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Peace Psychologists: Necessarily Complicit in Political Violence?

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Abstract. This article presents an argument that the basic and applied research of peace psychologists does not attenuate but contributes to violent political conflict.

The July 1998 Issue of the American Psychologist contains a series of articles intended to foster basic and applied psychological research as a tool among many in preventing political violence and fostering nonviolent resolution of such violence. This research endeavor is often called peace psychology. But peace psychology may have little to do with peace.

The role of illusory correlation. Peace psychologists often ascribe a significant association between the attenuation and termination of violent political conflict and face valid (to a peace psychologist) events such as negotiation, face-to-face encounters, and verbal compromise. Yet there is an infinite number of events that can be statistically associated with the attenuation and termination of violent political conflict. By emphasizing only those consonant with face valid expectations, peace psychologists merely reinforce their own worldviews--often fueled with their own deep-seated needs and psychodynamic conflicts--and subvert the quest for scientific knowledge in the public interest.

Correlation is not causality. (a) Inverse statistical correlations of the implementation of nonviolent conflict management techniques with political violence and (b) the degree of variance allegedly accounted for by the former of the latter have no necessary bearing on causality. In fact, in the world of the peace psychologist, political violence may have a significant predictive relationship with the presence of nonviolent conflict management techniques and account for a good deal of the latter's variance.

Unvalidated Theoretical Assumptions. Questions posed by a peace psychologist contain embedded assumptions--subjugating discourses--that impede scientific exploration. For example, a question posed in the American Psychologist article like "What psychological tools might be used to increase sensitivity to ethnic differences and to build interethnic harmony?" (p. 738) carries the unanalyzed assumptions that increased sensitivity to ethnic differences and increased interethnic harmony will be inversely related to political violence.

The History of Peace Psychology as a History of Hypostatization. The extensive peace psychology literature within modern scientific psychology appears to be an exercise in the reification of hypothetical constructs whose most significant contribution seems to be the creation and reification of still others without a demonstrated robustness in affecting or effecting political violence. That peace psychologists are able--through content analysis of speeches, interviews, debriefings, journalistic accounts, and so on--to cite reports of the involvement in political violence of identity, symbols, legitimacy, memory, and perceptions of justice does nothing to cast these constructs from lay phenomenology to epiphenomenology, let alone causal phenomena. Instead, a jargon-filled narrative is developed with the implicit assumption that through naming psychological events one controls them.

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An Overarching Assumption of Political Violence as Pathological and Dysfunctional. Although peace psychologists espouse the need for input from local people, societies, and cultures in conflict research, one kind of input is not accepted at all or--if so--only as pathological or dysfunctional. This is the very notion that political violence can be intrinsically--ethically, morally, socially, culturally--benign, adaptive, and healthy. Although willing to work in a multidisciplinary and multicultural context, the peace psychologist lays down limits of willingness.

It is from the above that one does not necessarily have to bemoan the shortage of trained psychologists in many war-torn countries to provide ethnic conflict analysis and prevention. As well, one does not need to adhere to a peace psychology that, while admitting its failings in linking theory and practice (p. 739), advocates an ideology of principles that must guide solutions to political violence--e.g., local control, acknowledgement of cultural diversity, amelioration of economic inequalities, and the connection of individual and community well-being (p. 739).

Sadly, for the state of the contemporary world, peace psychology seems to have been successful in only two enterprises. The first is in not linking science with value but in equating the two. The second is in creating the social role of peace psychologist. At best, the result is no result at all. At worst, a complicity in political violence through utilization of material and intellectual and even spiritual assets that could be better employed elsewhere. (See Blumberg, H.H. (1998). Peace psychology after the cold war: A selective review. Genetic, Social, and General Psychology Monographs, 124, 5-37; Kimmel, P.R. (1995). Sustainability and cultural understanding: Peace psychology as public interest science. Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology, 1, 101-116; Mays, V.M., Bullock, M., Rosenzweig, M.R., & Wessells, M. (1998). Ethnic conflict: Global challenges and psychological perspectives. American Psychologist, 53, 737-742; Milburn, T.W. (1998). Psychology, negotiation, and peace. Applied and Preventive Psychology, 7, 109-119.) (Keywords: Peace, War.)

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