

## Special Thematic Section on "Multiple Perspectives in Conflict Settings: From Diversity to Pluralism"

# The Role of Identity Transformations in Comparative Victim Beliefs? Evidence From South Sudanese Diaspora

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### Abstract

There has been a growing interest in the study on collective victimhood and this research has increased our knowledge on how victim groups construe their victimization relative to other groups. However, most of this research has assumed that the groups involved in these construals were pre-existing prior to the conflict and remained fixed during and after the conflict. This study aimed to examine how conflict facilitates the transformation of social identities (i.e., how ingroups and outgroups are construed) and how these transformed social identities are used by group members in their construals of comparative victim beliefs. Eighteen South Sudanese immigrants were interviewed about their experiences during the Sudan civil wars. Thematic analysis revealed two broader themes: "1) "who is 'us' versus 'them'?" (i.e., identity transformation in light of collective victimization and privilege; 2) "what happened to us?" (i.e., construal of ingroup victimization relative to other groups). These findings demonstrate the complexity in how immigrant groups construe social identities constructed in the context of intergroup conflicts, and how these transformed identities are then used in their construals of collective victimhood.

**Keywords:** social identity transformation, comparative victim beliefs, collective victimhood, intergroup conflict, diaspora, South Sudanese

Journal of Social and Political Psychology, 2019, Vol. 7(2), 1021–1043, <https://doi.org/10.5964/jspp.v7i2.865>

Received: 2017-10-01. Accepted: 2019-07-12. Published (VoR): 2019-12-18.

Handling Editor: Guy Elchereth, University of Lausanne, Lausanne, Switzerland

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In the aftermath of conflict, members of victim groups attempt to make sense of what happened to them. In many cases, they develop certain beliefs about their group's victimization, including perceived injustice and ingroup vulnerability (Bar-Tal & Antebi, 1992; Bar-Tal, Chernyak-Hai, Schori, & Gundar, 2009; Vollhardt, 2009). Some specific beliefs about the ingroup's victimization are constructed in comparison to other groups' experiences during the same or a different conflict—referred to as comparative victim beliefs (Noor, Vollhardt, Mari, & Nadler, 2017). Comparisons with different groups such as the adversary in a conflict (Cohrs, McNeill, & Vollhardt, 2015; Noor, Brown, Gonzalez, Manzi, & Lewis, 2008; Noor, Brown, & Prentice, 2008) or other victim or minority groups (Nair & Vollhardt, 2019; Vollhardt, Nair, & Tropp, 2016) are key ingredients in post-conflict reconciliation as they have

been associated with negative or prosocial attitudes towards these groups, depending on whether the comparisons are exclusive/competitive or inclusive (see also [Noor et al., 2017](#); [Vollhardt et al., 2019](#)).

Given that most of the research on collective victimhood has been conducted among groups involved in intractable conflicts (e.g., Jews and Palestinians in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; Protestants and Catholics in the Northern Ireland conflict), researchers have often chosen the groups involved when developing interview questions or survey items (e.g., “To what extent do you agree with the following statement(s): In one way or another, we, Palestinians and Israelis, are all victims of the regional conflict”, [Noor, Shnabel, Halabi, & Doosje, 2015](#)). This assumes that the “ingroup” and “outgroup” were clear-cut and unambiguous, relevant groups. However, in other conflict settings such as civil wars, it is not always clear which groups are involved, or which are relevant for comparisons of victimization experiences. This is because groups may continue to evolve during the civil war as alliances and divisions occur, thus making the target groups of comparative victim beliefs less obvious.

The current study examines South Sudanese diasporans’ experiences of collective victimhood during the Sudan civil wars (1955–1972 and 1983–2005) with the aim of contributing to our understanding of how groups construe their experience relative to others. Specifically, I examine how the Sudan civil wars shaped the “ingroup” and “outgroup(s)”, and how these conflict-informed social identities were then used in construals of comparative victim beliefs. The Sudan civil wars provide a fitting context for examining these questions given the multiple groups in Sudan and their continuous evolution during and in the aftermath of the war ([Madibbo, 2012](#); [Mamdani, 2004](#); see also [Moss, 2017](#)). Furthermore, the identities of migrant groups continue to evolve as their social contexts change ([Bhatia, 2002](#)), thus presenting a complex blueprint for their construals of comparative victim beliefs.

## The Transformation of Social Groups in the Context of Intergroup Conflict

Researchers across various disciplines have generally argued that social identities can be used for mobilizing intergroup conflict. In social and political psychology, social identity theory (SIT, [Tajfel & Turner, 1979](#)) and self-categorization theory (SCT, [Turner, 1982](#); [Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987](#)) have provided a theoretical framework for the link between social identities and intergroup conflict. According to these theories, political leaders and other “identity entrepreneurs” mobilize individuals to define themselves in terms of their social group membership, categorizing individuals with similar attributes as ingroup members and individuals with different attributes as outgroup members (see [Reicher & Hopkins, 2001](#); [Steffens et al., 2014](#); but see also [Durrheim et al., 2018](#); [Moss, 2017](#)). After creating the boundaries that delineated the ingroup from the outgroup, these leaders then provide direction to ingroup members on specific actions to engage in, including agitating or creating defense against the outgroup ([Durrheim et al., 2018](#); [Reicher & Haslam, 2016](#)).

Beyond social categorization, social identity content also plays an important role in intergroup conflict. For example, interviews with Bosnian refugees showed that participants construe two meanings to their social identity as Bosnian Muslims— while some participants endorsed a narrative of coexistence of groups in prewar Bosnia & Herzegovina, others endorsed a narrative of threat ([Bikmen, 2013](#)). Furthermore, these diverging meanings of ingroup identity further interacted with the participants’ ethnic identification to predict their attitudes towards the outgroup (i.e., Bosnian Croats). Similarly, in Northern Ireland, ingroup identification only predicted negative behavioral intentions when participants endorsed an antagonistic ingroup identity content ([Livingstone & Haslam, 2008](#)). Finally, when a neutral or tolerant social identity content was invoked, highly identified Dutch participants were more likely than low identifiers to oppose Muslim rights. Conversely, similar levels of opposition to Muslim rights

were observed for both high and low identifiers when a social identity rooted in Christianity was invoked (Smeekes, Verkuyten, & Poppe, 2011).

Researchers have therefore argued that social identities can be used to *promote* intergroup conflict and the content of these social identities impact how participants make sense of their experience and relate to outgroups. Despite the emphasis on the causal link between the mobilized social identities and intergroup conflict, social identity theories allow for an interactionist view whereby the social context can also produce or redefine social identities (Drury & Reicher, 2000; Reicher & Hopkins, 1996). Drawing on several events including mass protests, disasters and sporting matches, Reicher and his colleagues proposed the elaborated social identity model (ESIM) of the crowd (e.g., Drury & Reicher, 2000; Reicher, 1984), which argues that social identities are not always a predefined construct that guide collective behavior, but can also develop as a function of intergroup dynamics present in collective events.

We can expect these processes to be relevant to intergroup conflict as well. Contrary to the common belief that intergroup conflicts only reflect historical tensions between two or more pre-existing, chronically salient and clear-cut groups (e.g., long-standing and historically relevant ethnicities, races, etc.), conflict can also give rise to the creation and transformation of new social identities based on the political and social processes present in the conflict (Elcheroth & Reicher, 2017). This is because conflict and other forms of collective violence provide an environment for defining which people are included in the “us” versus “them”. That is, regardless of previous identities, people that acted together and experienced similar situations during the conflict may be now perceived as part of a new superordinate ingroup, while those that did not support the ingroup or took active steps to curtail their goals may be perceived as part of a new collective outgroup identity (Elcheroth & Reicher, 2017).

### **Making Sense of Collective Victimhood: Comparative Victim Beliefs**

Research on comparative victim beliefs so far has mostly focused on two distinct ways in which members of victim groups make sense of their experience of collective victimhood in relation to other groups' experiences. On one hand, they may construe their experience in a way that establishes that they have suffered more than the other group involved in the conflict (i.e., “competitive victimhood”, Noor, Shnabel, Halabi, & Nadler, 2012) or excludes the outgroup from the victim category (i.e., “exclusive victim consciousness”, Vollhardt, 2012). This construal, which amplifies ingroup suffering relative to other groups' suffering, has been found in numerous contexts and has been linked to destructive intergroup relations with different outgroups (Noor et al., 2012). For example, among Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland, claims that the ingroup had suffered more than the opposing conflict party predicted less intergroup forgiveness due to decreased outgroup trust and empathy (Noor, Brown, & Prentice, 2008). Similarly, Vollhardt and Bilali (2015) found that among different groups in Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo and Rwanda, competitive victimhood predicted negative intergroup attitudes such as decreased outgroup trust, increased social distance, and support for political and economic exclusion of the outgroup.

Alternatively, victim groups may acknowledge the other group's suffering (i.e., “inclusive victim consciousness”, Vollhardt, 2015) and include other groups in the victim category (i.e., “common victim identity”, Shnabel, Halabi, & Noor, 2013). This construal has also been shown to be present in narrative accounts of collective victimhood among various victim groups and to facilitate positive intergroup relations (Adelman, Leidner, Ünal, Nahhas, & Shnabel, 2016; Vollhardt, 2015). For example, among various historically oppressed groups in India and among Vietnamese-Americans, inclusive victim consciousness (that is, perceived similarities between the ingroup's and outgroup's collective victimization) predicted support for refugees and immigrants (Vollhardt et al., 2016). Similarly,

Shnabel et al. (2013) found that when a common victim identity was induced among Israeli Jews and Palestinians after reading that both Jews and Palestinians were victims of the intractable conflict, both groups were more likely to forgive the opposing conflict party.

Beyond these well-established comparative victim beliefs, in some cases, victim groups may make a downward comparison whereby they perceive that the outgroup has suffered *more* than their ingroup or that the ingroup has more privileges than the outgroup (Nair & Vollhardt, 2019). For example, when some Muslim men in India were asked about their ingroup's experience of collective victimization, they argued that Muslim women had more disadvantages compared to them (Nair & Vollhardt, 2019). These downward comparisons, although rare, can have important intergroup outcomes as acknowledging in-group advantages or outgroup suffering can promote positive attitudes and behaviors towards the outgroup members, including those involved in a contentious relationship (Vollhardt, Mazur, & Lemahieu, 2014; see also, Twali, Hameiri, Vollhardt, & Nadler, *in press*).

Research on these comparative victim beliefs has mostly focused on comparisons with the other conflict party, especially in conflicts where both groups have been both perpetrators and victims (e.g., Great Lakes Region, Vollhardt & Bilali, 2015; Israel-Palestinian conflict, Shnabel et al., 2013; Northern Ireland conflict, Cohrs et al., 2015; McNeill, Pehrson, & Stevenson, 2017; Noor, Brown, Gonzalez, et al., 2008). In addition, the comparisons sometimes go beyond those directly involved in the conflict to include other victim groups in the region or worldwide (Vollhardt et al., 2019; Vollhardt et al., 2016).

In stating the specific comparison in interview questions or items assessing comparative victim beliefs, most of this research has assumed that the victimized ingroup and comparison outgroups were clear and psychologically salient groups. However, there are several reasons why this is not always the case. First, it is equally likely that comparisons can be made about various subgroups within the ingroup (e.g., among Ashkenazi and Mizrahi Israeli Jews; Saguy, Dovidio, & Pratto, 2008), and that competition due to different intersecting identities of disadvantage occurs within the ethnic, religious, or racial ingroup as well (e.g., Dalit women compared to Dalit men in India, Nair & Vollhardt, 2019). Furthermore, the comparison groups in this research have usually been chosen by the researcher according to rigidly predefined groups, based on their roles during the conflict (for an exception, see McNeill et al., 2017).

Most importantly, assuming specific comparison groups ignores the possibility that conflicts can define and reconceptualize the boundaries and content of the social identities (Elcheroth & Reicher, 2017). Specifically, during some conflicts, new groups may emerge when alliances are formed across groups in order to achieve a higher order goal such as collective resistance against a common enemy (Acar & Uluğ, 2016), or an existing group may disintegrate into smaller groups due to competition for resources and dominance (Jok & Hutchinson, 1999). In addition, emigration, which is a common consequence of intergroup conflict, may facilitate in the further evolution of these social identities as emigrants adopt the social identities of their host countries or construct new diasporic identities (Bhatia, 2002). Consequently, these transformed social identities may inform the comparative victim beliefs constructed. When researchers therefore focus on chronically salient social groups such as based on ethnicity, they fail to capture the full range of and diversity within these groups and may overlook resulting comparative victim beliefs that arise from comparing groups that emerged in the context of the conflict.

## Present Study

The present study therefore seeks to examine how intergroup conflict shapes the construction and reinterpretation of social identities, and how these social identities are then utilized when making sense of ingroup's experience of collective victimization relative to other groups.

These questions seek to add a more complex approach to the research on comparative victim beliefs, which often assumes that the groups involved in these comparisons are fixed throughout the conflict. To answer these questions, I examined the narrative accounts of South Sudanese immigrants and refugees in the United States about their experiences of collective victimization during the Sudan civil wars.

## The Sudan Civil War

The Sudan civil wars (1955–1972 and 1983–2005) provide a good example of the complex role of social identity in intergroup conflict. Prior to the civil wars, Sudan was inhabited by a diverse ethnic and religious population, with some estimating the country to have about 500 ethnic groups who speak 130 languages (Zambakari, 2013). However, these groups became confined into two dichotomous superordinate social identities – Arabism, which is associated with groups with Muslim and Arab descent and culture, and Africanism, which is associated with groups with Christian or indigenous beliefs and African culture (Madibbo, 2012; Mamdani, 2004). Propelled by discourse from elites of both groups on whether Sudan should primarily be identified as an Arab or African country, Sudan became engulfed in a 'national identity crisis' (A/Salam, 2008), with the mostly dominating Northern elites claiming an Arab identity and institutionalizing the hegemony of Arabism in various facets of social and political life (e.g., Arabic became the only medium of education and public communication, Madibbo, 2012). The Southern elites, however, rejected this on the grounds that Southerners would become further alienated politically and socio-economically (Deng, 1997). However, these social identities were not always dichotomous and rigid and as the conflict progressed, the nature of the groups continued to evolve. For instance, some groups that had enjoyed peaceful coexistence and political alliances became divided after taking opposing sides of the conflict (e.g., Ngok Dinka and Homr Arabs: Deng, 2001) while other groups that were part of the Southern liberation movement briefly defected back to the Northern government (e.g., Nuer: Jok & Hutchinson, 1999).

This crisis of identity and socioeconomic marginalization of groups that inhabited the Southern part of Sudan eventually led to the outbreak of a civil war between the Arab-dominated government of Sudan and the African-dominated Sudan People's Liberation Movement/ Army (SPLM/A; Deng, 1995). The civil war led to the loss of more than two and half million lives and the displacement of more than five million more (United Nations Mission in Sudan, 2011). The end of the civil war came in 2005 after the signing of a Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA). In January 2011, a referendum to determine self-determination led to an overwhelming number of South Sudanese choosing to secede from Sudan. Later that year, South Sudan became independent. However, previously unresolved conflict between different tribes in South Sudan over political representation and competition for resources led to the eruption of an internal civil war soon after independence between groups loyal to President Kiir (who is from the Dinka tribe) and his former deputy Riek Marchar (from the Nuer tribe).

The Sudan civil wars led to a large number of South Sudanese becoming displaced to surrounding African countries, with some of them getting resettled to a third country, including the United States. It is currently estimated that about one hundred thousand South Sudanese live in the United States (Kelemen, 2007). Examining South Sudanese diasporans' social identity transformation and how these transformations factor into their construals of comparative victim beliefs is critical given the various identity transformations that have occurred among the group,

including transformations as a result of emigration, formation of the new country of South Sudan, among others. In addition, many diasporans groups generally play a critical role in post-conflict negotiation and can become “peace-makers” or “peace-wreckers” (Shain, 2002; Smith & Stares, 2007). Finally, diaspora groups actively participate in the construction of a master narrative about their group’s experience of collective victimhood. Indeed, members of the diaspora have been relied on in several narrative construction processes such as Truth and Reconciliation Commissions (e.g., Liberia Truth and Reconciliation Commission Diaspora Project), or the memorialization of historical events, among others.

## Method

### Participants

Eighteen South Sudanese immigrants in the United States were interviewed. All participants had left Sudan because of the civil war and had lived in different countries in Africa before emigrating to the U.S. All participants had been living in the U.S. for at least two years. There was an equal number of male and female participants, and their age ranged from 26 to 53 years ( $M = 36$ ,  $SD = 7.1$ ). Participants came from different groups within the South Sudanese African pan-ethnic group (Bari=3, Dinka=10, Lokoya=1, Nuer=3, Unspecified=1), and none of them belonged to the Sudanese Arab pan-ethnic group. Participants came from varying educational backgrounds, with the majority having attended some high school.

Participants were recruited using personal contacts, community gatekeepers, and through snowball sampling (Patton, 2002). First, gatekeepers were identified through personal contacts and community centers serving the South Sudanese communities. The gatekeepers were informed about the purpose of the interview (i.e., “discuss people’s experiences when their group was the target of harm by another group”), after which they proceeded to introduce me to the wider South Sudanese community in cities across the North-East, East and Mid-West regions of the United States. Additional participants were recruited through snowballing when interviewed participants introduced me to other South Sudanese community members.

### Interview Process

The interviews were conducted in English and took place from January to June 2016. Prior to this time, an internal civil war had erupted in South Sudan between groups loyal to two leaders of the SPLM liberation movement – President Kiir and his former deputy Riek Machar (International Crisis Group, 2014). At the time of the interview, a peace deal between the different factions was in effect but there was renewed fear of another eruption of violence. The saliency of the ongoing South Sudan conflict occasionally influenced participants’ narrative accounts about the Sudan civil war such as when they described the war as a root cause of the 2013 conflict.

The structure of the interview was modeled after the biographic-narrative method (Wengraf, 2001). This method utilizes different interview sections with open-ended questions, which elicit participants’ narratives without the constraints of structured interviews. In this study there were three interview sections. First, participants were asked demographic questions including their age, education background, current occupation, current and previous residence, and years spent in the U.S. In the second section, participants were asked to provide a narrative account of their group’s experience of collective victimization. Specifically, participants were given the following open-ended prompt:

*“I want you to tell me about the time in Sudan/ South Sudan when your ethnic group or tribe was the target of harm (e.g., violence, severe injustice) by another group from Sudan/ South Sudan. You could start by talking about the time when you became aware about the conflict...up to when the conflict finally came to an end, if it came to an end.”*

When participants were narrating about their experience, I encouraged continued narration by using general fillers (e.g., “uhuh”, “right”), or by repeating verbatim part of what they had said (e.g., “so you said that...”). Notably, the prompt did not specify which groups constituted the ingroup or the outgroup group, instead participants identified these groups while providing a narrative account about their group’s experiences during the civil war. In addition, many participants interwove personal experiences within the narrative. Similarly, participants’ specific recounting of their experience (e.g., their construal of their experience relative to other groups) was not prompted. In the third and final stage of the interview, participants were asked several follow-up questions about the collective victimization events, its personal significance, and information about the perpetrating and victimized group(s). The interview concluded with a general probe (“Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your own or your group’s experience?”).

All interviews were audio-recorded and lasted from 11 minutes to 1 hour and 25 minutes ( $M = 32.16$  minutes), with the shortest interview resulting from one participant’s general and unelaborated responses. They were then transcribed verbatim, considering all verbal and nonverbal utterances such as sighs (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The transcripts were then de-identified to maintain privacy. The final data corpus consisted of 107 single-spaced pages.

## Positionality and Reflexivity

Qualitative research benefits when the researcher locates herself in relation to the research participants (Fine, Weis, Weseen, & Wong, 2003). My identity as a Black African woman who also comes from a country that experienced collective violence gave me a unique position as an insider and outsider (Bouka, 2015). From the insider perspective, many of the South Sudanese drew on our shared experiences as former refugees and Black people living in the U.S. to highlight several points. For instance, some participants used parallels between the conflict in my country and their country to illustrate which group was the victim of the conflict and the extent of their experience of collective victimization. These shared experiences therefore allowed me to build a good rapport with the participants. However, participants also saw me as an outsider as I am not from South Sudan and do not speak any of their first languages (e.g., Dinka, Nuer). The use of English as a medium of communication, and the need to explain certain unfamiliar details related to South Sudan (e.g., cattle raiding) therefore limited the rapport.

During the research process, I attempted to remain as sensitive as possible to the ways in which my identity influenced the participants’ responses. First, I was aware of the potential power differences between the participants and myself given my affiliation with a U.S. academic institution. I was keen to ensure that our perceived power differences did not inadvertently coerce participants into narrating beyond what felt comfortable. For instance, while requesting consent to participate in the interview, I emphasized participants’ right to stop the interview whenever they wanted without repercussions. Furthermore, whenever participants appeared uncomfortable during the interview when discussing certain details, I reminded them of their right to limit the information they provided or outright withdraw from the study. However, no participant decided to withdraw from the study altogether, although one male participant chose to limit the information he provided. Second, I tried to ensure that my personal experiences and perception of the Sudan conflict were not imposed on the data analysis. To do so, I remained as close as possible to the semantic content of the data (see Braun & Clarke, 2006).

## Data Analysis

I used thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2013) to analyze the data because it is appropriate for the examination of understudied topics as well as studies that aim for a rich and broad description of a phenomenon, rather than a detailed description of a single theme. Specifically, I examined commonalities and contradictions in participants' responses based on the "face value" of their words rather than examining the latent meanings (see Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 84). In addition, thematic analysis proved helpful for an examination of identity transformations during the Sudan conflict, as it allowed us to examine how groups (i.e., ingroup and outgroup) were framed and made concrete in participants' retrospective accounts (see also Drury, Reicher, & Stott, 2003). In addition, thematic analysis proved helpful for an examination of identity transformations during the Sudan conflict, as it allowed us to examine how groups (i.e., ingroup and outgroup) were framed and made concrete in participants' retrospective accounts (see also Drury, Reicher, & Stott, 2003).

To identify the themes and sub-themes, I initially used an inductive approach and followed the 6 steps recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006). First, I read the interviews several times to familiarize myself with the content. Next, I undertook an iterative process of broadly identifying codes present in the entire data corpus, after which I searched for patterns within the codes. I reviewed these patterns repeatedly, dropping and combining similar codes within each theme, eventually dropping some themes. Through this inductive approach, I narrowed the focus of the paper to examine social identity transformation in the context of the conflict. Finally, I examined participants' construal of their experience of collective victimhood based on these transformed social identities. This last coding process used a deductive approach whereby the identified themes related to social identity transformation for the ingroup and outgroup (see Topic 1) informed the coding of participants' construal of their experience of collective victimhood (see Topic 2). In the following, I discuss these topics and themes using one or more quotes from participants that encapsulates the theme.

## Findings

The findings focus on two major topics: (1) identity transformation in light of collective victimization and privilege; and (2) construals of ingroup victimization relative to other groups (i.e., comparative victim beliefs). For the first topic, I identified two themes: the construction of the ingroup and outgroup identity boundaries, and development of ingroup identity content. For the second topic, I found two themes: intergroup comparative victim beliefs and intra-group comparative victim beliefs.

### Topic 1: Who Is 'Us' Versus 'Them': Identity Transformation in Light of Collective Victimization and Privilege

Participants reported that the intergroup conflict provided a context through which the ingroup identity was transformed. In addition, the content of these transformed identities was informed by their experiences of collective victimhood during and in the aftermath of the conflict.

#### Theme 1: Construction of the Ingroup and Outgroup Identity Boundaries

Many participants described how in the period during the Sudan civil war, different groups morphed into superordinate ingroup and outgroup, facilitated by the conflict events. These identity transformations happened in three different ways: a unified ingroup identity was constructed based on shared experiences of collective victimization

and conversely, through formation of fragmented identities within the transformed ingroup. The outgroup was constructed similarly and in direct contrast to the construction of the ingroup (Drury & Reicher, 2000).

**Sub-Theme 1: Constructing a unified ingroup identity based on shared experiences of collective victimization (n = 11)** — A little more than half of the participants described how certain groups of people, that is, people who belonged to a particular geographical location (i.e., southern part of Sudan), religion (i.e., African indigenous beliefs or Christian), and pan-ethnic origin (i.e., black Africans) faced a lot of structural disadvantage and direct violence prior to and during the civil war. These shared experiences of collective victimization facilitated the transformation of their singular collective identities into a superordinate common victimhood identity (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000; Shnabel, Halabi, & Noor, 2013; Vollhardt, 2015), as described by a 32- year old male participant:

Sudan is inhabited by a lot of ethnic groups, and one of the main ethnic groups is a pan-ethnic group called the Arabs, and a lot of other ethnic groups from the Southern part of Sudan; I belong to one of them. When the war started, it was much more because the Southerners felt that they were being oppressed by the Arab pan-ethnic group [...]. They felt that the resources that were predominantly from the South were being used up by the Northerners, which is inhabited by the Arab people, and so in the end, it became more complex than just ethnicity. (part.02)

Similarly, a 38- year old female participant described how the civil war led to the formation of a liberation movement which acted as a catalyst for the transformation of a superordinate ingroup identity as it highlighted the grievances faced by members from a particular region:

When they [SPLA] was formed, I was still little, but this is what I was hearing from family and they always tell me, “There is some people in the bush called SPLA but we don’t know them.” After a little by little, we start knowing that we are a South Sudan citizen, and we say we are together. You find yourself asking, “South Sudan citizens and the North, why are we different?” They treat us different from the North and my dad is like that is why the SPLA went to the bush because we are not the same. Everything is in the North and in the South, we don’t have anything. (part.23)

As the above quotes show, the civil war facilitated the construction of a new ingroup identity that was informed by the experience of collective victimization. In other words, despite the heterogeneity of ingroup members, their shared experience of discrimination and violence transformed their singular identities into a collective identity. This transformation was a dynamic process that involved not only being the target of harm, but also engaging in collective resistance (see also Deng, 2001).

**Sub-Theme 2: Formation of fragmented identities within the transformed superordinate ingroup (n = 9)** — Although the majority of participants reported the construction of a unified superordinate ingroup identity based on shared experiences of collective victimization, this view was not held by all participants. Half of the participants also described a lot of conflict and fragmentation within the newly transformed ingroup. Specifically, participants highlighted how previous groups with competing social norms and socio-political histories occasionally engaged in intra-group conflict as they competed for power and resources both during and in the aftermath of the Sudan civil war. As one 36- year old male participant described,

The way it [the 2013 South Sudan conflict] has been portrayed, there is an element of truth that there is a tribal element to it, where some tribes have taken advantage of one another by tending to the hatred that the lack of previous coexistence created [...] The Khartoum government has this policy of categorizing

all these tribes by their primary enemy; by how many people from that tribe were participating in the fight against the North, or were heavily involved in the resistant movement. [...] However, the whole dynamic changed with time depending on whether there was a defection of one leader who joined the Northern government, and you know, it is a common thing to happen in any liberation movement. [...] And so, the whole Khartoum government was very smart about making sure that Southerners were divided. [...] The whole thing was created around that "divide and rule and divide" policy. (part.03)

Although the majority of participants who described this fragmented ingroup identity focused on the role of the outgroup (i.e., Northern Arab government) in facilitating this division, other participants noted that the divisions were rooted in historical conflict prior to the civil war, as exemplified by the quote below from a 49- male participant:

And by the way, these people have a long history of killing each other – the Nuer and Dinka. That is not the first time, they kill each other all the time because of their cows, because of the conflict that they have between them. Even outside here in the diaspora, they live in groups. They hate each other, you see. (part.22).

The above participant therefore argues that the conflict between the sub-groups in the superordinate ingroup results from long-standing factors that existed prior to the civil war and also continue to exist in the aftermath of the war. In addition, even when facing shared challenges that come from emigrating to a new country, divisions between the sub-groups remained.

Overall, the creation of a new superordinate identity in the context of intergroup conflict was therefore not without its challenges. This is because the lack of previous co-existence fueled intra-group divisions. In addition, the formation of a new ingroup identity created a power-struggle as different sub-groups competed to become representative of the ingroup. In some cases, these intra-group conflicts were usually resolved in pursuit of shared, higher-order goals (e.g., collective resistance against a common enemy), but sometimes they persisted even in the aftermath of the conflict.

**Sub-Theme 3: Construction of the outgroup based on perceived privilege of the group (n = 13)** — Participants constructed the most central outgroup (i.e., the opposing conflict party) based on groups with demographic characteristics that availed them privileges compared to the ingroup. These included the outgroup's geographical location (i.e., Northern part of Sudan), religion (i.e., Muslim), and ethnicity (i.e., Arab), as a 32-year male participant illustrates:

Since after independence in 1955, control was given by the British to the Arab ethnic group, and so literally, they felt that Sudan belonged to them. So nobody from the South or any other ethnic group was allowed to govern the country. Also, because some tenets of Islam, or the Sharia, stipulate that anybody who is non-Muslim is basically an infidel, and his life is nothing, my parents told me that under the regime, they were considered as third-class citizens. (part.02)

The disproportional privileges that some groups received (e.g., post-independence governance) created a certain hierarchy that rendered members of the ingroup at the lowest rank (see also [Moss, 2017](#)). However, this distinction was not always clear-cut, as some members of the outgroup also shared certain characteristics with members of the ingroup. For example, a 36- year old male participant described that several groups in the predominantly Arab North belonged to the African pan-ethnic group:

There were Darfurians and Nubians who were Black Africans, and the Beja who were also ethnic Africans. These people had the only common background [with the outgroup] in Islam, but their identity was very African. So, it was hard to even say this group is homogenous. But you know, looking at what were the sides and what sides they supported, and take the good example of the Nubians, although they were predominantly Muslims, they took their African identity as number one, which sided with the Southerners. So yeah, it's a very- it is very complicated, and it helped me really ease some of the tension that I had in looking at the complex situation and seeing that there were many factors driving the whole thing." (part.03)

Participants therefore noted the difficulty involved in constructing the outgroup solely based on groups with particular privileges that distinguish them from the ingroup, as several groups had multiple cross-cutting social identities (Roccas & Brewer, 2002).

## **Theme 2: Construction of Conflict-Based Identity Content**

In addition to the transformation of the ingroup, participants ascribed four different meanings to the group's identity. Participants relied on their personal thoughts, feelings and experiences, as well as their perception of the ideas, emotions, and experiences of ingroup members to articulate the ingroup's characteristics (Ashmore, Deaux, & McLaughlin-Volpe, 2004). This is noteworthy given the important role that ingroup identity content plays in general intergroup attitudes (Bikmen, 2013; Livingstone & Haslam, 2008).

**Sub-Theme 1: Identity as 'in-between' and unstable (n = 6)** — Due to the novelty in the transformed ingroup identity and the general effects of conflict such as forced displacement and emigration, one third of the participants described how the conflict led to a loss of their identity. For example, a 26-year old male college student described how the Sudan civil war destroyed his home, which is where he derived his sense of identity:

There is a lot to say about the [Sudan civil war] because it destroyed my original home so it destroyed my future, it affected my education because I left schooling in Sudan. I fled to another country, so I am just like someone who has no identity. (part.05)

Similarly, a 26- year old female participant explained how the displacement and emigration to a new country has led to a perpetual state of identity suspension (see also Mahmoud, 2014):

Sometimes I feel that sense of belonging to South Sudan but then there are times I even ask myself what is going on? I am not really identifying myself with America either so sometimes, I am really left in the middle. (part.09)

The state of confusion resulting from being a member of multiple identities or from not fully belonging to one identity is common among refugees and other emigrants or marginalized group members (Hopkins & Greenwood, 2013; Mahmoud, 2011, 2014; Okuyan & Curtin, 2018). This can be due to the fact that collective identity is embedded in contextual and cultural practices (Reicher & Hopkins, 2001) and forced migration, especially as a result of intergroup conflict, disrupts these ties.

**Sub-Theme 2: Reinterpreting previous imposed identity content (n = 4)** — In addition, four male participants discussed how there were particular meanings that were imposed during the conflict on their collective identities by the opposing conflict group and others (e.g., international humanitarian community). These imposed meanings were perceived as a misrepresentation of their group (Hopkins & Blackwood, 2011). Participants therefore distanced themselves from these interpretations and redefined the meaning or replaced them with an alternate meaning

(Reicher, 2004; Reicher & Hopkins, 2001). These reinterpretations are exemplified in the quote below from a 33-year old male participant:

I was separated from my parents, and that's when I fled to Ethiopia and basically, there was a bunch of little kids – well-known as Sudan Lost Boys. I am one of them. Actually, I am not- we were not “lost”, but it is because people were scattered. We didn't know where our parents fled and we all kind of grouped together. (part.19)

Later in the interview, the same participant went on to say:

They were targeting not just my group, they were targeting every village that they could find a lot of people. Or where there is the military or “the rebels” - they called us “rebels”, then they would target them. They don't care about civilian - they were just targeting. (part.19)

These quotes show that the participant perceived the interpretations conjured by the labels given to their groups (i.e., “Lost” Boys and “rebels”) as stigmatizing. By defining the ingroup as “lost”, the active role of the perpetrators was removed. Changing the meaning to “scattered” therefore inferred that the ingroup did not get to that state by chance but by the intentional actions of the perpetrator group. Similarly, the imposition of the “rebel” label to the ingroup by the perpetrator group provided the perpetrators with the justification of indiscriminate violence. The participant therefore reinterpreted the identity to “military” and included civilians. These identity interpretations reflect different identity management strategies that participants take on in order to change their social identities from a stigmatized to a positive identity (Blanz, Mummendey, Mielke, & Klink, 1998; Mahmoud, 2014), thus re-claiming their sense of agency diminished during the conflict (Shnabel & Nadler, 2015).

**Sub-Theme 3: Ingroup as radicalized (n = 4)** — Although a few participants characterized their ingroup as an innocent target of the civil war, which is a common characterization of the ingroup after experiencing collective victimization (e.g., Bar-Tal et al., 2009), many participants also described their ingroup's transformation towards violence and resistance. For instance, a 32- year old male participant described this transformation among children and adolescents:

After a while, our behavior started to change. We began to resist, no matter how peaceful people were, we began becoming violent. That violence that we had in school was being transported back to playgrounds. In the playgrounds, we started playing war-themed games whereby it depends, one day, one group is the bad guys, which to us was the government, and the other is the good guys. For us as kids, we saw it as just a game, not knowing also that we were becoming violent. (part.14)

The conflict therefore provided a basis for the transformation of their once nonviolent ingroup identity into one that sanctioned violence even in contexts of harmless interpersonal encounters such as play. The trauma experienced therefore provided a lens through which participants recalled and interpreted their past experiences (Bernard, Whittles, Kertz, & Burke, 2015).

Similarly, contrary to dominant views that victims are passive and give in to collective victimization as “sheep led to slaughter” (e.g., Bettelheim, 1943; Hilberg, 1985), the majority of participants described their ingroup as transforming into a collective resistance movement during the war. This was illustrated with examples of ingroup members engaged in different forms of resistance efforts, all of which became incorporated into their ingroup identity. For instance, several participants described how the conflict led to their adoption of symbolic acts of re-

sistance such as engaging in civil disobedience as illustrated by the quote below from a 53-year old male participant who recounted his experience in the education system after Arabic was made the only official language:

After high school, I had to sit for the Arabic language exam. If you decline it, you are subjected not to pass. Unfortunately, I was a little bit bitter on what was going on, so I declined to take Arabic. I just put my name on the paper and was open to them and said that, "You know I don't care about Arabic subject". [...] I just wrote my name on the paper and walked out. I don't like it and I don't want it because it was forced on us. (part. 15)

In addition to symbolic resistance, several participants described the ingroup as a movement engaged in acts of physical resistance, although they were careful to point out that actions that required violence were performed as a reaction to unjustified oppression and were a last resort when peaceful options were not possible (e.g., [Saab, Spears, Tausch, & Sasse, 2016](#)). As a 34-year old male participant aptly articulated:

And so, it became to South Sudanese that, if this is the destiny where we have to change our own beliefs to Muslim to get what we need in the government, or to get a better education, this is not going to work. And that's the reason a lot of people left to join the war, to fight against the government. (Part.08)

However, a few participants also described how this transformation to violent resistance came at a cost. Specifically, participants detailed instances when ingroup members who were actively involved in the resistance movement harmed fellow members for reasons related to the conflict (e.g., perceived treason). As a 36-year old male participant illustrated:

These guys [ingroup resistance movement] were losing. They were cornered at the border between Uganda and Sudan. At the border, they first asked you, "Why are you leaving? Are you coming from the other side to our side or are you trying to take information about where we are to the other side?" So, they would accuse you of espionage and all this other stuff attributed to war, and a lot of people actually ended up losing their lives at the hands of people who were trying to liberate them from the Arabs. (part.02)

All the above quotes describing the transformation towards radicalization of ingroup members again points to participants' perception of the ingroup as agentic. Although the process of collective victimization by definition diminishes groups' agency ([Nadler & Shnabel, 2015](#)), it is important to point out that agency-seeking actions do not only happen in the aftermath of conflict but also during the conflict.

## **Topic 2: "What Happened to Us?": Construal of Ingroup Collective Victimization Relative to Other Groups**

The construction of the different social identities in the context of the conflict thus informed how participants construed comparative victim beliefs: by comparing the victimization experiences of their transformed ingroup to those of the transformed outgroup, or by comparing the victimization experiences of different sub-groups within the transformed ingroup.

### **Theme 1: Development of Intergroup Comparative Victim Beliefs**

A little more than half of the participants construed their ingroup's experience of collective victimhood in relation to the experiences of different outgroups made relevant by the Sudan civil war. These outgroups included groups that committed harm against their ingroup during the conflict, as well as outgroups that had also been harmed by the same perpetrating outgroup.

**Sub-Theme 1: Ingroup members suffered more than, or differently from outgroup members (exclusive victim beliefs, n = 8)** — One intergroup comparison that participants engaged in was by construing ingroup suffering as greater than the suffering of the group that perpetrated harm against the ingroup. In other words, participants expressed intergroup competitive victimhood (Noor et al., 2012). For example, a participant remarked: “People were saying that the South and the North [suffered] but the South was more targeted, where I come from.” (part.05).

In addition to the quantitative comparisons regarding the perceived greater severity of suffering, a few participants highlighted qualitative differences by describing the unique suffering that their ingroup experienced relative to the perpetrating outgroup, as the quote below from a 26- year old female participant shows:

You know how Americans can go to some place to fight for war? It was the same thing. The Northerners didn't move, they didn't go anywhere. Their families were not scattered everywhere. It was a different case for us. (part.09)

As the two quotes above show, participants compared the suffering of the ingroup that was transformed and made clear during the conflict (i.e., “Southerners”) against the transformed outgroup (“perpetrator”, “Northerners”), and perceived greater ingroup suffering. Importantly, this perception of greater ingroup suffering did not necessarily lead to the total denial of the outgroup’s experience of suffering. Rather, participants acknowledged that the perpetrating outgroup had also suffered, although their suffering was perceived as comparatively less severe.

**Sub-Theme 2: Everyone suffered (inclusive victim consciousness, n = 4)** — Another way in which participants made sense of their collective experience of victimization was by construing that outgroup members, including *some* members of the perpetrator outgroup, had suffered in one way or another. This is exemplified by the quote below from a 36- year old male participant:

I never had any sort of affiliation with the Arabs before until I came to the United States where I met some good Northern Sudanese. We debunked all these kinds of nationhood or identity of being South Sudanese first and then reached out to other people who have opposing views. And you know, I met a few Arabs [...] and I had the chance to talk to them, to hear their side from what I was hearing from my group, and they also, it turns out, some of them were also marginalized. (part.03)

Importantly, the participant’s ability to construct an inclusive victim belief with members of the perpetrator group was made possible by his diaspora experience, which facilitated perspective-taking and intergroup contact. However, very few participants made this inclusive comparison with members of the perpetrating outgroup. Instead, some participants made comparisons with groups that were perceived as outgroups but were not part of the perpetrator group. These groups included tribes from Northern Sudan such as the Darfurians and Nubians, as reported by a 33- year old male participant:

When I saw the Darfur thing, because they showed on TV, I said, “That’s normal, that’s what happened to us.” And seeing on the news, the world can see it. At our time, no camera, there is nothing you can take, it’s just what you witnessed with your eye. And probably you can keep it in your brain. But basically, when the Darfur thing happened, it just recalled everything for me because it happened to us too, and now the world saw on TV. (part.19).

Overall, by acknowledging both ingroup and outgroup suffering, participants did not dismiss the nuanced qualitative differences in the groups’ suffering (Nair & Vollhardt, 2019; Vollhardt et al., 2019). In fact, participants argued for

the recognition of these differences in suffering, as illustrated by the following statement from one of the participants: “Many Sudanese experienced the same. Everybody experienced it in a different way but all of us is the same case.” (part.23).

**Sub-Theme 3: Outgroup members suffered more (downward comparative victim beliefs, n = 4)** — Finally, a few participants construed their transformed ingroup’s suffering as being less severe than the suffering experienced by some outgroups (Nair & Vollhardt, 2019). For example, one 26- year old female participant explained:

South Sudan shares a lot of borders with some tribes that were dark-skinned such as the Nubia. There were these people that did terrible things to them and if we were to do any comparison, I would say that we were much better off. (part.09)

Notably, all the participants who made this downward comparison referenced the suffering of outgroup members who were not part of the perpetrating outgroup but were also victims of the same perpetrator, such as Nubians and Darfurians. Although, some of these groups shared cross-cutting identities with the ingroup (e.g., Nubians were also of African descent), they were still perceived as outgroup members because they were excluded from the de facto ingroup constructed as a result of the formation of a new country after the civil war (i.e., South Sudan) and had the same religion to the perpetrating outgroup (i.e., Islam).

Downward comparison can facilitate prosocial attitudes and behaviors towards the comparison group, especially when the ingroup at least one advantaged identity (e.g., Muslim men in India engaging in downward comparison to Muslim women, Nair & Vollhardt, 2019).

## **Theme 2: Development of Intra-Group Comparative Victim Beliefs**

In addition to making superordinate intergroup comparisons, several participants also made comparisons between groups in the transformed ingroup. Specifically, participants compared the experiences of ingroup members who experienced different forms of collective victimization at different times (e.g., pre- Sudan civil wars, ongoing South Sudan conflict). In addition, comparisons were made between the different sub-groups within the ingroup that were constructed as a result of the divisions caused during the Sudan conflict.

**Sub-theme 1: Our previous or current ingroup members suffered more (temporal ingroup victim comparison, n = 9)** — Half of the participants reported that different generations of ingroup members had suffered more, or less, compared to ingroup members during the civil wars. These comparisons varied across different dimensions (i.e., greater amount of suffering or unique suffering) as exemplified by a 33- year old male participant:

I know that in South Sudan, there is tribal conflict right now, but the parting of the North and South conflict was a huge thing because at that time, they burned the churches, they burnt everything they could see - there are no actual buildings. I remember at that time being a kid, my parents would tell me "don't wear no red because they would see it from the sky and could drop [bomb]". If you hear the plane coming, you gotta go running to your hole where you dig in the ground and you gotta run as fast as you can. It's very hard. [...] So yeah. It's - I am glad South Sudan got their own country whether there is tribal conflict in South Sudan right now- it's fine. (part.19)

As reflected in the above quote, participants compared the suffering of ingroup members from a past generation to the suffering of the current ingroup and attributed greater suffering to the former. This within-group comparison can have a significant impact on actions such as seeking justice for previous or ongoing suffering (e.g., Smith,

Pettigrew, Pippin, & Bialosiewicz, 2012). However, these effects have so far been studied in the relative deprivation literature but not in the collective victimization literature.

**Sub-theme 2: Some ingroup members suffered more than others (intersectional exclusive/ downward comparisons, n = 3)** — In addition, a few participants perceived that some members of the ingroup suffered more or differently than other members of the ingroup. Specifically, participants thought that members of a particular gender (i.e., male), age (i.e., young people), religion (i.e., Christian or Animist) or region (i.e., border towns) were disproportionately targeted compared to other ingroup members, as reported by a 36- year old male participant:

The Northern government was in fact targeting us young people who left the villages in 1987. Around that time, they felt that maybe there was a possibility that some of us may become part of that rebel movement that was going on. (part.03)

Being able to distinguish the suffering of different groups within the ingroup is especially important since it allows for the acknowledgment of the unique qualitative experiences of members with multiple intersecting identity such as class, gender and race (Crenshaw, 1991; Nair & Vollhardt, 2019).

**Sub-Theme 3: All ingroup members suffered (intersectional inclusive victim consciousness, n = 11)** — In contrast to these various forms of intragroup distinctions of collective victimization, most participants construed inclusive victim consciousness without awareness of intersectional differences, by arguing that all members of the superordinate ingroup, irrespective of the geographical, religious or demographic origin, had been targeted. For example, a 33- year old female participant explained:

So, the Junubeen<sup>i</sup> [were targeted]. There were so many tribes, like 64 tribes, so we all together are Junubeen. So, all together, the Junubeens, were targeted by the Arab. (part.18)

This form of inclusive victim consciousness is different from the earlier described inclusive victim consciousness between groups, as it does not focus on outgroup suffering. Instead, similarities and shared experiences of victimization are perceived between different sub-groups within the ingroup, especially along the constructed divisions created by the intergroup conflict (Nair & Vollhardt, 2019).

## Discussion

The analysis revealed overall complexity in how South Sudanese diasporans in the U.S. constructed the social identities involved in the Sudan civil wars, and how these identities were consequently used in their comparative victim beliefs. This complexity was apparent in three different ways: First, in how the ingroups and outgroups were construed; second, in the diversity of collective victim beliefs that did not follow the often assumed master narrative of exclusive victimhood (e.g., Hammack, 2008; Noor et al., 2012); and third, in the variation across and within individual narrative accounts about their experience of collective victimization.

While researchers examining comparative victim beliefs have generally assumed which social groups are involved in victim groups' construals based on ethnicity, religion, or other dominant societal distinctions, this study demonstrates that the "ingroup" or "victim group" for which the construal of collective victimhood is made, as well as the "outgroup" or "perpetrator, bystander or other victim group" (i.e., the comparison groups), are not always fixed from the onset to the termination of the conflict. Instead, these social identities (i.e., identity boundaries and

content) can be constructed during the conflict based on groups' experiences and roles during the conflict (e.g., victimization, perpetration, outgroup helping) and the group members' perceived suffering or privileges.

Furthermore, the findings demonstrated that these constructed social groups become salient when people make sense of their experience of collective victimhood and may impact how collective victim beliefs, especially those focused on comparisons of suffering, are formed. First, people may make both intergroup and intragroup comparisons of collective victimization experiences. The availability of multiple comparison groups with varying degrees of victimization allows for a more nuanced understanding of who suffered in comparable or distinct ways. Second, beyond increasing the number of potential comparison groups, the findings also showed that the boundaries of the ingroup and outgroups (i.e., who is included within each category) should not be assumed or taken for granted. For instance, intergroup comparisons may be made between the ingroup and members of the opposing group who engaged in the harming as well as members of a peripheral outgroup who were also harmed by the same perpetrator; while intragroup comparisons may be drawn between ingroup members from different time periods or with different intersecting identities. Third, the type of comparative victim belief may also vary depending on the chosen comparison group. For instance, several participants who expressed intergroup competitive victim beliefs regarding the perpetrator group made a clear distinction between severity of suffering (i.e., quantitative comparisons) and uniqueness of suffering (i.e., qualitative comparisons) (see also [Nair & Vollhardt, 2019](#); [Vollhardt et al., 2019](#)). These findings might suggest a bidirectional influence whereby social identities and the comparative victim beliefs constructed in contexts of collective violence continue to inform each other.

Finally, an overall analysis of participants' narrative accounts of their collective victimization experience revealed that the specific construal of the ingroup's experience should also not be assumed. There was considerable variation across and *within* individuals' narratives about the boundaries and content of the ingroup and outgroups, as well as related comparative victim beliefs. In fact, in many cases, these variations were in direct contradiction to other ingroup members' construals. For example, some members assumed the ingroup to be unified based on similar experiences of collective victimization, while others perceived that these same experiences had brought about division. Interestingly, such seeming contradictions in construals of collective victimization were also present within some individual narrative accounts: some individuals made what appeared to be conflicting comparisons about their group's experiences (i.e., assumed that their ingroup had suffered more in some cases, and less in others depending on the comparison group or time period). These findings therefore show that multiple, potentially conflicting construals of collective victimhood can co-exist, sometimes even within the same individual.

What remains to be answered is *how* these constructed social identities are implicated in people's construal of their experience of collective victimhood. Drawing on the elaborated social identity model (ESIM, [Drury & Reicher, 2000](#); [Reicher, 1996](#)), I propose that intergroup conflicts provide an essential ingredient for the construction of social identities and how they subsequently inform people's construals of their group's experience of collective victimization relative to other groups. Intergroup conflicts are manifestations of existing power asymmetry in society and expose the fracture that align people on each side of power hierarchies. Group members who are perceived to be disproportionately affected by intergroup violence are then included in the ingroup category, while those who wield power and whose actions are seen as illegitimate and excessive may be seen as outgroup members.

## Limitations

There were several limitations to this study. First, due to the difficulty in recruiting participants from a diaspora community, especially one that emigrated due to conflict, the sample did not reflect the full diversity in experiences

of the South Sudanese immigrant population. It is therefore possible that there are other transformed social identities in addition to those reported in this paper that are relevant for construals of comparative victim beliefs. For example, I did not interview any participant who was a direct member of the army that fought for the liberation of South Sudanese people from Sudan (i.e., Sudan People's Liberation Army [SPLA]). However, it is likely that the civil war transformed the identity of people involved in the armed resistance and this identity may then be used when construing comparative victim beliefs (see [Ferguson, Burgess, & Hollywood, 2010](#)).

Second, although the prompt used to generate the narrative account inquired about the ingroup's experience of collective victimization more generally during the Sudan civil wars of 1955–1972 and 1983–2005, participants weaved personal and family experiences during the civil war into the narratives. These findings therefore do not aim to be generalized to the entire South Sudanese diaspora, but instead seek to highlight both individual and collective experiences in conflict that may sometimes go unreported or understudied due to the general focus on official narratives of leaders and other prominent people that are used to construct a coherent singular narrative about a group's experience during the civil war.

Relatedly, the interviews were conducted against the backdrop of an ongoing internal conflict in South Sudan, the post-Sudan war country that was formed by members of the superordinate ingroup. Although the interview prompt focused on the Sudan civil wars, participants also discussed the ongoing conflict, and occasionally juxtaposed their experiences during both conflicts. Given the charged nature of the South Sudan conflict at the time of the interview, it is likely that it informed participants' construal of identity transformations during the Sudan civil wars by over-emphasizing some identities, or conversely, overlooking others. It is also very likely that these identity transformations and comparative victim beliefs were constructed retrospectively or consecutively during the interview process or both, and may even continue to occur throughout the participants' lifetimes. However, the methodological and analytical approach used fails to capture this dynamic process.

In conclusion, the findings make important empirical and theoretical contributions by combining and extending two research areas in social and political psychology using an often-understudied context of South Sudan. First, they add to the growing literature that demonstrates how collective events facilitate in the construction of social identities (e.g., [Drury & Reicher, 2000](#)). Although this past research has mostly been conducted in the context of mass protests, the current study extends it to other collective events like intergroup conflict. Second, this study extends research on comparative victim beliefs by showing how the transformation of social identities during conflict can create additional complexity in the form and range of comparative victim beliefs constructed. Therefore, they build on recent studies showing that comparative victim beliefs can move beyond comparisons with the adversary group in a conflict (e.g., [Noor, Brown, & Prentice, 2008](#)), and can also be constructed in comparison to other non-adversarial outgroups (e.g., outgroups that have also been victimized by the same perpetrator) as well as within the ingroup. It is therefore important to keep this complexity in comparative victim beliefs in mind as they can impact the kind of meaning that people make about their ingroup's experience of collective victimization and the attitudes and behaviors they may have towards outgroup members or other members of the ingroup.

## Notes

i) Junubeen is Arabic slang meaning “Southerners”. It is therefore used to refer to South Sudanese people.

## Funding

This research was supported by funds from the Department of Psychology, Clark University, Worcester, Massachusetts, USA.

## Competing Interests

The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

## Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Johanna Ray Vollhardt for the overall supervision of this study. I would also like to thank Sherief Eldeeb, Eric Dushimimana and Adelisa Turnadzic for assisting in the recruitment and transcribing of the interviews.

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