



## Peace and Conflict Studies

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Volume 11 | Number 1

Article 5

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5-1-2004

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### Recommended Citation

Wallach, Tracy (2004) "Transforming Conflict: A Group Relations Perspective," *Peace and Conflict Studies*: Vol. 11 : No. 1 , Article 5.  
Available at: <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/pcs/vol11/iss1/5>

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# Transforming Conflict: A Group Relations Perspective

## **Abstract**

This article offers a group relations perspective of conflict and conflict transformation and explores how conflict manifests on the individual, interpersonal, group, and inter-group levels. Conflict and aggression are defined as normal aspects of the human condition. Current theories and practices in the field of conflict transformation tend to be more rationally based. The author uses concepts from psychoanalytic theory, such as defense mechanisms; and concepts from open systems theory, such as task, role, boundaries, and authority, to argue that in order to transform conflict, it is essential to understand the non-rational and often unconscious emotional elements that operate in groups and systems.

## **Author Bio(s)**

Tracy Wallach, trained as a clinical social worker and worked as a psychotherapist in various organizations and in private practice for 20 years. For the past 10 years, she has been an organization development and leadership consultant based in Brookline, MA. Her clients have included manufacturing, health care, social service and public sector organizations. She has taught extensively on the topics of group and organizational dynamics, leadership, conflict, and communication in professional, organizational and academic settings, both in the US and abroad. She holds a Masters Degree in Social Work from Smith College and has done post graduate work in Organization Development and Human Resource Consultation at the Boston Institute for Psychotherapy. Currently, she serves as President of the Center for the Study of Groups and Social Systems (Boston Affiliate, AKRI), and is a past board member of AK Rice Institute for the Study of Social Systems.

## **TRANSFORMING CONFLICT: A GROUP RELATIONS PERSPECTIVE**

**Tracy Wallach**

### **Abstract**

*This article offers a group relations perspective of conflict and conflict transformation and explores how conflict manifests on the individual, interpersonal, group, and inter-group levels. Conflict and aggression are defined as normal aspects of the human condition. Current theories and practices in the field of conflict transformation tend to be more rationally based. The author uses concepts from psychoanalytic theory, such as defense mechanisms; and concepts from open systems theory, such as task, role, boundaries, and authority, to argue that in order to transform conflict, it is essential to understand the non-rational and often unconscious emotional elements that operate in groups and systems.*

*The only thing we have to fear is fear itself—nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance.*

*Franklin D. Roosevelt, First Inaugural Address, March 4, 1933*

*Fear is, I believe, a most effective tool in destroying the soul of an individual—and the soul of a people.*

*Anwar el-Sadat, "The Second Revolution," In Search of Identity (1977)*

### **Introduction**

Conflict and aggression are normal aspects and reflections of the human condition. Conflict is neither positive nor negative in and of itself. Rather, it is an outgrowth of the diversity that characterizes our thoughts, attitudes, beliefs, perceptions, and our social systems and structures. Differences and conflict stir up feelings of discomfort, irritation, and anxiety. Because conflict stirs up these difficult feelings, it is often viewed as a problem to be fixed or gotten rid of, rather than an expression of a polarity/paradox that is inherent in group life (Berg and Smith, 1987). The ability to sit with

difference, and the conflict it arouses, offers opportunities for reflection, growth, innovation and transformation. Transformation is not possible without first bringing to light the difference and conflict that exist within any living human system.

Current theory and practice in conflict resolution tend to be rationally based. A number of authors (Fisher and Ury, 1991; Susskind and Cruikshank, 1987; Bazerman and Neale, 1982; Carpenter and Kennedy, 1988) posit that it is possible to reach win/win agreements if one can create a rational process where the right people are involved, the necessary data is available to fully analyze the conflict/problem, there is a structure, and particular procedures and rules are followed. And, indeed, providing a structure, with procedures and ground rules, can provide a psychological container in which problem solving can occur and agreements can be made. Kelman (1999) demonstrated this in his work when conducting problem-solving workshops with Israelis and Palestinians over the past 30 years. Rational processes are very important in working with conflict. It is also important to be able to connect the rational and conscious process with the extremely powerful (and often unconscious) feelings of anxiety, fear, anger, etc. that are stirred up in conflict situations and that further fuel conflicts. There are some practitioners who do work with conflict on its emotional levels (see for example Duek, 2001; Volkan, 1991; Montville, 1991; and Mindell, 1995). Montville (1991) contends that revealing the "critical psychological tasks" is "the essential business of the pre-negotiation stage of any true resolution of a conflict, before formal negotiations focus on the essentials of political institution building" (p. 540). Besod Siach, an Israeli association specifically works at the unconscious and emotional level in its work facilitating dialogue between conflict groups in Israel (Duek, 2001).

Emotions that are unspoken or unspeakable do not disappear, but are likely to surface in ways that are insidious or even dangerous. To work with conflict effectively, it must be dealt with on both the rational *and* emotional levels. At the very least, conflict resolution practitioners must be able to recognize and work with emotional and non-rational processes as they arise, even if they are using a rationally based model. Therefore, it is incumbent upon us as peace builders and teachers of conflict transformation to learn how to explore, reflect upon and understand those feelings within ourselves, rather than ridding ourselves of those feelings, and to create learning environments where others may learn to reflect upon and manage those feelings.

My approach to thinking about conflict stems from psychoanalytic and open systems theories and the work of Wilfred Bion. These theories have

been further explored and developed at the Tavistock Institute in London, the AK Rice Institute in the US, and other group relations organizations around the world. For over 50 years, these organizations have been weaving theory and practice by sponsoring group relations conferences. In the context of the temporary organization of the conference system, it is possible to study authority, leadership and group dynamics experientially, as they unfold in the here and now<sup>16</sup>. In this article, I summarize some of the concepts of group relations theory that are relevant to the work of conflict transformation.

The theories presented here are not new, although the application to peace building derived from these theories is new. Clinicians have previously attempted to apply psychological concepts to the understanding of political processes and of conflict (see, for example, Ettin, Fidler, and Cohen, 1995). By introducing concepts from group relations theory to the field of peace building, I hope to shed light on how we take up our roles as educators and practitioners and how we might use ourselves to help people move through conflict in a transformative way.

### **Levels of Conflict**

Conflict occurs on many levels (Deutsch, 1973): within oneself (intra-psychic conflict), between two people (interpersonal conflict), between sub-groups within a group (intra-group conflict), between groups (inter-group conflict), organizations, ethnic or religious groups or nations. At all of these levels, conflict may be either overt and conscious, or covert and unconscious. What happens on one level invariably affects and reflects what happens at the other levels. Individuals are defined by the group contexts in which they live (family, social groups, communities, nations), while at the same time, these larger groups and systems (family, social groups, communities, nations) are created by the individuals that make them up (Rice, 1965; Miller and Rice, 1967).

A conflict at one level may find its expression on the other levels. Unconscious internal conflicts may get projected on to the other person, group, or nation. Collective narratives and myths of larger groups and nations also find their expression on the individual level. For that reason, awareness of one's own ideas, feelings, assumptions, beliefs, and values, is necessary in order to work in the field of conflict transformation.

In this article, the dynamics of conflict on all of these levels will be explored, as well as how conflict dynamics on one level impact those on the

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<sup>16</sup> A full description of the conference experience can be found in Rice (1963), Banet and Hayden (1977); Hayden and Molenkamp (2003); and Miller (1989).

other levels. The nature of this medium forces me to present these concepts in a linear fashion, though I understand conflict to be dynamic, systemic and circular.

### **Intra-psychic Conflict**

Psychoanalytic theory offers a language that helps us think about conflict on an intra-psychic level. Our personalities are defined by our upbringing, our family and cultural background, as well as by our genetics. Our national, ethnic or religious cultures, as well as our gender, age, and life experiences, contribute to our particular ways of managing our emotions. Experiencing and expressing particular emotions may be more acceptable in some cultures than in others. We are often not conscious of our individual and culturally conditioned ways of managing emotions, until, that is, we come in contact with a difference.

#### *Defense Mechanisms*

We all find that certain emotions are difficult to bear. Psychoanalytic theory posits that we protect ourselves from these difficult or intolerable feelings in various ways, known as *defense mechanisms*<sup>17</sup>. Defense mechanisms offer a way to manage internal conflict and the anxiety it arouses. Just as countries develop various kinds of defenses and weaponry to protect themselves from perceived enemies, so, too, do individuals try to protect themselves from perceived dangers. Below a few of the defense mechanisms that are particularly relevant in the area of conflict transformation are described.

*Splitting* is a defensive process in which we gain relief from internal conflicts by dividing emotions into either “all good” or “all bad” parts. We split our emotions due to our difficulty in holding two paradoxical experiences at the same time. Containing both the good and the bad parts of ourselves and seeing others as containing both good and bad aspects presents an intolerable conflict. We split in order to protect ourselves from the anxiety that the conflict arouses.

*Projection* is a defense in which an individual disowns, and, then locates in someone else the disowned intolerable feelings s/he is experiencing. Whether the feelings are objectively good or bad, the individual experiences them as intolerable. Projection is often seen in

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<sup>17</sup> Defense mechanisms and how they manifest on the individual and group level have been written about extensively in the psychoanalytic and group relations literature (see, for example, S. Freud, 1926; A. Freud, 1966; Klein, 1959; Bion, 1961; Ogden, 1965; Obholzer, 1994).

conjunction with splitting, with the split-off aspects of the self being projected onto another party because of the induced anxiety of holding onto the feelings oneself. Through splitting and projective processes, an internal conflict is externalized and located outside the self (e.g., *we* are good, *they* are evil; *we* are rational, *they* are emotional; *we* are victims, *they* are perpetrators; *we* are peace loving, *they* are aggressive; *we* are heroes, *they* are cowards, etc.).

Child psychoanalyst Melanie Klein (1959) viewed splitting and projection as rooted in infancy as a result of early frustration of the infant's needs. The infant hates the source of its frustration. Because the anxiety generated by the infant's hate towards the person on whom s/he is dependent is intolerable, the infant splits the image of the caretaker into good and bad parts. Children's fairy tales and fables are filled with characters that exemplify the splitting of emotions. Rarely are characters in these stories portrayed as complex beings with both good and bad elements. So, the image of mother is split into the good fairy godmother (or the long deceased good mother) and the wicked stepmother; the sister is either beautiful and good or wicked and jealous. Bruno Bettelheim (1976) explores how fairy tales offer children the opportunity to work through difficult emotions.

### **Working with Intra-psychic Conflict**

In psychoanalytically informed theory and practice, intra-psychic conflict is brought into the consulting room in the form of transference, in which the patient transfers to the therapist emotions that s/he had towards authority figures in childhood. Healing occurs when unconscious conflicts, as expressed through the transference, can be contained, made conscious, and put into words. This process helps the patient to make meaning of his or her experience (Freud, S., 1915; Foulkes, 1965; Lazar, 2002); and occurs in the context of a therapeutic "holding environment" (Winnicott, 1960; Ogden, 1982).

### **Interpersonal Conflict**

In analytic terms, intra-psychic conflict may be transformed into inter-personal conflict through the process of *projective identification*. Unlike projection and splitting, which are one party defenses, projective identification is a collusive process between two or more parties. In this process, once the projector has re-located his intolerable feelings in another, the recipient of the projection identifies with and owns the projected feelings. The target of the projection thus changes in response to the projected feeling

or impulse. The projector can manipulate or train an individual or group to act according to his projections by himself behaving *as if* those projections are true. The “projector” needs to stay in contact with the recipient in order to maintain a connection to the disowned, projected feelings (Horwitz, 1983).

A typical example of projective identification in interpersonal conflict is offered in the following illustration of a couple relationship:

Person A is emotional and attracted to Person B for B’s ability to think and act rationally. B is attracted to A’s ability to connect with emotions. Over time, A disowns, that is, splits off and projects onto B, and allows B to carry more and more of the rationality that A finds uncomfortable (since B has a valence or tendency for that) while B disowns and allows A to carry more and more of the emotionality that B finds uncomfortable (since A has a valence for that). As a result, A becomes less adept at thinking rationally, and B becomes less adept at managing emotions. A becomes distressed with B over B’s inability to express feelings, while B becomes irritated with A for A’s inability to think rationally. The couple becomes polarized.

The above example shows how an initial difference, over time, leads to polarization in a couple relationship. Similar dynamics may play out in other kinds of two party relationships, such as business partnerships, parent/child relationships, and friendships. While the above example demonstrates a particular split, emotionality/rationality, not uncommon in couples, the split may also occur around other emotions and characteristics, such as, strength/vulnerability, victim/perpetrator, kind/critical, happy/sad, optimistic/pessimistic, laziness/ambition, etc., depending on the valences of the individuals involved, and the context in which they live. The valence for a particular emotion is based upon the individual’s own psychological makeup or personality. Identifying characteristics, such as nationality, race, age, gender, socioeconomic status may also determine the valence or tendency an individual may have for particular emotions. For example, in many cultures women are generally perceived as holding, and are expected to hold, the emotional elements in a relationship.

### *Working with Interpersonal Conflict*

Splitting and projective identification are unconscious processes. Couples that have become polarized through continual projective identification are often not aware of the aspects of themselves that they have offloaded onto the other. Healing a conflict in an interpersonal relationship requires recognition of the particular valences of each party. It also requires each party to recognize and own the split off aspects of themselves that they

have projected onto the other. That is, they have to re-internalize the conflict that has been externalized. This presents a dilemma, and is a source of resistance for working through an interpersonal conflict, since the individual must then face the conflict that has been previously managed through the process of splitting. In the therapeutic dyad, the therapist serves as a container for the patient's projections, and can then "return to the patient a modified version of an unconscious defensive aspect of the patient that has been externalized by means of projective identification" (Ogden, 1982, p. 87). By interpreting the defense in a digestible way, the patient can then re-internalize and integrate that which has been projected. Splitting and projective processes also contribute to conflict within groups and larger systems. These will be discussed in greater detail below, following a brief introduction to some basic concepts of group relations theory.

### **Conflict within Groups: Group Relations Theory**

#### *Structural Sources of Conflict in Groups*

Groups tend to join together based on similarities and in order to pursue a common task. Often, differences, in skill, viewpoint, or values, are also necessary to achieve a group's primary task. The *primary task* of any group is that which it must do in order to survive. To accomplish a group's task, members must differentiate, by taking on different roles in service of the larger group task. Boundaries are formed or created around a group and its subsystems, task, and roles to define what is in and what is out of the group. Leadership is assigned to those most able to help a group achieve its primary task (Miller and Rice, 1967; Miller, 1989; Zagier Roberts, 1994).

The concepts of task, role, boundary, leadership, and authority help us to understand the overt and covert dynamics of groups and systems. When they are agreed upon and in alignment with each other, groups and systems may function relatively well. Conflict can arise when there is disagreement, or when task, role, boundaries, and authority are not in alignment. When a group is in the throes of a conflict, it is often useful to first look at the group structure. What is its primary task? What roles do members take up? Are they clear to everyone? Are they agreed upon? Do group members interpret the primary task and their roles in the same way? How are boundaries managed? How is authority taken up? How are members authorized to do the work of the group?

*Psychological Sources of Conflict*

We all belong to many kinds of groups—some of which we consciously choose to join, such as a work group or organization, professional groups or societies, or particular task groups. Other groups offer no choice about membership—the family we are born into, our particular ethnic, racial, gender, or age group. Group membership stirs up conflicting feelings. We long to be a part of something bigger than ourselves, while at the same time, we want to hold on to our individual identity (Bion, 1961; McCollom, 1990). Conflict may signify the normal ambivalences of individual and collective life and may also signify a particular challenge that needs to be faced in the life of a group at a particular time (Smith and Berg, 1987; Heifetz, 1994).

Just as individuals utilize defense mechanisms, such as splitting and projective identification, so do groups, organizations, communities and nations, mobilize social defenses to protect themselves against unbearable feelings and unconscious anxieties (Menzies, 1997). Groups may also avoid anxiety and other difficult feelings and decisions by substituting routines or rituals for direct engagement with the painful problem.

Wilfred Bion (1961), a British psychoanalyst at the Center for Applied Social Research in London's Tavistock Institute of Human Relations, explored the relationship between the individual and the group. He believed that individual members enter groups with their own rational and non-rational aims and needs, and employ psychosocial defenses such as splitting, projection, and projective identification in order to tolerate the powerful tensions of group life. The group serves as a container for the various projections of individual group members and also takes on a life of its own as a consequence of these processes. As a result, individual group members act not only on their own behalf, but also on behalf of the larger group or system. These processes make up the unconscious of the group-as-a-whole. The group-as-a-whole becomes an entity much greater than its individual members, with a character of its own.

In groups, conflict may manifest between individuals in the group, between subgroups, between the group as a whole and an individual, or between the group as a whole and a particular subgroup. A group that is anxious about facing a conflict directly may unconsciously find covert ways of containing or managing the conflict. For example, groups may use particular members or subgroups to carry or hold a difficult emotion, thought, or point of view on behalf of the group as a whole. That is, an individual group member, or a sub-group, may be compelled, through the processes of projective identification in a group, to take up a role to meet the

unconscious needs of the group. The group as a whole can view itself as OK, as long as it can view “the problem” as located in one individual or subgroup.

For example, a group with conflicts around dependency issues may find an “identified patient” in the group who it can take care of. By loading the dependency into one person, the group frees itself of the anxiety caused by the intolerable dependency, while at the same time maintaining the connection with those feelings in the person of the identified patient. Conversely, a group with anxieties about its own competence may project all of its competence into one member or the leader and then rely on that leader to take care of the group<sup>18</sup>.

The example of Judith and Holophernes in Apocrypha has been cited in the group relations literature as an example of the dangers of extreme dependency upon a leader. Judith cut off the head of the Assyrian leader, Holophernes, and then displayed it to his army. Without their leader, or “head,” the army acted as if they had “all lost their own heads” (Obholzer, 1994), and were quickly defeated by the Israelites.

A group that struggles with its own aggression may find a member (or sub-group) onto whom it may project its own aggressive tendencies (or other characteristic that contradicts the group’s perception of itself). The group locates the intolerable characteristic in one individual and can then scapegoat that individual for owning the characteristic<sup>19</sup>. How a group may use an individual member or subgroup to express a conflicted aspect of itself is described in the example below.

In December 2002, the US Senate was engaged in a debate over the future of Trent Lott who was Senate Majority Leader. In a party honoring Senator Strom Thurmond on his 100<sup>th</sup> birthday, Senator Lott referred to Thurmond’s 1948 presidential campaign and stated that the country “would have been better off had he won (Hulse, 2002).” Thurmond had run that campaign on a policy of segregation. Lott was immediately attacked for his comments by both the left and the right wings of both parties. The Senators who spoke up most stridently against Lott and pressured him to resign, had questionable records in regard to their own stands on civil rights (Gettleman, 2002). The group focused on a particular scapegoat, as a method of avoidance of its own racism, and a way to escape really grappling with the issue. While Senator Lott may have volunteered for the role of scapegoat, he was not the only Senator who had made public racist comments or voted against civil rights legislation. Focusing on one person as “the racist” or “the

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<sup>18</sup> Bion (1959) referred to this dynamic as basic assumption dependency.

<sup>19</sup> Bion (1959) referred to this dynamic as basic assumption fight/flight.

problem” served to distract the rest of the Senate from dealing with the anxiety about race and racism in the US, engaging in a deeper discussion about the issue, or taking any meaningful action. The Senator resigned his leadership role after six weeks of controversy (Hulse, 2002), and the Senate ceased further discussion of racism in the country.

The above example illustrates how a group may use one of its members, through the processes of splitting and projective identification, to manage anxiety around a particular problem or conflict. By locating the intolerable feeling or point of view (in this case, racism) in one person, the rest of the group members may divest themselves of responsibility, and thus can continue to deny their own contribution to the problem. By scapegoating a particular individual, the group maintains a connection with the split off aspects of itself, without having to actually take ownership of those parts, or to feel the anxiety that that would involve. “The deviancy is informing the group about aspects of its nature of which it would prefer to remain ignorant.” (Smith and Berg, 1987, p. 91) Scapegoating allows a group to manage its anxiety about conflict or a particular challenge it might be facing. Ultimately, it also interferes with a group’s ability to effectively face that challenge or conflict, or to adapt to its environment. Real change or transformation can thus be avoided. Heifetz (1994) maintains that the role of the leader is to help the group face its adaptive challenges. If the group succeeds in extruding the scapegoat from the group, it is likely that the problem or conflict that the scapegoat represented will surface elsewhere in the system.

Groups can exert enormous pressure, both overt and covert, on an individual member or subgroup to take up a particular role on behalf of the group. Demographic characteristics, such as age, gender, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and physical characteristics, may serve as the basis for which certain members are ascribed particular roles (Horowitz, 1983; Berg and Smith, 1987; Reed and Noumair, 2000). For example, women may be asked to take on caretaking roles on behalf of the larger group, or to give voice to emotions in the group, based on cultural expectations. Members of a particular ethnic group in a society may hold certain characteristics, such as aggression or sexuality, deemed intolerable by another ethnic group.

A group may also offer up a pair who gives voice to the conflict existing in the group at a particular time. That is, the group may designate two of its members to fight with each other, while the remainder of the group observes passively. Thus, rather than the group as a whole engaging in a dialogue to reflect on the conflict, it may instead be located in two

individuals who give voice to the conflict on behalf of the larger system<sup>20</sup>. Pairs of members may also be asked to hold a sense of hope for the group. Sometimes they may hold a sense of hope for the group. This may still be problematic, as the group-as-a-whole continues to avoid dealing with reality. This is illustrated in the example below.

In a training program for conflict transformation, with participants from conflict areas around the world, conflict was virtually unspeakable. Pairs of participants from opposing sides of particular conflicts (Israel/Palestine; Bosnia/Serbia; Greek and Turkish Cypriots, etc.) were engaged by the course director and the group to serve as emblems of hope. At the same time, conflict and dialogue within the whole group was discouraged. The course was structured in such a way as to bar real engagement and dialogue. Theatre style seating, minimal time allowed to work in small groups, and avoidance of the feelings generated in the room of 60 participants all contributed to a sense of emotional and intellectual constriction. Conflict went underground in the group and re-surfaced in the form of repeated lateness to sessions, and several complaints of sexual harassment. Participants who spoke up or complained about the course structure, were labeled as “troublemakers” by the course director, and were effectively silenced.

Groups that are invested in maintaining a particular view of themselves (identity) and of other groups can exert similar pressure to behave according to group norms/expectations as a way of keeping members “in line.” Speaking against predominating group norms may carry the risk of being scapegoated.

### *Working with Conflict Within Groups*

Working with a group in conflict involves viewing the conflicting individuals and subgroups as part of a larger system. What is the meaning of the conflict for the larger system? What is the adaptive challenge that the group needs to face? What is the conversation that the group needs to have as a system? What is being avoided in the group-as-a-whole that is being located in particular individuals or sub-groups in the system? In other words, what are the fears, needs, and emotions that are being projected into the conflicting parties? As with inter-personal conflict, transforming conflict on the group level also involves taking back and re-owning those projections.

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<sup>20</sup> Bion (1959) referred to this dynamic as basic assumption pairing. Basic assumption functioning is also discussed in Rioch (1970), Miller (1989), Lawrence, Bain, and Gould (1996), Banet and Hayden (1977); and Hayden and Molenkamp (2003).

The role of consultant or leader or peace-builder is to create a containing environment where such emotions can be explored and understood (Winnicott, 1960; Ogden, 1982; Lazar, 2002). In addition to observing the group process, the consultant can use his or her own emotional experience as data in understanding the underlying dynamics in the group<sup>21</sup>. Do the consultant's (leader/peace-builder) emotions mirror the emotional experience of the group, or a particular sub-group? What do these emotions suggest about how the group is “using” the consultant, and/or how the group may use particular members to manage its internal conflicts? Would sharing this data with the group help the group face its adaptive challenges?

### **Inter-group Conflict**

The dynamics that emerge within any particular group are also influenced by the larger system and environment within which the group is embedded. In an organization, the process of a particular group within it tends to reflect the larger organizational culture, the assumptions, values, and beliefs associated with the particular business or profession, which is, in turn, influenced by the culture of the larger community and nation. Also, by virtue of their outside group memberships, group members import conflicts and ways of looking at conflict from the larger environment (Berg and Smith, 1987). The group then serves as a microcosm of the larger environment. Individual members of the group can then export conflicts, or, new ways of looking at them back into their outside groups.

#### *Splitting and Projective Identification in an inter-group context*

Groups may attempt to avoid or deny their own internal conflicts by finding an external group or enemy onto whom it can project its unacceptable, split-off parts. This is the root of stereotyping, sexism, racism and other “isms”. The less personal contact we have with other groups or individuals who represent different group identities, the more they may serve as a blank screen onto which we project our own images, ideas, desires, longings, anxieties, and prejudices. The external groups may have a valence for the characteristic that is being projected, and may also be compelled to take on those characteristics by virtue of the behavior of the projecting group. The more we treat a group as if they have a particular characteristic, the more we actually encourage, or even create that behavior. For example, in an exercise I use to train students to understand group and inter-group

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<sup>21</sup> The idea that emotions may be viewed and used as “intelligence” is explored in Armstrong, 2000.

dynamics, I ask one group to treat a second group “stereotypically,” that is, as if the subgroup were, aggressive, potentially dangerous, and not terribly smart. Within minutes, the stereotyped group begins to behave aggressively--precisely in the way they are “trained” to act by the other group’s behavior.

In the international political arena we can see many examples of splitting and projective processes. In many countries, various leaders over time have invoked an external enemy in order to mobilize public sentiment and to distract attention from internal group conflicts. For example, in the 1980’s in the US, Ronald Reagan referred to the former Soviet Union as the “Evil Empire” and gained support for his SDI initiative (Heifetz, 1994). Right-leaning politicians in Israel focus on Palestinian terrorism and thereby distract attention from serious conflict within the Israeli Jewish community. Political leaders in Arab nations in the Middle East target Israel as the problem while ignoring problems and conflicts within their own countries. In the former Yugoslavia, leaders mobilized anxiety and hatred toward “other” ethnic groups (that had previously enjoyed good relations) rather than help the country as a whole face the adaptive challenges of the breakup of the Soviet Bloc. Most recently, using phrases such as “axis of evil,” or “evil doers,” to describe Saddam Hussein’s regime in Iraq, and by implicitly linking Iraq to the attacks on the World Trade Center (BBC News, 1/29/03, *State of the Union Address*; BBC News/Europe 2/2/02),

George W. Bush was remarkably successful in mobilizing support for the war on Iraq in the anxious environment of post 9/11 USA. From the perspective of projective identification, as discussed earlier, it might also be argued that his persistent verbal attacks on the Iraqi leader further encouraged Hussein’s intransigence. Evidence of splitting can also be found in the current Bush administration’s attitudes towards dissent—those in the US who disagreed with his policies towards Iraq were labeled as “unpatriotic”, while the president stated to European allies, “if you’re not with us, you’re against us (BBCNews/Europe 11/6/01).” In his analysis of the current Bush administration’s policies toward Iraq, Lazar (2002) contends that the war in Iraq serves to deflect attention from internal conflicts stemming from the economic downturn, such as the national debt, unemployment, the widening gap between rich and poor, and the health care crisis. He goes on to emphasize the importance of the leader in performing a “containing function” if he or she is to help followers to function successfully:

If anxieties, irrationalities, aggressions, envy and rivalry, disruptive unconscious fantasies and ideas, etc. are not adequately contained, they threaten to paralyze the group or to blow it up.... If this is the

case, then the group will be forced to fall back on functioning in a basic assumption mode in order to prevent such threats and disturbances from destroying the group altogether. The price paid for this is the loss of task orientation and with it, the capacity to do work. When, however, the work group leader is capable of offering the group enough containment, these disturbing factors can be "digested", can be better metabolized into the group's dynamic life, and it can then "feed" on this experience, can grow on it, learn from it, and thereby improve its capacity to devote itself to the task at hand and to achieve good results. (p. 7)

The concept of containment is particularly relevant in the work of peace building, discussed below.

### **The Work of Peace-building**

Peace building involves working with conflict at all levels: intra-psychic, interpersonal, group, and inter-group. It is intensive work, which evokes powerful anxieties and emotions. Thus, peace building must begin internally, on the intra-psychic level, with self-knowledge. Understanding one's own emotional valences can help the peace builder understand how one may use *and* be used by the group with which one is working. Knowledge of the emotional dynamics of any conflict, and comfort with the ways that individuals and groups may defend themselves against anxiety, will greatly aid the peace builder to design appropriate conflict resolution processes. The ability to accept, contain, and work with strong emotions enables the peace builder to intervene when these processes appear to be stuck. It is through this process of containment and working through emotions that conflict can be transformed.

There is much anxiety inherent in the work of peace building. It is not unusual for those engaged in the field of peace building and conflict transformation to have experienced great conflict—in their families, communities, and nations. Thus they seek better, less violent ways of dealing with conflict. Aside from the anxieties that come from past experience of conflict and war, many peace-builders face current and ongoing threats (physical, economic, spiritual) to themselves and their families as they attempt to engage the other in efforts to resolve conflict. It is a powerful motivator, but there are consequences. Peace builders must be able to contain their own anxieties and emotions, so as not to project them onto the groups with whom they work. Peace builders sit on the boundary—between their

own identity group and that of the other. Being on the boundary subjects them to particular pressures, from both sides. They must be attuned to the anxieties and motivations of their own constituency (which may itself be in conflict) as well as those of their potential allies and enemies on the other side. They may face sanction from their own group if they violate group norms in attempting to reach out to the other. Anwar Sadat and Yitzhak Rabin were assassinated by members of their own constituencies for their attempts to make peace with the other without adequately addressing the profound anxieties in their own groups (Heifetz and Linsky, 2002).

When facilitating groups in conflict, peace builders may be recipients of unconscious dynamics and projections from the group, even if they have designed an essentially rational, problem-solving intervention. Peace builders must be able to accept, contain and work with the feelings directed at them. Since it is emotionally powerful work, it is often desirable to work with a co-facilitator or with a team of facilitators, depending on the size of the group in conflict. It is not unusual for peace building partners or teams to find themselves in conflict as a result of the group's splitting and projective processes. That is, individual members of the peace building team, based on their personal valences and on their identifying characteristics, will hold different parts of the group's conflict. They need to be able to step back and reflect, both rationally and emotionally, upon the meaning of their experience in the group. Since their emotions will mirror those of the group, their experience offers data that is diagnostic of the group's functioning.

Similarly, organizations involved in peace building and conflict transformation that are located in countries where a conflict is ongoing may mirror internally, through the process of importation (Berg and Smith, 1987), the conflict that is being waged on the outside. Similar defensive structures and assumptions may operate within the organization as operate within the groups in conflict. If the organization is to be effective in pursuing its primary task, the capacity to reflect, to think, and to dialogue about the parallel organizational experiences are paramount. Exploration of the internal processes and conflicts of a group or organization can lead to greater understanding of the larger context and conflict in which the group is embedded. Members of the organization, Besod Siach, mentioned earlier in this article, are themselves players in the larger conflict. Representing the political left and right, secular and religious, Jewish and Arab, Ashkenazi and Mizrahi elements of Israeli society, staff members must continually stay in dialogue amongst themselves, even as they consult to groups in conflict (Duek, 2001).

The role of peace builder is to create a safe container in which people can tolerate the level of anxiety necessary to get through to the other side. Containment is essential in order to enhance everyone's capacity to know their own worldview, its underlying assumptions, and to appreciate the others' worldview. This is accomplished by building the initial structure in which the process unfolds. A safe container or "holding environment" is created through clarity of task and roles, and appropriate management of the group's boundaries. Offering information about the purpose of the intervention, describing the roles that various participants are expected to take up (including the facilitator), and developing mutually agreed upon ground rules or guidelines for behavior are ways that the peace builder can manage the group's boundaries and contain anxiety. On a psychological level, peace builders may contain the group's anxiety by demonstrating their own comfort with strong emotions. Looking at the dynamics of the group or organization as a whole and understanding that group members take up roles on behalf of the larger system, helps the facilitator to refrain from engaging in or colluding with a group's scapegoating behavior. The ability to contain and interpret group defenses in a way that can be digested makes it possible for a group to re-internalize and integrate what was projected outward. When differences are integrated in a group, healing and growth become possible.

In order to get to transformation it is crucial to be able to live with uncertainties, paradoxes, and anxieties of conflict. We leave our assumptions unexamined at our own peril. We are subject to the same unconscious and irrational processes that we see in groups in conflict. Unconscious processes fuel conflicts on the overt level, such as those arising from scarce resources or different values, and thus may prevent problem solving and compromise. It is only by sitting with the uncertainties and anxieties of conflict that it is possible to create something new. The fog can't lift until we recognize the ways in which we deal with the unease of difference.

### **Summary**

There are many methodologies and strategies for working with and negotiating conflict. The focus in this article has been on the emotional and non-rational elements of conflict that can interfere with these rationally based strategies. We have explored conflict as it manifests on various levels, and how unconscious processes such as splitting, projection and projective identification can fuel inter-personal, group, and inter-group conflict. Splitting and projective phenomena can be seen on an inter-personal level in couple relationships; on an inter-group level between groups within an

organization; between ethnic groups or communities; and on an international level. The characteristics felt to be unbearable, or unacceptable in one context are those that are projected onto the other individual and group.

By focusing on the evil or unacceptable characteristic that exists “out there,” outside of one’s self, group, or country, individuals and groups are “protected” from looking at the evil “they” perpetrate, and the anxiety that might be felt in acknowledging it, or doing something differently about it. We create enemies who will carry for us those characteristics that are unacceptable: evil, imperialism, fundamentalism, irrationality, vulnerability, etc., *as if* those characteristics do not exist within our own nation, community or self.

It is difficult to take back, to re-own, these painful characteristics of one’s self, community, and nation that we have lodged in others. It must be made bearable. Learning to own individual and collective projections, fears, needs and insecurities is the first step in the process of peace building.

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