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Self-Harm Focus Leads to Greater Collective Guilt: The Case of the U.S.-Iraq Conflict

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Abstract

Collective guilt for harm one's group has caused an outgroup is often undermined because people minimize or legitimize the harm done (i.e., they generate *exonerating cognitions*). When a group action has harmed both the ingroup and the outgroup, focusing people on "self-harm" – ways in which the ingroup has harmed itself – may elicit more collective guilt because self-harm is less likely to be exonerated. In Study 1, American participants who focused on how the invasion of Iraq had harmed the United States expressed greater collective guilt over harm inflicted on the people of Iraq than those who focused on Iraqi suffering. Study 2 showed that this effect is due to reductions in exonerating cognitions among people focused on self-harm. We consider the implications of these findings for intergroup reconciliation, particularly in situations where two groups have been involved in open conflict. *Word count: 140*

Self-harm Focus Leads to Greater Collective Guilt: The Case of the U.S.-Iraq Conflict

Many violent intergroup interactions are difficult to resolve; indeed, they may become ultimately intractable, with each side justifying its own actions (Staub, 2006). When one nation invades another, or when terrorists of one religious denomination launch an attack on civilians of another denomination, it can take decades for the resulting wounds to heal and for the parties involved to begin a process of rebuilding and forgiveness. What factors promote reconciliation between ethnic, political, or religious groups that have engaged in an extended open conflict? While many conditions must be met for intergroup reconciliation to occur, one important condition that has emerged in the literature is an acknowledgment on the part of both groups of the harm that they have done one another (Branscombe & Cronin, 2010; Long & Brecke, 2003; Nadler & Shnabel, 2008; Staub, 2006). In short, members of a perpetrator group must acknowledge that their group is responsible for illegitimate harm - and thereby experience collective guilt - as a prerequisite to reconciliation.

Collective guilt is felt when one's group is perceived as responsible for having illegitimately committed harm against another group (Branscombe, 2004). Individuals can experience guilt over their group's harmful actions even when they had no personal involvement in or responsibility for those actions (Doosje, Branscombe, Spears, & Manstead, 1998). Despite being an aversive emotion for the individual, collective guilt can motivate people to act on behalf of the harmed outgroup (Stewart, Latu, Branscombe, & Denney, 2010) and make financial reparations for the harm done (Doosje et al., 1998; Doosje, Branscombe, Spears, & Manstead, 2006). Thus, feelings of collective guilt generally serve to promote reconciliation between groups with a history of conflict (Nadler & Shnabel, 2008).

Although there are clear social benefits that can result from collective guilt, people can employ a variety of strategies to avoid it, including minimizing the severity of and legitimizing the harm experienced by an outgroup (Branscombe & Miron, 2004). These motivated cognitions—harm minimization and legitimization—are referred to as *exonerating cognitions*. Past research has shown that the amount of guilt people experience in connection with their ingroup's harmful actions is predicted by the perceived illegitimacy of those actions (Miron, Branscombe, & Schmitt, 2006) and the perceived severity of the harm committed (Miron, Branscombe, & Biernat, 2010). Thus, if people are led to focus on ingroup harmdoing in a way that prompts them to generate fewer exonerating cognitions, they should experience greater collective guilt.

According to psychoanalytic theorists such as Medard Boss (1963) and Rollo May (1984), harm to the self resulting from one's own actions is often perceived to be less justifiable and more severe than harm that the self has caused others. Accordingly, while people tend to minimize and legitimize harm they have caused others (e.g., Branscombe & Miron, 2004), they tend not to justify harm that they themselves have experienced, seeing it as less legitimate (Baumeister, Stillwell, & Wotan, 1990) and more severe overall (Stillwell & Baumeister, 1997). Examining these processes at the group level, we hypothesized that when an ingroup action has resulted in harm to both the ingroup and an outgroup, focusing on the harm done to the ingroup should, ironically, elicit greater collective guilt toward the outgroup than focusing directly on the harm done to that outgroup. The current studies provide the first empirical test of this rather counterintuitive hypothesis.

To demonstrate the potential practical implications of self-harm focus for promoting reconciliation between political groups in conflict, we conducted our research in the context of

U.S. participants' attitudes towards the United States' conflict with Iraq, during the time when that conflict was still ongoing. We expected that participants who contemplated ways in which the United States harmed its own interests by the decision to invade would feel more guilt towards the people of Iraq than those who focused directly on Iraqi suffering from the conflict.

Avoiding collective guilt through exonerating cognitions

Prior research reveals a paradox in the influence of perceptions of outgroup suffering on feelings of collective guilt. By definition, harm done to an outgroup must be acknowledged for ingroup members to feel collective guilt, and so we might expect that focusing people on the harm the ingroup has caused an outgroup should maximally elicit collective guilt. Research shows, however, that focusing people on outgroup suffering actually *decreases* collective guilt compared to other inductions (Powell, Branscombe, & Schmitt, 2005). This seeming paradox occurs because collective guilt is a negative emotional state that people are motivated to avoid, and they can do so most easily when focused on aspects of the outgroup that legitimize harmdoing – for example, by making the outgroup appear to deserve their suffering (Miron, Branscombe, & Schmitt, 2006) – or by minimizing the severity of the harm experienced by the outgroup (“It wasn’t really *that* bad”; Miron et al., 2010).

Examples of legitimization and minimization of harmdoing to avoid collective guilt are rampant throughout history. At the end of World War II, when atomic bombs were dropped on Japan, many members of the U.S. military and government justified the decision by arguing that the Japanese were ruthless and unwilling to surrender, implying that they forced the United States into a nuclear attack (Glover, 1999). Staub (2006) reported that Bosnian Serbs, Croats and Muslims all minimized the harm that each of their respective groups had committed in the early 1990s at a conference intended to promote reconciliation between the groups. Focusing people

on outgroup suffering invites such processes – referred to as exonerating cognitions or justification strategies (Branscombe & Miron, 2004; Roccas, Klar, & Liviatan, 2006) – by shifting focus away from the ingroup’s actions and its responsibility for them.

In short, although the perception that an outgroup has been harmed by one’s group is a precursor of collective guilt, focusing people on harm done to an outgroup generally fails to elicit collective guilt because such a focus encourages people to engage in exonerating cognitions. But what happens when people focus on how their group’s actions have harmed *themselves*? One previously unexplored possibility, examined in the present research, is that a focus on harm caused by the ingroup *against itself* (vs. against others) will prompt individuals to generate fewer exonerating cognitions, and will consequently elicit greater feelings of collective guilt toward an outgroup that has also suffered from the ingroup’s actions.

Self-harm focus as a means of eliciting collective guilt

Contemporary social psychologists typically define guilt (including collective guilt) as stemming from the perception that the self or one’s group has illegitimately harmed another individual or group (e.g., Baumeister, Stillwell, & Heatherton, 1994; Branscombe, 2004; Eisenberg, 2000; Hoffman, 2000; R.H. Smith, Webster, Parrott, & Eyre, 2002). In contrast to this recent emphasis on harm to others, psychoanalytic theorists (Boss, 1963; May, 1984) described guilt as potentially stemming from two different construals of the self’s harmful actions: *other-harm*, which is harm done by the self primarily to others; and *self-harm*, which is harm done by the self primarily to the self. In this view, guilt is experienced psychologically as a feeling of “indebtedness” arising from the recognition that the self has acted (or failed to act) in ways that deviate from internalized standards or values. However, the moral debt incurred by a given

transgression might be understood as primarily owed to other people (“I *owe* it to my friends to treat them better”) or primarily to the self (“I *owe* it to myself to treat myself better”).

Critically, some psychoanalysts argue that self-harm can be more conspicuous and impactful to the individual than other-harm. Indeed, Rank (1996) contended that, in childhood, it is first through an understanding of ways in which the self’s actions lead to negative outcomes for the self that the individual begins to feel a sense of guilt or regret in connection with those actions, and it is only later in development that the individual understands and feels guilt over the harm she has caused others. In adulthood, harm suffered by the self continues to be more perceptually salient than harm suffered by others. As Adam Smith (1759/2002) noted, “Every man feels...his own pains more sensibly than those of other people” (p. 257). Supporting this notion, studies show that participants who recalled an autobiographical incident in which they were a victim of harm, or who imagined themselves as victims in a story, saw the harm that occurred as more severe and long-lasting compared to participants who recalled or imagined an incident in which they were a perpetrator of harm (Stillwell & Baumeister, 1997; Zechmeister & Romero, 2002). At the group level, people tend to express less concern with harm suffered by an outgroup member compared to harm suffered by an ingroup member (Cikara, Bruneau, & Saxe, 2011). In addition, people are less likely to see actions resulting in harm to themselves as legitimate compared to actions that have resulted in harm to others (Baumeister, Stillwell, & Wotan, 1990). Although these studies did not focus on self-harm, they support the notion that people will be less likely to generate cognitions exonerating self-harm compared to other-harm.

It is important to conceptually distinguish between self-harm focus and focusing on victimization of the self or ingroup by *another* person or group. Self-harm involves the perception that the self or ingroup is simultaneously the victim *and* the perpetrator of its own

harmful action. This is different from contemplating harm that the self or ingroup has suffered at the hands of another perpetrator. Contemplating victimization of the self by another party has been shown to decrease, rather than increase, guilt feelings. For example, at the group level, Wohl and Branscombe (2008) found that reminding U.S. participants of ingroup victimization - whether historical (the 1941 Pearl Harbor attack) or current (the September 11th, 2001 attacks) - reduced feelings of collective guilt over contemporary harmful ingroup actions in Iraq. Similarly, reminders of past and current ingroup victimization increase feelings of collective forgiveness for harmful acts committed by the ingroup (Wohl & Branscombe, 2009). The authors suggest that focusing individuals on harm suffered by the ingroup at the hands of other groups prompts them to see all outgroups as potential perpetrators of harm, and all ingroup harmdoing as a legitimate means of defense.

However, unlike in the case of harm done to the (collective) self by another, harm committed against the self *by the self* does not seem to legitimize current or future harmful action. While remembering past victimization by an outgroup might cause one to see all harmful ingroup actions as necessary defenses, contemplating collective self-harm would seem to have the opposite effect – that is, it should cause one to see ingroup actions as detrimental to the ingroup's own well-being. Thus, while reminders of ingroup victimization by an outgroup should increase exonerating cognitions, reminders of self-harm should decrease them.

In light of converging theory and research suggesting that self-harm is likely to be perceived as more severe and less legitimate than other-harm, and evidence that collective guilt is positively associated with perceived harm illegitimacy and severity (Miron et al., 2010; Miron et al., 2006), we hypothesized that focusing individuals on harm their group has caused itself will lead to greater collective guilt toward an outgroup also harmed by the same action, compared to

focusing individuals directly on the harm suffered by the outgroup. Two studies tested this possibility by assessing the effect of self-harm focus on collective guilt felt by American students in connection with the United States' invasion and subsequent occupation of Iraq (2003-2011). The data for these studies were collected in February 2009 (Study 1) and May 2010 (Study 2). During this time, Operation Iraqi Freedom was still officially underway, and most Americans had come to view the invasion of Iraq as the beginning of an illegitimate conflict (Pew Research Center, 2008). Past research has already shown that Americans express collective guilt over the conflict with Iraq (Pagano & Huo, 2007).

Because we were interested in examining how self-harm focus influences the established construct of collective guilt, defined as guilt felt toward an outgroup, we did not ask participants whether they felt a sense of guilt toward *themselves* as a result of contemplating self-harm. Self-directed guilt is largely unstudied in the social psychological literature (as mentioned above, many definitions of guilt focus on interpersonal harm and therefore exclude it as a possibility). It is possible that while people use the term *guilt* to describe the emotion they feel toward others when contemplating illegitimate harm they have done to them, people might be more likely to use the term *regret* to describe the parallel emotion they feel toward themselves when contemplating self-harm (see Berndsen, van der Pligt, Doosje, & Manstead, 2004). Regardless, it is unclear exactly how one could measure ingroup-directed guilt in the context of the U.S.-Iraq conflict. If participants were asked, for example, to rate how guilty they feel about bad things that have happened to Americans as a result of the United States' decision to invade, they would probably interpret the item as referring to a subset of Americans (such as soldiers), rather than to all Americans, including themselves. In short, because of the lack of prior research on self- or ingroup-directed guilt, as well as our interest in the politically important construct of collective

guilt towards an outgroup, we centered our initial investigation of the effects of self-harm focus on its relationship to a previously validated collective guilt measure.

Although there is little research addressing the possible collective emotion of ingroup-directed guilt, there is a considerable amount of research on another distinction - that between collective guilt and collective shame (e.g., Lickel, Schmader, & Barquissau, 2004). Collective shame is typically understood as involving a belief that the ingroup has a reputation for incompetence or weakness (Branscombe et al., 2004; Brown et al., 2008). Allpress, Barlow, Brown, and Lewis (2010) have further distinguished between “image shame” – the perception that the ingroup has a negative reputation – and “essence shame,” which represents the internalized belief that the ingroup in fact has negative qualities.

It is possible that a self-harm focus might induce both collective shame and collective guilt. However, we deem this unlikely given that collective guilt and shame have been shown to be two separate constructs that arise under differing circumstances (Lickel et al., 2004). Collective shame is associated with perceived ingroup weakness, as well as a sense that one has little control over ingroup actions. It is unlikely that American participants contemplating the U.S. invasion of Iraq, and the role of U.S. citizens in the decision to invade, would perceive the ingroup as weak, or themselves as lacking in control. For these reasons, we believe that, although it is quite possible that participants might feel some collective shame in connection with self-harm committed during the U.S.-Iraq conflict, collective guilt is much more likely to be affected. Nevertheless, because prior work suggests that these constructs are distinct but potentially related, we measured collective shame as well as collective guilt to determine whether the latter would be more strongly influenced by self-harm focus.

Study 1 provided an initial test of our hypothesis by asking people to read different essays about the harm that resulted from the U.S. invasion of Iraq. While some participants read an essay that focused on negative consequences for the Iraqi people (other-harm), other participants read an essay that focused on ways in which the ingroup's (the United States') decision to invade resulted in harm to the ingroup itself (self-harm). We then assessed feelings of collective guilt for the harm done to the Iraqi people.

Our analysis suggests that self-harm focus will elicit higher levels of collective guilt as a function of people generating fewer exonerating cognitions in connection with self-harm than with other-harm. Thus, the effect of self-harm focus on collective guilt should be mediated by exonerating cognitions. In Study 2, we tested this mediational hypothesis by again manipulating the type of harm (self- vs. other-harm) participants focused on in connection with the U.S. invasion of Iraq, then measuring exonerating cognitions (harm minimization and legitimization) connected with the conflict, as well as collective guilt. Additionally, in Study 2 we assessed other variables – feelings of empathy towards the outgroup, collective shame, and personal affect – that might be affected by our harm focus manipulation. By doing so, we hoped to demonstrate the unique effect of our manipulation on collective guilt (but not on collective shame or personal affect), as well as mediation of this effect by exonerating cognitions (but not by empathy). Furthermore, we controlled for political orientation and national identification in our analyses for Study 2.

Study 1

Study 1 provided an initial test of whether self-harm (vs. other-harm) focus leads to greater collective guilt. Depending on condition, participants read how the U.S. invasion of Iraq primarily harmed the United States (self-harm), primarily harmed Iraq (other-harm), or caused

minimal harm to both countries (no-harm control). We then measured collective guilt over the United States' harmful actions in Iraq. We predicted that participants in the self-harm condition would report more collective guilt compared to participants in both the other-harm and control conditions, while participants in the latter two conditions would not differ in collective guilt.

Method

Forty-three American undergraduates were approached on a large university campus and asked to partake in a survey of political attitudes in exchange for candy. Four (9%) declined, leaving a total of 39 participants (24 women, 15 men). Participants were randomly assigned to one of three harm focus conditions and privately completed the materials.

Harm focus manipulation

The harm focus manipulation followed a neutral measure of media preferences meant to distract participants from the centrality of the manipulation. Participants were instructed to read an excerpt from a report on the U.S.-Iraq conflict ostensibly prepared by U.S. military and policy officials. In the self-harm condition, the essay described how the United States harmed its own interests by invading Iraq. Specifically, the essay noted that the invasion cost the United States three trillion dollars, claimed over 4,000 American lives, and damaged relations between the United States and other nations. In the other-harm condition, the essay described how the invasion harmed Iraq, costing Iraq three trillion dollars, claiming over 4,000 Iraqi lives, and inflicting psychological damage on Iraqis. Note that at the time data collection for the present studies began (February 2009), a far greater number of Iraqi civilians, soldiers, and insurgents had been killed in the conflict. However, we were desirous of maintaining a consistent sense of objective damage done across conditions. Furthermore, we were not particularly concerned about the reported number reducing the report's perceived credibility, as research suggests that U.S.

participants were largely uninformed regarding the actual number of casualties occurring in the Iraq conflict while it was ongoing (Boettcher & Cobb, 2006). The essays in both the self- and other-harm conditions equally emphasized the ingroup's responsibility for the harm done and implicated the participant through categorization with the ingroup (e.g., "All of us, as citizens of the United States, have harmed ourselves [the Iraqi people] by allowing this invasion to occur and continue.").

In the no-harm control condition, the essay stated that although the invasion caused harm to both the United States and Iraq, the harm was minor and temporary. This essay placed equal emphasis on the responsibility of the ingroup for the invasion, but downplayed the resulting consequences. The essays were fabricated by the experimenters and were matched in length and style. Efforts were taken to enhance the essays' apparent legitimacy, and no participant expressed suspicion about the materials in this or the following study.

Collective guilt

The next page was a five-item collective guilt scale used in prior research (e.g., Branscombe, Slugoski, & Kappen, 2004). Participants indicated their agreement with statements such as "I feel guilty about America's harmful actions toward Iraq" (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*). Collective guilt scores were calculated as the mean response across all items ($\alpha = .86$), with higher scores indicating greater collective guilt.

Results and discussion

Preliminary analyses. In this and the following study, we originally performed our primary analyses including gender as a between-subjects factor. There were no main effects or interactions involving participant gender. Consequently, gender is not reported in the primary analyses.

Collective guilt. We submitted the collective guilt scores to a one-way (harm focus: self-harm vs. other-harm vs. no-harm) analysis of variance (ANOVA). The omnibus test was significant, $F(2, 36) = 5.94, p < .01, \eta^2 = .25$. Consistent with predictions, pairwise comparisons (Fisher's LSD) revealed that participants in the self-harm condition reported feeling more collective guilt ($M = 5.20, SD = .77$) compared to participants in the other-harm condition ($M = 4.35, SD = 1.19; F(1, 36) = 3.90, p = .05$) and participants in the no-harm condition ($M = 3.74, SD = 1.23; F(1, 36) = 11.80, p < .01$). The other-harm and no-harm conditions did not differ significantly in collective guilt, $F(1, 36) = 2.00, p = .16$.

As predicted, participants who focused on the harm they have collectively caused themselves felt greater collective guilt over their group's harmful actions toward an outgroup compared to participants who focused directly on the harm suffered by the outgroup. Indeed, other-harm-focused participants did not report any more collective guilt than participants primed to think of the U.S.-Iraq conflict as a relatively harmless incident. This finding is consistent with our broader theoretical claim that self-harm focus can, perhaps counterintuitively, elicit greater collective guilt than other-harm focus, because self-harm is less likely to be legitimized than other-harm. Study 2 more directly assesses the proposed process by testing whether the effect of self-harm focus on collective guilt is mediated by the tendency to generate cognitions exonerating the ingroup's harmful actions.

Study 2

Our analysis suggests that, when considering the same act of ingroup harming, participants focused on self-harm (compared to other-harm) will be less likely to spontaneously engage in cognitions exonerating the harm done, and will therefore experience greater feelings of

collective guilt in connection with the act. Study 2 was designed to test this mediation hypothesis.

A second goal of Study 2 was to control for some possible alternative explanations of the self-harm effect observed in Study 1. For example, as discussed in the Introduction, it is possible that self-harm focus induces feelings of collective shame as much as or more than feelings of collective guilt. For reasons presented above, we believe that self-harm focus is more likely to uniquely influence collective guilt. However, given that validated measures of collective shame exist in the literature, we decided to include one such measure to test for any possible effect of our harm focus manipulation.

It is also possible that the effect obtained in Study 1 might have been driven not by a tendency to generate fewer exonerating cognitions, but rather by increased feelings of empathy for the outgroup among self-harm-focused participants. Research has shown that when people believe they have committed harm against others, the empathy they feel in connection with that harm is positively associated with their sense of guilt over causing it (Baumeister et al., 1994). It is possible that focusing on self-harm makes participants more aware of the gravity of the harm they have suffered, and that this in turn makes them more empathic towards others who have also been harmed. This increase in empathy caused by self-harm focus could, in turn, elicit greater feelings of collective guilt. We believe this is unlikely for two reasons: 1) empathy is typically conceived as an other-focused, rather than a self-focused emotion (Batson, Fultz, & Schoenrade, 1987); and 2) past collective guilt effects have been shown not to be mediated by feelings of empathy towards the outgroup (despite the fact that collective guilt and empathy can be positively associated; Miron et al., 2006). However, to determine whether feelings of empathy

might mediate the effect of harm focus on collective guilt, rather than exonerating cognitions as we claim, we included a measure of empathy towards the people of Iraq.

In addition, the effect of self-harm focus on increasing collective guilt may have been due to a general increase in personal negative affect or mood. To assess this possibility, we measured self-reported personal affect following the harm focus manipulation.

Finally, in Study 2 we wanted to assess some individual differences that could conceivably moderate the effect of harm focus on collective guilt. In particular, given the politically charged context of the manipulation, we measured political orientation to determine whether this might interact with harm focus to influence level of collective guilt. Also, because some prior research suggests that the effect of reminders of ingroup harmdoing on collective guilt is moderated by identification with one's group (e.g., Doosje et al., 1998), we measured ingroup identification prior to the manipulation. Because Doosje et al. (1998) found that identification only moderated the effect of a harm reminder on collective guilt when the harm was ambiguous (which is not the case in our harm focus manipulation), we did not expect identification to play a moderating role in the present study.

Method

One-hundred and twenty-six American undergraduates (64 women, 62 men) took part in a survey in exchange for course credit.

Group identification

Using scales constructed by Roccas et al. (2006), we measured two different modes of national identification: glorification of the national group (eight items, e.g., "America is better than other nations in all respects"), and attachment to the national group (eight items, e.g., "Being an American is an important part of my identity"). Responses to both sets of items were

made on 7-point scales and were separately averaged to form two composite identification measures (glorification: $\alpha = .86$; attachment: $\alpha = .91$), with higher scores indicating greater identification with the ingroup.

Harm focus manipulation

As in Study 1, we manipulated harm focus by randomly assigning participants to read either an essay describing how the U.S. invasion of Iraq harmed the United States (self-harm focus) or a parallel essay describing how the invasion harmed Iraq (other-harm focus). We did not include a no-harm control condition as this condition did not differ from the other-harm condition in Study 1.

Affect

Next, participants completed Watson, Clark, and Tellegen's (1998) Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS), indicating the extent to which they were currently experiencing 10 positive (e.g., excited; $\alpha = .89$) and 10 negative (e.g., scared; $\alpha = .84$) emotions (1 = *very slightly or not at all*; 5 = *extremely*). One of the negative affect items assessed by the PANAS is "guilt." However, since collective guilt has been shown to be independent of feelings of personal guilt (Doosje et al., 1998) as well as general negative affect (Schmitt, Miller, Branscombe, & Brehm, 2008), we did not expect our manipulation to affect the negative affect (or the positive affect) subscale of the PANAS.

Exonerating cognitions

Participants were then asked to reflect back on the essay they read about the U.S.-Iraq conflict and respond to three items assessing minimization of the harm that resulted from the U.S. invasion of Iraq: "Please indicate how much harm you feel resulted from the U.S. invasion of Iraq" (1 = *not very much*, 7 = *very much*); "Please indicate how severe the harm is that

resulted from the U.S. invasion of Iraq” (1 = *not very severe*, 7 = *very severe*); “Please indicate how difficult to undo the harm that resulted from the U.S. invasion of Iraq is” (1 = *easy to undo*, 7 = *difficult to undo*; for the minimization items, $\alpha = .83$). Participants also responded to two items assessing legitimization of the harm: “The invasion of Iraq was necessary” and “The invasion of Iraq was legitimate” (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*; for the legitimization items, $r = .83$). The harm minimization items were reverse-scored, and the five items were averaged to form a single composite measure of exonerating cognitions ($\alpha = .81$).

Empathy

We measured empathy for the suffering of Iraqi citizens using a scale adapted from Pagano and Huo (2007). Participants rated (on 7-point scales) their level of agreement with five statements: “I am moved by the plight of the Iraqi people”; “Thinking about the hardships the Iraqis have endured makes me feel softhearted toward them”; “Images of the downtrodden among the Iraqi people make me feel tenderness toward them”; “I feel empathy for the suffering of the individuals in Iraq”; and “I feel sympathy for the Iraqis when I think of their situation.” Responses were averaged to create composite empathy scores ($\alpha = .92$), with higher values indicating greater empathy for Iraqis.

Collective guilt

Collective guilt towards the Iraqi people was assessed using the same five-item measure used in Study 1 ($\alpha = .88$).

Collective shame

We used three items (adopted from Brown et al., 2008) to measure feelings of collective shame in connection with the U.S.-Iraq conflict. The first two items represent essence shame (Allpress et al., 2010): “I feel ashamed for the damage done to Iraq by Americans” and “I feel ashamed to be an American for the way we have treated Iraqis” (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 =

strongly agree). A third item was more representative of image shame: “I feel bad because the behavior of Americans towards Iraqis has created a bad image in the eyes of the world.” Because responses on the three items showed good reliability ($\alpha = .83$), we averaged them to form composite collective shame scores.

Political orientation

Finally, participants indicated their political orientation on a 9-point scale (1 = *very conservative*, 9 = *very liberal*; $M_{Grand} = 5.80$).

Results and discussion

Affect. To determine whether manipulating harm focus in connection with the U.S.-Iraq conflict influenced participants’ personal affect, we submitted positive and negative affect scores from the PANAS to independent-samples *t*-tests (harm-focus: self-harm vs. other-harm). No significant results were found, $t_s < 1$, $p_s > .75$, suggesting that any condition effects are not due to differential personal affect induced by the manipulation.

Exonerating cognitions. As predicted, participants engaged in fewer exonerating cognitions when they were focused on harm to the United States ($M = 2.80$, $SD = 1.03$) than when they were focused on harm to Iraq ($M = 3.27$, $SD = 1.19$), $t(124) = 2.40$, $p < .02$, $d = .43$.

Empathy. Participants in the self-harm focus condition did not express significantly more empathy toward the people of Iraq ($M = 4.43$, $SD = 1.37$) than participants in the other-harm focus condition ($M = 4.18$, $SD = 1.15$), $t(124) = 1.11$, $p = .27$.

Collective guilt. Replicating the effect found in Study 1, self-harm-focused participants felt more collective guilt towards the outgroup ($M = 4.14$, $SD = 1.27$) than other-harm-focused participants ($M = 3.58$, $SD = 1.31$), $t(124) = 2.46$, $p = .02$, $d = .43$.

Regression analysis testing for moderation of harm focus condition by political orientation (continuous) yielded a marginal main effect for political orientation, $\beta = .17$, $t(125) = 1.92$, $p = .06$. More liberal participants tended to express more collective guilt than conservative participants. However, the two-way interaction was not significant ($t < 1$, $p = .68$), suggesting that the observed effect of the harm focus manipulation on collective guilt was not dependent on participants' pre-existing political views.

Similar regression analyses separately testing for moderation by the two measures of national identification yielded main effects for both national attachment ($\beta = -.25$, $t(125) = 2.92$, $p < .01$) and national glorification ($\beta = -.21$, $t(125) = 2.50$, $p = .02$), such that both predicted less felt collective guilt. However, neither mode of identification interacted with harm focus condition, $ts < 1$, $ps > .44$. Finally, the effect of harm focus condition on collective guilt remained significant ($p = .04$) when political orientation, national attachment, and national glorification were all entered simultaneously as covariates. For all correlations between collective guilt and relevant variables, see Table 1.

Collective shame. Participants in the self-harm condition did not report feeling significantly more collective shame ($M = 3.97$, $SD = 1.54$) than participants in the other-harm condition ($M = 3.61$, $SD = 1.37$), $t(124) = 1.39$, $p = .16$.

Mediation analysis. Using Preacher and Hayes' (2008) procedure and corresponding SPSS macro for testing multiple indirect effects, we tested our hypothesis that the effect of harm focus condition on collective guilt would be mediated by exonerating cognitions, but not by empathy. Specifically, we regressed collective guilt scores onto harm focus condition (dummy-coded: self-harm = 1, other-harm = 0), with exonerating cognitions and empathy entered as potential mediators. Five-thousand bootstrapping resamples were performed. The 95%

confidence interval obtained for the indirect effect of harm focus condition on collective guilt via exonerating cognitions did not contain zero (.03, .38). However, the confidence interval for the indirect effect of harm focus condition through empathy did contain zero (-.07, .31). Therefore, we are confident at $\alpha = .05$ that self-harm-focused participants' greater feelings of guilt were driven by their corresponding tendency to engage in fewer exonerating cognitions, and not by any between-condition differences in empathy (see Figure 1 for a graphical depiction of the mediation model).

In Study 2 we replicated the harm focus effect on collective guilt found in Study 1 by showing that participants focused on the harm the United States caused itself by invading Iraq felt more guilt over the United States' harmful actions toward Iraq than participants focused directly on the harm the United States has caused the Iraqi people. Furthermore, supporting our theoretical model, we found evidence that this effect was mediated by a corresponding decrease in exonerating cognitions, and not by differences in empathy, among self-harm-focused participants. Although empathy was positively associated with collective guilt ($r = .53$), an effect consistent with prior research (Miron et al., 2006), it was shown not to mediate the effect of a harm focus induction on collective guilt. In addition, the effect of self-harm focus was shown to be independent of variations in self-reported personal affect and collective shame, and was not moderated by identification with the ingroup or political orientation.

General Discussion

Across two studies, participants felt more guilt in connection with an ingroup action that harmed both the ingroup and an outgroup when focused on the harm suffered by the ingroup. Study 1 showed that focusing on ways the ingroup has suffered as a result of its own actions elicited more collective guilt than focusing on ways an outgroup has been harmed by the same

actions. Study 2 replicated this effect and further showed, in line with our guiding analysis, that the effect of self-harm focus on collective guilt was mediated by a reduced tendency to engage in cognitions exonerating the harmdoing, and not by feelings of empathy towards the outgroup. Study 2 also demonstrated that the effect of self-harm focus on collective guilt was independent of personal negative affect and feelings of collective shame. In addition, the effect was not moderated by attachment to or glorification of the ingroup, or by political orientation.

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of the present studies. Both studies were conducted with undergraduate students at a large university in the Midwestern United States. They were also conducted during a time (2009-2010) when the U.S.-Iraq conflict was still ongoing and still fairly salient in the American media, and collective opinion had already transitioned towards an increased sense of the conflict's illegitimacy (Pew Research Center, 2008). It could be the case that when a conflict is less the focus of public attention, or when it is perceived to be generally legitimate by the public, the effect of self-harm focus might not be as prominent. It is also true that different populations in the United States demonstrated differential levels of support for the invasion of Iraq and the continued presence of U.S. troops in that country until recent months (Boussios & Cole, 2010). It is therefore possible that the effects of self-harm focus on perceptions of the conflict might be different for populations other than university students, who might perceive American actions as relatively more legitimate (although Boussios and Cole [2010] did not find strong evidence for a distinction between college graduates and non-college graduates in level of support for the conflict). However, despite these potential limitations regarding the populations and contexts in which the self-harm effect will emerge, we believe that the present studies make an important contribution to our understanding

of collective guilt by illustrating that a focus on self-harm can elicit more collective guilt than a focus on harm done to others.

Directions for future research and broader implications

As noted, there is a tendency in current psychological research on guilt processes to emphasize the role of considering harm done by the self to another, or by the ingroup to an outgroup. The current studies clearly demonstrate that contemplating self-harm can also (and potentially more strongly) influence collective guilt.

We believe the present work has important practical implications for intergroup relations and the reconciliation of groups in conflict. This is a critical issue because political groups that have not reconciled after violence often renew their conflict at some point in the future (e.g., Staub, 2006). If groups fail to acknowledge the harm they have done to each other, group members on both sides may perceive members of the other group to be biased and incapable of reasoned discussion, increasing the likelihood of intractable conflict (Kennedy & Pronin, 2008). In many situations authentic expressions of intergroup reconciliation and forgiveness are far more likely to prevent future violence than reluctant acquiescence to peace agreements made out of perceived practical necessity (Long & Brecke, 2003). In order for such processes to occur, however, a group that has perpetrated violence must be willing to acknowledge its actions (Nadler & Shnabel, 2008). Yet, as discussed in the Introduction, exonerating cognitions often undermine authentic feelings of guilt and thereby lessen the likelihood of reconciliation.

In the case of the conflict in Iraq – the context in which we studied the effect of self-harm focus – exonerating cognitions played an important role. For example, McAlister, Bandura, and Owen (2006) found that, in a nationwide sample of U.S. citizens, people's tendency to justify military force (e.g., to see military force as necessary to prevent even greater suffering) and to

minimize the consequences of such force predicted their support for specific military actions in Iraq. To the extent that such cognitions also retrospectively exonerate U.S. citizens for damage caused during the invasion of Iraq, feelings of collective guilt in connection with the invasion, the ensuing conflict, and their aftermath remain unlikely. As numerous scholars have observed (e.g., Fraser, 2009; Heazle, 2006), the failure of the U.S. invasion to produce an effective, stable democratic government in Iraq and the ongoing violence in this region has partly led to a crisis of U.S. authority in the Middle East. The result is generally agreed to have been a resurgence, rather than a dampening, of anti-U.S. sentiment in the region and elsewhere. This means that conflict between the United States and predominantly Islamic nations and organizations is only likely to continue as long as serious attempts at reconciliation fail to be made (Dodge, 2009).

Given that self-harm focus reduces exonerating cognitions and prompts individuals to express greater collective guilt over harmful ingroup actions, it may well be an important factor in rebuilding international relationships in the years following the U.S.-Iraq conflict. Indeed (as is often the case during periods of protracted war), it appears to be the case that public support for the war declined as the negative consequences of the invasion for the United States became increasingly more apparent. Although official U.S. military involvement in Iraq ended in 2011, the importance of fully restoring and maintaining positive relations between these two countries in a post-war environment is obvious. Applying this case more broadly, it seems that self-harm focus may play a key part in successful negotiations between any two groups with a history of harmdoing. In a situation where acknowledgment of illegitimate harm against an outgroup is necessary for reconciliation to occur, perhaps the best strategy for obtaining this acknowledgment would be to first convince group members that their actions have resulted in harm to themselves. While many studies - both within the collective guilt literature (Powell et al.,

2005) and beyond (e.g., Imhoff & Banse, 2009) - show that focusing on the suffering of victimized outgroups is unlikely to generate attempts to improve their conditions, self-harm focus avoids the legitimizing defenses typically employed by people confronted with the suffering of others.

While it is certainly important that self-harm focus increases collective guilt compared to other-harm focus, and therefore increases the likelihood that illegitimate ingroup actions will be acknowledged, it is also important to consider additional downstream consequences of focusing on self-harm. For example, prior research (e.g., Doosje et al., 1998; 2006) shows that greater collective guilt is associated with greater willingness to make financial reparations to the harmed outgroup. This research would seem to suggest that collective guilt induced by self-harm focus should also elevate desire to help the victimized group, financially or in other ways. However, it could also be the case that because self-harm focus involves concentration on ways in which the ingroup has suffered, there may be feelings of ambivalence on the part of group members about how to spend their collective resources. Although self-harm focus increases feelings of guilt about what the ingroup has done to another group, it may be more likely to motivate ingroup members to repair the damage they have done to themselves, rather than to assist with reparations for the outgroup. To take the present case as an example, asking U.S. citizens to contemplate ways in which the country was negatively impacted by the conflict in Iraq may induce more concern for re-strengthening the U. S., rather than the Iraqi, economy. Future research should investigate these possibilities.

It is also important to recognize that while the presence of a self-harm focus may increase feelings of collective guilt, the *absence* of such a focus should decrease them. In other words, people are likely to be more willing to endorse collective harmdoing if it appears that the

consequences for the ingroup of such actions will be minimal. At the same time, when past ingroup atrocities are discussed, a lack of focus on self-harm may actually reduce collective guilt. For example, when history textbooks discuss the suffering incurred on Jewish persons by the Nazis in World War II, contemporary Germans may feel a greater sense of guilt if the passages also describe how collective actions of the German people ultimately resulted in negative consequences for themselves (e.g., the loss of many German lives and the destruction of German cities in the conflict). Politicians, historians, and others who deal with the chronicling or management of international conflicts should carefully consider the possibility that when self-harm is minimized or out of focal attention, people will tend to feel less guilt over collective actions.

Since self-harm focus elicits guilt by reducing exonerating cognitions, it might be more likely to prompt attempts to improve intergroup relations than other manipulations that primarily cause guilt by elevating distress felt as a result of one's group membership (Miron et al., 2006). Feeling guilty on behalf of one's ingroup is a painful process; however, self-harm focus may mitigate some of the distress typically involved in the experience of collective guilt. Reflecting on self-harm highlights the ingroup's role as both perpetrator and *victim* of its own actions. Accordingly, self-harm focus may allow perpetrator groups to acknowledge their guilt partly because it offers them a sense of shared victim status with the harmed outgroup. In this sense, self-harm focus may help groups establish what Spini, Elcheroth, and Fasel (2008) refer to as a shared sense of *collective vulnerability*: group members may see that, by perpetrating conflict, they are creating a mutually dangerous situation for their ingroup as well as the outgroup. This sense of shared vulnerability or victimhood, induced by self-harm focus, may ultimately help both groups in a conflict situation reconcile by setting them on the path to mutual

acknowledgment of harm suffered and harm inflicted (Branscombe & Cronin, 2010), or even by encouraging recategorization of group members at a superordinate level (Wohl & Branscombe, 2005). Thus, the present account of the role of self-harm focus in collective guilt processes makes an important contribution to our broader understanding of the factors that facilitate harmonious relationships between groups.

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Table 1*Correlations (Study 2)*

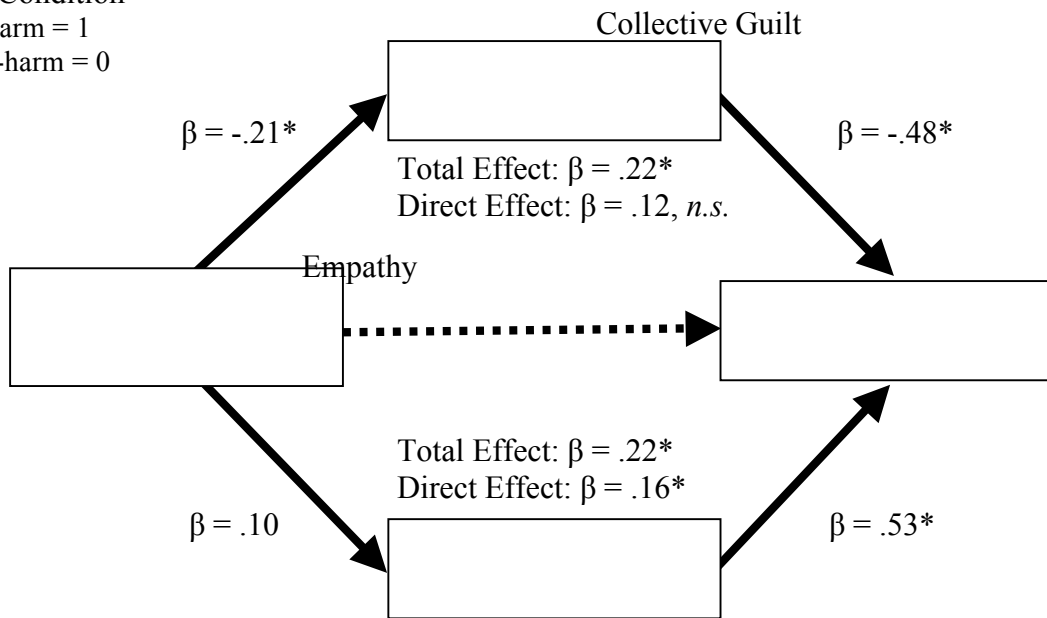
	Collective Guilt	National Glorification	National Attachment	Political Orientation	Exonerating Cognitions	Empathy	Collective Shame
Collective Guilt	—						
National Glorification	-.24**	—					
National Attachment	-.27**	.73**	—				
Political Orientation	.20*	-.40**	-.42**	—			
Exonerating Cognitions	-.48**	.47**	.46**	-.35**	—		
Empathy	.53**	-.26**	-.14	.13	-.45**	—	
Collective Shame	.70**	-.41**	-.48**	.32**	-.56**	.53**	—

 $N = 126$ * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.*Note.* Higher political orientation scores indicate greater liberalism.

Figure 1

Mediation model (Study 2)

Harm Focus Condition
 Self-harm = 1
 Other-harm = 0



Note. All path coefficients represent standardized regression weights. The direct effect coefficient represents the effect of the independent variable after controlling for the effect of the proposed mediator. Total adjusted R^2 for the model = .35, $F(3, 122) = 23.56, p < .001$. * Significant at $p < .05$

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