

11-2-1996

Xenophobia and Conflict Resolution

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Recommended Citation

Editor (1996) "Xenophobia and Conflict Resolution," *International Bulletin of Political Psychology*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 1 , Article 3.
Available at: <https://commons.erau.edu/ibpp/vol1/iss1/3>

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International Bulletin of Political Psychology

Title: Xenophobia and Conflict Resolution

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Volume: 1

Issue: 1

Date: 1996-11-02

Keywords: Xenophobia, conflict resolution

Abstract: The editor discusses xenophobia and conflict resolution in a post-two-superpower world.

By now it's de rigueur to note that with the collapse of a two-superpower world, the number and severity of conflicts fueled by nationalism, racism, ethnocentrism, and other virulent components of political conflict have increased. Somewhat less de rigueur would be a clinical analysis of one psychological substrate of the above, xenophobia. A clinical definition of this term might be nonadaptive anxiety, conscious and unconscious, towards people and cultures different than one's own.

The term nonadaptive in this definition denotes significantly hindering attaining basic goals, e.g., satisfying needs for food, water, and shelter, for modulating physical, psychological, and/or spiritual pain, and for some sense of continuity within the current of human events. (Two caveats here. First, xenophobia often does satisfy this last need, at least in the short-term. Second, basic goals might be very different than those above, for some individuals and groups. In other words, Maslow's hierarchy of needs might be inverted, subverted, perverted, and triangulated in a manner applauded by a certain U.S. presidential consultant.)

The definition's referent of conscious anxiety can be directly expressed in avoidance of what is different or in preemptive violence. The referent, unconscious anxiety, can be expressed in projection of negative self-attributes towards others who are different. In xenophobia, the conscious and unconscious anxieties are largely not based on realistic fears. (A caveat: differentiating xenophobia from realistic fear in specific cases--e.g., Bosnia, Burundi, Boston-- may be more a matter of the observer's or analyst's projective processes than political psychological analysis. Or, perhaps the discipline of political psychology is a collective projection-- or worse a projective identification by political psychologists.)

It follows, if the clinical analogy is continued, that the premier approach to attenuate xenophobia during official and unofficial contacts between, within, and among combatants, from low-level talks to full-blown negotiations, might contain cognitive and behavioral techniques similar to those effective in attenuating other phobias. These techniques would include exposure to phobic objects, restructuring of anxiogenic cognitions, substitution of anxiolytic cognitions, social skills training, and related role playing.

One difference with clinical therapy would be that many pertinent roles would not have to be simulated. (In fact, the combatant contacts can be conceived of as roles, and often are by the combatants themselves.) Another difference would be that in contrast to the often tender-minded context of psychotherapy, the above-mentioned cognitive and behavioral techniques would be rigorously implemented in a tough-minded manner and placed within a protocol delineating the sequence of agenda items as part of the preparations for more formal contacts. (Here tender-minded and tough-minded harbor the meanings of either William James or Hans Eysenck.)

The cognitive-behavioral approach advocated here might be less likely to exacerbate social relations among negotiators and hinder conflict resolution than many other approaches. Some formal allowance

International Bulletin of Political Psychology

for emotional venting--be it conceived as catharsis, implosion, paradoxical intention, or desensitization--could even further conflict resolution.

Yet the realism in this overall approach allows rapacious, power-hungry interlocutors to more effectively seek a balance of power, hegemony, or outright unconditional surrender and destruction of their foes without the nonadaptive hindrance of xenophobia. Thus this approach, unlike many others, does not assume that ultimately the participants do not desire conflict and unrest, but rather crave faith, hope, and charity. It is not founded on a Pollyanna hypothesis requiring Saddam Hussein, Hafez el Assad, Li Peng, Mobutu Sese Seko, and Augusto Pinochet to be merely repressed flower children. (Remember the Reagan Administration's cake for the Iranians with the message that they all were "people of the Book?") Intriguingly, the promise of being able to achieve one's initial power goals more effectively may coopt leaders to participate in negotiations that may moderate those very goals. (See Heimberg et al. (1990.) Cognitive behavioral group treatment for social phobia. *Cognitive Therapy and Research*. 14, 1-23 for more on clinical approaches to phobias. (Keywords: Xenophobia, conflict resolution.)