

When Suffering Begets Suffering: The Psychology of Competitive Victimhood between
Adversarial Groups in Violent Conflicts

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[In press in *Personality and Social Psychology Review*]

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Word count (incl. of ref): 19139 words

Abstract

Inter-group Competitive Victimhood (CV) describes the efforts of members of groups involved in violent conflicts to establish that their group has suffered more than their adversarial group. Such efforts contribute to conflicts' escalation and impede their peaceful resolution. CV stems from groups' general tendency to compete with each other, along with the deep sense of victimization resulting from conflicts. We point to biases that contribute to groups' engagement in CV, describe five dimensions of victimhood over which groups may compete, and contend that such competition serves various functions that contribute to the maintenance of conflicts. Drawing on the Needs-Based Model, we suggest that CV may reflect groups' motivations to restore power or moral acceptance. We then review evidence of the negative consequences of CV for inter-group forgiveness and suggest potential strategies to reduce CV. Finally, we discuss potential moderators and directions for future research.

Keywords

competitive victimhood, inter-group relations, violent conflicts, victims, perpetrators

When Suffering Begets Suffering: The Psychology of Inter-group Competitive Victimhood

Victimhood experiences can bear catastrophic consequences for inter-group relations, as recently demonstrated by leaders in different parts of the world (e.g., in former Yugoslavia and Rwanda) who successfully led their followers into violent conflicts with their historical perpetrators by evoking their past and sometimes ancient victimhood experiences (Ignatieff, 1993; MacDonald, 2002). Yet social psychology has only begun to probe the psychological underpinnings of these collective wounds and their implications for inter-group relations (see Bar-Tal, 2000; Nadler & Liviatan, 2006; Nadler & Shnabel, 2008; Noor, Brown, & Prentice, 2008a & b; Staub, 2006). The present article seeks to expand this work by developing the concept of inter-group *competitive victimhood* (CV), which refers to a group's motivation and consequent efforts to establish that it has suffered more than its adversaries. Tragically, CV contributes to conflicts' continuation, escalation, and the impediment of potential resolutions. To illustrate, as a result of CV each of the conflicting parties may see it as the other party's responsibility to initiate actions towards ending the conflict.

Our analysis of CV focuses on contexts of direct violence in which adversarial groups repeatedly aggress against each other with the intention to harm or kill a great number of people (Galtung, 1969). Such contexts often leave the parties involved with a deep sense of victimhood and the belief that they are the 'true' victims of the conflict (Bar-Tal, 2000). The phenomenon of CV is not limited to contexts of adversarial relations, however. For example, non-adversarial groups who are victims of the same (or different) perpetrator group(s) may compare and compete over the severity of their suffering. To illustrate, gays, Jews, or Romani people may compete over their relative degree of suffering due to their persecution by the Nazi regime. Furthermore, CV may arise in conflicts between individuals or between

materially/socially advantaged and disadvantaged groups within the same society (i.e., contexts characterized by structural violence, Galtung, 1969). Indeed, we occasionally borrow insights from research conducted in these contexts. For example because social psychological research on victimhood within interpersonal relationships is rapidly advancing (Exline, Worthington, & McCullough, 2003) whereas victimhood within contexts of inter-group relations is relatively understudied, we sometimes rely on theoretical and empirical evidence on the interpersonal level¹. Nevertheless, a detailed analysis of the concept of CV within contexts other than violent conflicts between adversarial groups is beyond the scope of the current article.

A number of historians, social scientists and journalists have observed and discussed groups' tendencies to engage in competition over their victim status (e.g., Brennan, 2008; Buruma, 2002; Jensen, 2002; Melendy, 2005; Rothberg, 2009; Woolford & Wolejszo, 2006). However, these discussions mainly relate to competition between different victim groups of the same (or different) perpetrator(s) (e.g., Jews versus Gypsy survivors of the Holocaust, Woolford & Wolejszo, 2006) rather than on competition between adversarial groups that victimized each other, which is the focus of the present analysis. In addition, the goal of previous analyses has been primarily to shed light on specific historical and political contexts (e.g., the Rwandan genocide, Mamdani, 2002) rather than on general social-psychological mechanisms and processes that operate across contexts, which is the purpose of the present article.

Within social psychology, several researchers have depicted phenomena that are closely related to CV. For example, Bronfenbrenner (1961) coined the term *mirror image* to describe how during the cold war both the Americans and the Soviets viewed each other as untrustworthy and irrational aggressors whose actions and policies exacerbated the conflict. This mirror image of the other group validated each group's binary perception of reality as

consisting of ‘good guys’ (us) and ‘bad guys’ (them). As we will discuss, these perceptions of exclusive social roles (good *or* evil) contribute to groups’ engagement in CV. Yet another example can be found in Bar-Tal’s (2007) analysis of the psychological repertoires of group-based emotions and cognitions resulting from intractable conflicts. He suggests that these repertoires lead groups to view the world from a victim perspective. The present work builds on this analysis and suggests that such perspectives are likely to contribute to CV².

As can be seen, several concepts that are related to CV have been discussed in social psychology and related disciplines. The goal of the present article is to fill a conceptual gap in the field by integrating these ideas into a comprehensive theoretical framework that formally defines CV and analyses its antecedents, dimensions, functions, consequences, and moderators in contexts of violent conflicts between adversarial groups.

We begin our analysis by defining inter-group CV, presenting its theoretical premises, and identifying basic processes likely to contribute to it. We describe the psychological mechanisms that underlie competition of this nature, both at the individual and collective levels. We then classify the dimensions of victimhood over which groups may compete and identify the intra- and inter-group psychological functions of such competition. Based on the logic of the Needs-Based Model (Nadler & Shnabel, 2008), we examine different motivations that may underlie CV. We then review empirical data from various contexts of inter-group conflict that examine the impact of CV on inter-group forgiveness and reconciliation attitudes (Noor, et al., 2008a & b; Noor, Brown, Gonzalez, Manzi, & Lewis, 2008; Noor, Gonzalez, Musa, & Carrasco, 2010). We also propose several psychological strategies, based on the principles of the Needs-Based Model, the Common In-group Identity Model (CIIM) (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000), and other relevant works (e.g., Vollhardt, 2009), that may have the potential to reduce groups’ tendencies to engage in CV. We conclude by discussing

potential moderators of individuals' and groups' tendencies to engage in CV and outline directions for future research.

Inter-group Competitive Victimhood: Definition and Basic Processes

A recurrent insight put forward in the social psychological literature regarding the nature of inter-group relations is that groups often compete with one another. Competitive processes are at the core of inter-group relations, particularly those defined by conflict over material or social resources (Blumer, 1958; Brewer & Brown, 1998; Hewstone, Rubin, & Willis, 2002; Pratto & Glasford, 2008; Schopler, Insko, Wieselquist et al., 2001; Sherif, 1966).

Another recurrent insight is that prolonged inter-group violence leaves the involved groups with a deep sense of victimhood, often irrespective of their differential access to material and social power and their respective roles in the conflict (Bar-Tal & Salomon, 2006; Nadler & Saguy, 2003; Noor et al., 2008a & b; Staub, 2006; 2003). Victimhood can be experienced through one's direct exposure to an out-group's acts of victimization (e.g., the personal suffering of injury or loss) or indirectly, through witnessing fellow in-group members suffer at the hands of the out-group³ (Lickel, Miller, Sentstrom et al., 2006; Staub, 2006). Once victimization experiences become public accounts, individual suffering takes on a social dimension with psychological and political consequences for inter-group relations (Rosland, 2009).

Combining groups' general tendency to compete with each other with their propensity to view their own group as the victimized group of a violent conflict provides the basic premise for the phenomenon of *inter-group competitive victimhood* (Noor et al., 2008; Noor et al., 2008a & b). In the competitive victimhood state, members of conflicting groups experience a strong wish – and thus also strive – to establish that their in-group was

subjected to *more* injustice and suffering at the hands of the out-group than the other way around. We expect CV to operate at both the collective and individual group member levels (for a similar conceptual distinction see Ohad & Bar-Tal, 2009). Thus, a group could use the public sphere to create a particular historical narrative about itself, for example, through media coverage of the conflict or speeches by the group's leaders to construct a discourse that revolves around CV for the whole group as a collective. At the same time, group members may individually differ from each other in their tendency to engage in CV. For example, group members who are highly identified with their groups are likely to show a stronger tendency toward CV than group members with weaker in-group identification (as discussed in the Moderators section below).

It is worth inquiring, however, why and how groups manage to perceive themselves as the exclusive victim of a conflict even though objectively - almost by definition - contexts that give rise to CV involve mutual victimization. In other words, even if one group experienced greater loss than the other – to the extent that loss and suffering can be objectively and accurately quantified – it is clear that the other group must have undergone severe suffering as well. How can this suffering be entirely dismissed? For example, how can the Hutus in Rwanda compete over the victim's role (Staub, 2003) after committing the notoriously brutal genocide (des Forges, 1999) of the Tutsi population? At the same time, how can the Tutsis dismiss their role in oppressing and victimizing the Hutu people, both before and after the genocide, and within and outside Rwanda (Mamdani, 2002)? Another question that is also worth inquiring is why conflicting groups are attracted to the victims' role, which is associated with helplessness and humiliation?

The first part of the present article aims to provide some social psychological answers to the above questions by elaborating on (a) the basic conditions that give rise to CV in violent conflicts, as well as (b) the various biases, goals and psychological motivations that

contribute to the formation and maintenance of CV (see Figure 1). We discuss these processes in the following sections.

[insert Figure 1 about here]

Psychological Mechanisms Underlying Competitive Victimhood

Several psychological mechanisms underlie the tendency to engage in CV. In this section we first present the mechanisms that operate at the individual level (i.e., mechanisms that influence individual group members to compete over their group's share of victimhood) and then specify the ones that operate at the collective level (i.e., mechanisms that motivate a certain society as a whole to pursue the exclusive victim's role).

Individual level mechanisms

Moral typecasting. A basic cognitive process that may motivate group members to engage in CV is moral typecasting. This refers to the tendency to classify moral actors into *mutually exclusive* roles of agents (i.e., those who have the capacity to do right or wrong) and patients (i.e., those who are the passive targets of right or wrong acts), when making moral judgments (Gray & Wegner, 2009). To illustrate, once one is described as the recipient of good or evil (i.e., as a moral patient), one is perceived as less capable of performing good or evil actions (i.e., as a moral agent). For example, a person who is described as genetically sensitive to pain is perceived by participants as less responsible for stealing a car compared to a person who is not sensitive to pain. Similarly, an increase in the perception of one's moral agency leads to a decrease in the perception of one's moral patiency. For example, even though objectively one's blameworthy behavior is not necessarily related to one's sensitivity to pain, learning that one has behaved in a blameworthy manner lead participants to judge one as less sensitive to pain (Gray & Wegner, 2009).

These processes of moral typecasting were found in contexts of interpersonal transgressions, where the participants who made the moral judgments had no particular motivation to condemn or justify either of the parties involved in the transgressions. Applying these processes to our analysis, members of groups involved in a conflict are likely to perceive the victim identity as dichotomous and non-divisible: only one group – *either* the in-group *or* the out-group – can be the ‘real’ victim of the conflict (Noor et al., 2008a & b). Further, given their general motivation to maintain positive in-group identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), group members are likely to cast their in-group in the role of the victim and their out-group in the role of the perpetrator.

Social comparison. Group members’ engagement in CV may be further encouraged by the general human tendency to refer to other individuals and groups as a benchmark against which oneself and one’s in-group are compared, particularly when absolute, objective criteria for assessment are absent (Festinger, 1954; Guimond, 2006; Mussweiler & Bodenhausen, 2000). While such social comparison processes are partially driven by a desire to gain accurate knowledge about oneself (Festinger, 1954), they are also driven by the motivation for self-enhancement. Thus, as suggested by Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) group members may help achieve a positive evaluation of their in-group by downward comparisons with other out-groups. This is accomplished by choosing comparison dimensions on which the in-group does well or on which the out-group is thought to do poorly (Wills, 1981). Despite this generally defensive nature of social comparison processes, under certain circumstances the results of inter-group social comparisons can nevertheless be threatening. According to the Self-Esteem Maintenance model (Tesser, 1988) when a social comparison reveals that a relevant other has outperformed them on an ego-relevant dimension, people feel a threat to their self-esteem and take actions to alleviate this threat. By applying the Self-Esteem Maintenance model to the case of violent intergroup conflicts, we

suggest that when one learns that as a result of the conflict the out-group has suffered more than the in-group, this might pose a threat to one's in-group's moral image (as it implies that the in-group is a guilty, evil perpetrator). In other words, learning that the out-group has 'outperformed' the in-group with regard to its conflict-related suffering ironically constitutes an 'upward comparison', which is threatening in contexts of intergroup conflict. The engagement in CV may thus reflect group members' attempts to alleviate the threat posed to their social identity due to this upward comparison.

Magnitude gap. Another phenomenon that is likely to contribute to CV is the *magnitude gap*, reported in contexts of interpersonal transgressions. This concept was proposed by Baumeister (1996) to characterize the discrepancy between victims' and perpetrators' perceptions of the same transgressions in terms of severity and illegitimacy. Specifically, victims' and perpetrators' accounts were replete with perspective-related biases that led them to construct systematically different narratives of the same incident (Baumeister, 1998; Kearns & Finchman, 2005). In other words, perpetrators tended to underestimate, whereas victims tended to overestimate the severity and illegitimacy of the transgression. These divergent perceptions of victims and perpetrators were observed even after controlling statistically for the severity of the transgression (Kearns & Finchman, 2005). Applying these processes to the group level, a similar magnitude gap is likely when members of adversarial groups account for their mutual transgressions throughout a conflict, resulting in a considerable discrepancy between their collective narratives of the conflict (see *Collective level mechanisms* section below).

Biased individual memory. In a related vein, because accounts of a transgression, like most other accounts, often rely on actively construed memories, they are likely to be influenced by goals and motives and fail to represent what actually happened (Loftus, 1993; Loftus, 2003; Schachter, 1999). Consequently, individual memories of past transgressions are

construed in a self-serving manner that underestimates one's blame and overestimates and highlights one's righteousness and innocence (Kearns & Finchman, 2005). Goals and motives similarly affect group members' memories of events related to violent conflicts, such as the recollection of the in-group's aggressive acts (Sahdra & Ross, 2007) and the out-group's apology for the wrongdoing (Philpot & Hornsey, 2011; these memory biases are moderated by the strength of in-group identification discussed later.)

In summary, these mechanisms may underlie individual group member's tendencies to perceive their in-group as having suffered more than the out-group. Furthermore, they may also lay the foundation for the psychological mechanisms that form and maintain the desire to compete over one's victimhood status at the collective level. For example, one way that collective memories of events are formed is that group members actively talk and think about them extensively (Pennebaker, Paez, & Rime, 1997). Therefore, the biases that affect the memories of individual group members are likely to influence the group's collective memory as well. We discuss collective memory and other mechanisms that operate at the collective level and contribute to CV in the next section.

Collective level mechanisms

Biases in memory and accounts of inter-group transgression can also occur at the group level, which can contribute to the collective motivation to engage in CV.

Biased collective memory. According to Halbwachs (1992), memories of groups' actions and historical events are often founded and organized within a collective context, as society provides the framework for beliefs and behaviors and our recollections of them. Groups are likely to endorse and remember those events that affected them most (Pennebaker et al., 1997), including events in which the in-group was victimized by another group. Such events may be *mythologized* by groups and become their *chosen traumas* (Volkan, 2006).

The mental representation and the emotional significance of a group's chosen trauma becomes embedded in the group's identity, and it transmits the event's symbolic meaning across generations. Moreover, the memory of such collective traumas may revive ancient animosities, fuel current conflicts and spark new ones, making the emotional issues (e.g., feelings of humiliation and helplessness) become as important as the 'real' issues at stake (e.g., a dispute over specific territory) (Volkan, 2001).

According to Volkan (2001), under the influence of their chosen traumas, groups are less likely to display empathy for their adversary's sufferings (see also Chaitin & Steinberg, 2008), even when such sufferings amount to equal or greater suffering than the in-group sufferings. In other words, they act in line with the principle of *egoism of victimization* (Mack, 1979). Such egotism may stem from victims' increased sense of entitlement to behave in a less prosocial manner (see Zitek, Jordan, Monin and Leach, 2010, who revealed this phenomenon at the interpersonal level), which may lead groups to embrace ideologies of entitlement (Moses, 1990), such as exclusive claims of territory. In fact, reminders of these chosen traumas may increase legitimization of harming adversarial groups in the present. Indeed, across various contexts of intergroup conflicts, reminders of past collective victimhood has been shown to decrease groups' acceptance of collective responsibility and guilt for inflicting harm on an out-group in a contemporary conflict (Wohl & Branscombe, 2008).

In addition, when a new conflict develops, the mental representation of the current adversary can become contaminated with the image of the enemy from the chosen trauma. This phenomenon is particularly pronounced when groups are perpetually persecuted by other groups and might develop the belief that old adversaries are embodied in contemporary enemies (e.g., Jewish Israelis' perceptions of Ahmadinejad as a contemporary Hitler) (Schori, Klar, & Roccas, 2009; Bar-Tal, Chernyak-Hai, Schori, & Gundar, 2009). Thus, viewing

victimhood as the central feature of one's collective identity is likely to increase the tendency to compete for victimhood against a multitude of out-groups.

Biased collective accounts of inter-group conflicts and transgressions. Groups' accounts of factual inter-group transgressions can be distorted by aspects of their cultures that are used to legitimize violence against one another, also referred to as 'cultural violence' (Galtung, 1990). Cultural violence may be manifested through groups' religion, ideology, arts, language, and even empirical and formal science (Galtung, 1990). For example, the 'doctrine of the just war' (Bellum Iustum) is a cultural narrative according to which there are certain conditions under which direct violence is justified; as such, and as opposed to the doctrine of nonviolent resistance, it can be viewed as a form of cultural violence (Christie, Tint, Wagner, & Winter, 2008). The 'doctrine of the just war', however, is rarely accepted as a justification for out-group's violence.

Another factor that can contribute to biases in collective accounts of inter-group transgressions is that groups are often exposed to war-promoting rather than peace-promoting journalism (Lynch & McGoldrick, 2005). Specifically, war-promoting journalism establishes a zero-sum perception of the conflict and prioritizes the reporting of the here-and-now of the conflict over its root causes, its physical over its psychological impact, the differences rather than the similarities between the involved parties, and stalemates over previous agreements and progress. Exposure to such journalism may feed both groups' perceptions that their needs can be met only by the other side's compromise or defeat. It may also lead to valuing violent responses over non-violent alternatives to the conflict. Moreover, the 'us-them' journalism - that gives voice only to 'us', views 'them' as the problem, dehumanizes 'them', is propaganda rather than truth oriented, and focuses on 'our' suffering and 'their' violence (see Lynch & Galtung 2010 for a comprehensive review) - might further underpin the collective perception of 'us' as the exclusive victim and 'them' as the exclusive perpetrators.

In summary, the biases in groups' collective memory as well as in their accounts of mutual inter-group transgressions may lay the foundation for groups' engagement in CV. These processes tend to predominate when groups are involved in intractable conflicts, that is conflicts that are violent, protracted (i.e., there is at least one generation that never knew a different reality), perceived as irresolvable, existential, zero-sum in nature, demand extensive investment (e.g., militarily, economically), and that occupy a central place in the lives of the societies involved (Kriesberg, 1998, Bar-Tal, 2007). Over time, groups involved in such conflicts develop a repertoire of societal emotions, beliefs, and attitudes that afford them with strategies for coping with the conflict. For example, to maintain their respective interpretation of the conflict groups develop clashing *ethos* of the conflict (Bar-Tal, 2000) that supply the epistemic basis for their societal consciousness. The endorsement of this *ethos* encourages groups to embed their sense of victimhood as a core component of their identity, which leads them to view the out-group – and more generally the world – through a victim perspective. It also encourages groups to delegitimize the suffering and injustices caused to the out-group while highlighting their own. Ultimately, all of the influences described above can lead to perceptions of the out-group as the guilty, violent perpetrator and the in-group as the innocent, moral victim (Bar-Tal, 2000). This, again, lays the foundation for CV.

Dimensions of Inter-group Competitive Victimhood

Groups may make their case for victimhood by engaging in discourses that highlight the unique nature of their suffering. These discourses may stress one or more of the following dimensions, depending on the historical context and the nature of the inter-group relations.

The Physical Dimension of Suffering

Physical suffering results from groups engaging in deliberate, direct violence (Galtung, 1969), such as the internment regimen in Northern Ireland, mass killings in the

former Yugoslavia, suicide bombings in Israel, and the torture of Iraqi prisoners. In contexts where direct violence is used by both groups, groups may mutually accuse each other of committing gross and intentional acts of harm.

To prove that their in-group has been subjected to more physical victimization than the out-group, groups may simply quantify suffering and portray their in-group as having endured a larger share of the overall suffering (Noor et al., 2008; Noor et al., 2008a & b). Alternatively, groups may devalue the sufferings experienced by the out-group and deplore their own group's sufferings regardless of the objective number and severity of physical injuries and deaths in each group. Evidence for such differential valuation of lives and suffering emerges from a series of experiments in real inter-group contexts, which show that the way in which people value lives (lost or saved) is partly determined by ethnocentrism and inter-group competition (Pratto & Glasford, 2008). Specifically, U.S. participants tended to value the lives of co-nationals more than those of out-group members (Iraqis and Afghans) under conditions of national competition. This tendency was observed even when the in-group members were portrayed as war combatants and the out-group members as civilians.

Moreover, even in contexts where one group has been commonly acknowledged as responsible for more violence than the other group, both groups may still engage in competition over physical suffering. For example, during the Pinochet rule in Chile, the political Left was the target of most of the physical violence inflicted by the military regime and found backing from the political Right. Yet, the latter group still often highlights its physical suffering caused by leftist guerrilla attacks and assassinations (Roniger & Sznajder, 1999; see similar trends after the Rwandan genocide in Staub, 2003; Mamdani, 2002).

The Material Dimension of Suffering

Suffering in violent conflicts, particularly among groups within the same society, is often inflicted indirectly through discriminating societal structures and practices (Christie et al., 2008; Galtung, 1969). In other words, beyond the direct violence there may be structural violence, resulting in inter-group inequalities, such as housing, education, and employment. As proposed by Realistic Inter-group Conflict Theory, groups often compete over material resources (Brown, 2000; Sherif, 1966; Sherif & Sherif, 1953). Therefore, groups facing material disadvantages may be left with the sore crown of defeat (i.e., of losing out materially to the out-group), which in turn can fuel the conflict. To illustrate: although the Northern Irish conflict was triggered by a number of factors, one cause was the discrimination experienced by the Catholic community in terms of employment, housing, education, and security prior to the start of the conflict (Cairns & Darby, 1998).

Of course, as Relative Deprivation Theory suggests (Runcimen, 1966; Walker & Smith, 2002), competition over real resources can be driven by a subjective sense of deprivation: comparing themselves to other individuals or groups may lead people to perceive relative discrepancies between what they have and what they should be entitled to (e.g., de la Sablonniere, Taylor, Perozzo, & Sadykova, 2009). At the collective level, relative deprivation encompasses the belief that the in-group has received unequal shares of the collective material goods or is unjustly deprived of resources (e.g., Zagefka & Brown, 2005). Groups are likely to believe that the existing distribution of resources is the outcome of a corrupt political system benefiting the out-group (Eidelson & Eidelson, 2003).

Still, as is the case with the physical suffering, competition over the experience of material deprivation is not confined to less powerful groups. Advantaged groups can also experience suffering of a similar nature, especially when faced with the threat of radical

institutional reforms that lead to significant material redistributions (e.g., land and/or political power). The claim of material victimhood by the political Right as the result of radical reforms by Allende's leftist government in Chile is one example (Perez de Arce, 2008).

The Cultural Dimension of Suffering

Culture is commonly understood as a worldview that informs individuals' perceptions of social reality (Ross, 1997; Spiro, 1984; see also Lehman, Chiu, & Schaller, 2004). Conflicting groups may call attention to their sense of cultural deprivation or threat of cultural extinction. Cultural deprivation can entail the loss of language, unique practices (e.g., religious or healing practices), or customs, or represent simply a general threat to the ingroup's 'way of life' that expresses its cultural continuity, identity, norms, values, and heritage (Gone, 2008; Hammack, 2008).

The impact of such a threat to one's culture can be drastic. For example, former British Prime Minister Tony Blair reported that his perception of the 9/11 terrorist attacks as an attempt to destroy the Western way of life prompted him to engage the UK in a war with Iraq (Blair, 2010). Terror Management Theory (TMT, Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 2004) attempts to explain these severe reactions to threats to one's culture. It suggests that people's cultural worldview is a psychological defense mechanism that buffers against the anxiety people feel when reminded of their mortality. Research on TMT has shown that individuals display prejudice and aggression toward outgroups when they feel an increased need to safeguard their cultural worldviews from threats (Greenberg & Kosloff, 2008). Consistent with TMT, Wohl and Branscombe (2010, Study 2) reported that the perceived threat of cultural extinction posed by English Canada to the French Canadians in Quebec predicted French Canadians' collective angst (anxiety focused on threat-related outcomes). In turn, a high level of angst led to behaviors that strengthened the ingroup (e.g., promoting the

French Canadian way of life). Other work has also shown that a perceived attack or insensitivity towards ethno-cultural groups' worldviews (e.g., vandalism of sacred sites in India or caricatures of Muslim figures in Europe) may trigger outrage among their members (Eidelson & Eidelson, 2003; see also Huntington, 1993; Ross, 1997).

Groups' perceptions of cultural victimhood may be further intensified by the fact that cultures constantly change (Ross, 1997). The presence of steady change makes it difficult for the groups involved in a conflict to distinguish the changes that take place as a direct consequence of outgroup oppression from those caused by societal and intergenerational forces and dynamics.

The experience of suffering and oppression in the physical, material, and cultural realms may give rise to feelings of psychological distress and injustice.

The Psychological Dimension of Suffering

The experience of victimization leaves behind psychological distress and emotional pain (e.g., Barber, 2001; Bar-Tal & Salomon, 2006; Gidron, Gal, & Zahavi, 1999; Muldoon, Schmid, Downes, Kremer, & Trew, 2010). Distress and emotional pain do not develop merely from actual physical, material, or cultural harm but can also result from the threat of harm (Eidelson & Eidelson, 2003). For example, the practices of surveillance and attempts by the government to cultivate a widespread culture of spying among the citizens of the former East German Democratic Republic show how the mere threat of harm can lead to deleterious psychological consequences, such as suspicion and generalized distrust (Childs & Poppelwell, 1996). Moreover, the impact of psychological suffering is not limited to those who are directly exposed to it but can also affect those who witness and experience harmful events vicariously through transgenerational stories and narratives (Hammack, 2008; Lickel

et al., 2006; Morrow, 2001). For example, Hayden (2003) claimed that the 'true Irish soul' has been shaped by the trauma of the great famine of the 1840s.

The importance of the psychological dimension of CV becomes particularly central when groups pay exclusive attention to their own psychosocial suffering while minimizing the suffering experienced by the outgroup (Vollhardt, 2009). Over time, focusing on the in-groups' psychological suffering can lead such suffering to become embedded in the groups' collective narratives and collective identities (Hammack, 2008; Volkan, 2001).

The Legitimacy Dimension of Suffering

Groups may acknowledge each other's suffering but still compete over the legitimacy and injustice of their suffering (Bar-Tal, 2000). That is, groups may claim not only to have suffered but also that their suffering was decidedly more unjust than that of the other group (Noor et al., 2008a). This dimension of CV may help to legitimize violence through the rationale of: 'We were left with no other choice by the outgroup but to respond with violence' (Noor et al., 2008b; see also Čehajić & Brown, 2010; Mallett & Swim, 2007). For example, in a study of the Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland, a positive association was found between perceptions of inter-group CV and each group's attempt to portray their past ingroup violence as self-defense and claims that it was provoked by the aggressive acts of the outgroup (Noor et al., 2008b).

Importantly, even when one party suffers more objective physical or material loss than the other party, groups may still argue over the legitimacy of their respective suffering and whether one party brought it upon itself. For instance, Israel maintains that whereas the Israeli attacks are aimed at military targets (such that the death of Palestinian civilians, if caused, is a means to an end), the Hamas attacks are aimed at civil targets (such that the death of Israeli civilians is an end in itself) and are therefore more illegitimate (Israeli Ministry of

Foreign Affairs, 2011). Thus, even when Palestinians objectively suffer from more harm, Israelis may still hold the view that their suffering is more unjust.

In summary, groups may suffer from physical, material, cultural and psychological damage, as well as from the experience of severe injustice. They can then highlight each of these dimensions of suffering to be crowned the ‘true’ victim of the conflict. For example, within uneven inter-group power relations, the less powerful group may engage in CV with respect to all dimensions, including the first one, which is more objective in nature (e.g., one can count the exact number of deaths caused by an out-group attack) to show clearly that they suffered more losses. Conversely, the more powerful group may highlight primarily the fifth dimension - injustice of the suffering - which is more subjective and therefore open to different interpretations. Future research should examine whether groups indeed strategically emphasize different dimensions of their suffering and how this emphasis contributes to their engagement in CV.

Psychological Functions of Competitive Victimhood

It is perhaps paradoxical that groups compete over the victim’s role. Perceiving one’s in-group as a victim is often associated with weakness, helplessness (Nadler, 2002; Prilleltensky, 2008; Shnabel & Nadler, 2008), low agency (Gray & Wegner, 2009), and humiliation (Lindner, 2006). Thus, groups should be motivated to reject the victim’s identity. For example, during the first decades after World War II, Israelis perceived the Holocaust as antithetical to the identity of the “new Israeli,” who was active, free and daring, and the Holocaust was therefore rejected rather than endorsed as part of the Israeli identity (Nadler, 2001; Zertal, 2005, see also Klar, Schori-Eyal, & Klar, 2011). Furthermore, members of a perpetrator group may not always respond with compassion when learning about the violence that their group inflicted upon other groups. In fact, they may display increased prejudice and

a tendency to dehumanize the victimized group (Castano & Giner-Sorolla, 2006). For example, the perception of Jews' ongoing suffering from past atrocities was shown to result in increased anti-Semitism (Imhoff & Banse, 2009). Finally, to relieve the discomfort caused by exposure to victims' suffering (Lerner, 1971), non-involved bystanders may blame the victims for bringing their plight upon themselves (see also Gray & Wegner, 2010). Indeed, bystanders donated less and attributed more blame to victim groups who were victimized by another group (e.g., due to a civil war) compared to victim groups of natural disasters, because the former were perceived to have brought the crisis on themselves (Zagefka, Noor, Brown et al., 2011).

In summary, being identified as the victims of another group may carry stigma. Nevertheless, in the following section we suggest that in spite of the potential drawbacks associated with the victim's role, victimhood status can be viewed as a valuable psychological resource that serves several positive functions for individual group members as well as for the group as a collective. These functions include:

Increasing In-group Cohesiveness

During intergroup conflicts, leaders need followers who view themselves as a group that faces a severe injustice. Such perceptions of a threatened 'Us' are facilitated when followers experience a sense of identification and a shared past and future. Victimhood may serve as a means of bolstering ingroup cohesiveness (Ignatieff, 1993; Noor et al., 2008b; Ramanathapillai, 2006; Stern, 1995; Wohl & Branscombe, 2010). For example, narratives of past suffering can sustain the close bond between current members of the in-group and the older generation who lived through the injustices. The narratives from this trusted source can induce a sense of vicarious victimhood in younger group members (Christie et al., 2008; Lickel et al., 2006). Thus, aside from satisfying group members' desires for acceptance,

ideological consensus, and self-worth (Correll & Park, 2005), the ties between individuals due to their unique suffering offers them protection from new injustices and increases in-group cohesiveness (Noor et al., 2008b; Ramanathapillai, 2006; Stern, 1995; Wohl & Branscombe, 2010).

Justifying In-group Violence

Past victimhood has been associated with increased distrust (Eidelson & Eidelson, 2003; see also Tam, Hewstone, Kenworthy, & Cairns, 2009), negation of the outgroup's *raison d'être* (Kelman, 2008) and various intergroup emotions. These emotions include, on one hand, humiliation (Linder, 2006) and fear (Skitka, Bauman, Aramovich, & Morgan, 2006), which are often associated with defensiveness (Skitka et al., 2006) or even passivity (Ginges & Atran, 2008). On the other hand, there are action-oriented emotions (Mackie, Devos, & Smith, 2000) such as collective angst (Wohl & Branscombe, 2010), collective anger, and rage (Pennkamp, Doosje, Zebel, & Fisher, 2007; Rice & Benson, 2005; Tam et al., 2007; see also Rydell et al., 2008) that are generally associated with confrontational responses (e.g., Skitka et al., 2006). These confrontational tendencies, in turn, might encourage the acceptance of in-group violence as a means to resolve the conflict.

Indeed, groups involved in violent conflicts often believe that their grievances can be addressed only through physical force. However, before violence can take place, moral justification for such violence is required (Bandura, 1999). This may be achieved by invoking an exaggerated sense of ingroup vulnerability (Eidelson & Eidelson, 2003), which is facilitated through the evocation of action-oriented collective emotions such as anger among group members (Smith, Cronin, & Kessler, 2008; Leach, Iyer & Pederson, 2007). Once again, assuming the victim's role provides groups with a useful tool for inflating the scale of the threat that the out-group may represent. Thus, in the presence of heightened and possibly

chronic threat, calls for pre-emptive violent actions against the out-group may become more easily justified.

The events leading to the Rwandan genocide and the massacres in the former Yugoslavia illustrate this scenario. Reminders of past ill-treatment, sometimes dating as far back as pre-colonial times or the period of the Ottoman Empire, were used to instill in-group members with a sense of threat and the imminence of renewed out-group attacks to justify and garner support for pre-emptive and retaliatory violent strategies (Ignatieff, 1993; Keane, 1996; Mamdani, 2002; Noor et al., 2008a).

Denying Responsibility, Avoiding Negative Group Emotions, and Seeking Compensation

As groups emerge from violent conflict and resume non-violent ways of resolving their disagreements they may view victimhood as a psychological resource that can be used to deflect responsibility for the use of violence during the conflict (Wohl & Branscombe, 2008). That is, portraying the in-group's historical suffering as greater than the out-group's could be used as evidence that the in-group was left with no choice but to resort to violence as a means of self-defense (Noor et al., 2008b; see also Čehajić & Brown, 2010).

Accepting collective responsibility for past wrongdoings is associated with collective guilt and empathy for the out-group members' suffering. In turn, these emotions predict compensatory policies to make amends (e.g., reparations, affirmative action) (Branscombe, Slugoksi, & Kappen, 2004; Iyer, Leach, & Crosby, 2003). In contrast, perceiving their victimhood as more severe than the other group's may lead groups to display an unwillingness to accept in-group responsibility and eschew empathy for the out-group (Čehajić, Brown, & Gonzalez, 2009). In fact, group members sometimes go to great lengths to avoid collective guilt. For example, they may exhibit defensive temporal distancing in the

face of past in-group atrocities. To illustrate, Germans (but not Canadians) judged the Holocaust to be more subjectively remote in time when they read about German-perpetrated atrocities. Greater subjective distance, in turn, predicted lower collective guilt and less willingness to make amends (Peetz et al., 2010). Group members may also shift their standards of justice (through requiring more evidence before accepting in-group wrongs) to view the harm inflicted by their in-group as less severe (Miron, Branscombe & Biernat, 2010). Shifting the focus of suffering onto one's own group through CV could be employed to reduce the intensity of unpleasant collective emotions and to counter threats to the unity of the group (Eidelson & Eidelson, 2003; Ignatieff, 1993; Peetz et al., 2010; Rosland, 2009).

Moreover, CV could also serve group members in the post-conflict phase as a way of minimizing out-group claims and maximizing in-group claims for compensation (Gonzalez, Manzi, & Noor, 2011; Manzi & Gonzalez, 2007; see also Miron et al., 2010; Peetz et al., 2010). This strategy may be especially effective when groups manage to convey that the impact of their suffering has continued into the present post-conflict era. Starzyk and Ross' (2008) findings revealed that, relative to other historical victim groups, groups with continued suffering were offered more sympathy, and the injustices they experienced were judged as more intense, which in turn increased support for their compensation.

Recruiting Moral and Material Support from Third Parties

As important as it is to manage the conflict itself, it is equally essential for groups to maintain their positive image in the eyes of third parties who are not directly involved in the conflict. Material and moral support from groups located outside the immediate conflict is of huge importance. For example, third-party interventions increase the likelihood that the supported group will win the conflict militarily (Balch-Lindsay, Enterline, & Joyce, 2008). Group leaders may believe that they are more likely to be helped by and receive empathy

from other groups to the extent that they are considered to be innocent and not responsible for their own plight. Research suggests that such intuitions are valid, both at the interpersonal and inter-group levels (Friedman & Austin, 1978; Zagefka, Noor, Brown et al., 2011). Thus, groups may engage in CV to appear innocent and deserving of empathy, alliance, and moral and practical support from third party groups (Simon & Klandermans, 2001).

Summary

Although being victimized is a negative experience with many harmful consequences, being recognized as a victim can be a valuable psychological commodity that may serve several psychological functions. We suggest that due to groups' tendency to compete over valuable resources, they are likely to compete over the symbolic resource of being recognized as a victim as well. Future research should examine whether the various functions of being recognized as victims varies across the different phases of the conflict (i.e., outset, violent phase, and post-conflict phase; Christie et al., 2008; Kelman, 2008; Lederach, 1995). For example, seeking compensation may be of a particular importance in the aftermath of the violence (i.e., the post-conflict phase) whereas justifying in-group's violence may be particularly important during the violent phase.

It should be acknowledged that various processes discussed so far have been described as deriving from groups' engagement in CV (e.g., the belief that victimhood may justify the in-group's violence towards the out-group). Nevertheless, these processes, in turn, may increase groups' engagement in CV (e.g., if the in-group's violence towards the out-group is justified, the perception of victimhood is enhanced). Although social psychology tends to emphasize models of unidirectional cause-and-effect (Rusbult & Agnew, 2010), such cyclical patterns of bi-directional causality (see Figure 1) are characteristics of ongoing processes (Wieselquist, Rusbult, Foster, & Agnew, 1999) such as prolonged inter-group conflict.

Psychological Motivations Underlying Inter-group Competitive Victimhood

So far, our discussion has focused on aspects of CV that are common to all groups, regardless of their relative power and status. For example, irrespective of the relative power of the conflicting groups and their perceived victimhood status by other non-involved parties, groups may make efforts to garner support from third parties. However, consistent with the Needs-Based Model (Nadler & Shnabel, 2008; Shnabel & Nadler, 2008; Shnabel et al., 2009), we suggest that engaging in CV may also reflect groups' experience of threats to different dimensions of their identities, resulting in different psychological motivations. In other words, although both more and less powerful groups engage in similar behaviors designed to maximize perceptions of their own group's suffering relative to the out-group, different motivations may underlie these efforts.

Specifically, the Needs-Based Model identifies a set of distinct motivations for victims and perpetrators. Victims experience a loss of relative power, control, and autonomy, as well as a sense of competence and respect, and therefore are motivated to restore their power and control. Perpetrators, in contrast, experience a threat to their moral image, and thus their belongingness to their 'moral community' is in doubt (Tavuchis, 1991). Consequently, they are motivated to restore their moral image and enhance their social acceptance. Thus, both victims and perpetrators may engage in CV as an attempt to restore their dimensions of identity that have been compromised by the conflict. However, whereas victims may use this as a form of empowerment, perpetrators may engage in CV to achieve social acceptance.

We propose that acknowledgment of the in-group's victimization on the part of other members of the 'moral community' can serve as a form of empowerment⁴ and social acceptance and thus has critical implications for groups' sense of power and moral image simultaneously. Such acknowledgement can be manifested, at the collective level, by the

international community's recognition of the group's victimization or, at the individual level, through expressions of empathy by out-group members who participate in an inter-group dialogue (e.g., Bar-On & Kassem, 2004).

For victims in particular, seeking acknowledgment and validation of their suffering may reflect their desire for power because such an acknowledgment constitutes an admission of responsibility and consequent moral debt, particularly when coming from perpetrators (Minow, 1998). This admission empowers the victims, who can then decide whether and how this debt should be annulled or repaid. In contrast, denial of their suffering by either perpetrators or by third parties leaves their wish to restore their sense of power, agency, and control unsatisfied. For example, acknowledging Jews' sufferings from persecution in Europe (e.g., by recognizing the Holocaust) often serves as a rationale for justifying their aspiration and right for self-determination – a form of empowerment. In contrast, the denial of this suffering (e.g., denial of the Holocaust) often serves as an argument for undermining this right and is therefore disempowering for Israeli Jews (Shnabel & Dovidio, 2009).

For perpetrators, seeking acknowledgment of their suffering may reflect their enhanced desire for acceptance: if their suffering is recognized, then there is room for expressions – by both victims and third parties – of compassion for the perpetrators' distress, understanding of the circumstances that compelled their actions, and sympathy for their emotional hardship. Sympathy for and understanding of the perpetrators' perspective can mitigate the moral inferiority engendered by the perpetrator role (Exline & Baumeister, 2000) and provide reassurance that perpetrators belong to the moral community from which they feel potentially excluded. For example, teaching the Rwandan people about the roots of violence that had led the Hutus to commit the 1994 genocide helped members of the Hutu group feel 're-humanized' and eased their burden of shame and guilt (Staub et al., 2005)⁵.

Victims' and perpetrators' motivations and their consequent tendency to compete over their share of victimhood is further intensified by the inherent 'magnitude gap' (Baumeister, 1996) in their perspectives on the same victimization episode. As discussed earlier, this gap refers to victims' tendency to perceive the injustice they experienced as more severe and illegitimate than do the perpetrators, who tend to underestimate the harm they caused and its immorality. Because of this gap, members of the victimized group who become aware of their adversaries' perspective on the transgression may feel that their victimhood is not sufficiently acknowledged and become even more motivated to obtain such empowering acknowledgement. In contrast, when members of the perpetrating group become aware of the victims' perspective, they are likely to feel that the victims are exaggerating the harm that the perpetrators caused, as well as the extent to which these acts violate moral standards. Consequently, perpetrators may be even more motivated to stress their own victimhood in order to emphasize the fact that they too are vulnerable human beings with whom others can identify and whose perspective can be understood. The goal of such a strategy is to eliminate the threat to their morality due to their social role as perpetrators.

For the sake of conceptual clarity, we have referred to victims and perpetrators as distinct social categories with clear-cut boundaries, but this is rarely the case in contexts of CV. Nevertheless, the above analysis is applicable to understanding CV for two reasons. First, although both groups may perceive themselves as the 'real' victims overall, they may nevertheless see themselves as either victims or perpetrators when referring to specific transgressions. For example, in the context of Northern Ireland, Protestants may feel they are the perpetrators (i.e., experience an enhanced desire for acceptance) when referring to Protestant Loyalist attacks, and victims (i.e., experience an enhanced desire for empowerment) when referring to IRA terror attacks, and vice versa for Catholics. Thus,

group members may engage in CV to lessen different threats to their identities across different contexts and events.

Second, even when both parties inflict suffering on each other, they may nevertheless have asymmetrical power relations. In such contexts, the stronger party is likely to be viewed as the perpetrator and the weaker party as the victim (Nadler & Liviatan, 2006), even though they may have engaged in mutual victimization. In the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, for example, the Israelis are stronger than the Palestinians along several objective dimensions (economically, militarily, etc.), and yet both sides have been victimized by each other on many different occasions (e.g., terror attacks and counter-attacks) (Nadler & Shnabel, 2011).

In this context, Palestinians may be motivated to stress their suffering in order to draw the Israelis' and the world's attention to the injustice caused by the Israeli occupation. The Israelis may, however, be motivated to stress their suffering at the hands of the Palestinians in order to gain the Palestinians' and world's understanding of the circumstances that compelled them to engage in what might be otherwise interpreted as immoral behavior. Empirical evidence supporting this possibility stems from findings that in the presence of basic trust, Palestinians responded more positively to a message of apology from an Israeli representative stressing Israel's responsibility for causing suffering (i.e., an empowering message) (Halabi & Nadler, 2009), whereas Israelis responded more positively to a message from a Palestinian representative expressing empathy towards their suffering (i.e., an accepting message) (Nadler & Liviatan, 2006).

In summary, group members may compete over their share of victimhood to remove different kinds of threats to their collective identities. Indeed, to the extent that adversarial groups reciprocally exchange empowering and accepting messages (e.g., through speeches delivered by the group representatives), group members' willingness to reconcile with the

out-group increases (Shnabel et al., 2009). However, the ironic tragedy of CV is that although it reflects groups' common desire for validation and acknowledgment of their suffering by the out-group (although their underlying motivation may be different), their competitive mind-set prevents such reciprocal exchange as it obstructs expressions of generosity and understanding towards the out-group (Noor et al., 2008a & b). The absence of such expressions reduces the probability of acknowledging the out-group's suffering and, consequently, the prospects for healing fractured inter-group relations (Noor et al., 2008). Hence, CV can be conceived as a prime factor that feeds the intractability of conflicts and impedes reconciliation between rival groups. In the next section we discuss these negative consequences of CV for inter-group forgiveness and reconciliation.

The Relationship between Inter-group Competitive Victimhood and Inter-group Forgiveness and Reconciliation

Kelman's (2008) theorizing about the processes that foster and hinder inter-group reconciliation suggests that each group in an intractable conflict bases its collective identity on the negation of the other group's identity. This negation typically involves challenging the validity of the other group's narrative and basic psychological needs (e.g., the need for security) by questioning the truthfulness of the out-group's narrative and portraying the in-group's needs as more urgent than those of the out-group. When group members are confronted (e.g., through exposure to media reports) with the negation of their narrative and identity by their out-group they experience psychological distress (evident in their self-reports as well as in ego depletion effects, such as temporal decrease in IQ scores, Baram & Klar, 2011). This hardship can lead to heightened motivation for CV and, in turn, reduced prospects for fostering positive attitudes towards inter-group forgiveness and reconciliation.

For instance, Maoz and Eidelson (2007) found in a representative Israeli sample that victim beliefs regarding concerns over Israeli safety and vulnerability predicted the endorsement of policies in support of annexing land from the Palestinians and transferring the population to neighboring Arab countries. Conversely, victim beliefs on the Palestinian side revealed that the motivation for suicide bombing missions is partially influenced by the bombers' deep sense of victimization, lack of effective non-violent alternatives, and feelings of oppression and humiliation (Berko & Erez, 2005; Hafez, 2006; see also Bar-Tal & Antebi, 1992; Bar-Tal et al., 2009; Vollhardt, 2009; but see also Ginges & Atran, 2008 for 'inertia' effects following humiliation). While this research examined the effects of victim beliefs in general (i.e., not necessarily in competitive contexts), other research has directly examined the relationship between CV and forgiveness (Noor et al., 2008a & b; Noor et al., 2008):

Forgiveness – defined as decreased motivation to retaliate against or avoid the offender and increased motivation to reconcile with the offender despite harmful acts (McCullough, 2008) – has recently become the focus of research that explores ways of ameliorating hostile inter-group relations (Nadler & Liviatan, 2006; Noor et al., 2008a & b; Noor et al., 2008; Staub, 2006; Tam et al., 2007; Wohl & Branscombe, 2005). This research has linked forgiving an out-group for its past wrongs with ending the cycle of inter-group revenge, preventing victims from becoming victimizers, and shifting the focus of inter-group relations from the painful past to a positive future. Ultimately, forgiveness can be conceptualized as a constructive strategy that provides rival groups with an opportunity to restore their damaged relationship and reconcile (Minow, 1998; Noor et al., 2008a & b; Noor et al., 2008).

However, groups who compete over their share of victimhood are more motivated to establish their ingroup's suffering than to let go of the painful past (Noor et al., 2008a), which decreases the likelihood of inter-group forgiveness. Evidence from two different contexts of

inter-group conflict - Catholic and Protestant communities in Northern Ireland and opponents and supporters of Pinochet's military rule in Chile - validate this negative relationship between CV and inter-group forgiveness attitudes. Group members party to the conflict were given the opportunity to compare the harm that they had endured as a result of the conflict with that experienced by the out-group. Overall, CV was a unique negative predictor of inter-group forgiveness (Noor et al., 2008). The negative relationship between CV and forgiveness attitudes was mediated by the strength of in-group identification and trust towards the outgroup: the more the group members engaged in competition over victimhood, the stronger they identified with their in-groups and, in turn, the less willing they were to forgive the out-group. In contrast, low CV was associated with greater trust in the out-group's intentions, which was in turn positively correlated with forgiveness attitudes (Noor et al., 2008b).

In addition to this correlational evidence, Noor, Gonzalez, Musa, and Carrasco (2010) carried out an experiment in which participants belonging to the political Left in Chile (a social identity associated with those who suffered the greatest human losses as a result of the Pinochet regime; Roniger & Sznajder, 1999) were randomly assigned to one of two experimental conditions. In the *competitive victimhood* condition, participants read a bogus quotation, ostensibly reflecting a recent social survey, which portrayed the political Right (i.e., the out-group) as the ultimate victim group relative to the political Left (i.e., the in-group). In the *mutual victimhood* condition, participants read a bogus quotation that acknowledged that both the political Left and Right groups had suffered (with no further comparison). Prior to receiving the manipulation, participants were asked to complete a measure tapping their identification with their in-group (the political Left). The results revealed that the participants in the competitive condition, relative to those in the mutual victimhood condition, tended to report less willingness to forgive their historical out-group. Importantly, a significant interaction effect between strength of political identification and the

experimental manipulation of CV was observed. Participants who identified less with the political Left were not affected by the experimental manipulation in terms of their willingness to forgive the out-group. In contrast, participants who strongly identified with the political Left reported less willingness to forgive the out-group in the CV compared to the mutual victimhood condition. In other words, the engagement in CV among those with a strong attachment to the political Left seemed to have more negative consequences for intergroup relations.

Taken together, both the correlational and experimental findings point to the negative impact of CV on positive inter-group attitudes and crucially on the forgiveness attitudes essential to reconciliation processes.

Overcoming Inter-group Competitive Victimhood

In this section, we consider two routes toward overcoming CV, which are schematically presented in Figure 2.

[Insert Figure 2 about here]

Removing Threats to the In-group's Identity

The first route is based on the principles of the Needs-Based Model. As discussed earlier, beyond pointing to the nature of the threats to the identities of adversarial groups, the model suggests that addressing their motivations through a reciprocal exchange of empowerment and acceptance may improve inter-group relations. In the context of Jewish-German relations, when Jews (i.e., members of a victimized group) received an empowering message from a German representative (i.e., a representative of the perpetrating group), and when Germans received an accepting message from a Jewish representative, their willingness to reconcile increased. An identical pattern of findings was observed among Jews and Arabs

when relating to the context of the 1956 Kefar Kassem killings, in which Arab civilians were victimized by Jews (Shnabel et al., 2009). These findings encouragingly pointed to the malleable nature of identity threats and thus raise the possibility that removing such identity threats through reciprocal exchanges of messages may reduce adversaries' tendencies to engage in CV and thereby facilitate reconciliation.

Sonnenschein's (2008) ethnographic analysis of a series of structured encounters between Israeli Jews and Israeli Palestinians (i.e., a dialogue group intervention) provides initial support for this proposed process. Sonnenschein found that Jews and Palestinians often engaged in CV, with each group trying to prove that the threat posed to the in-group was particularly existential and severe. When this happened, communication was impeded and the groups stopped listening to the other. However, unlike Helman's (2002) and Bekerman's (2002) analyses, which concluded that inter-group dialogues of this kind eventually reach a dead end, Sonnenschein (2008) found that the groups did find their way towards potential reconciliation. This happened when Jews recognized, rather than denied, the injustice to the Palestinians and Palestinians expressed an understanding of the Jews' perspective and empathized with their experience of existential threat instead of merely reproaching them. These expressions of recognition of injustice on one hand and empathy and understanding on the other allowed the groups to let go of the 'exclusive victim' role, and paved the way to a more constructive dialogue.

Whereas Sonnenschein's analysis focused on encounters between individual group members, exchanges of empowering and accepting messages can also take place in the collective public sphere as well. For example, such exchange processes govern Truth and Reconciliation Commissions, where perpetrators admit and express remorse for their wrongs, and victims, in turn, may grant them forgiveness (see Gobodo-Madikizela, 2008, Shnabel, Nadler, Canetti-Nisim, & Ullrich, 2008). Another illustration of a gesture expressed in the

collective sphere can be seen in the initiative of an Israeli Palestinian clergyman Emil Shufani, who was awarded the 2003 UNESCO Prize for Peace Education. Perhaps partially because of the fear that it might overshadow the Palestinian suffering due to the Naqba, in recent decades there is a growing voice in the Arab discourse that denies the Jewish suffering during the Holocaust (Litvak & Webman, 2009). Tackling such denials, in 2002, Shufani launched a project that involved a joint Jewish-Arab pilgrimage to the Auschwitz concentration camp to demonstrate brotherhood and understanding of the Jews' historical wounds. Despite the mixed, sometimes cynical responses evoked by this initiative among both Jews and Arab, we believe that gestures of this kind may help the involved parties transcend the competition of 'who suffered more'.

Future research should experimentally examine whether reciprocal exchange of empowerment and acceptance can promote reconciliation through the reduction of the motivation for CV. For example, studies could examine whether learning about Shufani's pilgrimage project would make it easier for Jewish Israelis to acknowledge Palestinian suffering. Such research is important as it may point to a way to disentangle the Gordian knot that is characteristic of the dynamics between parties involved in seemingly intractable conflicts.

Re-categorization into Common Victimhood Identity

The second potential route to overcoming CV is based on the logic of the Common In-group Identity Model (CIIM) (Gaertner et al., 1993; Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000). CIIM is grounded on the social categorization approach. This approach defines inter-group relations in terms of the social categories that are used to represent groups (Turner, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987). It suggests that the higher the level of inclusiveness between two social categories, the more similarities will be perceived between them (Turner & Onorato, 1999).

The CIIM further suggests that encouraging members of conflicting groups to think about themselves as members of a common superordinate group, for example to re-categorize themselves as Americans instead of as Blacks and Whites, can reduce negative attitudes and biases towards out-group members.

Although an abundance of research has established the validity of the CIIM in contexts of societal group disparities (see Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000), few studies have tested the influence of re-categorization on victimized groups' forgiveness and reconciliation attitudes towards perpetrator groups (Gonzalez, Manzi, & Noor, 2011; Noor et al., 2010; Noor et al., 2008; Wohl & Branscombe, 2005). These studies have demonstrated that identification with superordinate categories can increase victim groups' readiness to forgive their historical perpetrators. For example, when Jewish participants were led to think about themselves and the Germans as common members of humanity, or when supporters of the politically opposing groups in Chile were led to think about themselves as common members of the Chilean nation, their willingness to forgive the out-group increased. Thus, re-categorizing separate group identities into a common, superordinate identity can serve as an effective strategy for promoting inter-group forgiveness and reconciliation.

Building on these findings, we propose that a similar process of re-categorization, whereby conflicting groups maintain their experience of unique victimhood but simultaneously extend their focus onto their common, shared victimhood, may serve as a strategy to reduce CV. Such re-categorization may occur when victims who had suffered a major life-transforming experience (e.g., loss of loved one in war; undergoing torture) realize that others in the adversarial group had been similarly victimized. When this realization of shared victimhood is psychologically significant, by listening to the other's story, victims from both groups are united by their intense and common victimization experience. The cross-group solidarity between victims is a fertile ground for the development of a

psychologically relevant identity of common victimhood that may attenuate the divisive forces of CV. Such re-categorization is epitomized powerfully through the work of one of the reconciliation-oriented organizations in the Middle East - the Palestinian Israeli Bereaved Families for Peace. This organization consists of people who had lost close family members as a result of the regional conflict. They have taken their victimhood as a basis of a common new identity that unites them both in their quest for reconciliation between the two peoples. Whereas the proposition that fostering common victimhood can be used to reduce CV might seem tautological at first glance, closer scrutiny reveals that this is not the case once common and competitive victimhood are conceptualized as ongoing processes rather than as discrete outcomes. Thus, whereas earlier we discussed the mechanisms that influence the process leading to CV, in the following section we turn to identify the underlying mechanisms that guide the process of common victimhood, suggesting that setting it in motion may eventually hinder the opposing process that encourages CV.

Although conflicting groups often differ vehemently in their ideologies, goals, and narratives about the conflict and its causes (Hammack, 2008), they might find it difficult to disagree with each other that a violent conflict has a negative impact on the lives of both groups (due to lack of security, poor quality of life, unstable economy, etc.), albeit in possibly different ways. Such detrimental, common effects of the conflict can be framed as a shared social category of common victimhood. For example, by separating the issues related to responsibility for the conflict from issues relating to the common suffering, conflicting parties may be more willing to broaden their exclusive perspectives on their in-group victimhood to one that centers on the victimization experiences of both groups. In addition, focusing on common victimhood may draw the parties' attention to the costs of the conflict and foster the recognition that these costs are higher than those involved in its termination (e.g., giving up land), which is a key element in resolving the conflict (Bar-Tal & Halperin,

2009). Hence, it can be hypothesized that reminders of common victimhood will reduce groups' efforts to compete over their in-group suffering and foster inter-group forgiveness and reconciliation attitudes.

Noor et al. (2010) provided initial support for this suggestion in their experimental research conducted in Chile. In this work, members of the political Left were exposed to quotations intended to induce either CV by statements that their out-group had suffered more than their in-group or a sense of mutual, shared victimhood by statements that both the in-group and out-group had suffered. Consistent with the researchers' predictions, participants who identified strongly with their group and were in the shared victimhood condition were more forgiving of the out-group than participants with strong in-group identification who were in the CV condition.

This strategy is also in line with the recent revision of the CIIM (Dovidio, Gaertner & Saguy, 2009), which emphasizes the importance of dual identity; i.e., identification with the immediate subgroup as well as with the superordinate, common identity. The re-categorization strategy of highlighting common victimhood could serve as a useful superordinate category by encouraging groups to broaden their narrow focus on their own victimhood and become mindful that the impact of the conflict is more pervasive. The proposed re-categorization strategy, however, does not eliminate perceived differences over unique types of in-group suffering. In fact, consistent with the dual-identity approach, a degree of identification with and recognition of one's own in-group victims may be necessary to identify with the superordinate category of common victims (Dovidio et al., 2009).

Nevertheless, how should the perception of shared victimhood best be fostered when groups are motivated to dismiss each other's suffering? One strategy suggested by Vollhardt (2009) involves promoting a more inclusive construal of victimhood through abstract/de-

contextualized framing of the conflict, increasing perceived similarity between in-group victims and other unrelated or out-group victims, and endorsing a common in-group identity that includes the out-group. This strategy resembles in several respects (e.g., in its broadening of group members' historical perspective) Staub's (2006, 2008) intervention in Rwanda, which aimed (among several other goals) to develop a shared understanding of the historical and causal factors of the conflict between Hutus and Tutsis. Realizing that both groups were victims of a legacy of historical mistakes and violence had a positive effect on healing and reconciliation between these groups. Similar to Kelman's Interactive Problem Solving workshops (see Kelman, 2008), Staub's intervention focused on top-down processes and was thus carried out through workshops with national and community leaders.

However, constructing a shared view of history could also be advanced using bottom-up processes. For example, the PRIME (Peace Research Institute in the Middle East) dual-narrative history project developed by Adwan and Bar-On (2004) focused on high school history teachers and their pupils. Admittedly, the Jewish and Palestinian teachers failed to reach a single agreed-upon historical narrative (Adwan & Bar-On, 2004). Nevertheless, based on the positive outcomes of the project (e.g., in terms of increasing students' tolerant attitudes), becoming better acquainted with the historical narrative of the out-group in itself (i.e., even without endorsing it) may assist in establishing a sense of common victimhood.

Potential Obstacles

These strategies for overcoming inter-group CV face a number of obstacles. One major obstacle to the strategy of reciprocal removal of identity threats is that, as in any interaction based on the exchange of materialistic or symbolic resources (Poundstone, 1992), mutual exchange of empowerment and acceptance involves some risk-taking behavior. For example, if a group admits its responsibility for victimizing the other group (e.g., through a

public apology), how does it know that the other group will reciprocate by accepting the apology and granting forgiveness? This leads to the conclusion that prior to any social exchange interactions, a climate of trust should be established. This conclusion is consistent with Nadler and Shnabel's (2008) suggestion that 'instrumental reconciliation' (i.e., trust building through joint pursuit of common instrumental goals such as a cleaner environment) should precede 'socio-emotional reconciliation' (i.e., addressing the adversary's needs through the use of the apology- forgiveness cycle). In the absence of a basic level of trust, the parties are unlikely to take the risk involved in satisfying the other party's concerns because they fear that their gesture will not be reciprocated (e.g., Leunissen, De Cremer, & Reinders Folmer, in press).

The second strategy concerning the development of a shared identity of victimhood may also encounter a number of obstacles. Specifically, some groups, particularly if they are a threatened minority, may resist embracing a shared superordinate category due to fears of having to abandon their group identity and its values (Crisp, Stone, & Hall, 2006; Hornsey & Hogg, 2000; Fischer, Greitemeyer, Omay & Frey, 2007; Saguy, Dovidio & Pratto, 2008). Furthermore, according to the Ingroup Projection Model (IPM) (Waldzus & Mummendey, 2004; Wenzel, Mummendey & Waldzus, 2007), groups, particularly those enjoying the majority status, typically view the characteristics of the superordinate category as representing their own in-group values and qualities. Such a projection might reduce the positive effects of identification with the superordinate category on out-group bias (Kessler & Mummendey, 2001; Waldzus & Mummendey, 2004). In line with this reasoning, Noor and colleagues (2010) found obstacles of this nature among the Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland. Although both groups unanimously agreed that the category 'Northern Irish' was the most inclusive social category in the region and both groups displayed a moderate to strong identification with it, only the Catholic group's outgroup forgiveness

attitude (the historically minority/disadvantaged group) benefited from such identification with Northern Ireland. As for the Protestant group, the lack of influence of the superordinate category on their outgroup forgiveness attitude was explained by their perceptions of the superordinate category and their own immediate subgroup category (i.e., Protestant community) as nearly identical.

A third obstacle to promoting a shared identity is dehumanization of the outgroup (i.e., stripping the outgroup of human qualities) may have already become a common practice (Bandura, 1999; Bar-Tal, 2007; Gaunt, 2009). In such cases re-humanization (a term suggested by Staub et al., 2005) of the adversary might be necessary before any of the strategies can be implemented.

Seeking answers from social psychology, at the micro level, fostering inter-group contact may help. Although Allport's (1954) classical 'contact hypothesis' has several drawbacks and limitations (for a critical discussion see Dixon, Durrheim, & Tredoux, 2005), accumulated evidence suggests that direct or extended contact encourages groups to learn about each other, develop positive inter-group emotions, and engage in future prosocial interactions (Brown & Hewstone, 2005). Similarly, over the course of planned inter-group contacts, an important aspect of the exchanged knowledge may reveal the mutual suffering experienced by both groups, which in turn may help groups empathize with each other and identify with the common victimhood category. The identification with this category could be assisted by maintaining a degree of in-group distinctiveness, which could be achieved by maintaining the salience of the original sub-group identity categories within the common victimhood category (Crisp et al., 2006; Dovidio et al., 2007; 2009; Hornsey & Hogg, 2000).

At the macro level, media reports of conflict that aim to de-escalate tension between the conflicting groups may be a crucial factor. The de-escalation approach (Kempf 2002,

2003) challenges the use of violence by both sides of the conflict, takes into account the interests, goals, and psychological needs of both parties, and approaches the history of the conflict from a critical perspective. These characteristics are consistent with the notion of common victimhood as a non-exclusive view of suffering that highlights the impact of the conflict on both sides and avoids dehumanization of the other.

Moderators

Earlier, we reported and discussed findings that highlighted the negative consequences of engagement in CV for high in-group identifiers' prosocial attitudes toward the out-group (see the section on the Relationship between Inter-group Competitive Victimhood and Forgiveness and Reconciliation). Below, we review research that highlights how the strength of in-group identification can moderate individual group member's motivation to compete over their group's victimhood status. In addition, we also consider 'type of conflict' as a collective level moderator.

Individual level moderator: Strength of in-group identifications. As discussed earlier, group members' level of identification with their in-group was empirically found to moderate many of the processes that underlie the motivation to engage in CV. Thus, the stronger their in-group identification, the more likely individual group members will tend to engage in CV.

In a study that examined the impact of strength of in-group identification on a group's tendency to dispute their own unjust actions against another group, Miron and colleagues' (2010) work showed that people who identified strongly with the in-group required more evidence to judge their group's actions as harmful and felt less collective guilt than people who identified less strongly. High identifiers' strategic shift of their justice standards when evaluating their in-group actions may have stemmed from their tendency to perceive their

group as the innocent victim of the conflict. High identification with one's in-group was also associated with an ethnocentric valuing of the lives of one's co-nationals over those of foreign nationals when groups were in competition over positive outcomes (Pratto & Glasford, 2008). Again, under competitive conditions, high identifiers who value their in-group members' lives more than those of the out-group members' would be expected to be more willing to dismiss the suffering of the out-group while highlighting the suffering of their in-group. Strength of in-group identification was also found to moderate group members' memory with regard to a conflict. For example, in the context of Hindu-Sikh inter-group relations, group members with a high degree of religious identification recalled fewer incidents of past in-group violence than did those with a low degree of religious identification (Sahdra & Ross, 2007). High identifiers were also less likely to remember that the out-group apologized for its wrongdoing (Philpot & Hornsey, 2011). Again, the biased memories of those who identify strongly with their group is likely to lead them to engage more in CV.

Finally, group members who were highly identified with their in-group also displayed increased bias toward the out-group following a process of re-categorization into a superordinate category that did not sufficiently incorporate the distinct subgroup identity categories (Crisp et al., 2006; Hornsey & Hogg, 2000). Thus, due to threat of loss of distinctiveness of subgroup identities, strength of in-group identification may interfere with the effectiveness of a potential strategy for reducing CV, namely, developing a sense of shared victimhood among the adversarial groups that does not sufficiently acknowledge the different nature of the groups' sufferings.

Collective level moderator: Type of conflict. As already noted, CV can stem from various motivational and cognitive processes (e.g., memory biases or the motivation to justify the ingroup's acts) that take place to varying degrees across most contexts of inter-group conflict. The degree of CV, however, may be determined by the severity of the conflict. In

conflicts that involve direct violence, rather than structural violence, CV is likely to be more pronounced in the mainstream societal ethos. This is not to argue that CV is absent in conflicts that revolve around structural injustices. For example, some members of advantaged groups in structural violence contexts may also strive for their share of victimhood (e.g., claims of material deprivation among non-indigenous Australians, Leach, Iyer & Pederson, 2007, and claims among White U.S. college students that Affirmative Action Policies are a form of reverse discrimination, Thomsen, Green, Ho, Levin, van Laar, Sinclair, & Sidanius, 2010, see also Sykes, 1993).

Rather, our theoretical argument is that because structural violence is often manifested in subtle, implicit and even benevolent forms (e.g., Dovidio & Gaertner, 2004; Jackman, 1994) and is therefore harder to pinpoint, direct violence offers more easily identifiable victimization episodes. Consequently, CV is likely to be more intense in contexts involving direct violence. Specifically, societies involved in violent, intractable conflicts develop a socio-psychological infrastructure that consists of mutually interrelated collective memories, an ethos of conflict, and a collective emotional orientation that help them to cope with the challenges posed by their harsh conditions (Bar-Tal, 2007). This repertoire of emotions, beliefs and attitudes motivates the parties to delegitimize the suffering caused to their out-group while highlighting their own (Bar-Tal, 2000). As mentioned above, the result of this process is that each group perceives itself as the innocent, moral victim and the out-group as the guilty, violent perpetrator, which sets the stage for CV.

Future Research Directions

In the section, *Overcoming Inter-group Competitive Victimhood*, we outlined two strategies to reduce CV. Future research should empirically examine the effectiveness of

these theoretical strategies and their ability to promote inter-group forgiveness and reconciliation in practice.

Another line of research should examine CV in contexts other than violent inter-group conflicts. The first context is *competition between non-adversarial victim groups*. Groups who were victimized by the same or different perpetrator groups may engage in several forms of CV. Members of a certain victim group may strive to establish that their group's current suffering exceeds, or at least compares to, the suffering of their group in a different historical period (e.g., Jensen, 2002). Alternatively, members of different victim groups may compete over which group has suffered more either at the hands of the same historical perpetrator, or across different historical and geographical contexts. For example, because the Holocaust has been commonly declared unique among human atrocities (Rothberg, 2009), other victim groups sometimes highlight their sufferings by comparing it with the Jewish experience. For instance, Iris Chang, the Chinese-American author of a book about the Nanking massacre, called this 1937 killing spree by the Japanese army in China "the forgotten Holocaust", and expressed her discontent that the Chinese victims have not received the same recognition as the Jews (Buruma, 2002).

It would be interesting and informative to compare the psychological dynamics involved in these contexts to the contexts discussed in the present article. For example, some of the reasons for engaging in CV- such as drawing attention to the in-group's suffering and receiving acknowledgment (e.g., Melendy, 2005) or compensation (e.g., Woolford & Wolejszo, 2006) for it, or encouraging collective action among in-group members (e.g., Jensen, 2002) - might be similar in both contexts. Nevertheless, other motivations to engage in CV may be unique to each of these contexts. For example, the motive to justify in-group violence may take place in contexts of CV among adversarial groups, whereas the concern

that directing resources to another victim group may come at the in-group's expense (e.g., Brennan, 2008) may be found in contexts of CV among non-adversarial victim groups.

A second context of CV worth exploring in future research involves competition over victimhood following interpersonal transgressions. Arguably, group processes are sometimes fundamentally different from processes operating at the interpersonal level. For example, evidence on the inter-individual/inter-group discontinuity effect suggests that relations between groups are more competitive and less cooperative than relations between individuals (Insko, Kirchner, Pinter, Efav, & Wildschut, 2005). Nevertheless, competition over the role of the 'true' victim seems to be present in interpersonal transgressions as well. For instance, victimhood is highly relevant to individual self-esteem, especially if self-esteem is conceptualized as a *sociometer* that monitors the likelihood of the individual being accepted versus rejected by others (Leary & Downs, 1995). Because acts of aggression and moral violations result in social exclusion and rejection by others and thus lower the rejected individual's self-esteem (Leary, Tambor, Terdal, & Downs, 1995), individuals may be motivated to compare the scale of their suffering resulting from interpersonal conflicts in a self-serving and competitive manner. Testing this hypothesis would assist clinicians and counselors in understanding the psychological impact of CV on individuals' well-being and on their interpersonal relationships.

Conclusion

The social psychological processes related to victimhood within inter-group conflicts are relatively understudied. In the present article, we focused on the interaction between groups involved in violent conflicts and introduced the concept of inter-group CV. We identified the factors, both at the individual and collective levels, that give rise to groups' motivations to claim the exclusive victim's role as well as the different dimensions of

victimhood over which groups compete. The intra- and inter-group functions of this competition and their contribution to the conflict were highlighted. We pointed out the motives that may underlie groups' involvement in CV and reviewed research revealing the negative consequences of CV for inter-group forgiveness and reconciliation. We then suggested that removing the threats to group identities through the exchange of empowering and accepting messages or gestures and highlighting their common victimhood (i.e., as a form of re-categorization) may constitute constructive strategies for reducing groups' engagement in CV. We concluded by discussing individual group member level and collective level moderators of CV and identified important directions for future research. Given that violent conflicts are common around the world and lead to immense suffering and millions of deaths (Smith, 2004), the aim of this article was to offer insights into some of the psychological processes that underlie such tragedies so that they can be prevented and overcome.

Notes

1. We acknowledge that group processes can sometimes be fundamentally different than processes operating at the interpersonal level. Thus to alert the reader to exercise caution, throughout the paper, we specifically indicate wherever we cite insights from the literature on interpersonal victimhood.
2. Note that at the time of writing this manuscript only two journal articles and a book chapter, authored by Noor and colleagues (2008), directly addressed the concept of CV in terms of theoretical development and empirical measurement. However, throughout the present article, we will refer to a large body of empirical work within social psychology and related disciplines that support our understanding of CV but which have not directly used CV as defined and measured by Noor and colleagues (2008).

3. An in-group refers to a collective with whom individuals identify on the basis of a social category (e.g., political ideology, religion, ethnicity, etc.). In-group identification occurs in comparison to a relevant out-group from which the in-group distinguishes itself (e.g., Brown, 2000).
4. Note, however, that somewhat contrary to our theoretical claim, Maercker and Mehr (2006) found that victims of crimes reacted in a predominantly negative way to media reports of their victimization. We acknowledge the importance of this research. However, when considering these findings, one must also bear in mind that a report of a harmful event should be distinguished from a genuine statement of acknowledgement. We argue that in contexts of CV, groups witness the *denial* of their suffering by their perpetrators. It is possible that under such conditions, the recognition of one's suffering may convey a positive psychological response as suggested by the Needs-Based Model.
5. Understanding the roots of evil rehumanized the Tutsi as well, but in a different manner, such as by making them realize that they "were not outside history and human experience, and the genocide in Rwanda was not God's punishment" (Staub 2008, p. 16).

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Figure 1: Antecedents and consequences of the motivational state of competitive victimhood

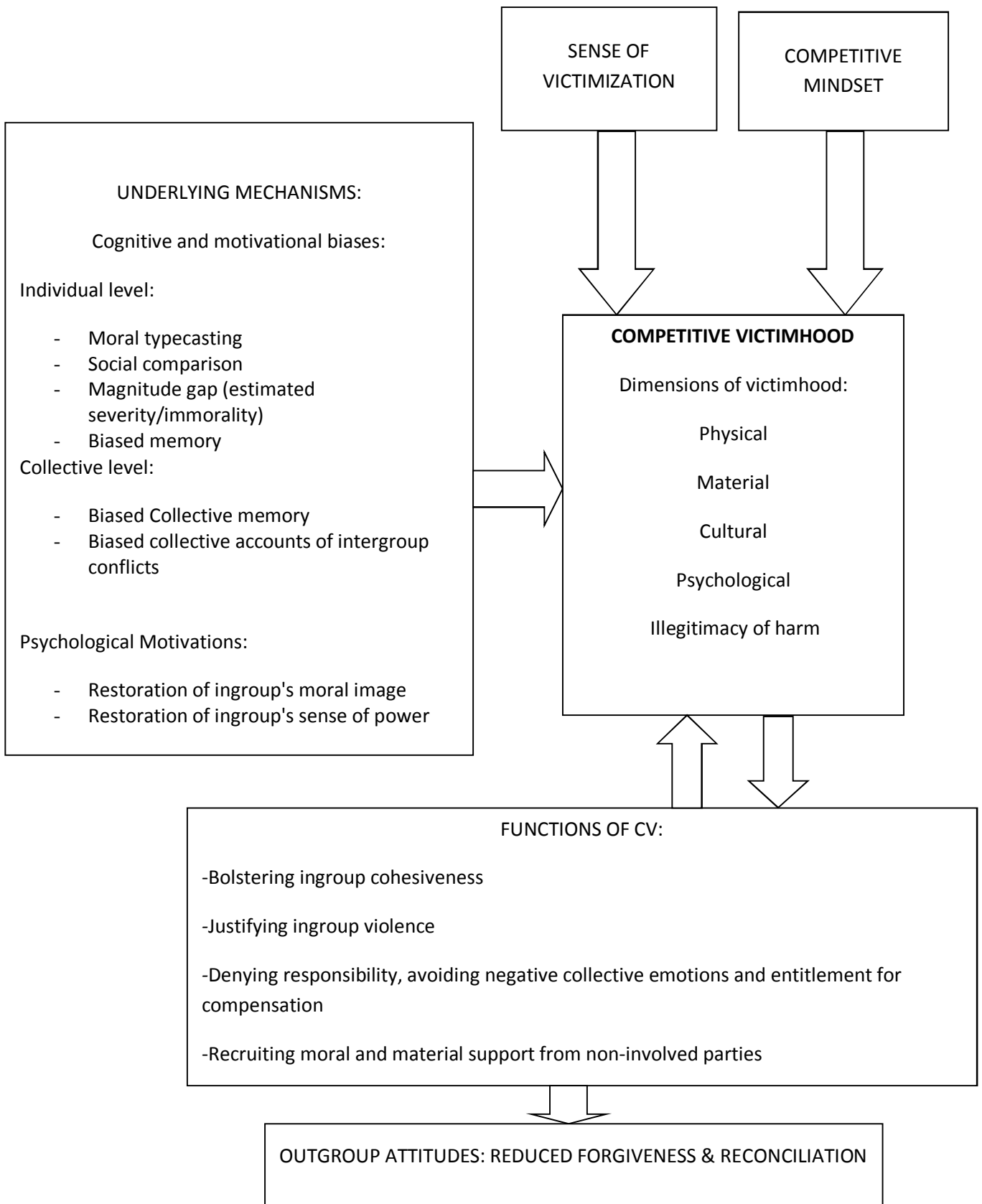


Figure 2: Strategies for overcoming competitive victimhood

