Ethnic Conflict

Global Challenges and Psychological Perspectives

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I n the past decade, events in the international arena have presented a mixture of great challenges and significant hope. Worldwide, ethnic conflict—perhaps more accurately described as ethnopolitical conflict—poses immense threats and challenges. No continent is immune. The global scope of the problem is apparent in the wars in Bosnia, Rwanda, Armenia, and Guatemala. But this problem also resides within U.S. borders, with the increase in racial hate crimes and civil disturbances in Los Angeles, California; Birmingham, Alabama; and New York, New York being only the most visible manifestations of a set of much deeper, structurally embedded problems. At the same time, there is considerable hope. The peaceful dismantling of apartheid in South Africa stands as a symbol that violent ethnic conflict can be managed, reduced, and prevented. Effective efforts toward resolution and prevention, however, require an understanding of the causes of ethnic conflict and careful scrutiny of the efficacy of interventions applied on a societal scale.

This *International Perspectives* section offers psychologically informed analyses of five conflicts in different parts of the world. Designed to raise questions for future research, each article illustrates the contributions that psychologists stand to make with regard to ethnic conflict. The hope is that they will serve to generate additional research, practice, and theory. These in turn will influence policy and the development of interventions that can ameliorate or prevent ethnic conflicts both internationally and domestically.

The Challenge of Ethnic Conflict

Today, the dominant form of war is no longer international conflict but rather intrastate conflict, often carved along lines of ethnicity, religion, and communal identity. Ethnic conflict exhibits enormous diversity (Horowitz, 1985) and is often rooted in histories of colonialism, ethnocentrism, racism, political oppression, human rights abuse, social injustice, poverty, and environmental degradation. Because conflicts are often fought in and around communities rather than on well-defined battlefields, over

80% of the casualties are civilians (Garfield & Neugut, 1997; Sivard, 1991). Civilians often become unwilling participants in conflicts because of circumstances of birth, history, skin color, religion, or country conditions that act to maintain social inequalities. In many settings, ethnic conflict constitutes a grave threat to human security and emotional well-being (Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict, 1997; Horowitz, 1994).

Violent ethnic conflict is hardly new. Gurr (1996) estimated that between 1945 and 1990, approximately 100 national and minority groups participated in armed conflict. In the 1990s alone, two dozen ethnic conflicts have each resulted in at least a thousand deaths, and some have killed hundreds of thousands. During the Cold War, ethnic conflict was overshadowed by the East–West struggle, suppressed internally by hegemonic govern-

ments such as that of the former Soviet Union, and limited by superpowers that sought to retain control. In the aftermath of the Cold War, regional power vacuums and a multiplicity of factors stirred the nationalist aspirations of several ethnic groups, creating bloody internal wars often characterized by atrocities, systematic violations of human rights, land mines, and the displacement of vast numbers of people (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 1997). Conflicts such as those in Rwanda, Bosnia, and Guatemala have been saturated with violence and abuse against women (Card, 1996; Human Rights Watch/Africa, 1996; McKay, in press) and children, large numbers of whom have been forced into soldiering and killing (Wessells, 1997). The current year, 1998, is the 50th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It is vital for all professions to stimulate dialogue about ethnic conflict and to ask what their disciplines can contribute to the amelioration and prevention of human rights abuse that occurs as a result of ethnic conflict.

An extreme of ethnic conflict is genocide, the attempt to kill many or all members of an ethnic group. The Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, ratified in 1948 by most countries including the United States, requires each country to act when a case of genocide is recognized. In 1998, the United States and other countries have expressed regret that they refused to acknowledge that in 1994 genocide was occurring in Rwanda, referring at that time only to ''massacres.'' The Convention was an attempt to translate part of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights into binding international law; like all laws, it is meaningful only if it is enforced consistently.

The widespread occurrence of violent ethnic conflicts in many parts of the world raises important questions about the future of the United States or any other country or nation that seeks to be both multiethnic and peaceful. What triggers violent interethnic conflict? How strong or prevalent are the conditions that serve as triggers? What factors mitigate intense ethnic conflict? What psychological tools might be used to increase sensitivity to ethnic differences and to build interethnic harmony? There is much that psychologists and social scientists can learn from analyses of ethnopolitical conflict in countries other than their own. Those psychologists and social scientists in the United States stand to benefit from the study of ethnic conflicts outside the United States, and what is known about ethnic conflict in the United States may have implications internationally.

Psychological Contributions and Challenges

Beginning with the work of William James (1910/1995), there is an extensive literature that has analyzed the psychological causes and consequences of war and has pointed out the potential contributions by psychology in the nonviolent resolution of international conflict (e.g., Bercovitch & Rubin, 1992; Deutsch, 1973; Fisher, 1990; Kelman, 1965; Osgood, 1962; Pruitt & Carnevale, 1993; Schwebel, 1965; Tetlock, 1986; White, 1984, 1986). This psychological literature is part of a wider multidisciplinary field of conflict analysis and conflict resolution (e.g., Azar, 1990; Boulding, 1989; Burton, 1990; Curle, 1971; Fisher, 1997; Galtung, 1996; Kriesberg, 1992; Ross, 1993; Rothman, 1997; Zartman & Rasmussen, 1997).

Although there is psychological research that addresses ethnic conflict in different parts of the world (e.g., Emminghaus, Kimmel, & Stewart, 1997; Fisher, 1997; Kelman, 1982, 1997; Kos, 1995; Montville, 1991a; Rothman, 1992; Staub, 1989; Volkan, 1988; Weston, 1994), much of this work is of recent origin. Additional psychological research is badly needed. As witnessed, for example, by the horrible atrocities, mass rapes, and ethnic cleansing of the recent wars in the former Yugoslavia, contemporary ethnic wars have powerful subjective elements that involve personal acts of violence. This violence can inflict psychological damage on large numbers of civilians. It is important to remember that ethnic struggles are profoundly psychological and often center around issues of identity, symbols, legitimacy, memory, and perceptions of justice. Similarly, the task of building peace has important psychological components. Mass victimization presents formidable obstacles to reconciliation and peace (Montville, 1991b), as do lingering fears, hatred, and the desire for revenge. To meet humanitarian needs and to build peace in contexts torn by ethnic conflict, it is essential to apply psychological concepts, tools, and perspectives to such tasks as addressing war trauma, increasing tolerance, reducing existential fears, improving intergroup relations, and resolving conflicts through nonviolent means.

Psychological work, however, faces formidable analytic, ethical, and practical challenges. Because many ethnic conflicts are rooted in political, economic, and social histories, including colonialism, and are fueled by interacting historic, political, economic, and social influences, psychological analysis of the causes of ethnic conflict cannot be conducted reasonably in a stand-alone manner. Rather, ethnic conflict resolution must be embedded in a multidisciplinary framework. The traditional specialized training orientation within psychology, however, lessens the chances for such an approach. Blending traditional psychological approaches with multidisciplinary ones is a daunting task. This difficulty, combined with the inherent messiness of real-world conflicts, makes it impossible to achieve the high level of precision that is typical of research in controlled settings. Problems of cultural bias, for example, may also arise, as local causes of conflict might not fall along dimensions apparent to Western-trained specialists. Although some general psychological processes of hostile conflict resolution may be relevant (Deutsch, 1973; Kriesberg, 1982; Rubin, Pruitt, & Kim, 1994), the particulars of the local culture, history, and situation may be more salient in defining individual or community conflicts and their dynamics (Lederach, 1995). Furthermore, conflict research that does not significantly include the voices of local people may exclude critical perspectives on the different sides of the conflict. The exclusion of dissenting views and voices is often an

important source of the conflict. In the study of ethnic conflict, it is essential to learn from people who have extensive experience in the particular situation and culture and to include elicitive and action research methodologies (Lederach, 1995; Lewin, 1946) that will embrace and accommodate the voices of local people.

The improvement of psychological intervention faces weighty challenges. First, a shortage of trained psychologists exists in many war-torn countries. Second, psychology's traditional focus on individual and small-group processes is ill-suited for addressing the communal and societal problems created by war. Few road maps exist in the traditional training of psychologists for conducting psychologically informed interventions at multiple social levels or on the large scale needed for coordinating psychological work with the broader tasks of political, economic, and social reconstruction. Third, the linkage between conflict theory and practice is relatively weak. A unifying conflict resolution theory is lacking. Even domain-specific theories of ethnic conflicts are underdeveloped. Fourth is the challenge of cultural differences. It is both risky and ethnocentric to assume that methods developed in Western contexts can be applied directly in different cultures and contexts. Research on different cultural beliefs and practices and their implications for ethnopolitical conflict analysis and prevention is essential if the field of psychology is going to be successful in its contributions (Cohen, 1997; Faure & Rubin, 1993; Fry & Bjorkqvist, 1997; Galtung, 1996; Jandt & Pedersen, 1996; Kimmel, 1994). However, the reality is that in the foreseeable future of many of the countries and nations most in need of ethnic conflict analysis and prevention, psychologists and other trained behavioral science professionals will continue to be unavailable. This shortage of personnel underscores the need to strengthen local capacities' abilities to engage in psychological work. Although each country or nation may differ in its prevention needs, there is a common set of principles to guide solutions. First, solutions will work best if they are locally controlled and administered and if they acknowledge cultural, ethnic, and gender diversity. Second, solutions must build on local strengths and resources to ensure their sustainability and repair of local weaknesses. Third, solutions must address themselves to ameliorating economic and structural inequalities and to promoting human rights. Fourth, solutions must take seriously the fundamental connection between the well-being of individuals and the well-being of communities. Finally, solutions need to recognize structural obstacles to their effective implementation (Harvard Medical School, Department of Social Medicine, 1995).

Overview of This *International Perspectives* Section

One goal of this section of the *American Psychologist* is to increase the awareness of psychologists and other social scientists of the global nature of ethnic conflict and the various forms it has taken in different cultural, regional, and national contexts. Equally important as a goal is to challenge the discipline to examine the adequacy of psychology's current theories, tools, and intervention strategies for ameliorating ethnic conflicts internationally as well as in the United States. This section attempts to analyze psychological dimensions of particular conflicts and to stimulate thinking about the possible contributions psychology can make in the research, practice, and policy domains. The articles in this section illustrate a range of different ethnopolitical conflicts and attempt to illustrate the value of psychological analyses of ethnic conflict when it is situated in a historicized and multidisciplinary context. We hope that the articles will stimulate thinking about ways in which psychology can advance efforts in ethnic conflict analysis and ethnic conflict prevention. It is also our hope that the debate engendered by this group of articles will be rich and heuristic in suggesting areas for future research, practice, and policy.

Although there was a clear recognition of the array of ethnopolitical conflicts, many with compelling case examples for psychology, only a few could be chosen (for a review and discussion of various ethnopolitical conflicts, see Gurr, 1993; Penn & Kiesel, 1994; Wallensteen & Sollenberg, 1997). During the development of this section, many ethnic conflicts came to mind, such as those of Bosnia, Croatia, Guatemala, Tibet, Afghanistan, Tadjikistan, Burma, Indonesia (East Timor), Russia (Chechnya), Georgia (Abkhazia), Turkey (Kurdistan), Iraq, Lebanon, Armenia and Azerbaijian, Sudan, Burundi, and South Africa, among many others. Our hope in selecting only a few is that their analyses will stimulate interest and psychological work on these and other ethnic conflicts by many readers, including those in the United States. We settled on examining ethnopolitical conflicts that varied by geographic region, by stages of the conflict, by longevity or "protractedness," by level of lethality, by apparent proximity to or distance from nonviolent conflict resolution or transformation, and also by the diverse kinds of psychological work being conducted.

In the process of assembling these articles, a number of issues arose, including the desire to ensure that every article would be perceived by knowledgeable readers as being balanced. Yet, balance when the issues are human rights, abuse, and violence can cause one to lose sight of the forest for the trees. As pointed out by one of the authors (Wessells) as we debated these issues, there is danger in insisting on "balanced" analyses when extreme situations are present. One needs only to imagine the absurdity of presenting Hilter's view of the Holocaust as if it were on equal footing with views grounded in a perspective based on human rights and a wider view of human well-being. Our choice was not for balance as equal time but rather balance in which authors were required to be accurate and attentive to human rights standards and to the perceptions, needs, and voices of the local people struggling with the particular ethnopolitical conflicts. On first reading, some of the articles in this section may challenge traditional views of the role of psychology, particularly psychology steeped in the North American tradition. However, if North American psychol-

ogists wish to make significant contributions in situations of protracted state-sponsored violence, then psychology will find it necessary to engage in a critical self-examination of its current theories, practices, and tools. It is our hope that this section will stimulate such self-study.

Some of the ethnopolitical conflicts presented in the articles are intended to stimulate a dialogue about the role, responsibilities, and boundaries of psychology in ethnic conflict analysis and conflict prevention. In reading the articles and preparing this section, it became clear to us that it is not easy to draw a sharp distinction between psychology and politics. To take an extreme case, a psychologist who conducted "traditional" psychophysics research in Nazi Germany could be viewed as giving tacit support or complicity via silence to a racist, genocidal regime. Claims of "value-neutral" science would be untenable. In this kind of extreme situation, one confronts the reality that political neutrality in daily and professional activity is an impossibility. Psychologists confront the reality that psychological tools such as journals or theories are used to create a false reality, to oppress or demonize. These tools can enable slaughter and genocide. We often heard this from our psychologist colleagues fighting apartheid in South Africa. Some South African journals presented only one side and one reality while appearing to be value-neutral in their peer-reviewed articles. The effect was to silence the voices and demonize the reality for others (Duncan, 1997). In these kinds of situations, which are present in Latin American countries such as Guatemala, it makes sense to construct psychology in an action research mode that deliberately seeks to correct state-sponsored lies, to end oppression, and to support human well-being in its broadest sense.

Pragmatically, the articles that appear are also a function of availability as well as the resources of authors to write an article within a particular time frame that would allow us to compile them as a group into a section. Whenever possible, we chose authoring teams that included expertise from different disciplines, different national origins, varying perspectives on the conflict, and firsthand experience with the culture and situation of the conflict. In addition to psychology, the disciplines represented among the authors include history, anthropology, sociology, political science, and psychiatry to present a multidisciplinary approach to understanding ethnopolitical conflicts.

The section includes five case studies of ethnopolitical conflicts. Collectively, these articles discourage single-factor approaches. The set of articles encourages the view that ethnic conflicts show enormous diversity—some have strong religious components whereas others do not; race is an issue in some but not in others. The fact that ethnic conflicts are multifaceted and variegated means that theories in this field will have to be equally multifaceted and contextualized. Developing such theories is an important task for the future. Still, this set of articles makes visible those psychological processes that pervade ethnic conflict: shared historical memories; victimization; competition for scarce resources such as land;

the social construction of history; social polarization; enemy imaging; and the profound effects of discrimination and economic, social, and political privileging. Together, they establish that it is not ethnic differences in and of themselves that spark violence.

Smith's (1998, this issue) article on Rwanda challenges essentialist ideas about ethnic conflict, showing that the genocide resulted not from "ancient ethnic hatreds," an attribution made frequently in the press, but from a complex mixture of factors such as social privileging, political manipulation, and propaganda. Smith reminds us that so-called ethnic differences are inextricably interwoven with social class and that ethnic conflict is rooted in a context of social injustice and inequitable distribution of resources. Cairns and Darby's (1998, this issue) article on Northern Ireland explores a range of the causes of the conflict and describes its costs in material, social, and psychological dimensions. They raise the challenge of explaining why this conflict has been so protracted, despite reasoned attempts to ameliorate many of the conditions believed to underlie it, such as social inequality, and despite interventions designed to provide increased contact and understanding among participants. Their analyses remind us of the complexity of applying interventions in real-world political–social arenas. The article on the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, written by Rouhana and Bar-Tal (1998, this issue), who are Israeli–Palestinian and Israeli authors, respectively, shows the importance of societal beliefs and processes of perception and construction of social narratives in shaping the conflict. The authors suggest that psychological interventions potentially have significant value in the conflict because they can help to address rigid, polarized, extreme beliefs about self and other. Rogers, Spencer, and Uyangoda's (1998, this issue) article on Sri Lanka, written by an American, a Scot, and a Sri Lankan, respectively, illustrates that despite popular desire for peace, political interests of power holders can continue to govern conflict. A complicating contribution to the resolution of ethnopolitical conflict in Sri Lanka is the deep divisions within the ethnic communities themselves.

The tradition of integrating psychology and social action begun by Lewin's (1946) work is followed by Comas-Díaz, Lykes, and Alarcón's (1998, this issue) article on Latin America. Their article stands in contrast to the others with its focus on a liberation psychology framework. Like Smith's (1998) article about Rwanda, it presents a class analysis, although for Comas-Díaz et al., racism is more salient than it is in many of the other conflicts presented in the section. The article has powerful implications for how one goes about doing psychological research and applied work in situations of structural violence and protracted state-sponsored violence and terrorism. It offers a significant metatheoretical analysis of psychology, analyzing its epistemic ground, its cultural context, its political implications, and its tacit value and social agenda. Although liberation psychology is not the only approach that Latin American psychologists take, it nonetheless is a major approach for those working in

these countries and for those of Latin American background. Liberation psychology has been embraced in the Philippines as well as by some in the field of Black psychology in the United States.

Comas-Díaz et al. (1998) present a widely used but still somewhat controversial approach to understanding the causes of conflict and the historical experiences of oppression in Latin America. It expands the dialogue within psychology of the appropriate roles and approaches of psychology in extreme conditions. In general, the authors of this section sought to present some of the ethnopolitical conflicts that are less visible in the Western press but that nonetheless present ongoing demands for better research, practice, and policy. This article may serve to challenge the traditional views of both the role and the responsibilities of psychology. As a whole, the articles serve as catalysts for invigorating psychological thinking and research about the causes and consequences of ethnopolitical violence and for suggesting directions for resolution strategies.

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