



Terrorism and military conflict: General psychology informs international relations¹

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One of the highest honors ever to be bestowed on me was my election to the presidency of the Society for General Psychology. I cannot begin to tell readers of this newsletter how pleased I was to receive this recognition, primarily because it signifies a certain standing in a community of people who consider themselves as I do, psychologists, first and foremost. It is fashionable these days to accept the fractures in our field as certifying that there really is no discipline of psychology, only a loose federation of separate subareas such as cognitive psychology, clinical practice, and behavioral neuroscience, whose phenomena, to the extent there are any, are explained by other disciplines anyway. I don't agree with that perspective. I have always considered myself a psychologist, and I am honored to be chosen by the other members of Division 1 who are inclined to think of psychology as I do - as a fundamental scientific discipline, fully capable of standing on its own and, rather than being explained away, itself explaining why the world is as it is.

General Psychology

I say this, even though I acknowledge that there is no universal agreement on what general psychology is. Let me begin then by telling you what I think it takes to be a general psychologist. First, you need to be interested enough in behavior and attendant thought processes to try to stay abreast about what's going on in the far reaches of our field. It takes a level of sensitivity to and a willingness to engage issues in a variety of problem areas. Secondly, you need to think about ways in which the methods of psychology can be used to collect data on these important theoretical and practical issues and to find ways in which the data of psychology can be used to illuminate those issues. That said, let me give you a summary of my presidential lecture in which I tried to address a problem of general interest and importance, especially in the

light of recent events. It is a problem not normally thought of as central to psychology, and yet a topic of immense practical importance, to which general psychology can make a serious and significant contribution. The topic is international relations. My apologies if the title — Terrorism and military conflict: General psychology informs international relations — sounds pretentious.

International Disputes

The end of the East-West cold war and the fall of the Berlin Wall were triggers for major peace efforts and serious attempts to settle long-standing political disputes among nations. One of the most visible transitional events, of course, was the reunification of Germany, but there have been numerous other more recent examples of progress (and sometimes regress) in the Middle East, in Northern Ireland, on the Korean peninsula, in India/Pakistan, and elsewhere. These developments provide a new context for contemporary international relations, and there has been an enormous amount of literature written by political scientists in an effort to understand the dimensionality of this context.

Over the last 15 years, while these international developments have unfolded, my colleagues and I have conducted a series of laboratory experiments, paralleling international events, to examine how young citizens of the U.S. understand and react to episodes of international conflict and conflict resolution. The studies are based on fictionalized recreations or simulations of cases of real international conflict, sometimes involving military attacks of one nation on another, as for example in the dispute between Argentina and Great Britain over the Falkland (Malvinas) Islands, and sometimes involving terrorist activity, as in the case of conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. College student subjects, all of voting age, are asked to respond to significant events within each scenario by selecting a possible reaction or position for our

1. This article was the Presidential Address given by Society President Lyle Bourne at the APA Convention in San Francisco, August 2001.

government, the United States, to take. We view these simple experiments as at best studies related to the influence of media reports on public opinion. As such, they might or might not contain a message for international policy makers. One purpose of this work has been to determine whether there are any tried and true general psychological principles that might help to understand why international events unfold as they do, why political decision makers act the way they do, and how decisions by diplomats might differ from those taken by the general public. My principal collaborators throughout have been Frank Beer, a political scientist, and Alice Healy, cognitive psychologist, both at the University of Colorado

General Conclusions

There is no space here to present these experiment in detail. The results of some of them have already been published (Bourne, Sinclair, Healy & Beer, 1996) and others I hope will appear in forthcoming issues of one or another standard journal. But I do want to tell you what general conclusions about international relations flow from the results of these experiments. First, we found systematic action-reaction effects in simulated situations of international crisis and tension. College students, young voting age citizens of this country, recommended measured reactions to initial reports of aggressive attacks by the military or by terrorist groups harbored in another country. Their reactions seemed initially to be tempered by forgiveness. But, citizens became less tolerant if attacks persisted, even when the type of aggression and the target of attack changed across occasions. This pattern of forgiveness followed by escalation was disproportionate for terrorist acts relative to military acts. Participants responded to terrorist acts less conflictually at the outset and more conflictually in later rounds. Thus to justify a strong response to an opposing country, repeated acts of state-sponsored terrorism appear to be necessary. But once respondents have overcome their initial reluctance, they reacted even more strongly to terrorism than to a military attack. Note further that the specific target of a terrorist act had a strong effect on the intensity of reaction. Perhaps counterintuitively, participants responded with more overall conflict to terrorist attacks on military targets than to attacks on cultural/educational targets.

But these overall effects do not tell the whole story. There were major individual difference variables operating in our paradigm. Dominant individuals were more aggressive in their responses to an attack, especially when first primed by reminders of previous wars; submissive individuals were less

aggressive and war priming caused them to be even more submissive. Moreover, identical international events appear to have substantially different meanings to men and women. With a peace treaty in place between nations, men, faced with reports of transgression (military or terrorist attack by one signatory to the peace agreement), recommended strong retaliation. Under similar circumstances, women moderated their response relative to a no peace treaty condition. After speaking of this research in a different venue, a student in the audience told me about a magazine interview with Virginia Woolf he had come across, written back in the 1930's. When asked what she would do to preserve world peace at that time of growing unrest in Europe, Woolf said, "Put women in charge." Simple answer, possibly naive, but she might have had a point.

In several of our studies, gender of decision-maker was found to interact with form of government of a terrorist-sponsoring nation. Participants appeared to interpret a shared form of government (democracy) as tantamount to an implicit peace treaty. By virtue of their common democratic form of government, two countries in dispute have ready-made formal diplomatic (i.e., non-conflictual) mechanisms for resolving their differences). But again, women appear to interpret these pre-existing contractual relationships among nations differently than men. And for that reason, women ultimately responded with less conflict in the face of an attack by a democratic country (with an implicit peace treaty) than by a non-democratic country. Men, on the other hand, retaliated against contractual violation, ultimately responding with greater conflict to an attack by a democratic country.

It is important to point out that these interactive effects of form of government were evident only in the later rounds of international dispute. There seems to be a general principle that certain variables exert their influence only after participants have had some amount of exposure to a conflictual international climate. Some conflictual acts may initially be ignored, excused, or forgiven, minimizing the impact of relatively subtle political variables (e.g., form of government) and individual difference variables (e.g., gender). However, after repeated assaults, these variables become overriding and significantly influence the level of counter-attack. Similarly, for certain personality variables. More dominant participants responded with a higher level of conflict than did the more submissive participants, but mostly in the later rounds or after being primed by war vignettes.

So, reactions to international disputes and attacks

of one country on another change over time. Individual decision-makers start out in a forgiving mode, such that some critical variables have little effect on their decision behavior initially. But as conflict escalates, these variables begin to manifest themselves. Thus, one bottom-line lesson from this research for policy makers who wish to take account of public opinion is that initial public reactions may be quite different from subsequent reactions in the face of a continuing conflict. The current Arab/Israeli dispute is a poignant current example. Of course, it remains to be seen how reactions to the attack on the World Trade Center towers will play out.

Final Comment

The international system in which we live brings with it order and disorder, peaceful agreements and violent disturbances. Peace treaties, even tentative or preliminary ones, as for example in the Middle East, are usually seen as evidence of progress into a new age. But, as the world has often experienced, treaty violations can amplify conflict. The desirability of treaty agreements in real life interna-

tional relations might depend, as it does in our artificial laboratory situation, on the gender and personality of individuals in power. While we are aware of the limits on psychological experiments, it might not be unreasonable to try out some of these laboratory-based principles in the real world. Maybe politicians and diplomats would be well-advised, especially now, to take account of the facts of general psychology and of the psychology of individual differences. General psychology actually might have something to contribute to further peaceful progress in the current "new type of war" international environment. In international relations, as elsewhere, general psychological variables involving memory, personality, and gender, probably make a bigger difference than typically they are given credit for.

Reference

Bourne L. E., Jr., Sinclair, G. P., Healy, A. F., & Beer, F. A. (1996). Peace and gender: Differential reactions to international treaty violations. *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology, 2*, 143-149.