

# **Nonviolent Democratic Transitions Within a Peace Psychology Framework**

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In addition to being the bloodiest century in human history, the 20th century was distinguished by many large-scale nonviolent movements that successfully toppled oppressive regimes, often in the face of overwhelming military power. Notable examples include: India, South Africa, Poland, Czechoslovakia, the Philippines, Chile, and Serbia (cf. Ackerman & DuVall, 2000; Ackerman & Kruegler, 1994; Zunes, Kurtz, & Asher, 1999). Montiel and Belo's research is unique, identifying human cognitions, emotions, and values that accompanied East Timor's nonviolent transition to democracy. The current article places their work within the larger framework of peace psychology

Montiel and Belo's research describes social, psychological, and cultural conditions and variables that link objective social conditions with the subjectivities of individuals and collectivities. These subjectivities in turn are related nonviolent direct action. In this brief response to Montiel and Belo, I will situate their work within the domain of the field of peace psychology and highlight the ways in which their work contributes to our understanding of the conditions that promote socially just arrangements.

Peace psychology explores the role of human cognition, affect, and behaviour in the prevention of violence and the promotion of social justice (Christie, Wagner, & Winter, 2001). Like scholars in the interdisciplinary field of peace studies (e.g., Barash & Webel, 2002; Galtung, 1969), peace psychologists distinguish direct from structural forms of violence. While direct forms of violence are intermittent and kill people directly, structural violence is built into political and economic systems, depriving people of voice and representation in matters that affect their well being and depriving them of resources that are necessary to satisfy basic needs (Galtung, 1969). Hence, structural violence kills people indirectly through the deprivation of human needs.

Drawing on the distinction between direct and structural violence, many peace psychologists have found it

useful to conceptualise the domain of peace psychology with a  $2 \times 2$  matrix that crosses the terms 'violence' and 'peace' with 'direct' and 'structural' as illustrated in Figure 1 (Christie, Wagner, & Winter, 2001).

Montiel and Belo's research on East Timor examines a nonviolent movement that is aimed at redressing enormous inequalities in power, as illustrated in the lower right-hand corner of the  $2 \times 2$  matrix in Figure 1. Here, the focal peace-building concern is how to nonviolently transform political and economic systems of oppression, the hallmarks of authoritarian regimes, in order to move toward a more socially just arrangement (i.e., democratisation).

Their research not only provides a description of the democratisation process from a social science perspective but also offers important implications for the reduction of power differences that underlie direct forms of violence. Clearly, structure-based inequalities are often preconditions and consequences of violent episodes, regardless of the scale of violence. For instance, the origins of many forms of large scale direct violence, such as genocide, can be found in unjust and difficult life conditions that give rise to psychological processes including destructive intergroup ideologies (Staub, 1999).

	Direct	Structural
Violence	Intermittent & Direct	Continuous & Indirect
Peace	Contact & Nonviolent Conflict Management	Nonviolent Movement toward Socially Just Arrangements

**Figure 1**

The domain of peace psychology.

Even at the level of interpersonal violence, structural preconditions are important. The violence of men towards women continues worldwide, in part because women's low status restricts choices and keeps women in a position of vulnerability and dependency *vis-à-vis* men, a structurally violent precondition that sets the stage for more episodes of violence (Bunch & Carillo, 1998). Conversely, men's use of violence on women is a means of maintaining dominance and control in the relationship (Gelles & Murray, 1988).

In the context of an authoritarian system, structure-based inequalities may be enforced through political detention and the torture of civilians who dissent. Here we see an interlocking system of direct and structural violence, where the former is used to enforce the latter. Although Montiel and Belo's work emphasises structural peace-building, their research also deals with the problem of direct violence: embracing the nonviolent management of conflict (lower left corner of quadrant) while pursuing a more equitable structural arrangement (the lower right corner of quadrant) that would yield greater voice and representation in matters that affect well being (i.e., democratisation).

#### *Conceptualising the Democratisation Process*

Montiel and Belo's work is consistent with previous research that is breaking new conceptual ground (cf. Montiel, 2001, 2003, in press) by proposing relationships between objective social-structural conditions and the subjectivities of individuals and groups. The identification individual subjectivities are explored through interviews and their analyses yield some subjectivities that are shared across members of the democratisation

movement. It is important to deepen our understanding of these shared subjectivities because the shared conceptualisations of participants in nonviolent social change movements bear an iterative relationship to the objective social conditions on the ground, conditions that the movement is seeking to transform.

Direct peace efforts (i.e., periodic or episodic peace-making), which are often equated with conflict management, can be contrasted with the Montiel and Belo's emphasis on structural peace efforts (i.e., structural peace-building) in a number of ways, as illustrated in Figure 2.

While emphasising structural peace-building, Montiel and Belo's approach is inclusive, incorporating features of both episodic and structural peace-building; that is, nonviolent means are used to pursue socially just ends. If we regard nonviolence as a state of negative peace, and socially just ends as positive peace, then we can situate Montiel's work within an activist tradition that is pursuing peace by peaceful means, where the former 'peace' refers to positive peace and the latter 'peace' means negative peace (Galtung, 1996).

In conclusion, Montiel and Belo's examination of nonviolent democratic transitions suggests that there are relations between the objective conditions of unjust social arrangements on the one hand, and individual and cultural subjectivities on the other hand. These subjectivities are variable, either primarily supporting the status quo or propelling socially transformative arrangements. Together, Montiel and Belo map the subjective terrain of human cognitions, emotions, and values that accompany East Timor's struggle for democratisation.

**Episodic Peacebuilding**

**Structural Peacebuilding**

Emphasis	Nonviolent means	Socially just ends
Tension	Reduction	Enhancement
Goal	Prevention of violent episodes	Pursuit of social justice
Status Quo	Served	Challenged

**Figure 2**  
The domain of peace psychology.

Their research demonstrates that structural peacebuilding is an active process that challenges the status quo while managing and channelling intergroup tension toward socially just ends. Therefore, their approach to peace-building is highly integrated, preventing violent episodes while pursuing structural change, an approach designed to transform political and economic structures from a culture of violence to a durable, culture of peace.

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