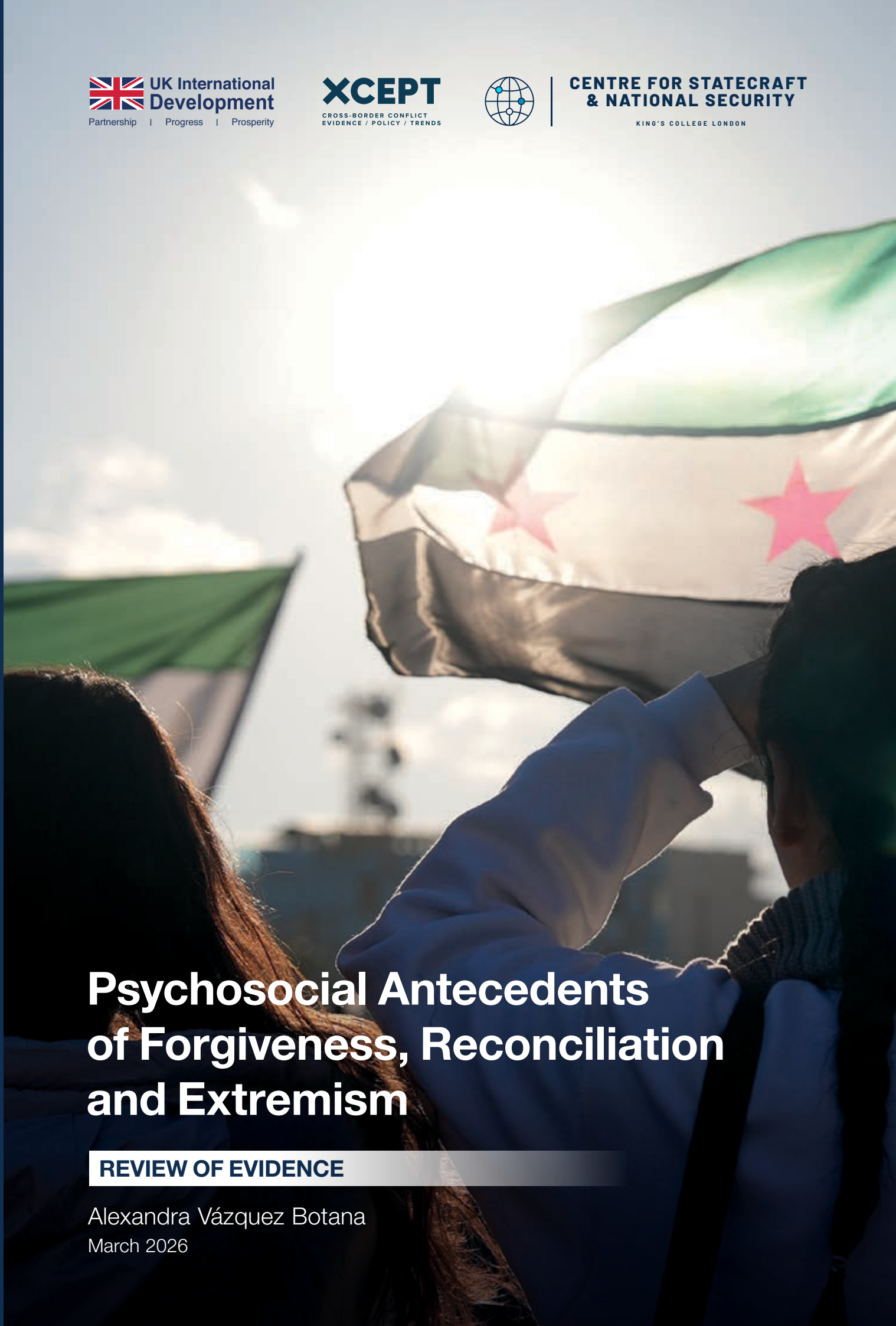
UK International Development
Partnership | Progress | Prosperity

XCEPT
CROSS-BORDER CONFLICT EVIDENCE / POLICY / TRENDS

CENTRE FOR STATECRAFT & NATIONAL SECURITY
KING'S COLLEGE LONDON



Psychosocial Antecedents of Forgiveness, Reconciliation and Extremism

REVIEW OF EVIDENCE

Alexandra Vázquez Botana

March 2026

Alexandra Vázquez Botana is Associate Professor in the Department of Social and Organisational Psychology at Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia (UNED) in Spain. Her research focuses on intra- and intergroup relations, particularly identity fusion and its role in motivating extreme behaviour. She has led research projects funded by the Spanish Ministry of Science on the antecedents of collective action for social change. She currently collaborates on a project funded by the European Research Council, which aims to prevent and diminish radicalisation leading to violence through innovative, evidence-based strategies.

This publication is issued by the Cross-Border Conflict Evidence, Policy and Trends (XCEPT) research programme, funded by UK International Development. XCEPT brings together world-leading experts and local researchers to examine conflict-affected borderlands, how conflicts connect across borders, the intersection of climate stresses and conflict, and the drivers of violent and peaceful behaviour, to inform policies and programmes that support peace.

CONTACT DETAILS

For questions and queries, please contact:

Centre for Statecraft and National Security
King's College London
Strand
London WC2R 2LS
United Kingdom

mail@csns.uk

Like all other CSNS publications, this report can be downloaded free of charge at **www.csns.uk**.

Cover: Syrians celebrate the victory of the Syrian revolution. Syria, January 07, 2025
Mohammad Bash / Shutterstock.com

Introduction

This paper examines some of the factors that determine extremism and the willingness to forgive and reconcile in the context of intergroup conflict. The paper focuses on a limited set of determining factors identified in the scientific literature on these topics, with specific selection criteria designed to inform a series of multi-country, longitudinal, mixed methods studies being conducted by King's College London under the Cross-Border Conflict Evidence, Policy and Trends (XCEPT) research programme, and focused on the socio-emotional aspects of forgiveness, reconciliation and extremism. Recommendations for practitioners and policymakers are included in the policy brief which accompanies this review.

Before conducting studies in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria and South Sudan, the King's College London XCEPT team conferred with subject matter experts and reviewed previous literature to create a set of candidate variables which may play a role in determining extremism or a willingness to forgive/reconcile. This review of literature was commissioned to delve into each of those candidate variables to explore current understanding of them. These candidate variables are not meant to be an exhaustive list of factors which may contribute to forgiveness/reconciliation or extremism. This review contributes to the knowledge base that the King's College London team will use when analysing its multi-country data.

While it might be tempting to view extremism and forgiveness/reconciliation as opposing poles on a single spectrum, they are better understood as distinct processes which can coexist or unfold independently. Individuals and societies can simultaneously experience elements of both extremism and reconciliation, depending on the circumstances and context. Hence, the antecedents of forgiveness and reconciliation, and of extremism, may diverge, rather than align perfectly in a mirrored fashion. Certain factors may impact extremism without necessarily contributing to reconciliation processes, and vice versa.

Moreover, the literature on extremism has evolved somewhat independently from the literature on reconciliation and forgiveness. Consequently, some variables discussed in this paper have been exclusively associated with extremism, or solely with forgiveness and reconciliation. For instance, research on identity fusion, a construct developed specifically to elucidate extremism, has not yet gathered evidence on the potential impact on reconciliation processes. This is why, in reviewing each of the factors discussed, more emphasis may be placed on either extremism or forgiveness and reconciliation.

This review of literature focuses on the influences of identity, intergroup emotions, social belonging, social cohesion and social capital, and collective efficacy on extremism, and the willingness of actors to forgive and reconcile in intergroup conflict contexts. These conflicts encompass confrontations between two or more groups, expressed in diverse ways in different global settings, from competitive to violent interactions. Conflict can emerge when there is a perceived

threat to factors such as group interests, status, values, worldviews or resources.

The effects of the reviewed factors on intergroup conflicts are complex and multifaceted, and often differ depending on the conflict context.

This review begins by looking at social identity, intergroup emotions and social belonging, which have been extensively studied by social psychologists, before examining social cohesion, social capital and collective efficacy (a group's shared belief in its combined abilities to implement the necessary actions to achieve desired goals). Prior to delving into the empirical evidence regarding the influence of these factors, it is essential to establish clear definitions of forgiveness, reconciliation and extremism.

Definition of Key Processes

In the context of intergroup conflicts, forgiveness and reconciliation are two related but distinct processes which play significant roles in promoting healing and resolution.

Forgiveness (an intrapersonal process) is usually considered a necessary step to achieving reconciliation (an interpersonal process).[1]Forgiveness refers to the psychological and emotional process of letting go of feelings of resentment, anger and the desire for revenge towards those who have caused harm, and it involves a voluntary decision to release negative judgment and/or indifferent behaviour towards them.[2] Forgiveness does not necessarily condone the actions that injured us, but it involves a willingness to move forward.

Reconciliation goes beyond forgiveness and involves "a process that leads to a stable end to conflict and is predicated on changes in the nature of adversarial relations between the adversaries and each of the parties' conflict-related needs, emotions, and cognitions".[3] Put simply, reconciliation means restoring or building harmonious and cooperative relationships between groups that were previously in conflict, for which it is necessary to address the causes of the conflict, take collective responsibility for the past, and actively promote truth and just societal arrangements.[4] However, acknowledgement of the harmful actions perpetrated by one's own group and the assumption of responsibility for them are difficult. When the violence committed against the out-group is severe, people may deny the responsibility of their group as a means to maintain a positive moral identity.[5] Such strategies interfere with moving towards a shared history and prevent the conflict from ending.[6]

Unresolved political, social or economic grievances can create fertile ground for extremism. If we also consider the political instability, weak institutions and/or the destruction of basic resources, common in the aftermath of severe conflicts, the risk of extremist groups exploiting the situation of vulnerability increases.

Extremism remains a subject of contention, with various definitions exhibiting circular reasoning, oversimplification or a narrow focus on specific movements.[7] Moreover, it is frequently wielded to delegitimise opposing viewpoints. For the purposes of this review, we will adopt Bötticher's definition,[8] which characterises extremism as "an ideological position embraced by those anti-establishment

1 Claire McGlynn et al., "Moving Out of Conflict: The Contribution of Integrated Schools in Northern Ireland to Identity, Attitudes, Forgiveness and Reconciliation," *Journal of Peace Education* 1, no. 2 (2004): 149–150.
2 Robert D. Enright et al., "The Psychology of Interpersonal Forgiveness," in *Exploring Forgiveness*, eds. Robert. D. Enright and Joanna North (University of Wisconsin Press, 1998), 46–47.
3 Arie Nadler et al., eds., *The Social Psychology of Intergroup Reconciliation* (Oxford University Press, 2008), 4.
4 Ervin Staub, "The Challenging Road to Reconciliation in Rwanda: Societal Processes, Interventions and Their Evaluation," *Journal of Social and Political Psychology* 2, no. 1 (2014): 505–517.
5 Arie Nadler and Nurit Shnabel, "Intergroup Reconciliation: Instrumental and Socio-Emotional Processes and the Needs-Based Model," *European Review of Social Psychology* 26, no. 1 (2015): 95.
6 Staub, "Challenging Road," 505.
7 J. M. Berger, *Extremism* (MIT Press, 2018), 36–39.
8 Astrid Bötticher, "Towards Academic Consensus Definitions of Radicalism and Extremism," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 11, no. 4 (2017): 74.

movements which understand politics as struggle for supremacy rather than as peaceful competition between parties with different interests seeking popular support for advancing the common good". This definition characterises extremism as a group phenomenon rather than an individual one. Extremism involves complex interactions among individuals within a social context, where group dynamics, shared identities and collective actions play crucial roles. Extremists can engage in criminal acts and mass violence to seize political power, often destroying social diversity when they achieve it. However, it is essential to avoid conflating extremism with intergroup violence. Not all intergroup violence is rooted in extremist ideologies, and extremism does not always culminate in violence.

Social Categorisation and Identity

Social identity constitutes a pivotal factor in the causes and reasons for the continuation of intergroup conflicts. The social identity approach, put forward in the late 1970s,[9] remains the predominant framework within social psychology for understanding intergroup relations and social change. This approach posits that comprehending intergroup behaviour requires examining how individuals categorise and define themselves and others. According to this approach, categorisation within a group, even when based on arbitrary motives, leads individuals to psychologically identify with such a group and favour its members over those who do not belong to it. This identification is crucial for the psychological existence of the group and the manifestation of favouritism towards its members. Within this theory, the in-group embodies the 'us' in the dichotomy of 'us versus them', encompassing all individuals who share a social identity. Conversely, the out-group comprises individuals perceived as external or excluded from the specific in-group, thereby representing 'them' or 'the others'. In the early stages of the theory, it was observed that categorisation within the in-group and the resulting identification led to in-group favouritism but not to out-group hostility. Subsequent empirical evidence suggests that certain factors (such as moral superiority, perceived threat and power politics) propel the transition from in-group favouritism to hostility towards other groups.[10]

Based on historiographical analysis and a review of the psychosocial literature on intergroup conflicts, Reicher and colleagues[11] developed a five-step model to explain the perpetration and celebration of atrocities such as genocides. According to this model, during the first stage, identification with a cohesive group occurs, which makes members assimilate their beliefs and worldview, conform to norms, develop bonds of trust and solidarity with others, and coordinate their actions. In the second step, specific groups are excluded from the in-group, and thus are deprived of the rights and benefits that belonging to the in-group brings.

According to this model, the definition of the in-group and the demarcation of intergroup barriers would be critical in the development of collective hatred, because these barriers determine who receives 'our' protection and who is left out. Ethnic definitions of national categories, compared with more inclusive definitions based on civic criteria (such as residence), are associated with more negative attitudes and behaviours towards minority groups.[12] For instance,

9 Henri Tajfel, ed., *Differentiation Between Social Groups: Studies in the Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations* (Academic Press, 1978). See also Henri Tajfel and John. C. Turner, "An Integrative Theory of Intergroup Conflict," in *The Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations*, eds. William G. Austin and Stephen Worchel (Brooks-Cole, 1979), 33–47.

10 Marilynn B. Brewer, "The Psychology of Prejudice: Ingroup Love and Outgroup Hate?," *Journal of Social Issues* 55, no. 3 (1999): 434–438.

11 Stephen Reicher et al., "Making a Virtue of Evil: A Five-Step Social Identity Model of the Development of Collective Hate," *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* 2, no. 3 (2008): 1313–1344.

12 Joke Meeus et al., "The Role of National Identity Representation in the Relation between In-Group Identification and Out-Group Derogation: Ethnic Versus Civic Representation," *British Journal of Social Psychology* 49 no. 2 (2010): 305–320. See also Samuel Pehrson et al., "When Does National Identification Lead to the Rejection of Immigrants? Cross-Sectional and Longitudinal Evidence for the Role of Essentialist In-Group Definitions," *British Journal of Social Psychology* 48, no. 1 (2009): 61–76; Juliet R. Wakefield et al., "The Impact of Adopting Ethnic or Civic Conceptions of National Belonging for Others' Treatment," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 37, no. 12 (2011): 1599–1610.

Reicher and colleagues point out that during the period of Nazism, the definition of nation in Germany excluded Jews and Roma, while in Bulgaria these same groups were included in the definition.[13] The differing levels of inclusiveness of the two definitions helps explain why Bulgarian Roma and Jews received help from their compatriots and why there were no deportations to extermination camps on Bulgarian territory.

If, as the social identity approach maintains, the delimitation of intergroup barriers can be a trigger for intergroup conflict,[14] it can be assumed that a different, more inclusive definition of the in-group can promote reconciliation between the conflicting parties. Social psychologists have proposed different strategies for reducing intergroup conflicts by modifying the cognitive representation of social categories. Among them we can find the recategorisation strategy, which consists of reducing the prominence of the categorical distinctions that produce the conflict (such as Catholics and Protestants) by promoting a more inclusive categorisation (such as Christians), which encompasses in-group and out-group members in a single group.[15] It intends to abandon the dialectic of 'us versus them' in order to adopt a broader and shared vision of 'us'.

When members of two warring groups stop thinking of themselves and others as members of two distinct categories and realise that they share a more inclusive identity, the cognitive and motivational processes which induced favouritism towards members of their original group extend to members of the former out-group, so that they become beneficiaries of in-group favouritism and begin to be perceived and treated favourably.[16] For instance, in an attempt to overcome antagonism between Hutus and Tutsis, the post-conflict Rwandan Government insisted that there were no Hutus or Tutsis, only Rwandans.[17]

However, although a common identity is an effective strategy to reduce intergroup conflict,[18] it may entail certain pitfalls and encounter resistance. Overarching identities frequently reflect the values and norms of the dominant group, perpetuating systemic injustice for disadvantaged groups. Disadvantaged groups, in turn, may resist assimilation into a superordinate identity and instead emphasise power differences between groups.[19] Furthermore, when it is not the in-group but the out-group which shows interest in embracing the common social identity, different threats (to the values, status or distinctiveness of the in-group, for example) can be activated in people's minds, hampering the success of the recategorisation strategy.[20] Regardless of the source of the recategorisation, certain social categories (such as ethnic or religious) are so culturally relevant that they remain

13 Reicher et al., "Making a Virtue," 1330–1331.
14 Tajfel and Turner, "Integrative Theory," 99–100. See also John. C. Turner et al., *Rediscovering the Social Group: A Self-Categorization Theory* (Blackwell, 1987).
15 Samuel. L. Gaertner et al. "The Common Ingroup Identity Model: Recategorization and the Reduction of Intergroup Bias," in *European Review of Social Psychology*, Vol. 4, eds. Wolfgang Stroebe and Miles Hewstone (Wiley, 1993), 1–26. See also Samuel L. Gaertner et al., "Across Cultural Divides: The Value of a Superordinate Identity," in *Cultural Divides: Understanding and Overcoming Group Conflict*, eds. Deborah Prentice and Dale Miller (Russell Sage Foundation, 1999), 173–212.
16 Gaertner et al., "Common Ingroup." See also Samuel L. Gaertner et al., "The Common Ingroup Identity Model for Reducing Intergroup Bias: Progress and Challenges," in *Social Identity Processes: Trends in Theory and Research*, eds. Dora Capozza and Rupert Brown (SAGE Publications, 2000), 133–148.
17 Staub, "Challenging Road," 508.
18 Gaertner et al., "Common Ingroup Identity Model," 133–148.
19 John. F. Dovidio et al., "Included but Invisible? Subtle Bias, Common Identity, and the Darker Side of 'We'," *Social Issues and Policy Review* 10, no. 1 (2016): 18–21.
20 Ángel Gómez et al., "The Other Side of We: When Outgroup Members Express Common Identity," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 34, no. 12 (2013): 1613–1626. See also Ángel Gómez et al., "Responses to Endorsement of Commonality by Ingroup and Outgroup Members: The Roles of Group Representation and Threat," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 39, no. 4 (2013): 419–431.

cognitively activated in a chronic way across different contexts, which diminishes the possibility of maintaining more inclusive representations in the long term. For instance, after a long history of violent conflict, such as between the Rwandan Hutus and Tutsis, it is unrealistic to expect people to easily abdicate original ethnic identities and assume a superordinated national identity.[21] In these cases, it is more appropriate to foster a dual identity in which people simultaneously maintain both the more inclusive identity (such as Rwandan) and the less inclusive identity (such as Tutsi).[22]

Dual identities have been found to promote more harmonious and fair intergroup relations. For instance, white Americans who identify themselves as members of their country (superordinate category) and their ethnic group (subordinate category) are more supportive of affirmative action policies in favour of ethnic minorities than those who identify only with their ethnic group.[23] Although some evidence points to dual identity as a cause of radicalisation, mainly among migrants, such association only occurs when the two component identifications are perceived as incompatible.[24] Therefore, efforts to create a dual identity that can improve intergroup relations and promote social integration must ensure good integration between the two identifications.

Hence, it becomes evident that social identities serve as both the catalyst for intergroup conflicts and the cornerstone for forgiveness and reconciliation, contingent upon their harmonisation and inclusivity. Exclusive social identities may breed hostility towards perceived threatening out-groups. Conversely, inclusive identities can pave the path for reconciliation among conflicting groups, especially when they align with subordinate identities. Notably, social identity also emerges as a central factor in understanding extremism, as further elucidated below.

21 Staub, "Challenging Road," 508.
22 Dovidio et al., "Included but Invisible," 8–13.
23 Yuen J. Huo et al., "Superordinate Identification, Subgroup Identification, and Justice Concerns: Is Separatism the Problem? Is Assimilation the Answer?," *Psychological Science* 7, no. 1 (1996): 40–45.
24 Bernd Simon and Daniela Ruhs, "Identity and Politicization among Turkish Migrants in Germany: The Role of Dual Identification," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 95, no. 6 (2008): 1354–1366.

Destroyed buildings in Aleppo, Syria

Andrea Backhaus / Shutterstock.com

Identity Fusion and Extremism

Social identity is a core element of psychosocial explanations of coordinated, collective action[25] and individuals' progroup behaviours.[26] Identity fusion theory suggests that in some people, the boundaries between personal identity and social identity become permeable, allowing for the appearance of a synergy between the identities which provides an additional motivational boost, stimulating the performance of extreme progroup behaviours.[27] Strongly fused people experience a visceral connection to the group, accompanied by powerful feelings of personal agency and perceptions of invulnerability. In addition, they develop affective ties with other group members, akin to ties usually found within families, and thus consider them as brothers and sisters.[28] These fierce 'family' ties cause strongly fused people to experience great emotional distress when they perceive group members to be in danger; they then feel morally obligated to help these members, even at the cost of their own personal safety.[29] As a result of family ties, a sense of invulnerability to danger and a perception of personal agency, strongly fused people display an extraordinary willingness to fight and to sacrifice, on behalf of their group and its members.[30]

Measures developed to capture identity fusion predict a large repertoire of personally costly, progroup intentions and behaviours. Research conducted across five continents has found that strongly fused individuals, compared to weakly fused ones, are more willing to fight and die for the group,[31] including in self-sacrifice to save imperilled in-group members,[32] help fellow group members under duress (for example, through donations),[33] and endure pain to affirm their belonging in a group (for example, undergoing surgery on primary [rather than only secondary] sexual characteristics in a sample of transsexual individuals),[34] among others.[35] Importantly, research on identity fusion has considered different group types, primarily national, but also political, religious, familial, gender-based, sports-related, criminal, and so on.[36]

25 For a meta-analysis, see Maximilian Agostini and Martijn van Zomeren, "Toward a Comprehensive and Potentially Cross-Cultural Model of Why People Engage in Collective Action: A Quantitative Research Synthesis of Four Motivations and Structural Constraints," *Psychological Bulletin* 147, no. 7 (2021): 667–700.

26 Ángel Gómez et al., "Recent Advances, Misconceptions, Untested Assumptions, and Future Research Agenda for Identity Fusion Theory," *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* 14, no. 6 (2020): e12531.

27 William B. Swann Jr. et al., "Identity Fusion: The Interplay of Personal and Social Identities in Extreme Group Behaviour," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 96, no. 5 (2009): 995–1011. See also William B. Swann Jr. et al., "When Group Membership Gets Personal: A Theory of Identity Fusion," *Psychological Review* 119, no. 3 (2012): 441–456.

28 Swann Jr. et al., "Group Membership."

29 William B. Swann Jr. et al., "Contemplating the Ultimate Sacrifice: Identity Fusion Channels Pro-Group Affect, Cognition, and Moral Decision Making," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 106, no. 5 (2014): 713–727.

30 Ángel Gómez et al., "On the Nature of Identity Fusion: Insights into the Construct and a New Measure," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 100, no. 5 (2011): 918–933. See also Swann Jr. et al., "Ultimate Sacrifice"; Anders H. Varmann et al., "How Identity Fusion Predicts Extreme Pro-Group Orientations: A Meta-Analysis," *European Review of Social Psychology* 35 no. 1 (2024): 162–197.

31 Gómez et al., "Nature of Identity Fusion"; Swann Jr. et al., "Identity Fusion." See also Cristopher M. Kavanagh et al., "Positive Experiences of High Arousal Martial Arts Rituals Are Linked to Identity Fusion and Costly Pro-Group actions," *European Journal of Social Psychology* 49, no. 3 (2019): 461–481; Francois A. Martel et al., "Why True Believers Make the Ultimate Sacrifice: Sacred Values, Moral Convictions, or Identity Fusion?," *Frontiers in Psychology* 12 (2021): 779120.

32 Gómez et al., "Nature of Identity Fusion," 918–933; Swann Jr. et al., "Ultimate Sacrifice," 713–727.

33 Michael D. Buhrmester et al., "When Terror Hits Home: Identity Fused Americans Who Saw Boston Bombing Victims as 'Family' Provided Aid," *Self and Identity* 14, no. 3 (2015): 253–270. See also Keren. Segal et al., "The Fusing Power of Natural Disasters: An Experimental Study," *Self and Identity* 17, no. 5 (2018): 574–586; William B. Swann Jr, et al., "Dying and Killing for One's Group: Identity Fusion Moderates Responses to Intergroup Versions of the Trolley Problem," *Psychological Science* 21, no. 8 (2010): 1176–1183.

34 William B. Swann et al., "Fusion with the Cross-Gender Group Predicts Genital Sex Reassignment Surgery," *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 44 (2015): 1313–1318.

35 For reviews, see Gómez et al., "Recent Advances," e12531; Varmann et al., "How Identity Fusion Predicts," 162–197.

36 Varmann et al., "How Identity Fusion Predicts," 162–197.

Although identity fusion has been consistently linked to extremism, it should not be concluded that it is socially damaging. The consequences of fusion depend on the nature and goals of the group with which one is aligned. Fusion with violent extremist groups can have very detrimental effects by encouraging hostile actions against other groups, especially if combined with other factors such as perceived threat or commitment to sacred values.[37] However, fusion with benevolent groups, far from damaging relations with others, could promote social harmony, as recent evidence suggests. Fusion could act as a secure base which allows the development of trusting relationships[38] and positive attitudes towards other groups in non-threatening conditions.[39]

Recent findings suggest that fusion can facilitate both violent radicalisation and deradicalisation processes. For example, a quantitative investigation conducted in Spanish prisons with inmates convicted of crimes related to jihadist terrorism or violence associated with Latino gangs, found that fusion with one's family and with the country's justice system (such as with security forces or prison personnel) can be protective factors against radicalisation as well as useful strategies to promote deradicalisation.[40] Stimulating fusion with alternative groups to the one that led to radicalisation, such as family, can contribute to the abandonment of extremist activities and mindsets.[41]

Identity fusion theory was developed to offer a psychosocial framework for understanding extremist acts such as the Islamist attacks of 11 September 2001 in New York and of 11 March 2004 in Madrid. Consequently, identity fusion has been primarily associated with extremism, yet there remains a dearth of solid evidence regarding its applicability to processes of forgiveness and reconciliation. Drawing from evidence indicating that fusion cultivates favourable attitudes and trust towards other groups in harmonious contexts,[42] it is reasonable to speculate that fusion could facilitate reconciliation when inclusive social identities are nurtured and perceptions of intergroup threat are mitigated. Indeed, the perception of threat and social identities serves as pivotal determinants in the emergence of intergroup emotions, a phenomenon we will delve into below.

37 Ángel Gómez et al., "The Devoted Actor's Will to Fight and the Spiritual Dimension of Human Conflict," *Nature Human Behaviour* 1, no. 9, (2017): 673–679. See also Alexandra Vázquez et al., "Threat Enhances Aggressive Inclinations among Devoted Actors Via Increase in their Relative Physical Formidability," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 46, no. 10 (2020): 1461–1475.

38 Jack W. Klein and Brock Bastian, "The Fusion-Secure Base Hypothesis," *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 27, no. 2 (2023): 107–127.

39 Alexandra Vázquez et al., "Can Identity Fusion Foster Social Harmony? Strongly Fused Individuals Embrace Familiar Outgroup Members unless Threatened," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 107 (2023): 104462.

40 Ángel Gómez et al., "Willingness to Sacrifice among Convicted Islamist Terrorists Versus Violent Gang Members and Other Criminals," *Scientific Reports* 12, no. 1 (2022): 2596.

41 Steven Windisch et al., "Disengagement from Ideologically-Based and Violent Organizations: A Systematic Review of the Literature," *Journal for Deradicalization* 9 (2016): 1–38.

42 Klein and Bastian, "Fusion-Secure Base Hypothesis," 107–127; Vázquez et al., "Can Identity Fusion Foster Social Harmony?," 104462.

Feelings and Emotions Related to In-groups and Out-groups

Intergroup emotions, which are related to social identity, are an essential component in the dynamics of intergroup conflicts. The classic psychosocial approach to intergroup conflicts has revolved around prejudice, understanding this as a negative attitude or as antipathy towards the opponent.[43] To capture these negative intergroup attitudes, researchers have frequently used feeling thermometers,[44] which can provide a global affective evaluation of members of one's own group and others. However, some critics have questioned the predictive ability of the conceptualisation of prejudice as a negative evaluation, and advocate investigating the influence of discrete emotions on the emergence, maintenance and resolution of conflicts.[45] For instance, groups that are despised and those that are feared would be evaluated similarly – negatively – when feeling thermometers are used as measuring instruments.

In contrast, the action tendencies elicited by these groups are very different: attack in the case of despised groups and flight in the case of feared groups.[46] In response to these criticisms, Mackie and Smith developed a theory of intergroup emotions which claims that intergroup behaviour is driven by group-based emotions.[47] Just as individual emotions are self-regulatory, group-based emotions also regulate intra- and intergroup behaviour. When people identify with a group, their appraisal of the events and the actors in their environment takes into account the implications for their group. These appraisals, in turn, give rise to group-based emotions which motivate group-relevant behaviours towards either the in-group or the out-group.[48] Thus, intergroup emotions serve as mediators between social identity and intergroup behaviour. Social identity influences individuals' emotional reactions towards out-groups, subsequently impacting the dynamics of intergroup relations and conflicts.

In recent decades, a growing number of investigations has been exploring the role of different emotions in the maintenance of conflicts and in their resolution. Among those that contribute to the origin and perpetuation of conflicts, hatred, anger and contempt stand out. Hatred is one of the most destructive emotions in intergroup conflicts[49] because of the violent consequences that it often entails and because it represents a major obstacle to attempts at conflict resolution.[50] Halperin and colleagues define hatred towards out-groups as

43 See for example Richard D. Ashmore, "Prejudice: Causes and Cures," in *Social Psychology: Social Influence, Attitude Change, Group Processes, and Prejudice*, ed. Barry E. Collins (Addison Wesley, 1970), 245–339.
44 For example, Angus Campbell, *White Attitudes Toward Black People* (Institute for Social Research), 6.
45 Eliot R. Smith, "Social Identity and Social Emotions: Toward New Conceptualizations of Prejudice," in *Affect, Cognition, and Stereotyping: Interactive Processes in Group Perception*, eds. Diane M. Mackie and David L. Hamilton (Academic Press, 1993), 297–315.
46 Smith, "Social Identity and Social Emotions," 297–315.
47 Daniel M. Mackie and Eliot R. Smith, "Intergroup Relations: Insights from a Theoretically Integrative Approach," *Psychological Review* 105, no. 3 (1998): 499–529.
48 Eliot R. Smith and Diane M. Mackie, "Group-Based Emotions Over Time: Dynamics of Experience and Regulation," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 47, no. 7 (2021): 1135–1151.
49 Edward B. Royzman et al., "From Plato to Putnam: Four Ways to Think about Hate," in *The Psychology of Hate*, ed. Robert J. Sternberg (American Psychological Association, 2005), 3–35.
50 Eran Halperin et al., "In Love with Hatred: Rethinking the Role Hatred Plays in Shaping Political Behavior," *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 42, no. 9 (2012): 2231–2256.

"a secondary, extreme, and continuous emotion that is directed at a particular group and that fundamentally and all-inclusively denounces it".[51] As it often involves the belief that the enemy possesses extremely negative characteristics which cannot be amended, hatred aims to harm or even eliminate the target either physically or socially.[52] Therefore, hatred has the potential to push people to engage in massacres, genocides and wars,[53] and undermines support for commitments aimed at resolving the conflict.[54]

Although hatred often appears associated with anger, there is a key difference between these two emotions which has important implications for intergroup conflicts. While hatred is based on the attribution of immutable evil characteristics to the opponent, anger can be constructive under some circumstances because it stems from the consideration that the other group or the situation can be changed,[55] and hence may induce concessions in the absence of hatred.[56] Anger stems from the perception that the group situation is unfair and that others are to blame, and is usually associated with tendencies to confront the opponent. It is a multifaceted emotion, because it can help to escalate conflicts,[57] but it can also instigate actions against injustice[58] and inspire support for non-violent policies in the context of political negotiations between adversaries.[59] Group-based anger is one of the most powerful predictors of participation in non-violent collective action cross-culturally.[60] However, it has also been linked to greater support for aggressive behaviour and military attacks during intergroup conflicts.[61] In sum, the consequences of anger seem to be context-dependent, such that it can inspire aggressive responses during the conflict but increase support for non-violent behaviours in the context of de-escalation efforts.[62]

Contempt is another emotion that has been linked to intergroup conflicts. It shares with hate the conviction that opponents are not susceptible to change, but whereas hate is associated with the cognitive appraisal of the other group as inherently and permanently evil, contempt is related to the belief that its members are unworthy and inferior.[63] Like anger, contempt might be a response to perceived social and moral transgressions, but the belief that the opponents are not amenable to change leads to attempts to socially exclude them.[64] Some studies suggest that it is contempt, rather than anger, which motivates people to engage in non-normative, violent forms of collective action.[65] Recent evidence collected in various socio-political conflicts also revealed that group-based contempt is uniquely associated with

51 Halperin et al., "In Love with Hatred," 2232.
52 Smadar Cohen-Chen and Eran Halperin, "Emotional Processes in Intractable Conflicts: Integrating Descriptive and Interventionist Approaches," in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Psychology*, eds. Leonie Huddy et al. (Oxford University Press, 2023), 25.
53 Reicher et al., "Making a Virtue," 1313–1344.
54 Eran Halperin et al., "Anger, Hatred, and the Quest for Peace: Anger Can Be Constructive in the Absence of Hatred," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 55, no. 2 (2011): 274–291.
55 Cohen-Chen and Halperin, "Emotional Processes," 19.
56 Halperin et al., "Anger, Hatred, and the Quest for Peace," 274–291.
57 Elizabeth Mullen and Linda J. Skitka, "Exploring the Psychological Underpinnings of the Moral Mandate Effect: Motivated Reasoning, Group Differentiation, or Anger?," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 90, no. 4 (2006): 629–643.
58 Agostini and van Zomeren, "Toward a Comprehensive."
59 Michal R. Tagar et al., "The Positive Effect of Negative Emotions in Protracted Conflict: The Case of Anger," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 47, no. 1 (2011): 157–164.
60 Agostini and van Zomeren, "Toward a Comprehensive," 667.
61 Jennifer S. Lerner et al., "Effects of Fear and Anger on Perceived Risks of Terrorism: A National Field Experiment," *Psychological Science* 14, no. 2 (2003): 144–150.
62 Tagar et al., "Positive Effect of Negative Emotions," 157–164.
63 Julia Elad-Strenger et al., "Out of Sight, Out of Mind: The Emotional Determinant of 'Harmful Inaction' in Intergroup Conflict," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 101 (2022): 104304.
64 Agneta Fischer and Roger Giner-Sorolla, "Contempt: Derogating Others While Keeping Calm," *Emotion Review* 8, no. 4 (2016): 346–357.
65 Nicole Tausch et al., "Explaining Radical Group Behavior: Developing Emotion and Efficacy Routes to Normative and Nonnormative Collective Action," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 101, no. 1 (2011): 129–148.

harmful inaction (rather than action) towards the rival (by ignoring its existence and needs, or avoiding cooperation and communication, for example), compared to anger, hate, disgust and fear.[66]

More recently, in the literature on intergroup conflicts, scholars have begun to explore the influence of intergroup emotions such as guilt, empathy, and hope on conflict resolution and reconciliation. Group-based guilt seems to be a crucial emotion on the path towards reconciliation. It arises in response to a wrongdoing committed by a member of one's own group which is perceived as illegitimate and is likely to motivate actions to repair the damage.[67] Across different contexts and conflicts, group-based guilt has been associated with greater support for reparation policies towards the victimised group[68] and for conciliatory apologies.[69]

Intergroup empathy is a complex cognitive-affective process which develops over time and involves identification with the perspectives and emotions of members of a group to which one does not belong.[70] Empathy holds great promise as a means of reconciliation because it helps members of conflicting groups to reach a mutual understanding. Empathy has been associated with greater reparation intentions,[71] support for prosocial[72] and political actions aimed at advancing the welfare of victimised groups,[73] willingness to engage in intergroup contact,[74] forgiveness[75] and altruistic behaviour,[76] and with less aggressive attitudes, even during the escalation of intractable conflicts.[77]

Hope involves expectations and aspirations for a better future as well as positive feelings about an anticipated outcome, thus stimulating the design of innovative and creative solutions to resolve conflicts.[78] It has been found to promote concession-making in intractable conflicts,[79] forgiveness,[80] conciliatory attitudes,[81] support for proposals aimed at conflict resolution,[82] and for humanitarian aid to out-group members.[83] As a positive and inspiring emotion, hope seems to be instrumental in transforming attitudes in conflict resolution and reconciliation

66 Elad-Strenger et al., "Out of Sight," 104304.
67 Nyla Branscombe et al., "Antecedents and Consequences of Collective Guilt," in *From Prejudice to Intergroup Emotions: Differentiated Reactions to Social Groups*, eds. Diane M. Mackie and Eliot R. Smith (Psychology Press, 2002), 49–66.
68 Sabina Čehajić-Clancy et al., "Affirmation, Acknowledgment of In-Group Responsibility, Group-Based Guilt, and Support for Reparative Measures," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 101, no. 2 (2011): 256–270.
69 Sabina Čehajić-Clancy, "Dealing with Ingroup Committed Atrocities: Moral Responsibility and Group-Based Guilt," in *The Social Psychology of Intractable Conflict: Celebrating the Legacy of Daniel Bar-Tal*, Vol. 1, eds. Eran Halperin and Keren Sharvit (Springer, 2015), 103–115. See also Craig McGarty et al., "Group-Based Guilt as a Predictor of Commitment to Apology," *British Journal of Social Psychology* 44, no. 4 (2005): 659–680.
70 John M. Levine and Michael A. Hogg, *Encyclopedia of group processes and intergroup relations* (Sage Publications, 2009), 476.
71 Ali Mashuri et al., "The Role of Dual Categorization and Relative Ingroup Prototypicality in Reparations to a Minority Group: An Examination of Empathy and Collective Guilt as Mediators," *Asian Journal of Social Psychology* 20, no. 1 (2017): 33–44.
72 Yossi Hasson et al., "Using Performance Art to Promote Intergroup Prosociality by Cultivating the Belief that Empathy is Unlimited," *Nature Communications* 13, no. 1 (2022): 7786.
73 Sabrina J. Pagano and Yuen J. Huo, "The Role of Moral Emotions in Predicting Support for Political Actions in Post-War Iraq," *Political Psychology* 28, no. 2 (2007): 227–255.
74 Shpend Voca et al., "Victimhood Beliefs Are Linked to Willingness to Engage in Intergroup Contact with the Former Adversary Through Empathy and Trust," *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations* 26, no. 3 (2023): 696–719.
75 Scott L. Moeschberger et al., "Forgiveness in Northern Ireland: Model for Peace in the Midst of the 'Troubles'," *Peace and Conflict* 11, no. 2 (2005): 199–214.
76 Adam Waytz et al., "Response of Dorsomedial Prefrontal Cortex Predicts Altruistic Behavior," *Journal of Neuroscience* 32, no. 22 (2012): 7646–7650.
77 Nimrod Rosler et al., "The Distinctive Effects of Empathy and Hope in Intractable Conflicts," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 61, no. 1 (2017): 114–139.
78 Rosler et al., "Distinctive Effects," 114–139.
79 Smadar Cohen-Chen et al., "Hope in the Middle East: Malleability Beliefs, Hope, and the Willingness to Compromise for Peace," *Social Psychological and Personality Science* 5, no. 1 (2014): 67–75.
80 Moeschberger et al., "Forgiveness in Northern Ireland," 199–214.
81 Béatrice S. Hasler et al., "Young Generations' Hopelessness Perpetuates Long-Term Conflicts," *Scientific Reports* 13, no. 1 (2023): 4926.
82 Smadar Cohen-Chen et al., "Dealing in Hope: Does Observing Hope Expressions Increase Conciliatory Attitudes in Intergroup Conflict?," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 83 (2019): 102–111.
83 Eran Halperin and James J. Gross, "Emotion Regulation in Violent Conflict: Reappraisal, Hope, and Support for Humanitarian Aid to the Opponent in Wartime," *Cognition & Emotion* 25, no. 7 (2011): 1228–1236.

processes,[84] but requires a dynamic vision of the conflict. A series of six studies conducted over two decades in two contexts of intractable conflicts (Israel and Cyprus) suggested that younger generations have less hope for peace, and consequently less conciliatory attitudes than older generations, because they have a narrower, more static perspective of the conflict.[85]

Based on this evidence, some scholars attach paramount importance to emotional regulation as a path to reconciliation. This is the case of Čehajić-Clancy and colleagues, who conceive reconciliation as a process operating mostly at an emotional level.[86] From this approach, the regulation of several specific emotions would be the key psychological mechanism for inducing the parties in conflict to reconcile. Social-psychological interventions aimed at intergroup reconciliation must change people's perceptions about out-groups and conflictual intergroup relations, as well as their understanding of social identities. In turn, these changes would allow the emergence of positive intergroup affects, and would reduce the negative emotional barriers which feed self-perpetuating cycles of mistrust and violence and prevent the creation of cooperative intergroup relations.

In particular, Čehajić-Clancy and colleagues proposed five intervention strategies aimed at regulating specific intergroup emotions and as such contributing to intergroup reconciliation.[87]

Firstly, to reduce intergroup hatred, they recommend increasing perceptions of out-group moral variability ('there are good and bad people', for example) and group malleability ('the characteristics of the groups can change', for example). Secondly, to reduce intergroup anger, they suggest offering apologies and reparations. Thirdly, to replace despair with hope, these authors advise challenging and changing beliefs that the conflict is irresolvable and chronic. Fourthly, to take advantage of the positive consequences of group-based guilt, they propose promoting acknowledgment of in-group responsibility and affirming personal (versus social) identity to bolster individuals' feelings of self-integrity. Fifthly, to induce intergroup empathy, they suggest encouraging perspective-taking and creating a common in-group identity, as mentioned previously.

In summary, intergroup emotions arise in contexts where individuals perceive themselves as part of one group and others as part of different groups. They mediate the relationship between social identities and intergroup behaviour. Since they play a significant role in shaping intergroup behaviour and interactions, regulating intergroup emotions seems crucial for promoting forgiveness and reconciliation between diverse groups. To effectively manage intergroup emotions, it is essential to tailor strategies to address each specific emotion, as they stem from unique patterns of cognitive appraisals. Additionally, these strategies should consider the socio-historical context and the current stage of the conflict to be impactful.

Intergroup emotions remain largely unexplored in the extremism literature, which has predominantly emphasised more distant causal factors. One of them, social belonging, will be analysed in the following section.

84 Cohen-Chen et al., "Hope in the Middle East," 199–214.
85 Hasler et al., "Young Generations," 4926.
86 Sabina Čehajić-Clancy et al., "Social-Psychological Interventions for Intergroup Reconciliation: An Emotion Regulation Perspective," *Psychological Inquiry* 27, no. 2 (2016): 73–88.
87 Čehajić-Clancy et al., "Social-Psychological Interventions," 73–88.

Social Belonging and Support

Some scholars conceive extremism and radicalism as consequences of the frustration of basic psychological needs. In line with this, significance quest theory states that social rejection and personal failures challenge the universal need to feel respected, recognised and valued, or, in other words, to have social worth.[88] The need for significance is fulfilled when we sense that we measure up to the core values that we share with reference individuals and groups.[89] Experiences of social rejection, loss of social standing and/or personal failures endanger this need because they involve a negative evaluation of the self, which is discrepant from the desired positive view. This discrepancy motivates actions aimed at restoring self-worth, including extreme means. Among them, radical political engagement is particularly effective in preventing significance loss and in promoting significance gain because it makes sure that individuals are noticed and gives them meaning and purpose.[90]

Significance quest theory has received empirical support in diverse contexts. For instance, a series of studies encompassing field surveys of imprisoned Filipino and Sri Lankan extremists, along with experiments conducted with American samples, showed that perceptions of personal failure foster support for violence.[91] In the USA, experiences of loss of significance (such as loss of social standing and abusive experiences) predicted the use of violence in a sample of individuals who had committed ideologically motivated crimes, especially when they had radicalised friends (but not family members).[92] A five-wave study with Swedish adolescents showed that experiencing harassment increased the risk of radicalism, but that supportive teachers or parents mitigated this relationship.[93] These findings suggest that the quest for significance does not occur in a vacuum, but depends on the social context in which individuals are embedded. Four studies conducted in Sri Lanka, Morocco and Indonesia revealed that radical social contexts strengthen the association between quest for significance and support for political violence, such that those individuals residing in a social context that justifies violence are more likely to use violent means to restore significance.[94]

One of the core aspects of the need for significance is the need to belong. This need to form and maintain strong, stable interpersonal relationships is a powerful, fundamental and pervasive motivation that exerts multiple effects on emotional, cognitive and behavioural

88 Arie W. Kruglanski et al., "Significance-Quest Theory," *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 17, no. 4 (2022): 1050–1071.
89 Kruglanski et al., "Significance-Quest Theory," 1050–1071.
90 Kruglanski et al., "Significance-Quest Theory," 1050–1071.
91 David Webber et al., "The Road to Extremism: Field and Experimental Evidence that Significance Loss-Induced Need for Closure Fosters Radicalization," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 114, no. 2 (2018): 270–285.
92 Katarzyna Jasko et al., "Quest for Significance and Violent Extremism: The Case of Domestic Radicalization," *Political Psychology* 38, no. 5 (2017): 815–831.
93 Marta Miklikowska et al., "The Making of a Radical: The Role of Peer Harassment in Youth Political Radicalism," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 49, no. 3 (2023): 477–492.
94 Katarzyna Jasko, "Rebel with a Cause: Personal Significance from Political Activism Predicts Willingness to Self-Sacrifice," *Journal of Social Issues* 75, no. 1 (2019): 314–349.

processes.[95] Lack of social belonging is linked to multiple negative consequences on health and well-being.

Research on this fundamental need has demonstrated that experiences of social exclusion (rejection and ostracism) may fuel aggressive behaviour[96] and approval for and willingness to engage in violent political parties and actions.[97] For instance, a study conducted with a sample of European Muslim sympathisers of jihadist groups found that participants ostracised by the cyberball paradigm (an online ball-tossing game manipulated to make participants feel ostracised as the other players gradually stop throwing the ball to them) increased their willingness to fight and die to defend their values, as compared to those assigned to a control condition (non-ostracised).[98]

In a sample of individuals involved in ideologically motivated crimes, Jasko et al. found that those who had troubles in romantic or non-romantic relationships were more likely to resort to violent forms of extremist behaviour.[99] Also, a multilevel analysis of data from the European Social Survey revealed that people's experience of social exclusion seems to promote hostile attitudes towards immigrants through reduced feelings of generalised interpersonal trust.[100] Finally, poor attachment – weak emotional closeness – to families and friends with prosocial values and behaviours can be a pull factor in the explanation of violent extremism.[101]

Bonds with family and peers play a fundamental role in radicalisation and disengagement processes, depending on whether significant others endorse prosocial or radical (violence-justifying) ideologies. On the one hand, contact with either radical peers or radical family members seems to be significantly related to engagement in different acts of ideologically motivated violence against other people.[102] Radical social networks provide significance and acceptance, transmit and reinforce particular ideological convictions, and validate engagement in violent acts.[103] On the other hand, significant non-radical others constitute a pull factor which facilitates the abandonment of violence. Regret about the cost of one's actions for the family, as well as the desire to form or support a family, are some of the main reasons that lead extremists to disengage from violent groups.[104]

As these authors suggest, concerns regarding family relations must also be viewed through the lens of aging, which prompts significant life changes. Individuals' departure from extremism is influenced by

95 Roy F. Baumeister and Mark R. Leary, "The Need to Belong: Desire for Interpersonal Attachments as a Fundamental Human Motivation," *Psychological Bulletin* 117, no. 3 (1995): 497–529.
96 Kipling D. Williams and Eric D. Wesselmann, "The Link between Ostracism and Aggression," in *The Psychology of Social Conflict and Aggression*, eds. Joseph. P. Forgas, Arie W. Kruglanski, and Kipling D. Williams (Psychology Press, 2010), 37–51.
97 Michaela Pfundmair et al., "How Social Exclusion Makes Radicalism Flourish: A Review of Empirical Evidence," *Journal of Social Issues* 80, no. 1 (2024): 341–359.
98 Clara Pretus et al., "Neural and Behavioral Correlates of Sacred Values and Vulnerability to Violent Extremism," *Frontiers in Psychology* 9 (2018): 2462.
99 Katarzyna Jasko et al., "Social Context Moderates the Effects of Quest for Significance on Violent Extremism," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 118, no. 6 (2020): 1165–1187.
100 Valerio Pellegrini et al., "Social Exclusion and Anti-Immigration Attitudes in Europe: The Mediating Role of Interpersonal Trust," *Social Indicators Research* 155 (2021): 697–724.
101 Adrian Cherney et al., "The Push and Pull of Radicalization and Extremist Disengagement: The Application of Criminological Theory to Indonesian and Australian Cases of Radicalization," *Journal of Criminology* 54, no. 4 (2021): 407–424.
102 Gary LaFree et al., "Correlates of Violent Political Extremism in the United States," *Criminology* 56, no. 2 (2018): 233–268.
103 Arie W. Kruglanski et al., "To the Fringe and Back: Violent Extremism and the Psychology of Deviance," *American Psychologist* 72, no. 3 (2017): 217–230. See also Mirra Noor Milla et al., "Mechanisms of 3N Model on Radicalization: Testing the Mediation by Group Identity and Ideology of the Relationship between Need for Significance and Violent Extremism," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 27, no. 11 (2022).
104 Cherney et al., "Push and Pull," 407–424.

shifting priorities associated with maturity (such as the assumption of parental and provider roles). In some instances, incarceration offers an opportunity for self-reflection which enables individuals to confront the detrimental impacts of their beliefs and actions on both themselves and others, and encourages a revaluation of one's life choices and paths.

In conclusion, given that social belonging fulfils fundamental psychological needs, individuals may turn to extremism in response to experiencing social rejection, as a means to restore their self-worth. Extremist groups can be seen as a refuge by individuals who feel marginalised or isolated from mainstream society. Offering alternative sources of social support and belonging can help divert individuals away from extremist groups. Hence, societies must prioritise efforts to strengthen inclusion and social cohesion, as we will explore further ahead.

A car bomb detonated by ISIS.
Aleppo, Syria October 16, 2018
Mohammad Bash / Shutterstock.com

Social Cohesion

Social cohesion is defined as the strength of relationships and solidarity among different social groups that live in close proximity.[105] Social cohesion helps create environments conducive to reconciliation in post-conflict societies, and, in fact, is sometimes considered as a proxy for or a component of reconciliation.[106] Social cohesion requires that people cooperate and rely not exclusively on members of their own groups, and also that they cross intergroup barriers. Positive experiences of intergroup contact seem to be effective in fostering social cohesion and reconciliatory attitudes in divided societies. Several studies conducted in societies affected in the past by wars and severe conflicts show that more positive or frequent intergroup contact reduces violence support[107] and increases empathy, trust, and favourable attitudes towards out-group members,[108] forgiveness,[109] support for restorative policies,[110] civic engagement,[111] and reconciliatory beliefs.[112]

However, to really promote reconciliation, experiences of intergroup contact must be frequent and positive at the context level. If the quantity or quality of intergroup contact within the region in which individuals live (context-level contact) is low, the effectiveness of individual contact-based interventions will be limited. For instance, a recent intervention that brought together Iraqi Christians (displaced by IS) and Muslims in the same football team improved certain intergroup behaviours – such as voting for an out-group member to receive a sportsmanship award or registering for a mixed team the following season – but did not substantially affect behaviours in other social contexts.[113] Although contact-based interventions can promote positive attitudes towards out-group members involved in the interactions, these attitudes do not always extrapolate to the entire group.

Building broader social cohesion is more challenging and requires a great collective effort to reduce intergroup threat and create more inclusive public spaces that make it possible to increase intergroup interactions significantly.[114] In fact, context-level intergroup contact seems to be a stronger predictor of reconciliation than individual-level

105 Salma Mousa, "Building Social Cohesion between Christians and Muslims Through Soccer in Post-ISIS Iraq," *Science* 369, no. 6505 (2020): 866–870.
106 Manuel Cárdenas Castro et al., "A Social Psychological Index for Transitional Political Reconciliation (SPITPR–5F)," *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology* 27, no. 3 (2021): 466–474. See also Rachel Schiller, "Reconciliation in Aceh: Addressing the Social Effects of Prolonged Armed Conflict," *Asian Journal of Social Science* 39, no. 4 (2011): 489–507.
107 Rim Saab et al., "Intergroup Contact as a Predictor of Violent and Nonviolent Collective Action: Evidence from Syrian Refugees and Lebanese Nationals," *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology* 23, no. 3 (2017): 297–306.
108 Sabina Cehajic et al., "Forgive and Forget? Antecedents and Consequences of Intergroup Gorgiveness in Bosnia and Herzegovina," *Political Psychology* 29, no. 3 (2008): 351–367. See also Miles Hewstone et al., "Intergroup Contact, Forgiveness, and Experience of 'The Troubles' in Northern Ireland," *Journal of Social Issues* 62, no. 1 (2006): 99–120; Tania Tam et al., "Intergroup Trust in Northern Ireland," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 35, no. 1 (2009): 45–59.
109 Čehajić et al., "Forgive and Forget," 351–367; Hewstone et al., "Intergroup Contact," 45–59.
110 John Dixon, "Intergroup Contact and Attitudes Toward the Principle and Practice of Racial Equality," *Psychological Science* 18, no. 10 (2007): 867–872.
111 Shelley McKeown and Laura K. Taylor, "Intergroup Contact and Peacebuilding: Promoting Youth Civic Engagement in Northern Ireland," *Journal of Social and Political Psychology* 5, no. 2 (2017): 415–434.
112 Sabina Čehajić-Clancy and Michal Bilewicz, "Fostering Reconciliation Through Historical Moral Exemplars in a Postconflict Society," *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology* 23, no. 3 (2017): 288–296.
113 Mousa, "Building Social Cohesion," 866–870.
114 John Dixon et al., "Parallel Lives: Intergroup Contact, Threat, and the Segregation of Everyday Activity Spaces," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 118, no. 3 (2020): 457–480.

contact. Frequent intergroup contact in a post-war context promotes forgiveness, trust and approach-oriented behaviours (aimed at establishing interactions with others), even among those individuals who personally have little contact with members of other groups.[115] Thus, intergroup reconciliation will be more or less likely depending on the frequency and quality of the experiences of intergroup contact that happen around individuals.

Despite the potential of intergroup contact to enhance social cohesion and reconciliatory attitudes, some scholars have pointed to possible paradoxical effects. On the one hand, intergroup contact is not always pleasant, especially in divided societies characterised by high levels of perceived threat from other groups. Some evidence suggests that negative contact has a stronger impact on prejudice than positive contact,[116] whereas other studies offer mixed results.[117] On the other hand, frequent and/or positive intergroup contact (as well as other strategies such as recategorisation or multiculturalism) could undermine social change towards equality and social justice by reducing perceptions of injustice among members of disadvantaged groups, ultimately leading to their demobilisation.[118] Future research will be needed to determine how positive and negative contact interact over time and the joint outcomes they produce, as well as to investigate factors that may prevent the demobilising effects of contact among disadvantaged groups.

In conclusion, social cohesion plays a pivotal role in fostering environments conducive to reconciliation in post-conflict societies. Specific contact-based interventions may not suffice to boost social cohesion, particularly in spatially segregated societies with minimal intergroup interactions. Fostering broader social cohesion poses significant challenges, necessitating a systemic approach to mitigate intergroup threat and cultivate inclusive public spaces that facilitate meaningful interactions between members of different groups within everyday settings. Enhanced social cohesion will, in turn, bolster social capital, as we will explore further below.

115 Sabina Cehajic-Clancy et al., "Context-Level Contact as a Stronger Predictor of Inter-Ethnic Reconciliation than Individual-Level Contact: Evidence from Post-War Countries," [Working Paper] (2023), https://osf.io/preprints/osf/skz5v_v1.

116 Fiona K. Barlow et al., "The Contact Caveat: Negative Contact Predicts Increased Prejudice More Than Positive Contact Predicts Reduced Prejudice," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 38, no. 12 (2012): 1629–1643; Stefania Paolini et al., "Negative Intergroup Contact Makes Group Memberships Salient: Explaining Why Intergroup Conflict Endures," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 36, no. 12 (2010): 1723–1738.

117 Sarina J. Schäfer et al., "Does Negative Contact Undermine Attempts to Improve Intergroup Relations? Deepening the Understanding of Negative Contact and Its Consequences for Intergroup Contact Research and Interventions," *Journal of Social Issues* 77, no. 1 (2021): 197–216.

118 Tabea Hässler et al., "A Large-Scale Test of the Link between Intergroup Contact and Support for Social Change," *Nature Human Behaviour* 4, no. 4 (2020): 380–386. See also Stephen C. Wright and Micha E. Lubensky, "The Struggle for Social Equality: Collective Action Versus Prejudice Reduction," in *Intergroup Misunderstandings: Impact of Divergent Social Realities*, eds. Stéphanie Demoulin, Jacques-Philippe Leyens, and John F. Dovidio (Psychology Press, 2009), 291–310; Dovidio et al., "Included but Invisible," 6–46.

Social Capital

Beyond social psychology, scholars from other disciplines such as political science and sociology discuss the importance of social capital for the resolution of intergroup conflicts. Social cohesion and social capital are two interconnected concepts which contribute to the well-being of societies by promoting cooperation, trust and collective action. Whereas social cohesion captures the degree of connectedness and solidarity among individuals within a society, social capital refers to the features of social organisation – such as social networks, interpersonal trust and norms of mutual aid – that act as resources for individuals and facilitate mutually beneficial cooperation and collective action.[119] Social cohesion and social capital reinforce each other. High levels of social cohesion lead individuals to engage in more social interactions and community activities which, in turn, contribute to the development of shared resources. At the same time, social capital provides resources that make it easier to trust others and that help communities overcome challenges, fostering social cohesion.

Putnam differentiates between bonding and bridging social capital.[120] Bonding social capital brings people from the same group together and strengthens identity, whereas bridging social capital blurs social divisions and exists in the ties which link people with heterogenous backgrounds. Intergroup conflicts may have opposite effects on these two types of social capital, increasing bonding social capital (within the group) but reducing bridging social capital (between groups). In societies characterised by high bonding but low bridging social capital, groups usually adopt ethnocentric beliefs which are instrumental to justify the exclusion of different others or even sectarian violence.[121] Based on the analysis of different conflicts (such as the Rwandan and Cambodian genocides), Colletta and Cullen proposed that a decline in bridging social capital destroys trust, as well as the norms and values that underlie cooperation, which may precipitate the outbreak of violence.[122] Thus, although social capital is usually an asset for peacebuilding and reconciliation processes,[123] it can facilitate intergroup violence under certain circumstances, that is, when it becomes exclusive and leads to the formation of closed groups which isolate themselves from wider society and foster extremist ideologies.

Reconciliation processes often include structured intervention programmes which bring together war victims with perpetrators, based on the idea that discussing grievances helps to restore social ties and build bridging social capital. However, there is scarce empirical evidence about the psychological effects that this approach entails for the victims. A randomised control trial of a reconciliation process in

119 Kimberly Lochner et al., "Social Capital: A Guide to Its Measurement," *Health & Place* 5, no. 4 (1999): 259–270. See also Robert D. Putnam, "The Prosperous Community: Social Capital and Public Life," *American Prospect* 4 (1993): 35–42.

120 Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (Simon and Schuster, 2000), 23.

121 Nevin T. Aiken, "Post-Conflict Peacebuilding and the Politics of Identity: Insights for Restoration and Reconciliation in Transitional Justice," *Peace Research* 40, no. 2 (2008): 9–38.

122 Nat Colletta and Michelle Cullen, *Violent Conflict and the Transformation of Social Capital: Lessons from Cambodia, Rwanda, Guatemala and Somalia* (World Bank, 2000), 13.

123 Ashutosh Varshney, "Ethnic Conflict and Civil Society: India and Beyond," *World Politics* 53, no. 3 (2001): 362–398.

Sierra Leone, which involved 2,383 participants across 200 villages, indicated that this approach led to greater forgiveness of perpetrators and increased social capital.[124] However, the reconciliation treatment also increased depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder in these villages among both victims and perpetrators, nine and 31 months after the intervention. It seems that reconciliation attempts aimed at increasing social capital and cohesion can promote societal healing but at a substantial cost to individual psychological health. As Cilliers and colleagues suggest, combining reconciliation programmes with counselling might help mitigate the individual psychological costs while retaining the societal benefits.[125]

Social capital is pivotal in rebuilding trust and fostering cooperation between individuals and groups that have been in conflict. Reconciliation efforts frequently incorporate strategies to cultivate bridging social capital, such as organised dialogues and community initiatives. However, these endeavours can impose psychological strains on participants, particularly when they involve interaction with perpetrators of violence. Thus, fostering bridging social capital necessitates a multidisciplinary approach which prioritises the psychological well-being of all involved. Fostering social capital will additionally enhance community efficacy, which we will now discuss as the final aspect of this review.

124 Jacobus Cilliers et al., "Reconciling After Civil Conflict Increases Social Capital but Decreases Individual Well-Being," *Science* 352, no. 6287 (2016): 787–794.
125 Cilliers et al., "Reconciling After Civil Conflict." 787–794.

Collective Community Efficacy

The perceived efficacy of one's own group to improve its situation through collective effort is one of the most important determinants of engagement in collective action cross-culturally.[126] The subjective experience of collective efficacy induces strong feelings of power and stimulates confidence in the group's ability to transform reality,[127] which in turn increases motivation to cooperate with other group members to achieve shared goals.[128] Collective efficacy is strongly linked to social identities; those individuals who strongly identify with their group tend to perceive high collective efficacy to attain positive changes.[129] Furthermore, identification with one's group influences the assessment that people make of their collective efficacy to achieve the desired results, so that those who identify more with the group can consider as a success what those who are less identified see as a failure.[130]

Community efficacy has two components: informal social control and social cohesion.[131] Social control refers to the capacity of a community to regulate, support and supervise its members so that they cooperate for the common good, whereas social cohesion refers to the strength of relationships and solidarity among its members. In a study conducted in the USA, Sampson and colleagues found that neighbourhood efficacy was negatively related to violence when controlling for individual factors and prior violence.[132] That is, heightened collective efficacy within neighbourhoods was associated with diminished perceptions among residents regarding the prevalence of violence and their susceptibility to violent attacks within their community, and with a reduction in the neighbourhood's homicide rate. Additional research conducted in the USA suggests that communities that live with violence show lower levels of collective efficacy, whereas building community efficacy can help prevent neighbourhood violence and negative health outcomes.[133]

Perceived community efficacy is considered a key aspect of the psychosocial interventions that are implemented in contexts of mass violence or disasters. Hobfoll and colleagues brought together a panel of experts who identified collective efficacy as one of the key principles that should guide psychosocial interventions in situations of violence.[134] However, these authors warn that the promotion of a sense of community efficacy must necessarily be accompanied by

126 Agostini and van Zomeren, "Toward a Comprehensive," 667.
127 John Drury and Steve Reicher, "Explaining Enduring Empowerment: A Comparative Study of Collective Action and Psychological Outcomes," *European Journal of Social Psychology* 35, no. 1 (2005): 35–58.
128 Mathew J. Hornsey et al., "Why Do People Engage in Collective Action? Revisiting the Role of Perceived Effectiveness," *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 36, no. 7 (2006): 1701–1722.
129 Agostini and van Zomeren, "Toward a Comprehensive," 667.
130 Leda M. Blackwood and Winnifred R. Louis, "If It Matters for the Group Then It Matters to Me: Collective Action Outcomes for Seasoned Activists," *British Journal of Social Psychology* 51, no. 1 (2012): 72–92.
131 Robert J. Sampson, "Neighborhoods and Violent Crime: A Multilevel Study of Collective Efficacy," *Science* 277 (1997): 918–924.
132 Sampson, "Neighborhoods and Violent Crime," 918–924.
133 Daniel T. O'Brien et al., "Ecometrics in the Age of Big Data: Measuring and Assessing 'Broken Windows' Using Large-Scale Administrative Records," *Sociological Methodology* 45, no. 1 (2015): 101–147. See also Mary L. Ohmer et al., "Preventing Violence in Disadvantaged Communities: Strategies for Building Collective Efficacy and Improving Community Health," *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment* 26, nos. 7–8 (2016): 608–621.
134 Stevan E. Hobfoll et al., "Five Essential Elements of Immediate and Mid–Term Mass Trauma Intervention: Empirical Evidence," *Psychiatry* 70, no. 4 (2007): 283–315.

social and economic resources. Otherwise, the inability to act on those efficacy beliefs due to resource constraints can be demoralising for victims and hinder the effectiveness of interventions.

Restoring collective efficacy could also be crucial for the success of reconciliation processes after intergroup conflict, particularly among victimised groups. Nadler and Shnabel proposed that during reconciliation processes, the other group continues to pose a threat to the positive identity of the in-group.[135] The alleviation of this sense of threat is crucial for successful reconciliation. The needs-based model suggests that after intergroup violence, victimised groups wish to satisfy their need for agency (that is, efficacy and control), whereas perpetrator groups wish to satisfy their need for communion (that is, moral image).[136]

According to Nadler and Shnabel, an optimal process of reconciliation consists of an exchange in which the perpetrator group empowers the victim group (for example, by acknowledging its collective efficacy and value), and the victim group gives moral-social acceptance of the perpetrator (for example, by forgiving or understanding its perspective).[137] Evidence obtained in different contexts shows that victimised groups are more willing to reconcile following a message of empowerment from the perpetrating group than following a message of acceptance, whereas perpetrating groups are more willing to reconcile following a message of acceptance from the victimised group than following a message of empowerment.[138]

In sum, the evidence indicates that collective efficacy is a precursor to collective action, is linked to a reduction in violence, and can contribute to reconciliation processes by empowering victimised groups. However, in contexts of continuing violence, collective efficacy can have detrimental, unintended consequences for intergroup relations. For instance, in two field experiments in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, Bilali and Staub found that mass media interventions based on role-modelling (showing fictional characters discussing community problems and planning collective action to address them) increased perceived collective efficacy and action tendencies but also negative intergroup attitudes.[139] These researchers conclude that in contexts of continued violence, increasing perceived collective efficacy and action could promote identification with the less inclusive group and reinforce intergroup barriers.

135 Nadler and Shnabel, "Intergroup Reconciliation," 93–125.
136 Arie Nadler and Nurit Shnabel, "Instrumental and Socio-Emotional Inter-Group Reconciliation: The Needs Based Model of Reconciliation," in *Social Psychology of Inter-Group Reconciliation*, eds. Arie Nadler, Thomas Maloy, and Jeffrey D. Fisher (Oxford University Press, 2008), 37–56.
137 Nadler and Shnabel, "Intergroup Reconciliation," 93–125.
138 Nurit Shnabel et al., "Promoting Reconciliation Through the Satisfaction of the Emotional Needs of Victimized and Perpetrating Group Members: The Needs-Based Model of Reconciliation," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 35, no. 8 (2009): 1021–1030.
139 Rezarta Bilali and Ervin Staub, "Interventions in Real-World Settings: Using Media to Overcome Prejudice and Promote Intergroup Reconciliation in Central Africa," in *The Cambridge Handbook of the Psychology of* Prejudice, eds. Chris G. Sibley and Fiona K. Barlow (Cambridge University Press, 2017), 607–631.

Conclusions

Social identity, intergroup emotions, social belonging, social cohesion, social capital, and collective efficacy all play significant roles in shaping extremism and the willingness to engage in forgiveness and reconciliation. These factors are not uniform in their influence on conflict resolution. Depending on social, political, economic or historical contexts, these factors can either be an asset or an obstacle to reconciliation and the construction of more just societies.

For instance, social identities might exacerbate conflict when they are exclusionary (for example, based on ethnic criteria), but can be part of the solution if we succeed in creating superordinate identities that encompass members of formerly opposing groups, or dual identities that integrate harmoniously different social categorisations. Likewise, identity fusion can drive extreme intergroup behaviour when the out-group is perceived as threatening, yet, in neutral conditions, might foster intergroup trust and positive attitudes.

Emotion regulation is also intricately tied to the specific context. For instance, addressing intergroup anxiety is key when the goal is to facilitate dialogue between conflicting parties regarding past events. However, if there is a need for a perpetrator group to offer apologies, addressing feelings of guilt becomes paramount. Social belonging can either fuel or restrain extremism, depending on the values upheld by the groups to which individuals belong. Effective strategies aimed at nurturing social cohesion must consider both the frequency and nature of intergroup contact in each case. In highly segregated societies, individual interventions reliant solely on contact may yield limited outcomes. While social capital typically supports peacebuilding and reconciliation, an overemphasis on bonding social capital through interconnected groups can also fuel intergroup violence when this comes at the expense of bridging social capital. This may instead create closed, isolated groups which promote extremist ideologies. Finally, collective efficacy can be used in prosocial ways in reconciliation processes, but may also inspire coordinated attacks against members of other groups, depending on the context.

In conclusion, the choice of strategies to apply in intervention programmes and reconciliation processes cannot be taken in a socio-historical vacuum, but must be grounded in the broader context (such as historical grievances, power dynamics, socioeconomic conditions and cultural norms) and the phase of the conflict. This involves, for example, understanding how the socio-historical context shapes social identities that influence perceptions of other groups and the conflict itself, generating specific emotions that affect both the trajectory of the conflict and the prospects for reconciliation. It also requires assessing the nature of intergroup relations, the level of interdependence, and frequency of contact between the groups to determine whether efforts should focus on strengthening bonding social capital, bridging social capital or both. Additionally, it is essential to evaluate whether the available social and economic resources

are sufficient to ensure that initiatives aimed at enhancing collective efficacy are experienced as empowering rather than demoralising.

Moreover, the effectiveness of intervention strategies must be continually reassessed; actions required in the early phases of peacebuilding may lose relevance as time progresses, while other strategies that might initially be rejected by the target populations can be helpful once trust between groups has been developed and begins to take root. Social-psychological interventions aimed at intergroup reconciliation have the potential to transform people's perceptions of the conflict and opposing groups, thereby reducing negative emotional barriers that hinder cooperation. This shift can foster positive intergroup affect, making individuals more open to embracing alternative superordinate identities, enhancing social cohesion, building bridging social capital, and supporting initiatives that promote collective efficacy. Consequently, ongoing evaluation of key psychosocial constructs – such as social identity, group-based emotions, social capital and cohesion – is essential to develop evidence-based interventions that are both sensitive to the context and appropriate to the phase of the peacebuilding process.

CENTRE FOR STATECRAFT
& NATIONAL SECURITY

KING'S COLLEGE LONDON

CONTACT DETAILS

For questions and queries, please contact:

Centre for Statecraft and National Security
King's College London
Strand
London WC2R 2LS
United Kingdom

mail@csns.uk

Like all other CSNS publications, this report can be downloaded free of charge at **www.csns.uk**.