

Asking different questions about outrage

A reply to Brady & Crockett

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Brady and Crockett [1] “agree that moral outrage can have positive social consequences [2], but suggest that online outrage has more downsides than upsides.” At a high level, we take their commentary to ask: is outrage on balance beneficial or harmful (i.e., for collective action)? And answer: harmful.

First, we submit that this is the wrong question. B&C cite evidence that anger impairs decision-making and exacerbates intergroup conflict. It turns out anger also increases decision-makers’ sense of control and agency [3]. Group efficacy—the belief that the group’s goals can be achieved—is a key determinant of collective action (hence outrage’s efficacy for promoting it [4]). Anger can also be productive, specifically in intergroup contexts (so long as it is not accompanied by hatred), because it makes people “channel the anger into more constructive solutions such as education, negotiation, and even compromises” [5]. This suggests that hate, not anger, is the problem. Each of us could continue to highlight findings that nudge the evaluative needle toward “beneficial” or “harmful,” but we believe this is a futile exercise. Our point is that we ought to eschew the practice of determining whether any emotion is harmful on balance—for the purposes of any goal—and document instead the entire spectrum of behaviors that result from experiencing said emotion (see Box 1 for related discussion). This merits mention given the recent uptick in discussions of whether different emotions are effective or useful in everyday life—discussions which sometimes veer into non-falsifiable territory (e.g., claiming outrage does not constitute a “good moral compass in itself” [2]).

Second, even though our original comment focused specifically on the emotion outrage, B&C dedicate most of their commentary to discussing the costs associated

with “online outrage”—sharing expressions of outrage online. This exchange underscores how careful researchers must be to differentiate the experience of outrage from its expression and other downstream behaviors. Online outrage is only *one possible* behavioral response associated with experiencing outrage. As we note in our original article, there are several alternative behaviors that may result from experiencing outrage, including civil forms of collective action (e.g., peaceful protest, voting). Even when outrage drives people to log on to social media, it is not unilaterally destructive so long as constructive response options are available. This suggests one fruitful direction for future research (to which B&C gesture in their concluding remarks): we should study how best to leverage choice architecture so that social media environments provide more constructive than destructive behavioral channels toward which users can target their outrage. For example, when Justine Sacco posted a racist “joke” on Twitter about not wanting to contract AIDS on her trip to Africa, many took to social media to express (among many things) their outrage against her.ⁱ Sacco’s tweet got her fired but also spurred a clever new fundraising opportunity: the URL justinesacco.com now directs visitors to a donation page for the nonprofit Aid for Africa.ⁱⁱ Similarly, outrage over the poaching of Cecil the Lion infused the Wildlife Research Conservation Unit with hundreds of thousands of dollars in donations, bringing the organization back from the brink of shuttering.ⁱⁱⁱ Again, our broader point is that there is not a one-to-one mapping between a given emotion and the resulting behavior (or the pro- or anti-social nature of that behavior).

B&C highlight two specific costs associated with online outrage—the drowning out of the “most important issues” with outrage-driven “noise” and the oppression of

marginalized voices. As to the first cost: they provide no evidence for this claim. Moreover, this line of reasoning immediately sparks the question “most important for whom?” Speaking directly contra their example, there was a massive surge in donation to RAICES, an organization focused on providing assistance to separated migrant families^{iv}, after their donation link went viral on social media (their website crashed from too many visits and donation attempts).^v As to the second cost: the oppression of marginalized voices is well-documented. What is less clear is how much variance in harassment is explained by outrage per se. Even if online outrage drives these effects, a full consideration should account for how social media also provides a relatively low-cost means of broadcasting and receiving common knowledge of a given injustice, while keeping communicators out of physical harm’s way. However, this is all tangential to the point that these costs are associated with behavior on social media, not the experience of outrage itself.

In conclusion, the goal of our original article was to bridge two literatures—moral psychology and intergroup relations—to emphasize the diversity of outcomes associated with experiencing outrage and to initiate a broader conversation regarding the (dis)utility of framing emotions as “beneficial” or “harmful” without detailed consideration of the relevant context. We hope this exchange inspires further research on several open questions about outrage and its consequences.

Box 1. Emotion and reason are not mutually exclusive

This conversation highlights another assumption implied in many theories of human behavior: that emotion and reason are mutually exclusive—or at least very strongly

negatively correlated. Drawing an analogy to recent work demonstrating the dissociation of deontological and utilitarian inclinations in moral decision-making [6], we would like to challenge the positioning of outrage as an absolute antagonist to reason. People may use emotions such as outrage to rationally inform their decision-making, directing their attention to important cues and leading them to draw clearer inferences about what they value (see [7] for related argument regarding empathic concern). As a thought experiment: do we imagine that Gandhi was not outraged by Britain's treatment of Indian citizens? Or do we grant that he experienced outrage, but also recognize that his capacity for reason likely allowed him to channel that outrage toward civil resistance? In the latter case it is not the absence of outrage that drove his behavior but rather the concomitant presence of deliberation and strategy. Future research should also account for the intensity of outrage; while extreme rage might predict destruction, moderated outrage coupled with well-articulated goals (and means of achieving them) may be especially effective for invigorating constructive behavior.

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Resources

ⁱ www.nytimes.com/2015/02/15/magazine/how-one-stupid-tweet-ruined-justine-saccos-life.html

ⁱⁱ www.justinesacco.com

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://news.nationalgeographic.com/2015/08/150801-cecil-the-lion-death-spurred-donations-now-what/>

^{iv} www.usnews.com/news/articles/2018-06-21/raices-works-to-stay-afloat-in-a-flood-of-donations

^v www.texastribune.org/2018/06/27/viral-facebook-fundraiser-has-generated-more-20-million-immigration-no/

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