Intergroup Conflict 2020
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Abstract
The pervasiveness, persistence, and petrifying scope of intergroup conflict have fueled substantial scholarly interest in intergroup conflict across the social and biological sciences. Here we outline five questions that we hope students of intergroup conflict will undertake to research in years to come: (a) When and why do people engage in, and publicly display, blatant forms of intergroup hostility? (b) How do different moral motives shape individual behavior in intergroup conflict? (c) How do intragroup processes influence intergroup processes and vice versa? (d) How does the changing nature of “groups” influence intergroup conflict and its resolution? And (e) how will global challenges shape intergroup relations in the 21st century? Although it is unimaginable that the problem of intergroup conflict will be eradicated, we hope that addressing these questions will help us understand how to manage intergroup conflicts and their harmful consequences better.

Intergroup conflict is plausibly humanity’s stickiest, longest-standing problem (Cohen & Insko, 2008; Fiske, 2002). The many faces of intergroup conflict—from the stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination that plague everyday life, to the horrors of terrorism, warfare, and massacres that threaten the lives of millions around the globe—have stimulated a substantial body of basic and applied research on human conflict (e.g., Choi & Bowles, 2007; Cikara & Van Bavel, 2014; Cottrell & Neuberg, 2005; Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2007; De Dreu, Balliet, & Halevy, 2014; Esteban, Mayoral, & Ray, 2012; Ginges, Atran, Medin, & Shikaki, 2007; Riek, Mania, & Gaertner, 2006).

Research on intergroup conflict at the turn of the 21st century has explored a wide range of causes and potential solutions to intergroup conflict, many of which are based on the three “I”s of conflict: the interests, identities, and ideologies that often govern the dynamics of intergroup conflict (e.g., Bornstein, 2003; Brewer, 1999; Brown, 2000; Duckitt, 2001; Hewstone, Rubin, & Willis, 2002; Sidanius & Pratto, 2001; Whitson, Anichich, Wang, & Galinsky, 2017; Wildschut, Pinter, Vevea, Insko, & Schopler, 2003). Examples of interest-based solutions include interventions aimed at disentangling “ingroup love” from “outgroup hate” (Halevy, Bornstein, & Sagiv, 2008) and promoting consideration of future consequences (Axelrod, 1984; Insko et al., 1998, 2001; Wolf et al., 2009). Examples of identity-based solutions include promoting a common ingroup identity (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2005; Hornsey & Hogg, 2000) or a relational intergroup identity through intergroup leadership (Hogg, Van Knippenberg, & Rast, 2012; Pinter et al., 2007). Examples of ideology-based

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solutions include interventions aimed at promoting colorblindness or multiculturalism (Apfelbaum, Grunberg, Halevy, & Kang, 2017; Apfelbaum, Pauker, Sommers, & Ambady, 2010).

Other proposed solutions to intergroup conflict abound, including interventions aimed at promoting intergroup contact (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006); empathy for outgroup members (Malhotra & Liyanage, 2005; Stephan & Finlay, 1999); needs-based reconciliation (Shnabel & Nadler, 2008); group malleability beliefs (Halperin, Russell, Trzesniewski, Gross, & Dweck, 2011); and using mass media to change perceived norms related to intergroup relations (Paluck, 2009). Identifying a common thread that runs through all the proposed solutions to intergroup conflict noted above is quite challenging. The challenge arises from the fact that, more often than not, the different streams of research on intergroup conflict have progressed in parallel silos, with limited cross-fertilization between different theories. Thus, integrative accounts of intergroup conflict, as well as multifaceted solutions to the problem of intergroup conflict, are largely missing from the literature.

The immense costs and ominous consequences of intergroup conflict will continue to fuel worldwide interest in deeper understanding and more effective management of intergroup conflict, and when and where possible—reducing or resolving intergroup conflict. Here we respond to an invitation to discuss the future of intergroup conflict research by highlighting questions about intergroup conflict that we personally find interesting and important, both theoretically and practically. Predicting the future is notoriously difficult; therefore, rather than providing a precarious forecast, we outline in the current paper what we think are some of the most intriguing challenges that we hope to see students of intergroup conflict undertake in coming years. Thus, we have organized the remainder of this paper around our (admittedly subjective) top five pressing research questions and challenges for the field of intergroup conflict.

**Pressing Research Questions and Challenges**

**When and Why Do People Engage in, and Publicly Display, Blatant Forms of Intergroup Hostility?**

People typically try to avoid seeming bigoted. However, under certain conditions, such as perceived threat from outgroup members (Brewer, 1999; Riek et al., 2006), people are willing to engage not only in private, implicit, and mild forms of intergroup bias, such as privately rating ingroup members more favorably than outgroup members in surveys (Mummendey & Otten, 1998), but also in public, direct, and extreme forms of intergroup hostility, such as openly participating in a white nationalist rally (https://www.cnn.com/2017/08/13/us/charlottesville-white-nationalist-rally-car-crash/index.html).

For example, consider the difference between infrahumanization and dehumanization (Haslam & Loughnan, 2014). Infrahumanization is a subtle and indirect form of denying full humanity to outgroup members by attributing uniquely human characteristics (such as secondary emotions, e.g., guilt) to ingroup members more than to outgroup members (Vaes, Paladino, Castelli, Leyens, & Giovanazzi, 2003). In contrast, blatant dehumanization entails more overt and aggressive forms of derogation whereby individuals readily express their views that members of certain outgroups are animal-like (Kteily, Bruneau, Waytz, & Cotterill, 2015). Whereas implicit and mild infrahumanization may be tolerated more readily in society, there are circumstances under which blatant dehumanization gains prominence. Understanding the conditions under which individuals, and society at large, condone blatant forms of intergroup hostility constitutes a key challenge for future research on intergroup conflict.

Researchers have made initial strides in identifying antecedent conditions that are potentially related to individuals’ tendencies to publicly display blatant forms of intergroup animosity, and correspondingly—to society’s willingness to tolerate such displays. For instance, though individuals typically avoid harming outgroup members financially when other alternatives are available (De Dreu et al., 2010; Halevy et al., 2008; Halevy, Weisel, & Bornstein, 2012), experiencing relative deprivation...
increases the propensity of individuals in economically disadvantaged groups to harm members of economically advantaged outgroups financially (Halevy, Chou, Cohen, & Bornstein, 2010). Intergroup situations that involve direct threat to group interests (e.g., war, strike/lockout, sport competitions between rival clubs) may promote both the propensity to harm outgroup members and the perceived appropriateness of publicly displaying hostility toward outgroup members (Bornstein, 2003; Cottrell & Neuberg, 2005; Duckitt & Fisher, 2003; Kilduff, Elfenbein, & Staw, 2010; Weisel & Böhm, 2015; Wolf, Insko, Kirchner, & Wildschut, 2008; Yip, Schweitzer, & Nurmohamed, 2018).

With regard to the role of perceived threat, Brewer (1999, pp. 435–436) noted, “the reciprocal relationship between ingroup cohesion and outgroup hostility may be limited to conditions in which groups are in competition over physical resources or political power. Whether actual or imagined, the perception that outgroup members constitute a threat to ingroup members’ interests or survival creates a circumstance in which identification and interdependence with the ingroup are directly associated with fear and hostility toward the threatening outgroup and vice versa.” Indeed, research shows that national groups with a history of territorial conflicts show higher levels of cultural tightness (i.e., they tend to have strong norms that are enforced fervently: Gelfand et al., 2011), lending support to the idea that intergroup conflict and intragroup cooperation tend to coevolve (Choi & Bowles, 2007). Under conditions of intergroup rivalry individuals may not only harm outgroup members, but also derive pleasure from the suffering of outgroup members (Cikara, Botvinick, & Fiske, 2011; Cikara & Van Bavel, 2014).

Future research is required to explore more systematically additional conditions that potentially give rise to blatant and public forms of intergroup hostility. For example, building on theoretical and experimental paradigms that focus on economic interdependence within and between groups (e.g., Bornstein, 2003), future research may examine the effects of economic uncertainty and adversity (which has been linked to the rise of dominant leaders: Kakkar & Sivanathan, 2017) on overt manifestations of animosity toward outgroup members. A deeper and more complete understanding of these antecedent conditions should aid in designing effective interventions for managing such harmful behaviors.

**How Do Different Moral Motives Shape Individual Behavior in Intergroup Conflict?**

Intergroup conflict has a peculiar quality: it has the power to transform certain behaviors, such as homicidal aggression, that are considered immoral when enacted within the group, into behaviors that are considered moral or heroic when enacted across group boundaries (e.g., during warfare: Cohen, Montoya, & Insko, 2006; Rai & Fiske, 2011). Intergroup conflict also transforms virtuous behaviors, such as helpfulness and cooperation, which are considered moral when enacted within the group, into behaviors that are considered immoral or traitorous when enacted across group boundaries (e.g., Halevy, Chou, Cohen, & Livingston, 2012). The double standard that exists concerning the very same behaviors, and the inverse moral meaning that is attributed to the same actions when applied to ingroup members as opposed to outgroup members, highlight that intergroup conflict and morality are inherently interwoven (Campbell, 1975; Halevy, Jun, & Chou, 2018; Halevy, Kreps, Weisel, & Goldenberg, 2015).

Considerable research in psychology and related disciplines suggests that moral character is at the core of interpersonal and intergroup dynamics (Cohen, Panter, Turan, Morse, & Kim, 2014; Cuddy et al., 2007; Goodwin, Piazza, & Rozin, 2014; Stellar & Willer, 2018; Wojciszke, 2005). Because morality is a primary evaluative dimension, individuals wish to perceive themselves as moral (Aquino & Reed, 2002), strive to develop a reputation as moral (Trevino, Hartman, & Brown, 2000; Vonasch, Reynolds, Winegard, & Baumeister, 2018), and take actions to satisfy the need to feel moral (Prentice et al., 2018).

Different moral foundations, however, prescribe different pathways to feeling moral and developing moral reputations (Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009). Whereas two centrifugal moral foundations—harm/care and fairness/reciprocity—can potentially support positive intergroup interactions by expanding moral regard outward (to include distant others), two centripetal moral foundations—ingroup/loyalty and authority/respect—can promote intergroup conflict by justifying fighting for ingroup goals and
institutions over appreciation and promotion of universal goals and institutions (Doosje, van den Bos, Loseman, Feddes, & Mann, 2012; Graham, Waytz, Meindl, Iyer, & Young, 2017).

Multiple streams of research have endeavored to illuminate the role morality and personal value priorities play in intergroup relations. For example, research shows that individuals' willingness to express prejudice increases when their past behavior can be construed as establishing their "moral credentials" (e.g., lack of prejudice: Effron, Cameron, & Monin, 2009; Monin & Miller, 2001). Research from a motivational perspective has focused on personal value priorities, showing that universalism values promote willingness for outgroup social contact among majority group members in intractable conflict (Sagiv & Schwartz, 2005).

Other lines of research have explored antecedents and consequences of group-based moral emotions. Negative group-based moral emotions, such as group-based guilt, arise from perceptions that one's group has acted immorally. In contrast, positive group-based moral emotions, such as group-based pride, arise from perceptions that one's group has acted morally. Research shows that more inclusive social categorizations can promote intergroup forgiveness (Wohl & Branscombe, 2005) and that critical thinking about the ingroup's wrongdoing underlies feelings of group-based guilt (Roccas, Klar, & Liviatan, 2006). Unfortunately, the different streams of research on moral identity, moral foundations, moral credentials, and moral group-based emotions remain largely independent from each other. Future research could benefit from a multifaceted consideration of the role of morality in intergroup conflict.

How Do Intragroup Processes Influence Intergroup Processes and Vice Versa?

Intergroup conflict is a multilevel phenomenon. Hence, to fully understand how intergroup conflict unfolds, researchers need to explore not only individual cognitions (e.g., Halevy, Sagiv, Roccas, & Bornstein, 2006), emotions (e.g., Mackie, Devos, & Smith, 2000), and behavior (e.g., De Dreu et al., 2016), but also the reciprocal influence of intragroup processes on intergroup processes and vice versa. There is evidence that competition between groups increases cooperation within groups (Bornstein & Ben-Yossef, 1994) and that within-group coordination and consensus positively influence joint gains and subjective value in between-group negotiation (Halevy, 2008). Although few scholars would dispute that intergroup conflict is a multilevel phenomenon, more research is required to establish the reciprocal relations between intragroup and intergroup processes.

One line of research that has looked at the interdependence between intragroup and intergroup processes focuses on representative negotiation as a means of intergroup conflict resolution (e.g., Demoulin, Teixeira, Gillis, Goldoni, & Stinglhamber, 2016; Ramsbotham & Schiff, 2018). Research by Steinel and his colleagues (Steinel, De Dreu, Ouwehand, & Ramirez-Marín, 2009) found that hawkish constituencies, who push for a competitive approach in intergroup bargaining, increase representatives' demands and distributive success. Importantly, the impact of hawkish voices on negotiated agreements is significantly greater than the impact of dovish voices, who push for a cooperative approach in intergroup bargaining (Kahneman & Renshon, 2007; Steinel et al., 2009; for similar findings from research with the Prisoner’s Dilemma Game, see Schopler et al., 1993; Wildschut, Insko, & Gaertner, 2002).

Subsequent research has shown that the persuasiveness of a hawkish minority critically depends on the status of group members who express hawkish views (Aaldering & De Dreu, 2012) and that attributes of the representative to the intergroup negotiation (i.e., their status as prototypical or peripheral within their group) and aspects of the situation (i.e., the extent to which the representative is being held accountable by the group) interact in shaping the depth of information processing in intergroup negotiation and the quality of negotiated agreements (Van Kleef, Steinel, & Homan, 2013). Specifically, that research found that peripheral group members who represent their groups under conditions of high (versus low) accountability process information more thoroughly and reach more integrative outcomes that benefit members of both groups.
Another line of research that considers the interdependence between intragroup and intergroup processes focuses on social hierarchy and leader emergence in groups. Consistent with the social identity theory of leadership (Hogg, 2001), prototypical leaders and leaders who deviate from group norms in a direction that makes them more different from outgroup members are evaluated more favorably by followers than leaders who deviate from group norms in a direction that makes them more similar to outgroup members (Abrams, Randlsde Moura, Marques, & Hutchison, 2008). In addition, group members who display virtues, such as prosocial behavior toward fellow ingroup members, are preferred as leaders for peaceful intergroup interactions whereas group members who display dominance (by acting selfishly or aggressively toward outgroup members) are preferred as leaders for competitive, zero-sum intergroup interactions (Halevy, Chou et al., 2012; cf. Kakkar & Sivanathan, 2017).

Integrating the different streams of research that have considered the reciprocal influence between intragroup processes and intergroup processes raises interesting questions for future research on intergroup conflict and its resolution. For instance, how do majority group members cope with a dissenting minority that challenges how intergroup conflict is being managed? Under what conditions do dissenting voices galvanize into a social movement that is sufficiently influential to impact the dynamics of a large-scale intergroup conflict? Given the interdependence between intragroup and intergroup processes (Putnam, 1988), it is plausible that some intractable intergroup conflicts are sustained by obstacles that exist within each group rather than due to insurmountable disagreements between groups. More specifically, negotiating peace agreements (e.g., in the Middle East) is extremely difficult to the extent that groups: (a) cannot reach internal consensus concerning the group’s priorities and preferences (i.e., which issues are more important versus less important; which tradeoffs are desirable versus undesirable); (b) are influenced by hawkish minorities more than by dovish voices within the group; and (c) elect dominant leaders who are extreme progroup deviants to represent them in negotiations with the other group. Future research on intergroup conflict as a multilevel process may focus on how these obstacles can be overcome (e.g., through constructive intragroup negotiations that establish consensus within groups prior to the intergroup negotiation) as a means to promote success in complex, multi-issue peace negotiations.

How Does the Changing Nature of “Groups” Influence Intergroup Conflict and Its Resolution?

Recent changes in communication technology and work arrangements have stimulated the emergence of multiple new kinds of groups. A common characteristic shared across these new forms of organizing is greater fluidity in membership. Specifically, the boundaries that define who is a member and who is not are increasingly murky in many of these new kinds of groups. Studies of fluid teams (Bedwell, Ramsay, & Salas, 2012; Dineen, 2005; Ervin, Kahn, Cohen, & Weingart, 2018), flash organizations (Retelny et al., 2014), X-Teams (Ancona, Bresman, & Kaeufer, 2002), and multiple team memberships (O’Leary, Mortensen, & Woolley, 2011) highlight some of the unique challenges associated with achieving high levels of performance when team membership is in flux and group boundaries are unclear or rapidly changing.

As the aforementioned references illustrate, the literature on work teams in organizational settings has begun to address questions about the changing nature of groups. In contrast, the intergroup relations literature has been relatively slow to do so, making the relations between fluid groups a potentially generative area for future research. Research on intrapersonal processes and stereotyping has considered how individuals manage multiple social identities (social identity complexity: Roccas & Brewer, 2002; intersectionality: e.g., Cole, 2009; Hall, Hall, Galinsky, & Phillips, 2018). Future research is required to enhance our understanding of the ways in which fluid groups manage intragroup and intergroup conflicts. For example, to the extent that the transient nature of fluid groups make individuals identify with them less strongly, it is plausible that identity-based conflicts in fluid groups are relatively muted. Group members’ lower identification with fluid groups may also lead individuals to exit from the group more readily as an individual solution to identity-based conflicts within fluid groups. Further, the fluidity of
group boundaries and memberships may make it easier for some group members to expel an individual from the group or proclaim a particular individual is an outgroup member rather than an ingroup member. Future research may directly explore these possibilities and many others.

In addition to promoting understanding of how members of fluid groups negotiate their social identities within the group context, future research is required to enhance our understanding of how the fluidity of group memberships and boundaries impact intergroup relations. In today’s polarized social and political climate, many intense conflicts between groups manifest online in emergent virtual communities on Twitter, Reddit, Facebook, and other platforms. The incivility—and in many cases outright vitriol—that is unleashed in online intergroup conflicts is undoubtedly exacerbated by the anonymity and deindividuation afforded by the Internet.

However, online groups potentially lack many of the key elements of group entitativity that give rise to greed and fear in intergroup conflicts (Campbell, 1958; Insko, Wildschut, & Cohen, 2013; Lickel, Hamilton, & Sherman, 2001). For example, in some cases, the members of these online communities are spatially distant; hence, physical proximity among members of online groups is generally low. Although members of online groups may share certain interests and values, most online groups have diverse members that are often more dissimilar than they are similar. Perhaps most importantly with regard to intergroup conflict, common fate among members of online groups is fairly minimal given that the barriers to entry and exit from the group are insignificant and interdependence among members is often negligible. The limited entitativity of online groups suggests that, despite the surface-level nastiness that characterizes many heated exchanges online, there is at least some reason to believe that many of these seemingly fierce intergroup conflicts between fluid collectives of individuals interacting on the Internet could have more bark than bite. This is currently an understudied area that would benefit greatly from future investigations, especially because more and more of our communications and social interactions are moving online or involve online elements.

To enhance our understanding of the within-group and between-group dynamics of fluid groups of different kinds, future research may compare parallel processes online and offline. For example, researchers could compare the mobilization of collective action in online and offline protests. Initial evidence suggests that social media may change not only patterns of participation in collective events (e.g., protests or riots) but also interactions between protesters and law enforcement officials. Research on the role of social media in the Arab Spring (e.g., Bruns, Highfield, & Burgess, 2013) and evidence from other contexts (e.g., riots in London: Bohannon, 2012) suggests that online communication may play an increasing role in patterns of group organization and action in intergroup contexts. Exploring the role that communication technology plays in shaping intragroup and intergroup processes constitutes a particularly fruitful avenue for future research on intergroup conflict.

How Will Global Challenges Shape Intergroup Relations in the 21st Century?

Earlier, we labeled interests, identities, and ideologies the three “I”s of intergroup conflict. Here we introduce a fourth “I” of intergroup conflict: Institutions (e.g., Wade-Benzoni et al., 2002). Human societies around the globe are currently facing major challenges that are managed by large national, transnational, and nongovernmental institutions. Some of these major challenges include exponential population growth (Hardin, 1968), the expansion of migration worldwide (Castles, De Haas, & Miller, 2013), and rapid climate change (Crowley, 2000). The links between intergroup conflict and these great challenges are manifold and multidirectional. Further complicating matters, global cooperation is required to address these interrelated problems (Buchan et al., 2009, 2011).

Consider, for instance, the linkages between intergroup conflict and migration. Armed conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Somalia, Sudan, and elsewhere have led millions of displaced people to flee their countries in search of refuge in other countries. These waves of refugees from war-stricken areas have joined millions of immigrants seeking to escape harsh economic, political, and natural conditions in...
their home countries. The flow of refugees and immigrants has stimulated three kinds of intergroup conflicts: (a) between citizens and asylum seekers within host countries; (b) between citizens who support and citizens who oppose the integration of refugees and immigrants in the host countries; and (c) at the international level—between countries that differ in their willingness to accept refugees (e.g., within the European Union). Security, economic, legal, cultural, social, and organizational challenges hinder effective management of these complex interrelated problems (e.g., Böhm, Theelen, Rusch, & Van Lange, 2018; Ceobanu & Escandell, 2010; Holmes & Castañeda, 2016). Identifying adequate solutions to the intertwined challenges of global migration and intergroup conflict requires an integrative approach that considers all four “I”s of intergroup conflict: interests, identities, ideologies, and institutions.

Another great challenge that has been linked—via multiple pathways—with intergroup conflict is climate change. Changes to temperatures and rainfall patterns may change the landscape of pastures, make certain regions less inhabitable, promote food insecurity, and fuel conflicts over land use and water supply, as well as facilitate migration following weather-related natural disasters (Hsiang, Burke, & Miguel, 2013; Scheffran, Brzoska, Kominek, Link, & Schilling, 2012). Importantly, climate-related disasters (e.g., long droughts) may promote armed conflicts especially in countries that are already polarized along ethnic fault-lines (Schleussner, Donges, Donner, & Schellnhuber, 2016).

Much of the research on social dilemmas has studied cooperation problems in the context of small and relatively homogenous group contexts (Naquin & Kurtzberg, 2018; Peysakhovich & Rand, 2015; Weber, Kopelman, & Messick, 2004; Weber & Murnighan, 2008). Hence, a particularly fruitful direction for future research involves examining which of the solutions that proved effective in controlled experimental settings is applicable to heterogeneous, multigroup contexts as well as scalable to the magnitude of current global challenges.

**Conclusion**

We have selectively focused in this article on research questions that we see as particularly interesting and important for students of intergroup conflict to address. Though challenging, we encourage students of intergroup conflict to put forth integrative accounts of the problem that consider how interests, identities, ideologies, and institutions jointly impact intergroup relations. The magnitude and urgency of the problems that intergroup conflict poses for societies will continue to engage scientists and policy makers, generals and diplomats, and lay people and leaders in years to come. We hope that students of intergroup conflict will find the research agenda summarized here a helpful tool to guide their journey.

**References**


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**Taya R. Cohen** PhD is an Associate Professor of Organizational Behavior and Theory at the Tepper School of Business at Carnegie Mellon University, and holds a courtesy appointment in the Department of Social and Decision Sciences. She teaches MBA and executive education courses on Negotiations, and on Managing People and Teams, and doctoral seminars on Negotiations and Conflict Management, and on Research Methods in the Behavioral Sciences. Her research is in the area of organizational psychology, with a particular focus on understanding moral character and ethical behavior in organizations. Her investigations of intergroup conflict reveal how behaviors that might be considered wrong or immoral in interpersonal interactions with fellow in-group members (e.g., competition, deception) can instead be regarded as moral and just when enacted across group boundaries. This double standard in how we evaluate the same actions differently according to whether they are directed at in-group members versus out-group members highlights how morality and intergroup conflict are inexorably linked. Prior to joining the faculty at the Tepper School, Professor Cohen spent two years as a postdoctoral fellow in the Dispute Resolution Research Center at Northwestern University, where she taught Negotiations at the Kellogg School of Management. She earned a B.A. in Psychology from the Pennsylvania State University, and an M.A. and Ph.D. in Social Psychology from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.