Can Outrage Be a Good Thing?

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Lately, it has started to feel as if outrage is everywhere. On both sides of the political aisle, people have taken to social media—and to the streets—to express their fury over perceived injustices. The religious right demands a boycott against a popular coffee chain for removing religious iconography from their holiday cups; meanwhile, the left rallies marches in protest against police brutality against young Black men. In the midst of all this anger, both liberal and conservative pundits have started raising the question: has outrage drowned out civil dialogue in America?

The moment you read the title of this article, you likely had an immediate, gut-level reaction. Perhaps you thought *of course, outrage helps get things done!* Or maybe you thought *that's ridiculous, outrage just drives people further apart.* I would venture to guess, though, that most people have an intuition that outrage is ultimately a bad thing—that it gets in the way of constructive dialogue, further dividing our increasingly-partisan nation.

A similar discussion has been going on in psychology, in two separate subfields: moral psychology (the scientific study of how we judge what's right and wrong) and intergroup psychology (the study of how different groups—e.g., genders, races/ethnicities, religions—interact). As those of you who voted for option number two—"outrage is bad"—might have predicted, some research from moral psychology suggests outrage drives disproportionately aggressive behavior against wrongdoers. But on the flip side, and consistent with "outrage is good" option number one, work in intergroup psychology demonstrates outrage can serve as a glue binding people together in activism against injustice—increased anger predicts support for non-violent solutions to intractable conflicts like the one between Israel and Palestine.

So if the experimental results on outrage are mixed, what's the truth about outrage?

This is the question that inspired me—and my colleagues Daryl Cameron and Mina Cikara—to write a paper (now out in *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*) aimed at untangling the mixed research on outrage. In the paper, we suggest that maybe the problem is how we've been thinking about outrage to begin with. So much of the dialogue about moral outrage seems to be about whether outrage as an *emotion* is fundamentally "good" or "bad." Pundits and politicians accuse those on the other side of the political aisle of "faux outrage"—manufactured anger over perceived injustices. Even in psychology, researchers have suggested moral outrage is just a thin façade disguising more egotistical motives (e.g., to "virtue signal"). Even the term we use to describe outrage—calling it *moral* outrage, specifically—might bias us toward viewing outrage itself as a moral act.