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Social Representations of Peace and Conflict: Introduction to the Special Issue

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Work on the representation of peace and conflict can be found across many disciplines and within many theoretical frameworks (Gibson & Mollan, 2012). Although much work within social psychology is of course relevant to matters of peace and conflict (Vollhardt & Bilali, 2008), it is only relatively recently that social psychologists have begun to directly address questions of how peace and conflict are represented. A burgeoning literature on these issues exists within the social representations approach (e.g. Elcheroth, Doise & Reicher, 2011; Orr, Sagi & Bar-on, 2000; Sarrica, 2007; Sarrica & Contarello, 2004; Sarrica & Wachelke, 2012; Sen & Wagner, 2005; Wagner, Valencia & Elejabarrieta, 1996), and closely related work has explored social representations of concepts such as history (e.g. Liu et al., 2005; Liu & Hilton, 2005) and human rights (e.g. Doise, 2002; Doise, Spini & Clémence, 1999; Elcheroth, 2006).

In referring to the broad topic 'peace and conflict', the aim of the special issue is not to imply or suggest any form of conceptual unity across work which explores these issues. However, it is important to note the overlap between our concerns here and those of peace psychology (Christie, 2006; Christie, Wagner & Winter, 2001), and more broadly of peace studies. Indeed, one of the most influential scholars in the field of peace studies, Johan Galtung (e.g. 1969, 1990), has provided a series of seminal analyses of the meaning of peace and

violence. His conceptualization of the distinctions between direct, structural and cultural violence, and between positive and negative peace, provides a useful definitional point of departure for the special issue.

Galtung (1969) distinguished between personal (or direct) and structural (or indirect) violence, describing the former as the act of inflicting physical violence (either interpersonally, collectively or militarily) against the person, and the latter as the myriad features of a socio-structural system that result in the maintenance of poverty, inequality and injustice. This distinction mapped onto a similar distinction between negative and positive peace, in which the former is simply the absence of direct violence, whereas the latter is the absence of indirect violence, and therefore the presence of structural factors promoting social justice. Galtung subsequently added cultural violence to his typology, defining this as those aspects of culture which make 'direct and structural violence look, even feel, right – or at least not wrong' (Galtung, 1990, p. 291).

It is in addressing the issue of cultural violence where the analysis of social representations may have the greatest purchase. Notwithstanding the numerous variations of the social representations approach, all share a concern with those aspects of a social system that are more-or-less consensual. In this respect, it is when social representations are such that direct and structural violence appear to be normal and inevitable that analysis of those representations may be of most importance. Social psychology has generally been adept at addressing some significant aspects of this cultural system, and in this respect has made important contributions to peace psychological concerns (see Vollhardt & Bilali, 2008). Studies of prejudice, intergroup conflict and aggression, for example, are well-established in the discipline. However, as has been noted by many scholars, these have often been conceptualized in rather individualistic terms. Equally, there are other areas that have largely escaped social psychological attention altogether over the decades. As Hewer (this issue) points out, 'the work carried out to reduce prejudice and discrimination … has never been matched by attempts to limit conventional warfare or to explain its dynamics so that it might be minimised, curtailed or eradicated' (p. 12.3; see also Gibson, 2011).

The idea of cultural violence leads, in turn, to a focus on the opposing concept of cultural peace. A notable endeavour – and one that is enshrined in official United Nations doctrine – has

been work around the building of cultures of peace (UNESCO, 2002; and see Adams, 2000; Brenes & Wessels, 2001; de Rivera, 2009; Ratković & Wintersteiner, 2010). Analysing social representations of peace and conflict affords one possible avenue along which social psychology might move if it is to complement its traditional areas of focus with a renewed emphasis on other aspects of direct and structural violence, and positive and negative peace. In doing so, it will become difficult to escape the conclusion that analyses of social representations are central to attempts at building cultures of peace.

The papers in the special issue cover a range of substantive topics, and adopt a variety of methodological and theoretical positions, but each constitutes an attempt to use social psychological concepts to address themes that – to a greater or lesser extent – remain on the margins of mainstream social psychological attention.

Christopher J. Hewer provides a conceptual and historical analysis of social representations of war and peace. In particular, he focuses on representations of power relationships, and the way in which they make certain forms of political and military action seem justified, and even inevitable. He also explores how social representations within one culture help to explain difficulties in understanding other cultures, leading to the perpetuation of politically damaging images of 'the other'. Hewer suggests that this concern with culture should lead us to explore social representations in contexts seldom considered by social psychologists, such as situation comedy, for example.

Giovanna Leone and Mauro Sarrica consider the best way of representing war crimes to descendants of the perpetrators' group. They present a study in which different accounts of the Italian colonial invasion of Ethiopia in the 1930s were presented to a sample of Italian students. Specifically, they explore the effects of a vague account versus a more detailed one, which made Italian culpability clear. When exposed to this more detailed narrative, participants were, amongst other things, more likely to be emotionally affected and more likely to report willingness to engage in restorative behaviours. Levels of agreement with the myth of Italians as 'good fellows' was also affected by exposure to the narratives.

Adriano Zamperini, Marialuisa Menegatto, Giovanni A. Travaglino and Eugene Nulman adopt a qualitative approach to analyse representations of the G8 protests in Genoa in 2001. Using activists' accounts published in online media sources, they explore the way in which the

police, and the protest itself, were represented. They point to the use of the language of war, and also highlight the contrasting constructions of different intergroup relationships. Specifically, whereas the police were constructed as incompetent and as an enemy which used excessive force, black bloc anarchists were excluded from definitions of the activists' ingroup, but not in such a way as to position them as an enemy. Zamperini et al. conclude by suggesting that the representation of protestors by the media fuelled the police's approach to the G8 protests, which in turn led activists to represent the event in starkly dichotomous terms themselves.

Robert D. Lowe explores issues of temporality in internet forum discussions concerning political protests. He considers the ways in which temporal frames could be drawn on in representations of social groups and identities in relation to the annual Mayday protests held in London. Central to Lowe's discussion is the incorporation of a temporal dimension to anchoring – the process of rendering the strange familiar. Posters to the forums draw on different temporal strategies in their attempts to anchor contemporary protest to competing historical forebears, and in doing so contest the boundaries of present-day group membership.

In my own paper, I adopt an approach informed by discursive and rhetorical psychologies to argue for a focus on representation-in-action. Specifically, I present an analysis of televised debates from the UK in the period immediately prior to the Iraq War, focusing in particular on the way in which contributors could mobilise historical analogies in their arguments. In this respect, social representations of history are not conceived of as existing independently of social interaction, but instead emerge from – and are inseparable from – discourse. It is suggested that such a position is preferable to a view that treats social representations of history as relatively static constructs.

In many respects, these papers constitute a methodologically and conceptually eclectic mix, but there are also common threads running through them. Several feature a concern with historicity and temporality. The interconnection between social representations and collective memory is a notable feature of much recent theoretical and empirical work (e.g. Hewer & Roberts, 2012; Liu & Hilton, 2005), and this perhaps reflects a broader sense in which the temporal dimension of social psychological processes is beginning to be addressed more explicitly than was the case previously (see e.g. Condor, 1996, 2006; Levine, 2003). In the context of what Nigel Young (2012) has termed the 'memory boom' – a rapid flowering of an

impetus to memorialize, recreate and commemorate in the latter part of the twentieth century – such an engagement with temporality seems more important than ever.

Similarly, there is a concern with intergroup relations present in each contribution which highlights the extent to which explorations of social representations must inevitably constitute explorations of their embeddedness within a network of groups. This point is well appreciated by most social psychologists anyway, but here we arguably see a novel angle. As noted above, viewed through the lens of Galtung's (1990) definition of cultural violence, social representations can be understood as part of the cultural apparatus that makes violence and inequality appear inevitable – or even desirable. The challenge is to move from cultural violence to cultural peace – and here, of course, analyses of social representations have their part to play too. As Hewer points out in his contribution to this special issue, there are presently a great many representational systems which make conflict, and the institutions which facilitate it, appear natural and enduring. Analysing the ways in which these representations are constituted and used, and pointing the way to alternative representational forms, offers one way in which social psychologists might continue to further unlock the critical potential (Howarth, 2006) of social representations theories.

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