

Reflections on harmdoing

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## Abstract

In this discussion we touch on a major theme of the six articles in this issue: the negative harmful consequences of doing harm and especially of engaging in violence. We then bring into relief two connected questions that emerge from the pieces: What are the antecedents or causes of violence? How can one prevent further violence? We close by mentioning questions for further research.

War – as they say – is hell. Contemplating the violence of war, or any violence, can provoke distress. Thinking about the perpetrators of violence as real human beings, themselves damaged by the violence they have perpetrated, unsettles us. And that is why, taken as a whole, the present volume is both brave and unsettling. Serious contemplation of the research presented here may lead thoughtful readers to the disturbing observation that perpetrators of violence live among and within our own families.

Although the force of this special issue of *Peace and Conflict* is greatest when one considers the articles as an ensemble, each article is important in its own right. Carrying forward work that she (MacNair, 2002) started two decades ago on Perpetration-Induced Traumatic Stress (PITS), MacNair (this volume) synthesizes a great deal of recent research on the factors that increase or dampen PITS. Leidner, Li and Kardos (this volume) review numerous studies that show how the negative consequences of violence extend beyond the individual perpetrator to the perpetrator's in-group. Two additional authors give texture to considerations of the perpetrators of violence. King and Sakamoto presents a moving description of one attempt to bring together Hutus and Tutsis in post-genocide Rwanda. Kraft presents a close analysis of the recorded narratives of white supremacists and African liberation fighters who gave testimony as part of the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa. Complementing the literature reviews of MacNair and of Leidner et al. and the in-depth qualitative studies of King and Sakamoto and of Kraft are the articles by Hijazi Keith and O'Brien (this volume) and by Neville, Gavine, Goodall, Williams and Donnelly (this volume). In a nomothetic study of 167 veterans suffering Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, Hijazi et al. finds some predictors of post traumatic growth among perpetrators of violence, and Neville et al. argues that violence,

especially among youth, should be understood as much as a public health issue as a judicial issue.

### **Fundamental observation: Perpetrating violence harms all**

The articles in this volume show that violence has negative implications on a personal, interpersonal and group level. On a personal level, individuals who commit harm may suffer intrusive thoughts, memories or nightmares and hypervigilance. MacNair argues that soldiers who report killing are more likely to experience symptoms associated with PTSD compared to those who didn't report killing (see Hijazi et al. [this issue] for exceptions). The articles in the present volume resonate with other studies of the individual consequences of violence. Litz, Stein, Delaney, Lebowitz, Nash, Silva, and Maguen, (2009), for example, speak of the negative aspects of what they call "moral injury." Moral injury occurs as individuals move from a context in which killing and harming are encouraged to a post-conflict context in which killing is seen as immoral and unjust.

On an interpersonal level, the consequences of perpetuation of violence can be devastating. For instance, in the post genocide period in Rwanda, when Hutus and Tutsi again found themselves living together in the same communities, many coped with their memories by isolating themselves. According to King and Sakamoto (this issue) the practice of *nyamwigendaho* or "minding your own business", led people to isolate themselves socially, avoid conversation with others, and spend more time in their homes. Individuals' isolation and avoidance of others led, among other things, to the continuation of tensions between Hutu and Tutsi neighbors. Moreover, within families the practice of *nyamwigendaho* led parents to ignore the needs of their children.

Even beyond communities, at a societal level, the perpetration of violence harms those associated with the harm-doers. Leidner et al. (this issue) point out that harm-doing committed by the group functions as a stressor to members of the group, even if they were not personally involved in the violence. To reduce stress, members of the group who tend to glorify their in-group will dehumanize the out-group as “genocidaires” “killers” or “violent by nature”. This dehumanization frames violence against the out-group as necessary and sensible, further perpetuating the cycle of violence.

### **Related questions**

Although the focus of the articles in this issue is on the consequences of harmdoing, the observation that the doing of harm hurts not only victims but also perpetrators makes us wonder: why do people engage in violent acts of harm? The same observation also invites us to consider ways to prevent harm-doing and dampen its consequences.

### **Why do people violently harm others?**

Kraft (this issue) uses an in-depth phenomenological analysis to understand motives for violent harm-doing. Kraft’s analysis of testimonials made by Afrikaners who served in the South African police during South Africa’s apartheid suggests that an ideological narrative framed Afrikaner police as having to fight and torture in order to protect a threatened social order. Framing harm-doing, such as torture and oppression of others, as a defensive measure is common among hegemonic groups in power.

Again, the work in the present issue resonates with the work of other scholars. According to White (1991), groups in power often seek to solidify their rule and justify violence by pointing to a threat from the outside. This tendency is found in the discourse of Islamophobia in Europe

and the United States that frames Islam as threatening to western democracy (Pettigrew, 2003). The trend is also seen in the Jewish-Israeli narrative on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that sees Israel as constantly having to defend itself from Arab attacks (Ben Hagai, Hammack, Pilecki & Aresta, 2013, Ben Hagai, Zurbriggen, Hammack & Ziman, 2013). Nor are dominant groups the only ones to justify violence. Less powerful social groups justify violence as a call for liberation (Moghaddam, 2005; Roccas, Klar, & Liviatan, 2006). Ideology can provide more than sufficient justification for violence.

While at variance with the tradition of Milgram (1963), the articles in this volume echo studies that discuss the role of “group dynamics” in the perpetuation of violence (Staub, 1989). Individuals who accept the need for violent measures to protect or advance the interests of their groups may wish to gain respect, advance in rank or contribute to the organizations to which they belong; and they may use harm-doing to achieve their ends. Ambition – more perhaps than obedience – may lead people to employ creative and innovative ways of harming perceived enemies (Kraft, this volume).

### **What are ways to treat and prevent harmdoing?**

Collective processes are important in victims’ recovery. Following the fall of the apartheid regime in South Africa, members of the regime and those who fought against it could testify in front of the Truth and Reconciliation Committee (TRC); if their testimonies were deemed truthful and complete, they were granted amnesty. The process of illuminating the brutality of the regime substantiated the experiences of the victims. Acknowledgment of the victims’ narrative empowered them. This empowerment represented the beginning of a process of recovery on a social and personal level.

Public processes are also essential for facilitating socially broad disavowals of violence and harmdoing. Public discussion and condemnations done by public institutions such as the TRC and the Gacaca courts in Rwanda reinforced changing norms that renounced violence and brutality. Prevention of violence through the changing of group norms is also important when combating nonpolitical violence, such as gang violence in urban centers. According to Neville et al., successful violence prevention programs in urban centers across the world have included five components: community mobilization, youth outreach and intervention, faith-based leader involvement, public education, and criminal justice participation.

While public debate and discussion serves to delegitimize intergroup violence and promote democratic values, further intervention is needed to facilitate coexistence among survivors and non-survivors of violence. The development of inter-group forums in which people tell stories and enter dialogue with the other allows for a process of deconstructing categories of victim and perpetrator, acknowledging the pain and the suffering of the other, as well as taking responsibility for one's painful actions (King and Sakamoto, this issue). Overall, atonement, repentance, making reparations, bearing witness and re-identifying one's self in public forums and intergroup dialogue is not only important to the healing of individuals involved in harmdoing (as MacNair points out), but also can heal schisms within societies in conflict.

Development of diagnostic categories specific to those who inflict harm, such as Perpetration-Induced Traumatic Stress, can also facilitate the development of unique treatments associated with the perpetration of harm (see MacNair, this issue). For instance, Hijazi et al. (this issue) suggest that a predictor of post traumatic growth (including increase in connectedness to others, and valuing of life) is cognitive flexibility. Cognitive flexibility, with which people are able to move away from "us" versus "them" thinking (that soldiers are trained to have in

combat), to more complex and empathetic thinking based on greater listening and openness, can help increase post traumatic growth specifically in those who have committed acts related to moral injury. By increasing self-compassion and understanding of the contextual factors that lead to killing, perpetrators can let go of their past identities and shift their actions away from violence and harm.

### **Additional questions**

The present volume is so excellent that it is sure to ignite more scholarship in the area of the psychological consequences of perpetrating violence. In addition to looking at the issues and questions raised here, future researchers might explore some additional questions. A couple of issues seem to emerge naturally from the material in this volume.

The first concerns leadership. The origins of war, genocide and torture are often found in decisions made by political leaders. Political leaders in Rwanda, South Africa and the United States (to name a few) declare war, order torture, and order massacres of civilian populations. Why do some leaders lean toward violence and others away? Winter's (2004) method of studying from a distance the personality traits and motives of political leaders can help provide a systematic understanding of the correlation between a leader's motives (such as a motive for power, achievement or affiliation) and the likelihood of declaring war. Researchers might also wish to see how the propensities of leaders gradually escalate over time. The literature on personality, including work on authoritarian personality (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswick, & Levinson, 1950; Altemeyer, 1980) social dominance (Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994) and the need for closure (Federico, Hunt, & Fisher, 2013) might be utilized to understand which leaders are most or least likely to declare wars.



What happens to a leader who initiates mass violence? Are most leaders condemned to engage in forms of perpetual groupthink once they have launched their nations into violence? Or can some leaders emerge from “the fog of war” and have post-conflagration epiphanies such as the one that Robert McNamara so famously experienced while being interviewed on film about Viet Nam?

A second line of inquiry might center on the means of creating violence. Much perpetration of violence today is done at a distance. Technological advancements allow drone operators to launch bombs at Pakistan from military bases in California or Nevada. Much of the harmdoing today is related to surveillance data. The channeling of harmdoing through the conduit of computers may work to reduce psychological injury to the perpetrators (Zurbriggen, 2013). Soldiers who bomb houses from a long distance, or terrorists using computers for distal acts of sabotage, may not suffer the same psychological consequences as people who are sitting with their victim in the same interrogation room. While recent research has begun examining the psychological consequences of remote warfare, further research is needed to understand the implication of technology on the psychological reality of harmdoing.

Finally, there might be important cultural differences in the consequences of harmdoing. The construct of moral injury suggests that many negative psychological consequences are associated with a shift from a context in which killing and harming are encouraged to a context in which killing and harmdoing is seen as deeply immoral. The dependence of moral injury on social context raises questions of whether differences in the contexts that soldiers return to change the likelihood of suffering from moral injury. For instance, do soldiers who come from countries involved in ongoing intractable conflict experience the same levels of moral injury when returning to a society in which dehumanization of the enemy is common, compared to

those who come from societies distanced from the atrocities of war (Bar-Tal, 2001)?

Furthermore, does returning to certain organizational contexts in which harmdoing is accepted influence the level of moral injury? Finally, do members of liberation groups or soldiers fighting dictators experience the same types of moral injury as those who aim to sustain dictatorships or regimes that are oppressive? A more rigorous engagement with the differences between these groups is needed.

Because the present volume has significantly advanced our thinking about the perpetrators of violence, the volume highlights how much further we might someday go in our scholarship. And can good scholarship help create a more peaceful world? That is a matter for philosophers to debate.

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