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Morality, Valuation and Coalitional Psychology: Commentary on Workman, Yoder & Decety

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We are all aware that many people can easily combine general moral understandings that make unprovoked violence inexcusable, with tolerance or even support for that same behavior when it is carried out on behalf of their own political "camp." But the question remains, what computations are involved in this support.

The data suggest an intriguing and new answer–that the bias that makes some political violence acceptable or even desirable, does not necessarily come from a suspension of intuitive morality, but from a perception of the costs and benefits that could be accrued from political violence. That is a counter-intuitive and important finding.

Since the study addresses the *proximate* aspects of support for violence (how it occurs in the mind, what mechanisms are involved), it may be relevant to suggest that this important finding is consistent with a consideration of the *ultimate* factors engaged (why such mechanisms are in place and function in that way). I propose to do that by briefly discussing the evolutionary background to our coalitional dispositions.

Coalitional psychology is a crucial element of the human capacity for collective action, in which a collection of agents cooperate toward a particular (set of) goal(s) that cannot be achieved by any single individual (or only at much greater cost); these agents behave in ways that increase each agent's welfare by making it more likely that the goal is achieved (Hardin 1982). Humans for a long time have required, for their survival and reproduction, extensive support from kin

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but also from non-kin conspecifics, for example, in hunting (Dubreuil 2010; Kelly 1995), parenting (Hrdy 2009) and defense against other human groups (Gat 2006; Tooby and Cosmides 1988).

These evolutionary conditions explain why human groups are often stable and competitive. Humans need relatively stable alliances, because many endeavors require a prior assurance that support will be available when needed—warfare is a case in point. Also, human alliances may become rival even in contexts that may not require competition, because social support itself is a rival good. If an alliance builds up offering its members mutual support, it deprives others of that resource, so that one would expect coalitions to emerge as a response to the existence of other coalitions.

Humans, in contrast to other species, can build stable and extensive coalitions because of a suite of specialized computational resources–capacities and preferences that have been the object of experimental study in the last thirty years, see, e.g., (Kurzban and Neuberg 2005; Pietraszewski 2016; Tooby and Cosmides 2010). Coalitional psychology includes for instance a capacity to evaluate the size, cohesiveness and commitment of rival coalitions, as well as strong motivations to enhance the welfare of coalition members or ferret out defectors (Tooby and Cosmides 2010).

Participants in coalitional interactions rarely, if ever, represent these principles explicitly. All they are aware of are intuitive preferences, for instance, a desire to punish a renegade, a motivation to engage in risky behaviors for the good of the cause, an interest in whether and how far a specific person can be trusted or the fact that one's enemies' enemies can be strategic allies. Such motives and cognitions may seem self-evident to both actors and observers, and the necessary complex computations are not available to conscious inspection (Kurzban and Neuberg 2005).

Coalitional psychology systems contribute to the representations of various courses of action, either one's own or other agents', in terms of potential costs and benefits, on the basis of cues that would on average correlate with increases/decreases in fitness in ancestral environments. That too seems to occur without explicit deliberation–for instance when people intuit that people who pay a higher price to join a coalition are more committed to that group, or when people see increased cohesiveness in a rival coalition as intrinsically threatening (Boyer et al. 2015).

Consistent with this cognitive model, the present study suggests a valuation-based model for the connections between morality and support for violence. Basically, the circuitry that mediates reaction to congruent ("my-side") and incongruent ("other-side") violence is not so much the dlPFC areas that would underpin the computation of morality, but circuits in dmPFC usually involved in the calculation of value, the cost-benefit analysis that underpins decision-making.

The cognitive description of coalitional psychology proposed by evolutionary psychologists would suggest that, to the human mind, violence exerted on behalf of "my side" is perceived as a good in a quasi-economic sense. Why would that be the case? Having coalitional allies is positive for fitness, and it would be surprising if human minds did not include some calculation of the extent to which their coalitions are faring, in comparison with rival groups. Belonging to an alliance that is stronger than others should evoke the prospect of higher benefits from collective action. In such calculations, the fact that our allies can engage in violence is intuitively positive, as it suggests that "we" are strong enough, confident enough, to engage in behavior that usually triggers an equally string response. In other words, it suggests that we have the upper hand. This would also be consistent with the result, that moral valuations as such, underpinned by such circuitry as dlPFC, shows little difference between congruent ("my side") and incongruent ("the others") violence. The moral representation, that e.g., throwing bricks at people or setting stores on fire, is wrong does not need to be affected.

In other words, and contrary to some popular interpretation of the psychology of political violence, people who engage in such behavior, or approve of it, may not be morally blind–they can see violence as violence regardless of the side it emanates from. But that is not the only valuation that occurs in the representation of such events. To the extent that a coalitional benefit is expected from such actions, the moral valuation as wrong just triggers a search for attenuating arguments. That may be why people in such contexts would immediately access memories of similar actions carried out by the opposite camp, suggesting moral equivalence, or activate representations of grievances (on "our" side) so egregious that they should result in uncontrollable rage, in terms of our folk-psychology of emotions (Malle 2004).

How could one go further? Beyond the extension and replication of the present findings, one obvious outstanding question is that of personal differences. The study identified the neural underpinnings of a pathway between value-calculation and the justification of violence. But this is clearly one factor likely to display great differences. As we know from social scientific evidence, people vary a lot in the extent to

which they attach emotional value to political beliefs. It might be relevant to see whether differences in commitment modulate the neural effects observed here.

More important, political violence may be particularly valuable for a subset of individuals in different human societies. Petersen and colleagues conducted a series of multi-nation, large-sample studies of people's online behavior, in particular, their propensity to share inflammatory rumors and use those messages to incite violence (Petersen 2020). They found that such propensities were highly correlated with measurement on a specially designed "need for chaos" instrument. This denotes a set of beliefs and motivations centered on a desire to destroy the existing order of social and political institutions, independent of a particular political alignment. Petersen et al.'s data also suggest that this "need for chaos" may be the outcome of recurrent losses of status, in other words, what would happen if an individual repeatedly loses in competitive encounters with other agents (Petersen 2020).

We are only at the beginning of a computationally tractable political psychology, that could integrate the evolutionary, cognitive and neural descriptions of the processes engaged. The present study provides a great opportunity for such integration.

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