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The impact of collateral damage: Unravelling psychological mechanisms in the context of war and conflict: A literature review

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Abstract. The enduring conflicts among Middle Eastern nations have caused devastating casualties and loss of life, leading to deep human suffering and significant societal distress. Their impact is not limited to the immediate regions involved but has reverberated across communities within those countries. Additionally, the international community has been deeply affected by the conflict and has made efforts to seek a resolution. The inadequate understanding of collateral damage and a primitive mindset have resulted in the unfortunate deaths of numerous innocent civilians. This article explores the psychological mechanisms underlying collateral damage in the context of war and conflict. In an effort to shed light on the multifaceted nature of collateral damage and its impact on both affected populations and combatants, the complex interplay of cognitive, emotional, and social factors was explored. The aim was to explore the psychological consequences of collateral damage and provide theoretical assumptions to understand collateral damage and war. The SANRA narrative review method was adopted to discuss the psychological underpinnings of collateral damage. Several studies have explored the concept of collateral damage in the context of war and psychology. By understanding the psychological mechanisms behind collateral damage, it is possible to effectively address the root causes and develop strategies to minimise its occurrence in armed conflicts. Moreover, it is essential to prioritise the education of leaders and military personnel regarding the concept of collateral damage

Keywords: war; collateral damage; war and conflict; war trauma; international humanitarian law; peace psychology

INTRODUCTION

Throughout history, humans have frequently engaged in armed conflicts with one another. Regrettably, they engage in aggressive attacks on other countries, causing harm to people with whom they could potentially foster peaceful relations. The concept of collateral damage, which refers to unintended harm inflicted on civilian entities during military actions, can be relatively easy to assess in terms of unintentional harm to non-military targets compared to anticipated benefits, thanks to well-defined definitions and technical evaluations

(Romanosky & Goldman, 2016). In traditional contexts, when determining the permissibility of a strategy or action in a war based on proportionality and necessity, both international law and just war theory have historically concentrated solely on civilian casualties and the devastation inflicted upon civilian infrastructure (Davidovic, 2018).

However, understanding the psychological, social, and cultural factors that contribute to acts of violence is essential in comprehending the complexities of

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collateral damage and its implications. Psychological, social, and cultural factors play a significant role in shaping individuals' support, advocacy, and engagement in violence against innocent people, as explored through the lens of terror management theory (Pyszczynski *et al.*, 2009). These factors, such as religious, ideological, national, or ethnic bonds, can generate animosity and fuel acts of violence. Therefore, it is crucial to delve into the underlying psychological and sociocultural dynamics that contribute to violent behaviour.

Moreover, a survey conducted among Jewish-Israelis following a conflict between Israelis and Palestinians revealed interesting insights. The study found that minimal ideological differences existed in the acceptance of "collateral damage", support for retribution, or willingness to compromise when discussing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict without strong moral intensity. However, individuals on both the left and right sides of the political spectrum exhibited polarised policy preferences only when their positions in the conflict were accompanied by strong moral convictions (Tagar *et al.*, 2014). This highlights the importance of moral conviction and its influence on individuals' perspectives and policy preferences in the context of collateral damage and conflicts.

Additionally, it is essential to provide education and promote understanding of the concept of collateral damage to both sides involved in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In educational curricula, it is essential to avoid demonising other countries. Despite technological advancements in military capabilities, the outcomes and consequences of conflicts have remained largely unchanged. Although the use of "smart" bombs has become more prevalent, it has led to what some observers perceive as a significant number of casualties (Byron, 2011).

Furthermore, it is important to recognise that during times of war, civilians can suffer casualties even without direct attacks. An example of this is the examination of the impact of the perceived threat of annihilation during the Iraqi missile attack on Israel, which provided an opportunity to study the occurrence of acute myocardial infarction and sudden death among civilians. In the early days of the Gulf War, there was a notable increase in the occurrence of acute myocardial infarction and sudden death (Meisel *et al.*, 1991).

The presence of innocent people affected by war serves as a stark reminder of the imperative for countries to make every effort to prevent such harm. Furthermore, gaining an understanding of the underlying causes of terrorist behaviour is crucial. A prior article highlights that terrorist conduct is nurtured through extensive training in moral disengagement (Bandura, 1990). Systematic desensitisation can be used to reduce the moral disengagement that contributes to the evolution of terrorist behaviour. However, it is important to note that individuals exhibiting such behaviour may be unaware of the impact or consequences of their actions. Specifically, when a significant number of

people embrace terrorist ideologies or when their superiors enforce such beliefs, individuals may be inclined to accept them unquestioningly.

Moreover, a previous study utilised precise geo-coded information on violence in Iraq spanning from 2004 to 2009, revealing that both parties face consequences for the collateral damage they cause. The study found that instances of coalition forces causing civilian casualties were associated with increased levels of insurgent violence (Condra & Shapiro, 2012). Additionally, the previous study emphasised the significance of distinguishing between accidental and incidental collateral damage (Schwenkenbecher, 2014). In this context, it is imperative to provide military personnel with training aimed at minimising collateral damage. Moreover, defensive war systems should be developed and implemented in a manner that minimises the risk of collateral damage and harm to innocent civilians.

Furthermore, soldiers who experience traumas can encounter specific challenges that may lead to increased aggression towards civilians. For example, military sexual trauma can be a harmful aspect of military life (Holland *et al.*, 2016). Given this consideration, it is crucial to ensure that military personnel are not subjected to psychological trauma as part of their education and training.

THE IMPACT OF TECHNOLOGY ON COLLATERAL DAMAGE AND DESENSITISATION

Understanding the interplay between technology, collateral damage, and desensitisation is crucial in comprehending the potential consequences and implications of technological advancements in modern conflicts. The pervasive influence of social media and modern computer games can contribute to the tendency of individuals to generalise complex situations or foster a demonising perception of specific countries. As a result, such tendencies can have implications for collateral damage, potentially leading soldiers from certain countries to engage in actions without considering the possibility that the individuals they are targeting may be completely innocent.

Additionally, the advancement of technology and the proliferation of video games can introduce numerous gaming experiences that may desensitise individuals to the act of killing innocent people. For example, the association between involvement in violent video games and negative consequences, particularly desensitisation to violence, has been established (Chittaro & Sioni, 2012). Furthermore, a previous study revealed that individuals with moderate levels of exposure to television violence experienced a smaller increase in blood pressure when viewing violent videos compared to those with low exposure. This indicates that such exposure may have negative effects on individuals (Mrug *et al.*, 2015). These findings suggest that exposure to violent media content may have detrimental

effects on individuals. Thus, it is paramount to further explore the social and cultural factors that contribute to desensitisation and prioritise strategies aimed at promoting healthier media consumption and fostering empathy and non-violent behaviours.

FACTORS INFLUENCING POST-WAR DYNAMICS

After a war, it becomes crucial to examine and address the factors related to collateral damage. Collateral damage refers to the unintended harm inflicted on civilians, their property, or non-military targets during military operations. Understanding and addressing these factors is essential.

The analysis findings indicate that providing post-harm compensation effectively reduces local levels of insurgent violence, regardless of the form of compensation. These observed patterns can be best understood through a rationalist mechanism, whereby civilians adjust their beliefs about violent incidents based on newly acquired information (Silverman, 2020).

In conclusion, the analysis findings strongly suggest that the provision of post-harm compensation plays a significant role in reducing levels of insurgent violence within local communities. Hence, in situations where governments are inadvertently responsible for the loss of innocent lives, it is crucial for them to take responsibility and provide appropriate compensation.

Furthermore, sanctions can inadvertently contribute to the criminalization of the state, economy, and civil society of both the targeted nation and its neighbouring countries (Andreas, 2005). Hence, it is essential to calculate and assess the impact of sanctions to minimise any unintended negative consequences, particularly those that may harm innocent individuals. It is imperative to ensure that sanctions do not result in the loss of innocent lives. To illustrate, accounts emerging from Syria, Yemen, and South Sudan indicate that civilian populations residing in conflict-affected areas are experiencing widespread famine and severe food shortages (Stevoli, 2020). Therefore, sanctions should be designed in a way that avoids targeting essential items such as medicine and necessities like food and water.

In addition, the impact on health resulting from the US-led war on terror and civil armed conflicts in the Arab world extends far beyond the direct harm caused to civilians, infrastructure, environment, and healthcare systems. A previous report examined the repercussions of conflicts in Iraq and Syria, revealing how wars and conflicts have led to the militarization and regionalisation of healthcare. These circumstances pose challenges to the reconstruction of once-resilient

national healthcare systems (Dewachi *et al.*, 2014). The findings underscore the urgent need for concerted efforts to address the long-term health implications of these conflicts.

The SANRA narrative review method was used to search articles (Baethge *et al.*, 2019). Based on the primary findings, numerous studies have been encountered that explore the intersection of psychology, warfare, and collateral damage. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the studies primarily consist of commentaries and encompass various geographical regions and conflict zones.

CONCLUSIONS

Understanding the psychological mechanisms behind collateral damage allows for the effective addressing of root causes and the development of strategies to minimise its occurrence in armed conflicts. Additionally, leaders of countries should regularly meet to promote peace around the globe. It is particularly crucial to provide training to soldiers regarding the importance of minimising civilian casualties. Moreover, it is of utmost importance to prioritise diplomatic channels for conflict resolution rather than resorting to war. As mentioned in the previous article, recognising the importance of understanding the elements that shape public perception, it is vital to persuade military organisations to prioritise strategies that emphasise social and political resolutions rather than relying solely on kinetic operations (Clark, 2010). Furthermore, it is crucial to identify and examine other social, economic, and cultural factors that could contribute to the occurrence of collateral damage.

It is crucial to provide comprehensive education on collateral damage to both leaders and soldiers. Furthermore, it is important to include lessons on peace in history classes and refrain from promoting violence. Younger individuals should refrain from watching cartoons that depict collateral damage and collateral violence. The authors did not conduct a comprehensive and structured search for relevant keywords. Hence, it is important to clarify that this manuscript does not serve as a systematic review. Additionally, conducting surveys during times of war can be challenging, as individuals may be hesitant to express their true opinions and may instead conceal their viewpoints.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

None.

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Вплив випадкових втрат: розкриття психологічних механізмів в контексті війни та конфлікту: огляд літератури

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Анотація. Тривалі конфлікти між країнами Близького Сходу призвели до величезних жертв і втрат, викликавши глибокі людські страждання та значний суспільний розлад. Їх вплив не обмежується безпосередніми регіонами, але відгукується у громадах цих країн. Крім того, міжнародна спільнота була глибоко зачеплена конфліктом і робила зусилля для пошуку рішення. Недостатнє розуміння супутніх втрат і примітивний менталітет призвели до трагічних смертей багатьох невинних цивільних осіб. У цій статті досліджуються психологічні механізми, що лежать в основі супутніх втрат у контексті війни та конфлікту. З метою висвітлення багатогранної природи супутніх втрат та їхнього впливу як на постраждале населення так і на учасників бойових дій, було досліджено складну взаємодію когнітивних, емоційних і соціальних чинників. Метою було дослідити психологічні наслідки супутніх втрат і надати теоретичні припущення для розуміння супутніх втрат і війни. Метод наративного огляду SANRA був прийнятий для обговорення психологічних основ супутньої шкоди. У кількох дослідженнях вивчали її концепцію в контексті війни та психології. Розуміючи психологічні механізми, що лежать в основі супутніх втрат, можна ефективно вирішувати корінні причини та розробляти стратегії для мінімізації їх виникнення під час збройних конфліктів. Крім того, важливо надавати пріоритет освіті лідерів та військовослужбовців щодо концепції супутніх втрат

Ключові слова: війна; супутні збитки; війни і конфлікти; травма війни; міжнародне гуманітарне право; психологія миру