Intergroup Conflict Self-Perpetuates via Meaning: Exposure to Intergroup Conflict Increases

Meaning and Fuels a Desire for Further 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 contributing to the perpetuation of intergroup conflict. Across a wide variety of contexts, we found that making intergroup conflict salient increased the meaning people found in conflict and, in turn, increased support for conflict-perpetuating beliefs, ideologies, policies, and behaviors. These effects were detected among participants exposed to reminders of intergroup conflict (the American Revolutionary War and the U.S.-led campaign against ISIS; Studies 1A and 1B), participants living through actual intergroup conflict (the 2014 Israel-Gaza war; Study 2), and participants who perceived actual intergroup conflicts to be larger versus smaller in scope (the November 2015 Paris attacks; Studies 3 and 4). We also found that directly manipulating the perceived meaning in conflict (in the context of the 2014 NYC "hatchet attack"; Study 5) led to greater perceived meaning in life in general and thereby greater support for conflict escalation. Together, these findings suggest that intergroup conflict can serve as a source of meaning that people are motivated to hold on to. 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, intergroup 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 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 appear to be intractable and persist 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. That is, 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), in six studies we systematically tested whether individuals find 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 (see also Staub, 1999). 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 overcome barriers to the satisfaction of their needs. Beyond being a tool to help people meet their needs, we argue that the mere *presence* of conflict in one's life can *itself* fulfill an important human need – one 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). Thus, we propose that conflict is not merely pursued as a means to some other end (i.e., elimination of threats), but rather that it is pursued as an end in itself due to an alluring quality it contains (i.e., meaning).

Although many definitions of meaning in life have emerged in the literature, there is consensus that meaning is composed of two overarching components. One component is a sense of *purpose*, which can involve pursuing goal-directed behavior (e.g., Ryff & Singer, 1998), attaining personal accomplishments, pursuing personal growth and understanding, cultivating

interpersonal relationships (e.g., Ebersole, 1998; Frankl, 1984), and attaching oneself to a larger

philosophical framework (e.g., Allport, 1961). A second component of meaning is

comprehension, or the ability to make sense of and understand one's life and the surrounding

world in a coherent manner (Janoff-Bulman & Frantz, 1997; Heintzelman & King, 2014; Steger,

2012). As King et al. (2006, p. 180) put it, "We can broadly state that a life is meaningful when it

is understood by the person living it to matter in some larger sense. Lives may be experienced as

meaningful when they are felt to have significance beyond the trivial or momentary, to have

purpose, or to have a coherence that transcends chaos." Like others, we conceptualize meaning

as a transcendent subjective phenomenological experience, the overall impression of which is

intuitively known (Heintzelman & King, 2013; Steger, 2012).

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).

The motivation for meaning is generally 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, pursuing meaning can also be maladaptive

(e.g., meaning making after trauma has the potential to foster perceptions of the self as bad or

damaged; Lilgendahl, McLean, & Mansfield, 2013). Indeed, to the extent that intergroup conflict

serves as a sought-after source of meaning, such pursuits may be adaptive in some ways and

maladaptive in others. We argue that tolerating a conflict due to its capacity to provide meaning

might be considered to be adaptive on the individual level and in the short term, because it can

restore a sense of purpose, order, and comfort amidst the chaos of conflict. However, on the

group level and in the long term, the tendency to search for 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.

We propose that despite its ability to devastate lives, exposure to intergroup conflict can make people more supportive of intergroup conflict by providing people with a source of meaning. This proposed process can be thought of as involving two stages. First, we posit that people find a sense of meaning in conflict. Second, we propose that the desire to hold on to this sense of meaning leads to greater tolerance for additional intergroup conflict. We discuss literatures relevant to each of these stages below.

From Conflict to Meaning

Research on meaning making and posttraumatic growth can inform the first stage in the process, in which we propose that people can find meaning in conflict. These literatures have demonstrated that the human tendency to strive for and create meaning is so strong that people can even derive meaning from severe traumatic experiences, such as debilitating medical issues or being the victim of a violent 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 can 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; Park, 2010). Violent conflict, too, can be perceived as meaningful, as illustrated 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 largely qualitative findings were complemented by quantitative findings, in which World War II, Korean War, 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 indicate 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 (and indeed potentially detrimental) 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 negative consequences.

Why might the general population find intergroup conflict to be meaningful? Considered together, the literatures on meaning making (Janoff-Bulman, 1992; Park, 2010) and posttraumatic growth (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996), as well as journalists' (Hedges, 2010) and war veterans' (Schok, Kleber, Elands, & Weerts, 2008) accounts of the experience of conflict

can help us begin answer this question. In general, traumatic events have been shown to enhance numerous components of meaning and purpose. Specifically, they lead to more meaningful social relationships by creating a greater sense of closeness with others (e.g., Calhoun, Tedeschi, Fulmer, & Harlan, 2000; Malinak, Hoyt, & Patterson, 1979), perceptions of personal growth, strength, and understanding (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006; Park & Helgeson, 2006; Thomas, DiGiulio, & Sheehan, 1991), and changes in priorities, such as taking life easier, a greater appreciation for the value of life, and a consideration of new opportunities and life paths (Taylor, Lichtman, & Wood, 1984; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996, 2004). In the domain of war and conflict, war correspondents have written at length about the sense of exhilaration in the form of physiological arousal inherent in conflict settings (e.g., Hedges, 2010). Despite these literatures' diverse applications and methodologies, they converge to suggest that people might derive meaning from conflict for several reasons. Based on these literatures, we therefore postulated that people may derive meaning from conflict because: 1) it promotes a sense of unity and connectedness, 2) it confers a sense of exhilaration and arousal, 3) it can provide a perception of personal growth and a determination to emerge stronger, 4) it provides a different vantage point that can offer a new perspective on life and on one's priorities, 5) it makes people feel that they are part of something important that transcends the self. While the primary goal of the present research was to determine *whether* conflict self-perpetuates via meaning, a secondary goal was to determine *which specific elements* of meaning people perceive in conflict, and, of these, which elements help motivate a desire for further conflict.

From Meaning to Conflict Perpetuation

We argue that if people derive a sense of meaning from conflict, they will likely be motivated to adopt attitudes that perpetuate conflict in order to hold on to the meaning it confers.

This second stage of the proposed process 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, Psyczcysnki, Solomon, & Chatel, 1992; Greenberg, Solomon, & Pysczcynski, 1997), often by derogating members of other groups (Greenberg et al., 1990; Rosenblatt, Greenberg, Solomon, Pyszczynski, & Lyon, 1989), and even by supporting violence and war against them and their groups (e.g., Hirschberger & Ein-Dor, 2006; Pysczcysnki, Abdollahi, Solomon, Greenberg, Cohen, & Weise, 2006). Research has similarly found that extreme behaviors like acts of suicide terrorism can be motivated by a quest for personal significance (Kruglanski, Chen, Dechesne, Fishman, & Orehek, 2007). Given that TMT research has investigated violent conflict as an outcome, this work can inform our hypothesis about conflict perpetuation. The effects in the

TMT literature are discussed as arising specifically from a motivation to buffer mortality salience and/or defend one's cultural worldview, and not from a motivation to maintain meaning per se. Still, some have argued that the TMT findings are in line with the meaning maintenance 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; Pyszczynski, 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 by suggesting that conflict may be intensified by attempts to seek meaning as compensation for feelings of existential threat. At the same time, however, both TMT and MMM argue that worldview affirmation 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 (conflict-related or otherwise) because of some alluring quality of this source, and not as compensation for a threat (i.e., death anxiety, expectancy violation). While we do agree with the notion that people may 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 an alluring sense of meaning that becomes difficult to let go of.

Our perspective's core assumption that people can see conflict as meaningful and seek it out despite its negativity is in keeping with other social psychological perspectives demonstrating that people often like and seek out negative experiences. For example, cognitive dissonance involves liking aversive experiences, even in the absence of any redeeming quality,

in order to justify having gone through the experience (Festinger, 1957). In a similar vein, it has been demonstrated that people sometimes actively seek out negative experiences when these are perceived to be useful (e.g., people prefer anger when they need to confront someone; Tamir, 2009). And 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 be similarly tolerated and sought out for its capacity to provide meaning.

We should qualify that we do not argue that conflict's ability to provide meaning is a reason for people to necessarily *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 over time by providing one of the most important and elusive aspects of life: meaning.

The Present Research

We predicted that exposure to conflict would provide people with a source of meaning, which, given the human need for meaning, people will be reluctant to let go of. As a consequence of this effort to maintain the source of meaning, people's tolerance and support for conflict in general should increase. To test this, we made conflict salient and measured the level of meaning people found in conflict as well as their support for the perpetuation of conflict. Although it would be unethical to manipulate exposure to actual real-world intergroup conflict,

social psychologists often manipulate whether or not participants are reminded about conflict or are exposed to other symbolic instantiations of intergroup conflict. We took a multi-method approach and operationalized the salience of conflict in three ways: being reminded (versus not reminded) of a conflict (Studies 1A and 1B), living in a period of ongoing (versus completed) real-world conflict (Study 2), and perceiving a real-world conflict to be large (versus small) in scope (Studies 3 and 4). We also directly manipulated the perceived meaning in conflict in Study 5 to test the causal relation between meaning and support for further conflict.

We conducted six studies using multiple methodologies, including experimental, quasi-experimental, longitudinal, and correlational designs among samples from different countries and conflict contexts. These studies tested whether exposure to conflict, or perceiving a conflict to be larger in scale 1) elevates the meaning people find in conflict, 2) makes people more likely to subscribe to beliefs and attitudes that perpetuate conflict, and 3) whether making a conflict salient increases conflict perpetuating beliefs and attitudes *because* it heightens meaning. Although all studies addressed all of these questions, certain studies were designed to focus primarily on certain stages of the proposed process (see *Figure 1* for an illustration). Studies 1A and 1B tested these predictions experimentally in the context of past and present U.S. wars among American samples. Study 2 tested the predictions using quasi-experimental and longitudinal designs among Jewish Israeli participants experiencing an actual ongoing conflict: the 2014 Israel-Gaza war. Study 3 focused on the causal link between the salience of conflict and meaning using an experimental design in the context of the November 13, 2015, Paris attacks with a Parisian sample. Study 4 focused on identifying the particular aspects of meaning that carry the effect from conflict salience to conflict perpetuating attitudes using a correlational design with a Belgian sample in the context of the November 13, 2015, Paris attacks. Study 5

manipulated the mediator to test the causal link between perceiving meaning and supporting

conflict perpetuation, among American participants in the context of an attack conducted by an

individual associated with ISIS on American soil (see *Figure 2* for an overview of the studies).

In all studies, we aimed for a minimum of at least 100 participants per condition; we

achieved this minimum in all studies except Study 3, where the sample size was limited by the

number of participants who responded to the survey invitation. Ethics approval for all studies in

this article was granted by the University of Massachusetts Amherst IRB under protocols 2013-

1833, 2014-2273, 2015-2569, and 2015-2818 (entitled *The Contagion of Interstate Violence;*

Meaning and Conflict; *Meaning and Conflict in Israel*; *Meaning and Conflict II*).

[Insert Figure 1 here]

[Insert Figure 2 here]

Study 1A

Study 1A tested whether a reminder of past conflict would increase meaning and thereby

increase resignation toward the continuation of an unrelated 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. We reasoned that if people readily find meaning in conflict,

participants should be more likely to report finding meaning in conflict after they are exposed to

reminders of the American Revolutionary War compared to when they are not exposed to any

such reminders. 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 that have been identified by the literatures on trauma, posttraumatic growth, veteran

war experiences, and anecdotal accounts of war: a sense of unity, exhilaration, growth, a new

perspective on life's priorities, and an enhanced appreciation for the value of their lives. We also measured participants' resignation to the inevitability that the U.S. "war on terror" would continue for decades 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 five who did not pay sufficient attention to the experimental manipulation (they either spent less than ten seconds on the screen containing the article constituting the critical manipulation or could not identify the main theme of the article, as indicated by coding of the summaries they wrote of the article), 375 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 reminder condition, participants read an article (formatted to look like a New York Times 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. All articles used throughout the studies are available from the authors upon request. After reading the article, participants were asked to summarize it in as much detail as possible. In the control condition, participants did not read any article and directly proceeded to the dependent measures. All participants completed the following measures on 1-9 analog visual scales.

Perceived meaning in conflict (α = .92, M = 5.82, SD = 1.73). On ten items, participants expressed the extent to which they derived a sense of meaning from conflict. The first five items were developed for the present research. The second set of five items were adapted from measures of post-traumatic growth (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). Participants responded on scales ranging from *Not at all* to *Very much* or *Strongly Disagree* to *Strongly Agree* depending on the item (*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, Adversaries who try to threaten our nations resolve only make our country stronger, It is exhilarating to see our nation restore justice after being attacked or threatened by our adversaries, Knowing that our servicemen and women fight for our country... ...gives me a greater sense of closeness with Americans, ...gives me a greater appreciation for the value of life, ...gives me a better understanding of spiritual matters, ...changed my priorities about what is important in life, ...tells me that I can count on other people in times of trouble*).

Conflict perpetuating beliefs (α = .75, M = 6.92, SD = 1.49). On three items (1 = *Strongly disagree*; 9 = *Strongly agree*), participants expressed the extent to which they were resigned to the perpetuation of conflict and saw its continuation as inevitable (*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*).

Results and Discussion

We used one-way analyses of variance (ANOVAs) to test the hypotheses that a reminder of conflict (relative to the control condition) would increase perceived meaning in conflict and

resignation toward conflict. As predicted, participants who were reminded of conflict found more

meaning in conflict ($M = 6.12$, $SD = 1.65$) than participants who were not reminded of conflict

($M = 5.54$, $SD = 1.76$), $F(1, 373) = 10.70$, $p = .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .028$, 90% CI[.007, .061][1]. Also as

predicted, participants who were reminded of conflict were more resigned to the perpetuation of

conflict ($M = 7.10$, $SD = 1.45$) than participants who were not reminded of conflict ($M = 6.76$,

$SD = 1.51$), $F(1, 373) = 5.01$, $p = .026$, $\eta_p^2 = .013$, 90% CI[.001, .039]. We next used conditional

process modeling using bias corrected bootstrapping with 10,000 resamples (Hayes, 2013; model

4; see *Figure 3*) to test our hypothesis that a reminder of conflict would increase resignation to

the perpetuation of conflict *because* it increased perceived meaning. The indirect effect of the

manipulation on conflict perpetuation through perceived meaning was significant, $b = .13$, $SE =$

$.05$, 95% CI[.054, .240], while the direct effect became non-significant when accounting for the

mediator, $b = .21$, $SE = .15$, $p = .157$, 95% CI[-.082, .507], $\eta_p^2 = .005$, 90% CI[.000, .024]. The

ratio of the indirect effect to the total effect (P_M) was .38, indicating that 38% of the effect of

exposure to conflict on resignation to prolonged conflict occurred indirectly via perceiving

meaning in conflict[2].

[Insert Figure 3 here]

These findings demonstrate that reminders of *past* conflict can increase people's

resignation to the indefinite continuation of a *current* conflict (the U.S. "war on terror") *because*

the past conflict reminder increases the meaning people find in conflict. Given that resignation to

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[1] Throughout the article we report 90% confidence intervals (CI) for η_p^2 (as recommended by Lakens, 2013, and Steiger, 2004). Given that F tests are one-sided and η_p^2 cannot be negative, a 90% CI is equivalent to a significance level of $\alpha = .05$.
[2] Although the ratio of the indirect effect to the total effect can be difficult to interpret under some circumstances, we use this as a measure of effect size throughout the article when it is possible to calculate it and when it does not suffer from these interpretive issues (see Hayes, 2013).

conflict's continuation is unlikely to lead people to try to end it, this provided initial evidence that conflict can perpetuate itself by providing people with a sense of meaning.

Study 1B

Study 1A compared levels of meaning and conflict perpetuating beliefs among participants who were either reminded about conflict (via a brief article) or not (in a condition with no article). Although the use of a no-article condition ensured that conflict was not made salient in participants' minds and demonstrated that there was something about the Revolutionary War article that enhanced perceived meaning and conflict perpetuating beliefs, using a more closely-matched control condition could ensure that the effects did not arise due to other non-conflict related content in the Revolutionary War article. For example, the Revolutionary War was a foundational war that the United States won, and, as such, the article may have elicited feelings of ingroup nationalism or pride from winning.

Study 1B sought to conceptually replicate Study 1A while addressing alternative explanations. To do so, Study 1B exposed participants to a reminder of an ongoing conflict with no clear resolution (i.e., which the ingroup had not yet won) and, importantly, included a comparison condition that induced positive thoughts about the ingroup but did not make conflict salient. Specifically, we made conflict salient by asking participants to read an article about the escalation of the U.S. military campaign against ISIS (a conflict the U.S. had not yet won), which included a description of new measures the U.S. was taking to fight ISIS (e.g., airstrikes, troop deployments, intelligence efforts) in the wake of recent attacks in Western cities. The control condition consisted of an article about the creation of the U.S. national park system (adapted from Leidner & Castano, 2012). It described the beauty of the U.S. national parks in exceedingly positive language, and characterized the efforts of the U.S. Congress to preserve the

parks as an unprecedented and democratic endeavor. With these methodological changes, we attempted to rule out ingroup positivity, nationalism, and pride from winning as potential alternative explanations for the effects. Study 1B also evaluated whether the sense of meaning derived from conflict would influence *active* support for conflict, not just resignation to conflict's continuation. Study 1B used a measure of perceived meaning from conflict that tapped into the theorized components of unity, growth, and sense of being part of something important. In addition, unlike Study 1A, Study 1B included reverse coded items on the meaning measure.

Method

Participants

We recruited 299 participants from MTurk. After excluding ten participants who were not born in the U.S. and 34 participants who did not pay sufficient attention to the experimental manipulation (they either spent less than ten seconds on the screen containing the article constituting the critical manipulation, could not identify the main theme of the article as indicated by coding of their article summaries, or were unable to correctly answer a true/false question asking whether the article mentioned terrorist attacks), 255 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 the escalation of the U.S. campaign against ISIS (conflict reminder condition) or an article about the creation of the U.S. national park system (control condition). Both articles were formatted to look like New York Times articles. After reading one of the articles, participants were asked to summarize the article they read in as much detail as possible.

All participants then completed the following measures on analog visual scales (1 = *Strongly disagree*; 9 = *Strongly agree*).

Perceived meaning in conflict (α = .84, M = 5.95, SD = 1.58). On six items, participants expressed the extent to which they derived a sense of meaning from conflict. We included three forward-worded and three reverse-worded items (*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; When adversaries attack my nation, I feel like I am living through an important time in history; When my country is involved in conflict, it only weakens the country; it does not strengthen it; I am* not *inspired by the unity my nation shows during times of conflict; Periods of war or conflict do not represent especially important times in history*).

General militaristic attitudes (α = .88, M = 5.11, SD = 2.10). On three items used in past research (Vail & Motyl, 2010), participants expressed their endorsement of a general ideology of militarism (*Threat of military force is often the best way to keep down aggressive states; Only the militarily strong can negotiate successfully in international conflicts; Terrorism is best countered through strong military action*).

Ingroup attachment (α = .96, M = 6.43, SD = 1.87) *and glorification* (α = .88, M = 4.77, SD = 1.63). In order to ensure that the articles constituting the manipulation did not evoke different levels of nationalism, we measured two forms of identification with the national ingroup using 16 items: ingroup attachment (e.g., *I love the United States*) and glorification (e.g., *The U.S. is better than other nations in all respects*; Roccas, Klar, & Liviatan, 2006).

Results and Discussion

As expected, the conditions did not differ on levels of ingroup attachment, $F(1, 250)$ = 1.15, p = .285, η_p^2 = .005, 90% CI[.000, .028] ($M_{conflict}$ = 6.56, $SD_{conflict}$ = 1.91; $M_{control}$ = 6.31,

$SD_{control}$ = 1.83), or ingroup glorification, $F(1, 250) = 2.03$, $p = .156$, $\eta_p^2 = .008$, 90% CI[.000,

.036] ($M_{conflict}$ = 4.91, $SD_{conflict}$ = 1.69; $M_{control}$ = 4.62, $SD_{control}$ = 1.56).

We used one-way ANOVAs to test whether a reminder of conflict (relative to the control

condition) would increase perceived meaning in conflict and endorsement of a general ideology

of militarism. As predicted, participants for whom conflict was made salient found more

meaning in conflict ($M = 6.16$, $SD = 1.51$) than participants for whom general positivity

regarding the ingroup was made salient ($M = 5.74$, $SD = 1.63$), $F(1, 253) = 4.38$, $p = .037$, $\eta_p^2 =$

.02, 90% CI[.001, .052]. Further, as predicted, participants for whom conflict was made salient

more strongly endorsed militaristic, conflict perpetuating attitudes ($M = 5.42$, $SD = 2.15$) than

participants for whom ingroup positivity was made salient ($M = 4.79$, $SD = 1.99$), $F(1, 253) =$

5.85, $p = .016$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$, 90% CI[.002, .061]. We used conditional process modeling using bias

corrected bootstrapping with 10,000 resamples (Hayes, 2013; model 4; see *Figure 4*) to test our

hypothesis that a reminder of conflict would increase conflict perpetuating attitudes because it

increases perceived meaning. The indirect effect of the manipulation on conflict perpetuation

through perceived meaning was significant, $b = .38$, $SE = .18$, 95% CI[.034, .744], $P_M = .60$,

while the direct effect became non-significant when accounting for the mediator, $b = .25$, $SE =$

$.19$, $p = .186$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$, 95% CI[-.122, .622], $\eta_p^2 = .01$, 90% CI[000, .034].

[Insert Figure 4 here]

These findings demonstrate that reminders of ongoing conflict increase endorsement of

militaristic ideologies in general because the reminders increase the meaning people find in

conflict. This study rules out nationalism from *winning* a war and positive feelings toward the

ingroup as viable alternative explanations for the effect, thereby providing stronger evidence that

people perceive meaning in violent intergroup conflict, and, as a result of this perceived

meaning, grow more tolerant of conflict.

Study 2

Although the manipulation used in Study 1B involved a reminder of an ongoing conflict

(the U.S. campaign against ISIS), the daily lives of the participants in the study were largely

unaffected by the conflict they were reminded of, which was primarily being fought overseas.

Indeed, Studies 1A and 1B involved reminding participants of either past or ongoing conflicts,

but these studies did not consider the impact of the presence or absence of actual intergroup

conflict in producing meaning and support for further conflict. In Study 2, we tested whether

these processes generalize to people living in the midst of real-world, ongoing, violent intergroup

conflict on their country's soil, using a time of relative peace as a comparison. This was

important because our claim is that people may seek to prolong conflict even despite intimate

awareness of conflict's negative qualities. Thus, Study 2 tested whether people living in the

midst of conflict find more meaning in it and are more willing to escalate it compared to people

who are not living in the midst of a conflict. Like Study 1B, Study 2 also assessed whether

conflict-related meaning would influence explicit support for conflict escalation.

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 compared

(using both cross-sectional and longitudinal data) 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 acute phase of the conflict had 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). Due to survey space constraints, Study 2 used an abbreviated measure of perceived meaning in conflict that captured the unity and exhilaration components.

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 with the *same* participants as Time 1, allowing for a longitudinal analysis, and the other consisted of new participants who had not previously participated at Time 1, allowing for a cross-sectional analysis.[3] Across all data in Study 2, 95% of the data was collected on the first two days of data collection within each time point.

Time 1 sample. 166 Jewish Israeli participants were recruited and participated online via the Midgam panel service (www.midgam.com) on July 23-24, 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[4], leaving 151 participants in the final Time 1 sample.

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[3] Analyses from this dataset that are not relevant to the hypotheses considered here were previously reported in a different article (Rovenpor, Leidner, Kardos, & O'Brien, 2016). Although the design of the study was the same, the dependent measure (conflict perpetuating attitudes) was not tested for the earlier article, and the mediator (perceived meaning in conflict) was reported briefly in the earlier article but was not part of the primary analyses.
[4] We excluded participants who spent a long time completing this study as a data quality precaution. We only excluded extreme outliers, defined as values greater than 3 interquartile

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 the conflict allowed for a powerful within-subject test of our hypotheses. A total of 96 participants returned for Time 2. 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, 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 11-15, 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.

The demographic makeup was comparable across samples in terms of gender, geographic location within Israel, religiosity, occupation, and socioeconomic status (full demographic information for each sample was previously reported in Rovenpor, Leidner, Kardos, & O'Brien, 2016).

Procedure

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ranges above the 75th percentile (Tukey, 1977). All results remain unchanged when including these participants in the analyses.

The study procedures were identical at all time points. Participants did not undergo any experimental manipulation and instead completed the following questionnaires on analog visual scales (1 = *Completely disagree*; 9 = *Completely agree*). Participants then answered demographic questions and were debriefed. All study materials were translated into Hebrew.

Perceived meaning in conflict (α = .90, M = 7.57, SD = 1.59)*.* Three items assessed the extent to which individuals perceived meaning in conflict ("*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 perpetuating attitudes (α = .57, M = 7.10, SD = 1.55). Three items assessed participants' support for military intervention that would escalate the conflict ("*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 perceive 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, η_p^2 = .02, 90% CI [.001, .050], and longitudinal comparisons (M_{hot} = 7.96, SD_{hot} = 1.22; M_{cold} = 7.42, SD_{cold} = 1.69), $t(67)$= 2.97, p = .004, d = .37. Consistent with Studies 1A and 1B, 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, η_p^2 = .02, 90% CI [.002, .059], and longitudinal comparisons (M_{hot} = 6.07, SD_{hot} = 1.65;

M_{cold} = 5.73, SD_{cold} = 1.83), $t(66)$ = 4.33, p < .001, d = .18.

We next assessed whether the presence of a hot conflict increased support for further

conflict *because* of its impact on perceptions of conflict as meaningful. In the cross-sectional

sample, we tested a mediational model using bias-corrected bootstrapping with 10,000 resamples

(Hayes, 2013, model 4; see *Figure 5*). The indirect effect was significant, b = -.15, SE = .07,

95% CI[-.313, -.019], P_M = .33, while the direct effect became non-significant when accounting

for the mediator, b = -.30, SE = .17, p = .084, 95% CI[-.642, .041], η_p^2 = .01, 90% CI[.000, .041].

In the longitudinal sample, we followed guidelines for testing within-subject mediation (Judd,

Kenny, & McClelland, 2001; Montoya & Hayes, 2016; see *Figure 5*), testing the hypothesis that

the within-subject decrease in conflict perpetuating attitudes from Time 1 to Time 2 can be

explained by a decrease in perceived meaning in conflict. We computed difference scores for

both the mediator ($M_2 - M_1$) and outcome variables ($Y_2 - Y_1$), which were correlated, r = .301, p

= .014, suggesting that the change in perceived meaning was related to the change in conflict

perpetuating attitudes. We next regressed ($Y_2 - Y_1$) on ($M_2 - M_1$) and the mean centered (M_2 +

M_1) as described by Judd, Kenny, and McClelland (2001) as an appropriate test of within-subject

mediation. The change in meaning over time predicted the change in support for conflict over

time, b = .22, SE = .10, t = 2.14, p = .037. We also estimated the indirect effect using a within-

subject mediation analysis in PROCESS (model 4 using bias-corrected bootstrapping with

10,000 resamples; Montoya & Hayes, 2016), which was marginally significant, b = -.11, SE =

.08, 93% CI[-.292, -.002]. Thus, our predictions were supported in both the cross-sectional and longitudinal samples.[5]

[Insert Figure 5 here]

These findings are consistent with Studies 1A and 1B 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 meaning derived from highly salient conflicts can contribute to conflict escalation. While Study 2 provided a highly ecologically valid test of our hypotheses, its quasi-experimental design allows for alternative explanations based on factors that could have covaried with time; these converging findings should therefore be interpreted in conjunction with the other studies in this paper, which help to rule out numerous alternative explanations.

Study 3

The studies presented thus far examined the effects of exposure (versus no exposure) to historical or personally experienced conflicts, and demonstrated that people who are exposed to conflict find meaning in it and thus are more tolerant of it. Studies 3 and 4 were designed to test our theoretical position in a slightly different way. That is, the independent variables used in Studies 3 and 4 reflect the psychological salience or "weight" of a conflict, allowing us to consider whether the *larger* in magnitude people perceive a conflict to be, the *more* meaning they will derive from conflict.

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[5] Given the relatively low alpha on the conflict perpetuating attitudes composite score, we repeated the analyses on each item individually. In the cross-sectional comparison, the indirect effects were significant for all items. In the longitudinal comparison (with a much smaller sample size and now less reliable single-item dependent measures), the indirect effects were marginal with items 2 ($p = .08$) and 3 ($p = .06$) using the Judd, Kenny, and McClelland (2001) approach. The total effects of time point on conflict perpetuating attitudes were significant for item 3 in the cross-sectional sample and items 2 and 3 in the longitudinal sample. (The item numbers provided correspond to the order in which they are listed in the Procedure section.)

Study 3 was conducted in Paris in November, 2015, three weeks after a series of attacks directed by ISIS killed more than 100 people in restaurants, the Bataclan theater, and the Stade de France. This study considered whether framing the events as either a) representing the start of a large-scale war between ISIS and Western nations, or b) an isolated event with a measured response from Western nations, would increase the meaning participants would derive from the conflict and, as a result, influence their support for policies, behaviors, and ideologies in favor of escalating and perpetuating violent conflict.

Study 3 sought to extend our findings in numerous ways. First, Study 3 sought experimental evidence for our predictions in a real-world conflict context, thereby merging the respective strengths of Studies 1 and 2 (i.e., the experimental nature of Studies 1A and 1B and the naturalistic conflict setting of Study 2) into a single paradigm, by experimentally manipulating perceptions of the scope of a conflict that participants were living through. Second, Study 3 established a very stringent comparison between conditions. Rather than use a no-prime baseline or a carefully matched control group stripped of all conflict-evoking content, we used a comparison condition in which participants read about *the same conflict*, but varied how large their government's response to the conflict seemed. Given the ambiguity surrounding the aftermath of the Paris attacks and the uncertainty about the measures France and its allies would take in responding, we could encourage participants to view France's response to the conflict as vast versus contained. This allowed a comparison of two conditions that both describe recent violent conflict, thereby holding many variables constant, but which vary in how big or small the likely future response to the conflict is portrayed.

Importantly, the design of Study 3 also held threat constant. One possible alternative explanation for our previous findings could be that by manipulating exposure to conflict in

Studies 1 and 2, we also manipulated threat, and thus the increases in meaning and conflict perpetuation we detected could reflect threat-compensation processes. Given that all of the participants in Study 3 were likely experiencing heightened levels of threat during the time of data collection – and all participants were reminded of this threat, regardless of condition – Study 3 attempted to hold threat constant experimentally.

Yet another way in which Study 3 extended the earlier studies is that rather than using a measure of meaning assessing multiple aspects of meaning people might find in conflict, Study 3 used a face valid measure of meaning that assessed whether people derived a subjective global sense of meaning and purpose from conflict. Finally, in addition to measuring endorsement of conflict perpetuating ideologies and public policies that could be implemented to escalate the conflict, Study 3 included measures of behavioral intentions to personally get involved in the conflict. Given that the study was conducted in the midst of salient intergroup conflict, this study was able to test the intriguing possibility that individuals may be willing to become personally involved in something that might cause them immediate personal harm because it provides them with a sense of meaning. That is, Study 3 aimed to test whether people are willing to incur costs to the self in order to pursue further conflict and the meaning it can provide.

We should note that although Study 3 is well-suited for testing the effect of conflict salience on perceived meaning, an interpretive issue arises when considering the effect of conflict salience on support for conflict perpetuation, as both framings of large and small conflict describe a conflict, and the *small-scale* framing might be expected to lead to more support for conflict escalation given that people may view such a response as inadequate. In other words, given that perceived baseline military responses to conflict are being manipulated, the predicted effects of the manipulation on conflict escalation may compete with the effects of altered

expectancies regarding the adequacy of the current response (creating a suppression effect, as described in Hayes, 2013). Thus, we expected that although the manipulation may not have *direct* effects on support for conflict escalation, it should nonetheless have *indirect* effects through perceived meaning. Thus, Study 3 focused on testing the effect of conflict salience on perceived meaning, and still allowed for a test of the effect of the manipulation on desire for additional conflict *through perceived meaning*.

Method

Participants

We recruited 157 French-speaking participants in Paris. The majority of participants participated approximately three weeks after the November 13, 2015, attacks; 55% of the data were collected between 20 and 22 days after the attacks, 80% were collected by 27 days after the attacks, and 100% were collected by the end of December (i.e., all participants participated within six weeks of the attacks). Participants either volunteered their time or were students who received course credit. All participants completed the study online. After excluding 14 participants who were not born in Europe or had not been speaking French for at least five years, two who reported technical difficulties, ten who did not pay sufficient attention to the experimental manipulation (they either spent less than ten seconds on the screen containing the article constituting the critical manipulation, could not identify the main theme of the article as indicated by coding of their article summaries, or were unable to correctly answer a true/false question asking whether the article quoted a brother of one of the terrorists [neither article included such a quote]), and 13 who reported not taking the study seriously, 118 participants were included in the analyses reported below.

Procedure

Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions in which they read one of two articles formatted to look like articles from France's popular news source, "Le Monde." In both articles, participants read brief descriptions of the November 13, 2015, Paris attacks (which were described in the same way in both articles), descriptions of police raids aimed at preventing future attacks, statements from French President Francois Hollande who called for new legislation increasing France's military budget and capabilities, descriptions of France's air campaigns against ISIS and its plans to deploy a large aircraft carrier to the Eastern Mediterranean, and descriptions of international support for the response from the United States and the European Union. Thus, all the events mentioned in the articles were the same. What differed was the framing of how large or small of a response these events represented. The small-scale conflict framing condition used adjectives like "moderate," "calculated," "measured," "cautious," and "judicious" to characterize France's response to the attacks, describing a need to balance increased security with an avoidance of conflict escalation, and mentioning that President Hollande was taking care not to lead France into a deeper conflict. The large-scale conflict framing condition characterized France's response as "even stronger" and "more powerful than expected," using terms like "total war," and stating that attacks on ISIS would be intensifying. The article described the mobilization of forces, the ongoing military operations, and the international coalition against ISIS as unprecedented in their scope. Importantly, this manipulation of the framing of the conflict as vast versus constrained did not manipulate the description of the attacks themselves, affording the opportunity to rule out threat as a potential alternative explanation.

After reading an article and writing a brief summary of it, all participants completed the following measures on analog visual scales (1 = *Strongly Disagree*; 9 = *Strongly Agree*, unless otherwise noted). All study materials were translated into French.

Perceived meaning in life derived from conflict (α = .80, *M* = 4.63, *SD* = 1.57). Six items assessed the extent to which people perceived that conflict has contributed to a broad sense of meaning or purpose in their lives (*The conflict my country is engaged in has provided my life with a greater sense of meaning; As a result of the recent acts of terror, I have a greater appreciation for the value of life; Because of the recent acts of terror, I now have a greater sense of purpose in life; The recent terror attacks give me the opportunity to contribute to the noble cause of defending our way of life; The recent struggle against our adversaries made me realize even more how important our values are; The conflict has provided me with greater clarity about my life's mission*).

Support for conflict escalating policies (α = .82, *M* = 5.54, *SD* = 1.61)*.* On eight items, participants expressed their support for conflict escalating policies (*France is currently taking military action against ISIS. How forceful do you think this military action should be? France is conducting military operations against ISIS. How much do you support this? Prior to the attacks of November 13, France decided not to send ground troops to fight ISIS. Now, after the attacks, to what extent do you feel that France should send ground troops to fight ISIS? How much of the government budget do you think should be allotted to fighting ISIS? The public should understand if certain rights (e.g., privacy, freedom of press) need to be curtailed in order to help the war effort during these difficult times. To what extent would you support a reinstatement of a military draft in France? To what extent do you support using internment camps to detain terror suspects? Would you vote in favor of a proposition to increase France's military budget?*).

Intentions to engage in conflict escalating behaviors (α = .73, *M* = 4.87, *SD* = 2.04). On three items, participants rated their intentions to sign up for military service, attend a rally to support French troops, and donate money to support French troops (1 = *Not at all*; 9 = *Very much*).

General militaristic attitudes (α = .56, *M* = 4.78, *SD* = 1.64). Participants responded to the same three general militaristic ideology items as in Study 1B.

Perceived threat (*M* = 6.15, *SD* = 2.06). To ensure that the manipulation did not influence threat, participants responded to one item assessing perceived threat (*I feel that I am in danger because of the terrorism threat in France*).

Perceived conflict scope (*M* = 6.77, *SD* = 1.54). One item served as a manipulation check assessing participants' perception of the scale of the conflict resulting from the November 13, 2015, attacks (*In your opinion, what will be the magnitude of the conflict resulting from the attacks of November 13 in Paris?*; 1 = *Very limited*; 9 = *Very large*).

Results and Discussion

The manipulation was effective in shaping participants' perceptions of the conflict: participants in the large-scale conflict framing (*M* = 7.07, *SD* = 1.30) perceived the conflict as larger in scope than participants in the small scale conflict framing (*M* = 6.49, *SD* = 1.70), $F(1, 113) = 4.19$, $p = .043$, $\eta_p^2 = .04$, 90% CI[.001, .107]. As expected, the manipulation had no effect on perceived threat, $F(1, 115) = 0.74$, $p = .390$, $\eta_p^2 = .006$.

Next we tested the hypothesis that a large-scale conflict framing would lead people to perceive more meaning in conflict compared to a small-scale conflict framing. As predicted, participants who received the large-scale framing (*M* = 4.94, *SD* = 1.45) reported deriving more

meaning from conflict than participants who received the small-scale framing ($M = 4.33$, $SD =$

1.64), $F(1, 116) = 4.52$, $p = .036$, $\eta_p^2 = .04$, 90% CI[.001, .108].

Although the manipulation did not, independently of its effect on meaning, lead to

increased support for conflict escalating policies, $F(1, 116) = 0.98$, $p = .324$, $\eta_p^2 = .008$ ($M_{large\text{-}scale} = 5.69$, $SD_{large\text{-}scale} = 1.77$; $M_{small\text{-}scale} = 5.39$, $SD_{small\text{-}scale} = 1.44$), intentions to engage in

conflict escalating behaviors, $F(1, 116) = 0.03$, $p = .866$, $\eta_p^2 = .008$ ($M_{large\text{-}scale} = 4.90$, $SD_{large\text{-}scale} = 1.98$; $M_{small\text{-}scale} = 4.84$, $SD_{small\text{-}scale} = 2.11$), or general militaristic attitudes, $F(1, 116) = 0.41$, $p = .522$, $\eta_p^2 = .004$ ($M_{large\text{-}scale} = 4.88$, $SD_{large\text{-}scale} = 1.56$; $M_{small\text{-}scale} = 4.69$, $SD_{small\text{-}scale} = 1.72$), the

manipulation did significantly influence each of these outcomes via perceived meaning (see

Figure 6). Using conditional process modeling with bias corrected bootstrapping with 10,000

resamples (Hayes, 2013; model 4; see *Figure 6*), we found indirect effects of the manipulation

on all three conflict escalation outcomes through perceived meaning. That is, consistent with our

hypotheses, indirect effects via meaning were detected on support for conflict escalating policies,

$b = .24$, $SE = .14$, 95% CI[.035, .606], intentions to engage in conflict escalating behaviors, $b = .33$, $SE = .18$, 95% CI[.032, .757], and general militaristic attitudes, $b = .11$, $SE = .08$, 95%

CI[.004, .346].[6]

Given that the data were collected over the span of just over three weeks, to ensure that

the effects held regardless of how much time had passed between the November 13th attacks and

participants' completion of the study, we re-ran the analyses with time elapsed since the attacks

as a covariate. The results remained unchanged.

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[6] Readers might wonder whether two of the items on the scale assessing meaning in life from
conflict (i.e., *"The recent terror attacks give me the opportunity to contribute to the noble cause
of defending our way of life"* and *"The conflict has provided me with greater clarity about my
life's mission"*) have high conceptual overlap with the conflict escalation outcomes. We thus re-
ran the analyses after removing these items. The results remained unchanged, suggesting that
these items are not responsible for driving the effects.

[Insert Figure 6 here]

These findings demonstrate that perceiving a conflict as larger (relative to smaller) in scope leads people to derive more meaning in their lives from conflict. This in turn is associated with greater endorsement of specific policies, behaviors, and general ideologies that help perpetuate conflict. Study 3 built on the earlier studies by providing experimental evidence for our hypotheses in the context of a salient real-world conflict, while examining a different independent variable (perceived conflict scope) in a different geopolitical context (the Paris attacks). Additionally, Study 3 used a broader measure of perceived meaning, provided greater experimental control, and illustrated that the phenomenon operates independently of perceived threat. Finally, Study 3 demonstrated that meaning derived from large-scale conflict can motivate people to become personally invested in conflict, making them more likely to intend to join or support the military. This suggests that meaning can encourage people to support conflict even when doing so would increase the amount of intergroup conflict they personally experience in their lives.

Study 4

Our primary research questions in this program of research were 1) whether people find meaning in conflict and 2) whether this meaning contributes to the perpetuation of conflict. Studies 1-3 answered these questions affirmatively, demonstrating that people perceive more meaning in conflict when they are reminded of it, experiencing it, or perceive it to be larger in scope, and as a result, are more tolerant and supportive of additional conflict in the present and future. The identification of this phenomenon led to another interesting question: *why* does something so devastating as violent intergroup conflict confer a sense of meaning that fuels support for additional conflict? Study 4 was designed to conceptually replicate our earlier

findings while systematically addressing this question about which features of conflict allow it to self-perpetuate through meaning. We conducted a correlational study that measured natural variation in participants' perceptions of how big or small an existing conflict is, and investigated whether perceiving the conflict as larger was associated with a variety of different possible sources of meaning associated with conflict. As in Study 3, we assessed support for conflict escalating policies and ideologies, as well as behavioral intentions to become personally involved in conflict.

In this study, we obtained a sample of Belgian participants in Brussels soon after the November 13, 2015, attacks on Paris. To assess which elements of conflict allow it to provide meaning, it was important to obtain a sample of participants who were experiencing a real-world conflict and for whom these elements had the potential to be salient. Further, to assess the associations between perceived conflict scope, aspects of meaning in conflict, and support for additional conflict, it was important to obtain a sample of participants who were particularly uncertain about how large the conflict would become, thereby affording natural variability in perceptions of the scope of the conflict. Belgium provided an appropriate context for this, as several people involved in the Paris attacks were from Brussels and the city was under lockdown between November 21-25, 2015, because of suspicions of an imminent attack in Brussels. Tightened security measures persisted for weeks, though at the time, no attack occurred. Thus, this context provided natural variation in perceptions of the conflict as large or small. Given that the independent variable did not involve altering participants' preexisting expectations regarding the societal response to the conflict, we did not anticipate an interpretation issue to arise in the evaluation of the direct effect of perceived conflict scope on support for conflict perpetuation in this study.

Studies 1 and 2 used slightly different items to measure perceived meaning derived from conflict as these studies were run at different points in the development of methods for testing our ideas. In Study 4, we formalized multi-item measures for tapping each aspect of meaning. We developed multiple four-item scales measuring different aspects of meaning based on the meaning literature, the trauma and posttraumatic growth literatures, and writings about conflict from other disciplines (e.g., literary descriptions of and journalistic accounts of conflict). As described earlier in this article, we postulated that people might derive meaning from conflict because: 1) it promotes a sense of unity, 2) it provides a sense of exhilaration, 3) it provides a growth experience, 4) it helps people put life in perspective, 5) it makes people feel like they are involved in something more important than themselves. Given that the meaning literature draws a distinction between meaning as significance (i.e., whether something is of value or worth) and meaning as comprehensibility (i.e., whether something "makes sense"; Heintzelman & King, 2014; Janoff-Bulman & Frantz, 1997), we also measured the extent to which people have a sense of comprehensibility about the events. We also included the broader measure of meaning in life from conflict used in Study 3. Study 4 provided a systematic test of which, if any, of these aspects of meaning people perceive in conflict and which of them contribute to conflict's self-perpetuating nature.

Method

Participants

We recruited 228 French speaking Belgian nationals in Brussels, Belgium. The majority of participants (58%) participated between 13-21 days after the November 13, 2015, Paris attacks; 93% of the data were collected by 27 days after the attacks, and 100% were collected within 34 days of the attacks. Participants either volunteered their time or were students who

received course credit. All participants completed the study online. After excluding twelve

participants who were not born in Europe, eleven who spent considerably less time on the survey

than the other participants (i.e., less than ten minutes; six of these participants spent less than

four minutes; the median duration was 27.81 minutes)[7], and two participants who experienced

technical difficulties, 203 participants were included in the analyses reported below.

Procedure

Participants either proceeded directly to the measures or first responded to an open-ended

writing prompt in which they wrote about whether they perceived the conflict to be large or

small in scope. This allowed us to test the assumption that in a context of an ongoing conflict, the

conflict will be salient in participants' minds and the study itself does not need to prime the

conflict. We thus expected that responses would be similar regardless of whether or not

participants first wrote about the conflict.

All participants completed the following measures on analog visual scales (1 = *Strongly*

Disagree; 9 = *Strongly Agree,* unless otherwise noted). All study materials were translated into

French. All items from the meaning subscales are provided in *Table 1*.

Perceived conflict scope (*M* = 6.62, *SD* = 1.28)*.* Two items assessed participants'

perceptions of the scope of the conflict (*r* = .30, *p* < .001). The first item assessed how big or

small participants perceived the conflict to be (*In your opinion, what will be the magnitude of the*

conflict resulting from the attacks of November 13 in Paris; 1 = *Very limited*; 9 = *Very large*)

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[7] These participants who spent very short amounts of time completing the survey were excluded
to ensure high data quality. Including these participants in the analyses does not change whether
any of the findings reported below are statistically significant. We report analyses excluding
these participants because we suspect that they more accurately reflect the true magnitudes of the
effects.

and the second item assessed how long they expected the conflict to last (*How long do you think the conflict will last*; 1 = *Not long*; 9 = *Very long*).

Unity (α = .81, *M* = 5.69, *SD* = 1.59). On four items, participants indicated the extent to which they perceived that conflict provides a reified sense of national unity (e.g., *The national unity my country displays during times of conflict is very uplifting*).

Growth (α = .76, *M* = 4.79, *SD* = 1.66). On four items, participants indicated the extent to which they perceived that conflict provides an opportunity to grow stronger as a nation and actualize their full potential (e.g., *When my country faces conflict, we have the opportunity to show our full potential*).

Exhilaration (α = .82, *M* = 3.74, *SD* = 1.79). On four items, participants indicated the extent to which they perceived that conflict provides them with a sense of energy, excitement, and exhilaration (e.g., *It is exhilarating to see my nation fight back after being attacked or threatened by our adversaries*).

Transformed perspective (α = .84, *M* = 5.19, *SD* = 1.82). On four items, participants indicated the extent to which they perceived that conflict has helped provide them perspective on life and helps them focus on more fundamental and important aspects of life (e.g., *When my country is in conflict, it helps put other issues in my life into perspective*).

Being part of something important (α = .81, *M* = 6.04, *SD* = 1.67). On four items, participants indicated the extent to which they perceived that conflict provides them with a sense that they are living through an important time in history and are part of something bigger than themselves (e.g., *When adversaries attack our nation, I feel that I am part of something larger than myself*).

Comprehensibility (α = .84, *M* = 5.16, *SD* = 1.69). On four items, participants indicated the extent to which they felt they could comprehend and make sense of the conflict (e.g., *When I think about the conflict we are facing, I have an easy time comprehending what is happening and why*).

Perceived meaning in life derived from conflict (α = .87, *M* = 4.02, *SD* = 1.57). Using the same six items as Study 3 (adapted to refer to Belgium), we assessed the extent to which people perceived that conflict has contributed to a broad, subjective sense of meaning or purpose in their lives.

Support for conflict escalating policies (α = .87, *M* = 5.19, *SD* = 1.75). On the same eight items as Study 3 (adapted to the Belgian context), participants expressed their support for conflict escalating policies.

Intentions to engage in conflict escalating behaviors (α = .73, *M* = 4.19, *SD* = 1.95). On the same three items as Study 3 (adapted to refer to Belgium), participants rated their intentions to sign up for military service, attend a rally to support the Belgian military, and donate money to support Belgian troops.

General militaristic attitudes (α = .70, *M* = 4.34, *SD* = 1.73). Participants responded to the same three general militaristic ideology items as in Study 1B and Study 3.

[Insert Table 1 here]

Results and Discussion

None of the measures differed as a function of whether or not participants first wrote about the conflict. Specifically, participants who wrote about the conflict (*M* = 6.47, *SD* = 1.45) did not perceive the conflict to be larger in scope than those who did not (*M* = 6.72, *SD* = 1.13), *F* = 1.92, *p* = .17, η_p^2 = .01. Support for conflict escalating policies, behaviors, and attitudes also

did not differ across conditions, F's < 1.14, p's > .29, η_p^2's < .01. Similarly, no differences across conditions emerged for any of the meaning measures, F's < 2.60, p's > .11, η_p^2's < .01. This confirmed our assumption that violent conflict was salient in this context even without being primed. We thus ran our analyses on the full dataset. Thus, while conflict was salient for all participants, we investigated whether *natural variability in how large or small* participants perceived the conflict to be influenced perceived meaning and support for further conflict.

As expected, perceived conflict scope was positively correlated with numerous scales assessing aspects of conflict that people find meaningful. Specifically, the larger in scope people perceived the conflict to be, the more they reported perceiving a strong sense of unity, $r = .195$, $p = .007$, a sense of growth, $r = .173$, $p = .016$, a sense of seeing life through a new perspective, $r = .248$, $p < .001$, a sense that they are part of something important, $r = .233$, $p = .001$, a sense of greater comprehensibility, $r = .262$, $p < .001$, and a greater global sense that conflict has contributed meaning and purpose to their lives, $r = .148$, $p < .041$. However, perceiving the conflict as larger in scope was not significantly associated with a stronger sense of exhilaration, $r = .075$, $p = .302$.

Next, we tested whether perceived conflict scope was related to support for policies, behaviors, and ideologies that would perpetuate conflict. As expected, perceiving the conflict as larger in scope was related to stronger support for conflict escalating policies, $r = .291$, $p < .001$, behavioral intentions to become personally involved in the conflict, $r = .232$, $p = .001$, and general militaristic attitudes, $r = .168$, $p = .020$.

Next, we tested whether each aspect of meaning was associated with support for policies, behaviors, and ideologies that can perpetuate conflict. All aspects of meaning, with the exception of comprehensibility, were positively associated with the three measures of support for conflict

escalation. As shown on *Table 2*, all correlation coefficients were greater than .18 and all *p*'s

were less than .001. Only comprehensibility was not associated with the conflict escalation

outcome measures; thus, although perceiving a conflict as larger is associated with a greater

perceived understanding of the situation, understanding and comprehensibility alone does not

appear to be enough to fuel support for further conflict.

[Insert Table 2 here]

Next, we assessed the indirect effects of perceived conflict scope on support for conflict

escalation through each aspect of meaning. Given that *Exhilaration* was not associated with

perceived conflict scope, and *Comprehensibility* was not associated with support for conflict

escalation, it was likely that indirect effects would not emerge with these variables. All indirect

effects of conflict scope through each mediator on the three conflict escalation outcomes are

presented in *Table 3*. To summarize, indirect effects of conflict scope on all three conflict

escalation outcomes emerged via: the general meaning measure, *Unity*, *Growth*, *Transformed*

perspective, and *Being part of something important*. This demonstrates that the relationship

between perceiving conflict as bigger in scope and supporting conflict escalation is carried by

each of these aspects of meaning. Indirect effects via *Exhilaration* and *Comprehensibility* did not

emerge. It thus appears that, in this sample and context, these two factors do not contribute to

conflict's capacity to self-perpetuate.[8]

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[8] An additional question these data could address is which specific aspect of meaning is the strongest mediator. When entering the four aspects of meaning that were significant mediators (*Unity, Growth, Transformed perspective, Being part of something important*) as *simultaneous* mediators (PROCESS model 4, with 10,000 bias corrected bootstrap resamples), *Growth* was the only significant mediator. This finding should not be over-interpreted, however, as the nature of the statistical model suggests a very specific interpretation. When entered simultaneously into a regression equation predicting the outcome, the four mediator variables serve as statistical controls; however, the regression equations in which perceived conflict scope predicted the mediator variables *do not* control for the other mediator variables. Therefore, *Growth* emerges as

Given that the data were collected over a three week time period, to ensure that the effects held regardless of how much time had passed between the November 13th attacks and participants' completion of the study, we re-ran the analyses with time elapsed since the attacks as a covariate. The results remained unchanged.

[Insert Table 3 here]

These findings conceptually replicate the findings from Study 3 using a correlational design and complement the results of the earlier experiments by providing data from another real-world conflict context. Notably, we again found effects on behavioral intentions to become personally involved in the conflict and through a global, face valid measure of subjective meaning. We also extended the previous studies by systematically considering which aspects of meaning transmit the effect from conflict salience to support for further conflict. We provide evidence that a sense of unity, personal growth, a new perspective on life, and the sense of being part of something important all help to transmit this effect, shedding additional light on why people find meaning in conflict and why conflict can be difficult to let go of.

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the only significant mediator because *Growth* is the only significant predictor of each conflict escalation outcome when the four mediator variables are simultaneously entered; however, it is important to note that *Growth*'s emergence as the sole simultaneous mediator does *not* mean that perceived conflict scope uniquely predicts *Growth* over and above the other mediator variables. Indeed, running a separate regression model in which the four mediator variables are simultaneously used to predict perceived conflict scope reveals that *Transformed perspective* and *Being part of something important* emerge as predictors, whereas *Growth* and *Unity* do not. Thus, the apparent strength of *Growth* as a mediator seems to be driven by the way the regression equations are structured. Therefore the most precise conclusion from these analyses may be that whereas *Growth* explains the most unique variance in conflict perpetuating attitudes, *Transformed perspective* and *Being part of something important* account for the most unique variance in perceived conflict scope. In sum, all four mediators transmit part of the effect of perceived conflict scope on conflict perpetuating attitudes, and a statistical evaluation of which mediator is "strongest" or "most operative" suggests that the different mediators may help to "uniquely" transmit the effect in different ways.

These results should be interpreted in the context of the climate in Brussels following the November 13 attacks. It is possible that in the aftermath of the attacks, people felt that it was inappropriate to indicate that they derived a sense of exhilaration from the conflict. Thus we do not take the null effect of *Exhilaration* as conclusive evidence that people do not derive a sense of exhilaration or excitement from conflict, as has been suggested by war reporters (e.g., Hedges, 2003). Similarly, the nature of the study did not allow us to examine reactions over a long period of time; doing so might provide a more likely context for finding an effect through *Comprehensibility*, as time may be necessary before people develop new schemas for understanding the world (Janoff-Bulman, 1992). Still, consistent with our data, we suspect that merely understanding a conflict may not be enough to motivate people to tolerate or support it. We believe that meaning as purpose and significance is the primary form of meaning that drives intergroup conflict, though research should continue to consider this question. Of course, although this study allowed for a rich examination of the reasons conflict promotes meaning that is self-sustaining, the study's correlational design did not permit us to make strong causal conclusions. However, taken together with the earlier studies demonstrating analogous effects experimentally, we believe that these findings help shed light on the specific processes that contribute to conflict's ability to self-perpetuate through meaning.

Finally, this study may have important real-world implications. Our methods and findings may help inform the development of targeted interventions that either reduce conflict's ability to generate meaning (by targeting the specific elements of conflict that people find meaningful and that contribute to support for conflict perpetuation) or that provide for the especially important aspects of meaning in other ways during the implementation of conflict resolution efforts.

Study 5

Studies 1-3 demonstrated that people find meaning in conflict when they are reminded about a past or present conflict, experience an actual conflict, and perceive a conflict as larger (relative to smaller), and that this contributes to support for the perpetuation of conflict. Study 4 illustrated that a number of aspects of meaning transmit this effect. Despite strong causal evidence for the effects of conflict salience on both meaning and support for additional conflict, however, one link in the chain connecting conflict salience, meaning, and support for conflict perpetuation has yet to be tested experimentally: the link between meaning and support for conflict perpetuation. Study 5 sought to causally test the relationship between perceiving meaning in conflict and support for conflict perpetuation by manipulating the mediator (i.e., manipulating the extent to which conflict is perceived as meaningful).

We argue that while conflicts *can* be perceived as meaningful, and they may even *often* be perceived as meaningful (thus helping to account for the proliferation of intergroup violence around the world), not *all* conflicts must necessarily be perceived as meaningful. The meaning provided by World War I or the Vietnam War, for example, likely waxed and waned over time. Conflicts that are, or come to be, viewed as immoral or lacking a cause should also be less likely to provide a sense of meaning. We argue that removing the perceived meaning from a conflict should make it easier to end.

To test this idea, Study 5 exposed participants to a reminder of the same conflict, but manipulated the extent to which the conflict was perceived as meaningful. We predicted that only a conflict perceived as meaningful would increase support for conflict perpetuation. We also sought to test whether meaning in life in general would mediate the effect of perceiving a conflict as meaningful and supporting additional conflict. Thus, Study 5 focused on the second stage of our conceptual process 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 meaningful conflict leads to a stronger overall evaluation of one's life as meaningful.

Study 5 employed a commonly used measure of the subjective sense of meaning in life (Steger,

Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006). 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 a brief reminder of a meaningful conflict could enhance meaning in life in general, and

whether individuals who do derive a generalized sense of meaning in life from conflict are in

turn more likely to support conflict perpetuation.

Study 5 was conducted in the context of the U.S. involvement in the conflict with ISIS.

Specifically, participants were recruited shortly after the October 23, 2014, "hatchet attack" in

New York City, in which a man attacked two police officers with a hatchet. This provided an

appropriate context for this study because the attack, which constituted an instance of intergroup

violence and reflected a broader intergroup conflict, was minor enough to have the potential to

not be perceived as meaningful (there was no presidential address following the attack, no

nation-wide military response to the attack, no outpouring of grief or support after the attack),

and yet was significant and brazen enough to have the potential to *be* perceived as meaningful.

We manipulated whether or not the attack was framed as meaningful to experimentally test

whether perceiving meaning in conflict imbues one's life with meaning, and, in turn, leads to greater support for conflict perpetuation.

Method

Participants

We recruited 460 participants from MTurk. All participants participated between five and 13 days after the October 23, 2014, attack in New York City. The majority of participants (50%) participated within 3 days of the beginning of data collection. We excluded 21 participants who were not born in the U.S., 16 who reported language difficulties or did not speak English as their first language, 21 participants who skipped past the video (as indicated by a timer embedded on the page), twelve participants who completed the study on a phone or tablet device (which hindered viewing of the video), 13 who reported technical difficulties, and 25 who did not pay sufficient attention to the experimental manipulation (as indicated by coding of their summaries of the video and by their responses to three attention check questions assessing basic knowledge of the video: the type of weapon used in the attack, whether the attacker spoke in the video, and whether the video mentioned themes relating to meaning such as unity and resolve), leaving 352 participants. Although a large number of participants needed to be excluded, the exclusion rate was comparable to other MTurk studies (Chandler, Mueller, & Paolacci, 2014), especially considering the use of online video-streaming of our manipulation materials.

Procedure

Participants in the study were randomly assigned to one of three conditions in which they either saw 1) a 4-5 minute video describing the October 13, 2014, "hatchet 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 videos are available from the authors upon

request). 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 intended to increase the overall meaning perceived in the conflict, 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 write a brief summary of the video, complete several attention checks, and fill out a series of questionnaires on 9-point analog visual scales (1 = *Strongly disagree; 9 = Strongly agree*, unless indicated otherwise).

Perceived meaning in conflict (α = .87, *M* = 6.30, *SD* = 1.79)*.* Four items assessed the extent to which individuals derived a sense of meaning from 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*," "*Terrorists who try to threaten our nation's resolve only make our country stronger*"). In this study, since we manipulated meaning in conflict directly, this measure served as a manipulation check.

Perceived meaning in life (α = .92, *M* = 6.28, *SD* = 1.92)*.* Participants' general sense of meaning in life was assessed using Steger et al.'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*").

Support for conflict escalating policies (α = .89, *M* = 4.98, *SD* = 1.99). Four items assessed participants' support for conflict escalating policies ("*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*]).

General militaristic attitudes (α = .84, *M* = 5.18, *SD* = 1.99). Participants responded to the same three general militaristic ideology items as in Studies 1B, 3, and 4.

Results and Discussion

We first tested the effect of the manipulation on perceived meaning in conflict as a manipulation check, which was significant, $F(2, 349) = 6.21$, $p = .002$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$, 95% CI[.008, .068]. Participants in the high-meaning condition perceived more meaning in conflict ($M = 6.87$, $SD = 1.56$) compared to participants in the baseline condition ($M = 6.13$, $SD = 1.82$), $t = -3.12$, $p = .002$, $d = .43$, and participants in the low-meaning condition ($M = 6.08$, $SD = 1.85$), $t = 3.17$, $p = .002$, $d = .46$. Participants in the low-meaning condition did not differ from participants in the baseline condition, $t = .26$, $p = .791$, $d = .03$. The results demonstrate that, as expected, framing

the isolated attack as meaningful led to greater perceptions of meaning in the conflict compared

to not framing the attack as meaningful and compared to a baseline condition in which no video

was shown. Thus, the manipulation was successful.

We also found an effect of the manipulation on perceived meaning in life, $F(2, 349) =$

3.19, $p = .042$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$, 95% CI[.003, .044] (see *Figure 7*). As predicted, participants in the

high-meaning condition reported experiencing more meaning in life ($M = 6.72$, $SD = 1.76$)

compared to participants in the baseline condition ($M = 6.10$, $SD = 2.00$), $t = -2.42$, $p = .016$, $d =$

.32, and participants in the low-meaning condition ($M = 6.17$, $SD = 1.90$), $t = 2.02$, $p = .044$, $d =$

.30. Participants in the low-meaning condition did not differ on meaning in life from participants

in the baseline condition, $t = -0.29$, $p = .775$, $d = .04$.

The effect of the manipulation on support for conflict escalating policies was significant,

$F(2, 349) = 3.37$, $p = .036$ $\eta_p^2 = .02$, 95% CI[.001, .045] (see *Figure 7*). As predicted,

participants in the high-meaning condition ($M = 5.45$, $SD = 1.79$) supported conflict escalating

policies to a greater extent than those in the baseline condition ($M = 4.79$, $SD = 2.08$), $t = -2.52$, p

$= .012$, $d = .34$, and the low-meaning condition ($M = 4.89$, $SD = 1.97$), $t = 2.01$ $p = .046$, $d = .30$.

The low-meaning and baseline conditions did not differ, $t = -0.41$, $p = .680$, $d = .05$.

Similarly, a (marginally significant) effect of the manipulation emerged on general

militaristic attitudes, $F(2, 349) = 3.63$, $p = .073$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$, 95% CI[.000, .039] (see *Figure 7*). As

expected, participants endorsed militaristic attitudes significantly more in the high-meaning

condition ($M = 5.58$, $SD = 1.86$) than participants in the low-meaning condition ($M = 4.95$, $SD =$

1.92), $t = 2.24$, $p = .026$, $d = .33$, and marginally more than participants in the baseline condition

($M = 5.13$, $SD = 2.09$), $t = -1.73$, $p = .085$, $d = .23$. The low-meaning and baseline conditions did

not differ, $t = 0.71$, $p = .480$, $d = .09$.

[Insert Figure 7 here]

We next tested whether framing a conflict as meaningful increased support for conflict perpetuating policies and ideologies *because* it increased perceived meaning in life. We tested for mediation using bias-corrected bootstrapping with 10,000 resamples (Hayes 2013; model 4; see *Figure 8*). Given that we had three conditions, we specified a multicategorical predictor in PROCESS, which yielded indirect effects via meaning in life on the conflict escalation outcomes for the high-meaning vs. baseline and high-meaning vs. low-meaning conditions separately (Hayes & Montoya, 2016). Indicator coding was used, with the high-meaning condition serving as the reference group to allow it to be compared to both other groups (the signs of the effects were expected to thus be negative, given that a one unit change from high-meaning to either low-meaning or baseline is associated with a *decrease* in meaning in life and support for conflict escalation). As predicted, the meaningful conflict framing, compared to the baseline framing, $b =$ -.08, $SE = .05$, 95% CI[-.214, -.006], and the low-meaning framing, $b = -.07$, $SE = .05$, 95% CI[-.210, -.002], led to increased support for conflict escalating policies because it increased meaning in life. Similarly, the meaningful conflict framing, compared to both the baseline condition, $b = -.07$, $SE = .05$, 95% CI[-.207, -.006], and the low-meaning framing, $b = -.07$, $SE = .05$, 95% CI[-.205, -.003], led to increased support for general militaristic attitudes because it increased meaning in life.

[Insert Figure 8 here]

These results provide evidence for the notion 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 increases support for conflict perpetuation. We view the potential for intergroup conflict to generate meaning as existing on a continuum. Study 5 demonstrates that although an individual

attacker thought to have connections to ISIS injuring two policemen is not sufficient to increase perceived meaning in conflict, perceived meaning in life, or support for further conflict, a brief 30 second clip framing the attack as meaningful is sufficient to produce these effects. Thus, Study 5 is useful in helping to identify a threshold across which intergroup conflict can versus cannot self-perpetuate via meaning.

These data also help to further rule out a threat compensation interpretation of our effects. If threat compensation were operating, one would expect both the high-meaning and low-meaning conflict conditions (which both mentioned the attack) to differ from baseline, but not from each other. In contrast to this, however, the baseline condition and the low-meaning conflict condition did not differ from each other, but both differed from the high-meaning conflict condition. In addition to causally demonstrating the link between perceived meaning in conflict and conflict perpetuation, illustrating the mediating effect of meaning in life, and helping to rule out threat as an alternative interpretation for our findings, Study 5 may have significant applied implications: enhancing the perceived meaningfulness of a conflict may be detrimental to future intergroup relations, while stripping a conflict of its meaning may reduce intergroup violence.

General Discussion

Six studies provided support for the notion that conflict can self-perpetuate by serving as a source of meaning. Study 1A demonstrated that reminders of past conflict increase the meaning people perceive in conflict and thereby increase resignation toward ending an unrelated conflict. Study 1B showed that reminders of ongoing conflicts increase general militaristic ideologies 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 demonstrated that an experimental manipulation of the scope of a real-world conflict influenced perceived meaning and support for conflict-escalating policies, ideologies, and behaviors. Study 4 identified the specific meaning pathways (i.e., unity, growth, transformed perspective, being part of something important) through which perceiving a conflict as larger in scope can increase support for further conflict. Finally, Study 5 provided causal evidence for the notion that perceiving a conflict as meaningful enhances meaning in life and in turn increases support for further conflict. Using a wide variety of methods, we demonstrate that exposure to conflict can lead people to perceive conflict as meaningful, and that this meaning, once perceived, tends to increase support for future conflict. We provide causal evidence for two steps in a process which likely fuels a self-sustaining cycle of violence.

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, correlational), different languages and cultural contexts (U.S., Israel, France, Belgium), different operationalizations of conflict salience (reminder of past conflict, reminder of ongoing conflict, exposure to actual conflict, perceptions of conflict scope), different measures of meaning (perceived meaning in conflict, perceived contribution of conflict to meaning in life, perceived meaning in life in general), and different measures of support for conflict perpetuation (related versus unrelated to the primed conflict; resignation versus active escalation; support for abstract ideologies, concrete policies, and actual behaviors). The fact that our predictions were supported across this diversity of methodologies and contexts points to the robustness of our findings. By studying these issues in the context of actual intergroup conflicts, our findings may be particularly useful for understanding how meaning influences the unfolding of intergroup conflict in the real world.

We also demonstrated the internal validity of our effects by ruling out alternative explanations. Study 1B employed a comparison condition that helped ruled out ingroup positivity, nationalism, and pride from winning as alternative explanations for the effects. The experimental conditions used in Studies 3 and 5 ruled out the possibility that our results reflect threat compensation effects.

Theoretical Contributions

Our findings extend the meaning making literature to the domain of intergroup conflict by illustrating that the general population can find meaning in conflict, 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 is activated. While the notion that people make meaning out of negative events is consistent with the MMM, our work extends this by using meaning seeking as an explanation for the perpetuation of intergroup conflict. These findings also suggest that people pursue conflict for the sake of meaning itself – not for the purpose of dealing with threat or avoiding some type 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. While our perspective does not preclude the possibility that threat compensation processes also operate in conjunction with meaning seeking processes, we demonstrate that meaning seeking processes can fuel conflict perpetuation even when threat is invariant.

Heeding 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 a prime in Studies 1-4 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 (*in*creasing it), but also the subjective

sense of meaning in life. Individual differences in this shift in meaning then predicted support for

ideologies, policies, and behaviors that prolong conflict in ways that were fully consistent with

our theoretically-driven hypotheses, illustrating predictive validity and utility 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.

Measuring Meaning

Meaning is intuitive and subjective, making it amenable to studying via self-report

(Heintzelman & King, 2013). Yet, there are many ways to conceptualize and operationalize

meaning. We tackled this issue by measuring meaning at multiple levels of analysis. First, in

Studies 1A, 1B, 2, and 4, we measured the ways in which people might find meaning in conflict

using notions of meaning derived from the literatures on meaning making and posttraumatic

growth (i.e., unity, growth, transformed perspective, exhilaration, being part of something

important, comprehension). Although these measures do not always explicitly mention meaning,

they represent aspects of meaning discussed by numerous literatures. Second, in Studies 3 and 4,

we employed measures of meaning with greater face validity. These measures directly assess the

subjective sense that conflict contributes to one's sense of meaning in life in general in a broad,

face-valid manner. Third, in Study 5, we used a previously developed measure of meaning in life in general to explicitly document the link between conflicts that have the potential to generate meaning and elevated meaning in life in general. Thus, we employed measures from different levels of analysis to triangulate on the construct of meaning and provide converging evidence in support of our hypotheses.

In addition to drawing on preexisting literatures on meaning and measuring meaning at both granular and broader levels, we have attempted to further elucidate the precise processes that may be operating. Specifically, Study 4 begins to illustrate *which* aspects of meaning are at play. Although the primary purpose of this research was to determine *whether* people find meaning in conflict and *whether* this meaning can fuel support for further conflict, the next question became *why* exactly does this happen and which specific aspects of meaning help transmit these effects. Study 4 answers these questions by including separate multi-item measures of each meaning dimension assessed in Studies 1-3 and testing which dimensions carry the effect of perceived conflict scope to support for further conflict. Further, Study 4 was conducted in the context of Brussels during an intergroup conflict-related lockdown of the city and thus provides a high degree of ecological validity that is useful for answering precisely this type of question (i.e., which specific aspects of meaning are elevated by such events and which aspects in turn promote support for further conflict). We found that a general sense of meaning derived from conflict, perceived unity, personal growth, transformed perspective, and the sense of being part of something important all helped to transmit the effect, whereas a sense of exhilaration and comprehensibility did not. This begins to provide a richer and more textured account of precisely which meaning processes can contribute to the perpetuation of intergroup conflict.

Limitations, Integration With Other Research, and Future Directions

Although our analyses provided consistent support for our hypotheses, many of the effect sizes were small. Given that our independent variables consisted of subtle reminders of intergroup conflict, periods of "hot" versus "cold" conflict, or relative perceptions of a salient conflict as being bigger versus smaller, we believe that small effects are to be expected within these paradigms. Another factor limiting the size of the effects is likely the social desirability concerns associated with admitting that intergroup conflict has meaningful qualities and that one is willing to prolong conflict to obtain them. Future work might employ implicit measures of meaning (Heintzelman et al., 2013), which might yield stronger effects than the ones we observed. It is also possible that the meaning derived from conflict may accrue over time, and, as a result, efforts to prolong conflict may intensify over time, possibilities not captured by our paradigms.

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. 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 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, meaning surely operates in conjunction with other factors that contribute to conflict's perpetuation. 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, 2015; Leidner & Castano, 2012; Leidner et al., 2010; Roccas et al., 2006). Future research should aim to integrate these complementary perspectives. For example, future research might test whether glorification or political orientation moderate the effect of conflict salience on meaning or the effect of meaning on conflict perpetuation.

Building upon Study 4's findings, future research should continue to discern the specific elements of conflict that can provide meaning and fuel additional conflict. In addition, future research might build upon Study 5's findings and further investigate what precise elements may be required for a conflict to be perceived as meaningful. For example, must a conflict have the potential to be perceived as morally just in order to be perceived as meaningful? Relatedly, research might explore additional mechanisms that might allow people to prolong conflict and pursue meaning in it despite its negative consequences (e.g., cognitive dissonance, self-handicapping). Finally, 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.

Concluding Remarks

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 might 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 these ways, the force that helps sustain conflict might also be harnessed to help end it.

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Unity

    The national unity my country displays during times of conflict is very uplifting.

    It is inspiring to see the solidarity that arises when my country is engaged in conflict.

    It is reassuring to know that I can count on my countrymen and women in times of conflict.

    It is incredible to see our nation unite under a common goal when we face threats from our adversaries.

Growth

    Adversaries who try to threaten our nation's resolve only make our country stronger.

    It is encouraging to see our nation's military fight to secure our nation during times of conflict.

    When our adversaries test our nation's resolve, our best qualities show through.

    When my country faces conflict, we have the opportunity to show our full potential.

Exhilaration

    It is exhilarating to see my nation fight back after being attacked or threatened by our adversaries.

    I feel a rush of adrenaline when I think about the measures my nation is taking to defend itself from harm.

    It is exciting to see my country take on its adversaries.

    It energizes me to see my country fight back against those who threaten us.

Transformed perspective

    When my country is in conflict, it helps put other issues in my life into perspective.

    When my nation is at war, it gives me a greater appreciation for the important things in life.

    When my country is in a conflict, I tend to focus more on the basic aspects of life.

    When my nation is in a conflict, it allows me to worry less about the complicated things in life.

Being part of something important

    When adversaries attack our nation, I feel that I am part of something larger than myself.

    I feel like I am living through an important time in history.

    When we are embroiled in war we are also making history at every turn.

    The challenges facing our nation will become a pivotal part of our nation's history.

Comprehensibility

    When I think about the conflict we are facing ...

    ... I find it easy to wrap my head around why this is happening.

    ... I have an easy time comprehending what is happening and why.

    ... It is difficult for me to grasp what is going on.

    ... I can make sense of current events.

Perceived meaning in life derived from conflict

    The conflict my country is engaged in has provided my life with a greater sense of meaning.

    Because of the recent acts of terror, I now have a greater sense of purpose in life.

    As a result of the recent acts of terror, I have a greater appreciation for the value of life.

    The recent terror attacks give me the opportunity to contribute to the noble cause of defending our way of life.

    The recent struggle against our adversaries made me realize even more how important our values are.

    The conflict has provided me with greater clarity about my life's mission.

Table 1. Items from perceived meaning in conflict subscales used in Study 4.

	Conflict Escalating Policies		Conflict Escalating Behaviors		General Militaristic Attitudes	
	r	*p*	*r*	*p*	*r*	*p*
Unity	.368	<.001	.373	<.001	.237	<.001
Growth	.554	<.001	.554	<.001	.451	<.001
Exhilaration	.448	<.001	.377	<.001	.393	<.001
Transformed perspective	.375	<.001	.316	<.001	.260	<.001
Being part of something important	.303	<.001	.229	.001	.186	.009
Comprehensibility	−.002	.980	.079	.274	.019	.793
Meaning derived from conflict	.341	<.001	.379	<.001	.231	.001

Table 2. Correlations between aspects of meaning and conflict escalation in Study 4.

	Conflict Escalating Policies				Conflict Escalating Behaviors				General Militaristic Attitudes			
	b	*SE*	*95% CI*	P_M	*b*	*SE*	*95% CI*	P_M	*b*	*SE*	*95% CI*	P_M
Unity	.08	.04	[.021, .162]	.21	.09	.04	[.024, .194]	.27	.05	.03	[.010, .133]	.24
Growth	.13	.05	[.027, .239]	.32	.14	.06	[.028, .279]	.40	.10	.05	[.020, .206]	.45
Exhilaration	.04	.04	[-.036, .129]	.11	.04	.04	[-.042, .125]	.10	.04	.04	[-.033, .111]	.17
Transformed perspective	.11	.04	[.042, .215]	.27	.11	.05	[.037, .221]	.30	.08	.04	[.024, .179]	.35
Being part of something important	.08	.03	[.021, .163]	.19	.06	.04	[.008, .158]	.17	.05	.03	[.004, .139]	.22
Comprehensibility	-.03	.03	[-.096, .024]	-.07	.01	.03	[-.048, .085]	.03	-.01	.03	[-.071, .053]	-.04
Meaning derived from conflict	.06	.03	[.008, .136]	.15	.07	.04	[.002, .165]	.21	.04	.03	[.004, .109]	.18

Table 3. Indirect effects of conflict scope on conflict escalation outcomes via different aspects of meaning in Study 4.
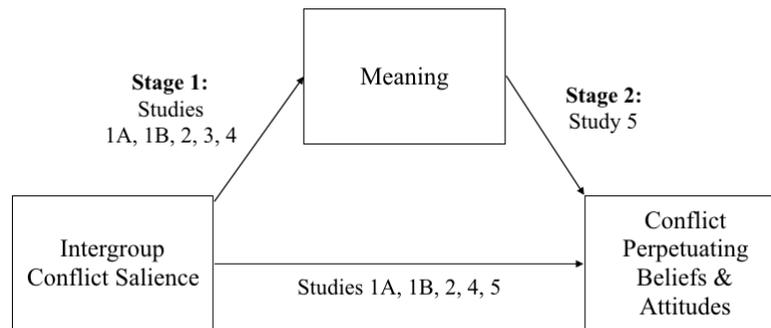
Figure 1. The proposed two-stage model, with a depiction of the studies most appropriately suited for testing each stage.

Study	Design	Sample	Conflict Context	Stage of Model Focused On	IV	Mediator	DV	Alternative Explanations Ruled Out
1A	Experimental	American	American Revolutionary War	1 and 2	Past Conflict Reminder vs. No Reminder	Perceived meaning in conflict	Resignation to conflict perpetuation	
1B	Experimental	American	Campaign Against ISIS	1 and 2	Ongoing Conflict Reminder vs. Ingroup Positivity	Perceived meaning in conflict	General militaristic attitudes	Nationalism, Pride from winning
2	Quasi-Experimental, Longitudinal	Jewish Israeli	2014 Israel-Gaza War	1 and 2	Hot vs. Cold Conflict	Perceived meaning in conflict	Support for conflict escalation	
3	Experimental	French	November 15, 2015 Attacks	1	Perceived Conflict Scope	Perceived meaning in life from conflict	Conflict perpetuating ideologies, policies, and behaviors	Threat
4	Correlational	Belgian	November 15, 2015 Attacks	1 and 2	Perceived Conflict Scope	Specific aspects of meaning in conflict, Perceived meaning in life from conflict	Conflict perpetuating ideologies, policies, and behaviors	
5	Experimental	American	NYC Hatchet Attack	2	Perceived Meaning in Conflict	Perceived meaning in life	Conflict perpetuating ideologies and policies	Threat

Figure 2. Overview of studies.
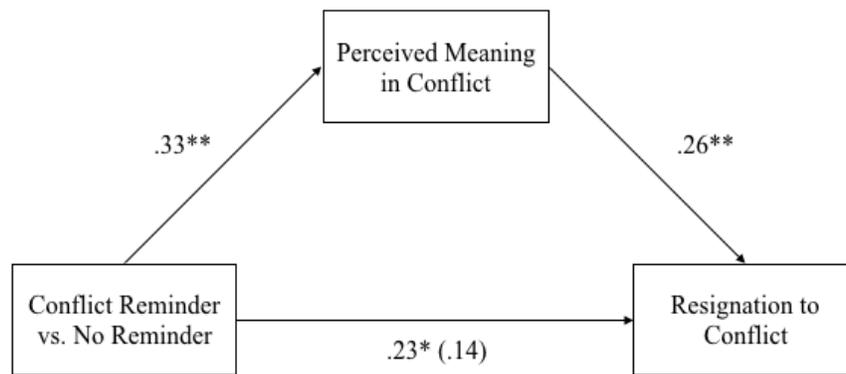
Indirect effect: $b = .13$, $SE = .05$, 95% CI[.054, .240], $P_M = .38$

Figure 3. Depiction of indirect effect of the manipulation on resignation via perceived meaning in conflict (Study 1A). Standardized coefficients are shown for individual paths; unstandardized coefficients are used for indirect effects. ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$.
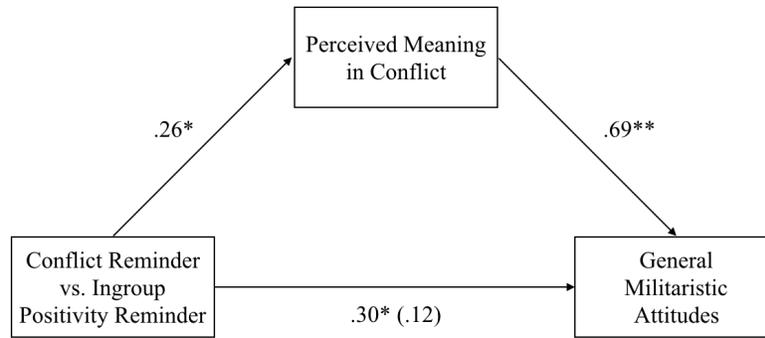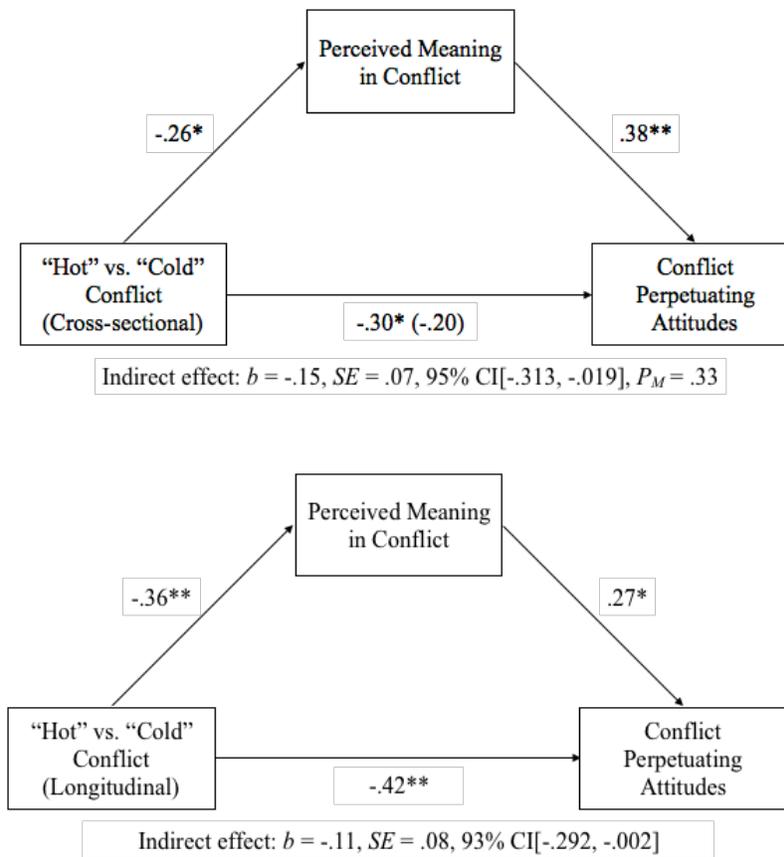
Indirect effect: $b = .38$, $SE = .18$, 95% CI[.034, .744], $P_M = .60$

Figure 4. Depiction of indirect effect of the manipulation on general militaristic attitudes via perceived meaning in conflict (Study 1B). Standardized coefficients are shown for individual paths; unstandardized coefficients are used for indirect effects. ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$.

Figure 5. Depiction of indirect effect of time point on conflict perpetuating attitudes via perceived meaning in conflict for Study 2 cross-sectional data (top panel) and longitudinal data (bottom panel). Standardized coefficients are shown for individual paths; unstandardized coefficients are used for indirect effects. ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$.
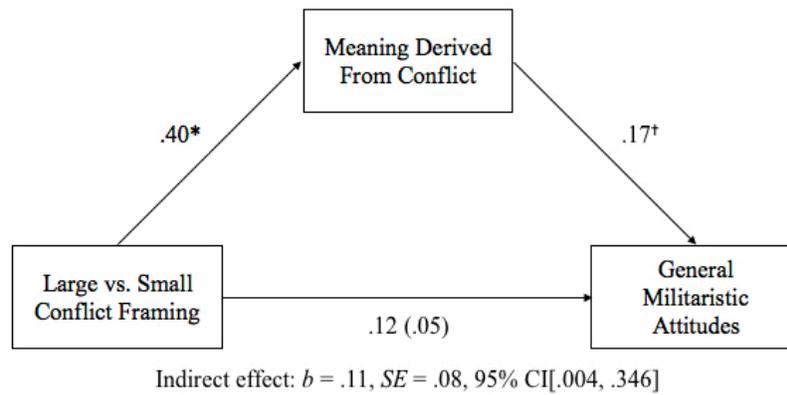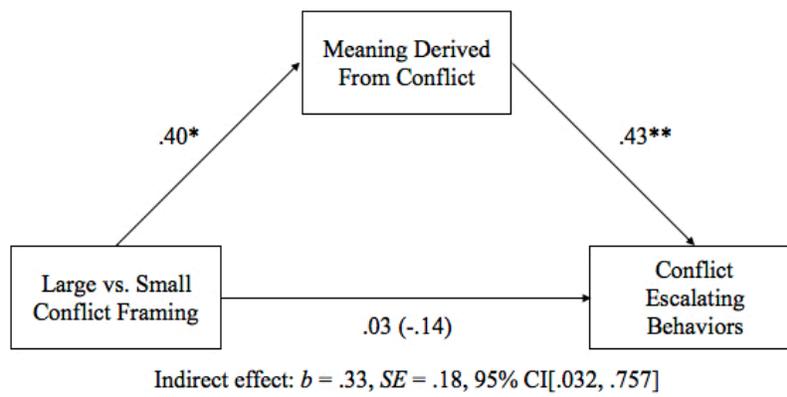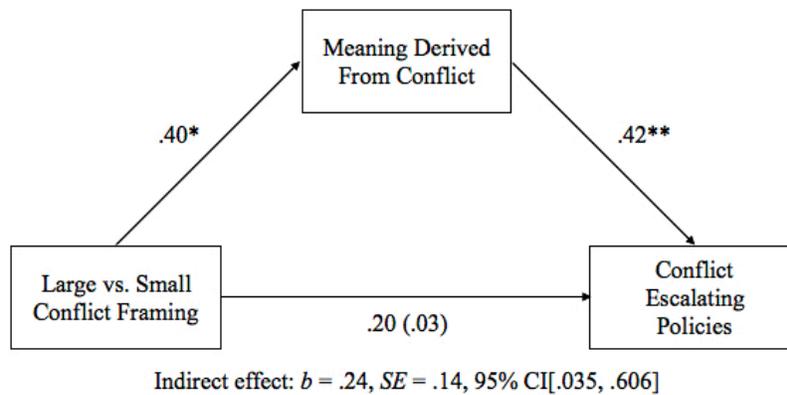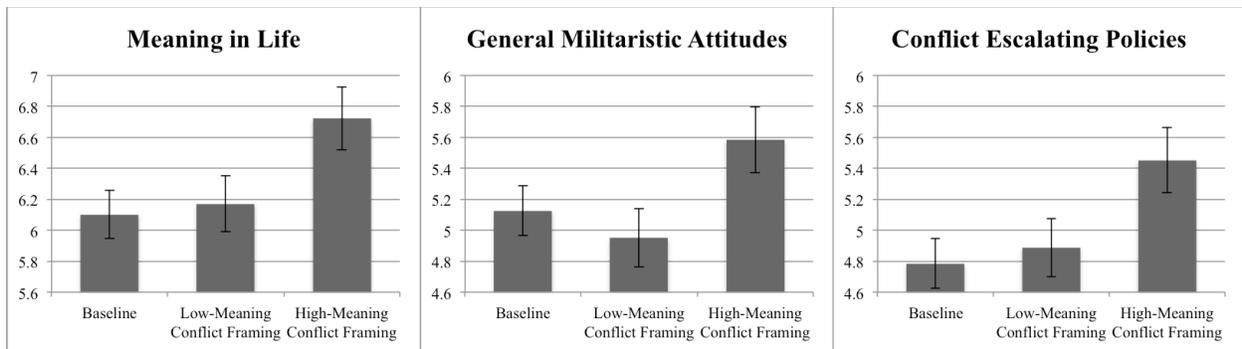
Figure 6. Depiction of indirect effects of the manipulation on conflict escalating policies (top panel), conflict escalating behaviors (middle panel), and general militaristic attitudes (bottom panel) via meaning derived from conflict (Study 3). Standardized coefficients are shown for individual paths; unstandardized coefficients are used for indirect effects. ** *p* < .01, * *p* < .05, † *p* < .07.

Figure 7. The effects of the manipulation on meaning in life, general militaristic attitudes, and support for conflict escalating policies in Study 5.
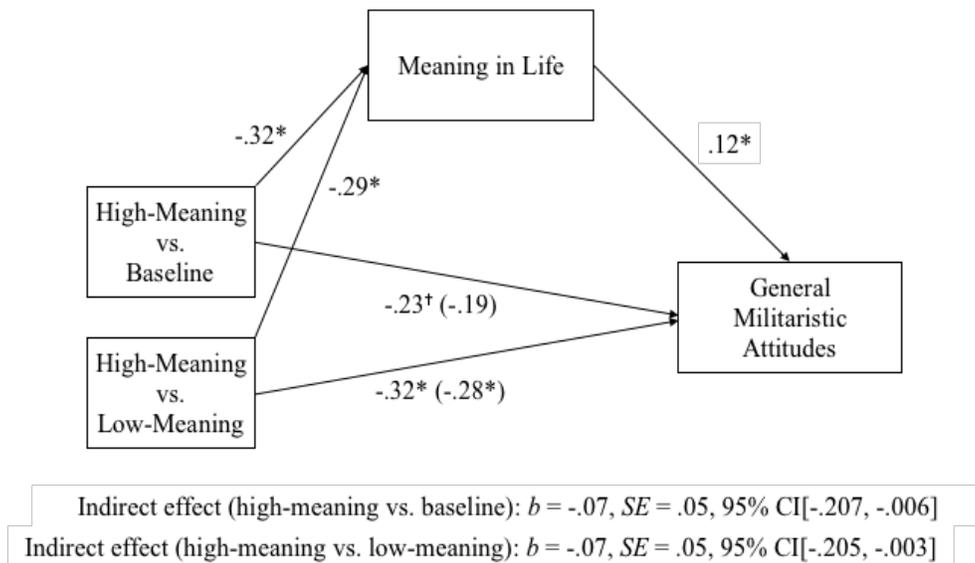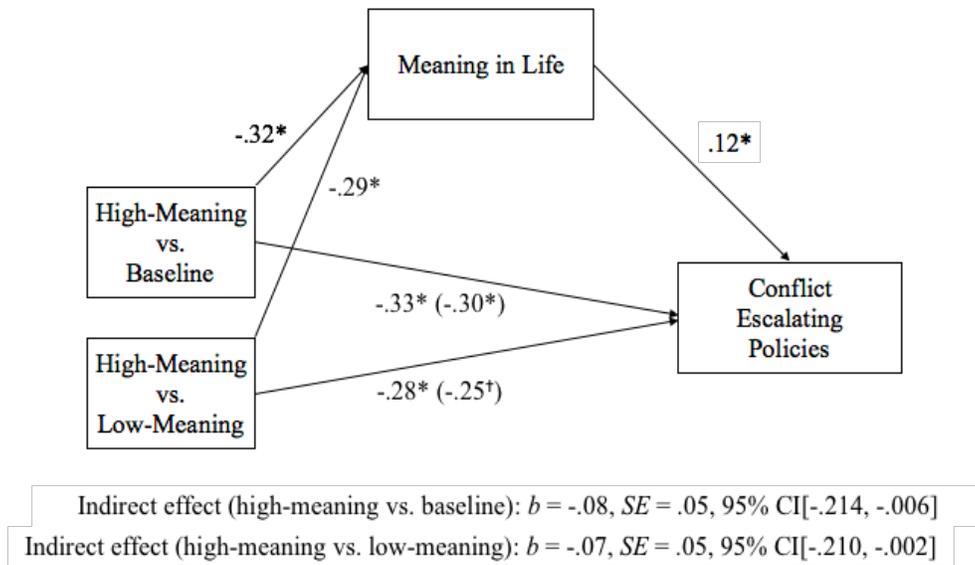
Figure 8. Depiction of multi-categorical indirect effects of the manipulation on conflict escalating policies (top panel) and general militaristic attitudes (bottom panel) via meaning in life (Study 5). Standardized coefficients are shown for individual paths; unstandardized coefficients are used for indirect effects. ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$, † $p < .10$.