

# On Social Psychology and Conflict

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Although there are differing ideologies, belief systems, cultures, histories and power structures at the basis of violent conflict, ultimately people are the creators, benefactors and victims of this violence.

Much of the substance of conflict falls under the domain of social psychology, and previous research has made great progress in understanding the processes that underlie intergroup relations. Several high-status researchers have argued for the necessity of social psychological research to augment and inform other theories of violent conflict, mainly those used by political scientists and International Relations analysts (see, for example, Kelman, 2008). However, these interdisciplinary approaches are in their infancy. Moreover, social psychological contributions to the understanding of war and other forms of violent conflict lack integration with political theories of conflict resolution, and as such are often marginalized, ensuring social psychology's inability to inform and augment policy formation in this area.

There are several reasons for this. Traditional research paradigms, and the majority of contemporary endeavours, focus on a laboratory based approach to understanding intergroup relations. This research typically involves instrumental control of independent and dependent variables to find correlations between them. It is assumed from understanding such processes at this level, a big picture of what is actually occurring during interethnic, intrastate or international conflicts can be extrapolated. Certainly laboratory work has been, and will continually be, invaluable in understanding how individuals and groups act before, during and after conflict. However, I suggest the emphasis on these approaches, which are removed from violent conflict between real social groups, has limited the potential impact of social psychology in understanding conflict and creating ideas to resolve it. The distance between laboratory studies and the realities of actual conflict needs to be reduced, through theoretical integration and a refocus on the level at which research is conducted, in order to generate and inform ideas and policies to reduce its prevalence.

It is necessary to take a step back, and look at the 'big picture'. The world that we inhabit is constructed by people. We form political, religious and cultural systems that are regulated and enforced by laws, beliefs, power-structures and histories. Within these constructs, people live their lives; experiencing and generating an amazing range of phenomena: from love to loss, youth to old age, security to injustice, peace to war, and remembering to forgetting, to name just a few. Within this contextualized mix of peoples, academia is borne out, with social psychologists given the responsibility to understand and explain such phenomena. In general, such motivated researchers are taught to study human interaction in a laboratory setting and somewhere between research, theory and policy, the influence of these

findings becomes obscured to the world that people construct, give meaning to, and experience. This is evident in the distance between social psychological findings, and meaningful policy generation.

Many social psychologists have been inspired by Bruner's (1990) second cognitive revolution: He calls to refocus social psychological research on both human experiences and the generation of meaning, which is situated in a fluid context. This thesis has important implications both for research on intergroup conflict – between real social groups –and the level at which government and private agencies fund social psychological research. If social psychologists are to move beyond explaining and understanding intergroup relations in a laboratory setting, and are interested in understanding violent conflict to generate ideas towards stable and contextualized peace, several changes are needed in the balance of social psychological research, and associated funding. A greater focus on fieldwork in (pre/post) conflict zones would augment existing theories concerned with intergroup relations, and have the potential to bridge the gap between academia and contextualized policy formation. By creating and augmenting theories sensitive to shifting contexts outside of the laboratory where actual intergroup conflict is occurring, social psychological research may have a greater impact on the reduction of violent conflict. The implication for funding agencies is clear: money spent researching intergroup conflict is at least one level of abstraction closer to understanding the actual processes involved in violent conflict as it actually occurs or occurred.

In order to de-marginalize social psychological research, it is necessary to increase the visibility of its primary function: to help people live their lives. Therefore greater efforts need to be made to engage non-specialists with the findings of psychological research. Accessibility to psychological insights and conclusions could be improved with a re-focus on writing-style. Complex ideas need to be communicated simply. One way to do this is to increase the level of narration in psychological publications. Some high profile social psychologists have published their seminal works in this format, such as *Zimbardo's The Lucifer Effect: Understanding how good people turn evil* (2007). This has the benefit of engaging larger audiences as the findings are understandable to non-specialists and are also more widely available. Such publications are the exception rather than the norm, but this need not be the case. A move towards increased narration to package social psychological findings in a more accessible manner would not de-legitimize the value of the research, if the research is well presented, and useful conclusions are drawn. If social psychological studies were made more accessible and understandable, the findings of this research could be implemented more practically.

Elaborating upon the potential of mixing psychology with narratives illustrates how useful metaphors, such as Moghaddam's (2005) 'Stairway to Terrorism' are important in orientating the opinions and informing the debate of those who might be in a position to construct or challenge both foreign and domestic policy, and those who need to re-think how social phenomena, such as terrorism, are conceptualized. Moghaddam's metaphor has implications for both long and short term U.S. foreign policy to deal with Islamic terrorism. Focusing on those who are

already at the top of the staircase i.e. those who are already recruited into terrorist organizations brings only short term solutions. Long term policy, Moghaddam argues, should focus on generating contextualized democracies to increase an actual and perceived sense of voice and justice, thus preventing the potential to climb through the narrowing steps of the staircase to terrorism. In this sense, social psychological findings can act like good literature: it provides useful and creative ways to think through cultures, and the problems associated with them. By drawing on creative metaphors, such as the staircase metaphor, social psychologists can frame how issues, such as terrorism, are conceptualized and subsequently how these problems might be resolved (Moghaddam, 2004).

Secondly, the accessibility of social psychological findings must be improved. The open access nature of *Psychology & Society* increases the audience who can and will read this Special Edition. This journal, and others which are freely available yet peer-reviewed, encourage the circulation and duplication of potentially useful knowledge throughout the world, and subsequently are at the forefront of the Digital Age (Gillespie, 2010). Exclusivity to academic information is problematic, as it serves to distance potentially useful information from the very people who might be in a position to constructively implement these findings, provided they are understandable to the non-specialist too. By using a variety of methodologies, bridging the dogged and tired gap between qualitative and quantitative research, the articles in this volume reflect the thesis I have outlined in this introduction, namely that social psychological research conducted outside the laboratory, and the format in which it is written and published, can be important in understanding conflict as it occurs between real social groups either on an international or intrastate level.

### **A Preview of the Issue**

Kohl's (2011) study sensitizes researchers to the importance of investigating the historical dimension of international conflict. Her research investigates how Nazi propaganda, as evidenced in the speeches of both Hitler and Gobbels, formed a strong, coherent ingroup, legitimizing their violent annihilation of the outgroup: the Jewish population during World War II. Despite the changing fortunes of the Nazi regime, Kohl's analysis shows no deviation from a consistent monological form of propaganda, despite their changing fortunes between 1939 and 1945. Although a prevalent feature of propaganda is consistency of message, Power and Peterson (2011) suggest that the use of propaganda in contemporary warfare is best conceptualized as being dialogical: where the discourse (and acts) of one group (whether on an intrastate or international level) affects the response from the other.

In contrast to Kohl's article which examines the importance of elites (i.e. Hitler and Gobbels), Susnjic (2011) is concerned with understanding how different ethnic groups remember violent conflict differently, and how these different memories inform current attitudes. Using survey data obtained in Croatia, she examines the responses from people either from conflict affected or conflict averted zones, concluding that the ways in which groups remember another group can dictate the contemporary attitudes towards them. Social psychological research, concerned

with history and memory is of utmost importance to understand contemporary issues, in (post) conflict zones. Brescó (2011) augments Susnjic's approach to examining the role of memory, arguing for the importance of understanding the role of artefacts and narratives in remembering violent conflict and the role these memories have in relation to contemporary intergroup engagement.

In Power (2011), I propose a foundation for a dialogical model of conflict resolution, by extending previous work by Tileagă (2007) to resituate dehumanization, delegitimatization and depersonalization as socially constructed phenomena. The model I propose examines the ways in which groups can engage with each other in a shifting cultural, historical and political context. I identify two overarching strategies as a consequence of further engagement. 'Dialogical divergence' occurs through discourse and acts which distance one group from another, increasing the potential for actual violence. The opposing umbrella strategy - 'dialogical convergence'- has received less empirical research, where there is the possibility of groups to 'become other' (see Gillespie, 2006).

O' Sullivan-Lago (2011) asks whether it is possible to resolve conflict through the use of dialogue when one group is being dehumanized and where possible alternative representations are silenced. Vollhardt (2011) expands upon O'Sullivan's commentary, and argues that the possibility of intergroup dialogue is complicated both by the process of dehumanization itself, and the underlying unequal power structures that already exist in the context the groups are situated in.

Lacey (2011) focuses a psychosocial lens sensitive to the role of emotion of the Palestinian/Israeli conflict in Gaza. He argues that those people who both experience and feel they have experienced humiliation the most acutely are the most likely to resort to violence and aggression. Commenting on this essay, Andriani (2011) identifies the restoration of dignity and honour for both Palestinians and Israeli's as an important social force to counteract the proliferation of violent conflict which Lacey identifies as being exasperated by humiliation. Andriani also highlights the potential usefulness of social psychologists employing 'action research', both to generate ideas and augment pre-existing methods, discovered by researchers, to enact societal change.

Fagerlund (2011) examines the motivations behind the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) targeting civilians during the recently ended Civil War in Sri Lanka. Her qualitative analysis of three distinct acts of violence against civilians by insurgent groups should sensitize social psychologists to examining the function and motivations of patterns and magnitude of violence against civilians during civil war. When the LTTE target members of their ingroup (i.e. fellow Tamils) the aim is to affect and control the behavior of the ingroup, particularly so they wouldn't enlist with the government forces. Conversely, by targeting the members of the government's constituency, the insurgents tried to affect the behavior of the government, who, in theory at least, at representative of the constituency. In a short, yet wide ranging commentary on Fagerlund's article, Shanahan (2011), argues that although violence against civilians during warfare is decreasing, the motivations behind its use is more complex and multi-faceted than originally

delineated by Fagerland. Factors such as external contracts and financing, limited resources, state violence against both civilians and rebel groups are also important to consider in understanding the motivations and functions behind acts of violence in situated intrastate conflicts.

The collection of articles in this Special Edition illustrate some of the ways in which social psychologists can research conflict outside the laboratory. This line of investigation and the form in which it is published is promising, both for generating ideas for conflict resolution and for engaging social psychological findings with a wider audience. Policy makers should take note of the importance of social psychological research to develop meaningful ideas and solutions to end conflict and to generate peace. On the other hand, social psychologists need to continue to produce meaningful research, and ideas, which are both available and accessible to people who can enact them.

Although violent conflict is permeated from its inception to its proliferation and prolonging by complex systems, essentially these are social psychological, and thus they are open to investigation and understanding, which has the potential to generate meaningful policy solutions to reduce or end them. The task is not straightforward, but essentially it is people who lie at the heart of conflict, and therefore it is people who can stop it.

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