

Teaching Peace Psychology in a Post 9/11 World

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“For it isn’t enough to talk about peace. One must believe in it. And it isn’t enough to believe in it. One must work at it.” Eleanor Roosevelt

Occasionally, when attending a conference or professional meeting, a newly introduced colleague will inquire as to my area of research or ask what I teach. Certainly, such questions are common, and the response provides a wealth of information concerning the individual. Functionally, one can dip a toe into the lake before deciding to swim in extended conversation. My response to such a question has always been that I study and teach about the psychosocial roots of mass violence, war, and genocide. In addition, I note that I am a peace psychologist. Prior to the attacks of September 11, 2001, this response was occasionally met with a nod of recognition and, at times, greeted with sparks of intrigued interest. However, more often than not, I was met with a disapproving stare and a question: “What does mass violence have to do with psychology?” Since September 11, 2001, I am no longer asked that question. The relevance of psychology to the understanding of terrorism, war, torture, and other topics within the realm of peace psychology has become very transparent.

Benefits of Teaching Peace Psychology

Although research related to peace psychology is highly relevant in today’s world, why should we work to include the research and theory from peace psychology into the curriculum? On a personal level, I find teaching peace psychology to be rewarding, challenging, and increasingly important. However, I think there are other reasons why peace psychology should be integrated across the curriculum.

First, students have questions about the events they see occurring in the world around them. Many have friends or family serving overseas in the military. Certainly, with regular news and political reports about the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the status of the terrorism alert system often changing, the issue of mass violence remains in the forefront of American consciousness, including the minds of our students. Our students have questions, fears, and concerns, and they are trying to make sense of a rapidly changing global landscape. For example, they may want to know the causes of mass hate or how someone could even think about becoming a suicide bomber. The research from peace psychology can help them sort through the mass of information impacting them each day and help them address some of their fundamental questions.

Unfortunately, amidst the seeming overload of information is a fair amount of misinformation as well. As social psychology teaches us, misinformation repeated often enough begins to take on the mantle of validity. For example, some students may believe that the source of all terrorism is

Islamic fundamentalism. Such a belief may lead individuals to demonize a particular ethnic or religious group as inherently “evil.” Topics such as stereotyping, prejudice and discrimination, social cognition, propaganda, and persuasion can all be discussed in relation to examples of misinformation taken from the media. Research from the peace psychology literature can be used to augment these discussions.

Critical thinking skills can be further developed through an evaluation of the research in peace psychology. For example, research related to mass violence has demonstrated that during times of destabilizing crisis, an escalation of fear produces a myriad of responses in individuals and within the greater culture. Awareness of how fear and crisis affect decision-making can perhaps help our students become more socially responsible and recognize the role of propaganda and persuasion in their lives. Familiarity with the problems of groupthink and group polarization may enable our students to counter these detrimental tendencies within their own groups and to recognize the risk in others. Additionally, research with college students related specifically to the events of September 11, 2001, has demonstrated that greater knowledge of political functioning is related to less fearfulness (Sherrod, Quinones, & Davila, 2004). Our students, equipped with knowledge of the research from peace psychology, may be in a better position to evaluate and analyze critically political information and participate more effectively as a member of their local and global communities.

Finally, much of the research in peace psychology concerning international affairs is highly transferable and thus can also be of value in our students’ lives. For example, many students operate under the false assumption that conflict is bad and something to be avoided. Their utopian vision is a world without conflict. However, conflict is a normal part of life and can be beneficial. What students fail to realize is that conflict isn’t the issue; rather how one elects to use constructive or destructive conflict resolution strategies is what matters. From the interpersonal to the international, knowing conflict resolution skills and having the ability to evaluate one’s own conflict-related goals and motivations are invaluable.

Challenges Related to Teaching Peace Psychology

Having discussed the benefits of teaching peace psychology, it is important to note that there are some realistic concerns, particularly in relation to international issues. For example, some of the material within peace psychology can be very distressing to read, view, and study. My terrorism, genocide, and Holocaust syllabi all contain the following statement:

“This course is difficult because of its almost unrelieved concentration on human suffering and extreme, deliberately inflicted cruelty. The information presented in this class is difficult to read and difficult to discuss. There will be opportunities for class members to discuss thoughts and feelings that arise during the course.”

It is important to be aware that some of the material related to peace psychology can be emotionally challenging. Many students have not previously examined deeply issues of human cruelty. As such, it is important to provide mechanisms for dialogue both within and outside the classroom. Additionally, discussion of topics such as altruism, rescue, reconciliation, and peace building can highlight the best in human behavior during our most grim periods of history.

Finally, it is important to remind students that the lessons learned from the past can provide insights towards prevention and building a more peaceful global community.

I have also found that for some classes it has been important to add a social action or service learning component to the class. Such a component can counter the sense of helplessness experienced by some students and provide opportunities to put the principles of peace psychology into practice. For example, in my Women and Global Human Rights class, the students decided to organize a used cell phone drive in which the phones were donated to the Call to Protect program, a program that provides free refurbished cell phones and service to victims of domestic violence. Ultimately, the goal of classes or material related to mass violence should not be to traumatize or create despair in students, but rather to inform, enhance understanding, and build skills that facilitate their journey through an often contentious world.

Another challenge related to teaching peace psychology is that certain issues can be fraught with political landmines. It is important to remain grounded in research and not have the classroom become a sounding board for political opinions, either your students' or your own. It is not unusual for students simply to express what they know to be true based solely on a radio talk show or recent movie. It is important for students to challenge and evaluate their ideas based on the research and scholarly literature, and this can be modeled in the classroom. Occasionally, topics may arise that draw ire from outside forces. For example, there are Holocaust deniers who want "the other side" of the "Holocaust issue" discussed in the classroom. For these reasons, is important to keep your Chairperson and Dean apprised of any problems that arise.

How to Teach Peace Psychology

Although specialized courses in peace psychology can be offered, it is important that this information not be ghettoized. Rather, the topics of peace psychology can be integrated into existing psychology courses throughout the curriculum. This may seem a daunting task if one is unfamiliar with peace psychology, but it is important to remember that it can be done gradually. Using some of the resources discussed below, teachers of psychology can begin to explore the topic and integrate the material over time. For example, in developmental psychology, the topic of child soldiers or research on aging survivors of mass violence related to generativity and life review can be discussed. Of course, the decision to include peace psychology topics may be shaped in part by world events. I'm sure many teachers of psychology have discussed parallels between the Stanford Prison Study and the Abu Graib prison abuse scandal.

Most undergraduate and graduate programs in psychology do not offer coursework in peace psychology. So how does one go about getting the necessary information and education to be able to successfully teach topics courses and/or integrate the material into existing psychology courses? Fortunately, there are many avenues to learn more about peace psychology. First, my colleague Michael Hulsizer and I have put together three new curriculum resources related to the teaching of peace and mass violence:

1. Psychology of Mass Violence -- War, Ethnopolitical Conflict, Terrorism, and Peace: Informational Resources

2. Psychology of Mass Violence -- Genocide, Torture, and Human Rights: Informational Resources

3. Psychology of Mass Violence: Instructional Resources

These resources are available for free download on the Office of Teaching Resources in Psychology Web site (www.lemoyne.edu/OTRP/index.html) under the heading of Diversity and Cross-cultural Issues. Additionally, the Society for the Study of Peace, Conflict, and Violence: Peace Psychology Division of the American Psychological Association (APA) has a wealth of information available on their Web site (www.peacepsych.org) including the Peace Psychology Resource Project. Two other organizations that also include information related to peace psychology on their Web sites include Psychologists for Social Responsibility (www.psysr.org) and the International Society of Political Psychology (www.ispp.org).

It is important to bear in mind that the goal of peace psychology is not only to outline the various facets of mass violence. Rather, the goal is to develop understanding with an eye toward prevention, intervention, reconstruction, and reconciliation. As a discipline, peace psychology expands into many arenas. Peace psychologists conduct research on intimate and interpersonal relationships; examine issues of peace, conflict, and violence in our communities and schools; address institutional and structural forms of violence (e.g., racism); and work on international concerns. International peace issues are currently prevalent in the media, but the role of peace psychology in other domains is important despite being less publicized. Although published prior to September 11, 2001, *Peace, Conflict, and Violence: Peace Psychology for the 21st Century* (Christie, Wagner, & Winter, 2001) provides a good overview of the discipline.

This past September, an editorial in the *Toronto Sun* read, “IS IT really three years since 9/11? Much has happened since that terrible day, yet it remains fresh in memories. Just as the lives of those who lost loved ones in that terrorist atrocity have changed forever—an act of war against civilization—so the world changed that day” (“The Day,” 2004). For many within the United States, the attacks of September 11, 2001, represent a watershed event: “The world changed forever.” Individuals’ perceptions of their own lives, beliefs about the world, and sense of safety all changed irrevocably that day. And, of course, this phenomenological shift was also experienced by many of our students. However, over the next few years, increasing numbers of our students may see the threat of terrorist attacks and the subsequent war not as life-changing phenomena, but rather as ever present, seamless threads interwoven through their developing adolescence and identity. Students for whom the events of September 11, 2001, and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are just a “normal” part of the fabric of their lives and identities will soon be entering college. Thus, the topic of peace psychology, particularly as it relates to international concerns, will remain an important topic within the discipline and to our students’ lives as well.

References

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