

## 12 A social-psychological approach to conflict analysis and resolution\*

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### Introduction

The end of the Cold War has changed the character of international conflict, but it has not reduced the prevalence of violent conflict, the human suffering that it causes, or the threat that it poses to the wellbeing and survival of the human species. Thus, during recent years, there has been a proliferation of deadly, deep-rooted conflicts between ethnic and other identity groups within and across nation-states – conflicts often marked by violence against civilians, ethnic cleansing, and genocidal actions. There has also been a rise in terrorism and counterterrorism around the world, undermining the peace and development of established and emerging states.

Psychological theory and research can make useful contributions to the understanding and amelioration of the violent manifestations of international conflict. Indeed, psychological concepts and findings have been used increasingly in the study of international conflict and international relations more generally as well as in the development of new approaches to conflict resolution. This chapter offers a perspective on international conflict that is anchored in social-psychological theory and research and that, in turn, informs the practice of conflict resolution. Social-psychological analysis is designed to complement (and not to replace) approaches based on structural or strategic analysis by providing a special lens for viewing international conflict that brings some of its less explored dimensions into focus.

In this spirit, the chapter begins with a discussion of several propositions about the nature of international conflict that flow from a social-psychological perspective and that have clear implications for conflict resolution. It then describes social-psychological processes characteristic of conflict interaction that contribute to the escalation and perpetuation of conflict and that must be reversed if such conflict is to be resolved. It concludes with a very brief discussion of the implications of this approach for conflict resolution, which are presented in much greater detail in Ronald Fisher's chapter in the present volume.<sup>1</sup>

### The nature of international conflict

A social-psychological perspective can expand on and enrich the analysis of international conflict provided by the realist or neorealist schools of international relations or other, more traditional approaches. While acknowledging the importance of objectively anchored

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national interests, it explores the subjective factors that set constraints on rationality. Without denying the primacy of the state in the international system, a social-psychological perspective opens the "black box" of the state as unitary actor and analyzes processes within and between the societies that underlie state action. Fully recognizing the role of power in international relations, it postulates a broader range of influence processes (and, indeed, of definitions of power) that play a role in international politics. And, while affirming the importance of structural factors in determining the course of an international conflict, it conceives of conflict as a dynamic process, shaped by changing realities, interests, and relationships between the conflicting parties.

These observations suggest four general propositions about international conflict that call for social-psychological concepts and data. The four propositions are particularly relevant to existential conflicts between identity groups; that is, conflicts in which the collective identities of the parties are engaged and in which the continued existence of the groups is seen to be at stake. Thus, the propositions apply most directly to ethnic or ideological conflicts, but they also apply to more mundane interstate conflicts insofar as issues of national identity and existence come into play – as they often do.

#### ***Conflict as a process driven by collective needs and fears***

According to the first proposition, 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. Human needs are often articulated and fulfilled through important collectivities such as the ethnic group, the national group, and the state. Conflict arises when a group is faced with non-fulfillment or threat to the fulfillment of basic needs, including not only material needs such as food, shelter, physical safety, and physical wellbeing but also psychological needs such as identity, security, recognition, autonomy, self-esteem, and a sense of justice (Burton 1988, 1990). Moreover, needs for identity and security and similarly powerful collective needs, as well as the fears and concerns about survival associated with them, contribute heavily to the escalation and perpetuation of conflict once it has started. Even when the conflicting parties have come to the conclusion that it is in their best interest to put an end to the conflict, they resist going to the negotiating table or making the accommodations necessary for the negotiations to move forward out of fear that they will be propelled into concessions that, in the end, will leave their very existence compromised. The fears that drive existential conflicts lie at the heart of the relationship between the conflicting parties, going beyond the cycle of fears resulting from the dynamics of the security dilemma discussed by Jervis (1976).

Collective fears and needs, although more pronounced in ethnic conflicts, play a part in all international conflicts. They combine with objective factors – a state's resources, the ethnic composition of its population, its access to the sea (or lack thereof), and the like – in determining how different segments of a society perceive state interests and what ultimately becomes the national interest as defined by the dominant elites. Similarly, all conflicts – interstate as well as ethnic – represent a combination of rational and irrational factors, and in each type of conflict the mix may vary from case to case. Some ethnic conflicts may be preponderantly rational, just as some interstate conflicts may be preponderantly irrational. Furthermore, in all international conflicts, the needs and fears of populations are mobilized and often manipulated by the leadership, with varying degrees of demagoguery and cynicism. Even when manipulated, collective needs and fears represent authentic reactions within the population and become the focus of societal action.

They may be linked to individual needs and fears. For example, in highly violent ethnic conflicts, the fear of annihilation of one's group is often tied to a fear of personal annihilation (and for good reason).

The conception of conflict as a process driven by collective needs and fears implies, first and foremost, that conflict resolution – if it is to lead to a stable peace that both sides consider just and to a new relationship that enhances the welfare and development of the two societies – must address the fundamental needs and deepest fears of the populations. From a normative point of view, such a solution can be viewed as the operationalization of justice within a problemsolving approach to conflict resolution. Another implication of a human needs orientation noted by Burton (1988) is that the psychological needs on which it focuses – security, identity, recognition, and the like – are not inherently zero-sum, although they are usually seen as such in deep-rooted conflicts. Thus, it may well be possible to shape an integrative solution that satisfies both sets of needs, which in turn might make it easier to settle issues such as territory and resources through distributive bargaining. Finally, the view of conflict as a process driven by collective needs and fears suggests that conflict resolution must, at some stage, provide for certain processes that take place at the level of individuals and interactions between individuals, for example, taking the other society's perspective – what White (1984) has called “realistic empathy” – as well as creative problemsolving, learning, and insight.

#### *Conflict as an intersocietal process*

Focusing on the needs and fears of the populations in conflict reminds one that international conflict is an intersocietal process, not merely an intergovernmental or interstate phenomenon. The conflict, particularly in the case of protracted ethnic struggles, becomes an inescapable part of daily life for each society and its component elements. Thus, analysis of conflict requires attention, not only to its strategic, military, and diplomatic dimensions, but also to its economic, psychological, cultural, and social-structural dimensions. Interactions along these dimensions, both within and between the conflicting societies, shape the political environment in which governments function and define the political constraints under which they operate.

An intersocietal view of conflict points to the role of internal divisions within each society, which often play a major part in exacerbating or even creating conflicts between the societies. They impose constraints on political leaders pursuing a policy of accommodation, in the form of accusations by opposition elements that the leaders are jeopardizing national existence, as well as in the form of anxieties and doubts within the general population that are both fostered and exploited by the opposition elements. However, the internal divisions may also provide potential levers for change in the direction of conflict resolution by challenging the monolithic image of the enemy that parties in conflict tend to hold and by enabling them to deal with each other in a more differentiated way. They point to the presence of potential partners for negotiation on the other side and thus provide the opportunity for forming pro-negotiation “coalitions across the conflict lines.” To contribute to conflict resolution, any such coalition must necessarily remain an “uneasy coalition,” lest its members lose their credibility and political effectiveness within their respective communities (Kelman 1993).

Another implication of an intersocietal view of conflict is that negotiations and third party efforts should ideally be directed not to mere settlement of the conflict, in the form of a brokered political agreement, but to its resolution. A political agreement may be

adequate for terminating relatively specific, containable interstate disputes, but conflicts that engage the collective identities and existential concerns of the adversaries require a process conducive to structural and attitude change, to reconciliation, and to the transformation of the relationship between the two societies. Finally, an intersocietal analysis of conflict suggests a view of diplomacy as a complex mix of official and unofficial efforts with complementary contributions. The peaceful termination or management of conflict requires binding agreements that can be achieved only at the official level, but many different sectors of the two societies must be involved in creating a favorable environment for negotiating and implementing such agreements.

### ***Conflict as a multifaceted process of mutual influence***

International conflict is best understood as a multifaceted process of mutual influence and not just a contest in the exercise of coercive power. Much of international politics entails a process of mutual influence in which each party seeks to protect and promote its own interests by shaping the behavior of the other party. Conflict occurs when these interests clash; that is, when attainment of one party's interests (and fulfillment of the needs that underlie them) threatens, or is perceived to threaten, the interests (and needs) of the other party. Therefore, in pursuing the conflict, the parties engage in mutual influence, designed to advance their own positions and to block the adversary. Similarly, in conflict resolution, by negotiation or other means, the parties exercise influence to induce the adversary to come to the table, to make concessions, to accept an agreement that meets their interests and needs, and to live up to that agreement. Third parties also exercise influence in conflict situations by backing one party or the other, by mediating between them, or by maneuvering to protect their own interests.

Influence in international conflict typically relies on a mixture of threats and inducements, with the balance often on the side of force and threat of force. Thus, the US-Soviet relationship during the Cold War was predominantly framed in terms of an elaborate theory of deterrence; that is, a form of influence designed to keep the other side from doing what one does not want it to do, as described in important books by Schelling (1963), George and Smoke (1974), and Jervis, Lebow, and Stein (1985). In other conflict relationships, the emphasis may be on compellence, that is a form of influence designed to make the other side do what one wants it to do. Such coercive strategies entail serious costs and risks, and their effects may be severely limited. For example, they are likely to be reciprocated by the other side and lead to escalation of the conflict, and they are unlikely to change behavior to which the other side is committed. Thus, the effective exercise of influence in international conflict requires a broadening of the repertoire of influence strategies, at least to the extent of combining "carrots and sticks," that is, of supplementing the negative incentives that typically dominate international conflict relationships with positive incentives (e.g. economic benefits, international approval, a general reduction in the level of tension). An example of an approach based on the systematic use of positive incentives is Osgood's (1962) GRIT (Graduated and Reciprocated Initiatives in Tension reduction) strategy. Egyptian President Anwar Sadat, in his 1977 trip to Jerusalem, undertook a unilateral initiative with the expectation (partly pre-negotiated) of Israeli reciprocation, but – unlike GRIT – he started with a large fundamental concession in the anticipation that negotiations would fill in the intervening steps (Kelman 1985).

Effective use of positive incentives requires more than offering the other party whatever rewards, promises, or confidence-building measures seem to be most readily available. It

requires actions that address the fundamental needs and fears of the other party. Thus, the key to an effective influence strategy based on the exchange of positive incentives is responsiveness to the other party's concerns; that is, actively exploring ways in which each party can help to meet the other's needs and allay its fears, as well as ways in which the parties can help each other to overcome the constraints within their respective societies against taking the actions that each wants the other to take. The advantage of a strategy of responsiveness is that it allows each party to exert influence on the other through positive steps (not threats) that are within its own capacity to take. The process is greatly facilitated by communication between the parties to identify actions that are politically feasible for each party and yet are likely to have an impact on the other.

A key element in an influence strategy based on responsiveness is mutual reassurance, which is particularly critical in any effort to resolve an existential conflict. The negotiation literature suggests that parties are often driven to the table by a "mutually hurting stalemate" (Zartman 1989), which makes negotiations more attractive than continuing the conflict. But parties in existential conflicts are afraid of negotiations, even when the status quo has become increasingly painful and they recognize that a negotiated agreement is in their interest. To advance the negotiating process under such circumstances, it is at least as important to reduce the parties' fears as it is to increase their pain.

Mutual reassurance can take the form of acknowledgments, symbolic gestures, or confidence-building measures. To be maximally effective, such steps need to address the other party's central needs and fears as directly as possible – as illustrated in Sadat's words and actions during his dramatic visit to Jerusalem in 1977 (Kelman 1985). In deep-rooted conflicts, acknowledgment of what was heretofore denied – in the form of recognition of each other's humanity, nationhood, rights, grievances, and interpretation of history – is an important source of reassurance that the other party may indeed be ready to negotiate an agreement that addresses one's own fundamental concerns. By signaling acceptance of the other side's legitimacy, each party reassures the other that negotiations and concessions no longer constitute mortal threats to its security and national existence. By confirming the other side's narrative, each party reassures the other that a compromise does not represent an abandonment of its identity.

An influence strategy based on responsiveness to each other's needs and fears, and on the resulting search for ways in which to reassure and benefit each other, has important advantages from a long-term point of view. It does not merely elicit specific desired behaviors from the other party but can contribute to a creative redefinition of the conflict, joint discovery of mutually satisfactory solutions, and transformation of the relationship between the parties.

#### ***Conflict as an interactive process with an escalatory, self-perpetuating dynamic***

The influence strategies employed in a conflict relationship take on special significance in light of the fourth proposition, which views international conflict as an interactive process and not merely a sequence of action and reaction by stable actors. In intense conflict relationships, the natural course of interaction between the parties tends to reinforce and deepen the conflict rather than reduce and resolve it. The interaction is governed by a set of norms and is guided by a set of images that create an escalatory, self-perpetuating dynamic. This dynamic can be reversed through skillful diplomacy, imaginative leadership, third party intervention, and institutionalized mechanisms for managing and resolving conflict.

But in the absence of such deliberate efforts the spontaneous interaction between the parties is more likely than not to increase distrust, hostility, and the sense of grievance.

The needs and fears of parties engaged in intense conflict impose perceptual and cognitive constraints on their processing of new information, with the resulting tendency to underestimate the occurrence and the possibility of change. The ability to take the role of the other is severely impaired. Dehumanization of the enemy makes it even more difficult to acknowledge and access the other's perspective. Inaccessibility of the other's perspective contributes significantly to some of the psychological barriers to conflict resolution described by Ross and Ward (1995). The dynamics of conflict interaction tend to entrench the parties in their own perspectives on history and justice. Conflicting parties display particularly strong tendencies to find evidence that confirms their negative images of each other and to resist evidence that would seem to disconfirm these images. Thus, interaction not only fails to contribute to a revision of the enemy image but actually helps to reinforce and perpetuate it. Interaction guided by mirror images of a demonic enemy and a virtuous self (Bronfenbrenner 1961; White 1965) creates self-fulfilling prophecies by inducing the parties to engage in the hostile actions they expect from one another.

Self-fulfilling prophecies are also generated by the conflict norms that typically govern the interaction between parties engaged in an intense conflict. Expressions of hostility and distrust toward the enemy are not just spontaneous manifestations of the conflict; they are normatively prescribed behaviors. The assumption of political leaders that their publics' evaluation of them depends on their adherence to these norms influences their tactical and strategic decisions, their approach to negotiations, their public pronouncements, and (ultimately) the ways in which they educate their own publics. For the publics, in turn, adherence to these norms is often taken as an indicator of group loyalty. Thus, the discourse in deep-rooted conflicts is marked by mutual delegitimization and dehumanization. Interaction governed by this set of norms – at both the micro and the macro level – contributes to escalation and perpetuation of the conflict. Parties that systematically treat each other with hostility and distrust are likely to become increasingly hostile and untrustworthy.

The dynamics of conflict interaction create a high probability that opportunities for conflict resolution will be missed. Parties whose interaction is shaped by the norms and images rooted in the history of the conflict are systematically constrained in their capacity to respond to the occurrence and possibility of change. Each party finds it difficult to communicate the changes that have occurred on its own side, to notice the changes that have occurred on the other side, and to explore the possibilities for change that would serve both sides' interests. Therefore, conflict resolution efforts require promotion of a different kind of interaction that is capable of reversing the escalatory and self-perpetuating dynamics of conflict – an interaction conducive to sharing perspectives, differentiating the enemy image, and developing a language of mutual reassurance and a new discourse based on the norms of responsiveness and reciprocity.

### **Psychological processes promoting conflict**

Social-psychological analysis can be particularly helpful in explaining why and how, once a conflict has started, normative and perceptual processes that promote its escalation and perpetuation are set into motion 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.

*Normative processes*

A variety of interaction processes at the mass and elite levels of conflicting societies that influence the evolving course of the conflict are governed by a set of powerful social norms that tend to encourage actions and attitudes conducive to the generation, escalation, and perpetuation of conflict and that tend to inhibit the perception and occurrence of change in the direction of tension reduction and conflict resolution.

*Formation of collective moods*

With periodic shifts in collective mood, public opinion can act as both a resource and a constraint for political leaders in the foreign policy process. In principle, public opinion can provide support for either aggressive or conciliatory policies but, under the prevailing norms in an intense protracted conflict, leaders are more likely to expect – and mobilize – public support for aggressive policies than for conciliatory ones.

Apart from transitory moods, certain pervasive states of consciousness underlie public opinion in a society engulfed in a deep-rooted conflict, reflecting the existential concerns and central national narratives widely shared within the population. In many cases, such as Serbia, Northern Ireland, and the Middle East, historical traumas serve as the points of reference for current events. Although these memories may be manipulated by demagogic leaders, they are part of the people's consciousness and are available for manipulation, as is the associated sense of injustice, abandonment, and vulnerability. The effect of such collective moods is to bring to the fore powerful social norms that support escalatory actions and inhibit moves toward compromise and accommodation.

When fundamental concerns about survival and identity are tapped, national leaders, with full expectation of public support, are far more ready to risk war than to take risks for peace, in line with the proposition derived from prospect theory (see Levy 1992) that people are more willing to take risks to avoid losses than to achieve gains. Any change in the established view of the enemy and of the imperatives of national defense comes to be seen as a threat to the nation's very existence.

*Mobilization of group loyalties*

Public support is an essential resource for political leaders engaged in a conflict relationship, both in ensuring the public's readiness to accept the costs that their policies may entail and in enhancing the credibility of their threats and promises to the other side. The primary means of gaining public support is the mobilization of group loyalties. Arousal of nationalist and patriotic sentiments, particularly in a context of national security and survival, is a powerful tool in garnering public support. It may evoke automatic endorsement of the policies that the leadership defines as necessary and a willingness to make sacrifices that cannot be entirely understood in terms of rational calculations of costs and benefits. The nation generates such powerful identifications and loyalties because it brings together two central psychological dispositions: the need for self-protection and the need for self-transcendence (Kelman 1969, 1997).

Group loyalties can potentially be mobilized in support of conciliatory policies. Political leaders may promote painful compromises and concessions to the adversary on the grounds that the security, wellbeing, integrity, and survival of the nation require such actions. Indeed, leaders with impeccable nationalist credentials, such as Charles de Gaulle,

Yitzhak Rabin, and F. W. de Klerk, are often most effective in leading their populations toward peaceful resolutions of conflicts once they have decided that this approach best serves their national interests. In general, however, group loyalties are more readily available to mobilize support for aggressive policies than for conciliatory ones. Proposals for aggressive actions can more easily rely on the vocabulary of nationalism, which characteristically marks off the ingroup from the outgroup to the detriment of the latter. An appeal to defend the nation against an imminent attack, in particular, is more compelling than an appeal to seize a promising opportunity, as prospect theory might predict. Also, such an appeal elicits a nearly unanimous response among members of the population, whereas an appeal to take advantage of an opportunity for peace holds no attraction to that segment of the population that equates peace with surrender.

Processes of group loyalty create barriers to change in a conflict relationship. Group loyalty requires adherence to the group's norms, which call for a militant, unyielding, and suspicious attitude toward the enemy in an intense conflict. Militancy and intransigence thus become the measures of loyalty. As a result, particularly in situations of perceived national crisis, the militants exercise disproportionate power and often a veto over official actions and policies. They impose severe constraints on the ability of leaders to explore peaceful options. Dissent from the dominant conflict norms becomes defined as an act of disloyalty and is suppressed, further undermining the exploration of peaceful alternatives.

#### *Decisionmaking processes*

The way in which decisions are made in a conflict situation tends to inhibit the search for alternatives and the exploration of new possibilities, particularly when decisionmakers are operating in an atmosphere of crisis. These tendencies are by no means inevitable, and there are historical instances of creative decisionmaking in dangerous crisis situations, for example the Cuban missile crisis (see Allison 1971). However, conflict norms do impose serious burdens on the decisionmaking process.

A major source of reluctance to explore new options can be found in the domestic constraints under which decisionmakers labor. In an intense conflict situation, adherence to the conflict norms tends to be seen as the safest course of action. Cautious decisionmakers assume that they are less vulnerable domestically if they stay with the conflict's status quo, adhere to a discourse of hostility and distrust vis-à-vis the other side, or threaten escalatory actions than if they take steps toward accommodation and compromise. The search for alternatives in view of changing realities is also inhibited by institutionalized rigidities in the decisionmaking apparatus. Decisionmakers and their bureaucracies operate within a framework of assumptions about available choices, effective strategies, and constituency expectations – shaped by the prevailing conflict norms – that may make them unaware of the occurrence and possibility of change. Furthermore, they often rely on established procedures and technologies, which are more likely to be geared toward pursuing the conflict – by military and other means – than resolving it.

The microprocesses of action and interaction in crisis decisionmaking further inhibit the exploration of new options. At the level of individual decisionmakers, the stress they experience in situations of crisis, when consequential decisions must be made under severe time pressures, limits the number of alternatives they consider and impels them to settle quickly on the dominant response, which, in intense conflicts, is likely to be aggressive and escalatory (Holsti 1972; Lebow 1987). At the level of decisionmaking groups, crisis



decisionmaking often leads to "groupthink" (Janis 1982), a concurrence-seeking tendency designed to maintain the group's cohesiveness. Decisionmaking under these circumstances is more likely to produce policies and actions that perpetuate and escalate the conflict than innovative ideas for conflict resolution.

#### *Negotiation and bargaining processes*

The norms governing negotiation and bargaining between parties involved in long-standing conflict strongly encourage zero-sum thinking, which equates the enemy's loss with one's own gain. Negotiation, even distributive bargaining in its narrowest form, is possible only when the parties define the situation – at least at some level – as a win-win, mixed-motive game in which they have both competitive and cooperative goals. Each party, while pursuing its own interest, must actively seek out ways in which the adversary can also win and appear to be winning. But this is precisely the kind of effort that is discouraged by the conflict norms.

At the micro level, negotiators in an intense conflict tend to evaluate their performance by the forcefulness with which they present their own case and by their effectiveness in resisting compromise. To listen to what the other side needs and to help the other side achieve its goals would violate the conflict norms and might subject the negotiators to criticism from their own constituencies, particularly from the hard-line domestic opposition. At the macro level, the parties tend to pursue an overall outcome that strengthens their own strategic position and weakens that of the adversary, even when they recognize their common interest in negotiating certain specific issues. Such a strategy reduces the other party's incentive for concluding an agreement and its ability to mobilize public support for whatever agreement is negotiated. Zero-sum thinking at both levels undermines the negotiating process, causing delays, setbacks, and repeated failures.

#### *Structural and psychological commitments*

Finally, conflict creates certain commitments that take on a life of their own and contribute to structural changes conducive to the escalation and perpetuation of the conflict (see Rubin *et al.* 1994). Most obviously, in a conflict of long standing, various individuals, groups, and organizations (e.g. military, political, industrial, scholarly) develop a vested interest in maintaining the conflict as a source of profit, power, status, and/or *raison d'être*. Others, although not benefiting from the conflict as such, may have a strong interest in forestalling a compromise solution because it would not address their particular grievances or fulfill their particular aspirations. Vested interests do not necessarily manifest themselves in deliberate attempts to undermine efforts at conflict resolution. They may take indirect and subtle forms such as interpreting ambiguous realities and choosing between uncertain policy alternatives in ways that favor continuation of the conflict.

Vested interests and similar structural commitments to the conflict are bolstered by psychological commitments. People involved in a long-standing and deep-rooted conflict tend to develop a worldview that is built around the conflict and would be threatened by an end to the conflict. Resistance to change is likely to be more pronounced when the cognitive structure or ideology in which the view of the conflict is embedded is more elaborate, because changing this view would have wider ramifications. In an intense conflict, the image of the enemy is often a particularly important part of people's worldview, with implications for their national identity, view of their own society, and interpretation

of history. This is one reason why images of the enemy, to which I turn next, are highly resistant to change and contribute to the escalatory and self-perpetuating dynamic of conflict.

### *Perceptual processes*

Perceptual and cognitive processes, that is the ways in which people interpret and organize conflict-related information, play a major role in escalating and perpetuating conflict and create barriers to redefining and resolving the conflict despite changing realities and interests. Two perceptual processes that characterize mutual images of parties in conflict can account for this effect: the formation of mirror images and the resistance of images to contradictory information.

#### *Mirror image formation*

As noted earlier, Bronfenbrenner (1961) and White (1965), social psychologists writing about US-Soviet relations, first noted the formation of mirror images as a characteristic of many conflict relationships. Both parties tend to develop parallel images of the self and the other, except with the values reversed. The core content of mirror images is captured by the good-bad dimension. Each side sees itself as virtuous and peaceful, arming only for defensive reasons and prepared to compromise. The enemy, in contrast, is seen as evil and hostile, arming for aggressive reasons and responsive only to the language of force.

A typical corollary of the good-bad images in protracted conflicts is the view that the other party's aggressiveness is inherent in its nature (e.g. ideology, religion, national character, political system), whereas any signs of aggressiveness on one's own part are entirely reactive and defensive. In the language of attribution theory (Jones and Nisbett 1971), the enemy's aggression is explained in dispositional terms, whereas one's own aggression is explained in situational terms. Another common corollary of the good-bad image, one that derives from the virtuous self-image, is the assumption on each side that the enemy knows very well that "we" are not threatening them. Since its own basic decency and peacefulness, and the provocation to which it has been subjected, are so obvious to each side, it assumes that they must also be obvious to the other side. Apart from such generic features of mirror images, which arise from the dynamics of intergroup conflict across the board, mirror images in any given case may reflect the dynamics of the specific conflict. Thus, ethnic conflicts may be characterized by mutual denial of the other side's national identity accompanied by efforts to delegitimize the other's national movement and claim to nationhood, by mutual fear of national and personal annihilation, by a mutual sense of victimization by the other side, and/or by a mutual view of the other side as a source of one's own humiliation and vulnerability.

The mirror image concept implies that certain symmetries in the parties' reactions arise from the very nature of conflict interaction and that they play an important role in escalating the conflict. There is no assumption that all images of the self and the enemy are mirror images, that images on the two sides are equally inaccurate, or that there is empirical symmetry in the two sides' historical experiences and current situation or moral equivalence in their positions. However, the dynamics of the conflict relationship produce a degree of parallelism in some of the images developed by both participants in that relationship, arising out of the motivational and cognitive contexts in which they operate. At the level of motivation, each side is concerned with "looking good" when blame for the conflict

events is being apportioned. Therefore, political leaders feel a strong need to persuade themselves, their own people, the rest of the world, and future historians that the blame rests with the enemy. Cognitively, each side views the conflict from its own perspective and is convinced that it is acting defensively and with the best intentions (painfully aware of its own needs, fears, historical traumas, grievances, suspicions, and political constraints) and that this is so self-evident that it must be equally clear to the enemy.

Mirror images produce a spiraling effect (exemplified by the classical pattern of an arms race) because each side interprets any hostile action by the other as an indication of aggressive intent against which it must defend itself, while its own reactions – whose defensive nature it assumes to be obvious to the enemy – are taken by the other as signs of aggressive intent. The effect of mirror images is accentuated insofar as the enemy's ideology or national character is perceived to be inherently aggressive and expansionist. In addition to the escalatory effect of mirror images, they tend to make conflicts more intractable because the sharp contrast between the innocent self and the aggressive other makes it difficult to break out of a zero-sum conception of the conflict. However, the concept of mirror images may be a useful tool in conflict resolution. For example, in problemsolving workshops, the parties' discovery that their own actions are perceived differently by the other side and by themselves may open them up to the possibility that the reverse may be true as well. Thus, they may gain access to each other's perspective, insight into the escalatory effects of such two-directional differences in perception, and awareness of the need for mutual reassurance to set a de-escalatory process in motion.

#### *Resistance to contradictory information*

The second feature of conflict images, their high propensity to resisting contradictory information, inhibits the perception of change and the expectation of future change. A great deal of social-psychological theorizing and research has addressed the general phenomenon of the persistence of attitudes and beliefs in the face of new information that, from an outside point of view, challenges their validity, but is somehow neutralized or ignored. Research has focused on several types of mechanisms that account for resistance to contradictory information, including selectivity, consistency, attribution, and the self-fulfilling prophecy.

The concepts of selective exposure, selective perception, and selective recall all point to the fact that people's attitudes help to determine the kind of information that is available to them. People are more likely to seek out and be exposed to information that confirms their existing attitudes and to perceive and remember new information in ways that fit into their pre-existing cognitive framework. The various models of cognitive consistency – e.g. Heider's (1958) theory of cognitive balance and Festinger's (1957) theory of cognitive dissonance – suggest that, in the interest of maintaining consistency, people tend to screen out information that is incongruent with their existing beliefs and attitudes. Although inconsistent information may also instigate attitude change, it is more likely to be resisted when the existing attitudes are strongly held and have wide ramifications, as is the case with enemy images. Attribution mechanisms, linked to what Ross (1977) called "the fundamental attribution error," also promote confirmation of the original enemy image. Hostile actions by the enemy tend to be attributed dispositionally, providing further evidence of the enemy's inherently aggressive, implacable character, whereas conciliatory actions are explained away as reactions to situational forces, requiring no revision of the original image – a phenomenon observed in research by Rosenberg and Wolfsfeld (1977),

Heradstveit (1981), and Rouhana (1997). Finally, interactions between conflicting parties tend to produce self-fulfilling prophecies by creating conditions that cause one's adversaries to behave in line with one's expectations – to take on the roles in which they have been cast by the other side (Weinstein and Deutschberger 1963) – thereby confirming the parties' original attitudes.

The mechanisms that account for resistance to disconfirming information are particularly powerful in a conflict relationship for several reasons. First, images of the enemy and conflict-related self-images are central aspects of the national consensus; therefore, resistance to disconfirming information is reinforced by strong normative pressures. Second, in a conflict relationship, the opportunities and capacity for taking the perspective of the other side are limited, and this reduces the impact of potentially new information about the varieties, changes, and signs of flexibility in the other side's views. Third, the resistance of enemy images to disconfirmation is magnified by strong beliefs about the unchangeability of the enemy and is reinforced by the view that it is dangerous or even treasonous to propose that the enemy has changed or will change.

Despite all of the reasons why conflict images are particularly resistant to contradictory information, they are not immutable. Social-psychological evidence suggests that they can change, and historical evidence shows that they do change. The challenge for scholars and practitioners of international conflict resolution is to devise the means to overcome their resistance to change.

### **Implications for conflict resolution**

Social-psychological analysis can contribute to international peacemaking by identifying the psychological and social processes that generate and escalate violent conflicts and impede their peaceful resolution, as well as by identifying the conditions and procedures required for breaking and reversing the conflict cycle and setting in motion a process of change in the direction of conflict resolution and reconciliation. Social-psychological principles have also informed the development and application of various unofficial micro-level efforts at conflict resolution, designed to complement official diplomacy in a larger multidimensional peace process. Efforts along these lines were pioneered by John Burton (1969). Ronald Fisher (1997; see also his chapter in the present volume) has summarized and integrated – under the rubric of interactive conflict resolution – the range of models for intervening in protracted conflicts between identity groups based on social-psychological analysis. My own model, interactive problemsolving (Kelman 1998, 2002), and the problemsolving workshops through which it is operationalized belong to this family of approaches.

The implications of social-psychological analysis for the macro process of conflict resolution, as well as for the micro process of problemsolving workshops and related activities, can be summarized by returning briefly to the four propositions about the nature of international conflict spelled out earlier in this chapter. The view of conflict as a process driven by collective needs and fears serves as a reminder that a conflict cannot be genuinely resolved until these needs and fears of the parties are addressed. The view of conflict as an intersocietal process points to the limits of political agreements signed by governments, often under the pressure, or with the mediation, of outside powers or international organizations; suggests a view of diplomacy as a complex array of complementary official and unofficial processes; and helps to counteract the monolithic image that parties in conflict tend to have of each other by encouraging them to attend to what is happening within

the other society and to the diversity of tendencies that it encompasses. The view of conflict as a multifaceted process of mutual influence suggests which strategies and tactics of influence between conflicting parties are most conducive to conflict resolution and to the development of a long-term peaceful relationship.

Finally, the view of conflict as an interactive process with an escalatory, self-perpetuating dynamic suggests that conflict resolution efforts must be designed to counteract and reverse this conflict dynamic. A conflict relationship generates images and norms that entrench the conflict and create barriers to change that inhibit conflict resolution. Therefore, conflict resolution efforts must be geared to discovering the possibilities for change, identifying the conditions for change, and overcoming the resistances to change. Openness to change and reversal of the conflict dynamic depend on the establishment of a new discourse among the parties characterized by a shift in emphasis from power politics and threat of coercion to mutual responsiveness, reciprocity, and invitation to a new relationship.

### Note

- 1 The ideas presented in this chapter are discussed in fuller detail in Kelman (2007). The links between a social-psychological analysis and the resolution of conflict are explored more fully in Kelman and Fisher (2003).

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