International Review of the Red Cross (2014), **96** (895/896), 697–705.
Generating respect for the law
doi: 10.1017/S1816383115000508

INTERNATIONAL REVIEW of the Red Cross

Interview with Emanuele Castano

Professor and Chair of Psychology, New School for Social Research*

: : : : : : :

You are a social and political psychologist. Tell us a bit more about your area of expertise and your ongoing research projects.

As a social and political psychologist, I have been doing research on issues of collective behaviour and collective identities for over fifteen years. One of my three lines of research focuses on conflict at the intergroup level, and specifically on the factors that allow individuals to behave in a violent manner or in violation of certain norms, such as international humanitarian law (IHL). My work has to do, among other things, with strategies of "moral disengagement"; in other words, all the psychological justifications that we give ourselves for our behaviour, particularly when it comes to immoral, unlawful and violent behaviour.

A lot of my research is conducted in the United States with individuals who have not been personally involved in violent intergroup conflict. We put them in "pretend" scenarios, or ask them to read about violence perpetrated by their fellow countrymen. However, I have also conducted studies with people who have experienced or are experiencing violent conflict themselves. In Bosnia-Herzegovina I studied the antecedents and consequences of forgiveness for intergroup violence with fellow scholars Sabina Cehajic and Rupert Brown. In Pakistan, with my former Pakistani student Gulnaz Anjun and Dr Giner-Sorolla,

* This interview was conducted in Geneva on 18 June 2014 by Mariya Nikolova, Editor of the *International Review of the Red Cross*.

I looked at the effects of apologies provided to the civilian population by the US Army, following drone attacks by the latter which resulted in civilian casualties. In our research, we did not look at whether such casualties were lawful or not from an IHL perspective. We were interested primarily in how these deaths of people who are considered civilians by the population can increase anger among the population and boost support for, say, the Taliban, or more broadly fuel anti-Western attitudes.

About ten years ago, I started collaborating with the ICRC, and particularly with one of your colleagues, Daniel Munoz-Rojas, in the context of a study that was already under way, called "People on War".[1] At the time, Daniel and his team had collected data in four conflict areas: the Republic of the Congo (at the time, Congo-Brazzaville), Colombia, Georgia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. He and I then looked at this data and tried to identify patterns that could help us understand why people behave the way they do during conflict. More specifically, we drew a series of conclusions about the social and psychological factors that determined the behaviour of combatants. When I say "combatants" I mean active, but also former combatants, and not only soldiers of State armies but also members of non-State armed groups.

Ten years later, I am back at the ICRC to launch a second study. To some extent, I will try to follow up and see whether some of the conclusions we drew still stand today. In essence, I will see if we can gain more knowledge of the behaviour of combatants in today's conflicts, which have certain similarities to old ones but also their own idiosyncratic characteristics. The aim is to identify how to help the ICRC and other humanitarian organizations and actors to effectively engage in prevention and protection strategies to reduce the amount of atrocities and violations that occur during armed conflicts.

What are some of the concrete elements of this upcoming research collaboration with the ICRC?

I hope that over the next two years, we will be able to create a synergy with the ICRC, where we as scientists can gain an understanding of the reality on the ground and then provide an analysis that could enhance our understanding of how psychological, sociological, political, economic and religious factors affect conduct in violent conflict. Ultimately, we want to help with operational guidance, particularly in the field of prevention.

The research project is led by myself and includes two other team members, who are sociologists with somewhat different backgrounds. One of them, Professor Anna Di Lellio, has spent a lot of time in the field, particularly in Kosovo, where she

1 Editor's note: The "People on War" project was launched in 1999 and constituted a series of consultations conducted with the general public in twelve conflict-affected contexts, in which people were asked to air their opinions on the many facets of war. The general report of the study is available at: www.icrc.org/eng/assets/files/other/icrc_002_0758.pdf. Individual country reports are also available on the ICRC's website.

is still very active in various research and intervention projects. The other colleague, Robin Wagner-Pacifici, is an expert in content analysis.

We have a two-year plan for this project, which we have divided into four phases. The first phase is dedicated to a review of the literature across several social science disciplines. This phase is completed. Now we are developing what we call the empirical tools for this research project. These consist of structured interviews that we are planning to have with about 100 respondents in each context. We are focusing on four to five contexts across the globe. Respondents answer questions using what we call a Likert-type scale; scales from, say, one to five, indicating agreement or disagreement. We couple this with a more qualitative approach, which consists of in-depth interviews and focus groups with a smaller amount of participants. We are aiming at twenty to thirty interviews per context and one focus group with eight to ten participants per context.

The third phase will be a year of data collection, hopefully to be completed by mid-2016. We are giving ourselves quite a bit of time given that we are going to work in contexts that are very volatile and in which access sometimes may be delayed. Obviously prior to research in the field, we will also educate ourselves on the specific historical, political, economic and social contexts in which we are going to work.

The last phase will involve analyzing and interpreting data. We will most likely spend the second half of 2016 in an effort to produce a report and share our findings.

In a previous article in the* Review *on the behaviour of combatants in war,[2] you argued that group identities have a profound influence on the way combatants decide to respect the law, or not. Is this still the case today?

These "group identities" are also often referred to as "collective identities" or "social identities". Such identities depend on the many groups to which any individual belongs. A "group" can be a national group, a gender, a profession, and so on. In our daily social interactions, we act not only – or not exclusively – as individuals, but also as members of a group. Whether or not we are conscious of it does not really matter. Often this belonging – this collective identity – influences our behaviour profoundly because it gives us the lens through which we interpret social reality and offers us norms and values that influence our attitudes, our perception of reality and ultimately our behaviour.

Conflict situations are all the more regulated by social identities. Apart from criminal cases, in which an individual acts out of his/her own interest or motivation, in large-scale armed conflicts, it is a collective fighting against another collective. The underlying causes and motivations for the conflict might

2 Emanuele Castano, Bernhard Leidner and Patrycja Slawuta, "Social Identification Processes, Group Dynamics and the Behaviour of Combatants", *International Review of the Red Cross*, Vol. 90, No. 870, 2008, pp. 259–271.

be different, but it is always an armed collective pitted against one or more other armed collectives.

So when we try to read these realities, we have to understand them not just as a phenomenon of individual behaviour, but rather as one of individual behaviour driven by membership within a social group. When combatants act in armed conflict, they do as members of a specific group. This can be a religious, national or ethnic group, or it can be a group defined in many other ways. I am sure that some of the research that we are planning to conduct will shed light on some other forms of categorization that people use and with which they enter the conflict, such as nomads versus settlers. This collective aspect is fundamental and if we want to understand what guides behaviour in these contexts, we have to understand the content of the collective identities that are relevant in said contexts.

Are there other factors that could play a role in determining how a person behaves in war?

There are many other factors, of course, and some of them may be the very same that one would expect to regulate behaviour at the individual level. A "do not harm" norm, for instance, can be held at the individual level, although it is probably being in some way internalized through socialization in a specific society. We are social animals – we are not individual entities that learn and become humans in isolation – so we are always somehow the product of a specific cultural context, and it is that context which gives us norms.

Some norms are shared across groups, such as human rights, for example. We all have human rights. However, there are two important aspects here. First, a general notion of "human rights" is difficult to discern, because it is filtered through the cultural understandings of each community. Second, and perhaps more importantly, there are many situations in which we end up excluding certain groups from what we define as "humanity". It is in this context that most atrocities can and in fact do occur. Examples in history abound. The classic example is the Second World War, in the course of which certain groups were literally – through metaphors and through direct denigration – excluded from the "moral community", understood as the community of people toward which moral standards apply. Once this psychological operation occurs – primarily through propaganda or references to long-held beliefs – violence against a given group is very much facilitated. It is not that the norm of "do not harm" is thrown out of the window; it is simply not applied to this specific group of people.

The dehumanization of the enemy is perhaps the most important factor in determining violence against the enemy, either as a precursor to violence or as a justification of violence that has already occurred. Once we get into the cycle of violence, we need to justify to ourselves why we behave in a certain manner. Entire groups of people engaged in violent actions become very motivated to

maintain a certain narrative, part of which is the distinction between "us" and "them" and the dehumanization of the other. As the cycle of violence goes on, it becomes increasingly difficult for an organization such as the ICRC to intervene and change the dynamic. You have to re-humanize one party in the eyes of the other party. It is not an easy task.

It is important to keep in mind that the above factors contribute and foster violence in general, regardless of its collective or individual nature. Of course, there are many situations in which an individual suddenly "snaps out" of the identity or the role that he or she has adopted and realizes the absurdity of the violence. Most of the time, those who take part in or are affected by violence do not have the time or luxury to observe and realize its absurdity in a cool-headed way.

On the other hand, it is not necessarily the case that behaving as individuals is better than behaving as group members. In the same way in which norms and values can be used at a group level to implement violence, they can also be used to promote peaceful relations and respect for others. In other words, if there is a momentum at the collective level to, say, forgive a different ethnic group for a past conflict, and a desire to establish a new, positive relationship (ideally a momentum created or embraced by a respected leader of the in-group), acting in terms of our group identity will enhance positive and peaceful relations with the other group, and will reduce animosity, distrust, prejudice and so on.

Do you notice any qualitative evolution in the conflicts fought today? Are the features of modern armed conflicts really "new"?

Over the last ten years, a lot has happened all over the world, and situations of conflict, as with any other situations, present some new features, although it is unclear to what extent the conflicts are really different, and to what extent it is our discourse on them that is different. For instance, there has been a lot of talk about "new wars" and "asymmetric wars". But the extent to which these wars are really new is questionable, and of course asymmetric wars have always existed. Certainly 9/11 has affected the way we look at certain types of non-State armed groups, particularly in the West. And the way we look at them, as psychologists have long known, affects our and their behaviour. So our discourse can, in fact, have an effect on conflicts and on the way they are conducted. For instance, in a forthcoming article in the journal *Political Psychology*,[3] we show how the "image" that, say, an American holds of another country influences their reaction to a confrontation with that country. Depending on the image, the reaction to the exact same event varies between conciliatory and very aggressive. In a literature review that we recently prepared for the ICRC, we discuss this question in more detail.

3 Emanuele Castano, Alain Bonacossa and Peter Gries, "National Images as Integrated Schemas: Subliminal Primes of Image Attributes Shape Foreign Policy Preferences", *Political Psychology*, forthcoming 2015.

What does research tell us so far about the motivations of non-State armed groups (as opposed to State armies) to respect IHL, or not?

This is a difficult question. It very much depends on what kind of non-State actor we are looking at. There are many hundreds of them, if not thousands, all over the world, varying dramatically in size and motivations: ideological, religious, political, economic and sometimes purely criminal. Some of them are comparable to State armies, some are not. Their motivations will be vastly different. One mistake we have to avoid is quickly labelling them based on our preconceived images, as I pointed out earlier.

This being said, the goal of this research project is also to understand whether some common themes underlie some of these different realities. I see us approaching this task by identifying "clusters of realities". Such clusters may display a level of homogeneity and therefore allow for some generalization. Across these clusters, generalizations will likely be difficult, because what works in one set of specific situations will probably not work in another.

So, I think that we will have to strike a balance between recognizing the specificities and the idiosyncrasies of each context and actor, and at the same time identifying common underlying themes. At the end of the day, the goal is to develop policy, and to produce policy for every single conflict in the world is not going to be feasible. We need guidelines but we also need to ensure that these guidelines are respectful of the different contexts involved.

Are there, at this stage, any recent findings in sociology and psychology that you want to share with humanitarians engaging with parties to armed conflicts today?

Over the past decade or so, there has been a renewed interest in the concept of empathy, among social psychologists and neuroscientists. One question being debated is the role of empathy in moral behaviour. Are empathic feelings important for moral behaviour, or are they a distraction, and norms are what we need?

One of the scholars contributing to this debate is the eminent psychologist Steven Pinker. In his book, *The Better Angels of Our Nature*, he analyzes what he sees as decreasing violence over our evolutionary history, and his main argument is that the development of norms is responsible for this decreased violence. It is difficult to disagree with Pinker, but I am also asking, what is behind norms?[4] How does the suffering of others influence the development of norms? If I remember correctly, the founding of the ICRC itself came as a result of witnessing large-scale, extensive suffering. This is what I would define as an empathic reaction: witnessing all this suffering and wanting to do something about it, and certainly wanting to do something to prevent it from reoccurring in the future or to alleviate it.

So one area of research that I believe we should monitor is the study of empathy: how it is developed through our childhood, how we socialize our

4 Editor's note: See Emanuele Castano, "The Attack on Empathy", *Public Seminar*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 2013, available at: www.publicseminar.org/2013/10/the-attack-on-empathy/#.VVw9HOkcTct.

children to experience empathy and to act in a certain way – with compassion, for instance – and implement actions to relieve the suffering of others, and especially the mechanisms that allow us to somehow curtail empathy for certain others – minorities, people from different religions or cultures. This is an essential question in psychology today, with a remarkable number of scientific articles on it published every month.

By and large, unless you have experienced a very traumatic and unusual upbringing as a child, you develop a natural empathic reaction to others. Unfortunately, there are circumstances in which we are very much able to curtail our empathic reaction and take part in the process of dehumanization or exclusion from the moral community of certain groups, a process I referred to earlier. There are conditions under which we prevent ourselves from feeling this empathic reaction towards others. I think this may be a crucial mediating factor that explains violence in general and – given our specific interest here – violations of international humanitarian law.

To the extent that I perceive other individuals as humans, my empathic reaction will probably prevent me from harming them. Of course, in war where there is a sense of emergency; there is fear, anxiety and often, a desire for revenge. This may contribute to curtailing our empathic reaction. We also know from research that the very fact of distinguishing between *us* and *them*, a narrative oftentimes reinforced by politicians and leaders, may be very problematic because it really cuts off entire groups of people from our innate empathic reaction that we have towards them. There is an anecdote from a conversation with an IHL specialist who worked in Central America with a State army. A sergeant was training his soldiers in the laws of war – what they could and couldn't do. Things were going well, for the sergeant clearly knew what the rules were, for instance, with regard to distinguishing between combatants and civilians. At the end of the training, however, he said "*Recuerde, todos los campesinos son terroristas*" – in Spanish, meaning "Remember, all farmers are terrorists." Once you apply that label, all the empathic reaction, as well as the protection that the law gives to the farmers as civilians, is annulled.

The ICRC's "Roots of Behaviour in War"[5] study in 2004 put the emphasis on the integration of the law and norms, accompanied by an appropriate system of sanctions. It de-emphasized the importance of appealing to moral, religious or other values to encourage better respect. Is this finding still in touch with today's reality?

I do not necessarily see these two as being in contradiction. I think that one of the important changes that has occurred in the way the ICRC has approached

5 Editor's note: See Daniel Munoz-Rojas and Jean-Jacques Fresard, "The Roots of Behaviour in War: Understanding and Preventing IHL Violations", *International Review of the Red Cross*, Vol. 86, No. 853, 2004, p. 202: "We need to treat IHL as a legal and political matter rather than as a moral one, and to focus communication activities more on the norms than on their underlying values because the idea that the bearer of weapons is morally autonomous is inappropriate."

prevention is the shift from simply imparting knowledge and explaining IHL towards a greater effort to *integrate* IHL within specific systems of knowledge, values and norms of a particular group.

So perhaps the differentiation between these two approaches is not as important as it seemed at the time. If we say that we are going to integrate IHL into the norms of a particular group, be it a State army or a non-State armed group, we are still generally trying to understand what their social reality is shaped by – their principles, moral beliefs, their cultural, ethnic or religious references and so on. No individual lives in a vacuum. People and groups come from a specific cultural context, and I think that the integration of any norm has to pass through these cultural/religious filters to be able to have an impact on that individual's behaviour.

Today we are looking at how we can *further* integrate norms. Again, identifying different "clusters of realities" is perhaps one step towards doing this. If, instead of trying to impose on others what we believe are the norms that should be respected, we look at local traditions that sometimes go back hundreds of years, we can find elements that are very similar to what we believe in and the norms that we are trying to foster in other societies. It is important to recognize these connectors to specific contexts because they are crucial starting points for dialogue. I think this is perhaps the most promising way ahead. The most interesting documents I have seen in this regard come from the ICRC delegations themselves, with delegates taking it upon themselves to interview the locals about their rules for violent conflict.

As a psychologist, do you think the prevention of IHL violations is a cause worth pursuing? Is it effective? How can we know?

I think prevention is perhaps the only thing we have. As we know from different contexts, preventing always seems better than trying to cure and fix a situation after the fact. In the specific context of violence, I think the data that we do have today seem to show that it is indeed very important.

There is one specific finding that is emerging from the re-analysis of the data from ten years ago: once people get into the cycle of violence, it becomes more and more difficult to eradicate it. One of the reasons for this seems to be that once you engage in violence, you have to start justifying the action to yourself. Even if the narrative that led you to perform acts of violence in the first place is not very strong or credible, it becomes more so as a consequence of your psychological need to justify your own actions, and those of your fellows.

This is what we call "moral disengagement" and it has to do with the dehumanization of the enemy, the exaggeration of their negative actions in the past. When we analyzed the Srebrenica massacre, for instance, and the Balkan wars in general, the rhetoric oftentimes went back to events that had occurred hundreds of years ago. Once people have the motivation to produce and maintain a narrative that depicts them as victims and gives them the psychological

weapons to justify their actions, intervening to *change* this narrative becomes very difficult because it really means changing their view of the world and of themselves.

So prevention is key. To make a parallel with medicine, we know that intervening as soon as the first symptom of a disease occurs increases the chance of success exponentially. I think this is very much true for conflict as well. In fact, I am a firm believer in early-warning initiatives that monitor discourse and try to identify early signs of degeneration of the debate and the rhetoric by one group vis-à-vis another.

All of the research that I have done and that I am aware of suggests that it is difficult, once people have engaged in a particular sort of behaviour, to change their behaviour in the future. This is why I agreed to collaborate with the ICRC almost ten years ago and why I agreed to lead this project today. Hopefully, we are a little smarter now, we have more knowledge, and we have more empirical findings from various areas of psychology and other social sciences to build upon.

In the meantime, the ICRC and other organizations have kept a very close reading of conflict dynamics in the field, and so I very much look forward to a true collaboration to better understand specific contexts and identify relevant principles for future prevention strategies and policies.