Revisiting barriers to conflict resolution:
Perspectives on power, relationships, and application to practice

Ifat Maoz & Brenna Marea Powell

To cite this article: Ifat Maoz & Brenna Marea Powell (2014) Revisiting barriers to conflict resolution: Perspectives on power, relationships, and application to practice, Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict, 7:2-3, 115-119,DOI: 10.1080/17467586.2014.979431

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17467586.2014.979431

Published online: 13 Nov 2014.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 472

View related articles

View Crossmark data
Revisiting barriers to conflict resolution: Perspectives on power, relationships, and application to practice

Ifat Maoz and Brenna Marea Powell *

Guest Editors, SCICN, Stanford University, Stanford, CA, USA

(Received 14 October 2014; accepted 19 October 2014)

This article introduces the special issue of Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict entitled “Revisiting barriers to conflict resolution: Perspectives on power, relationships, and application to practice”. We introduce the concepts and overarching themes to be addressed in the special issue, and provide an overview of the articles and contributors to the issue. In addition, we trace the intellectual roots of the barriers to conflict research agenda to the founding scholars at the Stanford Center on International Conflict and Negotiation (SCICN), and discuss the contributions of the participating scholars in this special issue to developing the barriers research agenda.

Introduction

The Stanford Center on Conflict and Negotiation was founded in 1984, with support from the Hewlett Foundation, by an interdisciplinary group of scholars consisting of economists Kenneth Arrow and Robert Wilson, legal scholar Robert Mnookin, and psychologists Amos Tversky and Lee Ross. A primary goal of this center was the interdisciplinary exploration of barriers to the achievement of efficient negotiation outcomes and dispute resolution – barriers arising not only from the calculated strategies and tactics of the parties, but also from institutional constraints on mutually beneficial exchanges of concessions and from cognitive and motivational biases that had been explored in research by psychologists.

In service of that goal, the Center produced an edited volume, Barriers to Conflict Resolution (Arrow, Mnookin, Ross, Tversky, & Wilson, 1995). The introductory chapter of that volume, by Mnookin and Ross, began by noting that certain conflicts remain refractory to resolution even when there exists a range of potential agreements that could enhance the position of both sides over the status quo. That “real-world” observation continues to motivate and animate the efforts of SCICN scholars and their associates.

Over the years, faculty associated with the Center (which later changed its name to the Stanford Center on International Conflict and Negotiation, SCICN) have continued to undertake relevant research, to offer educational opportunities to students, and to participate in efforts to reduce conflict and promote peaceful dialogue in Northern Ireland, Israel/Palestine, and other sites of continuing intergroup conflict. Throughout this period, the “barriers approach” developed and expanded upon by SCICN participants has provided a useful framework, indeed has been foundational for academic work and applied efforts in many troubled areas of the world where seemingly intractable conflicts continue to cause suffering and prevent individuals and communities from pursuing more constructive goals.

*Corresponding author. Email: msifat@gmail.com

© 2014 Taylor & Francis
Now, three decades after the founding of the Stanford Center, we are proud to present this special issue of *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict* (DAC). The contributors to this volume review and reappraise SCICN’s continuing work on barriers to conflict resolution and strategies for overcoming those barriers, but they do so with particular attention to issues of asymmetries in power and to the various relational, moral and practical issues arising from such asymmetries. This perspective is both timely in terms of the particular intergroup conflicts that are unfolding in the international sphere and reflective of SCICN’s increasing emphasis over the past decade on barriers that arise from misunderstanding, enmity, and distrust about longer-term objectives. These “relational barriers” have been shown both in research and in SCICN’s partnerships with real world practitioners to exacerbate the other types of strategic and psychological impediments to the peaceful resolution of conflict.

We are pleased and honored to have this special issue of SCICN on barriers in asymmetric conflict published in *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict*. We thank Clark McCauley, Emeritus Editor of DAC, for his help in making this happen. We also thank the contributors of this special issue for the articles they have prepared and for their participation in a fruitful and productive – even if not always simple – discussion of revisiting barriers to conflict resolution.

The contributors to this special issue have all been involved with SCICN’s work for years and have helped to shape its agenda. Their articles address different conflicts and disputes at different degrees of resolution, including the protracted, asymmetrical conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, the Northern Ireland peace process, the South Africa truth and reconciliation process and recent developments in US–China relations. These articles also reflect the stimulating and fruitful conversation that has evolved in the Center among scholars representing different disciplines, methodologies and perspectives that span social psychology, law, political science, international relations, business, religion and sociology. The common core of SCICN scholars, however, is their shared commitment to identifying and attempting to overcome barriers to the resolution of conflicts. We believe that the articles presented here succeed both in conveying the importance of the issues addressed and in offering some insights relevant to those issues that can be useful to researchers and practitioners alike. We describe below briefly the articles included in this issue.

Contents and contributors

**Barriers to agreement in the asymmetric Israeli–Palestinian Conflict**

In this article, author *Lee Ross* opens our volume with a discussion of the structural, strategic, and especially the *psychological* barriers that can prevent parties from reaching such “win–win” agreements in the context of protracted conflicts. His article reviews and updates the Mnookin & Ross (1995) account offered in the earlier SCCN volume. Particular emphasis is given to the barriers that have sustained and exacerbated the enduring conflict between Israel and the Palestinians, and made it so difficult to agree on the provisions for a “two-state” solution to the conflict – an outcome that (at least in principle) majorities of the citizenry in both societies consistently endorse. Relevant academic research by Ross and his colleagues is reviewed, and lessons drawn from real-world experience are considered.

**US–China relations in the shadow of the future**

In this article, authors *David Holloway* and *Cui Lei* apply a barriers approach to the analysis and management of interstate conflicts. The article uses the lens of relational barriers to
make sense of evolving US–China relations, and to suggest potential points of tension as well as compatibility in the two nations’ aspirations for global influence. Holloway and Lei break down the barriers work of the SCICN into two broad approaches: the first focusing on barriers to conflict resolution, the second focusing on barriers to peaceful relationships. The first identifies social psychological, structural, and strategic barriers that not only impede the resolution of conflict generally, but also complicate the negotiation of agreements and may lead to suboptimal outcomes. This approach directs attention to a variety of means that might be needed to tackle these impediments, but does not provide a formula for conflict resolution. The second approach focuses on what are sometimes called “relational barriers.” These are barriers that impede the transformation of a relationship of enmity or hostility into a peaceful relationship. This approach suggests that there are four questions that need to be addressed if a peaceful or working political relationship is to be created among parties who have been engaged in a violent conflict. These questions have to do with the future, with trust, with loss, and with equity. The authors examine the utility of the second approach in understanding US–China relations as they become less asymmetric with China’s growing economic and military power.

(Non)Acknowledgment of rights as a barrier to conflict resolution: Predicting Jewish–Israeli attitudes towards the Palestinian demand to national self-determination

In this article, authors Rotem Nagar and Ifat Maoz discuss a major barrier to conflict resolution: the unwillingness to acknowledge or recognize the basic rights of the other side in situations of conflict. Recognizing the rights of out-groups is especially important in asymmetric intergroup relations, where marginalized social-political groups, national groups or even states – that see themselves as unjustly neglected, excluded, and discriminated against – demand recognition of their basic rights. Although unwillingness to acknowledge the rights of outgroups constitutes a major barrier to the resolution of protracted asymmetric conflicts (Maoz & McCauley, 2008), this barrier has received little systematic research attention. Nagar and Maoz examine psychological and ideological correlates underlying the (un)willingness to recognize the out-group as having the right to national self-determination in the asymmetrical and protracted conflict between Israelis and Palestinians. Implications for applying the “barriers” approach in other settings of asymmetrical conflict are discussed.

“The Politics of Policing Post-War Transitions: Insecurity, Legitimacy, and Reform in Northern Ireland”

In this article, author Brenna Marea Powell explores the critical role of the police in responding to fundamental challenges that a peace process presents: the demobilization of armed groups and the local security vacuums that emerge as a result. Policing is centrally important but deeply political in divided societies; it is often one of the most difficult aspects of a peace deal to reach agreement on. Powell presents a study of Northern Ireland, a relatively successful case of post-war police reform, to highlight the political challenges that emerge even in a best-case scenario where the basic resource and training needs of the police are met. Powell argues that Northern Ireland demonstrates that whether, and to what degree, people view the police as legitimate is linked to their perceptions about the legitimacy of the state. This has important implications for cases of asymmetric conflict, because improving the perceived legitimacy of the police presents distinct challenges in communities that are traditionally pro-state versus hostile to it. Persistent intercommunal
enmity, or the context of a “hostile peace,” poses additional challenges, making it nearly impossible for the police to adjudicate intercommunal disputes in a manner regarded as fair or impartial by all sides.

**Searching for Mandela: Finding a way beyond the Israeli–Palestinian impasse**

In this article, author Byron Bland elaborates relational barriers to the resolution of intractable conflict, and demonstrates across a number of contexts that the fundamental relational barrier is the absence of a vision for a shared future. Bland argues that the stable resolution of protracted intergroup conflict is only possible when the parties are able to articulate a vision of the future to one another that the other would find minimally bearable. The article presents the concept of a shared future, and uses contrasting case studies to demonstrate its fundamental importance. In particular, it contrasts the South African transition with the Israeli–Palestinian impasse, and argues that movement was ultimately possible in South Africa because the parties were able to articulate a vision for a shared future to one another. In addition, the article provides further substance to the idea of a shared future by contrasting approaches taken to non-violence in the US Civil Rights Movement and various approaches adopted by Palestinian and pro-Palestinian activists today. Ultimately, the article argues and demonstrates through the case studies that effective strategies will be those that assist the parties in articulating a vision for the future that the opposing side would find minimally bearable.

**Governments, publics, and enemies: Intragroup dynamics as barriers to conflict resolution**

Domestic (or other intragroup) politics can play a significant role in the development of foreign (or other intergroup) relations. In the context of international or other intergroup conflicts, features as such as disparate interests within a group or leader-constituent dynamics can impede the prospects for intergroup conflict resolution. In this article, authors Gilat Bachar and Allen Weiner discuss such intragroup processes that affect the dynamics of intergroup conflict and can serve as barriers to conflict resolution efforts, focusing in particular on relationships between political leaders and their constituents. The first section of the article outlines the constraints arising from disparate or competing interests of political actors within a particular community, drawing largely on political science and game theoretic approaches that analyze how those disparate interests may shape decision-making in collective organizations. The second section focuses on the dynamics of public–leadership interactions, and on the political and social psychological processes that help shape them. One of the key lessons Bachar and Weiner draw concerns the danger that leaders may articulate public justifications for intransigence that have the effect of deepening their publics’ resistance to compromise. Leaders may do so either because they employ what might be seen as rational “hardball” tactics in their negotiations with the adversary, because they are appealing for support from outside actors in the international community, or because they are psychologically ill-disposed to reaching even welfare-enhancing agreements.

**Barriers to conflict resolution in landscapes of asymmetric conflict**

Guest editors Ifat Maoz and Brenna Marea Powell conclude this special issue by offering an overview and discussion of the state of the art conveyed through the articles in
this volume regarding research and theorizing on barriers to conflict resolution. They identify a number of important themes that emerge in this special issue, including the role of relationships, emotions, context and power in shaping or constituting barriers to conflict resolution. Maoz and Powell conclude by defining directions for future research.

References