

Sean Byrne and Jessica Senehi

Violence: Analysis, Intervention and Prevention

(Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2012, 274pp.)

Sean Byrne and Jessica Senehi of a peace studies center of the University of Manitoba, have written a useful analysis of approaches to violence and conflict resolution. It is written as a textbook for the increasing number of university-level classes in Peace and Conflict Studies (PACS).

Ultimately the goal of violence prevention is nonviolence and peace. The classic readings in nonviolence represent a body of thinking that gave birth to Peace and Conflict Studies as a conscious focus and a field of study by a group of scholars, practitioners, and activists from many different disciplines.

All conflicts are unique, and broad social conflicts involve a complex intermeshing of psycho-cultural, historical, religious, demographic, economic, and political forces. We need to find ways in which individuals and groups at odds can empower themselves and others to move effectively and in moral ways toward desired goals.

Individuals need to enhance and develop their access to psychological, social, and material resources, thereby developing grassroots empowerment and helping others to empower themselves.

As a textbook, there is an extensive bibliography, website addresses of organizations and “think tanks” working on conflict issues, and for each chapter a list of “Suggested Questions for Further Discussions”. Also as a text book, there is a good deal of analysis of the writing of others on conflict issues such as Elise and Kenneth Boulding, John Burton, Johan Galtung and Jean Paul Lederach as well as presentations of the psychological contributions of Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers.

However, the book is of value for those of us whose university studies are well behind but who are concerned with what intellectual considerations may provide for our own efforts at resolution of violent conflicts.

As has often been pointed out, conflict as such is not bad and may even lead to constructive change. What we wish to prevent is violence, aggression and a permanent harm to the personality of the “other”. We need to de-legitimize violence as a way of meeting basic needs, overcoming frustrations or advancing one’s interests.

The book is organized on the basis of a *web of violence*. “The web of violence is expressed in the interrelationship among personal, collective, national and global levels that link the personal to the global which in turn frames the public discourse about what is violence and what can be done about it.” This *web of violence* is discussed on a continuum going from violence directed at a single person within the family, the school and the work place to ethnopolitical conflict to war among states.

Personally, I am currently most concerned with violence in Syria and Mali with the fear that the violence may spread to neighboring states. Thus it was the sections on ethnopolitical conflict and the techniques of Track II (non-official) diplomacy which was of most interest to me.

In the book *Roots of Evil*, Ervin Staub writes about a critical loyalty to humankind, that is, “creating positive connections between groups by expanding contacts, positive reciprocity, cross-cutting relations and superordinate goals.” There is a need to join people across conflict lines, promoting shared values and distributing resources in ways that encourage cooperation and interdependence. Citizens must have the opportunity to get together in critical spaces to share stories and to build trust, forgiveness and repair relationships rather than to tie their destructive stories to the past, to atrocities and to grievances.

The problem in such situations as Syria and Mali is that there have been very few cross-cutting institutions in which people of different ethnic or religious communities could meet and possibly find ways to cooperate. Rather each community has closed in on itself with few “bridge builders” who could play a role in more than one segment. When the fuse of violence is lit, there are few people already organized to facilitate negotiations. So, today, we see the great difficulty even to start good-faith discussions and to look at the possibilities of reforms. There are few, if any, ‘neutral’ institutions which are trusted by all parties.

Outside, external actors can sometimes play a useful role either governmental or non-governmental. Yet in the two cases of Syria and Mali — the intergovernmental organizations — United Nations, League of Arab States, and the African Union — have not been able to provide a framework for negotiations. In the non-governmental sector, some relief organizations have been able to work but with difficulty. Most relief organizations stay away from “political issues” for fear that it would limit their possibility of providing relief. For non-governmental peacemaking efforts to be effective, there often has to be a long history of contacts so as to built trust and confidence. It is difficult just to “drop in” to settle disputes.

Thus there is a need to develop close links between the academic study of violence and violence-prevention and organizations working on intervention in specific conflict situations. The Byrne-Senehi book is a good overview of the academic approach and should be of value to both students and others concerned with replacing violence with modes of nonviolent conflict resolution.

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Painting: Lona Towsley