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Barriers to conflict resolution in landscapes of asymmetric conflict: Current issues and future directions

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The core of the barriers research agenda is to understand what stands in the way of parties reaching agreement or successfully resolving a conflict, and to identify strategies for overcoming these barriers. Over the last three decades, this research agenda has expanded to incorporate new disciplinary perspectives and a broader range of methodological approaches. Here we draw together the important developments in the barriers research agenda represented in the contributions to this special issue of *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict*. We discuss key themes related to recent work on relational barriers: application to real-world cases and the particulars of context, attention to power relations and power asymmetries, and the link between emotions and barriers to conflict resolution. Finally, we identify important directions for future research on barriers to the resolution of asymmetric conflict suggested by the contributions to this volume.

Keywords: barriers to conflict resolution; asymmetric conflict; conflict resolution; relational barriers; emotion; dialogue

The core of the barriers research agenda is to understand what stands in the way of parties reaching agreement or successfully resolving a conflict, and to identify strategies for overcoming these barriers. Early barriers scholarship identified three categories of barriers that might stand in the way of parties resolving conflicts to which interest-maximizing solutions could be imagined. These were tactical and strategic barriers, psychological barriers, and institutional or structural barriers (Mnookin & Ross, 1995). Over the last three decades, this research agenda has expanded to incorporate new disciplinary perspectives utilizing a range of methodological approaches. This special issue of *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict* presents a range of perspectives on the evolution of barriers research, expanding upon the original framework, applying it to real-world cases, and presenting important new developments. The contributions to this volume represent an array of different theoretical, disciplinary, and methodological perspectives. Despite their considerable diversity, these rich and thought-provoking contributions join together to create an integrative and multifaceted textual project exploring several major developments in the barriers approach.

The focus on relational barriers

One major development prominently represented in the different contributions included in this volume is the focus on relational factors. In the past few decades, it has become increasingly clear to barriers researchers that in the context of sustained intergroup conflict, the parties' ability to overcome the various barriers identified in earlier work

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(Ross, this volume; and see also Maoz, 2000; Mnookin & Ross, 1995; Ross, 1995, 2012; Ross & Stillinger, 1991; Ross & Ward, 1996) is heavily determined by the quality of their relationship (Bland, Powell, & Ross, 2012; Ross, this volume). The more acrimonious and distrustful the relationship, the more insurmountable the barriers standing in the way of agreement become. Moreover, relational barriers can emerge within parties to a conflict as well as between them (Bachar & Weiner, this volume). Most challenging are *enemy* relationships; that is, relationships characterized by existential threat wherein the parties fear the other side seeks their destruction (Bland, this volume).

Scholars identified four primary relational barriers to the resolution of intractable conflict. First developed in a series of working papers by Bland and colleagues, these are (1) the need for each side to articulate a *vision of a shared future* that the other side would deem bearable, (2) the *development of trust* about ultimate goals and willingness to adhere over the long term with terms of agreement, (3) the willingness to *accept losses* that are painful and have been resisted in the past, and (4) the thorny issue of *just entitlements*, or more specifically the willingness of the parties to move from past demands for justice to a shared commitment to reduce the most obvious sources of injustice. Central to this scholarship is a reversal of the normal prescription whereby proposals for mutually advantageous exchanges of concessions and institutional arrangements – win–win solutions – are seen as a vehicle to build trust and improve relationships. Rather, a relational barriers perspective favors an effort that *begins* with the task of relationship building – a task that importantly involves addressing the "four question" framework proposed by Bland and colleagues (Bland et al., 2012).

Understanding how relational barriers might be overcome is not merely of academic significance. It is also critical for the real-world resolution of intractable conflict. The identification of the four relational barriers discussed in this volume by Holloway and Lei and by Bland, emerged from the experience of scholars affiliated with the Stanford Center on International Conflict and Negotiation (SCICN), and the Center's multi-year engagement with grassroots practitioners in protracted intergroup conflicts including Northern Ireland, Israel and Palestine, and South Africa. Drawing on the concepts and evidence generated by academic research, Bland, Ross and Powell developed the four relational barriers into a framework for relational transformation to be used in real-world dialogue and Track Two negotiation settings (Bland et al., 2012; Bland & Powell, 2014; Bland & Ross, in press). This framework was developed and refined in the context of many years of direct work with grassroots practitioners in conflict settings from Israel and Palestine to Northern Ireland.

Application to "real-world" interventions

Indeed, a second major theme running through the contributions to this special issue, and directly linked to the increasing focus on relational barriers, is attention to context and application to real-world cases (Ross, this volume, 2012). The developments in the barriers approach over the past 30 years presented in the different articles in this volume all illuminate the importance of historical, political, cultural, and relational context in understanding the barriers to the resolution of conflict. The lessons learned through the engagement with practitioners in conflicts from South Africa and Northern Ireland to Israel and Palestine directly informed scholarly research. Rather than simply modeling conflict dynamics through simulations or the laboratory, the authors represented here have sought to inform the development of theory with a sound understanding of practice and engagement with the real world (see Bachar & Weiner, this volume; Bland, this volume;

Bland & Powell, 2014; Powell, this volume; Ross, this volume, 2012). This engagement directly informs the scholarship produced over the last decades and the evolution of the barriers research agenda.

An important contribution emerging from the attention to context and practice has been the exploration of interventions designed to lower or overcome barriers, with a particular focus on dialogue as a mechanism for improving or rebuilding relationships. Contributions in this regard include the work of Bland, Powell and Ross, as mentioned above, at SCICN on strategies for more effective intercommunal dialogue built on the basis of the four-question framework (Bland et al., 2012). Scholars at SCICN developed these strategies in the context of their partnerships with grassroots organizations practitioners in Northern Ireland spanning nearly two decades (Bland & Powell, 2014). Research by Lee Ross has made related contributions on the positive effects of explicit acknowledgment that concessions were made by one's own side in response to the claims of the other side, and on the value of engendering optimism about the outcome of negotiation (see Ross, this volume; Ward, Gerber, Disston, Brenner, & Ross, 2008). Similarly, research by Nagar and Maoz (this volume) demonstrating the importance of recognition of the other side's needs and demands has specific implications for interventions designed to mobilize peace and reconciliation.

Much of the work on the use of intergroup dialogues to improve relationships, increase trust, and heighten moral concern for the other in conflict has been grounded in the ongoing and seemingly intractable conflict between Israelis and Palestinians (Bekerman, 2002, 2009b; Hammack, 2009, 2010, 2011; Maoz, 2000, 2004, 2011; Ron & Maoz, 2013a, b). Several researchers have specifically focused on manifestations of power relations and asymmetry in power in dialogues between Israeli-Jews and Palestinians (Bekerman, 2002, 2009b; Halabi & Sonnenschein, 2004; Maoz, 2000; 2004; 2011; Saguy, Dovidio, & Pratto, 2008; Saguy, Tropp, & Hawi, 2014; Suleiman, 2004). Maoz has presented a framework identifying the extent to which different models of dialogue interventions aim to preserve or to transform the unequal status quo between Israeli-Jews and Palestinians (Maoz, 2000, 2004, 2011). Hammack, Pilecki and Merrilees (2014) use an experimental paradigm to compare the extent to which different dialogue models challenge the existing status quo. Maoz (2000, 2004, 2011) uses interaction analysis and qualitative research, while Saguy et al. (2008, 2014) rely on experimental paradigms to compare the motivations and preferences of Israeli-Jews and Palestinians as a high- and low-power group, respectively, for status quo preserving versus status quo disrupting discussion in contact situations.

More generally, research points to the potential of dialogues and contact interventions to overcome barriers to conflict resolution, at least among those directly participating in such interventions. Directly encountering the aspirations, pain and narratives of those on the other side of the conflict, and discussion of injustice, discrimination and power asymmetry, can contribute to building a relationship based on extending the scope of moral responsibility (Frosh, 2006; Opotow, 1990; Opotow, Gerson, & Woodside, 2005) while increasing trust and empathy towards the other group (see Bar-On, 2008, 2009; Bar-On & Adwan, 2006; Bar-On & Kassem, 2004; Bekerman & Zembylas, 2010, 2011; Hammack, 2009, 2011; Maoz, 2011; Ron & Maoz, 2013a,b; see also Bland & Powell, 2014).

Other important contributions informing interventions for overcoming relational barriers include the studies of Halperin and his colleagues showing the dramatic potential of emotion-regulation interventions to decrease anger and therefore to improve attitudes towards the opponents in conflict (Halperin, 2014; Halperin & Gross, 2011; Halperin, Pliskin, Saguy, Liberman, & Gross, 2014b; Halperin, Porat, Tamir, & Gross, 2013;

Halperin, Sharvit, & Gross, 2011b). Another line of studies by Halperin and his colleagues (Halperin, Gross, & Dweck, 2014a; Halperin, Russell, Trzesniewski, Gross, & Dweck, 2011a) demonstrates that perceiving characteristics of other groups less as fixed and unchangeable and more as malleable and open to change has crucial effects on increased readiness for conflict resolution. Taken together, these innovative studies demonstrate that a drastic change in attitudes that can help overcome barriers to conflict resolution can be achieved through highly focused experimental manipulations based on cutting edge scientific knowledge (Halperin et al., 2011a, 2013). As with other interventions aimed at attitude transformation, it remains to be seen (and studied) if these changes are long-lasting and stable over time, and whether there are any positive "spillover" effects that have an impact beyond the individuals who directly participate in an intervention.

Barriers, power, and power asymmetry

Attention to power and power asymmetries is also an important element in more recent barriers work that is clearly reflected in this volume. In a conflict or negotiation context, power asymmetry comes in many guises – from the military and coercive power of states versus insurgent groups, as discussed by Ross in this volume, to the power of moral claims over material ones, to which Bland's article alludes. In this volume, Powell's article deals explicitly with the power inherent in both the possession and concession of legitimacy. The power to grant legitimacy to state institutions (such as the police), or take it away, positions historically pro- and anti-state constituencies differently *vis-à-vis* those institutions (Powell, this volume). Also in this volume, Ross' article addresses the role of acute power asymmetries as barriers in and of themselves to the resolution of conflict – such as when one party believes that maintaining an advantageous position over the other is the only guarantee of their security (Ross, this volume). Moreover, as Bachar and Weiner illustrate, power dynamics within groups can be as important as power dynamics between groups in shaping conflict processes (Bachar & Weiner, this volume).

In devoting special attention to power relations and power asymmetries, the articles assembled in this volume further develop the barriers research agenda to account for the very real power dynamics that shape many intergroup conflicts. In particular, a number of the contributions shed important new light on how power relations and asymmetry contribute to and even amplify relational barriers to conflict resolution. Two themes emerge. First, the kind of power imbalances that are important for the parties, and shape their behavior in the context of a conflict resolution process, are not simply objective conditions of asymmetry. Parties in conflict situations make subjective assessments about the power of the other side to inflict harm, which may diverge significantly from the available evidence about the other side's actual capacities. Such assessments may be driven by the strategic calculations of, or competition between, leaders on either side (Bachar & Weiner, this volume). The key observation is that even in circumstances of extreme power asymmetries, where one side is objectively far better resourced than the other, both sides may regard the other as a real existential threat, capable of destroying their people or way of life.

Subjective assessments regarding the other side's power are critical drivers of conflict processes. As Bland's contribution to this volume argues, in the case of violent conflict it is the subjective assessment of the other side as an enemy who seeks our destruction that fuels the ongoing conflict dynamics. A sense of existential threat gives even those groups with greater numbers, greater political authority, and greater military capability a fear about what the other side would do if they had the chance, which drives more powerful

groups to suppress any potential risk emerging from relatively weak parties which pose such a threat.

However, Maoz's work suggests that stronger and weaker parties may make these subjective assessments in different ways (Nagar & Maoz, this volume; see also Maoz, 2000, 2011). Weaker parties fear the total domination of the other side, and act in ways to resist or defy such domination (Maoz, 2000, 2004, 2010, 2011). Stronger parties may not articulate a fear of domination, but nevertheless perceive a real sense of threat posed by the other side, and are motivated by a desire to forestall or preclude the losses that could be imposed by the other side. Both sides are likely to feel that the other has and is willing to use unfair advantages to pursue immoral acts to advance its power (Maoz, Bar-On, Bekerman, & Jaber-Massarawa, 2004; Maoz, Bar-On, & Yikya, 2007).

A second theme emerging from this volume about power asymmetry and relational barriers relates directly to a core focus of this journal. Power relations are dynamic rather than static, and it is often this dynamism – changes in power relations – that motivates parties in a conflict situation. The implications of changing power relationships for conflict have been an important theme for social scientists. In this volume, Holloway and Lei note, for example, that "there is a great deal in the history and theory of international relations to suggest that unusual dangers manifest themselves when a rising power challenges a dominant power". A barriers analysis provides important leverage in understanding and addressing the potentially destabilizing nature of dynamic power relations. Holloway and Lei use a relational barriers frame to ask how the US and China might avoid the "Thucydides trap." The authors draw on the four relational barriers identified by Bland, Powell and Ross to explore how the US and China might peacefully navigate the tensions that may arise between the two powers as China expands its global influence (Bland et al., 2012).

Concerns about future losses of power or status can also motivate parties even where no clear hierarchy exists in the present. Powell's work suggests that the conditions of a "hostile peace," where neither side has won or lost, can generate ongoing mistrust and conflict (Powell, this volume; Bland & Powell, 2014). In this case, often seen in the context of a negotiated settlement, no side has emerged from the conflict victorious, but the peace process has not resolved the sense of existential threat that fueled the violence. Winning is no longer an option, but both sides fear that losing still is. Both continually seek to prevail over the other side in substantive and symbolic ways as a way to forestall future losses. The dynamic nature of power relations is a threatening consideration for both sides.

Ultimately, considering power and power asymmetry seriously is critical for a deeper and more nuanced perspective on relational barriers that takes into account history, culture, collective emotions, contested narratives, considerations of justice and moral concern as well as threat, dehumanization and humiliation (Nagar & Maoz, this volume; see also Maoz; 2010; Maoz & McCauley, 2008; Ron & Maoz, 2013a).

Barriers and emotions

Increased attention to intergroup emotions is another key development in barriers research reflected in the work included in this volume (see articles by Ross; Bland; Powell; Nagar & Maoz; and by Bachar & Weiner). The main thrust of the literature on negotiation and conflict resolution of 30 years ago focused on context-free calculations of power mainly in terms of BATNAs (or Best Alternatives to a Negotiated Agreement) and on "cold" (free from specific motivations and emotions) cognitive biases as major explanatory agents of

attitudes and behaviors in conflict. The developments in the barriers approach in the past 30 years have illuminated the importance of "warm" cognitive biases related to emotions and to threat perceptions and to power asymmetry (this volume: Bland; Ross; Nagar & Maoz; Bachar & Weiner). As noted above, the barriers approach has contributed crucially to research on conflict and conflict resolution by representing and legitimating the contextualized study of conflict that goes beyond the controlled laboratory experiments, and ventures beyond the traditional boundaries of clean and decontextualized simulations of negotiation that have treated people as negotiating from a similar and equal position of legitimacy.

Related research traditions emphasizing the role of emotions have evolved concurrently with the increased focus of the barriers approach on context. These include extensive bodies of theorizing and research by Bar-Tal (2000, 2007, 2010, 2013), Bar-Tal and Halperin (2013), Halperin (2008, 2011, 2014), Halperin et al. (2011b, 2013, 2014b) and by Maoz and her colleagues (Maoz & Eidelson, 2007; Maoz & Ellis, 2008; Maoz & McCauley, 2008, 2009) focusing on collective emotions and perceptions regarding the other side in conflict such as hatred, animosity and collective threat, that serve to maintain and even escalate conflicts. In political science, Petersen has also drawn attention to the role of emotions within a rational choice framework as a tool that conflict entrepreneurs use to mobilize populations in conflict situations (Petersen, 2011, 2012; see also Baele, Sterck, & Meur, 2014). Spread and propagated through mechanisms of mass socialization, collective emotions and perceptions constitute major societal level barriers to the resolution of conflict (Bar-Tal, 2000, 2007, 2013; Halperin, 2011; Halperin & Bar-Tal, 2011; Maoz & McCauley, 2008; Petersen, 2011, 2012; Baele et al., 2014).

Other related work, conducted in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict by Bar-On and his colleagues (Adwan & Bar-On, 2004; Bar-On, 2008; 2009; Bar-On & Adwan, 2006; Bar-On & Kassem, 2004), by Bekerman and his colleagues (Bekerman, 2009a; Bekerman & Zembylas, 2010, 2011), by Hammack (2009, 2010, 2011), by Hammack et al. (2014) and by Ron & Maoz (2013a,b) and in other contexts by Powell and Bland (2014; see also Teeger, 2014) focuses on the power of narratives in forming relationships in conflict, on contesting narratives as well as on the potential of bridging narratives, and on the encounter with the narrative of the other side as helping overcome relational barriers.

Directions for future research

In addition to embodying the important developments in the barriers research agenda that we lay out here, the work assembled in this volume contributes to identifying important directions for future research on barriers to the resolution of asymmetric conflict. Against the background of growing attention to the role of relationships, emotions, context, power and narratives in conflict, we believe that future research should further explicate the role of relationships, emotions and of contested narratives in the formation and preservation of barriers to the resolution of conflict.

In particular, the four relational barriers identified and discussed in the scholarship presented here (shared futures, trust, loss acceptance, and just entitlements) constitute the framework for an important research agenda going forward. In their article in this volume, Holloway and Lei use the four relational barriers as a tool to analyze points of tension in US-China relations, as well as to identify opportunities to improve the relationship. Future research could further refine the analysis guided by the relational barriers paradigm and apply it in similar ways, particularly in contexts where international or intergroup hostilities are in periods of transition. Application to actual conflict situations

would provide a richer understanding of how relational barriers shape processes of (and opportunities for) conflict management and resolution in the real world.

More research is also needed to identify additional strategies for overcoming relational barriers in deeply hostile settings, particularly trust-building and the development of visions for the future that incorporate a minimally bearable place for the other side. As discussed here, current social psychological research points to important ways in which dialogue, exposure to narratives of the other side, and perspective-taking can play a role in overcoming relational barriers. More comparative analyses in a greater variety of real world conflict settings is necessary to understand whether and how these approaches work in the context of enemy relationships, and how trust and visions of a shared future emerge in such cases. As with the studies in this volume, future research should attend to the attitudes and behaviors of elites and political leaders, as well as the attitudes of grassroots activists working on the front lines and the general public as a whole. The interaction between elite and mass opinion is also a critical line of inquiry.

More ambitiously, the contributions included in this volume lay out foundations for creating a comprehensive paradigm that classifies and maps different types of barriers and takes first steps towards defining the interrelations between them. Future scholarship could continue this important project, of defining a broader paradigm and sets of categories and mapping the interrelations between different types and levels of barriers to conflict resolution. In addition, research can deepen the conversation between the barriers approach and other scholarly traditions that focus on asymmetry in power and on related issues of injustice, colonialization, oppression, race, and gender. The goal is to further illuminate the nature of barriers in an ever changing global landscape in which asymmetric conflicts based in ethnic, national, social, racial, and religious identity groups will continue to emerge.

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