

Frames and Framing

Terri Beswick, Peace Policy Research

We think, we understand, and we express ourselves in frames. Framing is how we structure our understanding of the world. Yet, framing is partial in both senses of the word. First, because frames reflect ideology and second, because they are always incomplete. Dehumanising terms like 'cockroaches' have power as much for what they suppress (individual complexity) as what they emphasize (an undesirable, unrelenting mass). This is exactly because they are intended to serve as a cognitive heuristic, a "shortcut", a ready-made schema to process the otherwise chaotic world.

How we frame prevention and how we frame identity has the power to help or hinder the efforts, empathy and action needed to assure the full enjoyment of freedoms and safety for everyone. The same categories, relations, analysis and structures that work to exclude people and make them vulnerable to violence is built on our understanding - or framing - of who we are and who 'they' are in relation to the challenges we see. If we are not alert to the insidious or lazy frames that become the new normal, we risk undermining efforts to counter the consequences.

Framing prevention

Contrary to the popular obsession with moments of drama and crescendo, violence emerges in painfully slow motion and there are multiple mundane yet horrifying steps of deterioration before we arrive at the acceptance of wide scale violence against a people. There are literally hundreds of opportunities and entry points for prevention. And yet, despite this, we still find ourselves frequently speaking about a "crisis of prevention".

However, if you consider the hundreds of billions spent on preventing "terrorism" and preventing the collapse of the banking sector globally, you could easily argue the converse: that prevention is actually quite popular and enjoys high levels of commitment and resources from governments and the private sector. In reality, a lack of attention and follow-through on preventing atrocities or identity-based violence is not likely due to a lack of knowledge around forecasting and risk analysis or a dearth of understanding on the causes of violence (unless politicians and policymakers have somehow overlooked the decades of scholarship on historical atrocities and genocide, criminology, peacebuilding theory and colonialism). It seems to matter very much *who* and *what* is at risk. So, perhaps it is not so much a 'crisis of prevention', but rather a crisis of prejudice.

Framing identity

Atrocities are rooted in (perceived) identities. They are the very opposite of indiscriminate violence. It is no coincidence that the risk of atrocities feels like it is rising at a time when the blossoming of rights and freedoms to express the complexity of our individuality is clashing head-on with reactionary and regressive politics; a brand of politics engaged in trying to narrow down and fix the frame of reference for who and what is typical. While the context and historical legacies dictate the manifestation of persecution, the pathways are remarkably similar. In reactionary politics, conformity is king (itself the ultimate symbol of patriarchy) and difference is deadly, which is why people who are 'racialised', 'sexual minorities', 'gender-diverse', 'neuro-diverse', 'differently-abled' are so often the first and easiest targets.

There appears to be a concerted effort among reactionary political figures to assign value and reward an ever-more-restricted idea of what is typical while painting everyone else as 'atypical' and therefore, a threat to stability and prosperity. Understanding the current dynamics as a fight for individuality and freedom against hierarchical and supremacist politics highlights the scope of the collective struggle. And, understanding who is being rewarded and protected as typical and who is being painted as dangerous and deviant will inform coalition-building across identity-groups, sectors and geographic lines.

It is not an accident that juxtaposing the words 'atrocious-prevention' and 'Europe' can sound strange to some ears. In the hierarchy of world power as it has been framed for us, we just cannot conceive of 'good' Europe doing bad things. But, the challenges are interconnected and the tasks, mutually-supportive. Maintaining and reproducing categories of hierarchy and supremacy will only undermine efforts to prevent violence. Preventing the recurrence or acceptance of atrocities will only work through an interdisciplinary and collective approach.

Crisis response

A crisis of prevention implies that if we could only crack the code on early warning methodology, decision-making work-flows and implementing the best operational practices, then crisis could be averted. But a crisis of prejudice is a much more human challenge. It is a cocktail of psychology, empathy, values, ideology and social incentives that are being shaped and reinforced by those with influence over how societies are structured. If the crisis is human, then the response can only flow from reaching across and within our collective humanity.