

# Social Psychological Dimensions of Conflict

By

**Claudia Seymour**

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## Introduction

So much less tangible than the physical destruction of war, the effects of conflict on the psychology of individuals and a society are as profound as they are neglected. If the attitudes that lead to conflict are to be mitigated, and if it is taken that psychology drives attitudes and behaviors of individuals and groups, then new emphasis must be placed on understanding the social psychology of conflict and its consequences. The suffering and trauma that are the results of war need to be addressed and prioritised in plans for peace. Effective means for dealing with these less-visible consequences of violent conflict must be developed if a true and sustained peace is to be realised.

For a comprehensive understanding of conflict and conflict management, social psychology as a frame of analysis should be used as a complement to the political and economic analyses usually used. Economic analysis explains the underlying **inequities** and injustices that exist in conflicted societies, while political analysis contributes to understanding the nature and inadequacies of states, ideally leading to models of responsible and **legitimate** governance. Both the political and economic approaches are essential for understanding the **root causes** of violence, and for offering necessary perspectives on effective conflict management. Yet for a comprehensive analysis of conflict, social-psychological dimensions must also be understood and addressed. Social-psychological analysis, when combined with political and economic analyses, allows for deeper insights into conflict and conflict management.

## Components of the Social-Psychological Dimension

Social psychology permeates all aspects of intractable conflict. While history, perceptions and identity are inherently present in the **escalation** of conflict, they are also intrinsic to managing conflict and contributing to a sustainable peace. Acknowledging history, building awareness, learning **empathy**, according **legitimacy**, and recognising **fears** are among the most powerful tools for building peace.

## History

Any **analysis of conflict** requires learning its history, the progression of events which led to the eruption of violence. As groups or nations interact with each other, patterns of interaction develop over time. Repeated experience leads to the formation and solidification of beliefs and perceptions of self and others. While this can be a positively reinforcing process in which the relationship between the two parties is based on **trust** and **cooperation**, in situations of conflict such processes are largely **negative**. If the history shared between two nations is competitive -- either over resources or over power -- then the other party is viewed as a **threat**. Wars fought in the past will create a collective history, the loss and suffering transferred in collective memory from one generation to the next. When there is a history of **domination** of one party over the other, there is little basis for trust or cooperation. Each of these past experiences lays the foundation for interactions in the present and the future.

As history builds upon itself, individuals and societies mobilise against the negative other, and soon define themselves according to their opposition of that other. Continuing conflict or threats of conflict lead to the formation of vested interests, expressed in the various aspects of war, defense, and opposition. Each of these interests becomes an integral component of the conflict dynamic, as ending the conflict effectively threatens their own existence.

## What Can Be Done: Acknowledging History

In the social-psychological analysis of conflict, emphasis is placed on the importance of acknowledging history. Previous wars fought, previous aggressions committed, or previous actions that led to the **loss of trust** are not easily forgotten. Denying these past realities does not remove them from history. On the contrary, denying claims rooted in history creates **fear** and **insecurity**, challenging the existence of other groups and nations, exacerbating tensions, and heightening conflict.

It is important to acknowledge the negative experiences and consequences of history between parties in order to reduce tensions. Tensions can thus be limited to contemporary issues over which control and change can be affected. Acknowledging the aspects of history in the national discourse, specifically its darker aspects, allows for at least the possibility of positive **transformation**, where lessons can be learned and new **relationships built**.

## Perceptions

In relations between nations and groups, **perceptions** are formed by interactions over time. Values of and threats from others, power distribution, and resource control, each contribute to these perceptions. The realist school of international-relations theory describes conflict as a result of a shift in power and the display of relative strength. In social-psychological terms, it is the perception of power, rather than the actual possession of power, which is important. **Power** is most often perceived in military, economic or political terms. If these terms are perceived as **zero-sum**, it is likely that conflict will erupt or **escalate**. However, if the terms of conflict and their perception can be moved from zero-sum to positive sum, then options for conflict management are greatly augmented.

## What Can Be Done: Learning Empathy

Kelman's exposition of mirror image theory[1] describes how parties develop parallel images of the other, with self-perceptions largely positive and perceptions of the other mostly negative. Violence and aggression become associated with the other party while virtue and **justice** are qualities possessed by oneself or one's own group. Deutsch's folk theory of war, in which one side perceives itself as only good and the other side as only evil, can lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy, where violence rapidly escalates.[2] In both cases, the best tools to counter the negative effects of mirror-imaging and the good-versus-evil dialectic is **empathy**, a capacity rarely found in the realm of international relations.

Perceptions are formed early in life, and unless otherwise challenged, continue to solidify. The danger with perceptions is that, while they are drawn from reality, over time they create reality: the self-fulfilling prophecy. Perceptions, however, are not perfect images of reality; through social experience, they can change. New perspectives can be learned, **values and interests** can be shared. Exchange programs and group workshops can be valuable opportunities to learn empathy, **build trust, open communication**, increase sensitivity, and augment perspectives and appreciation for the other.

## Identity

**Identity** can be described as the norms, beliefs, practices, and traditions with which one engages one's environment. Self-perception underlies the notion of identity, a pivotal component of social-psychological analysis. Identity and perceptions of the self provide the lens through which one views others. Identity is not an immutable concept, rather, it forms and changes depending on the particular historical moment. Conceptions of identity influence the process of conflicts. Yet identity is still overlooked when attempting to understand the origins of conflict, or in planning its management.

## What Can Be Done: Building Awareness

The mutability or adaptability of identity gives it vast potential as a tool for conflict management. While national identity can easily become a negative influence, it can just as easily be transformed to a positive impetus for peace. Intentional manipulation of any national identity should inspire wariness -- as exemplified with the rise of hyper-nationalist movements or of calls to [genocide](#) or "ethnic cleansing." Yet [leaders](#) and peacemakers can affect significant positive change through identity transformation. Increasing awareness of the self and supporting a more equitable perception of others can be facilitated through cross-cultural exchanges, or high-level and highly visible [dialogues](#). Sharing of each group's unique history, traditions, and culture are all positive initiatives that mutually reinforce one's own and the other's identity.

## Social Psychology in Negotiations

In negotiations, the importance of perceptions in terms of power distribution or relative positioning is key. Social-psychological dimensions -- perception in particular -- are key in even beginning negotiations. According to Zartman,[3] negotiations are usually only initiated -- and successful -- in certain "ripe" situations. These include:

- the occurrence of a recent or incipient national crisis,
- a change in the military situation, leading to the perception of a real and immediate threat of new or heightened violent conflict,
- the perception of a [mutually hurting stalemate](#),
- a perception that continued violence is more costly than the negotiations themselves,
- a change in power to a more equitable distribution. If parties perceive that power is distributed more equitably, they are more likely to come to the negotiating table.

## What Can Be Done: Recognising Fears and According Legitimacy

Parties naturally fear the [compromises](#) involved in attaining negotiated settlements. Fears of concessions threaten the [sense of security](#) for both sides, making parties less likely to enter into negotiations in the first place. The social-psychological approach can assist in bringing contending parties to the peacemaking process. If each side is able to recognise the fears and perceptions of the other -- thus accepting mutual legitimacy -- negotiations can create positive change. [Third-party](#) peacemakers can also support the process by providing reassurance in the form of acknowledgements and [confidence-building measures](#). Outside of negotiations, conflict-resolution [workshops](#) are useful for changing negative perceptions, acknowledging history, and addressing destructive divisions in identity. By addressing the fears and perceptions of threats, these peacemaking initiatives can support the transition from conflict to sustainable peace.

Other essays discuss [frames and framing](#) and [emotions](#) in more detail.

[1] Herbert Kelman, "Israelis and Palestinians: Psychological prerequisites for mutual acceptance", *International Security* 3, no. 1 (Summer 1978): 162-186.

[2] Daniel Druckman, "Nationalism, Patriotism, and Group Loyalty: A Social Psychological Perspective", *Mershon International Studies Review* 38 (1994): 43-68.

[3] I. William Zartman, "Prenegotiation: Phases and Functions", *Getting to the Table: The Process of International Prenegotiation*, ed. Janice Gross Stein (USA: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989).