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## Communicating anger and contempt in intergroup conflict

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# Chapter 1

## General Introduction

## General Introduction

Whether we think about large-scale intergroup conflicts (e.g., international wars, or the Israeli-Palestinian conflict) or small-scale interpersonal conflicts (e.g., between intimate partners), conflicts are an integral part of social life. Regardless of whether we consider riots between different groups of soccer hooligans, or bullying dynamics between individuals in the schoolyard, conflicts signal a clash between the interests of those involved that often also puts strong pressure on the relationship between them. For this reason, conflicts have an enormous emotional potency.

In the current dissertation I<sup>1</sup> will focus on the group-based emotions evoked in intergroup conflicts. Intergroup conflict is defined as a situation in which at least two parties are involved in an intergroup relation with opposing interests (e.g., Sherif & Sherif, 1965), which often results in a tense state of affairs (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). In line with mainstream perspectives on intergroup conflict that focus on individuals' subjective rather than objective group membership (e.g., Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987), I define a group as consisting of individuals who, within a given situation, perceive and define themselves as group members (rather than unique individuals). Intergroup conflicts may therefore be grounded in more objective circumstances (e.g., conflict about resources or territory), but their psychological dimension revolves more around subjective ones (e.g., status or identity). Often, of course, these two work in tandem. For example, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is characterized by an intergroup struggle for resources (e.g., territory) as well as status (e.g., religion).

The main consequence of subjective group membership is that when an individual identifies with a group in conflict, this group becomes self-relevant

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<sup>1</sup> Although I write the introduction to this dissertation using the first person pronoun 'I', this dissertation from start to finish has been the product of a collaborative process, as indicated by the use of 'we' in the other Chapters.

and thus acquires emotional significance (Smith & Henry, 1996; Tajfel, 1981). Theory and research suggest that individuals can experience specific emotions like anger or contempt on behalf of their group (i.e. group-based emotions), which are distinct from emotions felt on an individual level (Smith, 1993; Smith, Seger, & Mackie, 2007). As such, intergroup conflicts provide a context for the *experience* of different group-based emotions that can motivate different intergroup behaviors (e.g., conflict escalation or resolution). In my dissertation I will focus on two of the most prototypical group-based emotions in intergroup conflicts, anger and contempt (Allred, 1999; Halperin, Russell, Dweck, & Gross, 2011). Although much is known about the motivational power of group-based anger and contempt (e.g., Tausch et al., 2011; Van Zomeren, Spears, Fischer, & Leach, 2004), at present little is known about the psychological effects of their *communication* to the other party in the conflict. This is important because group-based emotions like anger and contempt are often communicated toward the relevant outgroup as a way of showing discontent. But we know relatively little about what the consequences are of the communication of group-based emotions in intergroup conflict.

This lack of knowledge in the communicative domain is unfortunate because group-based emotions are sometimes thought to be part of a dysfunctional dynamic that explains why conflicting parties engage in ‘heated discussions’ rather than focus on more objectively ‘rational’ conflict resolution strategies (e.g., see Wilkowski, Robinson, & Troop-Gordon, 2010). It is therefore often suggested that when groups are to negotiate an agreement, they should ‘leave their emotions at the door’. However, research on the communication of interpersonal emotions in interpersonal conflict suggests that the expression of anger (rather than contempt) within a meaningful relationship can have quite positive effects (Fischer & Roseman, 2007; see also Van Kleef, 2009). The main goal of this dissertation is to systematically investigate whether the communication of *group-based* anger (rather than contempt) has the

potential to de-escalate *intergroup* conflict (or otherwise improve the intergroup relationship).

Below, I first discuss the negative reputation that the specific emotion of anger has received and then suggest why this may be undeserved. Specifically, I suggest that emotions like anger and contempt have a *social function* and thus should not be viewed as products of individual irrationality. Because of my focus on the communication of these group-based emotions, I will propose that anger and contempt have an opposite *relational* function, which means that their communication serves to value or devalue the relationship, respectively. This function can be viewed as a conceptual complement to more *strategic* approaches to understanding the communication of emotions (Van Kleef, 2009); moreover, my analysis focuses on how those *group-based* emotions' relational function plays out in *intergroup* conflict. I then suggest how this relational function operates and how I have examined its effects in the three empirical Chapters of this dissertation.

### **Anger's (Undeserved) Bad Reputation**

The notion that anger can have positive effects in conflict settings is a fairly recent one (e.g., Fischer & Roseman, 2007; Halperin et al., 2011; Van Kleef, 2009). A more traditional notion is that the experience of anger colors and even biases individuals' reasoning (e.g., Bodenhausen, Sheppard, & Kramer, 1994; Hume, 1777; Keltner, Ellsworth, & Edwards, 1993; Lerner, Goldberg, & Tetlock, 1998; for an overview, see Lerner & Tiedens, 2006,) and therefore negatively affects a 'cool', reasoned, and logical approach to conflict resolution. For this reason, anger should be curtailed, or at least controlled and only minimally expressed or it will harm the relationship (e.g., Allred, Mallozzi, Matsui, & Raia, 1997; DiGuiseppe & Tafrate, 2003, Gottman, & Levenson, 1992, Rothbart & Hallmark, 1988, Tiedens, 2001). Now, in this dissertation I do not argue that such a 'cool' approach to conflict resolution would be ineffective; in fact, it might often be an important first step towards future negotiations.

However, I do argue in this dissertation that the communication of group-based anger holds a positive potential for *valuing the intergroup relationship* that may be difficult to realize when individuals are encouraged to keep their anger under wraps.

A first indication that anger has such positive potential comes from Averill's (1982) classic study on anger where researchers went out into the street and asked participants who they were most likely to get angry with and what the result of their anger was (Averill, 1982). The findings showed that individuals were more likely to express anger to psychologically closer targets. In fact, they most often expressed anger toward friends and family (i.e., meaningful relationships). More importantly, the results of their anger were most often not negative but in fact had positive consequences for the relationship (see also Fischer & Roseman, 2007). These findings suggest that the expression of anger in conflict settings may be an effective means to *reduce*, rather than escalate, the conflict. This suggests that, within the context of a meaningful relationship, there may be an undiscovered positive potential of communicating group-based anger with an eye to what it signals to the other party in the conflict about their relationship. This is what I refer to as the relational function of the communication of group-based anger in intergroup conflict – its signal to the other party in the conflict to keep valuing the relationship. By contrast, I propose that the communication of group-based contempt has the exact opposite function – to devalue and even sever the relationship. I develop this proposal below.

### **Opposite Relational Functions**

Anger and contempt are both negative emotions that signal norm and rights violations (e.g., Giner-Sorolla, Caswell, & Bosson, 2012; Rozin, Lowery, Imada, & Haidt, 1999). However, when expressed to the other party in the conflict, they send quite different messages (Fischer & Roseman, 2007; Van Kleef, De Dreu, & Manstead, 2004). Group-based anger stems from a group-based appraisal of outgroup members' intergroup behavior as unfair (e.g., Frijda,

1986; Lazarus, 1991; Roseman, 2001; Scherer, 2001; Scherer, Schorr, & Johnstone, 2001). It is unique in its combination of negative affect (addressing perceived group unfairness) and approach-orientation (confronting the other group about it; Carver & Harmon-Jones, 2009; Van Zomeren, Leach, & Spears, 2012). Indeed, the experience of group-based anger gears individuals up toward actively addressing a perceived wrong that has been done to the ingroup (Van Zomeren et al., 2004). This can be viewed by the other party as a request for negotiation about the problem (Van Kleef et al., 2004), but also for reconciliation between relationship partners (cf. Fischer & Roseman, 2007). Thus, the communication of group-based anger combines a focus on the *problem* within the broader context of the *relationship* between the parties. As such, its relational function is to value (and keep valuing) the relationship.

Less is known about group-based contempt, but it also seems to be informed by a group-based appraisal of outgroup members' intergroup behavior as unjust (Ekman, 1994; Fischer & Roseman, 2007; Rozin et al., 1999). Indeed, contempt is defined by a combination of negative affect and an avoidance orientation (either due to antagonism or indifference toward the other group). As such, and in contrast to the experience of anger, the experience of contempt makes individuals likely to seek to distance their group from the outgroup, to devalue or even dissolve the intergroup relationship, and avoid further contact (Fischer & Roseman, 2007). In this respect, the relational function of the communication of group-based contempt is the exact opposite of that of group-based anger.

Taken together, I propose that the communication of group-based anger in the context of intergroup conflict serves to focus the outgroup on concrete problems *within* a valued relationship, whereas the communication of contempt serves to devalue that relationship altogether. This implies that, of those two emotions, only the communication of group-based anger should be related to attempts to improve the *relationship* between the opposing parties. This is

exactly why group-based anger may hold an undiscovered relational potential in intergroup conflict settings.

The notion of relational function may complement a more strategic function of the communication of anger (e.g., in negotiations; see Van Kleef, 2009). In this perspective, the communication of anger (for instance in a negotiation) signals an instrumental, competitive focus on achieving optimal personal outcomes through persuasion or coercion. For instance, communicating anger in negotiations implies that one has high negotiation limits and is therefore less likely to give in, thus effectively pressuring and intimidating the other into compromising (Van Kleef & Côté, 2009). Although these dynamics may at times certainly apply to intergroup conflicts, I believe that anger's relational function concerns the broader intergroup relationship. Within that relationship, negotiation about a problem can of course occur and an intimidating negotiating style may sometimes have short-term pay-offs for the individual. However, it is doubtful whether such an intimidating negotiation style facilitates the survival of the broader relationship over time. Indeed, the relational function of anger suggests that cooperative efforts towards reconciliation are required if positive mutual outcomes are to be attained. Thus, when considering conflicts that refer to meaningful relationships (e.g., friends, family, meaningful ingroups), our focus on the relational function complements (and possibly qualifies) any strategic effects the communication of anger may have in intergroup conflict.

### **Indicators of relational function**

Proposing a relational function of the communication of group-based anger is not the same as proposing measures that tap it. Yet, the communication of group-based anger implies to the other group that although the angry group is upset about the current state of affairs, they also value the relationship and want to maintain it. It follows that a first good indicator of relational function is the extent to which individuals perceive the intergroup relationship to be important. For instance, when one group communicates anger about how the other group



treats them, individuals from the other group may interpret this emotional signal as a cue to keep valuing the relationship, thus increasing their perceived relationship importance.

Furthermore, the communication of group-based anger also signals a request for the other group *to do something* about the problem within their valued relationship (e.g., engage in reconciliatory actions). Thus, the communication of group-based anger serves as a request to the other group to show that they care about the intergroup relationship but also have a serious problem they want to see solved. For this reason, a second good indicator of relational function is the extent to which individuals of one group can take the perspective of the angry group and empathize with them.

Note that the same two indicators of anger's relational function – perceived relationship importance and empathy (or perspective taking) – can be used to tap the opposite relational function associated with contempt. Thus, when one group in conflict communicates contempt toward the other group, individuals in the other group may interpret this as a devaluation of their relationship, thus decreasing perceived relationship importance and empathy (or perspective taking).

### **Overview of this dissertation**

In this dissertation I set out to investigate the extent to which the communication of group-based anger and contempt (de-)escalate conflict by investigating their relational functions. First, I investigate whether the communication of group-based anger, rather than contempt, is indeed effective in reducing intergroup conflict and, if so, whether this is due to its proposed relational function. Second, I test the robustness of this effect by varying contextual factors to see under what circumstances the communication of anger is or ceases to be effective (i.e., potential boundary conditions of the effect). Finally, I look more closely into anger and contempt's opposite relational function by investigating when the communication of group-based contempt,

rather than anger, can be effective in reducing intergroup conflict (i.e., potential reversal of the effect).

In Chapter 2, I present three studies that provide a first test of the positive effect of communicating group-based anger in different intergroup conflicts. In these studies I manipulate the communication of group-based anger and/or group-based contempt orthogonally, resulting in four experimental conditions (in which no emotion, group-based anger, group-based contempt, or both are communicated by one group in conflict). The ‘mixed’ condition is important because we would expect the relational function of either emotion to be most visible in their ‘pure’ form; moreover, anger and contempt are often thought to co-occur in real life (Cottrell & Neuberg, 2005), which argues for the use of experimental control in our studies. In each study, Dutch students read a different newspaper article that described how German students communicated these emotions in response to being discriminated against either due to relative deprivation or based on negative attitudes. The main dependent variable is individuals’ constructive or destructive conflict intentions. Moreover, I investigate two proposed indicators for anger and contempt’s relational functions: relationship importance and empathy.

Chapter 3 zooms in on the specific role of empathy as a relational indicator of the communication of group-based anger and poses the question: What factors determine whether the communication of group-based anger does or does not positively affect outgroup empathy? I test two antecedents of the effectiveness of group-based anger: Perceived treatment legitimacy (i.e., does the angry group has a legitimate point?) and perceived outgroup consensus regarding the communicated anger (i.e., does the group feel anger, or is it just a lone individual?). First, if the treatment leading up to the communication of group-based anger is perceived to be legitimate (e.g., a worse performing department receiving less funding), then the anger communication might be perceived as inappropriate and thus be ineffective in evoking empathy. Second,

if anger is perceived as unshared within the outgroup (i.e., perceived low consensus), it will not be perceived as *group-based* anger to address a problem within the broader *intergroup* relationship. I test these assumptions in three experiments in which I manipulate the presence or absence of communicated anger in addition to manipulating perceived treatment legitimacy (Study 1), perceived outgroup consensus (Study 2), or both (Study 3; in this study the communication of anger itself is held constant).

Chapter 4 more closely focuses on the opposite relational functions of anger and contempt in the context of a long-term intergroup conflict. This type of context enabled the examination of whether the communication of anger is still effective when communicated about a conflictual event *in the past*. Specifically, I look at how temporal framing of the outgroup emotion communication about this past conflictual event (i.e., I was angry / I felt contempt versus I am angry / I feel contempt) would affect *current* constructive conflict intentions. I reason that the communication of past felt anger might not be as effective as it implies that anger is no longer felt today, which means that the importance of working on a positive relationship is no longer necessary. For past felt contempt, on the other hand, due to its opposite relational function, the reduced devaluation of the relationship might in fact pose a renewed opportunity to make amends. I test this in two studies where Dutch participants read a newspaper article about a past conflict between Moluccan Dutch people (i.e., an ethnic minority group in the Netherlands) and the Dutch government. Participants read that, at present with an upcoming memorial, some Moluccan Dutch people communicated anger and contempt about their treatment in either a past or present temporal framing.

Finally, in Chapter 5 I discuss the main findings of this dissertation and discuss implications for the literature on the communication of group-based anger and contempt, and, more broadly, intergroup conflict reduction. I address several limitations of the current studies and suggest areas for future research.

Also, I provide some practical implications of this work for conflict intervention and mediation.

