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# Conflict Resolution and Reconciliation: A Social-Psychological Perspective on Ending Violent Conflict Between Identity Groups

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# Conflict Resolution and Reconciliation: A Social-Psychological Perspective on Ending Violent Conflict Between Identity Groups

**Abstract**

My work over more than three decades has focused on the development and application of interactive problem solving: an unofficial, scholar-practitioner approach to the resolution of protracted, deep-rooted, and often violent conflicts between identity groups, which is derived from the pioneering work of John Burton and anchored in social-psychological principles. My primary focus over the years has been on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but my students and associates have also applied the approach in a number of other arenas of ethnonational conflict, including Cyprus, Northern Ireland, Sri Lanka, Colombia, and South Africa. A starting point of this work has been the assumption that the nonviolent termination of such conflicts must go beyond conflict settlement centered on interest-based bargaining, and aim for conflict resolution centered on joint development of solutions that address the needs and allay the fears of both parties. We have viewed interactive problem solving as a form of conflict resolution that is conducive to ultimate reconciliation. Increasingly, however, we have come to see reconciliation as a distinct process of peacemaking, which must accompany conflict resolution in deep-rooted conflicts between identity groups. Whereas conflict resolution refers to the process of shaping a mutually satisfactory and hence durable agreement between the two societies, reconciliation refers to the process whereby they learn to live together in the post-conflict environment. Following this logic, the paper conceptualizes conflict settlement, conflict resolution, and reconciliation as three qualitatively distinct processes, operating at the level of interests, relationships, and identity respectively. These three processes may be related sequentially, but they may also operate independently and simultaneously. The paper addresses the special challenge of reconciliation, which requires some changes in each party's identity, without threatening the core of its identity; and concludes with a brief discussion of the conditions conducive to reconciliation.

**Author Biography**

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# INTRODUCTION

My work over more than three decades has focused on the development and application of *interactive problem solving:* an unofficial, scholar-practitioner approach to the resolution of protracted, deep-rooted, and often violent conflicts between identity groups—particularly ethnonational groups—which is derived from the pioneering work of John Burton and anchored in social-psychological principles (Kelman 1999c; 2002). My primary focus over the years has been on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but my students and associates have also applied the approach in a number of other arenas of ethnonational conflict, including Cyprus, Northern Ireland, Sri Lanka, Colombia, and South Africa.

The central distinction in our work, following John Burton, has been between *settlement* and *resolution* of conflict (see for example Burton 1969, Chapters 11 and 12). In contrast to the negotiation of a political *settlement,* a process of conflict *resolution* goes beyond a realist view of national interests. It explores the causes of the conflict, particularly causes in the form of unmet or threatened needs for identity, security, recognition, autonomy, and justice. It seeks solutions responsive to the needs of both sides through active engagement in joint problem solving. Hence, agreements achieved through a process of genuine conflict resolution—unlike compromises achieved through a bargaining process brokered or imposed by third parties—are likely to engender the two parties' long-term commitment to the outcome and to transform their relationship. Our work starts with the assumption that the nonviolent termination of conflicts between identity groups requires a process of conflict resolution of the kind that I have briefly described.

## SETTLEMENT, RESOLUTION, AND RECONCILIATION

Although there are obvious continuities between conflict settlement and conflict resolution, they can be conceptualized as two distinct processes of peacemaking, with a primary focus at the level of *interests* and at the level of *relationships,* respectively. Let me compare the two processes in somewhat fuller detail.

Conflict settlement can be described as a process yielding an agreement that meets the interests of both parties to the extent that their respective power positions enable them to prevail. In other words, the terms of their agreement are heavily determined by the power they can bring to bear in the negotiations. Third parties—outside powers or international organizations—often play a role in brokering or even imposing an agreement, using their own power by way of threats or inducements. The agreement may be supported by the publics on the two sides because they are tired of war and have found the status quo of continuing hostility and uncertainty increasingly intolerable. Such support of the agreement does not rest in any particular change in public attitudes toward the adversary. The settlement process is not especially designed to change the quality of the relationship between the

societies. The stability of a political settlement ultimately depends on surveillance— by the parties themselves, in keeping with their deterrent capacities, by outside powers, and by international organizations.

Conflict settlement is not a negligible achievement in a violent and destructive relationship with escalatory potential. In fact, conflict resolution can often build on political settlements, insofar as these involve a negotiating process in which each side pursues its interests and in which they are able to reach agreement on many outstanding issues through distributive bargaining in which power as well as international norms play a role. But conflict resolution, particularly if we think of it within an interactive problem-solving framework, goes beyond conflict settlement in many of the ways to which I have already alluded:

- It refers to an agreement that is arrived at interactively, rather than imposed or sponsored by outside powers, and to which the parties therefore have a higher level of commitment.

- It addresses the parties' basic needs and fears and therefore has a greater capacity to sustain itself over time.

- It builds a degree of working trust between the parties—a pragmatic trust in the other's interest in achieving and maintaining peace—and therefore is not entirely dependent on surveillance as the guarantor of the agreement (for the distinction between working trust and interpersonal trust, see Kelman 2005).

- It establishes a new relationship between the parties, best described as a partnership, in which the parties are responsive to each other's needs and constraints, and committed to reciprocity.

- It generates public support for the agreement and encourages the development of new images of the other.

In all of these ways, conflict resolution moves beyond the interest-based settlement of the conflict and its dependence on the balance of power. It represents a strategic change in the relationship between the parties, expressed in terms of a pragmatic partnership, in which each side is persuaded that stable peace and cooperation are both in its own best interest and in the interest of the other. This is the kind of partnership that began to emerge, especially at the leadership level, between Israelis and Palestinians in the early post-Oslo environment (cf. Lustick 1997).

Conflict resolution as I have described it clearly represents a transformation of the relationship between the parties (cf. Lederach 1998; Kelman 1999a). But there are limits to this new relationship, which make it vulnerable to changes in interests, circumstances, and leadership. Conflict resolution as a process of peacemaking

involves the development of a new relationship, with an associated set of new attitudes *alongside*—or perhaps on top—of the old attitudes. The new attitudes are not necessarily integrated with one's pre-existing value structure and belief system—with one's worldview. This means that the old attitudes—including attitudes of fundamental distrust and negation of the other—remain intact even as new attitudes, associated with the new relationship, take shape. The coexistence of new attitudes toward the other as a potential partner in peace with old attitudes toward the other as a mortal enemy creates instability in the new relationship, particularly in the context of an existential identity conflict. Changing circumstances may trigger the old attitudes in their full force.

This brings us to what I propose is a third, distinct, process of peacemaking: reconciliation, with a primary focus at the level of *identities*. I have always argued that an agreement emerging from a process of conflict resolution within an interactive problem-solving framework and the new relationship it promotes are conducive to stable peace, mutually enhancing cooperation, and *ultimate reconciliation*.

Thus, reconciliation, in this view, is a consequence of successful conflict resolution. It comes at the end of the process, with time: The test of a good agreement, and of the process that generates it, is its conduciveness to *ultimate* reconciliation. This does not mean (and has never meant, in my view) that reconciliation comes into play only *after* an agreement has been reached. Reconciliation is, after all, a *process* as well as an outcome; as such, it should ideally be set into motion from the beginning of a peace process and as an integral part of it. In this spirit, I have proposed that the problem-solving workshops between politically influential Israelis and Palestinians that my colleagues and I have organized for some years (see Kelman 2002; Rouhana & Kelman 1994) represent tentative steps toward reconciliation, insofar as participants are encouraged to listen to and to try to appreciate each other's narrative and to engage in a process of "negotiating identity" (Kelman 2001).

Although reconciliation has been vital to my thinking in these and other ways, I tended to conceive of it not so much as a separate process, but as a component and logical outcome of conflict resolution as my colleagues and I have conceptualized and practiced it. But the recent events that have increasingly focused the attention of social scientists and political actors on reconciliation have encouraged me, along with my colleagues, to view reconciliation as a distinct process, qualitatively different from conflict resolution—even conflict resolution within a needs-oriented, interactive problem-solving framework. Reconciliation is obviously continuous with and linked to conflict resolution and it certainly is not an alternative to it. But, whereas conflict resolution refers to the process of achieving a mutually satisfactory and hence durable agreement between the two societies, reconciliation refers to the process whereby the societies learn to live together in the post-conflict environment.

Reconciliation presupposes conflict resolution of the type that I have described: the development of working trust; the transformation of the relationship toward a partnership based on reciprocity and mutual responsiveness; an agreement that addresses both parties' basic needs. But it goes beyond conflict resolution in representing a change in each party's identity.

The primary feature of the identity change constituting reconciliation is the removal of the negation of the other as a central component of one's own identity. My main empirical point of reference in this analysis is the Israeli-Palestinian case, in which mutual denial of the other's identity has been a central feature of the conflict over the decades (cf. Kelman 1978; 1999b). The mutual negation of the other's identity is perhaps not as central in other cases of conflict and reconciliation—such as those of Chile, Guatemala, or South Africa, or the German-Jewish, the Franco-German, or even the Egyptian-Israeli case—yet, in each case, the negation of the other is somehow embedded in the identity of each of the conflicting parties and must be addressed in the reconciliation process.

Changing one's collective identity by removing the negation of the other from it implies a degree of acceptance of the other's identity—at least in the sense of acknowledging the validity and legitimacy of the other's narrative without necessarily fully agreeing with that narrative. The change in each party's identity may go further by moving toward the development of a common, transcendent identity—not in lieu of, but alongside of each group's particularistic identity. Development of a transcendent identity becomes possible with reconciliation and, in turn, reinforces reconciliation, but is not a necessary condition or consequence of reconciliation. What is essential to reconciliation, in my view, is that each party revise its own identity just enough to accommodate the identity of the other. As the parties overcome the negative interdependence of their identities, they can build on the positive interdependence of their identities that often characterizes parties living in close proximity to each other (Kelman 1999b).

Reconciliation as I have defined it goes beyond conflict resolution in that it moves past the level of pragmatic partnership—which is essential to peacemaking—and enables the parties to internalize the new relationship, integrating it into their own identities. New attitudes toward the other can thus develop, not just alongside of the old attitudes, but in place of the old attitudes. As the new attitudes become integrated into the group's own identity, they gradually replace the old attitudes. Working trust can gradually turn into personal trust. This does not foreclose the possibility that old fears and suspicions will reemerge, but the relationship is less vulnerable to situational changes.

It is important to emphasize that the change in each party's identity—the revision in its narrative—that I am defining as reconciliation implies a strengthening, rather than a weakening, of each party's *core* identity. I would argue that a revision in

the group's identity and the associated narrative is possible only if the *core* of the identity remains intact. In fact, changes in more peripheral elements of identity are often seen as necessary in order to preserve the core of the identity. This was the basis, for example, on which a majority of Israelis and Palestinians were (and I believe continue to be) prepared to revise the territorial dimension of their national identity in order to maintain the essence of that identity (Kelman 2001).

This analysis points to a major dilemma of reconciliation. Reconciliation requires parties to change an element of their identity—the negation of the other—which is far from trivial for parties engaged in an existential identity conflict, while at the same time preserving, even strengthening, the core of their identity. This is more easily achieved in situations in which one of the parties has already rejected part of its identity—as was the case for many Germans in post-Nazi Germany and many whites in post-apartheid South Africa—although even in these situations resistances are bound to arise. It is particularly difficult, however, in conflicts in which each side insists on the justice of its cause and sees itself as having been wronged by the other. The dilemma is that the amount and kind of identity change that A requires from B in order to be ready for reconciliation may be perceived by B as undermining the core of *its* identity. A good example here would be the demand to acknowledge collective guilt to which even post-Nazi Germany was reluctant to accede (Auerbach 2004; Feldman 1999).

In conflicts such as that between Palestinians and Israelis, negation of the other is a *central* element of each party's own identity, which it cannot give up easily. Given the nature of the conflict, each party finds it necessary to deny the other's authenticity as a people, the other's links to the land, and the other's national rights, especially its right to national self-determination through the establishment of an independent state in the land both claim, because the other's claims to peoplehood and to rights in the land are seen as competitive to each party's own claims and rights. Moreover, negation of the other is also important to each party in a violent conflict as a protection against negative elements in its own identity (cf. Kelman 1999b). Insofar as the other can be demonized and dehumanized, it becomes easier for each party to minimize guilt feelings for acts of violence and oppression against the other and to avoid seeing itself in the role of victimizer, rather than only the role of victim.

Thus, in protracted identity conflicts, negation of the other is not a peripheral, marginal element of each party's identity that can be easily discarded. My argument is merely that, from an "objective" point of view, negating the identity of the other is not a *necessary* condition for preserving, and indeed enhancing the core of one's own identity. However, for conflicting parties to arrive at a point where they can be free to relegate negation of the other to the periphery of their own identities and eventually discard it requires the hard work of reconciliation. What is central to that

work is the growing assurance that the other is not a threat to one's own identity. In that process of assurance, the *conditions* for reconciliation play a vital role.

Parties in a conflict in which both sides perceive themselves as victims are helped to deal with the dilemma of abandoning some elements of identity without threatening the core of their identity by the reciprocal nature of reconciliation. Changes on the part of one group make changes on the other's part more attainable. But this view suggests that the process of reconciliation requires a certain amount of "negotiation" of identity, including negotiation of the conditions for reconciliation, which turn on such issues as truth, justice, and responsibility. It is my contention that reconciliation—especially in cases in which neither party is prepared to adopt the role of perpetrator—cannot be achieved on the basis of purely objective criteria of truth, justice, or responsibility, anchored in historical scholarship or international law, but requires some degree of mutual accommodation in the course of negotiating the conditions for reconciliation.

I can identify five conditions that may help groups in conflict arrive at the difficult point of revising their identity so as to accommodate the identity of the other. One might also think of these as indicators of reconciliation, or steps in a process of reconciliation. They are both indicators of movement toward reconciliation and conditions for further movement in that direction. I shall merely enumerate these conditions here; further elaboration can be found elsewhere (Kelman 2004; 2008).

1. *Mutual acknowledgment of the other's nationhood and humanity,* which involves acceptance of the other as an authentic nation and inclusion of the other in one's own moral community.

2. *Development of a common moral basis for peace,* allowing for a peace that both sides perceive as consistent with the principles of fairness and attainable justice.

3. *Confrontation with history,* which does not require a joint consensual history, but does require admitting the other's truth into one's own narrative.

4. *Acknowledgment of responsibility,* expressed in both symbolic and material terms.

5. *Establishment of patterns and institutional mechanisms of cooperation,* including various people-to-people activities that are genuinely useful to both parties and based on the principles of equality and reciprocity.

All five of these conditions for reconciliation are designed to facilitate changes in the collective identities of the conflicting parties, with particular emphasis on removing the negation of the other as a key element of each group's own identity.

# CONCLUSION

I have conceptualized conflict settlement, conflict resolution, and reconciliation as three qualitatively distinct processes, operating at the level of interests, relationships, and identities respectively (see Kelman 2004; 2006). Social psychologists may notice that these processes broadly correspond to the three processes of social influence—compliance, identification, and internalization—that I distinguished in my earlier work (Kelman 1958; 1961; Kelman and Hamilton 1989). My original three-process model grew out of an interest in the quality of changes induced by social influence—their depth, durability, independence, and integration. My approach to conflict resolution has posed a very similar set of questions: What are the conditions under which negotiations to end the conflict will produce a high-quality agreement—an agreement that will be deeper, more durable, more sustainable, more fully integrated in the political cultures or societal belief systems (cf. Bar-Tal and Bennink 2004) of the conflicting societies than the settlements that are so often hammered together under the pressure of external powers?

Although settlement, resolution, and reconciliation represent three approaches to peacemaking, they should not be viewed as three different ways of achieving the same goal. Rather, they are three ways of achieving different—though often overlapping—goals, all broadly linked to changing the relationship between groups, communities, societies, or states from one of hostility to one of peaceful coexistence. The specific goals and emphases of the three processes may be congruent and mutually supportive, but they may also be contradictory to one another.

I have already suggested that reconciliation is continuous with and linked to conflict resolution. In a sense, it can be argued that reconciliation, at least in its full form, presupposes conflict resolution: A long-term, cooperative relationship, based on mutual acceptance and respect, is not likely to take hold without a peace agreement that addresses the fundamental needs and sense of justice of both sides. Similarly, it can be argued that conflict resolution presupposes conflict settlement, at least in the sense that a political agreement negotiated by the legitimate leaderships of the conflicting parties and endorsed by relevant outside powers and international organizations must be in place if the two societies are to consider their conflict to have ended in a fair and mutually satisfactory way. The three processes may thus be related in a sequential way, with settlement as the first step, which may or may not be followed by resolution, which in turn may or may not be followed by reconciliation. However, there is no reason to assume that the three processes necessarily follow such a sequence. Steps in the direction or in the spirit of settlement, resolution, or reconciliation may occur quite independently, in any order and in any combination.

In short, possible relationships between the three processes need to be explored, conceptually and empirically, rather than assumed—or dismissed. The main purpose of the present exercise is to see whether we can gain some analytical

leverage by thinking of settlement, resolution, and reconciliation as qualitatively different (though not necessarily always empirically separate) processes and identifying the distinct antecedents and consequences of each.

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