What is political psychology?

Morton Deutsch

Although its ancestry in social philosophy can be traced back to ancient times, modern political psychology as an academic discipline was born in the decades between the First and Second World Wars. It is a child of political science and psychology, having been conceived in the ambivalent mood of optimism and despair which has characterized the scientific age. Rapidly expanding knowledge, increasing confidence in scientific methods and the ever quickening technological developments stimulated the awareness that scientific methods might be applied to the understanding of political behaviour. The increasing political turmoil, the irrationality and destructiveness of the First World War, the development of modern totalitarian regimes with their barbarities, the emergence of the mass media and their systematic use by propagandists suggested an urgent need for more systematic knowledge about the relationship between political and psychological processes.

The first notable link between psychology and political science in the United States developed at the University of Chicago under the encouragement of the political scientist Charles Merriam (Davies, 1973, p. 18). Merriam (1925, 1934) explicitly called for a scientific political science that would draw on psychology. It was one of Merriam's students, Harold D. Lasswell, who responded to that call and, through his writings and his teachings, became the American founding father of political psychology as a new academic discipline.

Although Lasswell's prolific writings touched on almost every topic of interest to political psychologists, his special emphasis on psychological processes as they affect political processes has been influential in shaping the approach of most American social scientists to the field of political psychology. His early books, Psychopathology and Politics (1930), World Politics and Personal Insecurity (1935), Politics: Who Gets What, When, and How (1936), Power and Personality (1948), helped to establish a distinctive psychological perspective for understanding political behaviour, politics and politicians. This perspective leads to a political psychology largely centring upon individual and social psychological processes—such as motivation, conflict, perception, cognition, learning, socialization, attitude formation and group dynamics—and upon individual personality and psychopathology as the causal factors influencing political behaviour.
The strong emphasis on psychological processes as determinants of political processes in American political psychology has led to a relative neglect of the study of the influence of political processes upon psychological processes. European political psychology, although much influenced by American political psychology, has been less one-sided. The greater impact of the Marxist perspective in Europe has evoked more awareness of the role of political processes in shaping psychological processes and personality. Thus, Max Horkheimer in his 1931 inaugural address as Director of the Institute for Social Research at the University of Frankfurt insisted that institute members should explore the interconnection between the economic life of society, the psychic development of the individual, and transformations in the realm of culture (Held, 1980, p. 33). Various members of the Frankfurt school and those associated with the development of 'critical theory'—Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse, Fromm, and Habermas—have made important contributions to the integration of the political-economic orientations of Marxist theory with the psychological perspectives of Freudian theory.

In my view, the field of political psychology is the study of the interaction of political and psychological processes: this is a bidirectional interaction. Just as cognitive capabilities limit and affect the nature of political decision-making so, also, the structure and process of political decision-making affects cognitive capabilities. Thus, five-year-olds and mature adults, partly as a result of their differences in cognitive capabilities, will develop rather different sorts of political structures and processes; similarly, certain sorts of political structures and processes will foster the development of the intelligent, autonomous, reflective, active characteristics of mature adults, while others will encourage the development of immature, passive, dependent, uncritical cognitive capabilities resembling those of a submissive child.

The field of political psychology is defined not only by its subject-matter, the interrelationship between political and psychological processes, but also by its approach to its subject-matter. Its approach is in the scientific tradition. As Nagel (1961, p. 4) has pointed out: 'It is the desire for explanations which are at once systematic and controllable by factual evidence that generates science.' The scientifically oriented political psychologist seeks to develop explanatory hypotheses, for the phenomena of interest, which have logical consequences that are precise enough to be genuinely testable. The explanatory hypotheses, in other words, must be subject to the possibility of rejection through empirically verifiable and scientifically competent evidence that has been obtained by procedures employed with the intent of eliminating known sources of error.

As Nagel (1961, p. 13) has indicated:

The practice of scientific method is the persistent critique of arguments, in the light of the tried canons for judging the reliability of the procedures by which evidential data are obtained, and for assessing the probative force of the evidence on which conclusions are based.

A scientifically oriented political psychology must, of necessity, be concerned with methodology: it must be concerned with developing the 'tried canons' for judging the reliability of procedures for collecting data and for assessing the validity of the evidence for testing explanatory hypotheses. It must also be concerned with developing the data-collection procedures which will produce reliable and valid data.

The practice of scientific method in a field such as political psychology is difficult to achieve and to sustain. The inherent nature of its subject-matter makes it largely inappropriate to transfer uncritically the methodological canons of the well-established physical and biological sciences to political psychology. Yet there is the natural temptation to use the natural sciences as a model and also the opposite temptation to reject the possibility of a scientific approach because the appropriateness of the model is rejected. The scientific approach of the natural sciences has mainly reflected a technical cognitive interest (Habermas, 1971) which has been oriented towards developing knowledge for instrumental action towards defined goals under given conditions. To the extent that the social sciences, including political psychology, have uncritically imitated the methodologies appropriate to a technical cognitive interest, they have tended to neglect the fact that human action has to be understood with reference to the meanings that the action has for the actors and for its audience: human action is rooted in intersubjective contexts of communication, in intersubjective practices and forms of life which have distinctive historical origins (Bernstein, 1976, p. 230). The uncritical im-
tation of the technical orientation of the natural sciences has also led many social scientists to ignore how their theoretical and empirical work—that is, their scientific activities—are influenced by the implicit assumptions, the value positions, ideological orientations and political-economic viewpoints in the communities in which they participate.

Natural as such imitation of an exalted, older idol is, it has had some ill-effects on the development of a scientific political psychology. It has led some to confuse 'science' and science; namely, to consider techniques labelled 'objective', 'behaviouristic', 'value free', and 'quantitative' as scientific even when critical reflection would have revealed how inappropriate the techniques (as well as the labels) were, and also how thoroughly value-laden they were. Others have reacted against the pseudo-objectivism of science by a retreat to an unbridled subjectivism, a subjectivism which, in effect, denies the possibility or value of an intersubjective methodology for the scientific study of political psychology.

Fortunately, neither science nor subjectivism is the dominant trend in political psychology. Most political psychologists are practitioners of the well-tried scientific art of 'methodological opportunism'. They employ research designs and established procedures—for example, content analysis, systematic interviewing, questionnaire methods, analysis of non-verbal behaviour, small-group experiments, projective techniques, controlled observations, polling, analysis of recorded data—borrowed from any of the various behavioural and social science disciplines and adapted so as to be appropriate to the problem they are investigating. If the research design or procedures are poorly implemented by the researcher or inappropriate to the research problem, one can normally expect that the 'persistent critique of arguments, in the light of tried canons' will reveal the deficiencies in the research (if the research is considered significant enough to warrant attention). Sometimes, of course, error goes unrecognized because everyone in a field of study are subject to the same incorrect assumption.

Much of the work being done in political psychology is exploratory and formulative, meant to stimulate insight and to develop hypotheses rather than to test them. There is considerable latitude in doing such research but since there are no good rules for being creative a good deal of exploratory research turns out to be unproductive. The latitudes for acceptable descriptive and hypothesis-testing kinds of studies are much smaller. The rules and procedures for conducting such studies are fairly well articulated. Nevertheless, many such studies, even when well done technically, are often of little value because not enough critical thought has preceded the formulation of the research problem.

Although political psychology is in the scientific tradition, it is also much concerned with being socially useful and with applying its knowledge and insights to improvement of political processes and to human betterment. Many of the 'applications' are speculative in the sense that there are numerous important gaps in our relevant theoretical and empirical knowledge and we must take a speculative leap to make specific recommendations from the shaky foundations of currently existing knowledge. However, the major social value of intellectual work in political psychology resides not in its specific recommendations but rather in its providing organizing frameworks, clarifying ideas and systematic concepts for helping those who are engaged in practical political work to think about what they do more comprehensively, more analytically, and with more concern for the empirical soundness of their working assumptions.

The content of political psychology

Political psychologists have investigated a wide range of topics. To get some personal feeling for the variety of topics that have fallen under the rubric of political psychology, I have reviewed the contents of the ISPP's journal, Political Psychology, since its first year of publication and have also examined the contents of a number

programmes of the annual scientific meetings of the International Society of Political Psychology (ISPP). ISPP was founded in January 1976 as an international and interdisciplinary scholarly society: its international membership includes psychologists, political scientists, psychiatrists, sociologists, historians, anthropologists, and people in government or public life who have a scholarly interest in political psychology. It can be considered the focal point of scholarly activity in the field of political psychology. I have reviewed the contents of the ISPP's journal, Political Psychology, since its first year of publication and have also examined the contents of a number


A listing of the titles of articles, chapters, papers, and symposia produced a bewildering diversity of topics, giving a sense of chaos in political psychology. Fortunately, after reflecting on the diversity, a reasonably clear structure emerged from the surface chaos. Below I identify a number of key nodes in the emerging structure of political psychology.
What is political psychology?

The individual as political actor

This node is the centre of a cluster of studies concerned with the determinants and consequences of the individual's political behaviour. Brewster Smith (1968) has provided a map (see Fig. 1) 'for the analysis of personality and politics', which charts in a programmatic way the interrelations within the node. Studies of political socialization, the formation of political attitudes, political participation, political alienation, voting behaviour, the social backgrounds of political terrorists, the relationship between personality and political attitudes, group membership and political attitudes, personality, situational factors influencing political behaviour, the influence of the mass media, etc., are some of the many studies in political psychology that could be identified as falling in Smith's map.

Political movements

Closely related to the preceding node is one that is the nexus of investigations of social formations, groups, organizations, and communities in which the political actor is not the individual but rather a social unit composed of interacting individuals and groups. Thus, Helmut Moser (1982), in a review of political psychology in the Federal Republic of Germany, identifies studies of the 'youth movement' and studies of action groups of citizens as two of the major topics that have been studied extensively by political psychologists in that country. Similarly, there have been studies of the women's movement, of the peace movement, of terrorist groups, of religious sects, of the development of national movements, etc. Although Figure 1 is not a completely suitable map of this node, by changing 'individually oriented' terms to 'group-oriented' ones, the map would be a reasonable chart of what has been or could be studied under this heading. Thus, for 'self', 'person', or 'personality' substitute 'group', for 'attitudes' substitute 'politics', for individual 'traits' substitute group 'characteristics', and so on.

The politician or political leader

This node is also closely related to the first one except that the research here deals with a special category of political actors, those who are identifiable as playing or having played a particularly significant role in the political process. Studies of political leaders and political leadership, the personalities of politicians, psychobiography and psychopathology fall under this heading. Many studies of political leaders have been done because of the inherent interest in personalities that have loomed large in history. Figure 1 provides a good programmatic map for research in this area but, of course, the kinds of attitudes and political behaviours that would be of interest in the study of a political leader such as Mao Zedong would be different than in the study of a typical Chinese citizen.

Political alignments and structures

This node is similar to 'political movements' except that the research studies here are concerned with the social formations, groupings and organizations that develop among politicians. Here, the interest is in such questions as how coalitions are formed, what leads to splintering of groups, what gives rise to particular leader follower relations, what initiates co-operative rather than competitive relations. More generally, here the interest is in the 'sociometric' structures and interactions that occur among the politicians in a given political unit, what has given rise to them, and what are their consequences.

Political intergroup relations

This node is similar to the preceding one but is centred on investigations dealing with the structures and interactions existing among political units and not on those among individual politicians. The political units may be local governments, nations, alliances, international organizations and so on. The study of hostile interrelations such as are involved in threat, war, deterrence, etc., as well as the
study of co-operative interrelations such as mutual aid, scientific and cultural exchanges, and trade are included under this rubric.

Under this and the preceding heading, as well as the one following, the distinctive orientation of political psychology is concerned with the role of individual and group psychological processes in affecting as well as being affected by the natural development of political structures, political interactions and political processes. Here, so to speak, political psychology contributes a distinctive emphasis to the understanding of the subjective matters of political science and international relations; it does not provide a substitute for these disciplines.

**Political processes**

Perhaps the most central node in political psychology concerns the various individual and group processes that are involved in, and affect as well as are affected by, the behaviour of political entities. A number of these processes have been studied fairly extensively and warrant distinctive and major sub-nodes. These include: perception and cognition (Jervis, 1976), decision-making (Janis and Mann, 1977), persuasion (Doob, 1948; Katz et al., 1954; Nimmo, 1970), learning (Dawson et al., 1977), conflict (Snyder and Diesing, 1977; Deutsch, 1973), and mobilization (Etzioni, 1968). Next to each of these processes, I have indicated one or more references which would provide the reader with a guide to important work that has been done in the relevant area.

**Case-studies**

Cross-cutting the structure of political psychology organized around relatively abstract nodes is an organization around particular 'cases'—for example, understanding the voting or non-voting behaviour of individuals in particular localities; studying particular political leaders such as Churchill, Roosevelt, De Gaulle or Hitler; investigating conflict in the Middle East; studying the images of one another held by leaders of the 'super-powers'; investigating decision-making in specific situations such as the Cuban missile crisis. Such case-studies are primarily meant to describe in a meaningful way a historically significant person or episode. However, a well-conceptualized case-study will not only have relevance to the particular individual or episode being characterized, it will also have relevance for general, theoretical ideas; it should not only provide understanding of the case that was studied but also help us to understand other cases. The literature of political psychology and other social science disciplines is dotted with many case-studies: some of them have considerable general import but many, by themselves, go no further than providing interesting descriptions of the object of study.

**Human development and the political economy**

The first node focuses on the individual as someone whose actions have political consequences; the present node centres on the consequences for the individual (for his personal development, self-esteem, cognitive development and so forth) of living in a society that has a political economy with given characteristics. Here, the focus is on how political-economic structures and processes affect socio-psychological processes and structures rather than the reverse. Marxist theorists (Venable, 1945; Bowles and Gintis, 1976; Giddens and Held, 1982) have written extensively on these matters. So have such theorists as Weber (1930), Merton (1957), and Lane (1981, 1982). There is much of relevance to this node in a good deal of the research in psychological anthropology (e.g. Kardiner, et al., 1945; Le Vine, 1974; Lloyd and Gay, 1981; Casson, 1981; Wagner and Stevenson, 1982); in the research on the effects of class, caste, race and sex on personal development (e.g., Schar, 1981; Deutsch, et al., 1968; Deaux, 1976; Unger, 1979); in the research on the psychological effects of unemployment, inflation, an expanding economy (e.g. Hayes and Nutman, 1981; Brenner, 1973, 1976; Pfeffer, 1979); in the studies of the effects of democratic versus authoritarian groups (e.g. Lewin et al., 1939); and in the investigations of the social psychological consequences of different systems of distributive justice (e.g. Deutsch et al., 1982).

**Illustrative studies of political psychology**

In this section, I plan to summarize briefly several studies in the field of political psychology, which provide a more specific picture of work being done in this field; the studies are described below.

**How voters decide**

Himmelweit et al. (1981) have conducted a longitudinal study of voting behaviour in the United Kingdom over a period of six elections, extending from 1959 to 1974 (described in Hilde Himmelweit's article 'Political Socialization' on page 237 of the present issue).

This consumer model of voting is an application of multiple-attribute utility theory, MAUT, (von Winterfeld and Fischer, 1975; Humphreys, 1977). MAUT assumes that a person chooses the alternative with the highest total subjective or expected utility among the possible objects of choice. Based on their MAUT analysis, Himmelweit et al. predicted the vote of 80 per cent of her sample correctly for the 1974 elections; whereas predictions based upon the voter's prior voting history were only correct for 67 per cent of the sample. These results are clearly consistent with the thesis that British voters mostly make their voting decisions so as to increase their perceived chances that the policy issues they favour will be implemented; that is, voting behaviour is rational. Further, they report that the voters they studied had clearly structured, interrelated attitudes or 'ideologies' which persisted over time and which were closely related to their voting. This finding runs counter to Bell's claim (1962) about the demise of ideology in advanced Western societies and to Converse's (1964) early conclusions that, apart from a small elite, the mass public had no coherent set of political beliefs which could be construed as a political ideology.

Political issues have a life history. As Berelson et al. (1954) have suggested, an issue goes through certain stages which have bearing on its relevance to the vote from initial rejection to hesitant acceptance to being taken as a given in the society. The salience and importance of an issue to voting or to an individual's ideology depends upon where the issue is in its life history.

**Groupthink**

Janis (1972, 1982) has done six case-studies of historic fiascos to identify the sources of defective decision-making in governmental policy-making groups concerned with foreign policy decisions. The case-studies included: (a) Neville Chamberlain's inner circle, whose members supported the policy of appeasement of Hitler during 1937 and 1938, despite repeated warnings and events indicating that it would have adverse consequences; (b) Admiral Kimmel's group of naval commanders whose members failed to respond to warnings in the autumn of 1941 that Pearl Harbor was in danger of being attacked by Japanese aircraft; (c) President Truman's advisory group, whose members supported the decision to escalate the war into the Democratic People's Republic of Korea despite firm warnings by the Chinese Government that United States entry into that country would be met with armed resistance from China; (d) President Kennedy's advisory group, whose members supported the decision to launch the Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba despite the availability of information indicating that it would be an unsuccessful venture and would damage relations between the United States and other countries; (e) President Johnson's 'Tuesday Luncheon Group', whose members supported the decision to escalate the war in Viet Nam despite intelligence reports and other information that indicated that this course of action would
through these diverse fiascos is a concurrence-seeking tendency (referred to as ‘groupthink’). There were eight main symptoms of groupthink each of which can be identified by a variety of indicators derived from historical records, observers’ accounts of conversations, and participants’ memoirs. They are (Janis, 1983, p. 41):

1. An illusion of invulnerability, shared by most or all the members, which creates excessive optimism and encourages taking extreme risks.

2. Collective efforts to rationalize in order to discount warnings which might lead the members to reconsider their assumptions before they recommit themselves to their past policy decisions.

3. An unquestioned belief in the group’s inherent morality, inclining the members to ignore the ethical or moral consequences of their decisions.

4. Stereotyped views of rivals and enemies as too evil to warrant genuine attempts to negotiate, or as too weak and stupid to counter whatever risky attempts are made to defeat their purposes.

5. Direct pressure on any member who expresses strong arguments against any of the group’s stereotypes, inclinations, or commitments, making clear that this type of dissent is contrary to what is expected of all loyal members.

6. Self-censorship of deviations from the apparent group consensus, reflecting each member’s inclination to minimize to himself the importance of his doubts and counter-arguments.

7. A shared illusion of unanimity concerning judgements conforming to the majority view (partly resulting from self-censorship of deviations, augmented by the false assumption that silence means consent).

8. The emergence of self-appointed mindguards—members who protect the group from adverse information that might shatter their shared complacency about the effectiveness and morality of their decisions.

A schematic analysis of the causes and consequences of groupthink is presented in Figure 2. From his analysis of the conditions that foster groupthink, Janis (1983, pp. 44-5) suggests ten prescriptive hypotheses:

1. Information about the causes and consequences of groupthink will have a beneficial detering effect. Impressive information from case-studies can augment the members’ resolve to curtail group encroachments on their critical thinking and can increase their willingness to try out antidote prescriptions, provided . . . that they are aware of the costs in time and effort and realize that there are other disadvantages they must also watch out for before they decide to adopt any of them as a standard operating procedure.

2. The leader, when assigning a policy-planning mission to a group, should be impartial instead of stating preferences and expectations at the outset. This practice allows the conference the opportunity to develop an atmosphere of open inquiry and to explore impartially a wide range of policy alternatives.

3. The leader of a policy-forming group at the outset should assign the role of critical evaluator to each member, encouraging the group to give high priority to airing objections and doubts. This practice needs to be reinforced by the leader’s acceptance of criticism of his own judgments in order to discourage the members from soft-peddling their disagreements.

4. At every meeting devoted to evaluating policy alternatives, one or more members should be assigned the role of devil’s advocate. In order to avoid domesticating and neutralizing the devil’s advocates, the group-leader will have to give each of them an unambiguous assignment to present his arguments as cleverly and convincingly as he can, as a good lawyer would, challenging the testimony of those advocating the majority position.

5. Throughout the period when the feasibility and effectiveness of policy alternatives are being surveyed, the policy-planning group should from time to time divide into two or more subgroups to meet separately, under different chairmen, and then come together to hammer out their differences.

6. Whenever the policy issue involves relations with a rival organization or out-group, a sizeable block of time (perhaps an entire session) should be spent surveying all warning signals from the rivals and constructing alternative scenarios of the rivals’ intentions.

7. After reaching a preliminary consensus about what seems to be the best policy alternative, the policy-planning group would hold a second change’ meeting at which every member is expected to express as vividly as he can all his residual doubts and to rethink the entire issue before making a definitive choice.

8. One or more outside experts or qualified colleagues within the organization who are not core members of the policy-planning group would be present at each meeting on a staggered basis and should be encouraged to challenge the views of the core members.

9. Each member of the policy-planning group should discuss periodically the group’s deliberations with trusted associates in his own unit of the organization and report back their reactions.

10. The organization should routinely follow the administrative practice of setting up several independent policy-planning and evaluation groups to work on the same policy question, each carrying out its deliberations under a different chairman.

Janis offers these hypotheses as ones which are sufficiently promising to warrant the trouble of being tested through further research rather than as well-proved procedures to counteract groupthink.

**Government and self-esteem**

Robert E. Lane (1982), in a very evocative theoretical paper, has drawn upon his deep knowledge of political science, moral philosophy, and psychology to present an analysis of the effect of government on individual self-esteem. He rejects the view advanced by Rawls (1971) that political equality is central to self-esteem. Lane (1982, p. 7) asserts that ‘political life is simply not important enough to bear this burden’. Public opinion surveys indicate that the national government or political organizations are rarely mentioned as sources.
of life satisfaction and people spend relatively few minutes a week engaging in political activities. There also appears to be less correlation between rankings of satisfactions with one’s own life and national life. Work, family life, leisure-time activities and standard of living are, in Lane’s view, much more likely to be the “dimensions” along which people measure themselves and their worth.

Lane (p. 26) points out that:

People who value themselves are more likely to value others; low self-esteem makes people deeply unhappy, and high self-esteem offers the condition for life happiness or life satisfaction; and high self-esteem serves as the psychological basis for learning, and hence, for growth. This generative power of self-esteem makes it of crucial importance to government.

All governments engage in the distribution and redistribution of the conditions that facilitate self-esteem. Government actions give significance, power, honour, opportunities and wealth to some, but not to others. These actions also indicate certain dimensions for self-evaluation (money, education, ethnicity, experience, sex) are better than others. Thus, there is no point in saying that esteem is not the business of government; the government is inevitably engaged in that business. Based upon philosophical as well as psychological considerations, Lane (p. 11) sets forth the following set of rules for governmental promotion of self-esteem:

1. Discourage power-based self-esteem, encourage non-invidious virtue-based and competence-based self-esteem; give to each the talisman of significance needed to make significance-based esteem of diminished importance.

2. Discourage invidiousness; reduce the importance of social comparison while increasing the importance of self-comparison; so far as possible, make all encounters with the government grounds for enhanced reflected appraisal, that is, let the police, the tax collector, the welfare officer, the institutional custodian treat each individual with supreme dignity.

3. Let people set their own standards for their ideal selves within an environment that encourages personal growth.

4. Encourage maturation toward sociocentric appreciation of others’ needs as criteria for estimating performances that meet self-esteem; relate virtue significance, and competence to these criteria.

Symbols of identity and self-esteem. Image MonarchMagnum

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**Fig. 2. Theoretical analysis of groupthink based on comparisons of high-quality with low-quality decisions by policy-making groups.** (After Janis, 1982.)
5. Convey, and encourage others to convey, to each person the sense of dignity, of being an unconditional 'end in oneself' and award praise, if nothing else, conditional on performance.

6. Except for the ascribed baseline condition of personhood, and bearing in mind the proscription of invidiousness, encourage self-esteem based on achievement rather than on ascription.

7. Diversify the dimensions along which people are graded and grade themselves; let each person choose a basis for individual self-appraisal consistent with high self-appraisal for others (maximize Mill's 'individuality').

In his elaboration of these rules, Lane (p. 27) suggests that since achievement is so central to self-esteem, 'the first right is the right to work'. He also stresses the importance of participation in self-direction at work: 'the second basic right, therefore, is the right to participate in decisions affecting one's work'. Compared with many other theorists, he places much less emphasis on the importance of the political rights of participation in the political sphere than on the rights of participation in the sphere of work as an influence on self-esteem.

Preventing World War III: A psychological perspective

In a recent theoretical paper, I developed a model of malignant social relations and described the social psychological processes which contributed to the development and perpetuation of such a pathological relation (Deutsch, 1983). The characteristics of such malignant relations is that they enmesh the participants in a web of interactions and defensive/offensive manoeuvres which, instead of improving their situations, make them feel less secure, more vulnerable, and more burdened. Perfectly sane and intelligent people, once they are enmeshed in a pathological social process, may engage in actions which seem to them completely rational and necessary but which a detached, objective observer would readily identify as contributing to the perpetuation and intensification of a vicious cycle of interactions. This can be seen to happen in married couples and in parent-child relations where the individuals involved seemed to be decent, intelligent, and rational. They trap themselves into a vicious social process which leads to outcomes—hostility, estrangement, violence—which no one really wants.

I indicate that the United States and the Soviet Union are involved in a vicious, pathological social process which is relentlessly driving them to engage in actions and reactions that are steadily increasing the chances of nuclear holocaust—an outcome no one wants. Both the United States and the Soviet Union continue to persist in policies which increasingly enmesh them in a web of interactions and defensive/offensive manoeuvres which make them feel less secure militarily, more vulnerable to a nuclear catastrophe, more burdened economically and more of a threat to one another and to the world at large.

There are a number of key social psychological factors which contribute to the development of malignant social processes. In the paper, I discuss how the pathological relation between the United States and the USSR is fostered and maintained by: (a) their anachronistic competition for world leadership; (b) the security dilemmas created for both superpowers by their competitive orientations and the lack of a strong world community; (c) the cognitive rigidities arising from their archaic, oversimplified, Manichean, mutually antagonistic ideologies; the misperceptions, unwitting commitments, self-fulfilling prophecies, and vicious escalating spirals which typically arise during the course of competitive conflict; (d) the gamesmanship orientation to their security dilemmas which turns their conflicts away from what in real life is being won or lost into an abstract conflict over images of power in which nuclear missiles become the pawns for enacting the game of power; and (e) by the internal problems and conflicts within each of the superpowers that can be managed more easily because of the conflicts between them.

The paper concludes with an extended discussion of what could be done to reduce the immediate dangers and what could be done to reverse their malignant social process.

References


