A whole other story: Alternative narratives of intergroup conflict reduce competitive victimhood and intergroup hostility.

With essential help from this IPRAF grant, we were able to conduct an important program of research on the role that alternative conflict narratives can play in reducing ideologies that underlie continued conflict as well as in reducing conflict behaviors. We believe that this research is an important step forward in the field of peace research.

Introduction

In the year 2015, there are more than 50 ongoing conflicts. Some, like the wars in Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq, and Ukraine, have been marked by high casualties, and others, like the Israel-Palestine conflict, the Turkey-PKK conflict, and the Kashmir conflict, have been simmering, with relatively less violence. However, these conflicts are not yet resolved, and may at any point return to high levels of conflict. These intergroup conflicts lead to vast amounts of human suffering for people directly involved as well as people all over the world. This is especially true in the case of protracted conflicts that have persisted for generations. When a society is engaged in a protracted conflict, it develops a set of deep-seated and widely shared beliefs about the conflict and their group's role in it, which is called the group's conflict narrative (Bar-Tal, 2000; Bar-Tal & Salomon, 2006). This conflict narrative serves to encourage societies to maintain the conflict despite their costs (Bar-Tal, 1998; Hammack, 2008; Rouhana & Bar-Tal, 1998). Past research has shown that conflict narratives play an important role in maintaining conflict, but we argue that they may also hold the power to reduce conflict. Therefore, this program of research tested this idea in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the U.S. "war on terror," and the Turkish-Kurdish conflict, investigating if presenting people from conflict groups with an alternative conflict narrative can decrease their participation in intergroup hostility and how that might happen.

The role of competitive victimhood in conflict narratives and conflict

For many groups engaged in conflict, the conflict narrative and the narrative of their group's history rests on beliefs about their status of being a victim in the conflict (Hammack, 2006; Rouhana & Bar-Tal, 1998; Vollhardt, 2009, 2012). One belief about one's own victimization in a conflict, called competitive victimhood, is that one's own group, and not the adversarial group, is the primary or sole victim of the conflict (Noor, Brown, Gonzalez, Manzi, & Lewis, 2008; Noor, Brown, & Prentice, 2008; Vollhardt, 2012). Past research has found that competitive victimhood plays an important role in conflict (Noor, Shnabel, Halabi, and Nadler, 2012; Vollhardt, 2012). Researchers have found that it negatively predicted forgiveness for past victimization as well as willingness to enaceg in reconciliation in Northern Ireland, Chile, and Israel (Noor et al., 2008a,

2008b; Noor, Shnabel, Halabi, & Doosje, in press; for reviews see Noor et al., 2012; Vollhardt, 2012). Therefore, one key way for an alternative conflict narrative to decrease conflict behaviors and increase the willingness to engage in resolution might be to reduce competitive victimhood. This may be ideally achieved by getting members of a group involved in a conflict to take a shared victimhood perspective, which sees both groups as being victims in the conflict (Shnabel, Halabi, & Noor, 2013; Vollhardt, 2009, 2012; see also Lickel, Miller, Stenstrom, Denson, & Schmader, 2006) rather than seeing the victimization of one's own group and the other conflict group as being mutually exclusive (Gray & Wegner, 2009). Rather than focusing solely on their own group's suffering, people could acknowledge that while their group suffered, so did the other group. Thus, when an alternative conflict narrative presents suffering as being something shared by both groups, conflict group members will have their competitive victimhood reduced.

By reducing competitive victimhood, the alternative narrative should then also reduce the willingness to engage in aggressive behavioral intentions within the conflict. Although past research on competitive victimhood has mostly focused on the effects that it has on perceptions of past conflicts and on intentions regarding past conflicts (e.g in terms of forgiveness; Noor et al., 2008a, 2008b) or on past wrongdoings in ongoing conflicts (e.g., Shnabel, Halabi, & Noor, 2013), it is important that we test whether this can also help improve behavioral intentions within an ongoing conflict. We believe that an alternative narrative can also be used to reduce competitive victimhood in an ongoing conflict, and then in turn should reduce support for aggressive policies aimed at harming the other party in the conflict.

To increase the likelihood that people will be willing to give up competitive aspects of their conflict narrative and accept an alternative narrative that emphasizes shared victimization, it is important that we can identify and alleviate the concerns that might have led to the development of competitive victimhood in the first place. While many studies have investigated the effects that competitive victimhood can have on conflicts, few have investigated why it is developed, arguing that competitive victimhood is motivated by the desire to garner moral and material support from third-party groups (see also Noor et al., 2012; Sullivan, Landau, Branscombe, & Rothschild, 2012). While there are many possible reasons why a conflict group may be motivated to develop and maintain a competitive victimhood narrative (see Noor et al., 2012), we believe that a particularly important reason why groups might develop competitive victimhood is to ensure third-party support for one's own group. As continued conflict is taxing on a group's morale and resources, support from third parties becomes critical to mitigating the costs of long-term conflict (Balch-Lindsay, Enterline, & Joyce, 2008; Gleditsch & Beardsley, 2004). By presenting the ingroup as being the true victim in the conflict, one can increase the perception of the ingroup as the underdog (Vandello, Goldschmied, & Richards, 2007) and thereby ensure support by third parties that generally prefer the underdog. Therefore, we expected that in order to convince people involved in a conflict to reduce their competitive victimhood, it may be necessary for those people to not be concerned that by giving up their competitive victimhood they will be sacrificing third-party support for their group.

Study 1: Can an alternative narrative reduce competitive victimhood and intergroup hostility for Jewish Israelis?

In a first study, we tested our proposed model with Jewish Israelis. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is one of the longest ongoing violent conflicts, and both conflict parties tend to self-identify as victims (Hammack, 2006; Leidner, Castano, & Ginges, 2013; Rouhana & Bar-Tal, 1998; Vollhardt, 2009). We tested whether exposure to a narrative that acknowledged the suffering of both ingroup *and* outgroup, relative to a narrative that only discussed ingroup suffering, could decrease support for national policies aimed at punishing Palestinians by decreasing competitive victimhood. We further tested whether the extent to which the alternative narrative would reduce competitive victimhood and support for punitive policies would depend on how concerned Jewish Israelis were that acknowledging Palestinian suffering would risk the loss of international support for Israel.

We found that the alternative narrative acknowledging ingroup and outgroup suffering decreased competitive victimhood and, in turn, support for aggressive policies, but only for people less concerned that acknowledging outgroup suffering would undermine third-party support for the ingroup. Furthermore, the reduction in support for aggressive policies was explained by the reduction in competitive victimhood. Importantly, the alternative narrative was successful at reducing competitive victimhood and support for aggressive policies despite a clear preference for the non-acknowledgement narrative, even among people low in concern.

Study 2: Can an alternative narrative reduce competitive victimhood and intergroup hostility for Americans?

In a second study, we reproduced the findings of Study 1 with American citizens in the context of drone war against the Taliban in Pakistan. Once again, we found that for people who were less concerned that acknowledging that the other group suffered would lead to a loss of third party support, the acknowledgement narrative decreased competitive victimhood and support for aggressive policies.

The pattern of results from the first and second studies suggests that third-party groups may have a unique position in intergroup conflicts: if they can assuage conflict parties' concern about losing valuable support from third-party groups if they acknowledged that the other group suffered, they might make members of the conflict group more open to an alternative narrative of shared victimization.

Study 3: Can a third party group ensure a positive reaction to an alternative narrative by assurance of continued support?

We tested that possibility in a third study, by creating a message from a third-party to a conflict party that reassures the party's members that acknowledging outgroup suffering will not risk loss of support but in fact is the only way to secure continued support. Consistent with the findings of the previous studies, we found that after a third-party message informing a conflict party that acknowledgment of outgroup suffering will *not* risk loss of third-party support (but in fact secure it), an alternative conflict narrative acknowledging both ingroup *and* outgroup suffering reduces competitive victimhood beliefs and support for aggressive policies among all members of the conflict party.

Study 4: Can an alternative narrative reduce competitive victimhood and intergroup hostility for a low power group such as Kurdish-Turks?

Finally, in a fourth study we found that the beneficial effects of an alternative narrative generalize beyond higher power groups in conflict, like Americans and Israelis. Even among low-power Turkish Kurds, the alternative narrative decreased competitive victimhood and consequently support for aggressive policies.

Conclusion

In sum, this project identified alternative conflict narratives as a way to decrease competitive victimhood, which has been identified as an important component in maintaining intergroup conflict. We found that although people dislike a narrative that emphasizes the suffering of both parties, it reduces competitive victimhood and, in turn, support for aggressive policies that further the conflict. This suggests a way for government and non-government organization to present the narrative of the conflict in a way that can help reduce conflict and increase the opportunity for peace. Importantly, this project also identified the fear of losing international support in reaction to acknowledging the suffering of the other conflict party as an important motivator for competitive victimhood. We further discovered that a third party can use this to their advantage in pursuing peaceful outcomes. When a third party group pressures a conflict group to acknowledge the suffering of the other group while reassuring them that they won't reduce support if they do, people are more open to the alternative narrative and show the reduction in competitive victimhood and policy support. This provides an important way forward for international organizations and countries that want to use their influence to generate peaceful conflict resolution.

We have recently submitted a paper based on the findings described above to the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology for publication. We expect that this paper will be published within the next year. We have also agreed to write an article based on these findings that can be published for wider audiences. In addition, once the paper is published, we will be disseminating these results through the UMass press office to increase interest in the results that we were able to find through this research.

Sincerely,
Bernhard Leidner and Levi Adelman