

Turning Grievance and Vulnerability Into Violence: Lessons on Identity-Based Conflict from the United States and Overseas

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High-profile global incidents of identity-based violence in recent years, such as the 2022 Buffalo, New York supermarket shooting and the Tigray conflict in Ethiopia, have demonstrated that hate can be a powerful mobilizing tool in any community perceiving its own marginalization for any reason. However, research on the linkages between emotional vulnerability, prejudice, and violence is still relatively new; further, sharing of information and best practices between practitioners working in the United States and abroad on similar issues is rare. Through literature reviews and interviews with practitioners working in the United States and Myanmar, I examine how identity-based grievance can serve to meet human needs for belonging and self-definition, and I outline histories of identity-based grievance in the United States and Myanmar. I analyze salient differences in efforts to combat identity-based grievance and violence between domestic American efforts and international aid programs; and provide policy and practice recommendations based on practitioner experiences. This research demonstrates that while the United States and Myanmar have different histories regarding identity-based grievance and violence, their experiences share a few notable patterns. Further, the main differences between interventions in the United States and elsewhere tackling prejudice and identity-based violence are largely related to the weight of the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, which treats hateful speech as a right. Finally, in the experience of U.S. and global practitioners, the most effective approaches involve reducing the salience of the cleavage at issue, addressing conditions (e.g. material) underpinning identity-based grievance, and leveraging current political conditions and the incentives of key stakeholders in conflict.

Introduction

In the wake of World War II, after Holocaust survivors were liberated from concentration camps, academic attention to questions of prejudice and hatred began in earnest to try to make sense of German state-sponsored persecution. Interest in identity as a mobilizing tool for violence intensified further after the breakup of the former Yugoslavia, the Rwandan genocide, and the failure of the Oslo Accords in Israel and Palestine. These events resulted in a growing body of research on how prejudice and hate manifest in humans, as well as scores of interventions to bridge divides and improve social cohesion aimed at reducing the likelihood of new or reemerging conflict. More recently, the events in Washington, D.C. on January 6, 2021, made clear that the United States is not immune to threats posed

by the spread of hateful rhetoric and beliefs which have been present for centuries.

Broadly, two schools of thought dominate discussions around identity-based conflict. One suggests that the distinction between “self” and “other” drives ethnic violence at the group level.¹ Another holds that identity-based cleavages are political tools superimposed onto local conflicts that operate based on individual grievances that are not directly related to identity.² These are not mutually exclusive, as hate can be a powerful mobilizing tool in communities perceiving their own marginalization for any reason. A literature review and interviews with researchers and practitioners about identity-based conflicts in various contexts reveal that these two schools of thought work in tandem to facilitate identity-based violence.

Instances of identity-based violence show that states and individuals participate in a process to translate grievance to hate to violence. Economic and social growth in most countries is uneven. This uneven growth often occurs along identity cleavages, particularly if the distribution of public services and other state resources is unequal. As a result, citizens experience unequal economic and social outcomes and lose trust in the state. The state feels threatened and extremist groups feel empowered by this public loss of trust; both groups then introduce and impose hateful “othering” narratives to explain the unequal outcomes. Citizens who feel emotionally vulnerable due to these unequal outcomes and loss of trust subscribe to those narratives and may then respond positively to calls for violence against outgroup members.

This process of interpreting grievances to lead to violence involves many steps. Evidence and experience from both domestic and overseas programs show that all steps of the process must be addressed at once to effectively stem this violence. Yet significant differences in language, framing, and approach are evident in studies of and interventions to address identity-based cleavages in the United States and elsewhere. As a result, guiding philosophies driving intervention design and impact analysis can be very different. This divergence can be leveraged as an asset, as varied perspectives can better inform program design and implementation. This paper aims to bring together lessons and best practices from practitioners working on domestic and international issues, who often lack incentives to share information in part due to organization structures and in part because of “American exceptionalism,” a belief that the United States is immune to certain problems that occur abroad.³

This paper will first examine literature in psychology, sociology, and peacebuilding to analyze the roots of prejudice and hate, then apply that framework to two case studies that are rarely directly compared: white supremacy in the United States and Burmese Buddhist supremacy in Myanmar. Finally, the paper will review trends in interventions addressing identity-based hate and violence in the United States and internationally and provide policy recommendations based on the experiences of practitioners and researchers across contexts.

Psychosocial and Relational Roots of Prejudice and Hate

Understanding a group’s path from prejudice and hate to violence must begin with an examination of the role of “ingroup” formation in addressing human needs, the role of “outgroup” formation in generating a sense that these needs are threatened, and how that feeling of vulnerability generates prejudice strong enough to respond positively to in-group encouragement to commit acts of violence.

Definitions of human psychological needs exhibit clear patterns. Although Maslow does not directly explain how meeting these needs influences conflict, the four most immediate needs on the hierarchy include, in order, basic survival, safety, belonging, and personal fulfillment.⁴ A few decades later, Burton identified four main human needs: a sense of security and identity; a consistent response from the environment in order to learn; recognition and valued relationships (i.e. bonding); and some control over their environments to ensure their needs are fulfilled.⁵ In the early 2000s, Deci and Ryan outlined self-determination theory, whose three psychological needs (autonomy, competence, and relatedness) underpin internalized motivation.⁶

These needs are partly met through the formation of social groups. Humans do not associate with social groups for merely pragmatic benefits of improved chances of survival; they also derive an emotional sense of “belonging” from such groups (i.e., a sense of security and identity as well as recognition and valued relationships, from Burton’s list of needs).⁷ This comprises social identity, which, as defined by Tajfel and Turner in the 1970s, are “those aspects of an individual’s self-image [that] derive from the social categories to which he perceives himself as belonging.”⁸

Prejudice, stereotype formation, and discrimination “meet” human needs when a major component of these needs is superiority to other groups. The feeling that one’s own group is superior to others requires little more than “in-group” and “out-group” designation. This was demonstrated by a 1954 study known as the “Robber’s Cave” experiment.⁹ In this study, boys as similar as reasonably possible in family background and age were randomly assigned to two groups. They were situated at a campsite, isolated within their respective groups, in order to build a sense of identity and cultural cohesion in their “in-group.” The groups were then brought in contact with each other in a series of competitions. The separation of the boys into competing teams was enough to generate hostility so strong it obscured the boys’ perceptions of reality.¹⁰ There were no intrinsic differences between the two groups, yet they easily created in-group identities and out-group hostilities.

As evidenced by the Robber’s Cave experiment, perceptions of ingroups and outgroups are influenced by emotions that obscure rational thinking and induce vulnerability to calls to violence. When intergroup competition tests group perceptions, people react emotionally. The

basis of intergroup emotions theory is that “people can and do feel emotions on behalf of the[ir] group;” a stronger sense of group identification correlates with stronger emotions in response to group threats.¹¹ In a 2019 case study, researchers outlined four emotions involved in the development of prejudice that leads to violence: resentment, fear, rage, and hatred. While this study asserts that resentment is the strongest of these, intergroup emotions theory qualifies that when a person perceives their ingroup as stronger than the outgroup, intergroup competition sparks anger.¹² In the opposite situation, intergroup competition generates anxiety. These emotional reactions inhibit the ability to rationally process new information that might contradict the source of the anger or anxiety.¹³

Strong negative emotions that underlie violence are not easily disarmed through counterfactual information. Earlier research found that “anxiety was found to lead to more thoughtful processing of information, while anger led to more reliance on easily available cues such as social identities.”¹⁴ However, anxious citizens look for information, particularly threatening information, in a biased way.¹⁵ Researchers Grant-Halvorson and Rock (2015) identify a series of cognitive biases that happen outside of conscious awareness yet influence how people process new information.¹⁶ The biases most relevant to information about in-groups and out-groups can be classified as similarity (i.e., favoring ingroups), safety (i.e., avoiding loss is more emotionally powerful than securing a gain), and expediency (i.e., making decisions using the minimum amount of cognitive effort required). In stressful situations, the effects of bias on decision-making are amplified, and the ability to think critically about new information suffers.¹⁷

Taking actions that lead to violence (for example, starting and spreading rumors about the out-group), or even merely consuming and accepting without questioning such actions, activates intergroup and individual emotions in various ways. The resulting motivations for either taking or supporting inflammatory actions range from: (i) heightening personal status among others by conveying the impression of uniquely having access to important information; (ii) desiring to inform others of impending danger; (iii) sharing anxieties about potential threats and seeking reassurance; and (iv) expressing hostility, fear, or wish, either directly or indirectly through projection.¹⁸ These motivations align with the three types of internalized motivations as defined by social determination theory: (i) identified regulation, or the conscious valuing of a behavior even if it is not enjoyable (for example, to heighten personal status among a group valued as important); (ii) integrated regulation, or valuing a behavior because it is important, an expression of the self, and coherent with other personal goals and values; and (iii) intrinsic motivation, or the mere pleasure (i.e., emotional reward) of a certain behavior.¹⁹ The two lists combined convey how motivation can be externally motivated to elevate social status or internally motivated by the alignment of negative emotions and values. Critically, when the opportunity arises to express these negative emotions as insulting or derogatory sentiments towards the outgroup, self-esteem that has been damaged due to (perceptions of) ingroup loss becomes restored.²⁰

Understanding the role of emotion in intergroup tension helps to explain why state support can be a powerful catalyst that aids majorities in resorting to violence. Political leaders can take advantage of group emotions to gain support and power. In

2019, Ethan Busby et al. found that subjects asked to frame failures of governance in terms of “dispositional blame,” or the attribution of behavior or circumstances to someone’s inherent characteristics, are much more likely to express populist attitudes and to support populist candidates.²¹ Social, political, and religious leaders exploit this for their own gains, employing violent rhetoric that evokes these negative emotions to great effect even among people who are not typically aggressive.²²

While not directly related to identity-based prejudice and violence, Emilie Hafner-Burton (2013) hints at the possible interests leaders might have in stoking such violence by explaining four “benefits” to perpetrators of human rights abuses: a sense of superiority or satisfying a sense of idealism, intelligence, revenge, and money.²³ These align loosely with the human needs outlined earlier: a desire for superiority or idealism corresponds with a “sense of security and identity” as people derive their sense of identity from perceived moral superiority to “out-groups”; intelligence corresponds to a need for “consistent response from the environment” as people develop their understanding of society from lived experience; and revenge corresponds to a need for “control over the environment to ensure needs are fulfilled” as the desire for retaliation often stems from a perceived need to assert control and dominance over those who have committed harms.

Thus, states, as entities led by humans, can be motivated by something resembling emotions just as individuals can. Further, states and other authorities are uniquely positioned to not only promulgate hateful narratives, but also transform these narratives into social norms to which people feel pressure or enthusiasm to conform.

Linkages Between Prejudice and Political Violence

The cases of recent domestic violence in the United States and Myanmar demonstrate the process by which individuals translate grievance into violence. The majority group's feelings of vulnerability and threat caused by anti-minority group narratives are not merely harmful at an interpersonal level but can have profound societal, political, and even institutional implications that persist through generations.

United States

The history of white supremacy in the United States, from the first slave ships to the January 6, 2021 attack on the U.S. Capitol, highlights that the entire definition of "whiteness" was built on superiority over "blackness" for economic reasons. Scholars of white supremacy in the United States generally indicate its main point of origin as European colonialism's effort to divide economic and social classes along racial lines between colonial subjects (i.e., Africans) and Europeans.²⁴ Europeans were influenced by medieval North African scholars who associated blackness with "filth, evilness, ugliness, and sin," and passed these stereotypes and prejudices to Spanish, Portuguese, and other European colonialists.²⁵ At the same time, European cultural consensus grew around the idea that white Christians were not enslavable (anymore), and the sight of Black slaves in Spain and Portugal became a role model for the British to follow. Further, 17th century white settlers in North America attempting to enslave Native Americans were not successful because contact with foreign diseases meant that the latter simply could not "survive in sufficient numbers to become a reliable source of labor."²⁶ Therefore, although it was theoretically economically costly to transport people from

one continent to another for enslavement, Black Africans became the victims of slavery in the early 1600s. This victimization was reinforced by the state where the first directly racially discriminatory law was passed in 1623, in British Bermuda.²⁷

In the United States, the growing need to justify the existence of slavery, even as the transatlantic slave trade was outlawed in Britain in 1807 and existing slaves in the British Caribbean were granted their freedom in 1833, further entrenched racist rhetoric and views against Black people.²⁸ This need became particularly salient during the 1850s. During that time, as new states were added, debates grew over the balance of "slave" and "free" states in the union, the primary line of political division at the time.²⁹ Proponents of slavery cited numerous theories and pseudo-science as justification. One popular theory, called monogenesis, drew from Christianity: namely, that God had turned Cain black as punishment for killing his brother Abel, and all Black people were thus descended from Cain.³⁰ The opposite theory, polygenesis, argued that blacks and whites belonged to different species.³¹ Polygenesis gained more traction in and after the 1850s, influenced not only by "scientific" research but also even by race scientists' emotions of "pity" upon encountering Black servants.³²

The guiding assumption underpinning these theories and the racist rhetoric that invoked them was that Black people were predestined to perpetual servitude to white people. Meanwhile, race "scientists" and racist doctors diagnosed "diseases" with names such as "Drapetomania" (given to a Black person who sought to escape from servitude) and "Rascality" ("misbehavior" of enslaved Black people).³³ These "diagnoses" further reinforced both that servitude was a "natural" state and that

deviation from that state was to be considered deviance. Southern news publications drew from that conclusion to justify enslaving individuals, and declared that American founding principles, such as those enshrined in the Declaration of Independence,

...involve the assumption that the negro is the white man, only a little different in external appearance and education...Ethnology and anatomy, history and daily observation, all contradict the idea...³⁴

The Civil War, and Reconstruction after it, facilitated the first identity-related loss of trust in state institutions by upending the previous social order. Around the end of the Civil War, global economic trends demanded increases in agricultural production of the primary crop cultivated by enslaved people: cotton.³⁵ White Southerners thus reeled from not only the humiliation of clear defeat, but also the loss of a significant labor force at precisely the wrong time.³⁶ One of the first acts of Reconstruction was the advancement of U.S. troops into Southern territory, seizing plantation land in the process.³⁷ This was viewed as Northern encroachment and was counterproductive to building trust in the Union and curbing North-South and racial tensions. With this in mind, President Andrew Johnson reversed General William T. Sherman's plans to redistribute plantation lands to free Black Americans because he was wary of upsetting both economic and race relations in such a direct way.³⁸ Soon after, sharecropping, a system that involved labor as a means of repaying increasingly burdensome debts, arose to replace slavery as a means of maintaining plantation owners' livelihoods with forced labor.³⁹ However, as sharecropping contributed to

growing economic inequality between landowners and the landless, indentured servitude ensnared poor whites as well.⁴⁰ These white Americans, threatened by the idea of sharing a socioeconomic status with Black sharecroppers, emphasized racial differences to distinguish themselves from Black sharecroppers. Thus, "the symbolic good of whiteness offered these laborers a ground for full membership within the republic, no matter their diminished material status."⁴¹

This sense of white vulnerability emboldened anti-Black extremist groups. As the last American forces withdrew from the South after Reconstruction, pro-South authors, starting with Edward Pollard, widely disseminated the idea of the Lost Cause.⁴² The Lost Cause held that the Civil War was not motivated primarily by slavery concerns but rather by concerns for the Southern "way of life," and further that slavery was a benevolent force, rather than a societal evil.⁴³ White supremacist groups such as the KKK, which was founded in 1865, terrorized Black freedmen in hopes of squashing their demands for equal rights and opportunities.⁴⁴ White Southern backlash against freedom for former slaves was supported by lukewarm attitudes in the North toward granting Black Americans full, equal rights. These attitudes persisted even as Northerners, whose economy did not rely on slave labor, tended to support the end of slavery.⁴⁵

Influenced by the racist science of a decade earlier, both Southerners and Northerners agitated over the "Negro Problem," or what free Black Americans would do if they were no longer bound by slavery. At best, the "Negro Problem" held, they might be idle and struggle to navigate the world. At worst, they posed a societal threat, particularly to white women.⁴⁶ Newspapers continued to write about the Black American as "a savage

or a slave” and references to Black Americans’ supposed inferiority remained as explicit as before the war.⁴⁷

As Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution gained currency, so did “Social Darwinism,” or the idea that the wealthy and powerful were biologically superior, and Black individuals belonged at the bottom of the social order because of the inferior traits they developed from evolution.⁴⁸ Even writers who viewed slavery as a problem for poor white Americans described Black Americans as something other than human.⁴⁹ Critically, these groups had the support of Southern state governments, representatives in Congress, and the Supreme Court, which, respectively, enacted and then upheld discriminatory “Jim Crow” legislation that overtly segregated blacks and whites in all public spaces and sought to covertly strip Black Americans of various rights and protections, such as the right to vote.⁵⁰ This legislation shows that the state can enforce individuals’ desire to strip other citizens of their rights, which is a result of their misinformed vulnerability-driven biases.

Mass media, which often draws on existing attitudes, further spread and normalized narratives of violence as an acceptable response to perceived racial threat. In 1905, author Thomas Dixon published his second novel *The Clansman: A Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan*, at a time when the Klan itself had lost most of its momentum.⁵¹ The novel “characterizes Reconstruction as an unmitigated disaster” and draws upon white supremacist themes such as tropes of the innocent white woman victimized by a brutish, savage Black man.⁵² The popularity of Dixon’s novel inspired D.W. Griffith’s infamous film *The Birth of a Nation* a decade later.⁵³ The film is credited with igniting the rebirth of the Ku Klux Klan and facilitating the height of its power.⁵⁴ That the movie simultaneously pioneered modern

film techniques and story construction, thereby remaining in the minds of later directors who drew from it, likely expanded the reach of the film’s supremacist rhetoric and themes.⁵⁵

Over the last century, white Americans have felt threatened by increased political enfranchisement of minority groups and have responded accordingly. In the 1960s, increased rights for Black Americans were successfully institutionalized as a result of the Civil Rights Movement and subsequent Supreme Court rulings that integrated public spaces and codified legal and civil protections.⁵⁶ Not coincidentally, the Ku Klux Klan experienced a revival, gaining renewed notoriety for bombings, lynchings, and other acts of violence against not only Black Americans, but also other Americans considered to be non-white.⁵⁷ As well, at least 101 Southern Congressmembers signed a “Southern Manifesto” encouraging opposition to the integration of schools.⁵⁸

Throughout the 1960s and beyond, perceived progress with racial equality never fully succeeded at diluting white entitlement. More recently, the 2008 election of President Barack Obama led to renewed white anger as white Americans perceived a loss of political dominance. The Obama years witnessed the creation of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program and the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement, which aimed to protect Hispanic Americans and advocate for Black Americans, respectively.⁵⁹ These developments have led television personalities such as Laura Ingraham to claim that America is undergoing “changes that none of us ever voted for and most of us don’t like,” namely, that America “has become estranged or alien” to white Americans.⁶⁰

This perceived loss among some White Americans found a mouthpiece in President Donald Trump, whose rise to political prominence was accompanied by a rise in violent hate crimes against nonwhite Americans and by executive orders sanctioning outright discrimination.⁶¹ President Trump successfully drew upon white Americans' sentiments that a white Christian background, rather than mere subscription to American civic and patriotic values, makes an American.⁶² Further, as evidenced by the discourse around remedying historical injustices towards other groups, for President Trump and his followers, "the historical primacy of whiteness (reflected by a historically majority status) is in a state of terminal decline."⁶³ Famously, the Charlottesville rally in 2017 invoked the rhetoric of loss with the chant "You will not replace us." Another version of this chant is "Jews will not replace us," which was also periodically used in Charlottesville and explicitly connects the rally to the white supremacist and anti-Semitic views underpinning the Holocaust.⁶⁴ Two years later, Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) Director Christopher Wray told the Senate Judiciary Committee that the majority of domestic terrorism investigations conducted by the FBI were connected to white extremist ideologies.⁶⁵ This remark eerily foreshadows the white extremist motivations behind the Capitol attack on January 6, 2021.

Although Trump is no longer in office, the identity-based grievances his administration amplified linger. Benjamin Gellman reported that the most significant determinant of participation in the January 6 attack is white identity in a region where the percentage of white residents is in decline.⁶⁶ Gellman explicitly notes that socioeconomic grievance alone was not enough to attract people to violence against the state, as the January 6 participants included highly

educated professionals.⁶⁷ As demographic trends erode white numerical majorities, these white Americans believe that with their majority, their economic and political power will dwindle as well. The perceived shield whiteness provides from other types of deprivation (such as poverty) becomes an entitlement that white citizens believe they are "owed," and will resort to violence to "reclaim" if it is lost.⁶⁸

Myanmar

The history of in-groups and out-groups in Myanmar points to the ways that even groups long habituated to peaceful coexistence can, after experiencing economic and demographic shifts, turn towards emotional responses that facilitate hate and violence. Prior to British colonial rule, kingdoms in what is today's Myanmar, particularly those on the western frontier such as the Arakan, maintained peaceful relationships with their diverse constituents. When settlers from the Ayeyarwady Valley (who would become today's Rakhine ethnic group) mass migrated into the Arakan in the 11th century, Arakan governors even encouraged these settlers to intermarry with the descendants of earlier Persian and Indian traders.⁶⁹ Further east, although King Anawratha essentially imposed Buddhism as the state religion and the monarchy as its official keeper, Muslims were present in his administration and those that followed.⁷⁰ In later centuries, mosques were built alongside Buddhist temples in the Rakhine capital of Mrauk U. The Kaman, a primarily Muslim ethnic group, descended from a unit of archers that defended the court there in the 17th century.⁷¹

Ethnicity in Burma was fluid and difficult to categorize until the British imported their system of racial classification.⁷² The British process of recording ethnicities calcified not just identities, but allegiances, along racial

lines. Until British colonial annexation upended Burmese society, “[t]hese rulers knew the value in keeping the country’s various religious communities onside, and in doing so they cultivated a degree of communal harmony.”⁷³

Buddhist supremacy in Myanmar originated with an upending of the existing social and economic order. Upon annexation in 1886, British Burma, a territory heretofore populated mostly by ethnic Bamar Buddhists, was administered as a province of British India.⁷⁴ Encouraged by the British perception that Indians were hard workers and loyal to the regime, Indians flowed throughout the British-administrated territory, taking jobs in every sector of society wherever they went.⁷⁵ As a result, Burma rapidly diversified, such that Indians outnumbered indigenous Buddhist Bamar in Yangon, the area’s largest city, within twenty years.⁷⁶ By the 1930s, commentators observed that Yangon had “developed the feel of an Indian city.”⁷⁷ As the Great Depression ravaged heavily indebted rice farmers, more than half of the arable land in the Ayeyarwady Delta was controlled by mostly-Indian “nonresident landlords.” Further, local Buddhist women who married Muslim men often converted and raised their children as Muslims.⁷⁸ As in the United States, swift yet thorough societal and economic changes soon engendered resentment among Myanmar’s indigenous population.

For many Buddhist Burmese, the issues of independence from Britain and reversing the unfavorable demographic changes were the same. Like in the United States, perceived threats empowered extremist groups that promoted violence. Two of the first known Burmese independence/Buddhist supremacy groups were the Young Men’s Buddhist Association (YMBA), founded in 1906 with the goal of uniting various Buddhist groups

to “assert a cultural identity distinct from the Western culture of the colonisers;” and the We Burman Association, founded in 1930 as racial and independence-related tensions escalated during that decade.⁷⁹ A popular anti-colonial rallying cry during the 1920s and 1930s, “Amyo, Batha, Thathana,” declared the need to “protect the race and the nation, the majority language and religion, and the Sasana” (i.e. teachings of the Buddha). This phrase was printed and distributed prolifically by We Burman.⁸⁰ Also around this time, the term “taingyintha,” which today is loosely translated as “national races,” became a means of distinguishing indigenous Burmese from foreigners in British Burma such as Chinese, Indians, and British.⁸¹

The British interpreted Bamar grievance against this situation as subversive resistance to British rule. In response, they further exacerbated the grievance by giving preferential treatment to minority groups regarding representation in the colonial administration and the military.⁸² During World War II, while the Burma Independence Army elected initially to side with the Japanese, minorities such as the Rohingya were recruited to fight with the British.⁸³ On the eve of independence, the British even promised rights to secession for minority groups including the Muslim Rohingya and the Christian Karen and Kachin.⁸⁴ After independence, however, these secession promises were summarily discarded by the first independent Burmese government under Prime Minister U Nu, leading to the first small-scale ethnic armed rebellions.⁸⁵

As in the United States, policy solutions intended to promote resolution ultimately backfired as they attempted to work around, rather than directly address, underlying grievances. The new government, although not completely interested in promoting

multiculturalism, prioritized national unity. Most minority groups, including the Rohingya, were treated comparably with other ethnic minorities.⁸⁶ In the wake of World War II, *taingyintha*, here translated as “indigenous races,” was used in the draft constitution of Burma to advocate for cultural rights for minorities. *Taingyintha* was also used to advocate for national unity: U Nu appealed to *taingyintha* to accept and discharge a duty of responsibility to the state.⁸⁷ The first National Registration Cards (i.e. citizenship papers) printed in 1952 did not ask for or mention religion or ethnicity, meaning “all who could prove a family presence in the country going back two generations or who had lived in the country for eight years prior to independence were granted citizenship, regardless of their group identity.”⁸⁸

However, “national unity” could not resolve the original pre-independence grievance that indigenous Burmese-ness was under threat. Almost immediately after Ne Win led a military coup in 1962 that replaced U Nu’s government with martial law, foreign influences in Myanmar were expelled from the country.⁸⁹ Those expelled included major Western foundations, education institutions, and libraries run by the U.K., the United States, India, and Russia. The military, also known as the Tatmadaw, initiated mass deportations of Indians and Pakistanis living in Burma. Political dialogue with minorities stopped as xenophobia took root.⁹⁰ Roughly ten years after the coup, Ne Win pushed for a new constitution for Burma that defined 135 recognized ethnic groups as indigenous (notably excluding the Rohingya). In 1988, the Burmese legislature passed a law recognizing three tiers of citizenship (full, associate, and naturalized). The law defined “full citizenship” as the ability to demonstrate clear documentation of living in Burma since before 1823, a signal that

implied residency before British rule over Burma began.⁹¹ The choice of date, coupled with the obvious intention of excluding Rohingya Muslims, clearly demonstrates that resentment over demographic changes in Myanmar before independence from Britain was never resolved.

The end of military rule in 2010 proved a critical moment in the determination of who to include in the new democracy. More specifically, although the Tatmadaw retained significant control of the new government according to the 2008 constitution, it felt vulnerable to the direct loss of a share of its political control. The Tatmadaw’s concerns were not unwarranted: Americans who spent significant time in Myanmar found that resentment for the military was stronger after almost fifty years of hardship, and anti-minority sentiment was much more indoctrinated from the top-down than natively internalized.⁹²

As in the United States, mass media played a role in spreading and normalizing violent narratives. Extremist Buddhist groups experienced a revival around 2011 and gained support through social media.⁹³ Promoting, or at least permitting, these extremist groups served the interests of the military by providing rhetorical ammunition to help direct popular grievance away from the military and towards Myanmar’s Muslims. The 969 Movement grew out of the 1988 political uprising and has had considerable influence over the NLD, the party that came to oppose the military and lead the country.⁹⁴ The movement would instruct Buddhist shopkeepers to post stickers with the numbers 969 on their storefronts and encourage Buddhists to boycott Muslim shops.⁹⁵ Its leader, U Wirathu, was known for giving internationally published interviews claiming that Muslims were “breeding so fast” and “stealing...raping” Burmese

women.⁹⁶ When 969 fell out of prominence due to government restrictions, MaBaTha, the acronym for “Organization for Protection of Race, Religion, and Sasana,” arose in 2010 to replace it and became even more powerful than 969.⁹⁷ MaBaTha’s key claim to prominence was its advocacy for a series of Race and Religion Laws grounded in anti-Muslim narratives that were ultimately passed in 2015.⁹⁸ MaBaTha has also gained influence over religious education, which it uses to advance a more anti-Muslim version of Buddhism. Although the liberalization of telecommunications and the plummeting price of a SIM card around that time were expected to improve the exchange of information and therefore reduce prejudice, bias, and manipulability, instead they amplified an alliance of 969 and MaBaTha that orchestrated violence in Rakhine in 2012-13.⁹⁹ However, the Myanmar population lacked adequate time to develop the internet literacy skills needed to filter through the information overload before both the military and MaBaTha began wielding the internet, and Facebook specifically, to spread misinformation and promote their agendas.¹⁰⁰

This violence was, unfortunately, supported by the rise of the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) in October 2016. Although ARSA is just one of many ethnicity-based armed groups battling the military at any given time, its appearance in the headlines provided the perfect scapegoat around which the military could rally support for anti-Rohingya armed action. State-run media published various claims with unclear veracity about ARSA, such as ARSA alliances with foreign terrorist networks and jihadist groups, and that ARSA fighters posed as refugees as they recruited new fighters in Bangladesh. According to military chief Min Aung Hlaing, “the broader ‘Bengali issue’...had become ‘a national cause and we need to be

united in establishing the truth.” His comments were supported by remarks made by Aung San Suu Kyi and her party, reflecting the sentiment that Muslims were receiving outsized support from the international community.¹⁰¹

Once attitudes of emotional vulnerability and grievance lead to violence, these attitudes are extremely difficult to dislodge. Although the government formally banned MaBaTha in 2017, its influence persists. Its views continue to be represented by the military online through partnerships with Burmese influencers and propaganda hidden among seemingly harmless entertainment pages. Facebook’s capabilities proved instrumental in fomenting popular acceptance of military actions against the Rohingya in 2017.¹⁰² In particular, Facebook helped the military gain support among Buddhists in Rakhine State who already subscribed to narratives that suggested Rohingya would eventually take away and occupy all of the land there. The Rohingya have fallen out of the headlines since the February 2021 military coup; in its wake, young urban Burmese Buddhists have begun vocalizing their growing awareness of minority group struggles and even training with minority-led forces to fight militarily with a new unit of the National Unity Government in exile called the People’s Defense Force.¹⁰³ Despite a military-imposed ban on access to Facebook, Facebook identified scores of fake accounts, pages, and groups with ties to Tatmadaw-linked users, after receiving reports from civil society as recently as July 2021.¹⁰⁴ Meanwhile, the National Unity Government in exile has publicly pledged to include the Rohingya in conversations about a new constitution and work towards birthright citizenship for Myanmar.¹⁰⁵ However, skepticism lingers among minority groups about whether these pledges would come to fruition, as there had not been a previous

commitment to an inclusive federal government.¹⁰⁶

A long history of imperialist economic and societal divisions facilitated the takeover of anti-minority narratives and the permeation of identity-based violence in a society that once valued coexistence. Further developments may demonstrate whether and how a century of exposure to anti-“other” narratives can be overcome by the superordinate goal of defeating a common enemy.

Similarities and Implications

On the surface, the United States and Myanmar have very different histories leading to white supremacy and Buddhist Burmese supremacy, respectively. White European settlers in the Americas had no previous contact or intermingling with the African-descended peoples they would exploit, while Burmese Buddhists had centuries-long records of peaceful and even state-encouraged intermingling with Muslims. Further, differences in the permitted levels of free expression in both contexts had implications for how centralized identity-based hateful narratives would become. In part because of these two factors, the Burmese state post-independence played a much larger role in defining anti-Muslim narratives than the American state did in defining anti-Black narratives. The Burmese state created and sowed anti-minority attitudes in areas where they did not substantively exist previously, while American political figures merely amplified already virulent anti-minority rhetoric.

Despite these differences in history, however, majority group supremacy has worked psychologically and rhetorically in many of the same ways. First, both contexts were tainted by the British “obsession with

racial classification” that distinguished between white and Black Americans and between Buddhist Burmese and others in Myanmar and cemented judgments of superiority and inferiority of groups.¹⁰⁷ In both the United States and Myanmar, a majority group’s sense of economic and political loss, vulnerability, and threat led to the development and promotion of negative, dehumanizing stereotypes that facilitate violence against supposedly threatening minority groups. Further, such violence is often organized through extremist groups that take advantage of popular media to sow hysteria and escalate tensions. After a period of conflict, both countries experienced a reconciliation period that was supposed to help the different groups work toward participatory democracy. In practice, however, these reconciliation periods were far too short to address the historical depth of conflict and the emotions underpinning it. Finally, by framing the genuine challenges of majority groups in a dispositional way that draws from these stereotypes throughout history, political actors stoke extant identity-based resentments for political gain.¹⁰⁸ In both contexts, these political narratives produce, and appeal to, a similar spectrum of viewpoints: people who already hold extreme views and people who are aware of the extreme views that exist. The path of extreme hate toward generalized acceptance transpired in different ways. In Myanmar, hateful narratives imposed by the state and extremist groups became mainstream among the people. In the United States, hateful narratives became mainstream from the grassroots to the political elite and back again. But for both white Americans and Burmese Buddhists, “Emotions...serve as resources (similar to weapons and money) for conflict entrepreneurs, who use them against enemies.”¹⁰⁹

Domestic and International Approaches to Combat Identity-Based Hate and Violence

While all countries, including the United States, face challenges of emotions and identity-based conflict, key differences arise in how the United States approaches solutions in domestic and international contexts. Relevant lessons can be derived from each. The next section will now analyze patterns in United States' domestic and international approaches to combating identity-based hate and violence as a basis for its recommendations on best practices.

Key Trends in Approaches

A review of both domestic and international programs reveals key trends in how various programs seek to minimize identity-based hate. First, it is important to note the United States' unique approach to speech protection. In the United States, hateful expressions are treated as protected speech under the First Amendment; hateful expression is not subject to legal consequences. A lack of legal consequences has facilitated a culture in which those who express hateful speech perpetually assert their "right" to make such remarks free of cultural or societal consequences. Unfortunately, when hate speech is not regarded as a problem to be corrected, expressions of hate are not treated as a warning sign for potential violence until actual violence occurs.¹¹⁰ The distinction of protected speech is less salient for organizations working overseas, which are not bound by U.S. legal culture and therefore can more easily link hateful rhetoric to anticipated violence. For these organizations, counter-extremism programming may feed into community-based social cohesion goals.¹¹¹

This difference has facilitated the development of a few distinct approaches, from addressing individual-level intervention, broad-scale bias reduction, direct engagement with political leaders and public figures, and others. Some organizations, such as Life After Hate and Parents for Peace, aim to rehabilitate members of violent extremist groups or prevent the vulnerable from joining one.¹¹² These programs may take the view that hate is a public health problem akin to addiction.¹¹³ This view follows two general trends in social science research: first, that community-level violence can be treated as an "epidemic" similar to contagious disease; and second, that social cohesion can be a dependent variable for other health outcomes.¹¹⁴

Other programs work to engage ordinary citizens with different identities in conversation to reduce ordinary prejudice.¹¹⁵ In service of this, some American organizations, such as Facing History and Ourselves, develop materials targeting individual educators or institutions.¹¹⁶ They may choose to work with universities precisely because their student bodies represent a "cross section of society" where students from diverse backgrounds and communities interact.¹¹⁷ These types of programs tend to promote social cohesion for its own sake, using the language of countering "a divided America"¹¹⁸ or of training the next generation in civic skills. Organizations such as Soliya, which hosts virtual dialogues between university students in the United States and overseas, may adopt this lens as part of their strategy for combating selection bias and inviting a wider audience to participate, as people who feel threatened by the rhetoric used to frame a conversation will not come to the table.¹¹⁹

International organizations, particularly multilateral bodies, have been able to

coordinate directly with local government entities to influence, for example, locality-wide educational curricula.¹²⁰ Common to initiatives funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and other international donors, an overarching project in a country or community may contain a diverse mixture of program components such as dialogues, bridging activities (e.g. soccer matches between youth from different groups), trauma awareness-raising and healing, and coordination to address issues such as resource management disputes that drive identity-based grievance.¹²¹ These types of interventions often directly instrumentalize social cohesion programming as a means of preventing or recovering from identity-based violence.¹²² Finally, some organizations, such as Canopy of Northwest Arkansas and the Centre for Information Technology and Development (CITAD) in Nigeria, seek to directly engage lawmakers, policymakers, and other leaders and persuade them to leverage their role in social cohesion through policy, public awareness, or both.¹²³

Despite the broad-based strategies to combat violence, programs operating in both the United States and overseas shared that they face common challenges, including: (i) political will and buy-in from influential authorities, (ii) the rapid spread of misinformation and disinformation online, (iii) community pessimism or disengagement due to previous intervention failures, (iv) selection bias in program participants; and (v) the need for conflict sensitivity in intervention design.

Recommendations

Given the science behind vulnerability to emotional responses that beget hate and violence, differences in framing and approach, and the broad experience of practitioners and researchers, below is a

non-exhaustive list of recommendations for policymakers and practitioners addressing identity-based conflict.

Find ways to make identity less salient as a mobilization tool.¹²⁴ The salience of identity cleavages in daily life influences how easily identity can be weaponized by states for political ends.¹²⁵ Reducing the salience of identity could impact how quickly and emotionally people react to changes related to their perceived identity status. This reduction could include appealing to a different identity that supersedes the identity of cleavage and that allows multiple forms of identity to exist. For example, Canopy of Northwest Arkansas, a refugee services organization, drew community support for its initial founding from common values as Christians in the face of hateful anti-immigrant rhetoric.¹²⁶ This type of appeal is supported by research showing that in- and out-groups are malleable and context-dependent.¹²⁷ As such, emphasizing commonalities over differences can be an effective way of countering hateful narratives.¹²⁸ One particularly effective approach is highlighting common “superordinate” goals that are unrelated to the identity cleavage.¹²⁹ Reducing the influence of identity may also involve rehabilitation from trauma: organizations working to support people seeking to leave extremism, including white supremacy, “go around [ideology] to go beyond it”¹³⁰ by seeking information about events in extremists’ lives, such as trauma, that make them emotionally vulnerable to the influence of hate.¹³¹ Similarly, organizations working to rebuild social cohesion after violent conflict and prevent it from reoccurring incorporate trauma counseling and rehabilitation services into their programs.¹³²

Address hate and underlying conditions that facilitate vulnerability to hate simultaneously. As emotions underpinning outgroup prejudice and hate are typically reactive, isolating the prejudice and hate as a target for intervention is inadequate, as is isolating the material grievance without addressing societal-level emotional responses. A USAID-funded Mercy Corps evaluative research report finds that in contexts where natural resource management is a conflict driver, building trust between groups in conflict most effectively reduces support for extremist violence when paired with other interventions that substantively address resource distribution.¹³³ Multiple practitioners with experience in Myanmar shared their assessment that international programs' inability to address the core challenges of citizenship and power imbalances undermines their social cohesion efforts.¹³⁴ Similarly, a main critique of Search for Common Ground's evaluation report on social cohesion programming in Tanzania is that the choice to avoid direct mention of the contentious issues to secure government buy-in came at the cost of project efficacy.¹³⁵

In the United States, projects encouraging racial reconciliation often fail to integrate the underlying grievance and emotion behind hateful narratives or provide opportunities to develop substantive community efforts to that end, and efforts to temper the social acceptability of hateful rhetoric and views, while experiencing modest success at a classroom level, falter under the weight of the First Amendment.¹³⁶ However, tailored interventions to explore both hateful narratives and lifetime experiences and trauma behind a person's motivation to join an extremist group have helped to lead extremists to disengage.¹³⁷ Similarly, Mercy Corps finds that dialogue programs between Arab and Kurdish

municipal leaders in Iraq have built sufficient trust that changing the inequitable distribution of municipal service provision was not only possible but correlated with reductions in local violence; and that interventions that only focus on facilitated interactions or public awareness are not successful if they do not address underlying material inequities or other grievances.¹³⁸

Take advantage of prevailing political conditions and interests as well as local community consensus. Experience with USAID programs has shown that, while the goal is to end bloodshed expediently, interventions that are not mindful of political conditions will fail because division almost always serves a political interest.¹³⁹ Through its work in countering hate speech, PeaceTech Lab has observed that interventions to educate communities about harmful and hateful rhetoric are most effective in the time immediately following elections. PeaceTech Lab's local partners have reported that after the urgency of mobilizing for an election subsides, the public is calmer and more receptive to questions about the nature of their actions during the election season and even the prospect that they might have been lied to.¹⁴⁰ For Canopy, the refugee resettlement organization in Arkansas, two local conditions collided fortuitously. First, Governor Asa Hutchinson was term-limited and could not legally campaign for reelection as Governor of Arkansas. Given this, voicing opinions that ran counter to dominant political party narratives would not incur direct political risks. Second, as the 2015 Syrian refugee crisis dominated headlines, an outpouring of sympathy emerged across northwest Arkansas as it did elsewhere in the United States. These conditions supported Canopy's advocacy to persuade Governor Hutchinson to continue to resettle refugees in Arkansas despite President Trump's September 2019

executive order permitting state and local governments to end new refugee resettlement in their localities.¹⁴¹ Ultimately, Canopy was a participant in successfully convincing Governor Hutchinson to continue resettling refugees in northwest Arkansas.¹⁴² According to Emily Linn, Canopy's former executive director, he chose to publicly defend that decision independently of any of Canopy's demands. According to George Washington University researcher Jon Lewis, the range of solutions available to policymakers looking to combat the hate behind white supremacist violence has narrowed considerably over the last four or five years given the extent to which expressions of identity-based hate have been normalized. However, legal or institutional tools are still available to address extremist violence—for example, establishing a domestic terrorism unit in the Department of Justice.

Identify key stakeholders influencing identity-based narratives and leverage incentives for action. Related to the previous recommendation, it is important to work with states and other authorities and build their trust, appealing to both their emotions (as entities directed by humans) and their more tangible incentives. PeaceTech Lab has found that shaming organizations and individuals from a position outside the relevant context and without a clear plan or approach to combat the hateful narratives they spread does not work.¹⁴³ CITAD, a partner of PeaceTech Lab, has been successful at publicly calling out politicians and other figures for using hateful language and tracking how these figures stop their use of such language afterward. While outside organizations often shout their condemnation into the void, CITAD attributes its success to the reputation it has developed within Nigeria in tracking and combating hate speech over the last six years.¹⁴⁴ Similarly, key to Canopy's

advocacy efforts were relationships built at each level of authority: community leaders, then local government officials, and finally Congressmembers. Demonstrated support from each level of leadership provided Canopy credibility when appealing to the next level.¹⁴⁵

Conclusion

While the field of political psychology and exploration of vulnerability and prejudice as policy questions is still relatively new, this paper demonstrates that the research on human needs and the role of emotions in conflict is already aligned with the experience of practitioners in both the United States and overseas. Best practices from programs in the United States combating identity-based hate that leads to white supremacy-motivated violence can inform programs related to counter-extremism, conflict prevention, and peacebuilding abroad, and vice versa.

Leaning into sharing learnings between U.S. and overseas programs raises questions about the limits of the universality of human psychology given local cultural contexts. While some interventions or ideas may be received differently by audiences with different cultural frames of reference, some best practices from each context could be beneficial to consider universally. U.S. domestic practitioners can learn from global programs' non-securitized (i.e., avoiding clear focus on minimizing security threats such as terrorism) approach to countering hate-related violence, as overly securitized approaches have been shown to be less effective overseas. Further, U.S. programs could, as overseas programs do, clarify goals of reducing violence through social cohesion programs, particularly as hate crimes rise in the wake of COVID-19 and possibly as a means of sidestepping concerns about

running afoul of the First Amendment.¹⁴⁶ Meanwhile, practitioners working overseas can improve the framing of project initiatives and project work with family members of individuals engaged in identity-based violence to more precisely attract the target group to participate, and learn from U.S. programs' framing of violence as a public health issue, which may improve likelihood of support for initiatives from host governments.

The systematic integration of behavioral psychology into interventions and the sharing of learnings between international practitioners and American practitioners is long overdue. As hateful speech and misinformation spread across rapidly

developing technology platforms, those seeking to fight against prejudice and hateful rhetoric must make full use of every available tool, experience, and lesson.

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