

How to Break the Cycle?

Dealing with emotions of pride, shame, guilt and humiliation in conflict

By Marthe Hesselmanns

“I cannot express pride, I am from Palestine.” These words came from a participant when she was asked to show the emotion during a non-violence training. She argued that due to the deeply humiliating occupation of her land, she felt unable to be proud of anything. Undoubtedly, many youth active in peacebuilding activities will recognise this. Working with people from conflict areas it is likely to stumble on intense emotions. Sometimes they open up useful discussions. In many other cases however, their appearance blocks further communication, let alone reconciliation with perceived opponents. What happens in these situations and how can we deal with them within our work?

This article aims to explain the role of emotions that peacebuilders encounter in conflict and to identify ways to transform their destructive effects into constructive ones. The focus will be on the secondary emotions of pride, guilt, shame and humiliation that often linger underneath people’s conflict behaviour.

Discussing the sentiments’ main characteristics, the first part seeks to build a framework through which they can be recognised. Secondly, the article will provide a more profound analysis of emotions in the context of current conflicts, especially considering intergroup tensions. When does a sense of group discrimination trigger such intense feelings of shame that its members are willing to take up arms and humiliate again others? Concern for an individual or collective identity often plays a crucial role here. Besides this psychological dimension, attention will be paid to cultural and societal factors affecting the way people experience their struggles and express these feelings.

From here the last part moves on to translate theories into practice. Three stages of action will be identified, as well as training suggestions and dangers and dilemmas to keep in mind. As such, the article finally hopes to provide trainers and youth with applicable tools derived from social science theories to help them connect people and break vicious cycles of emotions and conflict.

Framework of the Four Emotions

Primary or Secondary

Efforts to explain emotions often raise more questions than they can answer. As each individual interprets her or his feelings differently, they are subjective and can hardly be generalised. Besides, who are we to look into another person’s head and heart? Theories in this respect hence do not so much provide solid evidence-based facts, but rather guidelines to better understand human behaviour. For they affect our deeds, whether constructive or destructive, and can run up so high that they dominate over rationality. In a complex chain of reactions, emotions become driving forces while logical arguments are either put to underpin them or simply cast aside.

In order to handle the many and often intertwined sentiments influencing human interaction it can help to distinguish them and know when, why and how they occur. A main distinction is often made between primary and secondary emotions. The first may include for instance anger, fear or happiness. They are spontaneous and nearly instinctive responses that can disappear as fast as they appear. Secondary emotions in turn often come up afterwards and remain for a longer period of time. Encompassing feelings like guilt or pride they result from more intricate chains of thinking and easily become mixed with other emotions. The end of war may for example first trigger cheerful spirits that later evolve into a sense of shame for having survived while others sacrificed their lives.

Among the secondary emotions those of pride, guilt, shame and humiliation deserve special attention. Though hard to detect, all four deeply pervade our lives and societies. They can linger underneath expressions of hatred and contribute to violent outbursts. Aggression against minorities might for instance happen in a temporary eruption of anger, while sentiments of pride on one’s own identity or fear for humiliation tend to foster a lasting atmosphere of discrimination. Being rather abstract as words or notions, these feelings are easily misunderstood or overlooked. It is therefore

important to have a closer look at some of their main characteristics. It should be noted here that the descriptions below are neither complete nor exclusive. All four emotions entail many different interpretations. Especially shame and humiliation are moreover often employed interchangeably. Rather than fixed definitions, the following ones are best regarded as starting points from where a further discussion on their meaning in conflict can take place.

Pride

The emotion of pride is first of all associated with satisfaction. People can feel proud on an action they have done well, the good person they believe they are or the group they affiliate with. It therefore enhances and is in turn enhanced by a sense of self-respect. On an individual level pride has the potential to empower people and strengthen their efforts. Felt collectively the emotion helps unify members within a group, affirming for instance a country's national identity. When emphasised, pride can also evolve into a sense of superiority. Upgrading one's own esteem might happen at the cost of others who are perceived inferior as opposed to the unique self. From here pride runs the risk of fuelling humiliation, hatred or even dehumanisation of those outside the own circle.

Guilt

Contrary to pride, guilt entails dissatisfaction with one's self or community. The feeling appears when people believe they have done something wrong. They fear that others will be or were harmed and blame themselves for the damage done. As such, this emotion can incorporate personal conscience as well as empathy for others. From here people might be motivated to change their behaviour and make up for their mistakes. At the same time guilt feelings may have a disturbing or even paralysing effect. An often-mentioned example is Germany, where remorse for its Nazi past has been impeding many constructive discussions on national identity. Moreover, the emotion is often redirected and can evolve into a negative spiral of blaming others and putting off one's own responsibility.

Shame

Shame is generally regarded as one of people's most intense and profound emotions. The feeling of dissatisfaction often goes deeper than in the case of guilt as it is not only about a mistake that might be mended, but mostly about the self. While a child might feel guilty because it failed to finish homework on time, shame is felt when the delay is attributed to its own stupidity. The emotion hence comes with and enhances a low sense of self-esteem as well as lack of power to change the situation. It touches upon one of people's basic needs: recognition and esteem for who they are. Subsequently, shame is often denied and hidden from others. Trivial in this regard is the fear for disapproval. Because of one's personal failure people believe they lose honour and respect among their peers. It often triggers feelings of unworthiness to connect or feel empathy with others. As a result, ashamed people might seek to withdraw from social relationships or resort to destructive behaviour as a way to command respect and regain control.

Humiliation

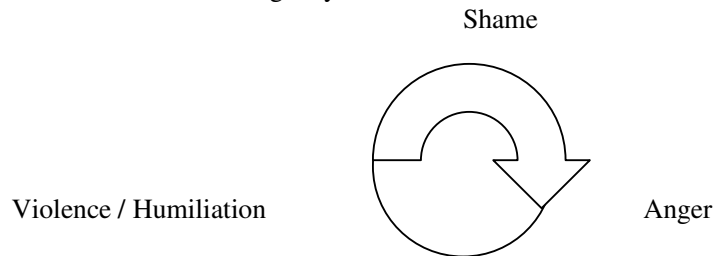
Humiliation resembles shame to the extent that it also involves severe damage to a person or group's self-esteem. People feel bad because of who they are and fear the consequential loss of honour and power. Different from what is usually the case with shame however, this sentiment is perceived to be largely undeserved and caused by others. This can for instance be the case with young Arabs who have to endure extensive investigations while their Caucasian peers can pass through custodies without questioning. Such an experience is often found humiliating as it excludes people because of their identity and devalues them in public. The great fear for disapproval from others combined with a broken self-image can trigger deep frustrations both individually and collectively. Caught in their own victimhood, humiliated people often have difficulty empathising with others. Responses can hence include apathy or aggression to revenge the experienced injustice.

Emotional Conflict Cycle

Explained separately, the emotions of pride, guilt, shame and humiliation might seem pretty clear-cut. When emerging in conflict situations however, they can become heavily entangled. Minor events in

which persons feel subjugated can trigger deep sentiments of degradation. Feeling poor about themselves, some turn inwards to seek protection within their own community. Others in turn redirect their frustration to those attacking them. Especially this last reaction provides a dangerous link leading up to a chain of violence. In an attempt to recuperate or safe face, ashamed people might humiliate others who in turn will also seek revenge. Hence, opponents can get trapped in a vicious cycle. Both see themselves as victims in the conflict and become incapable of understanding the other's position. Continuous acts of humiliation increasingly dehumanise the perceived enemy. Against such a rival even the most gruesome atrocities become justified as acts of defence, if they are acknowledged at all. Consequently, feelings of shame, anger and humiliation only grow as they take turns and help escalate the conflict.

Emotional conflict or shame-anger cycle



While such cycles can take place among individuals, they become even more dangerous when lifted to a collective level. When entire groups feel oppressed by others, feelings of shame and humiliation not only intensify but also generate fiercer reactions, with ethnic cleansing or genocide as ghastly extremes. In these situations the other two emotions play equally significant roles. Feelings of pride first of all might enhance intergroup differences when they place the so-called in-group above an inferior out-group. Simultaneously, they can blind people for their own aggression or help legitimise it as a way to gain strength. Secondly, guilt might enter the cycle in the form of blaming anyone else except the own community for the suffering.

When guilt on the other hand is felt within a person or group, it can also help break the cycle. People take up responsibility for their actions and seek to mend the harm done. Such constructive reactions can in potential be triggered by each of the four emotions. Even in the hardest of conflict situations persons like Nelson Mandela might emerge, seeking to overcome their shame and humiliation through reconciliation or employing their people's pride to stress its traditions of forgiveness and non-violence. The challenge remains how best to support their brave efforts.

Possible responses to shame and humiliation:

- Move away: withdrawal, apathy
- Move towards: appeasing, reconciliation, non-violent change, forgiveness
- Move against: anger, rage, violent

Understanding Emotions in Conflict

Before looking at how to break a vicious cycle, it is necessary to better understand its emergence. How can the involved emotions develop into these large collective traumas and which psychological, cultural and societal factors facilitate their protraction?

Psychological Factor: The Role of Identity

Crucial here is first of all the issue of identity. We all hold a deep longing to establish our own identity and be acknowledged by others as a valuable person. As came forward in the above descriptions, each of the four emotions relates to this self-esteem. They touch upon who we believe to be or like others to see us. Hitting at one of our most sensitive spots, shame and humiliation above all are likely to rouse harsh responses. The distinctive self needs to be guarded by any means, especially in public.

Identity matters also help explain how initially individual emotions transfer to a collective level. Self-image is to a large extent derived from membership to certain communities like family, religious or cultural associations. Together with the significance we attach to it, this membership forms our so-called “*social identity*.” It enables us to categorise others and ourselves and as such simplify the complex social structures we live in. More importantly however, a social identity enhances our self-esteem. When you belong to a larger collective it can give a sense of meaning as well as security and solidarity. Group members receive support and are respected for their contributions. This provides a vital sense of inclusion and positive valuation by others. Meanwhile it helps us feel special, not so much as an individual, but as part of a unique group in contrast with outsiders or other communities.

Meeting some of our most fundamental needs, recognition, inclusion and distinction, it is no wonder that group membership can become equally important as our own personal identity. A threat to the group is hence perceived to endanger the self and the other way round. When a religious community feels hampered in its expression, the members might take this as a personal attack. Simultaneously, only one person needs to experience discrimination to rouse indignation in its entire group. The more people join in these emotions the stronger they get and the easier a situation escalates, as could for instance be seen in the Danish cartoon riots: From a deep sense of humiliation over the drawings of their prophet, emotional protests emerged among Muslims all over the world. The violence that occurred in some cases further enhanced collective distress among supporters as well as opponents of the cartoons. Feeling strongly about tolerance and freedom of expression, the first experienced the protests as directly attacking their societies core values. The latter in turn linked the events with an overall sense of Western exclusion and discrimination purely because of their faith.

In such conflict situations, identity in combination with the four emotions can severely aggravate intergroup differences. Feeling humiliated and threatened by a rival group often enforces intergroup bonds and pride as a way to heighten internal strength. At the same time hatred towards the perceived enemy increases, causing similar feelings of shame and despair among this group. As the cycle continues, opponents get evermore enmeshed in mutual prejudice. Everything the other is proud of turns into a humiliation for the own community and is perceived to endanger its very existence.

A famous example of this so-called negative interdependency of identities can be seen in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Since both feel attached to the same land, the two parties view the national identity of the other as greatest threat to their idealised own. Where accepting Israeli nationhood might imply the disregard of Palestinian identity, Israelis often perceive their opponent’s national dream as equivalent to driving the Jews into the sea. Both are increasingly convinced of the other’s intention to destroy and unable to see their own mistakes. In such an existential struggle, emotions easily overrule any attempt to reasonable compromises, making the situation ever more intractable.

Cultural Factor: Different Expressions & Different Interpretations

So far the discussed emotions seem quite universal. We all know what it is like to feel proud or guilty. The way we deal with these feelings however, greatly differs from person to person. While public punishment might be mortally humiliating for some, it can hardly bother others. Not only can such differences become a catalyst or even cause for conflict, they also impede its peaceful resolution. As long as we do not know what is making our opponent so upset, it is hard to truly tackle the issues at stake. Cultural backgrounds play a major role in shaping emotions and are a vital second factor to analyse with respect to the emotional conflict cycle.

Before looking into the cultural dimension, the concept of “culture” itself needs clarification. Besides customs and traditions, it can entail norms and values as well as institutions and achievements of a particular nation, people or group. Meanwhile, culture does not necessarily have to link to ethnicity or nationality, but may just as well be based on sexual orientation or socio-economic class. Though still debated, it is largely considered a constructed phenomenon that can change in different circumstances. Cultural distinctions should therefore not be taken as fixed categories, but rather as tools that help put people’s thinking and behaviour in their contexts.

When seeking to explain cultural differences regarding emotions, an interesting division is often made between traditional and modern structures. In general the first stands for a rather collectivist mind-set

in which group interests prevail over individual needs and strong adherence is made to the community's rules and values. Traditional communication styles are characterised by fine patterns and strong but mostly implicit codes. Modern structures on the other hand tend to prioritise personal development above common welfare. Regulations and codes are minimised and left open for individual interpretation.

Both structures can be seen everywhere, whether within states, companies or families. Though they do occur in the extreme forms as described above, it is seldom a matter of black or white. Most people find themselves in between, combining modern as well as traditional aspects. Without putting them into static boxes, it can still be useful to identify a person or group's general position on the line. For a Chinese who has rather traditional beliefs and is used to extensive courtesies for instance, compact email messages by a partner from Germany can be deeply insulting. At the same time, submission to communal norms might seem a frustrating hassle to the more individualistic German.

While this theory is neither perfect nor exclusive, it holds significant consequences for how we deal with emotions in conflict. The more people attach to traditional structures, the more emphasis is often put on feelings of shame and humiliation. They quickly rise when common rules are breached. As the rules are believed trivial to safeguard a group's harmony, their violation might endanger an entire community. It can bring great public dishonour to those responsible as well as to their relatives. Shame and humiliation hence belong to the gravest emotions to be experienced in traditional contexts. Though some appreciate them as means to ensure peace and order, they are also easily exploited to impose hierarchal obedience. Emotions in this perspective are moreover likely to be linked with group affiliations. In order to maintain the community's status quo, emphasis is often put on differences with outsiders. Especially in case of intergroup tensions, guaranteeing boundaries becomes vital. In-group pride is blown up and the downgrading of others only reinforces its superiority.

In cultures with rather modern standards, shame and humiliation are not only understood but also valued differently. Instead of open embarrassment and damage to the group, they focus on personal failure. Being fired for example can severely harm someone's self-respect and cause a deep sense of inner disappointment. Meanwhile, more weight is often put on guilt feelings. From a sense of moral responsibility they are projected on oneself or others, restraining people and their actions for years.

When dealing with emotions in conflict such cultural differences can lead to severe misunderstandings. Referring back to the cartoon issue for instance, its escalation can also be attributed to the discrepancy between traditional structures prevailing among Muslim communities and the modern context of most Western societies. For the latter both the collective upheaval and immense feelings of humiliation were hard to imagine. Even if the cartoonist was perceived to have made a mistake, only the person himself was responsible. Blaming the entire Danish community might have been logic from a traditionally collectivist point of view, but incomprehensible and greatly offensive for the more individualist mind-set. In order to anticipate such clashes it is hence trivial to consider different perspectives on emotions.

TRADITIONAL	MODERN
Collective: Focus on other; group interest first; conflict endangers harmony	Individual: Focus on self; personal above collective interest; conflict is part of life
High context communication: Indirect; focus on building relations; follow common codes and rules to avoid shame / humiliation	Low context communication: Direct; focus on the issue / problem; few codes; personal interpretation
Shame: Concerns self; related to fear of breaking rules, harming group honour, losing face, exclusion, unworthiness to interact	Guilt: Concerns individual actions; empathy with others; related to personal responsibility and moral conscience
Large power distance: Characterised by hierarchal and powerful leadership	Small power distance: Characterised by participatory leadership, critical attitudes
In/out group differences: Receive more attention in order to maintain group boundaries	In/out group differences: Are less trivial as individuals can switch groups

Societal Factor: Narratives as Infrastructure for Emotions

While identity and culture greatly affect the way we perceive and deal with our emotions, they do not sufficiently explain their deep permeation in people's lives. How about the institutions, laws, organisations, beliefs and patterns that shape our daily reality? In other words: how about the influence of society? It is with this third major factor that emotions in conflict become truly intractable. Largely unconscious, these shared societal structures form, use and nurture our sentiments. From an early age onwards certain feelings like guilt or shame are often being internalised. First at home and later in school or through government campaigns Dutch children for instance learn about starvation in Africa and its link with their country's shameful colonial past. Similarly, a city's mayor might encourage traditional celebrations in order to unite its polarised citizens and as such employ as well as enhance feelings of pride.

In this respect the term sociopsychological infrastructure is often applied, incorporating the various beliefs and institutions that make up our societies. Especially in conflict situations this infrastructure can become highly influential. It for instance entails narratives that clarify the past history as well as present goals of the struggle people are facing. Such stories not only provide an explanation for the suffering endured but also a sense of solidarity and recognition. Myths of martyrdom can hence turn into a strong and welcome belief, allowing a father to take the death of his son as a valuable sacrifice for the sake of the community's existence rather than a waste of life. Societal and political structures additionally tend to become more appreciated in times of hardship as last straws to clutch on for safety and a way out of the misery.

While such infrastructure might help people cope with a harsh war context, this also makes it more vulnerable to manipulation. Through media, education and political discourse group leaders can influence their constituents' emotions and direct them to serve conflict interests. A notorious example is often found in the Bush administration's claim that Saddam's Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction. It not only tuned in with already existing public fears, but also further enhanced anxiety and enemy images towards the Middle East. In the face of post-September-11 patriotism moreover, few dared to overtly question this claim, dreading the shameful reproach of not being loyal.

Emotions can as such become effective instruments in conflict. Combining fear and contempt for the other with sentiments of pride and superiority for the own group, they form a highly dangerous cocktail that is likely to drive intergroup strife. It mobilises people, morally justifies atrocities and bolsters differences between parties. Shame and humiliation meanwhile are being put to contain internal opposition and enforce social and political control. Dissident opinions become linked with treachery, leading to public shaming or even violent retaliation whenever authorities are criticised.

With the use of a society's infrastructure, emotions can thus become profoundly and perilously entangled with conflict perceptions. On both sides, people grow up and are constantly fed with antagonistic views. Lingering feelings of pride and humiliation are reinforced to fit with the conflict rationale and encourage action against enemies. While minds are being closed, it becomes increasingly difficult to change repertoires. As mentioned above, narratives play a crucial role here. They channel emotions and help shape perspectives regarding the conflict. As such they have the potential to polarise as well as reconcile if used in a constructive manner. To illustrate the mostly unconscious effect of such narratives, the text box below describes how trainers for non-violence who participated at the Istanbul workshop reflect the influence of both family and societal stories or values on their work and life.

"There is always one official story and one hidden story in the houses, mostly just an atmosphere that proposed that there are also other stories than the one well known. And on this point we start to fuel potential conflicts and misunderstanding."

"Even if I recognize that the narratives from the past are not right anymore, it's not easy to change them because there is this feeling to betray the people I love, as if their death doesn't make any sense anymore."

(Quotations on narratives from German, Bosnian, Serb and Russian participants at Umbruch Seminar, 2008)

Three Stages of Action

However complex the cycles of emotions and conflict might seem, we can undertake actions to diminish their impact or even untangle them. Trivial in this respect is first of all a better understanding as well as acknowledgment of their role in strife and reconciliation. Three stages of action can thus be identified: awareness, recognition and transcendence. Though possibly sequential, their order is not fixed nor are they absolute. Rather than discarding or radically changing people's feelings, they focus on a constructive approach towards emotions in conflict by helping to break patterns or avoid manipulation. Below, each stage will be further elaborated on by identifying main objectives as well as how to apply them in a training context.

Awareness

Objectives: Enhance personal insight into emotions, their cultural context and the way they affect behaviour

Application: Exercises of experiential learning and reflection

- Self-assessment for trainers

In order to truly connect with people in conflict, it is useful to first become aware of our own emotions and assumptions as trainers or peacebuilders by for instance asking ourselves: Why did I engage with this project? How do I feel about the conflicts at stake? How have emotions of shame, humiliation, pride and guilt occurred in my life?

- Theatre, stories, sculptures

Acting out emotions through light arbitrary performances is often a good starting point to explore them as well as break down people's uneasiness to express their feelings. As a next step participants can be asked to think of stories in which they personally experienced certain emotions and portray them through short scenes or sculptures.

Exercise I: Theatre emotions: Facilitator asks participants to alternately feel various emotions, act them out silently and slowly enlarge their expressions while walking around. Thereupon groups are formed of 5 to 6 participants. Of each group a volunteer is asked to step outside while the groups prepare a short scene in which they will direct a certain emotion, e.g. anger, humiliation or pride, at the volunteer. The groups act out their scene one after the other, while the rest observes.
Debriefing: Reflection for the groups, volunteers and observers on what it was like to express, see and feel these emotions; space for discussion about associations with real life situations.

- Cultural dilemmas

Presenting complex situations involving various emotions and inviting participants to decide upon their action encourages reflection about where they put their priorities and how this relates to their cultural backgrounds.

Exercise II: Dilemmas: Participants can for instance be asked what they would do if a best friend tells you s/he accidentally hit someone with a car, without stopping afterwards and asks you to keep it quiet?
Debriefing: Link responses with differences between people in traditional and modern structures: focusing on relationships and fearing public humiliation, the first might prefer to sort it out with the friend personally while the latter reports it to the police, stressing individual responsibility and guilt.

Recognition

Objectives: Stimulate participants to acknowledge their own as well as others' emotions and become familiar with factors influencing them

Application: Exercises of exposure and exchange

- Checklist

An overview of major factors that often affect our emotions in conflict might serve as guide throughout a seminar. In case of emotional outbursts people can refer to them, hence learning to recognise and take into account possible catalysts of such eruptions.

Exercise III: A checklist can include:

- Identity: Fear to lose self-esteem or be excluded
- Cultural: Contrasting styles of communication, e.g. high vs. low context
- Societal: Antagonistic beliefs or stories about other groups

- Non-violent communication (NVC)

Working with Marshall Rosenberg's NVC techniques can contribute to constructive interaction and as such to mutual respect. By distinguishing their observations, feelings, profound needs and requests from others in a conflict, participants are stimulated to freely express themselves, listen with empathy, and acknowledge diverging perspectives and emotions.

Exercise IV: Discussion on symbols: Symbolic acts of recognition like attending each other's celebrations can often greatly contribute to soothing emotional tensions between opposing groups. As an exercise participants can be asked to discuss such actions first within their own group and later with others. The mentioned NVC steps are also functional in this respect, enabling participants to link their requests for actions from the other side with their fundamental needs in the conflict.

- Exchange of narratives

Telling each other about the conflict beliefs and patterns present in society is often a useful way to better understand our own and others' perspectives. To avoid presentations of assumed facts and figures, trainers can ask participants to concentrate on personal accounts: What stories or experiences affect their view on the situation and which feelings relate to them?

Transcendence

Objectives: Overcome emotional barriers in conflict and move beyond intergroup differences

Application: Activities of cooperative interaction

- Role playing

Simulation activities enable participants to experiment with different roles and emotions in conflict situations. Having experienced the effect of emotions through earlier (theatre) activities, they can here be encouraged to transform them and look for non-violent solutions to the disagreement.

Exercise V: Example role-play: A pregnant woman and her husband seek to pass through a checkpoint that was just closed. Participants play the roles of the couple and two soldiers who engage in an argument over allowing access. Enable participants to first feel the tensions and escalate the situation. After this initial explosion, the actors are asked to redo the scene in various different manners, each time changing their words and attitudes until they find a mutually acceptable way to tackle their disagreement. The facilitator can guide the process by asking them to experiment with different emotions and behaviour. As such, the soldiers might experience that whereas shaming and bullying only increased their resistance, respectful listening enhanced the couple's cooperation. Likewise, the latter might discover that calmly explaining their problem received more attention from the soldiers than blaming them for all their suffering.

Debriefing: Reflection on how to transform emotions and as such trigger more constructive behaviour of yourself and the other. To what extent were participants able to step out of feelings of shame and humiliation and how did that affect the conflict?

- Shared activities and goals

Working together towards a common goal can form a great unifying factor when dealing with participants from opposing sides of a conflict. When all agree and are sincerely motivated to reach an overall objective or withstand an overarching threat, it becomes easier to discard smaller disparities or frustrations. Sharing the same goals and having to interact to achieve them moreover helps people to break through humiliating and dehumanising stereotypes on perceived differences. Such activities can also be directed at participants' home communities, such as a joint campaign to raise awareness about different conflict perspectives.

Exercise VI: Discussion on positive potential: Besides protracting shame-anger cycles, each of the described psychological, cultural and societal factors can contribute to a more constructive approach towards emotions in conflict. When for instance a person or group feels secure about the own identity and no longer fears for its existence, it becomes easier to refrain from humiliating and even feel empathy for others. In every culture moreover, you can find values and narratives of peace that stimulate people to reflect upon their deeds and move towards reconciliation. The same can be said about societal structures which democratic or cooperative principles enlarge public participation and responsible decision-making. As an exercise, participants can be asked to jointly identify constructive dimensions in their societies as well as ways to foster them.

- Negotiation of identities

In order to move beyond differences, trainers can stimulate participants to investigate their identities together. Besides exploring what they have in common, it is important to distinguish between elements that are core to their existence and those that are rather marginal. Participants might for instance realise that hanging a national flag from a school building is only minor to more essential symbols of recognition such as equal access to education. Additionally, they can discover that where some matters like a particular piece of land mean a lot to one, they have little significance for the other and can thus be exchanged. Such so-called identity negotiations¹ are particularly vital to break patterns of negative interdependency. They show that reconciling steps can be taken and fundamental needs can be met without compromising an entire group's existence. This can in turn help people transcend their victimhood and lessen their anxieties for the other.

Dangers and Dilemmas

Clearly, none of the above stages and tools is without risks. Particularly when identity matters are involved, they are likely to bring up sensitivities and can even do more harm than good. What dangers and dilemmas should trainers keep in mind when challenging emotions in conflict and how to respond to them?

¹ The scholar Herbert Kelman has written various interesting articles on this subject, see the resources below.

Emotions as Touchy Subject

A first problem often comes up when participants are not comfortable to deal with their feelings individually, let alone in public. Some are simply not used to it, others might have an intrinsic contempt for anything non-rational or fear public embarrassment. The question rises to what extent trainers should urge participants to express and reflect upon their feelings? And how to deal with participants who feel less heard than others, ignored or even denounced?

Crucial in this respect is to be clear from the beginning that emotional issues can come up and will not be condemned. Equally important is to guarantee equal treatment of all group members and their emotions and to reassure the right of everyone not to go deeper or cross personal boundaries. As it is difficult to allow space for all sentiments at any time in the entire group, it is moreover useful to agree upon specific moments and create small group or even one to one sessions to address them. Finally, it can help for a trainer to be open about his or her own feelings and as such demonstrate their public acceptance. Besides the need to be comfortable with such frankness, this however demands great care in order not to lose credibility.

Accentuation

A next question is whether attention for emotions in conflict runs the risk of intensifying them? This dilemma especially applies to intergroup tensions. Gathering people from opposing parties and stimulating them to express their sentiments regarding the conflict might aggravate feelings of despair and division. As an Israeli participant said after a dialogue session with a Palestinian: "Having heard about their deep frustrations, I am now even more convinced that our conflict is irresolvable." Close confrontation with both the conflict and perceived opponents can hence trigger grave disillusion. As a result, existential fears easily increase, with participants turning inwards for security rather than outwards. From a strengthened position within their own group, more emphasis is put on disparity with the other and chances to break emotional conflict cycles diminish.

While it is hard to totally avoid such accentuation, it is not a mission impossible. Through extensive preparations participants' expectations can first of all be adjusted to a seminar's reality and disappointments prevented. Secondly, it helps to alternate emotional discussions on politics with (positive) personal stories and shared activities through which participants can regain inspiration. In this respect the above-mentioned methods of NVC and common goals are also useful, enabling conflicting parties to humanise the other and move from apparently incompatible demands into more overarching aspirations.

Common Goal or Dividing Threat?

Though shared ambitions and threats can help improve intergroup contact, they also entail the danger of increasing tensions. An overarching goal might be perceived as an imposition, that nullifies a group's own objectives. Meanwhile, a common threat is easily directed towards the perceived enemy who becomes a scapegoat that is blamed for all the misery. Fears for invasion by others and the destruction of a community's unique existence are thus fuelled rather than transcended.

Key to this dilemma is the concept of trust. Groups first need to build mutual confidence and believe in each other's good intentions to tackle the common goal without abusing it for their own interest. A second step is to explore similarities together in order to avoid feelings of enforcement. Distinguishing parties deeper needs from their positions on the surface can moreover show that the first are not always contradictory. Recognising one party's identity can in principle go together with acknowledgment of the adversary's right to exist. Parties hence focus on how to cooperate and work towards common goals without losing what is really vital to them.

Conclusion

As came forward, the four discussed emotions play a large role in protracting conflict and can be equally detrimental as exploitable. The more contenders stress their own party's pride and feelings of

shame or humiliation towards others, the harder it will be to overcome their incompatibilities. Trapped in a net of intergroup prejudice, hatred and victimhood, the polarising sentiments easily come to prevail over any balanced reasoning.

Their apparent intractability however should not discourage efforts to challenge such conflict situations. When leaders fail to end the violence, refuse to meet or even if they do achieve a settlement, it is necessary for true reconciliation to come from the bottom up. This is where we have a role to play. Through training and other peacebuilding activities we can raise awareness, facilitate recognition and stimulate transcendence of the factors that allow emotions to protract intergroup strife. These three stages might not end a struggle, but do make a beginning with constructively approaching our undeniable emotions and breaching the cycles. Meanwhile it should be clear that neither the stages nor the list of dangers and dilemmas are complete. They demand continuous reviewing and most of all complementing with our own vital experiences.

Resources

This article was originally written for the Umbruch brochure “Pride, Guilt, Shame and Humiliation. Emotions in the context of current conflicts” with input from the Umbruch Seminar with the same title that took place in Istanbul in June 2008. More information, tools and analyses on emotions and conflict can be also found in the following:

Articles

- Bar-Tal, D., “Sociopsychological foundations of intractable conflicts”, in *American behavioral science*, volume 50, no. 11, July 2007.
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