

PSYCHOLOGISTS FOR SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

Governmental Aggression

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Governments, like individuals, have shown a capacity for inhumanity to man, for as long as they have been in existence. Even within today's constitutional democracies, governments carry out acts of aggression that would constitute criminal conduct if performed by civilians. Invasions of other lands, capital punishment, torture, violations of international treaties, disavowals of international human rights agreements, police or military violence against their own citizens, and killing foreign civilians during wartime are all examples of governmentally sanctioned aggression and violence.

Research on governmental aggression and the factors that can inhibit it demands a collaborative multidisciplinary effort and an ecological model that addresses causes of aggression at all levels--macro-system, exo-system, micro-system, and individual. Traditionally, theories on governmental ("nation-state" or "state") violence have been the province of political science theories whereas characteristics of individuals and groups that contribute to or support aggression by states have been the province of psychologists. Freud argued that humans are born with basic impulses that are at the root of all evil but that can be controlled and transformed through the development of conscience, and the accompanying replacement of egoism with altruism, as long as society and the state demand moral behavior--a demand that typically disappears in wartime. Freud talked of the dangers of individual obedience to malevolent authority, as did Stanley Milgram. More recently, psychologists have emphasized the role of emotions and cognitions, as well as social identity, in contributing not just to obedience to authority but to individual tolerance for and complicity in governmental aggression. Bandura's theory of moral disengagement is probably the most complete description of the psychological mechanisms that allow individuals to condone and justify various forms of aggression by their governments.

Psychologists have a responsibility to contribute to the development of sustainable public policies and individual cognitions that mitigate the tendency of governing agencies to use aggression to achieve goals, punish resisters, and rule by terror. Psychological research can analyze the effects of xenophobic rhetoric and compliance with aggression, and arm individuals with the intellectual resources, positive affective responses (e.g., empathy), and behavioral strategies needed to combat forms of governmental aggression that violate human rights, including all forms of violence sanctioned by governing individuals and groups. Educational programs in political action, human rights, and conflict resolution can shift the discourse from the adversarial divisions between nation-states to the interconnectedness of human beings from all cultures.

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

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