The Interplay between internal and external conflict
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In situations involving interaction between individuals, groups, or nations, the internal state of the individual, group, or nation will often have profound effects on the interactions which take place. The reverse is also true: the interactions that take place will often have profound impact on the internal states of the interacting entities. In this chapter, I shall provide an example of the effects of internal conflicts upon negotiations and consider some ways of managing the difficulties they often create. The example will be of negotiations about conflicts between a husband and wife. Although the example is about interpersonal conflict, I shall draw some general conclusions that may be applicable to intergroup and international conflict.

Before discussing the husband and wife conflict, I briefly consider some relevant aspects of Psychodynamic Theory to provide a framework for understanding such conflicts.

Psychodynamic Theory: The Effect of Internal Conflict upon External Conflict

Psychodynamic theory, as developed by Freud and other psychoanalytic theorists, emphasizes the role of unconscious internal conflict as critical to the understanding of human development and behaviors. There are seven basic ideas in psychodynamic theory that are relevant to this chapter. They are:

An Active Unconscious. People actively seek to remain unaware (unconscious) of those of their impulses, thoughts, and actions that make them feel very disturbing emotions (for example, anxiety, guilt, shame).

Internal Conflict. People may have internal conflict between desires and conscience, desires and fears, and what the “good” self wants and what the “bad” self wants; the conflict may occur outside of consciousness.

Control and Defense Mechanisms. People develop tactics and strategies to control their impulses, thoughts, actions, and realities so that they won’t feel anxious, guilty, or ashamed. If their controls are ineffective, they develop defense mechanisms to keep from feeling these disturbing emotions.

Stages of Development. From birth on to old age, people go through stages of development. Associated with the stages are normal frustrations, a development crisis, and typical defense mechanisms. Certain forms of psychopathology are likely to develop if severe frustration and crisis face the child during a particular stage, with the result that the child becomes “fixated” at that stage; in addition, some adult character traits are thought to originate in each given stage.

The Layered Personality. How someone has gone through the stages of development determines current personality. One can presumably discover the residue of earlier stages of development in current personality and behavior. Thus, a paranoid/schizoid adult personality supposedly reflects a basic fault in the earliest stage of development in which the infant did not experience the minimal love, care, and nurturance that would enable him to feel basic trust in the world. The concept of layered personality does not imply that earlier faults cannot be repaired. However, it does imply that an adult personality with a repaired fault is not the same as one that did not need repair. Under severe frustration or anxiety, such a personality is apt to regress to an earlier stage.

Conflict with Another Can Lead to Intrapsychic Conflict Anxiety. People may feel anxious because they sense they are unable to control their destructive or evil impulses toward the other in a heated conflict. Or the conflict may lead to a sense of helplessness and vulnerability if they feel overwhelmed by the power and strength of the other.

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Defense Mechanisms. If the anxiety aroused by the conflict with another is intense, the individual may rely on unconscious defense mechanisms to screen it out in an attempt to reduce the anxiety. Anxiety is most apt to be aroused if one's basic security, self-conception, self-worth, or social identity is threatened. Defense mechanisms are pathological or ineffective if they create the conditions that perpetuate the anxiety.

The defense mechanisms that people use are determined in part by their layered personality, which may have given rise to a characterological tendency to employ certain defense mechanisms rather than others, and also in part by the situation they confront. Psychoanalysts have identified many defense mechanisms; they are usually discussed in relation to intrapsychic conflict. We believe that they are also applicable in interpersonal and other external conflict. We have space to discuss only a number of the important ones for understanding conflict with others

1) Denial occurs when it is too disturbing to recognize the existence of a conflict (as between husband and wife about their affection toward one another, so they deny it: repressing it, so that it remains unconscious, or suppressing it so they don’t think about it).

2) Avoidance involves not facing the conflict, even when you are fully aware of it. To support avoidance, you develop ever-changing rationalizations for not facing the conflict (“I’m too tired”, “This is not the right timing,” “She is not ready,” “It won’t do any good”).

3) Projection allows denial of faults in yourself. It involves projecting or attributing your own faults to the other (“You’re too hostile,” “You don’t trust me,” “You’re to blame, not me,” “I’m attacking to prevent you from attacking me”). Suspicion, hostility, vulnerability, hypervigilance, and helplessness, as well as attacking or withdrawing from the potential attack of the other, are often associated with this defense.

4) Reaction formation involves taking on the attributes and characteristics of the other with whom you are in conflict. The conflict is masked by agreement with or submission to the other, by flattering and ingratiating yourself with the other. A child who likes to be messy but is very anxious about her mother’s angry reactions may become excessively neat and finicky in a way that is annoying to her mother.

5) Displacement involves changing the topic of conflict or changing the party with whom you engage in conflict. Thus, if it is too painful to express openly your hurt and anger toward your spouse because he is not sufficiently affectionate, you may constantly attack him as being too stingy with money. If it is too dangerous to express your anger toward your exploitative boss, you may direct it at a subordinate who annoys you.

6) Counterphobic defenses entail denial of anxiety about conflict by aggressively seeking it out-by being confrontational, challenging, or having a chip on your shoulder.

7) Escalation of the importance of the conflict is a complex mechanism that entails narcissistic self-focus on your own needs with inattention to the other’s needs, histrionic intensity of emotional expressiveness and calling attention to yourself, and demanding needfulness. The needs involved in the conflict become life-or-death issues, the emotions expressed are very intense, and the other person must give in. The function of this defense is to get the other to feel that your needs are urgent and must have highest priority.

8) In intellectualization and minimization of the importance of the conflict, you do not feel the intensity of your needs intellectually but instead experience the conflict with little emotion. You focus on details and side issues, making the central issue from your perspective in the conflict seem unimportant to yourself and the other.

The psychoanalytical emphasis on intrapsychic conflict, anxiety, and defense mechanisms highlights the importance of understanding the interplay between internal conflict and the external conflict with another. Thus, if an external conflict elicits anxiety and defensiveness, the anxious party is apt to project onto, transfer, or attribute to the other party characteristics similar to those of internalized significant others who, in the past, elicited similar anxiety in unresolved earlier conflict. Similarly, the anxious party may unconsciously attribute to himself the characteristics he had in the earlier conflict. Thus, if you are made very anxious by a conflict with a supervisor (you feel your basic security is...
threatened), you may distort your perception of the supervisor and what she is saying so that you unconsciously experience the conflict as similar to unresolved conflict between your mother and yourself as a child.

If you or the other is acting defensively, it is important to understand what is making you or her anxious, what threat is being experienced. The sense of threat, anxiety, and defensiveness hamper developing a productive and cooperative problem-solving orientation toward the conflict. Similarly, transference reactions produce a distorted perception of the other and interfere with realistic, effective problem solving (for example, reacting to the other as though she were similar to your parent). You can sometimes tell when the other is projecting a false image onto you by your own countertransference reaction: you feel that she is attempting to induce you to enact a role that feels inappropriate in your interactions with her. You can sometimes become aware of projecting a false image onto the other by recognizing that other people don’t see her this way, or that you are defensive and anxious in your response to her with no apparent justification.

Negotiations between individuals

As a psychologist, I have had the opportunity to do therapeutic work with couples who have been involved in bitter conflicts over issues that they considered non-negotiable. I will briefly describe a young couple who were involved in what I have elsewhere characterized as a “malignant process” of dealing with their conflicts.

The malignancy of their process of dealing with their conflicts was reflected in the tendency for them to escalate a dispute about almost any specific issue (for example, a household chore or their child’s bedtime) into a power struggle in which each spouse felt that his or her self-esteem or core identity was at stake. The malignant process resulted in (as well as resulted from) justified mutual suspicion; correctly perceived mutual hostility; a win-lose orientation to conflicts; a tendency for each to act toward the other in a way that would lead the other to respond in a way that would, in turn, confirm the former’s worst suspicion about the latter; an inability to understand and empathize with the other’s needs and vulnerabilities; and a reluctance — based on stubborn pride, nursed grudges, and fear of humiliation — to initiate or respond to a positive generous action to break out of the escalating vicious cycle in which they were entrapped.

Many couples involved in such malignant conflicts do not seek help; they continue to abuse one another, sometimes violently, or they break up. The couple that I worked with sought help for several reasons. On the one hand, their conflicts were becoming physically violent: this frightened them and it also ran counter to their strongly held intellectual values regarding violence. On the other hand, there were strong constraints making it difficult for them to separate. They felt they would be considerably worse off economically, their child would suffer, and they had mutually congenial intellectual, esthetic, sexual, and recreational interests.

Developing a Readiness to Negotiate

Before I turn to a discussion of the negotiation of a non-negotiable issue, let me briefly discuss the steps involved in getting the couple to the point where they were ready to negotiate. There were two major interrelated steps, each of which involved many substeps. The first entailed helping each spouse to recognize that the present situation of a bitter, stalemated conflict no longer served his or her real interests. The second step involved aiding the couple to become aware of the possibility that each of them could be better off than they currently were if they recognized their conflict as a joint problem, which required creative, joint efforts in order to improve their individual situations. The two steps do not follow one another in neat order: Progress in either step facilitates progress in the other.

Irrational Deterrents to Negotiation

There are many reasons why otherwise intelligent and sane individuals may persist in behaviors that perpetuate a destructive conflict harmful to their rational interests. Some of the common reasons are:

[3] For more on "mutually hurting stalemates", see Zartman, Ripeness, in this volume.
It enables one to blame one's own inadequacies, difficulties, and problems on the other so that one can avoid confronting the necessity of changing oneself. Thus, in the couple I treated, the wife perceived herself to be a victim, and felt that her failure to achieve her professional goals was due to her husband's unfair treatment of her as exemplified by his unwillingness to share responsibilities for the household and child care. Blaming her husband provided her with a means of avoiding her own apprehensions about whether she personally had the abilities and courage to fulfill her aspirations. Similarly, the husband who provoked continuous criticism from his wife for his domineering, imperious behavior employed criticisms to justify his emotional withdrawal, thus enabling him to avoid dealing with his anxieties about personal intimacy and emotional closeness. Even though the wife's accusations concerning her husband's behavior were largely correct, as were the husband's toward her, each had an investment in maintaining the other's noxious behavior, because of the defensive self-justifications such behavior provided. 4

(2) It enables one to maintain and enjoy skills, attitudes, roles, resources, and investments that one has developed and built up during the course of one's history. The wife's role as "victim" and the husband's role as "unappreciated emperor" had long histories. Each had well-honed skills and attitudes in relation to their respective roles that made their roles very familiar and natural to enact in times of stress. Less familiar roles, in which one's skills and attitudes are not well-developed, are often avoided because of the fear of facing the unknown. Analogous to similar social institutions, these personality "institutions" also seek out opportunities for exercise and self-justification, and in so doing help to maintain and perpetuate themselves.

(3) It enables one to have a sense of excitement, purpose, coherence, and unity which is otherwise lacking in one's life. Some people feel aimless, dissatisfied, at odds with themselves, bored, unfocused, and unenergetic. Conflict, especially if it has dangerous undertones, can serve to counteract these feelings: it can give a heightened sense of purpose as well as unity, and can also be energizing as one mobilizes oneself for struggle against the other. For depressed people who lack self-esteem, conflict can be an addictive stimulant which is sought out to mask an underlying depression.

(4) It enables one to obtain support and approval from interested third parties. Friends and relatives on each side may buttress the opposing positions of the conflicting parties with moral, material, and ideological support. For the conflicting parties to change their positions and behaviors may entail the dangers of loss of esteem, rejection, and even attack from others who are vitally significant to them.

How does a therapist or other third party help the conflicting parties overcome such deterrents to recognizing that their bitter, stalemated conflict no longer serves their real interests? The general answer, which is quite often difficult to implement in practice, is to help each of the conflicting parties change in such a way that the conflict no longer is maintained by conditions in the parties that are extrinsic to the conflict. In essence, this entails helping each of the conflicting parties to achieve the self-esteem and self-image that would make them no longer need the destructive conflict process as a defense against their sense of personal inadequacy, their fear of taking on new and unfamiliar roles, their feeling of purposelessness and boredom, and their fears of rejection and attack if they act independently of others. Fortunately the strength of the irrational factors binding the conflicting parties to a destructive conflict process is often considerably weaker than the motivation arising from the real havoc and distress resulting from the conflict. Emphasis on this reality, if combined with a sense of hope that the situation can be changed for the better, provides a good basis for negotiation.

**Conditions That Foster the Recognition of the Conflict as a Joint Problem Requiring Joint Efforts**

What are the conditions that are likely to help conflicting parties become aware of the possibility that each of them could be better off than they currently are if they recognize that their conflict is a joint problem that requires creative, joint efforts in order to improve their individual situations? A number of such conditions are listed below:

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4 For more on the differences between the way individuals explain their point of view and the unarticulated and unadmitted "theory-in-use" that is actually guiding them, see Peppet and Moffitt, "Learning How to Learn to Negotiate", in this volume.
Crucial to this awareness is the recognition that one cannot impose a solution which may be acceptable or satisfactory to oneself upon the other. In other words, there is recognition that a satisfactory solution for oneself requires the other’s agreement, and that this is unlikely unless the other is also satisfied with the solution. Such recognition implies an awareness that a mutually acceptable agreement will require at least a minimal degree of cooperation.

To believe that the other is ready to engage in a joint problem-solving effort, one must believe that the other has also recognized that he or she cannot impose a solution — that is, the other has also recognized that a solution has to be mutually acceptable.

The conflicting parties must have some hope that a mutually acceptable agreement can be found. This hope may rest upon their own perception of the outlines of a possible fair settlement or it may be based on their confidence in the expertise of third parties, or even on a generalized optimism.

The conflicting parties must have confidence that if a mutually acceptable agreement is concluded, both will abide by it, or that violations will be detected before the losses to the self and the gains to the other become intolerable. If the other is viewed as unstable, lacking self-control, or untrustworthy, it will be difficult to have confidence in the viability of an agreement unless one has confidence in third parties who are willing and able to guarantee the integrity of an agreement.

The foregoing conditions for establishing a basis of initiating the joint work necessary in serious negotiation are much easier to develop when the conflicting parties are part of a strong community in which there are well-developed norms, procedures, professionals, and institutions which encourage and facilitate problem-solving negotiations. When the encouragements to negotiation do not exist as a result of belonging to a common community, the availability of helpful, skilled, prestigious, and powerful third parties who will use their influence to foster problem-solving negotiations between the conflict parties becomes especially important.

**Negotiating the Non-Negotiable**

Issues that seem vitally important to a person, such as one’s identity, security, self-esteem, or reputation, often are experienced as non-negotiable. Thus, consider the husband and wife who viewed themselves in conflict over a non-negotiable issue. The wife who worked (and wanted to do so) wanted the husband to share equally in the household and child-care responsibilities; she considered equality between the genders to be one of her core personal values. The husband wanted a traditional marriage with a traditional division of responsibilities, in which he would have primary responsibility for income-producing work outside the home while his wife would have primary responsibility for the work related to the household and child care. The husband considered household work and child care as inconsistent with his deeply rooted image of adult masculinity. The conflict seemed non-negotiable to the couple. For the wife it would be a betrayal of her feminist values to accept her husband’s terms; for the husband, it would be a violation of his sense of adult masculinity to become deeply involved in housework and child care.

However, this non-negotiable conflict became negotiable when, with the help of the therapist, the husband and wife were able to listen to and really understand each other’s feelings and the ways in which their respective life experiences had led them to the views they each held. Understanding the other’s position fully, and the feelings and experiences which are behind them, made them each feel less hurt and humiliated by the other’s position and more ready to seek solutions that would accommodate the interests of both. They realized that with their joint incomes they could afford to pay for household and child-care help, which would enable the wife to be considerably less burdened by these responsibilities without increasing the husband’s chores in these areas; of course, doing so lessened the amount of money they had available for other purposes.

This solution was not a perfect one for either party. The wife and husband would each have preferred that the other share their own view of what a marriage should be like. However, their deeper understanding of the other’s position made them feel less humiliated and threatened by it, and less

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defensive toward the other. It also enabled them to negotiate a mutually acceptable agreement that lessened the tensions between them despite their continuing differences in basic perspectives.

The general conclusions that I draw from this and other experiences with a "non-negotiable" issue is that most such issues are negotiable even though the underlying basic differences between the conflicting parties may not be reconcilable. The issues become negotiable when the conflicting parties learn to listen, understand, and empathize with the other party's position, interests, and feelings, providing they are also able to communicate to the other their understanding and empathy. Even though understanding and empathy do not imply agreement with the other's views, they indicate an openness and responsiveness which reduces hostility and defensiveness and which also allows the other to be more open and responsive. Such understanding and empathy help the conflicting parties to reduce their feeling that their self-esteem, security, or identity will be threatened and endangered by recognizing that the other's feelings and interests, as well as one's own, deserve consideration in dealing with the issues of conflict.

"Non-negotiable" issues also become negotiable when the conflicting parties can be shown that their vital interests will be protected or enhanced by negotiation. As R. Fisher, W. Ury and B. Patton have stressed, it is helpful for negotiators to learn the difference between "positions" and "interests." The positions of the conflicting parties may be irreconcilable, but their interests may be concordant. Helping parties in conflict to be fully in touch with their long-term interests may enable them to see beyond their non-negotiable positions to their congruent interests. An atmosphere of mutual understanding and empathy fosters the conditions that permit conflicting parties to get beyond their initial rigid, unnegotiable positions to their underlying interests.

Although this chapter does not have the space to discuss the interaction between intragroup conflict and intergroup conflict, it seems reasonable to hypothesize that inner conflicts within groups that are involved in an intergroup conflict hamper the development of a constructive process of resolving the intergroup conflict, and make it less likely that a sustainable cooperative agreement that improves intergroup relations will be attained. Implicit in our discussion of internal conflict within individuals in an interpersonal conflict are some general principles that may be applicable to the intergroup context. They are simply, in relation to both the intragroup as well as the intergroup conflicts, to: (1) create a safe, congenial context in which the true interest (rather than positions) of the conflicting parties can be mutually understood; (2) work to strengthen their common, cooperative interests and seek to expand them; (3) find ways to weaken and inhibit their destructive interest as well as constructive substitutes to replace them. Obviously, whether it can be done or how it can be done, will depend upon circumstances that are specific to the particular conflicts.

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- **An Active Unconscious.** People actively seek to remain unaware (unconscious) of those of their impulses, thoughts, and actions that make them feel very disturbing emotions (for example, anxiety, guilt, shame).
- **Internal Conflict.** People may have internal conflict between desires and conscience, desires and fears, and what the “good” self wants and what the “bad” self wants; the conflict may occur outside of consciousness.
- **Control and Defense Mechanisms.** People develop tactics and strategies to control their impulses, thoughts, actions, and realities so that they won’t feel anxious, guilty, or ashamed. If their controls are ineffective, they develop defense mechanisms to keep from feeling these disturbing emotions.
- **Stages of Development.** From birth on to old age, people go through stages of development. Associated with the stages are normal frustrations, a development crisis, and typical defense mechanisms. Certain forms of psychopathology are likely to develop if severe frustration and crisis face the child during a particular stage, with the result that the child becomes “fixated” at that stage; in addition, some adult character traits are thought to originate in each given stage.
- **The Layered Personality.** How someone has gone through the stages of development determines current personality. One can presumably discover the residue of earlier stages of development in current personality and behavior. Thus, a paranoid/schizoid adult personality supposedly reflects a basic fault in the earliest stage of development in which the infant did not experience the minimal love, care, and nurturance that would enable him to feel basic trust in the world. The concept of layered personality does not imply that earlier faults cannot be repaired. However, it does imply that an adult personality with a repaired fault is not the same as one that did not need repair. Under severe frustration or anxiety, such a personality is apt to regress to an earlier stage.

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(4) Reaction formation involves taking on the attributes and characteristics of the other with whom you are in conflict. The conflict is masked by agreement with or submission to the other, by flattering and ingratiating yourself with the other. A child who likes to be messy but is very anxious about her mother’s angry reactions may become excessively neat and finicky in a way that is annoying to her mother.

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(7) Escalation of the importance of the conflict is a complex mechanism that entails narcissistic self-focus on your own needs with inattention to the other’s needs, histrionic intensity of emotional expressiveness and calling attention to yourself, and demanding needfulness. The needs involved in the conflict become life-or-death issues, the emotions expressed are very intense, and the other person must give in. The function of this defense is to get the other to feel that your needs are urgent and must have highest priority.

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threatened), you may distort your perception of the supervisor and what she is saying so that you unconsciously experience the conflict as similar to unresolved conflict between your mother and yourself as a child.

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(1) It enables one to blame one's own inadequacies, difficulties, and problems on the other so that one can avoid confronting the necessity of changing oneself. Thus, in the couple I treated, the wife perceived herself to be a victim, and felt that her failure to achieve her professional goals was due to her husband's unfair treatment of her as exemplified by his unwillingness to share responsibilities for the household and child care. Blaming her husband provided her with a means of avoiding her own apprehensions about whether she personally had the abilities and courage to fulfill her aspirations. Similarly, the husband who provoked continuous criticism from his wife for his domineering, imperious behavior employed criticisms to justify his emotional withdrawal, thus enabling him to avoid dealing with his anxieties about personal intimacy and emotional closeness. Even though the wife's accusations concerning her husband's behavior were largely correct, as were the husband's toward her, each had an investment in maintaining the other'snoxious behavior, because of the defensive self-justifications such behavior provided.

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(4) It enables one to obtain support and approval from interested third parties. Friends and relatives on each side may buttress the opposing positions of the conflicting parties with moral, material, and ideological support. For the conflicting parties to change their positions and behaviors may entail the dangers of loss of esteem, rejection, and even attack from others who are vitally significant to them.

How does a therapist or other third party help the conflicting parties overcome such deterrents to recognizing that their bitter, stalemated conflict no longer serves their real interests? The general answer, which is quite often difficult to implement in practice, is to help each of the conflicting parties change in such a way that the conflict no longer is maintained by conditions in the parties that are extrinsic to the conflict. In essence, this entails helping each of the conflicting parties to achieve the self-esteem and self-image that would make them no longer need the destructive conflict process as a defense against their sense of personal inadequacy, their fear of taking on new and unfamiliar roles, their feeling of purposelessness and boredom, and their fears of rejection and attack if they act independently of others. Fortunately the strength of the irrational factors binding the conflicting parties to a destructive conflict process is often considerably weaker than the motivation arising from the real havoc and distress resulting from the conflict. Emphasis on this reality, if combined with a sense of hope that the situation can be changed for the better, provides a good basis for negotiation.

**Conditions That Foster the Recognition of the Conflict as a Joint Problem Requiring Joint Efforts**

What are the conditions that are likely to help conflicting parties become aware of the possibility that each of them could be better off than they currently are if they recognize that their conflict is a joint problem that requires creative, joint efforts in order to improve their individual situations? A number of such conditions are listed below:

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4 For more on the differences between the way individuals explain their point of view and the unarticulated and unadmitted "theory-in-use" that is actually guiding them, see Peppet and Moffitt, "Learning How to Learn to Negotiate", in this volume.
(1) Crucial to this awareness is the recognition that one cannot impose a solution which may be
acceptable or satisfactory to oneself upon the other. In other words, there is recognition that a satisfactory
solution for oneself requires the other’s agreement, and that this is unlikely unless the other is also
satisfied with the solution. Such recognition implies an awareness that a mutually acceptable agreement
will require at least a minimal degree of cooperation.

(2) To believe that the other is ready to engage in a joint problem-solving effort, one must believe that the
other has also recognized that he or she cannot impose a solution — that is, the other has also recognized
that a solution has to be mutually acceptable.

(3) The conflicting parties must have some hope that a mutually acceptable agreement can be found. This
hope may rest upon their own perception of the outlines of a possible fair settlement or it may be based on
their confidence in the expertise of third parties, or even on a generalized optimism.

(4) The conflicting parties must have confidence that if a mutually acceptable agreement is concluded,
both will abide by it, or that violations will be detected before the losses to the self and the gains to the
other become intolerable. If the other is viewed as unstable, lacking self-control, or untrustworthy, it will
be difficult to have confidence in the viability of an agreement unless one has confidence in third parties
who are willing and able to guarantee the integrity of an agreement.

The foregoing conditions for establishing a basis of initiating the joint work necessary in serious
negotiation are much easier to develop when the conflicting parties are part of a strong community in
which there are well-developed norms, procedures, professionals, and institutions which encourage and
facilitate problem-solving negotiations. When the encouragements to negotiation do not exist as a result
of belonging to a common community, the availability of helpful, skilled, prestigious, and powerful third
parties who will use their influence to foster problem-solving negotiations between the conflict parties
becomes especially important.

**Negotiating the Non-Negotiable**

Issues that seem vitally important to a person, such as one’s identity, security, self-esteem, or
reputation, often are experienced as non-negotiable. Thus, consider the husband and wife who viewed
themselves in conflict over a non-negotiable issue. The wife who worked (and wanted to do so) wanted
the husband to share equally in the household and child-care responsibilities; she considered equality
between the genders to be one of her core personal values. The husband wanted a traditional marriage
with a traditional division of responsibilities, in which he would have primary responsibility for income­
producing work outside the home while his wife would have primary responsibility for the work related
to the household and child care. The husband considered household work and child care as inconsistent
with his deeply rooted image of adult masculinity. The conflict seemed non-negotiable to the couple. For
the wife it would be a betrayal of her feminist values to accept her husband’s terms; for the husband, it
would be a violation of his sense of adult masculinity to become deeply involved in housework and child
care.

However, this non-negotiable conflict became negotiable when, with the help of the therapist, the
husband and wife were able to listen to and really understand each other’s feelings and the ways in which
their respective life experiences had led them to the views they each held. Understanding the other’s
position fully, and the feelings and experiences which are behind them, made them each feel less hurt and
humiliated by the other’s position and more ready to seek solutions that would accommodate the interests
of both. They realized that with their joint incomes they could afford to pay for household and child-care
help, which would enable the wife to be considerably less burdened by these responsibilities without
increasing the husband’s chores in these areas; of course, doing so lessened the amount of money they
had available for other purposes.

This solution was not a perfect one for either party. The wife and husband would each have
preferred that the other share their own view of what a marriage should be like. However, their deeper
understanding of the other’s position made them feel less humiliated and threatened by it, and less

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defensive toward the other. It also enabled them to negotiate a mutually acceptable agreement that
lessened the tensions between them despite their continuing differences in basic perspectives.

The general conclusions that I draw from this and other experiences with a “non-negotiable” issue
is that most such issues are negotiable even though the underlying basic differences between the
conflicting parties may not be reconcilable. The issues become negotiable when the conflicting parties
learn to listen, understand, and empathize with the other party’s position, interests, and feelings, providing
they are also able to communicate to the other their understanding and empathy. Even though
understanding and empathy do not imply agreement with the other’s views, they indicate an openness and
responsiveness which reduces hostility and defensiveness and which also allows the other to be more
open and responsive. Such understanding and empathy help the conflicting parties to reduce their feeling
that their self-esteem, security, or identity will be threatened and endangered by recognizing that the
other’s feelings and interests, as well as one’s own, deserve consideration in dealing with the issues of
conflict.

“Non-negotiable” issues also become negotiable when the conflicting parties can be shown that
their vital interests will be protected or enhanced by negotiation. As R. Fisher, W. Ury and B. Patton have
stressed, it is helpful for negotiators to learn the difference between “positions” and “interests.” The
positions of the conflicting parties may be irreconcilable, but their interests may be concordant. Helping
parties in conflict to be fully in touch with their long-term interests may enable them to see beyond their
non-negotiable positions to their congruent interests. An atmosphere of mutual understanding and
empathy fosters the conditions that permit conflicting parties to get beyond their initial rigid, unnegotiable
positions to their underlying interests.

Although this chapter does not have the space to discuss the interaction between intragroup
conflict and intergroup conflict, it seems reasonable to hypothesize that inner conflicts within groups that
are involved in an intergroup conflict hamper the development of a constructive process of resolving the
intergroup conflict, and make it less likely that a sustainable cooperative agreement that improves
intergroup relations will be attained. Implicit in our discussion of internal conflict within individuals in an
interpersonal conflict are some general principles that may be applicable to the intergroup context. They
are simply, in relation to both the intragroup as well as the intergroup conflicts, to: (1) create a safe,
congenial context in which the true interest (rather than positions) of the conflicting parties can be
mutually understood; (2) work to strengthen their common, cooperative interests and seek to expand
them; (3) find ways to weaken and inhibit their destructive interest as well as constructive substitutes to
replace them. Obviously, whether it can be done or how it can be done, will depend upon circumstances
that are specific to the particular conflicts.

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