

22 Psychological contributions to understanding peace and conflict

Charles P. Webel and Viera Sotakova

Individual reflections about 'the nature of human nature' and the reasons for peace and war date back to ancient times. But what is now known as 'peace psychology' – the branch of academic psychology that investigates individual and collective determinants of irenic and belligerent behaviour – is, like peace and conflict studies, a product of the Cold War and its termination, when the perceived threat to global peace posed by nuclear weapons was at its peak.

Forerunners of contemporary psychological investigations of peace and conflict include such distinguished researchers as William James, Sigmund Freud, Konrad Lorenz and Stanley Milgram, who have focused on inner and outer *aggression and conflict*, not on inner and outer *peace*. It is only relatively recently that peace studies has examined the roots of peace and peaceful societies, in addition to the reasons for war and violent conflict.

Psychology is used for the investigation of the causes of war and peace, and psychological contributions to peace and conflict research are numerous and noteworthy. Only a few can be mentioned here (for more comprehensive overviews, see Barash and Webel, 2009, Chapters 5 and 6; and Christie, Wagner and Winter, 2001). They range from philosophical and meta-psychological reflections on war, peace and the human condition as a whole, to empirical studies of the behaviour of individuals and groups in stress-inducing circumstances. And psychological explanations of belligerent and irenic behaviour operate on a number of occasionally isolated and often intersecting levels – ranging from the intra-psychic and individual, through the interpersonal and small group, and extending to the socio-political and cultural dimensions of human belief, motivation and interaction. While we acknowledge the limitations of a Western-centred approach, our focus here is mainly on some North American and European psychological contributions.

The roots of violence, aggression and personality; the importance of social situations

In 1910, William James, referred to by Morton Deutsch as the first peace psychologist, published his classic article, 'The moral equivalent of war'. There, James noted the 'militant enthusiasm' of humans to rally around the military flag, and he challenged the simplistic view that war was an inevitable result of human nature. He argued for 'the moral equivalent of war' because he claimed that war gives people an opportunity to express their spiritual inclinations towards self-sacrifice and personal honor, and to create peace it is necessary to express these sentiments in another, less bellicose way.

From 1915 until 1932, Sigmund Freud published a series of reflections on aggression, war and civilization. Like Albert Einstein, with whom he corresponded, Freud was a pacifist.

But he postulated the existence of a 'death drive' (*thanatos*) that is ultimately responsible for the deplorable state of the human condition. And while *thanatos* could not be extinguished, Freud, foreshadowing Lorenz, claimed that aggression might be rechannelled, or sublimated, into non-destructive activities. While Freud was of course better known for his understanding of inner conflict, he also contributed significantly to assessing how outer conflicts might be mollified if humanity's destructive propensities could be redirected. In this lay the hope of human civilization, according to Freud.

Konrad Lorenz (1966) agreed with Freud that aggression is instinctive. However, he believed that fighting within a species (including humanity) performs species-preserving functions, and he emphasized the role of inhibitions, which control aggression and deter us from killing fellow animals. Paradoxically, Lorenz believed that the same unique characteristics that elevate humanity above the rest of nature – conceptual thinking and verbal speech – may also cause its extinction. However, many reductionistic theories regard violence as an inherent human (and animal) tendency and ignore its social and cultural roots.

Investigators after Lorenz argued that significant cultural variations in humans' propensity to violence necessitate the reconsideration of theories of biological determinism of violence. And the data from cross-cultural studies have tended to favour theories of cultural constructivism.

For example, the 'Seville Statement' of 1986, by a distinguished group of social and biological scientists, provided a list of objections to biological determinism. And the growing realization that both the theories of biological determinism and cultural constructivism are too reductionistic, led to the development of interactionist perspectives on violent behaviour, combining such multiple factors as personality, motivation and situational variables. According to Zillmann's 'excitation transfer model' (1979), the violent expression of individual aggression is a function of learned behaviour, a personal expression of an aroused state, and it is based on excitation by another, external source.

The German philosopher T. Adorno and the American social psychologist N. Sanford approached individual inclinations toward violence from a more political perspective. In *The Authoritarian Personality* (1950) they connected anti-Semitism, proto-fascism and other anti-democratic practices with a set of personal traits that predisposes one to act in these ways. The 'authoritarian personality' was negatively associated with peace-supportiveness. Similarly, the 'Machiavellian personality', as described by R. Christie and F. Geis in their *Studies in Machiavellianism* (1970), is likely to be supportive of unjust and violent behaviour, if it is profitable for the person. In opposition to the Machiavellian personality stands the altruistic personality – emphatic, moral and highly peace-supportive.

In 1939, Dollard, in contrast, assumed that it was individuals' frustration with their environment that causes people to turn violent. According to the frustration-aggression hypothesis, when circumstances disallow people from achieving their goals, individuals are likely to engage in aggressive behaviour. Subsequent studies by Milgram in the 1960s showed the importance of situational factors; so Dollard's causal hypothesis has been shown to be too far-reaching, because, according to Bandura, subjectivity and the possibility of social learning were downplayed. Milgram, in contrast, connected violence with individual obedience to perceived authority figures. His classic experiments demonstrated that specific situations often elicit compliance and aggression.

Groups, prejudice, images of the enemy and human needs

In *Victims of Groupthink* (1972), Irving Janis focused on the failures of group decision-making. He found that groups sometimes make irrational decisions and authorize extremely

dehumanizing activities, such as large-scale bombing, because the core concern is to reach group consensus, not the quality of the decision. Janis named this phenomenon 'groupthink' and claimed that it may result in the group's illusion of invulnerability, while viewing the opponent as weak and stupid.

In *The Nature of Prejudice* (1954) Gordon Allport argued that prejudice is founded on ignorance of others; therefore, less ignorance would mean less prejudice. Allport claimed that conflicts escalate due to ignorance of one's adversaries. According to Allport's 'contact hypothesis', an increase in social interaction between members of in- and out-groups could reduce intergroup prejudice.

Jerome Frank, in *Sanity and Survival: Psychological Aspects of War and Peace* (1968) and Ralph White, in *Fearful Warriors* (1984) and *Psychology and the Prevention of Nuclear War* (1986), emphasized the dangers of developing diabolical enemy images, which people tend to create, especially when they feel threatened. White developed U. Bronfenbrenner's theory of mirror images (1961) and emphasized their destructive consequences.

Charles Osgood, in *An Alternative to War or Surrender* (1962), proposed 'Graduated and Reciprocated Initiatives in Tension-reduction' (GRIT), a method of defusing international tensions by having each side take turns at initiating tension-reducing actions. President Kennedy and Soviet premier Khrushchev engaged in GRIT when they took a series of initiatives that culminated in a nuclear arms-control treaty in the early 1960s.

John Burton, in *Conflict Resolution and Prevention* (1990), claimed that human needs, values and interests are relevant for understanding the causes of conflicts. Many violent conflicts result from the suppression of human needs. Basic needs, such as security, and core values are not negotiable, unlike interests, which are negotiable and depend on circumstances.

Johan Galtung, perhaps the dean of peace studies, for several decades has also been stressing the primacy of human needs – especially our needs for security and identity, which, if frustrated, may engender intrastate and destructive identity conflicts. He argues that sustainable peace requires the satisfaction of our needs for security, identity, well-being and self-determination. For Galtung, psychology has much to say about the causes of intolerance and the way to increase peace and tolerance.

Attribution, intergroup relations and just world theories of behaviour

Attributions refer to the causal explanations that people devise in order to rationalize both physical events and human behaviour, especially acts perceived as successes or failures and that benefit or harm oneself and others. Attribution theory is especially relevant for understanding behaviour that is based on cognitive errors and biases, and that may often lead to interpersonal and group conflict.

According to Brewer's 'optimal distinctiveness theory' (1991), humans are characterized by two opposing needs – a need to belong and the need for differentiation – and we seek to maintain some balance between them. Later, Brewer (2007) argued that a major consequence of in-group identification is that individuals modify their social behaviour depending whether they are interacting with an in-group or an out-group; groups promote trust and cooperation within the group, and caution, wariness and constraint in intergroup interactions. Thus stereotypical and ethnocentric intergroup attributions are necessary consequences of in-group/out-group differences.

These attributions are governed by such attribution biases as 'the illusion of control'. This is an idea put forward by contemporary 'just-world theory', according to which there is a (deterministic) tendency of people to believe that the world is a just place, one in which people

get what they deserve – ‘good things happen to good people and bad things happen to bad people’. Therefore, we tend to blame the victim for his/her misfortune, and not the society/culture/economy/environment. (Lerner, 1977; Lerner & Miller, 1978). If our thinking is ‘self-serving’ and ‘other-blaming’, then it’s easy to valorize one’s ‘own’ group and demean or demonize others and to rationalize ‘our’ good fortune and the misfortune of others.

According to Tajfel (1981), social groups may activate or accentuate existing stereotypes for the purpose of anxiety reduction. For example, racists, Nazis and other anti-Semites attribute large-scale distressing events – such as economic recessions – to the actions of specific outgroups, e.g. to blacks, Jews and ‘gypsies’. They do this to relieve themselves of any blame or guilt for antisocial beliefs and to rationalize and justify violent and discriminatory actions committed or planned against out-groups.

This dynamic could be malevolent because the social-psychological process of categorizing individuals into in-groups and out-groups may lead to depersonalization: individuals are perceived as without distinctive features and as anonymous members of a ‘mass’. And ‘they’ may no longer be viewed as (fully) human, especially when the language of dehumanization is at play (Brennan, 1995).

According to Brennan, crimes against humanity share a common language of dehumanization. Labelling people as more or less human facilitates or makes possible denying them their basic and essential dignity as fully fledged human beings. To Brennan, an important part of the solution to human oppression would be to change from dehumanizing, ‘toxic’ rhetoric to life-affirming rhetoric. Brennan speaks of an ‘expansive definition of humanity’, one that embraces all human persons regardless of their physical characteristics or stage of life.

The discourse of dehumanization motivates and activates stereotypical and ethnocentric thinking and behaviour; once viewed as ‘sub-human’, other groups and individuals are easily stripped of their dignity, and their humanity is denied. Discriminatory, belligerent and even genocidal behaviour against ‘non-persons’ may therefore be ‘justifiable’.

Biased attributions may also be present at the level of larger-scale societal, class, religious, cultural and even civilizational attributions. For example, many Westerners, especially affluent ones, tend to make more dispositional attributions (‘individuals make their own destinies’), based on shared cultural assumptions of Western individualism; whereas people in non-Western cultures may attribute beneficial or harmful events and actions to fate, nature, collectivity or the ‘will of God’. This provides an ideological and motivational basis for a ‘clash of civilizations’ and a ‘war between cultures’, with all participants in the conflict believing they are ‘good’, their adversaries are ‘evil’ and ‘God is on our side’.

Goal compatibility and group interdependence

Based on his studies of boys’ camps, Sherif (1966) claimed that group dynamics depend on the compatibility or incompatibility of goals – the higher the perceived incompatibility of intergroup goals, the greater the likelihood of conflict, and vice versa. And according to ‘relative deprivation theory’ (Berkowitz, 1962), under conditions of relative deprivation – when people believe that they have less than what they feel entitled to – humans feel frustrated; and in the presence of aversive and aggressive stimuli, collective violence happens.

Brewer (2000) argued that perceptions of common goals and common threats may promote intergroup conflict and hostility, because positive interdependence threatens intergroup differentiation. Volkan (1985) had reached a similar conclusion 15 years earlier, arguing that groups have a need for a bipolar relation – us versus them – with their enemies, and this need

becomes exaggerated and possibly accompanied by violence if a group's identity is threatened. Another group is perceived as a 'container' of unacceptable psychic content previously built into unconscious mechanisms. According to Volkan, the perception of an 'enemy' is formulated in a way to protect oneself from contamination by the possible boomeranging of psychic content.

Altruism, aggression and reconciliation

In sharp contrast to the paradigm that human behaviour is primarily egoistic, altruism denotes activities that are costly to individuals themselves but benefit others. According to the empirically well-supported 'empathy-altruism hypothesis', formulated by Batson et al. (2003), empathic concern (an emotional reaction brought about by the act of perspective-taking, and characterized by such feelings as compassion, tenderness, soft-heartedness and sympathy for another) leads to truly selfless motivation to help the other person.

De Waal (1990) argues against the allegedly antisocial character of aggression and instead proposes a 'reconciliation hypothesis', according to which aggression is a well-integrated part of social life. By examining the dynamics of social interactions among non-human primates, de Waal argues that confrontation should not be viewed as a barrier to sociality but rather as an unavoidable element, upon which social relationships can be built and strengthened through reconciliation. Social animals, including humans, seek contact with former opponents and engage in post-conflict reunion practices like kissing, embracing, sexual intercourse, grooming, etc. Reconciliation serves to decrease aggression and socially destabilizing anxiety. Reconciliation occurs especially after a conflict between parties whose possible partnership may have a high socially reproductive value.

De Waal's demonstration of reconciliation in both monkeys and apes supports his idea that forgiveness and peacemaking are widespread among non-human primates. The evolutionary advantages of reconciliation are obvious for animals that survive through mutual aid, i.e., the continuation of cooperation among parties with partially conflicting interests. De Waal's findings regarding non-human primates (especially among the young) may have significant potential applications for understanding human conflict resolution: to him, reconciliation behaviour must be seen as a shared heritage of the primate order.

Conclusion and directions for future research

Peace and conflict studies in general, and peace psychology in particular, have come very far in a relatively brief period. But they have a great deal more to offer – both for studying and for making peace.

For example, by focusing less on 'terrorists', and more on the victims of all forms of political violence, especially that perpetrated by states, we might transform the current, constrained terrorism discussion in the West. By developing a cross-cultural political psychology of terrorism, peace psychology might contribute to negotiations between adversaries, instead of violent confrontation, and to reconciliation rather than revenge.

Psychology might also contribute to peacemaking and war prevention by investigating the inner and intersubjective factors that facilitate or block peace. Minds at peace, and families, small groups and organizations that practise equitable and nonviolent modes of conflict resolution, are less predisposed to violence.

Peace psychology is indispensable – both to peace and conflict studies, and to peace.

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Additional resources

- Reflections on the History and Status of Peace Research: <http://www.wcfia.harvard.edu/node/867>
- Peace Psychology History: <http://www.rachelmacnair.com/peace-psych-history>
- The American Psychology Association, Division of Peace Psychology: <http://www.webster.edu/peacepsychology/>