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# Do Group Processes Cause Violence and Aggression?

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Aggression and violence are phenomena that always were, and almost certainly will remain, phenomena with high societal relevance. On a large scale, examples of aggression are wars between nations, riots between parties striving for political change and those trying to protect the establishment, and hooliganism. On a smaller scale, in the interpersonal sphere, examples are crimes of passion, mobbing in school classes, and siblings fighting—verbally or physically—over having a specific toy. Large-scale events and events where aggression and violence result in highly negative consequences for the victim(s) tend to trigger an especially large amount of attention and tend to raise the question: Why did this happen? This question has, not surprisingly, also elicited a lot of theorizing and research in the social sciences, and especially in psychology. One relevant factor in the social-psychological literature is group membership. In fact, the tendency to link people's membership (especially of larger groups) to a higher willingness to engage in aggressive behavior has a long history in psychological theory and research. This chapter will focus on this potential role of group membership in aggression and summarize the relevant literature and research.

Do group processes cause violence and aggression? What looks like a relatively simple, straightforward question is certainly a tricky one ~~to answer~~—or at least one that needs a multifaceted and multidirectional answer. Because, yes, group processes may enhance or even trigger aggression, but they can also have no effect or even make nonaggressive behavior more probable. In the following I will discuss these options and will reflect on (1) group membership as a potential *immediate cause* for aggression (i.e., people becoming aggressive *because* they are part of a group) but more so on (2) group membership as a *moderating variable* affecting people's interpretation of and reactions to events that may be interpreted as aggression and that could stir the escalation of conflicts. But, first, the following section will briefly introduce the main underlying theoretical perspectives on how group membership affects individuals' thinking, feeling, and behavior and on how aggressive behavior comes about.

## Theoretical Background

### A Social–Cognitive Perspective on Aggression

When we try to define aggressive behavior, it quickly becomes obvious that it is hard to delimit a fixed class of behaviors that can unambiguously be labeled “aggressive.” On the one hand, there is a large consensus that, in order to be defined as aggressive, behavior has to be guided by the intention to do harm and has to be considered inappropriate according to the relevant situational norms (Baron & Richardson, 1994). On the other hand, both elements—the intention to do harm and inappropriateness according to relevant norms—are subject to interpretation and, accordingly, prone to eliciting perspective-specific differences in the perception and evaluation of events. While victims of harmful behavior are often convinced that the respective action was intended to do harm, perpetrators are likely to deny having intended to do harm or to assert that they were justified in intending to cause harm due to previous provocation by the victim (Mummendey & Otten, 1989). The perspective- and context-specific experience and interpretation of actions that actually cause or are potentially intended to cause harm affects not only how the opponents but also how outside observers will react to these events (Mummendey, Linneweber, & Löscher, 1984). Even such an extremely violent act as manslaughter can be interpreted as appropriate or even as an act intended to create peace if the victim is known to be terrorist or vicious dictator.

Hence, behavior is not aggressive per se, but it needs to be interpreted as such. Such subjective interpretations then guide the subsequent emotional and behavioral reactions to events that involve harm-doing. This reasoning is central in social–cognitive models of aggression (Dodge & Coie, 1987; Krahe, 2001). These models show how, at various stages of an aggressive episode, a possible aggressive or nonaggressive reaction is determined by perceptual (What do I see?), cognitive (How do I interpret the situation?), and affective factors (How do I feel about it?), together with the estimated costs and benefits of available potential reactions (Tedeschi & Felson, 1994). Both individual differences and situational variables feed into the various steps, from perceiving a potential trigger of aggressive behavior to its actual enactment (see the general affective aggression model; Lindsay & Anderson, 2000). This reasoning is highly relevant in the context of the present chapter and the question that it considers (whether group membership may affect aggression). First, because there may be individual differences in how relevant group membership is to a certain person (i.e., differences in group identification) and, second, because there may be contextual differences regarding the situational relevance of certain group memberships (e.g., being a supporter of a certain soccer team is much more relevant when in or close to the arena than when at home at the dining table). Both aspects can lead to differences in whether and how group memberships and their associated relations with other groups will affect social interactions.

### Group Membership as a Social Identity

In early social psychology, there was an understanding that all social behavior can ultimately be traced back to the individual and their psychology. This perspective was challenged by social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), which assumes that the self-concept of an individual comprises two components: a personal identity, based on characteristics that, in combination, define the unique individual, and a social identity, which is based on shared group memberships. Social identity is defined by the respective norms and characteristics associated with

certain group memberships. Importantly, the relative relevance of personal and social identity is not fixed and can vary across situations (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987).

Acknowledging the relevance of social identity in social behavior has two major implications: First, the assumption in social identity theory, and in the more generally phrased self-categorization theory (Turner et al., 1987), is that the more group membership becomes salient, the more individuals will function in terms of the relevant norms and characteristics of the group. This also implies homogeneity in the attitudes and behavior of members of the same group. The normative standards associated with a social identity may be different from idiosyncratic, personal standards that are considered relevant when the personal identity is situationally salient. In self-categorization theory, the psychological state elicited when social identity is situationally more salient than personal identity has been termed “depersonalization.”

Second, positioning one’s own groups as positively distinct from relevant other groups is assumed to contribute to people’s overall positive self-concept (for an overview, see Hewstone, Rubin, & Willis, 2002). Hence, people have a stable tendency to prefer their own group over other groups and to evaluate it and treat it favorably. This positive ingroup bias has been shown in many studies and can even occur spontaneously and outside conscious control (Otten & Moskowitz, 2000); however, it is important to note that ingroup love does not automatically imply outgroup hate (Brewer, 1999). In fact, many studies investigating the impact of group membership in the laboratory have found that attitudes and behaviors toward outgroup members are typically less positive than those toward the ingroup, but mostly not really negative. Moreover, Mummendey and collaborators (Mummendey, Otten, Berger, & Kessler, 2000; Otten, Mummendey, & Blanz, 1996) have shown that, overall, people are less willing to favor their ingroup over an outgroup on negative comparison dimensions (such as punishment decisions) than on positive comparison dimensions (such as resource allocations). Hence, the striving for positive distinctiveness is not unconditional, especially if negative behavior is involved. Yet, the striving for a positive social identity can be a risk factor in intergroup interactions: It implies that, if another group challenges one’s own group’s positive distinctiveness, this may become a source of conflict. We will return to both aspects further in subsequent sections.

## Group Membership as an Immediate Cause of Aggression

Blaming group membership for being a direct trigger or at least a serious risk factor in the emergence and escalation of aggression and violence is an idea that emerged in psychological theory and research more than a century ago. So-called mass psychology (Le Bon, 1895/1947) assumed that being part of a crowd would generally enhance people’s readiness to behave aggressively. In fact, a discontinuity was assumed between how individuals would behave in interpersonal contexts and within smaller group as opposed to when part of a bigger mass. In the latter situation, individuals were assumed to *dehumanize*: Their human reason, morality, and responsibility would fade. Instead, within the mass, people would behave irrationally and free of the normative restrictions they would otherwise endorse.

### Deindividuation in Groups and the SIDE Model

Le Bon’s (1895/1947) idea that being part of a crowd *per se* will trigger the worst in people was dismissed in psychological research decades ago (for an interesting analysis of the political

functions of this perspective, see Reicher, 1996). Yet, some structural elements of the crowd setting are still considered relevant to understanding people's propensity to behave aggressively in large groups. Most importantly, being part of a crowd typically provides people with more anonymity, and this anonymity has been assumed to elicit a state of "deindividuation" (Zimbardo, 1969). Deindividuation has been associated with several psychological consequences that may trigger norm-deviant behavior: a diffusion of responsibility, fewer concerns about moral and normative standards, and reduced self-control (Diener, 1980). However, the assumption that deindividuation will straightforwardly feed into a higher probability of aggressive behavior has been qualified. According to Diener (1980, p. 231), such a possible increase will depend on (1) the specific needs and desires of the individual who is experiencing deindividuation and (2) situational factors, such as the behavioral models provided by other group members. Accordingly, one could argue that being part of a crowd could potentially trigger both pro- and antisocial behavior. Nonetheless, overall, the research has for a long time mainly focused on the negative consequences of deindividuation due to the assumed lack of normative regulation (i.e., low self-control and low responsibility).

The traditional view on how a state of deindividuation may affect group members' (especially antinormative) behavior has been criticized and challenged by the social identity model of deindividuation effects (SIDE; Reicher, Spears, & Postmes, 1995). Reicher and collaborators argue that previous models on deindividuation are based on a purely individualistic view of the self; however, as already outlined, the self is in part also defined by social identities—that is by the norms, behaviors, and goals associated with an individual's group memberships (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner et al., 1987). Hence, if a group membership becomes psychologically salient, group members will indeed function less in terms of their idiosyncratic, personal norms and be more likely to follow the standards of the group that is psychologically relevant to them. Rather than resulting in chaos and a lack of self-control, however, such a state of "depersonalization" within crowds is assumed to create relatively homogeneous behavior in group members, which is guided by their shared group norms (Postmes & Spears, 1998; Reicher et al., 1995).

Hence, the SIDE model rejects the idea that a reduction of normative constraints is characteristic for larger groups, but rather stresses that the social identity will determine group members' rules of conduct within crowds. These rules will guide both whether and against whom aggressive behavior will occur. In line with this reasoning, Reicher (1984) analyzed real-life riots and showed that group membership led people in the crowd to highly systematic and predictable behavior directed at giving full voice to group members' social identities. For example, rather than blindly destroying everything in their way, crowd members' acts of destruction were clearly directed at those they considered as being members of the outgroup (e.g., police officers). Conversely, crowd members actively avoided hurting those who could not be categorized as members of outgroups (Reicher, 1984).

Besides being relevant for analyzing people's behavior in crowds, the SIDE model has been used to analyze how people behave in cyberspace, where there is also a high degree of anonymity. Again, the argument is that anonymity does not directly feed into a higher propensity for negative behavior in computer-mediated communication but that the norms of the salient group identity are a decisive factor (Postmes, Spears, & Lea, 1998). Christie and Dill (2016) investigated the predictions of the SIDE model regarding antisocial behavior in cyberspace. They did not find evidence that people's willingness to evaluate others negatively was significantly shaped by their social identity. Possibly, this was due to a low salience and psychological relevance of the social categorization they introduced in the laboratory. At the same time, their

data confirm that anonymity per se does not enhance the propensity for negative behavior; it only does so in combination with certain variables relating to individual differences.

### Realistic Conflict Theory

Besides the idea that the psychological experience of being part of (large) groups per se may elicit major changes in how people perceive, feel, and behave in social conflicts, it has also been proposed that group membership can directly provide people with *functional motives* to act either prosocially or aggressively toward others. Groups may cooperate or compete in order to gain or maintain certain limited resources; if there is negative interdependence (i.e., competition) between groups, this may negatively affect the relation between members of the different groups. Such links between, on the one hand, positive versus negative interdependence between groups and, on the other, intergroup harmony versus intergroup conflict were impressively demonstrated by Sherif, Harvey, White, Hood, and Sherif (1961) in their seminal Robbers Cave experiments. These field studies investigated schoolboys of 11 to 12 years who were participating in a summer camp. Two groups of boys who did not know each other beforehand were formed. After a short getting-to-know-each-other period, the researchers introduced competition between the groups (the group scoring best in a series of sports event could win technical devices). Quickly, this led to increasing tension and hostile incidents between the members of the two groups. Importantly, however, this hostility vanished after goals were implemented that necessitated collaboration between the two groups. Accordingly, realistic conflict theory (Campbell, 1965; Sherif, 1966) postulates that whether group members engage in intergroup aggression is determined by the nature of interdependence between the groups. If this relation is competitive, the probability of intergroup aggression (but not intra-group aggression) should increase.

To further illustrate this, think about passionate soccer supporters whose favorite team is competing with another team to win a national championship. Obviously, there is negative interdependence between the two teams: Only one of them can win. Accordingly, it makes sense that there are frequently conflicts between soccer fans from rival teams and that hooliganism is a serious problem for many soccer clubs. At the same time, realistic conflict theory implies that, by changing and/or redefining the structure of interdependence between groups, intergroup conflicts can be reduced or fully avoided. Again, we can illustrate this in the context of soccer: Soccer supporters may fear that, after violent conflicts between (more extreme and violence-prone) supporters of their own team and supporters of the rival team, they may be banned altogether from watching the next competition. The wish to avoid such punishment may create an overarching interest for the members of both groups, and this shared, superordinate goal may reduce the probability of aggressive interaction between members of the rival teams.

The example of soccer supporters also illustrates another relevant point. Conflicts between groups need not always be based on negative interdependence regarding material resources. Soccer fans typically will not obtain money if their favorite team wins. Yet, they will *feel better* and their team's potential superiority may contribute to their positive social identity. Accordingly, more than about scarce material resources, the issue of conflict is about the *relative value of the social identities* at stake. Hence, group members may be in conflict about getting more but also about being better than members of other groups—or both (Tedeschi & Felson, 1994). This assumption is, as already briefly explained above, at the core of social identity theory, which provides an “integrative theory of intergroup conflict” by assuming that



the quality of intergroup relations is to a large extent determined by group members' need to maintain or achieve a positive social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, p. 33). This implies that the **salience of social identity** is a crucial factor. This salience is determined, on the one hand, by the individual group member's degree of group identification (not all soccer supporters are equally fanatical) and, on the other hand, by the situation and the relevant ingroup–outgroup relations it entails. For example, in soccer, some teams have an especially strong rivalry and, accordingly, their encounters carry a stronger identity relevance.

To sum up, the research discussed in this section fits the idea that—under certain circumstances—group membership can directly enhance an individual's willingness to behave aggressively. Group membership may elicit various psychological states in group members and may create various functional motives. However, modern social psychology no longer assumes that collective aggression is due to people's general lack of control and morality when part of a large group. Being part of a crowd is not per se associated with mindless (or reckless) behavior. Rather, when a certain group identity becomes salient, it provides group members with norms and interests that will guide their behavior. In principle, these group norms can facilitate both pro- and antisocial behavior. Yet, and in line with realistic conflict theory (Sherif, 1966, pp. 24–61), when interacting with outgroups whose interests are opposed to one's own group's interest, willingness to show aggressive behavior will increase. But, rather than being “mindless,” such aggression will typically target only outgroup members. Protagonists will be prone to considering intentional harmful behavior as situationally justified against outgroup members but not against ingroup members. Hence, the same behavior may be interpreted and evaluated differently depending on whether it is enacted by and/or directed at an ingroup or an outgroup member. This idea is central in the following part of this chapter.

## Group Membership as a Moderating Variable in Aggressive Interactions

So far, we have dealt with the question whether, when, and how group membership can be the trigger for aggression and violence. The following sections take a slightly different perspective: They focus on the impact of group affiliations on cognitive, affective, and behavioral reactions in potential conflict situations, in which harm has been or is intended to be done. The running thread is the question: How are the very same (at least potentially) harmful actions interpreted, which emotions do they elicit, and which behavioral intentions do they activate, depending on whether the protagonist belongs to one's own group (i.e., ingroup) or to another group (i.e., outgroup)? It is highly relevant to address these questions, because aggression typically does not comprise a single one-shot event but is embedded in a longer sequence of actions and reactions (Mummendey & Otten, 1989). Accordingly, understanding the role of group membership within such chains of events also provides relevant knowledge regarding factors that may either fuel or de-escalate conflicts (Otten & Mummendey, 2000; Otten, Mummendey, & Wenzel, 1995).

### Group Membership and Attributional Biases in Aggressive Interactions

As stated at the beginning of this chapter, whether a behavior is defined as aggressive—and thereby also justifying a potential retaliatory, harmful reaction—depends heavily on whether an intention to do harm is perceived. In some situations, the task of inferring whether harm was done intentionally is easy. Think, for example, of a thief who patiently waits until a house

owner opens the front door, then hits him hard from behind with a baseball bat and robs valuables from the house while the owner is unconscious. In other situations, the evidence for harmful intentions is less clear. For example, being pushed when leaving a busy subway station could be either accidental or a mean offense. In such cases, group membership can be a relevant cue to infer whether or not bad intentions were involved.

#### *Ambiguity regarding harmful intentions*

How does group affiliation affect how an ambiguously intentional harmful event is interpreted? Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), with its assumption that people strive to achieve and maintain a positive social identity, suggests that, in general, ingroup members ~~may be~~ seen more positively than outgroup members. This positive attitude toward the ingroup and its members is a very fundamental phenomenon and has been shown to automatically guide information processing immediately after an individual has been categorized as a member of a new ingroup (Otten & Moskowitz, 2000). Hence, such a positive default association with the ingroup and its members may guide the interpretation of harm inflicted by ingroup members whose hostile intention is unclear.

This is exactly what has been found in research by Braun, Otten, and Gordijn (2009; see also Otten & Gordijn, 2014): They found that, when there was ambiguity in the hostile intentions of an ingroup protagonist, the harmed fellow ingroup members judged the event as being less negative, reported less anger, and showed less retaliatory aggression than in the case of an unambiguous intention to do harm. For outgroup members, however, on all measures the reactions were similarly negative, irrespective of variation in the ambiguity of the hostile intention. Similar evidence was reported by Van Prooijen (2006). He showed that, when a target had not yet been unequivocally identified as an actor in an illegal offense, outside observers were much more prone to considering an outgroup member guilty than an ingroup member.

Negative stereotypes about members of other groups can further enhance people's unwillingness to give outgroup members the benefit of doubt. In this vein, Devine (1989) showed that, after researchers activated the category of African Americans and related (negative) stereotypes, people were more prone to interpreting an uncategorized target's ambiguous behavior as signaling aggression and hostility.

Hence, there is evidence for positively biased evaluations of ambiguously behaving ingroup members but not ambiguously behaving outgroup members. This implies that conflicts within groups (i.e., between ingroup members) have a higher chance to *not* escalate, as group members will use shared group membership as a judgmental cue that suggests positive rather than negative behavior by fellow ingroup members. Outgroup members, however, will not receive such trust that their intentions are fundamentally positive (Brewer & Caporael, 1990).

But what about cases in which there is no doubt that the harmful outcome was intended? With respect to this question, Braun and collaborators (2009; see also Otten & Gordijn, 2014) showed that ingroup bias vanished as soon as unambiguously aggressive conduct was at stake. In these instances, the ingroup member was evaluated as negatively and elicited as much anger as the outgroup member. What is more, in one of the studies, the effect even reversed, revealing more lenient reaction toward outgroup members whose hostile intention was obvious.

#### *The black sheep effect*

This last finding, an especially harsh reaction toward ingroup members who unambiguously misbehave, is at the core of what has been termed the "black sheep effect" (Marques,



Yzerbyt, & Leyens, 1988). This effect is at first surprising, as it seems to run counter to the idea that people are positively biased toward the groups they belong to. However, Marques and collaborators (1988) have argued that the black sheep effect should better be understood as “sophisticated ingroup favoritism” (p. 5). By clearly rejecting the negatively deviating ingroup member, the group as a whole can keep its positive image and can actually reaffirm the relevance of its norms. Hence, as is further elaborated in the subjective group dynamics model (Marques, Adams, & Serôdio, 2001), inflicting harsh punishment (i.e., harm) on an ingroup member who challenges important ingroup norms can be considered functional and an appropriate response serving the ingroup’s best interests.

The black sheep effect does not occur in all instances of negative conduct by ingroup members. Rather, it is restricted to those cases of misconduct that are in conflict with relevant norms and characteristics of one’s own group (Marques et al., 2001; see Otten & Gordijn, 2014, for an overview). For example, if the chair of a proenvironmental group were found to have dumped an old washing machine in the woods, this would be likely to elicit the black sheep effect in the reactions of other members of this group. If the chair had cheated on ~~their~~ spouse, however, this might be evaluated in the same way as, or even more mildly than, the same misconduct enacted by an outgroup member.

### Nothing to Lose: The Impact of Power in Intergroup Aggression

Intergroup relations entail more than a simple distinction between ingroup and outgroup. The relation between the groups is also defined by sociostructural variables, most notably by the groups’ relative size, power, and status (factors that are often related). How do these variables affect group members’ willingness to behave aggressively? Social-cognitive approaches to aggressive interactions (Felson & Tedeschi, 1993; Krahe, 2001) assume that the decision to enact aggressive behavior is, among other things, based on cost-benefit considerations. Consequently, one can assume that groups high in power will be more prone to using coercive action in conflicts. At the same time, however, the use of negative, harmful behavior may challenge the powerful group’s positive status, making the choice of other noncoercive means to resolve conflicts more attractive. Conversely, if members of a group that is low in power and status are involved in a conflict, they may be especially prone to engage in non-normative, antisocial behavior: After all, they have nothing to lose (Scheepers, Spears, Doosje, & Manstead, 2006).

This latter reasoning was supported in research by Kamans and colleagues (Kamans, Otten, & Gordijn, 2011; Kamans, Otten, Gordijn, & Spears, 2010). They manipulated whether group members who experienced a provocation belonged to a group high or low in power. Importantly, those who identified highly with their group were more likely to experience high levels of anger. Moreover, subsequently they were more prone to confronting the offender and risking an escalation rather than to choosing behavior that would avoid further conflict (such as leaving the situation). This was especially the case when the other group posed an obstacle threat—that is, a threat directed at getting access to valuable resources (see Cottrell & Neuberg, 2005, for distinctions between types of threats). In case of physical threats, however, low-power group members rather experienced fear and showed an enhanced probability of avoiding confrontation with the powerful outgroup. Together, these findings underline that the effects of group membership on aggressive behavioral tendencies are not unconditional, but rather follow closely functional considerations.

## Conclusion

This chapter started by considering the question of whether group membership causes aggression and violence. By now it should be clear that a straightforward “yes” to this question would be utterly inappropriate. At the same time, it cannot be denied that people can indeed behave very violently and commit atrocities on behalf of their group and directed at members of other groups. Genocide, probably the most evil form of aggression that is directed at people of other groups, is still happening in various parts of the world. Yet, even such violent actions are not properly described as the result of mindlessness and lack of control in crowds. Rather, as had been shown by Ervin Staub (1989, 1990) in a moving and convincing analysis of several instances of genocide, such as in Rwanda and in the former Yugoslavia, such atrocities are the result of a long-term process: In a process that is partly shaped by passive observation of violent models, norms that would typically inhibit violence against other humans are gradually ~~moved~~ and the outgroup becomes the target of moral exclusion (Opatow, 1990); in the end, this process may lead people to consider even the extinction of outgroup members as a legitimate option.

Though at first shocking, Staub’s (1989) analysis of the “roots of evil,” together with the other evidence summarized in this chapter, carries some hope for positive change in cases where group members behave violently on behalf of their group. This is because, if aggression and violence in a group context are affected by social norms as provided by the relevant social identities, and if functional motives typically guide group members’ behavior, then these factors may also be starting points for interventions. For example, one could try to exchange problematic ingroup–outgroup distinctions with larger, superordinate categories including both groups and giving the two groups joint goals (Gaertner et al., 2000). Similarly, Opatow (1990) opts for pluralistic perspectives in intergroup relations to avoid moral exclusion of and violence against certain groups. Moreover, one could try to provide powerless groups with hope that they can improve their situation via nonviolent means (Kamans et al., 2010). Or one could ~~try~~ to motivate group leaders to communicate to their followers that aggression and violence are violating the norms and positive reputation of their group. Hence, the answer to the question of whether group membership causes aggression is not a simple but a nuanced one: Although group affiliations and social identities can indeed enhance the risk of aggression and violence, they can also be valuable tools to avoid or de-escalate conflicts.

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#### ABSTRACT

The appropriate answer to the question posed by this chapter is not a straightforward “yes” or “no” but rather “sometimes.” On the one hand, people may be involved in conflicts as a direct consequence of their group membership and with the aim of pursuing the group's interest. Their participation in the conflict and the side they are on is directly determined by their group affiliation. Prominent examples are warfare between nations and hooliganism between rival soccer supporters. On the other hand, there are instances where group processes and social identities are not the immediate cause but nonetheless have an impact on how conflicts are perceived and how they further develop. For example, the intentionality of a group member's negative behavior may be interpreted differently based on stereotypes regarding their group. Relevant theory and empirical evidence for both options will be presented and their practical implications discussed.

#### KEYWORDS

aggression, conflict, group processes, social identity, violence