

## Against the Blood-Dimmed Tide: Psychology's Response to Mass Killing and Genocide

A review of



### **Explaining the Breakdown of Ethnic Relations: Why Neighbors Kill**

by Victoria M. Esses and Richard A. Vernon (Eds.)

Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008. 272 pp. ISBN 978-1-4051-7059-8

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Reviewed by

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If there is a common article of faith among skeptical, data-driven psychologists, it is a profound hopefulness about the willingness and ability of humans to use behavioral science as a problem-solving tool. The ideal of a psychology that can be utilized to understand and solve long-standing problems of our individual and collective lives, including intergroup hatred and conflict, is arguably one of the discipline's most durable themes, sustained over years of a growing empirical knowledge base and cutting across clashing paradigms (Allport, 1958; Skinner, 1948/1962; Smith, 2003).

One example of this ideal that is both inspiring in its promise and sobering in its difficulty is the application of social psychological constructs and research to the issue of mass killing and genocide (Staub, 1989). The past 100 years of history chronicle acts of violence that have claimed millions of lives through a jarring combination of skillful

organization and stark brutality. These killings, in which victims are targeted on the basis of ethnic or other group membership, force us to consider some pointed questions: What are the limits of psychology's effective application? Can the reasoned cadence of psychological discourse be heard over the din of hateful propaganda?

These questions are faced unflinchingly in *Explaining the Breakdown of Ethnic Relations: Why Neighbors Kill*, a collection of primarily social psychological perspectives on how prejudice and tension among groups within the borders of a given nation segue into designation of a specific group as inferior, yet somehow dangerous, to the well-being of that nation's dominant society (or in some instances, to the nation's self-identified revolutionary vanguard); such designation then proceeds to the targeting of the identified group for disenfranchisement and assault, imprisonment and torture, and systematic slaughter. The book, edited by psychologist Victoria Esses and political scientist/philosopher Richard Vernon, is replete with specific examples of this process and associated body counts.

The most familiar story here is that of six million Jews killed by German Nazis in the Holocaust, the prototype of 20th-century genocide for many and a mass murder whose horrors led to solemn declarations that such must never be allowed to happen again. The murders of many thousands more, in Cambodia, Rwanda, the former Yugoslavia, and elsewhere, are also recounted.

What these stories share, in addition to a level of violence alternately horrifying and numbing as one reads through the book, is a psychological "slippery slope" whereby social conflict and socioeconomic stress exacerbate existing prejudice against targeted groups, to the point of rhetorical dehumanization through propaganda (e.g., Rwandan Tutsis described as "cockroaches" in state-controlled media). The ubiquity of these group-based cognitions and emotions creates a point of entry for psychologists who wish to understand and prevent crimes against humanity. But even with a clear point of entry, confidence is difficult to sustain, given that most of the incidents described in *Why Neighbors Kill* occurred after the atrocities of the Second World War and all of the subsequent revelations, trials, and analyses by psychologists and other intellectuals (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswick, Levinson, & Sanford, 1950; Milgram, 1974).

## **The Role of Social Psychology: From Doubt to Interdisciplinary Dialogue**

Doubts that even the most rigorous and theoretically incisive research in our field can ameliorate or prevent these mass killings are directly stated by a number of contributors to *Why Neighbors Kill*. Social psychologists in particular often experience tension arising from the sheer difference in scale between the tragedies of history, involving vast numbers of perpetrators and victims enmeshed in political and cultural context versus intensely focused

laboratory experiments. Experimental emphasis on internal validity, the removal of political and cultural contexts, and the ethical necessity that actual aggression and harm cannot be induced for research purposes leave many of our best scientists feeling “rather vulnerable,” as Russell Spears and Colin Leach put it in their contribution, to the charge of being “trite” (p. 93) as they seek to understand the psychological underpinnings of such horrific events.

Concern that laboratory experimentation creates too narrow a focus within social psychology is not new (Ring, 1967) and has always been addressed easily enough through properly circumspect interpretation of results and calls for methodological diversity (McGuire, 1967). A more general note of caution on the limits of any social psychological account is sounded elsewhere in the book by Miles Hewstone, Nicole Tausch, and their colleagues:

Social conflict is more complex than intergroup bias. . . . Real-world intergroup relations owe at least as much of their character to history, economics, politics, and ideology as they do to social psychological variables such as self-esteem, ingroup identification, group size, and group threat. (p. 65)

A strength of this book is that the contributing psychologists share the kind of work that they do best—including laboratory experimentation—as part of an interdisciplinary exchange. The book, published under the auspices of the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues (SPSSI) as part of a new series on social issues and interventions, includes contributions from psychology, education, sociology, philosophy, and political science. The majority of contributors are psychologists, but all inform their work with knowledge of politics and history. The authors make a strong case, however, that the psychological piece is crucial; ideology denouncing a targeted group could not be effective without the raw material of preexisting prejudice.

## **Social Stress and the Open Expression of Hatred**

Following an overview chapter by the editors, 10 contributed chapters are divided according to emphasis first on individual factors underlying mass killing events (Part I), then societal factors (Part II), and finally integrative models synthesizing individual and societal factors (Part III). An overarching theme is that prejudice and intergroup biases learned and held by individuals in a given society precede open conflict and aggression; this prejudice and bias may or may not be commonly expressed in the society’s public dialogue but can be drawn into verbal and physical expression by ideological demagoguery, particularly in the midst of social upheaval such as war or economic depression.

Hewstone et al. quote a Bosnian Croat as stating, about the interethnic harmony that appeared to exist prior to Yugoslavia's breakup, "Yes, we lived in peace and harmony . . . because every hundred metres we had a policeman to make sure we loved one another" (p. 72). Indeed, a consistent finding in social psychological research on prejudice is that negative group-based emotion is a lurking presence even in those of us who sincerely hold ideals to the contrary (Devine, 1989).

When these emotions appear to be reduced or eliminated in a given society, they may instead be merely eclipsed for a time, withheld from public expression due to external pressure and law and suppressed from the private consciousness of egalitarians. Like any effortful process, suppression of prejudice depletes a limited supply of energy (Baumeister, Bratlavsky, Muraven, & Tice, 1998); cognitive strain, fatigue, alcohol consumption, and subtle shifts in group norms have all been linked experimentally with increased expression of stereotypes and prejudice (Crandall & Eshleman, 2003; Payne, Burkley, & Stokes, 2008).

In Part I of *Why Neighbors Kill*, then, psychological underpinnings of group-based killing are discussed that can be subtle and highly context dependent. Spears and Leach, for example, describe their work on *schadenfreude*, a German term referring to "malicious pleasure . . . experienced at the misfortune of another" (p. 93). The authors' experiments indicate that people report positive emotion in response to a rival outgroup's misfortune (e.g., a major loss for a rival sports team; also see Leach & Spears, 2008), when participants are experiencing emotional pain due to recent failure of their own group and when the group targeted for *schadenfreude* is close to their own in social status and has experienced recent success.

Spears and Leach speculate that this process may have played a role in the willingness of civilians in Germany, for example, to allow the persecution of their Jewish neighbors. Difficult economic conditions and the loss of World War I created both status and survival threats among Germans, and state propaganda leveraged long-standing anti-Semitism to frame the resulting despair in group-based terms, encouraging Germans to perceive racial "outsiders" in their midst as instrumental in past suffering and threatening to future existence. Under these conditions, it is certainly conceivable that many would have experienced vengeful positive emotion as their Jewish neighbors were attacked by Nazis. Such emotions, together with belief that persecution is a form of justice (discussed in Chapter 2 by Hafer, Olson, and Peterson), can quickly render a nation's prevailing psychological atmosphere toxic.

All of the contributors acknowledge that a toxic psychological atmosphere is insufficient to explain the killing of thousands or millions based on their group membership. In Part II (Societal Factors), sociologist Patricia Marchak reminds us that prejudice usually exists without reaching the level of expression through organized mass violence. She then emphasizes the point that these mass killings are crimes perpetrated by states and argues that certain macrolevel preconditions can be found across cases, including "substantial social change that threatened to destroy or was already destroying the existing hierarchy of social

and economic positions of citizens” (p. 174), a powerful military or militia together with weakness in other political and social structures, and extreme economic or social inequality. When these conditions are present and a political crisis (such as breakdown of a government) occurs, ideology that identifies and denigrates a scapegoat group ensues (Chapter 6, by Peter Glick, addresses scapegoating in depth).

## Reconciliation and Prevention

So, how to escape this cycle? The chapter of *Why Neighbors Kill* that brings the most hope to those who grapple with the questions about psychology’s applicability stated at the beginning of this review is the concluding piece by Ervin Staub, a social psychologist whose 1989 book *Roots of Evil* can be read as a companion volume to *Why Neighbors Kill*. Staub discusses societal and psychological background factors addressed elsewhere in the book and then focuses on reconciliation work conducted by himself and his colleagues inside Rwanda after the mass killing of Tutsis by Hutus.

This work is carried out in the recognition that once conflict and violence have subsided, they can easily return if their causes and consequent anguish are not directly, intentionally addressed. Staub and others are working with community leaders and the press to establish neighborhood groups that can discuss the causes and experiences of these events openly. Staub also argues in favor of continuous and nonsuperficial intergroup contact, with cooperation and pursuit of shared goals in schools and in the economy. These are venerable ideas in the social psychological study of group conflict resolution (Sherif, Harvey, White, Hood, & Sherif, 1954/1961), cultivated here with some success in undeniably stony soil.

Nevertheless, reading *Why Neighbors Kill* straight through, one is confronted with the persistence of atrocity. Poet William Butler Yeats characterized his time by saying that “the blood-dimmed tide is loosed. . . . The best lack all conviction, while the worst/Are full of passionate intensity” (Yeats, 1919/1961, p. 489). The continued determination of governments, armies, and citizens to address social problems through killing and the continuous substrate of prejudice that seems to lurk beneath the surface even of stable heterogeneous societies lend contemporary relevance to these lines, and this is frankly discouraging.

No vision of a peaceful Utopia based on principles of behavioral science is offered in *Why Neighbors Kill*. But the quality of the empirical research described here, as well as the direct engagement at the scene of tragedy exemplified by Staub, reminds us that the seeming impossibility of a total state of peace in our world is no reason for psychologists to suspend effort. To the contrary, it is the very persistence of war across the globe today that makes this blueprint for psychology’s engagement timely and worth reading and discussing within and beyond the boundaries of our discipline.

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