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The Trap of Complementary Victim Identities in Large Group Conflict

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THE TRAP OF COMPLEMENTARY VICTIM IDENTITIES IN LARGE GROUP CONFLICT*

Abstract

Modern large group conflicts tend to be protracted and intractable. The division between friend and foe is often along ethnic lines. Negotiation and mediation are very limited in these conflicts. This essay describes a socio-psychological factor for the intractability: The trap of complementary victim identities, which is a self-organizing dynamic in large group conflict systems. While following their interests to the best of their judgment, the conflicting parties are led into a stalemate. Their historically rooted mindsets cooperate in constructing a world of existential combat. The conflict between Georgia and its breakaway region Abkhazia serves as an illustration. Approaches to deal with socio-psychological factors in large group conflicts are discussed.

1. Complementary Victim Identities and the Self-Organization of Conflict Stalemates

Former Egyptian President Anwar el Sadat is credited with saying that the psychological barriers constituted 70% of the problem between Israel and Egypt in the 1970s. International peace

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endeavors underestimate the fatal power of socio-psychological factors in large group relations. Revealing this dimension is a first step in deconstructing socio-psychological barriers to peace.

The secession conflict between Georgia and its breakaway region Abkhazia has resisted twenty years of efforts in diplomacy and mediation (Gruska, 2005; Kaufmann, 2007; Halbach, 2010). The conflict broke open with the fall of the Soviet Union and ever since then it keeps flaring up in skirmishes, displacements, and wars. Hundreds of thousands of people are affected by flight or displacement. Years of mutual embargoes hamper sound economic developments and foster social disparities and organized criminality. Valuable resources are bound in struggle and control rather than being available for sustainable developments and fruitful cooperation. The incompatible agendas of the conflicting parties regarding the status of Abkhazia continually threaten to bust the international negotiations initiated after the war in August 2008, known as the Geneva Talks.

Before moving on to my analysis of the conflict, I think it is important to situate myself. I am a mediator, systemic consultant and scholar of law and of peace and conflict studies. The field of peace and conflict studies is fed by a number of disciplines and approaches such as politology, socio-psychology, sociology, law, economics, history, systems theory, game theory, etc. My approach is primarily a socio-psychological and a systemic one: socio-psychological in the sense that it conceives large group conflict as a process driven also by collective fears and needs (Kelman, 2007) rather than as mere product of rational calculation of objective interests; systemic in the sense that it focuses on relationships, structures, and dynamics within a social system rather than attributing qualities to elements of the system (Varga von Kibed, 2005).

Conflict researchers are increasingly analyzing psychological and systemic aspects of large group conflict escalation (Volkan, 2003, 2007; Coleman, 2006; Kelman, 2007, 2009; Kaufman, 2001; Lübke, 2009; Simon, 2004; Wallach, 2006). The dynamics within such conflict systems may be described as an entrapment: Following their interests to the best of their judgment, actors are led into a dead-end that is thoroughly adverse to their interests. Paul Meerts (2005) analyzed traps in international negotiations. Stuart Kaufman (2006: 205) described the “symbolic politics trap” as a dilemma of political leaders who ascended through ethnicizing propaganda and would jeopardize their position with a de-escalation policy. Deadlocks in conflict systems tend to organize themselves through a mutual enhancement of the conflicting parties' actions. A self-organizing entrapment mechanism typical for ethnopolitical conflicts is exemplified in the following analysis of the Georgian-Abkhazian stalemate.

2. Ethnopolitical Conflict Escalation

The conflict on the status of Abkhazia is an ethnopolitical conflict. This does not mean that ethnic difference is the cause of the conflict. Ethnic groups can coexist peacefully and do so in many parts of the world. Ethnopolitical conflict means that the friend/foe division of the conflict follows ethnic lines. Crucial for the ethnic identity is a common narrative of the group's history, a shared chronicle of their origin and their triumphs and travails, or in the terminology of Vamik Volkan (2003, 2007): the glory and the trauma chapters of the group's chronicle. In that sense, ethnic groups are *Schicksalsgemeinschaften* (communities of fate). With a group's chronicle, specific fears and desires are connected—fears of repeating past collective trauma, such as

displacement, genocide, or forced assimilation, and desires for the reestablishment of past greatness, the return to a territory of origin, or for a compensation for a once suffered humiliation (Kühner, 2003).

In times of peace, the ethnic identity is weakly pronounced. The group permits ambiguous membership, and the ethnic affiliation coexists with the numerous other affiliations of the group members (Sen, 2006). That changes in times of tension and uncertainty. Factors promoting tension and uncertainty include sparse resources, especially when unjustly allocated, a weak national identity, often due to state structures superimposed on tribal traditions, and a political destabilization. People then tend to move together in more archaic communities, in *Schicksalsgemeinschaften*, while other affiliations abate. The collective hopes and fears become salient and political leaders exploit them to gather the group behind them (Kaufman, 2001; Volkan, 2007). As the conflict escalates, propaganda suggests that the time has come to correct everything that has ever gone wrong in the group's history, and that the "Others," as deemed inhuman by nature, must be eradicated. From this, displacements and killings may appear to be a necessary self-defense or, in very asymmetrical conflicts, a necessary cleansing to get rid of something evil (Lübbe, 2009). When violence finally breaks out, another collective trauma is added to the fate record. With years of tension and combat, culture and economy adapt to the situation, which further adds to the intractability of the conflict.

Endeavors built on realpolitik tend to underestimate the fatal power of this socio-psychological background to conflict. Ethnopoliticization cannot be turned on and off depending on political interests, but assumes an independent reality. This reality persists, even if the hopelessness, danger, and enormous costs of the ethnopolitical way of pursuing political interest have long ago become obvious (Lübbe, 2009).

3. Intractability by Mediation

Mediation, as a method to create win-win-solutions among conflicting parties with incompatible agendas, is unfit in such conflicts. Part of the successful mediation of a conflict is a transition from the incompatible positions of the conflict parties to their underlying specific wants and needs. On the level of wants and needs, solutions that satisfy all of the parties concerned may be found, solutions that are out of scope as long as merely positions are negotiated (Fisher, Ury, Patton, 1981). The transition from positions to wants and needs is thus a crucial step to find consensus solutions in a mediation process. In an ethnopoliticized conflict this transition is impeded. When historically rooted fears begin to rule perceptions of present reality as described, the incompatible positions of the parties in the actual conflict tend to become existentially overlaid: Letting go of their positions then amounts to self-abandonment in the parties' mindsets. The parties cannot abstain from their incompatible positions and in consequence stay narrowed down to a world of victory or defeat.

In the case of Georgia and Abkhazia, the main positions concern the status question. The position on the Georgian side is: *Abkhazia is and always will remain a part of Georgia*. The Abkhazian position is: *Abkhazia does not and will never again belong to Georgia*. These positions are indeed incompatible. In order to understand the existential significance of these

positions for the parties, we must identify the unresolved past dimension of the conflict. How do the conflicting parties construct their realities through the lens of the salient trauma chapters of their chronicles? Historically rooted fears of victimization can be found within their respective positions.

In the case of Abkhazia, it is the fear of extinction as a distinct minority group. It became salient with the raising ethno-nationalism of Georgian leaders associated with Georgia's transition into independence after the fall of the Soviet Union. It dates back to former experiences of suppression and displacement: With the foundation of the Soviet Union, Abkhazia had equal status with Georgia, but then experienced a decrease in autonomy. In 1931 Abkhazia was downgraded to an autonomous republic within Georgia. The Abkhazian fight for self-determination was cruelly suppressed under Stalin. Deportation and forced assimilation threatened to obliterate the Abkhazian minority as a distinct group. Similar incidents had happened under the Tsarist Empire, when tens of thousands were driven into exile, a trauma well remembered in Abkhazia (Kaufman, 2001; Wolleh, 2006).

The post-Soviet transition period with its ethnicising propaganda (“Georgia to the Georgians”) was suitable for reactivating this trauma feature of the Abkhazian identity. Against this background, Abkhazia's absoluteness in the status question is comprehensible: The victim perspective forecasts another threat of extinction. The threat is that forced assimilation and displacement by the Georgians will extinguish the Abkhazian minority. The position *Independence from Georgia* in the victim perspective is an indispensable safeguard against this anticipated development. Tragically, Abkhazia advances a retraumatization by the vehemence of its defense. The more decidedly a minority strives not only for ethnic autonomy, but for secession, the more the majority will tend to use forced assimilation. The victim anticipation has a tendency of self-fulfillment.

Georgia's basic fear is to never be allowed to reach independence from major powers within intact borders: either domination or fragmentation seems to be the choice. This fear is rooted in repeated experiences of being occupied or incorporated with whole or part of its territory by the competing major powers surrounding it throughout history: Persians, Mongols, Osmons, and Russians. Time and again Georgia found itself in the borderland of spheres of influence of rival neighbors, whose roles were alternating between protecting power and oppressor (Kaufman, 2001). The fall of the Russian Empire brought a short time of independent statehood, but soon Georgia again lost its independence—and the Abkhazian territory—to the Soviet Union.

The Georgian fear equally became salient with the end of the Soviet domination: As Georgia was probing its freedom by turning itself westwards, Russia sustained the separatism of Georgian territories. From this perspective Abkhazia and South Ossetia appear as mines implanted to fragment Georgia as soon as it tries to evade Russian dominance (Halbach, 2010; Kaufman, 2001; Gruska, 2005). Letting go of the position *Abkhazia remains Georgian territory* in the victim perspective coincides with the final loss of Georgia's hope for independent statehood within stable borders. Georgia, like Abkhazia, increases the chance that their fears will come true by its defensive Western orientation and its attempts to force the seceded minorities back by arms. Never in post-Soviet times has Russia so blatantly demonstrated its superiority and claims

to rule the region as in the August 2008 war: Russian used its military force to end the Georgian attack on South Ossetia and Abkhazia and to penetrate deeply into Georgian territory.

4. The Trap of Complementary Victim Identities

This example illustrates how past collective trauma can affect current conflicts in an escalating and obstructive manner: In ethnopolitical conflict the ethnic affiliation and existential fears rooted in the ethnic groups' conceptions of history have become salient. It is a *conception* of history (*Geschichtsbild*), not *the* history of the group, because the narratives constructing ethnic identity are selective and mythifying. History is always related in new and different ways, depending on who tells them when and in what context (Lübbe, 1989). Thus, collective identities are not fixed, but time-dependent and changeable (Erll, 2005; Kühner, 2003). In ethnopoliticized times, an unconscious "time collapse" (Volkan, 2004: 73) occurs: In the perception of the group, past experiences recorded as trauma and the current conflict cannot be told apart. This association renders specific positions to be existentially indispensable.

If in a conflict two parties meet with (a) incompatible and (b) existentially overlaid positions as described, the conflict is deadlocked. The parties are stuck in what I call the trap of complementary victim identities. Their historically rooted mindsets tragically cooperate in constructing a world of existential combat, thus reiterating harmful experiences. *Victim identity* means that each group is unconsciously occupied by salient traumatic chapters of its chronicle. The victim identities are *complementary* because the defense behavior of one party exactly triggers the basic fear of the other party and vice versa, resulting in a cross-catalytic cycle (A enhances B, B enhances A): Georgia's ethno-nationalism triggers the Abkhazian fear of extinction as a distinct ethnic group, and Abkhazia's separatism triggers Georgia's fear of fragmentation. And a *trap* it is, because through this mutual reinforcement the parties actually foster what they fear: a now real existential threat, which, once it is established, reveals that there is no escape. At best the conflict can be "held on ice." That would be the attractor—a game theory term for a stable condition towards which a dynamic system tends to evolve—of the conflict system under equal forces: a tinder box on ice, which is a common metaphor for the Caucasus.

The "trap of complementary victim identities" is not just another name for security dilemma, but there is a parallel: The security dilemma in international relations leads to a military buildup spiral, because the parties' feel threatened and military defense behaviors mutually reinforce each other. It is a cross-catalytic cycle, just as described above for the trap of complementary victim identities. But the trap of complementary victim identities is not seen as a dynamic simply arising due to the competition of players in a self-help system, as is the security dilemma (Herz 1950). It is a pattern likely to occur between large groups, when specific, concurrent, and historically rooted susceptibilities are triggered. The Gilovitch experiments (Gilovitch, 1981), which showed the dependency of political judgements on historical analogies, support the concept. When I speak of "specific susceptibilities" of large groups, I do not want to maintain an essentialist ancient hatreds thesis, implying that ethnic groups clash because of intrinsic incompatibilities. As I have already described, I see ethnic identities as constructed and

changeable in time and context, but not arbitrarily. Some constructions have tenacious lives and are more likely to arise than others.

5. Psycho-Political Approaches in Peace Work

The trap of complementary victim identities is of course not *the* cause for the intractability of the conflict. Such conflicts have no simple causation, but a complex, systemic, circular causation with many interdependent and mutually reinforcing factors and subsystems (Coleman, 2009; Wils et al., 2006). A prominent factor is international influence, especially the Russian-American competition in the region, which hampers the international efforts to stabilize the region (Gruska, 2005; Kaufmann, 2007; Halbach, 2010). In protracted conflicts the economic system also adapts to the splitting between the conflicting parties. This is true, too, in the media, in education, and science where one-sided depictions prevail, particularly under conditions of restricted freedom of opinion (Halbach, 2010; Kaufmann, 2007). In order to meet these complex interdependencies a multifarious and long term approach is needed (Ropers, 1997; Diamond/McDonald, 1996). It must include methods that allow the identity issues of the conflict to be addressed. Peace and conflict research and practice are developing what one could call psycho-political approaches. The next three sections provide some examples of these approaches.

6. Grassroots Dialogue Projects

Relational work between the conflict parties is usually done in dialogue projects, most of them at the grassroots level (Ropers, 2004). An example of a dialogue project explicitly addressing the unresolved past dimension is Dan Bar On's "To Reflect and Trust" groups (Bar On, 2008). Bar On brought together descendants of Holocaust perpetrators and descendants of Holocaust victims in storytelling projects. He found that they were all suffering from the past. Believing the Holocaust to be a relevant collective trauma in the unresolved past background of the Middle East conflict, Bar On included Palestinians in his later youth dialogue projects. Dialogue projects are often done with young people, perhaps mainly because they are within easier reach, and their attitudes are more susceptible to change. Different from Bar On's workshops, these projects often are simply meeting opportunities intended to promote experiences in which the "adverse Other" is perceived as neither very adverse nor very other.

Vamik Volkan (2004) argued that in such encounter projects, the precarious attitudes rooted in the collective identity would not be transformed, not even in the individual participants. The group identity is left outside—almost like a coat hung up at the door. Friendships are easily brokered through joint activities, but once at home, the mantle of collective hatred is worn again. Humans are capable of hatred towards the members of another group while also befriending individual members of that group. In consequence, Volkan (2004) facilitated dialogue projects based on a previous analysis of the conflict-relevant aspects of the group identities. This analysis was done by a multidisciplinary team, including historians. Members of the conflicting groups—for instance, Estonians and Russians in Estonia—then met under circumstances intended to trigger the group identity aspects rather than leave them out. This was done, for example, by choosing a venue that had been the site of a collective trauma relevant to the conflict in question. The parties should not seek friendship, but should maintain the mantle of their group identity.

These considerations address the problem of transfer. The difficulty to achieve a lasting change in the attitudes of the project participants is just one aspect of it. Another aspect is the question of how to reach a broader social effect within the respective communities. Dialogue projects at the grassroots level, even when effecting a long term change in attitude in the participants, transform a few young people, not the conflicting large groups. One approach to promote broader and sustainable effects is to let the participants design their own transfer projects (Ropers, 2004). This can go from a co-written statement that relates the experiences at home, in schools or other educational institutions, to establishing an NGO that follows the large-group understanding. The possibilities of promoting a social transfer of the changes in attitude achieved in the dialogue project depend on the possibilities of public action of the project participants within their respective collectives. An obvious approach to achieving a broad impact is to work with pertinent participants who are influential within their respective groups.

7. Macropolitical Dialogue Approaches

The most direct lines of action are generally held by the political elite. The political elite, however, are more suited for strategic rather than relational communication. Strategic communication is targeted at the implementation of immutable agendas, whereas relational communication keeps the agenda open to change in the course of the dialogue. The political elite are selected, trained, and used to implement agendas, present themselves in official roles, communicate in jargons, and safeguard public images. The psycho-political conquest of new territory, however, requires openness to the side effects of changes in worldviews and perceptions of self and the “Other.” The participants may undergo processes that involve feelings of dismay, pain, helplessness, or confusion. Impressive examples are the reports from Dan Bar On's above mentioned workshops (Bar On, 2008). They show how the young people that were taking part went through phases of denial and deep confusion before they gradually could accept that the opposite side also suffers.

Approaches designed to address this problem include “problem solving workshops” and/or “interactive conflict resolution projects” (Burton, 1990; Kelman, 2007, 2009; Fisher, 2005). These are informal consultation or dialogue projects with participants from NGOs, scientific institutions, and participants near the decision making level. The informal settings allow for work on a deeper relational level than official negotiations in that they provide a space to address the basic fears and needs of the conflicting parties. The transfer idea is that, hopefully, the participants, by means of their professional contacts with decision makers, can achieve a transfer of converted attitudes to macro level politics. The approach is also called “1.5-track-diplomacy,” indicating the intended shuttle of the participants connected to the macro level between the informal meetings and the macro-political sphere. There have been dialogue projects on the Caucasus conflicts that brought together civil society representatives and participants near the leadership levels. An example is the Stadtschlaining process, a series of informal workshops on the Abkhazian case, which came to a premature end with the Kodori crisis in 2006 (Wolleh, 2006). After the war in August 2008, a window of opportunity for such a macro level project will need time to reopen.

8. Consultation of Multipliers

While the political elite are unattainable for relational work, the majority of the population may be more inclined towards rapprochement. After the Caucasus war in August 2008, I attended talks on the Caucasus Crisis hosted by the Conference of International Non-Governmental Organizations of the Council of Europe, which is the civil society pillar of the Council of Europe. The participants were mainly NGO and think-tank representatives from the regions directly affected by the war, including Russia. The first of these talks took place in December 2008, four months after the war in August 2008. The constructive nature of these talks was deeply impressive. The participants—above all the female participants—openly showed their concern and needs, and the enormous distress that the war trauma left was palpable in many of the statements from all sides. A common ground of humanity thus became apparent above all friend/enemy dichotomies.

Over the course of the talks it became evident that a high readiness of cooperation and a wealth of ideas exist on this civil society level. However, frustration also exists because of a perceived hopelessness to reach the leaders' level, especially in Georgia. Times of crisis tend to foster a rise in personalities that are particularly difficult to bring into dialogical work. The Georgian leaders are focused on the alleged necessities of foreign politics and the status of the seceded minority regions. They disregard the needs of the population as well as important domestic issues like how to become a country that minorities want to be part of. This vertical cleavage—authoritarian leadership with a passive, enduring majority of population—is another factor stabilizing the conflict (Kaufmann, 2007).

One other approach might include working with multipliers—i.e., people who are involved in the conflict-ridden society and can operate on a wider scale than the common grassroots level. In areas with protracted large-group conflicts that are characterized by weak or authoritarian rule, ethnic strife, economies of violence, and multiple social problems, valuable intra-systemic resources can be found within civil society initiatives and people who can contribute to forming social opinions and attitudes.

Multipliers might include people who are involved in the media, education, art, science; as well as religious leaders, members of NGOs, political parties, unions, and foundations. Marco de Carvalho and Jörgen Klußmann have worked with this target group in Afghanistan (de Carvalho/Klußmann/Rahman, 2010). The participants could bring forward concerns related to their respective field of action, such as the question of a local mediator: “How can Pashtune and Tadjik people live together peacefully in the village again?” The issues were processed using a systemic simulation approach (described in Lübke 2010). The actual condition of the system in question was depicted and the underlying dynamics between the represented system parts unfolded. More resourceful options of coexistence were configured in the simulation, and culturally adapted and locally owned solutions could be found. I consider such inner-systemic impulses to move towards a better condition of the system as more promising than attempts to change a system according to concepts superimposed from the outside.

9. Conclusion

Ultimately, the transformation of protracted large group conflicts requires an integration of psycho-political views and methods into the peace process in order to modify fatal constructions of reality (Wendt, 1999). This long term process indeed eventually demands a kind of self-abandonment. But not in the sense dreaded and fended off by the groups: What must be abandoned is not the identity of the group—understood as its path-dependent but changeable sense of uniqueness—but its victim identity. While caught in a victim identity, the group is occupied by selected chapters of its chronicle. This tragically limits its capabilities to cope with present issues and tends to subject the group to a reiteration of harmful experiences. With the abandonment of victim identities, more resourceful options of coexistence might reopen.

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