# Social psychologists say war is not inevitable, psychology research should promote peace

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This image shows Bernhard Leidner, University of Massachusetts at Amherst. Credit: UMass Amherst

In a new review of how psychology research has illuminated the causes of war and violence, three political psychologists at the University of Massachusetts Amherst say this understanding can and should be used to promote peace and overturn the belief that violent conflict is inevitable.

Writing in the current special "peace psychology" issue of *American Psychologist*, lead author Bernhard Leidner, Linda Tropp and Brian Lickel of UMass Amherst's Psychology of Peace and Violence program say that if social [psychology research](#) focuses only on how to soften the [negative consequences](#) of war and [violence](#), "it would fall far short of its potential and value for society."

"In summarizing psychological perspectives on the conditions and motivations that underlie violent [conflict](#)," says Tropp, "we find that psychology's contributions can extend beyond understanding the origins and nature of violence to promote nonviolence and peace." She adds, "We oppose the view that war is inevitable and argue that understanding the psychological roots of conflict can increase the likelihood of avoiding violence as a way to resolve conflicts with others."

Political leaders can be crucial in showing people different paths and alternatives to violent confrontation, the researchers point out. Leidner mentions Nelson Mandela, a leader who "offered South Africans an example of how to deal with the legacy of apartheid without resorting to further violence by making statements such as, 'If you want to make peace with your enemy, you have to work with your enemy. Then he becomes your partner.'"

Leidner and colleagues recall how political and social psychology researchers have in recent decades steadily gained more understanding, through research, of such psychological factors as intergroup threat, uncertainty, group identity, emotions, moral beliefs and how intergroup conflict affects views of the world and of oneself.

They review theory and research that specify [psychological factors](#) that contribute to and perpetuate intergroup violence through emotional responses and belief systems fostered by conflict. Finally, they summarize ideas of how psychological "defenses of peace" — a phrase

in the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) preamble — can be constructed in the human mind.

The authors acknowledge that conflict and violence between groups persist because they often give people ways to address psychological needs, for identity, safety, security and power. Nonviolence has received far less media and research attention, they point out, but this should change. The UMass Amherst team urges social psychologists to consider factors that increase empathy and understanding of others, along with factors that increase the capacity for critical evaluation of the "ingroup."

They conclude, "Research that investigates how to mitigate negative consequences of war and violence is valuable," and the studies they summarize, grounded in "realistic insights," support the view that psychology can be applied to promote peace. "It is our contention that psychology can and should be applied to promote peace, not war."

**More information:** psycnet.apa.org/journals/amp/68/7/514/

Provided by University of Massachusetts Amherst