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Intergroup conflict and barriers to common ground: A self-affirmation perspective

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Abstract

Psychological barriers to conflict resolution stem, in part, from defensive responses to feelings of self-threat. Self-affirmation theory proposes that affirmations of global self-worth—often achieved by writing or reflecting on core values—can broaden individuals' perspectives and potentially reduce biases in their intergroup judgments. In this paper, we review the extant literature on the use of self-affirmation to potentially reduce intergroup biases in order to shed light on the role of self-threat in perpetuating conflict. Self-affirmation has been shown to impact 3 key aspects of intergroup conflict: (a) the strength with which conflict-supporting beliefs are held, (b) the biased processing of conflict-relevant information, and (c) the resistance to seeing common ground in negotiations. Discussion centers on the limits as well as the potential of self-affirmation to promote openness and conflict resolution.

1 | INTRODUCTION

The intergroup conflicts that rage in different parts of the world over territories, natural resources, power, economic wealth, self-determination, and/or basic values are real. They center over disagreements which focus on contradictory goals and interests in different domains and there is no doubt that these real issues have to be addressed in conflict resolution. But it is well known that the disagreements could potentially be resolved if not for the various powerful forces which fuel and maintain the conflicts. These forces, which underlie the mere disagreements, are the barriers that inhibit and impede progress toward peaceful settlement of the conflict. They stand as major obstacles to begin the negotiation, to carry the negotiation, to achieve an agreement and later to engage in a process of reconciliation. These barriers are found among the leaders, as well as among society members that are involved in intergroup conflict. (Bar-Tal & Halperin, 2011, p. 217)

In an insightful chapter on barriers to conflict resolution, Bar-Tal and Halperin (2011) detail social psychological factors that prevent groups in conflict—both leaders and the general public—from seeing the common ground that could exist as a basis for peace and understanding. Each group in a conflict has their own historical narrative or cultural

worldview that shapes how they interpret evidence, evaluate their side's and the opposing side's responsibility for the conflict, think about and engage in negotiation, and evaluate prospects for the future.

It is crucial to begin any analysis of conflict with an acknowledgement of the historical, structural, and political reasons for the persistence of conflict. Such reasons often center on the battle for limited resources and the incompatibility of ideological and religious perspectives (Sherif, 1966). Yet it is also important to recognize that social psychological factors affect people's perceptions that resources are limited and that competing perspectives are incompatible, and that these perceptions exacerbate the conflict, making it all the more intractable (Bar-Tal & Halperin, 2011; Gayer, Landman, Halperin, & Bar-Tal, 2009; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Towards this end, social psychologists have developed and tested theories of human attitudes, emotions, and behaviors to understand intergroup conflict at both the individual and group levels (e.g., Allport, 1954; Halperin, 2016; Pettigrew, 1998). The assumption of this work is that understanding the factors that drive individuals and groups apart can lead to ideas and potentially interventions to help resolve conflict and promote peace.

In this paper, we review defensive biases that perpetuate conflict between groups and focus on a well-studied social psychological approach that has been increasingly applied in the realm of intergroup conflict: self-affirmation. To preview the general argument: To the extent that self-affirmation can attenuate psychological biases underlying intergroup conflict, it suggests that these biases stem, in part, from a motivation to protect the self from threat (Steele, 1988). And although self-threat may only play a partial role in the complex structures that drive intransigent conflict, by mitigating biased judgments, self-affirmation strategies could potentially reduce the distance between conflicting groups, providing just enough incremental opportunity to realize progress towards peace, openness, and compromise.

While gaps in the extant literature on affirmation will be addressed, the findings offer an encouraging path forward. The studies reviewed herein demonstrate the effects of self-affirmation in reducing the specific intergroup biases that have been proposed as relevant to the perpetuation of conflict (Bar-Tal & Halperin, 2011).

2 | SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGICAL BARRIERS TO CONFLICT RESOLUTION

To begin, we consider the abstract goal that those studying conflict aspire to: its end. What would conflict resolution look like? As Kelman (1987) described it many years ago referring to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, the ultimate goal of peace is “... a *resolution* of the conflict, an outcome that meets the basic needs of both parties and is responsive to their basic fears. Such an outcome—even though it involves, of necessity, a negotiated compromise—would leave both parties better off and more secure than they are today and would be minimally consistent with their sense of justice (p. 348).” The question, then, is what are the social psychological barriers that make this negotiated compromise difficult, and what role self-threat may play in perpetuating these barriers?

Bar-Tal and Halperin (2011; see also Hameiri, Bar-Tal, & Halperin, 2014) proposed a model outlining barriers to conflict resolution that provides a useful framework to understand where and how self-affirmation might exert influence (self-affirmation is one potential intervention noted by Hameiri et al., 2014, and Paluck, 2012, in their reviews of conflict-reducing interventions). This model describes conflict-supporting beliefs that serve as a prism through which all intergroup interactions are framed. These beliefs include the perception that the conflict is a zero-sum game (Kelman, 1987), that the outgroup deserves the blame for the conflict, and that the ingroup is the sole victim of the conflict. They propose further that although beliefs serve the important structural function of helping people make sense of a conflicted world, they can become entrenched barriers to the resolution of that conflict when they are made rigid by a combination of emotional and motivational “freezing” factors (Bar-Tal & Halperin, 2011). In this context, emotional factors may include powerful feelings such as fear and hatred (Halperin, 2008), and motivational factors may include a need for closure that would be threatened by considering information that contradicts existing beliefs (Kruglanski, 1989). These beliefs become self-perpetuating by channeling motivated information processing (Kunda, 1990) that focuses attention on belief-confirming information, leading to even greater perceived polarization between groups (Lord, Ross, & Lepper, 1979) and making it difficult to acknowledge ingroup

wrongdoing. Thus, it is a combination of “frozen” conflict-supporting beliefs and biased information processing that leads group members to view any compromise presented by the outgroup through rigidified lenses, making negotiations over limited resources or conflicting goals intractable (Ross & Ward, 1995).

Against this backdrop, we organize our review as follows. We begin by reviewing the core tenets of self-affirmation theory—a motivational perspective on how people cope with information and events that threaten the self. Then we introduce the self-affirmation research relevant to intergroup conflict, using the Bar-Tal and Halperin (2011) model on social psychological barriers within intergroup conflict as a framework. First, we present research showing that by reducing prejudice and increasing collective responsibility for wrongdoing, self-affirmation can alleviate emotional “freezing factors” that keep conflict-supporting beliefs rigid. Second, we review how the biased information processing that occurs as a function of rigid conflict-supporting beliefs can be attenuated among individuals who are affirmed (Sherman & Cohen, 2002). Third, we examine the impact of self-affirmation on negotiation processes, discussing studies that have examined whether affirming important values can make people more open-minded when negotiating contentious issues (Cohen et al., 2007).

To be clear, no social psychological intervention is going to eliminate the causes that gave rise to the conflict in the first place, that is, the differences over the natural resources and religious values referred to in the opening quote. However, social psychological interventions could potentially help people take important first steps towards reduction of conflict by shifting their perceptions of it.

3 | SELF-AFFIRMATION THEORY

Self-affirmation theory holds that individuals are motivated to maintain self-integrity—an image of oneself as globally adequate and able to control the important moral and adaptive outcomes in life (Cohen & Sherman, 2014; Sherman, 2013; Sherman & Cohen, 2006; Steele, 1988). The theory assumes that there is great flexibility in how individuals maintain this sense of self-integrity. Individuals can restore their perception of global adequacy when one aspect of the self is threatened by drawing on a reservoir of self-resources including their relationships, values, and identities (Sherman & Hartson, 2011). Thus, when a threat to self-integrity is experienced in one domain, individuals often seek to buttress their self-integrity by solidifying an aspect of the self in another domain (Cohen & Sherman, 2014). Self-affirmation theory predicts that to the extent a particular bias (e.g., intergroup antipathy) stems from self-threat, it should be attenuated when people are given the opportunity to self-affirm (Sherman & Cohen, 2002) because their sources of self-worth are broadened beyond the specific domain of threat (Cohen & Sherman, 2014).

The most common experimental manipulation used to examine the effects of self-affirmation is the values affirmation task (Epton, Harris, Kane, Koningsbruggen, & Sheeran, 2015; McQueen & Klein, 2006). People rank their values in terms of personal importance and then write about values they identified as being important to the self. Participants in control conditions write about values of lesser importance or other neutral topics. Because individuals can respond flexibly to threat, expressing self-affirming thoughts can restore perceptions of global self-adequacy and reduce the need to respond defensively to a focal threat. In most studies, people are directed to affirm values in domains unrelated to the conflict; there is evidence that affirming the self in the same domain as the threat may backfire and lead to an increase in defensive biases (Blanton, Cooper, Skurnik, & Aronson, 1997; Sivanathan, Molden, Galinsky, & Ku, 2008), presumably because it narrows rather than broadens perceived sources of self-worth (Sherman & Hartson, 2011).

Providing people with an opportunity to affirm the self has been shown to reduce defensive threat responses and to make people more open-minded to threatening information across domains such as health risks (see Harris & Epton, 2009, 2010 for reviews), relationship threats (Jaremka, Bunyan, Collins, & Sherman, 2011; Stinson, Logel, Shepherd, & Zanna, 2011), and persistent identity threats in educational contexts (Cook, Purdie-Vaughns, Garcia, & Cohen, 2012). For example, after completing a self-affirmation exercise, people who recalled an unresolved conflict and considered what they would say to the person they had hurt took greater responsibility for the problems and

offered fewer self-serving justifications (Schumann, 2014). These findings suggest that affirmation can lead to more sincere apologies, which could pave the way for the reduction of interpersonal conflict. Of course, interpersonal conflict differs from intergroup conflict, for example, in terms of the historical narratives that opposing groups possess that sustain intractable conflicts (Nasie, Bar-Tal, Pliskin, Nahhas, & Halperin, 2014).

How does affirmation achieve such effects across disparate domains such as health, relationship conflict, and education? Much research has explored the multiple processes by which self-affirmations operate (see Cohen & Sherman, 2014; Critcher & Dunning, 2015; Sherman, 2013). Affirming one's important values boosts the psychological resources that are available to protect self-integrity (Schmeichel & Vohs, 2009) and broadens one's perspectives so that threats can be viewed in a larger context (Wakslak & Trope, 2009). With this broader perspective, self-affirmation "uncouples" the threat from the self, reducing its impact (Sherman & Hartson, 2011). In the context of intergroup conflict, these mechanisms of affirmation might allow individuals to see their threatened group identity as one smaller aspect of a broader self-image rather than being singularly self-defining. By seeing the outside threat to their ingroup as psychologically "smaller," people may possess sufficient perspective to pursue more balanced resolution of the conflict (Critcher & Dunning, 2015; Sherman et al., 2013).

4 | SELF-AFFIRMATION AND PSYCHOLOGICAL BARRIERS TO CONFLICT RESOLUTION

We now turn to an exploration of self-affirmation research directly related to different psychological barriers to conflict resolution. To what extent can self-affirmation affect prejudice and conflict-supporting beliefs about the outgroup, distorted processing of conflict information, and intergroup disagreement over goals and interests in negotiation?

4.1 | Prejudice and conflict-supporting beliefs

Intergroup conflict can create strongly held antipathy and prejudice towards opposing groups, psychological responses that can serve as "freezing factors" that lock people into a conflict-supporting narrative (Bar-Tal & Halperin, 2011). For groups to have the kind of meaningful contact required to find common ground and potentially negotiate to resolve long-standing conflicts, it is important to mitigate this entrenched prejudice (Fiske, 2002). Early affirmation research explored the role of the self in prejudice towards outgroup members (Fein & Spencer, 1997). Prejudices develop, in part, as a defensive response when one's value system is challenged by exposure to outgroup members with discrepant worldviews. This threat to worldview could be experienced as a threat to self and lead people to derogate others to maintain their self-worth and integrity—a finding consistent with social identity theory (Abrams & Hogg, 1988). Indeed, studies have shown that people who were given a threat to self-image exhibited more outgroup derogation than did people who were given no such threat (Fein & Spencer, 1997). Following this logic, if individuals are given the chance to affirm on values unrelated to the conflict, then the resulting boost in self-integrity should reduce the need to derogate outgroup members. Indeed, affirmation has reduced prejudice and outgroup derogation in this manner (Fein & Spencer, 1997). Work from the terror management perspective is also consistent with this notion (Schmeichel & Martens, 2005), showing that after reminders of mortality, affirmation reduces the derogation of violators of a cultural worldview. The typical prejudicial responses towards members of other groups that are heightened when people experience threat can be reduced when people are affirmed.

An individual's willingness to have contact and engage with a person from a negatively stereotyped outgroup has been used as a measuring stick for how much prejudice a person has towards people from that group (Hameiri et al., 2014; Pettigrew, 1998). If self-affirmation increases the willingness to meet an outgroup member, this suggests that self-threat may have been preventing the cross-group contact. In one study (Stone, Whitehead, Schmader, & Focella, 2011), highly prejudiced individuals were asked if they wanted to meet an Arab American to discuss the topic of

prejudice. Individuals were more interested in meeting and saw the person as less confrontational when they were first asked a self-affirming question (“When were you really *creative*? How?”) compared to individuals who were not. The affirmation manipulation in this study was subtly embedded in the conversation by the Arab Americans themselves—an innovative approach with potential benefits for broader implementation.

For reconciliation between groups to occur, it is also important for people not only to respond without animus towards outgroup members, but also to genuinely acknowledge their role in the perpetuation of the conflict (Wohl, Branscombe, & Klar, 2006). The refusal to acknowledge collective responsibility or guilt for conflict, then, is a rigidly held conflict-supporting belief (Bar-Tal & Halperin, 2011), which, we propose, may occur because it can be self-threatening to contemplate the role that sins of prior generations of ingroup members (which may have occurred before one's birth) play in the continuity of the conflict. The role of guilt for past wrongdoings in the process of reconciliation has been looked at in conflicts between Israelis and Palestinians (Čehajić-Clancy, Effron, Halperin, Liberman, & Ross, 2011), Australians and aboriginals (Allpress, Barlow, Brown, & Louis, 2010; McGarty et al., 2005), the Dutch and Indonesians (Doosje, Branscombe, Spears, & Manstead, 2006), and White Americans and African-Americans (Powell, Branscombe, & Schmitt, 2005).

If accepting the role that one's ingroup has played in perpetuating a conflict is experienced as a threat to self-integrity, then it follows that affirming some other aspect of the self should broaden one's self views and increase the likelihood that group members would express guilt for historical wrongdoings. Indeed, Israeli participants who completed a self-affirmation task reported more ingroup guilt for past wrongdoings than did those who completed a control task (Čehajić-Clancy et al., 2011). When affirmed, Israelis not only acknowledged greater culpability for wrongdoing, but they were also more likely to support reparations. Similar effects were found among Bosnian Serb high-school students who were asked questions about Serbian atrocities committed during the 1990s war in the Balkans (Čehajić-Clancy et al., 2011). Self-affirmed students were more likely to acknowledge that their group committed atrocities and were more supportive of reparations. Affirmation, then, may aid in unfreezing people from narrative adherence to a hardened historical position (cf. Nasie et al., 2014). It is important to note that engaging in group affirmation was not effective at increasing acknowledgment of wrongdoing in the same studies (Čehajić-Clancy et al., 2011), and in general, the effect of group affirmation has been quite mixed in contexts of intergroup conflict, and is in need of future research (cf. Badea, Tavani, Rubin, & Meyer, 2017; Ehrlich & Gramzow, 2015).

To sum up, affirmation has been shown to mitigate prejudicial responses and increase acceptance of historical wrongdoing by an ingroup. The evidence that overt bias can be reduced with self-affirmation shows that these biases originate, at least in part, from self-threat. However, it is not being claimed that self-affirmations are a panacea for bias, single-handedly “unfreezing” a conflict process by eliminating intergroup bias. The substantive, long-term reduction of biased behaviors is a key criterion variable that the reviewed studies have not demonstrated, a point we shall return to in the discussion.

4.2 | Biased intergroup information processing

Within the Bar-Tal and Halperin (2011) model of intergroup conflict, conflict-supporting beliefs are sustained by selective, biased, and distorted processing of conflict-related information. Self-affirmation research has demonstrated that when affirmed, people are more able to evaluate group-relevant information independently from self-evaluative concerns (Sherman & Kim, 2005). Self-affirmation has been shown to reduce cognitive biases across several domains, showing that an affirmed self leads to a more open mind, and in particular, that affirmation makes people less biased when processing information related to such hotly debated issues as capital punishment and abortion rights (Cohen, Aronson, & Steele, 2000; see also Correll, Spencer, & Zanna, 2004). This body of work suggests that self-protection motivations drive individuals to be biased in their judgments of conflict-related information because they challenge their previously held beliefs about their group's role in the conflict.

Such biased judgments are a function of both motivational states and information processing. That is, people resist threatening information both because they are motivated to come to desired, group-serving conclusions and

because they use their prior beliefs as a rational lens with which to view new group-relevant information (Kunda, 1990). A series of studies experimentally manipulated national identity (designed to make motivations for group-protection salient) versus rational identity (designed to make objective information processes salient) and found that when the motivational context was salient, the influence of affirmation was particularly pronounced. Participants in these studies were categorized as patriots or “antipatriots” (individuals defining themselves in opposition to a patriotic identity) and evaluated a report critical of U.S. foreign policy (Cohen et al., 2007). The report, purportedly written by an analyst of Arab descent, argued that decades of U.S. foreign policy mistakes had created the problem of Islamic radicalization. When rational identity was made salient, patriots were significantly more critical of the report than were antipatriots, and the affirmation manipulation had no effect. By contrast, when national identity was made salient, these strong differences between patriot and antipatriot groups were eliminated by the self-affirmation.

There has been much recent debate about the role of facts in political decision making and how this might perpetuate conflict between groups in regards to policy (e.g., Blow, 2017; Kolbert, 2017). Two sources of information about policy are (a) facts and evidence about the policy's impact and outcomes and (b) normative information about how people perceive the policy. In a series of studies conducted during the Obama administration, affirmations led both Republican and Democratic partisans to be less likely to go along with political polls about President Obama's policies, and more likely to be persuaded by factual evidence about the policies themselves (Binning, Brick, Cohen, & Sherman, 2015). In other words, affirmation made people more likely to overcome the tendency to “go along to get along” and to take stands against popular norms. In the context of the 2008 presidential election, Republicans and Democrats who were affirmed were less divided in their assessments of then candidate Barack Obama and his policy proposals; 10 days after the election, Republican voters who were affirmed in the days before the election indicated greater optimism for the success of then-President-elect Obama (Binning, Sherman, Cohen, & Heitland, 2010). The bias to go along with one's groups, to place party over policy (Cohen, 2003) is seen as one of the major barriers to intergroup resolution over policy, and to the extent affirmations can alleviate some of this bias, there may be greater ability to identify common ground (for discussion, see Sherman & Van Boven, 2014).

These studies on affirmation and openness to information raise the important question of boundary conditions and whether affirmation induces a general susceptibility to persuasion. However, other research shows this mechanism to be unlikely. Studies suggest that affirmed individuals are open to change when presented with strong, and not weak arguments (Correll et al., 2004). Research in the health domain has further found that affirmation can *reduce* receptiveness to identity-threatening information if arguments are seen as weak or invalid (Klein, Harris, Ferrer, & Zajac, 2011), suggesting that affirmation induces more careful information processing. In sum, studies on information processing suggest that affirmation can lead people to be less biased and group serving in their assessments related to intergroup conflict, and more open to relevant facts and evidence.

4.3 | Negotiating over limited resources and incompatible goals

Affirmations have been shown to reduce prejudice in judgments towards outgroups and increase ingroup responsibility for conflict. Affirmed information processors are less biased and more receptive to otherwise threatening facts. Several studies have explored whether these bias-reducing effects of affirmation can lead to greater acceptance and openness among negotiators representing opposing sides. When two competing parties are trying to simultaneously find solutions for a conflict over limited resources and defend the interests and reputation of their own group, classic negotiation biases can interfere (Ross & Ward, 1995). The negotiation context itself can lead people to focus on their commitment to a cause rather than the actual best outcome for their side—people strive to be good group members lest they be seen as “black sheep” for making unpopular concessions (Marques, Yzerbyt, & Leyens, 1988). Being receptive to the other side's interests when serving as a representative of a valued ingroup is thus potentially self-threatening, which can hinder progress in negotiations.

One well-studied negotiation bias is reactive devaluation, the process whereby people devalue an offer merely because it is proposed by the other side (Ross & Stillinger, 1991). In a series of studies using hypothetical

negotiation scenarios, people who completed self-affirmation tasks were less likely to derogate compromises suggested by outgroup members than were participants who completed a control task (Ward, Atkins, Lepper, & Ross, 2011). Concessions offered by opponents were seen as more attractive among participants who self-affirmed.

Part of the difficulty of making concessions during negotiation is admitting that prior courses of action were wrong, misguided, or counterproductive. Rather than risking the potential self-threat from admitting errors, people often escalate their commitment to a cause (Staw, 1981), a process that appears to operate in many intransigent political conflicts. One study in the investment context suggests that the escalation of commitment to a failed course of action can be attenuated via self-affirmation—participants who self-affirmed subsequently reinvested less money in a failed investment than participants who did not self-affirm (Sivanathan et al., 2008). Coupled with the research described earlier on the increased willingness to accept collective responsibility for ingroup atrocities shown by individuals who are affirmed (Čehajić-Clancy et al., 2011), this finding suggests that by affording a broader perspective to people in conflict, affirmation could lead to a subtle change of course in negotiations and greater openness to solutions that might otherwise be considered unacceptable.

This greater openness was examined in a study on abortion rights that sought to create a realistic legislative scenario for partisans to weigh the value of compromise. Participants in this study (all of whom were personally prochoice) role-played being a prochoice legislator who had a face-to-face interaction with a prolife advocate. This scenario was constructed such that failure to compromise would lead to a worse outcome for the prochoice cause. And so participants were faced with the unpalatable but realistic scenario whereby they could either compromise their principles or leave the decision in the hands of others (whom they knew held opposing values and goals). Prochoice partisans could thus either compromise with prolife advocates or strictly adhere to their ingroup's strongly held prochoice beliefs and refuse to cooperate (Cohen et al., 2007). In this study, affirmed participants had greater trust in the other side and were more willing to make concessions.

Across a variety of lab-based negotiation paradigms, affirmed negotiators have been shown to be more willing to consider options presented by the opposing side and less rigid in their ideological commitments. In practice, such simple acts of affirmations as finding common ground with an adversary around family or humor may meaningfully improve outcomes, providing greater perspective and openness. This possibility was illustrated in a recent *New York Times* (Bornstein, 2017) article, where the Citizens Climate Lobby seemed to take an affirming approach when meeting with a Republican Congressional representative. They began their conversation by expressing “appreciation for his service in Iraq and in the State Senate before mentioning anything about climate change.” In response, the Republican Congressman said, “I just have to say, you guys are not normal. You're smiling, you're saying nice things about me. That's not what people like you do when you come into my office.” That a simple affirmation of common goodwill among opposing party members on a contentious issue was surprising suggests that it is a relatively underemployed tactic. That the Congressman, Lee Zeldin, a Republican from New York, was persuaded to join the Climate Solutions Caucus, a bipartisan Congressional caucus, suggests the potential utility of the approach (Sherman & Van Boven, 2014).

5 | FUTURE DIRECTIONS: USING SELF-AFFIRMATION IN THE CONTEXT OF INTERGROUP CONFLICT

We would like to conclude with two questions that we believe can provide context for researchers and practitioners interested in incorporating self-affirmation in situations of intergroup conflict. The first, more theoretical question centers on how different outcome variables related to intergroup conflict fit together. That is, we reviewed a number of studies suggesting that affirming core values can reduce prejudice and outgroup enmity, increase acknowledgment of collective responsibility for ingroup wrongdoing, and facilitate greater trust and open-mindedness in negotiation over limited resources or opposing values. It is important to examine both the mediational and causal pathways by

which affirmation affects these variables and where there might be potential for these factors to promote longer term changes in behavior. In one illustrative example, Čehajić-Clancy et al. (2011) found evidence for a process model whereby affirmation led to support for reparations through the acknowledgment of ingroup responsibility and increased feelings of guilt for ingroup misdeeds. Although the researchers did not look specifically at negotiation outcomes, their findings suggest that if self-affirmation can change an individual's views on the outcome variable being negotiated—that is, reparations for wrongdoing—it may occur through mediating variables, in this case feelings of guilt and acknowledgment of wrongdoing. Future research should not only examine such mediational questions via path models but also integrate affirmations with manipulations of potential mediators (i.e., ingroup responsibility) to test causal pathways for how changes in the self via affirmation could potentially lead to changes in how conflicting groups interact.

The second question centers on the potential to intervene in real-world conflict situations. The research reviewed in this paper has obtained diverse samples such as Serbian high-school students and Israeli partisans, each reflecting on their intergroup conflicts (Čehajić-Clancy et al., 2011), as well as Arab Americans responding to prejudice against their group (Stone et al., 2011). However, an important limitation of much of the research reviewed here is that it has been conducted with self-report outcome measures, often assessed over a short term, and with a paucity of behavioral change observations. By comparison, affirmation research in other domains has moved beyond these methods and found longer term behavioral change when looking at outcomes such as biological stress indicators (Sherman, Bunyan, Creswell, & Jaremka, 2009), health behaviors such as exercise level (e.g., Falk et al., 2015) and diet (Epton et al., 2015), and educational outcomes such as college enrollment over a period of years (e.g., Goyer et al., 2017).

When affirmations exert such long-term effects, it is not because the affirmed state “magically” lingers in the person's mind (Yeager & Walton, 2011), but rather because the affirmation instigates a cycle of adaptive potential (Cohen & Sherman, 2014) whereby changes in the individual interact with changes in the environment to perpetuate the effects over time. So, in the case of educational outcomes, an affirmed student may feel less evaluative stress about a given exam and perform better. Elements of the environment may then respond differently to the student's improved performance—teachers, for example, may become more positively responsive, continually reaffirming the student in their interactions. The student is then affirmed both from her or his objectively improved grades and the teacher's encouraging feedback. Moreover, people who are affirmed experimentally in one context (i.e., students under identity threat) may have the potential to spontaneously engage in affirmation in other contexts, with suggestive evidence that this can lead to greater academic performance (Brady et al., 2016). This could lead to even more improvement as time goes on, instantiating positive feedback loops (Cohen, Garcia, Purdie-Vaughns, Apfel, & Brzustoski, 2009). Long-term changes are possible in individuals when social psychological interventions instantiate personal changes that lead to changes in the environment that feed back to the individual (Cohen & Sherman, 2014).

To transition from questionnaire studies of intergroup conflict that feature affirmation manipulations to interventions and field studies designed to address long-term conflict requires a broad approach. One critical insight from the education research relevant for this goal is that if any social psychological intervention is to have sustained effects, it needs to be reinforced by the environment over time (Garcia & Cohen, 2012; Yeager & Walton, 2011). If not, there is potential for the affirmation to backfire and lead to disengagement rather than engagement, as when, for example, people are affirmed but then experience failure (Vohs, Park, & Schmeichel, 2013). In contexts of intergroup conflict, it will be difficult for affirmation to change beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors in the long term if the individual changes in perception that it may facilitate—that is, an increased willingness to acknowledge ingroup wrongdoing—are squelched by environmental forces (Hameiri et al., 2014).

Thus, one potential avenue for affirmation interventions to be applied effectively is to explore environments where self-threat, prejudice, and outgroup derogation may be present, but where there also exists cultural support for the values of openness, plurality, and inclusion to reinforce the benefits of affirmation over time. For example, Schroeder and Risen (2014) have implemented intergroup contact interventions as part of a larger

summer camp program for Israeli and Palestinian teenagers. They describe the camp where they conduct their research as follows:

Seeds of Peace brings Israeli and Palestinian teenagers together for a 3-week summer camp nestled in the woods of Maine, thousands of miles from their home and the conflict. The camp experience is designed to promote positive intergroup contact using the "optimal" conditions specified by Allport's intergroup contact theory (1954). In addition, largely because the camp takes place in relatively neutral territory, it provides a rare opportunity for friendships to form between groups. Friendship is widely regarded as a potent form of contact and "friendship potential" has been offered as the fifth optimal condition for effective contact interventions (Davies, Tropp, Aron, Pettigrew, & Wright, 2011; Pettigrew, 1998). (Schroeder & Risen, 2014, p. 2)

In their study, Israeli and Palestinian positivity about the outgroup was found to improve over the course of the camp, particularly among those who made outgroup friends. However, the positivity faded to some extent after reentry to their home countries, although feelings remained more positive than they had been before the camp began. Although we acknowledge that the uniquely controlled nature of this camp environment may limit the generalizability of the findings, the camp setting seems to include many of the key environmental factors expected to be important for affirmation interventions to have long-term impact. Although intergroup identity threat and the conflict between the groups is salient, because the camp is explicitly designed to encourage peace and understanding across group boundaries, it also provides an environment that reinforces the benefits of contact and openness over time. A young person in this context is presented with countless opportunities to form intergroup friendships that each represent potential for self-threat and adherence to a counterproductive narrative and beliefs on one the hand, or positive experiences of exposure to the stories of others that could lead to a construal of openness on the other hand. Affirmations in educational contexts, for example, have led students under identity threat to develop adaptive coping skills (Brady et al., 2016), and shape their narratives in a more adaptive manner, leading to improved academic performance in new contexts when students have changed schools (Goyer et al., 2017; Sherman et al., 2013). The extra security that could come from affirming the self, then, could potentially tip the balance when people return to their more threatening home contexts by providing fertile psychological soil for the seeds to grow and the narratives to take shape. The examples of Seeds of Peace, as well as the bipartisan Citizens Climate Lobby described earlier, show how contexts can be created that foster moments of affirmation that may mitigate self-threat, shape peoples' narratives in situations of conflict, and prompt lasting change.

6 | CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

What can be achieved by the study of self-affirmation in intergroup conflict? Theoretically, the research reviewed in this paper has advanced an understanding of the role of self-threat in defensive intergroup biases that perpetuate conflict. It illustrates how different psychological barriers to dispute resolution, from prejudice and outgroup derogation to biased beliefs and ingroup favoritism, may stem from a common psychological motivation to protect the self. In terms of application, this research provides a tool to potentially increase openness to information and ideas that might otherwise be quickly rejected when people become defensive in situations of conflict. It suggests an approach to help shape individuals' narratives in sustaining ways to promote openness to change when threat occurs. As Bar-Tal & Halperin (2011) noted, intergroup conflicts could "potentially be resolved if not for the various powerful forces which fuel and maintain the conflicts. These forces, which underlie the mere disagreements, are the barriers that inhibit and impede progress toward peaceful settlement of the conflict (p. 217)." Understanding the social psychological factors that makes these forces powerful may prove useful in developing approaches to reducing their impact.

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