Going beyond guilt and revenge: The effects of admitting responsibility and expressing empathy for the enemy's suffering on inter-group reconciliation

© Arie Nadler
Professor of Social Psychology, Argentina Chair for Research on the Social
Psychology of Conflict and Cooperation
Tel Aviv University, Ramat-Aviv, 69978, Israel

The study of conflict has been a central topic for many disciplines within the social sciences and much of it has been governed by a 'rational-economic' perspective on conflict and its ending. This perspective has been dominated by two key assumptions: (a) Groups are in conflict over scarce resources (e.g., land, water, etc.,), and (b) Conflict will end when rational actors negotiate an optimal formula for the division of these resources. Another view on conflict and its ending has emphasized the role of the parties' psychological needs in maintaining and ending conflict. This perspective, which is commonly discussed under the heading of "conflict resolution", regards feelings and cognitions that emanate from years of conflict (e.g., distrust, guilt, victimhood) as the major barriers to ending the conflict. It suggests that even if the parties had successfully negotiated an optimal formula to divide the contested resources between them the conflict will be re-ignited if parties' psychological needs (e.g., for a sense of security, respect and self-worth) had not been addressed. In my comments I propose to view the processes through which psychological needs are addressed and emotional barriers removed as processes of reconciliation. My comments focus on two forms of reconciliation: Socio-emotional reconciliation and Trust-building/Instrumental reconciliation.

Socio-emotional barriers emanate from the pain and humiliation that parties have inflicted on each other and which result in feelings of victimization. When one party views itself as the victim in a conflict it is likely to be preoccupied with the motivation to take revenge and rid itself of the feelings of powerlessness and humiliation that are associated with victimhood. It is therefore not likely to attend to the objective issues that separate it from its adversary and detracts from the possibility of resolving the conflict. When, as is often the case in inter-group conflicts, both parties view themselves as the victim both are preoccupied with the need to "get even" and neither is able to attend to the prospects of ending the conflict. Revenge can remedy feelings of humiliation and victimization but one act of revenge is likely to instigate a reciprocal act of violence and intensify rather than quell conflict. Alternatively, feelings of victimization and humiliation may be reduced when the adversary takes responsibility for past wrongdoings and gives the victim the power to grant or withhold forgiveness. When both parties view themselves as the victim, they both expect the other to apologize and take responsibility first, and this "impasse of expectations" may result in intensification of the conflict.

A second emotional deterrent to the end of conflict is the distrust that dominates relations between adversaries. Trust-building/Instrumental reconciliation is

the gradual process through which the parties learn to trust each other as a consequence of working together to achieve common goals. There are many differences between socio-emotional and trust-building/instrumental reconciliation. One stands out quite clearly- A different temporal focus: While socio-emotional reconciliation asserts that confronting the pains of the <u>past</u> is the key to a reconciled future, trust building reconciliation suggests that <u>cooperation in the present</u> is the key to a reconciled future. Other differences include the goal of reconciliation (i.e., social integration vs. social separation, and whether the change is evolutionary or revolutionary).

   Our research has centered on these processes in the context of relations between Israelis and Palestinians. Our experimental findings demonstrate the importance of the adversary's expression of empathy for in-group's suffering. For example, in a number of studies Israelis who had been exposed to an expression of empathy by a Palestinian leader were readier to reconcile with Palestinians than those who did not hear similar expressions of empathy. Importantly however, this was true only for Israelis who saw Palestinians as relatively trustworthy. For those who showed distrust towards Palestinians, the expression of empathy by the other side decreased the readiness to reconcile with them. Our research has now moved to identifying the different emotional needs of the perpetrator and the victims in the process of socio-emotional reconciliation. Finally, in another research we studied the process of trust-building reconciliation by interviewing Israelis and Palestinians who had been involved in joint projects. This research reveals the conditions that are necessary for an effective process of trust-building reconciliation.