

# PSYCHOLOGISTS FOR SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

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## Preventing Armageddon in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

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Some conflicts – whether between spouses, labor and management, or nations – seem to escalate out of control. They follow a malignant course toward outcomes that nobody wants. People who are caught up in such conflict usually find ample justification for blaming the other party. It seldom occurs to the opponents to look hard at the conflict itself, including the conditions that intensify it or might de-escalate it.

Psychologists and other social scientists are well acquainted with such conflicts. Conflict research yields knowledge that has been successfully applied and can be productively applied to the conflicts between Palestinians and Israelis, India and Pakistan, the volatile situation with Iran, and other conflicts that seem to be stuck in the kind of escalating sequence that could lead to continued mutual harm. The findings of research on conflict do not replace the need for expert understanding of our antagonists or of the technical side of arms negotiation. But focusing on the typical characteristics of the conflict process itself, rather than exclusively on the characteristics and motives of our antagonists, may suggest a different approach for dealing with an adversary. How we define the problem determines where we look for solutions.

What do we know about malignant conflicts – ones that lead to bad results from everybody's standpoint?

*A win-or-lose orientation tends to escalate conflicts.* Under controlled laboratory conditions research has shown that when the participants define a conflict as a win or lose situation, several consequences are predictable: a) communication is impaired, reinforcing existing stereotypes and encouraging misinformation and error; b) the opponents become more suspicious of each other, more sensitive to difference and threats, and c) each party becomes convinced that a solution to the conflict can only be found through superior force or by outwitting the antagonist. Thus, disputes over specific issues that might be resolved to the satisfaction of both parties become struggles solely for superior power.

*Malignant conflicts encourage misperception and misjudgments that yield unwanted results.* Research shows that during such conflicts, each party tends to perceive its own behavior more favorably than the other's, and to look at the conflict from a "blaming" rather than "problem-solving" point of view. As the conflict escalates, the actions taken by each party commit each more deeply to policies that perpetuate the conflict; the opponents thus become locked into their positions of self-interest rather than open to exploring mutually desirable policies and programs. Information communications and contact, which might mitigate the conflict, are reduced. All parties become so focused

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on winning that they readily lose sight of their basic interests – which is the case of many intractable conflicts whether at the interpersonal or international levels.

*Psychological experiments suggest that when one party in a conflict attempts to increase its security without regard for the security of the other party, the attempt readily becomes self-defeating.* Such a situation is potentially catastrophic when the stakes involve nuclear war. If military inferiority is dangerous, so is superiority. It is dangerous for either side in a conflict to feel tempted or frightened into action, or to have grounds to believe that its antagonist might be so tempted or frightened. According to this analysis, our security and that of an adversary can only be obtained through our *mutual security*.

Conflict research provides no easy answers to our difficult conflicts. However, by focusing on factors involved in the dynamics of the conflict itself, rather than simply on the blameworthiness of our opponent, conflict research has highlighted the need for different strategies from those that follow from our own blind involvement in the conflict process. Such strategies ought to include initiatives aimed at opening communication and finding common objectives. Neither party in a conflict has a complete monopoly on good or evil. Neither is insane. It is the conflict *process* that is crazy. With imagination, patience, and commitment, we can do something about that.

## References

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*Psychologists for Social Responsibility seeks to bring greater psychological knowledge and public awareness to the many issues highlighted in this brief overview. For more information, please contact us at [info@psysr.org](mailto:info@psysr.org). We encourage new PsySR members to join in these efforts. Media inquiries are also welcome.*

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