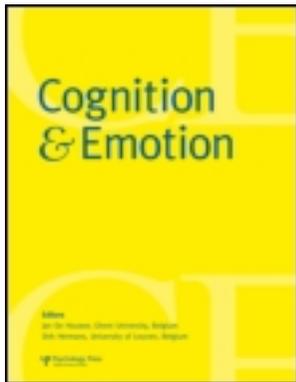


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Publisher: Psychology Press

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Cognition & Emotion

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/pcem20>

Emotion regulation in violent conflict: Reappraisal, hope, and support for humanitarian aid to the opponent in wartime

Eran Halperin^a & James J. Gross^b

^a School of Government, Interdisciplinary Center, Herzliya, Israel

^b Department of Psychology, Stanford University, Stanford, CA, USA

Available online: 24 May 2011

To cite this article: Eran Halperin & James J. Gross (2011): Emotion regulation in violent conflict: Reappraisal, hope, and support for humanitarian aid to the opponent in wartime, *Cognition & Emotion*, 25:7, 1228-1236

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02699931.2010.536081>

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BRIEF REPORT

Emotion regulation in violent conflict: Reappraisal, hope, and support for humanitarian aid to the opponent in wartime

Eran Halperin¹ and James J. Gross²

¹School of Government, Interdisciplinary Center, Herzliya, Israel

²Department of Psychology, Stanford University, Stanford, CA, USA

It is well known that negative intergroup emotions such as anger, fear, and hatred play a major role in initiating and maintaining intergroup conflicts. It is far less clear, however, what factors promote the resolution of intergroup conflicts. Using an emotion regulation- framework, we hypothesised that one form of emotion regulation—namely cognitive reappraisal—should play a salutary role in such conflicts, and be associated with increased hope as well as greater support for humanitarian aid to out-group members. To test these hypotheses, we used a nationwide survey of Jewish-Israeli adults, conducted during the war in Gaza between Israelis and Palestinians. Results obtained via structural equation modelling revealed that Israelis who regulated their negative emotions during the war through reappraisal were more supportive in providing humanitarian aid to innocent Palestinian citizens and that this relation was partially mediated by an enhanced feeling of hope.

Keywords: Emotion regulation; Intergroup conflict; Reappraisal; Hope; Israeli–Palestinian conflict.

Long-term intergroup conflicts are saturated with negative intergroup emotions that powerfully shape attitudes and behaviours during the conflict (Bar-Tal, Halperin, & deRivera, 2007; Horowitz, 1985; Petersen, 2002). Most relevant to the current analysis are intergroup emotions—i.e., emotions felt as a result of belonging to a certain

group, and targeted at another group (Mackie, Devos, & Smith, 2000; Smith, Seger, & Mackie, 2007; Yzerbyt, Dumont, Wigboldus, & Gordin, 2003).

Negative intergroup emotions lead people to war and guide people's political attitudes and behaviour during wartime (Horowitz, 1985;

Correspondence should be addressed to: Eran Halperin at the School of Government, IDC, Israel PO Box 167 Herzliya 46150, Israel. E-mail: eran.halperin@idc.ac.il

The authors would like to thank Tamar Saguy, Keren Sharvit and Gal Sheppes for their valuable comments on previous versions of this paper.

Petersen, 2002). Studies in the USA following the 9/11 attacks found that angry individuals were significantly more supportive of an American military response in Iraq and elsewhere (Cheung-Blunden & Blunden, 2008; Lerner, Gonzalez, Small, & Fischhoff, 2003; Skitka, Bauman, Aramovich, & Morgan, 2006). Other studies have shown that negative emotions can lead people actively to take part in or passively to support the most horrible aggressive actions (Staub & Bar-Tal, 2003; Halperin, 2008, in press).

In many cases, high levels of negative intergroup emotions lead people to support (or even take part in) actions that aim at hurting and sometimes even humiliating the adversary. These actions are not necessarily to achieve the goals of the in-group in the conflict. In some cases these actions can be counterproductive; hindering any possibility of improving intergroup relations in the post-conflict era. For example, members of the in-group, guided by their negative emotions, might oppose providing humanitarian aid to innocent members of the out-group (e.g., injured women and children). A crucial question, therefore, is what might lead people to act humanely towards out-group members even during wartime?

We propose that individuals who effectively regulate their negative emotions during war will support providing humanitarian aid to the out-group for the sake of ending the war and improving intergroup relations. This argument relies on the developing literature on *emotion regulation* (Gross, 2007) and more specifically on the application of that concept to the realm of intergroup relations and intergroup conflict (Halperin, Sharvit, & Gross, 2010).

The role of emotion regulation during conflict

Emotion regulation refers to processes that are engaged when individuals try to influence the type or amount of emotion they (or others) experience, when they (or others) have them, and how they (or others) experience and express these emotions (Gross, 1998). If intergroup emotions are influential during conflict, regulating them effectively

is probably one of the most important challenges facing those who wish to put an end to the conflict. One particularly powerful form of emotion regulation is *cognitive reappraisal*, which involves changing a situation's meaning in a way that alters its emotional impact (Gross, 2002).

Studies have shown that certain people tend to use reappraisal more frequently than others even when not directed to do so (Gross & John, 2003). Previous studies have documented the efficacy of reappraisal using different measures and target emotions (e.g., Butler et al., 2003; Levesque et al., 2003; Ochsner et al., 2004). Among other implications, the proclivity to reappraise is correlated with lower levels of negative emotional experience, higher levels of positive emotional experience, and better interpersonal functioning (Gross & John, 2003).

In the context of an ongoing intergroup conflict, cognitive reappraisal might have an impact by reducing the magnitude of negative emotions directed towards the adversary or by increasing positive emotions. The common tendency during war is to construe the events in a one-sided, biased way, while emphasising the exclusive contribution of the opponent to the outbreak of the war, his brutal behaviour during the war, and his unwillingness to end the war based on bilateral agreement (see Kelman, 2007). Previous studies have shown that reappraisal can draw attention to the broader meaning or consequences of events (Ray, Wilhelm, & Gross, 2008), leading to a more balanced and nuanced perspective that might engender more positive emotion.

During violent conflict, negative emotions contribute to the unity of the involved groups and move people to support, initiate or take active part in aggressive actions that, from their group's perspective, are necessary in order to survive and/or to overpower the enemy. As a result, we considered it unlikely that the tendency to reappraise could substantially decrease negative emotions experienced during an ongoing war. This had led us to focus on the possibility that reappraisal might increase positive emotion. In the following section, we suggest that even when it fails to reduce negative emotions, the contribution

of reappraisal to a broadening of perspectives might allow feelings of hope to develop, which in turn might lead to increased support for providing humanitarian aid to the opponent.

The mediating role of hope

Scholars in the field of peace psychology have repeatedly emphasised the importance of hope in creating the attitudinal platform to find a way out of the war (Halperin, Bar-Tal, Nets-Zehngut, & Almog, 2008). *Hope* involves expectation and aspiration for a positive goal, as well as positive feelings about the anticipated outcome (Snyder, 1994). It facilitates goal setting, planning, use of imagery, creativity, and even risk taking (Breznitz, 1986). Hope liberates people from fixed—and limiting—beliefs about the irreconcilability of the conflict to find creative ways to resolve it. As a result, it motivates people to change their situation by means of actions that were long unthinkable. Recent research suggests that in times of war hope is the single best emotional predictor of support for compromises for peace (Rosler, Gross, & Halperin, 2009).

But what factors give rise to these feelings of hope? The emotion-regulation perspective suggests that greater reappraisal use should be associated with higher levels of positive emotions (Gross & John, 2003). We suggest that cognitive reappraisal will lead to a discrete feeling of hope and not simply lead to a general positive affect due to the close relation between the psychological mechanisms that underlie hope and the ones promoted by cognitive reappraisal.

Hope enables people to imagine a future that is different from the past. In order to do so, it requires cognitive flexibility and mental exploration of novel situations (Breznitz, 1986). Because reappraisal is inherently about benefit-finding ways of thinking about situations that might otherwise elicit negative emotion, hope might be its most immediate emotional consequence in the course of war. Furthermore, compared to all other strategies of emotion regulation, cognitive reappraisal involves a broader perspective, a more complex way of thinking and a more future-oriented view of

the events (Gross & John, 2003), which can all be seen as necessary preconditions for the evolvment of hope (Halperin et al., 2008). Hence, we suggest that reappraisal should be related to support for providing humanitarian aid to the opponent during war, and this effect should be mediated by the feeling of hope.

The present study

The goal of the present study was to examine whether reappraisal use predicted support for providing humanitarian aid to out-group members during war, via its impact on the positive emotion of hope. We hypothesised that: (1) reappraisal would be associated with support for providing humanitarian aid during war; (2) reappraisal would be associated with greater levels of hope; and (3) the link between reappraisal and support for aid would be mediated via reappraisal's effect on hope.

METHOD

To test these hypotheses, we conducted a nationwide survey based on a representative sample of Jewish-Israeli adults in the midst of the last “Gaza War” between the Israelis and Palestinians (see Halperin & Gross, in press, for further details about the survey). This war began after a half-year ceasefire between Israel and the Hamas movement ruling the Gaza Strip collapsed in December 2008 and missile attacks against civilian areas inside Israel intensified. Israel then launched a wide-scale offensive in the Gaza Strip that led to about 1,300 Palestinian casualties, 13 Israeli casualties, and mass destruction on the Palestinian side. This war led to wide humanitarian distress in both sides of the conflict, but especially among the Palestinian citizens of Gaza, who suffered not only from repeated violent attacks, but also were cut off from their main sources of financial, medical, and food supplies.

During the second week of the war we contacted Jewish-Israelis by phone and asked them to think of the way they dealt with the negative emotions they experienced while being exposed (directly or indirectly) to the recent violent events. Then, participants were asked to report on

the extent to which they felt hope and other emotions during the war, as well as their degree of support for providing (or allowing a third party to provide) humanitarian aid to the Palestinian people. We also measured participants' level of education, religiosity, and political orientation as control variables. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first attempt to utilise a real-life situation and to incorporate measures of emotion regulation into the study of intergroup conflicts.

Participants

The survey consisted of 201 respondents (101 men and 100 women), who were contacted and interviewed a week after the outbreak of the war. It should be noted that during the war, some Israelis were recruited to reserve army service, while many others came under missile attacks or left their homes for other reasons, and therefore the interview process was very difficult. The sample mirrored the distribution within the Israeli society in terms of sex, socioeconomic status, religious definition, and political beliefs. For example, 45.3% defined themselves as Rightists, 22.9% as Centrist, and 21.4% as Leftists (10.4% refused to answer that question).

Measures

To assess levels of reappraisal, we used a 3-item abbreviated version of the Emotion Regulation Questionnaire reappraisal scale (Gross & John, 2003),¹ which asks participants to what extent the following statements reflect the way they dealt with the negative emotions they may have experienced during the last days of the war (1 = *not at all* to 6 = *very much*): 1. *When faced with a stressful situation, I've made myself think about it in a way that helped me stay calm*; 2. *I controlled my emotions by changing the way I think about the situation I'm in*; 3. *When I wanted to feel fewer negative emotions, I changed the way I'm thinking about the situation* ($\alpha = .64$).

Participants then were asked to rate the extent to which (1 = *not at all* to 6 = *very much*) the

recent events made them feel each of the following emotions towards the Palestinians (*fear, anger, and empathy*) and in regard to the future of the conflict (*hope*).

Two items reflected support for providing humanitarian aid to innocent Palestinian citizens during the war. Participants were asked to rank their level of support (1 = *totally oppose* to 6 = *totally support*) for: 1. *Allowing the transfer of food and medicine to innocent Palestinians*; and 2. *Providing medical care to injured Palestinian women and children in Israeli hospitals* ($\alpha = .79$).

Finally, relevant sociopolitical information was obtained for use as control variables. These items were: educational attainment (1 = *elementary* to 5 = *BA or higher*); gender (1 = *men*, 2 = *women*); religious definition (1 = *ultra orthodox* to 5 = *secular*); and self-definition of political orientation (1 = *extreme hawkish* to 5 = *extreme dovish*).

Procedure

Phone interviews were conducted by an experienced survey institute in Israel (the Machshov Institute) during one week in January 2009. Interviewers conducted interviews in the interviewee's native language of Hebrew or Russian. Questionnaires were translated into Russian and carefully back-translated. Interviews were conducted by fluent speakers of Hebrew or Russian. At the outset of the interview, oral informed consent was obtained. A random sampling within stratified subgroups was used to obtain a representative sample of Jews living in Israel at the time of the survey. The order of questions throughout the questionnaire was counterbalanced, and there was no effect of order.

RESULTS

Preliminary analyses

While levels of reappraisal were just below the mid-point of the scale ($M = 3.24$, $SD = 1.33$), levels of support for providing humanitarian aid for the Palestinians were well above that point

¹We used the abbreviated version of the scale due to space limitations within this field study.

($M=4.40$, $SD=1.64$), suggesting that many Israelis were in favour of providing aid to Palestinians even in the midst of the war. On the other hand, levels of anger were reasonably high ($M=4.27$, $SD=1.91$), whereas levels of hope ($M=3.13$, $SD=1.73$) and empathy ($M=2.51$, $SD=1.57$) were much lower. Interestingly, the Jewish public in Israel did not express high levels of personal fear ($M=2.78$, $SD=1.87$) in the midst of the war in Gaza. Levels of anger were significantly higher than those of all other emotions (Paired t -scores ranged from 5.45 to 9.39 with all p -values $<.001$).

Does reappraisal predict support for humanitarian aid?

As predicted, support for providing humanitarian aid to the Palestinians was positively correlated with the extent to which Israelis reported using reappraisal to cope with their negative emotions during the war ($r=.29$, $p<.001$). In line with patterns revealed in previous studies within that context (e.g., Halperin, 2008), leftists ($r=.40$, $p<.001$), seculars ($r=.31$, $p<.001$) and individuals with relatively high education ($r=.18$, $p=.01$) tended to support providing humanitarian aid even during war. No significant correlations were found between the tendency to use reappraisal during the war and any of the sociopolitical control variables that were just mentioned. Regression analysis revealed that even when controlling for all relevant sociopolitical variables, the effect of reappraisal on support for providing humanitarian aid remained positive and significant ($\beta = 0.26$, $p < .001$; $R^2 = .30$).

Then, we entered emotional variables and sociopolitical variables into the regression equation as predictors. We found that the effect of reappraisal on support for providing humanitarian aid was slightly reduced, but remained significant ($\beta = 0.16$, $p = .02$; $R^2 = .38$). The last regression also revealed that while negative emotions like fear and anger did not yield a significant affect on support for humanitarian aid, hope was the most

powerful emotional predictor of that variable ($\beta = 0.24$, $p = .001$).

Does reappraisal predict emotions towards the Palestinians?

In a first step, we examined whether reappraisal was associated with negative and/or positive emotions. We found that the tendency to use reappraisal during the war was not correlated with levels of fear ($r = .09$, ns) or anger ($r = .08$, ns). However, as expected, the tendency to use reappraisal during the war was positively correlated with high levels of hope ($r = .33$, $p < .001$) and high levels of empathy ($r = .15$, $p = .04$). High levels of hope were also significantly correlated with leftist ideology ($r = .23$, $p < .001$) and secular religious definition ($r = .14$, $p = .06$). Regression analysis in which sociopolitical variables were also entered into the regression equation as predictors of hope, revealed that the effect of reappraisal on hope remained significant ($\beta = 0.34$, $p < .001$; $R^2 = .18$).

Does hope mediate the effect of reappraisal on support for humanitarian aid?

To test whether hope mediated the effect of reappraisal on support for providing humanitarian aid, we used structural equation modelling. Reappraisal and all sociopolitical variables that were found to have significant effects on support for providing humanitarian aid were specified as exogenous in the model. Hope, as well as the other emotions of fear, anger, and empathy were specified as mediators, and support for providing humanitarian aid as an endogenous, dependent variable. Since no significant associations were found, neither between the negative emotions (i.e., anger and fear) and cognitive reappraisal, nor between these emotions and support for providing humanitarian aid, anger and fear were omitted from the model for simplicity.

Our hypothesised model fitted the data well, $\chi^2(27) = 28.2$, $p = .40$; $NFI = .93$, $IFI = .99$, $CFI = .99$, $RMSEA = .01$. Standardised parameter estimates are presented in Figure 1. The

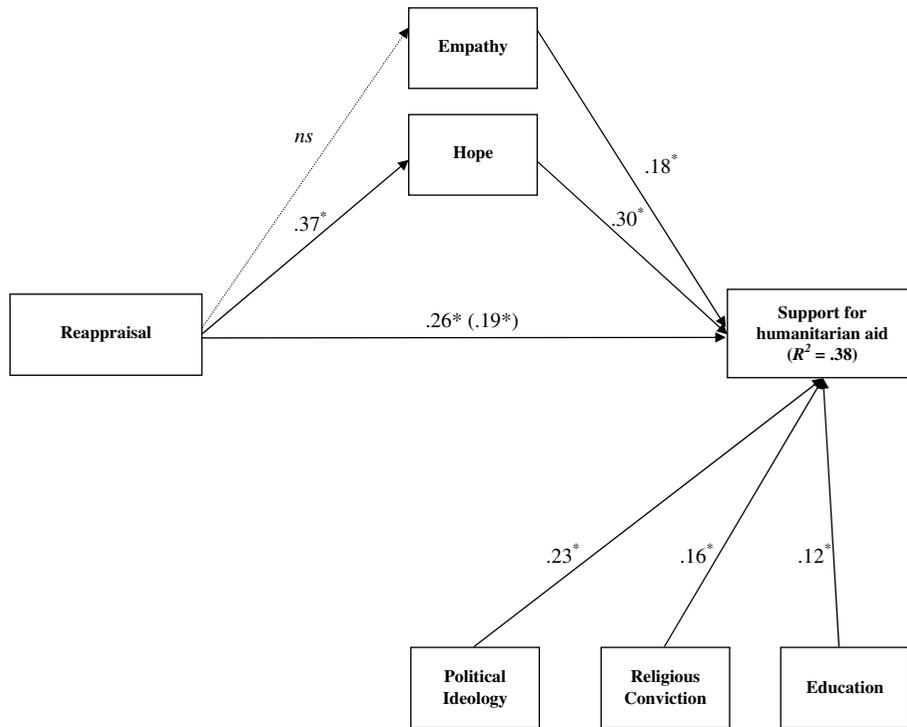


Figure 1. Hope mediates the effect of reappraisal on support for providing humanitarian aid, controlling for political ideology, religious conviction and level of education. Results from a structural equation model (Sobel test: $z = 3.09$; $p < .001$). Other emotional variables (i.e., empathy, anger and fear) were also tested as plausible mediators. No significant results were found regarding anger and fear and they were omitted from the model in order to simplify it.

sociopolitical control variables that had associations with support for providing humanitarian aid are political ideology ($\beta = 0.23$, $p < .001$), religious conviction ($\beta = 0.16$, $p = .02$), and level of education ($\beta = 0.12$, $p = .05$). Empathy predicted support for humanitarian aid ($\beta = 0.18$, $p = .01$), but was not predicted by cognitive reappraisal.

As expected, the tendency to use reappraisal during the war was positively associated with levels of hope ($\beta = 0.37$, $p < .001$), which in turn predicted support for providing humanitarian aid ($\beta = 0.30$, $p < .001$). A Sobel test revealed that the direct path from reappraisal to support for humanitarian aid is weaker when hope is included as a predictor (Sobel test: $z = 3.09$; $p < .001$). Since reappraisal also had a direct effect on support for humanitarian aid ($\beta = 0.19$, $p = .04$) we can infer that the effect of reappraisal on

support for humanitarian aid was partially mediated by hope.

Removal of the direct path between reappraisal and support for providing humanitarian aid, leaving only the mediated path, decreased all fit measures, $\chi^2(28) = 33.3$, $p = .22$; $NFI = .91$, $IFI = .98$, $CFI = .98$, $RMSEA = .02$, and therefore the two optional routes for the influence of reappraisal on support for providing humanitarian aid were integrated in the same model. Finally, given the cross-sectional nature of the study, we also advanced a model with a reversed causal relation in which levels of hope predicted support for humanitarian aid through the mediation of reappraisal. As we expected, the fit measures of that model were poor ($p = .003$; $NFI = .89$, $IFI = .91$, $CFI = .90$, $RMSEA = .09$).

DISCUSSION

In the present study, we examined whether the way emotions are regulated during wartime predicts the degree to which a person adopts a humanitarian position towards non-combatant members of the out-group. We addressed this goal using a novel design in which we assessed emotional experiences, emotion regulation, and support for policies (i.e., providing humanitarian aid to out-group members) during a violent war between the Israelis and the Palestinians.

Our findings showed that even when wartime fighting was at its peak, those who reported doing more emotion regulation through reappraisal (compared to those who reported using reappraisal less frequently) were both more supportive of providing humanitarian aid to innocent Palestinian citizens and more hopeful about the future of Israeli–Palestinian relations. Furthermore, the effect of reappraisal on support for humanitarian aid was partly mediated by feelings of hope

Implications for the study of emotion regulation

From an emotion-regulation perspective, the current study offers a unique view of emotion regulation of intergroup (or group-based) emotional experiences. In addition, the current results buttress the notion that cognitive reappraisal is an efficacious emotion-regulation strategy that has broad utility. The current results demonstrate that even during one of the most complicated and emotionally charged situations imaginable (fighting during wartime), reappraisal may enable people to maintain a positive sense of hope for the future.

It bears noting that reappraisal proved beneficial even though it was not associated with lower levels of negative emotional experiences. This finding is at odds with prior reports (e.g., Gross & John, 2003), which have shown that reappraisal is associated with lower levels of negative emotion. We believe that reappraisal use was not associated with lower levels of negative emotion here because of the extreme nature of the present study, a context in which very high levels of negative

emotions are repeatedly evoked by life-threatening situations. We believe that it is noteworthy that even in these circumstances, reappraisal was helpful due to its effect on one of the most dominant positive emotions in conflict—hope.

Implications for the study of intergroup conflict

From the perspective of the study of intergroup conflict, the current study represents an initial application of the concept of emotion regulation to the study of interethnic, intractable conflicts. To date, most studies dealing with emotions in conflicts have pointed to the specific influence of discrete emotions on attitudes and behaviour of leaders and citizens during war (e.g., Skitka et al., 2006). The current investigation extends this line of studies by showing that it is not just the type of emotional experience that determines the response to conflict related events, but also the way people deal with their emotions during war.

One additional implication of the present study is that it extends current knowledge about possible interventions aimed at reducing tensions and de-escalating intergroup, violent conflicts. The results of the current study indicate that training people to use reappraisal may be conducive to conflict resolution. Furthermore, we suggest that reappraisal training might be a particularly beneficial strategy because it does not include explicit reminders of the causes of the conflict or the nature of the adversary, and in the context of violent conflict citizens are not very open to direct persuasive attempts.

Limitations and future directions

The two most obvious limitations of the current study are its correlational design and its focus on a single emotion-regulation strategy. These limitations arise naturally from the attempt to investigate the role of emotion regulation during a real-life unconventional event. Studies conducted in the setting of real-world conflicts, especially during wartime, confront logistical realities that

make it difficult to comprehensively assess a large number of constructs of interest.

We believe that these limitations are offset by the real-world applicability of findings obtained from the “natural laboratory” provided by ongoing conflict (Bar-Tal, 2004). Because it would be unethical to attempt to recreate in the laboratory anything like the emotional stresses and strains that exist during wartime, the only way to examine the impact of such situations is by employing correlational designs. That said, we acknowledge the value of both approaches, and we believe that the current framework should be tested in the future under more controlled lab conditions, with random assignment to regulation conditions. Congruent findings from these two different settings would provide important additional support for our proposed theoretical framework.

To conclude, one cannot think of many events that are as emotionally charged as war. The current findings highlight the enormous potential that is hidden within the attempt to constructively cope with negative emotions even in these highly emotional times. It is our truthful hope that the current results will serve positive goals in real-world conflicts and will be further developed in additional research settings.

Manuscript received 14 October 2009

Revised manuscript received 5 October 2010

Manuscript accepted 12 October 2010

First published online 4 January 2011

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