

# A sense of self-perceived collective victimhood in intractable conflicts\*

**Daniel Bar-Tal, Lily Chernyak-Hai, Noa Schori and Ayelet Gundar**

Daniel Bar-Tal is a political psychologist. He is the Branco Weiss Professor of Research in Child Development and Education at Tel-Aviv University's School of Education. Lily Chernyak-Hai, Noa Schori and Ayelet Gundar are studying social psychology at the Department of Psychology, Tel-Aviv University. Chernyak-Hai and Schori are PhD candidates, while Gundar is reading for an MA.

## Abstract

*A sense of self-perceived collective victimhood emerges as a major theme in the ethos of conflict of societies involved in intractable conflict and is a fundamental part of the collective memory of the conflict. This sense is defined as a mindset shared by group members that results from a perceived intentional harm with severe consequences, inflicted on the collective by another group. This harm is viewed as undeserved, unjust and immoral, and one that the group could not prevent. The article analyses the nature of the self-perceived collective sense of victimhood in the conflict, its antecedents, the functions that it fulfils for the society and the consequences that result from this view.*



It is probably universal that in every serious, harsh and violent intergroup conflict, at least one side – and very often both sides – believe that they are the victim in that

\* The authors would like to thank Johanna Vollhardt, Sabina Čehajić-Clancy, Dinka Corkalo Biruski, Yechiel Klar and Dario Spini for their helpful comments on the earlier draft of the present paper. Correspondence regarding this manuscript should be sent to Daniel Bar-Tal, School of Education, Tel-Aviv University, Tel Aviv 69778, Israel, email: [daniel@post.tau.ac.il](mailto:daniel@post.tau.ac.il)

conflict. In intractable intergroup conflicts, this theme is well-developed.<sup>1</sup> It constitutes an inseparable part of the shared narrative among society members as constructed in their collective memory of the conflict and ethos of conflict,<sup>2</sup> and denotes that the rival group continuously inflicted unjust and immoral harm upon them throughout the conflict. The prevalence of this theme is not surprising in view of the fact that societies involved in intractable conflict believe that their goals in conflict are well-justified, perceive their own group in a very positive light, and delegitimize the rival.

Within this framework, it is just very natural that society members believe that they are the victims of the rival in the conflict. This collective sense of victimhood has important effects on the way these societies manage the course of the conflict, approach the peace process and eventually reconcile. In many cases it serves as a factor that feeds continuation of the conflict and as an inhibitor of peacemaking. Thus it is important to clarify the nature of the sense of collective victimhood, its antecedents, functions and consequences. This is the objective of the present paper.

In order to advance understanding of the phenomenon of the sense of collective victimhood, we will also draw on contributions made in the study of victimhood at the individual level. This line of research is developing in the social sciences. It is especially marked in criminology and psychology, where the sub-discipline of victimology has emerged, which studies victims' relations with their offenders, their behaviour, and the reactions of society (including those of various institutions) towards them.<sup>3</sup> In contrast, very little has been written in terms of a comprehensive study of the collective sense of victimhood in the context of intractable conflict. This omission is strange, considering that a number of scholars have recognized the importance of the sense of collective victimhood in understanding the behaviour of society members, their relationship with the rival and with the international community at large.<sup>4</sup>

- 1 Intractable conflicts, in which the parties involved invest substantial material and non-material resources and which last at least 25 years, are characterized as being total, protracted, violent, central, and perceived as being unsolvable and of zero-sum nature. See D. Bar-Tal, 'Sociopsychological foundations of intractable conflicts', *American Behavioral Scientist*, Vol. 50, 2007, pp. 1430–1453-a.
- 2 We recognize that in almost every intergroup conflict at least one side experiences a sense of collective victimhood and that in many of them both sides have this sense. The present paper focuses on intractable conflicts, in which both sides always experience a sense of collective victimhood.
- 3 A. Karmen, *Crime Victims: An Introduction to Victimology* (2nd edn), Wadsworth: Belmont, CA, 1990; N. Ronel, K. Jaishankar and M. Bensimon, M. (eds), 2009, *Trends and Issues in Victimology*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing: Newcastle upon Tyne, UK; O. Zur, 'The psychology of victimhood', in R.H. Wright and N.A. Cummings (eds), *Destructive Trends in Mental Health*, Routledge: New York, 2005, pp. 45–64.
- 4 D. Corkalo Biruski and S. Penic (in preparation), 'Facing trauma, facing the enemy: War trauma, group identity, collective guilt and outgroup attitudes', in D. Spini, D. Corkalo Biruski, G. Elcheroth and M. Vasovic (eds), *Facing Massive Violence and Social Change: Collective Experiences in the Former Yugoslavia*; J.D. Frank, *Sanity and Survival: Psychological Aspects of War and Peace*, Vintage: New York, 1967; H.C. Kelman, 'Social-psychological dimensions of international conflict', in I.W. Zartman (ed), *Peacemaking in International Conflict: Methods and Techniques* (revised edition), United States Institute of Peace Press: Washington, DC, 2007, pp. 61–107; J. Mack, 'The Enemy System', 1990, in V. Volkan, J. Demtrios and J. Montville (eds), *The Psychodynamics of International Relationships, Vol. I: Concepts and*

## Sense of victimhood: individual approach

There are many kinds of situations that can bring a person as an individual or as a member of a collective to have a sense of being a victim. It seems that victimhood describes some lasting psychological state of mind that involves beliefs, attitudes, emotions and behavioural tendencies. This results on the one hand from direct or indirect experience of victimization, and on the other hand from its maintenance in the personal repertoire. In other words, it is a state where the experienced harm and the long-standing consequences 'become elements in the victim's personality'.<sup>5</sup>

### Experience

From the individual perspective, some researchers define victimization by focusing on the experienced events. For example, Aquino and Byron refer to 'the individual's self-perception of having been the target, either momentarily or over time, to harmful actions emanating from one or more other persons. In the most general sense, a victim is anyone who experiences injury, loss, or misfortune as a result of some event or series of events'.<sup>6</sup> Other scholars have emphasized elements in victims' psychology that emerges as a result of the harmful event.<sup>7</sup> They point to the observed feeling of helplessness and self-pity, self-inefficacy, low self-esteem, hopelessness, guilt, loss of trust, meaning and privacy, an absent sense of accountability, a tendency to blame, and a stable external locus of control (in this case, the belief is that the incident was beyond a person's control and choice, and is consistent with 'out-of-control' feelings).<sup>8</sup> Finally, of special interest is the finding indicating that repeated experiences of victimization can trigger a pattern of requital behaviours of retribution and cycles of violence.<sup>9</sup>

*Theories*, pp. 83–95, Lexington, MA; V. Volkan, *Blood Lines: From Ethnic Pride to Ethnic Terrorism*. Westview Press: Boulder, Colorado, 1997.

5 J. Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, Basic Books: New York, 1992.

6 K. Aquino and K. Byron, 'Dominating interpersonal behavior and perceived victimization in groups: Evidence for a curvilinear relationship', *Journal of Management*, Vol. 28, No. 1, 2002, p. 71.

7 M. Bard and D. Sangrey, *The Crime Victims' Book* (2nd edn). Brunner/Mazel Publishers: New York, 1986; see also O. Zur, above note 3.

8 In addition, it was found that personal victimization manifests itself in post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), symptoms of depression or substance abuse (P.A. Resick, 'The psychological impact of rape', *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, Vol. 8, 1993, pp. 223–255; J. Wolfe and R. Kimerling, Gender issues in the assessment of post-traumatic stress disorder, in J.P. Wilson and T.M. Keane (eds), *Assessing psychological trauma and PTSD*, Guilford: New York, 1997, pp. 192–238), of fear and anxiety (S.E. Taylor, J.V. Wood and R.R. Lichtman, 'It could be worse: Selective evaluation as a response to victimization', *Journal of Social Issues*, Vol. 39, 1983, pp. 19–40) and of physical health problems (J.M. Golding, 'Sexual assault history and physical health in randomly selected Los Angeles women', *Health Psychology*, 13, 1994, pp. 130–138; H.S. Resnick, R.E. Acierno and D. Kilpatrick, 'Health impact of interpersonal violence I: Prevalence rates, case identification, and risk factors for sexual assault, physical assault, and domestic violence in men and women', *Behavioral Medicine*, Vol. 23, 1997, pp. 65–78).

9 R.J. Bies, T.M. Tripp and R.M. Kramer, 'At the breaking point: Cognitive and social dynamics of revenge in organizations', in R. Giacalone and J. Greenberg (eds), *Antisocial Behavior in Organizations*, Sage: Thousand Oaks, CA, 1997, pp. 18–36; D.P. Skarlicki and R. Folger, 'Retaliation in the workplace: The

## Conditions for victimhood

Another approach taken delineates a series of necessary conditions for the emergence of a sense of victimhood. It suggests that individuals define themselves as a victim if they believe that: (1) they were harmed; (2) they were not responsible for the occurrence of the harmful act; (3) they could not prevent the harm; (4) they are morally right and suffering from injustice done to them; and (5) they deserve sympathy.<sup>10</sup> The latter condition adds crucial aspects to the definition. It points out that mere experience of the harmful event is not enough for the emergence of the sense of being a victim. In order to have this sense there is the need to perceive the harm as undeserved, unjust and immoral, an act that could not be prevented by the victim. The need to get empathy then emerges.

## Further analysis

In addition to the different specific definitions, diverse elaborations of the analysis of victimization have also appeared. For example, it has been proposed that the idea of victimization assumes that certain individual or collective rights were violated: either concrete rights such as the right to shelter and food, or more abstract rights such as the right to happiness, living space, self-determination and free expression of identity. This distinction leads to another differentiation which suggests that some victims experience a tangible violation of rights (territory, property, physical injury, murder), whereas other victims are affected by intangible experiences such as identity damage, other psychological trauma, loss of security and even loss of the 'old' self.<sup>11</sup> Therefore victimization is not only an objective occurrence, but is also based on a subjective experience, as some people can define themselves as 'victims' in circumstances that many others would regard as part of their everyday life.<sup>12</sup>

In addition, it should be noted that individuals may experience the harm either directly or indirectly. That is, they can suffer psychological or physical harm by themselves, or be related to other victimized individuals and therefore feel indirect victimization.<sup>13</sup> Accordingly, there is an assumption that the most practical approach to understanding the sense of being a victim is to focus on the individual's perception of his/her unpleasant experience.<sup>14</sup> It can be said that

roles of distributive, procedural, and interactional justice', *Journal of Applied Psychology*, Vol. 82, 1997, pp. 434–443.

10 C.J. Sykes, *A nation of victims: The decay of the American character*, St. Martin's Press: New York, 1992.

11 A. Confino, 'Remembering the Second World War, 1945–1965: Narratives of victimhood and genocide'. *Cultural Analysis*, Vol. 4, 2005, pp. 46–75.

12 S. Garkawe, 'Revisiting the scope of victimology – How broad a discipline should it be?' *International Review of Victimology*, 11, 2004, pp. 275–294.

13 D. Bloomfield, T. Barnes and L. Huyse (eds), *Reconciliation after violent conflict: A handbook*, International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, Stockholm, 2003; R. Strobl, 'Constructing the victim: Theoretical reflections and empirical examples', *International Review of Victimology*, Vol. 11, 2004, pp. 295–311.

14 See K. Aquino and K. Byron, above note 6.

victimhood is a psychological state of an individual who perceives himself/herself as a victim and feels like a victim,<sup>15</sup> or is holding 'victim beliefs'.<sup>16</sup>

However, the question that should be raised is whether the sense of victimhood is based on self-perception only. A number of scholars add another perspective to the analysis: the view of the social milieu. There is a 'social construction' of the sense of victimhood that defines the characteristics of 'victim', assigns them to the victims and their social environment and legitimizes the label.<sup>17</sup> Once this legitimization takes place, individuals often make efforts to maintain that sense over time. In this vein, it is worth noting that reference to victimhood as a social construction allows cultural variation in the definition of the victim, according to different socio-political contexts<sup>18</sup>: 'Victimization happens within a context of relationship and a certain environment or culture. Hence, each participant's behavior must be understood within the framework of the relationship and its legal, economical, political, and social context'.<sup>19</sup>

## Foundations

Hence the sense of victimhood has three foundations. First, it is rooted in a realization of harm experienced either directly or indirectly.<sup>20</sup> Second, mere personal perception is not enough. 'Victim' is also a social label – in other words, a result of social recognition of an act as illegitimate harm. Third, once individuals perceive themselves as victims, they often attempt to maintain this status.

## Sequential stages: the process of victimization

It is thus possible to see victimization as a dynamic social process divided into several sequential stages that result in giving a certain individual or a group the status of victim.<sup>21</sup> For example, according to the symbolic interaction approach, individuals and collectives come to be known as victims through the social process. This process requires an experience of a harmful act and then of suffering, removal of self-responsibility for the suffering, ascription of causes for the harmful act and specification of expected responses and behaviours. Viano<sup>22</sup> suggested four complementary stages in a process of victimization:

1. individuals experience harm, injury or suffering caused by another person or persons or by institutions;

15 J.E. Bayley, The concept of victimhood, in D. Sank and D.I. Caplan (eds), *To be a victim: Encounters with crime and justice*, Insight Books: New York, 1991, pp. 53–67.

16 See C.J. Sykes, above note 10.

17 J.A. Holstein and G. Miller, Rethinking victimization: An interactional approach to victimology, *Symbolic Interaction*, 13, 1990, pp. 103–122.

18 See J.E. Bayley, above note 15; D. Bloomfield, T. Barnes and L. Huysse, above note 13.

19 See O. Zur, above note 3.

20 See D. Bloomfield, T. Barnes and L. Huysse, above note 13; R. Strobl, above note 13.

21 M.M. Lanier and S. Henry, *Essential Criminology*, Westview Press: Boulder, CO, 1998.

22 E.C. Viano, 'Victimology today: Major issues in research and public policy', in E.C. Viano (ed), *Crime and its victims: International research and public policy issues*, Hemisphere: New York, 1989, pp. 3–14.

2. some of them perceive this harm as undeserved, unfair and unjust, leading them to view themselves as a victim;
3. some of those who perceive themselves as a victim attempt to gain social validation by persuading others (family, friends, authorities, etc.) to recognize that the harm occurred and that they are victims;
4. some of those who assert that they have been victimized receive external validation of their claim, thus becoming 'official' victims (as a result they may receive social or institutional support and compensation).

Similarly, Strobl<sup>23</sup> proposed five minimum criteria as necessary to qualify for the status of victim:

1. identifiable single event of harm;
2. its negative evaluation;
3. its being viewed as an uncontrollable event;
4. its attribution to a personal or social offender; and
5. its consideration as violating a socially shared norm.

On the basis of the above clarifications of the victim's definition, status and conception, we would now like to turn to analysis of the collective sense of victimhood, which is our focal interest.

## Collective sense of victimhood

### Collective basis

The basic premise of this article is that just as individuals experience a sense of victimhood because of personal experiences, collectives such as ethnic groups may also experience this sense. It may result from events that harm the members of the collective because of their membership, even if not all the group members experience the harm directly.<sup>24</sup> Groups can suffer from collective victimization which, similarly to individual victimization, is not based only on an objective experience but also on the social construction of it. It means that at the collective level of victimization, members of a collective hold shared beliefs about ingroup victimization, i.e. of the social group to which they belong. Sharing these beliefs reflects a sense of collective victimhood. In this case the inflicted harm has to be perceived as intentionally directed towards the group, or towards the group members because of their membership in that group.

Group members experience this sense on the basis of their identification with the group. An act carried out with the intention to harm either the group as

23 See Strobl, above note 13.

24 In this conception we focus only on a sense of self-perceived collective victimhood that results from behaviour of another group or groups.

a whole or some of its members also affects the thinking and feeling of other group members who were not directly harmed.<sup>25</sup> They perceive this harm as directed towards them because of their identification with the causes of the group and their concerns about its well-being.<sup>26</sup>

A social psychological theory of self-categorization, proposed by Turner and his colleagues<sup>27</sup> is especially relevant in discussing the relationship between group members, social identity and the sharing of beliefs within a group. Sharing beliefs is one of the basic elements for group formation and the expression of common social identity, since beliefs with particular contents prototypically define a group. Individuals, defining themselves as group members, acquire these beliefs through the process of depersonalization as part of their formation of social identity. They subsequently continue to adopt various beliefs, attitudes and emotions on the basis of experiences of their group.<sup>28</sup> In this vein there are, for example, clear indications that group members experience a vicarious empathy when they witness or are informed about distress and suffering experienced by compatriots.<sup>29</sup> This is an important psychological mechanism that underlies the development of a collective sense of victimhood among group members who do not experience harm directly. A large-scale study conducted by Cairns, Mallet, Lewis and Wilson<sup>30</sup> reveals that a great majority of Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland, despite not being directly harmed, labelled themselves as victims in the conflict because their fellow group members were hurt.

Thus the sense of self-perceived collective victimhood is based on and reflected in the sharing of societal beliefs,<sup>31</sup> attitudes and emotions. These provide one of the foundations for a societal system. Shared societal beliefs, such as beliefs about victimhood, serve as a basis for construction of a common reality, culture, identity, communication, unity, solidarity, goal-setting, co-ordinated activities, and so on.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, societies may choose to internalize past harms and to

25 M.J.A. Wohl and N. Branscombe, 'Collective guilt for current ingroup transgressions', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 94, No. 6, 2008, pp. 988–1006.

26 O. David and D. Bar-Tal, *Collective identity and nations: A Socio-psychological conception*, 2008, manuscript submitted.

27 J.C. Turner, 'Some current issues in research on social identity and self-categorization theories', in N. Ellemers, R. Spears and B. Dösjé (eds), *Social Identity: Context, Commitment, Content*. Blackwell: Oxford, 1999, pp. 6–34; J.C. Turner, M.A. Hogg, P.J. Oakes, S.D. Reicher and M. Wetherell, *Rediscovering the Social Group: A Self-Categorizing Theory*. Blackwell: Oxford, 1987.

28 D. Bar-Tal, *Shared Beliefs in a Society: Social Psychological Analysis*, Sage: Thousand Oaks, CA, 2000; D.M. Mackie, T. Devos and E.R. Smith, *From Prejudice to Intergroup Emotions: Differentiated Reactions to Social Groups*, Psychology Press: New York, 2002.

29 M.H. Davis, *Empathy: A social psychological approach*, Hawthorne: New York, 1994.

30 E. Cairns, J. Mallet, C. Lewis and R. Wilson, *Who are the victims? Self-assessed victimhood and the Northern Irish conflict*, NIO Research and Statistical Series, Report No. 7, Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, Belfast, 2003.

31 Societal beliefs are defined as shared cognitions by the society members that address themes and issues with which the society members are particularly preoccupied, and which contribute to their sense of uniqueness, see D. Bar-Tal, above note 28.

32 J.W.D. Dougherty (ed), *Directions in Cognitive Anthropology*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985; K. Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia*, Harcourt, Brace and Company: NY, 1952; R.K. Merton, *Social Theory and Social Structure*, Free Press: NY, 1957; T. Parsons, *The Social System*, Glencoe, IL, The Free

‘transform them into powerful cultural narratives which become an integral part of the social identity’.<sup>33</sup> Finally, the collective sense of victimhood becomes a prism through which the society processes information and makes decisions.

## Past foundations

An imperative aspect of the collective sense of victimhood is that a collective may experience this sense in the present as a result of harm done even in the distant past, as noted by Staub and Bar-Tal: ‘Groups encode important experiences, especially extensive suffering, in their collective memory, which can maintain a sense of woundedness and past injustice through generations’.<sup>34</sup> This encoding fulfils various functions, just as Liu and Liu<sup>35</sup> believe that cultures shape their collective memories<sup>36</sup> according to a ‘historical affordance’. This means that they preserve those narratives that can be functional in the life of the collective. Indeed, collective memory is entrenched in the particular socio-political-cultural context that imprints its meaning. Connerton pointed out that ‘our experience of the present very largely depends upon our knowledge of the past. We experience our present world in the context which is causally connected with the past event and objects’.<sup>37</sup>

The lasting preoccupation with these memories, even after their effects have ceased, can be explained by the functions that the collective of sense of victimhood

Press, 1951; R.A. Shweder and R.A. Levine (eds), *Culture Theory*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1984.

- 33 A. Robben and M. Suarez-Orozco, *Cultures under siege: Collective violence and trauma*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2000, p. 23.
- 34 E. Staub and D. Bar-Tal, ‘Genocide, mass killing, and intractable conflict: Roots, evolution, prevention, and reconciliation’, in D.O. Sears, L. Huddy and R. Jervis (eds), *Handbook of Political Psychology*, 2003, Oxford University Press, New York, p. 722.
- 35 J.H. Liu and S.H. Liu, ‘The role of the social psychologist in the benevolent authority and plurality of powers systems of historical affordance for authority’, in K.S. Yang, K.K. Hwang, P.B. Pedersen and I. Daibo (eds), *Progress in Asian social psychology: Conceptual and empirical contributions*, Praeger: Westport, CT, 2003, pp. 43–46.
- 36 Collective memory is defined as representations of the past which are remembered by society members as the history of the group (see W. Kansteiner, ‘Finding meaning in memory: A methodological critique of collective memory studies’, *History and Theory*, Vol. 41, 2002, pp. 179–197). Collective memory contains the narratives, the symbols, the models, the myths, and the events that mould the culture of the group. It does not intend to provide an objective history of the past, but tells about the past that is functional and relevant to the society’s present existence and future aspirations. Thus it creates a socially constructed narrative that has some basis in actual events, but is biased, selective and distorted in ways that meet societal present needs (see E. Hobsbawm and T. Ranger (eds), *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1983; J.H. Liu and D.J. Hilton, ‘How the past weighs on the present: Social representations of history and their role in identity politics’, *British Journal of Social Psychology*, Vol. 44, No. 4, 2005, pp. 537–556; B. Southgate, *What is History For?* New York, Routledge, 2005). Moreover, Corkalo *et al* talk about the ‘ethnization of memory’, where ‘memory itself and interpretation of the past become ethnically exclusive, creating subjective, psychological realities and different symbolic meanings of common events in people who belong to different ethnic groups’. D. Corkalo, D. Ajdukovic, H. Weinstein, E. Stover, D. Djipa and M. Biro, ‘Neighbors again? Inter-Community relations after ethnic violence’, in E. Stover and H. Weinstein (eds), *My neighbor, my enemy: Justice and community in the aftermath of mass atrocity*, 2004, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, pp. 143–161.
- 37 P. Connerton, *How Societies Remember*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 1989, p. 2.



fulfils. Despite obvious discussed consequences of being a victim, a victim's position is also often a powerful one because it is viewed as morally superior, entitled to sympathy and consideration and protected from criticism.<sup>38</sup> As a result, a collective may cultivate the image of being a victim and embed it in their culture.

Groups maintain a sense of collective victimhood as a result of various traumatic experiences such as past colonial occupation, extensive harm done to them, inflicted wars or prolonged exploitation and discrimination, or of genocide – many of them within the framework of vicious and violent conflicts. For example, Serbs maintain a sense of collective victimhood because of their past experiences of violence. This sense is well expressed in a declaration issued in April 1997 by a prominent group of Serbian bishops, intellectuals and artists:

The history of Serbian lands ... is full of instances of genocide against Serbs and of exoduses to which they were exposed. Processes of annihilation of Serbs in the most diverse and brutal ways have been continuous ... yet they have always been self-defenders of their own existence, spirituality, culture, and democratic convictions.<sup>39</sup>

Similarly, Poles suffered under the yoke of imperial domination by Prussia, Russia and Austria through the centuries and therefore 'a romantic myth emerged that ascribed to the Polish nation a messianic role as the "Christ of nations"', or 'the new Golgotha'.<sup>40</sup> Through its suffering Poland, the blameless victim, atones for the sins of other nations and thereby incurs their debt. The self-image of Poland as the innocent victim of aggression by powerful neighbours has endured throughout the centuries to this day and has an effect on the relationship with Germany and Russia.

In this vein, Volkan<sup>41</sup> argues that groups may adhere to a particular experience of collective violence and loss that survivors are unable to mourn, and hold it in their collective memory. He suggested that 'if historical circumstances do not allow a new generation to reverse feelings of past powerlessness, the mental representation of the shared calamity still bonds members of the group together. But instead of raising a group's self esteem, the mental image of the event links people through a continuing sense of powerlessness, as though members of the group existed under a large tent of victim hood'. This experience is considered as a 'chosen trauma' and leads to the collective focus on the group's past experiences of victimization, to the point when the entire identity of the group's members may centre on it.<sup>42</sup> It is maintained in the culture and transmitted to the new generations. Examples of such 'chosen traumas' are the defeat of the Serbs by the Turks in the Battle of Kosovo in 1389, the 1937 massacre of Chinese in Nanking,

38 M. Kanan, 'On victim and victimhood: The Iraqi case', *Current History*, Vol. 98, 1999, pp. 96–106.

39 Anzulovic, *Heavenly Serbia: From myth to genocide*, Hurst: London, 1999, p. 124.

40 A. Jasińska-Kania, 'Bloody revenge in "God's Playground": Poles' collective memory of relations with Germans, Russians, and Jews', *International Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 37, No. 1, 2007, p. 33.

41 See V. Volkan, above note 4, p. 47.

42 See V. Volkan, above note 4; H. Krystal, *Massive Psychic Trauma*, International Universities Press: New York, 1968.

the Holocaust in World War II, and the Palestinian Nakba (disaster) or exodus of the Palestinians in the 1948 war. Each of these events has great societal significance, is kept in mind, commemorated and used for various purposes in many different ways to provide an important lesson for the respective society, and is sometimes even used to justify violence against other groups.

It can be assumed that groups who focus in their collective memory on being a victim and view themselves as such are prone to view themselves also as victims in new situations in which they are harmed. These societies are very sensitive to particular cues and conditions and readily tend to use their inherent schema of victimhood to apply to the new situation. An example of this are Serbs who viewed themselves as victims in the wars that broke out in the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s, partly because of their collective memory of the Battle of Kosovo that took place some 600 years earlier, but also the traumatic events during World War II when hundreds of thousands of Serbs were massacred and others sent to concentration camps.<sup>43</sup> A traumatic re-enactment and exploitation of old fears and hatreds, as well as the emphasis placed on the victimization of Serbs in the past,<sup>44</sup> may have added to the nationalism that sparked the wars, horrendous acts of revenge, mass killings and ethnic cleansing in the former Yugoslavia.<sup>45</sup>

## The psychological nature of collective victimhood

We would like to define a sense of self-perceived collective victimhood as a mindset shared by group members that results from a perceived intentional harm with severe and lasting consequences inflicted on a collective by another group or groups, a harm that is viewed as undeserved, unjust and immoral, and one that the group was not able to prevent.<sup>46</sup> This mindset emerges as a result of cognitive construction of the situation in which such harm is inflicted. The perceived harm can be done in the present or fairly recent past, or well remembered in the collective memory as harm done in the distant past. It can be real or partly imagined, but usually is based on experienced events. It can be large-scale, as a result of a one-time event (such as the loss of a battle or war, genocide or ethnic cleansing) or of long-term harmful treatment of the group such as slavery, exploitation, discrimination or occupation.

43 See B. Anzulovic, above note 39.

44 J. Leatherman, W. DeMars, P.D. Gaffney and R. Vayrynen, *Breaking cycles of violence: Conflict prevention in intrastate crises*, Kumarian Press: West Hartford, CT, 1999; G. Ross, *The trauma vortex in action again in the Middle East*, 2001, available at <http://www.traumainstitute.org/articles.php> (last viewed on 24 April 2009).

45 E. Staub, 'Reconciliation after genocide, mass killing and intractable conflict: Understanding the roots of violence, psychological recovery, and steps toward a general theory', *Political Psychology*, Vol. 27, No. 6, 2006, pp. 867–894.

46 We do not claim that this mindset has to be shared by all the group members. We assume that at the height of an intractable conflict it is shared by the great majority of group members, but over time, when the peace process begins and continues, the sharing may be significantly diminished.

## *Symptoms of victimhood*

When a collective develops a sense of victimhood, it consists of beliefs, attitudes, emotions and behavioural tendencies. The beliefs first of all focus on various types of harms such as losses, destructions, suffering, oppressions, humiliations or atrocities viewed as uncontrolled and unavoidable, which are inflicted on the ingroup by another group. They stress that the harm is undeserved and unjust; it is viewed as immoral because in the eyes of the group members it violates basic moral norms and codes that govern human behaviour. The beliefs ascribe the responsibility for the harm to the other group. They centre on the tribulations of the ingroup and its members; pertain to the duration and continuity of the harmful experiences, the circumstances surrounding them and the resulting severe consequences; and highlight the status of being a victim, the obligations of the perpetrator and those of the international community. The latter beliefs focus on the deservingness of apology, compensation or punishment of the perpetrator, and the entitlement to empathy, support and help from the international community.

The attitudes express negative feelings towards the perpetrator and towards those who do not recognize the group's status as being the victim, while positive feelings are expressed towards all those groups who empathize with, support and help the group. Emotionally, the sense of victimhood is usually associated with anger, fear and self-pity. Finally, this sense leads to various behavioural intentions such as the desire to prevent future harm and to avenge the harm already done. The described beliefs, attitudes, emotions and behavioural tendencies may become a very dominant part of the repertoire held by a collective, assimilated into its collective memory, where it is maintained, elaborated and activated frequently. It can then be labelled as a syndrome of victimhood.

## *Process of collective victimization*

We accept the view that, as in the individual case, the collective sense of victimhood develops progressively. An act or acts carried out by another group are only the first phase in its development. Eventually those patterns of behaviour have to be assessed as being harmful. The assessment can be made immediately, following a particular event (for example an attack such as that on 1 September 1939, when Poland was invaded by Germany), or through a longer process of self-enlightenment as sometimes occurs in a situation of collective discrimination, oppression, maltreatment and exploitation. Again, the assessment of the harm must be accompanied by an evaluation of the act as unjust, undeserved, unavoidable and uncontrolled by the collective. On the basis of these findings, a collective labels itself a victim and attempts to impart this label and the rationale of this status to members of the collective. Once the collective views itself as a victim, it makes an active effort to persuade other groups and the whole international community that it has this status.

However, in contrast to the individual case, where there is need for acknowledgment by the social environment, the recognition of the international

community is not a necessary condition for the emergence and solidification of the collective sense of victimhood. A collective may continue to view itself as a victim despite the fact that the international community does not recognize its victimhood and sometimes even considers this same group as a perpetrator. One example is Iran, which perceives itself as a victim although the international community views that country very differently. Iran's President Ahmadinejad recently said: 'We've been victims of terrorism ...',<sup>47</sup> whereas many nations view Iran as a perpetrator that develops mass destruction weapons and exports terror.

## Sense of victimhood in intractable conflicts

The sense of collective victimhood emerges as a major theme in the ethos of conflict<sup>48</sup> of societies involved in intractable conflict and is a fundamental part of the collective memory thereof. The ethos and collective memory of conflict are part of the socio-psychological infrastructure and provide the contents for a culture of conflict that evolves to meet the challenges of the conflict.<sup>49</sup> The shared societal beliefs of ethos and collective memory portray the own group as the victim of the opponent. The focus of these beliefs is on the unjust harm, evil deeds and atrocities perpetrated by the adversary. This view is formed over a long period of violence as a result of the society's sufferings and losses.<sup>50</sup> The more and the longer the society experiences harm (especially human losses) in conflict, and the more intensive and extensive is the view that the harm is undeserved and unjust, the more prevalent and entrenched is the collective sense of being the victim.

47 Sewell Chan, 'Iranian Leader, Calling Introductory Remarks Insulting, Addresses Columbia', *New York Times*, 25 September 2007.

48 *Ethos of conflict*, defined as the configuration of central societal beliefs that provide a particular dominant orientation to a society experiencing prolonged intractable conflict (see D. Bar-Tal, above note 28). It has been proposed that in the context of intractable conflict, such an ethos evolves with eight themes (see D. Bar-Tal, Societal beliefs in times of intractable conflict: The Israeli case, *International Journal of Conflict Management*, 9, 1998, pp. 22–50; and D. Bar-Tal, above note 1), as follows: *societal beliefs about the justness of one's own goals* first of all outline the goals in conflict, indicate their crucial importance and provide explanations and rationales for them. *Societal beliefs about security* stress the importance of personal safety and national survival, and outline the conditions for their achievement. *Societal beliefs of a positive collective self-image* concern the ethnocentric tendency to attribute positive traits, values and behaviour to one's own society. *Societal beliefs about one's own victimization* concern self-presentation as a victim, especially in the context of the intractable conflict. *Societal beliefs about the delegitimization of the opponent* are beliefs that deny the adversary's humanity. *Societal beliefs about patriotism* generate attachment to the country and society by propagating loyalty, love, care and sacrifice. *Societal beliefs about unity* refer to the importance of ignoring internal conflicts and disagreements during intractable conflict in order to join forces in the face of the external threat. Finally, *societal beliefs about peace* refer to peace as the ultimate desire of the society.

49 See D. Bar-Tal, above note 1.

50 D. Bar-Tal, Collective memory of physical violence: Its contribution to the culture of violence, in E. Cairns and M. D. Roe (eds), *The Role of Memory in Ethnic Conflict*, Palgrave Macmillan: Houndmills, UK, 2003, pp. 77–93; see also H.C. Kelman, above note 4; J. Mack, above note 4; J.V. Montville, *Conflict and Peacemaking in Multiethnic Societies*, New York: Lexington Books, 1991; see also V. Volkan, above note 4.

‘The killing fields of national ethnic conflicts, the graves of the fallen, are the building blocks of which modern nations are made, out of which the fabric of national sentiment grows.’<sup>51</sup>

A sense of collective victimhood is unrelated to the strength and power of the collectives involved in intractable conflict. Collectives that are strong and powerful militarily, politically and economically still perceive themselves as victims or potential victims in the conflict. The self-assigned status as the victim does not necessarily indicate weakness. On the contrary, it provides strength vis-à-vis the international community, which usually tends to support the victimized side in the conflict, and it often energizes members of a group to take revenge and punish the opponent.

This has happened in the case of Russians in the Chechen conflict, Americans in the Vietnam War, Israeli Jews in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Turks in their conflict with Kurds, or Sinhalese in the Sri Lanka conflict. The sense of collective victimhood is a result of the inimical context and the socio-psychological repertoire that accompanies it. The violence, losses and unavoidable suffering together with their framing within the ethos of conflict lead to the inevitable inference of being a victim in the conflict.

The formation of the sense of collective victimhood is based on beliefs about the justness of the goals of one’s group and on one’s positive self-image, while emphasizing the wickedness of the opponent’s goals and characteristics.<sup>52</sup> In other words, focusing on the injustice, harm, evil and atrocities associated with the adversary, while emphasizing one’s own society as being just, moral and human, leads society members to present themselves as victims.<sup>53</sup> Beliefs about victimhood imply that the conflict was imposed by an adversary who not only fights for unjust goals, but also uses violent and immoral means to achieve them. They provide the moral incentive to seek justice and oppose the opponent, as well as to mobilize moral, political and material support from the international community. In fact, these three themes of the ethos of conflict – societal beliefs about victimhood, justness of one’s own goals, and delegitimization of the rival – form a triangular system that constitutes the core beliefs of the intractable conflict.<sup>54</sup> The three themes feed and sustain each other, contributing to the continuation of the conflict.

For example, in the context of the violent Northern Ireland conflict, both the Catholics and the Protestants each perceive themselves as victims of the other. The two groups focus on the terrorism of the other side, selectively

51 I. Zertal, *Israel’s Holocaust and the Politics of Nationhood*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005, p. 9.

52 See D. Bar-Tal, above note 1; J.D. Frank, above note 4; H.C. Kelman, above note 4; R.K. White, *Nobody Wanted War: Misperception in Vietnam and Other Wars*, Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1970.

53 B. Sahdra and M. Ross, ‘Group identification and historical memory’, *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, Vol. 33, 2007, pp. 384–395.

54 U. Gopher, *Antecedents to the ethos of conflict in Israeli-Jewish society*, Master Thesis submitted to Tel Aviv University (in Hebrew), 2006.

remembering the violent acts and blaming the opponent for them.<sup>55</sup> The same holds true in the case of Israeli Jews and Palestinians in the Israeli-Arab conflict;<sup>56</sup> Serbs and Croats in the conflict following Croatia's declaration of independence in June 1991;<sup>57</sup> Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots<sup>58</sup> and Tamils and Sinhalese in Sri Lanka.<sup>59</sup> Each community construes the other as the cause of their suffering and perceives their own side as not responsible – in other words, as the victim.

In sum, the sense of collective victimhood as defined has a number of important implications during intractable conflict:

1. it positions the society members in a particular state of mind;
2. it provides a rigid, durable self-perception that is unlikely to change while the intractable conflict lasts, and will most probably persist long after;
3. it is accompanied by intense negative emotions such as anger, fear or self-pity;
4. it appears automatically in situations of violence because of the underlying emotional and teleological nature;
5. it serves as a prism through which society members evaluate their experiences, especially in the context of the conflict;
6. it magnifies the difference between the groups engaged in conflict;
7. it implies that the rival has the ongoing potential for harming and thus the society lives under continuous conditions of threat;
8. it has serious cognitive and emotional consequences that also reinforce the self-collective view as the victim; and
9. it has behavioural implications for the society suggesting that it does not deserve to be harmed, and that therefore measures should be taken to prevent any further harm and punish the opponent for the harm already done.

Thus the sense of collective victimhood often leads to cycles of violence because of preventive and vengeful acts.

55 See E. Cairns, J. Mallet, C. Lewis and R. Wilson, above note 30; J.A. Hunter, M. Stringer and R.P. Watson, 'Intergroup violence and intergroup attributions', *British Journal of Social Psychology*, Vol. 30, 1991, pp. 261–266.

56 D. Bar-Tal, *Living with the conflict: Socio-psychological analysis of the Israeli-Jewish society*, Jerusalem: Carmel (in Hebrew), 2007; N. Caplan, 'Victimhood and identity: Psychological obstacles to Israeli reconciliation with the Palestinians', in K. Abdel-Malek and D.C. Jacobson (eds), *Israeli and Palestinian Identities in History and Literature*, St Martin's Press: New York, 1999, pp. 63–86; L. Khalili, *Heroes and Martyrs of Palestine – The politics of national commemoration*, Cambridge University Press: New York, 2007; N. Rouhana and D. Bar-Tal, 'Psychological dynamics of intractable conflicts: The Israeli-Palestinian case', *American Psychologist*, Vol. 53, 1998, pp. 761–770; J. Vollhardt, 'The role of victim beliefs in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict: Risk or potential for peace?' *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology* (in press).

57 See V. Volkan, above note 4, p. 54.

58 M. Hadjipavlou, 'The Cyprus conflict: Root causes and implications for peacebuilding', *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 44, No. 3, 2007, pp. 349–365.

59 R. Ramanathapillai, 'The politicizing of trauma: A case study of Sri Lanka'. *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology*, Vol. 12, 2006, pp. 1–18.

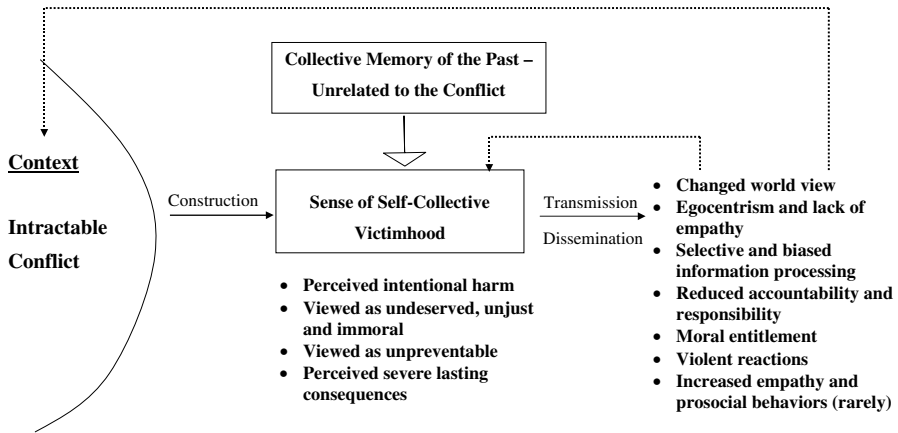


Figure 1: Model of Sense of Self-Collective Victimhood in Intractable Conflict

## Functions

The sense of collective victimhood fulfils major functions for the societies involved in intractable conflicts.<sup>60</sup> These functions are of importance for understanding why groups make an active effort to create and then maintain the sense of victimhood.

### *Providing explanations*

First, the beliefs about self-perceived collective victimhood perform the epistemic function of illuminating the conflict situation. The situation of intractable conflict is extremely threatening and accompanied by stress, vulnerability, uncertainty and fear, as well as shattering previously held world views. In face of the ambiguity and unpredictability, individuals must satisfy the need for a comprehensive understanding of the conflict, which provides a coherent and predictable picture of the situation.<sup>61</sup> The societal beliefs about collective victimhood fulfil these demands, providing information and explanations about the conflict, explaining who is responsible for the harm it brings, which is the evil side in it and which is the victim.

### *Coping with stress*

Furthermore, the sense of being a victim helps in coping with stress created by the conditions of intractable conflict. Successful coping with stress often involves

60 J. Holmwood, 'Functionalism and its critics', in A. Harrington (ed), *Modern Social Theory: an introduction*, Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2005, pp. 87–109.

61 J.W. Burton (ed), *Conflict: Human Needs Theory*, St Martin's Press: New York, 1990.

making sense of and finding meaning in the stressful conditions within existing schemes and the existing world view, or an adjustment of that view to the events.<sup>62</sup> The societal beliefs of victimhood provide such meaning and allow ‘sense-making’.

### *Moral justification*

In its moral function, the sense of being a victim delegates responsibility for both the outbreak of the conflict and the subsequent violence to the opponent. In addition, it provides the moral weight to seek justice and oppose the adversary, and thus serves to justify and legitimize the harmful acts of the ingroup towards the enemy, including violence and destruction.<sup>63</sup>

### *Differentiation and superiority*

The sense of being a victim creates a sense of differentiation and superiority.<sup>64</sup> It sharpens intergroup differences because while it describes the opponent in delegitimizing terms and at the same time as responsible for the unjust and immoral acts, it presents the own society as a sole victim of the conflict. Since societies involved in intractable conflict view their own goals as justified and perceive themselves in a positive light, they attribute all responsibility for the outbreak of the conflict, its continuation and especially its violence to the opponent. The repertoire focuses on the violence, atrocities, cruelty, lack of concern for human life, and viciousness of the other side. It describes the other side as inhuman and immoral; the conflict as intransigent, irrational, far-reaching and irreconcilable; and this precludes any peaceful solution. These beliefs stand in contrast to the societal beliefs about positive collective self-image, which portray the ingroup in positive terms and as the victim in the conflict.

### *Preparation and immunization*

The sense of being a victim prepares the society for threatening and violent acts of the enemy, as well as for difficult living conditions. It tunes the society to information that signals potential harm and continuing violent confrontations, allowing

62 A. Antonovsky, *Unraveling the Mystery of Health: How People Manage Stress and Stay Well*, Jossey-Bass: San Francisco, 1987; V.E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, Washington Square Press: New York, 1963; R. Janoff-Bulman, *Shattered Assumptions: Towards a New Psychology of Trauma*, The Free Press: New York, 1992; S.E. Taylor, 'Adjustment to threatening events: A theory of cognitive adaptation', *American Psychologist*, Vol. 38, 1983, pp. 1161–1173.

63 D.E. Apter (ed), *Legitimization of Violence*, New York University Press: New York, 1997; J.T. Jost and B. Major (eds), *The Psychology of Legitimacy: Emerging Perspectives on Ideology, Justice, and Intergroup Relations*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2001.

64 J. Sidanius and F. Pratto, *Social Dominance*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 1999.



psychological preparations for the lasting conflict and immunization against negative experiences. The society is attentive and sensitive to cues about threats, so no sudden surprises can arise. In this sense the psychological repertoire also allows economic predictability, which is one of the basic conditions for coping successfully with stress.<sup>65</sup>

### *Solidarity*

The sense of being a victim serves as a basis for unity and solidarity because it implies a threat to the collective's well-being and even to its survival.<sup>66</sup> It heightens the need for unity and solidarity, which are important conditions for survival in view of the continuous harm caused by the rival. Collective victimhood may serve as 'social glue', bonding members of the collective together on the basis of the present threat and past 'chosen traumas'.<sup>67</sup> This basis for unity has been used by various societies, as this representation 'appears to be capable of smoothing over ethnic and regional differences'.<sup>68</sup>

### *Patriotism and mobilization*

The sense of being a victim has the function of motivating patriotism, mobilization and action.<sup>69</sup> It highlights security needs as a core value and indicates a situation of emergency which requires mobilization and sacrifice that are crucial for countering the threat. It implies the necessity to exert all the group's efforts and resources in the struggle against the perpetrator. It plays a central role in stirring up patriotism, which leads to readiness for various sacrifices in order to defend the group and the country and avenge acts of violence by the enemy. In addition, it reminds group members of past violent acts by the rival and indicates that they could recur. The implication is that society members should mobilize in view of the threat, and should maybe even take violent action to prevent possible harm and avenge the harm already done. This function is therefore essential to meet the challenge of withstanding the enemy in the conflict.

For example, in the case of Sri Lanka victimhood narratives were used by militant groups to recruit the Tamil people and induce them to commit violent acts.<sup>70</sup> Ramanathapillai claims that: 'Stories about the traumatic events became both a powerful symbol and an effective tool to create new

65 See A. Antonovsky, above note 62; R.S. Lazarus and S. Folkman, *Stress, Appraisal and Coping*, Springer Publishing Company: New York, 1984.

66 S. Rosenberg, *Victimhood*, Intractable Conflict Knowledge Base Project, Conflict Research Consortium, University of Colorado, 2003, available at <http://www.intractableconflict.org/m/victimhood.jsp> (last visited 27 April 2009).

67 See V. Volkan, above note 4.

68 See J.H. Liu and D.J. Hilton, above note 36, p. 546.

69 D. Bar-Tal and E. Staub, *Patriotism in the Life of Individuals and Nations*. Nelson-Hall: Chicago, 1997.

70 See R. Ramanathapillai, above note 59.

combatants'.<sup>71</sup> Also, in a speech given just before Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 1982, Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin used collective victimization as an argument in favour of the war. 'It is our destiny that in Israel there is no other way but fighting', said Begin, and added: 'We won't allow another Treblinka'. By mentioning the notorious extermination camp, Begin activated beliefs about collective victimization.

### *Gaining international support*

Victimhood in a conflict enables criticism to be avoided and support obtained from the international community, especially when the group or society concerned is the weaker side, suffers more and does not violate international moral codes of behaviour. Victims are not blamed for the outbreak of the conflict and the violence that follows, as they are suffering from the unjustified violence of the aggressor. This is crucial in obtaining the backing of worldwide public opinion and increasing the likelihood of moral, political and material support. In the post-conflict era, it puts the group or society at an advantage – especially if the rival accepts this status – as the one that should get support, assistance, compensation, apology, and so on.

### Competitive victimhood

As pointed out, 'The status of victim renders the victim deserving of sympathy, support, outside help. Victims, by definition, are vulnerable, and any violence on their part can be construed as the consequences of their victimization. The acquisition of the status of victim becomes an institutionalized way of escaping guilt, shame or responsibility.'<sup>72</sup> It is thus not surprising that the described 'rewards' inherent in the status of victim can lead to a 'competitive victimhood' between two sides in an intractable conflict.<sup>73</sup> Each of the adversaries in intractable conflict makes every effort to persuade its own society, the rival side and the international community that it alone is the victim in the conflict. The side that wins this status is assured of international support and often financial aid, since the international community tends to assist groups that are perceived as victims. In this vein, Nadler and Shnabel<sup>74</sup> examined the frequent use of victim terminology among both Palestinians and Israelis. They argue that the 'victimhood competition' between

71 *Ibid.*, p. 1.

72 M. Smyth, 'Putting the past in its place: Issues of victimhood and reconciliation in Northern Ireland's peace process', in N. Biggar (ed), *Burying the Past: Making Peace and Doing Justice after Civil Conflict*, Georgetown University Press: Washington, DC, 2001, p. 126.

73 M. Noor, R.J. Brown and G. Prentice, 'Precursors and mediators of intergroup reconciliation in Northern Ireland: A new model', *British Journal of Social Psychology*, Vol. 47, 2008, pp. 481–495.

74 A. Nadler and N. Shnabel, 'Instrumental and socio-emotional paths to intergroup reconciliation and the need-based model of socio-emotional reconciliation', in A. Nadler, T. Malloy and J. Fisher (eds), *Social Psychology of Intergroup Reconciliation*, Oxford University Press: New York, 2006, pp. 37–56.

those two rivals is actually a fight over moral social identity. Palestinians portrays Israel as an imperialist power, sometimes comparing Jewish soldiers with Nazis.<sup>75</sup> Israeli Jews, on the other hand, insist they are the victims of Arab aggression.<sup>76</sup> These two groups are striving to achieve a moral social identity by favouring their own-group tragedies over those of the other. Similarly, Noor *et al.*<sup>77</sup> found that Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland not only focus on their own ingroup's victimhood, but also engage in competition about which group's suffering is greater.

### Maintaining the sense of collective victimhood

Considering the psychological, social and political profits to be gained by collective victimization, it is no wonder that societies involved in intractable conflict seek to maintain the sense of victimhood over time, or at least for the duration of the conflict. They make efforts to nurture the beliefs and feelings embedded in the sense of collective victimization and try to assimilate them into the society's collective memory and ethos of conflict and collective emotional orientation.<sup>78</sup>

In order to maintain this theme in the repertoire of society members, the beliefs that impart the status of victimhood are transmitted and disseminated via societal channels of communication and societal institutions. These supplement interpersonal transmissions, as well as personal experiences of suffering. The educational system plays a major role in inculcating those beliefs through textbooks, educational programmes, school ceremonies and teachers' explicit and implicit messages. In addition, the public discourse in speeches by leaders, newspaper articles and texts in various other channels of communication continuously strengthens the sense of collective victimhood. Politicians often use collective victimization as a source of political power, and reminders of past and present victimization are a potent theme for recruitment and mobilization. At the formal societal and cultural level, memorial days, religious and national holidays and the ceremonies that accompany them serve as an annual routine to remind society members about their victimization. Finally, cultural products of various kinds are an important means of transmitting beliefs and feelings about the society's victimhood. Books, films, theatrical plays and even art exhibitions may convey the sense of collective victimhood to consumers of these cultural products. Israeli society provides an illustration of how societal, political, educational and cultural sources play a role in forming, transmitting and disseminating the sense of

75 N. Oren and D. Bar-Tal, 'The detrimental dynamics of delegitimization in intractable conflicts: The Israeli-Palestinian case', *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 31 (1), 2006, pp. 111–126.

76 See D. Bar-Tal, above note 56.

77 See M. Noor, R.J. Brown and G. Prentice, above note 73.

78 See D. Bar-Tal, above note 1.

collective victimhood.<sup>79</sup> The way Serbs maintain their sense of victimhood is another example of continuous societal socialization.<sup>80</sup>

## Consequences

A system of beliefs about victimization of one's own society has a profound influence on all aspects of life of its members and the society as a whole. A number of major consequences are outlined below.

### Effects on world view

#### *General world view*

A sense of collective victimhood based on continuous harm or even a major traumatic event to which a group was subjected may become the cornerstone for the construction of a new reality. Those experiences and the subsequent beliefs about the group's victimhood may shake its general world view by shattering

79 L. Adar and H. Adler, *Values Education for Immigrant School Children*, Hebrew University and Ministry of Culture and Education Press: Jerusalem, 1965, (in Hebrew); R. Arviv-Abbramovich, *State ceremonies as mechanism for inculcating ethos of conflict in times of intractable conflict: The Israeli case*, 2004, Master Thesis submitted to Tel Aviv University (in Hebrew); D. Bar-Tal, above note 48; D. Bar-Tal, 'The rocky road towards peace: Societal beliefs functional to intractable conflict in Israeli school textbooks', *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 35, 1998, pp. 723–742; D. Bar-Tal, above note 56; D. Bar-Tal and D. Antebi, 'Siege mentality in Israel', *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 16, 1992, pp. 251–275; N. Ben-Shaul, *A violent world: TV news images of Middle Eastern terror and war*, Rowman and Littlefield: Boulder, CO, 2006; O. David, *The crystallization and transformations of the Jewish-Israeli identity: A study of identity reflection in Hebrew readers of the 20th century*, Doctoral dissertation, 2007, Tel-Aviv University (in Hebrew); R. Firer, *The Agents of Zionist Education*, Hakibutz Hameuhad Tel-Aviv, 1985, (in Hebrew); C.S. Liebman and E. Don-Yehiya, *Civil religion in Israel: Traditional Judaism and political culture in the Jewish state*, University of California Press: Berkeley, CA, 1983; D. Ofer, 'History, memory and identity: Perceptions of Holocaust in Israel', in U. Rebhun and C.I. Waxman (eds), *Jews in Israel. Contemporary social and cultural patterns*, Brandeis University Press: Hanover NH, 2004, pp. 394–417; E. Podeh, *The Arab-Israeli conflict in Israeli history textbooks, 1948–2000*, Bergin and Garvey: Westport, CT, 2002; D.A. Porat, 'From the scandal to the Holocaust in Israeli education', *Journal in Contemporary History*, Vol. 39, 2004, pp. 636–619; T. Segev, *The Seventh Million: The Israelis and the Holocaust*, Henry Holt and Co: New York, 2000; E. Shohat, *Israeli Cinema: East/west and the Politics of Representation*, University of Texas Press: Austin, TX, 1989; H. Yazo, *The Holocaust in Hebrew Literature – As historical and trans-historical fiction*, 1980, Tel-Aviv: Eked (in Hebrew); J. Yedger, *Our Story: The National Narrative and the Israeli Press*, Haifa University Press: Haifa, 2004, (in Hebrew); A. Yurman, *Victimization of the holocaust as a component of the cultural-political discourse in Israeli society between the years 1948–1998*, Doctoral dissertation, 2001, Bar-Ilan University (in Hebrew); I. Zertal, above note 51; M. Zuckermann, *Shoah in the sealed room – The Holocaust in the Israeli press during the Gulf war*, Hubermann: Tel-Aviv, 1993 (in Hebrew).

80 See B. Anzulovic, above note 39; S. Jansen, 'Why do they hate us? Everyday Serbian nationalist knowledge of Muslim hatred', *Journal of Mediterranean Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 2, 2003, pp. 215–237; D.B. MacDonald, *Balkan holocaust? Serbian and Croatian victim-centered propaganda and the war in Yugoslavia*, Manchester University Press: Manchester, 2002; N. Malcolm, *Bosnia: A Short History*, New York University Press: New York, 1994; T. Pavasovic, *The political dynamics of ethnicity change: A case-study of Serbian textbooks 1970–2002*, paper presented at the Harvard-Oxford-Stockholm Conference in Stockholm, 14–16 April 2006; V. Volkan, above note 4.

constructs of collective self-perception and transforming assumptions about intergroup relations and the world itself. The changes take place because naturally the victimized collectives try to explain the harm inflicted, make inferences, draw conclusions and imply lessons to be learned. The first result of these processes is to blame the perpetrator and the bystanders (groups who did not prevent the harm from being done) and nurturing vindictive feelings and intentions. Sometimes the collectives even tend to blame their own group because this appears to be a reasonable explanation for the absolutely inconceivable situation.<sup>81</sup> Very often they affirm the perception of the world as a dangerous place, raise a sense of intense vulnerability, increase awareness of the group's dependence on others and undermine beliefs in a just world.<sup>82</sup> Sometimes the sense of collective victimhood is accompanied by fear of physical or symbolic annihilation.<sup>83</sup> Furthermore, collectives often develop feelings of helplessness, humiliation, lack of control, mistrust of the rival group and the belief that little can be done to change the situation.<sup>84</sup>

### *Stance on humanitarian norms*

A specific effect that was investigated pertains to views of the humanitarian norms. On the basis of a very large-scale study in fourteen conflict areas around the globe, Elcheroth<sup>85</sup> found that at the individual level victims of violence tend to abandon the legal conception of humanitarian norms in favour of a conception that these norms can be violated under certain conditions. However, the same individuals continued to support moral principles of these norms. The surprising finding in this study is at the community level, which shows that a normative climate favouring the legal conception of humanitarian norms develops within the community. A different analysis of the same data by Spini, Elcheroth and Fasel<sup>86</sup> demonstrated an effect of collective vulnerability defined by them as a material or symbolic threat to the survival of a collective as a whole. The analysis shows that in

81 E. Staub, 'Breaking the cycle of genocidal violence: Healing and reconciliation', in J. Harvey (ed), *Perspectives on Loss*, Taylor and Francis, Washington DC, 1982, pp. 231–241; E. Staub and L.A. Pearlman, 'Healing, reconciliation and forgiving after genocide and other collective violence', in S.J. Helmick and R.L. Petersen (eds), *Forgiveness and Reconciliation: Religion, Public Policy and Conflict Transformation*, Templeton Foundation Press, Randor, PA, 2001, pp. 205–229.

82 See J. Herman, above note 5; J. Mack, above note 4; E. Staub and D. Bar-Tal, above note 34; O. Zur, 'Rethinking "Don't blame the victim": The psychology of victimhood', *Journal of Couples Therapy*, Vol. 4, 1994, pp. 15–36.

83 See J.V. Montville, above note 50.

84 J. Chaitin and S. Steinberg, 'You should know better: Expressions of empathy and disregard among victims of massive social trauma', *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment and Trauma*, Vol. 17, No. 2, 2008, pp. 197–226; E.G. Lindner, 'Humiliation and human condition: Mapping a minefield', *Human Rights Review*, Vol. 2, No. 2, 2001, pp. 46–63; E. Staub and L.A. Pearlman, above note 81; V. Volkan, above note 4, and also 'Transgenerational transmission and Chosen Traumas: An aspect of large-group identity', *Group Analysis*, Vol. 34, 2001, pp. 79–97.

85 G. Elcheroth, 'Individual-level and community-level effects of war trauma on social representations related to humanitarian law' *European Journal of Social Psychology*, Vol. 36, 2006, pp. 907–930.

86 D. Spini, G. Elcheroth and R. Fasel, 'The impact of groups norms and generalization of risks on judgments of war behavior', *Political Psychology*, Vol. 29, 2008, pp. 919–941.

a conflict situation when the risks of becoming a victim are so extended that even the dominant groups cannot effectively protect their members – that is, develop collective vulnerability – a climate evolves favouring the defence of humanitarian norms within the community.

### *View of the conflict*

The sense of being a victim in conflict not only influences the general world view but also the view of the conflict itself. First, the collective sense of victimhood greatly strengthens the societal beliefs in the justness of one's own goals in conflict and in delegitimization of the rival. This attitude substantially reinforces the ethos of conflict that is one of the major incentives for continuation of the conflict.<sup>87</sup> Thus a strong sense of victimhood has an effect on the course of the conflict. Society members, perceiving themselves as unjust victims, vigorously uphold their ethos of conflict and strive to achieve their goals, prevent future harm and avenge losses and destruction already done. All these ways of thinking and behaviours are accompanied by intense hostility, mistrust and hatred directed towards the rival, which prevents any peacemaking process even from beginning. A study conducted in Croatia and Serbia by Corkalo Biruski and Penic<sup>88</sup> showed that collective guilt assignment could serve as a mediating mechanism in the relationship between traumatic experiences and outgroup attitudes. In this study it was found that the more people suffered, the more they assigned collective guilt to the group perceived as being responsible for their suffering. This led to greater social distance from the target outgroup.

In a recent study carried out on a national sample of Israeli Jews in the summer of 2008, significant links were found between views about the Israeli-Arab conflict and the societal belief of being a victim in it (i.e. about 40.6% of respondents highly agreed or agreed with the statement that, 'Throughout all the years of the conflict, Israel has been the victim and the Arabs and the Palestinians are the side causing harm', and an additional 20.8% somewhat agreed with it). Specifically, the more a respondent believed that Israel is the victim in the conflict, the more he/she (1) accepted the Zionist narrative about the conflict; (2) believed that Jews have exclusive rights for the whole land of Israel; (3) expressed dehumanizing views of the Arabs and Palestinians; (4) attributed responsibility for the outbreak and continuation of the conflict to them; (5) believed that the Jews exhibited moral behaviour during the fighting; and (6) felt hatred towards the Arabs. Respondents strongly believing in Israel's victimhood were also less ready to compromise on various key issues at the core of the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations (i.e. withdrawal, Jerusalem and refugee issues), were more in favour of forceful acts

87 D. Bar-Tal and E. Halperin (in preparation), 'Socio-psychological barriers to conflict resolution', in D. Bar-Tal (ed), *Intergroup Conflicts and their Resolution: Social Psychological Perspective*, Psychology Press: New York.

88 See D. Corkalo Biruski and S. Penic (in preparation), above note 4.

towards the Palestinians, and were less open to alternative information about the conflict.<sup>89</sup>

### *Siege mentality*

One of the possible consequences of a continuous sense of victimhood is the evolvment of a siege mentality,<sup>90</sup> which denotes a generalized mistrust of other groups and negative feelings towards them. It is based on a system of beliefs indicating that other groups have negative intentions to harm the collective. This syndrome develops when other groups support either directly or indirectly the rival (the perpetrator) who is viewed as evil. The Soviet Union following the Bolshevik revolution or Iran today provide an example of such a siege mentality.

### *Effects on identity*

In some cases, strong views on being a victim may redefine the collective identity, as noted by Volkan.<sup>91</sup> In fact, Adwan and Bar-On<sup>92</sup> proposed that to develop collective self-perception as the victim is an identity process, occurring in long and violent conflicts, in which one or both parties reconstruct their respective identity around their victimization by the other side. The imprint of the past experiences of Poles is an example of how beliefs about victimhood can affect the identity. It is based on shared traumas and memories of suffering and being harmed.<sup>93</sup> Also, the perception of the Jewish people as the victim of a hostile world, which emerged early on in its history,<sup>94</sup> has become a central part of the Jewish-Israeli ethos and identity, and has had a major effect on the way Israeli Jews view the situation and act through the course of the Israeli-Arab conflict.<sup>95</sup>

### *Egocentrism and lack of empathy*

Since the victims usually tend to focus on themselves and their suffering, their sense of collective victimhood may also lead to a reduced capacity for empathy. Mack<sup>96</sup> observed that a society that is engulfed by the deep sense of being a victim focuses on own fate and is completely preoccupied with its own suffering,

89 See E. Halperin and D. Bar-Tal (in preparation) *Collective beliefs about victimhood in the Israeli Jewish society and their effects on the view of the Israeli-Arab conflict*.

90 See D. Bar-Tal, above note 28; D. Bar-Tal and D. Antebi, above note 79.

91 See V. Volkan, above note 4.

92 S. Adwan and D. Bar-On, *Victimhood and Beyond: The Bethlehem Encounter*, Newton Center, Boston, 2001.

93 See A. Jasińska-Kania, above note 40.

94 See D. Bar-Tal and D. Antebi, above note 79; A. Hareven, 'Victimization: Some comments by an Israeli', *Political Psychology*, Vol. 4, 1983, pp. 145–155; C. Liebman, 'Myth, tradition and values in Israeli society', *Midstream*, Vol. 24, 1978, pp. 44–53; H.F. Stein, 'Judaism and the group-fantasy of martyrdom: The psycho-dynamic paradox of survival through persecution', *Journal of Psychohistory*, Vol. 6, 1978, pp. 151–210.

95 See D. Bar-Tal, above note 56.

96 See J. Mack, above note 4.

developing what he called an ‘egoism of victimhood’. It means that a collective in this state is unable to see things from the rival group’s perspective, empathize with its suffering and accept responsibility for harm inflicted by its own group.<sup>97</sup> Moreover, the victimized group also often finds it hard to identify with the suffering of other societies in completely different contexts and experience empathy towards them.

This consequence can be found, for example, in Japanese society. The historical narrative that has been canonized and passed down there focuses on the death and suffering of Japanese soldiers and Japan’s civilian population, omitting the death, suffering and destruction endured by other Asians at the hands of the Japanese during the years of World War II. The younger generation thus mostly views Japan as a victim of the war, not as a perpetrator or aggressor. A result of this self-perception of victimhood is that ‘many Japanese people find it psychologically disorienting to be asked to recognize the victimhood of others, especially when it involves admitting the unfamiliar possibility of Japan as victimizer and perpetrator’.<sup>98</sup>

## Selective and biased information-processing

The sense of collective victimhood also influences cognitive processes.<sup>99</sup> It causes individuals to be more sensitive to threatening information and become hyper-vigilant, constantly searching for threats<sup>100</sup> because the threshold of attention to threatening stimuli is lowered, as happens when individuals are under stress.<sup>101</sup> In this case individuals tend to select and interpret information about possible harm too easily, sometimes biasing and distorting it. In other words, every item of information or cue is scrutinized for signs of negative intentions, and society members may be disposed to search for information that is consistent with these beliefs while disregarding evidence that does not support them.<sup>102</sup> This processing is based on the suspicion that society members feel toward the victimizing group, and which is necessary to prepare them for any harm to come.

## Reduced accountability and responsibility

As mentioned above, the sense of collective victimhood that is central to intractable conflicts delegates responsibility for the outbreak of violence and the violence that

97 S. Čehajić and R. Brown, ‘Not in my name: A social psychological study of antecedents and consequences of acknowledgment of ingroup atrocities’, *Genocide Studies and Prevention*, Vol. 3, 2008, pp. 195–211; J. Chaitin and S. Steinberg, above note 84; E. Staub, above note 45.

98 P.G. Schalow, ‘Japan’s war responsibility and the Pan-Asian movement for redress and compensation: An overview’, *East Asia*, Vol. 18, No. 3, 2000, p. 11.

99 R.F. Baumeister and S. Hastings, ‘Distortions of collective memory: How groups flatter and deceive themselves’, in J.W. Pennebaker, D. Paez and B. Rimé (eds), *Collective Memory of Political Events: Social Psychological Perspectives*, Lawrence Erlbaum: Mahwah, NJ, 1997, pp. 277–293.

100 See G. Ross, above note 44.

101 D.E. Broadbent, ‘Decision and Stress’, Academic Press: London, 1971; R.R. Mackie, *Vigilance: Theory, Operational Performance and Physiological Correlates*, Plenum: NY, 1977.

102 See H.C. Kelman, above note 4.



follows to the adversary. Indeed, the sense of victimhood reduces the activation of mechanisms that usually prevent individuals and groups from committing harmful acts. Feelings of guilt and shame, moral considerations or a positive collective self-view are the human safeguards of humane conduct, but they often fail to operate when individuals perceive themselves as being victims.<sup>103</sup>

### *Reduction of group-based guilt*

The sense of victimhood protects the group members' self-esteem and prevents feelings of guilt for committing harmful acts against the other group, acts which take place regularly in intractable conflict.<sup>104</sup> It suggests that from the perspective of victimization, the harm done was inflicted as a punishment and/or prevention, and victims cannot be blamed for acts that are viewed as protective. A perpetual collective perception of being a victim thus has great psychological value; it serves as a buffer against group-based negative thoughts and feelings.<sup>105</sup> When the ingroup's victimization is made salient, individuals reported less group-based guilt in response to violence perpetrated by their ingroup against another. The reduction in group-based guilt occurred in various ethnic-national groups when reminded of diverse historical victimizations. A recent study conducted in connection with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict discovered a strong association between a sense of victimhood among Israeli Jewish respondents and reduced group-based guilt over Israel's actions against the Palestinians.<sup>106</sup> Those who had a high sense of victimhood expressed less guilt, less moral accountability and less willingness to compensate Palestinians for harmful acts by Israel. They also used more exonerating cognitions, or justifications, such as 'under the circumstances, any other state would treat the Palestinians in the same way' and 'I believe the Palestinians brought their current situations upon themselves'.

### *Justifying negative ingroup behaviour*

Similarly Čehajić and Brown<sup>107</sup> found that perception of victimhood serves the function of justifying ingroup negative behaviour after it has occurred and as such undermines one's readiness to acknowledge ingroup responsibility for committed

103 See M.J.A. Wohl and N. Branscombe, above note 25.

104 N.R. Branscombe, 'A social psychological process perspective on collective guilt', in N.R. Branscombe and B. Doosje (eds), *Collective Guilt: International Perspectives*, Cambridge University Press: New York, 2004, pp. 320–334; N.R. Branscombe, N. Ellemers, R. Spears and B. Doosje, 'The context and content of social identity threat', in N. Ellemers, R. Spears and B. Doosje (eds), *Social Identity: Context, Commitment, Content*, Blackwell Publishers: Oxford, England, 1999, pp. 35–58; N.R. Branscombe, M.T. Schmitt and K. Schifffhauer, 'Racial attitudes in response to thoughts of White privilege', *European Journal of Social Psychology*, Vol. 37, 2007, pp. 203–215.

105 See M. Wohl and N. Branscombe, above note 25.

106 Y. Klar, N. Schori and S. Roccas, *The shadow of the past: perpetual victimhood in intergroup conflicts*, unpublished data, Department of Psychology, Tel Aviv University, 2009.

107 S. Čehajić and R. Brown (in preparation), *Victimhood and acknowledgment of ingroup atrocities*, unpublished manuscript.

misdeeds. Serbian adolescents who believe that their group is actually the true victim (in the 1991–95 war) and/or has suffered more than members of the other groups are less willing to acknowledge their group's responsibility for atrocities committed against others.

## Moral entitlement

Victimhood is also strongly related to a feeling of moral entitlement, which can be defined as the belief that the group is allowed to use whatever means to ensure its safety, with little regard to moral norms. In the very recent study by Schori, Klar and Roccas,<sup>108</sup> the sense of self-perceived collective victimhood was found to be strongly positively associated with the feeling of moral entitlement and negatively associated with group-based guilt over Israel's actions in the occupied territories. It was also related with willingness to continue the military operations at all costs, even allowing for great losses to either the Israeli or the Palestinian side, and with the wish to continue punishing the enemy group, even if such punishment means retaliation and suffering inflicted upon the ingroup.

It is thus not surprising that the sense of being a victim frees the society from the limitations of moral considerations that usually limit its scope of action. It allows some freedom of action because the society believes that it needs to defend itself to prevent immoral and destructive behaviour of the rival. This need often allows the society to feel free from the binding force of international norms and agreements. Survival is instead its overriding consideration. An example of this is the Memorandum of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, which in 1986 argued that 'Serbia must not be passive and wait and see what the others will say, as it has done so often in the past'. Similarly, in 1973 Israel's Prime Minister Golda Meir responded to international criticism by saying: 'As for those who are trying to preach to us now ... You didn't come to the help of millions of Jews in the Holocaust ... you don't have the right to preach'.<sup>109</sup> Recently, Israel justified the wide-scale harm inflicted on the Palestinians in Gaza by the fact of being continuously bombarded with Palestinian rockets. A society may thus use the sense of being the victim in a conflict as a reason for rejecting pressures from the international community and to justify taking unrestrained courses of action.

## Violent reactions

The sense of collective victimhood may lead to intensified violent reactions that are viewed as a punishment for the harm already done and/or as prevention of possible future harm. It provides moral power to oppose the enemy and seek justice.<sup>110</sup> The

108 See N. Schori, Y. Klar and S. Roccas, *When past is present: reminders of historical victimhood and their effect on intergroup conflicts*, unpublished data, Department of Psychology, Tel Aviv University, 2009.

109 *Ha'aretz*, 29 April 1973.

110 See D. Bar-Tal, above note 1.

violent actions are based on absence of guilt feelings, feeling of moral entitlement and moral justifications for whatever actions the group takes to defend itself.<sup>111</sup>

### *Rationalization of immoral acts*

The status of being a victim is sometimes interpreted as a licence to commit immoral and illegitimate acts. This licence is based on several types of rationalizations: (1) a world that allowed such a thing to happen has no right to pass moral judgement on the ingroup; (2) if the trauma was allowed to take place, then moral conventions no longer apply, and the ingroup is not bound by them; (3) the ingroup is allowed to do everything within its power to prevent a similar trauma from ever happening again; (4) whatever the group may do, it is nothing in comparison with what has been done to it. The result of these justifications is that acts which under other circumstances might be considered by the same group as immoral and illegitimate are perceived as just and worthy when employed in defence of the group against new threats, both real and imaginary.

### *Victim-to-victimizer cycle*

Horowitz<sup>112</sup> and Petersen<sup>113</sup> provide numerous examples of inter-ethnic conflicts in which parties that suffered harm continue the acts of violence to teach the rival a lesson and to deter that group from committing future acts of aggression. In some cases, under certain conditions, a history of severe persecution may lead group members onto the path of becoming perpetrators themselves.<sup>114</sup> A recent review by Lickel, Miller, Stenstrom, Denson and Schmader<sup>115</sup> describes the psychological mechanisms that underlie acts of violence carried out as retribution by ingroup members, who were not even hurt, towards outgroup members who had done no harm. They suggested that factors such as initial construal of the event as a harmful act, identification with the ingroup, and homogenized perception of the rival lead to 'vicarious retribution'.

Botcharova<sup>116</sup> delineates a circle of revenge that illuminates the feelings and processes stemming from personal and ethno-national trauma. The original feelings of suffering, injustice, anger and frustration may lead to the desire 'to do justice' and then directly to violent acts of 'justified aggression'. Similarly

111 See S. Čehajić and R. Brown, above note 97.

112 D.L. Horowitz, *The Deadly Ethnic Riot*, University of California Press: Berkeley, 2001.

113 R.G. Petersen, *Understanding Ethnic Violence: Fear, Hatred, and Resentment in Twentieth-Century Eastern Europe*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2002.

114 D. Enns, *Identity and Victimhood*, Berghof Occasional Paper No. 28, Berghof Research Center for Constructive Conflict Management: Berlin, 2007; E. Staub and D. Bar-Tal, above note 34.

115 B. Lickel, N. Miller, D.M. Stenstrom, T. Denson and T. Schmader, 'Vicarious retribution: The role of collective blame in intergroup aggression', *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, Vol. 10, 2006, pp. 372–390.

116 O. Botcharova, 'Implementation of track two diplomacy: Developing a model for forgiveness', in G. Raymond, S.J. Helmick and R.L. Peterson (ed), *Forgiveness and Reconciliation: Religion, Public Policy, and Conflict Transformation*, Temple Foundation Press: Philadelphia, 2001, pp. 279–304.

Staub<sup>117</sup> proposed that the sense of collective victimhood is related to negative affective consequences of fear, reduced empathy and anger, to cognitive biases such as interpretation of ambiguous information as hostile and threatening, to emergence of the belief that violent action taken is morally justified, to reduced moral accountability and finally to a tendency to seek revenge. Bandura<sup>118</sup> suggested a number of psychological mechanisms that serve as facilitators of moral disengagement leading to acts of violence. Among them, he noted moral justification, euphemistic labelling, advantageous comparison between the groups, disregard or distortion of the severe consequences of violence, and dehumanization of the rival. This analysis can be easily applied to the victims' state of mind that facilitates the harm they inflict in turn. Ramanathapillai<sup>119</sup> described how this process led Tamils, who had themselves experienced continuous atrocities, to perform acts of indiscriminate violence that killed many innocent Sinhalese. The genocide in Rwanda is one of the most poignant examples of the victim-to-victimizer cycle. In a book about the horrendous events that took place during the 1990s, Mamdani<sup>120</sup> poses a series of questions which shed light on elements of the process that locks victims into the cycle of victim-turned-perpetrator:

‘What happens when yesterday’s victims act out of a determination that they must never again be victimized, *never again*? What happens when yesterday’s victims act out of a conviction that power is the only guarantee against victimhood, so that the only dignified alternative to power is death? What happens when they are convinced that the taking of life is really noble because it signifies the willingness to risk one’s own life, and is thus, in the final analysis, proof of one’s own humanity?’

## Increased empathy and pro-social behaviours

The above description focuses on the negative effects of the sense of victimhood because it seems that these negative patterns of thought and behaviour are highly prevalent; therefore, most of the literature refers to them. However, it is recognized that the sense of collective victimhood may under certain circumstances lead to heightened sensitivity to the suffering of others, empathy, understanding and willingness to aid other groups in need<sup>121</sup> but this form of reaction seems to be the exception rather than the rule.

Vollhardt<sup>122</sup> presented this effect of victimhood by differentiating between exclusive and inclusive victim beliefs. The latter emphasize the shared existential

117 See E. Staub, above note 45.

118 A. Bandura, ‘Moral disengagement in the perpetration of inhumanity’, *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, Vol. 3, No. 3, 1999, pp. 193–209.

119 See R. Ramanathapillai, above note 59.

120 M. Mamdani, *When victims become killers: Colonialism, nativism, and the Genocide in Rwanda*, Princeton University Press: Princeton, 2001, p. 34.

121 See J. Chaitin and S. Steinberg, above note 84; J. Vollhardt, above note 56.

122 See V. Vollhardt, above note 56.

experience of victimization and suffering between groups. According to the logic of this line of reactions, when group members experience harm, it tunes their sensitivity to suffering in general and under some conditions to perceived similarity with other groups' experiences, even including those of the rival in conflict. In turn, this empathy may facilitate courses of action that promote peacemaking, including various co-operative activities with members of the rival society who have had similar experiences and whose repertoire of beliefs and attitudes is similar.

The most vivid example of this type of effect is the activity of the Forum of Israeli and Palestinian Bereaved Families for Peace, established in 1995 by Yitzhak Frankenthal whose son was killed by the Palestinians. Today the Forum consists of several hundred Israeli Jews and Palestinian families (half from each side) who have lost their loved ones in the conflict and decided to devote their lives to peace-building in order:

'to prevent further bereavement, in the absence of peace; To influence the public and the policy makers – to prefer the way of peace on the way of war; To educate for peace and reconciliation; To promote the cessation of acts of hostility and the achievement of a political agreement; To prevent the usage of bereavement as a means of expanding enmity between our peoples'.

This exceptional example testifies to the possibility of escaping from the narrow confines of a particular group or society's sense of collective victimhood into the open fields of universal moral considerations.

## Conclusion

The objective of the present article is to describe the psychological foundations and dynamics of the collective sense of victimhood in intractable conflict. There was no intention whatsoever to diminish the status of the victim. On the contrary, we recognize that intractable conflicts are violent, harsh and vicious, causing tremendous suffering to society members involved in them. Throughout history, in various conflicts, there are societies that experienced great losses and we did not intend to argue against their collective sense of victimhood. However, it is well established that in intractable conflict both sides almost always perceive themselves as being victims of the rival.

It is therefore essential to illuminate the nature and meaning of the collective perception of victimhood. Self-perceived collective victimhood is a state of mind that is brought into being by society members and transmitted to the members of new generations. The establishment of this state of mind is based on real experiences and on the process of social construction. Once it evolves it is solidified and has important implications for society members, for the way the conflict is managed and for general intergroup relations of the victimized group.

Of great importance for us is the effect of this state of mind in intractable conflicts. The present analysis indicates that it may be one of the factors that fuels continuation of the intractable conflict and inhibits its peaceful resolution. Victims

cease to view the present as the preparation for defining a new future, but simply as a continuation of the same past. On the one hand, the sense of victimhood is one of the foundations of the core societal beliefs of the ethos of conflict and collective memory that maintain the conflict, and on the other hand it is one of the major factors that sustain violence. When this state of mind prevails on both sides in intractable conflict, then these sets of beliefs help to perpetuate the cycles of violence. However, in very rare cases, the sense of being a victim leads to consideration of peaceful ways to resolve the conflict.

Yet groups do sometimes overcome the barriers to peaceful conflict resolution and embark on the road to reconciliation, as has happened in Northern Ireland. In these cases, there is a need to address the feeling of victimhood. Without doing so it is hard to bring about any reconciliation, which demands a change in the psychological orientation toward the past rival and towards the collective self. Almost all theorists, experts and practitioners of reconciliation hold that in this process it is necessary to address issues of justice and truth, which in essence pertain to the harm done during the conflict. This requires an examination of the harm done by both sides, its extent and nature, the responsibility for it, and due accountability. Through this process both sides can, by getting to know the two narratives of the conflict (including those about victimization), at least acknowledge what happened in the past.

Often, however, more than that is required for preoccupation with the past to be resolved. The successful process of reconciliation should ultimately lead to collective healing and forgiveness for the adversary's misdeeds. It allows the emergence of a common frame of reference that enables and encourages societies to acknowledge the past, confess the wrongs, relive the experiences under safe conditions, mourn the losses, validate the experienced pain and grief, receive empathy and support and restore the broken relationship, and eventually creates a space where forgiveness can be offered and accepted. It is also recognized that intractable conflicts may be asymmetrical in the way the sides involved carried or carry out harmful acts. In these cases, it is essential that the side that is to a greater extent the perpetrator takes responsibility for the inflicted harms. They should not only stop carrying out these harmful acts, but also initiate acts of benevolence such as apology and compensation in order to speed the process of reconciliation.

The sense of self-perceived collective victimhood is an unavoidable part of the human repertoire in the context of intractable conflict. Societies involved in this type of conflict experience losses, bleed and suffer, and themselves cause losses, injuries, destruction and suffering to the rival. However, the real test for humanity is whether the groups involved eventually begin to see the contours of human beings on the other side of the fence, through the dark clouds of enmity that obscure them. This phenomenal discovery may eventually lead to the great revelation that both sides are victims of the conflict, and that it is therefore time to end it.