

Tribes of Victims: How Feelings of Victimhood Drive Moral Conflict

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Abstract

People form tribes for many reasons. But an underemphasized driver of tribalism is victimhood, which binds people together at the individual, group, and intergroup levels. First, at the individual level, people band together to reap the benefits of group protection from outside threats. Banding together with others confers a higher chance of survival when facing an attack from a lion or bear than facing such a threat on your own. At the group level, people form tribes over shared morality—an intuitive sense of what is right and wrong. Moral judgments are rooted in understandings about who is a victim and how to protect them, and disagreement about the vulnerability of different entities results in different moral tribes. Finally, at the intergroup level, moral tribes fight for control over the conflict’s narrative. Victims are seen as less blameworthy than villains, so in conflict, groups compete for the title of the “true victim.” Understanding tribalism as competition between people and groups who feel like victims (rather than aggressors) allows us to better understand the motivations and psychological mechanisms driving intergroup conflict.

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The word “tribalism” conjures images of warfare, violence, and dominance between groups. One example of tribalism comes from the Bible, when God told the Hebrews to completely destroy the Amalekites and all that belongs to them. The question we explore here is what motivates such gruesome competition between enemy tribes? Perhaps tribalism is driven by greed, a lust for power, and a natural desire to dominate and demonize outgroups. In this case, perhaps God's instruction to the Hebrews was just a cover for their tribal prejudice and lust for domination. But if we look one verse before, we see a more complete picture of the reason for God's instruction to destroy the Amalekites: "This is what the Lord Almighty Says: I will punish the Amalekites for what they did to Israel when they waylaid them as they came up from Egypt" (1 Samuel 15:2). The Hebrews' aggression toward the Amalekites was inspired by their felt sense of victimization. Though aggression and malice might play important roles in intergroup conflict, popular conceptions of tribalism miss an important but frequently overlooked piece of the story: when tribal conflict occurs, it's because groups feel victimized by each other.

This chapter explores how concerns over victimhood fuel tribal conflict and outgroup hostility. First, fears of harm or feelings of threat prompt people to band together into groups for safety. Second, concerns about victimhood within groups prompt the formation of strong moral codes, setting the stage for moral disagreement with other groups. Finally, the competition for victimhood perpetuates conflict between tribes.

Before diving in, we first define what we mean by victimhood. Victims are thought of as someone (or something) that is harmed unfairly by another entity. The field of law says that a victim is someone who suffers direct physical, emotional, or pecuniary harm as the result of a crime (Victims' Rights and Restitution Act, 1990), and work in moral psychology defines

victims as the recipient of any intentional and undeserved harm (Schein & Gray, 2018). But victims aren't natural kinds in the world. Assigning entities to the role of "victim" is a matter of *perception*. We argue here that tribalism-fueling moral disagreement stems from different ideas about who and what is a victim, and the desire to *protect* these different victims.

Why Do Tribes Conflict?

It is common to believe that tribal conflicts are rooted in groups' desires for dominance and destruction. Sigmund Freud endorsed this perspective. He believed that people are motivated by an instinct to exploit, humiliate, torture, and kill others, but that civilization conceals this innate aggression (Freud, 1930). The *Lord of the Flies* depicts a group of English schoolboys as descending into brutality, savagery, and selfishness when they are stranded on a remote jungle society and are freed from the constraints of society (Golding, 1954). Lay folk commonly endorse the idea of our group nature as being Hobbesian and dominance driven (Cargile et al., 2006; Goya-Tocchetto et al., 2022). Realistic Conflict Theory argues that when groups in proximity are competing for resources, tribal conflict is inevitable. The evidence for this theory comes from a real-life (if milder) example of *Lord of the Flies*, involving boys at a summer camp (Sherif, 1954).

In this study, two groups of twelve boys were sent off to a summer camp at Robbers Cave State Park in Oklahoma. The two groups, The Rattlers and The Eagles, were separated from the beginning of the camp and were instructed to bond within their own groups. When the groups were finally brought together to compete in games, the teams descended into conflict, burning each other's flags, ransacking cabins, and becoming so aggressive with one another that researchers had to physically separate them.

Social identity theory extended beyond Realistic Conflict Theory to show that group conflict—although exacerbated by competition for resources—can arise from our inherent groupishness. Tajfel and Turner demonstrated that people will discriminate against their outgroups even when those groups are purely arbitrary (Tajfel et al., 1971), indicating that humans have a natural tendency to form groups that are positively distinct from other groups. Social identity theory was formed to explain intergroup conflict and suggested that salient outgroups that are a threat to positive distinctiveness will likely become a source of tribal conflict (Tajfel, H. & Turner, J., 1979).

These theories are compelling and explain much of tribalism, but they fail to do justice to the role of victimhood in tribal conflict. Realistic Conflict Theory demonstrates that competition over prized resources causes conflict, and Social Identity Theory suggests that the search for positive distinctiveness causes conflict, but we believe that perceived victimhood is the necessary ingredient for transforming differences into hate and conflict. In fact, we suggest that without victimhood, competition over resources and mere group identification is unlikely to descend into tribal conflict. It is when group disagreement becomes *moral disagreement*—something fundamentally grounded in victimhood and harm—that groups descend into toxic tribal conflict.

Past research shows that moral groups are uniquely destined for intergroup conflict. Parker and Janoff-Bulmann (2013) found that identifying with a moral group, such as being pro-life, was a significant predictor of outgroup hatred (towards those who were pro-choice). Identifying with non-moral groups however, (e.g., Yankees fans, Uconn students, or men) did *not* predict outgroup negativity (towards Red Sox fans, UMass Students, or women, respectively). This research suggests that there might be a unique aspect to moral conflicts that

incite outgroup hatred, which non-moral tribal conflict may not evoke. We propose that *something* is victimhood.

In any vicious tribal conflict, *both* groups feel a sense of victimization at the hands of their outgroup. Indeed, feelings of victimhood are prevalent on both sides of the American political conflict (Armaly & Enders, 2022; Horwitz, 2018), the divide between Israelis and Palestinians (Caplan, 2012; Vollhardt, 2009), Hutus and Tutsis in Rwanda, and Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland (Brewer & Hayes, 2011). In many cases, however, it's difficult to appreciate that both groups feel victimized because one side seems like obvious aggressors solely driven by a desire for dominance and destruction.

Consider the conflict between Russia and Ukraine. When Vladimir Putin attacked Ukraine in February 2022, it seems self-evident to Westerner that he was motivated by a desire to exert dominance, limit freedom, and increase Russia's territory (Davis Jr., 2023; Kingsley & Sommerlad, 2023). Yet analyzing Putin's remarks during the initiation of war in Ukraine, Putin framed *Russia* as the victim, claiming that he is seeking to restore the historical land that it had lost and reunite its people (Putin, 2021). Some might wonder whether his claim to victimhood is genuinely felt. Vladimir Putin may not be motivated by his moral compass anymore, but it is worth noting that Putin is resorting to this victimhood rhetoric to inspire his soldiers to attack Ukraine.

When considering the power of victimhood to create conflict, it is useful to start at the very beginning, how concerns of victimhood motivated us at the dawn of our species, when we were worried about getting eaten.

Victimized by Nature: Afraid to Be Alone

Humans are often characterized as brutish apex predators, but this overlooks our deep concerns about the vulnerability of ourselves and others. Throughout history, humans have faced many physical threats and have been highly vulnerable to danger. We have evolved to become social creatures, relying on tribes to provide physical and psychological support. By creating these tribes, we have been able to navigate the dangers of the world and improve our chances of survival. Thus, understanding the role of threat in driving our desire for social connection is a critical first step in understanding tribal conflict.

Isolation Costs, Groups Reward

Imagine yourself stranded in an unfamiliar jungle with no food, water, weapons, or clothes. You rack your brain for how to defend yourself in the case of an attack, but find yourself equipped only with thin skin, short teeth, and fragile fingernails. Aside from the threat of predation, it's incredibly unlikely that alone, you'll find the food, shelter, and water you need to survive. Does this picture look familiar? This is the premise of all sorts of popular survival shows. The documentary television series "I Shouldn't Be Alive" shows reenactments of real stories where, against all odds, someone survived days or weeks in the forces of nature after a plane crash on a remote island, or after getting lost in desert. "Naked and Afraid" drops a pair of people in the middle of some of the most extreme environments on Earth, where they struggle to survive with nothing but their birthday suit. Unlike the common perspective of humans as "apex predators", this media genre demonstrates the truth of humanity—when left to our own devices, we are vulnerable.

If humans are so vulnerable, how did they survive? By increasing the size of our tribes. Social mammals benefit from group living because they serve as a cover for individuals from

predation and as an aggressive defense mechanism from potential predators (Alexander, 1974). For instance, baboons avoid predation by collective confrontation from potential threats, and by the clustering of baboon females and juveniles near the large males for protection (Devore, 2017). Though the ultimate reason for the evolution of social living is hard to definitively determine, Bayesian comparative methods support the suggestion that group living arose because it reduces predation risk (Van Schaik, 1983). Ultimately, the ways that group living protected individuals from vulnerability and promoted survival promoted the evolution of psychological needs for belonging and social ties (Buss, 1995).

Today, forming groups does less to protect us from *physical* threats like hunger, thirst, and predation and does more to protect us from *psychological* threats. Being in a group provides emotional support and a sense of belonging, which can be especially important for individuals who feel isolated or vulnerable (Cohen, 2004). Strong national identification has been shown to lower anxiety and improve health (Khan et al., 2020), global connectedness predicts higher well-being (satisfaction, confidence, positive affect; Jose et al., 2012), and social group membership is protective against future depression and alleviates current depressive symptoms (Cruwys et al., 2013). On the other hand, *not* belonging to a group can contribute to feelings of vulnerability and loneliness, having negative impacts on both mental and physical health, sometimes even leading to chronic diseases (Hawkey & Cacioppo, 2010; Petite et al., 2015; Uchino, B., 2009). People have strong psychological motivations to avoid the vulnerability they feel from loneliness by joining tribes and developing strong ingroup identities.

Overall, the benefits of forming tribes help individuals overcome the vulnerability of being alone. If a desire or tendency for tribalism resulted in survival benefits for individuals, it's no wonder that thousands of years later, group membership provides such strong psychological

utility (Correll & Park, 2005). We have reviewed evidence that one's vulnerability motivates people to band people together in tribes. But growing the size of a group introduces new problems. In the next section, we'll discuss how increasingly focusing on a shared moral code within groups helped us navigate these problems.

Victimized by Tribe Members: Afraid of Immorality

Living in tribes helps mitigate the threat of leopards and loneliness, but it introduces a new set of potential threats: the threat of harm by violent or free riding ingroup members. Morality—intuitive judgments about what is right and wrong—developed to mitigate the threat of people in our groups.

The Origins of Morality

Living in groups can be dangerous because the actions of one member can affect the whole group. Selfish behavior leads to negative consequences, as exemplified in the famous thought experiment “the tragedy of the commons,” where a shared resource is overused and degraded due to individuals acting in self-interest (Hardin, 1968). As a result, everyone suffers. To prevent such self-interested behavior, it is essential to have a moral code of “right and wrong” to ensure that one's actions do not harm the rest of the group. Though the specifics about the evolution of morality are contested, what most scholars across relevant disciplines agree on is that morality evolved to promote the survival of people and groups.

The Morality as Cooperation theory proposes that morality is an evolved set of solutions to the problems of cooperation in human social life (Curry, 2016; Curry et al., 2019). Several specific kinds of moral behavior have evolved (kinship, mutualism, exchange, etc.) for the purpose of cooperation. Mutualism for instance, describes situations in which individuals benefit more by working together than they do by working alone and kinship describes behavior that

functions to care for offspring, help family members, and avoid inbreeding. These moral rules have been found to apply to at least 60 societies worldwide (Curry et al., 2019).

While there is scholarly agreement that morality, as a tool, functions to promote group success and flourishing, there is debate about what's actually going on in people's heads when they engage in moral judgments and moral cognition. Namely, scholars disagree about the proximity of perceptions of harm to moral judgement. Some theories argue that perceptions of harm are distinct from moral judgements, most notably, the Moral Foundations Theory (Haidt, 2012), but our work shows that intuitive perceptions of harm are the most proximal cause of moral judgments (Schein & Gray, 2018).

Our work suggests that the threat-driven psychology that helped us survive the predatory savannah, is the same threat driven psychology that drives our moral sense. As we gathered in larger groups, we began turning our threat psychology towards other people, using moral language to express our fears of victimization. Of course, there are numerous ways that other groups and other group members can victimize us. Out-groups can victimize us by raiding our camps, killing our people, or ripping us off in trade. These moral violations evoke a sense of tribal outrage at our outgroups, revving our minds up for intergroup competition via emotions like anger, cognitive dehumanization of the outgroup, and other mental justifications for retaliation. On the other hand, members of our own group can victimize us by stabbing our group in the back, disrespecting tribal authorities, or engaging in disgusting actions that increase the likelihood that disease might tear through our group.

Past work has argued for differences in how different people—especially liberals and conservatives—judge moral violations, especially the moral violations that threaten the stability of our ingroup (Graham et al., 2011). This work also supposes many of these moral judgments

are disconnected from concerns about victimization, such that people have separate “moral foundations” for purity or loyalty, but our work shows that people intuitively perceive suffering victims in all moral judgments, including those where there ‘objectively’ isn’t one (Gray et al., 2014; Schein & Gray, 2018). Many studies show that people make moral judgment based on how harmful an act intuitively seems (Schein & Gray, 2018), with more apparent harmfulness leading to more moral condemnation—this is why genocide seems worse than double-parking.

More specifically, the Theory of Dyadic Morality (TDM) suggests that people condemn acts based on the perception of interpersonal harm—a dyad of an intentional agent (iA) causing damage to a vulnerable patient (vP). This theory takes its inspiration from models of categorization, which show that people make judgments about how much something belongs to a category (e.g., birds, furniture) are based on how well it resembles a template (e.g., a prototype) of that category (e.g., robins, chairs; Medin & Smith, 1984; Smith & Medin, 2002). With morality, judgments about how well something belongs to the category “immoral” are based on how well acts resemble the prototype of immorality—which is the dyad of interpersonal harm (Ochoa, 2022). Evidence for this idea is provided by the strong correlation between intuitive judgments of acts as harmful and immoral, *regardless* of whether that moral wrong is traditionally “harmful.” (Gray et al., 2014; Ochoa, 2022). The harmfulness of acts is a matter of perception and is something that varies continuously, from low amounts of apparent harmfulness to higher amounts of apparent harmfulness. The higher these perceptions of harm, the higher perceptions of immorality.

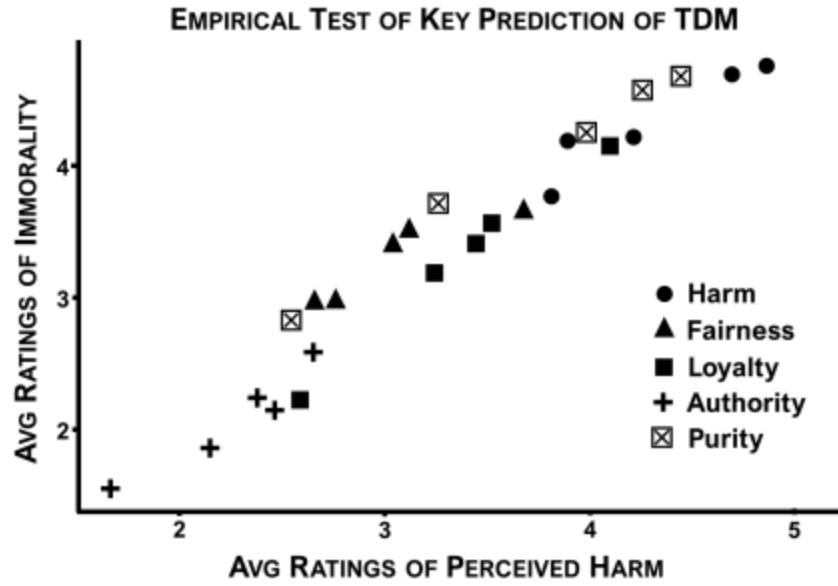


Figure 1. As predicted by the Theory of Dyadic Morality (TDM), moral judgments are extremely well predicted by perceptions of harm across acts that tap diverse values. Both harm and immorality are intuitive perceptions that form a continuum from low to high. The amount of harm seen in an act predicts the amount of immorality seen in that act.

The power of perceived harm to predict moral judgment across people and politics (Schein & Gray, 2018) overturns the popular idea that liberals and conservative have different bases of moral cognition (Graham et al., 2009). It also highlights the power of victimhood in moral judgment because perceptions of interpersonal harm are fundamentally grounded in victimhood. Harm involves someone harmed—a victimhood. The ubiquity of victims in moral judgment means that moral disagreement ultimately revolves around different understandings of victimhood.

Our victimhood-based morality is driven by a desire to protect ourselves and our tribe from unjust suffering, but this sense of morality is not impartial—it powerfully stacks the deck in favor of our group. We feel like our group are the true victims and the other side are the true

villains, perceptions that help to fuel conflict. But before we explore this, we first explore one key driver of moral conflict—our different assumptions about who or what is vulnerable to harm.

Victimized by Other Groups: Threatening our Victims and Afraid of Seeming like Perpetrators

The development of our moral sense helped our species to live in larger groups. In the previous section, we discussed how morality helps maintain peace and facilitate cooperation within these large groups. But what about for outgroups? What does morality do to the relationships between our groups? In this section, we propose a few ways in which our victimhood-based moral minds often contribute to intergroup conflict.

The Nature of Moral Disagreement

Though morality helps protect us from threats we see, tribal conflict occurs because people see harm (and morality) differently. But if we all share the same harm-based mind, then why is there so much variation in morality between and even within societies (Graham et al., 2016)? We suggest that this is because harm's key ingredients are perceived and thus subjective (Schein & Gray, 2018).

Pioneering work in moral psychology has shown that there is variation across cultures in what kinds of actions cause suffering (Shweder et al., 1997; Turiel et al., 1991). These subjective informational assumptions can account for much of the moral variation around the world. For example, in some cultures, it is considered a moral duty to kill one's elderly parents (Asch, 1952). While most cultures find this practice harmful and abhorrent, some cultures hold a belief that people live on in the afterlife in perpetuity in the same exact condition of health that they had at their time of death. Under this informational assumption, the act of killing one's own parents is seen as a benefit to them and may be viewed as an offspring's obligation. Yet in

cultures where this informational assumption is not shared, this view is clearly abominable.

When these disagreeing groups interact, tribal conflict can ensue.

What has been less studied in moral psychology, however, is the degree to which people disagree about what kinds of entities are more vulnerable to suffering. Work from our lab demonstrates that differences in perceptions of who or what is vulnerable to harm give rise to different moral judgments (Womick et al., in prep). Throughout this work, we asked participants to rate the vulnerability to harm, victimization, and mistreatment of 4 classes of entities : The Powerful (authority figures, corporate leaders, and police officers), The Othered (Muslims, illegal immigrants, and transgender people), The Environment (rainforests, coral reefs, and planet Earth), and The Divine (Jesus, God, and the Bible). We discovered some important findings that show how partisans vary in their assumptions of vulnerability and how this can contribute to moral discord.

First, people varied in how vulnerable different targets seemed, and this predicted how wrong participants thought it would be to hurt that entity—the more you thought coral reefs were vulnerable to harm, the more immoral you saw ocean pollution. Secondly, we found that perceptions of vulnerability vary reliably for liberals and conservatives. Liberals tend to see marginalized groups and the environment as much more vulnerable than divine and powerful entities, dividing the world into the vulnerable oppressed and the invulnerable oppressors. Conversely, conservatives saw the vulnerability of these four classes about equally, seeing the world populated by individual all with the capacity to suffer and to cause suffering to other. These perceptions of vulnerability can explain liberals and conservatives' diverging moral judgments around issues related to authority and purity (as documented by moral foundations theory; Graham et al., 2011), showing that you need not have distinct moral foundations to have

moral disagreement—you need only to see different entities as more or less vulnerable to mistreatment.

Tribes disagree about morality not because they have discrepant moral values, but because they navigate the world with a different set of assumptions. When tribes have different sets of assumptions about what causes suffering and who can suffer, they are more likely to develop disdain for one another. But why do tribes develop predictively different assumptions to begin with? In the United States, why is there a broad cluster of liberal assumptions of harm and victimhood and a conservative parallel?

There are rich traditions within social psychology and political science reaching back decades that have probed these questions with explanations ranging from different psychological motivations (Jost, 2019; Sidanius & Pratto, 2001) to environmental influences (Harrington & Gelfand, 2014). While these factors all may contribute to the different moral lenses through which liberals and conservatives see the world, we think the tribal gap between liberals and conservatives is less grounded in their distinct psychologies, but has more to do with the increasingly disparate information environments they find themselves in. Liberals and Conservatives may have always disagreed about morality some, but since the decline of the broadcast news era and the “fairness doctrine” of the 1980s, US liberals and conservatives have been occupying increasingly disconnected information environments. As a result, their attitudes have sorted more reliably into ideological camps (Mason, 2015). Additionally, there is some evidence that liberals and conservatives have geographically segregated into more homogeneous communities (Brown & Enos, 2021). Mild moral differences can polarize in environments where people only hear the evidence from their tribe about what causes suffering and who can suffer. As Minson and Dorison explained in their (2022) review on attitude conflict, when

interdependent tribes operate on different sets of evidence about outcomes that are important (passing legislation, distributing resources, etc.), intergroup conflict will emerge.

With a better understanding of the psychology behind intergroup disagreement, it should be clear that groups are motivated by a desire to protect victims, just different ones. But in the real world, it's hard to appreciate that our opponents' positions are driven by a concern for victimhood. Instead, we see ourselves and those we're concerned with as victims. We believe that we see the world objectively and that anyone who disagrees must be uninformed, biased, selfish, or evil (Ross & Ward, 1997). We typecast our opponents as villains and blame them for our victimhood.

Moral Typecasting

Aside from moral disagreements about issues, we also have psychological instincts to protect our moral righteousness, and sometimes this instinct causes us to demonize our enemies so we can feel blameless. Attacking is something that villains do, not victims. So, we justify our sides' actions in a conflict, seeing our hate and discrimination as merely self-defense. Many suggest that it was evolutionary advantageous for us to be convinced of our own moral righteousness (Simler & Hanson, 2018), because it helped us seem moral. Being genuinely convinced of their own and their tribe's moral righteousness likely conferred social benefits upon your ancestors – and most importantly, kept them from getting cast out of the tribe and sent to die alone in the jungle.

Nowadays, individuals must compete for social capital in social media and the news by competing for their group's victimhood, but tribal members are not knowingly making false claims of group victimhood for the purpose of building social capital. People have a

psychological tendency to typecast moral actors as victims and villains that makes the experience of victimhood seem authentic.

Typecasting refers to when a particular actor becomes very strongly associated and identified with specific attributes. For instance, Adam Sandler often plays a witty, crude character, who is portrayed as an average guy trying to make his way in the world. Once you've seen a few Adam Sandler movies, it's hard to imagine him playing any other kind of character. Likewise, we typecast *moral* actors as either moral agents who do moral acts (heroes and villains) or moral patients who receive moral acts (victims).

Typecasting means that villainy and victimhood are seen as inversely related—victims are attributed a high capacity for suffering and experiencing but lack the capacity for blame. On the other hand, villains seen to be highly blameworthy but lacking the capacity to suffer or be victimized (Gray & Wegner, 2009). Victims are seen as lacking the capacity for planning and doing, and because a guilty mind is considered a necessary precursor for blame and punishment (Hart & Honoré, 1985), escape responsibility for wrongdoing. Villains (and sometimes heroes), on the other hand, *are* blamed and punished since they have the capacity to act on and harm others (Gray & Wegner, 2011).

Importantly, because people directly experience their own groups suffering but not the suffering of the outgroup, it is easy to see themselves as victims. This inevitably leads groups to see outgroups—who may have had a hand in their suffering—as villains. These typecast perceptions means that group—as the victim—seems totally blameless, which allows them to lash out in violence without feeling bad about it. Seeing the out-group as villains justifies harm towards them, and enables them to deflect accountability for their actions. Because typecasts are hard to overcome, it also means that it is hard for tribes to see their opponents as making

authentic claims to victimhood. It seems like the suffering of opponents isn't real, and they are the one harming us. It is for these reasons that people compete to seem like they are the *true* victim.

Competitive Victimhood

As we've outlined before, people are sensitive to threats, and are naturally concerned with their own victimhood. But because people typecast moral actors as villains and victims in moral contexts, it means that when it comes to moral disagreement, we consider ourselves the victim, and our opponents the villains. These feelings of victimization can arise from being directly harmed, but also by feeling that our "collective autonomy" is restricted.

Groups have collective autonomy when they feel like they can freely engage in their own cultural practices (Kachanoff et al., 2021). But because perceptions of harm vary across groups, one group's innocent cultural practice seems to another group like a gruesome practice that harms victims. If one group tries to intervene, groups will perceive this as an arbitrary restriction to their collective autonomy. The Puritans of 17th century England famously settled land in the "New World" because of this very feeling of collective autonomy restriction from the Church of England (Betlock, 2003). Kachanoff et al. (2021) suggest that groups desire two resources that will help them maintain collective autonomy: real power, (e.g., resources) as well as a kind of soft power, a positive moral image. The desire for a positive moral image compels groups to see themselves as the victims within any intergroup conflict, catalyzing a competition of victimhood between groups.

Competitive victimhood is a phenomenon in which groups or individuals compete to claim the status of the ultimate victim or to gain the most sympathy for their suffering (Noor et al., 2012). One example of this is the conflict between the Black Lives Matter and Blue Lives

Matter movement. The Black Lives Matter movement emerged in response to police violence against African Americans, while the Blue Lives Matter movement was a countermovement that emphasizes the risks and sacrifices of law enforcement officers. The Blue Lives Matter movement engaged in competitive victimhood by portraying police officers as greater victims of violence and oppression, and by downplaying the impact of police brutality on Black Americans.

This is a problem because focusing on one's own victimhood while ignoring the other side distracts from the real issues and prevents constructive dialogue about either side's suffering (Caplan, 2012). It can lead to the perception that addressing victimhood is a zero-sum game in which one's group suffering is pitted against the other's, rather than recognizing that both groups can experience hardship. But we aren't just speculating about competitive victimhood's role in maintaining conflict. Psychological evidence has demonstrated that greater belief that your ingroup has suffered more than the outgroup is negatively associated with forgiveness, a necessary ingredient for reconciliation (Noor, Brown, Gonzalez, et al., 2008; Noor, Brown, & Prentice, 2008).

There are at least a few drivers of competitive victimhood that have been explored in past research. Noor and colleagues (2012) suggest that competitive victimhood functions to bolster in-group cohesiveness, justify in-group violence, deny blame and responsibility, and recruit support from non-involved parties. Young and Sullivan (2016) also cite a motive to gain societal recognition or support as a reason that individuals or groups strive to establish themselves as victims of oppression or injustice. But although victimhood can have positive consequences, we don't believe that many groups fabricate claims to victimhood just for its perks. After all, victimhood does have its downsides; it is associated with weakness, and can be a threat to one's sense of agency (Ferguson et al., 2010).

We propose that competitive victimhood is also driven by authentic experiences of victimhood. Moral typecasting blinds groups to the suffering of the outgroup. So, when they say *they* are the true victims or have suffered more, we are simply fighting for the truth—they are *not* the victim, we are. This is a problem because competitive victimhood has been linked to the continuation and resistance to resolving conflict (Noor et al., 2012). At this point, it seems like experiences of victimhood and their influence on tribal conflict and outgroup hate is inevitable. But maybe we can harness the power of victimhood to bridge divides.

Victimhood Can Bring Us Together

Our ancestors formed tribes due to the vulnerability of being alone. As tribes developed, concerns about successful group living and cooperation drove the development of morality. Further, threats posed by rival tribes motivate competitive victimhood. While we have emphasized victimhood as a key ingredient for tribal conflict, conflict is not inevitable. Victimhood can be both poison and cure. If tribal conflict is motivated by concern for victims, then intervention work might explore how to harness the power of victimhood to bridge divides.

Our work demonstrates that people have a psychological tendency to typecast opponent tribes as villains who lack the capacity to suffer and don't care about victims. So, we need to find a way to help warring tribes understand that each side is authentically concerned with victimhood. In other words, we have to correct misperceptions about the minds of opponent tribes. A large body of work shows that people believe their opponents are motivated by obstructionism, lack basic morality, and are blind to the harms that the other side sees (Goya-Tocchetto et al., 2022; Kubin et al., 2022; Puryear et al., 2023).

Put simply, people think the other side doesn't care about harming victims. Partisans on both sides demonstrate a *partisan trade-off bias*, where they believe that the harmful, but

unintended or unavoidable harmful side effects of policies proposed by contrapartisans are in fact, wanted and intended (Goya-Tocchetto et al., 2022). Other works finds that partisans think their opponents are much more approving of moral wrongs than they actually are (Puryear et al., 2023) and that the other side rejects both realistic and symbolic threats that the other side sees (Kubin et al., 2022).

These fundamental misunderstandings about opponent tribes (that they don't care about harm to victims) serve as barriers to conflict resolution, since they may lead to seeing opponents as cold and evil, which results in disliking (Goodwin et al., 2014) and decreased desire to interact with them (Brambilla et al., 2013). But by clarifying that they are *also* concerned with harm to victims, we can bridge divides and resolve tribal conflicts. Puryear et al. (2023) for instance, found that simply clarifying that issue opponents condemn unambiguous wrongs (child pornography, animal abuse, etc.) reduced dehumanization and led to a greater willingness to engage with opponents. This demonstrates that clarifying that moral opponents care about victims in even the most minimal sense can bridge divides between political groups.

Another way of showing groups that their opponents care about morality and victimhood is just as simple—sharing narratives of victimhood. Kubin and colleagues (2021) found that contrary to lay beliefs, sharing harm-based personal experiences with issue opponents generates more respect and understanding for your group than sharing facts. In other words, when discussing gun control, individuals are more likely to garner respect if they recount stories of individuals who have suffered or been saved from guns, rather than solely discussing gun laws or statistics on gun-related deaths. This is because people often dispute facts and the conclusions drawn from them but tend to believe personal experiences and agree that avoiding harm is rational.

Convincing groups that their opponent tribes genuinely experience victimhood, and care about victims is a promising path to bridging divides. But making the outgroup feel seen and recognized as a victim is also a promising avenue for conflict resolution. As we've seen, groups sometimes engage in conflict for the status as the *most* victimized, but that is not always the case. In some contexts, it is not the relative victimhood that matters, but merely being recognized as a group that has been *victimised at all* that matters for hostile intergroup attitudes. De Guissme & Licata (2017) demonstrated across diverse samples that the relationship between collective victimhood and negative outgroup attitudes was explained by a sense of lack of victimhood recognition, but not by competition over the severity of the sufferings. These findings suggest that *acknowledging* another group's suffering is a path to conflict resolution. Berndsen and colleagues (2015) found that acknowledging both the suffering of an out-group and the role of your in-group in that suffering is an important precursor to intergroup reconciliation. Further, Adelman and colleagues (2016) found that inclusive victimhood narratives that acknowledge the suffering of both parties in conflict decreased competitive victimhood, and lowered support for aggressive policies and conflict.

In sum, we suggest that to decrease tribal conflict and out-group hate towards your side, you should do one of two things: Emphasize that you too care about victims (by highlighting shared moral beliefs and sharing harm-based personal experiences) and acknowledging the outgroup's suffering and respecting the victims the *other side* cares about.

Tribalism, and the conflict it fuels, is driven by victimhood. Concern for our own victimhood drives us to groups, drives us to create morality, and drives us to compete with and dislike our opponents. But conflict is not inevitable. We just need to bridge the divides between our minds. Though we have natural tendencies to typecast our moral opponents as evil and

unconcerned with the harms we see, we can sooth animosity by sharing our own feelings of harm, and by recognizing the harms seen by others.

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