

Applying Social Psychology to International Social Issues

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This article discusses six key issues that arise when social psychology applies its insights to international affairs. Three involve the applications themselves. Effective applications must connect with the macro level of analysis, attend to social problems long overlooked by the discipline, and operate consistently across cultures and societies. For this last point, two broad predictions—the universality and mediation hypotheses—are advanced that assert that the same social psychological processes can lead to diverse outcomes in different settings. The remaining issues involve the political context of applications made in the public arena. Such efforts must avoid victim blaming; be made available throughout the status hierarchy, not just to elites; and recognize that the public policy arena is scalding hot and controversial. Throughout the discussion, Kelman’s remarkable applications to the search for peace in the Middle East illustrate the points. The article closes with remedial suggestions for the future.

Since its origins, social psychology has aspired to useful applications. The discipline has long wished to make a difference, to contribute to more rational and humane public policy. Yet compared with other social sciences, especially economics, social psychology has not had the impact on social policy to which it aspired.

Why? In an earlier paper (Pettigrew, 1988), I argued that a confluence of factors had deterred social psychology’s influence on policy. First, social psychology is largely an inductive science. Economics, as a more deductive science, can more easily use its models to provide timely guidance to policy makers. Second, institutions are likely to resist the discipline’s suggestions for change because social psychology generally urges situational changes with less powerful clients in mind rather than the perspective of more powerful institutional agents. For example, we suggest that medical doctors change the way they interact with their patients to increase the likelihood that treatment recommendations are followed (Greenfield, Kaplan,

Wary, Yano, & Frank, 1988). But doctors may resist changing their routine ways of behaving when they view the patients as the cause of the problem.

Three other factors are intradisciplinary issues. Social science rose to prominence in social policy during the 1950s and 1960s. But during these years social psychology directed most of its attention to basic laboratory research while it strove to gain acceptance within psychology departments. Consequently, unlike other social sciences, the discipline did not develop networks with policy makers and an understanding of the policy process. Finally, social psychology typically advances its findings and theory in an institutional vacuum. Our socially ungrounded models often appear irrelevant to policy makers, even though untested social psychological assumptions saturate their policy decisions. Objections to our ungrounded models are often raised within the field in terms of the lack of integrated or bold theory (e.g., Cartwright, 1978, 1979; Kelley, 1983; Pettigrew, 1991) or that they are not "social" enough (e.g., Cartwright, 1978, 1979; Steiner, 1974).

Here I wish to extend this analysis by considering six key issues that arise when we apply our discipline's insights to international affairs. Three issues deal with the applications themselves. This article maintains that effective applications must (1) connect with the macro level of analysis, (2) apply across cultures and societies in consistent ways, and (3) attend to many social problems that have traditionally received scant attention by the discipline. Three further issues involve the political context of advancing social psychological insights in the public arena both domestically and internationally. The article holds that effective applications must (4) avoid victim blaming, (5) be made available throughout the status hierarchy, not just to elites, and (6) recognize that the public policy arena is intensely hot and controversial.

Before discussing these points, let us first review an outstanding example of social psychological work that has influenced a major international concern: the desperate search for peace in the Middle East. In its effectiveness, this work addresses the central concerns of this article.

Kelman's Applications of Social Psychology for Peace

Many of the Palestinian and Israeli negotiators who engaged in the discussions that led to the Oslo Peace Agreement in 1993 had prior experience working together. And they shared a common vision that they could shape a win-win solution to achieve peace in the Middle East. Considering the long separation and hostilities between the two opponents, this situation was truly remarkable. How was it possible?

In part, it was achieved through the tireless efforts for peace of a dedicated leader of the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues (SPSSI), Herbert Kelman. His work is the best example I know of applying social psychology effectively to international social issues. Indeed, social psychologists have long taken

pride in the work of Ken Clark, another SPSSI leader, in influencing American racial history. Now we also can take pride in the achievements of Kelman's work for peace in the Middle East. And a look at this work provides an invaluable context for considering the application of social psychology to broad, international concerns. For more than two decades, Kelman has applied his social psychological approach to Arabs and Israelis. Most applications to broad issues must draw eclectically on a wide range of basic theory and research both within and without the discipline. And this work is no exception. Thus Kelman culls insights from Floyd Allport's (1933) overlooked classic on institutional behavior and early work by Lewin (1952) and others on participation. And he finds useful Bronfenbrenner's (1961) and Ralph White's (1965) mirror imaging of opponents' conceptions of each other and research on international exchange. He draws widely on the attitude change literature to which he was a major contributor earlier in his career. He also has utilized the work on mechanisms for neutralizing disconfirming information (Ross & Ward, 1995). And most directly, Kelman's approach relates to conflict negotiation principles (e.g., Rubin, Pruitt, & Kim, 1994) and the human need theory of Australian diplomat and international relations specialist John Burton (1969, 1979, 1984, 1988).

Kelman's conflict resolution efforts use workshops that stress interactive problem solving. Numbering between 8 and 16 people, these small groups include social science facilitators. They bring together influential, politically involved people from both sides for unofficial and confidential interaction. Part of Kelman's skill is in selecting the participants. They must be people who, for a variety of reasons, seriously entertain the notion of a peaceful solution to the conflict. Likud and Hamas members are not excluded, but obviously make unlikely participants.

These workshops have a dual purpose (Kelman, 1997). One intention is to induce changes in the participants themselves as they develop a more differentiated view of their opponents and their perspectives and priorities. But this is not a feel-good exercise. The workshops also strive to increase the likelihood that the insights, ideas, and proposals developed in the problem-solving interaction feed back into each community's political debate. The groups serve as laboratories and as a setting for direct interaction. They have the potential of initiating coalitions of peace-minded participants across conflict lines. And the workshops present a model for a new relationship between the parties.¹

Amid the varied influences operating in the Middle Eastern search for peace, one cannot isolate the full effects of Kelman's efforts. Suffice it to say that his many workshops have helped develop cadres of both Israelis and Palestinians who can carry out productive negotiations. And many have served in high-ranking positions in both communities.

¹ Readers of this journal can glean further details concerning these workshops from Rouhana and Kelman (1994).

Making Social Psychological Applications More Effective

Connecting With the Macro Level of Analysis

Kelman's impressive work illustrates points we must consider to enhance the effectiveness of international applications of social psychology. First, we must recognize at the onset that social psychology can supply only a few pieces of the puzzle of any major social issue. All such issues, from peace to poverty, involve factors at all major levels of analysis—micro-individual, meso-situational, and macro-societal (Pettigrew, 1991). This makes it essential that we shape social psychological contributions to link with the macro levels of culture and social structure.² Social psychological insights will not be useful to macro-level policy makers unless social psychologists themselves establish these cross-level links. Kelman's work offers one model for how we can forge such links.

Nevertheless, social psychological contributions are needed. Kelman makes the point succinctly:

Although international conflict and conflict resolution are societal and intersocietal processes, which cannot be reduced to the level of individual behavior, there are processes central to conflict resolution—such as empathy or taking the perspective of the other . . . and creative problem solving—that . . . take place at the level of individuals and interactions between individuals. (p. 217)

Add to this the unique contribution that social psychology can make by specifying the situational processes that mediate between the macro-structural and micro-individual levels of analysis. Other social sciences consider situations, but only social psychology focuses on situational mediation systematically. In doing so, the discipline provides both distinctive variables and distinctive explanations that usually involve subjective interpretations of the social environment. This situational and subjective perspective is the discipline's unique contribution and forms the core of its potential applications.

But Does Social Psychology Apply Across Cultures and Societies?

As Sears (1986) makes clear, North American social psychologists often assume that college sophomores typify all humankind. European social psychologists, too, have largely ignored cultural and structural contexts despite living in a natural laboratory for such work.

² As used in this article, *culture* refers to the content and patterns of human values, ideas, and other meaningful symbolic systems of a society (Kroeber & Parsons, 1958), social structure to relatively persistent social patterning of human behavior (Pettigrew, 1996).

During my five enjoyable years at the University of Amsterdam (1986–91), I was disappointed to learn the extent to which Europe accepted American findings in social psychology uncritically. For instance, the Netherlands has for centuries been one of the world's most densely populated areas. This led to the evolution of ingenious cultural and structural means of handling crowding and organizing space. Such arrangements do not exist in the North American settings of the crowding research (e.g., Baum & Valins, 1977, 1979; Evans, 1979; Karlin, Rosen, & Epstein, 1979). Yet I could find no comparable Dutch research, and Dutch students were at that time taught (but are not now) that overcrowding often has negative effects that did not occur in their nation.

Although such discrepancies across societies are widespread, it does *not* follow that basic social psychological principles are wrong. The principal conclusions of the overcrowding research in North America are still valid given the structural and cultural conditions under which these studies were conducted. With sharp differences in such macroconditions, crowding does not appear to have the same detrimental effects in the Netherlands.

Further work on crowding in such dense nations as Bangladesh, Egypt, Indonesia, Japan, and the Netherlands could expand our understanding of the phenomenon. This expansion would entail carefully specifying the links between the macro, meso, and micro levels of analysis. Such specification requires diverse sampling of structural contexts. And we already know the most likely mediators to the micro-individual level of analysis. Structural and cultural as well as situational factors shape the critical roles played by perceived control and arousal attribution (Aiello, Thompson, & Brodzinsky, 1983; Rodin, Soloman, & Metcalf, 1978; Schmidt & Keating, 1979; Sherrod, 1974). And perceived control has been shown to operate in India as it does in the United States (Ruback & Pandey, 1991).

In the work I did on intergroup prejudice in Western Europe with James Jackson and our European colleagues (Pettigrew et al., 1998), we were surprised to see how basic social psychological processes underlying intergroup prejudice operate similarly across France, Germany, Great Britain, and the Netherlands. These nations have sharply different intergroup situations, histories, and levels of prejudice, and their outgroups range from Turks and North Africans to Asians and West Indians. Yet the same correlates and processes operate in similar ways across them. To be sure, distinctive features characterize each nation and target group. Yet the thrust of our findings highlights the comparable operation of such psychological processes as social identification and group relative deprivation acting as proximal causes of prejudice and mediators for social factors acting as distal causes.

These results suggest two hypotheses. The *universality hypothesis* predicts that social psychological processes operate in similar ways across nations and target groups although the macrocontexts vary widely. The *mediation hypothesis* holds that key social psychological predictors serve as critical mediators of the effects of social factors on dependent variables at the micro level of individuals. Given vastly

different distal social factors, the same social psychological processes can lead to distinctly different outcomes in different settings.

Figures 1A and 1B illustrate these hypotheses. The diagrams fit the same nearly saturated path model (8 of 10 possible paths are included) to data from two contrasting national samples (British and Dutch) concerning sharply different minority targets (West Indians and Turks, respectively; for study details, see Pettigrew & Meertens, 1995; Pettigrew et al., 1998). The model employs four predictors of a 10-item measure of blatant prejudice. One is a consistently negative distal predictor of prejudice long favored by sociologists: education (e.g., Stouffer, 1955). And its effects are mediated in the model by three proximal variables: a single-item measure of authoritarianism,³ a scale of a respondent's intergroup friends (Pettigrew, 1997), and a self-rating of political conservatism.

Sharpening the test, the two national samples differ significantly on four of the model's five variables. The Dutch are better educated ($p < .0001$) and more authoritarian ($p < .0005$); the British are more politically conservative ($p < .0001$) and blatantly prejudiced ($p < .0001$). Yet the models fit both situations well. As called for by the universality and mediation hypotheses, the three proximal predictors mediate education's effects in similar ways in the two contrasting samples.

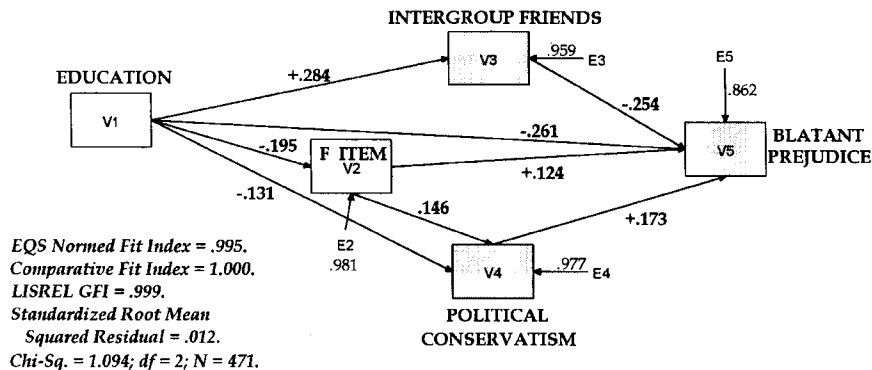


Fig. 1A. Model for British blatant prejudice against West Indians.

³ Unfortunately, the 1988 Eurobarometer survey that provided these data included only one authoritarian-like item and no indicators of the even more predictive social dominance orientation (Altemeyer, 1998; McFarland & Adelson, 1996; Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994; Reif & Melich, 1991). Remarkably, however, this lone *F*-item provides a significant and independent prediction of prejudice.

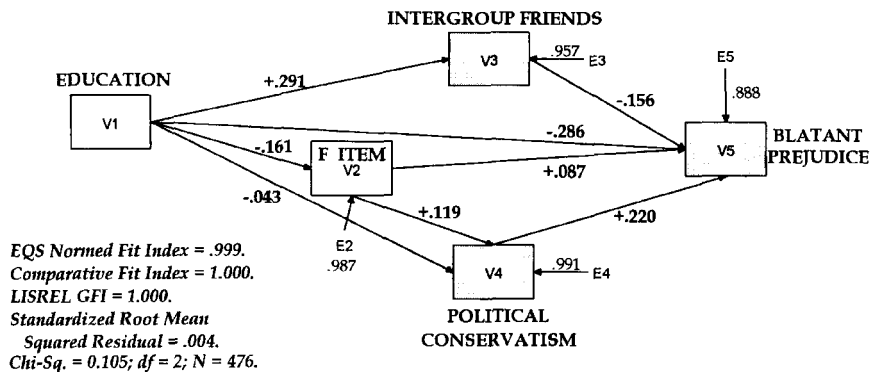


Fig. 1B. Model for Dutch blatant prejudice against Turks.

Among both the British and Dutch, the well-educated express less blatant prejudice partly because they are less authoritarian and politically conservative and especially because they are more likely to have friends of other groups. The strong direct effect of education in both diagrams indicates that many additional variables mediate education's negative effect on prejudice as well.

To be sure, the fact that these data cover only Western, industrialized countries limits the two proposed hypotheses. Comparable work in nonindustrialized nations is badly needed. This is what makes the Brewer and Campell (1976) volume on intergroup attitudes in East Africa so valuable. Indeed, applications of social psychology in nonindustrialized countries are sparse in general. And this lacuna represents the most serious weakness in demonstrating the utility of social psychological applications internationally.

Missed Opportunities

The narrowness of social psychology's applications has also limited the discipline's contributions to international problems. Consider some missed opportunities. In addition to the sparsity of work in nonindustrial nations, we have neglected many social issues of critical societal importance. For example, despite the persistent efforts of Marie Jahoda (1982), social psychologists have understudied the harmful effects of unemployment. Similarly, social psychologists in both Europe and the United States have paid surprisingly little attention to the specific problems of prejudice and discrimination directed against the new immigrant minorities (Pettigrew et al., 1998). For instance, with a few striking exceptions (e.g., Masson & Verkuyten, 1993; Sanchez-Mazas, Roux, & Mugny, 1994), the vast social identity

literature has rarely examined minority relations in Europe. From 1986 to 1996, the 12 leading English-language journals for the discipline published only 18 such papers, 10 of them from the Netherlands alone.⁴

Sometimes social conditions, such as war, make it impossible to study key phenomena. Think of Bosnia. For whatever else you might think of him, Marshal Josip Tito carried out an ethnic integration program in communist Yugoslavia that followed many social psychological principles of optimal contact. And it was successful. He achieved peace among his nation's many groups, and residential integration and intergroup marriage increased sharply, especially in major cities. Yet soon after his death, nationalist Serbian leaders quickly tipped the balance in the nation's most interethnic province into chaos and ethnic cleansing. We need to understand how four decades of progress could be so easily disrupted and destructively reversed.

The Political Contexts of Social Psychological Applications

Victim Blaming

Other problems for social psychological applications involve their political contexts. One is the danger of blaming the victim (Caplan & Nelson, 1973; Ryan, 1971). Psychological work in general, because it centers on individuals, constantly runs the danger of having its analyses appear as if the victims of social problems are fundamentally the cause of these problems. Hence, such valuable concepts as relative deprivation and learned helplessness can be easily twisted into victim blaming once they enter the political arena. This is not to say that difficult human conditions cannot cause changes in their victims that in turn make social problems more serious, but rather that such victim characteristics are not the basic cause of social problems, nor are remedial attempts that ignore structural causes likely to prove helpful.

Kelman keeps blame out of his workshop discussions. The focus is on future peace, not past conflict. Acknowledging each other's nationhood is one essential ingredient (Kelman, 1992). In addressing other issues, linking our findings and recommendations to their macro-level bases also helps to avoid victim blaming. Once we include culture and social structure in an analysis, holding individuals solely responsible becomes untenable.

Information for Whom?

Another issue concerns power. Information is power, and it is a two-edged sword. So, for whom do we do research? Becker (1967) points out that information

⁴ Ulrich Wagner at the University of Marburg developed these data; and they were originally published in Pettigrew et al. (1998).

tends to flow up the status hierarchy. Hence, it provides elites with a more complete view and greater capability. Those who would effectively and ethically apply social psychology must therefore be careful to make their results known throughout the status hierarchy, and not available just to the elites who are likely to have sponsored the research. Although Kelman engages largely the Palestinian and Israeli elites, he has worked hard through public addresses and writings to communicate his approach to both the Arab and Jewish worlds.

Becker (1967) also notes that when social scientists do give “equal access” to nonelites, they are likely to be perceived as politically biased to the left. This raises yet another issue.

It Is Hot in the Kitchen

Social scientists strive to be as objective in their work as possible. Yet no matter how well one succeeds in this effort, it remains scalding hot in the social policy kitchen. Once you intervene to have your work influence events, you face severe criticism. Social psychologists soon learn that far different standards apply outside of academia. For instance, I recall my surprise at defense lawyers’ attacks on my research when I served as an expert witness in school desegregation cases (Pettigrew, 1979, pp. 34–37). Had anyone conducted the research here in Springfield? Just because the study had sampled schools throughout the country, why, I was queried, would the result hold true for Springfield? This same antiscientific logic arose in 1998 when for purely partisan reasons Republicans in Congress wished to restrain the U.S. Census from using sampling methods that would obtain a more accurate count of minorities.

Tense conflicts produce strong emotions. Again Kelman’s efforts provide a case in point. In 1983, Kelman published in the *American Psychologist* a report on two lengthy interviews he held with Yassir Arafat, chair of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). The article and its author were immediately and savagely attacked—even, I regret to say, by some social psychologists. Critics viewed it as cavorting with the enemy; they sternly rejected treating Arafat as a human being to be taken seriously. Yet we now can look back at this controversial paper and note that it was not only in keeping with Kelman’s professional role as a trusted mediator but prophetic as well. The paper’s thesis held that Arafat “has the capacity and will to negotiate an agreement with Israel, based on mutual recognition and peaceful coexistence, if afforded necessary incentives and reassurances” (Kelman, 1983, p. 203). The Oslo Agreement a decade later proved Kelman’s analysis was correct.

Other social psychologists have endured even hotter kitchens. In South Africa, social psychologists studied racial prejudice and discrimination and blatantly labeled these phenomena for what they were throughout the police state days of apartheid. I have followed this literature closely because of my own modest contributions to this tradition during a five-month research visit to this troubled land in

1956 (Pettigrew, 1958, 1960; Pettigrew, Allport, & Barnett, 1958). Despite the intense pressures not to work in this politically charged realm, South African social psychologists have continuously conducted work on racism since the 1930s.

Suggestions for the Future

To sum up, social psychologists have applied their theory and research to acute problems throughout the world. Kelman's peace efforts in the Middle East present an outstanding example of the potential of the discipline to contribute, together with the other social sciences, to the solutions for these problems. But the record to date falls far short of the discipline's aspirations.

This discussion leads to a range of suggestions to make social psychological applications more relevant for policy. These recommendations flow from Cartwright's (1979) blunt assessment that "fundamental improvements in the intellectual performance of the discipline as a whole require changes in the system itself and the way it operates" (p. 83). Previously (Pettigrew, 1988, p. 217), I advocated structural changes in graduate study, conferences, funding agencies, journal policies, and university incentives. These changes emphasized policy training, the upgrading of quantitative methods, and funding and university rewards for interdisciplinary applied work.

The international concerns of this article suggest further alterations. I believe firmly that social psychology has the means and expertise to tackle the three interdisciplinary issues: connecting with the macro level of analysis, testing theory and findings across cultures and societies, and attending to neglected social issues. For instance, larger research projects could systematically sample institutional and other macrocontexts. Moreover, the field's journals could give especially high priority to studies that test basic theories in new structural and cultural settings. Meta-analytic reviews of the literature that explicitly use structural and cultural variables to explain effect size differences would be helpful. Greater use of structural equation models to test mediation processes would be another step in the right direction. The universalistic and mediation hypotheses advanced here almost surely overreach. But we need bold theory to shape bolder efforts at rendering our theory and research more amenable to useful international applications (Pettigrew, 1991).

For the political context issues, social psychologists simply must brace themselves for engaging in an arena far different from academia. In addition to avoiding victim-blaming exploitation of one's findings and to reporting to nonelites as well as elites, one must expect controversy and attempts to twist one's message to political advantage. If social psychologists wish to have their policy-relevant contributions considered, these costs are the price one pays. Increasingly, some social psychologists devote their full attention to these policy realms. They are in law, business, medical, and public health schools, know the ropes, and can help their less applied colleagues in the policy process. And the growing number of social

psychologists who are now in the media, such as Erica Goode of the *New York Times*, also can be of enormous aid.

A Final Word

Let me close with a story that underlines how social psychologists even in totalitarian countries have believed in the importance of the discipline and its applications for social policy. In 1991, the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences invited two sociologists and me to visit Sofia and consult on their problems of intergroup conflict. The country had just emerged from communist rule, and the economy was in a precarious state. But I was delighted to find a devoted group of young social psychologists. They were highly identified with the discipline and surprisingly well versed in the research literature.

Then they explained how they had stayed current. The communist regime had allowed only one subscription to *The Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* for the entire country. It was housed at the Academy under guard. Only one person could read it at a time, and the guards allowed no copies or notes. Yet patiently and defiantly, these Bulgarian social psychologists each month took turns at reading the issue. Then they discussed at length its contents and the potential applications to Bulgarian society. Remember that the next time you put off reading *The Journal of Social Issues*!

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