

Gorsevski, E.W. (2015). Review of the book *The language of peace: Communicating to create harmony*, by Rebecca L. Oxford. *Journal of Peace Education*, 12(2), 210-211. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17400201.2015.1047621>

In *The Language of Peace: Communicating to Create Harmony*, author Rebecca L. Oxford provides a sweeping and expansive overview of the ways that understanding structures of violence can serve as means to promote a peacebuilding perspective in a variety of contexts, from interpersonal relationships to interethnic communities, and in circumstances of violence and conflict from local to international realms. Oxford's expertise as a scholar of educational psychology and languages is evident in her erudite yet accessible discussions of complex concepts like positive and negative peace, and in her use of current and historical examples, which demonstrate effectively how conceptualizations and images of parties to conflicts can build enemies to foment conflict, or how they can transform the conflict by creating new ways to narrate and interact with potential or former enemies.

The Language of Peace begins by addressing the age-old question, 'Are we doomed to an eternal state of violence?' (4). The book uses current research data to dismiss the predominantly pessimistic, 'doomed' outlook; as the author argues convincingly, the notion of a perpetual 'state of violence,' she says, is erroneous. She maintains an opposing view that humans do have the ability to resolve conflicts nonviolently. Thus from the outset of the book, she introduces an important theme that runs throughout each chapter, which is that communicating for peace can and should be done both verbally and nonverbally across physical and emotional spaces traversing one's inner self, to communications with others, to 'intergroup, international, intercultural, and ecological' interrelationships (12–13).

Once the foundational concepts of the field of peace and conflict studies, of which peace education is an integral part, have been established as a viable and useful area of study and activism, the book's discussion then moves into an explanation of verbal and textual conceptualizations of peace through critical discourse analysis, poetry, visual imagery, and discourses of war journalism that skews mass media portrayals of conflict and possibilities for peacemaking vs. peacebuilding journalism. The book next covers deeply cultural implications of peace communication, especially ways differences are heightened in the process of enemy creation, and ways that conflicts can be addressed more productively through greater intercultural awareness. Dr Oxford closes the tome with a discussion of how everyone has some concept of what peace means, and what norms, habits and world views are included in creating social and environmental conditions that promote peace, such as fairness, equality, and environmental sustainability.

The strengths of this book include its expansive and lucid coverage of many of the most complicated and misunderstood theoretical concepts of peace and justice studies, including complex, interconnected causes of conflict such as cultural forms of violence, plus intercultural concepts of collectivism and individualism and their potential influences on diplomacy. The drawbacks of the book are few and would not be

noticeable to novice readers learning about peace communication. One of the minor but nonetheless pesky issues that I find recurs in books like this that introduce readers to peace and conflict studies is the uncomfortable mixing of ‘touchy-feely’ activities with already popular historical case studies of genocides such as Rwanda or the Holocaust that have yielded theoretical insights on pre-, mid-, and post-conflict propensities in human interactions. To a certain extent, trotting out cases like these, which are well studied and preponderantly cited as exemplars, can serve to reify many observers’ stereotypes and misunderstandings about the causes, effects, and sense of inevitability of groups of humans exerting grave violence on each other based on differences like longstanding ethnic or religious hatred. In addition, studying and employing humanistic texts like poetry, or showcasing peace festivals to advance peace concepts, seems to lend itself best to a certain set of white, middle-class clichés about what constitutes the oft-lampooned, ‘tree-hugging’ types of peace activism, which in Oxford’s book, among others, can somewhat, albeit not purposefully, undercut the serious and proven nature of current advances in peace and justice studies as a growing and respected field in the social sciences. That said, however, the book as a whole does succeed in presenting a strong case to neophytes that peacebuilding through constructive forms of human interaction, especially communicating for peace, is a thriving global activity today. As Oxford notes, ‘peace through sustainability’ is a mode of action taken ‘to halt the widespread human destruction of the environment’ that entails communicating and spreading a deep ethic of ‘care for the Earth if we want any species, including humans, to survive’ (43).

The book is written in an easy to read manner, largely minimizing the use of academic jargon, and would therefore work well as an advanced high school or lower division college reader in undergraduate courses relating to peace and conflict studies, English language studies, and to courses in communication and conflict management or intercultural communication. Discrete chapters also would enhance course units or seminars on feminist and gendered perspectives on peacebuilding. The book would also be very useful in multi- or non-denomination theological courses and workshops, too, especially those dealing with promoting peaceful and productive ways to address community conflicts.

Ellen W. Gorsevski is an associate professor of communication at Bowling Green State University, Bowling Green, Ohio, USA.

Gorsevski’s review was also published by Taylor & Francis Online.

<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/17400201.2015.1047621?journalCode=cjpe20>