

Psychology: Before and After September 11, 2001
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Over the past year, the phrase, "On September 11th, the world changed forever" has been often repeated and in many respects the world did change on that date. Certainly, the events beginning with the terrorist attacks on September 11 have had an impact on our students, our selves, and our classrooms. For many of our students, this was the first time they felt this magnitude of outrage and profound loss. As a result, it was imperative to not dismiss their feelings. Rather it was important to let them know that their various thoughts and feelings were normal and to provide information as to what they might experience psychologically in the days, weeks, and months ahead.

However, while our students and we as individuals may have changed, what has not changed is the science of psychology and its concern with issues related to terrorism, mass violence, conflict, and also peace. From the very beginning, psychology in the United States has concerned itself with issues of peace and conflict. In the intervening years, psychologists have examined the root causes of violence, researched effective conflict resolution strategies, and explored the nature of peace.

Over the past decade, psychology centers, such as the Solomon Asch Center for the Study of Ethnopolitical Conflict, have been created to encourage research on terrorism, ethnopolitical conflict, peace building, reconciliation and reconstruction and engage in strategic conflict resolution in war-torn regions around the globe. In addition, divisions within the American Psychological Association such as the Society for the Study of Peace, Conflict, and Violence promote scholarly research concerning peace psychology, encourage members to work on both conflict prevention and post conflict resolution with victims living in war-torn regions, and have NGO status with the United Nations.

On September 11th of last year, psychologists around the country responded to the terrorist attacks. Many psychologists are members of American Red Cross Disaster Response Teams and were among the first on the scene in New York, Washington, and Pennsylvania. Other psychologists served as governmental consultants to help shape long and short term responses to terrorism. Empirical data began to be collected immediately to determine the best and most effective ways to help individuals both young and old deal with the trauma of mass violence. Indeed, psychology Internet listservs received many emails from teachers asking the difficult question of "what do I teach now?"

Here at Webster, faculty within the department of Behavioral and Social Sciences participated in forums to help bring understanding to that which seemed incomprehensible and provided resource information on trauma to the Webster community. This past summer, the Behavioral and Social Sciences department offered a course entitled Psychosocial Perspectives on Terrorism. The course, which will be offered again in the spring, addresses the psychosocial roots and impact of terrorism, examines partisan perspectives, and discusses different types of terrorism such as

religious, ideological, state-sponsored, domestic, international, and individual acts of terrorism. Also discussed are topics related to the personal experience of trauma due to terrorism, such as normal emotional reactions to personal attack, PTSD, grief, coping, and the challenge to just-world-thinking as well as broader issues such as stereotyping, in-group/out-group behaviors, moral exclusion, displacement of aggression, nationalism, propaganda, and dehumanization. The course is designed to provide students a framework for putting the attacks in perspective and the means to respond constructively.

Faculty in the department of Behavioral and Social Sciences also serve as a resource to other psychologists across the United States. For example, at the recent American Psychological Association (APA) Meeting in Chicago, Linda Woolf chaired a symposium addressing the challenges of terrorism's aftermath on students, faculty, and the university. During this symposium, she gave a presentation that provided concrete strategies for integrating material related to terrorism and mass political violence into the psychology curriculum at all levels. Resource information and annotated references were provided to facilitate psychologists work when they returned to their various institutions. As an elected member of the Executive Committee of the Society for the Study of Peace, Conflict, and Violence, she also engaged in organizational strategic planning concerning war and terrorism around the globe and has been placed in charge of creating and administering the Peace Psychology Curriculum Project.

Also at APA, Michael Hulsizer reported the results of a study that examined student perceptions of the effectiveness of institutional responses to the September 11th tragedy. Students from five different states, including California, Missouri, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Maryland responded to a questionnaire that assessed the effectiveness of various university responses to the September 11th attacks. Regardless of state, students reported that student centered approaches (e.g., opportunities to give money/blood and open forums) were most effective in meeting their needs. Interestingly, those responses that may have met the needs of educators (e.g., panel discussions, distinguished speakers) were least effective according to students. The results suggest that the institution should strive to strike a balance between student and faculty needs when events of this magnitude occur.

The Behavioral and Social Sciences department has had a long commitment to educating our students in topics of international concern. We routinely offer courses related to peace and conflict, altruism and aggression, prejudice and discrimination, genocide, and human rights. Faculty have received grants and produced curriculum resources related to incorporating genocide, ethno-political conflict, and human rights issues into the psychology curriculum. Thus, in many ways our courses did not change following September 11th but rather their relevance became highly salient to our students in a personal way after that date.

It is certainly important for our students to be aware of the underlying root causes and consequences of terrorism and ethno-political conflict as well as the research that focuses on peacemaking and peace building. It is particularly important for our students to learn about the constructive and destructive ways that individuals deal with trauma,

information related to stereotyping, discrimination, hate, and aggression, and a host of other psychological topics which have a bearing on the attacks such as those of last year. Education can only lead our students to greater understanding of the cognitive, affective, social, cultural, and societal roots and effects of human cruelty and mass violence. With knowledge our students are more likely to accept the mantle of social responsibility and become actively involved as citizens within the global community.

References

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