

# Chapter 2

## Theories Underlying Research in Peace Psychology

Rachel M. MacNair

### 2.1 Founding of Peace Psychology

Though philosophizing about peace has ancient roots, the discipline of peace psychology essentially began soon after the establishment of modern scientific psychology with the 1910 essay by William James, “The Moral Equivalent of War.” Over the century since, many theories have been developed and tested extensively. Other theories are still in early stages and have yet to be researched.

Peace can be defined as a positive societal state in which violence, whether direct or structural, is not a likely occurrence, and in which all humans, animals, and ecology are treated with fairness, dignity, and respect. Peace psychology is the study of mental processes and behavior that lead to violence, prevent violence, and facilitate nonviolence as well as promoting fairness, respect, and dignity for all, for the purpose of making violence a less likely occurrence and helping to heal its psychological effects.

### 2.2 Violence and Countering Violence

Direct violence comes from individuals who hurt others in acute and discrete incidents. In a war, there will be a multitude of such incidents. Structural violence is inflicted on people through the structures of society and involves chronic forms of harm such as poverty, environmental damage, misallocated resources, or dangerous working conditions. As originally proposed by Galtung (1969), these two major

---

R. M. MacNair (✉)  
Institute for Integrated Social Analysis, Kansas City, USA  
e-mail: rachel\_macnair@yahoo.com

forms of violence are differentiated because the theoretical approach to understanding them and countering them might vary. The concept of structural violence is particularly important to understanding that peace is more than the absence of violence that is dramatic and direct, but might also be perceived as the absence of lifelong violence that may have come to be perceived as normal to many.

Some theorists have approached peace psychology research by positing key factors that either generate violence or counter it. Some theories focus on the institutions and situational contexts that result in aggression, even in people who would not otherwise commit violence (e.g., Vallacher, Coleman, Nowak, & Bui-Wrzosinska, 2012; Bar-Tal & Hammack, 2012). Others focus on the thinking processes that presage occurrences of massive violence, or consider the appeal that war might offer (e.g., Cohrs, 2012). Still other researchers focus on individual factors, such as the motivations, needs, and drives of individuals and groups (e.g., Lickel, 2012; Bilali & Ross, 2012; Vollhardt, 2012). The theorizing in peace psychology is not limited to these factors, but many decades of research have seen robust development in these areas.

### **2.3 Institutions and Situations Causing Direct Violence**

Starting in the early 1960s, the widely replicated Milgram electroshock laboratory experiments examined why people obey authority even when its demands are destructive. In a set-up where authoritative men in white lab coats made demands, compliance rates in this experiment were high in all cultures, countries, races, and for both genders (Blass, 2000). This led to a situational theory of perpetration behavior, one based on the characteristics of the situation rather than the individual.

Participants were told this was a learning–memory experiment. It was supposedly randomly decided which of two people would be the “teacher” and which the “learner,” yet was rigged so all participants were assigned the teacher role. The teacher was instructed to depress a key to give a shock to the learner, unseen but heard, when the learner gave an incorrect answer. The shocks started at a low level and increased gradually. After the shocks reached a certain level, the learner (actually an actor) indicated distress and demanded to be let out. “Teachers” were instructed to go on, with the researcher making authoritative statements such as “The experiment requires that you continue.” Under this pressure, roughly two-thirds of participants increased shocks to the highest level. Milgram proposed that the authority defined the situation, and the participants shifted their thinking to holding the authority responsible for the violence, rather than themselves.

Some manipulation of experimental conditions made a difference, offering ways for participants to counter the violence. There was a dramatic drop when the researcher was not present, allowing for “cheating.” The power of authority reduced dramatically when there was evidence of disunity: when two experimenters who were both in the position of authority argued, the shock giving stopped. A real-life

analogy for this situation might be when a government is opposed by a major religious institution. When experimenters arranged for a condition where people who appeared to be participating in the same experiment across the room rebelled in full view of the participant, this provided a powerful influence on participants' refusal to comply. This might provide some insight into why protest demonstrations have an effect; a peer rebellion provides a model.

Milgram suggested that the sequential nature of the action is important. Only at the beginning is a person asked to do something innovative, beginning with a mild action. People are then asked to become only a little more extreme than before. To break off the behavior, they would have to justify why they persisted to that point. Therefore, people continue up to the maximum level, which they would not have considered at the beginning. Since this is a descent down into behavior that would not otherwise occur—a downward slide rather than a quick fall—that is commonly described as a slippery slope.

There are two lessons on violence prevention from the “slippery slope” observation. It is important to address even small incidents of violence or discrimination—mild problems are easier to solve and their expansion can be stopped. Also, the slippery slope can work in both directions: people who are not willing to undertake fully-fledged nonviolent revolution immediately may be willing to attempt something small. As they grow accustomed to taking small actions, their resolve can build.

However, there was a major problem with the method for the Milgram experiments: the treatment of participants was harsh; a film is painful to watch. Paradoxically, the experimenters themselves seemed unaware that they were caught up in their own theory. They inflicted distress on others and they continued because the experiment required them to persist—an authority was instructing them to continue.

In the Stanford Prison Experiment of 1971, experimenters were aware that it was not merely the “subjects” of the experiment that could provide theoretical insight (Zimbardo, 2007). This experiment was a simulated imprisonment designed to last 2 weeks. There was no deception. The study had to be called off after 6 days. Though all participants were screened to be within normal psychological parameters, and assignment for prisoners or guards was random, vast personality changes quickly developed. The “guards” became cruel; the “prisoners” grew depressed. The experimenters were induced to attend to the requirements of a prison, becoming more concerned about rumors of a prison break than objectively collecting data. The person who called a halt to the destructive process was an outsider, Christina Maslach, the soon-to-be fiancée of Phil Zimbardo, the head experimenter. She was a trained psychologist, invited to observe the experiment. She was appalled to see how inhumane it became. After much argument, the experimenters were persuaded she was right, and shut down the simulation (Blass, 2000). We have more psychological knowledge because those involved knew to include the reaction of the experimenters themselves as part of the crucial data.

Real-life cases for applying this knowledge show up frequently. The most notable is the Abu Ghraib prison scandal of the USA in Iraq; anyone familiar with the

Stanford Prison Experiment would have been reminded of it from that news. Within a cruel environment of detainment, the “guards” became abusive. Consistent with theories focusing on institutional characteristics as key factors promoting aggression, researchers Haney and Zimbardo (1998) have suggested several reforms for the penal system with the aim of countering violence. But as with Abu Ghraib, which while a prison was also part of a war, the application can extend beyond reforms—primarily to understanding the destructive impact of the situational contexts and institutions that might encourage such brutal behavior.

In both the Milgram experiments and the Stanford Prison Experiment, the focus of the analysis was on the extreme individuals, those people who provided shocks all the way to the top of the scale and the “guards” who became brutal. It was, after all, the extreme individuals responsible for the violence, and that was the goal of the studies. But in the original Milgram electroshock experiments, there were still about a third of the people who refused to continue the shock, and differing conditions in the replications gave us information about what circumstances are most likely to bring about greater levels of noncompliance. In another prison experiment, Reicher and Haslam (2006, 2011) undertook a study which was instead informed by social identity theory, noting the conditions under which people identify with the groups to which they were assigned and the consequences of doing so or not doing so. They propose that it is “powerlessness and the failure of groups that makes tyranny psychologically acceptable” (Reicher & Haslam, 2006, p. 1).

Another method for generating theory is through using data generated in the real world, where the situations are not artificially contrived. An early case of this kind of research resulted in the concept of *groupthink*. Janis (1972) originally derived this notion from examination of the decision under the Kennedy administration to invade Cuba’s Bay of Pigs. The government of the USA believed this would spark an uprising against the Castro administration. The uprising did not occur, and careful analysis would have seen the shortcomings of their decision. The administration blundered into a fiasco because a group decision-making process did not allow individuals to consider the matter as carefully as they would have done if it had been their individual responsibility. Theoretical developments continue to explore where this concept may and may not apply; Whyte (1998) proposes a framework where the primary reason for lack of vigilance and unwise risk-taking is perceptions of collective efficacy that are an egregious mismatch to capability.

This psychological concept has proven helpful in preventing violence because decision-makers and the public scrutinizing them are aware of the possible pitfalls of groupthink. Among the measures Irving suggests for lessening groupthink are insisting that the group’s leader offer information without first stating preferences, and making it clear that airing objections is always encouraged. When a rival group is involved, a sizable block of time should be devoted to considering the rival’s possible reactions.

## 2.4 Thinking and Unthinking Violence

Examination of the cognition that results in violence includes studying how people are thinking in the lead-up to war or similar massive violence; how they allow themselves to inflict the violence which they would normally regard as immoral; and investigation of the kinds of beliefs that justify and underpin violence in people's minds.

### 2.4.1 *Integrative Complexity*

One concept for understanding the decision-making process for wars is *integrative complexity*. This construct has two features: differentiation or the degree to which people see differences among perspectives on a particular problem; and integration, which is the degree to which people relate those perspectives to each other within some coherent framework. Leaders who take an oversimplified, inflexible approach are more likely to escalate conflicts. More flexible leaders, able to understand the other side's perspectives, are less likely to get into a war.

Content analysis of public speeches and similar documents before various wars and conflicts shows that a fall in integrative complexity scores is a good predictor of whether war will be the outcome (Conway, Suedfeld, & Tetlock, 2001). In two-sided wars, scores for both sides drop as war approaches. When one nation attacks another, scores drop on the attacking side but increase for the defending nation. Defenders hope for a negotiated solution. In revolutions within a country, as far back as Cromwell in England, scores fall as the revolution is successful in overturning the government. If scores remain low afterward, the new government is less likely to remain in power.

Whether or not a lack of integrative complexity is a cause of specific wars awaits further study. It is difficult to perceive which factor takes precedence; it is possible that as war seems more likely, leaders become more rigid rather than the reverse. However, laboratory studies that simulated situations of international conflict suggested low complexity may be a cause rather than a symptom. Those leaders who came into the situation with low scores tended to move to more violent solutions within the same situations, compared to those who came in with high scores.

### 2.4.2 *Mechanisms of Moral Disengagement*

Albert Bandura and colleagues argue that the most inhumane behavior occurs when original ideas of moral conduct are disengaged. That these mechanisms remove inhibitions has been extensively documented in historical atrocities, and confirmed in laboratory studies of punitive behavior (Bandura, Barbaneli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 1996). People disengage by changing how they think about the act, comparing it

to worse conduct, scapegoating, deferring to authority, discounting the effects, or discounting the victims.

Discounting the effects is similar to the concept of *distancing*. To continue violence, one can create mental distance from the reality of what is happening. Violence is often made easier when distancing is done physically, such as where bombs are delivered from airplanes, dangerous working conditions are out of view of factory owners, or in examples like the Nazi gas chambers situated in remote locations. *Compartmentalizing* is related—putting different parts of life into different compartments, sealed off from one another. The officers ordering a massacre may go to church on Sunday and profess beliefs contrary to their actions. They are not thinking of their actions when they make those statements. Also related is *intellectualizing*, a focus on reasoning that allows for violence, avoiding the accompanying negative emotions. Discounting the victim is described in detail by Brennan (1995) who gives various categories of “linguistic warfare” used to facilitate violence: describing people as deficient humans, nonhumans, nonpersons, animals, parasites, diseases, inanimate objects, or waste products. He offers an array of quotations from throughout history to depict these attitudes aimed at vulnerable groups.

The alternative to dehumanizing is re-humanizing. Since linguistic warfare often functions as the first step down the slippery slope, challenging language and insisting on words that recognize all humans as humans (and nonhuman animals as beings, rather than targets of cruelty) becomes something that is not merely moralizing, but crucial to future violence prevention.

### 2.4.3 Beliefs

Various types of beliefs have been proposed to generate aggressive behavior, propositions that have received some empirical support. The Just World View is a psychological attitude whereby people interpret violent and other unfair events in such a way as to maintain a belief that the world operates in a basically fair way (Lerner, 1980; Lerner & Lerner, 1981; Rubin & Peplau, 1975). People use the view to protect their minds from the fear that they can become victims. Many do not want to believe grotesque unfairness happens; they must then fear being victims of such injustice. If victims are to blame for their own victimization, people can be more mentally comfortable they will never be similarly victimized. A belief in Realpolitik or the importance of maximizing power can also be used to justify violent conduct. The idea that violence is inevitable because it is part of human nature can serve to justify violence and can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. The belief that suffering violence demands a retaliatory response in kind can also underlay violence. A belief in violence as a last resort is a common justification. Many believe violence should ordinarily be avoided, but is needed as a last resort. Once violence is perceived this way, the model may be that violence is effective in solving problems. If violence should be used only when the situation is extreme, then when the situation becomes extreme, violence is expected. The question of whether it would actually be effective in solving the problem is not asked.

## 2.5 The Appeal of War

In his 1910 essay, “The Moral Equivalent of War,” William James suggested that war has appeal in meeting certain psychological functions, particularly the need to belong to a group: “All the qualities of a man acquire dignity when he knows that the service of the collectivity that owns him needs them. If proud of the collectivity, his own pride rises in proportion. No collectivity is like an army for nourishing such pride” (James, 1910/1971). James proposed that to eliminate war, society must offer nonviolent alternatives that meet those psychological needs: pride in belonging to a greater group which needs help to achieve its ends; a sense of aliveness as part of a vast undertaking; finding meaning to an otherwise boring life; projection of self-doubts or self-hatred onto someone else and redirecting anxieties toward a more comfortable target; displacing aggression onto a third party, and thereby increasing group cohesion; virtues of discipline, courage, and self-sacrifice; and diminishment of anxiety of uncertainty with the arrival of war hysteria.

LeShan’s (1992) theory expands on the phenomenon of war hysteria, in which a move toward war causes people to think in ways contrary to reason and contrary to the way they think in normal times. He suggests that psychologically, we all have different modes of perceiving reality in different contexts. We move between these modes easily and automatically. A businessman at work has a construction of reality determined by his senses—LeShan calls this the sensory mode. The rules of behavior in this context involve a realistic understanding. At home, the businessman hears his child crying and as he dashes upstairs he says a prayer, something it would not occur to him to do at work. Seeing that the child is fine, he assures her everything is all right and that she is safe. He would not make such assurances in the workplace as they may be inaccurate, but he is not lying to his child. The rules of behavior for comforting a frightened child are different from those for dealing with work colleagues. The businessman shifts between his different perceptions of reality, with their different rules, without any effort.

In the case of war, LeShan suggests, there is often a shift to a mythic mode. This means the rules of understanding change dramatically. Reasons that make sense in the sensory mode are quickly forgotten as people shift to the mythic mode.

The escalation to World War I is a prime example of this mythic mode, colloquially called war hysteria. Before the war, international travel in Europe was high, so dehumanized views of the enemy were not caused by lack of exposure to other peoples. Many pacifist groups existed, and the international socialist movement was fairly strong. But once war broke out, socialist groups shifted from their internationalist leanings to greater nationalism and enthusiastically supported the war effort. All their work on explaining what was wrong with war was quickly abandoned. People were no longer in a sensory mode that took reasoning into account. Large numbers shifted to the mythic mode.

James’ psychological solution to address the appeal of war included noncontroversial initiatives such as campaigns to eradicate a particular disease, but he was writing when the concept of nonviolent revolutions were still in formative stages.



With the twentieth century upsurge in nonviolent revolutions, we know that such revolutions do contain all the appealing features he described.

## **2.6 Emotions and Drives as Motivators of Violence**

A range of theories has focused on emotions and drives as bases for violent behavior. This section samples some of those theories, and includes some findings supporting or disconfirming their primary tenets.

### **2.6.1 *Frustration***

One of the earliest proposed explanations of aggression was the Frustration–Aggression Hypothesis, which holds that when people are thwarted from attaining an expected goal, aggression follows (Dollard, Doob, Miller, Mowrer, & Sears, 1939). Many but not all laboratory experiments showed frustration leading to greater aggression. Experiments that took time into account found that frustration dissipates quickly if not maintained by uninterrupted rumination. The later Milgram experiments also showed that greater aggression was not caused by frustration. Soldiers are discouraged from basing deliberate actions in warfare on frustration. A classic study by Hovland and Sears in 1940 suggested the hypothesis should be evident in a correlation between lynching and economic conditions. They found a correlation between lynching and lower cotton prices in the south of the USA between 1882 and 1930. Yet other studies have not supported this finding. The correlation in this study also falls apart under modern statistical analysis, or if the data is extended beyond 1930. That extension is not irrelevant—a major depression followed, yet lynchings decreased. Assessing other economic indicators, hate crimes, and historical periods, the evidence is that frustration alone does not lead to hate crimes (Green, Glaser, & Rich, 1998). The assertion that frustration must usually lie at the root of all aggression has not held up well under years of scrutiny. Nevertheless, there are occasions where it may be a motivating emotion, as in domestic abuse or street crime.

### **2.6.2 *Catharsis***

Freud believed that if anger builds up, it can explode into poorly timed, inappropriate action. If anger were aimed at an inanimate or symbolic target instead, it dissipates. The buildup subsides. He termed this process “catharsis.” This hypothesis has been tested extensively for decades. Contrary to Freud’s proposition, the opposite has been found: letting out anger *increases* aggression (see reviews: Geen & Quanty, 1977; Warren & Kurlychek, 1981). Aggression following expression of



anger has been found to be directed not only toward targets of the anger, but at innocent third parties (Bushman, Baumeister, & Stack, 1999).

### 2.6.3 *Cognitive Dissonance and Effort Justification*

The theory of cognitive dissonance is that people find it stressful to have two different ideas in conflict with each other. To reduce this tension, they might take actions or make arguments that seem illogical. Suggestions of a contradiction are then met with belligerency. For wars, this can include *effort justification*—the belief that more effort is required to protect and justify the effort already made. If one must otherwise admit all the effort was wasted, then the effort must be continued. The continuation of the American war in Vietnam for several years is one of the most cited examples.

When opposing structural violence it can be the case that belligerency and opting for a more forceful solution can override strategy that is more pragmatic and practical. Noonan observed puzzling behavior in relation to campaigns to end slavery in the early years of the USA: political prudence would make allowances, yet slavery advocates insisted on extremes. The *Dred Scott* court case led to Northerners being forced to watch escaped slaves taken away in chains. Noonan questions the actions of the slavery advocates: “Why did they take such risks, why did they persist beyond prudent calculation? The answer must be that in a moral question of this kind, turning on basic concepts of humanity, you cannot be content that your critics are feeble and ineffective, you cannot be content with their practical tolerance of your activities. You want, in a sense you need, actual acceptance, open approval” (Noonan, 1979, p. 82).

## 2.7 Psychological Effects of Violence

The theoretical implications of the mental aftermath of violence are important to peace psychology to further the understanding of how to heal from violence, both for individuals and for society as a whole. When violence begets violence, then understanding the psychological consequences can help in the design of interventions for individuals and for post-violence reconciliation efforts for society as a whole.

Psychological impacts of violence include increased tendency to abuse alcohol or drugs and other stress-related ailments. A major psychological impact of victimization by direct violence is Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). This diagnosis became official with veterans of the American war in Vietnam. Many of those who supported the war thought the idea was an antiwar propaganda ploy. Nevertheless, it developed into a psychiatric definition for diagnosis. It then was applied and expanded to various forms of victim groups.

Despite the explosion of interest, only a small number of studies have considered the impact of perpetrating violence in causing a traumatic outcome for the perpetrator. Official definitions of PTSD (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; World Health Organization, 1992) at least allow for the idea that committing violence is a kind of trauma, and the DSM-5, in contrast to previous versions, does address it in a direct if cursory way under the discussion accompanying the definition, by adding it to the list of causal factors: “for military personnel, being a perpetrator, witnessing atrocities, or killing the enemy.” Yet data shows that this trauma extends far beyond military personnel, and can cover a wide range of direct participants in violence (MacNair, 2002).

In the case of war, it would seem likely that the intensity of battle would be related to the severity of later PTSD symptoms. However, analysis of U.S. government data (the National Vietnam Veterans Readjustment Study) shows that even taking this into account, if someone participated in killing then this behavior leads to more severe symptoms. The pattern of symptoms also differed between those veterans who said they killed compared with those who said they did not. It showed intrusive imagery—nightmares, flashbacks, and unwanted thoughts one cannot get rid of—was especially high for those who said they had killed. Temper, irritability, and violent outbursts were also particularly high. Frequently reported, but not as strong, were hypervigilance, alienation, and survivor guilt (MacNair, 2002).

Killing as trauma—Perpetration-Induced Traumatic Stress (PITS)—can be applied to others apart from veterans of combat: people who carry out executions, police who have shot in the line of duty, the Nazi methodical killers, abortion providers, those engaged in blood sports or slaughterhouse activities, and homicide criminals (MacNair, 2002). Research to ascertain how such experiences affect individuals involved is just beginning; researchers have many factors to explore.

## 2.8 Cycles: Effects Turning into Causes

A theoretical understanding of how violence might be the cause of subsequent violence can be one of the many crucial avenues to violence prevention. Prevalent use of violence may legitimate it as a method of problem-solving in a society. For individuals, post-violence symptoms which disturb mental health can also lead to adverse behavioral outcomes and the increased use of violence.

### 2.8.1 *Homicide Rates after War*

Dane Archer (1984) examined homicide rates, comparing prewar and postwar homicide rates and generally finding a postwar upsurge. Most nations that had participated in war demonstrated increases in contrast to contemporary noncombatant nations, but rates varied. The main difference was related to the size, impact, and

Methodologies in Peace Psychology

Peace Research by Peaceful Means

Bretherton, D.; Law, S.F. (Eds.)

2015, XXV, 454 p. 20 illus., 11 illus. in color., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-3-319-18394-7