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# Dangerous Ideas

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## *Five Beliefs That Propel Groups Toward Conflict*

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*The toll in death, suffering, and displacement caused by conflicts engaging groups defined by ethnicity, nationality, religion, or other social identities has reached staggering proportions over the past decade. With expertise in research and intervention, psychologists have critical contributions to make to more fully understanding and more effectively confronting this distressing global phenomenon. The authors focus on the parallels between the core beliefs of individuals and the collective worldviews of groups that may operate to trigger or constrain violent struggles. On the basis of a review of relevant literatures, 5 belief domains—superiority, injustice, vulnerability, distrust, and helplessness—are identified as particularly important for further study.*

**T**he toll in death, suffering, and displacement caused by large-scale conflicts engaging groups defined by ethnicity, nationality, religion, or other social identities has reached truly staggering proportions as humanity enters the 21st century. Regrettably, recent events in this country and around the globe clearly point toward continuing massive bloodshed, terror, and related horrors spilling over unabated into the years immediately ahead. Although efforts to understand and combat this tragic worldwide phenomenon have come from many directions, psychologists and social scientists in related disciplines—with combined expertise in research and intervention—have critical contributions to make. Indeed, because the timing and magnitude of violent outbreaks so frequently defy the cold logic of historical fact and interest-based calculations, these intergroup hostilities provide especially fertile ground for the application of psychological analyses.

This article offers one such analysis, an investigation of the important roles that beliefs may play in triggering or constraining conflict between groups. More specifically, we examine parallels between the core beliefs individuals hold about their personal worlds and the collective worldviews of groups. Despite important differences, at both levels, deeply entrenched patterns for understanding and interpreting events appear to govern emotions and behaviors that may ultimately prove problematic or destructive. As Keltner and Robinson (1996) have written, “There is perhaps no more dangerous force in social relations than the human mind. People’s capacities to categorize, interpret, and go ‘beyond the information given’ readily lead to the stereotyping and dehumanization that escalate and entrench

group conflict” (p. 101). On the basis of a review of relevant literatures, five belief domains—superiority, injustice, vulnerability, distrust, and helplessness—stand out as especially noteworthy, and each is considered in turn. Although the focus and examples offered here revolve around ethnopolitical conflicts broadly construed, the issues raised have relevance for common-identity groups more generally (Prentice, Miller, & Lightdale, 1994).

### **Individual-Level and Group-Level Beliefs**

Psychologists, psychiatrists, and cognitive scientists have made significant theoretical and empirical advances in understanding how individuals make sense of their worlds. Much of the time, people use stable cognitive templates that produce regularities in expectations and interpretations of events. Many of these organizing beliefs about the self, the environment, and the future are formed relatively early in life and serve a useful purpose (Beck, 1976). Yet there is considerable evidence that habitual modes of perceiving and thinking can pose problems as well. An individual can experience significant and lasting adjustment difficulties when his or her deeply held beliefs contain key distortions or dysfunctional biases. Furthermore, these core beliefs are self-perpetuating. Unless dramatically challenged, data and feedback discrepant with a core belief typically either escape notice altogether or undergo reframing to be consistent with preconceptions. The end result can be significant impairment and restriction in the individual’s daily functioning. Of particular relevance here are the conceptualiza-

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tions and interventions that have emerged within the field of cognitive-behavioral therapy (see, e.g., Beck, 1979; Burns, 1980). These approaches have gained considerable recognition because they have yielded noteworthy advances in the treatment of a variety of psychological problems including depression and anxiety (DeRubeis, Gelfand, Tang, & Simons, 1999), personality disorders (e.g., Young, 1999), trauma (Follette, Ruzek, & Abueg, 1998), and marital conflict (Baucom & Epstein, 1990).

In contrast to core beliefs an individual holds about his or her personal world, collective core beliefs or group worldviews are the templates through which groups and group members interpret their shared experience. Such beliefs are an essential component of group culture. For example, Triandis (1996) has observed that there exists a general consensus among researchers that culture is reflected in “shared cognitions, standard operating procedures, and unexamined assumptions” (p. 407). Similarly, Kearney (1984) has referred to a collective worldview as “culturally organized macrothought: those dynamically inter-related basic assumptions of a people that determine much of their behavior and decision making” (p. 1).

Theory and research bearing on collective beliefs have largely developed independent of individual-level conceptualizations. Early work by Durkheim (1933) on collective representations and by Moscovici (1988) on social representations has been followed by more recent investigations of socially shared cognitions (see Thompson & Fine, 1999, for a review). Bar-Tal (1990, 2000) has emphasized that the beliefs group members share with each other can define the group’s very essence. He attributed the source of these shared beliefs—usually viewed as basic truths and therefore held with great conviction—to the similar experiences and elaborate socialization processes of the group mem-

bers. Psychocultural interpretation theory (M. H. Ross, 1995, 1997) and psychoanalytically based writings (e.g., Volkan, 1997) have also underscored the idea that collective templates for understanding the world emerge from culturally determined common experiences and shared frames of reference, with dynamics often operating at levels beneath full consciousness. An important related conceptualization is Lustick’s (1993) analysis of beliefs that have gained hegemonic status within a community, meaning that they enjoy a presumption of truth and cease to be routinely evaluated by the group.

The destructive role that a group’s shared beliefs can play in its relationships with other groups has received attention from a diverse group of scholars. For example, Kelman (1987, 1990, 1997) has long emphasized the influence of collective needs and fears regarding identity, security, and justice in driving intergroup conflicts. Staub (1989) has argued that conflict-engendering miscalculations become more likely when reliance on worldviews replaces objective reality as the basis for judging the intentions and behaviors of others. More generally, Brewer and Miller (1996) have observed that political psychologists as a group tend to see warfare as the result of “cognitive biases and belief systems that limit our capacity for international trust and cooperation” (p. 137). Finally, Beck (1999) has also recently examined collective illusions and their relationship to group hostility and violence.

## **Five Belief Domains**

With this overview as background, an examination of five specific belief domains follows—namely, superiority, injustice, vulnerability, distrust, and helplessness. For each domain, a brief summary of its individual-level manifestations is followed by a fuller discussion of group-level representations. These five domains were selected on the basis of a review of relevant literatures (e.g., in psychology, political science, sociology, etc.) and discussions with expert practitioners and scholars in these fields. Our specific interest was to identify beliefs directly relevant to distress or conflict at both the individual and group levels.

This focus on beliefs held both by individuals and by groups was based on several considerations. Foremost, by demonstrating sufficient breadth to encompass the intrapersonal and collective realms, these joint belief domains can serve as important bridges for better understanding key connections between individual psychology and group processes, especially as they bear on the dynamics underlying intergroup conflict. Indeed, whether they appear as convergent influences or discordant stimuli, pairings of individual-level core beliefs and collective worldviews are likely to contribute significantly to the formation and subsequent shaping of a group member’s own personal convictions about the group to which he or she belongs. Of particular concern in this context are the ways in which the intersection of joint belief domains may affect the individual member’s identification with the group and his or her readiness to take action on its behalf. Although we do not claim that the five domains discussed here fully represent the universe of relevant beliefs, we do think that they cover a significant

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amount of the pertinent territory. We also think that other beliefs of interest are likely to be linked to one or more of these domains.

As a final preliminary point, it is substantially less clear what *dysfunctional* means in the context of a group's worldviews than in reference to an individual's core beliefs. Furthermore, because of their potentially profound adverse impact on individuals and other groups, it is unavoidable that an assessment of group mindsets will include normative considerations. International and cross-cultural issues of morality and justice are inherently complex (Barkan, 2000), so disagreements about these judgments are inevitable as well. This said, in the discussion that follows, we have in mind the following three criteria for evaluating specific group worldviews: the promotion of peace and stability, the preservation of individual rights and freedoms, and the promotion of justice between groups (Kymlicka, 1999). Such criteria enable us to avoid, at least in part, the pitfalls of moral relativism whereby standards are culturally bounded and grounded in social custom only.

### **Superiority**

**Individual-level core belief.** This core belief revolves around a person's enduring conviction that he or she is better than other people in important ways (Millon & Davis, 2000; Young, 1999). The cluster of attitudes commonly associated with this belief includes a sense of specialness, deservingness, and entitlement. In a narcissistic manner, such an individual sees many societal rules as personally irrelevant because his or her own thoughts, feelings, and experiences are deemed to merit privileged status. In clinical practice, people who hold this superiority core belief tend to have difficulty getting along with others,

in part because they lack the empathy or inclination to understand the viewpoints and experiences of those around them. This belief is also inconsistent with a willingness to compromise. Settling for less than what one wants or might obtain is considered unacceptable in light of the presumptions with which this individual enters relationships. Additional interpersonal problems are created by the tendency to judge others harshly, especially when they fail to act in accord with one's inflated self-image.

**Group-level worldview.** Many of these elements are also present in the superiority worldview at the group level. This worldview encompasses shared convictions of moral superiority, chosenness, entitlement, and special destiny. Aspects of this group-level belief were described a century ago by Sumner (1906) as ethnocentrism. In their later elaboration of the concept, LeVine and Campbell (1972) discussed "the self-centered scaling of all values in terms of the ingroup folkways" (pp. 8–9) and the corresponding view of the out-group as contemptible, immoral, and inferior. More recently, several joint working committees of the American Psychological Association have identified "Belief in the superiority of one group's cultural heritage (history, values, language, traditions, arts and crafts, etc.) over another's" as a defining characteristic of the phenomenon they termed *ethnocentric monoculturalism* (Sue, Bingham, Porche-Burke, & Vasquez, 1999, p. 1065). Although it is essential to recognize the conflict-engendering potential of such in-group bias, it is equally important to acknowledge that one group's values may in fact conform more closely to widely accepted standards than another's (e.g., in reference to human rights).

Chosenness appears to be an especially important component of this collective superiority worldview, and it is quite common among ethnically based identity groups. Indeed, Weber (1997) has suggested that the notion of chosen peoples is a natural and perhaps inherent feature of ethnic diversity. He offered as one explanation for its pervasiveness the fact that any group can present evidence to support claims of chosenness or moral superiority. Thus, one group can explain, legitimize, and ruthlessly enforce its status advantages on the basis of these convictions (see, e.g., Sidanius, 1993), whereas another group can be convinced that its own relative deprivation is temporary and inappropriate for the very same reasons. In the latter case, once external constraints have been overcome, efforts to rectify the situation can proceed apace. The development of Hitler's ideology of Aryans as a master race deserving and destined to achieve their rightful rule over other peoples of the world is a chilling example (Gonen, 2000). Related here as well are collective efforts to prevent the in-group's moral purity from being polluted. In some cases, these contamination-prevention strategies have taken the form of rigid hierarchical divisions within a society, as in Hindu caste systems. In other cases, however, the manifestations have been violent and bloody, as in various wars of religion throughout history, more recent campaigns of ethnic cleansing, and the actions of certain fundamentalist groups today (Moore, 2000).

An unwavering and exaggerated sense of group enti-



tlement, often applied to critically scarce resources, is a common manifestation of perceived chooseness. Conflicting views regarding claims to territory or status often produce tensions that jeopardize peaceful intergroup relations. In this regard, van Evera (1997) has identified self-glorifying myths incorporating claims of special virtue as among the potent impetuses toward perceived entitlement, including the presumption of rulership. Evidence of chooseness and entitlement is often found in a selective recounting of a group's history. Volkan (1999) used the term *chosen glories* to describe "ritualistic recollections of events and heroes whose mental representations include a shared feeling of success and triumph among group members" (p. 45). Even when the objective historical record fails to provide supporting documentation for such accounts, embellished narratives of accomplishments are readily created and then transmitted from one generation to the next, often by word of mouth. This mythical and heroic past, which often demonizes other groups, is thereafter available for political entrepreneurs to call on in their efforts to mobilize support for a nationalist agenda (M. E. Brown, 1997; Crawford, 1998).

Beyond the readily apparent negative consequences for out-groups, a collective superiority mindset also poses less obvious dangers for the in-group itself. Unquestioned assumptions of invincibility and overly optimistic calculations of military success on the part of group leaders (Tetlock, 1998; van Evera, 1997) can lead to overstepping readily measured in unnecessary casualties. Notions of superiority and entitlement also frequently create obstacles to constructive compromise between opposing ethnic groups (Crawford, 1998). Moreover, even in a postconflict environment, a superiority worldview held by one side or the other (or both) can interfere with the expressions of apology and forgiveness that might otherwise contribute to achieving a lasting reconciliation.

## **Injustice**

**Individual-level core belief.** This core belief revolves around perceived mistreatment by specific others or by the world at large. Although actual experiences of victimization are commonplace for all too many, this mindset can lead the individual to identify as unfair that which is merely unfortunate (Ellis, 1962; Ellis & Harper, 1975) and to thereby inappropriately engage in retaliatory acts. In clinical practice, it is not unusual for people to seek counseling at least in part because of distress associated with grievances they hold toward those whom they see as having disappointed, betrayed, or mistreated them. For some, the ill treatment becomes a debilitating and immobilizing preoccupation. For others, the recognition that life is not always fair and that they have little choice but to play the hand they were dealt enables them to focus on taking responsibility for their own future. For example, in her discussion of the treatment of trauma survivors, Janoff-Bulman (1992) concluded that it is one's ability to construct a new personal narrative affording a sense of safety in the future—not simply the magnitude of the trauma itself—that predicts psychological recovery.

**Group-level worldview.** The injustice worldview reflects the in-group's conviction that it has significant and legitimate grievances against another group. This mindset can mobilize powerful and violent collective insurgencies (Staub 1989; Tetlock, 1998; van Evera, 1997), especially because shared perceptions of injustice typically heighten the identification and allegiance that individuals feel toward their group (Brewer & Brown, 1998). Furthermore, these assessments of mistreatment are particularly common across cultural divides because different cultures tend to have different definitions for what constitutes justice and different norms for how it should be achieved (Leung & Stephan, 1998). Indeed, Welch (1993) has concluded that the overriding impetus to war over the past two centuries has centered on issues of justice rather than security or power.

Group grievances are often based on the belief that in-group members receive substandard outcomes not due to their own inadequacies but because some other more powerful out-group has created a biased or rigged political system in which officeholders bestow disproportionate benefits on their own ethnic group (Horowitz, 1985). The collective injustice worldview is also frequently linked to a historical perspective that emphasizes past episodes or periods of mistreatment and exploitation at the hands of others. In this context, Volkan (1999) has highlighted the importance of *chosen traumas*. The term refers to the "mental representation of an event that has caused a large group to face drastic losses, feel helpless and victimized by another group, and share a humiliating injury" (Volkan, 1999, p. 46). These perceptions of history need not be veridical; as discussed earlier, they often contain subjective distortions that include both self-whitewashing and other-maligning myths (van Evera, 1997). Indeed, it is not uncommon for both sides to a conflict to hold contradictory, mirror-image views of their past relationship, each highlighting its grievances against the other. M. E. Brown (1997) has offered the following example: "Serbs . . . see themselves as heroic defenders of Europe and they see Croats as belligerent thugs; Croats see themselves as valiant victims of oppression and Serbs as congenital oppressors" (pp. 87–88).

Leaders often play an important role in promoting a group's adoption of the injustice worldview. An effective leader can persuade group members that their current situation is not only unjust but also intolerable—and that change, perhaps even violent change, is necessary (Homer-Dixon, 1999). Indeed, rhetorical appeals to action tend to be especially effective when they successfully engage issues of innocence and victimization (Stern, 1995). A shared injustice belief may be critical for social movements because this framework defines a problem and identifies a specific adversary responsible for the difficulties facing the group (Gamson, 1995). Additionally, political entrepreneurs can direct the in-group's perceptions regarding who is at fault so that injustices are attributed to a particular out-group or to specific state mechanisms. Of course, those deemed blameworthy are not without recourse of their own. The opposition can alter this frame if it succeeds in

either redirecting the group's hostility toward a different target or providing explanations for circumstances that do not depend on anyone's wrongdoing.

## **Vulnerability**

**Individual-level core belief.** The vulnerability core belief revolves around a person's conviction that he or she is perpetually living in harm's way. Beck, Emery, and Greenberg (1985) have defined vulnerability as "a person's perception of himself as subject to internal or external dangers over which his control is lacking or is insufficient to afford him a sense of safety" (p. 67). These perceptions typically produce high levels of anxiety. Although anxiety in the face of actual danger can be quite adaptive, individuals governed by an exaggerated sense of their own vulnerability often tend to overestimate the risks they are facing. In clinical practice, people whose lives are dominated by their fears frequently bring about the very outcomes they seek to avoid. Such individuals become hypervigilant, investing time and effort in bracing themselves for failure, rejection, injury, or loss—to the detriment of their overall quality of life.

Individuals who demonstrate persistent fears and worries about their prospects often engage in "catastrophic thinking" based on their idiosyncratic assessment of how dangerous the world is and how weak and unprotected they are (Beck et al., 1985; Burns, 1999; Ellis, 1962). A standard part of this cognitive pattern is an exaggerated expectation that, regardless of prevailing conditions, sooner or later circumstances will deteriorate precipitously. When people catastrophize, they draw extremely negative and unsubstantiated inferences about the future based on little or no information. Often, the situation under consideration is actually quite ambiguous. Nevertheless, the catastrophizer selectively focuses on the possible disastrous outcomes and may even behave as if his or her dire fate has already been sealed.

**Group-level worldview.** Important parallels to this individual-level core belief are present in a collective vulnerability worldview that again appears to be widespread among ethnic groups. According to Lake and Rothchild (1998), fears about the future are in fact the most common cause of ethnic conflicts and often produce spiraling violence. When issues of real or perceived threat absorb an entire group, the vulnerability worldview has the potential to govern significant aspects of the group's internal life and its relations with other groups. Perception of threat can focus group behavior in specific directions that include hostility to the source of threat, heightened in-group solidarity and ethnocentrism, and tightening of group boundaries (LeVine & Campbell, 1972).

Specific examples of the vulnerability worldview are not hard to find. For instance, in his analysis of the Middle East conflict, Kelman (1999) has highlighted the central role of both Israeli and Palestinian perceptions of pervasive vulnerability. For each side, this worldview has turned territorial issues into a fundamental matter of survival. A similar mirroring of vulnerability has characterized the relationship and animosity between Protestants and Cath-

olics in Northern Ireland, with each group seeing itself as a threatened minority (M. H. Ross, 1995). Not surprisingly, minority groups within a country sometimes attempt to address their fears—and often a concomitant sense of alienation—by seeking a state of their own. As one instance, Seneviratne and Stavropoulou (1998) have suggested that the Sri Lankan Tamil community's ongoing marginalization and the lack of accommodation to their protection demands contributed to the formation of the separatist Tamil United Liberation Front.

One particularly problematic aspect of the collective vulnerability worldview is the impetus it can provide for a group to act aggressively in an effort to preemptively ensure its own safety. When the dynamic takes the form of the prototypical security dilemma (Jervis, 1976, 1978), both sides, driven by uncertainty over each other's motives, ultimately and unintentionally weaken their own security by engaging in an escalating arms race that expends precious resources for naught. Typically, these models have been applied to interstate relations with a focus on protecting territory and sovereignty through military buildup. More recently, however, analysts have turned their attention to the dilemma posed by the maneuvering of vulnerable intrastate groups (Posen, 1993; Roe, 1999). In this context, the intensification of protective and divisive ethnic identities and attachments can substitute for the increasing armaments in the international arena.

As with individuals, an important manifestation of the vulnerability worldview is catastrophic thinking in which a group's imagined worst case scenarios take on the inexorable logic of inevitability. This tendency may originate in a group's real or perceived history of misery and devastation, including traumatic experiences as the victims of genocidal initiatives. In his discussion of ethnic conflict, Horowitz (1985) concluded that "reactions out of all proportion to the threat that arouses them and the singularly pessimistic concern about what seemingly insignificant present circumstances portend" (p. 131) are clearly suggestive of psychological roots to group antagonisms. He noted as well that in extreme cases, every issue can be interpreted as bearing directly on the group's literal survival and that elaborate preparations to forestall a dire but dimly perceived future can become all-important. Similarly, Chirot (2001) has observed that those who orchestrated the genocidal horrors in Armenia, Germany, Cambodia, and Rwanda shared in common "a mortal fear that if they did not destroy their real or imagined enemies first, they would themselves be annihilated" (p. 10).

It is important to recognize that a collective vulnerability worldview need not find expression only in exaggerated fears of subjugation or annihilation. For some groups, more subtle threats loom larger. Under certain conditions, concerns over assimilation and the loss of group distinctiveness may predominate (Brewer, 1991). Although assimilation into the larger culture can provide a variety of benefits to a minority group disadvantaged by its current status, the transition may require relinquishing a strong group identity and abandoning deeply cherished traditions, rituals, and intragroup connections and markers such as

language. A perceived threat to group distinctiveness may be combated by intentional efforts directed toward greater separation, including responses that ignite or reawaken animosities between groups. Militant extremists, for instance, may disrupt movements toward accommodation between more moderate representatives of contending groups (Mulvihill, Ross, & Schermer, 1995).

## **Distrust**

**Individual-level core belief.** On the individual level, this core belief focuses on the presumed hostility and malign intent of others. The critical role played by issues of trust in individual psychological development has long been recognized. Erikson (1950) described trust versus mistrust as the first challenge of psychosocial development, and Bowlby (1973) delineated the key relationship between trust and healthy attachment. In his compilation of early maladaptive schemas, Young (1999) offered a useful listing of manifestations of distrust in personal relationships: "The expectation that others will hurt, abuse, humiliate, cheat, lie, manipulate, or take advantage. Usually involves the perception that the harm is intentional or the result of unjustified and extreme negligence" (p. 12). At the extreme, the distrust core belief is transformed from a predisposition toward suspicion into outright paranoia with delusions of persecution.

From a clinical perspective, the distrust core belief often poses significant obstacles in the interpersonal realm. A realistic awareness that people do not always have positive intentions frequently serves as a useful protective device. The pervasive tendency to interpret others' behavior suspiciously is problematic, however, because this form of overgeneralization interferes with the individual's ability to distinguish between persons and situations where trust is appropriate and those where it is not. A personal history that includes incidents where faith in others proved to be misplaced can color all subsequent interactions and expectations. People who consistently assume the worst about the intentions of others prevent truly collaborative relationships from developing.

**Group-level worldview.** As an extension of this individual-level core belief to larger groups, the distrust worldview focuses specifically on perceptions of outgroups and revolves around beliefs that the other is untrustworthy and harbors malign intentions toward the in-group. This collective mindset is sufficiently widespread that *dishonest* and *untrustworthy* are considered to be central elements in the universal stereotype of outgroups (Campbell, 1967; LeVine & Campbell, 1972). In its more extreme manifestations, the distrust worldview is similar to collective paranoia, which Kramer and Messick (1998) have defined as "collectively held beliefs, either false or exaggerated, that cluster around ideas of being harassed, threatened, harmed, subjugated, persecuted, accused, mistreated, wronged, tormented, disparaged, or vilified by a malevolent outgroup or outgroups" (p. 239). Among the consequences of collective paranoia is the sinister attribution error in which individuals display a bias toward interpreting others' behavior as hostile and malevolent even when

competing explanations are available. In this regard, Insko and Schopler (1998; Schopler & Insko, 1992) have found empirical evidence for what they considered a group schema that causes groups to be significantly more distrustful of and competitive toward each other than are individuals. That is, the very same people approach their intergroup interactions differently from the way they approach one-to-one interactions.

As with the other worldviews already described, the distrust worldview may, to varying degrees, reflect an accurate and adaptive assessment of the world. For example, an in-group's suspiciousness may be derived in part either from a history of negative interactions with the out-group or from a rational recognition that others have opposing interests and are in competition for scarce resources (Hardin, 1995; Kramer & Messick, 1998). Similarly, Bar-Tal (1990) has noted that group beliefs that outsiders have malign intentions can serve the potentially constructive purpose of preparing group members for the worst and better enabling them to take decisive action in their own interest. On the other hand, intergroup relationships are likely to remain fragile even when conflicts appear to have been resolved if the disputants' deep-seated suspicions of each other still remain (Atwood, 1999; M. H. Ross, 1995).

## **Helplessness**

**Individual-level core belief.** A defining feature of a core belief in one's personal helplessness is the conviction that even carefully planned and executed actions will fail to produce desired outcomes. In some cases, the individual may perceive himself or herself as lacking the ability necessary to attain a goal. In other situations, the source of the disjuncture between effort and reward may instead be attributed to an environment where appropriate contingencies of reinforcement are absent. Regardless of the extent to which helplessness is a matter of distorted perception or objective reality, this core belief tends to be self-perpetuating because it diminishes motivation. When people believe that nothing they do will make a difference, they usually do nothing.

Helplessness has been the focus of extensive study, including the work of Seligman and colleagues on learned helplessness and depression (see, e.g., Abramson, Seligman, & Teasdale, 1978; Seligman, 1975) and pessimistic explanatory style (see, e.g., Buchanan & Seligman, 1995; Seligman, 1991) and Bandura's (1977, 1997) analyses of self-efficacy, which revealed that individuals with less belief in their capabilities tend not to try as hard or as long when pursuing goals and tend not to bounce back as resiliently when their efforts prove unproductive. Some degree of perceived helplessness is almost always present in cases of severe depression, and this self-perception must change for the individual to engage in the very activities that promote recovery.

**Group-level worldview.** The helplessness worldview describes a collective mindset of powerlessness and dependency. The extent to which a group perceives itself as helpless reflects assessments not only of its capabilities but

also of whether the environment is rich or poor in opportunities for group advancement. A shared pessimistic explanatory style restricts the group's focus to its own weaknesses, producing a negative appraisal of prospects because setbacks are attributed to the presumed lasting and pervasive internal limitations of the group itself. Horowitz (1985) has highlighted the sense of being weak and helpless that characterizes compliant groups that see themselves as being at a competitive disadvantage in relation to other groups they perceive as better along various dimensions. In this regard, in extending his work on self-efficacy to the collective realm, Bandura (1997) has emphasized that "The psychological barriers created by beliefs of collective powerlessness are especially pernicious because they are more demoralizing and debilitating than external impediments" (p. 524).

This shared perception of helplessness serves as an important constraint on organized political mobilization. An effective insurgency movement depends on the promise of some reasonable likelihood of success given the risks undertaken (Brewer & Brown, 1998; Homer-Dixon, 1999). Those who participate in a social movement must see themselves as capable through group efforts of righting the wrongs they perceive (Gamson, 1992, 1995). In the United States, the examples of both Southern Blacks prior to the 1950s and Native Americans up until the 1970s support this basic proposition (Gurr, 1993). Similarly, the Black experience in South Africa during the era of apartheid has been described as one where psychological dependency proved damaging to the people's cause (Esman, 1994).

Particularly important within the sphere of ethnopolitical conflicts are the very considerable resistances and obstacles that groups are likely to face, whether from other groups with competing interests or from an institutional structure that is firmly entrenched and unresponsive to calls for change. In authoritarian political systems, the efforts of selected groups to improve their circumstances may be met by aggressive and brutally effective retaliation, reinforcing the group's sense of powerlessness and preventing the emergence of a sense of collective efficacy. Under these conditions, subjugated groups may find the requisite inspiration and sense of possibility by observing and modeling the victories elsewhere of other groups that have collectively confronted their oppressors (Bandura, 1997). This was precisely the case in South Africa, where the success of insurrections in neighboring states, along with international responses to apartheid, enabled Blacks to no longer see themselves as helpless against an immutable White regime (Esman, 1994).

It should be emphasized that a group's perceptions regarding its collective efficacy and society's opportunity structures are potential points of contention between groups in their own right. Outsiders may judge matters quite differently from downtrodden in-group members, favoring alternative explanations for their own relative success and the status differential between them. In extending the notion of self-serving biases from individuals to groups, Pettigrew (1979) has suggested that the "ultimate attribution error" is the tendency for the in-group to see its positive

behaviors as having internal causes and its negative behaviors as having external causes, while making the opposite attributions for the behaviors of the out-group. In addition to these attributional biases, it is noteworthy that the constraining effects of low perceived collective efficacy provide an incentive for a self-interested, advantaged group to persuade another group that the latter lacks the capabilities necessary to contend for society's rewards.

## **Integration and Application**

### ***Theoretical Issues***

We have sought to establish parallels between specific core beliefs that pose problems in individual lives and corresponding collective worldviews linked to intergroup violence. Individual-level core beliefs primarily reflect and emerge from personal narratives within the circle of family and interpersonal relationships. Group-level worldviews involve collective narratives based on broader cultural understandings of in-group-out-group relationships. Both core beliefs and collective worldviews serve to create perceptual and interpretive biases that interfere with the full consideration of alternative meanings. The similar themes found at both the personal and group levels in part signal consistencies in the ways that human beings understand their worlds, whether as solitary individuals or as members of multitudes.

Although similarities have been emphasized in this article, it is important to highlight a critical difference between the core beliefs of individuals and the worldviews of groups. Inflexibility frequently characterizes core beliefs at the individual level, but collective worldviews potentially possess even greater staying power because in-group members endorse and consensually validate shared interpretations of events and experiences (Bar-Tal, 2000). So although an idiosyncratic perspective at the personal level may encounter resistance from others and lead to the individual's being labeled as deviant, in contrast, the person who adopts a distorted but broadly represented viewpoint finds considerable support from like-minded fellow group members. Indeed, group leaders are likely to emerge from among those members who are viewed as most prototypical of the group (Hogg, 2001). In sum, given the difficulty of changing personal core beliefs even in individuals eager for such transformations, the evidence that intergroup conflicts often involve corresponding collective mindsets may help to illuminate the intractability of many of these struggles.

More generally, it is important not to overreach from one level of analysis to another in comparing individual psychology and group phenomena. In particular, no reductionist argument is being made that group worldviews are merely personal beliefs writ large. Rather, the parallels are conceived here in nonhierarchical terms, as congruent phenomena that merit attention and that encourage further inquiry. Indeed, it is our own judgment that both levels of analysis are of critical importance in understanding conflict. As expressed by Lichbach (1998) in more general terms, "Individuals more or less purposefully make history, society, conditions, and rules, yet history, society, condi-



tions, and rules make individuals. We are both autonomous creators and dependent creatures, innovators and prisoners" (p. 403).

Here, we are claiming neither that the group is subordinate to the individual (or vice versa) nor that group-level worldviews are always readily predicted from individual-level beliefs. It is well recognized that groups can and do produce emergent phenomena that are entirely unanticipated and perhaps unpredictable from an analysis of the individual units comprising the collective (see, e.g., Eidelson, 1997). An important example of how we imagine that individual-level core beliefs and collective worldviews may operate in tandem is found in the beliefs that an individual member holds about the in-group (rather than about himself or herself). Such beliefs (e.g., "I believe my group has been treated unfairly") can be usefully understood as deriving in part from the combined influence of personal beliefs drawn from personal experience (e.g., "I have been treated unfairly") and from the individual's perceptions of the group's shared beliefs (e.g., "My group believes that it has been treated unfairly").

A useful framework for evaluating the five collective worldviews discussed here is to consider each in terms of its role as either a triggering or a constraining influence on group mobilization and the intergroup conflict it can engender. As a broad-brush simplification, four of the five worldviews appear to operate primarily as triggers—namely, superiority, injustice, vulnerability, and distrust. Thinking that reflects the confluence of these four mindsets might look something like this: "We are a special people deserving of high stature [superiority], but we have been unjustly denied our rightful place [injustice]. Our situation is precarious; we are staggering toward an abyss [vulnerability]. Why is this the case? Because other groups have repeatedly acted against us and betrayed us [distrust]. We must pull together and take action now." In contrast, the helplessness worldview ("But there is nothing we can do about it, we can only accept our fate") may instead serve as a critical constraint on mobilization in many cases, acting as a gatekeeper that prevents full instrumental expression of other shared beliefs.

Of course, the worldviews under discussion do not exist in a vacuum; they themselves are triggered or constrained by a variety of external influences, including political and economic opportunity structures and the behavior of out-groups toward the in-group. Indeed, it is this very environment, along with prior conditions, that presumably contributes significantly to the creation and activation of collective mindsets. For example, restrictive government policies may not only constrain a prudent or fearful minority from mobilizing on the basis of its beliefs but may also foster the development of distrust and perceptions of injustice and vulnerability. Subsequently, specific external events may unleash the behavioral expression of these mindsets in assertive, aggressive, and/or violent actions.

In short, it can be unproductive to view the roots of intergroup conflicts as solely or even primarily psychological. Structural theories of group conflict and violence, for example, make evident the macro-level influences of re-

sources and institutions (see, e.g., McAdam, Tarrow, & Tilly, 1997; J. I. Ross, 1993; Tilly, 1978). Realistic conflict theory (LeVine & Campbell, 1972; Sherif, 1966) demonstrates how divergent interests and the zero-sum aspects of competition over scarce resources can lead to intractable conflict between contending groups. In this regard, some of the key collective goals that precipitate and maintain conflicts between ethnic groups are by their very nature relativistic. For example, although both prosperity and security may be mutually enhanced through intergroup cooperation, greater authority cannot be obtained by both sides simultaneously (Hechter, 2000). Similarly, Horowitz (1985) has emphasized that zero-sumness typically applies to symbolic demands such as group prestige or the glorification of one group's identity. At the same time, however, the objective and subjective aspects of group conflict are often inseparable, with the latter persisting even after the former have been addressed (Hewstone & Cairns, 2001). Furthermore, even when objective incompatibilities are the predominant contributors to interethnic clashes, proposed solutions that fail to address the conflict's psychological dimensions may still fall well short of their mark.

For the sake of simplicity, collective worldviews have been presented as the mindsets of entire groups. However, ethnic, national, and other common-identity groups are never monolithic with all members sharing identical convictions. Rather, subgroups within the larger group differ to varying degrees in regard to the worldviews that characterize them. For example, divergent views are likely on the basis of demographic variables (e.g., age, gender, education, occupation) and along dimensions that separate idealists from pragmatists, activists from bystanders, fanatics from skeptics, the religious from the secular, and so on. These differences within groups and the dynamics by which they influence collective action are critical variables in their own right. Nevertheless, pressures toward conformity can be intense during periods of heightened threat, as can the punitive and unforgiving reactions toward in-group members who hold dissenting views at such times. Moreover, unanimity of opinion is rarely a prerequisite for a group to act as one. As Coser (1956) observed, "As long as the outside threat is perceived to concern the entire group (or society), internal conflicts do not hinder concerted action against the outside enemy" (p. 94).

### **Research Directions**

We believe that the theoretical ideas explored in this article can usefully contribute to research on several fronts, a few of which are briefly described here. For example, the relationship between these five collective worldviews and the mobilization of individual members on behalf of the group (and against an out-group) is an important topic for further study. A significant factor in this linkage will likely be the strength of the individual's identification with the group because those who identify more strongly are typically more willing to support the group in the pursuit of its agenda (see, e.g., McCauley, 2001). Research indicates that identification strength is itself affected by multiple factors, including the group's perceived entitativity based on per-



ceptions of common fate, similarity, and proximity among members (Campbell, 1958); the extent to which depersonalization as described by self-categorization theory (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987) leads members to evaluate themselves in relation to the in-group prototype; and the degree to which group membership provides an optimal balance between competing needs to assimilate and differentiate (Brewer, 1991).

The interplay between a leader's individual-level core beliefs and the collective worldviews of the group within which he or she has risen to power also merits further attention. For example, do leaders who hold certain templates for interpreting events in their own personal lives tend to apply similar templates when evaluating their group's circumstances? As a specific instance, do leaders who perceive themselves and their personal histories as burdened by injustices see their group as similarly victimized by other groups? Such a relationship would have significant implications because leaders are often in the forefront in encouraging scapegoating of out-groups and generating fear and hatred toward them (Staub, 2001). A related question is whether individuals whose personal core beliefs closely mirror the worldviews of their group stand a better chance of gaining influence and power (Hogg, 2001). Alternatively, as suggested by the small-group phenomenon of extremity shift (R. Brown, 1986), do leaders acquire their stature because their own views about the group (e.g., in regard to issues such as superiority or vulnerability) are more extreme than those of the members they represent? Finally, a leader's agenda and strategies for group mobilization are also likely to utilize the worldviews described here. Thus, for example, public speeches may be carefully crafted to resonate with or amplify these shared beliefs in followers.

Another significant arena for further study revolves around collective worldview change. Transformations in group mindsets may be directly implicated in the dynamics of intergroup conflict. For example, shifts in group perception toward greater presumptions of superiority or intensified convictions of injustice may either precede or follow the onset or escalation of hostilities. Similarly, alterations in the direction of diminished distrust and lessened perceived vulnerability may lay the groundwork for or parallel the process of amelioration. In this regard, the stability or fragility of a postconflict environment may depend in part on whether the cessation of overt violence emerged solely from external circumstances (e.g., depletion of resources or third-party military intervention) or also included important changes in the groups' entrenched mindsets regarding each other and their circumstances (e.g., new recognition of positive-sum possibilities). It is not yet clear whether the five worldviews examined here are comparable in regard to the ease with which they are transformed or whether each is responsive to the same circumstances and influences. In all cases, however, it seems likely that reversing an entrenched collective mindset requires a greater weight of evidence than was needed to propel the worldview forward initially, a feature not uncommon in complex adaptive systems (Eidelson, 1997).

Empirical investigations can also clarify the relationships among these five worldviews and determine the frequency and magnitude with which they appear in groups, especially groups facing the prospect or reality of intergroup conflict and violence. Although these mindsets are certainly not independent from each other, each domain includes key features not represented in the other domains. For example, in many ways, in-group worldviews involving vulnerability, injustice, and distrust appear to share a common theme encouraging an adversarial stance toward an out-group. However, proactive precautionary steps (e.g., defensive preparations by the in-group) or fortuitous circumstances (e.g., the limited capabilities of the out-group) may diminish a group's sense of vulnerability without altering its view that the other should not be trusted. Similarly, even if progress is made toward reconciliation between contending groups such that mutual distrust is softened, perceptions of unjust treatment—past or present—will not necessarily dissipate as well. This latter instance also raises the interesting question of how the alignment of worldviews between two groups might serve to exacerbate or moderate the potential for violence.

It should be noted that research advances in these areas will require the accurate measurement of the five belief domains. This is obviously no small matter—especially at the group level—and a variety of strategies merit consideration. Direct approaches include the development of structured interviews or questionnaires, perhaps administered to representative samples or selected group members (e.g., leaders). Preexisting instruments, such as those designed to measure individual-level core beliefs in clinical populations, may be adapted or used as guides in the construction of new instruments for specifically assessing collective mindsets. Such direct approaches, however, may become problematic in the midst of ongoing conflicts or when attempting to analyze historical case studies. Effective alternatives include indirect assessments, such as the evaluation of unsolicited material produced by groups or individual members. Here, content analysis of leaders' speeches, classroom textbooks, media representations, and master narratives such as sacred texts may be quite valuable. Regardless of the approaches used, it will be challenging to develop clear operational conceptualizations of a group's collective worldviews.

The topics discussed here are only a partial listing of key theoretical issues and research opportunities relating to the roles played by individual core beliefs and collective worldviews in intergroup conflict. Although the useful application of these concepts is not without its limits and difficulties, we believe that the potential value of the enterprise is clear. In addition to increasing the understanding of the psychological dynamics that often underlie the onset, escalation, and resolution of intergroup hostilities, exploration of the parallels and linkages between individual beliefs and collective worldviews may heighten the capacity to actively engage in efforts to reduce violence and promote reconciliation between contending groups. We are therefore hopeful that the ideas presented here will serve as a foundation and springboard for further scholarly work

while widening the circle of researchers and practitioners engaged in addressing the distressing consequences and prevalence of intergroup violence.

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