

# THE WORLDVIEW CONSTRUCT & PEACE PSYCHOLOGY

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In recent years, a conceptual tool has been described that can be of great utility to practitioners, researchers, and theorists in peace psychology: the construct of *worldview* (or 'world view'). In this article I describe the construct, its utility to those interested in peace psychology, some research questions, and practical matters of interest.

## The Worldview Construct

A worldview is a cognitive structure that comprises a set of foundational assumptions about physical and social reality (Koltko-Rivera, 2004). Worldview assumptions address a wide variety of topics, including: what exists and does not exist in the world; what can be known or done in the world, and how this can be known or done; what objects and objectives are good or evil; what behaviors are good, natural, or appropriate, versus what behaviors are evil, unnatural, or inappropriate; in sum, central truths about reality versus that which is false. Dominant worldviews can be defined at all levels of social process, such as the individual, the culture, the nation, and so forth.

In a recent article (Koltko-Rivera, 2004), I described how the worldview construct has been addressed by a variety of theorists and researchers over the last century. I also described a model of the many dimensions of worldview beliefs, a theory of worldview function within the processes of perception and behavior, and research agenda for various fields within psychology. Elsewhere, I have addressed a variety of topics: how the worldview construct has been assessed by various researchers, and how I have addressed this through the development of the Worldview Assessment Instrument (WAI; Koltko-Rivera, 2000); how the worldview construct may be applied within a general approach to psychological research (Koltko-Rivera, 2006); and, how worldview may be applied to the psychology of religion (Koltko-Rivera, 2006-2007) and human factors psychology (Koltko-Rivera, Ganey, Dalton, & Hancock, 2004). Here, I expand on some of my earlier comments (Koltko-Rivera, 2004) regarding how

to apply the worldview construct to the concerns of peace psychology.

## The Relevance of the Worldview Construct to Peace Psychology

Human conflict and its resolution are rooted in many factors, some relatively more tangible (e.g., historical events; presence and absence of various natural resources; economic and demographic circumstances), and some relatively intangible (e.g., culture; religion; values; the psychological qualities of individuals, such as psychopathology and personality configurations). Although conventional accounts of war and peace emphasize the more tangible factors, it is important to note that psychological factors may actually be more crucial, both to the creation of conflict, and to its resolution.

In the presence of a crisis, a given entity—for example, a person or a nation—will respond in some manner; this response of course will depend, to some extent, upon the resources that are available to the entity at the time of crisis. However, different entities, even with identical resources, will respond to the same crisis differently. Worldview—the central component of a culture, and a foundational cognitive structure within an individual (Koltko-Rivera, 2004)—moderates the way in which either a person's or a nation's available resources are used as a response to a given crisis.

For example, a drought is a tangible circumstance with the potential for life and death consequences. However, the way in which different individuals and nations *react* to a drought may differ widely, depending upon circumstances of culture, religion, and values, all of which

are reflections of worldview. One nation may take the initiative to address proactively the drought, its causes, and its effects, without involving its neighbors one way or another; another nation may react more passively; another may reach out to its neighbors for help; yet another may seek to appropriate its neighboring nations' water resources, perhaps through the violence of war. In each case, the external reality of drought may be the same, but internal differences of culture and values—more broadly, internal differences in worldview—result in vastly differing responses to the external situation.

Worldviews thus have a central role in forming responses to crisis. This suggests several areas for both research and practical application.

## Research Questions

Several research questions regarding the worldview construct are relevant to the concerns of peace psychology:

- **The role of specific worldview dimensions.** Over three dozen specific dimensions of worldview belief have been identified (Koltko-Rivera, 2004). Which of these, either singly or in combination, have an effect upon moderating the response to crisis? To what extent do the relevant worldview dimensions have a moderating effect? As I have noted elsewhere:

How do specific dimensions of worldview contribute to the creation and maintenance of different kinds of conflict? (This may be framed as an extension of the work of Rouhana and Bar-Tal [1998] and Eidelson and Eidelson [2003] regarding the psychological underpinnings of intractable conflict.) It has been asserted

that [the worldview position of] an extreme linear relation to authority underlies genocidal violence (Staub, 1996). Eidelson and Eidelson (2003) noted five “worldviews” (i.e., worldview dimensions) that seem associated with large-scale intercultural violence (Koltko-Rivera, 2004, pp. 45-46).

- **The role of specific worldview confrontations.** When two social groups come into contact, there will be areas in which their respective dominant worldviews will be similar, and others in which they will be different. As noted elsewhere:

Worldview differences may be a source of conflict. However, it may be the case that certain worldview *similarities* foment conflict. For example, consider two groups, each of which takes the following worldview positions: The group has full possession of a truth that is both universal in scope and exclusively available to the group, and—perhaps most important—otherness is intolerable. Despite these worldview similarities—indeed, *because* of these worldview similarities—should the groups differ in the substance of their “truths” (e.g., political, scientific, or religious doctrines), this could set the stage for serious, protracted conflict (Koltko-Rivera, 2004, p. 46, emphasis original).

### Practical Issues

Practitioners of peace psychology might find it worthwhile to investigate the following issues:

- **Matching of conflict resolution techniques to specific constellations of worldview dimensions.** A variety of conflict resolution techniques exist. As in psycho-

therapy, it is not to be expected that ‘one size should fit all,’ as it were. Paraphrasing the advice of G. L. Paul regarding psychotherapy research, we might say:

The question to which all conflict resolution outcome research should ultimately be directed is the following: *What* intervention, by *whom*, is most effective for groups with *these* specific worldviews and *that* specific problem, and under *which* set of circumstances (inspired by Paul, 1967, p. 111).

- **Effectiveness of addressing conflict in terms of specifics versus worldviews.** One high-level issue regarding conflict resolution involves the relative advisability of addressing a given conflict in terms of two distinct approaches. One approach involves addressing the specifics of the conflict itself (i.e., the specific historical and current circumstances and events). Another approach involves addressing the conflict in terms of the specific worldview dimensions, similarities, or differences that may underlie the conflict. It may well be advisable to use both approaches, although ultimately this decision should be guided by appropriate research.

### Conclusion

I have described the worldview construct, and ways in which it may be applied to research and practice in peace psychology. My hope is that psychologists interested in peace psychology will include the worldview construct in their teaching, research, theory, and practice.

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*There are three truths:  
my truth, your truth and the truth.*

*Chinese Proverb*