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Dinesh Sharma Ph.D.
Leaders in the Making

Imagining a New World

Psychologists look beyond the UN's 75th anniversary.

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Imagine there's no countries

It isn't hard to do

Nothing to kill or die for

And no religion too

Imagine all the people living life in peace,

you may say I'm a dreamer. ... ([John Lennon, 1971](#))

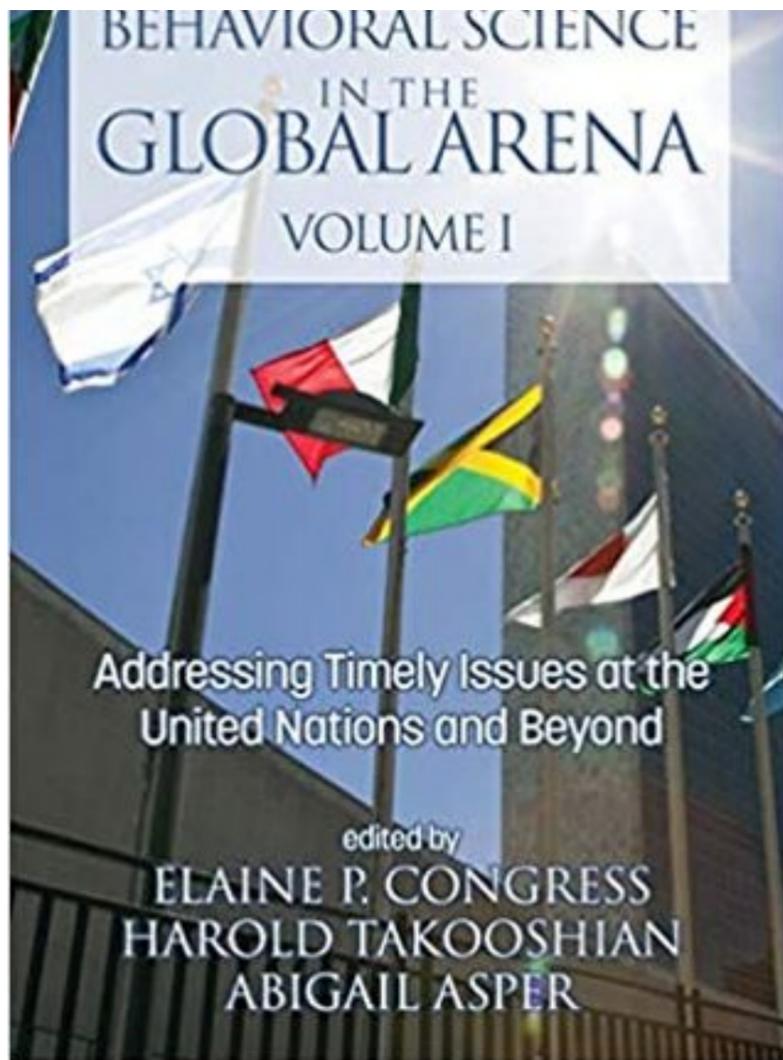
The immortalized lyrics from the 1971 song, Imagine, by the former Beatles lead John Lennon, who was assassinated 40 years ago, may sum up the spirit and the cultural renaissance represented by the counter-culture movement, the Hippies and the utopians who founded the United Nations. Thanks to their efforts, we may still be dreaming of a one world government, but we know in reality we are far from the chimerical vision of the English bard or the 'one world assembly' designed by the super-power nations, who triumphed in the global wars of the previous centuries.

So where are we really in the year 2020 -- the year of political delusions, conspiracy theories, and the global pandemic? The United Nations has been shuttered due to the spread of the Coronavirus; almost everyone has gone into the virtual environment. May be the mirage of the multi-lateral globalized world too has evaporated into the hyper-reality of the cloud storage space; while the multipolar world of data silos, firewalls, cyber-espionage and robo-killers is rapidly emerging as our new social reality?

Luckily, a few psychologists and social workers have been hunkered down at Lincoln Center, Fordham University, thinking about managing the hard psychological realities of the United Nations, and have published a report of their findings titled, Behavioral Sciences in the Global Arena: Assessing Timely Issues at the UN and Beyond ([Congress, Takooshian and Asper, 2020](#)).

Behavioral scientists working in the international arena, who rely on cross-cultural methods, will find this book an enlightening and useful one. Psychologists, social workers, NGO advocates, and United Nations' officials, offering consultation and advocacy to promote human rights and sustainable development will rely on this academic collection as an important guide to an emerging field.

Although the United Nations has been around for 75 years and psychological sciences as a discipline for most of the same post-World-War-II era has been expanding in the United States and around the globe, behavioral scientists have rarely covered the academic literature related to the psycho-social debates at the United Nations.



Behavioral Science in the Global Arena
Source: Congress, Takooshian and Asper/IAP 2020

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poverty, freedom, democracy, human rights and range of issues related to mental health.

The book is also an introduction to the growing roles psychologists and behavioral scientists can play at the United Nations today. This volume convenes over 20 authors to answer some key questions as the United Nations pursues its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for the year 2030. Can behavioral scientists play an important role in shaping the evidence-based answers for the 17 timely SDGs? That is the challenge posed to the new as well as mature generation of scholars and activists.



This book provides state-of-the-art analysis of what behavioral scientists can actually do to address the diverse global challenges today. Each chapter focuses on a specific topic, attempting to “boil the ocean” to manageable development goals, surveying concerns from the environmental climate action to increasing [happiness](#).

Recently, I got an opportunity to interview the editors of this collection, who are my colleagues at Fordham University, namely Dr. Elaine Congress (EC) and Dr. Harold Takooshian (HT).

DS: Do you think Lennon's song, Imagine, represents the dream of the United Nations?

HT: I am not sure how to comment on this. Since Lennon's death in 1980, society has become MORE rather than less divided by tribalism and [identity](#),



Professor Congress Source: Elaine Congress, Fordham University

DS: Why did you decide to write this book on the 75th anniversary of the UN's founding?

HT: It was the right time for a behavioral science volume (and Series) on the UN.

EC: Those in the behavioral science have excellent ideas about how we contribute our understanding of human behavior in promoting human rights for all. It certainly is time that we should start to share

these ideas with a larger audience than just each other.

DS: Given the discipline of psychology tends to be heavily focused on the experimental method, how do you think psychologists will take on this global approach posited in your edited book?

HT: Experimental is just one of at least 7 methods used by psychologists. Our volume's contributors cite surveys, archival and other methods as well.

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EC: All psychologists are not involved in the experimental approach for understanding human interactions. There are many ways of knowing and this book includes multiple ways to better understand and address complex challenging issues.

DS: Professionally, given the UN is run by diplomats, economists, and lawyers, how do you think psychologists can fit in the UN structure?

HT: Good point. With luck, diplomats will see us behavioral scientists as more honest-brokers than another advocacy group.

EC: The problems facing our society are caused by multiple social, environmental, economic, and physical factors. We need all professions to be involved in addressing the perplexing issues in our world. Behavioral scientists who are more likely to understand the role that people's personalities and motivation play in addressing world problems.

DS: Are you proposing a universalistic approach or a culturally relativistic approach to the global challenges we face?

HT: Hopefully, we can use both approaches as appropriate.

EC: Both the United Nations and civil society are committed to the universalistic approach of promoting human rights and the SDGs. We understand that there are different cultural and economic factors that affect our approach to addressing these challenges. The task is to identify these challenges and work out a compromise that respects cultural differences but still is promoting and preserving human rights.

DS: Given you cover a wide range of topics in the book – aging, child welfare, migration, gender equality, poverty, freedom, democracy, human rights and range of issues related to mental health – which one takes the priority in your mind?

HT: The core idea is that all of these diverse issues involve human behavior (and misbehavior), and can thus be better understood by using behavioral data -- as Ford Foundation predicted when it coined the concept of "behavioral science" back in 1951.

EC: I think the promotion of human rights is the key topic. Many of these topics such as aging, child welfare, and gender equality can be subsumed under this category.

DS: Do you envision that social psychology as a discipline will be able to cover the UN in the coming decades, including the social issues and challenges posed by the UN?

HT: Yes, the same challenges as in 1945 are still here today, but now behavioral scientists are involved.

EC: There has been progress since 1945 when the UN was created ([Pinker, Enlightenment Now, 2018](#)) in areas such as reduction of poverty, decrease in maternal mortality, and increased life expectancy. While these advances have been primarily economic and medical, the inclusion of behavioral science at the UN will help address continuing problems related to perceived and real social inequalities that result in interpersonal and international conflict and war.

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DS: You have often said, when it was founded in 1945, "The UN was not created to take mankind to heaven, but to save humanity from hell." Do you think UN has met that objective in the preceding 75 years?

HT: This dictum is as true today as when [Dag Hammarskjold](#) said this at Berkeley in 1954.

EC: Creating the UN was not supposed to be the panacea for all of human problems. Nothing is 100% effective. We would be very suspect of a research study that reported results that were 100%. We have begun the work of the UN and it can be predicted if behavioral scientists are more involved in the next 75 years there will be greater achievements in realizing the goals of the 17 SDGs.



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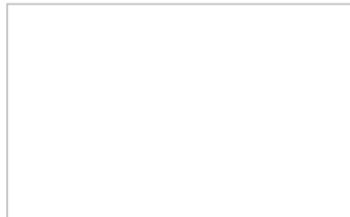


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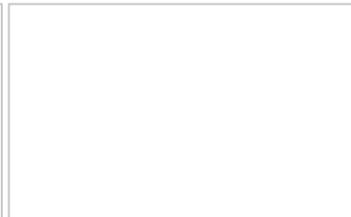
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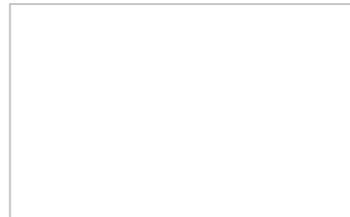
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