

A Tale of Interesting Conversations: Exploring Reconciliation in Northern Ireland

It was the morning of July 7, 1997, and I walked around the Drumcree community in Northern Ireland with my friend and colleague Fr. Brian Lennon asking myself what reconciliation could actually mean in the wake of what I was experiencing. On the previous morning, the RUC and British troops had put through the Orange March down the Garvaghy Road, and the residual hurt and bitterness of the local residents was overwhelming. Anger flared as not a few mothers, filled with a complex mixture of honor and regret, publicly pledged their sons to the Provisional IRA. Fathers spoke of the shame and humiliation of being reminded of their second-class status. A mood of despair darkened any hope that a new spirit of cooperation and respect had broken down the ancient antagonisms of Ireland.

My thoughts wandered beyond the testaments of resentment and hate that we heard at every stop. I knew that the war that had engulfed Northern Ireland for the past twenty-five years was probably over, but the hostility and distrust between Protestants and Catholics was alive and well. All had come to recognize that neither side had won or could win in the foreseeable future. Still, deep inside, everyone felt highly vulnerable to the prospect that his/her side might still lose. Despite the cease-fires, a life and death struggle continued although few understood the parameters of this new fight. Certainly, no one either believed that it could be contained within civil discourse or trusted that violence would not still play a tragic part. At the end of the day, neither side trusted that the other was really for peace, and certainly not for a peace that they would count as peaceful.

The conversation that I carried on both within myself and with my friend this morning was the continuation of one begun in 1991. Over the years, our conversation progressed through several stages of track-two diplomacy and public peace processes. At each turn, the circle of participants widened. Now, our conversation shifted toward the topic of reconciliation in a clear and focused way. However, on this fine July morning, harsh political and social realities ruthlessly intervened. While reconciliation seemed to suggest a willingness to come together for work, play, enrichment and recreation, these images were a flight of fantasy amidst the broken grass and debris from last night's rioting. Perhaps this lofty dream of reconciliation requires more than the Protestants and Catholics of Portadown can give – too much forgetting, too much forgiving, too much tolerating, too much compromising. If so, to what can Northern Ireland and other divided societies turn to chart a future that is a peaceful departure from a warring past?

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Although much has happened since I walked and talked with Brian Lennon on this morning of shattered hopes, the questions raised by reconciliation remain politically acute. The Good Friday Agreement was the result of a deal that offered Protestants political stability and Catholics greater equality. However, it left unresolved many of the conflicting interests and aspirations over which there remains serious disagreement. Moreover, beneath the particulars of any dispute resides a fundamental difference that plagues all efforts to reach compromise. On the one hand, unionists see the Agreement as the normalization of political life. Meanwhile, nationalists view it as the beginning of a process that will transform social and political life. While it is certainly possible that both will occur, it seems highly unlikely that it will do so in a way that will satisfy both sides simultaneously. More likely, each side will see the other's actions as a violation of the essential spirit, if not the explicit wording, of the Agreement.

At a deeper psychological level, neither side trusts the Agreement because it places them in political relationships with people whom, for historical reasons, they deeply distrust. On both sides, the grassroots rank and file has difficulty envisioning the other as a trustworthy political partner. As a result, political appeals for reconciliation fall on deaf eyes because the cost and risks associated with reaching concrete accommodation on divisive issues remain crystal clear, while the benefits and advantages appear uncertain, vague, and ethereal. In this context, peace must be more than deals struck by politicians. Instead, it must take form in a multiplicity of particular working agreements, arrangements, understandings, and associations

that operate between and within local communities. The arduous task of creating these kinds of partnerships in concrete local settings is the tough work of reconciliation.

Community Dialogue

Earlier in the year shortly before my encountering the Drumcree donnybrook, Lennon visited Lee Ross and myself at Stanford University as part of a well-earned sabbatical. At the time, it was clear to us that a peace agreement in Northern Ireland was very likely if for no other reason than the two governments involved clearly wanted one. We were also equally convinced that community relationships at the grassroots would not sustain such an agreement. When Lennon returned from his sabbatical to Northern Ireland, he began talking with people who had similar ideas and who had been working to create cross-community bridges. Together, they founded Community Dialogue (CD). They recruited an executive board composed of local community leaders, social workers, academics, and religious leaders, as well as ordinary citizens who simply sought a more normal community and civic life. Significantly, CD also attracted the involvement of individuals who had important loyalist and republican connections.¹ As a newly formed group, they began talking both among themselves and also with local community groups about difficult topics that the dominant political discourse suppressed.

Community Dialogue is now a well-established grassroots organization that has enjoyed success in uncovering common ground through dialogue between nationalist/republican and unionist/loyalist communities and is viewed both as a hub connecting members of the two communities and as a means of moving beyond merely “talking to the converted.” The new element that CD introduced is the creative use of a local dialogue process to focus on four important questions:

- 1) What do ordinary people in the relevant communities really want?
- 2) Why do they want this?
- 3) What difference will it make to them when they get it?
- 4) What can you live with, given that others may take a different viewpoint?

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The conversation that began with Brian and myself many years earlier now grew to include the CD Executive Board and Stanford scholars associated with the Stanford Center on Conflict and Negotiation (SCCN) and Stanford’s Institute for International Studies (IIS). As we worked together over the next few years, SCCN pinpointed four needs that we felt were relevant to Northern Ireland and probably other divided societies:

- 1) The need to focus on building trust by explicitly dealing with the place of the “enemy” in a common future;
- 2) The need to identify the shared commitments that each party has to a mutually agreeable future as a necessary component of conflict resolution;
- 3) The need to explore together strategies to overcome the psychological, as well as structural and strategic, barriers that block the resolution of conflicts;
- 4) The need to devise tactics to dispel misperceptions and misunderstandings that foster a false sense of polarization and processes that assess the parties in identifying “common ground.”

In addition, SCCN also identified three kinds of input from which we felt CD leaders would benefit. First, there was a need to explore what groups in other divided societies and violent situations around the world are doing to promote similar dialogues. The second type of input centered on the need to explore

¹ The terms *loyalist* and *republican* – as opposed to unionist and nationalist – refer to more working class associations and sometimes hard-line convictions. They often, but not universally, indicate paramilitary affiliations.

“common ground.”² Finally, there existed a need for a better theoretical understanding of how trust is created and nourished.³ We presented this list of suggested needs and inputs to CD leaders as a possible starting point for future collaboration.

As we began to reflect on this endeavor, we discovered that while a great deal is known about the social and psychological processes that cause division and conflict, very little understanding exists about how reconciliation comes about or about how partnerships develop.⁴ One obvious approach has been to reduce the number and potency of the *issues* that fuel conflict. The implicit assumption is that once this is done the parties will be drawn together. While reducing discord and dissension is undoubtedly helpful, it is important to recognize that reconciliation can have a different starting point. In particular, the process of reconciliation may begin with the creation of *relationships* that induce former enemies to start viewing each other as trustworthy political partners even in the face of continuing disagreement.

Over time, SCCN began to uncover a central premise underlying our view of reconciliation. Otherwise diverse and often contentious political parties can be united by the realization that they cannot get what they wanted without the other’s consent. Moreover, it often takes active assistance. This recognition would constitute the starting point for our exploration of reconciliation, and it raised several initial, but important, questions:

- 1) To what extent do various contentious groups in Northern Ireland as a whole see each other as necessary partners in the creation of a mutually beneficial and reliable future?
- 2) Where and how did this shift from former enemy to potential partner come about, and where and why has it not yet come about?
- 3) How does this shift relate to the willingness of individuals to think not only about the outlines of broad political settlements but also about the particular needs of their community and their own personal goals and aspirations?
- 4) What barriers had to be overcome in creating the relevant shift for those who have become connected in peace and reconciliation, and what barriers remain to be overcome for those still standing outside the peace process?

² Common ground is rooted in the common human concerns that make up daily life. Even in the most polarized communities, cooperative interactions make up a substantial portion of day-to-day existence (Anderson, 1999). There are many things that both communities need, and can achieve and maintain only with each other’s assistance. Most often these sources of interdependence are overlooked unless something happens to disrupt them. Instead, the parties tend to be attuned primarily to the problems that fuel hate and division, while ignoring the linkages that unite and promote cooperation. Thus, in Northern Ireland, it is important to highlight how much in common participants at Community Dialogue meetings have, even though they come from different traditions. It is equally worthwhile to note that this commonality emerges only after participants deal seriously with the question, “What do you *really* want?”

³ We have found from grassroots dialogue that despite deep conflicts over broad political ends, a surprising degree of unanimity is expressed in the hopes that people have regarding future community life and even greater unanimity exists with respect to the personal goals of the individual members of the divided communities. We believe that recognition of such symmetries in inter-group suspicions and individual hopes may provide the basis for a trust-increasing dialogue.

⁴ The “contact hypothesis,” which essentially contends that equal-status interactions between ethnic groups can, under ideal conditions, produce common goals and positive relations, has often produced less than encouraging results. It is not that the relevant hypothesis is wrong; rather the problem is that the “ideal conditions” stipulated by conflict resolution theorists (e.g., positive political climate, shared goals, and perceived interdependence of outcomes, etc.) are rarely met – especially in the case of groups with a history of long-standing and recent violence. In response, researchers have focused on developing structures that moderate the negative effects of inter-group contact. Only recently, however, have the psychological and social processes that promote positive group relations begun to receive as much attention as the processes that ameliorate negative ones.

- 5) Once fragile partnerships are engaged, what must be done to maintain and encourage them to grow?

Taking these questions as starting points, three further observations emerged:

1. In many conflicts, maintaining and/or building consensus *within* the parties is just as difficult, and remains just as critical, as reaching agreement between the parties. The counterintuitive implication that follows from this insight is that parties may be better served by *healing* breaches among their adversaries than by exacerbating or seeking to exploit them. Good settlements need strong parties, and the best tactic may then be to empower, rather than undermine, one's adversaries. What psychological and social processes trigger this realization?
2. As is clearly evident from its absence in the Middle East, local groups must be prepared to make painful concessions and to accept minimum gains to achieve peace. How do local groups come to "own" the agreements and concessions that must be made in order to reach a settlement?
3. Improving relations between conflicting parties may seem necessary in healing divided societies. However, there often exists a tension between the immediate goal of conflict reduction and the longer-term creation of a stable and just society. When should reconciliation be presented as an immediate and paramount goal? When should it be put aside until the conflict has progressed to the point of ripeness where the parties start to recognize the existence of shared goals that are more important than the issues that divide them and begin to make painful compromises rather than continue a hurting stalemate?

Both SCCN and CD now realized that, even to begin addressing these complex and difficult questions, we would need to develop a more extensive and focused conversation. With this in mind, CD approached the Hewlett Foundation with a proposal to explore jointly with SCCN/IIS the theory and practice of reconciliation. The project would run over a three-year period with the first step centering on a week-long workshop hosted by SCCN. We intentionally chose to "level the playing field" by staying clear of any notions of consulting or training. Instead, we fixed on the goal of asking better questions, both of ourselves and of each other. We also decided to continue building on the conversation motif and to structure our interactions around an interesting pair of questions that we began to ponder:

- 1) If researcher knew all that practitioners knew about reconciliation, what would they find interesting?
- 2) If practitioners knew all that researchers knew about reconciliation, what would they find interesting?

Developing a Thematic Agenda

In launching Hewlett project, SCCN took the lead in designing a structure that would facilitate a conversation around the goal of asking better questions. The need to articulate a common starting point became a central concern. We decided to offer a modified and embellished version of the five transitions in belief that Dan Bar-Tal had identified as playing a central role in moving from conflict to reconciliation.⁵

1. Beliefs about societal goals

Mirror-image beliefs about the justice of one's goals and aspirations lie at the heart of the conflict and justify its continuance. Reconciliation generally requires that both sides accept the indefinite postponement of the fulfillment of their ultimate goals and aspirations. Reconciliation also entails the adoption of new social goals that downgrade the importance of previous conflicts and promote the construction of

⁵ Bar-Tal (2000) argues that a distinct ethos serves to provide a sustaining psychological infrastructure for people who are engaged in protracted conflict. This same ethos, however, also serves to make the conflict intractable by preventing the development of more accommodating relationships. Bar-Tal maintains that the transition to reconciliation entails five transformations in the beliefs that are central to a conflict ethos.

cooperative relationships. (Previously intractable conflicts can be made resolvable by recasting them as problems to be mutual solved or by reframing the issues and interests involved in ways that promote collaboration.)

2. Beliefs about the adversary

Protracted and intractable conflict requires a discredited adversary. By the same token, reconciliation involves the legitimization and personalization of the opposition. The opposition must be perceived as a potential partner composed of various subgroups with differing opinions and aspirations and no longer as a hostile monolith intent on our destruction. A critical element may be the willingness to forgive the adversarial group for the harm done in its name thereby transferring responsibility to particular individuals. Forgiveness may also involve recognition that the rhetoric, anger, and frustration endemic to conflict situations influences ordinary human beings (much like ourselves) to do extraordinarily horrendous things.

3. Beliefs about the ingroup

Within protracted conflict, people shower their group with stores of glory and praise in order to sustain a positive group image. This image stands in stark contrast to view held about the adversary group. Reconciliation requires a more complex and critical view that acknowledges the role that our group has played throughout the conflict. The group must come to own its misdeeds and to see the suffering the other side has endured. While it is not necessary to accept the notion that all have suffered equally, the group must resist the temptation to rank greater and lesser suffering and must recognize that it shares victimhood with its opponent.

4. Beliefs about intergroup relations

Protracted conflict encourages the view that hostile relationships are the only ones possible with the adversary. In virtually all conflict situations, cooperative relationships and common ground also exists even though they are largely ignored or minimized. Reconciliation requires a shift in beliefs that emphasizes the current advantages of normalized and amicable relationships and highlights the future benefits.

(At some point, the past must be addressed because painful memories fuel hatred and mistrust. The selective and self-glorifying narratives that both side hold must give way to more balanced and objective views. Still, the role that addressing the past should play in reconciliation is highly debated. Some see it as a central mechanism to achieve reconciliation while others view it more as an outcome of the reconciliation process.)

5. Beliefs about peace

Adversary groups hold contrary views about what is necessary to end the conflict and enable peaceful relationships. In contrast, reconciliation entails a shift to beliefs that emphasize peaceful mechanisms for resolving conflicts. It must present compromise and concession as honorable and praiseworthy activities and endorse accommodation and tolerance as commendable attributes.

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From this starting point, we proposed using the week as an opportunity to explore six propositions on reconciliation that I had developed in an earlier paper (Bland, 2000).

- 1) Reconciliation begins with a sense that we belong together in relationships of proven worth and value.
- 2) Reconciliation principally occurs between social and political agents and is only secondarily concerned with institutions that can function to strengthen communal relationships.
- 3) Reconciliation fundamentally involves promising to act and think like a *we*.

- 4) Reconciliation builds upon commonalities with the goal of enhancing day-to-day existence in mutually beneficial ways.
- 5) Reconciliation seeks to promote trustworthy partnerships in the midst of severe distrust through the creation of “common knowledge.”
- 6) Reconciliation must address the past, the present, and the future through a strategy of sequencing that allows for the development of constructive relationships.

Exploring Reconciliation Workshop

The workshop was held during the week of February 26 – March 3, 2001. The fourteen participants from CD represented a wide range of political views and socio-economic backgrounds. While most of the participants came from the interface communities of Belfast, several were from more rural areas. We also invited Dan Bar-On and Ifat Maoz, two scholars from the Middle East, and John Guiney, an Irish Jesuit who works in refugee camps in east Africa. During the week, we met with the Nane Alejandrez and the Barrios Unidos staff, who work to halt the violence between the Norteño and Sureño gangs in California, with some of the principal Colombian negotiators addressing the civil/drug war in their country, and with Jack Weinstein, Director of Facing History and Ourselves based in the working class community of Fremont, California. The SCCN component included Melanie Greenberg, David Holloway, Lee Ross, Stephen Stedman, Brenna Powell, and myself.

The week contained many high points and proved to be very valuable for all who were involved. After the workshop, both CD and SCCN began working on reports that reflected their own respective concerns. At SCCN, our interest was primarily in the theoretical issues that the conference had raised for us. Some of these involved questions related to our collective research, and some had to do with themes generated by the discussions we had. We produced a summary that highlighted the major insights that we felt the workshop had raised. We organized our thoughts around the six propositions about reconciliation that I identified above. While noting that CD put out a very different type of report raising alternative perceptions and focusing more on the workshop’s relationship to CD activities, I offer SCCN’s review in order to underlie the theoretical richness of the week. (CD is a very diverse group whose members connected in various ways to different aspects of our report. It is not surprising that some would agree while others would dispute the points we raised.)

SCCN’s Comments and Reflections:

1. Reconciliation begins with a sense that we belong together in relationships of proven worth and value.

The goal of Community Dialogue is to promote better understanding, while the goal of reconciliation is partnership. These two objectives overlap yet differ. Dialogue may help parties to appreciate the reasons why they hold conflicting positions on divisive issues, but it may not lead to the increased sense of partnership that is fundamental to reconciliation. While increased understanding between former enemies is necessary for the development of such partnership, it is not sufficient. The underlying tension between these two goals is a theme running through all the comments that follow – one that has important implications for our project.

Most important, perhaps is the recognition that pushing forward in the attempt to achieve partnership and real reconciliation may jeopardize CD’s principal goal of increasing intergroup understanding. That is, making explicit and working toward the goal of partnership may discourage some people from entering dialogue because they view both the process and the outcome as too risky. CD is currently planning a major study to determine the various reasons why people refuse to enter into dialogue – an undertaking that provides a good opportunity for further SCCN/CD collaboration on strategies to overcome the particular barriers that must be surmounted to achieve meaningful dialogue and promote the goal of partnership.

Two other observations are worth noting here. First, a pervasive sense of loss runs throughout the communities in Northern Ireland (especially the unionist/loyalist community), and this sense of loss is a

major impediment to reconciliation and future partnership. This perception of loss, common among previously dominant communities that are undergoing power shifts towards a more balanced relationship, involves the following experiences:

- (1) the experience of no longer making decisions solely by themselves,
- (2) the experience of having of their social and cultural status decline as the media increasingly addresses the interests and concerns of the other groups,
- (3) the experience of feeling that what they are giving up is more valuable than what they are receiving and thus that the responsibility for creating reciprocity is falling disproportionately on their side, and
- (4) the experience of diminished expectations concerning what the future will bring.

In a real sense, however, these perceptions are at odds with the perceptions of nationalists who feel, with some justification, that unionists have “won” more than they have “lost” on almost all the important issues facing Northern Ireland. In particular, nationalists have not succeeded in their hope for a united Ireland, and all parties have been obliged to acknowledge that Northern Ireland will not be forced into any agreement that cannot command majority support – in other words, the “unionist veto” remains. Nevertheless, unionists often find it difficult to articulate exactly what it is they have lost. Often this sense of loss is vague and tied to evolving cultural, economic and political patterns in Northern Ireland. Finding ways to address the relevant barriers to communication and understanding arising from this gap in the perceptions of the two sides is another area for future SCCN/CD collaboration.

Finally, as our conference participant Dan Bar-On noted, the terms *forgiveness* and *reconciliation* can sometimes act as barriers that prevent relationship building. Different people and groups use these terms differently, and these variations in meanings and associations can cause great confusion and misunderstanding. Furthermore, the shift from an interpersonal context to the dynamics of larger social and political groups is also problematic with respect to the use of these terms, and the relevant issues often are not clearly conceptualized or communicated. One option that has certain advantages, Bar On suggests, is pursuing the goals of forgiveness and/or reconciliation without explicitly talking about such goals. However, the concept of *political* partnership is an inherent part of a stable political landscape, and the creation of these kinds of relationships is the ideal that reconciliation and forgiveness envision. Completely abandoning these terms – especially the term reconciliation (or, as some who deny the existence of some prior state of harmony suggest, *conciliation*) – may be difficult because the goals of increasing understanding and achieving better intergroup relations and partnerships are obviously linked. (In fact, Bar-On himself ultimately returns to these terms in describing and assessing his own activities with Palestinians and Israelis.)

It may be that the issues surrounding forgiveness and reconciliation will never be totally resolved. Nevertheless, the tension introduced by these issues is one of factors making theory/practice conversations potentially useful. One important practical question, of course, is when the notions of reconciliation and forgiveness contribute to a richer understanding of political partnership, and when they are merely a source of distraction and unnecessary divisiveness.

2. Reconciliation principally occurs between social and political agents; it is only secondarily concerned with institutions that can function to strengthen communal relationships.

A central theme of the week was the need to focus on building bridges between people. Two important topics emerged often in our conversations, including the conversations prompted in part by Jack Weinstein’s useful presentation. The first topic involved the need to strengthen and expand our moral universe. This universe is defined by (1) those to whom we owe obligations, (2) those to whom rules apply, and (3) those whose grievances must be addressed. While relevance of this notion was widely acknowledged, we did not address the content of the obligations, the nature of the rules, or the characteristics of the serious grievances that would give this moral universe form. One important idea that was expressed was the need for the wider communities to acknowledge the role that situational factors, including situational factors for which those communities bore some collective responsibility, played in the outbreak of violence. Notions of *restorative* rather than punitive justice, it was suggested, can play an increasingly important role for people

seeking to reestablish a system of accountability. An important question that remains to be addressed (ideally with SCCN playing some role) is what factors make the community consider and adopt restorative rather than punitive measures in dealing with individual incidents or with sequences of retaliatory violence.

The second topic involved the contention that many of those who have participated in brutal actions suffer from a kind of *moral trauma*. While some who participated in the workshop would not endorse the notion of moral trauma, we feel that many would agree that most in Northern Ireland have, in some form or another, been implicated in the conflict to some degree – even if only through acts of omission. A dilemma clearly arises because not all are equally responsible and because some have clearly suffered more than others. However, a response that focuses on identifying scapegoats or concentrates on creating hierarchies of suffering fails to address a significant portion of the underlying hurt that must be healed.

These issues cluster around the themes of forgiveness and repentance, and the same concerns raised in the previous section apply here as well. Again, more exploration is needed.

3. Reconciliation fundamentally involves promising to act and think as a *we*.

A fundamental marker of reconciliation is the degree to which the parties begin to think of themselves as a common unit. This shift toward *we-ness* was the subject of many discussions. A group that thinks of itself as a common unit, we noted, can create possibilities that neither side could achieve by acting in oppositional ways. Central to this shift is the linking of previously conflicting interests in ways that allow that the two sides to cooperate in addressing it.

Two obvious questions received too little attention in our discussion: 1) steps that could be taken to make dialogue better highlight such benefits of *we-ness*, and 2) ways to move the goal of dialogue from increased understanding to identification of ways in which increased understanding might facilitate increase partnership. Both questions envision moving the dialogue to a new level.

4. Reconciliation builds upon commonalities with the goal of enhancing day-to-day existence in mutually beneficial ways.

The talk by Lee Ross emphasized three themes that have particular relevance to the task of understanding differences and identifying commonalities. First, the concept of naïve realism help us to see how conflicts arise from (and are exacerbated and perpetuated by) the way that normal people act and think about the world, and the way they misinterpret the fact that other individuals or groups act and think differently. Realizing that such differences result from motivational and cognitive biases that are characteristic of all people (including oneself and one's own group) and are not the result of the other party's unique susceptibility to the distorting influence of self-interest or ideology is critical. This realization discourages people both from thinking that simply providing the other side with more and better information will resolve differences, and from reaching overly censorious and pessimistic conclusions when the exchange of information (i.e., dialogue) does not produce agreement. Equally important, an appreciation of naïve realism encourages people to look more seriously, insightfully, and sympathetically, at the factors that lead the two sides in a dispute to see and experience the world differently.

Second, the principle of false polarization underscores the possibility that the opposing parties may hold more in common than they initially suspect. Both the view that other people see the world in more ideologically consistent and extreme terms than oneself, and the dynamics of public discourse (whereby people present their strongest arguments without revealing their misgivings or sources of ambivalence), lead disputants to overestimate the "gap" that exists between them. Finding dialogue techniques that allow parties to perceive the complexities and ambivalences in each other's views more accurately, and to better identify, and exploit, potential areas of agreement or "common ground" could be a shared objective for both SCCN and CD.

Third, appreciating the phenomenon of *reactive devaluation* can help us to understand a source of conflict and frustration in ongoing unionist-nationalist negotiation, especially negotiations involving the

deeply contentious decommissioning issue. This phenomenon involves the tendency for parties to devalue concessions received from the other side, such that the particular concessions that are offered by one's adversary are seen as less valuable, less necessary, or less indicative of goodwill and trustworthiness, than those concessions that are withheld. The result is that the party offering the concession feels that the other side is unreasonable and not really committed to the goal of reaching an end to hostilities. This response pattern, it seems, has been a continuing theme in Northern Ireland as the parties attempt to move toward agreement.

One drawback to the week was that we did not have enough time to explore how these three principles could help CD develop a more effective dialogue strategy. Such conversation must await a later date. It might also be interesting to explore specific techniques, derived from theory and/or practice that might be useful in addressing the problems and barriers discussed above. Some specific techniques worth consideration in this regard include the use of personal story-telling and the use of role-playing exercises in which the parties demonstrate their capacity to present the other side's arguments sympathetically, or better still reveal sources of personal ambivalence.

5. Reconciliation seeks to promote trustworthy partnerships in the midst of severe distrust through the creation of "common knowledge."

Creating trust where distrust is prevalent is a central and very difficult problem, both in practice and in theory. During the Cold War, there existed common knowledge that the use of nuclear weapons by one side was suicidal. It was perhaps this common knowledge more than deterrence theory, as (Stanford's) David Holloway observed, that helps explain how the superpowers avoided nuclear war. That is, a rudimentary trust that the other side would not launch an unprovoked nuclear strike grew amidst deep distrust about their geopolitical intentions.

Dialogue is a way to develop common knowledge, and this common knowledge may provide a base for embryonic trust to grow between the very distrustful communities of Northern Ireland. Perhaps the underlying and critical question is what the other side needs to know about me so that they might trust me. The application of this idea merits more attention in future discussions.

6. Reconciliation must address the past, the present, and the future through a strategy of sequencing that allows for the development of constructive relationships.

Issues that involve "dealing with the past" and the need to "hold people accountable" arose numerous times during the week. With Dan Bar-On, we explored a project that brought together the descendents of Holocaust survivors and Nazi perpetrators. When these people met, the line between victims and perpetrators had been clearly drawn, and their current living situations involved no divisive issues or power struggles. Perhaps as a result of these benign circumstances, they found themselves able to address the past with greater ease and equanimity than they had expected. In Northern Ireland today, issues related to past accountability are used as weapons to gain advantage. While all parties recognize that it may be easier to agree about goals and hope for the future than about the matters of history, many feel that people will not trust a future where accountability is lacking. This dilemma remains a problem about which little headway was made during our week together.

Issues relating more specifically to the implementation of peace agreements, discussed by Steve Stedman, had particular relevance to the current situation in Northern Ireland. He noted that implementation occurs at three levels: (1) compliance, (2) process, and (3) relationship-building. Those who focus on compliance say that the agreement is a list of provisions that these must be met. Those who focus on process say that the agreement initiates a negotiation process in which the ambiguities and contingencies of the settlement must be worked out. Others, however, believe that the agreement promised peaceful relationships at the grass-roots level, and they will be dissatisfied unless they see a change in such relationships and personal outcomes in their own daily lives and those of their community. But successful implementation must engage all three levels. To focus solely on one level is to miss the emotional and relational factors at play in the other levels.

This framework helps our understanding of the Northern Ireland situation. On some issues, unionists have fixated on solely compliance, while nationalists emphasize process. On other issue, the reverse has occurred. Meanwhile, those at the grassroots wonder, “Where’s the peace, security, and increased prosperity that we were promised?” This analysis gave us an important handle on understanding the current impasses in Northern Ireland, and we feel that it could have a direct and broad impact on the work of both CD and SCCN (as well as other groups in Northern Ireland).

The Thorny Problem of Evaluating “Unique Program Impact”

In addition to our goal of helping to make citizen dialogues more fruitful, SCCN is interested in developing ways to evaluate them. Such evaluation poses particularly difficult challenges, especially when we consider that the goal, for at least one of the parties, as Ifat Maoz noted in her account of Palestinian Israeli dialogue, may be the achievement of confrontation, change, or justice rather than conflict resolution per se. The outcome-process distinction is relevant here, and in many circumstances an important goal of evaluation may be determining whether the dynamics of the ongoing conflict (which may involve imbalance in power or differences in commitment to conflict resolution, relationship building, or justice seeking) are mirrored in the structure and dynamics of the dialogue. Maoz’s work again offers a starting point for such considerations.

A more difficult challenge arises from the fact that, in the context of conflicts between entire communities or nations, any single project inevitably occurs in concert with many other projects and initiatives undertaken by lots of parties for lots of different reasons. No project is likely to be either necessary or sufficient to product change. In such circumstances, the joint impact of all these projects is likely to be an on-going process of change – indeed the occurrence of many projects at a particular moment in history is likely to also be a *reflection* of such change. Accordingly, the most that providers of any particular program can claim is that they are “doing their part.” This issue is particularly relevant to the ongoing dialogue with funders, who understandably want to know that their dollars are “making a difference.” The commons dilemma aspect of this situation should be made apparent. *Ceteris paribus*, it is terribly tempting to be a “free rider” who does not spend financial or other resources that could be preserved for other projects elsewhere. But if there is not a critical mass of riders willing to spend their dollars, effort, or even blood, the vehicle doesn’t reach its destination.

The Conversations Continue: Post-Workshop Developments

Since the workshop, there has been a growing unease within CD about the usefulness of the term “reconciliation” in the Irish/British context. The reasons for this development vary and rest upon important substantive concerns. However, the most significant by far is a deteriorating political situation. As a result, the term reconciliation has simply fallen off the political table in Northern Ireland. In its place, some are wondering if it would be better to seek some kind of coexistence instead. However, coexistence seems to depend upon lines of mental and physical division that enable the entities to stand disjoined, if not completely independent. Still, the human costs of defining and maintaining these boundaries are potentially extensive. Still, if reconciliation is not a realistic goal and coexistence is too costly an option, what is left but more of the same – more violence, more hate, more pain and death? Amidst these questions, many in CD find themselves gravitating toward the more immediate goal of trying to reduce destructive social and political conflict.

At present, SCCN is responding to this development by offering a framework that identifies various responses to potentially escalating conflict according to whether they aim to manage conflict, to resolve conflict, or to transform conflict (build partnerships). With CD, we are hoping to engage in an extensive exploration of the potential benefits and limitations of each approach in relationship to the different political and social conditions that Northern Ireland faces. No doubt, we will give different weights and priorities to issues and questions that arise. Often we will find ourselves taking off in different directions. Still, the creativity of our collaboration will depend on our skill in bring us back to an intersection of common concerns.

The method we have chosen is to review periodically an evolving set of questions so that it expresses our most challenging and perplexing concerns. These questions will chart our progress as well as guide our future conversations. We have divided our questions into twin tracks that reflect the tension that we have previously noted between dialogue and relational (reconciliation) themes. These tracks are tailored to raise research and practical concerns in a way that engages both CD and SCCN equally in both domains. We have also added a third category of questions related to implementing the Agreement itself. This addition cluster of questions arose initially in response to the presentation by Steve Stedman in our workshop. The list below represents our most recent formulation.

Dialogue

1. Why do some groups in Northern Ireland refuse to enter dialogue?
2. What pre-conditions are necessary for dialogue to be fruitful and satisfying for the participants?
3. How might CD use the interplay between “story telling” and “political analysis” in promoting effective dialogue?
4. What insights about naïve realism, false polarization, reactive devaluation, and other social psychological concepts might be useful in working out how to dialogue?

Relational

1. What are the best ways to describe CD’s aims of reducing social and political conflict?
2. To reduce social and political conflict to what extent do identities need to change or to remain the same?
3. What is the impact of interpersonal relationships on political developments?
4. What are the benefits and limits of Third Party intervention?
5. How might CD better promote the development of better relationships?

The Agreement

1. How can CD help implement the Agreement?
2. Do we need agreement about Northern Ireland or can we survive without agreement about the past, the present and the future?
3. How can CD address the sense of loss that pervades many sections of Northern Ireland?

* * *

In closing, let me state that SCCN values greatly the exposure it has had to the experience and wisdom of the dedicated CD practitioners. The opportunity to engage real world issues of this intensity and caliber will no doubt greatly influence our future research work.

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