

Transitions from violence to peace: a cultural change model

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Abstract:

This paper explores whether the sometimes disparate beliefs and behaviors having to do with conflict can or should be considered as a culture. Many discussions of conflict that invoke culture discuss the influence of culture on the etiology and course of the conflict itself. Fewer studies contemplate the influence of conflict itself on culture. This article asserts that there is a layer of behavior patterns that has slipped past lenses which look for cultural 'causes' of conflict, as well as lenses which look at effects of conflict on societies. It is proposed that when a population reacts to a situation of prolonged conflict, the collective behavioral and cognitive results of this stress constitute a culture, often without the conscious knowledge of the individuals or the society involved. The 'conflict culture' becomes a self-perpetuating entity of its own, the identity attachments and fear of change that are attendant to culture. One might then conceive of the conflict transformation process as a process of cultural change. Any transition from conflict to peace should include awareness of and programmatic compensation for the potentially destabilizing effects of cultural change that would be necessitated by the transition to peace. Ideas from cultural change theory are then brought in to the discussion of conflict transformation. Conceptions of cultures of peace are discussed, concluding with a consideration of the challenges of transforming a culture of conflict to a culture of peace. It is offered that incorporating this cultural change model of conflict resolution may help achieve a sustainable peace which can end cycles of violence. Directions for future theoretical and empirical research are noted.

Introduction

As social scientists have been increasingly more aware, and perhaps those “on the ground” have always known, achieving peace involves more than the simple signing of a peace treaty. In many of the conflicts that have proven to be most resistant to peace, the conflict has existed for such a long time that its effects have infiltrated much of the “tissue” of society. This paper proposes that these influences together can be called a culture of conflict, and that any transition to peace would therefore involve aspects of cultural change. Exploring the dynamics and challenges of this transition, “at the interface” of violent conflict and peace, may yield knowledge that may aid the success of future peace efforts.

Why a “culture” of conflict?

Most discussions of conflict that invoke culture discuss the influence of culture on the etiology and course of the conflict itself. One can (and should) tease out and explain the conflict-related aspects of particular cultures, since variations will undoubtedly occur. However, few of these studies discuss the influence of conflict on culture. In many ways this is a chicken-and-the-egg phenomenon, but the ambiguity of the relationship warrants investigations both ways. This paper explores whether the sometimes disparate beliefs and behaviors having to do with conflict (and with peace) can and should be considered as a culture or cultures. Many concepts of the role of culture in conflict refer to culture-specific practices and thoughts patterns. Yet many have ignored the fact of many commonalities of the experience of conflict worldwide. As such, these “commonalities” of experience may be explored to see if their influence on their populations’ mindsets may be called a “culture of conflict”. It is asserted here that there are layers of patterns

of behavior and thought processes, here called a “culture of conflict” that have slipped through social science lenses which look cultural “causes” of a conflict, as well as the lenses which look at effects of conflict on societies. Most conflict transformation discussions that include culture do not treat the transition from violence to peace as a process of cultural change. It should be noted that a singular, unvarying global “culture of conflict” is not proposed here. “Culture of conflict” as used in this paper refers to the beliefs, attitudes and opinions shared by one culture group involved in a conflict.

This discussion uses the definition of culture proposed by Ember and Ember (1996a, 1995) which encompasses the learned behaviors, beliefs, and attitudes, values and ideals that are characteristic of a people in a particular society or population. This allows inclusion of visible aspects of culture (behavior, customs), as well as invisible aspects (beliefs and attitudes). Inasmuch as social structures influence and are influenced by culture, they too should be considered as part of a culture of conflict. To limit the initial scope of this research, “conflict” as defined here shall be defined as physically violent, communal or group-directed conflict. A full discussion of violence would include physical violence at all levels of society (interpersonal in addition to communal), as well as Galtung’s (1969) structural violence and other forms of “invisible” harm.

Cultures of Conflict

Study of the culture of war is erratic and uneven. Many disciplines have documented how features within their field of study change during war (art, literature, economics, and national politics, for example). Others focus on how a particular war affected society’s or individuals’ cultures and perceptions--for example studies of American enemy images of Germans in World

War II (Rieber, 1991). In addition, much of the “culture of war” studies focus on the role of propaganda and other cultural data that seem to be choices made by people in the society. A few scholars have identified some psycho-social factors in the perpetuation of conflict such as the presence of an enemy image, blame, and the posited human need to have an “other” or an out-group. These conscious and unconscious factors certainly play a role in the creation of a culture of war, but I believe they are only piecemeal parts of a larger whole. When people in a society react to a situation of conflict, especially prolonged conflict, the collective behavioral and cognitive results of this stress become a culture of its own, often without the conscious knowledge of the individuals or society involved.

Studies of the impact of violence on an *individual's* world abound, most within the literature on post-traumatic stress disorder. Further, most research in this area has is focused on veterans of wars which did not take place in their “homeland”, and may not be applicable to veterans who fought in wars in or near their homes. However, some scholars have pointed out the need to examine *societal* effects due to the prolonged stress that intractable conflicts produce (Summerfield, 1995; Hobfoll, 1998). Scholars have also begun to note that traumatic stress can have “secondary victims,” which includes those who know the directly traumatized, such as families, or those who cared for them, such as aid or rescue workers (Figley & Kleber, 1995). If one applies this idea to societies such as Uganda, where hundreds of thousands of people were killed, one can begin to appreciate the idea that stresses from such drastic social destruction can reach societal, *cultural* levels. Williams (1999, 2000) suggests that a society under stress such as war or violent conflict will have higher rates of depression, anxiety, panic, and violence. If, as is often the case in war-torn societies, the conflict has continued continually or even sporadically

for years, these behaviors may eventually become *accepted* behaviors *shared* by large portions of the population, and thus may be considered cultural phenomena.¹

The following typology is suggested of internal and external changes in societies afflicted by violence, all of which can affect the culture of a society.

- Internal
 - **negative** effects such as trauma, fear, suspicion, grief
 - **positive** effects such as self-esteem and sense of self from soldierhood, issues of honor, social unity and cohesiveness
- External
 - **positive** effects such as economic prosperity, allies, etc.
 - **negative** effects such as loss of life, loss of infrastructure, displaced populations, general destruction of social, economic, physical structures

Rapid or drastic changes to any of these phenomena may be experienced as stressful by societies confronting a transition to peace.

Adam Curle notes regarding war-torn societies that “alienation has tended to escalate into post-traumatic stress syndrome, so universal in a land like Bosnia as to appear normal” (1999, 26). If we had more information on the possible long-term influences on individuals and societies within and after a trauma, we might learn more about how and why individuals and communities in protracted conflict behave and believe as they do. In their discussion of post-traumatic stress disorder, Kleber and Brom emphasize that they “prefer concepts such as coping or stress response syndrome, *in which normal and pathological responses are not separated, so that the normal adaptational process is included in a theoretical and research approach*” (1992, 30, italics added). Lira suggests that while fear may be fundamentally a private and socially invisible experience, “when thousands of individuals simultaneously feel threatened within a

¹ While some studies suggest that post-traumatic stress disorder reactions are the same in different cultures (Sack et al., 1997), other studies suggest that there may be different cultural manifestations of stress (i.e. increased somatization (“my stomach hurts”) instead of affective changes (“my life is terrible”)) (Marsella, 1980). Cultural differences should also be considered when looking for sign of psycho-social stress in a population.

specific political regime, the sensation of threat and fear colors social relationships, affecting individual conscience and behavior” (2001, 112).

Finally, another way in which a culture of violence should be explored is to examine how different populations of society may react to the stress of war or a protracted violent environment. Prolonged conflict certainly effects the psychology and subcultures of the soldiers, the women, and the children of the society differently. Child soldiers are at extreme risk here, because a great deal of their socialization and values were born in a conflict and threat-ridden environment. Their reaction to a post-war society, as well as the reactions of soldiers who may have lived for years in a militarized society, may be akin to culture shock.

Culture of Peace

The next question is, if there is a culture of conflict to be reckoned with in the process of conflict resolution, can we, should we then conceive of a culture of peace, as well? Galtung was one of the first to highlight the difference between a negative peace, or the absence of war, and a positive peace or the presence of the satisfaction of human needs. A delineated culture of peace may sometimes includes aspects which are the inverse of the culture of war, such as a culture which delegitimizes violence, reduces enemy images, and values differences (Galtung, 1995). A culture of peace may also be theorized as one in which hope plays a major factor. Another factor could be the transformation of people’s concerns from the daily survival that often occurs in wartime, to long-term existence, what Sites calls the emotion of satisfaction (1990). Keeping our focus on societal as well as individual concerns, a culture of peace would also incorporate the “meaningful social bonds” of which Clark (1990) describes. This would help combat the alienation so common in situations of cultural change.

Most current discussions of a culture of peace, in contrast to those discussed of a culture of conflict, have been above the level of any culture-group's culture (at least explicitly), for example, there is little discussion of Palestinian or Northern Irish cultural concepts of peace. Boulding (1991) wisely cautions against the West inscribing its cultural views of peace upon the rest of the world. It may be that while most humans can agree on what war looks like, there is less agreement on what peace looks like. For example, some veiled Muslim women have objected to Western efforts to "save" them from their "oppressors," for example. Any proposed pan-societal definition of a culture of violence or of peace should allow for local variations and modifications. Lira emphasizes that the plural term *cultures* of peace should be used, noting that the term allows that "different cultures may construct different views and practices concerning peace, and that cultural diversity would be honored in a system of peace" (2001, 101).

Theories of Cultural Change

Most scholarly discussions of cultural change examine the changes produced by the meeting of the distinct cultures of two (or more) societies. Other common approaches focus on how a particular custom or idea was born, grew, or died out within a particular culture. Some theorists do seek to understand cultural change at a broader, societal level. Despite their differences, all these theories have much to offer to the understanding of the cultural changes involved in transitions from conflict to peace.

Cultural change theory encompasses the various means of cultural adaptation including innovation (intentional and accidental), diffusion, acculturation, and revolution (Ember & Ember, 1996b). Cultural adaptation can involve direct assimilation of the new (McDonald's in Moscow), local adaptations of "new" cultural behaviors (Muslim women remaining covered, yet

wearing sneakers and jeans), or plain old rejection of “old” cultural behaviors (China’s attempts to outlaw religion).

Many studies document the difficulties of cultural change resulting from population movement from one society to another. Berry (1976, 66-67) notes the prevalence within the research of several important components of acculturative stress. The first is psychosocial symptoms of stress, which may be related to the rapidity of the sociocultural change, the difference between the two cultures, or both. Another important component of acculturative stress are feelings of marginality, or not quite belonging in one world or the other. Berry notes that marginality has been related to behavioral difficulties that often occur in acculturating communities, what sociologists commonly call anomie and psychologists call alienation. The liminal state of marginality involved in cultural change (and the uncertainty or fear theorized to accompany it) may pose a significant threat to the successful transformation of a culture of conflict to a culture of peace.

If there are indeed under-explored aspects of culture involved in conflict transformation, one might then conceive of a way of viewing the conflict transformation process as a process of cultural change. For a society that has lived with a conflict for decades, such as Northern Ireland or Israel/Palestine, the cessation of hostilities could end up being quite “traumatic,” even if not acknowledged as such. Particularly in Israel, where there is mandatory military service, where fear and suspicion have become part of daily life, where whole industries and occupations have been concerned with war for so long, the approach of peace might indeed be felt as a kind of culture shock.

Sztompka (2000) in particular has begun to combine psychological and sociological perspectives to help understand processes of cultural change. Citing a growing “trauma

discourse” in the social sciences and humanities, Sztompka suggests that the often rapid, often dysfunctional effects of major social change can cause a “cultural trauma.” Sztompka suggests that cultural trauma takes place when “the normative and cognitive context of human life and social actions loses its homogeneity, coherence, and stability” (2000, 45). While Sztompka’s theory is not limited to violent social change, his theories resonate deeply with the cultural issues involved in the transition from war to peace.

Sztompka (2000) suggests several factors theorized to lessen the trauma of cultural change. Noting that cultural change often involves “re-learning, re-skilling, and re-socializing” behavior, Sztompka suggests that education may play a prophylactic role with regard to cultural trauma. He also suggests that social rootedness, or rich social networks, can play a palliative role in cushioning traumatic cultural change.

Lira (2001) notes that when human beings are born into what we may objectively call an intolerable situation (a country at war, a military dictatorship), the sense of the abnormality of the situation is lost. Any attempts at change, therefore, may be met with fear or uncertainty. Lira states that

Another addition derives from the “chronicity” of fear. The concept of chronic fear is in itself a contradiction, as fear, like anxiety, is a specific response to a concrete situation. Fear, however, is no longer a specific reaction to concrete situations when it becomes practically a permanent state in daily life, not only for people directly affected by repression but also by anyone who may perceive him or herself to be threatened (112).

It may be that going from war to peace, despite all celebrations and promises, can end up feeling a lot like culture shock: one can feel fear, confusion, and anxiety—a general notion that “things aren’t right.” The (often unconscious) cultural dissonance involved in individual and group projections of peace can be significant impediments to the conflict transformation process.

Any transition from conflict to peace should include awareness of, and hopefully programmatic compensation for the potentially destabilizing effects of cultural change

Conclusion

There are basic human reactions to conflict that can be conceived as cultural phenomena. Those reactions, modified, of course, by any existing “local” culture, then becomes a self-perpetuating cultural entity of its own, with the concomitant identity attachments and fear of change. The transition from war to peace involves more than re forging swords into ploughshares. It involves deep changes in behaviors and attitudes that can and should be considered a cultural change, with all the benefits and challenges thereto. After the preceding discussion, one of the first questions to ask is, is it possible to remove aspects of a culture while keeping others? Caution is urged against taking a “surgical” attitude towards cultural change.

This discussion of the cultural changes involved in the transformation from conflict to peace has so far been largely theoretical. Further research is recommended that would apply the model to case studies of societies where peacebuilding efforts have been successful, and where they have failed. Empirical research should be encouraged, for example, on the prevalence and variation of “stress responses” among “peaceful” and “war-torn” societies. Finally, specific testing and elaboration of responses to various cultural changes should also be developed. It is hoped that this cultural change model of conflict resolution model suggests an additional lens or framework to consider, whether by an international nonprofit contemplating the specifics of a peacebuilding proposal, by a local group considering options for acting for social change, as well as through analysis of past peacemaking efforts that have failed.

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