Psychology and war: a review

Leonard Berkowitz, *Aggression: A Social Psychological Analysis*

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"Bang! Bang! Bang! As three shots ripped through my groin, I was off on the greatest adventure of my life!" This is reputed to be a classic, attention-getting, opening line and it has become increasingly apparent that psychologists who write about aggression need such an 'opener' if their work is to seize the attention of those who make decisions and form policy in international relations.

While aggression has been probed in its various aspects by every discipline worthy of its name, it remains, in the words of Churchill, ". . . a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma!"

Psychology's view of war and peace has been a varied and multidimensional one, yet it has always been tarred with the brush of the individual-psychoanalytic-pathological conception of hostility. Psychologists can fairly be accused of 'neglect of the normal.' But they have been aided and abetted in this oversight by the perpetual fascination of the lay person with the emotional sickness of his fellow human being. There has always been a moth-and-flame fascination to personal pathology, and the compelling quality of the juicy details of human frailty is such that more than one person begins reading the daily paper by a guilty, pleasing perusal of the obituaries or latest accounts of violence. Nor is he spared a daily TV immersion in the world of the twisted psyche. It is not surprising that, for the lay person, incomprehensible political and national behaviors are most comfortably 'understood' as a manifestation of emotional illness, for in this realm all things irrational seem reasonable. When Joost A. M. Meerloo speaks of sick cultures and Jerome Frank refers to pathological leaders, the reader experiences a sense of correctness and fulfillment that is denied him if he searches through the maze of political, economic, and historical theories with all their complexity and seemingly chimerical reality. A too-easy, uncritical public acceptance of mental derangement as a source of international misunderstanding has resulted in an unintended oversimplification and stereotypy regarding human conflict. This book by Berkowitz seems to add a number of dimensions usually overlooked by the casual student of psychology and agression.

While not intended solely as a study of war, Berkowitz's book is the closest approximation yet to a really useful tool for the student who is aware that in addition to its political, economic, and historical branches, the roots of war are sunk deep in the psychology of man's aggression toward his fellow man. For some time now, the various social sciences have bickered peevishly and uselessly with one another concerning the proper role of each in assem-

bling a realistic model of the constructive and destructive forces in international society. In this respect, Berkowitz's social psychological analysis of aggression appears to be an important bridge between the opposite shores of personal pathology and political-historical-economic views of the nature of human conflict.

First, in a simple but dignified ceremony, Berkowitz buries the "instinct" doctrine of war in the Potter's Field of theory. It is apparent that if nations possess "death wishes" they must either wage constant war against others or turn these impulses inward and destroy themselves. Neither common or uncommon sense nor history gives credence to such a speculation. There is a certain romantic theoretical pleasure in using the concept of a death wish in a highly symbolic and abstract fashion, but this pleasure should forever be reserved as the province of wistful philosophers. The instrumental quality of most aggression, i.e., aggression in the service of the accumulation of power, wealth, personal freedom, or national destiny, is a broad enough concept to encompass most of man's fatal proclivities. Ancient views of instinctive aggression, such as McDougall's instinct of Pugnacity, often got entangled with some very shaky anthropology. Instinctivists were pleased to point out the high frequency of human wars as evidence for the instinctual basis of conflict and McDougall once insisted that Europeans had a stronger aggressive instinct than the Indians or Chinese. Given World War II, Korea, and current anxiety about the Chinese approach to coexistence, we find few disciples of such theory. Berkowitz sums it up tersely, "War among nations is a social phenomenon, not a biological one" (p. 23).

In discussing the inhibition of aggressive action, two basic alternatives are available: fear of punishment and the urge not to violate one's standard of conduct. Punishment has at least two dimensions—the strength of the expected punishment and the probability of its occurrence. It is perfectly evident that policy-makers, without the benefit of research and theory, deduced that these elements were functional ones and from this derived the theory of massive deterrence and related doctrines. While this seems to have been the absolute minimum derivation possible from a common sense view of hostility, it is par for a policy course. As Berkowitz indicates, human beings fear *more* than physical punishment. They also seek to avoid the punishment which arises from disapproval by others. Obviously, they fear disapproval only from those persons important to them and it is here that nationalism works to the disadvantage of the world. Nationalism has certain internally unifying characteristics but it tends at the same time to circumscribe the reference group of important "others." World opinion has had attributed to it an enormous force that seems regularly to be measured only in terms of its inability to have any impact in times of nationalistic adventuring. It is clear a world-wide community of emotional co-involvement has yet to be developed and, until it is attained, fear of punishment may be our only resource.

In Berkowitz's analysis of intergroup hostility, a single sentence seems to contain the essence of his viewpoint: "Any complete description of the Civil War, or any other conflict for that matter, obviously must involve the full range of the social sciences: political, historical, sociological, and economic considerations, as well as those taken from psychology. . . . The study of intergroup conflict, of necessity, is a multidisciplinary matter" (p. 132). Among the disciplines, there certainly exists overlap of focus, distinctly different levels of analysis, and disparate groups of facts attended to.

For psychology, the nonrational components of conflict yet remain its most familiar bailiwick.

An analysis of international conflict in terms of personal or cultural tensions is inadequate. Berkowitz paraphrases this by saying "Tensions, like the poor, will always be with us" (p. 165). While these tensions and frustrations may never be eliminated, mankind could at least devote greater effort to the task of diverting these energies into socially more useful goals. To this end the UNESCO sponsored social scientists have largely concentrated their efforts on the investigation and elimination of misleading attitudes and stereotypes concerning other national groups. Such programs have been useful only to a limited degree since they may well be dealing with measle spots rather than the disease itself. In the whirling vortex of international affairs more than one observer has been confused by effect which he mistakenly takes to be cause.

Despite his social and group emphasis, Berkowitz remains less than convinced. He still is inclined to stress the importance of individualistic considerations in the field of group relations. This view is most clearly outlined in his statement that, "Dealings between groups ultimately become problems for the psychology of the individual. Individuals decide to go to war; battles are fought by individuals; and peace is established by individuals. It is the individual who adopts the beliefs prevailing in his society, even though the extent to which these opinions are shared by many people is a factor governing his readiness to adopt them, and he transmits these views to other individuals" (p. 167). This statement does not recant his belief in a multidisciplinary approach. It rather establishes its sequence and its areas of greatest application for each.

The most direct procedure for reducing intergroup conflict remains that of lessening the occurrence of frustrations or, at least, of preventing the frustrations from bursting into open aggression. In a list directed to achieving this end, Berkowitz includes communications advocating peace and harmony (including the futility of trying to scare people into changing their behavior), minimizing group differences, the establishment of perceived interdependence among people and nations, and the provision of equal status contacts among the various peoples.

Berkowitz indicates that certain factors must exist before there can be intergroup conflict. (1) People must be categorized as a unit and collectively regarded as a frustrating agent, (2) the group must be visible, i.e., be "different," (3) there must be some frustrating contact with the group. Since our relations with Russia and China seem to have satisfied all these conditions, the fact of intergroup conflict should come as no surprise. Berkowitz presents a thorough discussion of a variety of facets of aggression. Of these, perhaps his chapter on aggressive personalities is most relevant. Since men most often are political leaders and since they have learned more aggressive habits and have less strong inhibitions against direct aggression, we need only add frequent frustrations throughout childhood and we have the portrait of a human being ready to become quickly and strongly enraged. Berkowitz describes such a person. He is a person who (a) readily interprets many events as frustrations (including ambiguous events), (b) has a low frustration tolerance so that his emotional reactions to thwarting are relatively intense, (c) readily associates people and objects with his frustraters so that there are many stimuli capable of "drawing" hostile behavior from him, and (d) may have learned to make strong aggressive responses to aggression

cues. From this, Berkowitz proposes that the strength of aggressive actions exhibited by a person is a joint function of the intensity of his anger, the strength of his restraints against aggression, the degree of association between the initial instigator and the aggression cues in the situation, and the strength of his habitual tendencies to respond aggressively to aggression cues.

When Berkowitz discusses aggression in crime, homicide, and suicide he adds other dimensions to this portrait. He conjectures about the personality of persistent lawbreakers and concludes that they (a) are relatively unable to defer gratification, (b) are easily frustrated and typically show a strong emotional reaction when aroused, (c) feel alienated and apart from many other people, often viewing them with hostility and resentment, (d) have relatively strong aggressive motives, (e) possess insufficiently developed moral standards such that socially disapproved behaviors do not produce intense guilt and, (f) hold attitudes justifying antisocial behavior.

If, indeed, the triggering of war must eventually revert to the psychology of the individual leader, then we can never again underestimate his impact on human holocaust. It would seem that intergroup hostility is the backdrop before which the personal drama of leadership is played to its fatal conclusion, yet to focus all of our attention on the central character would be to narrow our perspective unreasonably. The declaration and execution of war still requires the combined forces of history and fate tied closely to the spirit of the times. Leadership plays a part in aggression that should never be neglected, but it is, in its very nature, a product of an accumulation of other forces and determinants.

In all, this extremely well-written, lucid book points the way to a proper appraisal of the function of aggression in human affairs. It does not diagram the way in which the various social sciences can learn to find common ground with one another and, even more important, move them to communicate with the physical, natural, and hardware sciences in resolving this human dilemma. It is a book that ought to be read carefully by the other sciences. It is a document that states what psychology has presently to offer those most concerned with international affairs, and while it does not deify psychology as mankind's only hope, it indicates clearly that psychology is an important contributing discipline.

REFERENCES

Berkowitz, Leonard. *Aggression: A Social Psychological Analysis*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1962.