Chapter 8

Social-Psychological Approaches for Resolving Intergroup and International Conflict

The problem of destructive intergroup and international conflict can be seen as the most significant issue confronting humankind, particularly in the nuclear age. The immediate question for all disciplines, including social psychology, is what unique contribution each might make to the nonviolent and constructive resolution of such conflict. As noted in Chapter 2, social psychology can be largely characterized as the study of intergroup relations and, directly or indirectly within that context, of intergroup conflict. Unfortunately, as also noted, social-psychological studies have tended to rely strongly upon concepts and methods at the individual or interpersonal levels of analysis, thus ignoring group, intergroup, and higher level variables. A similar concern is voiced by D.M. Taylor and Moghaddam (1987) in their integrative treatment of theories of intergroup relations that have a social-psychological orientation. These authors note the individualistic approach of much social-psychological work, with a consequent disregard of societal factors and a lack of relevance to collectivities such as ethnic groups. All of the theories discussed involve psychological processes at the level of individuals. Some theories, such as equity theory and relative deprivation theory, remain predominately at the individual level of analysis, while others, such as social identity theory and the 5-stage model of intergroup relations (D.M. Taylor & McKirnan, 1984), blend individual-level concepts with group-level concepts to explain the nature of intergroup relations.

Given these limitations, what is the unique orientation and emphasis of the social-psychological approach to understanding and resolving intergroup and international conflict? At the broader level of intergroup relations, D.M. Taylor and Moghaddam (1987) maintain that the “unique perspective of social psychology in the intergroup context is that the perceptions, motivations, feelings, and overt actions of individuals are studied to identify how they influence, and are affected by, relations between groups” (p. 3). With regard to intergroup conflict, the seminal work of Deutsch (1973), reviewed in Chapter 2, similarly emphasizes the phenomenology of conflict in that parties interact with reference to their motives, perceptions, cognition, and expectations of each other. Deutsch’s analysis also goes beyond the individual level in noting the importance of subsystems within the parties and the social
environment and in holding to the general law of reciprocity regardless of the level of the conflict. In distinguishing competitive versus cooperative relationships, and in describing the malignant social process of escalation, Deutsch further emphasizes the importance of perceptions, attitudes, orientations, and communication between the parties. Similarly, in a more recent, yet selective, treatment of the social psychology of intergroup conflict, Stroebe, Kruglanski, Bar-Tal, and Hewstone (1988) include examples of work on cognitive processes, social identity, and interaction between the parties, such as negotiation and intergroup contact. Thus, the consensus appears to have developed over time that a social-psychological approach to intergroup conflict will emphasize individual-level variables like perceptions, cognitions, expectations, and attitudes as they intertwine with group concepts, such as identity and norms, in influencing intergroup communication and interaction within a societal or global context. The eclectic model of intergroup conflict presented in Chapter 5 is an attempt to capture these types of variables and the essence of their relationships. The implication of this consensus is that a social-psychological approach to de-escalating and resolving intergroup conflict will emphasize changes in perceptions and attitudes, will be cognizant of essential elements such as group identity and the norm of reciprocity, and will look for mechanisms of communication and interaction that will help shift the underlying relationship from competition to cooperation.

Largely using a basis of humanistic values, social psychologists have articulated the conditions and principles by which different groups should be able to interrelate effectively in the societal and international context (Fisher, 1982). These principles generally emphasize the importance of each group having sufficient autonomy, identity, and power to enter into an interdependent relationship in a secure, meaningful, and respectful fashion (Fisher, 1988). For example, in discussing race relations in the United States, Pettigrew (1971) relates group autonomy to the dichotomy of living separately or together. With little autonomy, separation produces a minority ghetto, whereas living together results in mere desegregation with continuing prejudice and discrimination. With adequate autonomy, separation results in racial isolation with power (and probably continuing intergroup conflict), whereas living together produces true integration, that is, interdependence, institutional integration, and cross-group friendship. For race relations to move in the direction of true integration, social psychologists generally propose a mixed enrichment and integration strategy in which minority group development and self-determination is enhanced, while at the same time meaningful interdependence is established. The societal or international context in which this is most likely to occur is one of democratic pluralism and multiculturalism. In terms of political structure, some form of federation among ethnically different regions is compatible with true integration. The key concept in establishing these types of relationships may be that of group identity, as discussed in social identity theory (see Chapter 2) and as identified in the eclectic model (see Chapter 5). Furthermore, identity emerges as a common factor in most expressions of needs theory that attempt to articulate the compelling and universal needs of human beings that must be met for satisfactory individual and social development (see Lederer, 1980). In Chapter 7, on