Hope With Optimism: A Commentary on Brewster Smith's Article

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This article is a commentary on Brewster Smith's outstanding article in this issue of Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology. It points to some reasons for optimism as well as hope and it questions the view that "us versus them" thinking is a fundamental human propensity.

I very much admire Brewster Smith and his life-long commitment to employing psychological knowledge to developing a world that is more humane, just, and peaceful. In his long and distinguished career, he has made many valuable contributions to this end. In his masterful review of peace psychology in this issue of Peace and Conflict, he has mentioned several of them but neglected to mention his important work in the area of mental health—which I view as a central ingredient to a more amiable, peaceful world. Nor has he mentioned how, as a leader of various psychological organizations, he has been a persistent and influential advocate for psychology's increased involvement in such important social issues as war and peace.

I agree with almost all of what Brewster has written, and had I not been pressed by Milt Schwobel to write a comment, I would not accentuate here my minor differences with him. The differences center around "optimism" and his view that "us versus them" thinking and feeling is probably a fundamental human propensity.

I am more optimistic than Brewster, not only because I believe hope without optimism is unsustainable, but because I believe there are good reasons for optimism if one does not get mired in a short-term perspective. Taking a longer perspective, one

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can identify a number of trends that should give rise to optimism. Today there are more democratic governments than at any time in history, there has been a dramatic decrease in interpersonal homicides over the centuries, and slavery—which has been very common throughout human history—has largely been abolished. I am writing this without the opportunity or time to do research on other areas of progress but I suspect that a long-term perspective would show progress in human rights, health, education, literacy, and lifespan, as well as other indicators of the improving human condition over the past several centuries. Brewster and I are of the same age, and I am confident that he would acknowledge that we have both seen vast improvements in these indicators in the United States during our life times. There have, of course, been setbacks from time to time but the trend provides a reasonable basis for optimism for the future. None of the foregoing is meant to deny or minimize the many serious problems that still exist. We have a long way to go before we achieve a just, humane, peaceful, and sustainable human society.

I have several other reasons for optimism: the United Nations (UN), the technological revolution, globalization, and education for a peaceful world. The UN and its various affiliated organizations have survived over 50 years and despite its underfunding, its weakness, and its internal flaws, it is increasingly recognized as a useful resource in preventive diplomacy, peacekeeping, and peacemaking as well as in many other areas—human rights, economic development, health, education, environment, and so forth. It has gradually become an indispensable international organization that is slowly fostering the recognition that all nations and people live in one interdependent world whose fate is the collective responsibility of all. Secondly, despite the severe disruptions created by the technological revolution and economic globalization that is now occurring—and that, as Brewster rightly points out, is the root of much of our present conflicts and distress—there is potentially a very positive side to these radical changes. The positive long-run potentials include a considerably higher standard of living for many people throughout the world, the elimination of gross inequalities, a greater recognition of interdependence and world community, a leveling and diffusion of power, and so on. Although psychology as a discipline has a relatively minor role in fostering the positive potentials of the UN and of the revolution of technology and globalization, my impression is that only a few psychologists are actively engaged in developing and fulfilling psychology’s potential contributions in these areas.

Educating for a peaceful world—which includes education in constructive conflict resolution, constructive controversy, mediation, and cooperation as well as peace education—is a small but mushrooming movement in the United States and in many other parts of the world: Australia, South Africa, Europe, Middle East, and so on. It is not confined to educators and school children: business people, diplomats, UN personnel, health providers, and so forth are also seeking education in how to develop the knowledge, attitudes, and skills of dealing with conflicts more constructively. It is possible that this movement, over a period of time, will grow sufficiently to produce what Einstein called for after the detonation of the first atomic bomb: a new way of thinking about conflict. I am hopeful, as well as optimistic, that psychologists as well as educators will help to contribute to the growth of this new way of thinking about conflict.

Brewster is undoubtedly right to be cautious about the near future—not because the conflicts and atrocities are worse than in the past but rather because the weapons that are now available to 10-year-olds as well as to terrorists, conflicting ethnic groups, and nations are so much more destructive than in the past. When a conflict takes a destructive course, the temptation is to use the most powerful weapon available against your adversary if you think the other will attempt to strike you first with a powerful weapon.

The easy availability of destructive weapons is very dangerous. Several mutually supportive strategies have to be actively pursued to reduce the dangers they pose: (a) reducing the availability of weapons through elimination or curtailing of the immensely profitable arms trade within and between nations; (b) arms control—locating, identifying, and controlling the weapons through inspections, licensing, restrictions that would make accidental or irrational use more difficult; (c) development of an emphasis on mutual security so that neither side feels that it can be disadvantaged or that the other can be advantaged, by enhancing the security of both sides; and (d) dealing with conflicts constructively by addressing the grievances, injustices, and basic needs of the conflicting parties.

The foregoing will not be easy to accomplish in the short-term at the community, national, or international levels. However, I assume that we will muddle along toward these objectives and be prodded more strongly toward their achievement when, sporadically, acts of violence at the community, national, or international levels are sufficiently horrible that they demand public attention and preventive action. Optimistically, I assume that human society and a habitable environment will survive this period of muddling that we are now in and that we will come out of as a more cooperative, humane, and safe human society. Of course the chance of muddling through successfully increases if there are more of us devoting the thought, energy, and action necessary to overcoming the obstacles to the development of such a human society.

A more basic difference between Brewster and myself is his tentative assumption that there is a fundamental human propensity for “us versus them” in thinking and feeling. Here, I believe he is making the same error that earlier pessimists about human beings have made in their assumption that human nature predisposes people (particularly men) to be aggressive—that is, human nature predisposes to violence and war. Clearly, humans have the potential for a wide range of thought, feeling, and behavior: the potential for love as well as hate, for constructive as well as destructive behavior, for “we” as well as “us versus them.” There is no reason to assume that one potential or another is inherently prepotent without regard to particular personal and social circumstances as well as life history.
With regard to "us versus them" and interethnic conflict and war, there is considerable evidence to suggest that "us versus them" is the result rather than the cause of destructive conflict. This was clearly the case in Bosnia, where Serbs, Croats, and Muslims were friendly neighbors in many communities before Milosevic and Trujman, for their own political purposes, whipped up latent prejudices based on earlier destructive conflicts. I am confident that if systematic research were done, it would demonstrate that intergroup prejudice typically follows the initiation of destructive conflict rather than preceding it. The only study that I know of in this respect was done by Theodore Abel in relation to World War I. His research revealed that it was only after the United States declared war against Germany that negative attitudes and feelings developed toward Germany and Germans. Past negative attitudes that result from prior destructive conflict, even if they exist only as a historical residue rather than as an active present attitude, can be used by demagogues to develop and intensify hostile attitudes toward the "enemy" as they initiate destructive interethnic conflict.

Brewster’s mention of "deep-rooted human biases that contribute to making war a persistent historical fact" is troublesome. His use of the term human biases instead of cultural biases suggests that the biases are inherent in human nature (even though he denies that genes for aggression are involved). The use of the term cultural biases would, instead, point to the reality that not all cultures or even nations have been involved in war as a persistent historical fact. The variations among cultures and within cultures over time have been considerable in their involvement in war-making. These variations suggest that it is not deep-rooted biases in human nature that have to be overcome but rather specific cultural values, social circumstances, and socialization that need to be changed in war-prone cultures.

I also want to briefly discuss his mention of laboratory research on minimal social groups as being at least compatible with a built-in tendency for in-group preference. Here, Brewster is referring to the research initiated by Taffel that led to his development of social identity theory. I don’t wish to review the voluminous research on minimal social groups but I will simply assert that one does not need an assumption of "hard-wiring" to explain the results. And, to the extent that this assumption leads to the prediction of "us versus them" as the common response and in-group preference as an inevitable response, it is clearly wrong and inconsistent with the experimental evidence. (Parenthetically, I also note that the occurrence of "ingroup preference" is not necessarily accomplished by outgroup hostility.) These results occur despite the fact that the experiments have been conducted in a culture that has a competitive emphasis, with participants who have been mainly socialized in this culture, and in an experimental context that usually subtly communicates to the participants the importance of considering oneself a member of one group and not the other.

I want to conclude by agreeing with Brewster that there are enormous difficulties to be overcome if we are to achieve a just, humane, peaceful, and sustainable human society. Hope, and a realistic optimism in facing these difficulties, are essential to maintaining the sustained effort to overcome them.