

# Does putting the brakes on outrage bottle up social change?

October 23 2018

---



Credit: CC0 Public Domain

While outrage is often generally considered a hurdle in the path to civil discourse, a team of psychologists suggest outrage—specifically, moral outrage—may have beneficial outcomes, such as inspiring people to take

part in long-term collective action.

In a literature review, the team, led by two Penn State moral psychologists, combined findings from the fields of moral psychology and intergroup psychology to investigate the dynamics of outrage, which they define as anger at the violation of one's own moral standards.

In moral psychology, outrage is generally considered a negative emotion that leads to, at worst, an escalation of the conflict, or, at best, virtue signaling and slacktivism, according to Victoria L. Spring, a doctoral candidate in psychology, Penn State. However, she added these studies often focus on the immediate [effect](#) of outrage, unlike studies in intergroup psychology, which often suggest that outrage can lead to long-term positive effects through collective action.

"Some intergroup psychologists, who are psychologists who study group relations, conflict and conflict resolution, as well as some sociologists, have proposed that anger, if it is effectively communicated, can be leveraged into collective, social action," said Spring. "Anger can then serve as a signal that a specific transgression is broadly considered to be unjust by one's peers."

For example, the researchers, who present their analysis in *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, currently online, cite a study that showed women who read that the majority of men have hostile sexist beliefs exhibit anger, which also predicted intentions to join [collective action](#) for equal salaries. Women who showed anger at the sexist beliefs were also more likely to actually participate in political action later.

The researchers also said that more research should be done on the cumulative, long-term effect of expressing moral outrage, not just the immediate aftermath of an interpersonal exchange, said C. Daryl Cameron, assistant professor of psychology, Penn State and research

associate in the Rock Ethics Institute.

"By drawing on the intergroup relations literature, we're suggesting that there is actually a lot of work in this other area of psychology suggesting that outrage can get you to care, can get you motivated to sign petitions, can get you to volunteer, things which have outcomes that are much longer term than signaling," said Cameron.

In social media, for example, the researchers cite another study showing that people who express outrage at racist or sexist comments by piling on angry comments on the perpetrator, are often judged more negatively.

"Yes, studies do seem to show negative effects of viral blaming for the blamer, nevertheless, we have seen cases where viral blaming has led to positive change over time," said Cameron. "So, even if there are negative short-term effects for the blamers or the blamed, there could still be long-term effects where you have a pro-social action."

Spring also said that the idea that labeling any emotion as exclusively good, or exclusively bad, may lead to problems in creating social change. She added that rhetoric promoting only empathy, which is often described as a positive emotion, could have long-term negative effects on motivation to effect change.

"We've noticed a conflict in popular discourse that people often pit outrage and empathy against each other," said Spring. "However, people may leverage empathy norms to suppress outrage. This can be particularly damaging if the [anger](#) is being expressed by a marginalized group."

The researchers said that future studies should be conducted using this perspective that unites the moral and intergroup [psychology](#) fields.

"We want to present a more integrated approach," said Spring. "We think the downsides of outrage have been thoroughly discussed, so we want to present some potential upsides of outrage that we may have not paid as much attention to."

**More information:** Victoria L. Spring et al, The Upside of Outrage, *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* (2018). [DOI: 10.1016/j.tics.2018.09.006](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tics.2018.09.006)

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

Citation: Does putting the brakes on outrage bottle up social change? (2018, October 23)  
retrieved 26 April 2024 from  
<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2018-10-outrage-bottle-social.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.