



the psychologist...

'We can be the nation that discovers the cure'

Steve Reicher, Alex Haslam and Jay Van Bavel on the Christchurch massacre and toxic leadership.

The Christchurch massacre once more raises a question that has been at the core of developments in social psychology since the end of the Second World War. How can we understand the roots of hatred and of violence against members of other groups, and how can we contribute to their eradication?

But the relationship between our discipline and the tragic realities of intergroup antagonism is not one way. We are not just in a position to teach but also to be taught. And if Christchurch shows us anything, it is the critical importance of leadership. Far too often, we treat prejudice and racism as if they derive from the psyche of the individual either as specific quirks of personality or as generalised biases of the cognitive system. To do so is to ignore the importance and accountability of those who articulate a hateful cause and thereby make it possible for some (like the Christchurch killer) to take it upon themselves to act as foot soldiers, or martyrs, in that cause.

In our piece for The Psychologist website, we analyse the steps involved in creating such a cause. We show how the starting point lies in narrowing the definition of the community so as to exclude particular minorities such as Muslims ('they are aliens with alien values'). We show how the shift from exclusion to violence lies in constituting the ingroup as noble and the minority as an existential threat to the ingroup. And we show that when all this is in place, then brutality to the minority can be elevated as the defence of virtue. In this way we provide a nuanced approach which shows how casual Islamophobia is implicated in the process leading to Christchurch without being identical to the ideology of the killer.

But, if toxic leadership which excludes and demonises is a central element of intergroup hatred, so leadership is also central to overcoming hatred and achieving reconciliation. If anything, it is an appreciation of the constructive potential of leadership which is most critical to us as psychologists. A few years back the Equalities and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) commissioned a report on what we have to offer to improve intergroup relations and the answer was 'precious little'. The tools we do have, such as 'unconscious bias' training, are under increasing scrutiny. So we are in real danger of seeming irrelevant in an area that is one of our greatest concerns. A group level analysis of the ways we construe our communities, and the role of leadership in this, provides an important way forward.

Moreover, the responses of New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern teaches us much about what constructive leadership looks like. At the core of everything she has done is the realisation that condemning the massacre, however strongly, is not enough. The key element is how one talks about the victims and more particularly, whether they are positioned as inside or outside the community. As Ardern put it, when she visited Christchurch the day after the massacre – not only in words but also in gestures and policies – 'they are us'.

The same sure touch was evident in Ardern's speech at the memorial service to the victims two weeks later. For there was a danger in Ardern's insistence that New Zealand abhors racism and is defined through anti-racism. It could be used as a denial of past and present injustices, a call to complacency. But Ardern expressed it as an ideal and an aspiration, a call to

action so 'we' (New Zealand) can be who we really want to be. Thus, to use her own words, Ardern spoke of: 'a responsibility to be the place that we wish to be. A place that is diverse, that is welcoming, that is kind and compassionate. Those values represent the very best of us'. She continued: 'we are not immune to the viruses of hate, of fear, of other. We never have been. But we can be the nation that discovers the cure'.

Equally, by rooting our analyses of racism in real world events, by testing our theories against those events and learning from their deficiencies, then our discipline will be better able to become part of the cure.

This will not be an easy process. Indeed at times it will be distressing and even traumatic. For, as in this instance, it means engaging with the hateful ideas of the killer and his milieu. It means taking their perspective, seeking to understand how they made sense of the world, and hence how wholesale slaughter could become thinkable for them. There is a cost here, a cost which makes it all the more essential that our work makes a difference – for only that renders such work justifiable. More concretely, then, we argue that a full understanding of Christchurch, and of how to stop future Christchurches, depends upon reinstating leadership at the core of the analysis, and immersing ourselves in the study of both toxic and inclusive leaders.

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Editor's note: 'The road to Christchurch: A tale of two leaderships' was described by @sarb on Twitter as 'One of the best articles I've ever seen @psychmag produce and I've been a member of the BPS since 1988'... seek it out at <https://thepsychologist.bps.org.uk/road-christchurch-tale-two-leaderships>

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