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Overcoming Socio-Psychological Barriers: The Influence of Beliefs about Losses

Ruthie Pliskin, Eran Halperin, and Daniel Bar-Tal

Overcoming socio-psychological barriers entails a long process of persuasion and cognitive change. In other words, society members and leaders must implement a process of mobilization for peacemaking in the same way the process of mobilization for supporting and participating in the conflict was implemented at the conflict's onset. In both cases, society members matter. The society members themselves initially developed the ideas that led to the conflict's onset, and they can also develop ideas about the necessity of peacemaking. In both cases they must persuade fellow society members in the "justness" of the proposed path. Thus any analysis of intractable conflicts necessitates the use of a socio-psychological perspective alongside other perspectives. Humans are the decision makers; therefore, the psychological aspects embedded in human characteristics must be addressed in order to change the social context. Addressing the socio-psychological repertoire can assist in the creation of various socialization and mobilization mechanisms for peacemaking and peacebuilding. It is thus of crucial importance to advance knowledge that will shed light on the conditions, contents, and processes that not only lead society members to embark on peacebuilding processes in times of conflicts, but also socialize them to actively prevent the outbreak and maintenance of vicious and destructive conflicts and costly hate cycles.

Peacemaking focuses on societal actions towards reaching an official settlement of an intergroup conflict, in the form of a formal agreement

between the rival sides to end the confrontation.¹ Such actions are real and concrete, but the essence of peacemaking is psychological, as it requires changing the societal repertoire that has fueled the conflict, into a repertoire that is in line with the new goal of peacefully resolving the conflict. The new peace-supporting repertoire should include an approach to peaceful resolution, as well as humanization and legitimization of the rival. It should also involve changing previous views of the conflict as being of zero sum nature and unsolvable, changing the goals that fueled the conflict, accepting compromises, building trust, constructing beliefs that the agreement can be implemented, and developing new goals related to peaceful relations with the rival. Eventually, this process should lead to recognition of the need to reconcile and the construction of a new climate that promotes these new ideas about peacemaking and peacebuilding.²

Peacemaking usually involves “bottom-up” processes in which groups, grassroots organizations, and civil society members support the ideas of peacebuilding and act to disseminate them among leaders. On the other hand, peacemaking requires “top-down” processes in which emerging leaders join such efforts, initiate a peacemaking process, act to persuade the society members of the necessity of resolving the conflict peacefully, and carry it out. In both cases, unfreezing is the key process leading to change in the conflict-supporting repertoire.

The Unfreezing Process

According to the classical conception offered by Lewin in 1947,³ every process of societal change must begin with cognitive change. In individuals and groups, this indicates “unfreezing.” Hence, a precondition for the acceptance and internalization of any alternative beliefs about the conflict or peacebuilding depends on the ability to destabilize the rigid structure of the aforementioned dominant socio-psychological repertoire about the conflict. This endeavor is especially challenging because in many conflict situations, the unfreezing process begins with a minority that must have the courage to present the alternative ideas to fellow society members, as well as to decision makers that may eventually effect change on the political level. Indeed, all steps described below must occur among opinion leaders and other individuals in positions of leadership. Such top-down processes

must join societal level processes, so as to support and accelerate shifts in public opinion, while also directly influencing changes in policymaking relevant to the conflict.

Step 1: An Instigating Belief

In such a social climate, peacemaking requires a new perspective on the necessity of a peace process. Indeed, on the individual psychological level, the process of unfreezing usually begins pursuant to the appearance of a new idea (or ideas) inconsistent with held beliefs and attitudes, thus causing tension, a dilemma, or even an internal conflict, which may stimulate a reexamination of one's basic position.⁴ This new idea is termed "an instigating belief," because it motivates a reevaluation of held societal beliefs regarding the culture of conflict. Consequently, it may lead to the unfreezing of these beliefs.⁵ The content of the instigating belief may come from different domains, and may pertain to the image of the rival, the history of the conflict, the group's goals, new threats to the group, and so on. Regardless of its content, the belief must contradict existing beliefs.

The instigating belief must also be of high validity and/or coming from a credible source, otherwise it may be easily rejected. Additionally, it must be strong enough to cause dissonance, as described by Festinger.⁶ In other words, this belief must force an individual to pause and think before he or she can reconcile between the colliding beliefs. This may not mean that every society member will consider the instigating belief once it emerges, but it is possible that at least a few will be motivated to reconsider. The belief may emerge from personal experience or from external sources, but once it is acknowledged and considered it can eventually lead to an unfreezing process, in which at least some of the held beliefs are rejected.

Step 2: A Mediating Belief

This process paves the way for a new "mediating belief" that calls for changing the context of intractable conflict. The mediating belief is the logical outcome of dissonance, if it is resolved in the direction of accepting the instigating belief as valid.⁷ Mediating beliefs are usually stated in the form of arguments, such as "we must change strategies or we are going to suffer further losses," "some kind of change is inevitable," "we have

been going down a self-destructive path, so we must alter our goals and strategies,” and “the proposed change is clearly in the national interest, it is necessary for national security.”⁸ These statements prompt a discussion of alternatives and thereby deepen the process of unfreezing initiated by the instigating beliefs.

Step 3: A Peaceful Alternative

At least one alternative that may emerge at the end of this process is the suggestion that the peaceful settlement of the conflict may change the direction in which society is heading. The emergence of this idea marks the beginning of the journey towards peacemaking. For instance, in South Africa, a number of unequivocal indicators (internal violence, deterioration of the South African economy, demographic growth of the Blacks, South African isolation, and so on, all of which have served as instigating beliefs) led Pieter Willem Botha, the conservative leader of the South African National Party who came to power in 1978, to realize as early as the 1980s that the situation cannot continue and that the leadership must implement reforms and initiate negotiation with the African National Congress. This logic indicated the appearance of mediating beliefs.⁹

Conditions for Change

While unfreezing is an individual process that may transpire in different individuals at different times, the likelihood of this process beginning and fully developing is increased when certain societal conditions are met. Some scholars of conflict resolution argue that the success of peacemaking processes and consequential conflict resolution depend on specific conditions that make the conflict ripe for a peaceful resolution. For example, Zartman proposed that “if the parties to a conflict (a) perceive themselves to be in a hurting stalemate and (b) perceive the possibility of a negotiated solution (a way out), the conflict is ripe for resolution (i.e., for negotiations toward resolution to begin).”¹⁰ Furthermore, ideas about terminating the conflict peacefully often emerge and are successfully disseminated when changes in the context of the conflict are observed. These changes pertain to major events and/or information that may facilitate the process of peacemaking, and

this stage can therefore be termed “the emergence of facilitating conditions.” This may happen at any point during the peacemaking process.

Among the most salient facilitating conditions, trust-building actions by the rival lead to a perceived change in the opponents’ character, intentions, and goals. Another facilitating condition pertains to information about the state of society. A realization of the costs to society in continuing the conflict may lead to the crystallization of beliefs in the need to change the views of the conflict and the rival, reconsider the intransigent policy, and even adopt conciliatory positions that could allow a peaceful resolution of the conflict. Sometimes the intervention of a powerful third party pushing for a peaceful resolution of the conflict may also serve as a determining condition in changing these views about the conflict. In some cases, such an intervention may include a proposed mega-incentive by a third party. If this incentive is highly valued by at least one party to the conflict, it may affect its views on the conflict and move it towards more conciliatory views. Changed conflict-related beliefs may also result from global geopolitical processes and events that are not directly related to the conflict (for example, the collapse of a superpower or new global realignments). In such cases, global change may affect a party in conflict and move it to adopt more conciliatory positions, thus acting as a facilitating condition.

The noted conditions are neither exhaustive nor exclusive. Each condition, as well as possible combinations of conditions, may generate new needs and new goals that become more important than the goals that led to the conflict’s eruption. As a result, a set of beliefs may emerge that can contribute to the unfreezing of the long-held conflict-supporting repertoires. As we have discussed above, different beliefs can lead to unfreezing, but the main idea influencing unfreezing is probably the recognition that the losses incurred if the conflict continues are greater than the losses incurred with the acceptance of a particular opportunity for peaceful solution.¹¹ This recognition is a potent idea that may push the peacemaking process forward to its successful conclusion, and can therefore be a highly effective condition for change. In essence, such recognition refocuses the individual on the losses that the society may incur should it not resolve the conflict peacefully under the present conditions.

Effects of Information about Losses as a Facilitating Condition

Information about losses is a uniquely important condition, as individuals living in conflict zones are usually focused only on fear of loss, and may therefore underestimate or overlook losses incurred as a result of the continued conflict. Such information is of even greater importance when considering unfreezing processes among decision makers, since a miscalculation of possible losses may inhibit them from actively advancing conflict resolution. Our view on the importance of these considerations is partly based on Kahneman and Tversky's prospect theory,¹² which has been adapted to apply to conflict situations.¹³ According to prospect theory, people are more reluctant to lose what they already have than they are motivated to gain what they do not have.¹⁴ In the language of prospect theory, the value function is steeper on the loss side than on the gain side.

Reframing the Point of Reference

One way to emphasize the potential losses associated with continuing a conflict and to reduce the emphasis on possible losses associated with a peaceful settlement is to reframe the reference point. Prospect theory proposes that people react more strongly to changes in existing assets than to net asset levels; that is, they react to gains and losses from their subjective reference point rather than referring to the absolute values of gains or losses.¹⁵ In most cases, the reference point is the status quo, but in some situations it can be an "aspiration level"¹⁶ or a desired goal.¹⁷ Often, individuals residing in conflict zones are socialized to believe in the feasibility of future gains from the conflict or even their group's possible victory over the rival.¹⁸ The alternative possibility of paying a heavy price for continuing the conflict or being defeated is often ignored. As a result, when the compromises demanded in the context of a peaceful settlement of the conflict are compared with the society's aspirations, or even the status quo (mostly for the stronger party in the conflict), they are perceived as involving an enormous loss. In other words, the motivation to reevaluate firmly-held beliefs and consider alternatives depends on a new realization that continuing the conflict will not lead to a better or desired future, but may in fact drastically reduce the chances of achieving it.¹⁹ Moreover, as noted, the conflict's continuation may

lead to losses that are greater than the sacrifices needed in order to achieve a peaceful resolution to the conflict via compromises.

Real-World Transformations Driven by Beliefs about Losses

Two noteworthy examples of changes driven, at least to some extent, by the described processes can be found in the peacemaking efforts in Northern Ireland and South Africa. In Northern Ireland, MacGinty and Darby²⁰ have recently argued that in the early 1990s, the understanding that future change is inevitable and that such change might consist of fundamental losses to the unionist side of the conflict was one of the central motivations for reconsidering their intransigent position, and finally joining the negotiations in order to gain influence when formulating a future agreement. The writers quote a statement by a senior Orangeman, which they believe reflected a common view shared by the unionists: “Every time something comes along it is worse than what came before.”²¹ Within the context of the South African conflict, Mufson²² has pointed to a similar example of the unfreezing process, suggesting that de Klerk and his people realized that “white South Africans’ bargaining position would only grow weaker with time,” leading them to launch negotiations and make every effort to move towards a viable agreement as soon as possible.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict, while yet unresolved, also offers ample examples for the importance of beliefs about losses to unfreezing processes among leaders. In fact, Israeli leaders whose positions on the conflict moved towards support for conflict resolution, cited instrumental cost-benefit considerations, that is, information about potential losses should the conflict continue, rather than moral or ideological considerations. In fact, when heading into the Oslo peace process, the only strategic goal voiced by then-Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was his fear of continued Israeli sovereignty “over a large number of Arabs, which could lead to a binational state.” For many Jewish Israelis, this meant the loss of a Jewish state. Rabin’s former Foreign Minister Shimon Peres often echoed this sentiment, adding that “Rabin knew that the absence of decisiveness was likely to bring about a situation in which events would lead us, instead of us leading them.”²³ Several right wing Israeli leaders underwent a similar process, bringing them closer to a realization of the importance of peacefully resolving the conflict. Former

Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, for instance, decided to evacuate settlements out of a desire to avoid the loss of a Jewish majority in the State of Israel, and the next leader of the Likud Party, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, also stated the end goal for a peace agreement would be avoiding a binational state,²⁴ not mentioning any moral or ideological goals alongside this fear of a loss of Jewish sovereignty.

Empirical evidence of this process can be found in work conducted together with other colleagues,²⁵ in which the perception of the proposed process was examined among Jews in Israel. The investigation found that instigating beliefs that include information about future losses in various aspects of life (e.g., economic aspects, demographic aspects, as well as Israel's future position in potential negotiations with Palestinians) may help unfreeze Israelis' predispositions about the peace process with the Palestinians.

The ultimate outcome of unfreezing is detachment from the repertoire that supports the continuation of the conflict, its reevaluation, and a new-found readiness to entertain alternative beliefs.²⁶ The repertoire can then be replaced by alternative societal beliefs that promote a peaceful resolution to the conflict.²⁷ Nonetheless, the examples described illustrate more than unfreezing. In most of these examples, the leaders arrived at the point of being able to formulate a coherent set of compromising beliefs, and these served as a holistic plan acceptable to the rival party. Indeed, the ultimate objective is to go beyond an agreement that settles the conflict peacefully, to the formulation, acceptance, and internalization of a new ethos of peace. This ethos must act to counter the conflict-supporting repertoire in terms of both content and structure. However, in the absence of peace and reconciliation, the attempt to form the new socio-psychological repertoire that will fulfill these needs and aspirations is a great challenge for every society that strives to end the conflict peacefully. Fulfilling these needs in each of two clear-cut situations – intractable violent conflict or a viable peace – is much easier than doing so in the “transitional” period between violent conflict and peace, rife with uncertainty and often with continuing violence and active opposition by some groups within society.

Conclusion

Disagreements over tangible and non-tangible commodities influence harsh and violent conflicts that engage society members and cause continuous suffering and hardship, as well as considerable losses in human lives. Such conflicts inflict serious problems and challenges upon the involved societies and the international community. A resolution requires not only addressing the tangible issues that lie at the heart of the disagreements, but also necessitates finding ways of overcoming the socio-psychological barriers that underlie and magnify the disparities. Moreover, these barriers often become the major obstacles to resolving intractable conflicts. They reject new ideas and prevent the possibility of alternative views. These are essential steps in embarking on the road to peace, possessing the potential to unfreeze the highly-entrenched conflict-supporting societal beliefs.

One cannot underestimate the fact that at the foundation of these barriers lie ideological beliefs supporting the conflict that were formed on the societal level and then imparted to society members via societal institutions and major communication channels. Such ideological beliefs play a major role in maintaining the conflict, feeding its continuation, and preventing its peaceful resolution. Socio-psychological barriers and the mechanisms employed by society to maintain the above views are potent inhibitors of any potential peace process. Only a determined group employing activism and innovative ideas can lay the groundwork for overcoming the human tendency to adhere to known patterns of thought and action, and overcoming inherent reactions to threat and danger in order to build a better world, free of violence, suffering, and destruction. Overcoming these barriers is a major challenge for every society involved in harsh and violent conflict, if it aspires to embark on the road to peace.

The present paper suggests that overcoming these socio-psychological barriers is not beyond reach, but it is a long process of persuasion and cognitive change. In other words, society members and leaders must implement a process of mobilization for peacemaking in the same way the process of mobilization for supporting and participating in the conflict was implemented at the conflict's onset. Sadly, while it often takes a very short time to mobilize society members for participation in a conflict under the umbrella of patriotism, it usually takes a very long time to mobilize society

members to reject the way of conflict and replace it with new ways of peacemaking. In both cases, society members matter. The society members themselves initially developed the ideas that led to the conflict's onset, and they can also develop ideas about the necessity of peacemaking. In both cases they must persuade fellow society members in the "justness" of the proposed path.

From these observations we can learn that any analysis of intractable conflicts necessitates the use of a socio-psychological perspective alongside other perspectives. Human beings perceive, evaluate, infer, and act; they are active participants in events taking place around them. Human psychological processes are an integral part of conflict interactions, as human beings are the only real actors on the conflict stage. Humans make the decisions regarding the dissemination of information about the conflict's necessity, the mobilization of society members, and their children's socialization to maintain the conflict, violently persist in it, and reject its peaceful resolution. In essence, humans are the decision makers; therefore, the psychological aspects embedded in human characteristics must be addressed in order to change the social context. Later, if people begin to view the conflict situation differently, they may make the decision to disseminate ideas about the necessity of peacemaking and to mobilize society members at large to act to achieve this goal. Hopefully, addressing the socio-psychological repertoire can assist in the creation of various socialization and mobilization mechanisms for peacemaking and peacebuilding. It is thus of crucial importance to advance knowledge that will shed light on the conditions, contents, and processes that not only lead society members to embark on peacebuilding processes in times of conflicts, but also socialize them to actively prevent the outbreak and maintenance of vicious and destructive conflicts and costly hate cycles.

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