

War and peace

In today's media-conscious world psychologists are not known for their reticence to pronounce on matters of public interest. There is one field, however, where psychologists have been unduly modest in their efforts to influence public opinion – the area of psychology applied to promoting world peace and ending conflict. This diffidence has occurred despite the fact that today many conflicts involve psychological issues, such as security, fear, destructive ideologies, enemy images, and a host of other concerns that bear on human well-being and survival (see Anderson & Christie, in press).

Psychologists have not been silent on these topics simply because they have not thought about them. Ending conflict has been considered from before the First World War (James, 1910/1995) right up until the modern day (Chirrot & Seligman, 2000). We have now reached a point in history when psychology is in its best position ever to make a contribution to understanding collective violence and helping to promote world peace. This is because, since the ending of the Cold War, the main threats to world peace have tended to revolve around 'ethnic, religious, social cultural or linguistic strife' (Boutros-Ghali, 1992).

Currently the major contribution psychology makes to the well-being of the many victims of ethnic conflict is through the work of clinical psychologists. But I want to focus on areas where the contribution of psychology is less well known, despite the fact that psychological knowledge may be able to inform policies that will reduce the numbers of victims, not



ED CAIRNS with his practical recommendations for ending war and promoting peace.

simply treat them. This is not to suggest that psychology has all the answers, rather that in certain areas psychologists do hold information that may help to end, reduce or prevent violent conflict.

I will begin my 'action plan' with two related points about the nature of conflict.

1. *War is not inevitable, or caused by instinct or any other single motivation.*
2. *War is not an aberration.*

Allport and his colleagues were anxious to point to the fact that 'war is not born in men, it is built into them' (Smith, 1999). The Seville Statement on Violence (Adams, 1991) has spelt this out in more detail, asserting that it is scientifically incorrect to say that human beings have an inherited tendency to make war, or to behave violently. Psychologists would do well to emphasise this point.

In a similar vein, social psychologists have been able to demonstrate that intergroup conflict is essentially different from interpersonal conflict and can be explained on the basis of normal psychological processes, without resort to biological or psychiatric frames of reference. This has been well illustrated in work done in Northern Ireland where social identity has played a major role in stimulating psychological research (Cairns & Niens, 2001). It is therefore important to note that while ethnic conflicts are often defined round specific interests, the themes of identity and perceived threats to existence are often just as central (e.g. Cairns & Darby, 1998). And because one's social or group identity is an important part of one's self-concept even members of the group not directly involved in the conflict may be deeply affected by it (Bar-Tal & Staub, 1997).

A corollary of all of the above is that because people 'invented' war, they are

likewise capable of 'inventing' peace (Anderson & Christie, in press). But it is now recognised that conflict management at the macro level is not about resolving the conflict, or indeed ensuring that no further conflict will ever arise. However:

3. *Managing existing conflicts requires psychological insights.*

This is because it involves, at its best, a process that should help the parties realise that:

- tensions and differences in intergroup relations are normal (Ross, 2000);
- the conflict needs to be seen as a shared problem (Kelman, 1999);
- the underlying (psychological) causes of the conflict, which often revolve around such issues as threats to security and identity, justice, and recognition, must be addressed (Kelman, 1997);
- through negotiations people can learn to differentiate the image of the enemy; this in turn, should mean that the enemy is no longer seen as a monolithic entity, thus enabling opponents to discover potential negotiating parties (Kelman, 1999).

One way to improve relations, at least in the short term, is to improve intergroup attitudes at the micro level:

4. *Reducing the probability of future conflict involves improving existing intergroup relations through appropriate group contact.*

In this area research has shown that:

- physical proximity alone does not improve intergroup relations (Staub, 1989);
- contact can be successful when a more sophisticated approach is adopted (Pettigrew, 1998);

WEBLINKS

Society for the Study of Peace, Conflict and Violence: moon.pepperdine.edu/~mstima/Peace-Psychology.htm

Global Centre for the Study and Resolution of Conflict, N. Ireland: www.incore.ulst.ac.uk/

Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation, Johannesburg: www.reconciliation.org.za/

International Conflict Resolution Centre (Melbourne): www.psych.unimelb.edu.au/icrc/

- conflicts seldom adhere to the 'one conflict – two groups' model; it is therefore necessary to consider multilateral relations not just bilateral relations between conflicting groups (Maoz, 2000).

Perhaps the most difficult problem facing societies torn apart by ethnic conflict and desiring to deal with it in the long term is that they must eventually face up to the past:

5. *Cycles of revenge need to be addressed.*

In some societies the problem about the past is 'that it is not past at all' (Ignatieff, 1996). Recent research has given some insights in this area:

- The history of societies in conflict clearly illustrates psychologically that 'sleeping dogs do not lie'; past traumas do not simply pass or disappear with the passage of time (Hamber, 1995).
- Rituals, symbols, commemoration and reparations can play an important role in any process of healing, bereavement and addressing trauma and the past. They can help grieving by allowing individuals to focus exclusively on the grief and to share their feelings with others (Hamber, 1995).
- Truth commissions (which try to find a way to deal with a legacy of human rights abuse by steering a middle path between insistence on persecution and total acceptance of amnesty) are more likely to succeed in societies where *already* been achieved (such as South Africa) (Cairns *et al.*, 1997).
- Attempts to promote, or even contemplate, intergroup forgiveness in the aftermath of a conflict with a long history of violence can be extremely difficult (Staub, 1999).

In 1910 James pointed out that what is needed to replace the culture of war which then was prevalent (as it is today) was 'a moral equivalent of war' (James 1910/1995). Insights from psychology suggest that this might be better achieved if policy makers recognise that:

6. *Peaceful attitudes need to be actively rather than passively encouraged.*

War is seen as essentially an active concept. In contrast, peace is seen as a passive concept. This dichotomy begins in early childhood (Hakvoort & Oppenheimer, 1993). Attempts to develop peaceful attitudes should not therefore be done in a passive

THE PLAN IN BRIEF

- Humans do *not* have an inherited tendency to make war or behave violently
- Psychological causes of existing conflict need to be addressed
- Appropriate group contact and addressing cycles of revenge can reduce the probability of future conflict
- Peaceful attitudes should be *actively* encouraged – the media can play an important role in this

way, for example via formal teaching. Rather, it needs to involve 'learning by doing' (Cairns, 1996). This should emphasise, for example, the socialisation of children to promote caring about others through engaging in actions that benefit others.

How we think and talk about ethnic conflict is crucial in shaping what we do to settle these conflicts. Because of this:

7. *The media have an important role in influencing intergroup attitudes and stereotypes.*

These messages are particularly transmitted through stereotypes of victims and perpetrators (Ross, 2000; Staub, 1999). This was most apparent in former Yugoslavia, where the media were used to put out propaganda to dehumanise the other side.

Conclusions

To date governments have tended only to call upon psychologists in their role as clinicians working with victims of violence. However, this 'is like fighting brush fires; you may put out a few, but you may also spread others because you do not understand the larger issues of the ecology that creates the fires' (Kimmel, 1995, p.106). It is to be hoped that the growing interest and involvement by psychologists in research and policy studies related to the prevention of war and peacemaking augurs well for the future understanding of that ecology.

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