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Socio-psychological Barriers to Conflict Resolution

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The intergroup conflicts that rage in different parts of the world over territories, natural resources, power, economic wealth, self-determination, and/or basic values are real. They center over disagreements which focus on contradictory goals and interests in different domains and there is no doubt that these real issues have to be addressed in conflict resolution. But it is well known that the disagreements could potentially be resolved if not the various powerful forces which fuel and maintain the conflicts. These forces, which underlie the mere disagreements, are the barriers that inhibit and impede progress toward peaceful settlement of the conflict. They stand as major obstacles to begin the negotiation, to carry the negotiation, to achieve an agreement and later to engage in a process of reconciliation. These barriers are found among the leaders, as well as among society members that are involved in intergroup conflict.

The present chapter will focus on the socio-psychological barriers that are of special importance as they have dominant detrimental power in preventing peace making (Arrow, Mnookin, Ross, Tversky, & Wilson, 1999; Bar-Siman-Tov, 1995; Ross & Ward, 1995). Specifically, the chapter in its first part will review the various approaches to socio-psychological barriers. In the second part, a general model of socio-psychological barriers, that integrates different views and perspectives, will be introduced. This part will also elaborate specifically on the content-based socio-psychological barriers. It will discuss the causes for freezing, focusing mainly on the structural, motivational, emotional, and contextual factors. In the third part we will describe the functioning of the socio-psychological barriers in their selective, biased and distorting information processing in the context of conflict. Finally, we will draw several conclusions.

SOCIO-PSYCHOLOGICAL BARRIERS TO CONFLICT RESOLUTION: PAST APPROACHES

Review of the literature about the socio-psychological barriers identifies at least four different but complementary directions. The first one focused on the contents of societal beliefs^o that fuel the continuation of the conflict. Kelman (1987) suggested that perceptions of the relations in zero-sum terms, the denial of the other group's identity and the extremely negative and monolithic view of the adversary (also defined as delegitimization) delay any progress toward successful negotiation. In fact the content approach can be found almost in every major study about serious and prolonged conflict. Nevertheless, the lists of beliefs that serve as barriers can be a long one. Thus, in addition to the beliefs already noted, the different lists include beliefs that pertain to self-moral glorification, overconfidence in own strength, sense of being a victim, strong feeling of patriotism, being vulnerable, being helpless, and so on (Bar-Tal, 1998, 2007a; Coleman, 2003; Eidelson & Eidelson, 2003 for recent work; Kelman, 1965; White, 1970 for early work; also see Chapter 2).

Another important psychological phenomenon, frequently presented as the most important barrier for conflict resolution, is intergroup mistrust (Kelman, 2005; Kramer & Carnevale, 2001; Kydd, 2005). The importance of (mis)trust in delaying possible solution stems from its negative affect on levels of expectations about future behavior of the rival (Yamagishi & Yamagishi, 1994), which leads almost directly to refusal to take risks in negotiations and to support of conflict continuation (Larsen, 1997; Lewicki, 2006). This stems, mainly from the fear of being betrayed by the adversary, given the confrontational history of the mutual relations. Hence, despite some affective aspects of trust, it should be classified into the long list of content-based barriers, concentrating mainly on the view of the adversary and his expected actions.

A totally different view of socio-psychological barriers was presented in the important line of works of Ross and his colleagues in the Stanford Center on International Conflict and Negotiation (Maoz, Ward, Katz, & Ross, 2002; Mnookin & Ross, 1995; Ross & Ward, 1995). These scholars focused on the cognitive and motivational processes as pivotal barriers in times of negotiation. According to their view, socio-psychological barriers are "cognitive and motivational processes that impede mutually beneficial exchanges of concessions and render seemingly tractable conflicts refractory to negotiated resolution" (Ross & Ward, 1995, p. 254). These barriers "governing the way that human beings interpret information, evaluate risks, set priorities, and experience feelings of gain and loss" (p. 263). As few examples of the processes we will mention optimistic overconfidence (i.e., overestimation of the capability to achieve beneficial results in the absence of successful negotiation, Kahneman & Tversky, 1995) and *divergent construal* (i.e., each party in the conflict goes beyond the given information and differently interpret

^o *Societal beliefs* are defined as the society's members shared cognitions on topics and issues that are of special concern to society and contribute to its unique characteristics. They are organized around themes and consist of such contents as collective memories, ideologies, goals, myths, and so on (Bar-Tal, 2000). They may be shared by the great majority of society members or only part of them.

the events, Ross & Ward, 1995).^{*} It is worth noting that while the content-based barriers reflect long-standing, enduring psychological phenomenon, the perspective of Ross and his colleagues focus on “on-line” processes that rise in response to specific new events or information. Interestingly, empirical work that tries to integrate these two perspectives is rare.

Another notable example of socio-psychological barriers that leads to selective biased and distorting information is found in the perspective focusing on the affective and emotional factors that underlie many of the conflicts (refer to Chapter 3 for an elaborated general discussion; for more specific level contributions about fear, refer to Bar-Tal, 2001; Lake & Rothchild, 1998; or about hatred, refer to Baumeister & Butz, 2005; Halperin, 2008a, 2008b; White, 1984). This direction is a result of a shift in social psychology from pure cognitive research to a more integrated perspective that is also observed in the study of conflict resolution (de Rivera & Paez, 2007; Lerner, Gonzalez, Small, & Fischhoff, 2003). Most importantly, this developing line of research enables to point at the unique contribution of discrete emotions in biasing information processing and hindering support for peaceful resolutions (Brown, González, Zagefka, & Cehajic, 2008; Cheung-Blunden & Blunden, 2008; Halperin, 2008b).

An examination of the above review suggests a tendency among students of conflict to examine single aspects of the barriers, while neglecting the attempts to integrate the different parts of the puzzle. Therefore, in the present chapter we would like to propose an integrative approach, which combines different perspectives into an interactive model that outlines the functioning of the socio-psychological barriers.

INTEGRATIVE APPROACH

The proposed approach integrates a number of socio-psychological elements that have interactive mutual influence and it can be described as a conceptual process model (see Figure 9.1). This conceptual model applies to individual as well as to collective level of analysis because group members share beliefs, values, attitudes and emotions (Bar-Tal, 2000; see also Chapter 3). Moreover, identification with the group in the context of serious conflict increases the similarity of society members in their use of the barriers (Chapter 5).

Our lengthy description will focus mainly on these parts that are relatively original and only present briefly these parts which have been discussed widely in the socio-psychological literature elsewhere.

In this presentation we focus on the socio-psychological barriers in the context of intractable conflict, which represents the most difficult, prolonged and violent intergroup confrontation over major disagreements between the two (or more) parties about existential goals and interests (Bar-Tal, 1998; Coleman, 2006).[†]

^{*} A longer list of this type of barriers will be presented in the last part of this chapter.

[†] Intractable conflicts are characterized as lasting at least 25 years, over goals that are perceived as existential, being violent, perceived as unsolvable and of zero sum nature, preoccupying greatly society members, with parties involved investing much in their continuation (Bar-Tal, 1998, 2007a; Kriesberg, 1993).

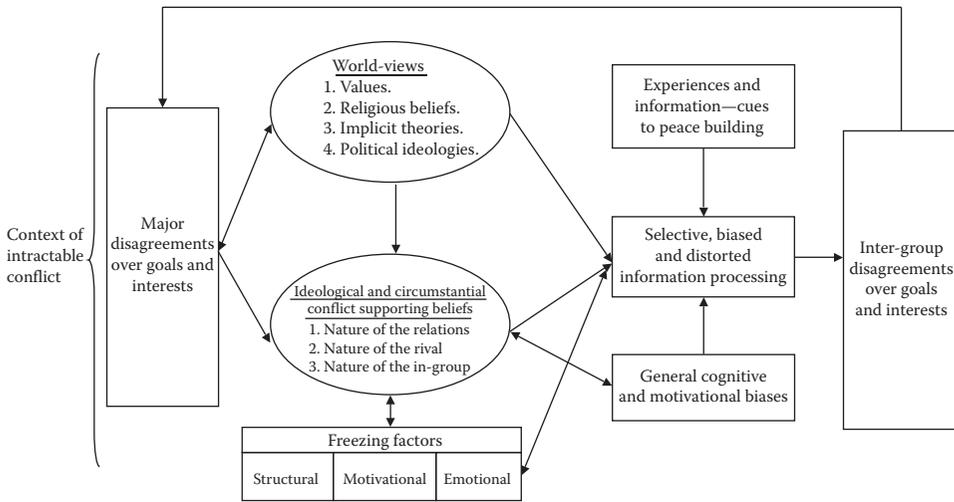


Figure 9.1 Socio-psychological barriers to peaceful conflict resolution.

Recently Bar-Tal, Halperin, and Oren (in press) used the integrative model in an analysis of the functioning of the social–psychological barriers in the Jewish Israeli society in the present stalemate of the negotiations between the state of Israel and the Palestinian Authority.

The major disagreements are the explicit causes of the conflict, but the long-term preservation of the conflict stems also from the enduring inability to overcome them because of the crystallization and functioning of various barriers including the socio-psychological ones. Socio-psychological barriers pertain to an integrated operation of cognitive, emotional and motivational processes, combined with preexisting repertoire of rigid supporting beliefs, world views and emotions that result in selective, biased and distorting information processing. This processing obstructs and inhibits a penetration of new information that can contribute to the facilitation of the development of the peace process. We will now describe the conceptual framework, beginning with ideological and circumstantial conflict supporting beliefs.

Ideological and Circumstantial Conflict Supporting Beliefs

The cores of the socio-psychological barriers that underlie the disagreements, preserve, and feed them are societal beliefs that are directly related to the confrontation and therefore are called as conflict supporting beliefs. There are two categories of these beliefs: ideological and circumstantial societal beliefs. Ideological conflict supporting beliefs provide a stable conceptual framework that allows society members involved in intractable conflict to organize and comprehend the world in which they live, and to act toward its preservation or alteration in accordance with its standpoint (Bar-Tal, Raviv, Raviv, & Dgani-Hirsch, 2009; see Chapter 6). They do not refer to specific issues or disagreements that are raised in particular conditions but are general ideological system of societal beliefs that serve as a prism to

view the conflict. They pertain to at least three important themes that greatly feed the continuations of the conflict: first, they draw the conflict as a “zero sum game,” justify the outbreak of the conflict, its development and insistence on its continuation (i.e., the nature of the conflict), mobilizing society members to actively participate in it. Second, they put all the blame for the outbreak of the conflict and its continuation on the rival and delegitimize him (i.e., nature of the rival). Third, they present a positive image of the in-group with self-glorification and present the in-group as being the sole victim of the conflict (i.e., nature of the in-group). More specifically these beliefs reflect systems of societal beliefs of collective memories[°] and ethos of conflict[†] that evolve under the harsh, violent and stressful conditions of intractable conflict in order to facilitate adaptation to these conditions (Bar-Tal, 2007a). Thus, the themes of the ideological conflict supporting beliefs that derive from collective memory and ethos of conflict are one sided, simplistic and provide black–white picture of the situation. They evolve through the years of the conflict to meet the challenges that it poses, and by being functional they facilitate adaptation to the harsh conditions of the conflict and allow satisfaction of the social needs on the individual and collective level (Bar-Tal, 2007a; Sharvit, 2008).

But we also recognize that additional beliefs may be added to the repertoire of the supporting beliefs as a result of particular conditions that develop in a conflict. We call these beliefs circumstantial conflict supporting beliefs as they appear in a specific context and later disappear (e.g., the leader of the rival group is weak and therefore is perceived as unable to implement the potential peace agreement). Nevertheless, all the supporting beliefs create mistrust, hostility and sense of threat. They serve as explicit barriers to the peace process by providing an epistemic basis for the continuation of the conflict.

General World Views

In addition, we suggest that the described conflict supporting beliefs are often fed by beliefs that are not directly related to the conflict but reflect general world

[°] Societal beliefs of collective memory evolve to present to society members the history of the intractable conflict in accordance to the needs of the society (Cairns & Roe, 2003).

[†] Ethos of conflict, defined as configuration of central societal beliefs that provide particular dominant orientation to a society experiencing prolonged intractable conflict (Bar-Tal, 2000). It has been proposed that in the context of intractable conflict evolves ethos with eight themes (Bar-Tal, 1998, 2007a). They include: societal beliefs about the justness of one’s own goals, which first of all outline the goals in conflict, indicate their crucial importance, and provide their explanations and rationales. Societal beliefs about security stress the importance of personal safety and national survival, and outline the conditions for their achievement. Societal beliefs of positive collective self-image concern the ethnocentric tendency to attribute positive traits, values and behavior to own society. Societal beliefs of own victimization concern self-presentation as a victim, especially in the context of the intractable conflict. Societal beliefs of delegitimizing the opponent concern beliefs which deny the adversary’s humanity. Societal beliefs of patriotism generate attachment to the country and society, by propagating loyalty, love, care, and sacrifice. Societal beliefs of unity refer to the importance of ignoring internal conflicts and disagreements during intractable conflict in order to unite the forces in the face of the external threat. Finally, societal beliefs of peace refer to peace as the ultimate desire of the society.

views. General world views are systems of beliefs not related to the particular conflict but provide orientations which contribute to the continuation of the conflicts because of the perspectives, norms, and values that they propagate. The list of these general views is long, but among the more distinctive ones it is possible to note as examples, political ideology (such as authoritarianism or conservatism) that is not directly related to the conflict (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswick, Levinson, & Sanford, 1950; Altemeyer, 1981; Jost, 2006; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999) specific values such as related to power or conservatism (Schwartz, 1992), religious beliefs (Kimball, 2002) and entity theory about the nature of human qualities (Dweck, 1999). All these world views have influence on how society members perceive the conflict disagreements and form their other beliefs about the nature of the conflict, the rival, and the own group (Beit-Hallahmi & Argyle, 1997; Dweck & Ehrlinger, 2006; Golec & Federico, 2004; Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003; Maoz & Eidelson, 2007; Sibley & Duckitt, 2008). Eventually, the two content-related clusters of beliefs (i.e., the two types of conflict supporting beliefs and the general world-view beliefs) that were just described provide a prism through which individuals perceive and interpret the reality of the conflict.

Freezing Factors

The contents themselves of the conflict supporting beliefs are only minor part of the problem. Theoretically they could be easily changed, but the essence of their functioning as barriers is their freezing (Kruglanski, 2004; Kruglanski & Webster, 1996). This freezing process is fed by structural, motivational, emotional factors that turn the conflict supporting beliefs to be rigid. Rigidity implies that the societal beliefs are resistant to change, being organized in a coherent manner with little complexity and great differentiation from alternative beliefs (Rokeach, 1960; Tetlock, 1989). It constitutes an important foundation of the barriers because it is responsible for the fact that the contents of the societal beliefs supporting the conflict do not change easily but are maintained even when the most convincing alternative arguments that suggest peaceful resolution of the conflict are presented. Now each of the factors will be presented.

Structural Factor The first factor that contributes to the freezing is structural, as it pertains to the rigid structure of the rigid conflict supporting beliefs. There are a number of causes for this rigid structure and they will be elaborated now.

Functionality The first reason refers to the functionality of the described societal beliefs. That is, they fulfill important functions on the individual and collective levels for societies involved in severe conflicts, especially during their intractable phase. Among them needs for identity, security, recognition, autonomy, self-esteem, differentiation, justice, and so on (Bar-Tal, 2007a; Burton, 1990; Kelman & Fisher, 2003; Staub & Bar-Tal, 2003). This functionality plays a role in the rigidity because it is well established that it is very difficult to change attitudes, beliefs or emotions when they satisfy human needs (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993, 1998).

Kruglanski (2004) proposed that society members tend “to freeze on their prior knowledge if such knowledge was congruent with their needs” (pp. 17–18). In our case, the evolved repertoire helps to meet the challenges that intractable conflict poses: it helps to satisfy the deprived needs, facilitates coping with stress and is functional to withstanding the enemy through many years of conflict (Bar-Tal, 2007a). Specifically, among various needs it fulfills the epistemic function of illuminating the conflict situation; provides moral function of justifying immoral acts of the in-group toward the enemy, including violence and destruction; allows maintenance of positive identity, sense of differentiation and superiority; satisfies the needs of security by elaborating the nature of threats and the conditions that can overcome them; and motivates for solidarity, mobilization and action for the causes of the conflict. These major functions are crucial for the society members and therefore the repertoire that serves them is inoculated against attempts to change it.

Structural Interrelationship Another reason for the rigidity of the conflict supporting beliefs is their coherent interrelated structure which can be considered as a type of conflict ideology (Bar-Tal et al., 2009; Tetlock, 1989; see Chapter 6). Ideology is considered as a closed system of systematically formulated beliefs which guide reality perception and behavior (van Dijk, 1998). Hence, it reduces openness to information and its processing. Eagly & Chaiken (1993, 1998) similarly proposed that embeddedness of beliefs and attitudes in an interrelated system creates resistance to change because coherent structure creates dependency and support among the beliefs and attitudes in this system (Rokeach, 1960). Changing one belief and/or attitude requires a change of other beliefs and attitudes as well. Accordingly, it may be assumed that the mode of thinking of those who hold an ideology is characterized (relatively to those who do not hold it) by an inclination to adhere to that which is familiar, to be selective in information search, and to think in a biased, simplistic and stereotypical way (Feldman, 2003; Jost, 2006; Jost et al., 2003).

Characteristics of the Repertoire In addition, the rigidity of the conflict supporting beliefs lies in their characteristics: They are central, held with great confidence and highly involve the society members (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). Central (or important) beliefs and attitudes are easily accessible and are relevant to various taken decisions (Bar-Tal, Raviv, & Freund, 1994; Krosnick, 1989). A number of studies demonstrated that when beliefs and attitudes are central, they resist change (Fazio, 1995). Also, beliefs that are considered valid and truthful are less prone to change than beliefs considered as hypothesis or possibilities (Kruglanski, 1989). A number of studies found that the greater the confidence or certainty with which beliefs or attitudes are held, the more likely they are to resist change and remain stable over time (Bassili, 1996; Petrocelli, Tormala, & Rucker, 2007). In addition, ego-involvement with beliefs or attitudes indicates motivational tendency to adhere to them because of their implications for important values and/or needs (Lavine, Borgida, & Sullivan, 2000). We would like to propose that in most of the serious conflict cases, beliefs, attitudes, and emotions of the socio-psychological

repertoire that evolve during harsh and prolonged conflict are central, considered as truthful and are of ego involving. The recent thorough analysis of the Jewish Israeli society engaged in the intractable conflict demonstrates this premise very clearly (Bar-Tal, 2007b).

Motivational Factor We suggest in line with the lay epistemic theory the freezing stems also from the fact that the held knowledge is underlined by a motivational factor-specific closure needs (Kruglanski, 1989, 2004), that is, society members are motivated to view the held knowledge as being truthful and valid because it fulfills for them various needs (Burton, 1990). Therefore, society members use various cognitive strategies to increase the likelihood of reaching particular conclusions that is line with this knowledge (Kunda, 1990).

Emotional Factor Third factor that affects the level of freezing is emotional. Emotions function to freeze the repertoire and stabilize the rigidity of the conflict supporting beliefs, but they also may act directly on the information processing. It is well established that inter-group negative emotional sentiments play also a pivotal role in preventing progress toward peaceful conflict resolution (Baumeister & Butz, 2005; Corradi, Fagen, & Garretton, 1992; Halperin, 2008a, 2008b; Scheff & Retzinger, 1991; Staub, 2005; White, 1984; see also Chapter 3). These emotions are shared by society members. Averill (1994) argued more than a decade ago that “emotional feelings are stories we tell ourselves in order to guide and account for our own behavior” (p. 385). We suggest that these emotional stories, which are characterized by high stability and resistance to change (Abelson & Prentice, 1989), serve as glue, holding the conflict supporting beliefs together.

The enduring emotional states that contribute to the stabilization of the supporting content are different in their nature from the well-known classic concept of emotions, that is, psychological states that occur as short-term reactions to specific events (Frijda, 1986). These emotional sentiments consist of all features of the classical emotions, yet they endure for a much longer period of time and therefore frequently defined as chronic (Arnold, 1960; Lazarus, 1994). They differ from general moods in that they are object or event directed (Frijda, 1986). Different scholars of emotions differently defined enduring or long-term emotions. Notable examples for such conceptualizations are “emotional climate” (de Rivera, 1992) or “collective emotional orientation” (Bar-Tal, Halperin, & de Rivera, 2007). Despite the differences between these two concepts (and others), in both of them the negative emotional states turn out to be part of the conflict’s culture (de Rivera & Paez, 2007), and continuously interact with the long-term societal beliefs about the conflict.

The link that connects between the emotional sentiments and the conflict supporting societal beliefs is the appraisal component of the emotions. Each and every emotion is related to unique configuration of comprehensive (conscious or unconscious) evaluations of the emotional stimulus (Roseman, 1984). Hence, emotions and beliefs are closely related and reinforce each other steadily. A decade ago, Lerner and Keltner (2000) argued that each emotion activates a cognitive

predisposition to appraise future events in line with the central-appraisal dimensions that triggered the emotion (Lerner et al., 2003). This appraisal tendency approach is of great importance in our context, mainly because a seemingly positive action or statement of the adversary can be appraised negatively, due to the long-term negative emotional sentiments, and strengthens the already extremely negative ethos of conflict. Therefore, for example, emotional sentiment of fear that is related to the appraisal of the situation as threatening and to the appraisal of low control capabilities (Lazarus, 1991), will bring about a tendency to appraise each statement or actions in the same pattern (Jarymowicz & Bar-Tal, 2006). In turn, this appraisal will reinforce existing content of victimhood, siege mentality and mistrust. Emotional sentiment of hatred, that involve appraisals about the intentionality of the harms caused by the rival as well as appraisals regarding stable, evil character of this group and its members (Halperin, 2008b), will amplify extreme delegitimization, and will enable initiation of extreme aggressive actions without eroding the positive self-collective group image.

Threatening Context Finally, the freezing of the socio-psychological repertoire can be attributed to the stressful and threatening context of conflict in which society members live. This stressful and threatening context leads to closure and limiting information processing (Driskell & Salas, 1996; Staal, 2004). Indeed numerous studies provide empirical evidence about the effect of threat and stress on cognitive functioning (see the extensive review of Staal, 2004). For example, the effect can be reflected in premature closure of decision alternatives (Keinan, 1987), restricted consideration of the number and quality of alternatives (Janis, Defares, & Grossman, 1983), sole reliance on previously stored knowledge (Bar-Tal, Raviv, & Spitzer, 1999; Pally, 1955), persistence in use of previous methods to solve problems even after they ceased to be useful and helpful (Staw, Sandelands, & Dutton, 1981) and increased use of schematic or stereotyped judgments (Hamilton, 1982).

In the context of conflict, studies found that threat is causing to closure of the societal beliefs of the conflict which means support for continuation of the conflict, use of violence and opposition to compromises (Arian, 1995; Gordon & Arian, 2001; Halperin, Bar-Tal, Nets-Zehngut, & Drori, 2008; Maoz & McCauley, 2008). Various explanations were offered for this detrimental effect of threat and stress and they range from the proposal that emotional arousal as a result of stress acts consistently reduces the range of information that individuals use (Easterbrook, 1959) to the proposal that coping with stress requires cognitive capacities and this leads to their reduced allocation for other cognitive tasks and therefore individuals in these situations use simplified and superficial cognitive strategies (Chajut & Algom, 2003).

According to Mitzen (2006), situation of conflict, which is full of threats leads to ontological security seeking which is defined as the need to create certainty and stability as part of identity fulfillment. This need is achieved by the establishment of routines that are familiar, trusted and well practiced. These routines sustain identity but at the same time perpetuate and eternalize the conflict because they prevent movement toward a different situation—situation of peace making, which

requires risk taking and uncertainty. Thus, society members involved in conflict have difficulty to imagine peaceful situation after living through years in a conflict, in which the patterns of thoughts and behavior became well established and continuously used, and thus continue dogmatically to pursue the familiar line of conflict societal beliefs and behaviors, without examining alternatives.

In sum, freezing resulting from rigidity of the conflict supporting beliefs serves as the dominant cause for their functioning as socio-psychological barriers because of their major influence on information processing. The barriers lead to selective collection of information, which means that society members involved in intractable conflict tend to search and absorb information that validates the societal beliefs of the repertoire while ignoring and omitting contradictory information (Kelman, 2007; Kruglanski, 2004; Kruglanski & Webster, 1996; Kunda, 1990). But even when ambiguous or contradictory information is absorbed, it is encoded and cognitively processed in accordance with the held repertoire through bias, addition and distortion.

Moreover, since the repertoire is indoctrinated in the early years of the childhood via societal institutions and channels of communications, it is possible to assume that almost all the young generation absorbs the contents of the conflict supporting beliefs (i.e., collective memory and ethos of conflict). Moreover during the childhood probably most of this generation holds the conflict supporting beliefs as valid and truthful. It is possible that when the peace process begins and progresses at least some of them acquire alternative beliefs which promote the peace process. But recent dramatic findings reveal that even when society members acquire through the years alternative beliefs and attitudes that support peace making, the learned repertoire at the early age continues to be stored in mind as implicit beliefs and attitudes and has influence on human functioning (Sharvit, 2008).

Before turning to the description of the consequences we would like only to note that the strength of the socio-psychological barriers does not lie only in the rigid structure of the conflict supporting societal beliefs and the fueling emotions, but also in the societal mechanisms, which are set to maintain the socio-psychological repertoire of conflict. Societies involved in intractable conflict exert great efforts to assure that society members would adhere to the dominant narrative and ignore alternative information. In other words, the society constructs mechanisms to assure that the themes of collective memory and the ethos of conflict, as well as collective emotions, will be maintained and alternative knowledge about possibilities of peace making will not penetrate into the social sphere and even when penetrates would be rejected (Bar-Tal, 2007b; Horowitz, 2000; Kelman, 2007). We will briefly note the most notable mechanisms below (for detailed descriptions of the mechanisms and examples from various conflicts, refer to Burns-Bisogno, 1997; Miller, 1994; Morris, 2000; Wolfsfeld, 2004).

Control of the mass media is practiced when the media is controlled by the governmental sources and relies mostly on information provided by them. In the situation of control the governmental sources provide information that is in line with the dominant narrative and avoid providing information that may challenge this narrative.

Censorship on information functions when the governmental authorities practice censorship on the information. This mechanism assures that contradicted information does not appear in the media and other channels.

Delegitimization of alternative information and its sources attempts to close a likelihood of appearance of alternative information about possibilities of peace. Therefore the authorities delegitimize either the alternative information and/or its sources in order to influence the public to reject the information.

Punishment is carried through formal and informal sanctions of social and/or physical nature for providers of alternative information in an attempt to silence these sources that may contradict the dominant narrative.

Closure of archives is done either completely or for a long period of time by the authorities with the aim of preventing information that may contradict the dominant repertoire.

Encouragement and rewarding mechanism uses a “carrot” for those sources, channels, agents, and products that support the psychological repertoire of conflict. Authorities may reward and encourage various sources that provide information, knowledge, art, and other products which transmit and disseminate the repertoire of conflict.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF THE CONTENT-BASED BARRIERS

During the years of the conflict, the well established conflict supporting beliefs held with rigidity by many of society members, together with the general world-views, become a prism through which society members construe their reality, collect new information, interpret their experiences and then make decisions about their course of action. This process is crystallized and accelerated by the previously described cognitive-structural, motivational, and emotional factors. Subsequently, these supporting beliefs have important cognitive, affective, and behavioral influences on society members as individuals and on the society as a whole. On the general level it is possible to describe the selective, biased and distorting information processing that inhibits the exposure, consideration and acquisition of the alternative new information with the following characteristics.*

1. The conflict supporting beliefs tend to be automatically activated when cues about the conflict become salient (Bargh, Chen, & Burrows, 1996; Devine, 1989).
2. Information that is consistent with the conflict supporting beliefs tends to be more attended and remembered, whereas inconsistent information is often neglected (Macrae, Milne, & Bodenhausen, 1994; Stangor & Mc Millan, 1992).

* The list of the characteristics is compiled on the basis of empirical research which shows the effect of held beliefs (including stereotypes), ideologies, values or affect on information processing (Iyengar & Ottati, 1994; Ottati & Wyer, 1993; Smith, 1998; Taber, 2003). In fact few studies were carried with conflict situation. We nevertheless assume that there is not reason to assume that society members in conflict context function with their held societal beliefs, fueled by emotions, in a different manner.

3. Ambiguous information tends to be construed in line with the conflict supporting beliefs (von Hippel, Sekaquaptewa, & Vergas, 1995).
4. Society members are more sensitive to information, which confirms their conflict supporting beliefs, in other words, they are selectively attentive and absorb confirmatory information more easily (Sweeney & Gruber, 1984; Vallone, Ross, & Lepper, 1985).
5. Society members actively search for information that confirms their conflict supporting beliefs (Schultz-Hardt, Frey, Luthgens, & Moscovici, 2000).
6. Society members less critically examine information that confirms their conflict supporting beliefs (Ditto & Lopez, 1992; Edwards & Smith, 1996).
7. Society members tend to interpret acquired information in line with the stored conflict supporting beliefs (Pfeifer & Oglloff, 1991; Rosenberg & Wolfsfeld, 1977; Shamir & Shikaki, 2002; Sommers & Ellsworth, 2000).
8. Society members tend to use their conflict supporting beliefs as a framework when organizing new information (Feldman, 1988).
9. Society members tend to use their conflict supporting beliefs in making attributions, evaluations, judgments, or decisions about the conflict (Bartels, 2002; Sibley, Liu, Duckitt, & Khan, 2008; Skitka, Mullen, Griffin, Hutchinson, & Chamberlin, 2002).
10. Based on their conflict supporting beliefs, society members tend to expect particular events, behaviors of the rival and other groups, and experiences all associated with the conflict (Darley & Gross, 1983; Hamilton, Sherman, & Ruvolo, 1990).
11. Society members tend to be guided by the conflict supporting beliefs in their behavior (Jost, 2006).

The above description of the psychological functioning suggests that the handling of the information in conflict situations is characterized by top-down processing because of the barriers. This process is affected more by what fits the contents of the conflict supporting beliefs and less by details of incongruent information. That is to say, in harsh conflict evolve socio-psychological barriers that tend to “close minds” and facilitate tunnel vision, precluding the contemplation of incongruent information and alternative approaches to the conflict. They often prevent even entertainment of ideas that may initiate peace making process.

In this vein it is important to note that the processing of new information and experiences is also amplified by universal cognitive and motivational biases that characterize all human beings as they are, in every context. Social psychology has contributed greatly to their elucidation as well as description of their functioning: Among them can be found the cognitive heuristics, automatic cognitive processing, and various motivations such as ego-enhancement (Bargh, 2007; Jarymowicz, 2008; Kunda, 1990; Nisbett & Ross, 1980). It can be assumed that the conflictive intergroup context, accompanied by the conflict supporting beliefs, provides an ultimate platform for the development of these biases (Ross & Ward, 1995). Interestingly, these biases, in turn, reinforce the rigidity and the stability of societal beliefs with contents that support the continuation of the conflict.

At present very few studies illustrated the functioning of the content-based barriers showing the effect of the conflict supporting beliefs on information processing by society members involved in a conflict (Bar-Tal et al., 2009). One notable exception is a very recent study that attempted to validate the described process model, using a correlative large-scale design with the Israeli Jewish national sample (Halperin & Bar-Tal, 2010). The survey included scales that captured representation of the potential socio-psychological barriers presented in the model, that is, (a) general world views (values, implicit theories about groups, authoritarianism, and political orientation); (b) conflict supporting societal beliefs, including specific long-term beliefs (self-perception of collective victimhood of the in-group and delegitimization of the rival group) and circumstantial beliefs about the current situation of the conflict; and (c) negative lasting emotions. As dependent variables (i.e., the result of the barriers), openness to information about the conflict and support for compromises for peace were assessed. Analysis of the results confirmed the basic patterns proposed in the presented theoretical model. The general world views influenced levels of openness to conflict-related information as well as support for compromises mainly through the mediation of the conflict supporting societal beliefs and the negative lasting emotions.

In contrast most studies demonstrated the mere selective, biased and distorting effects of the information processing in the context of conflict, with no actual reference to the group's held psychological repertoire of the conflict. This line of studies either applied previously presented biases to the area of conflict or elucidated new ones. These biases were presented as specific consequences of conflict or as barriers themselves. In some of the studies, the individual's political position was integrated into the equation, mostly used as a moderator of the effect of the bias on current attitudes. Hence, it seems that though not explicitly spelled out or empirically examined, in most of these studies the existence of content-based barriers was implicitly assumed. Among the most notable effects of information processing, the consequences mentioned below can also be found.

Double Standard Double standard indicates that a judgment or an evaluation of similar acts by the in-group and by the rival is done with two different standards favoring the in-group. This bias is well demonstrated in the study by Sande, Geothals, Ferrari, and Worth (1989) done in 1985, which found that American high school and college students gave opposing explanations of similar acts performed either by the Soviet Union or the United States (a positive act of smashing ice fields to allow whales to reach an open sea and a negative act of building a new fleet of nuclear-powered submarines). Thus while the actions of the United States were attributed to the positive moral characteristics of the Americans, the same acts of the Soviet Union were attributed to the self-serving and negative motives of the Russians in line with their enemy image. Similar results were found in other studies as well (Ashmore, Bird, Del-Boca, & Vanderet, 1979; Burn & Oskamp, 1989; Oskamp, 1965; Oskamp & Levenson, 1968). Highly relevant to our general model are results of a study conducted in the mid-1960s that found differences between doves and hawks in the implementation of that bias (Oskamp & Levenson, 1968).

Fundamental Attribution Error Another example of a bias is found in cases in which the negative behavior of the rival group is attributed to innate characteristics, while situational factors are disregarded (Pettigrew, 1979, who labeled this tendency as the “ultimate attribution error”). A study by Hunter, Stringer, and Watson (1991) demonstrates this error in a study in which Catholic and Protestant students in Northern Ireland were presented with newsreel footage showing scenes of violence performed by Protestants and Catholics and were asked to explain why the involved people behaved in the depicted way. The results showed very clearly that the violence of the in-group was attributed to external causes such as “retaliation” or “fear of being attacked,” while the violence of the out-group was attributed to internal dispositions such as being “psychopath” or “blood lust.” In a recent study, Bar-Tal et al. (2009) found that the fundamental attribution error was much more prevalent among Jews who adhere the supporting beliefs of the conflict, in comparison to those that do not (Taylor & Jaggi, 1974).

Reactive Devaluation Another consequence of the way society members involved in conflict process information is called reactive devaluation. Reactive devaluation suggests that an evaluation of a specific package deal or compromise offer is evaluated in accordance to what side proposed it. When the offer is proposed by own side it is accepted but when the same offer is proposed by the rival it is rejected (Maoz, 2006; Ross, 1995). Maoz et al. (2002) showed that Israeli Jews evaluated an actual Israeli-authored peace plan less favorably when it was presented as being a Palestinian plan than when it was attributed to their own government. Moreover, they also showed that the evaluation of the proposal was much more negative among extremists Jews and Arabs (Hawks), than among Doves from the same sides, implying for interaction between enduring political positions and the process of reactive devaluation.

False Polarization This is another notable example of cognitive bias which is based upon some preliminary beliefs about the in-group, the out-group and the nature of the relations between them (Robinson, Keltner, Ward, & Ross, 1995). It gives expression to exaggeration of the disparity in the basic values, beliefs, and positions and therefore it stabilizes the disagreements. According to previous studies, society members engaged in conflict tend to exaggerate the extent of the disagreements that stand at the core of the conflict (Robinson et al., 1995; Rouhana, O’Dwyer, & Morrison Vaso, 1997). This tendency is especially pronounced for beliefs that were related to own ideology than to the ideology of the rival (Chambers, Baron, & Inman, 2006). Corresponding with our assumption about the interaction between previous beliefs and on-line psychological mechanisms, in a study conducted among Jews and Arabs in the Middle-East, Rouhana et al. (1997) found that this tendency was much more common among supporters of less conciliatory political parties (i.e., hawks) than among supporters of more conciliatory political parties (i.e., doves).

Bias Perception This is one important aspect of a wider set of biases originally defined by Lee Ross and his colleagues as *Naïve Realism* (Ross & Ward, 1995, 1996), which is the tendency for people to assume that their perceptions and judgments are more objective and attuned to reality than the differing perceptions and judgments of their peers. It is assumed that this tendency amplifies in conflict

situations in which people tend to perceive their opponents as biased and this perception causes them to act in violent way which escalates the confrontations (Pronin, Gilovich, & Ross, 2004). In three studies by Kennedy and Pronin (2008) it has been demonstrated that people perceive those who disagree with them as biased, take toward them conflict-escalating approaches, and eventually act toward them in a conflictive way.

Biased Assimilation plays an important role in the conflict situation as it leads society members to evaluate beliefs-consistent information more positively than beliefs-inconsistent information (Greitemayer, Fischer, Frey, & Schulz-Hardt, 2009). This bias prevents the unfreezing of the held beliefs that support the continuation of the conflict.

The presented list of biases is not exhaustible and probably additional biases that are related to conflicts can be added (e.g., fixation on particular information, denial of wrong doing, self-focus on own needs and goals, disregard of empathetic information about rival, or perception of in-group uniqueness). As noted, there is lack of systematic empirical research that examines comprehensively various societal beliefs of the repertoire of conflict, their rigidity and its functioning in real life context. Most importantly, there is lack of studies that integrate the different aspects of the socio-psychological barriers, as presented in our model. But there are numerous references to beliefs and emotions, as well as to the deficient information processing, in various analyses of different conflicts that fuel continuation of the conflict and prevent its peaceful resolution (Chirof & Seligman, 2001; Frank, 1967; Heradstveit, 1981; Jervis, 1976; Kriesberg, 2007; Lake & Rothchild, 1998; Petersen, 2002; Sandole, 1999; Vertzberger, 1991; Volkan, 1997; White, 1970, 1984). Social psychology should extend its scope to include in its agenda research on the intractable conflicts and especially the socio-psychological barriers which contribute to their continuation and prevent peace making.

CONCLUSIONS

In this chapter we attempted to describe the nature and the functioning of the socio-psychological barriers that prevent peaceful resolution of intractable conflicts. An integrated operation of cognitive, emotional, and motivational processes, combined with preexisting repertoire of rigid conflict supporting beliefs, world views and emotions leads to selective, biased and distorting information processing. In essence, we suggest that the set of the conflict supporting societal beliefs constitute a well entrenched ideology supported by conservative world views and emotions. These two sets of beliefs constitute a coherent system that has a consistent structure with teleological basis that inhibits peace making.

Thus, the presented model outlines the process through which various socio-psychological views, beliefs and processes, join together to obstruct any penetration of new, positive information or proposals that can potentially advance peace making into the individual and societal cognitive sphere. Thus, for example, peaceful gestures initiated by the adversary, new proposals raised by third parties or by the other side and/or new information about the other side's willingness to compromise, may not get a proper attention and consideration. The consequence of this

functioning is preservation and even reinforcement of the basic disagreements, as well as of the supporting beliefs. Under these circumstances overcoming the basic disagreements is a very difficult challenge.

The described ensemble of socio-psychological barriers and specially its orchestrated effect on information processing serve as a catalyst for continuation of the conflict and in fact it operates as part of the vicious cycle in the intractable conflict. Considering that this process is mirror imaged by the two parties in the conflict, it can be well understood how the vicious cycle of violence operates. As the conflict evolves, each of the opponents develops a negative and rigid socio-psychological repertoire that is based upon the conflict supporting beliefs. This repertoire fulfills important roles, on the individual and collective levels. With time, however, this repertoire comes to be one of the factors determining the courses of policy and action taken by each side in the conflict, by serving as the major motivating, justifying, and rationalizing factor. The taken negative actions then serve as validating information to the existing negative psychological repertoire and in turn magnify the motivation and readiness to engage in conflict. The behaviors of each side confirm the held negative socio-psychological repertoire and justify harming the rival.

These vicious cycles of intractable conflict are detrimental to the well being of both the individuals and societies involved, as well as posing a danger to the world. The negative socio-psychological repertoire with its rigidity plays an important role in these cycles. It is, therefore, of vital necessity to change this repertoire, in order to establish new relations between the rival groups. But this change is not easy because of the other socio-psychological barriers that play a powerful role in preventing a transformation that may lead to the emergence of a repertoire that facilitates peace making. Nevertheless, changing the developed socio-psychological repertoire that is maintained by societies involved in intractable conflict is a necessary condition for advancing peace process and stopping the violence. This is a crucial challenge in view of the behavioral consequences that this rigid repertoire has in situations of intractable conflict, leading to violence, including losses of human life, ethnic cleansing and even genocide. Thus, studying how it is possible to overcome the barriers including the socio-psychological ones should be a mission placed with high priority on the agenda of social sciences and especially of social psychology.

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