Explaining the Breakdown of Ethnic Relations
Social Issues and Interventions
This edited series of books examines the psychological study of social problems and interventions. Each volume draws together newly commissioned chapters by experts in social psychology and related disciplines in order to provide a multifaceted analysis of a particular contemporary social issue. Utilizing both case studies and theory, this series presents readers with a comprehensive examination of complex social problems while concurrently advancing research in the field. Editors have been chosen for their expertise of the featured subjects, rendering Social Issues and Interventions an urgent and groundbreaking collection for scholars everywhere.

Series editor: Marilynn B. Brewer

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This book is dedicated to Marcelle and Israel Esses, and to the victims of ethnic cleansing and genocide throughout the world.
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Series Preface

The series of volumes on Social Issues and Interventions launched in 2006 represents a joint effort of the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues (SPSSI) and Wiley-Blackwell. Consistent with SPSSI’s dual mission of encouraging systematic research on current social issues and bringing the findings of social psychological research to bear on public policy, the goal of the series is to help fill the gap between basic research on social issues and translation into social policy and program interventions.

As the inaugural volume in the series, Explaining the Breakdown of Ethnic Relations: Why Neighbors Kill fulfills the purposes envisioned for this venture and provides a model for bringing together multiple perspectives to focus on a compelling and critically important social issue. Horrific examples of intergroup violence within divided societies have been prominent in media coverage from all parts of the world. Dramatic events lead us to search for dramatic causes, but as much of the content of this volume makes clear, subtle psychological biases and social psychological processes can have massive emergent consequences. The chapters in this volume approach the problem from distinct vantage points, each of which provides unique insights on the nature of violent conflict. As the authors acknowledge, this volume does not address the best of human nature. It is a strength of the book that the editors and chapter authors address this head-on and, when appropriate, do consider when intervention and social change may be possible. There are powerful messages here that should be of interest and relevance to social scientists and policy-makers alike.

Marilynn B. Brewer
Series Editor
Acknowledgments

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Why Neighbors Kill
An Overview

Richard A. Vernon and Victoria M. Esses

In Humanity: A Moral History of the Twentieth Century, the moral philosopher Jonathan Glover asks what it is that makes acts of great inhumanity possible (Glover, 2001). Glover is (mercifully) sparing in his use of examples, given the huge array of examples that the twentieth century provides; but even his exemplary list evokes a horrified demand for explanation. What makes people commit such cruelties to one another? In two ways, his book also gives some ground for optimism. First, it shows convincingly that the way to cruelty has to be prepared before it opens. Soldiers have to be systematically desensitized before they can kill; victims have to be dehumanized before they can be killed (or else killed from so great a distance that their humanity need not be confronted); great cruelties have to be approached, step by step, by a series of smaller ones, as though a natural resistance has to be overcome. Second, Glover’s book demonstrates the “moral resources” that stand in the way of acting cruelly: memorably, it records the story of the Afrikaner policeman who found that he could not beat a demonstrator to whom he had just acted politely (he had returned her lost shoe to her), and George Orwell’s famous anecdote, from the Spanish Civil War, about his inability to shoot a half-dressed Fascist soldier who was in the human predicament of holding up his beltless trousers (pp. 37–38, 53).

Among the “moral resources” that should stand in the way of brutality, it is natural to think, neighborliness should rank highly. It is a sad but fairly unsurprising fact that, given the right conditions, humans are capable of discounting the suffering of strangers. It is both a sad and a surprising fact that humans are capable of discounting the
suffering of those whom they know well and of directly inflicting the cruelest forms of suffering upon them. But the evidence for it is clear. In their work on resscuers, both Monroe (1996) and Geras (1995) have shown that neighborly ties have only rarely motivated people to risk their lives to save victims of genocide: For the most part, rescuers gave as their reason a primitive sense of shared humanity, not any special connection arising from local or neighborly ties. On the other hand, “an inestimably large number of people . . . did not help friends, neighbours and other acquaintances” (Geras, 1995, p. 35). When we turn from rescue and abandonment to actual perpetration, the evidence also tells against neighborliness. In both the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda in the 1990s, to mention but the two best-known cases, victims were killed – brutally – by people on first-name terms with them: who had broken bread with them, had chatted at the bus stop with them, had babysat their children, had married into their families, and for whom they had performed acts of personal kindness. “Doctors [in Rwanda] killed their patients, and schoolteachers killed their pupils” (Gourevitch, 1998, p. 115).

Of course, we need to know what kind of “neighborhood” preceded the killing, as chapter 4 in this volume, by Hewstone et al., importantly reminds us. It may not have been a very neighborly neighborhood, perhaps. If, as a Bosnian Croat reported, “we lived in peace and harmony . . . because every hundred metres we had a policeman to make sure we loved one another” (p. 72), then we would hardly expect neighborhood (in the sense of mere locality) to provide a moral resource. In a case of that kind, neighborliness would be a fiction that papered over deep preexisting hostilities, without which there would have been no need of “love police.” Moreover, in the Holocaust rescue cases and in the Rwandan case, we know that neighborliness was undercut by a particularly virulent ideology that was transmitted by all the resources of state power and reinforced by social pressure, or indeed by direct coercion. Thus, it is not implausible to suppose that neighborliness is, as intuition suggests, a “moral resource” that inhibits brutality, though we need to think about when it does and when it does not.

The chapters in this volume repeatedly point, as Glover’s book does, to the events and processes that can eat away at inhibitions and make the apparently unthinkable happen. None of them attribute magical potency to neighborhood, but they do assume “why neighbors kill” to be a more pressing question than “why don’t neighbors kill?”, a question that would be premised on very deep misanthropy indeed. The chapters reflect several different disciplinary perspectives; they work
at different levels of generality; and they concern different real-world cases. As a result, it is not surprising that their findings differ, though their differences are generally of a complementary rather a contradictory kind. As with other studies of intergroup conflict, this volume will offer the conclusion that “no single factor or set of factors can explain everything” (Brown, 1997, p. 24), and that understanding will be based on a sense of the way in which different kinds and levels of explanations interact with one another.

The chapters in Part I of this work direct our attention to the importance of factors at the level of the individual agent. In chapter 2, Hafer, Olson, and Peterson open the discussion with an account of the social psychology of justice, a field that enquires into “the conditions under which justice is seen as an important consideration in one’s interactions with others; how people judge what is fair and unfair (or just and unjust); and how people respond to injustice once it is perceived” (p. 18). Focusing upon individual-level variables, the authors distinguish between three scenarios. In the first, which very clearly addresses the theme of “devaluation” that frequently recurs in these chapters, certain groups are simply excluded from what the agent takes to be the scope of justice; these groups simply do not count, and so the field is left open to the operation of other motives, such as self-interest. Groups may be excluded because they are perceived as different, distant, perhaps not “human,” because they pose a threat; or because they are useless to the agent. In the second scenario, justice is operative, but weak, and what it calls for is outweighed by competing considerations, directly self-interested or otherwise. In the third scenario, justice applies, and with full force, but what it calls for is the infliction of harm. In this context, it becomes particularly important to examine what factors influence determinations of a group’s deservingness of punishment or reprisal. Those determinations may arise from actions taken or believed to have been taken, from the perceived character of the group’s members, or simply from whether members of the group are liked. Even when there are more-or-less agreed background principles of fairness or justice, then, many subjective elements will enter into decisions about whether and how they apply: “What may be especially difficult as an outsider is to entertain the notion that some atrocities might not be seen as unfair, and may even be seen as absolutely necessary for justice to prevail” (p. 32). When the latter applies, of course, we confront a much more overt phenomenon than the more furtive or unconscious operations of schadenfreude or prejudice discussed in later chapters, although some of the same variables (devaluation, difference, distance) may be involved.
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In chapter 3, Dovidio, Pearson, Gaertner, and Hodson discuss mild racial bias or what they term “everyday” prejudice. Within the past half-century outright racial bigotry has declined in western societies; however, Dovidio et al. demonstrate that extreme and overt prejudice of that kind is not necessary to produce support for harmful or even fatal damage to other racial groups. Many people who forthrightly condemn bigotry nevertheless have negative feelings towards racial minorities, feelings that may be given no expression in normal contexts of behavior, and that may be unperceived even by the agents themselves. Certain circumstances, however, make them consequential. For example, when negative judgments about a member of a racial minority can be justified by other criteria, aversion comes to the fore. Aversion may be “disinhibited” by perceived provocations, by anonymity, by peer pressure or the contagious effects of collective action. The effects are also evident, the authors show, in the interpretation of evidence and in sentencing decisions in the legal process. Employing an explanatory model of hatred that comprises three variables – denial of intimacy, passion (anger and/or fear), and devaluation of the other – the authors show that even low levels of negative disposition may cross the line into aggression. Levels of negativity that are quite consistent with normal neighborliness, then, are also consistent, given the right disinhibiting conditions, with support for destructive actions. As a result, legislation that delegitimizes and punishes outright bigotry will not reach some important causes of racial hostility and violence.

Most of the chapters in this volume refer in part to the question of what can restrain mass violence, if only by implication. However, the chapter by Hewstone at al. places the question of restraint at the forefront, asking what it is that neutralizes expected restraints or renders them inoperative. Its focus is on the well-known “contact hypothesis” (Allport, 1954), which concerns the restraining effects of previous contact between a group of potential perpetrators and a group of potential victims. When certain conditions have been met, it is hypothesized, prior contact among members of groups will inhibit subsequent violence between them. At least on the face of the matter, the stunning twentieth-century examples of neighborly murder in Poland, Yugoslavia, Rwanda, and elsewhere would seem to put paid fatally to that hypothesis. Hewstone et al. suggest a much more nuanced conclusion. For one thing, as already noted briefly above, we need to know much more about the kind and extent of intergroup contact. Mere proximity may mean nothing at all (and may even have negative effects when “the other” is nearby in worrying numbers). Coexistence, even over a long period, may be a poor predictor of future peace if
it accompanies a “psychological wall” of buried, unavowed distrust. Intermarriage may mean little if rates are low (and if intermarriage fails to win full social acceptance). Gross statistics may conceal crucial differences of very local kinds, which would need to be correlated precisely with rates of participation in or resistance to genocidal action. For another thing, even if prior intergroup contact (of any kind) has positive effects, it is entirely unreasonable to expect these to survive countervailing influences, ingroup pressure, massive propaganda, and threats to punish nonparticipation in mass violence. “Placed in some of the situations that perpetrators found themselves in, we doubt whether any of us could have resisted such extreme pressure” (p. 74).

There are, then, many unknowns. But Hewstone et al. conclude their chapter by suggesting that “actual, face-to-face” contact among members of potentially hostile groups is at least a necessary condition for potential hostility to be prevented from becoming actual.

In the final chapter in this section, Spears and Leach address a psychological trope known as schadenfreude, a German word pressed into service because English lacks a convenient term for taking pleasure in the misfortune of others. The chapter concerns schadenfreude in its group-based rather than its individual form. Spears and Leach are modest in their claims about its significance. Schadenfreude does not, they claim, directly propel people to mass violence; it is a passive and opportunistic reaction rather than an action-guiding motive, as Nietzsche classically pointed out. However, it may nevertheless enter into the explanation of mass violence in several important ways. It may help to explain the inaction of bystanders, in whom the alternative reaction of sympathy may be blocked by taking pleasure in the suffering of certain groups, groups that may well include neighbors, whose proximity facilitates comparison and thus amplifies the likelihood of resentment. Spears and Leach helpfully point out that it is implausible to take bystanders’ inaction as a sort of default position, in need of no explanation: It requires explaining just as the perpetrators’ actions do, and schadenfreude is one of the mechanisms that make it more intelligible. Schadenfreude may be part of a context of socially sustained beliefs that foster intergroup conflicts, especially, perhaps, if its widespread acceptance tends to neutralize norms that generally forbid the expression of malice. Its presence may signal to perpetrators that their actions will likely be overlooked or furtively approved. Finally, because the pleasure of schadenfreude is apparently enhanced when one also benefits from the target group’s misfortune, the emotion may easily ally itself with the motive of material interest, when, for example, the target group stands to lose land or property or other