

Social Justice and the Clash of Cultures

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In the past decade, the world has witnessed a surfeit of horrific political, religious, and ethnic conflicts: mass murder, genocide, crimes against humanity, suicide bombers, and global terrorism. One need only speak the names “Serbia and Bosnia,” “Northern Ireland,” “Cambodia,” “Rwanda,” “Palestine and Israel,” and “the United States, Afghanistan, and Iraq,” to feel despair.

Social psychologists have devoted a great deal of thought to unraveling the mysteries of the “psycho-logic” that allows good people to commit staggering injustices—to engage in orgies of cruelty, torture, and killing. Theologians parse the promises and premises of the Bible, the Torah, and the Qur’an. Social psychologists speak of cognitive transformations that allow people to interpret the Golden Rule and the Fifth Commandment that “Thou Shalt Not Kill” as meaning “God Is on Our Side,” “Victory at Any Price,” and “Destroy the ‘Infidel’ (or Heretic or Sinner or Anti-Christ, etc.,) by Any Means.”

Psychologists speak of cultural factors, “moral disengagement,” “self-deception,” “depersonalization,” “splitting,” and “externalization.” The development of an “Us Versus Them” mentality, of a hatred or fear of “The Other,” of “denials of doubt,” and a refusal to admit even the possibility of uncertainty.

Political policy makers and psychologists have attempted to understand the white heat of conflicts (such as the Arab–Israeli clash) by considering: (a) the cultural, historical, and economic factors sparking such conflicts; (b) the cognitive and rational calculations of combatants; and (c) the emotions of combatants—investigating the inner conflicts of people caught up in such “holy” crusades and attempting to comprehend the nature of their shame, fear, rage, hatred, and despair.

In this article, we review a few things social psychologists have learned about the powerful forces that unite people or divide them from their fellows, ignite emotions to a fever pitch, and contribute to people’s perplexing and unrelenting willingness to engage in murderous wars and acts of genocide—no matter how wasted the effort, horrendous the costs, or how devastated a suffering humanity.

Outline

In all cultures, people are concerned with social justice, fairness, kindness, and compassion. Definitions of

these concepts may differ, but at base, in most societies, at most times, most people believe that one should treat others with the kindness and compassion they deserve. Some version of “Do unto others, as you would have them do unto you,” exists in all religious and ideological creeds.

Given the fact that humankind’s most lofty aspirations are so often mocked by the injustice, cruelty, and violence we see around us, we ask: Why is this so?

Social psychologists, interested in the factors that provoke man’s inhumanity to man, have proposed a myriad of reasons why it is so difficult for people to “Do unto others . . .” (for a quick review of this research, see Hatfield, Martel, & Rapson, 2005; Newman & Erber, 2002; Sternberg, 2005). In this article, we mention just a few of the classic studies that have explored this question. Specifically, we discuss four programs of research, those demonstrating that:

1. People tend to perceive “social justice,” “fairness,” and “kindness and compassion” from their own points of view.
2. People tend to define “social justice,” “fairness,” and “kindness and compassion” in self-serving ways.
3. Authority, power, and peer pressure have a powerful impact on people’s definitions of “social justice,” “fairness,” and “kindness and compassion,” and thus determine how they treat others.
4. People’s emotions—such as calm versus anger, love versus hate—determine their perceptions of “social justice,” “fairness,” and “kindness and compassion,” and determine how they treat others.

Let us now discuss a few of the classic studies that document these contentions.

Social Psychological Research

People Tend to Perceive “Social Justice,” “Fairness,” and “Kindness and Compassion,” From Their Own Points of View

In the 5th century BC, the Greek historian Herodotus (trans. 1942) observed, “The Greeks have been from very ancient times distinguished from the

barbarians by superior sagacity and freedom from foolish simpleness” (p. 25.)

It is natural to assume that the way we think, feel, and behave is the only sensible way to be. Those who are different are assumed to be at best exotic and at worst pitiable, sinister, or detestable.

There is considerable evidence that in all cultures people tend to perceive the world from their own points of view.

In a classic series of studies, originating in a desire to explain “the fundamental attribution error”—that is, that people take a different perspective when acting than when observing others act (Jones & Nisbett, 1971)—social scientists have documented how profoundly point of view shapes attributions of causality. When we perform an act, we are well aware of the environmental pressures that conspire to make us behave as we do. When we watch others act, however, we tend to attribute their actions to their personalities and desires and to discount any situational pressures that motivate them to behave as they do.

Attribution theorists such as Michael D. Storms (1973) have demonstrated that if scientists change a person’s point of view—by such simple tricks as asking them to talk while gazing in a mirror/gazing at others, or watching themselves/watching others on TV, they can cause people to view the world and their own and others’ motivations in radically different ways! As predicted, one’s vantage point determines how one sees the world.

Not surprisingly, then, there is also considerable evidence that people perceive social justice and fairness from their own point of view (see Hatfield, Walster, & Berscheid, 1979, for a summary of this research).

People Tend to Define “Social Justice,” “Fairness” and “Kindness” in Self-Serving Ways

In the 1640s, in America, the Assembly in New England considered (and then passed) a series of resolutions as to the Indian question:

1. The Earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof. *Voted.*
2. The Lord may give the Earth or any part of it to his chosen people. *Voted.*
3. We are his chosen people. *Voted.* (Hatfield, et al., 1979, p. 220.)

It is easy to spot the self-interested mote in our ancestors’ eyes, but harder to detect the beam in our own. Social psychologists have amassed considerable evidence as to the contention that people do tend to define social justice, fairness, and kindness and compassion in self-serving ways. Those who possess power tend to assume they deserve the benefits fate has granted them;

that the deprived deserve the misery and suffering they experience (again, see Hatfield, et al., 1979, for a summary of this research).

Recently, anthropologists and evolutionary psychologists have begun to argue that there is a genetic, evolutionarily determined basis for the prevalence of such self-serving biases. Primatologists such as Sarah Brosnan and Frans de Waal (2003) contend that a sense of social justice and fairness got wired in fairly early in various species’ ancestral history. They note, however, that although most primates are exquisitely sensitive to getting cheated, most seem to experience little or no distress at observing another’s being cheated. This more sophisticated sense of social justice appears to have evolved later in humankind’s ancestral history (see Brosnan & de Waal, 2003; Brosnan, Schiff, & de Waal, 2005).

In a study with brown capuchin monkeys (*Cebus apella*), for example, Brosnan and de Waal (2003), found that when trainers gave female monkeys a cucumber as a reward for hard work, when the “going rate” was a delicious grape, they became furious. They refused to “play the game” (refused to exchange tokens for a cucumber reward) and refused to eat their “prize,” holding out for the grapes they thought they deserved. If severely provoked (they worked hard and got a cucumber, whereas another monkey who had done nothing got the grape!) the grape-deprived capuchins got so furious they began to toss the rejected food at the experimenter. Injustice provoked a food fight.

Justice has two sides, of course—feeling uneasy when you get more or less than you deserve. Again, the authors observed that although sensitive to getting cheated, the capuchins did not seem to experience guilt and shame when the experimenter gave them far more than they deserved.

It appears, then, that there may be deep-seated reasons why people tend to assess social justice and fairness from a “selfish” and biased perspective.

Authority, Power, and Peer Pressure Can Affect People’s Definitions of “Social Justice,” “Fairness,” and “Kindness and Compassion,” and Thus Determine How They Treat Others

This contention has been demonstrated in a plethora of studies. Let us consider two classic studies, that gained renewed prominence during the recent Abu Ghraib prison scandal (in Iraq), where American soldiers abused and killed Iraqi prisoners in their care.

In the 1960s, in a series of laboratory experiments, Stanley Milgram (1965) demonstrated that when an authority’s orders conflict with the dictates of conscience, people often succumb to the demands of authority. In one study, the author found that at an authority’s command, in spite of serious reservations, people

would administer a painful electric shock (described as “Danger. Severe shock. XXX”) to a mild-mannered stranger, without questioning the wisdom or humanity of their actions.

In a field study, (now known as the Stanford Prison Experiment), Philip Zimbardo (1972), conducted a simulated prison study. When assigned positions of power, Stanford “guards” (ordinary college students, given nightsticks and guard uniforms) became abusive and brutal toward “prisoners” (other college students, dressed in prison garb). The “prisoners,” for their part, behaved as prisoners usually do—they broke down, rebelled, or became apathetic. There developed a growing confusion between illusion and reality.

In many, many programs of research, authority, power, and peer pressure have been found to have a massive impact on people’s perceptions of social justice and to determine whether others are treated with kindness and compassion, or disdain and cruelty.

People’s Affects (Specifically Their Calm vs. Anger, Love vs. Hate) Determine Their Perception of “Social Justice,” “Fairness,” and “Kindness and Compassion,” and Determine How They Treat Others

In social psychology, there is perhaps no topic that has been explored more intensively than the links between anger and hatred and man’s inhumanity to man.

For a workaday illustration of the links between anger and hatred and cruelty and aggression, consider this transcript of Rush Limbaugh’s May 14, 2004, commentary when discussing his angry and nationalistic reaction to hearing of the Americans’ torture of the Abu Ghraib Prison prisoners in Baghdad, Iraq, and the subsequent killing of an American hostage.

I don’t want to try to understand why those people hate us, because it’s not relevant. Because if we are going to get into that mode of why do they hate us, then the next step is, “Okay, what are we going to do to change ourselves so they won’t hate us?” and that’s not possible, because they hate us for who we are, and who we are is who we are. Cannot be otherwise.

They’re the ones who are sick.. They’re the ones who are perverted. They’re the ones who are dangerous. They’re the ones who are subhuman. They’re the ones who are human debris, not the United States of America and not our soldiers and not our prison guards.

[On Nick Berg’s beheading:] I thought I saw a couple smiles through the mouth holes in the mask, and at that instant I wanted to call George Bush and say, “Level the place. Turn it 20,000 degrees and let’s start over. We’re not dealing with human beings. We’re dealing with human debris,” and there’s no other way to look at them, and there’s no other way to deal with

them. They don’t deserve to live. They don’t deserve sympathy. They don’t deserve understanding. They don’t deserve compassion. They don’t deserve traditional justice. That’s what I was thinking. To hell with rights and all this stuff. I wanted to be in the charge leading into that room to wipe ’em out.

Acts of hatred that resulted in aggression abound through history. Between 1095 and 1217, tens of thousands of people were killed in the Crusades. In the Middle Ages, Jews were expelled from England and France. In 1570, 30,000 Greeks were massacred by the Ottomans. Between 1882 and 1968, over 4,500 Blacks were lynched in the United States. Between 1933 and 1945, 6 million Jews perished under German hands during the Holocaust. Countless millions were killed during the purges of Joseph Stalin in the Soviet Union and Mao-Tse-Tung in China. In 1998, James Byrd, a black man from Texas, was chained by his feet behind a truck and dragged while conscious on pavement for miles by two White men until his body dismembered (Hatfield, et al., in press).

Social psychologists have amassed considerable evidence that angry and hate-filled people are likely to abandon concerns with social justice, fairness, and kindness and to vent their feelings on those they dislike or those different from themselves.

Anger and hatred is known to spark aggression against others—even if the others in no way provoked the situation. A woman who witnessed the terrorist attack of September 11, 2001, on the World Trade Center might berate an Indian taxi driver or stop buying food from the corner store owned by an Islamic family. The Palestinian whose house is bulldozed by Israeli troops, might throw a rock at a UN aid worker or visit a mosque and cry “Death to America.” Considerable evidence exists to support the contention that when frustrated, men and women are likely to take out their anger on weak and powerless scapegoats.

Neal Miller and B. R. Bugelski (1948), for example, interviewed young men who were attending a summer camp. In an initial interview, they assessed how favorable the men felt toward two ethnic groups—the Mexicans and the Japanese. “What traits are typical of the Mexicans and the Japanese?” they asked. “How friendly are such people?” “How smart?” “How honest?”

The authors’ next step was severely to frustrate the boys. Now things were ripe for the experimenters to see if the boys’ anger and frustration would spill over into their evaluations of minority groups—in this case, the Mexicans and Japanese. They found that frustrated boys did tend to take out their angry feelings on these minority groups. They were far more negative toward Mexicans and Japanese than they had been initially. The boys had “displaced” their anger toward groups of people who had done them no harm (see Hatfield, et

al., 2005; Newman & Erber, 2002, or Sternberg, 2005, for a review of research on the links between anger, hatred, and aggression).

Dealing With These Problems

One of the great ideas of the 18th century Enlightenment, the “Age of Reason,” was the notion of tolerance of differences. Voltaire, Diderot, Jefferson, Locke, and a host of other thinkers argued in behalf of accepting that people can possess different beliefs, and that such nonconformists need not be exiled, despised, castrated, or killed for them. But the idea of cherishing (or at least tolerating) differences is just that: an idea. It is not an emotion in itself, although it can lead to feelings, such as the joy that can come when one discovers that an assumed enemy can be a friend.

But the idea of toleration, like peace, remains a fragile flower, easily trampled underfoot. The conviction that cultural differences are to be accepted is oftentimes swept away in the anger, fear, and hate that is ignited and spread (via emotional contagion) to mobs joined in resentment. When faced with a sobbing Israeli father, with ululating mourners at the funerals of murdered Arab children, with people fleeing burning buildings, or crowds running through the streets in panic or rage, it is a rare person who can resist getting lost in a morass of emotion. Passion takes a toll on logic and complex thinking. In troubled times, it is tempting to retreat into religious, national, familial, and tribal loyalties. Yet it is just at these times that the world has the greatest need for intellectual and emotional intelligence. During outbreaks of the darker side of emotional contagion, we most need complex, nuanced thinking and emotional empathy for “the other.”

Can society find ways to instill in people an appreciation of thoughtful contemplation and toleration that matches the intensity of the feelings generated by anger and hate? If that were possible, it would arm the world with a “weapon” of peace as well as weapons of anger and mass destruction. It would give the world a chance of preventing angry contagion from becoming a plague of violence and destruction. At the very least, we can try to be passionate about the value of mutual

toleration and the need to plant a few seeds of understanding. The alternative is terrifying.

Note

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