

Group-level emotions

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## Abstract

Emotions can be experienced not only at the individual level, but also on behalf of social groups by people who belong to and identify with those groups. As outlined in Intergroup Emotions Theory, these emotions are driven by appraisals of objects or events in terms of their relevance for the group (rather than the individual). They shift depending on currently salient group memberships, and are moderated by the degree of identification with the group. Consequences of group-based emotions include treatment of outgroups (including bias and discrimination) as well as attitudes and behavior toward the ingroup (including ingroup affiliation and support). A particularly important new direction is the study of emotion regulation processes as they operate with group-based emotions, with some recent research suggesting that emotion regulation interventions may be helpful in ameliorating intractable intergroup conflicts.

Emotions have traditionally been seen as an individual-level phenomenon. For example, pioneering appraisal theorist Arnold [1, p. 171] wrote “to arouse an emotion, the object must be appraised as affecting me in some way, affecting me personally as an individual.” Now a range of research and theory has converged to overturn this assumption, introducing the concept of group-based emotions. Drawing on the social identity perspective [2], we now understand that when people identify with a group, the group identity becomes an aspect of the self through self-categorization. Like any aspect of the self, the group then becomes imbued with affective significance. One important consequence is that people will appraise objects and events in terms of their implications (positive or negative) for the group as a whole, rather than simply for the individual. Such group-based appraisals lead to the experience of group-based emotions, such as anxiety if the group is perceived to be threatened, anger if the group is treated unfairly by others, or hope if the group is seen as potentially making gains [3, 4]. We developed Intergroup Emotion Theory [5] to explain these emotions as well as their causes and effects, and many other researchers now assume essentially compatible perspectives [6, 7, 8, 9, 10]. Niedenthal and Brauer [11] broadly define group-based emotion as an emotion experienced by individuals on behalf of a group to which they belong and with which they identify, a definition that captures what is common among all these perspectives.

Research establishes several key facts about group-based emotions. First, because they depend on self-categorization, the specific emotions that a person will experience depend on the currently salient group membership. For example, someone might experience more pride and less disgust when thinking of the self as a student of their university, compared to thinking of the self as a citizen of their country, if the individual perceives the university as outstanding but strongly disagrees with the country’s national policies [12, 13, 14, 9]. It further follows that

group-based emotions will also differ from those experienced when self-categorizing at the individual (rather than group) level [15].

Second, because members of a group often perceive and appraise group-related events similarly, empirically they often tend to share common profiles of group-based emotions [12]. In effect, a group's typical emotion pattern becomes a group norm, so group members naturally tend to converge toward that pattern [16, 17]. However, it is important to note that this sharing is not part of the definition of group-based emotions, and may not always occur, for example if group members disagree on their interpretations of group-relevant events.

Third, group-based emotions are based on group-level rather than individual-level appraisals. For example, people who have not personally committed wrongdoing may still experience guilt when reminded of the misdeeds of other ingroup members [18, 19].

Fourth, because group identification (e.g., the importance and centrality of a group membership to the individual) can vary across individuals and over time, identification moderates the effect of self-categorization on emotion. Thus, highly identified group members converge toward group emotion norms more readily than do less identified members, so they experience the emotion (and its downstream consequences) more strongly [17]. However, this pattern changes in the case of negative group-based emotions, where highly identified group members may experience strong motivation to avoid feeling guilt, disappointment, or fear with regard to their groups, resulting in motivated reappraisals [18, 20].

In summary, self-categorization as a group member sets the stage for group-based appraisals of social groups or other objects or events, but this relationship is modified by the extent of group

identification. These appraisals generate group-level emotions, whose consequences then include group-related action tendencies and ultimately behavior.

The remainder of this review covers three areas of current research activity. First, we describe how group-based emotions regulate and influence people's judgments and behaviors toward outgroups, including prejudice and discrimination. Second, group-based emotions also affect people's feelings about and treatment of their ingroup. Finally, we discuss the role of emotion regulation processes with regard to group-based emotions, and their implications for potential interventions.

### **Relations to prejudice and treatment of outgroups**

The emotions felt toward outgroups – often negative but sometimes positive such as admiration or sympathy – have long been a central focus of work on group-based emotions, largely because they can provide a highly differentiated account of different types of intergroup behavior such as discrimination [3, 21]. Indeed, group-based emotions toward other groups or events can better predict collective action, compared to more cognitive perceptions of those groups or events [22]. These actions can be highly differentiated: groups that are viewed with anger, fear, disgust, or contempt (for example) may be treated very differently [8].

Anger has been the most-studied emotion in this context, because it predicts aggression toward outgroups [4, 12, 23]. Part of the reason may be that anger tends to increase risk-taking behavior in general [17, 24].

Other negative emotions are also relevant. Relations of fear to direct intergroup aggression are mixed [25, 26]. Contempt, however, appears to be related to aggression as strongly as anger is. More worrisome, contempt is sometimes found to predict extreme and violent intergroup

behavior, whereas anger predicts more “normative” behaviors such as protest or advocating for exclusionary policies [27, 28]. This makes sense because more broadly, contempt has been linked to moral exclusion (the removal of moral constraints), which can be a precursor to extreme harm against outgroups such as pogroms, enslavement, or even genocide. Recent work has examined dehumanization as a driver of extreme aggression in a similar context [29] but further research is needed to identify the emotional correlates or precursors of dehumanization (see Haslam & Stratemeyer, this issue).

Positive emotions toward outgroups as well as negative, threat-related ones, are also relevant to people’s treatment of those outgroups. Miller et al. [30] showed that a composite of positive emotions was a stronger mediator of the effect of intergroup contact on prejudice than was a composite of negative emotions. Seger et al. (unpublished), using a representative sample of the U.S. population, analyzed several discrete emotions separately and found that feelings of admiration and respect were a strong mediator (stronger than anger) of contact effects on prejudice between major ethnic groups. The role of positive emotions (especially based on intergroup contact) makes sense in light of theories holding that experiencing cross-group friendships, rather than merely learning about an outgroup, is crucial for prejudice reduction [31].

Finally, a small but growing number of studies have examined the role of group-based emotions in the process of intergroup reconciliation. Leonard et al. [16] found that the effect of apology on forgiveness of an outgroup was mediated by changes in group-based emotions, especially anger and respect/admiration. Again, increases in positive emotions as well as decreases in negative ones are important.

### **Relations to ingroup attachment and treatment of ingroup**

Emotions toward the ingroup may powerfully drive actions relevant to the group (e.g., affiliation, support, or sacrifice for the group; pressuring group leaders for change). Positive ingroup-directed emotions (“ingroup love”) may even play a more important role than outgroup-directed negativity (“outgroup hate”) in causing intergroup bias and discrimination [32]. Maitner, Mackie, and Smith [33, 19] found that group members experience emotions including anger, fear, or guilt when they disagree with the group’s action. The role of these emotions in regulating the relationship to the ingroup is shown by the fact that they dissipate when the group actually performs the desired action. Similarly, the combination of anger and guilt at the ingroup predicts political action aimed at changing group policies [34].

Ingroup-directed emotions may often be biased by people’s commitment to and identification with the group. The role of identification in biasing appraisals and therefore changing emotions has been examined by Maitner et al. [19], who found that highly identified group members appraised the ingroup’s aggressive acts as more justified, thereby reducing their feelings of guilt. Other work has similarly found that group identification can bias appraisals and emotions [18, 35].

Recent work suggests that group identification itself is multidimensional [36, 37], raising the possibility that different dimensions may differentially relate to group-based emotions. The importance or centrality of a group membership to the self should encourage self-categorization, leading to increased tendencies to appraise events in group-relevant terms and to experience group-based emotions. Although this could be true for all types of emotions, a different dimension, superiority [37] or idealization of one’s group may instead encourage people to feel positive emotions toward the ingroup, but to avoid negative emotions that might question the group’s image of power and morality.

An area that is little explored in research is that group members may have qualitatively different kinds of affective ties with the group, which in turn may have consequences for their group-based emotions. Some may feel a bond with the symbolic meaning of the group as a whole, whereas others are tied to the group through interpersonal relationships with other group members [38, 39]. One suggestion is that women are more likely to be interpersonally linked to others, whereas men are linked at the group level [40]. A clear implication of these ideas, not yet directly tested, is that people may experience different emotions when thinking about the group as a whole (e.g., hope for the group's future) than they do when thinking about other group members (e.g., disappointment at their failings). In turn these distinct types of emotions may have different behavioral implications; for example, actions directed at the group as a whole (contributions, verbal support) could be more positive than actions directed at other group members (disagreement, rejection).

### **Emotion regulation and potential interventions**

The idea that people tend to bring their group-based emotions into line with an ingroup norm for such emotions (described above; [17]) implies that emotion regulation occurs. But explicit consideration of emotion regulation processes is a new direction for this literature. A major theoretical paper by Goldenberg et al. [41] integrated intergroup emotion theory and emotion regulation processes. The integration not only suggests ways that people may regulate their group-based emotions but also further develops ideas that are new to the existing emotion regulation literature, such as the notion (suggested in [14]) that people may shift their self-categorization or group identification as a way to modify their emotions.



There are already empirical demonstrations of regulation of group-based emotions. Halperin et al. [42] introduced emotion-regulation interventions in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and showed that the interventions effectively reduced participants' support for punitive policies against the outgroup, consistent with the strong role of group-based emotions in driving intergroup aggression (reviewed above). Porat et al. [43] asked people to report their "ideal" levels of group-based emotions such as anger directed at an outgroup. Over time, these emotion ideals influenced actually experienced emotions as well as measures of policy support, consistent with the hypothesis that ideal emotions serve as targets for regulating emotions.

Goldenberg et al. [44] demonstrated a different type of emotion regulation effect. Group members learned about an immoral act of their ingroup, and received manipulated information about the emotional responses of other ingroup members. If they believed other group members felt low levels of guilt, participants themselves reported more guilt (compared to participants who believed others felt much guilt). In effect, people regulated their own emotions to compensate if they believed the emotional response of other ingroup members was inadequate.

Finally, departing from emotion regulation per se, our own studies have demonstrated several other interventions that successfully change levels of group-based emotions. Rydell et al. [24] used a misattribution manipulation to decrease group-based anger. And other studies [16, 17] manipulated participants' beliefs about group norms for particular emotions and found that group members' emotions converged toward those supposed norms.

All this work strongly suggests that group-based emotions are not simply a "given," an unchanging fact that must be taken into account in any intergroup situation (such as an

intractable conflict). Rather, group-based emotions, like individual emotions, are subject to regulation and change, with the potential to shift people's actions in the conflict.

### **Conclusions**

Research has now examined many aspects of the chain running from group identification, to group-based appraisals, to the experience of group-based emotions, to group-relevant behavior such as ingroup support, outgroup aggression, or various types of collective action. We are beginning to understand how the overall process may be moderated by people's different types of connection to the ingroup, such as qualitatively distinct dimensions of identification, or psychological ties to the meaning of the group as a whole versus ties to other group members. Finally, an emerging research area is the integration of emotion regulation processes with group-based emotions. This area has already generated increased understanding of how group identification and related processes may affect emotion regulation, but also of ways that regulation can shape the experience of group-based emotions. Equally important, this work shows promise of aiding the design of interventions that may ameliorate some of the worst potential consequences of group-based emotions, such as intergroup aggression.

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