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Perceptions of Shared Morality as an Important Socio-Psychological Mechanism for Finding the Common Ground

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Abstract

When we think of human history, it is easy to conclude that violent conflicts are unavoidable. Furthermore, in remembering history, we usually recall violent times and are less likely to remember peaceful societal change. Given the way we remember our history, it is easy to lose sight of the existence of peaceful conflict resolutions or other positive societal changes. The Polish Round Table Talks (RT) that took place in 1989 at times of growing political and economic instabilities serve as an example of peaceful and effective negotiation between two opposing and, one might argue, exclusive ideologies. These talks resulted in an agreement between the Communist government of Poland and the opposition movement Solidarity and paved the road towards the present, democratic and independent Polish state. In this commentary I am going to extrapolate some important socio-psychological mechanisms in the light of contributions made by Janusz Reykowski and Janusz Grzelak - both social psychologists. More specifically, I would like to discuss a specific perception of the other negotiating partner that was activated, formed and maintained during the negotiation, which facilitated the successful outcome. I will argue that the perception of shared morality (perceptions of similarity between the in-group and the out-group on the dimension of morality) was an important socio-psychological mechanism that enabled a stream of other positive psychological processes such as development of trust, as well as cooperative and common-oriented goal tendencies.

Keywords

Both Janusz Reykowski and Janusz Grzelak, each representing a different negotiation side, were among the key figures in the Round Table (RT) discussions. In this special issue they shared their views on social-psychological factors and processes that facilitated the success and the outcome of RT talks. In that sense, both authors agree that important psychological processes required for successful negotiations such as the motivation to engage in negotiations and the existence of a minimum level of trust, contributed to the success of the talks. It is very difficult to imagine not only the success but rather sustainability of the successful outcome without the minimum level of motivation and trust between conflicting parties. For example, research by Nadler in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has demonstrated that intergroup trust fully moderates the effects of potentially positive forces, such as acceptance of responsibility and expression of empathy (Nadler & Liviatan, 2006). In other words, even under positive conditions with no existence of intergroup trust (vs. minimum level trust), no positive effects and implications for intergroup relations can be observed. An important and conducive process in these negotiations was indeed the presence of at least some levels of trust and the consequent motivation to engage in these talks.

In addition to acknowledging the importance of these and other psychological factors (such as the perception of interdependence as mentioned in both contributions), both authors explicitly acknowledge the important role of other, more external, factors such as the Catholic Church. Janusz Grzelak (2020) maybe more so than Janusz Reykowski attributed the success of the RT talks to those other factors - political and social forces - ("*The agreement reached in the Round Table Talks in 1989 can be only in part attributed to the wisdom and negotiation skills of the Talks' participants*", p. 2) and in particular the international geopolitical environment at that time with Michail Gorbachev in the East and Ronald Reagan in the West. While I fully agree with Janusz Grzelak's observations that these factors were of crucial importance, in my commentary I am not going to address the importance of these or other external factors that contributed to the outcome of the negotiations. Instead, I will focus on an important social psychological mechanism that contributed to this success, namely perceptions of shared morality.

Perceptions of Shared Morality as the Key Underlying Psychological Mechanism

Grzelak's and Reykowski's reflections on this important event provide us with rare first-hand insights into psychological forces underlying successful intergroup negotiations. In my commentary I would like to focus on one particular mechanism that I believe was

important for this success but can also be relevant to contemporary conflict resolution and reconciliation processes. More specifically, I would like to discuss the role of *shared morality* as a process that facilitated other successful socio-psychological processes. In addition, I will argue that perceptions of shared morality that were activated and formed during the negotiation also minimized development of dysfunctional (negative) intergroup emotions and facilitated a sense of shared identity, which, as argued by main contributions in this special issue, was one of the crucial forces that contributed to the success.

Recent review of research on intergroup reconciliation argues that enabling perceptions of shared morality (perceiving *both* the in-group and the out-group are equally capable of moral behavior) can facilitate positive psychological and social changes (Čehajić-Clancy & Bilewicz, 2020) such as prosocial emotions, trust and contact intentions. More specifically and whilst acknowledging the central role of morality in individual and group perceptions, recent evidence provided support that enabling perceptions of shared morality (e.g., through moral exemplars: people who have displayed heroic behavior such as rescuing others often at the risk of their own life) effectively regulates intergroup relations by enabling trust, forgiveness and contact - in multiple post-genocide and post-conflict settings. When reading both contributions in this issue, it does indeed appear that at some point during the negotiation, perceptions of the 'other' changed. One can easily argue that a starting perception embodied the belief of outgroup homogeneity and an enemy image. The other was perceived as an essential homogenous entity with opposing values. This perception changed so to include diversity and perceptions of similarities. In that regard, Janusz Grzelak (2020) writes "...*the situation was perceived as so antagonistic that its subjective image was more likely to activate schemas of zero sum than cooperative schemas of mixed motive games. It activated the whole syndrome of an enemy rather than a partner on the other side of the table [...] The out-group was viewed as homogeneous. It took time to see differences, to see the heterogeneity of the other side*" (p. 4).

It appears that one of the most important changes that occurred in the course of the negotiation process was this gradual development of an understanding among negotiators that they were more similar in their values and goals than initially believed. Such perceptions of sharedness (which Janusz Reykowski termed as Synergic Tendencies) enabled the creation of common goals, trust, respect and finally the activation of a shared identity.

Morality and Group Perceptions

In most intergroup situations, the other is perceived as homogenous and bad. This perception is particularly pronounced in divisive or conflictual situations. Perceptions of heterogeneity and other positive biases are usually reserved for the ingroup. One dimension that appears to be important in such ingroup and outgroup evaluations is

morality. By now, several studies have shown that perceptions of morality, rather than sociability or competence have primacy in evaluating others (e.g., Pagliaro, 2012) and in forming perceptions about outgroups (e.g., Brambilla, Sacchi, Pagliaro, & Ellemers, 2013). For instance, research has revealed that moral traits are dominant in face-perception playing a key role in interpersonal impression formation (Goodwin, Piazza, & Rozin, 2014). Related to this, Janusz Grzelak (2020) in his contribution writes: "*Facial expressions of participants changed in the course of negotiations from raw, stiff, hostile and official to 'human friendly'. Dehumanization disappeared.*" (p. 7). One can argue that perceptions of shared morality started to emerge during the negotiations slowly leading to more perceived closeness and rehumanization of the other. Indeed, research shows that immoral social targets are ascribed lower levels of humanity and are perceived as less deserving of empathy from others (Riva, Brambilla, & Vaes, 2016). Furthermore, as suggested by evidence, perceived incompatibilities in values further facilitate perceptions of outgroup immorality and consequent dehumanization (e.g., Skitka & Mullen, 2002).

This suggests that morality judgments are indeed fundamental in how we evaluate and behave towards others (Wojciszke, 1994). In the beginning of the negotiation and as Janusz Grzelak noted, the other side was not perceived as a partner but rather as an enemy. In addition, Grzelak notes, the ingroup was perceived as more righteous. Such perceptions can maintain distance and lower motivation to resolve conflicts. What appears to have happened during the RT negotiations is that with time such perceptions shifted towards perceptions of similarities between negotiating groups on the morality dimension (perceptions of shared morality). This is not to say that many other factors did not contribute to perceptions of shared morality, such as the existence of common culture, heritage, language and particularly religion. One could argue that the presence and support provided by the Catholic Church most likely further facilitated this sense of shared morality.

"*It took time to see differences, to see the heterogeneity of the other side*" as Grzelak (2020, p. 4) wrote but once it was established the road towards shared realities emerged. Such understanding of commonalities and synergies, rather than differences, contributed to the successful outcomes of negotiations.

Shared Morality and Intergroup Emotions

It is a widely supported claim that emotions play an important role in conflict resolution and reconciliation processes as they shape reactions and responses to conflict-related events (e.g., Halperin, 2014, 2015). They lead to the formation of intergroup attitudes (Hewstone, Rubin, & Willis, 2002) and motivate human activities. When reading both contributions in this issue I could not detect an explicit reference that negotiations were marked by a presence of strong negative emotions such as hatred or contempt. It could be argued that during the Polish RT talks, the absence of strong negative emotions

might have facilitated the process and the successful outcome of RT negotiations. Indeed, research shows that negative intergroup emotions undermine positive social-psychological processes, such as the ability to imagine a better future and a solution to a given problem (e.g., Halperin, Cohen-Chen, & Goldenberg, 2014). Therefore, such an absence of strong negative emotions was an added facilitator in these negotiations (Čehajić-Clancy, Goldenberg, Gross, & Halperin, 2016). What I would argue in this regard is that the perceptions of shared morality that developed and consequently persisted during the negotiation *disabled* the formation of such negative emotions (e.g., fear, hatred, anger) and in that sense facilitated the final success of negotiations outcomes. Whether perceptions of shared morality can indeed be used as a cognitive emotion regulation mechanism ought to be empirically investigated in the future (see Čehajić-Clancy et al., 2016). For now, it remains an interesting observation when thinking about psychological processes that might have occurred during these negotiations.

Shared Morality and Identity

In any intergroup situation, social identity plays an essential role. Negotiating partners interpret the social context from the lens of their social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). This leads to biased perceptions, activation of various defensive mechanisms during negotiation and lowered likelihood for reaching compromises. One strategy to alter the perception of intergroup distance is through redefining boundaries of identity (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2014) and shifting levels of social identities to higher (e.g., universal, human) or different (e.g., national) levels of identification. My strong sense when reading the contributions in this special issue is that during the RT negotiations, a more national level of identification took place. Representatives from both negotiating parties slowly shifted their identity categorizations to a higher (Polish) level of identity. As noted by Reykowski (2020): "*However, my feeling was that – as the RT talks continued – members of each side gradually came to an understanding that the other side did in fact represent an important facet of the Polish national interest*" (p. 5).

Consequently, such a creation of a common frame of reference moved ingroup favoritism towards this new, more inclusive, ingroup (Poland). Building upon remarks made by both contributions, one could argue that changes in perceptions and evaluations of the former enemy - from homogenous and different to similar and moral - enabled creation of such a common identity. Perceptions of similarity on the morality dimension are indeed an important ingredient for perceiving commonalities across social identities.

Conclusion

When thinking about intergroup relations in general and conflict in particular, we have at least two options. We can choose to perceive intergroup differences and focus on issues that might lead to further divisions. Or, we can choose to accentuate the commonalities and parts that unite us. The Polish RT talks serve as a unique and important historical event where two parties chose to focus on commonalities whilst putting aside their differences. The perception of shared morality was among those beliefs that facilitated successful negotiations and successful outcomes. Scholars and researchers who aim to understand socio-psychological mechanisms for successful conflict resolution and ultimately reconciliation ought to consider these beliefs on shared morality as one of the key dimensions for how we view and behave towards the seemingly 'other'.

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