Social Representations of War and Peace

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Wars are not only fought on battlefields. They are also fought in people’s minds. Conducive to this state of affair is the fact that an appeal to force alone is seldom considered as sufficient. Wars require justification in the eyes of public opinion and/or the international community. As a consequence, leaders may need to insist on the virtues of war or assert that, in addition to other merits, it also serves the cause of peace. Such claims are usually contested by opponents to war who have developed and championed their own representations of war and peace. Hence, it can be argued that wars, in their preparation, execution, and remembering are also wars of images and meanings. (See also Encyclopedia entries on Social Representation Theory by Wagner, Social Representations of History by Liu and Hilton, and Social Representations of Reconciliation by DeZalia.)

However, even though warmongers, peace activists, or social scientists have dedicated much time and energy at explaining how one should think about peace and war, the question of how people actually think about peace and war has only received scarce attention so far. In this article, we will first identify the main social representations of war and peace. Next, we will consider some of their determinants before exploring the representational underpinnings of attitudes towards war and peace.

Social representations of War and Peace

Wars are central in people’s representations of world history (see Encyclopedia entry on Social Representations of History by Liu & Hilton). Considered to be amongst the most important human events, they are usually evaluated negatively. Prominent in participants’ answers, World War II can be expected to serve as the main prototype in people’s
representations of war and as an anchor in the representations of new wars. Existing literature (e.g. Malley-Morrison, 2009) on social representations of war shows that war is overwhelmingly associated with the ideas of death, blood, hate, destruction and violence. The most frequent themes alluded to by surveyed participants include: objects, activities or actors of war (i.e. weapon, killing, the US), consequences of war (i.e. chaos, poverty, hunger), negative emotions (i.e. hate, anger, fear), reasons for war (i.e. politics, greed, power), and negative evaluations (i.e. bad, immoral, horrible). In other words, people usually view war as an inter-state armed conflict involving direct and indirect violence and embodying a system of values. Nevertheless, non-negligible cohorts of participants believe that war is sometimes necessary.

Peace, on its part, is associated negatively with the end or absence of war and violence but this association is at best moderate. More generally, people focus on intra-personal (i.e. tranquility of mind, quiet, serenity) and relational (i.e. cooperation, friendship, brotherhood) elements when thinking about peace. Other frequent themes include positive feelings (i.e. love, happiness, joy), universal rights (i.e. freedom, equality, respect), wealth and physical well-being (i.e. prosperity, security, stability) as well as symbols (i.e. dove, peace sign, olive branch). Despite its desirable features, peace is sometimes also viewed as a utopia, the realization of which is impossible to achieve.

Comparisons between social representations of war and peace suggested that they are not complementary, the former pertaining more to relations between nation states, whereas the latter are typically applied to aspects within, and relations between individuals. Social representations of peace are also more abstract and are less stable, i.e. they include more themes that are only loosely related to each other, than social representations of war. Its meaning varies as a function of the person surveyed and the context. Given its polysemy, Ishida (1969) considers
the word peace an empty signifier that can be referred to by anyone in defense of any social policy, including war.

**Determinants of Social representations of War and Peace**

Individual, contextual and cultural factors have been invoked to explain observed variations in lay people’s social representations of war and peace.

*Individual Factors*

Qualitative changes in children’s representations of peace and war have been related to age. Children gradually shift from a description of peace as what it is not (i.e. absence of war, no quarrels) to a more abstract description focusing on norm-related aspects (i.e. respect, human attitudes). Different in content, older children’s representations of peace are also more complex. Similarly, older children focus more on the negative consequences and the reasons for war and less on the objects and activities of war. The role of socio-cognitive development in these changes has been underscored. According to Hakvoort & Oppenheimer (1998), the content and form of children’s representations of peace and war is contingent on the children’s ability to distinguish and to take different perspectives into account in their interpersonal relations, a claim which they were able to substantiate only for social representations of peace.

Gender differences have also been reported, though solely for social representations of war. Women, usually less supportive of war than men, associate it with more negative emotions (e.g. fear), tend to be more pessimistic about likely casualties, and are more concerned about the war’s consequences (e.g. poverty) than men. Most perspectives on this gender gap adopt a “shared property” approach. It has, for instance, been proposed that women’s thoughts about war flow either from their abiding by the social roles (i.e. caregiver) and stereotypes imposed on them by society, or from the fact that they associate wars with male-dominated societies that
maintain them in a subordinated social position and limit their participation in political decision-making.

*Contextual Factors*

The experience of life-threatening events like war touches people in their very existence. It can thus be expected to have enduring effects on the meanings they ascribe to these events. The nature of these effects depends on whether the war is ongoing, has just been settled or has ended in a relatively distant past. When fighting is still raging, people react to the threatening situation in ways that help them cope with it. They can do so by denying some aspects of reality or by cognitively altering their representations of war so as to make life tolerable. An unintended consequence of such a defensive mechanism is that it prevents people and collectivities from seriously considering alternative situations (e.g. peace).

If peace can be judged as socially irrelevant in times of violent conflict, it becomes a major topic of public debates once violence has stopped or when its end is foreseeable. Such heightened public attention enables the development of a stable social representation of peace and of a consensus around the ways of achieving it. But historical experiences like wars can affect people’s representations and attitudes far beyond the direct aftermath of the conflict. Research in this field has more particularly identified generational effects (see Wagner & Hayes, 2005). Younger generations who did not experience a war period but have learned about it usually exhibit a distant attitude. They think and talk less about it but show at the same time a propensity to reevaluate its meaning and to look for related information. Older generations who did experience a war period tend, on the contrary, to be more ambivalent. They can acknowledge the horrors of the war while stressing desirable features because they associate it not only with a period of chaos but also with an orderly society where a sense of duty, unity and full
employment were the rules. In addition, even if they report thinking and talking more often about it than younger generations, older generations may avoid or contest any attempt to bring polemic aspects of the war under public scrutiny. Contributing to collective forgetting, the experience of war, it would seem, orients communication processes and activities in determining what elements should be included in, or excluded from, the social representation of war.

**Cultural Factors**

Cultural differences in the meaning of peace have been established, and the weight of political or religious traditions has been implicated (Ishida, 1969). Building on previous cross-cultural comparisons, Galtung (1981) has proposed three dimensions along which peace concepts prevalent in a given culture at a given time can be classified. These dimensions concern the degree to which peace concepts make a clear distinction between one’s own group and other groups, are inward (vs outward) oriented, and are global (vs local) in scope. Applying this framework, Galtung concludes that Western peace concepts, with their emphasis on internal order and unity, score high on the first and third dimensions, whereas Asian peace concepts, with their emphasis on tranquility of mind, score high on the second dimension. No such cultural variations are documented with regard to social representations of war.

**Peace and War as Social Representations and as Attitudes**

Social scientists who have investigated attitudes towards war have only seldom shown consideration for their participants’ attitudes towards peace and have almost consistently ignored their representations of war and peace. This might be due to two assumptions with similar consequences. The first assumption is that attitudes towards peace and attitudes towards war are polar opposites along the same dimension, i.e. if you are in favor of peace, you should be against war. The second is that everybody is in favor of peace so that knowing what people mean by
peace helps us in no way to understand, and even less predict, their position towards war. However, there are good reasons to believe that peace, as a social representation and as an attitude, is related to war, though not in a mutually exclusive way. Ishida (1969) contends that certain conceptions of peace are compatible with violence, such as when emphasis is put on the realization of justice in one’s idealization of peace; which tends to justify violent retaliatory actions.

How does empirical research settle the issue of the links between representations of peace and war and attitudes towards war? Results of the few studies that addressed the question suggest that a representation of war(s) as direct (i.e. images of destruction and suffering) and indirect violence (i.e. ideas of misery and poverty), as opposed to a concrete and technical representation of war(s) (i.e. images of cruise missiles firing and planes dropping bombs), is incompatible with support of warfare. Results concerning social representations of peace are less conclusive. In a study conducted by Van der Linden, Bizumic, Stubager, & Mellon (2010) in the US and Denmark, the idea of peace as equality was highly incompatible with a positive attitude towards war. However, Sarrica (2007) failed to find reliable differences in social representations of peace between groups of participants who could be expected to vary in their level of support of war (i.e. peace activists vs non-activists, people who participated to a peace demonstration vs people who did not).

**Summary and Conclusion**

In this article, we have highlighted the dialectic relationship existing between wars and social representations. If wars are generative of representations that can contribute to their continuation on the battlefield and beyond (i.e. in groups’ collective memories), the way wars and peace are represented determine to a great extent people’s attitude towards wars as well as
their potential for resolution. Social representations of war are structured around main features like concrete objects, the consequences of war and negative evaluations, whereas social representations of peace are usually more varied, more abstract and less stable. This has led some authors (e.g. Wagner & Hayes, 2005) to conclude that, even if they are related, peace and war may not be equally relevant objects of representation. According to Sarrica (2007), confronted with the “weaknesses” of social representations of peace, peace activists should strengthen the links between peace and human rights. By virtue of their being normative and shared, social representations of human rights would allow groups and individuals to gather around the issue of peace using a common language and shared principles (see Gély & Sanchez-Mazas, 2006), thereby providing social representations of peace with the prescriptive elements they need to “counterbalance” the concrete and vivid images of war.

References


Additional Resource

Free access to original papers related to Social Representations Theory and its applications, among others on issues like war, peace and reconciliation: [http://www.psych.lse.ac.uk/psr/](http://www.psych.lse.ac.uk/psr/).

Key Terms

Social representations, war, peace, attitudes.

Bio

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