Social Psychology and World Peace: A Primer

Edited by

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Pitzer College
Let us not deceive ourselves;
We must elect world peace or world destruction.

Bernard Baruch
# Table of Contents

Foreword by Halford H. Fairchild

**Part 1: The ABCs of Social Psychology and World Peace, Overview by Halford H. Fairchild**

1. Peace in Dorm Life, By Earl Schultz
2. Seeking World Peace Through Global Citizenship, By Samuel Martin
3. Collectivism Preserves Peace, By Sasha Forbath
4. A Research Program for World Peace, By Halford H. Fairchild

**Part 2: Social Cognition and World Peace, Overview by Halford Fairchild**

5. Social Cognition and World Peace
6. By Samuel Martin
7. By Earl Schultz

**Part 3: The Social Psychology of The Self (and World Peace?)**

**Part 4: Attitudes, Behavior and Persuasion**

**Part 5: Perceiving Others**

**Part 6: Influencing and Conforming**

**Part 7: Liking and Loving**

**Part 8: Helping and Altruism**

**Part 9: Aggression**

**Part 10: Group Dynamics**

**Part 11: Stereotypes, Prejudice and Discrimination**

**Part 12: Cooperation and Competition**
Foreword

This book presents strategies for World Peace that have been derived from the research, theory, and practice of social psychology.

In the teaching of Social Psychology at Pitzer College in Spring, 2016, I tasked my students with applying some aspect of our text, Principles of Social Psychology – 1st International Edition (Jhangiani and Tarry, 2014), to the problem of World Peace.

Students were allowed to view World Peace on many levels – from intra-individual to global and inter-national– so many of their efforts reflect a wide range of social concerns.
Part 1:
The ABCs of Social Psychology

By
Halford H. Fairchild

Defining Social Psychology

Social Psychology locates behavior within its social context. Jhangiani and Tarry (2014) defined social psychology as “…the scientific study of how we feel about, think about, and behave toward the people around us and how our feelings, thoughts, and behaviors are influenced by those people” (p. 13). Another way of saying this is that social psychology is the scientific study of reciprocal social influences.

Typically, social psychologists contemplate social influences in terms of the “ABCs”: Affects (emotions), Behaviors and Cognitions (thoughts and attitudes). Attitudes, themselves, are thought to have three components: beliefs, an affective or emotional component, and an inclination to behave in a certain way.

The History of Social Psychology

Most historians of social psychology point to Triplett’s early study (1898) on social influence: when people did simple tasks, such as reeling line on a fishing reel, their performance was more energetic when observed by others.

At least one author (Aronson, 1999), suggested that Aristotle was the world’s “first” published historian in many of his alleged writings:

“More than 300 years b.c., Aristotle, the world’s first published social psychologist, wrote: ‘We believe good men more fully and more readily than others…”” (Aronson, 1999, The Social Animal (8th Ed), p. 74.)

Whether Aristotle’s construct about social relations was his or part of the Stolen Legacy described by George G.M. James (year), it is patently clear that formal musings about social relations antedated those of the ancient Greeks by thousands of years (in Egypt, Asia, Native America and elsewhere).

That said, the history of “modern” social psychology may be traced to the pioneering studies of William Triplett (1898).

The earliest empirical work in social psychology was in the area of attitudes: what they are, how they are measured, how they might be changed. Emory Bogardus (1925) was among the first to develop a scale to measure the “social distance” that people felt toward other national or racial groups. This early concern with inter-group attitudes and relations was a hallmark of American social psychology.
Social psychology’s focus on social issues was concretized in forming the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues (SPSSI) in 1936 (www.spssi.org.) From its founding to the present, SPSSI has devoted its attention-through its flagship journal, The Journal of Social Issues, and numerous special topic books—to the problems of war and peace, racial prejudice and discrimination, gender inequalities, sexuality, environmental issues, and social justice.

Principles of Social Psychology

Evolutionary Influences

Unfortunately, evolutionary psychology has been ascendant in all areas of psychology, including social psychology. Evolutionary psychology figures prominently in Jhangian and Tarry (2014), and suffers the problems attendant to irrefutable theorizing and teleological reasoning. Buss (2000), for example, argued that jealousy in men was evolutionarily adaptive because it enhanced their reproductive success. Jhangian and Tarry (2014) go on to suggest that these evolutionary pressures led to hostility and violence as being the norm in human affairs.

A full critique of the evolutionary perspective is beyond the scope of this text. However, the following critiques should suffice to debunk the idea that evolutionary thinking has any validity in contemporary human affairs:

1. As noted above, evolutionary thinking invokes irrefutable theorizing. One of the most hallowed principles of scientific methods is that hypotheses, or theories, be testable. When theories or hypotheses are testable, they may be accepted or refuted. Evolutionary thinking is irrefutable. The evolutionary “explanation” is one where the theory always fit the data.

2. Evolutionary thinking is teleological, where the end results are purposively driven. In this sense, evolutionary explanations explain “everything” because all extant behaviors have “survival value.” (If they didn’t have survival value, they would have been extinguished through the process of natural selection.) By this way of thinking, everything is due to evolution. Hindsight is 100%.

3. Evolutionary theories are untestable. Evolutionary processes occur over tens of thousands of years; we have no methodological tools – or patience – to assess the veracity of evolutionary theory.

4. Evolutionary theory is a decidedly naturist perspective. The long-standing nature-nurture debate has been solved: contemporary psychologists predominantly agree that human behavior is the product of the interaction of nature and nurture. Evolutionary theory leans too heavily on the naturist point of view that human behavior is due to genetically determined proclivities passed down the generations through the process of natural selection.
5. The naturist perspective gives evolutionary thinking a sense of inevitability. Human beings are puppets, in a sense, of their DNA inheritance.

6. The sense of inevitability robs us of our sense of human agency. If we are violent or aggressive because of the battle of the genes, then we are impotent to control these inborn instincts.

7. The idea that DNA seeks its replication – imbues these molecules with motivation and intentionality. At its heart, evolutionary thinking relies on anthropomorphic reasoning: attributing human motivations to molecules of DNA.

8. Evolutionary thinking relies heavily on magical thinking. It is said, for example, that one reason why people mate with attractive others, is because it gives their DNA the best chance to procreate. (Attractive people are presumed to be healthier and therefore more likely to successfully reproduce.) Exactly how do the DNA molecules detect these reproductive probabilities? How does the DNA communicate with the rest of the sense systems – eyes, ears, etc. – in making these mating choices?

9. Evolutionary thinking and scientific racism are bedfellows. The idea of “survival of the fittest” has been used to justify the racial caste system that has characterized the world’s social order for the past several hundred years. One of the more odious examples of this thinking was articulated in The Bell Curve (Herrnstein & Murray, 1994).

Situational Influences

From its inception, social psychology has recognized the interaction between the person and the situation. Kurt Lewin, one of the pioneers in the field, distilled this idea with the equation, “Behavior = f(person, social situation)” (Jhangiani & Tarry, 2014, p. 17).

Situational influences were dramatically illustrated in Philip Zimbardo’s controversial “Stanford Prison Experiment” (Haney, Banks & Zimbardo, 1973).

Conducting Research in Social Psychology

Research in social psychology utilizes a variety of methods, and throughout this text we imagine ways that the tools of research might be applied to the problem of World Peace.

Archival studies explore research questions by tapping into an existing – that is, archived – dataset. These datasets exist for virtually every research topic imaginable. By their nature, archival studies are most suitable to correlational analyses.

Observational studies in social psychology often take place in schools or other institutional settings where observers might be more unobtrusive in recording interactions of interest.
Case studies report on a specific incident, such as an individual case of suicide or the mass suicide of Jonestown in 1978 (Wikipedia).

Survey research involves the collection of questionnaire data from a sample, randomly chosen, to represent a larger population (for example, a sample of voters). Survey research is also correlative, in that researchers can only assess how variables co-vary.

Experimental research enables the researcher to reach cause and effect conclusions because an independent variable is manipulated to produce changes in some outcome variable, also known as the dependent variable.

Social Psychology and World Peace: An Introduction

In the following chapters, contributors explore a number of applications of social psychology’s history and methods to achieve World Peace. (etc.)

References


Chapter 1

Peace in Dorm Life

By

Earl Schultz

Students attending a residential college inevitably encounter roommate challenges. The college dorm room is an intimate social situation that establishes new social norms and often exposes cultural differences. The dorm room serves as the student’s home, a place that should embody peaceful feelings, thoughts, and behaviors. Thus, social psychology, defined as the scientific study of how we feel about, think about, and behave toward the people around us—and how our feelings, thoughts, and behaviors are influenced by those people—provides tools well suited to the exploration peace within one’s college living environment.

Social psychology offers three keys to a peaceful college dorm life: social influence, social norms, and collectivism. Social influence is the process of how people affect our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors; and how we affect theirs. To cultivate positive experiences, roommates should develop an awareness of cultural differences and those differences might influence their interactions.

Social norms are the ways of thinking, feeling, or behaving that are shared by group members and perceived by them as appropriate. College roommates must work in earnest to establish norms that promote peace of mind and body. These norms could include healthy habits in terms of sleeping, eating, studying, exercising, etc. (Asch, 1955; Cialdini, 1993).

The concept of collectivism emphasizes connecting with others and interdependence. Roommates practicing collectivism will boost each other’s physical and mental well-being as they can depend on each other. The trust formed through collectivism contributes to an environment of peace. By taking specific precautions and carefully crafting their interpersonal relationships, roommates can use the tools of social psychology to construct foundations that encourage and ensure peace within their living environment.

References


Chapter 2
Seeking World Peace Through Global Citizenship

By
Samuel Martin

Is it possible that individualism and collectivism, two concepts seemingly at odds with one another, co-exist as we move towards World Peace? Yes.

Individualism is defined as the set of cultural norms, common in Western societies, that focus primarily on self-enhancement and independence. This concept is especially emphasized in the United States, where ideas like individual freedoms and private property are held sacred and protected by powerful governments.

American youth are encouraged to develop individuality and value their own sense of self.

The emphasis on Self can often blind us to global issues. Indeed, The American Dream focuses on personal success, not society or the world at large.

Like individualism, collectivism can also have positive and negative consequences. Collectivism involves people being more connected to others and more oriented toward interdependence. Collectivism emphasizes positive social relationships, and experiences to benefit a group (most often family and close friends).

Collectivism often arises in the context of close or familial relationships. A strong sense of global collectivism, where individuals extend their concerns to include the welfare of the world, has yet to develop.

In order to achieve a feat as great as World Peace, global issues and perspectives must be brought to the foreground. Everyone must see themselves as a global citizen, and work together, learn from one another, and put the global good ahead of individual (and national) self interest.

Groups of motivated individuals that embrace the change they seek in the world can inspire others to do the same.
Chapter 3
Collectivism Preserves Peace

By

Sasha Forbath

World Peace will be impossible until concern for others becomes widespread. In order for humanity to eradicate violence and live in harmony, people must shift their self-concern to concern for others. If individuals are primarily focused on their personal well-being, they will not be motivated to eliminate violence everywhere.

Western culture is grounded in individualism and rewards independence and self interest. Individualist societies do not encourage people to act in a way that helps “the greatest good for the greatest number” (Ayn Rand, 1946). Instead, people further their personal agenda to the detriment of the common good.

The Western world faces increasing levels of violence. Individualistic attitudes provide the breeding ground for interpersonal violence.

Currently, the U.S. faces an unprecedented gun shooting epidemic, one that has been described as “contagious” (Gupta, 2015). But gun violence is preventable. If Western society restructures itself to emphasize collectivism rather than individualism, then violent behavior should decrease, as interpersonal violence is antithetical to the value of interconnectedness.

East Asian cultures emphasize collectivism. Collectivist societies understand the importance of interdependence and concern for others. In collectivist societies, societal norms ingrain empathy and compassion in children from a young age. Society teaches individuals to act in a manner that prioritizes the entire group, rather than simply acting out of self-interest.

In collectivist societies, gun violence is not common. This may due to cultural values that emphasize interdependence.

Ultimately, world peace can only be achieved if societies restructure their ideals so that violent behavior is not an accepted social norm. One way to do this is through collectivist ideology.

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Chapter 4
A Research Program for World Peace

By

Halford H. Fairchild, Ph.D.

Social scientists use a wide variety of tools in the conduct of research. Taken together, these tools suggest a program of research in the pursuit of World Peace.

Case Studies

Case studies are the intensive investigations of a single person or event. Unfortunately, case studies of World Peace are not easy to find. Of the hundreds of nations on Earth, only 11 have been reported to be relatively free of violent conflict (Switzerland, Japan, Qatar, Mauritius, Uruguay, Chile, Botswana, Costa Rica, Vietnam, Panama and Brazil). ¹

According to the Global Peace Index² the ten most peaceful countries were Ireland, Denmark, Austria, New Zealand, Switzerland, Finland, Canada, Japan, Australia and the Czech Republic. The United States ranked 50th on this list of 162 countries, with the most non-peaceful countries being Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, South Sudan, the Central African Republic, Somalia and Sudan.

Research on World Peace might pursue case studies of the most peaceful countries and societies. Some of this research could be done through historical and even archeological lenses.

It may be the case that cultural historians can find long periods of Peace among comparatively isolated populations in the world. Descriptions of Peaceful living might be historically reconstructed among Native Peoples in the Americas, the Pacific, Asia and elsewhere.

These case studies, whether current or historical, may provide formulas for harmonious social living.

Survey Research

Survey research is a useful tool for capturing social attitudes and values. Many studies on the attitudes toward war and peace have already been conducted (e.g., Bizumic, Stubager, Mellon, Van der Linden, Iyer & Jones, 2013; Grussendorf, McAlister, Sandström, Udd, & Morrison, 2002). Some survey research has been done on veterans, to assess their reactions to war and their adjustments to peace (e.g., Znakov, 1989).

¹ http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/politics/world-peace-these-are-the-only-11-countries-in-the-world-that-are-actually-free-from-conflict-9669623.html
² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Global_Peace_Index
Inasmuch as the public’s attitudes towards war and peace help to determine a nation’s entry and/or exit from war, a need exists for surveys of international populations – on an ongoing basis, to assess global attitudes toward war and peace. Such data collections would enable us to answer questions such as: How do attitudes change in the face of significant world events such as terrorist attacks? How might attitudes change in response to public service announcements that promote World Peace?

Experimental Studies

Researchers interested in World Peace might employ experimental methods in a wide variety of ways: (1) to explore the effects of intervention programs designed to affect attitudes and/or behaviors; (2) to measure the efficacy of various media on attitude change, for different segments of the population; or (3) to test hypotheses about the factors that affect inter-nation conflict.

Experimental methods may be invoked in a variety of program evaluations. For example, Fairchild (2016), proposed human relation “retreats” attended by warring factions (for example, all of the social studies teachers in Israel and Palestine). These retreats would be designed to facilitate inter-group dialogue and friendship formation. Such retreats may lay the groundwork for eventual Peace in the Middle East. These programs could be evaluated with the use of experimental or quasi-experimental methodologies.

Recent Peace studies that used an experimental method included the following:

- Bjerstedt (1987) reported on a series of experimental investigations that explored the efficacy of a variety of peace activities among school children.
- Geva and Hanson (1999) reported on an experiment that explored the public’s support for the use of force based on “democratic peace” (the tendency to not use violence against other democratic countries).
- Johnson, McDermott, Cowden & Tingley (2012) explored individuals’ level of aggression in a series of simulated international crises (e.g., a hostage crisis, a counter-insurgency campaign, and a coup). They reported that aggressive responding was predicted by political party affiliation, liberalism/conservatism, and preference for U.S. military action in the Middle East.
- Li, Li, Huang and Chiu (2015) explored the tenets of the contact hypothesis in connection with attitudes of Singaporeans to the Japanese during World War II.

A Call for Research on World Peace

World Peace, like any subject area, may be investigated using the entire range of methodologies. Even social neuroscience has traced the brain mechanisms that are related to intergroup attitudes and feelings of inclusion or exclusion (e.g., Will, van Lier, Crone, & Güroğlu, 2015).
If World Peace is to be achieved, it must be a high priority on the agenda of policy makers and researchers. The pursuit of World Peace also requires adequate funding to pursue robust and multifaceted programs of research.

References


Part II: Social Cognition

The Frailties of Social Cognition

By

Halford H. Fairchild

Introduction

Social cognition is concerned with how we think about our social worlds. Unfortunately, much of this thinking is prone to error. These errors lead to interpersonal conflicts on the personal level, and international conflicts at the macro level.

Sources of Social Knowledge

Social knowledge, like all knowledge, is learned, and occurs through a variety of processes or mechanisms (Jhangiani & Talley, 2014).

Similar to Pavlov’s conditioning of dogs to salivate to the sound of a bell, social knowledge and attitudes may be acquired by the mere association of events in our social worlds. Social hierarchies in societies that are based on race, for example, produce repetitive experiences that create the attitudinal climate that justifies those hierarchies. This form of learning is known as classical conditioning or associational learning.

Similar to Skinner’s chickens or rats in a “Skinner box,” social attitudes may be directly rewarded or punished, when, for example, a child waves a Confederate flag. This form of learning is known as “operant” or “respondent” conditioning.

Perhaps most important, social attitudes are acquired through exposure to the mass media—a form of observational learning first described by Albert Bandura (Bandura, Ross & Ross, 1961; 1963).

Taken together, our social knowledge—of a person or group—forms what social psychologists call a schema, the “...knowledge representations that include information about a person, group, or situation” (Jhangiani & Talley, 2014, p. 59). Schemas, then, change or accommodate to new information, or serve as a filter for the assimilation of new knowledge to fit the existing schema.

A great deal of the problem of achieving World Peace is the creation of schemas (mental representations) of the enemy that justify the making of war (Rieber, 1991).
These schemas as difficult to counter-act, as new information is assimilated in a way that produces a confirmation bias: interpretations support the extant belief system.

Schemas may also produce a self-fulfilling prophecy, where the holder of the belief interacts with social targets in a way that produces the very behaviors that the person prophesized. An example would be the teacher who treats minority children as if they can’t learn, and therefore doesn’t challenge them, reward them or nurture them; and the children end up under-performing.

The Power of Expectations

The self-fulfilling prophecy is a demonstration of the power of expectations. These expectations—our stores of social knowledge or schemas—may be more or less influential based on a number of factors. The salience of an attitude object is the extent to which it is easily noticeable. Racial minority status, for example, is typically more salient than religious status. Schemas may also vary in their cognitive accessibility—the readiness with which they might come to mind. In the U.S., schemas for African Americans might be more accessible than those for Native Americans (who have been more “out of sight and out of mind” in American ethnocultural politics).

Unfortunately, much of our social knowledge is prone to error and bias. In addition to the confirmation bias noted earlier, people are prone to the false consensus bias, or “the tendency to overestimate the extent to which other people hold similar views to our own” (Jhangiani & Talley, 2014, p. 75). This error in thinking has also been known as pluralistic ignorance (Breed, & Ktsanes, 1961), and is sometimes subject to conformity pressures or the unique decision making processes that occurs in groups known as groupthink (Janis, 2007).

People are prone to think that their opinion is more likely to be shared by the majority, a problem known as the false consensus bias (Jhangiani & Talley, 2014). A related problem is the overconfidence bias, “…a tendency to be overconfident in our own skills, abilities, and judgments” (Jhangiani & Talley, p. 78). In fact, we are biased about our biases, something that Jhangiani and Talley (2014) refer to as “The Bias Blind Spot.”

Social Cognition and Affect

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References


