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Dynamics of Group-Based Emotions: Insights From Intergroup Emotions Theory

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Abstract

Over-time variability characterizes not only individual-level emotions, but also group-level emotions, those that occur when people identify with social groups and appraise events in terms of their implications for those groups. We discuss theory and research regarding the role of emotions in intergroup contexts, focusing on their dynamic nature. We then describe new insights into the causes and consequences of emotional dynamics that flow from conceptualizing emotions as based in group membership, and conclude with research recommendations.

Keywords
appraisals, dynamics, emotions, group-based, group identification, intergroup

Emotions are dynamic, waxing and waning over timescales from seconds to years or decades if we include chronic emotional tendencies (such as dispositional anxiety or anger) or stable emotional reactions to specific objects or events (such as fear of spiders or anger at politicians). In our own work we have been investigating emotions in a specific context: emotions that people experience based on their memberships in social groups (Mackie & Smith, in press; Mackie, Smith, & Ray, 2008; Smith, 1993). These emotions may target the perceiver's own groups (i.e., ingroups), such as feelings of patriotic national pride. Or they may target other groups (outgroups), such as feelings of anger or anxiety toward a disliked minority group. Our research has shown that many aspects of prejudice and intergroup behavior can be understood through the lens of such group-based emotional reactions.

This article first reviews our theoretical perspective and the key characteristics of intergroup or group-based emotions. We then discuss implications of the nature of group-based emotions for variability in emotional experience, both in terms of its causes and consequences (see also Smith & Mackie, 2006). We close with brief research recommendations.

Overview of Intergroup Emotions Theory

Emotion research and theory generally view emotion as an individual-level phenomenon. While other people and social groups are obviously frequent causes of emotional reactions, the guiding assumption of emotion theory has been that emotion occurs only when the individual is directly affected in some way by an event. For example, the pioneering appraisal theorist Magda Arnold wrote "To arouse an emotion, the object must be appraised as affecting me in some way, affecting me personally as an individual" (Arnold, 1960, p. 171). Emotion theories based on this individualistic perspective have obviously been fruitful. However, by altering this assumption it is possible to conceptualize and study emotions that are based on people's important social group memberships. In many ways this parallels Schoebi and Randall's discussion (2015) of the role of interpersonal relationships in both generating and helping to regulate emotions.

Our model is based on the social identity perspective (Tajfel, 1978; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987), a major line of research and theory within social psychology. This perspective holds that important group memberships (groups

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with which people psychologically identify) become part of a person's "social identity," an extended version of the self. A group can be a relatively small number of people who interact face to face, such as a committee or a string quartet, or a large number of people who share a significant social category membership, such as a national, religious, gender, or ethnic identity. Any of these types of groups can become a meaningful part of the psychological self when people identify with them. When a significant group identity becomes salient, people think of themselves and fellow ingroup members as "we," as relatively interchangeable members of the group rather than as unique individuals. This is likely to occur, for example, in situations of intergroup conflict, rivalry, or social comparison. These are the circumstances in which people often experience group-based emotions, according to our model (termed intergroup emotions theory; Mackie et al., 2008).

Our fundamental assumptions about emotion follow appraisal theories (Lazarus, 1991; Smith, 1993). Emotions derive from appraisals of objects and events in the environment (including their relevance to the self, their valence, and the individual's ability to exert control). Emotions motivate coping processes aimed at regulating the person's relation to the social environment, and exist in a dynamic relationship in which appraisals, emotions, and coping behaviors may all feed back to change the other components. We argue that when a social identity comes to the fore, people appraise ongoing events based on relevance to the extended self (the social group) rather than the individual self, and respond to them with corresponding emotions. Thus, contrary to Arnold's statement, someone may be angered, disappointed, or frightened by events that influence an important ingroup—even if the event has absolutely no personal impact on the individual. In everyday life people feel pride when their sports team wins or anger when their nation is attacked. Emotions triggered by group-related events in this way are similar to individual-level emotions in most respects, such as how they are subjectively experienced and their effects on cognitive processes and action readiness (Rydell et al., 2008). They differ mainly in the types of events that elicit them, and in their functionality for regulating group-related or collective action (Maitner, Mackie, & Smith, 2006; van Zomeren, Leach, & Spears, 2012), rather than individual actions (Carver, 2015).

We have developed these ideas in two somewhat different directions. First, we have sought to understand people's reactions to outgroups, especially prejudice and negative intergroup behavior. People frequently view outgroups (for example, ethnic minority groups or immigrants) as threatening to an important ingroup, and so react to them with negative emotions such as anger, fear, or disgust (depending on the type of threat that is perceived; Cottrell & Neuberg, 2005). These emotional reactions may be based on specific events (such as a terrorist attack) or after repeated thoughts or experiences linking the group to a particular emotion, the emotions may be generalized to the group as a whole—so that encountering or thinking about a group will elicit the associated emotion. Second, in some work (e.g., Smith, Seger, & Mackie, 2007) we have investigated more general, mood-like emotional states such as feelings of patriotic pride activated by a self-categorization in a national group, anger (in a group engaged in chronic intergroup conflict), or anxiety (in a group whose situation is perceived as under threat). We have argued that groups have norms for the emotions that members experience, and that group members shift their emotions when such norms become salient (Moons, Leonard, Mackie, & Smith, 2009).

In summary, the major conceptual claims of intergroup emotions theory are the following. (a) Emotions can be elicited by events that affect groups with which people identify (and which therefore constitute a social identity), even if the events do not directly affect the individual (Mackie, Devos, & Smith, 2000; Yzerbyt, Dumont, Wigboldus, & Gordijn, 2003). (b) These group-based emotions are largely independent from individual-level emotions because they are caused by distinct appraisals (Kuppens, Yzerbyt, Dandache, Fischer, & van der Schalk, 2013; Smith et al., 2007). (c) Group-based emotions are functional in regulating group-relevant behavior (behaviors toward the ingroup, such as affiliation with other ingroup members, or toward the outgroup, such as discrimination; Branscombe & Doosje, 2004; Smith et al., 2007). These claims are all supported by extensive evidence both from our own and other labs. We offer more comprehensive reviews of the evidence elsewhere (e.g., Mackie & Smith, in press; Mackie et al., 2008), and space limitations prohibit an extensive recapitulation here, beyond the few representative citations given before.

Implications of the Group Basis of Emotions for Over-time Variability

The traditional approach to understanding prejudice and discrimination relies on cognitive representations (stereotyped beliefs and prejudiced attitudes) as causal factors. In contrast, we emphasize the role of emotions as a key part of people's reactions to social groups, both ingroups and outgroups, and a central driver of behavior toward such groups. A notable feature of this conceptualization is that emotions change dramatically over time, in contrast to stereotypes and attitudes, which are generally seen as highly stable (Smith & Mackie, 2006). Over-time variability is meaningful because people may react differently toward an outgroup member depending on their current emotional state, rather than reacting the same way at many different times. Illustrating this point, DeSteno, Dasgupta, Bartlett, and Cajdric (2004) found that because that anger amplifies appraisals related to intergroup conflict and competition, incidental anger increased bias against an outgroup.

We discuss first our perspectives on the sources of over-time variability, and then its consequences. Of course, many sources and consequences of variability are the same for group-based as for individual emotions (e.g., reappraisal or emotion regulation may occur at either level). We de-emphasize those to focus instead on the sources and consequences that are more unique to group-level emotions.

Sources of Over-time Variability in Emotions

Emotion regulation. With group-based as with individual-level emotions, people may seek to increase or decrease the

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intensity of specific emotional states, or to shift from experiencing one emotion to a different one, based on their own desires or on culturally shared standards for appropriate emotion in a given situation. Strategies for emotion regulation include suppression (for example, trying not to feel or appear afraid during a horror movie) and reappraisal (for example, taking a new perspective on an angering situation; Gross, 1998). Group-level emotions provide additional motives for regulation. For example, group members may feel or express anger or pride to "psych up" fellow ingroup members to take collective action (van Zomeren et al., 2012). Or group-level anger could be used to deter a threatening outgroup.

Changes in self-categorization or group identification. Because group-level emotions depend on self-categorization as a group member, situations or events that remind people of valued group memberships will influence their emotions, as a national day celebration might trigger feelings of pride, or being in the presence of members of a rival outgroup may lead to anger (Seger, Smith, & Mackie, 2009). Shifts in self-categorization (shifting from one group identity to another, or between group- and individual-level identities), like suppression and reappraisal, could also be used for emotion regulation. Thus, people wishing to feel pride might think of themselves as members of a group that elicits such feelings, such as a national group or a fan of a successful sports team. Similarly, people could regulate by shifting self-categorization away from (or decreasing their level of identification with) groups that elicit negative emotions such as disappointment, guilt, or anxiety (e.g., Kessler & Hollbach, 2005). It remains for research to examine more details of this identity-based emotion regulation strategy, and to compare its effectiveness against suppression or reappraisal strategies.

Changes in appraisals. Like any emotional reaction, group-based emotions may change when the appraisals that generate them change. While this process is similar for individual-level emotions, with group-based emotions it is especially likely that social influence from other ingroup members may directly influence an individual's perception and appraisal of a situation. While we have demonstrated that information about other group members' emotions influences people's own group-level emotions (see following section), no research has yet examined such social influence over appraisals specifically.

People's identification and attachment to the ingroup may also motivate reappraisal. For example, Doosje, Branscombe, Spears, and Manstead (1998) found that for high identifiers, thinking about colonial-era misdeeds of their country motivated reappraisal and justification to reduce feelings of guilt.

An especially interesting possibility is that someone may reappraise what initially was construed as an individual event and instead come to understand it as a group-relevant event. For example, someone may experience negative emotions when she is denied a promotion by the boss. But further reflection or influence from other ingroup members may lead her to reappraise this as a group-relevant event: my boss did that because I'm a woman. Results could well include increased anger, because people are likely to interpret victimization by gender discrimination as more unfair than a boss' mistaken negative impression of one's individual job performance. And the consequences obviously might include a greater readiness to take collective (rather than individual) action in response.

Information about other ingroup members' emotions. Social influence from other ingroup members may directly change emotions as well as appraisals. Group-based emotions tend to be shared within a group (such as Americans or university students), and shared even more strongly by members who identify more with the group (Smith et al., 2007). This sharing could be mediated by several distinct processes. One is emotion contagion, the tendency to take on the emotions of other ingroup members with whom one interacts (Weisbuch & Ambady, 2008). Even with large social category groups, group leaders may display emotions in media reports, influencing other group members (Pescosolido, 2002). A second process is that a group's typical emotions may become a norm, such as the norm linking national identification to patriotic feelings of pride. In general, when people identify with a group they tend to bring their attitudes and behaviors into conformity with group norms (Turner et al., 1987) and the same is true for emotions (Leonard, Moons, Mackie, & Smith, 2011; Moons et al., 2009). Yet a third process is that multiple members of the same group may, when reminded of their group membership, all think about similar group-relevant events and appraise them in similar ways. For example, students at a university may think about threats to the university's budget from politicians in the state legislature and react with shared feelings of anxious concern as well as anger at the politicians. In general, all three of these processes may operate together so that group members experience similar emotions with regard to their common group membership.

Very recent work (Goldenberg, Saguy, & Halperin, 2014) demonstrates that people are sometimes influenced to move in the opposite direction from other ingroup members' emotions. For example, learning that other group members feel low levels of anger may make an individual group member experience more anger (rather than conforming to the others). This can occur when the person believes that it is appropriate for the group to be angry, leading him or her to take up the "burden" of experiencing that emotion when it appears that others are not doing so adequately. Conversely, if other group members are very angry, a kind of diffusion of responsibility may mean that the individual does not feel the need to experience or express much anger because the group is already showing the appropriate level of emotion.

Information about outgroup members' emotions. Learning about other ingroup members' emotions may cause changes in one's emotional state, but knowing outgroup members' emotions could do so as well. Sometimes the effect may be to induce the same emotion in the perceiver; for example, encountering an angry outgroup member may lead to reciprocal feelings of anger. Sometimes, though, the perceiver's emotion may differ from that of the outgroup. Weisbuch and Ambady (2008)

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demonstrated that while people tend to mirror the emotions of fellow ingroup members, they often adopt contrasting emotions from those of outgroup members. They argue that people use others' observed emotions as cues about the intergroup situation, which then triggers appropriate emotions (Hess & Fischer, 2014). For example, in a context of intergroup rivalry or competition, observing a happy outgroup member suggests that the outgroup has the advantage, leading to emotions of anxiety or anger in the ingroup. In contrast, an anxious outgroup member may lead to perceptions that the ingroup is dominant, and result in happy feelings.

Feedback loops through appraisal. Emotions such as anger, fear, or sadness can influence future judgments about objects or situations in ways that depend on appraisals specific to the emotion (Lerner & Keltner, 2000). For example, fear involves an appraisal that a negative event may possibly happen, that is, an appraisal of uncertainty. When people are afraid, they judge many types of events to be relatively uncertain (Tiedens & Linton, 2001), perhaps making it more likely that they in turn feel fear following such appraisals. This process presumably operates in the same way with group-level as with individual-level emotions, but we mention it here for completeness.

Feedback loops through behavior. When emotions that are currently experienced (Maitner, Mackie, & Smith, 2007) or anticipated (Shepherd, Spears, & Manstead, 2013) lead to behavior, that behavior may change the group's situation, reshaping appraisals and leading to shifts in emotions. This can also occur at the level of individual emotions, of course. But with group-based emotions, not only the specific individual's actions but also other group members' actions may have this effect. For example, collective action undertaken by a small number of group members (e.g., those who intensely identify with the group and see its situation as unfair and angering; van Zomeren, Postmes, & Spears, 2008) may produce changes in the concrete situation of the entire group, potentially changing all group members' emotions.

Feedback loops through cohesion. Feeling the same emotions as other group members may plausibly increase the level of group identification (correlational evidence for this exists in the positive relation between positively valenced group-level emotions and group identification; Smith et al., 2007). Thus, shared group-level emotions are likely to increase group cohesion. This in turn should increase social influence, making group members more likely to act in concert, increasing collective efficacy and the likelihood of collective action (Parkinson, Fischer, & Manstead, 2005). Thus an event that prompts shared group pride (emotion) might promote greater interaction, cohesiveness, and influence, making interpretations of future events (appraisal) more likely to be shared and to result in collective action (behavior)—even for unrelated events.

In summary, intergroup emotions theory suggests many distinct processes that may generate over-time variation in group-level emotions. The dynamic nature of appraisal, emotion, and behavior allows for situations to be appraised differently and responded to with different emotions, depending on changes in the perceiver's categorization and identification, changes in the concrete reality of the situation, and social influence from other group members. Emotional variability may also reflect regulatory processes at the individual or group level: people may prefer to experience some emotions rather than others, and groups construct norms that influence members' emotional experience and expression.

Consequences of Over-time Variability in Emotions

Shifts in group identification. Just as changes in group identification might trigger different emotions, the reverse may also occur. As mentioned earlier, positive group-based emotions generally correlate positively with group identification (Smith et al., 2007), suggesting that if such emotions decline, people may reduce their levels of identification as well. People may even actively disidentify with groups associated with negative emotions such as guilt, anxiety, or anger (Kessler & Hollbach, 2005). Of course, these processes can become part of a feedback loop, as changes in identification produce further downstream changes in appraisals, emotions, and behavior.

Difficulties in intergroup interaction. Shifts over time in emotions experienced toward a specific social group may contribute to discomfort in interaction with members of the group, and ultimately to behavioral avoidance. Such discomfort has been conceptualized as intergroup anxiety (Stephan & Stephan, 1985), which is usually regarded as due to unfamiliarity with the outgroup, or the desire not to "say the wrong thing" or otherwise give offense. Intergroup anxiety has potent effects, often making intergroup interaction a negative experience for the participants and potentially undermining the positive effects of intergroup contact for prejudice reduction (Richeson & Shelton, 2010). We suggest that besides anxiety per se, an additional cause of discomfort in interaction may be multiple shifting emotions felt toward the outgroup. When asked, people rarely report feeling just one emotion toward an outgroup; it is more typical that several different negative emotions such as anger, anxiety, and disgust are all rated fairly high—or even a mix of negative emotions with positive ones such as hope or sympathy (Cottrell & Neuberg, 2005). Though we know of no data on the issue specifically in the context of intergroup interaction, it is plausible that such mixed and shifting emotions may contribute to discomfort and uncertainty about how to behave, and motivate avoidance of intergroup interaction.

Shifts in behavior toward an outgroup. Because changing emotions change appraisals (Tiedens & Linton, 2001) and also action tendencies, people may behave differently toward outgroup members depending on their current emotional state. Feeling disgust versus anger versus anxiety versus sympathy toward an outgroup, for example, might lead to intergroup behavior of very different sorts (DeSteno et al., 2004). Because (as just noted) people frequently experience mixed emotions

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toward outgroups, the possibility of such over-time changes in momentary emotional experience and therefore in intergroup behavior is very real.

If changes in group-level emotion can change intergroup behavior, emotion-based interventions might ameliorate intense intergroup conflict. Recent work in a situation of intractable intergroup conflict (the Israeli–Palestinian situation) gives reason for hope. Gross, Halperin, and Porat (2013) show that teaching emotion regulation strategies to people involved in the conflict actually reduces their political support for policies demeaning and harming those on the other side. Insights into the key role of emotion in shaping intergroup behavior may give rise to other theoretically based and effective strategies for conflict reduction and resolution.

Summary and Recommendations for Research

Considering emotional dynamics leads to several suggestions for changes in typical research approaches. The first is that researchers should measure group-level emotional reactions, as well as appraisals and levels of group identification, repeatedly over time. Multiple measures can, of course, contribute to reliability and validity by averaging over nonsystematic factors that contribute to error variance. They can also provide new insights, such as observations of over-time patterns in emotional states that might correlate with specific types of intergroup behavior, or estimates of the degree of over-time variability (vs. consistency) of emotions felt toward specific groups. The ultimate goal should be to predict and understand over-time variability, not simply to average over it.

A second research recommendation is to focus both conceptually and methodologically on specific events or objects—those that trigger emotional episodes. A traditional stereotype-based approach to prejudice or discrimination might involve asking participants what characteristics they associate with a specific outgroup (e.g., lazy). Bringing emotion into the picture, of course, suggests adding questions about emotional reactions (e.g., anger). But even more insights can be gained if we ask what specific events trigger such feelings (e.g., anger may be experienced whenever outgroup members are observed using food stamps at the supermarket, because that triggers thoughts about their stereotypical laziness). Events that elicit group-based emotions may occur only infrequently, of course, but they may also occur regularly and thus contribute to building up a strong association of a particular emotion with a group. In these ways, a focus on events—which are rarely considered in traditional stereotype-based approaches—may help us understand the time course of the development and expression of prejudice.

A third recommendation is to examine cognitions and behavior that occur at specific times when an emotional state is active. We know that emotions influence many types of cognitive processing, changing cognitive capacity and the motivation to process, or influencing judgments on dimensions that are related to the emotion's triggering appraisals. Such effects are caused by group-based emotions just as by emotions caused by individual-level factors (Leonard et al., 2011; Rydell et al., 2008). These observations suggest that studying the group-related judgments and behavior that people make at the specific time when they are experiencing an emotion about an intergroup situation should be fertile ground for research.

In summary, the dynamic perspective on emotions and their role in intergroup relations suggests new ways of thinking about both of these topic areas. Thinking about intergroup relations benefits when we acknowledge that cognition and behavior about groups may shift rapidly due to changing emotional states, and new types of interventions for reducing intergroup conflict, such as through emotion regulation, can be envisioned. Theorizing about emotion is enriched when we consider that emotions can be experienced with regard to people's social identities (important ingroup membership) and not only their individual identities, leading to new insights such as the role of shifting group identification or of group emotion norms as potential causes of over-time variation in emotions. Further exploration of these novel areas should prove fruitful.

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