

QnAs with Oded Adomi Leshem

Oded Adomi Leshem, is a postdoctoral fellow at the Truman Research Institute for the Advancement of Peace and at Eran Halperin's PICR Lab, both based in the Hebrew University, Jerusalem. He also serves as a visiting scholar at the Carter School for Peace and Conflict Resolution at George Mason University. He is researching social-psychological processes of conflict resolution during protracted conflicts, especially aspects of hope, fear, and perceptions of competition. His latest publication about lay theories of peace has received attention in the scientific community and has been published with the 'Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences.'



Q: Adomi, your research into lay theories of peace has received a lot of attention. What makes this research so interesting?

A: We are trying to understand the very fundamental ways people comprehend the abstract concept of peace, it's elemental understanding even before people think about concrete peace arrangements. It turns out that peace can mean very different things to different people. This, in turn, explains big misunderstandings that can happen during international negotiations or grassroots peacebuilding initiatives. We also show that lay understandings of peace shape peoples' strategies for conflict resolution, specifically, if they rather share or divide resources with their "enemy." The research is also interesting because data was collected among representative samples of Israelis & Palestinians, including participants from Gaza, whose voices and opinions we rarely hear.

Q: Another important topic for your research is to study the concept of hope. Can you elaborate a little more on this?

A: Hope is an elusive concept, difficult to measure, so for me, it is intriguing to study. What we know is that in protracted conflicts, the dispute is often perceived as inherently irresolvable. If something is perceived as irreconcilable, people will not invest effort in solving it, so keeping up hope is the biggest challenge for people living in conflict settings. It's a challenge for two reasons - hopelessness is highly destructive and highly pervasive. Trying to move that needle is a worthwhile endeavor. Also, as a psychological construct, hope is really interesting in the way it is connected to other psychological and political concepts.

For example, at the moment we are running a big project in both parts of Cyprus. We are studying the connection between hope and threat, two future-oriented constructs, one positive and one negative, and we see that the interplay is thought-provoking and somewhat counter-intuitive. The data came back just last week, so we're quite excited.

Q: Untangling these processes in intractable conflict is everything but straightforward. What is the biggest challenge for you to tackle these questions?

A: Not only exploring and investigating the questions but also finding concrete ways to mitigate and transform the conflict. We have a responsibility as social scientists to engage in the task of conflict transformation, reduce violence, and help people find peaceful solutions to their destructive disputes.

Q: In what ways can you, as a researcher, contribute to this?

A: First, we can contribute by giving voice to the public *and* suggesting explanations of *why* people behave in a certain way. We primarily aim to focus on the low-power group of the asymmetric conflict. A second significant contribution is that we devise and test interventions that might be useful for intergroup conflict resolution.

Q: What motivates you to pursue these challenging questions?

A: First of all, just living in this area of the world gives you a responsibility for the next generation. Before I got engaged in research, I worked as a news photographer and documentary filmmaker, which gave me a lot of exposure to war and confrontation from a very close range. That got me involved in the politics of the region.

I also had the privilege to work with different grassroots NGOs that are working for peace in Israel and Palestine. There I noticed the great extent to which peace and conflict are influenced by the peoples' subjective understandings.

I'm interested in solving conflict, and I think that social and political psychology is one of the most powerful tools at our disposal as so many foundations of the conflict are rooted in interpretations, beliefs, emotions, and other subjective aspects. If we manage to alter those in a meaningful way, we have a chance to transform conflicts.