

Preface

This work seeks to explore the use of symbols to divide or unite in various conflict settings around the world. We have taken a fairly broad perspective on what constitutes a “symbol,” to include objects such as flags, signs, and monuments. In addition, we include commemorations and other dynamic events that serve as a means for groups or individuals to connect with past generations, celebrate a heritage, and possibly express religiosity. While these symbols typically reflect heritage to one group, to another group the same symbols might convey hatred and oppression. Our goal is to provide examples of these symbols in a specific conflict setting, providing a historic background and then psychological/anthropological analyses of the current dialogue surrounding the use of the symbols.

This book came about during a series of discussions on the function of symbols. We realized that, although many peace psychologists differ in where they conduct their researches and what theoretical framework they employ, much of our work can boil down to how we are guided towards peace or continued violence through a variety of symbols. More precisely, regardless of the setting, these symbols function to connect us to the past and provide us with a cultural narrative as well as give us emotional attachments and perceptual filters through which we understand our current reality.

We sought a group of authors who were diverse in both their country of interest and the way in which they approached their understanding of the semiotics of conflict and reconciliation. In addition to giving readers a background in the conflict of their respective countries, we wanted the authors to analyze the symbols that have intentionally and unintentionally been utilized by societies after explicit conflict ends. What is the function of the symbols in that society? How do these symbols bring divided group together? How do they continue the conflict if only on an implicit level? Even though this book contains global and diverse percepts, the emphasis on the divisive and/or reconciling nature of symbols unites the chapters.

For peace psychologists, analyzing these divided symbols can lead to a rich understanding of the history of the conflict, but more importantly can serve as a powerful metaphor for understanding the progression of reconciliation within the

particular cultural conflict. These symbols likely are charged with sociopolitical narratives that help define social identity, in-group/out-group representations, and potentially serve as a current “assessment” of how groups or individuals experience conflict within the specific context. Authors were asked to provide a brief historical overview of the context for the readers, then focus on the particular symbols that are “divided” in the culture with a focus on nuances of the symbols. We have sought authors from around the world who have conducted empirical studies on intergroup relationships or have provided significant academic contributions in the area of symbols and collective memories represented in theoretical publications.

Our aim was to provide readers with a rich tapestry of intellectual analyses from a diverse set of scholars from around the globe. Woven through this framework are narratives that exemplify years of violence and conflict within each society. We recognize that in each chapter, there is a story—a story that by itself is powerful, but viewed collectively these stories complement each other in a way to show how symbols can powerfully divide or unite individuals. In this process, we see the analysis of these symbols as a way to both remember the past and in doing so keep a hopeful eye towards the future of restoration and justice.

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Symbols that Bind, Symbols that Divide

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