

Professor Winnifred Louis
School of Psychology, University of Queensland
St. Lucia, QLD
Australia 4072
Ph: +61 7 3346 9515
w.louis@psy.uq.edu.au

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Dear colleagues,

I welcome the opportunity to make a submission to the inquiry for ‘An independent and peaceful Australia’ concerning social psychological aspects of the Australian-American military relationship. My perspective is informed by my research in social psychology, which is often defined as the study of how the thoughts, feelings and actions of people influence the thoughts, feelings and actions of other people.

Relevant to this inquiry, I have studied topics such as support for war and opposition to war; anti-American prejudice; Australian national, religious, racial, and professional identities; willingness to engage in peace activism; support for political violence; and terrorism. My scholarly publications can be reviewed for example at this link <https://scholar.google.com.au/citations?user=fssfBFsAAAAJ&hl=en&oi=ao> .

Below I seek to draw out a few key points from a social psychological perspective on this inquiry topic.

First, research tells us that it is not inevitable for groups and individuals to support violence; instead there are large differences between groups and people, and changes over time. For example, different nations, religious groups, political parties, and historical periods are characterised by higher or lower support for war and for the military, as well as tolerance of violence and aggression against particular targets or support for particular alliances. Within Australia, support for the British alliance and ‘Frontier Wars’ has dropped from historical times; Australians also famously do not support conscription. Understanding the variability in support for war, for particular tactics in war (such as genocide), and for particular alliances (such as with the United States) helps to keep us focused on the question of why support might decrease (or increase) in Australia.

In thinking about the changing levels of support for militarism and support for the alliance with the United States in particular, I believe an important lens is to view these as group norms, and therefore to think about the processes of norm change that help us to understand why peace support increases or decreases. My own research has focused on the influence of group identities and norms on decision-making. Group norms are the social rules or standards for thinking and acting that guide us unconsciously and consciously in our decisions. These include formal laws, such as treaties of alliance or banning nuclear

weapons, but also informal beliefs of what is usual, approved of, and morally right (e.g., paying taxes to support the military, serving in the military).

An important point from the research literature is that these norms are taught within particular groups, associated with particular identities. For example, a child in a religious Quaker family might learn that war is wrong; another child in a military family might learn that joining the army is a family tradition.

One pathway to norm change therefore is identity change. For example, a soldier who returns from overseas may put off his or her uniform and stop engaging in the kinds of behaviours that were normative overseas. Individuals might leave or join particular groups and identities, for example when they change jobs, or in religious conversion, or switching from one party to another as a voter, and this might involve changes in their attitudes and actions. However, that kind of individual movement between groups does not mean that the norms of the groups themselves change. If a former soldier leaves the army and becomes a peace activist, that leaves the original institutions and military norms intact.

Research tells us therefore that a long-term change for the society usually involves a different process: individual change per se is not enough. The process of changing groups' norm is a social and political one.

Norm changes can be extremely slow. Norms sit in tension between continuity, fulfilling the values and needs of the past, and innovation, or responsiveness to the present. Many norms related to support for alliances or for war have been in place for decades or centuries. Thus change to these norms is not usually a matter of days or weeks, but rather of many years.

Norm changes are also usually initiated by insiders. Norm changes typically are put forward successfully by leaders who have the trust and moral authority to do so. Group norms are typically difficult to change from the outside. The proposed norm change is most likely to be adopted when it is framed as for the benefit of the group and in line with its core values.

At the group level, however, change is often resisted ferociously. Attempts at radical changes risk leading to leadership spills and a backlash. Further, it is common for factions to form in the face of change to advocate for the original tradition, and to seek to reinstate it later when they win power. Sustainable changes are often relatively slow and require the entire group to buy in or own the change. While a proposed norm change may initiate in one subgroup or faction (e.g., a left-wing party), it is not sustainable and complete until it wins the support of the broader community, and is endorsed by other subgroups and factions.

One framework for understanding the way that norms around peace or violence to other groups are transmitted is of 'Needs, Narratives, and Networks' (the 3N model put forward by Arie Kruglanski and Jocelyn Belanger, among others). The idea here is that groups and individuals have needs, which are channelled through narratives that are constructed about how these needs can be satisfied, and networks of relationships of trust that allow people to accept or reject the narratives. Over time, norms of independence or alliance, or of terrorism, militarism or peace, can be changed in these processes which involves people telling each other stories (narratives) that are trusted and believed. Such narratives must directly address the needs that are relevant to the behaviours and beliefs (e.g., for security, or loyalty) and be communicated by trusted voices.

If there is one fact that social psychologists like myself would impress upon change-makers, it is that trust relationships are vital to persuasion in conflict. Beliefs are not 'objective' but are dependent on trust in the source of the message. Marshalling a large coalition of people who trust each other enough to change towards a more peaceful and independent Australia is the key challenge for advocates, in this sense. Similarly, narratives are not facts but stories – numbers per se are often hard for people to understand, and stories of named individuals that people relate to emotionally are more likely to mobilise action.

With those caveats in mind: Perceptions of a dangerous world, and skepticism of the ability of international diplomacy or non-violent measures in general to protect from danger, are key beliefs associated with support for a strong military. The perceived threats associated with intergroup relationships of Australia with other countries, such as Russia, North Korea, and China, are strong drivers of normative support for the alliance with the United States in particular. The perceived benefits also include concrete economic and security benefits from the alliance, as well as symbolic affirmation of common values and fulfilment of obligations and duties of loyalty due to the past. Rival narratives of peace and independence must engage with these needs or costs and benefits.

It is also the case that for some Australians there is an ethnic or religious narrative, whereby Anglophone/British/white, Christian identities also are linked to support for the Australian-American alliance. These beliefs are correlated with more conservative political orientations, but also are learned and taught in groups (e.g., some political parties or media outlets). The narratives of historical religious and ethnic/racial conflict also needs to be addressed by counter-narratives of inclusiveness and common humanity.

Another lesson from social psychology is that people will engage in collective action for change when they feel a shared sense of identity, and a sense of injustice – but also a belief in the effectiveness or efficacy of change. Even if people feel that a particular policy or approach is wrong, without a sense of the effectiveness of action – that is, an understanding of the means by which the action will lead to transformative change – people will not take action. Put differently, many supporters of the military alliance do so because of their beliefs about the efficacy of the alliance in defending against important threats. Such beliefs underpinning particular normative positions are taught by group authorities, teachers, and in networks, and are also reinforced or challenged in cultural practices (e.g., ceremonies).

Thus, a key question that many Australians have about opposition to the alliance is what the alternative is – how will it work to face off threats, if any arise. Often peace activists have a general sense that international relations should be governed by international laws and that these would be enforced by international bodies, such as the United Nations or the European Union. Many peace narratives do not address audiences' skepticism or lack of understanding of how the transition will happen from the present world, when countries such as Syria have been, and continue to, be devastated by war without effective international oversight, to a future world in which justice reigns. Peace narratives must seek to present a compelling 'theory of change' from injustice and war to justice and peace, and position support for independent policy (vs. alliances) in relation to that.

The 'peace dividend' – the positive investments that could be made with reduced military spending – may be an easier point to engage in narratives, and this is often missed in some peace communication. It is not just opposition to war, but the benefits of peace, that are compelling for audiences from this perspective.

In addition, it may seem obvious, but age, gender, region, and race/ethnicity are examples of demographic categories and groups that profoundly affect attitudes and actions, including support for militarism. Within Australia, generational, regional, gender, and cultural group differences in support for militarism and the alliance exist that are associated with the media products that the groups consume as well as their historical narratives and current leaders.

Building a broad coalition to achieve sustainable change requires activists' groups to grow their connections outside 'the usual suspects' to engage different demographic and socio-cultural groups. Non-traditional advocates (who are demographically different, or different in beliefs and ideologies), can be more persuasive to connect to new audiences. In this sense, as much attention should be given to the question of who delivers the message as the question of what the message or narrative is. Reaching out to new voices and leaders from demographics that are skeptical of independence, and seeking to understand the sources they trust and the messages that they are receiving, is important in co-crafting and delivering a narrative that is compelling and persuasive to new audiences, rather than preaching to the converted.

Finally, while I have noted above that support for militarism in general and the alliance in particular are normative, in Australia, it is interesting to reflect on the asymmetry between the bipartisan commitment to the alliance and public ambivalence. There can be quite high levels of anti-American prejudice that many Australians endorse, despite support for the military alliance with the United States. Similarly, while foreign military commitments are common, they are rarely offered to the Australian people for endorsement (e.g., in a referendum), and they are even only rarely offered to the representatives of the people (e.g., in a parliamentary vote). Having the authority vested only in the leader to commit forces to battle seems to be tolerated because it offers deniability to the other representatives. Similarly, the military budget is rarely bragged of in democracies (vs. dictators' habits), and indeed there is often a conspiracy of silence in which leaders, representatives, and the mainstream media avoid discussing the topic of military spending or allowing it to be a point of debate which might fracture their base or give rise to calls for change. Corruption and procurement scandals are also often met with silence. These silences may signal a disconnect between the elite groups and other groups in the broader population on these issues, and a gap for peace narratives to engage.

Making topics such as corruption in procurement taboo in mainstream media has the potential to erode trust in the military and the mainstream media in the longer term. Social media sources (not all credible or prosocial) have stepped into this gap. Ultimately peace activists also should seek to offer and participate in networks by which other novel trust connections are forged outside traditional channels. Truthful narratives about corruption, disasters, waste, misbehaviour, and alternatives that are positively framed, have the potential to 'go viral' through these alternative channels, in the context of eroding trust in mainstream narratives caused by conspicuous silences and taboos that are leaving a "truth gap" that audiences want filled.

Another principle of influence through social media, as for traditional narratives mentioned above, is that advocates should seek to give their message away to other people to disseminate, passing the message onwards through new voices. Allowing the trust benefit to be reaped in the audiences receiving the message, rather than trying to brand the message per se, allows a 'chain of trust' to grow that will connect advocates and activists with networks

where many different links are being made stronger and reinforced, rather than trying to have a centralised and hierarchical source of information with only one voice that is dominating.

To sum up the points that I have been making:

- Norms for militarism and for the American alliance are attached to particular groups and identities.
- Changing these norms is a social and political process which is easier from the inside. Leaders and advocates change norms by creating new narratives about needs, channelled through networks.
- Narratives are more compelling when they address needs directly and positively, and convince people of effectiveness as well as the justice of a cause.
- Advocates grow their networks when they pass the messages to non-traditional advocates that reach new audiences with trust connections.
- The idea of an 'Australian norm' in support of militarism masks the diversity and ambivalence within Australian communities. The apparent taboos over many aspects of support for the military suggest a disconnect between elites and the broader public that can be addressed by speaking truthfully into the silences.

Thank you in advance for your consideration. I welcome any feedback, and am also interested to answer any questions that come up from the panel.

Regards,
Winnifred Louis, PhD, FAPS, FSPSSI, FSPSP
Professor of Psychology, University of Queensland