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What Motivates Barrier-Crossing Leadership?

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Abstract

From large-scale wars, natural disasters, and pandemics to community-level religious and ethnic conflicts, many leaders wield power during crises by championing their group's goals against those of rivals. But there is also a rarer breed of leader—barrier-crossers who pursue group interests by recognizing rivals' interests and working with them to achieve mutually beneficial outcomes. Though such leaders have played vital roles in resolving conflicts, little is known about their extraordinary motivation. Here we report survey results contrasting barrier-crossing with barrier-bound leaders from seven communities. In line with new theories from group psychology and anthropology, we found that barrier-crossers uniquely reported intense, family-like bonds to both ingroups and outgroups. Further evidence suggests that these outgroup bonds result from past, personally transformative experiences shared with outgroup members.

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Leaders often rise to prominence because they represent the interests of a particular group in opposition to its perceived rivals or enemies. But another, rarer form of leadership has also emerged during key moments of global history, epitomized by the South African statesman Nelson Mandela. In the 1990s, Mandela and F. W. de Klerk worked to dismantle apartheid and establish interracial reconciliation in ways previously unthinkable. Barrier-crossing leadership of this kind has unraveled oppressive systems and healed communities in many parts of the world, from the pioneers of the peace process in Northern Ireland to those bridging racial divides in the United States to those at the vanguard of reconciliation in Rwanda following the 1994 atrocities. Surprisingly, little is known empirically about the psychological processes that shape barrier-crossing leaders' motivations and effectiveness.

Early twentieth-century research on leadership emphasized individual traits capable of inspiring and mobilizing followers,¹ championed by early sociologists' "great man" models² and more recently as theories of leadership as transformative and charismatic.³ By mid-century, however, emphasis shifted away from traits and toward shared characteristics of leaders and followers⁴ and the situational factors leading people to recognize the need for leadership.⁵ Situational theories of leadership, especially when emphasizing features shared by leaders and followers, foreshadowed the approach adopted in this article. Nevertheless, these previous theories were concerned primarily with shared qualities among leaders and their *ingroups*, whereas we argue here that for barrier-crossing leadership, the sharing of qualities between leaders and *outgroups* is of equal importance. To begin, we lay out key qualities of barrier-crossing leadership.

Barrier-Crossing versus Barrier-Bound Leadership

We define a barrier-crossing leader as one who seeks opportunities to bridge social divisions in situations of actual or potential inter-group conflict. Barrier-crossing leaders are practiced in building what Putnam calls "bridging social capital," that is, relationships of trust that can underwrite shared action with former strangers, opponents, and even enemies.⁶ Barrier-crossers wish to understand the interests of outgroups and to have theirs understood by other groups, because doing so may create the conditions for effective collective action addressing both groups' interests.⁷ Many barrier-crossing actors are engaged in "broad-based community organizations"⁸ in the tradition of Saul Alinsky, which intentionally develop bridging social capital to drive change on a wide variety of concrete issues, such as public safety, community health services, and economic justice.⁹

By contrast, barrier-bound leaders do not cross intergroup boundaries and develop their group's social capital only by enhancing trust within their groups. Putnam calls this "bonding social capital."¹⁰ Examples include religious leaders and elected officials of homogeneous communities who work primarily to provide benefits solely for their ingroup. Often, such leaders are caught in social traps whereby longstanding divisions between communities lead to perceptions that intergroup dialogue is fruitless and intergroup relationships are zero-sum.¹¹

While the differences between barrier-crossing and barrier-bound leaders are plain to see, little is known about what leads one to become the former type rather than the latter. Our goal was to examine across a wide variety of sociocultural contexts the extent to which barrier-crossing and barrier-bound leaders are distinct with regard to key intergroup self-views and experiences. Our starting point is an emerging theoretical perspective on how individuals develop intense group ties and prosocial orientations, dubbed the "imagistic mode" by Whitehouse.¹²

The Imagistic Mode and Identity Fusion

The imagistic mode of group alignment suggests that strong group bonds emerge when individuals feel they share essentialized qualities with others, creating a porous boundary between the personal self and one's group identity, as described by Whitehouse.¹³ Group psychologists describe this as identity fusion—a visceral sense of oneness with a group.¹⁴ Imagistic practices typically take the form of emotionally intense rituals, such as initiations or hazing practices, that fuse together groups ensuring that they stand together in the face of adversity. The imagistic mode has been shown to operate in warrior cults,¹⁵ civil war armed groups,¹⁶ martial arts clubs,¹⁷ football fans,¹⁸ and sectarian communities.¹⁹

Efforts to investigate imagistic pathways to fusion have tended to focus on prosocial action within groups and hostility directed against outgroups, particularly in the form of violent self-sacrifice. This approach has sometimes led to the mistaken impression that fusion always leads to intergroup conflict. But fusion is also capable of motivating strong forms of prosocial commitment toward extended groups, including humanity at large, in ways that are exclusively peaceful.²⁰ The existence of peaceful forms of extended fusion inevitably raises the question whether leaders who are fused with their ingroups must necessarily view them as competitively arraigned against rival or enemy groups. If fusion can be extended indefinitely, is it not possible for at least some leaders fused with their ingroups also to fuse with outgroups? In such cases, we might expect leaders to show undiminished commitment to their followers but in a way that is augmented by fusion with wider communities, allowing them to cross traditional barriers that have divided groups in the past.²¹ Thus, we hypothesized that, since ingroup fusion is commonly based on shared imagistic experiences, the pathway to barrier-crossing leadership would follow this same pattern. That is, leaders capable of transcending intergroup divisions would be more fused with outgroups as a result of the conviction that at least some of their most personally transformative experiences are shared with members of those outgroups.

Leadership and Empathy

Our view of what differentiates barrier-crossing leaders from others stands in contrast to past perspectives on effective leadership in intergroup conflict. The research literature on the effects of empathy on attitudes and behavior has a rich and nuanced history.²² Scores of studies and intervention programs have sought to bolster cognitive and affective forms of empathy to improve intergroup attitudes and prosocial actions.²³ The logic of such endeavors is quite appealing *prima facie*—in order for groups to develop more positive attitudes toward one another and find common ground upon which to resolve conflict, they must first understand each other's point-of-view. As many have noted, however, addressing empathy gaps alone may be insufficient to produce desired changes in intergroup relations.²⁴ That is, even when groups are able to empathize with each other's perspectives, wants, and needs, they are still faced with many more psychological and practical hurdles to achieve even minimal progress toward resolution. For instance, to effectively cross ethnic and religious barriers between groups in conflict, leaders must be motivated to achieve intergroup goals that require personal sacrifices or risks. They may also be faced with deep mistrust between groups and forced to rely on their past experiences and pragmatic wisdom to rebuild foundations of trust. Thus, we included multi-faceted measures of empathy in the current study to explore potential differences between barrier-crossing and barrier-bound leaders.

Current Study

We set out to answer two fundamental questions. First, to what extent do barrier-crossing leaders differ from barrier-bound leaders in terms of their past imagistic experiences and empathic abilities? Based on the above analysis, we hypothesized that barrier-crossing leaders are more likely to have experienced an imagistic event with the outgroup compared with barrier-bound leaders. Given past literature on the role of leaders in conflict resolution, however, we also wanted to explore whether barrier-crossing and barrier-bound leaders might differ in their self-reported empathic abilities. Second, to what extent do barrier-crossing leaders differ from barrier-bound leaders in terms of their group alignments? We hypothesized that while barrier-bound and barrier-crossing leaders would both report high levels of fusion with their respective ingroups, barrier-crossing leaders would report comparatively high fusion to outgroups as well.

Method

Participants

There was a total of 60 participants—33 barrier-crossing leaders and 27 barrier-bound leaders, with *M age* = 56.78 years, *SD* = 12.72, range: 32–80, and 43 percent female. This total exceeded *N* = 52, the minimum sample size for a two-tailed *t*-test, $p < .05$, to detect $d = .8$, at 80 percent power. Since the prospective pool of barrier-crossing and barrier-bound leaders is small, we used a snowball sampling technique, relying on the second author's direct leader contacts and colleagues. Each participant was witnessed by either the second author or his colleagues to have a history of engagement in barrier-crossing or barrier-bound leadership. Participants were invited to participate by the second author on the basis of whether they met our definitional criteria as barrier-crossing leaders or barrier-bound leaders, and their categorization as such was made prior to data collection. Participants were recruited from communities with histories of longstanding intergroup conflicts based on religious and ethnic divides. Specifically, we examined leaders in Chicago, New Orleans, Minneapolis-St. Paul, and Winston-Salem involved in African American versus white community conflicts, in Omagh engaged in Protestant versus Catholic community conflict, in Dublin engaged in Irish Traveller versus settled community conflict, and in London engaged in Muslim versus non-Muslim community conflict. We developed the following criteria for identifying barrier-crossing versus barrier-bound leaders based on past descriptions of both types of leaders.²⁵ Barrier-crossing leaders were identified as those who understand through observation and conversation what leaders of other groups seek to achieve and reciprocally are clear with other leaders about their own group's interests and priorities. They work primarily for their group's interest by engaging with members of other groups to pool power and resources in identifying common interests, the scope and sequence of tasks to pursue common interests, executing cooperative tasks, and jointly evaluating their cooperative effectiveness. Barrier-bound leaders were identified as those who seek to advance their group's interests by working solely or primarily within the group. Outside groups are perceived as irrelevant, polite acquaintances or even as opponents decidedly not to be involved with the pursuit of the group's aims. Participants were invited by e-mail to complete an online survey about their leadership experience and views. All participants volunteered without compensation, provided informed consent prior to the study, and received a debriefing in accordance with the university's ethics approved protocol.

Procedure and Measures

Participants completed the following scales as part of the survey. In some instances, scales were shortened from their original versions to ensure that the survey would not be overly long.

Shared imagistic memory. Participants were first instructed to take a moment to think about the most difficult or painful experience that they endured with the group. They were then asked whether they were able to bring any memory to mind. Overall, 70 percent of participants were able to bring a memory to mind, and these participants were instructed to respond to the following three items: “This experience was difficult for me to endure,” “My memory of this experience is vivid and detailed,” and “I feel that this experience similarly affected others in the [ingroup/outgroup].” The instructions and items were presented first in reference to the ingroup and repeated again in reference to the outgroup. Note that we use the terms ingroup and outgroup to refer to one’s primary ethnic or religious affiliation. For instance, a Protestant leader in Omagh’s ingroup would be labeled Protestant and outgroup labeled Catholic. In New Orleans, a Caucasian leader’s ingroup would be Caucasian and outgroup would be African American.

Identity fusion. Participants completed an abbreviated four-item version of the verbal identity fusion measure in reference to their ingroup community and a second time in reference to their outgroup community.²⁶ Note: Ingroup and outgroup communities were defined as the two relevant groups in conflict for each city (e.g., the African American and Caucasian communities in New Orleans). On seven-point Likert scales, participants responded to “I have a deep emotional bond with the [ingroup/outgroup],” “I am strong because of the [ingroup/outgroup],” “I make the [ingroup/outgroup] strong,” and “I am one with the [ingroup/outgroup].”

Group identification. As with the fusion scales, participants completed four items on seven-point Likert scales based on items validated by Postmes and Leach and colleagues in reference to the ingroup and outgroup.²⁷ The scale measured a sense of identification with the collective features of the group (i.e., belongingness, prototypicality). Items were “I identify with the [ingroup/outgroup],” “I have a lot in common with the [ingroup/outgroup],” “I connect with the values of the [ingroup/outgroup],” and “I feel a sense of belonging with [ingroup/outgroup].”

Situated empathy. We adapted two items from Davis’s Interpersonal Reactivity Index to capture self-perceived ability to take the group’s perspective when making decisions—a cognitive facet of empathy.²⁸ The items were repeated for the ingroup and the outgroup. On seven-point Likert scales, items were, “I try to look at the [ingroup/outgroup’s] side of a disagreement before I make a decision,” and “I sometimes try to understand the [ingroup/outgroup] better by imagining how things look from their perspective.”

Trait empathy. Participants completed twenty items from the Interpersonal Reactivity Index by Davis on five-point Likert scales. The index is a well-validated measure of trait empathy, defined as the “reactions of one individual to the observed experiences of another.”²⁹ The index also has four subscales: perspective-taking, fantasy, empathic concern, and personal distress. Perspective-taking refers to a tendency to spontaneously adopt others’ points of view. Fantasy refers to a tendency to imagine oneself in the feelings and actions of fictional characters. Empathic concern refers to a tendency to experience sympathy and concern for unfortunate others. Personal distress refers to a tendency to experience personal anxiety and unease in tense interpersonal settings.

Results

Shared Imagistic Memories

We first tested the hypothesis that barrier-crossing leaders are more likely to have experienced an imagistic event with the outgroup compared with barrier-bound leaders. In line with predictions, we found that whereas 85 percent of barrier-crossing leaders were able to recall painful shared memories with the outgroup, only 59 percent of barrier-bound leaders were able to do so, $X^2(1, 60) = 4.97, p = .026$ (all tests two-tailed). Leaders did not differ on ability to recall ingroup memories $X^2(1, 60) = 2.33, n.s.$ Further t -tests revealed that among those who were able to recall a memory, barrier-crossing leaders reported their memories to be more imagistic ($M = 5.88, SD = 1.06$) compared with barrier-bound leaders ($M = 4.90, SD = 1.24$), $t(41) = 2.76, p = .009$. But means were not different on the ingroup measures, $t(40) = -1.12, n.s.$ (barrier-crossing $M = 5.52, SD = 1.12$, vs. barrier-bound $M = 5.87, SD = .89$).

Group Bonding

We next tested the hypothesis that barrier-crossing leaders would be strongly fused to the outgroup. In line with predictions, t -tests revealed that barrier-crossing leaders scored higher on fusion to the outgroup ($M = 5.17, SD = 1.19$) compared with barrier-bound leaders ($M = 3.79, SD = 1.33$), $t(58) = 4.24, p < .001$. However, fusion means were not different on the ingroup measures, $t(58) = -.19, n.s.$ (barrier-crossing $M = 4.64, SD = 1.43$, vs. barrier-bound $M = 4.71, SD = 1.51$). Further correlational analyses showed that among barrier-crossers, fusion to outgroup and intensity of imagistic experiences with outgroup were marginally positively related, $r(26) = .37, p = .054$, and fusion to ingroup and intensity of imagistic experiences with ingroup were positively related, $r(20) = .50, p = .02$. Barrier-crossers' identification to the outgroup and intensity of imagistic experiences with the outgroup were unrelated, $r(26) = .26, p = .19$. Barrier-crossers' identification with the ingroup and intensity of imagistic experiences with the ingroup were positively related, $r(20) = .54, p = .01$. Among barrier-bound leaders, fusion and identification were unrelated to imagistic experiences, $p's > .10$. Consistent with the fusion findings, t -tests revealed that barrier-crossing leaders scored higher on identification with the outgroup ($M = 5.12, SD = 1.45$) compared with barrier-bound leaders ($M = 3.82, SD = 1.30$), $t(58) = 3.62, p < .001$. But means were not different on the ingroup measures, $t(58) = -.10, n.s.$ (barrier-crossing $M = 5.01, SD = 1.34$, vs. barrier-bound $M = 5.05, SD = 1.41$).

Together, the results of fusion and identification are consistent with the pattern of results on the measures of shared experience and suggest that (1) barrier-crossing leaders are not merely identified with the ingroup and outgroup, but are also more highly fused to both groups, and (2) the key ostensible source of such fusion is the experience of a past imagistic event that remains highly salient in their present lives.

Situated Empathy

We hypothesized that barrier-crossing leaders and barrier-bound leaders alike would be strong empathizers toward the outgroup. But t -tests revealed that barrier-crossing leaders scored *lower* on perceived empathy to the outgroup ($M = 4.80, SD = 1.43$) compared with barrier-bound leaders ($M = 5.70, SD = .80$), $t(58) = -2.92, p = .005$. This finding was unexpected and may reflect a belief among barrier-crossers that focusing on outgroup feelings and concerns has limited utility. Barrier-crossers, instead, seem focused on pragmatic, shared action. Respect is a must, but not empathy.³⁰ Future work should explore this point in more detail. However, means were not different on the

ingroup measures, $t(58) = -.78$, *n.s.* (barrier-crossing $M = 4.62$, $SD = 1.68$, vs. barrier-bound $M = 4.92$, $SD = 1.27$). Further correlational analyses revealed that measures of fusion and empathy were unrelated, $p's > .10$.

Trait Empathy

In line with predictions that barrier-crossing leaders and barrier-bound leaders would score similarly on trait-level empathic abilities, a *t*-test found no differences between the two leader types, $t(52) = -.38$, *n.s.* (barrier-crossing $M = 3.00$, $SD = 1.43$, vs. barrier-bound $M = 3.06$, $SD = .57$). Leaders also did not differ on the four subscale scores, $|t's| < 1.97$, $p's > .05$. Last, fusion measures and trait empathy scores were not correlated, $p's > .28$. Overall, the situated and trait empathy findings suggest that empathic abilities are not a key differentiator between barrier-crossing and barrier-bound leaders, nor are they associated with identity fusion.

Discussion

The pattern of results supported our core hypotheses regarding the extent to which differences in imagistic experiences and group cohesion help explain what makes barrier-crossing leaders unique. Compared with barrier-bound leaders, barrier-crossing leaders reported more memorable imagistic experiences with the outgroup and especially strong identification and identity fusion to the outgroup. Barrier-crossers, however, did not consider themselves to be more empathic toward outgroups, nor did they score especially high on trait measures of empathy.

These results build on an emerging body of work on the dynamics of shared experiences, bonding, and prosociality. Whereas past studies have shown that identity fusion to one's ingroup motivates pro-group action,³¹ here we have shown that fusion to an outgroup may also underlie motivation to develop bridging social capital across intergroup boundaries. This finding is important because it suggests that for barrier-crossing work to take place, leaders may need to accomplish a very personal and difficult feat—to authentically and deeply embed their personal identity within the outgroup. This feat could come about naturally, for example, where combatants on both sides of a conflict recognize their shared experience of violent trauma or where groups mired in past conflict endure together the aftermath of a natural disaster.³² Many of our own study participants, during brief interviews, described unforeseen events experienced with outgroup members as transformative. Recalling the deaths of innocent community members and law enforcement or acute experiences of racism and social injustice, many leaders described formative events that transcended their identities as community leaders and resided within their sense of personal selves. But it may also be possible to develop policy interventions aimed at making shared sufferings more evident to those engaged in conflict. For example, one such initiative has provided Palestinians with the opportunity to visit concentration camps in Europe to see for themselves the evidence of the sufferings of Jews during the Holocaust, drawing parallels with the grievances of those affected more recently by Israeli military aggression.³³ Thus, when a leader shares in the acute suffering or trauma of an outgroup, such as in the wake of the tragic death of an outgroup community member or a visceral protest against injustice, these types of shared experiences may promote a process of personal reflection that often results in feelings of fusion with co-participants.

We hope that our study opens the door to further lines of research on barrier-crossing leaders. Because of the relative scarcity of barrier-crossing leaders, our sample size was relatively small and limited to the network of leaders known to clearly meet inclusion criteria by the second author. Future work could seek to cast a wider net by developing a set of survey items for identifying barrier-crossing versus barrier-bound leaders and distributing such items to community leaders

and community members who could identify leaders. Future work could also aim to recruit budding rather than existing barrier-crossers, or even more ambitiously, aim to develop intervention programs that promote the development of barrier-crossers and track them over time. This work could also shed light on the extent to which sharing traumatic experiences with outgroups is a cause rather than a consequence of fusion.

In addition to the challenge of how to foster barrier-crossing leadership, there are also important questions to ask about how barrier-crossing leaders can impact their followers. It is possible that by drawing attention to shared transformative experiences through their activities, such leaders can foster unity in otherwise divided societies. This effort could be partly a matter of reminding us of common histories through inspiring oratory, but it could also be a matter of creating new collective experiences such as memorial ceremonies and other potent imagistic events. While these techniques have often been used by barrier-bound leaders to foment outgroup hatreds, our research suggests that exactly the same methods can be used to extend group alignments to facilitate greater peacefulness, cooperation, and tolerance.

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