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Peace as prerequisite rather than consequence of cooperation

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Abstract

We take issue with Glowacki’s assumption that intergroup relations are characterized by positive-sum interactions and suggest to include negative-sum interactions, and between-group independence. As such, peace may be better defined as the absence of negative-sum interactions. Rather than being a consequence of cooperation, peace emerges as a necessary but not sufficient prerequisite for positive (in)direct reciprocity between groups that, in turn, is key to social identities and cultural complexity.

In the fascinating article, Glowacki proposes that peace can be understood as the solution to iterated prisoner’s dilemma interactions between members of different groups. Following a game-theoretic approach and a systematic review of conflict in small-scale societies, Glowacki concludes that peace is a consequence of cultural complexity, and that in turn cultural complexity has been favored by the formation of social identities within groups. Here, we take issue with (i) the conceptualization of intergroup relations as solely characterized by positive-sum interactions, and (ii) the lack of attention to how bottom-up processes such as direct and indirect reciprocity can lead to the formation and dissolution of groups, group identities, and institutions.

Glowacki starts from the assumption that intergroup relations are characterized by positive-sum interactions. While it is true that humans possess remarkable abilities to cooperate within and between groups, interdependencies between groups can range from negative-sum to positive-sum interdependencies, or reflect independent coexistence (De Dreu & Gross, 2019; De Dreu, Gross, Fariña, & Ma, 2020; Deutsch, 1973). For example, how groups relate to each other depends on (changes in) socioecological systems, resource scarcities, and subsistence style (De Dreu, Gross, & Reddmann, 2022). And different interdependencies dramatically shape and change intergroup interactions (De

Dreu et al., 2020). While peaceful coexistence is by definition present between independent groups and possible in positive-sum interactions, it is less trivial to reach peace in negative or zero-sum environments (Romano et al., 2021; Romano, Gross, & De Dreu, 2022a). Rather than defining peace as the solution to problems of cooperation, peace can be more parsimoniously defined as lack of conflict – something possible in any type of interdependence among groups. Crucially, however, the presence of peace neither translates into the establishment of cooperation, nor does a lack of cooperation translate to the presence of conflict. Rather than a consequence, peace becomes a necessary but not sufficient prerequisite for intergroup cooperation.

When peace is defined as the absence of conflict, there is no need to hypothesize that the mechanisms evolved to establish peace between groups evolved after the mechanisms that sustain cooperation. In fact, humans evolved strategies to cope with different interdependencies, including strategies to avoid conflict in negative- and zero-sum interactions (Aktipis et al., 2018; Balliet, Tybur, & Van Lange, 2016). This is not to say that cultural complexity does not contribute to the current features of peace that, for example, characterize international relations in the modern world. It is to say, however, that the psychological mechanisms that can bring groups of individuals to abstain from conflict can have coevolved in parallel to and independent of the psychological mechanisms that foster cooperation.

Acknowledging and integrating the interdependence structure of intergroup relations help to understand when and why cultural complexity may actually foster conflict rather than peace. Indeed, Glowacki makes the interesting observation that cultural complexity is often associated with an increased ability of groups to act unanimously, by developing, for example, hierarchies, role differentiation, and a dedicated military class. In environments in which groups are locked in negative-sum relationships, the ability of groups to coerce their members to act together may actually increase the likelihood of conflict and its associated waste (De Dreu et al., 2016).

In the final analysis, the question remains how groups move from peaceful coexistence to cooperation and, perhaps group fusion and fission. One possible answer is suggested in work on direct and indirect reciprocity (De Dreu, Fariña, Gross, & Romano, 2021; Lehmann, Powers, & Van Schaik, 2022; Romano, Balliet, & Wu, 2017; Romano, Saral, & Wu, 2022b; Wu, Balliet, & Van Lange, 2016; Yamagishi & Kiyonari, 2000). When initial acts of cooperation are reciprocated and rewarded rather than exploited, cooperation can become sustainable both within and between groups. Indeed, recent simulations and experimental studies in our laboratory revealed how more frequent interactions between members of different groups promote the emergence of cooperation across group boundaries and the creation of public goods that connect groups (Gross et al., 2023). Importantly, frequent intergroup interactions also led members to start identifying more with a larger collective rather than their own group – social identification is an emergent property rather than a causal mechanism for group formation and intergroup cooperation. With more (frequent) intergroup exchanges, reciprocity permeates group boundaries and fosters the fusion of groups, resulting in larger, multilayered groups with complex institutions.

Taken together, we suggest, in line with extant work on cooperation and conflict within and between groups, to define peace as the absence of conflict and (in)direct reciprocity as key to building cooperative relations between groups. For intergroup cooperation

and fusion to happen and cultural complexity to emerge, we need peace and (in)direct reciprocity.

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Police for peace

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Abstract

Glowacki's detailed account of small-scale societies' endogenously emerging tendencies to oscillate between phases of peace and war highlights a need for understanding better the incentives governing "internal" policing for "external" peace-keeping. Here, I sketch some of these incentives and point out a resulting dilemma which Glowacki's account leaves unresolved for the time being.

In his target article, Glowacki provides a detailed discussion of dynamics of conflict emergence and mechanisms for conflict resolution within and between small-scale nonstate societies. The analytical angle he chooses for his account is progressive: Instead of searching for causes of conflict in either the relations between groups, for example, their competition for dominance in a given region, or in their shared environment, for example, food scarcity caused by climatic instabilities, Glowacki takes a detailed look at drivers of conflict within societies themselves.

Thus, instead of treating groups as monadic units with potentially clashing interests between them but internally aligned goal functions, Glowacki breaks groups down into several classes of individuals, each with agendas of their own. This approach obviously complicates the analysis. However, as demonstrated in the target article, it also facilitates new insights. Our understanding of large-scale modern-day conflicts has benefited a lot from similar analytical refinements – see for example, Esteban, Morelli, and Rohner (2015); Esteban and Ray (2011); for an overview, see Rusch (2022). Moreover, within the domain of microlevel research on individuals' conflict behavior the study of heterogeneous incentives within groups has also gained traction – see for example, for humans: Doğan, Glowacki, and Rusch (2018); Herbst, Konrad, and Morath (2015); Kölle (2022); Konrad and Morath (2022); and for nonhuman animals: Johnstone, Cant, Cram, and Thompson (2020); Radford (2011).

The key troublemakers Glowacki identifies in the societies he discusses are young men. In his account, these benefit quite directly from the raids they organize, often without the consent of their group, while not having to fear high direct costs thanks to the stealth and surprise tactics they employ. However, the attacks carried out by a few raiders then have detrimental consequences for their groups at large, as retributive strikes are carried out by out-group avengers indiscriminately against all members of the raiders' group. In essence, this is a situation of privatized benefits for those thrill-seeking violent young men and socialized costs borne by their entire group. Theoretically, thus, those who suffer from these externalities should be willing to take action against the raiders within their own group as long as the costs of such "policing" are smaller than the losses incurred due to raiding. In short: There can be positive incentives to "police for peace."

Indeed, Glowacki describes such behavior: The existence of norms against raiding and their enforcement via sanctions in some societies fit very well with this reasoning. Moreover, supporting the structural argument, civil police forces take over important roles in peacekeeping also today – see, for example, Greener (2011) and Mailhot, Kriner, and Karim (2022). However, policing for peace faces several obstacles. For one, violent young men are difficult to police, a problem that has not been solved well in contemporary state societies either – see, for example, Freeman (1996). Where policing is too costly, thus, it might in fact be better, from a group-level collective perspective,