CULTURES OF PEACE: A SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

July, 1994

Committee for the Psychological Study of Peace (IUPsyS)

Reuben Ardila, Colombia
Klaus Boehnke, Germany
Morton Deutsch, USA
Erica Frydenberg, Australia
Toshio Iritani, Japan
Michael Wessells, USA

Additional Contributors:

Edward Cairns
Centre for the Study of Conflict
University of Ulster at Coleraine
Coleraine, N. Ireland

Milton Schwebel, USA
President, Psychologists for
  Social Responsibility
Rutgers University
CULTURES OF PEACE: A SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

Committee for the Psychological Study of Peace
International Union of Psychological Science

The contemporary world is ravaged by systemic violence, intra-state and intercommunal conflicts, virulent nationalism, and bitter hatreds. From the tragedies of the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda to the dangers of life in inner-city combat zones of the U. S., the high toll exacted by violence is all too apparent. Addressing this systemic violence requires an integrated, multi-disciplinary approach that cuts across a diversity of social levels ranging from families and communities to regional and global systems. This view is at the heart of the culture of peace.

Drawing upon the insights of top social psychologists from diverse cultures, this paper outlines conceptual and operational contributions from social psychology to the culture of peace. It is offered with the understanding that problems of peace transcend disciplinary boundaries and with the desire to avoid psychological reductionism. Since social psychology is only one element in the comprehensive approach needed to build peace, this paper attempts to identify points of intersection between social psychology and related areas as they pertain to cultures of peace.

Theoretical Foundations

Conflict is an essential feature of all social systems, and it has beneficial effects on social change, interpersonal relationships, and problem-solving. Conceptually, a culture of peace should be viewed not as a conflict-free utopia but as a culture in which individuals, groups, and nations have productive, cooperative relations with one another and manage their
inevitable conflicts constructively. It is a culture in which there are caring and just relations among individuals, groups, and nations based on full realization of their positive interdependence with one another and with their environment. Thus a culture of peace entails much more than the absence of war—it entails social justice, norms of equity and multicultural sensitivity, and social relations conducive to nonviolence, sustainable development, and human well-being. In the broadest sense, a culture of peace consists of integrated patterns of belief, affect, behavior, and social relations that nourish nonviolence and individual, social, and ecological health.

From a social psychological perspective, one of the essential tools for resolving conflict constructively and for building positive social relations is through cooperation on superordinate goals shared by groups in conflict. Extensive research indicates that although contact between members of groups in conflict may, under some conditions, reduce hostility and fighting, contact can, particularly in very heated conflict, set the stage for incidents that intensify hostilities and make matters worse. By contrast, cooperation on shared goals establishes a commonality of interests and a sense of positive interdependence between competing groups, strengthening the view that it is in everyone’s interest to work together. Furthermore, cooperation often serves to break down distinctions between "us" and "them," to weaken powerful enemy images of the Other as diabolical and untrustworthy, and to encourage positive communication and problem-solving. Building a culture of peace would require cooperation between conflicting parties on many different levels, within and across diverse human enterprises—business, education, arts, health, economic development, religion, environmental protection, etc.
While specific acts of cooperation may be useful, the establishment of a culture of peace requires a transformation of motivational orientations toward conflict from the competitive to the cooperative. In a cooperative orientation, there is a sense of positive interdependence, of commonality of interests, and of concern over the welfare of the other as well as oneself. Cooperative orientations support constructive conflict management and resolution by encouraging win-win attitudes, positive affect, and effective communication, problem-solving, and negotiating behavior. On the other hand, competitive, win-lose orientations toward conflict encourage mutual hostility, rigidity, suspicion, negative stereotyping, excessive reliance on threats and coercion, problems of communication and negotiation, and attempts to overpower the adversary. Held widely by individuals and groups, particularly in social contexts marked by large asymmetries of power, competitive orientations to conflict provide a psychological infrastructure for destructive conflict and a culture of violence. The encouragement of cooperative orientations to conflict not only enables particular cooperative projects but also transforms the ways in which people view and respond to conflict on a continuing basis. By laying the foundation for the long-term processes of social reconstruction, conflict prevention, and peacebuilding, cooperative orientations help to build the psychological foundation for a culture of peace.

Realistic empathy is a third essential part of the foundation for a culture of peace. In situations as diverse as the Arab-Israeli conflicts and the racial conflicts in the U. S., there has been a notable lack of empathy. In general, groups and nations locked in heated conflict often harbor negative stereotypes and diabolical enemy images of the other. These stereotypes and images heighten fears of the adversary, encourage a monolithic view of the
adversary that overlooks its internal diversity and its positive qualities, negatively bias perceptions of the adversary's motives, promote rigid and simplistic thinking, and socially isolate the conflicting parties, thereby impeding communication and negotiation. In extreme form, dehumanized images and stereotypes divide the social world into the "Good Us" and the "Evil Them," making it very difficult to see common interests, to recognize positive interdependence, or to view cooperation as anything more than a moral salve or as a means of perpetuating an unjust status quo. Even in the absence of strong enemy images, ethnocentrism and egocentric thinking often combine with norms of ignorance and social isolation to thwart empathy and constructive conflict management.

Realistic empathy is needed to humanize the adversary, to create a more complex, differentiated view of the diversity and multiple constituencies that exist on the other side, to enable each party to the conflict to understand how the other parties view the conflict and the key issues and interests at stake, to clarify the adversary's motivations, and to set the stage for cooperative problem-solving. Particularly in very heated conflicts in which the parties are unwilling to talk, much less to cooperate, empathy is a prerequisite for making progress. In addition, many conflicts have a significant cultural dimension, and empathy is an essential process for building cultural sensitivity and helping the parties to communicate in constructive ways. Thus it is useful to think in terms of a multi-component process in which steps to encourage empathy (e.g., peace education programs or workshops on interactive problem-solving) precede and accompany on a continuing basis efforts to build cooperative activities and orientations.

A fourth essential part of the theoretical foundation for a culture of peace is human
needs theory. This theory posits that deep conflict resolution cannot occur until fundamental psychological needs for identity, recognition, security, and equity have been met. Institutionalized oppression and diverse forms of structural violence disallow the satisfaction of these basic needs. In the aftermath of the Cold War, the failure to meet these needs has contributed significantly to the negative forces of ethno-nationalism, survival fears, and intra-state and intercommunal conflicts. The importance of having a recognized and legitimated social identity is apparent since it is through identity groups that many basic human needs are satisfied. Through affiliation with an identity group, for example, one gains self-esteem and a sense of meaning, the absence of which create an environment conducive to the spread of virulent nationalism and acts of thrill-seeking violence. Within communities and societies, it is often the failure to meet basic needs of identity and security that leads many youths to pursue lives of gang violence and social alienation.

A central challenge for a culture of peace is to fulfill social identity needs in ways that avoid pitting "us" against "them" and derogating the Other. One way to achieve this would be to create a new, single positive identity for both groups by, for example, creating overlapping group memberships, thereby increasing the perceived similarity between the groups. Alternately, one might create a common, socially unjust "enemy" such as poverty or illiteracy, not only heightening the perception of common needs and positive interdependence but also setting the stage for cooperative activities that address some of the root causes of the conflict. In this regard, it would be particularly valuable to develop models of effective cross-conflict participation, which may then be integrated into effective models and application strategies for promoting sustainable development.
Operational Considerations

To be effective, culture of peace projects must satisfy obvious criteria of having a strong theoretical foundation, effective design, and quality implementation. From a social psychological perspective, however, the culture of peace program should attach significant weight to criteria of inclusiveness, breadth of impact, and cultural sensitivity.

The criterion of inclusiveness reflects the desire to make the culture of peace program a nondiscriminatory, global enterprise and also the fact that issues of peace transcend national boundaries. If the initial projects on the culture of peace focused exclusively on developing nations, this could inadvertently narrow the scope of the program, set a paternalistic tone, and send a tacitly degrading, discriminatory message that developing nations are the source or the sites of the most pressing problems of peace. In fact, the so-called developed nations are the source of deep-seated militaristic institutions and are besieged by problems such as inner-city violence, racial tension, and poverty. To reduce these problems, to bring developed nations more fully into the culture of peace program, to build a sense of global partnership, and to establish a norm of helping all nations build a culture of peace, it would be appropriate to focus at least one of the initial culture of peace projects on highly industrialized, relatively wealthy nations such as the U. S.

The criterion of breadth of impact embodies the understanding that violence is a systemic phenomenon and cannot be addressed effectively by small-scale efforts that impact only a handful of individuals or that cannot be extended beyond a particular community. In choosing points of entry, it is important to work through social networks and subsystems that have strong effects on larger social systems and that can have a positive impact in the
wider social arena. A useful strategy in this regard is to focus on education, defined broadly to include not only schooling but also socialization practices within neighboring families and communities.

The cultural sensitivity criterion implies that projects should be based on an insider's understanding of the particulars and the cultural context of each conflict, on the recognition that concepts and methods developed in one cultural context may not apply in others, and on a desire to learn from and to work with the people whose lives are most directly affected by a particular conflict. It would be both limiting and disenfranchising to base culture of peace projects primarily on the expertise of Westerners. A much stronger approach is to utilize multinational teams that embody diverse cultural perspectives. In addition, it is essential to work in a partnership mode with local citizens, experts, and leaders on the conceptualization, design, and implementation of a culture of peace project in their area. This practice helps to build a sense of ownership for the project, to tailor it to the needs and the particulars of the specific cultural context, and to insure its continuation over the long run.

A related point is that culture of peace projects should address issues of cultural insensitivity and problems of violence associated with racism and ethnic discrimination. By addressing these issues, the culture of peace program would make a significant contribution to handling the intercommunal and ethnic conflicts that tear at the fabric of many societies and that thwart the establishment of a culture of peace.

In light of these considerations, it would be very useful to establish a UNESCO-sponsored culture of peace project on nonviolent, inter-ethnic conflict resolution in public
schools and surrounding communities in the U. S. and other highly industrialized nations. To have the greatest impact and to focus on problems of violence and ethnic tension that are both systemic and severe, it would be appropriate to work in inner-city schools in cities such as Bogota, Colombia and Chicago, USA. In these cities, urban communities have become virtual combat zones where homicide is a leading cause of death. Young people living in these areas become socialized into lives of crime, gang violence, and illiteracy, thereby planting the seeds for profound social problems in the future.

A model for such a program should include multiple steps, expanding conflict resolution training in progressively wider circles and linking schools, communities, and families in a constructive partnership. The first step is to provide training for school staffs in methods of nonviolent conflict resolution such as peer mediation. Educating the staff and obtaining their support is the essential first step since it is the staff that makes many of the key decisions and that is in a position to oversee the effective implementation of programs. The second step is to train the students in the use of peer mediation techniques. This approach, based on a model developed through a partnership between the International Center for Cooperation and Conflict Resolution at Columbia University and the New York City schools, has been applied on a limited-funding basis and has already demonstrated highly promising results.

Since schools are not isolated social systems and since what youths learn in the streets and their families often runs counter to school-based education, the next step is to extend conflict resolution training to communities and families. Through community venues such as churches, youth organizations, and community centers, conflict resolution trainings and
workshops should be made widely available without charge to the public, and centers should be established not only for training but also for providing mediation services on a wide spectrum of disputes. Although men, women, and children should be involved in these services, women may have a special role, for young women demonstrate greater concern about all social issues than young men, and in diverse cultures, women often play a pivotal role in child rearing and in overseeing children's educational activities. In dealing with entrenched inter-group conflicts such as those between rival gangs, it would be particularly valuable to provide interactive problem-solving workshops that defuse hostilities, erode enemy images, and increase empathy, positive communication, and cultural sensitivity, establishing a base of positive social relations and enabling cooperation in the future.

It would also be very useful to offer training in conflict resolution for parents and families since it is within the family that many of the basic patterns for dealing with conflict are established. Ideally, some of the same trainers would work in schools, communities, and families, building interconnections and establishing a common base of theory and practice. Interconnection and continuity could also be promoted by having some of the peer mediators from schools serve as mediators in the local community and within their families. Together, these steps would help to create an interconnected, multi-level system of nonviolent conflict resolution and a set of beliefs, norms, and practices that support a culture of peace.

It is also important to complement these steps with educational programs at all levels—in communities, in schools, and in the public media that help to shape social consciousness—aimed at building empathy and sensitivity to ethnic and cultural differences. For example,
there should be educational programs designed to increase understanding of the history and cultural values of other groups. There should also be exposure to people, stories, and myths that help to explode negative stereotypes, to create differentiated views of other groups, and to overcome the ignorance that allows ethnocentrism and misunderstanding to flourish.

The culture of peace program should also include cooperative work that cuts across many different levels of society and that addresses a diversity of intersecting social problems. There should be collaborative projects between business, education, and community aimed at reducing unemployment and poverty, increasing literacy, and creating an environment conducive to business and healthy, sustainable development. There should be cooperative projects between businesses, local governments, churches, and the media to educate the public about the unacceptable social costs of high levels of violent and drug-related crime and about alternatives for addressing these problems. Underlying and supporting these efforts should be a large-scale dialogue about what is needed to build a culture of peace. Ultimately, the culture of peace must be a process for dealing constructively with conflict, for encouraging positive social relations that prevent destructive conflict, and for nurturing the long-term vision that is essential for building peace.
SELECTED REFERENCES

Cooperation on Superordinate Goals:


Motivational Orientations Toward Conflict:


Realistic Empathy:


Human Needs Theory and Social Identity:


Cooperation and Nonviolent Conflict Resolution in Schools:
