

by Joanna Santa Barbara



Health and Peace: Galtung's Thought Experiment

Not long ago, several Peace through Health practitioners met at a site in the Mindanao rainforest to explore the possibilities for evaluation in Peace through Health. As they were from very different parts of the world and different cultures, they prudently began by ensuring they each knew what the other meant by "peace" and "health." Someone presented the World Health Organization (WHO) definition of health as "more than the absence of disease – complete biological, psychological, and social well-being." Good start. Someone else presented the definition of peace as an attribute of a relationship in which there was mutual benefit, or at least no harm, and in which conflicts were resolved nonviolently. Sounded promising. But the East Timorese physician in the group was not happy with this distinction. Good health, he said, must include harmonious relationships with all around you. Among East Timorese, this includes not only all people, but also Nature, and the spirits of the ancestors that inhabit Nature. So, he suggested, there is no difference between health and peace. Certainly, the admirable WHO definition leads in this direction. But for many thought structures, it may be useful to think of health as focusing at the small-scale end of relationships, and peace at the large-scale end, even though we could stretch the definitions of each to include the other.

We have been exploring, in previous columns, various ways that practitioners can act from the health sector to improve both health and peace when there is a deficit in both. In this column, we will see if the thought structures of each of these areas might expose new insights for the other – a thought experiment. Johan Galtung, one of the founding fathers of peace research, emphasizes the need for creativity in transforming conflict. A tool to stimulate creativity is to experiment

with similar patterns or isomorphisms between two different areas of thinking, such as health and peace. He has carried this experiment through in an interesting essay called *Peace and Health* (1). The newer discipline, peace studies, benefits most from this exercise, but the creative benefits flow in the other direction too.

Negative and Positive Health and Peace

These are simple parallels. We can think of negative health as the absence of disease and negative peace as the absence of violence in a relationship. In both areas, we are encouraged to aim for more. Positive health is "complete physical, mental, and social well-being". Positive peace is a relationship of mutual benefit. Here we can think of violence as the analogue to disease.

Exposure and Resistance (Resilience, Immunity)

It is commonplace for us to think about illness, disease, or morbidity as resulting from exposures of various kinds – to microorganisms, direct physical injury, toxins, inappropriate diets, and stress. Although we more naturally think of exposures coming from outside to act on the body or mind, we can easily extend to think of adverse internal exposures, such as from defective genes. We focus on resilience somewhat less, unless we are working in public health. Here we tend to think of "internal" factors, such as a well-functioning immune system, perhaps boosted by specific immunization. A little more thinking reminds us that regular aerobic exercise, an adequate diet, or above poverty-level income protects us against a variety of physical illnesses. Experiencing being loved as a child and having good relationships in

adulthood protects against physical and mental illness.

Does this transpose in a useful way to Peace? We are coming to understand better the factors which push a society toward breakdown into political violence. Conflict over political power, land, and natural resources, easily exploitable social divisions (eg religious and ethnic), low and declining income, large numbers of unemployed youth, and the presence of armaments are prominent ones. If we look deeper we might see that a culture that endorses violence as a good solution to conflict and rewards men and boys for fighting may be an internal factor increasing the probability of violence. However, not every situation with high levels of these factors breaks down into violence. It might be instructive to consider the possibility of factors that could boost resistance to the use of violence. The presence of institutionalized modes of conflict transformation seems important. This may be some form of democracy. Well-written constitutions play a role. Access to external aid such as regional or UN conflict transformation mechanisms, or the International Court of Justice may be crucial in dealing with dangerous conflict. Culturally-embedded values about nonviolence, respect for diversity, endorsement of equality, and an emphasis on dialogue are also protective.

Strategic Studies and Political Science are likely to focus on the “exposures” pushing a country or region towards war. Peace Studies will also focus on the “resistance” factors, with a view to strengthening them.

Primary, Secondary, and Tertiary Prevention

This pattern of thought transposes very neatly from Health to Peace. Primary prevention focuses on both reducing “exposures,” such as declining incomes, inflows of armaments and so on, on fostering a “culture of peace” in the long term as a major element in “immunity” to violence. Secondary prevention aims at ending the violence as soon as possible once it has broken out, or limiting the expression of violence, such as insisting on the observance of the Geneva Conventions about attacks on civilians, hospitals, and prisoners-of-war. Tertiary prevention aims at rehabilitating a war-damaged society, both in physical and social infrastructure, and at restoring the relationships



Figure 1. Johan Galtung.

damaged by violence (reconciliation). In many cases, it will include efforts to foster a “culture of peace” to prevent a recurrence of violence. This pattern of thinking, lifted from Health, has been helpful in propagating the so-called “culture of prevention” in the United Nations and some national foreign affairs departments.

In the arena of Health, it is notable that it seems possible to persuade large numbers of people to reduce their adverse exposures (by hand-washing, smoking less, not drinking and driving), but harder to persuade them to increase their resilience (by eating better and exercising more). Persuading corporations to reduce human exposure to industrial pollutants and climate-changing processes is proving to be dangerously difficult. The focus of Peace Studies on culture change may be a useful stimulus.

Diagnosis, Prognosis, Therapy

This pattern can be transposed directly from Health to Peace in a useful way. Both Health and Peace are values-based areas of practice, dedicated to relief of human suffering. Peace Studies distinguishes itself from political science by focusing on remediating violence and injustice, rather than simply describing the phenomena of war in a value-neutral framework.

Multi-track Therapy

In this therapeutic modality, Peace Studies may have something useful to offer Health. In the growing arena of peace interventions, there is

widespread agreement that it is necessary to try to have an impact on many aspects of a society simultaneously. Galtung elaborates on the levels of impact (1):

Political level – foster democracy in states, foster human rights, and foster UN democracy and reform.

Military level – curb arms flows, move to “defensive defense,” peacekeeping forces, and international nonviolent peace forces.

Economic level – enhance self-reliance, encourage local economies, internalize economic “externalities,” and South-South cooperation.

Cultural level – challenge values and assumptions that support violence (eg “chosen people” superiority), and strengthen existing values that support nonviolence, diversity, equality, human rights, diversity, and dialogue.

A focus solely on only one of these tracks may be an intervention of insufficient power to shift a course away from political violence.

In the above categories, it is not too difficult to recognize a similar pattern to body, mind,

and social relationships in individual humans. It is a common complaint of patients about western medical practitioners that they are not “holistic” – they treat one bit of the body and ignore the person around that bit. It is certainly the case that complex and chronic health problems benefit from a multi-track approach and often from a team delivering different “tracks” of the care, coordinating well with each other.

Has this thought experiment been useful? Galtung’s essay is more daring than this summary in exploring far-out isomorphisms. The structure of Health thinking for most people is far more elaborate than the structure of Peace thinking. The similar patterns in each structure often make it very useful to explain Peace concepts by matching them with Health concepts.

Reference

- 1 Galtung J. Part VI: Peace and health. Available from: <http://www.humanities.mcmaster.ca/peace-health/Confi2001/galttop6.pdf>. Accessed: April 16, 2005.