

**KJ Jonas & TA Morton (Eds) (2012) *Restoring Civil Societies: The Psychology of Intervention and Engagement Following Crisis*. Oxford, UK: Wiley-Blackwell. 328 pages, USD 110 Hardcover.**

*Restoring Civil Societies: The Psychology of Intervention and Engagement Following Crisis* is an important contribution to the study of post-crisis and post-conflict societies. It examines the underlying psychological fault-lines in crises, how they can be overcome and what risks practitioners face in working to reinforce the psychological bases of community cohesion. The book addresses a gap in the post-crisis literature and identifies areas for further research. It is a comprehensive survey of an under-studied field and will contribute to more psychologically effective communication and intervention.

The book is, in a sense, a continuation of a 1942 work, also produced by the Society for Psychological Study of Social Issues, called *Civilian Morale* edited by Goodwin Watson. Viewing social cohesion as critical to Allied success during World War Two, *Civilian Morale* analysed the structures, goals, identities, affiliations, and sense of justice or injustice that contributed to broader resilience during crisis and to post-crisis social stability. Seventy years later, Jonas & Morton's contemporary incarnation of Watson's work is "interested in the thoughts, feeling, and actions of individuals that might contribute positively to civil functioning within groups, communities, and society as a whole, and the events or ideas that can threaten or challenge these". To achieve this monumental task, *Restoring Civil Societies* analyses both theoretical applied approaches to social psychology in crises that promote "civility".

The book is notable both in the diversity of its examples and its ability to survey the literature of social psychology in multiple, particularly European, languages thus opening up a relatively wide range of perspectives, experiences and lines of enquiry that go beyond the Anglosphere. The applied chapters study interventions in Rwanda, Israel/Palestine, Northern Ireland, race relations in the US, HIV/AIDS, and training programs on 'moral courage' in Switzerland and an analysis of the UK Government's WRAP program - an attempt to sensitise public officials to the officially perceived causes of radicalisation among young Muslim men. This is underpinned by a comprehensive outline of theoretical approaches which analyse the academic field in the following broad areas: justice sensitivity, ways of regulating psychological threat, elements of prosocial behaviour, children's psychological risk and resilience, the interaction of past grievances with present and future peace-building, and the psychology of reconciliation and forgiveness.

As a survey of the field, rather than the presentation of new research, there is little that is genuinely new in either the theoretical or applied sections. We learn, for example, that perceptions of justice can be a risk or a resource to longer-term peace-building. For children, stable family environments provide a source of resilience to external conflicts (although, while it also reinforced sectarian division, strong confessional identification in Northern Ireland also provided psychological insulation from wider conflict). Volunteerism usually occurs "when doing so will serve personal motivational needs" and people who have experienced trauma themselves are more likely to exhibit altruistic behaviour. The poor are more likely to provide assistance than those who are financially better off. Further, a crisis can provide a defensive

motivation to sink into psychologically 'orderly' belief systems that serve to regulate or control threatening information.

More interesting are the chapters that set out to problematize common concepts that, when studied, are in fact not well understood. Kai Jonas' chapter analysing 'Prosocial behaviour in the context of crisis' is the best example of this. In this chapter, Jonas reveals the complexity of the psychology underpinning prosocial behaviour which has relatively little to do with ideas about dispassionate empathy. Prosocial behaviour of the sort advocated by aid agencies and ethicists – including morals of civil courage, intervention, care for members of an 'outgroups' – is often colloquially seen as a simple and inherent good, however this is misleading. While true altruism is "rather scarce", prosocial behaviour is most likely when it is self-motivated and autonomous. Directing people to respond 'morally' may in fact impede the motivational desire to do so. Further, prosocial behaviour must overcome a rationalisation process (which considers the magnitude of suffering, how 'deserving' the victim is, the extent to which suffering is perceived as being self-inflicted). This process establishes a hierarchy of victims that constrains responses based solely on appeals to universal ethical principles. Additionally, the primary beneficiaries are likely to be members of an "ingroup" with whom relations have already been established rather than those who might be deemed 'strangers' or an 'outgroup'. Consequently, Jonas finds that help is not always given to those who need it most but on the basis of who is subjectively deemed most 'helpable', 'deserving', and socially proximate.

Assistance is also part of a power dynamic based on the possibility of reciprocation and individuals may be reluctant to accept assistance from those assumed to be higher or lower in social status. Accepting such assistance would either reinforce or challenge established relations and preference is given to receiving assistance from equals. Importantly, "the provision of help, although superficially seen as a positive act, can be embedded in an intergroup context that it itself cemented in the status quo ... [and] can reinforce status positions within groups". These reminders of the psychological complexity of assistance are especially important in the context of aid organisations seeking to understand the local dynamics of assistance and to 'do no harm'.

Memory of past grievances provides a further complication. In the US, Black respondents saw the legacy of injustice as part of their lives, while White respondents contrasted the past with a more harmonious present. Intergroup exchanges showed a lack of trust in basic interactions and modes of expression. This suggested that concerns over past grievances and pre-emptory expectations of biased responses contributed to a level of distrust in intergroup interaction.

Contemporary relationships to, and understanding of, the past also informed relations between Jewish and Palestinian Israelis which are marked by 'competitive victimhood'. This term describes a relationship in where "both groups try to portray themselves as victims in the eyes of third parties ... in light of the various instrumental goals that recognised victimhood may promote ... adversarial groups often compete over the social role of the 'true victim'". Significantly, when both groups engage in competitive victimhood, the communication gets "stuck".

Paradoxically, Noor & Shnabel suggest “constructive dialogue” between Jewish and Palestinian Israelis might reinforce tensions in the absence of basic trust. Instead, they advocate the development of a dual-narrative process in which both Israeli and Palestinian histories are taught in parallel. The authors approvingly quote Paulo Freire that “the great humanistic and historical task of the oppressed is: to liberate themselves and their oppressors as well”. In both the US and Israeli examples, however, it is hard to see how such delicate work that is needed at the individual and small group level could be replicated at scale to produce significant social change.

The authors also point to ways of bridging entrenched conflicts. In Rwanda, the traditional *gacaca* system was adopted as a judicial process for 130,000 accused perpetrators of genocide. While there were reports of increased levels of depression and post-traumatic stress disorder among victims following testimony, the wider result was that shame decreased among victims and increased among perpetrators suggesting a re-balancing of roles, acceptance of the process and the effectiveness of ‘complementary needs analysis’ when overcoming the victim-perpetrator symmetry.

*Restoring Civil Societies* in an important survey of the field of the social psychology of intervention in crisis. Part of its aim is to “traverse the theory-practice divide” although the work reads and feels more squarely aimed at academic and policy communities than at practitioners working in the field. As the editors also observe, there is also an artificiality about psychological experiments that are divorced from ‘real-world’ experience. As a consequence, the earlier, theoretical chapters have less to say than the applied sections that deal with the gritty substance of conflict resolution.

Tom Bamforth  
Swinburne Institute for Social Research