Stepping Into Perpetrators’ Shoes: How Ingroup Transgressions and Victimization Shape Support for Justice Through Perspective Taking of Perpetrators

Mengyao Li¹
Bernhard Leidner¹
Silvia Fernandez-Campos²

¹ University of Massachusetts Amherst, USA
² New School for Social Research, USA

Mengyao Li
Department of Psychology
University of Massachusetts Amherst
135 Hicks Way
Amherst, MA 01003

e-mail: mengyao@psych.umass.edu
Abstract

Two experiments examined perspective taking of perpetrators in the aftermath of intergroup violence, and the implications of such perspective taking for justice among members of perpetrator and victim groups. In the context of the Iran-U.S. conflict, Experiment 1 demonstrated that American participants who strongly glorified their country showed increased perspective taking of perpetrators and reduced support for justice in response to violence committed rather than suffered by the ingroup. Further, perspective taking of perpetrators explained the effect of ingroup’s role as the victim or perpetrator on support for justice. Experiment 2 compared people’s reactions following a conflict involving their ingroup to those following a conflict involving two third parties. Results suggest that the differential justice demands in response to transgressions versus victimization through perspective taking of perpetrators are largely limited to conflicts that involve the ingroup. The negative implications of understanding perpetrators for intergroup relations and conflict resolution are discussed.

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Stepping Into Perpetrators’ Shoes: How Ingroup Transgressions and Victimization Shape Support for Justice Through Perspective Taking of Perpetrators

The ability to imagine how others think and feel is arguably one of the most intriguing and sophisticated attributes of human nature. For various reasons and to various degrees, people try to contemplate another person’s point of view, which is largely beneficial for social relations. Adopting another’s perspective can foster a sense of psychological connectedness between the self and the perspective-taking target (Davis, Conklin, Smith, & Luce, 1996; Galinsky & Moskowitz, 2000), and promote pro-social and altruistic behavior (Toi & Batson, 1982). Very little of this work, however, has examined a less intuitive, and yet not uncommon, case of perspective taking: the attempt to understand perpetrators and moral transgressions. After a transgression has occurred, there are often well-intentioned people calling for understanding the motivations behind the immoral act, even from the perspective of the perpetrator. The message seems reasonable and clear: we need to better understand the transgressors in order to prevent future transgressions. To understand is not to forgive, we often hear. Or is it?

We propose that adopting the perspective of perpetrators can have undesirable consequences for addressing past wrongdoings, and hinder efforts to restore justice. In line with Baumeister’s (1997) analysis of evil, we suggest that attempts to understand the perpetrators’ perspective risks seeing their crimes as less heinous and them as less responsible for the crimes. Perpetrators tend to minimize the harm they have committed, and thus any effort to understand the situation from their perspective might fall into the trap of following similar “minimalist, distancing styles of thought” (Baumeister, 1997, p. 4). This potential pitfall of understanding evil is especially worth discussing in the context of intergroup transgressions. When the interests of one’s own group are at stake – for instance, when members of the ingroup have committed
violence against members of another group – individuals may even be motivated to appraise the transgression from the perpetrators’ perspective in an effort to make sense of it, perhaps at the cost of diminishing their responsibility. When the ingroup has been victimized by an outgroup, on the other hand, such perspective taking seems rather unlikely to occur. We thus hypothesized that attempts to understand the perpetrators’ perspective serve an exonerating, morally disengaging function when the perpetrators belong to one’s own (rather than another) group.

The Ups and Downs of Perspective Taking in Intergroup Relations

**Perspective taking of victims.** Prior work on perspective taking and intergroup relations has focused almost exclusively on perspective taking of victimized, marginalized, or negatively stereotyped groups. Adopting the perspective of those groups has generally been shown to improve intergroup relations by decreasing prejudice and stereotyping (Dovidio et al., 2004; Galinsky & Moskowitz, 2000; Vescio, Sechrist, & Paolucci, 2003), and inducing positive feelings and helping behavior toward them (Baston et al., 1997; Baston, Chang, Orr, & Rowland, 2002). More recent research, however, has begun to examine the disruptive effects of perspective taking on intergroup attitudes and behaviors (Epley, Bazerman, Caruso, 2006; Vorauer, Martens, & Sasaki, 2009; Zebel, Doosje, & Spears, 2009). Vorauer and colleagues (2009), for example, showed that perspective taking can lead lower-prejudice individuals to be over-cautious about how to present themselves to the outgroup and thus inhibit positive behaviors toward an outgroup member, compared to when they adopt alternative mind-sets. In the context of group-based violence, it has been shown that taking the perspective of outgroup victims promotes collective guilt among low identifiers, but hinders guilt among high identifiers (Zebel et al., 2009). While the effects of victim perspective taking on intergroup relations are complex, they
are reasonably well understood, Much less is known, however, about perspective taking of perpetrators.

**Perspective taking of perpetrators.** In the context of interpersonal interactions, it has been shown that victims who adopt the perspective of transgressors, compared to those who do not, tend to make more situational rather than dispositional attributions, experience more benevolent emotions, and are more likely to accept apologies from the transgressor (Takaku, 2001; Takaku, Weiner, & Ohbuchi, 2001; Witvliet, Ludwig, & Vander Laan, 2001). Extending these findings to the intergroup context, Exline and colleagues (2008) found that seeing one’s own group’s capability for wrongdoing can predict forgiveness of outgroup transgressors through reduced perceived severity of the offense, increased empathic understanding of and perceived similarity to the transgressors (Study 3). These findings collectively suggest that victims’ efforts to appreciate the perspective of outgroup perpetrators can reduce intergroup tensions and foster positive intergroup attitudes.

Despite these positive consequences of perpetrator perspective taking among victims, the natural and immediate response to ingroup victimization is perhaps not to understand perpetrators’ motivations and inner processes, but rather to demand justice and retribution (Carlsmith, Darley, & Robinson, 2002; Leidner, Castano, & Ginges, 2013; Lickel, Miller, Stenstrom, Denson, & Schmader, 2006). The ingroup’s experiences of perpetration (rather than suffering) of violence, on the other hand, might motivate group members to understand the perpetrators’ perspective. This perspective taking of ingroup perpetrators might then be a key mechanism underlying the exonerating appraisals of ingroup-committed transgressions shown by other research (e.g., Castano & Giner-Sorolla, 2006; Leidner & Castano, 2012; Leidner, Castano, Zaiser, & Giner-Sorolla, 2010; Roccas, Klar, & Liviatan, 2006). The extent to which
people take the perspective of perpetrators should thus depend on individuals’ identification with either victim or perpetrator groups. Such perspective taking, due to its divergent functions among victim and perpetrator group members, should in turn have important implications for justice in the aftermath of intergroup transgressions.

**Justice, Perpetrator Perspective Taking, and Ingroup Identification**

When faced with large-scale violence and injustices, people tend to adopt vastly different responses depending on the specific role their group played in the conflict (e.g., Leidner et al., 2010; Shnabel, Nadler, Ullrich, Dovidio, & Carmi, 2009). Whereas members of victim groups have a strong desire for justice and retribution (Leidner et al., 2013; Lickel et al., 2006), members of perpetrator groups are often motivated to morally disengage from ingroup-committed transgressions and resist efforts to achieve justice (Leidner et al., 2010). While past research has focused primarily on the emotions and psychological needs of parties involved in intergroup conflict (e.g., Lickel et al., 2006; Shnabel et al., 2009), less attention has been devoted to the cognitive aspect of responses to ingroup victimization and perpetration. The notion that members of the perpetrator group actively engage in different moral disengagement strategies (Bandura, 1999, 2002) implies a basic, motivated cognitive process, in which individuals appraise the intergroup situation from the perspective of their fellow group members. Adopting the perspective of ingroup perpetrators can facilitate sense-making of their immoral behavior and make various types of justification possible. We therefore predicted that perspective taking of perpetrators should underlie individuals’ divergent support for justice depending on their ingroup’s role as the victim or perpetrator in a conflict.

Not everyone, however, responds defensively to ingroup-committed transgressions, nor does everyone respond vengefully to ingroup-suffered transgressions. The interindividual
difference in responses to transgressions committed or suffered by one’s own group is directly related to the notion of ingroup identification, or the extent to which people are psychologically invested in their own group. Substantial research has demonstrated that people are motivated to defend their own group to the extent that they identify with that group (e.g., Doosje, Ellemers, & Spears, 1995). As a consequence, when confronted with negative aspects of the ingroup, such as ingroup-committed transgressions, individuals who strongly identify with their group are less likely to accept the negative portrayal of their group (Branscombe, Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 1999). Recent research on social identification advocates a multidimensional view of group identification, for instance distinguishing between ingroup attachment and glorification (Roccas et al., 2006). Whereas attachment refers to one’s subjective identification with the ingroup, glorification refers to beliefs in the superiority of the ingroup over outgroups and emphasizes loyalty to ingroup norms and authorities. Research has revealed that these two dimensions of identification have different implications for intergroup attitudes and behavior. Whereas glorification is negatively related to group-based guilt, attachment does not directly correlate with group-based guilt (Roccas et al., 2006). More pertinent to the current research, when the ingroup (rather than an outgroup) is responsible for intergroup violence, higher levels of glorification—but not attachment—have been shown to predict dehumanization of outgroup victims, which in turn leads to decreased support for justice (Leidner et al., 2010). Lower levels of glorification, on the contrary, signal rather critical attitudes toward ingroup-committed transgressions (Leidner & Castano, 2012, Study 3).

Given the prominent role of glorification in intergroup conflict, the effects of the ingroup’s role as victim or perpetrator on group members’ tendency to adopt the perspective of perpetrators will likely depend on the extent to which people glorify their own group. Due to
high glorifiers’ strong need to defend their ingroup, they should be particularly motivated to adopt the perspective of perpetrators when their ingroup has committed (rather than suffered) violence. Low glorifiers, on the other hand, are unlikely to exhibit the same bias in perspective taking based on their ingroup’s role in the conflict; in fact, they might be motivated to break the bond with ingroup perpetrators (“black sheep effect”, Marques & Paez, 1994; Leidner, Li, & Kardos, in press) and refuse to take their perspective. Moreover, the extent to which people take the perspective of perpetrators may in turn lead to differential support for justice among members of victim and perpetrator groups.

**Study 1**

Study 1 tested the hypothesis that high (but not low) glorifiers will support less justice in response to ingroup perpetration than victimization, and their perspective taking of ingroup perpetrators should explain why such a justice bias occurs. In the context of the conflict between the United States and Iran, we experimentally manipulated whether American citizens have committed or suffered human rights violations. The manipulation enabled us to investigate the extent to which Americans reacted differently to intergroup transgressions depending on their ingroup’s experience in the conflict.

**Method**

**Participants.** The sample consisted of 191 participants recruited online through Amazon’s Mechanical Turk (MTurk). Our screening of the data quality indicated that 17 participants did not pay sufficient attention to the news article, as indicated by their incorrect written summaries of the news article, false answers to the manipulation check questions, and the little time they spent on reading the article. Three participants raised suspicions about the credibility of the news article. Four participants reported to have close Iranian family members
or friends. These participants were thus excluded from the subsequent data analyses. The data from the remaining 167 participants were used in the subsequent analyses (67% women; age $M = 33$, $SD = 11.12$).

**Procedure.** Participants were first randomly assigned to read a fictitious, but allegedly real, New York Times article depicting cases of prisoner abuse in an underground prison at the Afghan-Iranian border. In the ingroup transgression condition, participants read about American soldiers captured and tortured Iranian civilians, whereas in the ingroup transgression condition participants read about Iranian soldiers captured and tortured American civilians. The reported acts of abuse included sleep deprivation, severe beatings, suffocation, and humiliating acts. In one of the three cases, mistreatment and torture eventually led to the death of the prisoner. The news articles were identical across conditions except for the nationalities of the perpetrators and the victims. After the reading task, participants completed manipulation checks. To ensure that they read the article carefully, they also summarized it in their own words. Afterwards, participants filled out the following dependent measures in the order outlined below. All items were measured on 9-point scales ($1=\text{strongly disagree}; 9=\text{strongly agree}$).

**Materials.**

*Perspective taking of perpetrators.* Adapted from the perspective-taking subscale of the empathy questionnaire (Davis, 1980), five items measured the extent to which American participants took the perspective of the perpetrators in the news article (e.g., “I tried to understand these American/Iranian soldiers better by imagining how things looked from their perspective.”).
Support for justice. Adapted from Leidner et al. (2013), justice was measured using five items tapping the retributive aspects of justice (e.g., “To restore justice, the U.S./Iran need(s) to be punished for its actions described in the news report.”).

Ingroup attachment and glorification. Adopted from Roccas et al. (2006), ingroup attachment was measured with eight statements, tapping the importance of the U.S. to participants’ identity and their commitment to the U.S. (e.g., “Being American is an important part of my identity.”). Ingroup glorification was measured with eight statements, tapping participants’ belief in the superiority of the U.S. over other nations (e.g., “The U.S. is better than other nations in all respects.”), and their deference to American authorities (e.g., “It is disloyal for Americans to criticize the U.S.”). Following others (e.g., Feygina, Jost, & Goldsmith, 2009; Leidner et al., 2010; Leidner & Castano, 2012), the moderators were administered at the end of the study in order to avoid raising participants’ suspicion about the study goal.

Results

Ingroup attachment and glorification. Neither attachment ($\alpha = .96, M = 6.44, SD = 2.07), F(1, 165) = 0.00, p = .991, \eta^2 < .001$, nor glorification ($\alpha = .90, M = 4.69, SD = 1.65), F(1, 165) = 0.14, p = .712, \eta^2 < .001$, was affected by condition, thus allowing us to use them, together with condition, as independent variables (IVs) in subsequent general linear models (GLMs) carried out in SAS 9.4. Therefore, attachment and glorification were standardized (Aiken & West, 1991; Cohen, Cohen, West, & Aiken, 2003). To capture glorification’s conceptual distinctness from attachment despite the overlaps between these two constructs (Roccas et al., 2006), the following analyses used glorification as a moderator while controlling for attachment as a covariate.
Support for justice. As predicted, analysis with support for justice ($\alpha = .88$, $M = 6.25$, $SD = 1.70$) as the DV yielded a significant two-way interaction between ingroup role and glorification (see Figure 1), $F(1, 162) = 13.19, p < .001, \eta^2 = .08, 90\% CI [.02, .14]$. Simple effects revealed that participants who strongly glorified their ingroup supported significantly less retributive justice when the ingroup was the perpetrator ($M = 5.76$) rather than the victim ($M = 6.97$), $t(162) = -3.38, p = .001$. On the contrary, participants who weakly glorified their ingroup exhibited the opposite pattern, were somewhat more supportive of justice when the ingroup was the perpetrator ($M = 6.48$) rather than the victim ($M = 5.84$), $t(162) = 1.77, p = .078$. No other effects reached significance, $Fs(1, 162) < 1.30, ps > .258, \eta^2s < .01$.

Perspective taking of perpetrators. Analysis with perspective taking of perpetrators ($\alpha = .92$, $M = 4.57$, $SD = 2.09$) as DV yielded a significant two-way interaction between ingroup role and glorification (see Figure 2), $F(1, 162) = 14.13, p < .001, \eta^2 = .08, 90\% CI [.03, .15]$. Simple effects revealed that high glorifiers were significantly more likely to take the perspective of perpetrators when their ingroup was the perpetrator ($M = 5.31$) rather than the victim ($M = 3.79$), $t(162) = 3.45, p = .001$. Low glorifiers, in contrast, were somewhat less likely to take the perspective of perpetrators when their ingroup was the perpetrator ($M = 4.14$) rather than the victim ($M = 4.97$), $t(162) = -1.88, p = .062$. No other effects reached significance, $Fs(1, 162) < 1.25, ps > .260, \eta^2s < .01$.

Mediational analyses. To test whether perspective taking of perpetrators mediated the effect of ingroup role by glorification on support for justice, we conducted a moderated mediation analysis, in which ingroup role was introduced as the IV, perspective taking as the mediator, glorification as a moderator, and justice as the DV, with attachment as a covariate (Hayes, 2012, model 8). In line with our mediational hypothesis, there were significant indirect
effects of ingroup role on justice through perspective taking of perpetrators when glorification was high \((\text{boot coefficient} = -.25, 95\% \ CI [-.614, -.047])\), as well as when it was low, but in the opposite direction \((\text{boot coefficient} = .14, 95\% \ CI [.001, UCI = .425])\).

**Discussion**

Study 1 demonstrated that individuals who strongly glorified their own group showed increased perspective taking of perpetrators and reduced support for justice in response to violence committed rather than suffered by the ingroup. By contrast, low glorifiers exhibited the opposite pattern, taking less perspective of perpetrators and demanding more justice when their ingroup has committed rather than suffered violence. Furthermore, perspective taking of perpetrators explained the diametrically opposed effects of ingroup victimization versus transgression on support for justice among both high and low glorifiers. The results provided initial evidence for our conceptualization of perspective taking as a motivated cognition—that is, high glorifiers are motivated to adopt the perspective of ingroup perpetrators in an effort to exonerate them from punishment.

Although we focused on perspective taking of perpetrators as the primary underlying mechanism, it is also possible that high glorifiers were motivated to reduce their perspective taking of victims following transgressions committed (rather than suffered) by the ingroup, which in turn led to their reduced support for justice. This explanation, however, seems less plausible than perspective taking of perpetrators as we measured perpetrator- rather than victim-centered justice (i.e., punishment of perpetrators). To test this possibility, we measured perspective taking of victims, in addition to that of perpetrators, as a mediator variable in Study 2. Another alternative explanation of the findings in Study 1 is that high levels of glorification might predispose individuals to engaging in exonerating cognitions when perpetrators belong to
high-power groups such as the U.S. (rather than low-power groups such as Iran), regardless of whether they belong to the group or not. If this were true, the effects of perpetration versus victimization on justice through perspective taking would occur among high glorifiers regardless of whether the ingroup was involved in the conflict. To rule out this alternative explanation empirically, Study 2 examined American participants’ responses to either the Iran-U.S. conflict or a similar conflict between Iran and Australia.

**Study 2**

This study was conducted to replicate the findings of Study 1 and to provide a more stringent test of the hypothesis that perspective taking of perpetrators serves the function to facilitate exonerating appraisals of intergroup transgressions (as manifested in reduced support for justice) when the transgressors are ingroup members. In addition to perspective taking of perpetrators, we also investigated perspective taking of victims as an alternative mechanism underlying the effect of ingroup victimization versus perpetration on support for justice. Study 2 further advanced the methodology used in Study 1 by introducing two control conditions in which Australians were depicted as either the victims or perpetrators in the conflict between Iran and Australia.

**Method**

**Participants.** The sample consisted of 413 American adult participants recruited online through MTurk. Our screening of the data quality indicated that 60 participants did not pay sufficient attention to the news article, as indicated by their incorrect written summaries of the news article, false answers to the manipulation check questions, and the little time they spent on reading the article. Additionally, eleven participants spent significantly more time reading the
news article and/or completing the survey compared to the rest of the sample, and ten participants spent not even 10 minutes to complete the survey. One participant raised suspicions about the credibility of the news article. These participants, along with five multivariate outliers (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007), were thus excluded from the subsequent data analyses. Importantly, the 94 participants who were excluded were approximately evenly distributed across the study’s four conditions. 326 participants were retained in the subsequent data analyses (48% women; age $M = 36, SD = 13.35$). The percentage of the sample (22%) excluded from data analysis was similar to the average benchmarks for online studies (Chandler, Mueller, & Paolacci, 2013).

**Procedure.** To examine whether people respond differently to victimization and perpetration only when the conflict involves the ingroup, Study 2 employed a 2 (target group’s role: victim vs. perpetrator) × 2 (ingroup involvement: involved vs. un-involved) experimental design. In conditions where the conflict involved the ingroup, participants read a news article depicting prisoner abuses committed either by American soldiers against Iranians or by Iranian soldiers against Americans. In conditions where the conflict did not involve the ingroup, participants read a news article depicting the same prisoner abuses committed either by Australian soldiers against Iranians or by Iranian soldiers against Australians. The news articles were adapted from the ones used in Study 1 with some minor modifications, including the individualization of responsibility by providing the names of one perpetrator (“Michael Smith”) and his victim (“Amir Mohsen”). Both the perpetrator and the victim were given male names that are relatively common in either Western or Middle Eastern countries, depending on condition.

**Materials.**
**Perspective taking of perpetrators.** Four items measured the extent to which participants took the perspective of the perpetrators in the news article and all items were anchored to the individual perpetrator Michael Smith or Amir Mohsen (e.g., “I tried to see things from [Michael Smith’s/Amir Mohsen’s] point of view;” “It was very easy for me to imagine how [Michael Smith/Amir Mohsen] was feeling.”).

**Perspective taking of victims.** The same four items measured the extent to which participants took the perspective of the victims in the news article and all items were anchored to the individual victim.

**Support for justice** was measured using the same items as in Study 1 for the “U.S.-Iran” conditions, and were adapted to the Australia-Iran context in the conditions where the conflict did not involve participants’ ingroup.

**Ingroup attachment and glorification** were measured using the same items as in Study 1.

**Results**

**National attachment and glorification**

The distribution of attachment ($\alpha = .96, M = 6.32, SD = 1.95$) was moderately negatively skewed, necessitating a square root transformation based on a priori determined statistical decision making criteria.¹ Neither (transformed or non-transformed) attachment, $F$s(3, 322) $> .60, ps > .590, \eta^2 < .001$, nor glorification ($\alpha = .85, M = 4.85, SD = 1.57$), $F(3, 322) = .40, p = .757, \eta^2 < .001$, was significantly affected by experimental manipulations, thus allowing us to use them, together with condition, as IVs in subsequent GLMs as specified in the previous studies.

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¹ The results remained unchanged when using the untransformed attachment variable.
Main Analyses

Support for justice. We predicted that highly glorifying Americans would be less supportive of justice when the U.S. was the perpetrator rather than the victim in the Iran-U.S. conflict. Moreover, such justice bias against Iranians should not generalize, at least not to the same extent, to intergroup violence between Iran and an outgroup of similar power status as the U.S. (i.e., Australia). To test this hypothesis, we submitted support for justice ($\alpha = .91, M = 6.03, SD = 1.92$) as a DV to a GLM with target group’s role (victim vs. perpetrator) and ingroup involvement as IVs and glorification as a continuous moderating variable, while controlling for attachment as a covariate. Our prediction was supported by a significant three-way interaction of glorification by group role and ingroup involvement, $F(1, 317) = 14.36, p < .001, \eta^2 = .04, 90\% CI [.01, .08]$ (see Figure 3). Simple effects indicated that high glorifiers demanded significantly less justice when the U.S. was the perpetrator ($M = 3.60$) rather than the victim ($M = 7.11$), $t(317) = 8.22, p < .001$, in the U.S.-Iran conflict conditions. The same pattern emerged in the Australia-Iran conflict conditions, but to a significantly lesser degree; high glorifiers also demanded less justice when Australia was the perpetrator ($M = 5.76$) rather than the victim ($M = 7.07$), $t(317) = 3.51, p = .001$. Among low glorifiers, in contrast, the experimental manipulations did not significantly affect support for justice.

Besides the predicted three-way interaction, other effects were also significant and reported here for exhaustiveness; all of them followed expected patterns and were consistent with Study 1. The main effect of group role as the victim or perpetrator on support for justice was significant, $F(1, 317) = 41.10, p < .001, \eta^2 = .11, 90\% CI [.06, .17]$, such that portraying the target group as the perpetrator ($M = 5.45$) decreased participants’ support for justice, compared to portraying the group as the victim ($M = 6.52$). Replicating the findings in Study 1, this main
effect was further qualified by a two-way interaction between group role and glorification, \( F(1, 317) = 34.33, p < .001, \eta^2 = .10, 90\% CI [.05, .15]. \) Analyses of simple effects revealed that among high glorifiers, portraying the target group as the perpetrator (\( M = 4.68 \)) significantly decreased support for justice, compared to portraying the target group as the victim (\( M = 7.09 \)), \( t(317) = -8.50, p < .001. \) Low glorifiers, on the other hand, did not differ depending on group role, \( t(317) = -.13, p = .894. \) The main effect of ingroup involvement was also significant, \( F(1, 317) = 4.91, p = .027, \eta^2 = .02, 90\% CI [.001, .04], \) such that reading about a conflict involving participants’ ingroup (\( M = 5.87 \)) decreased support for justice, compared to reading about a conflict between two third-party countries (\( M = 6.18 \)). This main effect was further qualified by a significant two-way interaction between ingroup involvement and glorification, \( F(1, 317) = 10.01, p = .002, \eta^2 = .03, 90\% CI [.01, .07]. \) High glorifiers demanded significantly less justice when their ingroup was involved (\( M = 5.36 \)), compared to when it was not (\( M = 6.42 \)), \( t(317) = -3.74, p < .001. \) In contrast, low glorifiers did not differ depending on ingroup’s involvement in the conflict, \( t(317) = .80, p = .422. \) A two-way interaction between ingroup involvement and group role reached marginal significance, \( F(1, 317) = 3.11, p = .079, \eta^2 = .01, 90\% CI [.00, .03]. \) In the U.S.-Iran conflict conditions, American participants demanded significantly less justice when the U.S. was portrayed as the perpetrator (\( M = 4.99 \)) rather than the victim (\( M = 6.50 \)), \( t(317) = 5.48, p < .001. \) The same pattern emerged in the Australia-Iran conflict conditions, but to a lesser degree. Participants demanded less justice when Australia was the perpetrator (\( M = 5.71 \)) rather than the victim (\( M = 6.59 \)), \( t(317) = 3.35, p = .001. \) The main effect of attachment was also marginally significant, \( F(1, 317) = 2.82, p = .094, \eta^2 = .01, 90\% CI [.00, .03], \) indicating that attachment was somewhat positively associated with support for justice, \( \beta = .22. \)
The main effect of glorification was not significant, $F(1, 317) = .17, p = .682, \eta^2 = .01, 90\% CI [.00, .01].$

**Perspective taking of perpetrators.** We predicted that strongly glorifying Americans would engage in more perspective taking of perpetrators when the U.S. committed rather than suffered violence in the Iran-U.S. conflict. Again, this bias in perpetrator perspective taking should be less likely to occur when the target group was an outgroup (i.e., Australia in the fictitious Australia-Iran conflict). The analysis with perspective taking of perpetrators ($\alpha = .75, M = 3.67, SD = 1.67$) as the DV offered partial support for this hypothesis. Instead of a three-way interaction of glorification by group role and ingroup involvement, we obtained a significant two-way interaction between group role and glorification (see Figure 4), $F(1, 317) = 12.78, p < .001, \eta^2 = .04, 90\% CI [.01, .08]$. Simple effects revealed that among high glorifiers, portraying the target group as the perpetrator ($M = 4.39$) significantly increased perspective taking of the perpetrators, compared to portraying the target group as the victim ($M = 3.03$), $t(317) = 5.08, p < .001$. Low glorifiers, on the other hand, did not respond differently to perspective taking depending on group role, $t(317) = -.03, p = .979$. This finding suggests that while we replicated the findings of Study 1, the increased perpetrator perspective taking among strongly glorifying Americans was not limited to perpetrators that belonged to the ingroup; rather, the effects carried over to perpetrators of an outgroup of similar power status as the ingroup. Importantly, however, strongly glorifying Americans did engage in more perpetrator perspective taking when the ingroup committed (rather than suffered) violence. While they also engaged in more perpetrator perspective taking when an outgroup similar to the ingroup committed (rather than suffered) violence, we know from the analysis on support for justice reported above that this increase in perspective taking of outgroup perpetrators did not translate into decreased support for justice.
The analysis also yielded a significant main effect of group role on perspective taking of perpetrators, $F(1, 317) = 14.12, p < .001, \eta^2 = .04, 90\% CI [.01, .08]$, such that portraying Australia/the U.S. as the perpetrator ($M = 4.09$) increased perspective taking of the perpetrators, compared to portraying either country as the victim ($M = 3.39$). The main effect of ingroup involvement was also significant, $F(1, 317) = 6.43, p = .012, \eta^2 = .02, 90\% CI [.002, .05]$, such that reading about a conflict involving the U.S. ($M = 3.87$) increased American participants’ perspective taking of the perpetrators, compared to reading about a conflict that did not involve the U.S. ($M = 3.49$). A marginally significant two-way interaction between ingroup involvement and group role also emerged, $F(1, 317) = 2.95, p = .087, \eta^2 = .01, 90\% CI [.00, .03]$. In the U.S.-Iran conflict conditions, American participants took significantly more perspective of the perpetrators when the U.S. was the perpetrator ($M = 4.42$) rather than the victim ($M = 3.46$), $t(317) = -3.71, p < .001$. In the Australia-Iran conflict conditions, however, participants did not differ significantly depending on Australia’s role in the conflict, $t(317) = 1.44, p = .152$. No other effects reached significance, $Fs(1, 317) < .73, ps > .393, \eta^2 s < .01$.

**Perspective taking of victims.** To rule out the possibility that victim (rather than perpetrator) perspective taking explained high glorifiers’ reduced support for justice in response to ingroup perpetration than victimization, we conducted the same analysis with perspective taking of victims as the DV ($\alpha = .77, M = 5.82, SD = 1.70$). The analysis yielded a significant two-way interaction between target group’s role (perpetrator vs. victim) and glorification (see Figure 5), $F(1, 317) = 4.87, p = .028, \eta^2 = .02, 90\% CI [.01, .08]$. Among high glorifiers, portraying the target group as the perpetrator ($M = 5.29$) significantly decreased participants’ willingness to take the perspective of victims, compared to portraying the target group as the victim ($M = 5.95$), $t(317) = -2.33, p = .020$. Low glorifiers, in contrast, did not differ significantly
depending on group role, $t(317) = .85, p = .395$. There was also a marginally significant two-way interaction between ingroup’s involvement in the conflict and glorification, $F(1, 317) = 3.18, p = .076, \eta^2 = .01, 90\% CI [.00, .03]$. High glorifiers tended to take less perspective of the Iranian victims when the U.S. was involved ($M = 5.43$), as compared to when it was not ($M = 5.81$), $t(317) = -1.39, p = .164$. Low glorifiers, in contrast, did not differ significantly depending on group involvement; if anything, they exhibited the opposite pattern compared to high glorifiers, $t(317) = 1.20, p = .231$. No other effects reached significance, $Fs(1, 317) < 1.59, ps > .208, \eta^2 s < .001$. These results suggest that the experimental manipulations also affected victim perspective taking, in a similar but opposite way as it affected perpetrators perspective taking. Yet, this analysis cannot answer the question of whether the effects of ingroup’s role as perpetrator or victim on support for justice were driven by perpetrator perspective taking in particular or by perspective taking in general (i.e. both perpetrator and victim perspective taking). To test this alternative explanation fully and directly, we thus conducted the following mediational analyses.

**Mediational analyses.** To test the mediating roles of perspective taking of perpetrators and victims in the joint effects of ingroup involvement and group role by glorification on support for justice, we conducted a series of moderated mediation analyses. In the first analysis, ingroup involvement, group role, and their interaction were introduced as the IVs, perspective taking of perpetrators as the mediator, glorification as a moderator, and justice as the DV, with attachment as covariate. In line with our mediational hypothesis, there was a significant indirect effect of the IVs on justice through perspective taking of perpetrators when glorification was high (*boot coefficient* = -.23, 95% CI [-.598, -.003], but not when it was low (*boot coefficient* = -.07, 95% CI [-.388, .173]. In the second analysis, perspective taking of victims was introduced as the mediator and all the other variables remained the same in the model. This analysis, however, did
not yield a significant indirect effect on support for justice through perspective taking of victims.\(^2\)

**Discussion**

Replicating the main findings in Study 1, Study 2 showed that high glorifiers reduced support for justice in response to ingroup perpetration than victimization. Importantly, such differential support for justice in response to perpetration versus victimization was more pronounced when the ingroup was involved than when it was not, suggesting that belonging to the perpetrator group gives extra motivation to step into the shoes of the perpetrators in order to absolve them of responsibility. Furthermore, the mediational analyses confirmed our hypothesis that perspective taking of perpetrators, but not of victims, explained the effects of the experimental manipulations on support for justice among high glorifiers. Therefore, although perspective taking of victims was also affected by the experimental manipulations, it did not explain the reduction in support for justice among high glorifiers following ingroup perpetration as opposed to victimization.

It is worth noting that the American participants showed a similar, albeit less strong, justice bias when the target group was Australia, compared to when it was the United States. We speculate that this effect emerged because Australia is one of the closest allies of the U.S., and that the glorification of one’s own group can potentially carry over, at least to a certain extent, to influence attitudes toward outgroups that share many similarities with the ingroup. This is particularly true when it comes to perspective taking, since perspective taking essentially reflects

\(^2\) When both perpetrator and victim perspective taking were entered as mediators in the same model in parallel, none of them mediated the effects of the IVs on support for justice. Yet, the only mediator that was significant in separate simple mediations was perspective taking of perpetrators, supporting our theoretical rationale that the decreased support for justice in response to ingroup-committed (rather than suffered) violence was motivated by increased attempts to understand the perpetrators’ perspective, not decreased attempts to understand the victims’ perspective.
an increased self-other overlap (Galinsky et al., 2005). Due to the perceived overlap or similarities between the two target groups (Australia and the U.S.), highly glorifying Americans increased their perspective taking of perpetrators in response to Australia- (rather than Iran-) committed atrocities, to a similar degree as they did in response to U.S.- (rather than Iran-) committed atrocities. In other words, high glorifiers adopted more perspective of perpetrators when the target group has committed than suffered violence, regardless of whether the ingroup was involved in the conflict. This can therefore explain why we did not obtain a three-way interaction of glorification by target group’s role and ingroup involvement, but a more general two-way interaction of glorification by target group’s role. Essential to our hypothesis, however, the significant three-way interaction for justice demands indicates that perspective taking of perpetrators only serves the function of exonerating perpetrators from punishment when they belong to the ingroup, not when they belong to an outgroup, however similar to the ingroup it might be. This finding is in line with previous research showing that glorification only predicts moral disengagement when transgressions are committed by the ingroup (but not a similar outgroup; Leidner et al., 2010, Study 2).

General Discussion

Two experiments investigated perpetrator perspective taking in the aftermath of intergroup transgressions and its implications for justice among both victim and perpetrator group members. Among Americans who strongly glorified their country, reminders of ingroup perpetration (as opposed to victimization) in the conflict between the U.S. and Iran increased their perspective taking of perpetrators. Our mediational analyses further showed that adopting the perspective of ingroup perpetrators can have undesirable consequences for post-conflict
justice—namely, high glorifiers’ reduced support for justice in the form of perpetrator
punishment (Study 1). Interestingly, American participants exhibited a similar tendency to adopt
the perpetrators’ perspective when Australia committed rather than suffered violence in a
fictitious conflict with Iran (Study 2). Such increased perspective taking, however, did not
translate into lowered support for justice, suggesting that perpetrator perspective taking served
the exoneration function only when the perpetrators belonged to the ingroup. Furthermore, while
high glorifiers were also less likely to adopt the perspective of victims after ingroup perpetration
rather than victimization, this decrease in victim perspective taking did not explain the reduction
in support for justice, thus providing additional evidence for the mediating role of increased
perspective taking of (ingroup) perpetrators, not decreased perspective taking of (outgroup)
victims.

**Perspective Taking as Motivated Cognition**

Our findings highlight the motivated nature of perspective taking in the context of
intergroup relations. Substantial research has demonstrated that when confronted with
wrongdoings committed by the ingroup, people are motivated to execute various affective and
cognitive strategies that allow them to morally disengage from the wrongdoings (e.g., Aquino,
Reed, Thau, & Freeman, 2006; Bandura, 1999; Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli,
1996). Unlike the commonly studied moral disengagement strategies such as denial, victim
dehumanization, and moral justification, adopting the perspective of perpetrators does not imply
an explicit intention to disengage from moral transgressions. When motivated by ingroup-
committed (rather than suffered) violence, however, this basic cognitive process does result in
the exoneration of ingroup perpetrators from punishment, as is evident from the subsequent
reduced support for justice in response to human rights violations by the ingroup (but not an
equal-status outgroup). The present research thus contributes to the existing literature by showing that even without any explicit intention to morally disengage, cognitively appraising the intergroup situation from the perpetrators’ perspective can take on an exonerating, morally disengaging function when the perpetrators belong to one’s ingroup. In other words, attempts to understand ingroup perpetrators can prove to be a slippery slope to injustice, and prevent accountability and improvement of the ingroup.

The observed moderating effect of glorification adds another layer of complexity to the motivation component of perspective taking in response to intergroup conflict. Consistent with the prior research on ingroup identification in general (Branscombe et al., 1999; Doosje et al., 1995) and glorification in particular (Bilali, 2013; Leidner & Castano, 2012; Leidner et al., 2010; Roccas et al., 2006), we showed that members of the perpetrator group are motivated to adopt the perpetrators’ perspective only to the extent that they glorify their own group. In other words, this perspective taking process is essentially motivated by the basic psychological need to defend against threats to the (glorified) moral image of the ingroup.

**The Pitfalls of Understanding Evil**

The present research also bears on an intriguing philosophical and practical question in responding to human evil: should we attempt to understand evil, to view things through the eyes of perpetrators, and to imagine their thoughts, feelings, and intentions? There certainly are benefits of understanding perpetrators and their actions, especially for victims who are struggling to forgive and move on (Takaku, 2001; Takaku et al., 2001; Witvliet et al., 2001). For observers of evil, however, it has been cautioned that understanding the perspective of perpetrators might carry the moral risk of diminishing the severity of their crimes (Baumeister, 1997). Indeed, very few people who have committed severe moral transgressions actually see their actions as evil.
Understanding the perpetrators on their own terms, therefore, can come at the cost of impartial moral judgments. By showing that high glorifiers are particularly prone to adopting the perspective of ingroup perpetrators and hence seeing their crimes as less punishable, our findings not only offered empirical evidence, but also established a boundary condition (levels of ingroup glorification), for Baumeister’s (1997) claim.

Due to our exclusive focus on parties that are directly involved in acts of moral transgression, it will be important for future research to investigate perpetrator perspective taking and its implications among bystanders or uninvolved third parties of intergroup transgressions. Moreover, our operationalization of “understanding perpetrators” has been entirely cognitive, and thus does not address the emotional or affective aspects of understanding moral transgressions. Empathizing with perpetrators, for example, may evoke intense emotional responses that can further cloud observers’ moral judgments and eventually prevent pursuit of justice. Therefore, in the effort to understand perpetrators of intergroup violence future work should examine affective and cognitive processes in tandem.

**Conclusion**

This research suggests that in response to intergroup violence, high glorifiers are more likely to take the perspective of perpetrators when their own group was the perpetrator rather than the victim in the conflict. Such increased perspective taking further served the function to facilitate exonerating appraisals of the transgressions, as evidenced by high glorifiers’ reduced support for justice following transgressions committed rather than suffered by the ingroup. These findings uncovered the undesirable consequences of understanding evil in the context of intergroup conflict, and can have important implications for the restoration of justice in post-conflict societies.
Figure 1. Support for justice as a function of ingroup’s role as perpetrator or victim and national glorification (Study 1).
Figure 2. Perspective taking of perpetrators as a function of ingroup’s role as perpetrator or victim and national glorification (Study 1).
Figure 3. Support for justice as a function of ingroup’s role (perpetrator vs. victim), ingroup’s involvement in the conflict (involved vs. uninvolved), and national glorification (Study 2).
Figure 4. Perspective taking of perpetrators as a function of ingroup’s role (perpetrator vs. victim), ingroup’s involvement in the conflict (involved vs. uninvolved), and national glorification (Study 2).
Figure 5. Perspective taking of victims as a function of ingroup’s role (perpetrator vs. victim), ingroup’s involvement in the conflict (involved vs. uninvolved), and national glorification (Study 2).