

Talking to the Enemy: Difficult Conversations and Ethnopolitical Conflict

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Abstract

The article reviews intractability qualities and uses the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as an example of the difficult conversations that characterize the conflict between competing groups. There are two typical research trends for analyzing group conflict. These are either a rational model or intractable conflict model. The rational model assumes that differences are over realistic issues such as scarce resources. The intractable model focuses on identity and emotions. Intractable conflicts are recalcitrant, nonrational, and particularly resistant to resolution. They generate difficult conversations. The argument here demonstrates how intractability establishes the descriptive conditions for difficult conversations about conflicts. These conditions are incommensurate cultural narratives, narrative particularity, existential threat, power differences, and delegitimization. Islam and the West and the Israelis and Palestinians are used as examples. Finally, such difficult divides must attend to five issues that ameliorate difficult conversations, namely, inclusion, maximization of arguments and reasons, controlling undue influences, dialogic equality, and the value of deliberation.

Eventually, all parties to a conflict must talk. Whether the conflict is about a small matter that can be handled with some guided interaction, or a detailed and complex conflict that has implications for identity, ethnicity, or political power, there comes a point when the parties to the conflict must build relationships and collaborate on solutions. That is, at some point in the conflict conversations are necessary and sometimes these conversations are difficult. Ethnopolitical conflicts (e.g. Israelis and Palestinians), which are particularly resistant to resolution, and are concerned with issues such as sanctity, deep-rooted values, and identity are often characterized by “difficult conversations.” The essay below describes the conditions of ethnopolitical conflict that leads to difficult conversations. In an era of extreme polarization where conflicting parties live in their own information enclaves it becomes increasingly important to understand the strategies of respectful conversation, how to initiate and facilitate conversation, communication tactics for change, and the efficacy of democratic deliberation.

Introduction

Contemporary studies of conflict have much to say about the various difficulties and challenges associated with solving conflicts. And, of course, intractable conflicts (Coleman, 2003) are particularly trying.

They resist resolution and force the participants to contend with difficult issues pertaining to sanctity, identity, and deep-rooted values. But of all the ugly and murderous strands of conflict the world is subject to, those conflicts, where sacred values (e.g., religion, group identity, ethnicity) fundamentally inform the values and beliefs of each side and provide a group with a comprehensive and bounded system of beliefs, are often the most troubling and recalcitrant. Muslims, Jews, Christians, and Hindus are currently intertwined with one another—including differences that find their way into political and secular issues—in some complex ways that can be violent. And because intergroup religious, ethnic, and political conflict is so intense, we need to understand it better (Chang, 1997).

This article outlines in more detail the conditions typical of difficult conversations. I begin with some philosophical conceptual foundations and then become increasingly specific homing in on principles and theories of intractability and conclude with examples including some interventions that are helpful. Clearly, the focus will be on democratic assumptions and that intelligence on these matters is complex and slow. That is one reason why such conversations are difficult. Moreover, difficult conversations are a logical consequence of intractable conflicts. Religion and ethnic identification are implicated in the conflict, but it is more a matter of political issues being filtered through these religious and ethnic lenses. When two groups are ensnared in an intractable conflict, such as the Israelis and the Palestinians (see below), they communicate with each other through narratives. That is, the nature of reality, moral judgments, and causal explanations are conveyed through stories that each side tells. We will see below that these narratives, and their various expressions, are central to the explanation of difficult conversations between ethnopolitically divided groups.

Conceptual Foundation of Difficult Conversations

When Huntington (1998) coined his almost cartoonish phrase “The Clash of Civilizations,” he signaled the return of deep emotional issues as a central factor in contemporary politics (Juergensmeyer, 1993). Those conflicts most resistant to resolution and thereby most subject to difficult conversations emerge from theories and principles of intractable conflicts (cf. Coleman, 2003; Ellis, 2006). Intractable conflicts have five characteristics that distinguish them from traditional resolution approaches. Briefly, these characteristics are first that intractable conflicts involve power imbalances where language and ethnicity are used to define the other and maintain power differences. Second, these conflicts are concerned with existential threats. They are less about tangible resources and more about human needs and identity. Israeli Jews and Palestinians, for example, formulate identities that include the negative image of the other (Kelman, 2007). Third, intractable conflicts typically involve social and political distance between groups that results in misinformation and stereotypes and other cognitive distortions. Fourth, intractable conflicts involve extreme emotions. Deep feelings of humiliation and anger are part of these conflicts. And fifth, intractable conflicts result in trauma. Such traumas can be intergenerational (Bar-On, 2000). Intractable conflicts fuel competition between the meaning systems of two cultures and this makes for difficult conversations.

The most common successful way of managing the relationship between religion, ethnicity, and politics is liberal accommodation (Ellis, 2015). Briefly, classical liberalism began with the suspicion of sacred values such as in religion and politics, but contemporary liberalism tries to accommodate religion and does not single it out as dangerous. In a true liberal democracy, religion has the same standing as any other worldview with an exclusive claim to truth. Support for pluralism is foundational to basic principles of democracy (Young, 2000). Democracy through its persistent debate and contest maintains a checks and balances system that is constantly responding to needs and threats posed by different groups in society. Different religious, ethnic, and political groups need to have their rights met but also achieve a degree of unity. The most successful form of unity tying pluralistic groups together is broad but not necessarily very deep (Young, 2000). It represents a political conception of justice that is capable of including multiple groups. Rawls (1993) explains how over time in Europe a long process of liberalism

and tolerance has resulted in recognition of the possibility of harmony between religions and religion and the state, or if not harmony at least acceptance.

Hence, the logic of the European liberal experience has demonstrated that tolerance cannot be separated from liberalism. And continuing the logic, tolerance cannot be separated from a loss of certainty. Tolerance results in a loss of faith and in the experience of at least unfreezing one's attitudes. This is firmly rooted in a communication process, governed by conditions of civility and debate, which sets into motion political activity that questions one's own certainty. One of the difficulties for the liberal state is for its members to subscribe to a shared point of view about justice and recede from religious justifications but subscribe to this shared morality on the basis of their own religion and point of view.

The key point here is that the result of discovering this common point of view or common morality is justified on moral grounds acceptable to both competing parties. As Rawls (1993) maintains, this sort of overlapping morality can only emerge from the public sphere on the basis of public reasoning. So in other words, each participant in a conflict from either side whether Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist, Palestinian, Israeli, Kantian, Catholic, or atheist must find a way to agree on principles of conflict resolution and management hopefully by finding some reasons within their own ideology. This kind of *overlapping consensus*, as Rawls (1993) argues, should not be superficial compromise but steeped in moral acceptance. This is what difficult conversations must confront. This conceptual foundation is dependent on Rawls (1993) and various theoretical contributions that extend Rawls.

My goal here is to organize these thoughts as a theoretical foundation for the advent of difficult conversations—conversations between people who hold divergent worldviews and are trying to manage their differences within democratic contexts. I mentioned *reasonable*, and we have made reference to *public reason*. Public reason is that reason shared by competing parties or diverse citizens in the political polity. It is public because it is shared by participants, the concern of everyone, and the subject matter is public and more available to everyone. Rawls (1993) reminds us that public reason occurs only when there is genuine deliberation in public forums. All conversation and discussions in local communities do not rise to the level of public reason. This clearly does not mean that everyday conversation is unimportant. On the contrary, as Kim and Kim (2008) and others have explained, everyday political talk is where individuals develop an understanding of their own interests and the interests of others; informal communication is a prerequisite to purposive deliberation. For this reason alone, multiple forms of contact experiences between conflicting groups are instrumental to the development of satisfactory outcomes and improved relations (Kelman, 2007; Maoz & Ellis, 2006).

Public reason improves the people who participate in it and cultivates broader more expansive attitudes and perspectives from which to view others. Dialogue and deliberation are particularly intertwined with the concept of the public. The very process of opinion formation and more fully understanding other attitudes, the stronger will be my own thinking and the more I will be able to take the perspective of the other, thus leading to tolerance and the diminution of rigidity. Price (1992) is writing about public opinion but is consistent with principles of public reason when he argues that opinion is the emergent product of discussion and debate and one of the ingredients of the deliberative process.

Before continuing to unpack how deeply divided groups develop and pursue difficult conversations in the service of problem resolution, we should emphasize that the conversational space between people, or that space where conflicting parties can engage in public reason, is difficult to discover and navigate. The pressures in the public to relegate politics to the private sphere are strong. Even deeply divided groups who realize they must communicate find it difficult to do so. The findings of Eliasoph (1998) pose strong evidence for how much most people dislike talking about politics and want to relegate it to the backstage and consciously avoid the vigorous and healthy debate of the democratic public sphere. Still, as Kim and Kim (2008) point out, the backstage is essentially a public sphere and forms an interactive relationship with talk in the private sphere. In any case, ethnopolitically divided groups set the stage for successful conversations not by negotiating self-interest but by understanding the self-interest of others. Difficult

conversations as we will see are equally as about creating goals as achieving them and about constructing a conceptual foundation upon which conflicting groups can negotiate.

Communication, Religion, and Conflict

We all have multiple identities, and each can be foregrounded in a particular context. For example, a Jewish female military officer can have in one context gender activated such that her behavior and identity are informed by gender roles, and in another context, her identity as a military person is foregrounded and directs the interaction. And if she identifies as Jewish, then this religious tradition and all that implies can explain still other patterns of communication. But it is usually not easy, especially in the case of religion, to know when a particular identity is activated. Throughout the 20th-century social theorists assumed that modernization and secularization would overwhelm religion as an influential ideology (Huntington, 1998). And even though religion has faded more into the background for many people, there has been a rise in religious identity and fundamentalism in the late 20th century, especially in the Islamic world. Strands of Christianity have intensified their influences in the United States and evangelicalism has made headway into Africa and Latin America. There are political states defined by religion such as Saudi Arabia, Israel, Iran, and others with strong religious ties.

A useful way to think about the role of religion, and communication in difficult political conflicts, is to view religion as a system of beliefs that mobilize populations to confront real or imagined enemies. This is termed “positioning theory” by Moghaddam, Harré, and Lee (2008) and assumes a central role for communication because it is the mechanism for the promotion of cohesion and conformity within a group, defending the group, and maintaining a competitive position. Religious convictions are deep and held fervently and of all the influences on political problems, of all the barriers to compromise and tolerance, religious convictions are among the most passionate and defining of difficult conversations. Two competing groups—whether they are competing for land, resources, or recognition—could not choose any other set of values or belief systems to argue from then religion if they want their conversations to be potentially difficult.

But when people invoke religious expressions to maximize the ingroup–outgroup distinction, and probably exacerbate polarization, then religion is what we have referred to as highly implicated in political conflict. Terms the Jews use to refer to outgroup members (e.g., *goyim*), or the Muslim term *kafer* to refer to an unbeliever have evolved to sharpen distinctions. Although they do not enter into deliberative problem-solving discussions very often, they are indicators of group identity and cohesion. They represent classic social categorization and the incorporation of norms and values into a group to which people identify or reject. Following Tajfel and Turner (1986) and social identity theory, members of a group seek a positive ingroup identity. Such foundational group identities are normal enough but problems in the form of intractable conflicts occur when these identities are exaggerated and more extreme than normal. Dangerous conflict results when ingroup members organize their reality around a group identity, namely, religion and begin demanding group loyalty. This condition causes distortions in cognitive interpretations so that social stimuli such as accents, skin color, and physical appearance are readily perceived as categories representing ingroup qualities and carry with them automatic judgments, but stigmatized and stereotypical judgments in the case of conflicting groups.

A basic barrier that is always a sign of a difficult conversation, and the barrier that must be overcome during the dialogue phase of problem-solving, is the *linguistic intergroup bias* (Maass, Ceccarelli, & Rudin, 1996). This is the tendency to use more abstract language to describe desirable ingroup qualities and undesirable outgroup qualities and actions, then when describing undesirable ingroup or desirable outgroup actions. In other words, when individuals want to maintain group distinctions, they interpret things positively with respect to their own group and negatively with respect to the outgroup. The linguistic intergroup bias predicts that more abstract language is associated with stable attributes and consistent situations; therefore, it is language capable of stabilizing positive ingroup qualities and negative

outgroup qualities. And this abstract language increases in intensity and frequency when groups are under threat which is typical of deeply divided groups. This use of language is an identity and conflict management strategy that must be overcome for conflict reconciliation and at least managed for conflict resolution.

Insulting and insensitive terminology to refer to outgroups is part of the linguistic intergroup bias. There are any number of derogatory terms for Arabs and Jews as well as any other groups in intergroup conflict, but our concern is with more than simply recognizing these terms. They are representative of conflicts and can reflect group status as well as the intensity of the group differences. Mullen (2001) describes the structure of these terms including the differences between high- and low-status groups, superior and subordinate groups, and complexity. For our purposes, difficult conversations must work through these abstract terms that function as stereotypes through concerted efforts to avoid such language. And it is more than simply avoiding insensitive language to be polite. Language change accompanies consciousness change which is part of the strategy for managing difficult conversations. At the macrolevel, the political system must prevent the serial reproduction of unproductive images of the other group by eliminating stereotype consistent information and usage.

A pertinent line of research here is that by Clark and Kashima (2007) who found that passing stereotypical information along in the interpersonal network served a relational function. A stereotype is a classic categorization that is supported by the abstract language descriptive of the linguistic intergroup bias. Referring to a group of Arabs for example as “Islamists” or “jihadist” suggests that the core of Islam is compatible with terrorism or subverts the word *jihad* which in Arabic means to struggle and live closer to God. There are typically better alternatives for these words. An early dialogic phase of group interaction between deeply divided groups must seek to recategorize groups by changing people from thinking about their own restricted group boundaries and including new categorizations more conducive to learning. Group members must begin the process of internalizing new attitudes and trying to get the two competing groups focused on common identity perhaps rooted in universal values and then on ingroup–outgroup contrasts. Gaertner and Dovidio (2000) posit three steps that might ameliorate difficult conversations; they include *decategorization* where individuals are encouraged to individuate; this is followed by *mutual differentiation* or when group members become aware of more details and similarities. And finally, *recategorization* which encourages groups to adopt superordinate identities as well as activating efforts to move away from blame and guilt and more toward cooperation and tolerance.

The Conditions of Difficult Ethnopolitical Conversations

Difficult conversations are almost always centered on emotionally charged issues such as gender, race, religion, politics as well as personal feelings (Atran & Ginges, 2012). The subject matter causes discomfort and challenges one’s self-esteem. Conversation is by definition difficult because the parties feel dread at the thought of having the conversation. Consider in Table 1 the typical narratives and political dilemmas of Israeli Jews and Palestinians and how any one of them is an example of a difficult conversation. Each of the enumerated points in Table 1 represents a potential difficult conversation because of basic political, cultural, and religious differences. The conflict between Israelis and Palestinians is so difficult and intractable (it is probably the prototypical intractable conflict) and seems so resistant to resolution, precisely because so many of the conversations that must take place are difficult. Below is a sampling of these issues.

The issues in Table 1 are a sampling of the complex array of issues that confront Israelis and Palestinians. The perspective I have advanced differs from others in two respects. First, I argue that communicative activity especially democratic communicative activity must have a dialogic experience in order to express cultural stances and resistance. There must be a way to support a safe public articulation of concerns within a communicative environment that is committed to learning about the other. But second, ethnopolitical conflicts must be managed within political forums. There must be a model of strategic and

Table 1
Issues That Separate Israelis and Palestinians Requiring Difficult Conversations

Israeli Position	Palestinian Position
1. Israelis hold the Zionist enterprise as a moral imperative based on ancient Jewish descent. The Jewish people have inherited their right to the land and acquired it legally and morally	1. Palestinians maintain that Jews have no inherent claim to the land and they are a religion not a nation. In fact, the Palestinians are descendants of previous inhabitants
2. The Arabs of Palestine are not a national group and never have been. They were living on the outskirts of the Ottoman Empire. Palestine was never a state, and Jerusalem was never a capital	2. Palestinian ancestors were there before the Israelites and there is biblical and archeological evidence. A Palestinian national identity has been developing for a century
3. Zionism is an authentic response to persecution and the Zionists came as pioneers and redeemers	3. Zionism is a racist colonial enterprise that seeks to rob Arabs of their ancestral land
4. Palestinians are supportive of Islamism and the terrorism that accompanies it. The Palestine Liberation Organization was a leading supportive organization for terrorism as a political act	4. The Israelis cannot discredit martyrdom. These martyrdom operations are a lawful and justified part of Islam
5. Terrorism is an immoral obstacle to peace, and the separation wall is designed to keep terrorists out and save Israeli lives. The fence has restored calm to the region and increased the chances for peace	5. The wall is an illegal Apartheid wall and divided families and communities from one another. It provides protection for settlers but fragments the West Bank for Palestinians

normative democratic deliberation that secures solutions through debate and argument. Deliberative dialogue is capable of producing outcomes that protect and empower both sides. Two things are true about the above examples in Table 1. First, there is disagreement within cultures. Israelis are not unified on all issues and the communities themselves differ. Second, the disputes share a political character that is based in interests and power. This suggests a pragmatic and deliberative approach to the problem. Below are five particular conditions of difficult conversations.

Incommensurate Cultural Narratives

Difficult conversations are more apparent when the two cultures in conflict are particularly distinct or even incommensurate with respect to cultural qualities (Ellis, 2015, 2019). And there is no shortage of descriptors and statistics that report differences between cultures. But our concern here is not with general differences such as those posed by Hofstede (1980) but with those differences that represent cultural conflict. Conflicting cultures such as the Israelis and the Palestinians delegitimize each other and have qualities that exacerbate the differences thus making conversation or contact between the two groups difficult. The Israeli–Palestinian narrative in Table 1 represents significantly different accounts of the same historical events. They differ on how they selectively emphasize and organize events and motivations. But neither narrative recognizes very much legitimacy or pain of the other. Each blames the other and offers little recognition of its own behavior and how it has contributed to the conflict. Each sees the other as a threat and focuses on its own fears and reasons. Both sides demonize the other with historical events and have hardened their positions into mutually exclusive categories.

Cultural conflict becomes more restricted and difficult when both sides are heavily locked into the past, the myths of the culture's birth and evolution. The Israeli narrative, for example, has been analyzed by many scholars with respect to its images of the past parade of heroes and villains, and development of a worldview (Zerubavel, 1995). A key point is that these contemporary identities are constructed to meet contemporary needs by fashioning the modern narrative out of the past. The past is understood on the basis of the present. This is clearly the case for the Palestinians whose conflict ethos is completely directed

toward its contemporary political conditions with the Israelis. This incommensurability with respect to interpretation of the past is particularly powerful because *lessons drawn from the past are viewed as* becomes glorified as a timeless truth that is a steady beacon of light. Consequently, conversations calculated to unlearn these lessons or change them are particularly difficult.

Narrative Particularity

Difficult conversations focus on particular emotional experiences that are presented as objective. There is a difference between narrative in history where history is more rooted in collective agreement about events and their meaning, and narrative that focuses on particular events and weaves them into a story designed to serve group interests. Groups focus on emotional events such as victories or defeats and spend more time concentrating on the strength and character of their ingroup narrative than they do on the nature of the outgroup narrative. Hence, one's own narrative becomes sharp and precise with clear defenses and the outgroup narrative is more opaque. Israelis overweight the glories of the "War of Independence" or the "Six-Day War" while Palestinians interpret these events as a "Nakba" (disaster) or glorify the intifada.

A sharp and precise narrative produces high within-group agreement about the interpretation of events and results in intensified links between people (Ellis, 2009, 2015). Consequently, any disagreement within the narrative becomes disloyalty and dissenters are particularly stigmatized as outgroups. Conversations become particularly difficult because high within-group pressure is a powerful deterrent to change. Such pressure directs a wall of resistance to the exposure and adoption of new information and perspectives. But a regular discourse of deliberation or resolution does make the accumulation of new perspectives possible because we have seen new attitudes and beliefs emerge from intractable conflicts in a number of cases. The Israeli Zionist narrative, for example, has broken up with the rejection and alteration of many of its tenets and the narrative has somewhat less appeal than it did historically including the diminution of its emotional appeal.

Existential Threat

This is a common characteristic of intractable conflicts which of course makes conversations difficult. When a group fears for its very existence, it will respond in difficult and defensive ways. But in intractable conflicts, the two groups often have a deep history of existential threat. Jews have a long history of discrimination and defeat from Masada to the Holocaust, and the Palestinians also describe their history as one of occupation and oppression. Related to existential threat is victimhood and the feeling that one's own group is vulnerable. Groups that feel vulnerable or weak do not give up very easily and are particularly protective of themselves. Jews have an interesting history of both victimhood but are now in a power position. South African Blacks, Irish, Palestinians, Bosnians, Tamil in Sri Lanka all feel threatened. Such groups desperately hold onto an identity that categorizes everything the other side does as representative of their victimization. This mirror image psychology makes conversations difficult. Group members feel as if they are going to be attacked both physically and symbolically.

Power Differences

Conversations are most difficult and challenging when they are asymmetrical with respect to power (Deveaux, 2003). Power obstructs the pressures toward normative argumentation bound by norms of rationality. A clear position of power by one participant in a conversation pressures the person to use the power and makes him or her less amenable to listening and giving up strategic interests. Power distorts the issues and to the detriment of the process power becomes an issue itself. Dryzek (2010) reminds us

that the deliberative and communicative processes involved are supposed to transform participants. They are supposed to help us clarify issues as well as deepen commitments. But power makes it possible to exclude others and, more interestingly, it stunts normative reasoning. The conversation is clearly more difficult when the communication processes are distorted because of power asymmetry. And if one party is primarily concerned with its own status, or more concerned about one's own gain and has the power to realize this, then there is not much incentive for good arguments and reasons in the deliberation process. The powerful party does not feel compelled to seek valid justifications because other easier power moves are available. In fact, an idealized version of deliberation might only reinforce the advantages of powerful participants. This would be especially true if the more powerful party has more symbolic capital than the less powerful party.

Delegitimization

Bar-Tal and Teichman (2006) write comprehensively about the psychology of delegitimization that is most fundamental to groups in conflict and perhaps most associated with the experience of difficult interactions. As part of intractable conflicts, where the parties have prolonged violent conflict and are existentially threatened, delegitimization adds stereotypes and distorted communication patterns to the mix. Delegitimization is categorizing the other group as outside the sphere of humanity and subject to moral exclusion (Opatow, 1990). Interaction between the two groups, either individually or on the group level, is more than difficult; it is often impossible. Intergroup relations such as that between Hamas and Israel is an example of delegitimization such that each group refuses to recognize the other and considers the other as undeserving of human recognition.

Conflict Propensities

The political and historical conditions that keep groups separate are not the only things that make conversations difficult. The predilections or conflict propensities of different cultural and religious groups can either facilitate or interfere with successful conflict management. A conflict propensity is a general pattern or orientation to participating in resolving conflict. My concern here is not with reviewing standard literature on responding to conflict (cf. Blake & Mouton, 1964; Ellis, 2006), but with cultural differences. Some cultures, for example, have a propensity to emphasize individual rights and differences (Western-oriented cultures), and others are more collectivist in orientation. That is, the interdependence of all group members is more important than valuing individuality (e.g., Asian cultures). A few studies (Cai & Fink, 2002; Wilson & Power, 2004) address these issues. But the distinction between individual versus collectivist cultures (cf. Park & Guan, 2007) is a potential predictor of difficult conversations.

Other variables such as religion and strength of ethnic identification are also particularly important for ethnopolitical conflict. In the case of religion, increased religiosity is associated with making interactions and resolution more difficult, but this also depends on the extent of the group's religiosity. Ethnic identity is quite variant among groups and managing conflict is influenced by strength of identity and salience of ethnic identity, the particular ethnic group, and the strength of ingroup-outgroup relations. Ethnopolitical conflicts, where religion is highly implicated but not at the center of the conflict, can be useful during difficult conversations for moderating elements of the conflict. This is true in the case of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Mollov & Lavie, 2001). Interreligious communication often begins with finding commonalities and similarities between religions such as Christianity, Islam, and Judaism. Even at the risk of being too simplistic, this is particularly true for Islam and Judaism which share commonalities with respect to food practices, structure of prayers, and some parallel historical development.

Islam and the West: A Difficult Conversation

We should now examine a more specific example of a difficult conversation and note the cultural and political distinctions that inform the conflicts. We will see below that religious worldviews as well as political and cultural issues contribute to the intractability and issues of sanctity that make such conflicts so difficult. The current Islamism has created tensions between Islam and the West and contributed to the difficult conversations' conditions cited above—that is, conflicts characterized by narrative particularity, a sense of existential threat, power differences, and delegitimization. Cultural and political differences notwithstanding, all religious and secular traditions of beliefs—from Confucianism to dialectical materialism—offer new horizons of meaning and some idealized or peaceful future. Styles of religious practice might diverge but the ideals point to a common peace and renewal. Mainstream Islam promotes peace and human solidarity but does it somewhat differently than either Christianity or Judaism.

Certainly, one reason there is a dearth of current dialogue and efforts to resolve problems is because of the confrontational rhetoric between Islam and the West. But a second reason is the tendency of the West to consider its West-centric approach to peace superior to others. And yet another reason is the so-called incompatibility of Islam and the West. And some of these incompatibilities are clear enough but we must still get past the notion that the West is normal and rational and Islam is exceptional and extreme. Difficult as it may be, Islam and the West must construct new frameworks because it is no longer the case that a single culture is the holder of a universally valid technique or set of assumptions.

Table 2 is a schematic of some of the differences that separate Islam from the West. Identifying and incorporating these differences and sensibilities into difficult conversations and the management of conflict are important for any successful attempt at solving or managing problems. Tables displaying binary comparisons such as those in Table 2 are always a little bit schematic but, nonetheless, capture essential differences. The comparisons in Table 2 represent a distillation from a variety of scholars and research studies (cf. Abu-Nimer, 1996; Irani & Funk, 2000; Irani & Lebanon, 1999; Randeree & Faramawy, 2011; Said, Funk, & Kadayifci, 2001, 2002).

There would be no end to a list of all the potential influences and difficulties that affect reconciliation and conflict resolution and management efforts between deeply divided groups such as the West and various Islamic cultures. But they would all share the primary challenge of pluralism. This means that idealized models of dialogue for deliberation would be inadequate. Normative models of deliberation would ask questions about who is included, what issues are relevant, who has privilege, and what sort of outcome is desirable. The answer to all of these questions is something different in the context of cultural pluralism. For example, who in Islam speaks for all of Islam, and is it possible for peace activists to be truly representative of the larger population? Deliberative scholars have noted for some time that

Table 2
Differences Between Islam and the West with Respect to Conflict Resolution

Islam	The West
1. Believe an image of violent Islam is predominant in the West	1. Islam and the West are incompatible, and Islam is a threat
2. Peace is defined by the presence of Islamic values	2. Peace is the absence of war and found in pragmatism
3. Modern social sciences are not relevant	3. Importance of the social sciences and managing conflict
4. An emphasis on the maintenance of relationships and cultural consensus. Social justice, faith, and Islamic traditions along with religious values are primary for conflict resolution	4. The invisible hand of competition emphasizing human needs, pragmatic individualism, and instrumental problem-solving are the primary Western conflict resolution practices
5. Peace within multiple religious traditions	5. Peacemaking with a narrower focus on the economic and security needs of the few

inclusion is always important to any process, but the inequalities between different groups can make even successful inclusion anemic. Even the most desirable qualities of discourse and communication, if required and forced on other groups, can turn a desirable norm into an inhospitable requirement that disadvantages others. The issues listed in Table 2 already represent differences that must find their way into solutions.

The West sees itself as representative of a secular and scientific world view. It always considers itself rational and is convinced that problems would be solvable if only the other side would also be rational. Most of the items in “The West” column represent this Western secular tradition. On the other hand, Islam is primarily defined through a Western lens (Said, 1979) which thereby draws contrasts that result in the dichotomies represented in Table 2. The dichotomies in Table 2 represent the perceived reality of the conflict its social construction notwithstanding (cf. Johnstone, 1989).

The items in Table 2 are an illustrative sampling of differences between Islam and the West with respect to propensities for conflict. Consensus is probably unachievable but rigorous, engaged, and long-term communication must still be an ideal in the hopes of achieving moral compromise and mutually acceptable decisions. Democratic dialogue and deliberation must result in moral compromise and publicity such that both sides are publicly supportive of the process and its outcomes. Identity issues are equally as important as political issues between deeply culturally divided groups and too much emphasis on normative principles of deliberation results in a failure to properly attend to identity issues. A key point is that communication cannot be reduced to simple instrumental strategies but that it reflects upon how it can transform the relationship between the conflicting parties. Conflict between the West and Islam is always filtered through identity and intensified by identity. And identity arguments are typically at the heart of an issue. So, if identity is so central to cultural conflicts rendering their conversations difficult, then any sensible process for managing conflicts should recognize this. Consequently, below I outline five communication possibilities with the hope of tapping into some effective mechanisms of bridging the gaps that separates divided cultures. In other words, how can we facilitate the difficult conversations that need to take place and what might those difficult conversations look like?

Communication Strategies

The first requirement for closing difficult divides is *inclusion* (Young, 2000). A range of diverse opinions and representatives of different cultural groups must be part of the process including those who have strong disagreements about reforms or solutions. The definition of inclusion must be serious and deep. Contemporary democracies such as the United States, as successful as they may be, still fall short of genuine deliberative experiences that include a wide array of groups and voices. I would emphasize that inclusion is not a polite pleasantry or something that is simply legislatively required. Deep inclusion is a critical part of democratic deliberation and fundamental to the epistemological conditions of the process (Landemore, 2012).

Groups requiring deep inclusion are often marked by significant differences in power and resources. But this is exactly the reason for including these groups. Moreover, deliberations that have legal implications and are designed to be formal problem-solving sessions should include political representatives as well as legal policy experts and even scholars. Democratic theory should include forms of acknowledgment, narrative, rhetoric, and public protest, along with argument, in its account of the normative ideals of political communication. Inclusive democracy involves more than the formal equality of all individuals and groups to enter the political process but entails taking special measures to compensate for the social and economic inequalities of unjust social structures.

Second, and this issue is foundational to theories of dialogue and deliberation with an eye toward conflict management; participants in the dialogic and deliberative process must establish conditions that *maximize an emphasis on argument, and clear explanations and reasons*. In other words, all members of the group can use bargaining and negotiation as communicative acts designed to focus on reason and

explanation. But what is most important is the exposure of questionable justifications, weak evidence, and debilitated arguments that can result in poor conclusions. Consequently, the process must be defined as one of deliberating about problems in debating the issues with a focus on argument and contestatory exchange rather than individual group interests. The tendency to argue from positions of self-interest is strong and participants typically try to hide strategic concerns. Hence, it takes considerable effort, focus, and training for participants to maintain an ethical and inclusive argument frame. Everybody's position and interest must be subject to critical scrutiny. This encourages debate and decision making that results in better deliberation and more commonly accepted solutions rather than the victory of interest-based parties. This is not to say that interest-based issues are not important because they do represent the concerns of a particular group. But that these interest-based reasons and issues must become the subject of discussion and critical analysis. Thus, for example, if Israelis and Palestinians are arguing about borders and each has group-centered strategic interests, then these interests must be the subject of discussion. Otherwise the interests are simply used as weapons in an ongoing war that results in defeat for somebody.

Moreover, the emphasis on argument and reason must be culturally based and rooted in the indigenous qualities of argument and reason. As Johnstone (1989) and Irani and Funk (2000) note, settlements and reconciliation can be seen as Western centric and not sufficiently sensitive to Arab or Islamic conflict resolution practices. Narratives and stories, for example, are more likely to be used as an argument justification in Arab discursive traditions rather than Western ones. Stories and narratives carry meaning and evidence and must not be dismissed if they do not meet the conditions of logically defensible argument. In a globalized world, finally, deep inclusion involves criticizing adherence to nation-state sovereignty and creating global level democratic institutions.

Traditionally deliberative processes have sought to examine normative forms of communication that transcend particular cultural practices and patterns. But such normative discussions are often not possible given the variety of participants involved when inclusion is broad. For many theorists such as Bohman (2007) and Benhabib (2002), normative communication processes are impossible and even undesirable for minority groups. Sometimes bargaining and negotiation are possible, but these are still considered to be morally less acceptable. I would argue, however, that such communication patterns as bargaining, and negotiation can be incorporated into the deliberative process on a moral basis because they are vehicles that acceptably and adequately represent participants' actual positions and interests.

As Israelis and Palestinians—or representatives of Islam and the West—talk and strategize, they express the validity of their interests. If dialogue and deliberation are functioning as they should, with dialogue having laid the groundwork for increased respect and mutuality in relationships, then the deliberative process should be characterized by increased equality and fairness. Such an atmosphere will ensure even further that bargaining and negotiation communication strategies are used for critical reflection to make contestation easier rather than manipulative and difficult. As Bohman (2007) and Benhabib (2002) pointed out, bargaining and negotiation-type communication represent participants' actual positions and therefore by definition are culturally grounded.

Preventing those with special resources, influence, or power from exercising undue influence and perhaps controlling participants is a third way to direct the deliberation process more successfully. There are many types of coercion including manipulation of voting and threatened repercussions. Removing the exertion of undue influence may seem obvious enough but it is crucial. For conflicts which are value-laden, identity-based, and cultural, there is always the possibility that a conversation will be too difficult, and one group will simply seek to silence or pressure the other group. There is also the added chance that groups will easily or suddenly feel threatened and challenged and thus resort to pressure tactics because they feel trapped or so frustrated that they lash out in defense of themselves. Deliberation cannot function in the best epistemic sense of the term in an environment of tyrannical pressure or constraint.

Fourth, dialogue and deliberation groups must function in an environment of *equality*; that is, all participants or citizens must be able to participate and avail themselves of the opportunities for debate, discussion, and to shape group outcomes. Equality has a somewhat expanded definition here because it refers not only to equal interpersonal relations but equal experiences for all segments of society. Consequently, cultures must find and develop community services including the media that support efforts to make opportunities available to multiple cultures. The media and other societal structures on a more macrolevel play an important role in fostering debate and expressing the ideals of a liberal democracy that ensures the direct development of democratic spaces.

This principle applies more strictly to deliberation because it requires that communicative contributions count. In other words, techniques of voting and balancing interests must not disadvantage individuals or groups. Equal opportunity for participation in deliberation is a requirement for participating in political life. Equality is something to strive for but not always obtained. But it is important to continue to ensure equality for marginalized groups and efforts to avoid the distortions of asymmetrical relationships during negotiations. In fact, expansion of deliberative contexts is called for when working to ensure the inclusion of the most vulnerable members of the community. The development of informal sites of political debate is a good way to foster deliberation and maximize opportunities for marginalized group participation. Engagement and verbal contestation are part of the healthy socialization process where vulnerable and marginalized groups are afforded the opportunity to have communicative contact for the purpose of valued and efficacious interaction (Bateson, 1972).

And finally, the *processual and cyclical nature of deliberation must be recognized and maintained*. This means that conclusions and decisions may be reexamined and cycled back for consideration at any point in time. Conclusions can be changed, altered, and revised until they satisfactorily redressed the problems of the participants. This quality of deliberation ensures that solutions are based on as much agreement is possible and makes it easier to correct mistakes and clarify confusion. Still, a key feature of recognizing the processual nature of deliberation is the assurance that the process is gradual and that deep change takes time and engagement with a variety of processes such as economic and legislative initiatives. Managing, let alone solving, difficult cultural conflicts typically involves the transformation of ways of doing things and culturally embedded communication patterns. A processual and cyclical deliberative process means that questionable and troublesome social practices can be carefully examined and subject to slower and more deliberative scrutiny.

Conclusion

There are approximately two types of conflict that characterize disagreements between two parties. One is realistic interest-based conflict where the disagreements are over scarce resources. In realistic conflict, there is some incompatibility as the two parties compete for money, land, or natural resources and each side tries to maximize their own outcomes. The communication between the two parties in this case is more predictable and rooted in rational strategies; that is, the interactions are less emotional and easier to manage. In turn, a second kind of conflict, which results in difficult conversations, is identity-based. These types of conflicts are more intense and emotional often leading to threats, accusations, and challenges to symbolic identity. Such intergroup conflicts generate group comparisons that intensify differences between the groups, distort cognitions, introduce sacred values into the discussion, and result in severe political conflict or violence. Identity-based conflicts lead to difficult conversations as the two sides resist resolution. This article lays the foundation for a typology of descriptive conditions for difficult conversations as well as ways to ameliorate them. Although no set of category issues is complete, this article provides a solid conceptualization for the underlying dimensions of difficult conversations. Additional research is required to refine the theoretical conceptualizations and demonstrate their empirical effects, as well as operationalizing the variables and processes that make “talking to the enemy” so difficult.

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