

Psychosocial Analysis of the Collective Processes in the United States after September 11

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DOI: 10.1080/07388940500200716

Published in: *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, Volume 22, Issue 3 October 2005, pages 201-216

Subjects: Military & Strategic Studies; Peacekeeping

Abstract

This article studies alterations in the values, attitudes, and behaviors that emerged among U.S. citizens as a consequence of, and as a response to, the attacks of September 11, 2001. The study briefly examines the immediate reaction to the attack, before focusing on the collective reactions that characterized the behavior of the majority of the population between the events of 9/11 and the response to it in the form of intervention in Afghanistan. In studying this period an eight-phase sequential model (Botcharova, 2001) is used, where the initial phases center on the nation as the ingroup and the latter focus on the enemy who carried out the attack as the outgroup.

The study is conducted from a psychosocial perspective and uses "social identity theory" (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 1986) as the basic framework for interpreting and accounting for the collective reactions recorded. The main purpose of this paper is to show that the interpretation of these collective reactions is consistent with the postulates of social identity theory. The application of this theory provides a different and specific analysis of events. The study is based on data obtained from a variety of rigorous academic studies and opinion polls conducted in relation to the events of 9/11.

In line with social identity theory, 9/11 had a marked impact on the importance attached by the majority of U.S. citizens to their identity as members of a nation. This in turn accentuated group differentiation and activated ingroup favoritism and outgroup discrimination (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 1986). Ingroup favoritism strengthened group cohesion, feelings of solidarity, and identification with the most emblematic values of the U.S. nation, while outgroup discrimination induced U.S. citizens to conceive the enemy (al-Qaeda and its protectors) as the incarnation of evil, depersonalizing the group and venting their anger on it, and to give their backing to a military response, the eventual intervention in Afghanistan. Finally, and also in line with the postulates of social identity theory, as an alternative to the virtual bipolarization of the conflict (U.S. vs al-Qaeda), the activation of a higher level of identity in the ingroup is proposed, a group that includes the United States and the largest possible number of countries - including Islamic states - in the search for a common, more legitimate and effective solution.

Keywords

collective reactions; social identity; social categorization