How Conflict Corrupts: The Role of Meaning in the Perpetuation of Intergroup Conflict

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Abstract

We investigated whether violent conflict provides individuals with a sense of meaning that they are hesitant to let go of, thus leading to the perpetuation of intergroup conflict. We found that participants exposed to past (Study 1) or ongoing (Study 2) conflict found more meaning in conflict compared to participants not exposed to conflict, and as a result were more likely to hold conflict perpetuating beliefs. We also found that directly manipulating the perceived meaning in conflict (Study 3) led to greater perceived meaning in life in general and, thereby, greater support for conflict escalation. These results provide evidence that people can be motivated to prolong conflict because conflict provides them with a source of meaning. We discuss our findings in the context of the meaning making and threat compensation literatures, and consider their implications for perspectives on conflict escalation and resolution.

Key words: meaning, conflict, motivation, threat compensation
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_The enduring attraction of war is this: Even with its destruction and carnage it can give us what we long for in life. It can give us purpose, meaning, a reason for living [...]. Most of us willingly accept war as long as we can fold it into a belief system that paints the ensuing suffering as necessary for a higher good, for human beings seek not only happiness but also meaning. And tragically war is sometimes the most powerful way in human society to achieve meaning._

Chris Hedges, War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning, pp. 3, 10

It is estimated that across the 3,421 years of recorded human history, a war has been fought somewhere in the world in all but 268 of them (Durant & Durant, 1968, p. 81). Violent conflict thus appears to be the rule of the human condition, not the exception. To make matters worse, conflicts are contagious; once they start, they tend to spread quickly and are difficult to end (Crescenzi, 2007; Houweling & Siccama, 1985; Kedera, 1998; Levy, 1982; Most & Starr, 1990; Siverson & Starr, 1991). As a consequence, many conflicts become seemingly intractable, persisting for generations (Bar-Tal, 2000, 2007; Coleman, 2000). Though not inevitable (Leidner, Tropp, & Lickel, 2013), this state of affairs has long begged the question: what is it about the human condition that allows for the proliferation of something so universally condemned and devastating as violent conflict? Here, we investigate whether part of the answer may lie in a perhaps equally revered mainstay of the human condition: the human motivation to seek meaning. Specifically, we investigate whether one byproduct of conflict is that it provides individuals with a sense of meaning, which, once encountered, makes conflict difficult to let go of, thus contributing to its perpetuation. In this sense, one of the most destructive phenomena in the world might be self-sufficient and self-perpetuating. Although anecdotal evidence has accumulated for the notion that conflict provides people with a sense of meaning (a suggestion made by journalists and literary scholars; e.g., Hedges, 2003), we systematically tested whether
individuals see meaning in conflict and whether this meaning is in turn responsible for perpetuating further conflict. In doing so, we integrate the meaning making and meaning maintenance literatures with the conflict resolution literature, offering new insights into the psychological factors that fuel conflict as well as new avenues to reduce it.

While many psychological factors are thought to contribute to the perpetuation of conflict, such as threat, intergroup emotions, and morality (for a review see Leidner et al., 2013), what these factors have in common is that they all lead people to resort to conflict in the service of overcoming a frustrated human need. For example, people turn to violent conflict to help them resolve threats to economic security, physical safety, and moral identity. According to these perspectives, conflict serves as a means through which people can surmount obstacles to satisfying their needs. In addition to being a tool to remove need frustration, we argue that conflict in and of itself can fulfill an important human need, a motive that is considered by both philosophers and psychologists alike to lie at the core of the human condition: the psychological need for meaning (Camus, 1955; Frankl, 1963/1984; Heidegger, 1953/1996; Kierkegaard, 1842/1996; Maddi, 1970; Steger, 2009). That is, we propose that conflict is not merely pursued to deal with negative outcomes (such as threats), but rather that it is pursued as an end in itself. The centrality of the motivation to seek meaning is a well-established tenet in the psychological literature (Maslow, 1968; for reviews see Heintzelman & King, 2014a, 2014b). This motivation for meaning is considered to be adaptive, as meaning seeking helps people find coherence and purpose where it would otherwise be lacking (Heintzelman & King, 2014b; Heintzelman, Trent, & King, 2013). However, meaning making can also be maladaptive (Lilgendahl, McLean, & Mansfield, 2013). With this in mind, we argue that tolerating a conflict due to its capacity to provide meaning may similarly be adaptive for individuals and in the short-term, because it can
restore a sense of order to the chaos of conflict. However, for groups and in the long-term, the tendency to search for and find meaning in conflict can have the serious maladaptive side-effect of prolonging conflict.

If supported empirically, this perspective has the potential to transform our understanding of conflict and its resolution. If conflict does not depend solely on external factors such as threat for its sustenance, conflict might continue even once all threats are eliminated and all needs are met, simply because people have come to see conflict as meaningful and thus become reluctant to let go of it. Consequently, while minimizing threat would certainly help conflict resolution, it might not be sufficient to end conflict. Instead, strategies like reducing the meaning associated with conflict or providing meaning via other avenues would become a necessary part of conflict resolution.

From Trauma to Meaning

The human tendency to strive for and create meaning is so strong that people can even derive meaning from traumatic experiences (e.g., debilitating or life-threatening medical issues, crime). For example, research on posttraumatic growth demonstrates that while traumatic events tend to shatter victims’ assumptions about themselves and the world, these life-altering reminders of the fragility and unpredictability of life contribute over time to a renewed sense of appreciation of and meaning in life (e.g., Brickman, Coates, & Janoff-Bulman, 1978; Janoff-Bulman, 1992, 1998). Violent conflict, too, can be perceived as meaningful, as indicated by soldiers’ responses to war. In interviews, war veterans generally discuss more positive than negative aspects of their experiences (Dohrenwend et al., 2004; Elder & Clipp, 1989; Mehlum, 1995; for a review see Schok, Kleber, Elands, & Weerts, 2008). Between 60% and 70% of WWII and Korean war veterans spontaneously reported that their war experiences were
beneficial in terms of learning to cope with adversity, developing self-discipline and independence, and gaining a broader perspective on life. The negative effects of war were mentioned less frequently (Elder & Clipp, 1989). These findings were replicated in a quantitative study that found that WWII, Korean, and Vietnam war veterans rated their military service to be more positive than negative (Aldwin, Levenson, & Spiro, 1994).

Although the meaning making and post traumatic growth literatures demonstrate that it is possible to find meaning in violent conflict, these literatures do not comment on whether the general population (i.e., those who did not fight in combat and were not victims of violence) finds meaning in conflicts perpetrated by their nation, even though the conflict may have little impact on their daily lives. Most importantly, these literatures have not considered the possible negative consequences of conflict as a source of meaning—that once people find conflict to be meaningful, they may not want to let go of it, and thereby inadvertently perpetuate it despite its negativity.

**From Meaning to Conflict Perpetuation**

Our hypothesis that people derive meaning from conflict and thus, at least on some level, become more tolerant of conflict finds tangential support in the meaning maintenance and terror management literatures. Consistent with our formulation, the meaning maintenance model (MMM; Heine, Proulx, & Vohs, 2006; Proulx & Heine, 2010; Proulx & Inzlicht, 2012) proposes that people are motivated to maintain meaning and respond to meaning threats by attempting to reaffirm their meaning frameworks (Heine, Proulx, & Vohs, 2006; Proulx & Heine, 2010; Proulx & Inzlicht, 2012). For example, basic expectancy violations that threaten meaning at an implicit level (e.g., reverse-colored playing cards; exposure to absurdist literature, humor, or art) lead people to find more meaning in complex patterns (Proulx & Heine, 2009) and cling more
strongly to their cultural identities (Proulx, Heine, & Vohs, 2010) and moral schemas (Proulx & Heine, 2008). This work also shows that people can maintain meaning in ways that are unrelated to the original source of the meaning threat. Consistent with this perspective, we argue that conflict serves as a domain in which people can find and maintain meaning.

While research on the MMM has focused on meaning maintenance strategies unrelated to conflict, a large related literature on terror management theory (TMT) has found that when reminded of their own mortality, people reaffirm their cultural worldviews (Greenberg, Simon, Psyczynski, Solomon, & Chatel, 1992; Greenberg, Solomon, & Pyszcynski, 1997), often by derogating members of other groups (Greenberg et al., 1990; Rosenblatt, Greenberg, Solomon, Pyszcynski, & Lyon, 1989), and even by supporting violence and war against them and their groups (e.g., Hirschberger & Ein-Dor, 2006; Pysczynski, Abdollahi, Solomon, Greenberg, Cohen, & Weise, 2006). Thus, given that TMT research has investigated violent conflict as an outcome, this work can inform our hypothesis about conflict perpetuation. Although the findings in this literature are discussed as arising specifically from a motivation to buffer mortality salience and/or defend one’s cultural worldview, and not a motivation to maintain meaning per se, some have argued that the findings are not inconsistent with the meaning perspective, as mortality salience can be seen as a specific type of meaning threat, and worldview reaffirmation as a more specific form of meaning maintenance (for discussions see Heine et al., 2006; Proulx & Heine, 2010; Proulx & Inzlicht, 2012; Pysczynski, Greenberg, Solomon, & Maxfield, 2006).

Though the overlap between TMT and MMM is still the topic of ongoing debate, when considered together, the MMM and TMT literatures lend support for our hypothesis, suggesting that conflict may arise from attempts to compensate for feelings of existential threat. At the same time, however, both models would argue that worldview defense is a coping response to threat,
be it mortality salience or meaning threat. Neither perspective has considered whether people actively approach a source of meaning or worldview affirmation because of some alluring quality of this source, and not as compensation for another threat from some other source (e.g., mortality salience, expectancy violations). While we do agree with the notion that people often turn to conflict to cope with threat, we argue that people can also pursue conflict as an end in and of itself; not necessarily in reaction to threat, but because the mere presence of conflict provides a sense of meaning that becomes difficult to let go of.

We should qualify that we do not argue here that conflict’s ability to provide meaning is a reason for people to start conflict. We argue that even amidst the strong negativity of conflict, once people experience the meaning it often provides, this meaning will serve as an obstacle to ending the conflict. In other words, wars may not start because they provide meaning, but they may well be hard to end because they provide meaning. Thus, conflict may corrupt human societies by providing one of the most important and elusive aspects of life: meaning. We also note that while some conflicts, such as foundational wars or independence wars, should almost always constitute a source of meaning, others should not. The meaning provided by WWI or the Vietnam War, for example, has waxed and waned over time. Thus, conflicts that are, or come to be, viewed as immoral or lacking a cause should also be unable to provide a sense of meaning and thus pose an exception to the processes we outline above. In line with our perspective, such conflicts should be easier and quicker to end.

Our rationale and its core assumption that people can see conflict as meaningful despite its negativity are broadly consistent with other social psychological perspectives demonstrating that people often like and even seek out negative experiences. The cognitive dissonance literature demonstrates that people can grow to like aversive experiences, even in the absence of any
redeeming quality, because they need to justify having gone through the experience, and do so by adopting more favorable attitudes toward the experience (Aronson & Mills, 1959; Festinger, 1957). In a similar vein, research on contrahedonic motivation demonstrates that people seek out negative emotions when they perceive them as useful (Tamir, 2015). People choose to feel anger, for example, when they need to confront someone, as anger is useful (and often perceived to be) in confrontations (Tamir, 2009). A recent review of the psychological, social, and biological consequences of pain argues that pain has positive consequences by serving as a contrast to pleasure, facilitating self-regulation (e.g., by increasing the perception of the self as virtuous), and eliciting empathy and enhancing social cohesion (Bastian, Jetten, Hornsey, & Leknes, 2014). We argue that despite its many deleterious features, conflict may similarly be sought out for its capacity to provide meaning.

The Present Research

We predicted that exposure to conflict would provide people with a “taste” of meaning, which, given the human need for meaning, people will be reluctant to let go of. As an unintended consequence of this effort to maintain the source of meaning, people’s tolerance and support for conflict in general should increase, be it the same conflict people were initially exposed to or a different one. To test this prediction, we primed people with past or ongoing conflict and assessed 1) whether this exposure to conflict elevated the meaning they saw in conflict in general, 2) whether the exposure to conflict made people more likely to subscribe to beliefs that perpetuate conflict, and, if so, 3) whether the heightened meaning explained why exposure to conflict increases tendencies that perpetuate conflict. Study 1 tested this prediction experimentally in the context of the U.S. Revolutionary war with an American sample. Study 2 tested it using a quasi-experimental design in the context of an actual ongoing conflict, the 2014
Israel-Gaza war, with a Jewish Israeli sample. Study 3 tested this in the context of recent attacks by ISIS with an American sample, and also sought to experimentally test the mechanism underlying the effect by manipulating the mediator (i.e. the degree to which the conflict was seen as meaningful). To enhance the generalizability of our findings, besides varying the contexts throughout the studies, we also varied the operationalization of conflict perpetuation, measuring it in terms of Americans’ resignation to the inevitability of the ongoing “war on terror” (Study 1), Jewish Israelis’ support for military escalation in Israel’s conflicts with Hamas and Iran (Study 2), and Americans’ support for military escalation of the conflict with ISIS (Study 3). Our individual difference approach of measuring meaning as a mediator allowed us to investigate conflict-triggered meaning making processes *per se*.

**Study 1**

Study 1 tested whether a reminder of past conflict would increase meaning and thus complacency about ending currently ongoing conflict. We tested this in the context of the American Revolutionary War, a past conflict all Americans are aware of and have the potential to find meaning in. If people readily find meaning in conflict, participants should be more likely to report finding meaning in conflict after they are exposed to it (compared to when they are not exposed to it). Alternatively, if conflict simply serves as an aversive experience, participants should be less likely to find meaning in conflict after they are exposed to it. In measuring the extent to which people find meaning in conflict, we assessed numerous different components of meaning: a sense of exhilaration, camaraderie, resilience, and purpose. We also measured participants’ resignation to the inevitability that the U.S. “war on terror” would continue, and remain a central part of life indefinitely.

**Method**
Participants

We recruited 398 participants from Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk). After excluding 18 participants who were not born in the U.S. or did not speak English as their first language and another 17 who did not pay sufficient attention to the study materials (as indicated by response time measures), 363 participants were included in the analyses reported below.

Procedure

Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions in which they either were exposed to an article about conflict or not. In the conflict condition, participants read an article about the U.S. Revolutionary War, which included a brief overview of the war, the casualties resulting from the war, events that commemorate the war, and outcomes associated with the war (i.e., independence from Great Britain). In the control condition, participants did not see any article and directly proceeded to the dependent measures. All participants completed the measures in the order presented below on 1-9 analog visual scales.

Perceived meaning in conflict ($\alpha = .91$, $M = 5.89$, $SD = 1.66$). On ten items adapted from past research on meaning making and post-traumatic growth (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996), participants expressed to what extent they viewed conflict in general as meaningful, from Not at all to Very much or Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree (depending on the item; e.g. It is encouraging to see the US military fight to secure our nation during times of conflict, The national unity my country displays during times of conflict is very uplifting, Adversaries who try to threaten our nations resolve only make our country stronger, Knowing that our servicemen and women fight for our country gives me a greater appreciation for the value of life).

Conflict perpetuation ($\alpha = .94$, $M = 6.94$, $SD = 1.49$). On three items, participants expressed their resignation toward conflict resolution and saw the conflict’s continuation as
inevitable, from \textit{Strongly Disagree} to \textit{Strongly Agree} (Terrorism will likely remain a central part of life in the 21st century, I have accepted the fact that the U.S. military may combat terror for decades to come, and We live in a world in which perpetual war is more likely than perpetual peace).

\textbf{Results and Discussion}

We used one-way analyses of variance (ANOVAs) to test the hypothesis that a reminder of conflict (relative to the baseline condition) would increase perceived meaning in conflict and resignation toward conflict. As predicted, participants reminded of conflict found more meaning in conflict ($M = 6.12$, $SD = 1.62$) than participants who were not reminded of conflict ($M = 5.55$, $SD = 1.75$), $F(1, 346) = 9.73$, $p = .002$, $\eta^2_p = .03$, 90\% CI[.006, .061]\footnote{Throughout the paper we report 90\% confidence intervals for $\eta^2_p$, as recommended by Steiger (2004), because it is equivalent to a significance level of $\alpha = .05$ when the effect size estimate cannot be negative, as well as to 95\% confidence intervals for Cohen’s d.}. Also as predicted, participants reminded of conflict held stronger conflict perpetuating beliefs ($M = 7.15$, $SD = 1.44$) than participants who were not reminded of conflict ($M = 6.77$, $SD = 1.52$), $F(1, 346) = 5.65$, $p = .018$, $\eta^2_p = .02$, 90\% CI[.002, .045]. We then used conditional process modeling using bias corrected bootstrapping with 10,000 resamples (Hayes, 2013; model 4) to test our hypothesis that a reminder of conflict would increase conflict perpetuating beliefs because it increased perceived meaning. The indirect effect of the manipulation on conflict perpetuation through perceived meaning was significant, $b = .12$, $SE = .05$, 95\% CI[.048, .230], $\kappa^2 = .04$, 95\% CI[.016, .076], while the direct effect became non-significant when accounting for the mediator, $b = .26$, $SE = .16$, $p = .103$, 95\% CI[-.052, .566], $\eta^2_p = .01$, 90\% CI[.000, .030].

These findings demonstrate that reminders of past conflict can increase people’s resignation to the indefinite continuation of a \textit{current} conflict (the U.S. “war on terror”) because
the past conflict increases the meaning people find in conflict. Since resignation to conflict’s continuation is likely to lead people to try to end it, this provided initial evidence that conflict can perpetuate itself by providing a sense of meaning.

**Study 2**

In Study 2, we sought evidence that these processes operate in the midst of real-world, ongoing, violent intergroup conflict. This was important because our claim is that people may seek to prolong conflict even despite awareness of its many negative qualities. We also assessed whether the sense of meaning derived from conflict would influence explicit support for conflict escalation, not just the resignation to its continuation.

Study 2 was conducted in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In the summer of 2014, Israeli citizens experienced several weeks of violent conflict, during which Hamas launched thousands of rockets into Israel and carried out ground attacks on Israeli soil, while Israel’s military conducted aerial bombardments and a ground invasion of Gaza. We quasi-experimentally compared levels of perceived meaning in conflict and support for conflict escalation during this time of violent “hot” conflict to a time of relative calm – over 3 months after the conflict ended. This allowed us to test whether exposure to actual conflict increases the perception that conflict is meaningful and thereby support for conflict escalation (rather than resolution).

**Method**

**Participants**

We collected data from three samples of participants: one during “hot” conflict (Time 1) and two during “cold” conflict (Time 2). Of the latter two samples, one consisted of a follow-up of the same participants as Time 1 (Time 2 longitudinal), and the other consisted of new
participants who had not previously participated at Time 1 (Time 2 cross-sectional). See Table 1 for demographic information for each sample.

**Time 1 sample.** 166 Jewish Israeli participants were recruited and participated online via the Midgam panel service (www.midgam.com) on July 23, 2014, approximately 2 weeks into “Operation Protective Edge,” at the height of the tension and military operations in the 2014 Israel-Gaza war. We excluded one participant who reported that they had not taken the study seriously, five who reported language difficulties, one who completed the study on a mobile phone, and eight who took significantly longer than average to complete the survey, leaving 151 participants.

**Time 2 longitudinal sample.** We invited all 151 participants retained for analyses in the first wave of data collection to participate in the online study a second time between December 11-15, 2014. At this time there was no war in Israel and tensions with Palestinians were significantly reduced relative to Time 1. Comparing the same participants during and after a conflict allowed for a powerful test of within-subject changes due to the conflict. 96 participants completed the study the second time. We excluded three participants who reported language difficulties, three who took significantly longer than average to complete the survey, three who reported having technical issues (i.e., difficulty advancing through the survey due to poor internet connection), and one who completed the study while in another country (Uruguay), leaving 86 participants (57% of the original Time 1 sample).

**Time 2 cross-sectional sample.** In addition to following up with the same participants at Time 2, we recruited an entirely separate sample of 152 Jewish Israelis between December 11-

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2 Analyses from this dataset that are not relevant to the hypotheses considered here were previously reported in a different paper by the authors (under review).
15, 2014 who had not participated at Time 1. This allowed us to compare samples across time points cross-sectionally. We excluded one participant who reported not taking the study seriously, four who reported language difficulties, one who reported having technical issues, two who took the study on their mobile phone, and seven who took significantly longer than average to complete the survey, leaving 137 participants.

Procedure

The study procedures were identical at all time points. Participants did not undergo any experimental manipulation and instead completed a series of questionnaires in the order presented below on 1-9 analog visual scales. The scale endpoints were labeled Completely disagree and Completely agree. All questionnaires were translated into Hebrew. Participants then answered demographic questions and were debriefed.

Perceived meaning in conflict ($\alpha = .90$, $M = 7.57$, $SD = 1.59$). Three items assessed the extent to which individuals perceived that conflict had meaningful aspects to it (“It lifts one's spirits to see how the Israeli army fights to protect its nation during times of conflict,” “When Israel finds itself in situations of intense conflict which brings people together in national solidarity, this results in high morale and inspiration,” “There is a heightened sense of excitement when our nation manages to unite in solidarity in order to deal with its enemies”).

Conflict perpetuation ($\alpha = .57$, $M = 7.10$, $SD = 1.55$). Three items assessed participants’ support for a military intervention (“Israel needs to attack Iran’s nuclear capabilities as soon as possible,” “Using military force against Hamas and other terrorist groups that threaten Israel is justified,” “Israel must use military force against terrorist groups, even if this leads to the death of innocent Palestinians”).

Results and Discussion
We first tested whether experiencing a period of hot conflict led people to see more meaning in conflict relative to a period of cold conflict. This hypothesis was supported for both the cross-sectional ($M_{hot} = 7.82, SD_{hot} = 1.47; M_{cold} = 7.43, SD_{cold} = 1.56$), $F(1, 270) = 4.47, p = .035, \eta^2_p = .02$, 90% CI [.001, .050], and longitudinal ($M_{hot} = 7.96, SD_{hot} = 1.22; M_{cold} = 7.42, SD_{cold} = 1.69$), $t(67)= 2.97, p = .004, d = .37$, comparisons. Consistent with Study 1, this suggests that conflicts are perceived as more meaningful when they are salient. Also as predicted, support for conflict escalation was higher during hot compared to cold conflict, both in the cross-sectional ($M_{hot} = 7.41, SD_{hot} = 1.48; M_{cold} = 6.95, SD_{cold} = 1.55$), $F(1, 268) = 6.03, p = .015, \eta^2_p = .02$, 90% CI [.002, .059], and longitudinal ($M_{hot} = 6.07, SD_{hot} = 1.65; M_{cold} = 5.73, SD_{cold} = 1.83$), $t(66) = 4.33, p < .001, d = .18$, comparisons. To assess whether the presence of a hot conflict increased support for conflict because of its impact on perceptions of conflict as meaningful, we tested a mediational model using bias-corrected bootstrapping with 10,000 resamples (Hayes, 2013, model 4). Our predictions were supported in both the cross-sectional and longitudinal samples. In the cross-sectional sample, the indirect effect was significant, $b = -.15, SE = .07, 95\% CI[-.307, -.021], \kappa^2 = .05, 95\% CI[.009, .103]$, while the direct effect became non-significant when accounting for the mediator, $b = -.30, SE = .17, p = .084, 95\% CI[.642, .041], \eta^2_p = .01, 90\% CI[.000, .041]$. Likewise, in the longitudinal sample, the indirect effect was significant, $b = -.17, SE = .12, 95\% CI[-.496, -.002], \kappa^2 = .06, 95\% CI[.005, .165]$, while the direct effect became non-significant when accounting for the mediator, $b = -.31, SE = .23, p = .192, 95\% CI[-.768, .155]$.

These findings are consistent with Study 1 and demonstrate that people find conflict to be more meaningful when they are exposed to it, even in the midst of violent ongoing conflict. This
greater sense of meaning in turn contributed to greater support for conflict escalation, illustrating that the meaning derived from conflict contributes to conflict escalation.

**Study 3**

Studies 1 and 2 provided evidence that exposure to conflict increases the meaning people find in it as well as attitudes that perpetuate conflict. Study 3 sought to causally test the relationship between finding meaning in conflict and conflict perpetuation by manipulating the mediator (i.e., meaningfulness of conflict). We argue that not all conflicts can be easily perceived to be meaningful; thus, Study 3 exposed participants to the same conflict, but manipulated the extent to which the conflict was perceived as meaningful. We predicted that only the conflict that was perceived as meaningful would increase support for conflict escalation. We also sought to test whether meaning in life in general would mediate this effect. Thus, Study 3 focused on the second half of the chain to provide experimental evidence that perceiving conflicts as meaningful makes them more likely to continue, as well as evidence that this happens because exposure to conflict seen as meaningful elevates a sense of meaning in life in general. While meaning in life is often treated as a trait-like individual difference measure, some have argued that it is an inherently situational construct (Heintzelman & King, 2014a). Researchers have demonstrated that meaning in life is sensitive to experimental manipulations such as social exclusion (e.g., King & Geise, 2011), positive mood (e.g., Hicks & King, 2009), and perceived coherence (e.g., Heintzelman et al., 2013; for a review see Heintzelman & King, 2014a), and that people exhibit meaningful variability in measured meaning in life over time (e.g., Steger & Kashdan, 2013). In a similar vein, we sought to test whether exposure to a meaningful conflict could influence meaning in life, and whether individuals who do derive a generalized sense of meaning from conflict are more likely to support conflict escalation.
Study 3 also was designed to help rule out an alternative explanation for our earlier findings. It could be argued that by manipulating exposure vs. non-exposure to conflict in Studies 1 and 2, we really manipulated threat, and thus the increases in meaning and conflict perpetuation we found could reflect threat-compensation processes. Study 3 ruled out this interpretation by including a low-meaning conflict condition as well as a baseline condition. If threat compensation is responsible for the effects, both high- and low-meaning conflict conditions should differ from baseline, but not from each other. If meaning is responsible for the effects, however, the baseline condition and the low-meaning conflict condition should not differ from each other, but both should differ from the high-meaning conflict condition. Finally, one potential limitation of Studies 1 and 2 is the possibility that by measuring perceived meaning in conflict, participants responded as they did due to experimental demand – although, as noted earlier, a demand account could have predicted the opposite result (i.e., that perceptions of conflict as meaningful would decrease after exposure to conflict due to its negative nature). Study 3 addressed this as well by measuring meaning in life, which should not be affected by the knowledge that participants are engaging in a research study related to conflict. We tested this in the context of the U.S. involvement in the conflict with ISIS.

Method

Participants

We recruited 460 participants from MTurk. We excluded 21 participants who were not born in the U.S., 6 who did not participate in the U.S., 26 participants who reported language difficulties or did not speak English as their first language, 4 who had recently completed similar studies on MTurk, 21 participants who did not watch the video, 12 participants who completed the study on a phone or tablet device (which hindered viewing of the video), 13 who reported
technical difficulties, and 23 who did not pay sufficient attention to the study materials, leaving 344 participants. Although a large number of participants needed to be excluded, the number of exclusions was comparable to other MTurk studies (Chandler et al., 2012), especially considering the use of online video-streaming of our manipulation materials.

**Procedure**

Participants were recruited for a study about “Perceptions of media and current events” between 5 and 13 days after the October 23, 2014, “hatchet attack” in New York City, in which a man ran up to two police officers and attacked them with a hatchet. Participants in the study were randomly assigned to one of three experimental conditions, in which they either saw 1) a 4-5 minute video describing the attack, 2) the same video describing the attack with additional segments (about 30 additional seconds) framing the attack as potentially meaningful, or 3) no video. The video describing the attack consisted of a news segment describing the details of the attack, showing surveillance video of the attacker, discussing the attacker’s possible links to radical terrorist groups and possible links between this attack and other recent attacks in Canada, and the likelihood of similar attacks in the future. The video that framed the attack as meaningful was exactly the same, but contained additional segments (of overall 30 seconds) mentioning that the event would likely make people feel vigilant and “stiffen their resolve,” and that, as in the past, it is likely that people will “rise to the occasion”, display greater situational awareness, and will be willing to “stand up and stop this.”

Participants were then asked to briefly summarize the video, complete several attention checks, and fill out a series of questionnaires in the order presented below on 9-point analog

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3 To see the videos, visit https://vimeo.com/110103799 and https://vimeo.com/110104455
visual scales. Unless indicated otherwise, the scale endpoints were labeled *Strongly disagree* and *Strongly agree*.

*Perceived meaning in conflict* ($\alpha = .89$, $M = 6.31$, $SD = 1.76$). Four items assessed the extent to which individuals perceived meaning in conflict (“It is encouraging to see the US military fight to secure our nation during times of conflict,” “The national unity my country displays during times of conflict is very uplifting,” “It is incredible to see our nation unite under a common goal when we face threats from our adversaries,” “Attacks like last week’s hatchet attack in New York City and recent attacks in Canada are examples of a greater struggle that democratic nations are facing against groups that seek to undermine our values”). In this study, since we manipulated meaning in conflict directly, this measure served as a conceptual manipulation check.

*Perceived meaning in life* ($\alpha = .92$, $M = 6.24$, $SD = 1.94$). Participants’ general sense of meaning in life was assessed using Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler’s (2006) meaning presence subscale of the meaning in life questionnaire (e.g., “I understand my life’s meaning,” “My life has a clear sense of purpose”). This measure has been shown to have high convergent and discriminant validity (Steger et al., 2006; Steger & Kashdan, 2007).

*Conflict perpetuation* ($\alpha = .91$, $M = 5.29$, $SD = 1.69$). Ten items assessed both participants’ general militarist tendencies (e.g., “In some cases, war can be justified to maintain justice”) and more concrete support for the U.S. to engage in actions that would escalate or prolong military conflict (e.g., “Several months ago, the U.S. undertook military action against ISIS and other terrorist groups in Iraq and Syria. To what extent do you feel that the U.S. needs to scale up versus scale down this military action?” [Scale down a lot – Scale up a lot], “As of now, the United States has not employed ground troops to fight ISIS in Iraq and Syria. To what
extent do you feel that the U.S. should send ground troops to aid in the struggle against terror?” [Definitely should not send ground troops – Definitely should send ground troops], “How much money do you think the U.S. should devote to fighting terrorism in the Middle East and around the world?” [A lot less money – A lot more money], “Two broad approaches the United States can take to resolving current issues related to terrorism involve diplomacy and the military, respectively. To what extent do you think the U.S. should take a diplomatic versus military approach to the current threat of terrorism it faces?” [Completely diplomatic approach – Completely military approach]).

Results and Discussion

Perceived meaning in conflict. The effect of condition was significant, $F(2, 341) = 6.57, p = .002, \eta_p^2 = .04, 95\% \text{CI}[.009, .072]$. Participants in the high-meaning condition found more meaning in conflict ($M = 6.88, SD = 1.54$) compared to participants in the baseline condition ($M = 6.10, SD = 1.76$), $t(343) = -3.34, p = .001, d = .47$, or participants in the low-meaning condition ($M = 6.11, SD = 1.84$), $t(343) = 3.09, p = .002, d = .45$. Participants in the low-meaning condition did not differ from participants in the baseline condition, $t(343) = -0.03, p = .979, d < .01$. The results demonstrate that framing the conflict as meaningful promoted perceptions of conflict in general as more meaningful (compared to framing the conflict as less meaningful or no exposure to conflict); thus the manipulation was successful.

Perceived meaning in life. The effect of condition was (marginally) significant, $F(2, 341) = 3.00, p = .051, \eta_p^2 = .02, 95\% \text{CI}[.000, .043]$ (see Figure 1). As predicted, participants in the high-meaning condition found more meaning in life ($M = 6.66, SD = 1.87$) compared to participants in the baseline condition ($M = 6.06, SD = 2.00$), $t(343) = -2.32, p = .021, d = .31$, or the low-meaning condition ($M = 6.11, SD = 1.87$), $t(343) = 1.99, p = .048, d = .29$. Participants
in the low-meaning condition did not differ from participants in the baseline condition, \(t(343) = -0.20, p = .843, d = .03\).

**Conflict perpetuation.** The effect of condition was significant, \(F(2, 341) = 3.28, p = .039\) \(\eta^2_p = .02, 95\% \text{ CI}[.001, .046]\) (see Figure 1). As predicted, participants wanted to perpetuate conflict significantly more in the high-meaning condition (\(M = 5.67, SD = 1.46\)) than the baseline condition (\(M = 5.15, SD = 1.73\)), \(t(343) = -2.35, p = .020, d = .32\), or the low-meaning condition (\(M = 5.15, SD = 1.77\)), \(t(343) = 2.19, p = .029, d = .32\). The low-meaning and baseline conditions did not differ, \(t(343) = 0.00, p = .997, d < .01\).

**Mediation analyses.** To test whether framing a conflict as meaningful (compared to the baseline and low-meaning conditions) led to conflict perpetuation because it increased the meaning in life people derive from such conflict framings, we tested for mediation using bias-corrected bootstrapping with 10,000 resamples (Hayes, 2013, model 4). As predicted, the meaningful conflict framing (compared to the baseline and low-meaning framing) led to increased support for conflict perpetuation because it increased meaning in life, \(b = .07, SE = .04, 95\% \text{ CI} [.008, .185], \kappa^2 = .02, 95\% \text{ CI} [.003, .048]\). The indirect effect was significant regardless of whether we tested high-meaning against both other conditions or any one of them.

These results provide evidence for our core assertion that when people are exposed to a conflict that they can find meaning in, their sense of meaning in life in general increases, which in turn ultimately increases support for conflict perpetuation.

**General Discussion**

Three studies provided support for the notion that conflict self-perpetuates by providing people with a sense of meaning. Study 1 demonstrated that reminders of past conflict increase resignation toward ending other conflicts by increasing perceived meaning in conflict. Study 2
demonstrated that people find more meaning in conflict during a time of real-world, highly salient violent conflict, which increased support for escalation of the conflict. Study 3 provided causal evidence for the notion that perceiving a conflict as meaningful increases meaning in life and support for future conflict. Across all studies, significant total and indirect effects emerged that were consistent with our hypotheses.

The variety of methods used in the present research provides converging evidence for our conclusions and illustrates their generalizability in a number of ways. Specifically, the studies relied on different methodologies (experimental, quasi-experimental), different cultural contexts (U.S., Israel), conflict reminders with different time frames (past, current) and presented via different mediums (article, video, mere presence of ongoing conflict), different measures of meaning (perceived meaning in conflict, perceived meaning in life), and different measures of conflict perpetuation (related versus unrelated to the primed conflict, resignation/complacency versus active escalation). Our predictions were supported across this diversity of methodologies, pointing toward the robustness and generalizability of our findings.

These findings extend the meaning making literature to the domain of intergroup conflict by illustrating that people only tangentially involved in conflict find meaning in it, both as the result of being subtly reminded of conflict and living in a place and time of active hot conflict. This work also extends the threat compensation literatures (i.e., work on MMM and TMT), particularly as they relate to intergroup conflict, by demonstrating that people actively seek out the meaning associated with conflict once the prospect of conflict infiltrates their minds. While the notion that people make meaning out of negative events is consistent with the MMM, our work extends this by using it as an explanation for the perpetuation of intergroup conflict. These findings also demonstrate that people pursue conflict for the sake of meaning itself – not for the
purpose of dealing with threat or some sort of deficit (be it death anxiety or meaning threat), as MMM and TMT would argue, but rather because they find conflict to be a positive source of meaning. That is, we show that conflict is pursued as a supplementary source of meaning rather than being a product of compensatory coping strategies. While our perspective does not preclude threat compensation processes also operate, we demonstrate that meaning seeking processes can promote conflict perpetuation even in the absence of threat.

Heading the recent call to study the potentially contextually-situated nature of meaning via self-report measures of meaning (e.g., Heintzelman & King, 2014a), our use of meaning as a mediator rather than prime illustrates the approach-oriented “pull” of the meaning in conflict. As Heintzelman and King (2013, 2014a) noted, although such measures often go unused because they are seen as subjective, it is precisely this subjective sense of meaning that many researchers (including us) are interested in when they study meaning. We show that situational primes, as well as naturally-occurring situational differences in exposure to conflict, shift not only the meaning people find in conflict (increasing it), but also the subjective sense of meaning in life. Individual differences in this shift in meaning then predicted the beliefs and attitudes that prolong conflict in ways that were fully consistent with our theoretically-driven hypotheses, illustrating predictive validity of these individual difference measures of meaning in the context of intergroup conflict escalation. We expect that this approach will prove to be similarly fruitful for scholars who may wish to further explore the impact of meaning on conflict escalation and resolution.

Many factors have been shown to influence the protraction and perpetuation of conflict, and such a persistent feature of the human experience is likely to be multiply determined. We showed that meaning is one such factor. Yet we argue that the need for meaning is a particularly
fundamental factor in conflict perpetuation, given the universality of the need and search for meaning in human life, as well as a unique factor, given that meaning is the one element embedded in conflict that is actively approached for its own sake. The processes we outline provide a parsimonious account of the role of meaning in the perpetuation of conflict which starts and ends with the pursuit of meaning through conflict and does not rely on any additional external inputs (e.g., threat).

Still, the derivation of meaning from conflict surely operates in conjunction with other factors in its contribution to the perpetuation of intergroup conflict. Prior work has argued that intractable conflicts are sustained by a “conflictive ethos” (Bar-Tal, 2000) in which deep-seated group narratives about the conflict are assimilated into group members’ identities (Hammack, 2008). It is easy to see how meaning works together with narrative processes to contribute to the intractable nature of conflict. Identity-building narratives and an ethos of conflict are likely embraced because they are seen as desirable and meaningful. Indeed, research on narratives in other contexts has shown that narratives are highly related to meaning processes (Lilgendahl & McAdams, 2011; McAdams, 2011). Similarly, factors known to contribute to intergroup conflict, such as ingroup glorification, can also be understood through the lens of meaning – high glorifiers find meaning and value in their group itself, and thus seek to vigilantly protect the group and its interests (Bilali, 2013; Leidner, in press; Leidner & Castano, 2012; Leidner et al., 2010; Roccas et al., 2006). Future research should aim to integrate these complementary perspectives.

Future research should also extend this work by considering not only whether meaning leads people to support the continuation of existing conflict, but whether it might also be tantalizing enough to make people more open to starting new conflicts. That is, future work
should consider the role of meaning in conflict initiation, not only perpetuation. Future work might also employ implicit measures of meaning (Heintzelman, Trent, & King, 2013) to further rule out the role of demand characteristics and also to potentially reveal stronger effects, though it is notable that we found evidence for our hypotheses even despite possible social desirability constraints associated with admitting one wants more conflict because it is meaningful. Future research might also explore additional mechanisms that might allow people to prolong conflict and pursue meaning in it despite its negative consequences (e.g., adaptation, cognitive dissonance, self-handicapping).

Something so devastating and pervasive as violent intergroup conflict is likely undergirded by a positive force. Our findings identified meaning as this force. This insight opens up new pathways to conflict resolution and reduction. Attempts to resolve conflict should not only center on removing threats and discrepancies between the involved parties, but also on providing for people’s psychological need for meaning. This can be achieved by framing conflict in a way that takes away its power to generate meaning, by providing meaning via other sources, or by channeling the meaning conflict provides toward constructive (rather than destructive) goals, such as efforts to resolve conflict. In this way, the force that helps sustain conflict might also be harnessed to help end it.
References


Table 1. Demographic information for Study 3. Where there are no subscripts, the samples do not significantly differ in their percentages. Differing subscripts indicate significant differences across samples.
Figure 1. The effects of experimental condition on meaning in life and conflict perpetuation in Study 3.