Social Psychology of Violence

From "Encyclopedia of Violence, Peace and Conflict"

- Situational, Cognitive, and Systemic Sources of Violence
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Glossary

**Enemy Images**

Exaggerated representations of the ‘other’ as thoroughly diabolical, aggressive, and untrustworthy.

**Dehumanization**

The mental process of stripping away the human qualities of the other.

**Fundamental Attribution Error**

The tendency to perceive the bad behavior of out-group members to bad character and to perceive the bad behavior of in-group members to situational factors.

**Structural Violence**

Indirect violence through social injustice, inequity, and failure to meet basic human needs for items such as food and shelter.

**Superordinate Goals**

Goals that lie within the interests of each group in a conflict but that can be attained only through intergroup cooperation, which reduces tensions and destructive conflict.

Social psychology examines the psychological influence of people on people. Although violence such as the mass killing at Virginia Tech in April 2007 by a lone gunman is often seen as individual aggression, social psychology analyzes such acts through the lens of social and situational influences.

**Situational, Cognitive, and Systemic Sources of Violence**

Following World War II, psychological analyses of violence often emphasized personality variables, such as the degree to which people are receptive to prejudice or have a tendency to endorse authoritarian beliefs. This emphasis arose as an effort to understand the rise of fascism in Europe and later, the problem of race relations in the United States. However, it soon became apparent that much violent behavior owes not to personality alone but also the powerful influence of social situations.
The Power of the Situation

Stanley Milgram demonstrated that under particular conditions, ordinary people would readily obey authority figures, even if it meant delivering what the participants believed to be painful and deadly shocks to a victim. Obedience enables violence by allowing perpetrators to attribute their actions to the authority figure who issued the orders and to avoid moral pangs by saying “I was only following orders.” Obedience to authority has been an important dynamic in genocides and mass killings, from the Holocaust to the My Lai massacre, in which US troops followed orders from their commander to slaughter more than 200 unarmed Vietnamese people, including women and children.

Solomon Asch and colleagues demonstrated how individuals in a group tended to agree with the prevailing judgments of group members and resist breaking rank even when it was obvious that the group’s judgment was inaccurate. Pressures to conform also operate at the policy-making level among elites. Irving Janis has provided evidence that flawed decisions such as the Kennedy administration’s decision to launch the Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba with a small number of poorly equipped and trained Cuban refugees, arose in part from groupthink. When groupthink occurs, members of decision-making groups seek unanimity and group cohesion at the expense of critical thinking and contingency planning. Groupthink is particularly likely to occur in groups that are highly cohesive and have members act as self-appointed mind-guards to bring potential dissenters into line with the group thinking. Groupthink may also have contributed to the US decision to go to war in Iraq in 2003. Although this decision was based in no small part on the strong group expectation among policy leaders of finding weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, the evidence indicates that this expectation had little or no basis in reality.

Phillip Zimbardo’s mock “prison study” had college students engage in a simulation in which some students were prisoners whereas others were guards. When the prison ‘guards’began engaging in abusive behavior, the experiment had to be discontinued after six days for ethical reasons rather than continuing for two weeks as originally planned. These results indicate the power of the situation to lead normal people to engage in abusive behavior.

The outcome of the Zimbardo study bears an eerie resemblance to the torture of detainees at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq and the abuses of detainees at Guantanamo Bay. In both situations, US soldiers adopted abusive roles with the tacit approval of military commanders. In both cases, they appeared to have abdicated personal responsibility, regarding abuse as part of their job. An important difference is that official US policy at the time endorsed abuses of detainees at Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay in ways that violate the UN Convention Against Torture. The legitimation of abuse by high government officials such as Donald Rumsfeld, then head of the US Department of Defense, helped to create strong command pressures for actionable intelligence. These pressures, coupled with the enshrinement of abuse in official policy, added significantly to the already enormous situational pressures to abuse detainees.

Research by Albert Bandura on social learning theory demonstrated that children did not have to be frustrated or rewarded to exhibit aggressive behavior. Instead, they could learn aggression by merely observing a model behaving aggressively. Observational learning is believed to encourage copycat crimes that mimic other crimes that have occurred recently. Observational learning can occur even through exposure to media and video game violence. Taken in large doses, youth learn new ways to behave violently, perceive violence as normal, and exhibit desensitization to violence, as indicated by reduced levels of physiological responses to violent events. Extensive media violence may also lead viewers to have an exaggerated sense of danger in everyday life and to see the world as being even more troubled than it already is.

Social learning also occurs through external rewards and punishments and also through the internalization of group-defined values and expectations. Gang violence, for example, exhibits many of these social learning processes. Young people who see older, respected people join gangs and engage in violence also tend to join gangs. Young people often join gangs to obtain social rewards such as respect, power, and a sense of safety and belongingness.

Cognitive Influences in Social Contexts
In addition to underscoring the power of the situation, a second emerging theme in social psychology, like the field of psychology in general, is an emphasis on cognitive processes. Accordingly, social behavior is viewed as a function of cognitive processes that intervene between situational variables and behavioral outcomes. From a social cognitive perspective, violent behavior takes place in a social context and is largely a product of the way in which the individual interprets and processes social information. The bully in the schoolyard, for example, may be particularly attentive to threatening cues in the social environment and have a repertoire of violent mental scripts that can be readily accessed from memory and quickly executed behaviorally.

The importance of social cognition is highly visible in the use of political propaganda by groups in armed conflict. These groups tend to create mirror enemy images that portray the "other" as thoroughly aggressive, diabolical, and untrustworthy. Often, the images are dehumanizing in that they depict the other as subhuman and rapacious. In World War II, for example, both the US and Japan used enemy images of each other to prepare troops to kill. After all, it is easier to kill someone who seems savage and subhuman. In the Rwandan genocide, enemy images were conspicuous in the calls over the radio for Hutus to kill their implacable enemies, the Tutsis, who were described as "cockroaches."

Cognitive factors also influence the decisions made by leaders. In situations in which there are high levels of fear and threat, for example, the complexity of thought tends to decline. People tend to be cognitive misers who limit potential burdens on their mental resources by adopting simplified views of the world. In violent conflict, groups tend to adopt black-and-white views of the Good Us versus the Bad Them, with each group typically deemphasizing the diversity of views that may in fact exist among the members of the opposition. Leaders, too, show a marked propensity to simplify when under stress. In analyzing the complexity of leaders' speeches and writing before and during crises, Philip Tetlock has established that in the heat of a crisis, leaders show less tolerance of ambiguity, tend not to explore diverse arguments regarding the crisis, and tend to overlook differences that exist among the opposition. The net result can be oversimplification and misguided action.

When facing a complex situation involving much uncertainty, people use, without conscious planning, fallible heuristics or shortcuts for making difficult decisions. Leaders, for example, may judge a current threatening situation by its similarity to the patterns of conflict that are most available in memory. If the Hitler-at-Munich pattern is highly salient and available in memory, then leaders may judge attempts at negotiation as inappropriate since attempts to negotiate with or to appease Hitler had disastrous consequences. In addition, leaders show strong loss-avoidance tendencies and are often willing to avoid losses by taking risks much greater than those they would take to obtain a goal they had not previously achieved.

Systemic Interactions

Although the origin of social psychology can be traced to Western intellectual traditions that emphasize individualism, contemporary social psychologists are mindful that individuals and their thought processes in the context of interpersonal relations often are manifest in actions and policies that take place on the larger stage of inter-group and international politics. For instance, Slobodan Milosevic, the former Serbian leader, had strong enemy images of Kosovar Albanians and a particular view of history, both of which he used to stir public opinion, fuel the fires of nationalism, and justify the invasion of Kosovo. Leaders such as Milosevic, to some extent, reflect the will of the people, but also exercise considerable impact as leaders who spread particular images of the other and legitimate discriminatory and hostile actions.

In general, it is useful to think of social systems in which violence can arise at multiple levels such as family, community, ethnic group, societal, and international levels. The levels interact extensively, as the violence at one level may also fuel violence at other levels. For example, at an individual level, intrapsychic processes such as stereotypes can produce discriminatory behavior, which in turn can be part of a group process that supports exclusionary and violent national policies. Coming from the other direction, intergroup fighting can lead to increased pressure not to associate with the other, and this can lead, in turn, to polarization at community and interpersonal levels. While it is recognized that different levels of social complexity have emergent properties, social psychological analyses of the interaction of cognitive and situational variables have provided a useful lens for understanding not only individual and interpersonal behavior but also group
and intergroup behavior.

**Three Kinds of Violence: Episodic, Structural, and Cultural**

The term ‘aggression’ has been equated with ‘violence’ and the emphasis has been on individual action. Both terms imply that harm has been done, but ‘aggression’ of the instrumental variety further implies actions that are intentionally carried out by an individual. It is important to recognize, however, that violence may or may not be intentional and may be carried out at various levels of social complexity.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Episodic violence</th>
<th>Structural violence</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Also called ‘direct’ violence</td>
<td>• Also called “indirect” violence</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Typically harms people quickly</td>
<td>• Intermittently kills or harms people</td>
</tr>
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<td>• Continuously deprives people of basic need satisfaction</td>
<td>• Acute insult to well-being</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Chronic insult to well-being</td>
<td>• Typically harms people slowly</td>
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<td>• Dramatic</td>
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A more differentiated view of violence contrasts episodes and structural forms of violence, as illustrated in Table 1. Whereas people often think of direct forms of violence such as homicide and gang violence, some of the greatest harm comes from structural violence such as the caste system in India that discriminates systematically against ‘the untouchables’ and causes many deaths owing to deprivation of basic necessities such as access to quality healthcare. As Gandhi noted, poverty is one of the most potent forms of violence and harms people on a large scale though there is often no particular person or group who causes the poverty.

In general, episodes of violence are often intentional, personal, instrumental, and sometimes politically motivated. In contrast, structural violence is a result of the way in which institutions are organized, providing some people with material goods as well as representation and voice in matters that affect the well-being while depriving others. These structures are relatively impervious social arrangements. Although socially constructed, they cannot be imbued with motives or intentionality in contrast to many cases of episodic violence.

Cultural violence occurs when the symbolic sphere of our existence supports episodes or structures of violence. Culturally constructed narratives, such as the ‘doctrine of just war theory’, specify when direct violence is justified. Cultural narratives may also be used to support structural violence, for example, the ‘protestant ethic’ and its emphasis on individual responsibility can be used to justify enormous gaps in wealth and health between different classes in a society. One of the most important tasks in limiting violence is to increase the relative strength of cultural narratives that support peace rather than violence.

**Analysis of Conflict and Violence at Multiple Levels**
In violence-saturated contexts such as war zones or inner-city neighborhoods controlled by gangs, violence in the family often spills over into the streets. Conversely, the violence witnessed in the society helps to fuel violence in families, as people bring home guns and violent habits learned in the streets. Violence at the individual level affects violence at national and international levels and vice versa.

**Interpersonal Violence**

Two prominent forms of interpersonal violence are spouse abuse and homicide. Spouse abuse is rooted in systems of patriarchy that create rigid gender roles and systematically privilege men over women and legitimate the use of violence as a means of disciplining one's spouse and demonstrating machismo. In most societies, men hold greater power than women, and members of both genders internalize values and hold to social roles that privilege men as the decision-makers. At household level, many men believe they have dominion over the home and may regard challenges to their authority as a transgression that must be answered by violence. In grim testimony to the potency of observational learning, men's tendency to beat their spouse often increases significantly if the men themselves had grown up in families in which men beat their wives. In many war zones, rates of spouse abuse frequently rise as unemployed men, who have lost their role as providers, use spouse abuse as a means of venting frustration, reasserting control over their domain, and boosting their sense of power and manhood.

Violence in communities often involves fighting between individuals, apart from gangs. Leonard Berkowitz has distinguished between hostile aggression that is emotionally driven by anger, hatred, or fear and evoked without much thought, and instrumental aggression that enables people to obtain particular goals. Both forms of violence may be strongly influenced by cognition. For example, people who are angry tend to engage in higher levels of violence if the situation contains cues such as the sight of weapons that people usually associate with violence. Instrumental violence is influenced by how people perceive themselves in relation to their social environment. In a very poor, urban neighborhood, for example, materially deprived youth may use violence as a means of taking coveted items such as expensive clothes, thereby demonstrating their power and gaining respect for their prowess. To maintain power, individuals may be highly watchful for the slightest sign of disrespect, which they respond to with violence. In such contexts, respect is very much in the eye of the beholder.

**Intergroup Violence**

There are multiple, complementary theories about the social psychological origins of intergroup violence. According to realistic conflict theory, intergroup hostility is likely to occur when members of two or more groups are in competition for some resource, particularly when the structure of the conflict is zero-sum - one side's gain is the other side's loss. Armed conflict in Africa and other areas has often been animated by competition over resources such as diamonds, oil, and timber. Similarly, disputes over land animate hostility between Israel and Syria, Turkey and Greece, India and Pakistan, Armenia and Azerbaijan, and many other interstate contests.

Realistic conflicts over diminishing resources are expected to increase in the future because of population growth, increasing consumption of natural resources, a growing income gap, and deteriorating supplies of resources such as clean water, arable land, food, extractable oil, and precious minerals. Competition for oil, for example, is likely to produce a growing number of violent episodes in regions such as the Persian Gulf, Caspian Sea Basin, and South China Sea that have large oil reserves.

Conflicts can arise even when one side's gain is not at the expense of the other side. Studies on relative deprivation theory have demonstrated that perceptions that one's own group is deprived of money, jobs, status, or other coveted items may be as influential as differences that exist in reality. The mere perception of a discrepancy between one group's current standard of living and the standard of living that members of the group believe they should be enjoying relative to another group can result in intergroup hostility. The spread of democracy and capitalism can leave in their wake intergroup prejudice as in the cases of South Africa's transition to Black majority rule, a democratizing trend that produced an increase in the level of prejudice toward Blacks among White youth. Similarly, East Germany's movement toward capitalism following the Cold War yielded a rise in xenophobia among youth who felt they were being left behind.
Tensions over immigration also are amenable to a relative deprivation analysis.

Henri Tajfel and others have developed social identity theory to explain how people, even in the absence of deprivation and conflict, tend to form mental categories that divide their social world into in-group and out-group members. Furthermore, people favor and identify with the in-group and derive a sense of self-esteem through their identification with the in-group. However, research on social identity also indicates that in-group identity precedes out-group hostility and intergroup conflict. Importantly, the formation of social identity and the division into in-groups and out-groups does not inevitably lead to out-group hostility and conflict. Social identity stirs hostility and violence when it is coupled with processes such as oppression, real or perceived threats or mistreatment at the hands of the out-group, hostile ideologies, hatred, and a sense of victimization. Social identity and categorization processes have been examined in the context of the conflict between Turkish and Greek Cypriots, Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland, and Hutus and Tutsis in the Rwandan genocide, among others.

That social identity alone does not cause violence is evident in the distinction between patriotism, defined as love of one's country, and nationalism, which holds that one's country or people are superior to others. Patriotism is a manifestation of social identity processes, and uses a host of symbols (e.g., flags, anthems, etc.) to bolster in-group cohesion and self-worth. In contrast to moderate patriotism, nationalism often fuels hostility and violence toward the out-group. Inflamed by extremist ideology and perceived threats, as in the case of Nazi Germany, nationalism simultaneously elevates the in-group and animates out-group enmity and violence.

The combination of threatening situations and social categorization can lead to highly positive views of the in-group and highly negative views of the out-group. Often, the in-group views members of the out-group as homogenous and attributes their negative actions to immutable qualities of their character while attributing their positive actions to situational forces, a phenomenon called the fundamental attribution error. Conversely, positive actions by the in-group are viewed as evidence for their inherent goodness, while negative actions are seen as driven by situational forces. In its simplest form: they attack us because they are evil, while we attack them because the situation gives us no other choice. Their efforts to communicate with us are driven by the situation, while our efforts to communicate are due to our peace-loving disposition.

When groups in conflict turn to violence, victim-perpetrator cycles of circular causality can develop as one or both sides develop a sense of victimization that is woven into their social identity, which is defined in part by opposition to the other group. Further, through social identity processes, victims are likely to perceive atrocities committed against members of their group as a personal affront, thereby linking group trauma and individual trauma. Communities often construct powerful collective memories of victimization, which are transmitted across generations and are honored publicly in rituals and memorials. In the former Yugoslavia, Serbs remembered their victimization by the Croat Ustasha during World War II, providing Slobodan Milosevic with a powerful dynamic to exploit. In apartheid South Africa, oppression and collective memories of mistreatment helped fuel Black consciousness, which contributed to violence against the apartheid regime. Among Jews in Israel, searing memories of their history of persecution and Hitler's attempt to exterminate them became woven into their collective identity, creating a 'never again' mindset that helped fuel the already heated conflict between Jews and Arabs.

Mass Violence

At the societal level, the occurrence of mass violence, including political terrorist acts and genocide, owe in part to social psychological factors. Although terrorist acts have often been viewed as the product of mental illness or psychopaths, most terrorists appear to be normal and use terrorist acts as an instrument to achieve goals they could not attain through other means. For example, suicide bombers in Sri Lanka have, in videos left before their deaths, explained that their actions are necessary parts of their struggle for liberation from social oppression and injustice. Viewed in this manner, their acts of mass violence are not irrational but are rational expressions of a particular ideology that rationalizes bombing as an instrument for avenging past injustices inflicted upon their people and achieving liberation.

Similarly, extremist suicide bombers in Iraq who kill US soldiers do so out of desire to end what they regard
as an unjust occupation and an attempt of Christians to dominate Muslim people. Also, many Iraqis regard
the violence against the US as payback for perceived wrongs such as the US support for Israel, which has
dominated Palestinians. Regardless of the accuracy of such views, there is little doubt that radical ideologies
shape how people perceive the actions of others, and these perceptions can fuel violence. Radical
ideologies are particularly likely to incite violence when they are widely believed and leaders are skilled in
using them to manipulate people into fighting. An important note is that the US, too, has been influenced by
rather extreme ideologies such as the doctrine of “manifest destiny” at various points in its history. By 2007,
many Americans came to the view that the 2003 war and occupation of Iraq was itself the product of
extremist ideology and skilled manipulation of public opinion.

Radical ideologies also play an important role in enabling genocide. Hitler’s regime, for example, embraced
a thoroughly racist ideology that portrayed Germany as a body whose health was at risk due to the presence
of Jewish people, gypsies, and other groups who were portrayed as imminent threats. Often, radical
ideologies gain in following owing to absolute deprivation, which, like relative deprivation, can be a precursor
for violence. Difficult life conditions, such as severe economic problems, frustrate the human need for
satisfaction. In response, people may adopt destructive ideologies in which ‘others’are viewed as barriers to
need satisfaction. Taken to an extreme, the belief develops that those who constitute barriers must be
eliminated. Through an analysis of case studies, Ervin Staub has demonstrated that absolute deprivation
has been an important precondition for a number historical cases of mass murder and genocide including
the Holocaust, the genocide of Armenians in Turkey, the Cambodian genocide, and mass killings in
Argentina.

The 1994 Rwandan genocide illustrates the interplay of diverse social psychological processes. In addition to
the absolute deprivation described earlier, there was extreme competition for land. Hutus and Tutsis both
experienced high levels of fear of the other group since historically there had been mass killings of each by
the other in Rwanda and Burundi. Historically, animosity arose from the social injustice done when the
Belgian colonials privileged Tutsis over Hutus, leading Hutus to turn the tables following independence. Hutu
leaders used dehumanized images of Tutsis to quieten any moral angst over killing, and the people
embraced an extremist ideology that made them easier to manipulate. Obedience animated much killing as
local and national leaders issued orders to kill, and also fear motivated killing, as people who disobeyed
demands to kill were themselves killed. In this manner, large numbers of ordinary people became elements
in a societal killing machine that murdered approximately 800,000 people.

Social Psychology of Peace-making

Around the middle of the twentieth century, Gordon Allport’s contact hypothesis proposed that groups could
reduce their biases toward each other through contact as long as certain conditions were met. Subsequent
research has generally supported the view that contact works when the groups

- work together cooperatively,
- have frequent and prolonged contact,
- enjoy equal status, and
- receive institutional and social support.

Hence, contact alone will not reduce prejudice between groups. To the contrary, efforts to integrate schools
in the United States, for example, often led to higher levels of prejudice between Blacks and Whites, largely
because not all of the conditions for successful contact were met.

Morton Deutsch has shown that conflict can be constructive if it is managed in a constructive way that
prevents violent episodes. Conflict can be an opportunity for building constructive relationships at
interpersonal and intergroup levels. In interpersonal relationships, for example, conflict can stimulate
partners to express feelings, talk problems through, and solve issues in a mutually satisfying way that
strengthens the long-term relationship. Between groups, conflict can enhance in-group cohesion, a common
purpose, and yield mutually beneficial agreements.
Two broad means of managing conflict in a constructive manner are negotiation and mediation. When individuals or groups engage in principled negotiation, as contrasted with hard bargaining, conflict is treated as an opportunity for joint problem-solving and resolution that meets the concerns and interests of all parties. The principled approach focuses not on stated positions but on interests that underlie positions. The approach also encourages

1. intergroup empathy in an effort to understand what each other really wants;
2. separating the people from the problem;
3. avoiding criticism of each other but being tough on the problem;
4. inventing options that yield mutual gains; and
5. using objective criteria to judge whether proposed agreements satisfy everyone's interests.

Principled negotiation tends to yield creative options, positional flexibility, and improved relationships though mutual learning and problem-solving.

Mediation consists of a third-party facilitation that helps conflicted individuals or parties negotiate an agreement. Mediators do not have to be neutral in the conflict, but they must be trusted by the various parties. Mediation is used widely at local levels in child custody disputes, school-based conflicts among students, and labor-management disputes, among others.

Mediation is used frequently in the international arena. Amidst hostility and distrust between warring parties that are reluctant to negotiate, a mediator can use leverage, rewards, and punishments (i.e., carrots-and-sticks approach) that can increase the parties' motivation to engage in dialog and move toward a negotiated settlement. When, for example, US president Jimmy Carter brokered a peace agreement between Egypt and Israel at Camp David in 1979, he used promises of military and economic aid to encourage both parties to engage in dialog. When the talks stalled, he threatened them with withdrawal of US support. Carter also allowed the wary adversaries to save face by suggesting options (e.g., withdrawing Israeli settlements from the Sinai) that they themselves could not have raised out of fear of appearing weak to their counterpart and their respective right-wing constituencies.

Effective mediators reframe ideas for conflicted parties, create perceptions of common ground, and build hope that a mutually satisfactory agreement is possible. At its best, mediation not only facilitates agreements but transforms relationships so that the parties can adopt what Morton Deutsch refers to as a cooperative orientation that entails a positive interest in the well-being of the other as well as one's self.

In interactive problem-solving workshops, Herbert Kelman has employed social psychological principles to explore the relationship between individual and social changes. Changes at each of these levels are conceptualized as linked to each other by continuous, circular processes so that change in an individual can produce social change and conversely, social change can produce individual change. In Kelman's workshops, representatives of conflicted groups interact in a small group, neutral setting designed to induce change in the individual participants, as a catalyst for macrolevel changes in the policies and cultures of the parties in conflict.

In the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, a typical workshop brings together three to six respected members of the Israeli and Palestinian communities for two-and-a-half days of intensive dialog. To encourage truth-seeking and flexible exploration of ideas, the workshops convene in a private academic setting and no records are kept. Agreements are nonbinding because participants are not representatives of their governments; they are however, respected political influencers and it is expected that their work will induce changes in wider political communities. Kelman has emphasized that the workshops are not substitutes for official negotiations but are useful in preparing the way for official negotiations, for managing problems that arise during peace negotiations, and for enabling effective implementation of official agreements.
Social Psychology of Structural and Cultural Violence

Structural violence is ubiquitous and manifest in the enormous gap between people who have influence and material resources and those who are relatively powerless. At the time of this writing, one-fifth of the world’s population has 80% of the income while the bottom one-fifth has only 1% of the income. Johan Galtung has proposed that one way to define structural violence is to calculate the number of avoidable deaths. For instance, if people die from scarcities of food or shelter when both are available for them somewhere in the world, then structural violence is taking place. As Gandhi once noted, there’s enough food for everyone’s needs but not for everyone’s greed. Structural violence is reduced when systems of production and distribution are more equitably organized.

Cultural violence occurs when symbolic processes are used to justify and legitimize inequitable power relations in political and economic systems. Cultural violence and hierarchical structures are mutually reinforcing, highly resistant to change, and operate at the individual level of analysis where scripts that guide behavior are internalized and at the aggregate level where shared narratives support hierarchical social arrangements.

Social psychological constructs that bear on cultural violence include the meritocratic ideology, a set of beliefs that support the proposition that rewards should be commensurate with one’s contribution to society. This ideology provides the value scaffolding for the capitalist notion, ‘to each according to his merit’. In turn, the capitalist ethos has built into it an acceptance of inequality and the continuous struggle for power within and between states, along with justifications for the use of force in the interest of domestic and international order. The protestant ethic, promulgated primarily by Western elites, emphasizes the values of individualism, hard work, and delay of gratification. The ideologically congruent notion of blaming the victim locates the origin of social problems in the purported deficits and failings of those whose basic needs are unsatisfied rather than in political and economic institutions. A cluster of companion beliefs cohere under the umbrella of just world thinking that rationalizes disparities in power and wealth by assuming the world is just. On this view, people get what they deserve.

Peace Psychology: The Pursuit of Peace-building

While peace-making can prevent violence by managing conflicts between groups, the term ‘peace-building’ has been used to refer to the

1. pursuit of more equitable relations between groups, and

2. reconstruction of societies following large-scale violent episodes.

Both approaches seek to address the root causes of violence.

Pursuing more Equitable Relations

The roots of violence can be found in structural and cultural conditions and therefore, the pursuit of a sustainable peace requires structural and cultural peace-building, a pursuit for which traditional psychological approaches are not particularly well suited. In its prototypical Western form, despite being local and indigenous, psychology has global pretensions. Its dominant narrative is decontextualized and emphasizes objectivity, mechanism, and individualism. Stripped of social context, the individual becomes the only legitimate locus of intervention for psychologists and the desired outcome is individual adjustment, despite unjust circumstances in which the individual is embedded. Hence, psychology, with an absence of an analysis of social and cultural conditions, fails to address systemic causes of the problem, and leaves the social order unaffected.

In contrast, the emerging area of ‘peace psychology’ recognizes that violent episodes have structural and cultural roots. In domestic violence, for instance, the proximal cause may be interpersonal conflict that turns into violence. However, the violent episodes have structural roots in the power asymmetry between men and women and in women's economic dependence on men. Similarly, organized forms of direct violence are often rooted in institutional structures that form a system of violence, a military-political-industrial complex,
which is justified through cultural narratives embodied in ‘just war theory’, a set of propositions that spell out conditions under which war is acceptable and just.

The violent acts of substate organizations such as Al Qaeda can also be viewed from the perspective of proximal causes as well as more deeply rooted structural-cultural preconditions. A realistic conflict lens focuses on Western globalization as a proximal threat to traditional values of spiritualism, collectivism, and cooperation, a zero-sum arrangement in which advances of Western values necessarily means a retreat of traditional Islamic values. Similarly, the proximal causes of the US war on terrorism have been examined. Drawing on ‘terror management theory’, social psychologists have demonstrated how events that raise an individual's awareness of their own mortality produce a host of defenses in an effort to manage the terrorizing thought of one's death. Applied to the attacks of 9/11, many Americans experienced a sense of vulnerability and mortality, which activated defenses, including a desire for in-group cohesion, strong leadership, denigration of out-groups, and retaliation.

Examined from a peace psychology perspective, the violence of Al Qaeda, which targets civilians, can be viewed as a tool of the weak, a structural precondition that is supported by a host of cultural narratives. These narratives largely mirror US justifications for the use of force: the belief that there is no legal means to redress grievances, the ends justify the means, dialog is not an option, and only violence will work. Similarly, membership in Al Qaeda and the US military both engender obedience and conformity, in-group favoritism, depersonalization, sacrificing one's life for a greater cause, and rewards for giving one's life. Accordingly, sustainable peace will require not only the removal of proximal causes of violence but addressing the structural and cultural roots of the problem.

**Reconstructing War-Torn Societies**

War shatters social trust, reduces social cohesion, and damages social capital. Following armed conflict, societies may remain deeply divided into subgroups that fear and hate each other and are ready to continue fighting. Weakened civil society and low government capacities may leave people unable to meet basic needs and easily manipulated by spoilers or political opponents of the state. This situation often sets the stage for ongoing cycles of violence.

Social psychology offers numerous tools that complement wider political and economic reconstruction efforts and assist humanitarian efforts to support postconflict societies in moving toward peace. To strengthen social cohesion, it is useful to stimulate collective planning and action to meet community needs. For people who had been driven by displacement, fear, and desperation into isolation and lack of group planning to meet civilian needs, the process of participatory dialog, if managed well, can reestablish a sense of common purpose, reweave social ties, and enable different subgroups to act effectively as a community to solve their problems. Even in the early aftermath of an emergency, local people can organize themselves, often with outside facilitation, to plan how to most effectively distribute and use humanitarian aid. This approach fits with the methods of community participation and empowerment that yield the most sustainable results and benefits to survivors.

To rebuild social trust and reduce social divisions, one can use the method of superordinate goals in which members of different groups cooperate on the achievement of a common goal. Following the war in Sierra Leone, for example, former combatants cooperated with other village youth in building schools and health posts that communities had selected as high priorities. Through cooperation, the two groups came to see each other as human and as people they could live with. Similarly, the community members who had previously feared the ex-combatants came to see them as citizens who give back to the community. The work that the formerly recruited youth performed served the needs for restorative justice since building the structures helped symbolically and physically to repay for the damage the soldiers had done. It is useful to complement such efforts with methods such as interactive problem-solving and indigenous methods of nonviolent conflict resolution and healing the invisible wounds of war. In Liberia, for example, the organization of peace festivals helped to reactivate traditional mechanisms of nonviolent conflict resolution and created a space in which people planned what they needed to do to support peace.

Addressing poverty is a key need in postconflict situations. Through livelihoods programs that teach
vocational skills, support prosocial values and behavior, and support income-generating activities, formerly recruited soldiers can enter constructive civilian roles, find meaning and hope in civil society, and change their social identity from soldier to civilian. Similarly, marginalized groups can receive the economic support needed to support social justice and transform the patterns of social exclusion that often animate war. By building government capacities to continue these efforts, it is possible to institutionalize the supports and simultaneously strengthen the links between local people and their government that are necessary for sustainable peace.

See also: Aggression, Psychology of; Psychoanalysis; Psychological Effects of Combat; Social Control and Violence; Social Theorizing About War and Peace; Sociological Studies, Overview

Further Reading
- Aron, A.; Core, S. (eds.) Harvard University Press Cambridge, MA.
Relevant Websites


http://www.ispp.org - International Society of Political Psychology.


Daniel Christie
Ohio State University, Marion, OH USA

Michael Wessells
Columbia University, New York, NY, USA