Coming Together After Conflict: Power-Based Differences in Reconciliation

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Abstract

When resolving conflicts, the process of reconciliation must occur for groups to effectively move forward together. However, treating groups as equals can undermine attempts to reconcile. This paper examines how differences in power affect the role of groups within reconciliation, as well as how they may react to reconciliation attempts. Differences in power can be nuanced and can lead to both groups to view themselves as victimized. However, advantaged and disadvantaged groups react differently to different reconciliation attempts. Advantaged groups tend to benefit from recognizing both groups as members of a larger category, acknowledging that both groups are victims, and being seen as moral. Disadvantaged groups on the other hand tend to recognize both groups as connected but distinct, feel overlooked by statements that both groups are victims, and seek an increase in power. Furthermore, while both advantaged and disadvantaged groups feel more motivated to reconcile when made to feel positive emotions such as hope and empathy, negative emotions such as guilt or shame can also motivate advantaged groups to reconcile. However, reconciliation efforts can be hindered when groups do not believe that they will be effective, a belief that may be higher in disadvantaged groups. Overall, a critical analysis demonstrates that power differences are tied to the effectiveness of certain reconciliation strategies, indicating the importance of recognizing group differences when promoting reconciliation.

Keywords: *reconciliation, intergroup relations.*

Introduction

Reconciliation rarely begins with equality. It is a continual process of reinstating positive relationships between groups and occurs after or at the end of a period of conflict (Kelman, 2008). While it would be ideal to reconcile groups' attitudes towards each other when both groups have reached a state of equality, Little (2017) argues that this is uncommon and that reconciliation most commonly occurs in situations of imbalanced power. One of the purposes of reconciliation is to resolve this equality gap (Spear, 2008), but when the gap is particularly extreme, it can hinder attempts to reconcile. As such, it is necessary to understand

how asymmetrical power differences can influence how groups will react to reconciliation attempts and cater reconciliation efforts to each distinct group. This paper consolidates the literature on asymmetrical power differences resulting in different reactions to reconciliation efforts. There are numerous factors in which this can be seen. This paper will discuss three: identities, needs, and beliefs. Across factors, research demonstrates that advantaged and disadvantaged groups respond differently to reconciliation attempts (e.g., Dovidio et al., 2000; Kahalon et al., 2021). It is particularly important to recognize this and adjust reconciliation strategies accordingly, as not considering group differences can result in the perpetuation of inequality, as well as one or both groups not wanting to reconcile.

To illustrate how asymmetrical power differences can impact reconciliation, the Isreal-Palestine conflict can be examined. Theissen and Darweish (2018) have highlighted that Israel-Palestine relations are notable for being resistant to reconciliation methods that have been shown to work in other contexts, such as Northern Ireland. This is in part due to the ongoing nature of the conflict and lack of acknowledgement of the difference in power between the two sides. While power asymmetry still exists in Northern Ireland, the period of violence referred to as The Troubles has resolved (Cohrs et al., 2015), a marked difference from the tensions in Israel and Palestine. Though both groups are involved in the violent conflict, treating the two as equals misrepresents the present circumstances because Israel holds more structural power than Palestine (Theissen & Darweish, 2018). The authors shared Palestinian and Israeli participants' experiences of attending peaceful, equality-based activities with each other, noting that Palestinians had to undergo intense and distressing border security checks before and after they arrived. This makes the reconciliation activities traumatic to one side, while the other side benefits.

Asymmetrical Conflict

In order to reckon with the effects of unequal power dynamics in intergroup reconciliation, it is necessary to examine how these unequal relationships may appear. Unequal power is most frequently understood as concerning a perpetrator and a victim, where one group has done something to directly harm the other (Shnabel & Nadler, 2010). The Holocaust is often looked at in perpetrator-victim research because the overwhelming majority of people recognize the Nazis as clear perpetrators who unilaterally inflicted severe harm on outgroups (Shnabel & Nadler, 2010; Shnabel et al., 2009). The perpetrator-victim dynamic is significant for reconciliation research as it describes markedly different groups, who are expected to behave in markedly different ways.

However, in many scenarios, the perpetrator-victim relationship is less unilateral, with both sides taking harmful action against each other in perpetrator-perpetrator relationships. Victim groups may harm the perpetrator in retaliation, or two groups may harm each other equally. These more complicated dynamics are perhaps better reflected by the level of systemic power each group has. For example, The Black Panther Party, an American militant Black power organization that operated in the 1960s and 1970s, can help illustrate this dynamic. While it is true that the Black Panthers committed violent acts against the (primarily White) police, it was the White police who had the systematic power supporting their own violent actions (Pope & Flanigan, 2013). An asymmetrical power dynamic with both sides harming each other can complicate the reconciliation process, as without a clear separation between perpetrator and victim, it may be hard to predict how groups will react. Some groups are willing to acknowledge their responsibility in a conflict, while others reject it (Solomon & Martin, 2019). At times, the structural power differences are overlooked (especially by those who are advantaged), and groups may be perceived as equal aggressors.

Lastly, another relational dynamic that affects conflict is that of the majority and the minority. Majority-minority dynamics are unique in that they may be guided by more indirect harm, rather than overt efforts at perpetrating harm (Dovidio et al., 2008). While powerful majority groups sometimes have a history of harm against minority groups, Dovidio and colleagues (2008) highlight that majority-minority dynamics may not be

perceived as conflicts, despite significant structural imbalances and negative intergroup relationships. Members of the majority group may view direct harm as an issue of the past and therefore believe it is not their responsibility to reconcile (Bilali & Vollhardt, 2019; Blatz & Philpot, 2008). Overall, the group dynamics relevant to reconciliation relate to differences in their levels of power, but there are nuances to how the asymmetrical power manifests.

Construction of Group Identities

How a group identifies itself and relates to the conflicting group is crucial in the process of reconciliation. While there are countless dimensions on which a group may construct its identity, the way groups' identities are constructed in relationship to other groups is important to understanding how they may reconcile. Groups can be viewed as disconnected and separate, but reconciliation research has emphasized connectedness (Dovidio et al., 2000).

In particular, groups can sometimes be better understood as subgroups within a larger connected group, called a superordinate category (Dovidio et al., 2008). For example, both Black and White Americans (subgroups) share an identity as Americans (a superordinate category). Furthermore, groups may construct identities as "victims" or as "perpetrators," which will influence how they approach reconciliation. Asymmetrical power influences both identity inclusion (i.e., whether a group will identify with a larger superordinate category) and victimhood as identity (i.e., who a group identifies as victims).

Identity Inclusion

While focusing on a superordinate group identity has been presented as a way of bringing groups together (Čehajić-Clancy et al., 2016; Wohl & Branscombe, 2005), research has shown that superordinate group identification is not as helpful for disadvantaged groups (Dovidio et al., 2008). Dovidio and colleagues (2008) suggested that taking on the superordinate identity can cause disadvantaged minority group members to undervalue their own subgroup identities, and care less about injustice against them. Disadvantaged group members who recognize this dilemma are likely to resist a shared identity, as well as reconciliation efforts that utilize superordinate identity perspectives (Dovidio et al., 2008; Fiske, 1993). Furthermore, the prototype of the superordinate group can hinder minorities' identification with superordinate identities, as superordinate groups are often conflated with the majority (Dovidio et al., 2008). For example, while people of any ethnicity can be Canadian, some individuals may default to imagining "a Canadian" as White. This could lead people who are not White to identify less strongly as "a Canadian," as they do not feel it accurately represents them.

To reconcile this relational issue, Dovidio and colleagues (2000) proposed the "same team" framing. The same team framing conceptualizes an intergroup relationship as two distinct groups that are subcategories of a related larger group. This can also be conceptualized as a dual identity—the ability to hold both the superordinate and the subgroup identities at the same time—rather than having the superordinate identity take dominance (Dovidio et al., 2000). Indeed, Dovidio and colleagues (2000) found that the type of group identification had opposite effects on intergroup attitudes. In a correlational survey of White and Black American university students, they found that Black students who endorsed dual identity views felt more positively about intergroup contact, while White students felt more positively when they maintained a superordinate view of groups. Following these findings, Dovidio and colleagues (2008) suggested that superordinate identity interventions motivate advantaged group members to reconcile, while maintaining dual identities promotes reconciliation efforts in disadvantaged group members. They proposed this can be handled by differentiating reconciliation tactics in order to address both groups' needs. Rather than encouraging superordinate identification for all, groups can be separately encouraged to think of the outgroup more positively, using the framework that is most suitable.

Victimhood as an Identity

In addition to subgroups and superordinate groups, how groups identify with victimhood is

important to reconciliation. Groups seek victim identities for both instrumental and psychologically defensive reasons (Kahalon et al., 2021; Solomon & Martin, 2019). On an instrumental level, establishing one's group as the victims in an intergroup conflict presents one's group as deserving of compensation, such as improved legal standing (Solomon & Martin, 2019). Groups may also want to establish victimhood to benefit their own psychological standing, as victims are typically seen as the moral side of a conflict (Kahalon et al., 2021).

Frequently, this establishment of victimhood also extends beyond the mere label of the ingroup as victims, because victimhood indicates the existence of a victimizer. Thus, groups can become focused on establishing that they are the legitimate victims and another group is their victimizer. The term competitive victimhood is used describe the behaviour and attitude of groups trying to establish that they have suffered more (or with less cause) than the outgroup (Solomon & Martin, 2019). Victim groups are more likely to engage in competitive victimization (Kahalon et al., 2021), but often both groups compete to establish victimhood (Solomon & Marton, 2019). In situations where asymmetrical power is present between groups, perpetrator groups or structurally advantaged groups may suffer less harm than the disadvantaged group but still assert that they are the true victims.

There are mixed findings on whether advantaged or disadvantaged groups are more likely to be competitive. Solomon and Martin (2019) highlight that some perpetrator groups that engage in competitive victimhood acknowledge harmful perpetrator actions with the condition that these actions are not reflective of the group. For example, Blue Lives Matter advocates argue that police brutality exists only as a result of a few "bad apples." Rejecting their group's responsibility for harm can hinder reconciliation (Blatz & Philpot, 2010). Conversely, a study by Goldberg and Kupermintz (2017) suggests that minority groups are less likely to publicly accept responsibility for conflict even when they believe it privately, because their admission of fault may be perceived as legitimizing their lower status.

To reconcile victim competition and bring groups together, some scholars call for inclusive victimhood, which involves both groups mutually recognizing each other's victimization (Hameiri & Nadler, 2017; Shnabel et al., 2013; Solomon & Martin, 2019), but the effectiveness may depend on how asymmetrical the group inequalities are. Groups with lower structural power are less likely to be open to inclusive victimhood and are more selective towards which groups they include. This was demonstrated by Cohrs and colleagues (2015), who found that Catholic/Nationalist/ Republicans in Northern Ireland were more likely to view other groups as victims if they shared a victimizer—Protestant/Unionists. On the other hand, Protestant/Unionist participants viewed inclusive victimhood universally. The authors suggested that this was due to systematic power differences, with the majority group of Northern Irish Protestants being more inclusive towards victimhood because it is less costly for majority groups. Furthermore, Bilai and Vollhardt (2019) suggest that when advantaged groups emphasize mutual victimization, it contributes to the perpetration of harm by erasing group inequalities. One such example of this is the All Lives Matter response to the Black Lives Matter movement, which undermines the specific harms faced by Black Americans and can result in them not receiving justice (McNeill & Vollhardt, 2020).

In summary, advantaged and disadvantaged groups respond differently to identity-based reconciliation efforts. While universal inclusive victimhood may aid in reconciliation efforts, it is necessary to recognize differences in group willingness to accept a universal narrative. Which strategies will be successful for reconciliation depends on a group's level of power, so strategies must be tailored to each specific group.

Power and Status: The Needs-Based Model

Group differences in reconciliation can also be examined through the Needs-Based Model proposed by Shnabel and colleagues (2009). The model suggests that perpetration and victimization induce different needs (moral acceptance and power/agency), which must be addressed to increase groups' willingness to

reconcile. Victim groups are predominantly in need of agency after having their structural power reduced by the perpetrator group, while perpetrator groups require moral acceptance (Shnabel et al., 2009). According to Shnabel and Nadler (2010), when a perpetrator group victimizes the outgroup, they become concerned with the morality of their actions and the possibility of their peers rejecting them. Thus, to fully reconcile with the group that they victimized, perpetrators must receive acceptance from the victim group. Without this acceptance, the perpetrator group may engage in other methods to preserve their sense of morality (e.g., defensiveness), which can further devolve reconciliation efforts (Kahalon et al., 2018). Notably, this model does not insinuate that a perpetrator group is owed moral acceptance in response to their transgressions, merely that the acceptance is needed for both groups to view each other favourably.

The perpetrator group's desire to feel moral is tied to the specific perpetrator-victim relationship, rather than to individual group norms and values. Shnabel and colleagues (2009) compared two studies on the power-moral dimensions of reconciliation in Jewish Israelis. When the reconciliation was between Germans and Jewish Israelis on the subject of the Holocaust, Israeli victims showed increased desire for reconciliation when offered agency (Shnabel & Nadler, 2010; Shnabel et al., 2009). However, when the reconciliation was between Jewish Israelis and Arab citizens of Israel on the subject of a recognized illegitimate act of Jewish Israeli aggression, Jewish Israelis desired moral approval. As the same group required different needs to be met when they were either perpetrator or victim, this demonstrates that the needs pertain not to the group itself but rather to its relative status in the specific intergroup conflict. However, Shnabel and colleagues (2020) have noted that power needs may be stronger than acceptance needs regardless of group, because victimhood during conflict is often prioritized as an identity. When the victimhood of perpetrator groups is salient, both perpetrators and victims are likely to demand power. This complicates reconciliation attempts because offering power to both groups may result in the power imbalance continuing, but ignoring perpetrators' needs may lower their desire to reconcile.

Though needs may be met by the other group during the reconciliation process, moral acceptance needs can also be addressed without the victim group's involvement. In a series of studies, Barlow and colleagues (2015) demonstrated that perpetrator groups can fill their moral acceptance needs by seeing ingroup members express approval of an apology provided to the outgroup. This fulfillment was highest when the victimized outgroup also expressed approval of the apology, but it still occurred when only communicating with fellow ingroup members. The authors noted that relying solely on the ingroup's perspective of a conflict is harmful for reconciliation efforts, as it can cause them to ignore the needs of the victim group. However, fulfilling needs without the victim group can still be beneficial for reconciliation during instances when majority perpetrator group members have little to no contact with minority members (e.g., due to population differences).

Additionally, while the model was conceptualized to apply to aggressive conflicts between groups (Shnabel et al., 2009), a similar effect occurs when groups are disadvantaged even without direct conflict (Siem et al., 2013). Siem and colleagues (2013) found that advantaged and disadvantaged groups only differed in their power and acceptance needs when participants viewed the existing group inequalities as unjust. When inequality between groups was seen as justified, individuals in advantaged and disadvantaged groups had similar levels of both power and moral acceptance needs. Some research has indicated that power and acceptance needs are not always distinct, with some perpetrators focusing on power needs (Shnabel et al., 2020) and some victims focusing on acceptance (Siem et al., 2013). However, this only further demonstrates that careful consideration of group dynamics must be made when pursuing reconciliation.

Emotional Regulation and Group Beliefs

Čehajić-Clancy and colleagues (2016) proposed that reconciliation revolves around emotional regulation, suggesting that negative emotions surrounding the outgroup and the

conflict are to be reduced, while positive emotions are increased. Noor and colleagues (2008) found higher rates of forgiveness between both victim and perpetrator groups when they had higher feelings of empathy, suggesting that reconciliation efforts can be aided by addressing positive emotions in both sides of a conflict.

Many other studies on emotion-based reconciliation efforts see similar results between groups regardless of power asymmetry (see Čehajić-Clancy et al., 2016). Čehajić-Clancy and colleagues (2016) also suggest that emotional regulation during reconciliation is tied to beliefs about the other group and about the world. For instance, believing that the world is changing is associated with increased feelings of hope, which in turn is associated with increased support for reconciliation (Cohen-Chen et al., 2015).

Overall, targeting emotions and beliefs are regarded by researchers as effective strategies to promote reconciliation (Čehajić-Clancy et al., 2016). However, there are instances of emotional regulation where power asymmetry may affect success, two of which are negative emotions and malleability beliefs.

Negative Emotions

Though reducing negative emotions in both advantaged and disadvantaged groups is often important to reconciliation (Čehajić-Clancy et al., 2016), the specific emotions of shame and guilt have been shown to be beneficial in perpetrator groups. Noor and colleagues (2008) found that high rates of shame and guilt in perpetrator groups predicted desire to reconcile, meaning participants were more willing to reconcile when they viewed their own group negatively. The authors defined collective guilt as negative feelings surrounding a group's actions and the harms caused by the ingroup. Conversely, they defined shame as being focused on how the perpetrator group's actions worsen its image. Though both guilt and shame were associated with immediate desire for reconciliation, high rates of shame were associated with decreasing intent to reconcile over time (Brown et al., 2008; Noor et al., 2008). Brown and colleagues (2008) suggest that because shame is associated with a desire to improve group image, shameful perpetrators shift their behaviour from reconciliation to defensive tactics, such as arguing that their group's actions were justified. This is because it is an easier and more direct way of improving group image. On the other hand, guilt is specific to the perpetrator group's direct actions and is therefore resolved by working to aid the harmed group (Brown et al., 2008). Shnabel and Ullrich (2016) have further proposed that guilt in perpetrator groups aids reconciliation as it demonstrates to the victims that they are remorseful for their actions.

Notably, guilt has only been shown to benefit reconciliation when the perpetrator group experiences it. Increased feelings of guilt in victims may contribute to the continuing perpetuation of inequality, as it is not associated with victim groups seeking restitution (Kanyangara et al., 2014). This means that inducing or maintaining feelings of guilt will not aid reconciliation if applied to both groups. Shnabel and Ullrich (2016) highlight that emotional regulation without considering power dynamics will not effectively restore equality or positive intergroup relations.

Malleability Beliefs

Malleability beliefs refer to beliefs that people (or in this case, groups) are malleable and can change over time, and increases in this belief are generally beneficial to reconciliation (Čehajić-Clancy et al., 2016; Wohl et al., 2015). In a series of four studies, Halperin et al. (2011) primed belief for and against group malleability in Jewish Israelis, Arab citizens of Israel, and Palestinians in the West Bank. They observed higher outgroup opinion and willingness to reconcile when participants believed in group malleability, despite the considerable differences in the groups' power and goals.

However, disadvantaged groups may be more likely to endorse non-malleability beliefs (also referred to as *entity* beliefs). Studies on school performance have found a preliminary link between low socio-economic status and the belief that people do not change (Claro et al., 2016). While this link is not certain, those who have been significantly impacted and restrained by prolonged systematic factors may adopt non-malleability into their worldview and therefore

be more resistant to malleability messages. Wohl and colleagues (2015) note that individuals with entity beliefs can show an increase in negative intergroup attitudes when the outgroup makes reconciliation efforts because they may perceive it as a manipulation attempt. If disadvantaged groups do have higher entity beliefs, this can greatly impact reconciliation, particularly since rejection can cause ingroup members to be less inclined to reconcile (Barlow et al., 2015). Therefore, if disadvantaged groups do not believe the advantaged group will change, they are more likely to reject any attempts by the advantaged group to change, which in turn reduces the advantaged group's willingness to change. While research has yet to note a definitive link between victimized groups and resistance to malleability messages, recognizing when one group may be less impacted by a reconciliation attempt is crucial.

Conclusions

Levels of asymmetrical power can influence how groups construct their identities, including how connected they feel to the outgroup, and who they see as a victim. Furthermore, reconciliation measures designed to increase perceptions of connectedness can in fact be harmful to disadvantaged groups, making recognition of power imbalances important. This is also evident in needs-based reconciliation efforts, which dictate that perpetrator groups need acceptance and victims need agency/power, though there is a considerable amount of variance in these need levels. The potential role of negative emotions also differs depending on group status, with guilt in advantaged groups promoting reconciliation efforts. Overall, the success of strategies to address reconciliation can be dependent on group differences. Many of the differing factors are intertwined. For instance, the need for moral acceptance is connected to the group's emotions and perceptions, and the label of victimhood is highly salient in the desire for either moral acceptance or agency/power. Though it is important to examine factors individually, it may be that impacting one has a positive (or negative) influence on the other factor.

It is clear that there is no easy solution for universally addressing the influence of power asymmetry. In interviews with Israeli and Palestinian representatives on the success of contact interventions as a reconciliation method, many interviewees gave arguments both for and against contact, highlighting ways it could help and ways it may harm (Theissan & Darweish, 2018). Clearly, situations are nuanced even in the eyes of the individuals directly impacted.

Theissan and Darweish (2018) advise allowing disadvantaged groups to guide reconciliation attempts to more accurately address their needs, rather than having people less connected to the conflict impose their solutions. This would prevent inappropriate reconciliation efforts that disproportionately harm disadvantaged groups, though it also has the potential to alienate the specific needs advantaged group members have during the reconciliation process. Overall, it is beneficial to customize strategies when addressing groups individually, and to keep differing needs in mind when mediating intergroup reconciliation behaviours.

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