

A Social-Psychological Approach To Conflict Resolution: Interactive Problem Solving

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ABSTRACT

Track II diplomacy has gained currency on the international scene since the last quarter of the twentieth century. Herbert C. Kelman, a leading scholar in social sciences and a pioneer in interactive conflict resolution, has contributed to this field by applying social-psychological concepts to the analysis and resolution of conflict. In this article, the conceptual basis of Kelman's interactive problem solving approach will be appraised as well as his work on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The Israeli-Palestinian workshops that Kelman and his colleagues held for more than twenty years have been influential especially in the prenegotiation process leading to the Oslo Agreement.

Keywords: Conflict resolution, problem-solving workshops, prenegotiation

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INTRODUCTION

As a social-psychological method of intervention, interactive problem-solving approach was developed by Herbert C. Kelman. It was after meeting John Burton in 1960s, and learning about his innovative workshop approach that Kelman started to elaborate on social-psychological concepts and methods relevant to conflict resolution, especially within the framework of protracted conflicts.

In essence, interactive problem-solving is an unofficial third party approach to conflict resolution. The facilitative role of the third-party, composed of the unofficial representatives of conflicting parties, lies at the core of this approach. The participants engage in face-to-face communication with the guidance of social scientists/practitioners in the setting of a workshop. The participants are chosen carefully from people who are within the mainstream of their societies and close to the center of political spectrum. By the nature of this selection process, the solutions they bring about are expected to have a meaningful impact on official policy.

The method is essentially based on social-psychological concepts, which is its main differentiator from the traditional approach. The goal is to facilitate communication between the two opposing groups so that they would come up with their own ways of resolving problems, rather than offering them to accept already constructed solutions. The workshops are designed to produce changes in attitudes and perceptions of the influential individuals by way of developing a genuine understanding of the other side's needs, priorities and constraints. Once this understanding is reached, the participants jointly generate solutions addressing fundamental concerns of both sides.

As a complementary and parallel track to official diplomatic peace negotiations, the interactive problem solving approach has been implemented in the resolution of several conflicts. The workshops have been evaluated by the participants as highly beneficial to the peace process. In this article, the conceptual basis of Herbert Kelman's interactive problem solving approach to protracted international/intercommunal conflicts will be appraised, with a special focus on the Israeli-Palestinian workshops carried out by Kelman and his associates.

A Social-Psychological Approach to Protracted International Conflicts

According to the United Nations data, “as of mid-2005, there were eight major wars under way [down from 15 at the end of 2003] with as many as two dozen lesser conflicts with varying degrees of intensity”. Most of these are civil or intrastate wars, fueled as much by racial, ethnic or religious animosities as by ideological fervor. Most victims are civilians, a feature that distinguishes modern conflicts. A high percentage of those killed or wounded in wars are noncombatants.

As Wallensteen and Axell point out it was possible to identify thirty-two ongoing armed conflicts in mid 1990s (Wallensteen and Axell, 1994). In the wake of the Cold War an increasing number of civil wars were being fought in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union; “of the armed conflicts that ended or became inactive in 1989-93, only one in seven was resolved by a peace agreement” (Fisher, 1997: 1).

Most of the protracted international conflicts still continue for more than several decades in locations such as the Middle East, Cyprus, Kashmir, Sri Lanka and the Horn of Africa. Protracted conflicts are those conflicts which are difficult to manage, intense, extremely difficult to resolve and are mostly associated with problems of ethnicity and identity. They are often called as “deep-rooted” (Burton, 1990) or “intractable” conflicts (Kriesberg, 1998). In order to understand and resolve these conflicts, mainstream traditional approaches focusing on structural or strategic factors such as those of the realist or neo-realist schools of international relations need to be expanded by a social-psychological perspective.

Regarding the fact that the traditional realist approaches are mostly insufficient in dealing with intractable conflicts, Kelman (1997) has underscored the significance of subjective factors in resolving conflicts. He states that examination of the way in which group attitudes and perspectives feed, escalate and perpetuate intergroup conflict can provide conceptual tools to overcome the subjective factors such as psychological barriers that set constraint on rationality in resolving conflicts. As Kelman proposes, “social-psychological analysis can be particularly helpful in explaining why and how, once a conflict has started, normative and perceptual processes are set into motion that promote its escalation and perpetuation and create or intensify barriers to conflict resolution; by the same token, social-psychological analysis, in helping to identify and understand these barriers, can also suggest ways in which to overcome them” (Kelman, 2009: 175).

One of these social-psychological processes is the formation of mirror images which has an escalatory effect, making conflicts more intractable. In psychology, distortion in human perception is a well studied phenomenon, in which the behavior or thinking of a person is influenced by his perception, rather than the actual reality. As an example of distortion in perception, mirror image perception forms between two groups initially due to an assumption that one group (or both groups) believe(s) the counterparty to be hostile. The assumption in hostility leads to an act of hostility towards the counterparty. The act, which demonstrates an ill intention, results in a reciprocal hostile act, regardless of the counterparty's nature. This response confirms the initial assumption, which might have been incorrect. However, the process successfully feeds into a vicious circle of validation of the initial distorted image, without a chance to question assumptions.

The process of mirror image formation, commonly seen in international/intercommunal conflicts, stems from the sharp contrast in perception between 'the innocent self' and 'the aggressive other'. The actions of parties involved lead to an impasse in the conflict, making it more difficult to move out of a zero-sum game. It becomes quite impossible to reach a win-win approach. Kelman suggests that the concept of mirror images provide a useful tool in conflict resolution: "under the proper circumstances - such as those that problem-solving workshops try to create - the parties may gradually come to recognize the conflict-induced parallelisms in their views may gain access to each other's perspective and set a de-escalatory process in motion." (Kelman,1997: 226).

An important feature of enemy (conflict) images is their high degree of resistance to contradictory information or change. A lot of social-psychological research has been carried out to analyze the general phenomenon of the persistence of attitudes and beliefs in the face of new information which challenges their validity. It has been found out there are some psychological mechanisms coming into effect when there is a challenge to the existing attitudes and beliefs which lead the person to either ignore or neutralize these challenges. Some of these mechanisms that account for resistance to contradictory information are selectivity, the need for consistency, attribution and the self-fulfilling prophecy.

The models of cognitive consistency such as Heider's (1958) theory of cognitive balance and Festinger's (1957) theory of cognitive dissonance try to explain this resistance to change (Deaux et al., 1993: 167-174). According to these cognitive consistency theories, processes such as selective exposure

lead people to prefer supportive information and avoid information that contradict their existing attitudes. Selective perception and selective recall mechanisms serve the same purpose: existing attitudes help determine the kind of information that is available to people; in other words, in the interest of maintaining consistency, people tend to screen out information that is not fitting in with their existing beliefs and attitudes. Inconsistent information – which might lead to change in a positive direction -- is therefore resisted when the existing attitudes are strongly held as in the case of enemy images.

Attribution mechanisms also strengthen the original enemy image (Jones and Nisbett, 1971). As Heider (1958) has pointed out the causes to which we attribute events may be either of two basic types: dispositional (something about the person) and situational (something in the environment in which the event took place). So, hostile actions by the enemy tend to be attributed dispositionally, i.e., attributed to the enemy's inherently aggressive character; whereas conciliatory actions by the counterparty (enemy) tend to be attributed to situational factors, i.e. explained as reactions to situational factors, thus requiring no revision of the original enemy image.

Self-fulfilling prophecies are another mechanism that lead to the confirmation of original attitudes, thus making it more difficult to initiate any change in beliefs or attitudes. A self-fulfilling prophecy is a prediction that directly or indirectly causes itself to become true. Self-fulfilling prophecies arise when a party's expectations about their adversary cause them to act in ways that actually provoke the adversary's "expected" response. The adversary's (provoked) response is then taken as confirmation of the party's original expectation, and a vicious cycle ensues (Pruitt & Rubin, 1986).

Interactive problem-solving method has been designed to address these kinds of resistances along with other social-psychological processes that contribute to the intensity of protracted conflicts.

The Conceptual Basis of Interactive Problem Solving Method

Kelman builds his social-psychological analysis on several unique assumptions about international conflict concerning questions of ethnicity and identity. The leading assumption holds that international conflict is a process driven by collective needs and fears, rather than entirely a product of rational calculation of objective national interests on the part of political decision makers (Kelman, 1997: 194). As Aubert (1963) has suggested, it is useful to make a distinction between conflicts of interest and conflicts of

value. Conflicts of interest are over goods or resources that can be divided and distributed, thus can be negotiated. Conflicts of value, on the other hand, are nonnegotiable, these are needs for "identity, security, recognition, political participation, inclusion in political decision making, or distributive justice" (Rouhana & Kelman, 1994: 188; see also Azar, 1990; Burton, 1987; Mitchell, 1990).

Kelman has been greatly influenced by Burton's "basic human needs" theory which was in turn influenced by Maslow's "hierarchy of needs". Maslow states that human motivation is based upon a hierarchy of needs, moving from basic physical requirements up to psychological requirements such as recognition, attainment and fulfillment that are claimed to be biologically innate (Kimmel, 2000: 12). Burton has adopted Maslow's ideas to conflict theory; his expanded basic human needs list includes not only material needs as food, shelter, physical safety and well-being but also, such psychological needs as identity, security, autonomy, recognition, self-esteem and a sense of justice (Burton, 1990).

Burton claims that these psychological needs would seem to be even more fundamental than food and shelter, therefore they will be pursued in one way or another. Burton, along with other human needs theorists, perceives human needs as an emergent collection of human development essentials. According to this view, needs do not have a hierarchical order (in contrast with Maslow's hierarchy of needs); rather needs are sought simultaneously in an intense and relentless manner (Rothman, 1997). Denial by society of recognition and identity would lead, at all social levels, to alternative behaviors designed to satisfy such needs, be it ethnic wars or other types of violence. Burton underlines that "deep-rooted conflicts cannot be contained or suppressed in the long term, but can be prevented or resolved only by the satisfaction of basic needs through conflict resolution" (Fisher, 1997: 6). The methodological orientation of this theory is based on analytical problem solving workshops and analytic dialogues in which the causes of conflict and the suppressed human needs of each group can be analytically understood; traditional power bargaining does not take place in these workshops (Burton, 1990). As Burton points out: "once the relationships between the parties have been analyzed satisfactorily, once each side is accurately informed of the perceptions of the other, of alternative means of attaining values and goals, and of costs of pursuing present policies, possible outcomes are revealed that might be acceptable to all parties" (Burton, 1990: 205).

In line with Burton, Kelman rightfully points out that “identity, security and similarly powerful collective needs and the fears and concerns about survival associated with them, are often important causal factors in intergroup and intercommunal conflict” (Kelman, 1997: 195). He also points out to the fact that causes of conflict generally combine objective and subjective factors (needs), which are related to each other in a combined manner. Conflicts concerning objective factors, such as territory and/or resources reflect and often magnify underlying subjective factors/concerns about security and identity. As far as these subjective factors are concerned, the escalation and perpetuation of conflict is typically fuelled by psychological factors such as misperception and distrust (Fisher, 1997: 62). In this vein, Kelman (1990, 1992) considers the addressing and satisfaction of fundamental needs of the parties concerned, as articulated through identity groups, as the ultimate criterion for a successful resolution. He argues that “only through interaction around needs and related fears can the parties identify actions of mutual reassurance that are essential to deescalate existential conflicts involving identity and security” (Fisher, 1997: 62). Thus, overcoming psychological barriers creates new possibilities and conditions for negotiation on objective interests (ibid).

As Lumsden and Wolfe (1996) argue, the realization of the importance of needs such as needs for identity, security and recognition has shifted the emphasis in conflict resolution theory from rational decision-making to interactive problem-solving. In interactive problem-solving workshops, informed by a set of assumptions about interethnic conflict derived from social-psychological analysis, one can identify certain processes central to conflict resolution. As Rouhana and Kelman note these are processes “such as empathy, insight, creative problem-solving, and learning” (Rouhana & Kelman, 1994: 158-159). The problem-solving workshops are designed to provide a psychological setting where such processes can occur.

Another assumption on which Kelman builds his social-psychological approach is that international conflict is not merely an intergovernmental or interstate phenomenon, but an intersocietal process. Since intense conflict becomes an inescapable part of daily life for members of both parties -- particularly in the case of protracted ethnic conflicts -- the role of psychological, cultural and social-structural dimensions must be included in the analysis along with military, strategic and diplomatic dimensions. It follows that third party efforts need to be directed toward a resolution between collectivities rather than simply a settlement between governments. Kelman asserts that, to transform the relationship between the parties, solutions should come from the interaction of the parties and jointly address their needs. According to Kelman an intersocietal analysis of conflict

suggests a view of diplomacy as a complex mix of official and unofficial efforts with complementary contributions; many different sectors of the two societies have to be involved in creating a favorable environment for negotiating and implementing such agreements (Kelman, 1993)).

Regarding the fact that international conflict is a multifaceted process of mutual influence, the strategies of influence employed in a conflict relationship have important implications for the resolution. Therefore, to transform the relationship between the parties, solutions must come from the interaction of the parties by changing their perceptions of each other in a way that reconciles them. Based on these social-psychological concepts, Kelman's primary goal is not just establishing interaction between the parties/communities in conflict, but creating the favorable conditions for mutual conflict analysis and recognition as well as joint problem solving.

In cognizance of the fact that international conflict is an interactive phenomenon with an escalatory, self-perpetuating dynamic, Kelman maintains that conflict resolution efforts require promotion of a different kind of interaction that is conducive to sharing perspectives, differentiating the enemy image, developing a language of mutual reassurance and a new discourse based on the norms of responsiveness and reciprocity.

The Characteristics of Interactive Problem Solving Workshops

The primary instrument of interactive problem solving method is the problem solving workshop. The typical workshop brings together unofficial representatives of conflicting groups in a private setting to engage in face-to-face communication; there are usually three to six participants from each of the conflicting parties. Facilitators are mostly academics who are knowledgeable about the conflict resolution theories and the region in question. The participants are possibly influential members of their communities but are not in policymaking positions. They are briefed on the nature of the workshop process in separate pre-workshop sessions. These sessions serve to build familiarity between the parties.

The workshops generally last for two and a half days over an extended weekend. Discussions start under the guidance of the third party (the facilitator/social scientist) who only act as a facilitator of communication. The facilitators propose a loose agenda in an analytical, task-oriented atmosphere often leading the participants to jointly generate ideas that can be fed into the (official) policymaking process. Each party is given the opportunity to express their concerns before they begin to suggest solutions.

The type of communication that workshops are intended to promote is giving the opportunity for the parties to penetrate each other's perspective and to engage in joint problem solving designed to produce ideas for a mutually satisfactory agreement between them (Kelman, 1992: 84). The third party (a scholar/practitioner) serves as a source of trust, so that the participants develop a "working trust" recognizing common interests; parties are encouraged to focus on listening to and reaching an analytic understanding of each other and refraining from casting blame.

The problem solving workshop has the dual goal of being both educational -producing changes in the perceptions, attitudes, and ideas held by the individual participants-- and political, transferring these changes to the political dialogue and decision making in each community. For workshop learnings to have an impact on peace, they must be transferred to the actual policy making process related to the conflict, i.e. their communities and leadership.

It must be made clear that problem solving workshops are not negotiating sessions. Negotiations can only be held by officials who are authorized to make binding agreements. The discussions that are carried out in problem-solving workshops serve the purpose of exploring joint solutions but these are non-binding in character. Although the workshops should be clearly distinguished from official negotiations, they can be evaluated as having complementary functions to all the stages of the negotiation process: the prenegotiation, negotiaton and postnegotiation stages.

At the prenegotiation stage, workshops can be helpful to lead the parties to the negotiation table by creating an atmosphere that is conducive to negotiations. At the negotiation stage itself they can perform useful paranegotiation functions: they can contribute to overcoming obstacles to the negotiation such as reframing issues so that they can be negotiated more efficiently once they get to the table. At the postnegotiation stage, they can be useful in the implementation of negotiated agreements, in peacebuilding activities, i.e. reconciliation and transformation of the relationship between the opposing parties.

Israeli-Palestinian Workshops and the Oslo Agreement

Kelman and his associates have held many workshops on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict since 1971. In these workshops politically influential Israelis and Palestinians came together for more than twenty years; they had the opportunity to explore each other's perspective as well as the fears,

constraints and concerns that shaped their priorities. Workshops took place under academic auspices and were facilitated by a panel of social scientists knowledgeable about international conflict, group process and the Middle East (Fisher, 2005: 45). The Israeli and Palestinian participants were parliamentarians, leaders and activists of political movements or political parties, members of think tanks, former diplomats and military officers, scholars and journalists who were influential intellectuals. There were also some preinfluentials such as advanced graduate students -- aiming politics as a career-- among the participants.

These workshops which took place from the 1970s to the early 1990s laid the groundwork for the Oslo Agreement of September 1993 (Kelman, 1995). They were mostly "one-time" meetings that took place over an extended weekend and their cumulative effect on the two societies was felt over the years. These efforts contributed to the peace process (before the signing of the agreement) in three ways: First of all, the workshops were helpful in developing cadres who were prepared to carry out productive negotiations; secondly, they provided the medium for sharing information and formulating new ideas that inspired new inputs into the negotiations; thirdly, they created a political atmosphere which made the parties open to a new collaborative relationship.

It was only in 1990 that Kelman and his associate N. Rouhana organized for the first time a continuing workshop, comprised of a group of highly influential Israelis and Palestinians, six individuals on each side. They met for five times until August 1993. In 1991, with the beginning of official negotiations, first in Madrid and then in Washington, four of the six initial Palestinian participants in this group became key members of the Palestinian actual negotiation team (Kelman, 2005: 49). Another contribution took place on the Israeli side: in 1992, several of the Israeli members of the continuing workshop were appointed to ambassadorial and cabinet positions in the new Israeli government. Apart from transferring influential people to the actual negotiation process, the continuing workshop provided an opportunity for the participants to exercise interactive problem solving as a paranegotiation process.

After the Oslo Agreement, Kelman and Rouhana organized a Joint Working Group on Israeli-Palestinian Relations. This group met on regular basis from 1994 to 1999. The main purpose of this project was to produce joint concept papers on the final-status issues and thus create a peaceful and mutually enhancing relationship between the two societies. In this way, not only the negotiations but the post negotiation processes like peace-building and

reconciliation would be affected by this positive endeavour. The first one of the three papers that were published by the Joint Working Group during this period were on general principles for the final-status negotiations; the second paper was on the problem of Palestinian refugees and the right of return; the third one was on the future Israeli-Palestinian relationship.

In addressing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Kelman has consistently underlined that problem-solving workshops are not a substitute for diplomatic negotiations, but an unofficial approach that can prepare the way for, supplement and feed into the formal negotiation process (Kelman, 1991).

Conclusion

Kelman has shed new light onto conflict resolution through his interactive problem-solving approach. The social-psychological approach Kelman provides can be seen as a complementary perspective when evaluating conflict resolution via a traditional/classical framework. This method is not a negation of traditional conflict resolution techniques but serves the purpose of supplementing them. Absent a thorough understanding of Kelman's approach, the study and practice of conflict resolution would be incomplete. In fact, history is preview to many cases where the traditional approach to conflict resolution has failed to reach success, which in my opinion, is due to the fact that a social-psychological understanding was lacking. In this regard, I believe that the integration of interactive problem-solving method within the traditional framework of conflict resolution and its implementation in protracted conflicts would bring us closer to successful resolution processes.

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