S.–Syrian relations—with a sample of college students who had very little familiarity with this issue and were led to believe that de-escalatory negotiations were approaching, reconstructing the natural conditions

¹ Relatedly, anger has also been found to have positive consequences in interpersonal dispute resolution (e.g., Friedman et al., 2004), dyadic negotiation (e.g., Van Kleef, Van Dijk, Steinel, Harinck, & Van Beest, 2008), and ultimatum bargaining (e.g., Van Dijk, Van Kleef, Steinel, & Van Beest, 2008). However, it is important to note that “positive” in this context refers to advantage to the actor rather than non-violent policies or behavior.

² It could be argued that maintaining violent conflict is an equally risky alternative. However, though objectively it can indeed be as or even more risky, it is a *familiar* pattern of behavior and one that lends an illusion of power and control. As such, it is an underlying assumption of this paper that openness to engaging in new forms of behavior—particularly ones that imply at least a minimal level of reliance on the other—are perceived as more risky.

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