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Editor

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Title: Preventing, Managing, and Resolving Ethnocentric Conflict: The Perspective from Psychology

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Abstract. This article critiques common psychological theories and experimentation as they apply to affecting ethnocentric conflict.

Rwanda, Burundi, Bosnia, Northern Ireland, the West Bank, Quebec, Myanmar, Chechnya, Georgia: just a few of many current sites of ethnocentric conflict, hot or cold, acute or chronic, seemingly intractable or tractable. Applying principles of field dynamics, one might concur that with the fragmentation of a largely bipolar, two-superpower world there is less cohesive, macromolecular force to better bind real and potential fault lines of micromolecular conflict. A result may be that ethnocentric conflicts are even more difficult to prevent, manage, and resolve.

Psychology to the rescue? Unfortunately, there's less than meets the eye to most common applications of psychological theory and experimentation to ethnocentric conflict. Personality trait theories posit hypothetical tendencies and consistencies in thinking, feeling, motivation, and behavior that lead individuals to be more or less likely to engage in ethnocentric conflict. Perhaps the most popular is the so-called authoritarian personality (Adorno et al, 1950.) One problem with such theories is that they describe hypothetical constructs--concepts that are helpful in obtaining meaning from the world and that enjoy some shared, consensual usage among members of a language community. Constructed as if they exist, they often are reified by their employers as existing--caveat emptor! Another problem with such theories is that the very degree to which an individual's behavior seems to be compatible with any or some tendency or consistency seems to vary as an individual difference. Thirdly, tendencies or consistencies vary as to their dependence on specific situations, the pull of stimuli, the press of environments, needs and drive states, expectations, attributions, and the like-- irrespective of the individual difference Issue mentioned above. Fourth, even granting the ontological validity of traits, how useful could they be in attenuating ethnocentric conflict? Clinicians who attempt to modify what they claim to be traits usually report very significant resistance to change. Attempts to instead better manage traits often seem to fall victim to other hypothesized psychological phenomena that are interdependent--even individual differences in how traits are employed to socially perceive (Ross & Nisbett, 1991.)

Cooperation theories posit that interactions among adversaries towards some common, positive goal may have a salutary effect on ethnocentric conflict (Sherif et al, 1961.) However, other studies illustrate similar types of cooperation leading to no effect--at times even an exacerbation of conflict. In the real world of political conflict, even a robust and salutary cooperation induction accompanied by adequate logistic and economic resources would be impeded by the force of vested interests, including warlords viewing the induction as a provocation, e.g., act of war, brainwashing, collaboration, or subversion. The consequences would best be classified as hot conflict.

The extended contact effect--wherein in-group members are informed about friendships and positive contacts among individual in-group and out-group members--is assumed to reduce prejudices fueling conflict at least in some experimental situations involving United States college students (Wright et al, 1997.) Sometimes such information has quite different consequences. For example, in Northern Ireland

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on July 15, 1997 an 18-year-old Catholic girl was shot four times in the head as she slept by the side of her 19-year-old Protestant boyfriend.

A more intriguing approach is the notion of prejudice as self-image maintenance (Fein & Spencer, 1997.) The idea is that negative attributions towards others is a means of positively shoring up one's own self-identity. The practical import might be that praising ethnocentric murderers, committers of genocide, and perpetrators of crimes against nature may be an optimal approach to attenuating psychological components fueling their noxious behavior. Even allowing that there may be significant inconsistency between attitudes and seemingly consonant behaviors, perhaps those advocating against the arrests of Radovan Karadzic are right after all. Instead he should be killed with kindness--starting with being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

As of this writing, applications of psychology towards ethnocentric conflict seem similar to those of philosophy, political science, sociology, economics, and even astrology: the more you look, the less you see.) (See Adorno, T.W., Frenkel-Brunswik, E., Levinson, D.J., & Sanford, R.N. (1950.) *The authoritarian personality*. NY: Harper; Fein, S., & Spencer, S. J. (1997.) *Prejudice as self-image maintenance: Affirming the self through derogating others*. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 73, 31-44; Hoge, W. (July 19, 1997.) *Sinn Fein leader says he expects an I.R.A. cease-fire*. *The New York Times*. (<http://www.nytimes.com>); Ross, L., & Nisbett, R. E. (1991.) *The personal and the situation*. NY: McGraw-Hill; Sherif, M., Harvey, O.J., White, B.J., Hood, W.R., & Sherif, C.W. (1961.) *Intergroup conflict and cooperation: the robbers cave experiment*. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Book Exchange; Wright, S.C., Aron, A., McLaughlin-Volpe, T., & Ropp, S.A. (1997.) *The extended contact effect: Knowledge of cross-group friendships and prejudice*. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 73, 73-90.) (Keywords: Conflict, Ethnocentrism.)