Barriers to agreement in the asymmetric Israeli–Palestinian conflict[1]

Lee Ross[a]

[a] Stanford University, CA, USA
Published online: 15 Oct 2014.

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Barriers to agreement in the asymmetric Israeli–Palestinian conflict[1]

Lee Ross*

Stanford University, CA, USA

Intractable conflicts, including that between Israel and West Bank and Gaza Palestinians, are perpetuated by a number of psychological and relational barriers that prevent the parties from reaching agreements that would serve the parties mutual self-interests. This article reviews the nature of and empirical evidence for the operation of several such barriers, including enmity and distrust, false polarization, dissonance reduction and collective rationalization, insistence on justice rather than mere advance on the status quo, reactive devaluation of proposals from the other side, and naïve realism, with special attention to the role they play in asymmetric conflicts such as that in the Middle East. Some research evidence suggesting strategies for overcoming these barriers and unfreezing deadlocks is also discussed, along with some lessons that the author and his Stanford Center on Conflict and Negotiation have gleaned from their real-world experiences in second-track diplomacy and their efforts to promote constructive dialogue between Israelis and Palestinians, and between the rival political factions in Northern Ireland.

Keywords: asymmetric conflict; psychological barriers; negotiation; dispute resolution

> Yet, there remains another wall … a psychological barrier between us, a barrier of suspicion, a barrier of rejection; a barrier of fear, of deception, a barrier of hallucination without any action, deed or decision … A barrier of distorted and eroded interpretation of every event and statement. …. Today, through my visit to you, I ask why don't we stretch out our hands with faith and sincerity so that together we might destroy this barrier? (President Anwar al-Sadat, Statement before Israeli Knesset, Jerusalem, 29 November 1977)

In a volume edited by the founders of the Stanford Center on Conflict and Negotiation (now the Stanford Center on *International* Conflict and Negotiation or SCICN), we (Mnookin & Ross, 1995) began our introductory chapter by noting that certain conflicts remain refractory to resolution even when there exist a range of potential agreements that could enhance the position of both sides over the status quo. We proceeded to offer a discussion of the structural, strategic, and especially the *psychological* barriers that can prevent parties from reaching such "win–win" agreements. Since that time, my SCICN colleagues I have continued to expand our consideration of psychological barriers, based in no small part on our experiences during real-world efforts to promote constructive dialogue, cooperation and agreement in the Northern Ireland – a country that may be said to be in a post-conflict era, but one marked by continuing intercommunity distrust and occasional outbursts of violence between rival political faction – and in the Middle East, where we have so frequently seen good will and good intentions dissipate in the face of Palestinian frustration about the continuing occupation and expansion of settlements, and Israeli frustration at periodic rocket launchings by Hamas operatives in Gaza.

*Email: lross@stanford.edu

Increasingly, we find that most important barriers are relational ones. The parties harbor doubts about the longer-term objectives of their adversaries, not usually the moderates whom we bring together in various dialogue formats but rather the larger body politic, and especially some of their most prominent and popular leaders. Those misgivings, in turn, prompt distrust about the willingness and perhaps more importantly the ability of those on the other side of the table to honor the commitments they undertake and not to make further demands and insist on further concessions if and when the political situation on the ground turns to their advantage.

The present article reviews and updates our account of these psychological barriers, again, as in 1995, with particular emphasis on the enduring conflict between Israel and the Palestinians, and the failure of the two leaderships to agree on the provisions for a "two-state solution" – an outcome that (at least in principle) majorities of the citizenry in both societies have consistently endorsed, but increasingly have come to regard as a vain pursuit.

Both Israelis and Palestinians continue to pay heavy economic and social costs as the stalemate continues. The recent renewal and escalation of violent conflict in Gaza, with its heavy toll in human life, and for Israel and perhaps for Hamas as well increased political isolation and opprobrium, is but the latest chapter in that tragic saga. However, at least since 1967, two asymmetries have become increasingly obvious. The first is an asymmetry in suffering. The status quo of the West Bank occupation and the expansion of Israeli settlements on contested lands, while less than ideal for many Israelis who fear terrorist incidents and rockets launched from Gaza, and feel insecure about the future and about the increasingly negative view of the country in the eyes of most of the world, continues to be bearable for the great majority of Israeli Jews. By contrast, the status quo is far less bearable for ordinary West Bank Palestinians who seethe about the loss of lands, enjoy few economic opportunities, and suffer restrictions on movement and endure other daily humiliations. The second obvious asymmetry is in military and economic power. Israel boasts one of the best equipped and well-trained military in the world, and enjoys a vibrant "first-world" economy. The only limits on their ability to coerce and to inflict costs on the Palestinians are ones that are self-imposed. The Palestinians, by contrast, have virtually no coercive power and their ability to inflict costs and casualties on Israel is extremely limited and subject to immediate, decisive retaliation.

The relevance of these asymmetries to an updated "barriers analysis" is a second focus of this article. Indeed, as will become apparent, the Israeli belief that such asymmetry must be maintained if their own future is to be a bearable one is itself not only a source of enmity and mistrust, but also a barrier to the ending of the conflict, or even to its amelioration through confidence-building cooperative undertakings. The realities of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict and the positions of current leaders provide little basis for optimism about the prospect for agreement at this time. The best one can hope for is an improvement in the relationships between the parties – an improvement without which no careful drafting of language or crafting of potential exchanges of compromises is likely to bear fruit.

My SCICN colleague Byron Bland, in an article that follows, discusses steps that could and perhaps must be taken to achieve that improvement in relationships. His elaboration of the "four-question framework," developed mainly in the context of our work in Northern Ireland, especially the question of a mutually bearable and sustainable future, captures the emphasis of our continuing applied work. In addition to reviewing the list of operative psychological barriers, and anticipating some of Bland's discussion, I shall review some evidence that openness to compromise can be altered through two particular experimental

interventions. The first involves the creation of optimism; the second involves the value of acknowledging that one has taken into account the expressed position of the other side. My discussion of barriers and the means of overcoming them will end, as it began, by considering the significance of President Sadat's hope-inspiring visit to Jerusalem 38 long years ago. In particular, I shall discuss the potential for unfreezing fixed positions by violating negative expectations and stereotypes, something the President Sadat accomplished when he defied the realists of his time on both sides of the conflict by traveling to the Israeli capital to address his adversaries.

Psychological barriers to agreement and the relevance of asymmetric power

Enmity, distrust and other relational barriers

A study of the attitudes of Israeli business school students at a private university (Kahn, Halperin, Liberman, & Ross, in press) examined the linkage between negative intergroup sentiments – in particular, anger and hatred towards Palestinians, lack of compassion and sympathy, and the absence of any feelings of guilt and shame about the misdeeds of their own side – and negative responses both to the type of difficult tradeoffs that would be required in any settlement of the longstanding conflict and to proposals for more limited forms of cooperation and contact. One of these more modest proposals involved a plan for sharing in the development and utilization of water resources to the benefit of Israelis and Palestinians alike; the other involved a proposed program to promote dialogue and potential cooperation between Palestinian and Israeli professionals dealing with issues of city planning, education, health and social welfare, and business and entrepreneurship. The same sentiments also proved to be associated with negative attributions about the wisdom and to some extent even the patriotism of supporters of such proposals. Furthermore, in most cases the relevant association between negative sentiments and negative responses to potentially ameliorative proposals continued to be statistically significant even after controlling for the research participants' self-characterization on a left–right (or dove–hawk) political continuum.

A recently completed follow-up survey with a broader national sample of Israeli respondents (Maoz, David, & Ross, 2014) provides further evidence of these linkages. Beyond again documenting the association between rejection of compromises and negative intergroup sentiments, this survey allowed us to identify two beliefs about the other side that were strongly associated both with such sentiments and with reluctance to reach agreements. One was the belief that "if the Palestinians were able to do so, they would do much more harm to Israeli than Israel has ever done to the Palestinians". The other was the belief that "Israelis think of the good of the Palestinians far more than the Palestinians think of the good of the Israelis." Beyond the relevant correlations, the high level of agreement with these items shown by the survey sample as a whole are ominous – 4.7 and 4.5, respectively, on a 6-point scale anchored at 1 (disagree completely) and 6 (agree completely).

False polarization

While the dynamics of intergroup conflict pose barriers to agreement, intragroup processes also play a role. Indeed, when two political bodies prove unable to make a deal that would provide a net benefit for both sides, it is often disagreements within each side that stand in the way of efficient exchanges of concessions between the two sides. Beyond actual differences in views, however, perceived differences, or more specifically overestimation

of the degree of polarization – and underestimation of areas of agreement – can make the parties unduly pessimistic about the possibility for finding common ground and make political leaders unduly concerned about the political repercussions of searching for that ground.

Evidence for this "false polarization" phenomenon was provided in research by Robinson, Keltner, Ward, and Ross (1994). For example, partisans on both the pro-life and pro-choice side of the abortion debate overestimated the extremity and ideological consistency shown by both sides – especially the "other side," but to some extent their "own side" as well. That is, partisans (and also those with more moderate and ambivalent views) significantly overestimated the gap between the two sides, and in a sense, underestimated the amount of common ground to be found in the assumptions, beliefs, and values they shared.

Unpublished research undertaken with Michael Katz of Haifa University provided evidence of this false polarization phenomenon in the context of the Palestinian–Israeli context (Katz & Ross, 2005–2006). The sampling technique employed in these studies – reliance on a "snowball" procedure whereby students in Anthropology and Sociology courses at Bar Ilan University recruited friends and family members to fill out the relevant questionnaires – limits the claims that can be made about the generalizability of the relevant findings. But those findings suggest that Israeli hawks and doves (at least during the period in which the studies were conducted) differ much less than either group, or than those who place themselves at the middle of that political spectrum, assume. For example, in one study, conducted in 2006, a sample of 570 respondents were asked about their agreement with six potential provisions in an overall peace plan (e.g. establishing a Palestinian state, evacuating most of the settlements, releasing all Palestinian prisoners, withdrawal from the Golan, accepting a limited number of refugees, and dividing Jerusalem with each side exercising sovereignty over its quarters and holy sites). Both partisan groups and self-described moderates assumed that few self-described rightists would be willing to agree to any of these provisions and that most self-described leftists would agree to all of these provisions,

While the two groups did differ in responses to each of these provisions, actual views proved to be much less consistent and polarized than the participants had assumed. For example, whereas participants overall assumed that 72% of rightists would reject all six concessions, the actual percentage doing so was only 20.5%. The predictions regarding leftists were even less accurate. Whereas participants, on average, assumed that 71% of leftists would accept all six provisions, the actual percentage doing so was only 8%. In other words, rightists were more open to at least some provisions than leftists or even fellow rightists assumed, and leftists were less inclined to make the most difficult concessions than rightists or even fellow leftists assumed.

Informal interviews with students revealed one source of these misperceptions and overestimations beyond naive realism. Students reported that they rarely acknowledged to others the degree of ambivalence in their political beliefs. They avoided that acknowledgment in talking to their ideological allies (lest their resoluteness come into doubt) and they avoided it in talking to their ideological adversaries (lest their "concessions" be exploited or misunderstood). In fact, most students explained that in the interest of avoiding conflict or being "stereotyped," they generally shunned all potentially contentious political discussion. In so doing, ironically, they failed to discover that their actual positions on the political spectrum were more nuanced than is normally captured in questionnaire research.

False polarization is of course an even greater potential obstacle to agreement when it pertains to the views that the two sides in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict have of each other. Each side is apt to exaggerate the extent to which extremist rather than more moderate views are characteristic of the other side. Each side is also apt to underestimate the extent to which the majority on their own side would be willing to make painful concessions if the result would be an end to the conflict and the beginning of a period in which people in both communities would be free to pursue their personal goals. However, it is in this regard that the asymmetry between the situations facing the two sides is most glaringly apparent. Most Israelis already enjoy that freedom and fear that an agreement would not bring real peace and would make it harder rather than easier to pursue such goals. Most Palestinians do not enjoy that freedom to pursue their goals, and fear that an end to the political struggle, and the difficult concessions they would be called upon to make, would still leave them without that freedom.

Dissonance reduction and rationalization

A second barrier to the ending of conflict involves dissonance reduction (Festinger, 1957) and rationalization. Whatever rationalizations allowed the parties to justify their past sacrifices and suffering, and also their past rejection of potential agreements that would have put an end to such costs themselves constitute a barrier to now accepting a deal that is no better, and perhaps worse, than one that might have been available in the past. The justifications offered by the hardliners are similar across many violent conflicts: *The other side is the devil incarnate. God (or history) is on our side. We are more resolute than the other side because right makes might; we can't break faith with the martyrs who fell in service of the cause. They are untrustworthy and will renew the conflict any time they think that doing so will gain them more than keeping to their agreement.*

In the case of an asymmetric conflict, the hardliners in weaker party insists that *the rest of the world is bound to wake up one day and recognize the justice of our aspirations*; those in stronger party insist that *once the rest of the world takes a harder look at the conflict, their sympathies for the other side will diminish*. Rationalization plays a role not only in the maintenance of the status quo, but also in the willingness of the stronger and more advantaged party to justify that status quo.

The willingness of advantaged parties to rationalize inequality was demonstrated in a 1997 study by Diekmann, Samuels, Ross, and Bazerman. For present purposes, the most relevant finding in this study was that participants given the task of suggesting a resource allocation (for example a division of scholarship monies to their school versus another school) opted for a 50–50 division, and those given the task of rating a 50–50 allocation rated it as completely fair. Yet when told that a third party had decided on an allocation that gave them or their group the lion's share of the available resources, participants in the same study readily justified that unequal allocation and rated it as considerably less unfair than did participants who had been asked to recommend allocations or those who had been told initially of an equal allocation. In other words, even in the absence of conflict with a history of violence, people were willing after the fact to justify an allocation of resources and rewards that ex ante they would not have suggested to be fair and appropriate.

Of course, history has taught us that advantaged groups not only rationalize and justify their advantage, they tend to derogate the disadvantaged group and the capacities of its members, In the Palestinian–Israeli context, the disturbing possibility is that in justifying the status quo Israelis are motivated to derogate the other side and its intentions and capacities in a way that not only provides further justification but itself creates an obstacle

to agreement. That is, they can justify their unwillingness to alter the status quo on the grounds that their long-time adversaries lack the will and capacity to create a viable state that serves the interests and aspirations of the citizenry, and that the citizens of that failed state will thus continue to be an enemy and a threat.

Although the implications of dissonance reduction in the context of protracted stalemates are generally bleak, there is one optimistic note worth sounding. Once a settlement *has* been reached, the same process can play a constructive role – especially if the decision to settle has been freely reached, if great effort has been expended or sacrifices made in doing so, and if a public defense of the settlement has been called for (Aronson, 1969; Brehm & Cohen, 1969; Festinger, 1964). In those circumstances, dissonance reduction may compel leaders and their constituencies to find and exaggerate positive features of the settlement and to minimize or disregard negative ones. These processes occurred in dramatic fashion in 1972 when Richard Nixon suddenly and unexpectedly reached detente with China, and later when Nelson Mandela and the ANC reached an accord with the former practitioners of apartheid. We can thus have some optimism about the psychological and social dynamics that would ensue if the Palestinians and Israelis did at last reach a peace agreement – one that forced both sides to make the very concessions that they now vow never to make.

Seeking justice rather than mere advance on the status quo

In the context of many longstanding conflicts, and certainly in the case of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, the parties seek more than a simple advance over the status quo – they demand, and feel entitled to receive *fairness*, *equity*, or even *justice* (see Adams, 1965; Homans, 1961; also Berkowitz & Walster, 1976). The parties want an agreement that allocates gains and losses in a manner proportionate to the strength and legitimacy of their respective claims. Such demands raise the bar for the negotiators, especially when the parties inevitably have different narratives about past events, and different lenses through which they view present ones[2] and thus different views what would be an equitable settlement of the dispute.

Both sides in the conflict feel that it is they who have acted more honorably in the past, they who have been more sinned against than sinning, and they who are seeking no more than that to which they are entitled. Both sides, moreover, are apt to feel that it is *their* interests that most require protection in any negotiated agreement – for example, by avoiding ambiguities in language that could provide "loopholes" that could be exploited by the other side (while, at the same time, avoiding unrealistically rigid requirements and deadlines for their own side that might compromise their ability to deal with unforeseen future developments).The justice-seeking barrier to agreement is particularly applicable in the case of conflicts marked by asymmetric power and discrepancies in the burden and privations imposed by the status quo.

As in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, the weaker party demands an end to what it considers unjust as a precondition to for discussion of interest-based exchanges of concessions or the curtailing of activists who are pursuing paths other than negotiation, while the stronger party demands such curtailing as a precondition to discussion of steps to end obvious injustices. One side says "no peace without justice" (by which it means no peace without the *certainty* of justice) while the other says "no justice (or more specifically no redress of injustice) without peace" (by which it means the *certainty* of peace and the promise that the peace will not be broken when external circumstances provide the other side with more leverage. And of course the weaker side is not prepared to make any such

promise, as it feels its present weakness is forcing it to settle for something that it feels falls far short of justice and that it is entitled, even obliged, to continue the struggle in future.

Reactive devaluation, loss aversion and reluctance to trade concessions

During the Cold War that pitted the USSR against the United States and its Western Allies, a Florida congressman tellingly claimed that the US did not need arms control or weapon specialists to assist in negotiations with the Russians to ease the nuclear weapon threat. His explanation for this surprising claim was simple. If they offer a proposal, he argued, it must be good for them; and if it is good for them it is bad for us (and therefore unacceptable).[3] This vignette highlights an important barrier to the achievement of agreements in the face of ongoing conflict. The evaluation of a proposal may change when it is no longer just a hypothetical possibility, but is actually put on the table. This sort of "devaluation" is especially evident when the proposal is offered by a distrusted enemy. However, it can also occur when the proposal comes from someone who simply is not offering you everything you want and feel entitled to get.

A compelling demonstration of this sort of "devaluation" was provided by a study done at Stanford University several years ago (see Ross, 1995). At the time, there were widespread student and faculty demands for the university to "divest" its holdings companies doing business in South Africa. In the study, student opinions about the plan ultimately adopted by the university (one that would end Stanford's investments in particular companies tied to apartheid policies but fell short of the students' demand for full divestment) were measured both before and after the adoption of that plan was made public. For comparison purposes, the investigators also measured students' opinions about an alternative plan calling for no divestment but an *increase* in the university's investment in companies that had *left* South Africa. The students' ratings were revealing. Prior to the university's announced decision, the students rated whichever plan they were led to believe the university was going to adopt less favorably than they rated the alternative. And when the university did announce its plan, students' evaluation of that plan became more negative while their evaluation of the alternative plan became more positive.

A later study (Maoz, Ward, Katz, & Ross, 2002) illustrated the reactive devaluation phenomenon in the context of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict by having participants evaluate proposals that had been put forward by the two side only a few days apart in 1993 following the Oslo Accords, in what was intended to be the first stage in an ongoing plan to achieve peace. These proposals, it should be noted, dealt not with specific terms for ending the conflict (borders, degree of autonomy, etc.) but with general principles and less controversial issues such as the negotiation agenda, interim arrangements for security and policing issues, and coordination of activities and responsibilities. One proposal the participants in the study read was the one that had been put forward by the Palestinians representatives and the other was the proposal that had been put forward by the Israeli representatives. Half of the students were informed of the actual authorship of the two proposals, while for half of the students the purported authorship of the two proposals was reversed. The results of this study confirmed both the experimenters' hypothesis and the fears (and indeed some of the experiences) of those who have tried to achieve agreements in the course of that protracted conflict. The Israeli participants rated the actual Palestinian proposal, when it was attributed to their own side, more positively than they rated the actual proposal by their own side, when it was attributed to the Palestinians.

Reactive devaluation can be traced to several psychological mechanisms – some quite rational, but some more *psycho*logical than logical. These include fear of loss or restriction

of freedom (Brehm, 1966; Brehm& Brehm, 1981; Wicklund, 1974) and "loss aversion" (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979; also Kahneman, 2011) or excessive focus on potential losses rather than potential gains (a phenomenon exacerbated when the former are certain and the latter are uncertain). However, whatever it sources, and regardless of whether the processes are rational or irrational, the role of reactive devaluation in perpetuating deadlocks and producing cycles of heightened enmity and mistrust should be clear. Proposals are likely to be received less positively than they ought to be in terms of the objective interests of the parties. And each side is apt to interpret the other side's actions and rhetoric as dishonest, cynical, and dictated by animus and manipulative intent rather than a sincere effort to end the conflict.

The exacerbating attributional consequences of naïve realism

All of the barriers discussed above are exacerbated by the adversaries' conviction that they are the party that is seeing things objectively, or at least more objectively than the other side and those who hold differing views. This illusion of personal objectivity is not restricted to matters of political dispute: it is pervasive, fundamental and in a sense tautological insofar as one cannot believe that belief X (one's immediate belief) is less valid than belief Y (some revised belief) without therefore adopting the latter as one's revised, but now correct, belief. This epistemic stance, which has been termed "naïve realism" (Gilovich & Ross, forthcoming, chapter 1; Ross &Ward, 1996) and the related phenomenon of the bias blindspot (Pronin, Gilovich, & Ross, 2004; Pronin & Kruger, 2007; Pronin, Kruger, Savitsky, & Ross, 2001; Pronin, Lin, & Ross, 2002) whereby one denies the influence of biases on self that one readily attributes to others, gives rise to heightened enmity and distrust. The other side is seen as deceptive and insincere – either as making claims and offering justifications that it knows to be invalid or perhaps even worse as so irrational and so subject to ideological and motivational biases that it actually believes those invalid claims and justifications. What is lacking, of course, is the awareness that the other side, in showing reactive devaluation, offering a self-serving narrative about the past, engaging in rationalization, and displaying other cognitive and motivational biases is displaying normal human tendencies (to which one's own side is not immune) rather than some essentialist defect of its group.

In very recent research, we (Liberman, Kahn, & Ross, submitted for publication) have demonstrated some of the consequences of naïve realism by having Israeli students with varying views the intergroup sentiments and political views (including views about conflict resolution or amelioration proposals) exchange questionnaire responses reflecting those views with a counterpart. The respondents were then asked to assess, among other things, the wisdom and patriotism of their counterpart, and also the extent to which they thought their counterparts' views reflected rational considerations (such as objective facts and background knowledge) rather than various biases (such as propaganda and misleading information, and wishful thinking). The results of this study both confirmed and expanded our contentions regarding the role that naïve realism plays in the context of an ongoing conflict. Participants generally saw their own views as more reflective of rational considerations than the views of the individual whose sentiments towards West Bank and Gaza Palestinians they had been allowed to read.

Moreover, the extent to which they made this invidious comparison was a linear function of their subjective assessment of the relevant discrepancy in own versus other political views and intergroup sentiments. When it came to assessing the impact of various biases, and to attributions about patriotism and political wisdom, the results of our study

were a bit more complex, but highly revealing. Rightists and non-rightists alike perceived those who disagreed with them to be more heavily influenced than themselves by propaganda, but the two groups showed some interesting and revealing difference in their assessments of the influence of the wishful thinking and of animus toward Palestinians. The non-rightists accused the rightists of bias due to such intergroup animus, and the rightists acknowledge that such animus had indeed been an important determinant of their political views and preferences (although they would probably challenge the contention that such an influence was less than rational). Conversely, the rightists claimed that the non-rightists were guilty of "wishful thinking" – a charge that the leftists acknowledge had some validity (but no doubt would claim that less wishful thinking is a recipe for inaction and continuing pain for both sides in the conflict). Furthermore, while rightists and non-rightists alike saw those on the other side as relatively lacking in political wisdom, there was an asymmetry in claims regarding lack of patriotism. Rightists made that claim about non-rightists, but not vice versa.

Naïve realism also leads to negative attributions about third parties. An early study (Vallone, Ross, & Lepper, 1985), provided a dramatic example of its role when both pro-Israeli and anti-Israeli students on the Stanford campus rated samples of television media coverage of a tragic event for which some observers claimed that Israel arguably bore a measure of responsibility. That event was the killing (by Christian Falangist gunmen) of Palestinian civilian in the *Sabra* and *Shatila* refugee camps on the outskirts of Beirut. Although all respondents saw exactly the same excerpts of TV coverage, the two groups provided virtually non-overlapping assessments of the bias in that coverage. That is, pro-Israeli viewers saw the coverage and those responsible for it as displaying an anti-Israeli bias, whereas anti-Israeli viewers saw the coverage and those responsible for it as pro-Israeli.

The same bias is apparent in responses to third-party proposals that call for mutual concessions – concessions that are seen (by both sides) not as "even-handed" but as giving equal weight to claims that are of equal merit. In the face of asymmetric power the problematic influence of naïve realism is particularly acute. The weaker party, because it is the party more disadvantaged by the status quo, feels that the third party should take that disadvantage into account and try to "level the playing field" and pressure the stronger party to make the greater concessions. The stronger party of course rejects this view, and in fact thinks that the third party should be "realistic" in its demands on the two parties – that is, take into account the fact that the stronger party has less incentive to change the status quo than the weaker party.

Overcoming barriers

The analysis of barriers to agreement in the context of protracted conflict – not just psychological barriers, but structural, strategic, and political barriers as well – paints a gloomy picture. Does social psychological theory and research offer any rays of hope? At the broadest level, the answer is yes. The whole history of social psychological research attests to the fact that seemingly small changes in situations, and even modest interventions, can produce large changes in actions and outcomes (Ross & Nisbett, 1991; also Ross, Lepper, & Ward, 2010). Two studies are described below, both of which utilize classic random assignment designs, and examined negotiation outcomes when student participants negotiated with someone they believed to hold views and interests that differed from their own who was in fact an experimental confederate following a pre-determined script, and ultimately presented a compromise proposal that the research

participants were free to accept or reject. In both cases the experimental manipulation was based on a familiar principle in social psychology.

Managing attributions and offering acknowledgment

Reactive devaluation of the sort described earlier in this article may in part arise from the fact that people in conflict situations are bound to consider a pair of obvious attributional questions: why is my negotiation counterpart offering this *particular* concession or proposing this *particular* trade of compromises? And why is it being offered *now*? In the absence of some reason to do otherwise, the answer that the recipient of the offer is apt to provide is likely to result in reactive devaluation of that offer and to increase the odds that it will be rejected. The results of study by Ward, Gerber, Disston, Brenner and Ross (2008) suggest that linking the content of a proposal to the expressed needs and desires of the other side can change those odds in a positive direction.

In the study, students at Stanford University negotiated with an experimental confederate regarding the recommendations to be made by their university with regard to reform of drug laws. At a late stage in the negotiation the confederate, ostensibly a representative of the university, offered a compromise proposal (one calling for legalization of marijuana but harsher penalty for "harder drugs" and a provision to adopt more draconian measures if drug use increased rather than decreased over the course of the trial period). The key finding was that when the confederate introduced his proposal by saying "I have heard your arguments and proposal so I am discarding the proposal I came with and offering this new proposal instead" it was more frequently accepted by the student (63%), than when the confederate prefaced it by saying "here is the proposal I have brought to the negotiation" (40%). Also, the confederate was seen to have made a greater compromise, and to be liked better for having done so.

Such acknowledgment, it should be noted, is often absent in the context of ongoing conflicts, at least in public pronouncements wherein both of the parties in the conflict assure their constituencies that they are holding firm to their longstanding position and making their offer in light of their own interests and priorities rather than those of the other side. In the context of an asymmetry in power, the weaker party receiving such a proposal is understandably likely to be wary about the value of the concessions offered, particularly because of the awareness that the stronger party was not obliged to make those concessions. Indeed, as noted earlier, proposed agreements are bound to be perceived as unfair or even humiliating by the weaker side, and as a reflection of the existing imbalance in coercive power. The implication of this analysis, and the result of the study of Ward et al. described above, is clear. It is useful for both sides, but incumbent on the stronger side in a conflict to make it explicit that its proposal reflects a significant *change* in position, and better still that it is a change that is responsive to the expressed needs, preferences, and priorities of the other party.

Self-fulfilling prophesies of success versus failure in negotiation expectations

As yet another high-level American effort to restart the long-stalled negotiation process grinds to a halt, dashing the hopes of optimists and confirming the fears and expectations of most knowledgeable observers one wonders whether one is seeing an example of a self-fulfilling prophesy described by the great sociologist Robert Merton (1948). Both sides come to the table reluctantly forced there lest various favorable considerations of the US government be compromised. They come with little hope of a breakthrough or even a

significant change of position on the part of the other side, and accordingly little inclination to offer new concessions, lest their offer be met with criticism at home but a cool reception (and reactive devaluation) by their adversary. They fully expect yet another failure, act in accordance with that expectation, and thereby more or less guarantee that their expectation will prove correct.

However, experience, and some research evidence, suggests that more positive expectations can similarly prove self-fulfilling. When negotiators proceed feeling that they must succeed, and do so with a history of past successes, the cycle can become a virtuous one instead of a vicious one. That is, concessions are greeted with acknowledgment and approval rather than suspicion and derision, are reciprocated, and all parties do their utmost to guarantee that the record of successes remain unblemished. The canonical example would be the periodic election of a pope, which despite deep divisions in the church and starkly conflicting preferences and priorities, and despite the requirement of a supermajority, inevitably succeeds in a matter of days or at most weeks.

There is no magic formula available to create such positive, self-fulfilling expectations in the context of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. Quite the contrary! However, the results of a pair of laboratory studies illustrate the potential value of engendering positive expectations on the part of negotiators facing less daunting challenges (Liberman, Anderson, & Ross, 2010). One study was conducted with American college students undertaking a negotiation exercise involving the (hypothetical) allocation of resources to undergraduate vs. graduate student activities. The other was conducted with older Israel students(who had served in the military) and dealt with a structurally similar, but much more politically sensitive, resource allocation problem involving the hypothetical allocation of funds to various building projects benefiting Israelis versus Palestinians on opposite sides of the physical barrier separating the adversarial communities.

In the US study the participants negotiated with a confederate was an older student ostensibly representing the interests of the grad students. In the Israeli study, the confederate was an Israeli Arab ostensibly representing the interests of the Palestinians. In both studies, the negotiation proceeded in stages, with the confederate making an initial offer, the experimental participant making a counter-offer, and the confederate making a "final offer" as time was expiring. The participants assessed both the initial and final offer and were free to accept or reject the latter, knowing that the result of rejection would be a forfeiture of the funds in question until some later date. The "expectation manipulation" was a simple one. Half of the participants were informed at the outset of their negotiation that "all previous negotiation pairs" (in the case of the US study) or "virtually all" (in the Israeli study) had succeeded in reaching agreement. Half were merely told to do their best to reach an agreement. While the participants recognized the hypothetical nature of their role-play assignment, they represented the interests of their own group, and negotiated seriously, and at times, especially the Israeli study, even passionately.

As predicted, the positive expectations condition produced more generous counter-offers to the confederate's initial proposal, and more positive assessments of the confederate's final offer than the neutral expectations condition. The positive expectations condition also produced and much higher acceptance rates – unanimous acceptance in the US study; 85% acceptance in the Israeli study of terms that were rejected by large majorities in both studies by participants merely urged to do their best to reach an agreement. It is important to note that this result did not reflect grudging acceptance of terms that were perceived negatively in both conditions but rejected in the neutral expectations condition. In fact, the many participants who accepted the proposal in the positive expectations condition rated the terms or that proposal, and the person offering it,

more positively than did the much smaller number of participants who accepted the same proposal in the neutral expectations condition.

Of course, neither Palestinian and Israeli negotiators nor the peoples they represent can be told that past negotiations have been universally successful. While it would be helpful if leaders and negotiators could be told that despite the past history of failures, success in some upcoming negotiation to satisfy the aspirations of the majority in both societies for a two-state solution is both expected and demanded, the likelihood that such instructions are forthcoming in the near future is close to zero. Nevertheless, establishing a history of successes in negotiations with much more modest and easier to achieve goals, might be more achievable, and a useful step on the long road ahead on the journey to sustained peace and a better future for both societies.

Real-world lessons

Researchers and theorists who pursue the related topics of conflict, negotiation, and dispute resolution do so with the conviction, or at least the hope, that their labors will be of value to practitioners. However, in the experience of the author of this article, more often than not the reverse has proven to be true. Engagement in second-track activities, facilitating intergroup and intragroup dialogue, and participating in other applied undertakings in Northern Ireland and the Middle East has allowed me to see, up close and personal, unfolding in real time and in high-stakes contexts, the very phenomena (unwarranted dispositional inferences, naïve realism, false consensus and false polarization, perceptions of media and mediator bias, dissonance reduction and rationalization, the power of perceived social norms, reactive devaluation of proposal and concessions, the exacerbating effects of negative intergroup sentiments, etc.) that my colleagues and I have previously explored in laboratory research. (See, for example, Kahn et al., in press; Nisbett & Ross, 1980; Ross, 1977; Ross & Nisbett, 1991; Vallone et al., 1997). Those activities have also served to highlight gaps in theorizing, reveal additional phenomena, and focus attention on factors that have received less attention in academic work than they merit.

The most important of these "real-world lessons" involves the importance of a shared commitment to a mutually bearable future, and trust that the other side is prepared to accept the compromises and losses that are necessary to provide such a future. Characteristically, when well-meaning individuals on opposite sides of a conflict engage in dialogue in search of a less conflictual future, they are articulate about their needs and grievances but fall silent when asked in what way the future they envision includes the other side, and why that other side would be better served by that future than the current status quo. As I noted at the outset of this article, my colleague, Bryon Bland, enlarges on this lesson later in the collection of papers (see also Bland, Powell, & Ross, 2005; Bland & Ross, in press) and I will not comment on it further here. However, I will end this article with a brief discussion of three other "real-world lessons" that my SCICN colleagues and I have gleaned from our real-world efforts.

Conversion from militant to peacemaker can be a matter of "51 versus 49%"

A common refrain we hear in our SCICN ventures is that those on one side of the conflict do not want to deal with those on the other side who have "blood on their hands" and now claim to be interested in a non-violent end to their conflict. We point, of course, to the example of Nelson Mandela. However, we also tell them about the remarks made by David Ervine, a Northern Ireland "Loyalist" and ex-bomber who, after giving a talk to a Stanford audience

was asked the inevitable question about his personal transformation from militant bomber to a mainstream politician and leader in the quest for a peaceful solution to the conflict in his troubled country. His response was that in his personal case, it was a matter of "51% vs. 49%" – that his "change" involved not a transformation of character, or a dramatic blinding light conversion, but a kind of "tipping point" whereby the futility and costs of violence became marginally more obvious and the prospects for securing an acceptable agreement through normal politics became marginally brighter. He then added the striking comment that when he was only 51% certain about the decision to embrace bombing as a tactic, he was still 100% a "bomber," and now that he is only 51% certain about the prospects for change through peaceful means, he is 100% a politician and peace activist.

The profound social psychological insight driven home by Ervine's remarks is one that merits continual emphasis. Not only does the situation matter in determining the path that adversaries take in pursuing their goals, but small changes for the better in the everyday lives and experiences of people in conflict are worth working for. A meeting with the other side that goes well, a small concession that makes life for the other side more bearable, a single humanizing remark, can provide the tipping point that makes the difference in whether an individual, or a group, opts for discussion, persuasion, and political activity or for coercion and violence.

The futility of trying to convince people when they cannot "afford" to understand

My SCICN colleagues and I have often been frustrated by those in positions of authority during a conflict whose unwillingness to act decisively and make a deal results in ever worsening conditions and ever greater danger in terms of future developments. In considering the source of that unwillingness, we are reminded again and again that when the threat of loss or the cost of an agreement to the self is apt to be great, otherwise reasonable and well-meaning people will find a reason or at least a rationalization for continued intransigence. The cost in question may involve the pain of acknowledging that one's life has been spent in a fruitless endeavor or that sacrifices one has made in terms of opportunities for education or career (to say nothing of the sacrifices of blood and treasury of one's group that one has long called for) have been in vain. It may also involve the unacceptability of the life and status that awaits one post-agreement. The memory that comes vividly to mind is that of a Protestant militia leader who had come out of prison ready to renounce violence and willing to negotiate earnestly with the other side. Yet, somehow, no deal put on the table was ever good enough, no promise by the other side reliable enough, to get him to say, "Let's stop talking and close the deal!" Observing this charismatic but uneducated man, one could not escape the thought that right now he was a respected leader with a place at the negotiating table and a cadre of followers to do his bidding, but that in the aftermath of the agreement, and with the emergence of a normal peaceful society, he would be lucky to get a job driving a brewery truck. The issue of a "bearable future," we must keep in mind, pertains not only to groups and whole societies, but also to individuals with "veto power."

The issue of asymmetry once again is relevant in cases of the sort described above. In this case, however, it is less a matter of asymmetry of power than asymmetry of consequences. Agreements open doors for some, especially those with the education, talent, or other resources to take advantage of the newly created opportunities; but agreements close doors for others, and those others, consciously or unconsciously, will resist changes in the status quo that threaten them with losses of material or psychological consequence.

The value of positive violations of expectations in unfreezing positions

In the context of ongoing conflicts, the situation periodically seems "frozen", with neither party willing to offer concessions or endure risks because they doubt, with good reason, that their initiatives will be meaningfully reciprocated. Moreover, both parties treat the other party's intransigence as evidence of bad intentions, thereby initiating a cycle of distrust and recrimination that exacerbates the conflict. What can be done in such circumstances to "unfreeze" the situation? Two incidents, one well-known involving a historical figure, and one more local and personal for me and my SCICN colleagues, but both pertaining to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, suggest that the key to unfreezing a conflict may lie in the violation of expectations and presumptions.

The historical event was the 1977 visit of Egyptian president Anwar Sadat to Jerusalem, and his speech before the Knesset. The content of the speech was important, although it is worth remembering that while he made clear his interest in peace and normalization of relations, he offered no new material concessions. However, what may have been even more important was the clear signal offered by his actions that something important had changed, that Israel's earlier doubts about what was possible were worth reconsidering. If an Egyptian president could not only come to Israel, but speak directly to the Israeli people from a platform in the disputed Israeli capital, then other important results might be possible – even long-term peace. A thawing of relationships was achieved, and work toward an agreement could begin in earnest.

The Stanford event also involved a talk about the Middle East conflict – this time, one given by a founder of the militant Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, a man who by then had become outspoken advocate for negotiation and a two-state solution. Again, the content of the talk (which sketched the broad outlines of the type of mutual compromises that would be required for agreement) was welcomed by the audience, which included students and faculty with a wide range of views about the conflict. However, it was not the talk itself that those attending the event remember so vividly. It was his response to a question *after* the talk. An elderly psychiatrist who wanted to show his empathy for the Palestinian plight if not for their specific goals asked the speaker whether he thought Israelis and American Jews spent too much time obsessing about the Holocaust, and not enough learning about and talking about the *Nakba* – the "catastrophe" that encompasses the founding of the state of Israel, the loss of the 1948 War, and the plight of the Palestinians who lost their lives or their homes, farms, and livelihoods.

The speaker paused, walked to within a few feet of the questioner, and then, looking him directly in the eyes, replied, "Are you crazy? The *Nakba* was certainly a tragedy for Palestinians, and they continue to suffer from that injustice. But it was a tragedy of the sort that is all too common in the world and that many other people have suffered. The Holocaust was a *unique* and *unparalleled* tragedy – a defining event of the twentieth century." Then, wagging his finger at the questioner, he added, "Don't ever speak of them in the same breath again." The effect on the room was instantaneous and profound. A hushed silence fell over the room, and the members of the audience looked at each other to see if others shared their sense of the moment. The speaker's dramatic response did not speak to the ongoing stalemate. Yet it was clear to all that a new type of discussion – at least among those in the room – would now be possible.

In meeting with individuals who have been at the front lines in conflict and yet now work for peace and agreements that promise a better future, one with less suffering and more opportunity for the normal pursuits that make life rewarding, my SCICN colleagues and I have been struck again and again by moments in which ordinary and not-so-ordinary

acts of kindness, civility, empathy, or concern showed the human face of the adversary. I recall the Palestinian who told me he was touched when, after explaining that he had come from the funeral of his father, he was asked by his Israeli counterpart for the name of that father so he could say *Kaddish* for him. I think of the Protestant social worker who defied masked Unionist militiamen by visiting her Catholic clients. Most of all, I remember encounters with men and women who have lost loved ones, and responded by asking not for vengeance but for reconciliation. These stereotype-defying acts will not magically produce formal agreements, but they can help to unthaw relationships and motivate well-meaning people to keep talking and working for an end to the conflict even when prospects, perhaps *especially* when prospects, seem dimmest.

Notes

1. This article draws heavily on earlier discussions of psychological barriers and strategies for overcoming them, including Ross & Stillinger, 1991; Mnookin & Ross, 1995; Ross & Ward, 1995; Pronin, Puccio, & Ross, 2002; Ross, 2012; and Bland, Powell, & Ross, 2012.
2. Biased assimilation of evidence and experience (Lord, Ross, & Lepper, 1979) which has been called "the mother of cognitive biases" (Lilienfeld, 2007) can be regarded as an additional barrier to agreement insofar as makes it more difficult to arrive at agreements that satisfy both parties. As we shall note a bit later, it is the combination of this bias with naïve realism that is not only an impediment to agreement, but a source of enmity and mistrust and a barrier to the creation of more positive intergroup relationships.
3. The congressman was Republican Floyd Spence of Florida.

References

Adams, J. S. (1965). Inequity in social exchange. In L. Berkowitz (Ed.), *Advances in experimental social psychology* (Vol. 2). New York, NY: Academic Press.

Aronson, E. (1969). A theory of cognitive dissonance. In L. Berkowitz (Ed.), *Advances in experimental social psychology* (Vol. 4). New York, NY: Academic Press.

Berkowitz, L., & Walster, E. (1976). Equity theory: Toward a general theory of social interaction. In L. Berkowitz & E. Walster (Eds.), *Advances in experimental social psychology* (Vol. 9). New York, NY: Academic Press.

Bland, B., & Ross, L. (in press). Overcoming relational barriers to agreement. In A. Kurz & G. Sher (Eds.), *Negotiating in times of conflict*. Tel Aviv: Institute for National Security Studies.

Bland, B., Powell, B., & Ross, L. (2012). Barriers to dispute resolution: Reflections on peacemaking and relationships between adversaries. In R. Goodman, D. Jinks, & A. K. Woods (Eds.), *Understanding social action, promoting human rights*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Brehm, J. W. (1966). *A theory of psychological reactance*. New York, NY: Academic Press.

Brehm, J. W., & Cohen, A. R. (1962). *Explorations in cognitive dissonance*. New York, NY: John Wiley & Sons.

Brehm, S. S., & Brehm, J. W. (1981). *Psychological reactance: A theory of freedom and control*. New York, NY: Academic Press.

Diekmann, K., Samuels, S., Ross, L., & Bazerman, M. (1997). Self-interest and fairness of resource allocation: Allocators versus recipients. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *72*, 1061–1074.

Festinger, L. (1957). *A theory of cognitive dissonance*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Festinger, L. (1964). *Conflict, decision, and dissonance*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Gilovich, T. D., & Ross, L. (2015, forthcoming). *The wisest in the room*. New York, NY: Free Press.

Homans, G. C. (1961). *Social behavior in elementary forms*. New York, NY: Harcourt, Brace, & World.

Kahn, D., Halperin, E., Liberman, V., & Ross, L. (in press). Intergroup sentiments, political identity, and their influence on responses to potentially ameliorative proposals in the context of an intractable conflict. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*.

Kahneman, D., & Tversky, A. (1979). Prospect theory: An analysis of decision under risk. *Econometrica*, *47*, 263–291.

Kahneman, D. (2011). *Thinking fast and slow*. New York, NY: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux.

Katz, M., & Ross, L. (2005–2006). False polarization in beliefs about the willingness of leftists and rightists to make concessions in pursuit of a peace agreement (unpublished research).

Liberman, V., Anderson, N. R., & Ross, L. (2010). Achieving difficult agreements: Effects of positive expectations on negotiation processes and outcomes. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, *46*, 494–504.

Liberman, V., Kahn, D., & Ross, L. (manuscript submitted for publication). Naïve realism in assessments about fellow-citizens who do not share ones intergroup sentiments and political views: An Israeli case-study.

Lilienfeld, S. (2007). Presentation given at the Harriet Elliott Lecture Series, University of North Carolina, Greensboro, NC.

Lord, C., Ross, L., & Lepper, M. (1979). Biased assimilation and attitude polarization: The effects of prior theories on subsequently considered evidence. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *37*, 2098–2109.

Maoz, I., David, Y., & Ross, L. (2014). Unpublished research (manuscript in preparation).

Maoz, I., Ward, A., Katz, M., & Ross, L. (2002). Reactive devaluation of an "Israeli" vs a "Palestinian" peace proposal. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, *46*, 515–546.

Merton, R. K. (1948). The self-fulfilling prophecy. *Antioch Review*, *8*, 193–210.

Mnookin, R. H., & Ross, L. (1995). Strategic, psychological, and institutional barriers: An introduction. In K. Arrow, R. Mnookin, L. Ross, A. Tversky, & R. Wilson (Eds.), *Barriers to conflict resolution*. New York, NY: Norton.

Nisbett, R. E., & Ross, L. (1980). *Human inference: Strategies and shortcomings of social judgment*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Pronin, E., Gilovich, T., & Ross, L. (2004). Objectivity in the eye of the beholder: Divergent perceptions of bias in self versus others. *Psychology Review*, *111*, 781–799.

Pronin, E., & Kruger, M. B. (2007). Valuing thoughts, ignoring behavior. The introspection illusion as a source of the bias blind spot. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, *43*, 565–578.

Pronin, E., Kruger, J., Savitsky, K., & Ross, L. (2001). You don't know me, but I know you. The illusion of asymmetric insight. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *81*, 639–656.

Pronin, E., Lin, D., & Ross, L. (2002). The bias blindspot: Perceptions of bias in self and others. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *28*, 369–381.

Pronin, E., Puccio, C., & Ross, L. (2002). The understanding of misunderstanding and conflict: Social psychological perspectives. In T. Gilovich, D. W. Griffin, & D. Kahneman (Eds.), *Heuristics and biases; The psychology of intuitive judgment*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Robinson, R., Keltner, D., Ward, A., & Ross, L. (1995). Actual versus assumed differences in construal: "Naive realism" in intergroup perception and conflict. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *68*, 404–417.

Ross, L. (1977). The intuitive psychologist and his shortcomings: Distortions in the attribution process. In L. Berkowitz (Ed.), *Advances in experimental social psychology* (Vol. 10). New York, NY: Academic Press.

Ross, L. (1995). The reactive devaluation barrier to dispute resolution. In K. Arrow, R. Mnookin, L. Ross, A. Tversky, & R. Wilson (Eds.), *Barriers to conflict resolution*. New York, NY: Norton.

Ross, L. (2012). Perspectives on disagreement and dispute resolution: Lessons from the lab and the real world. In E. Shafir (Ed.), *The behavioral foundations of public policy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University & Russell Sage Foundation Press.

Ross, L., Lepper, M., & Ward, A. (2010). A history of social psychology: Insights, contributions, and challenges. In S. Fiske & D. Gilbert (Eds.), *The handbook of social psychology* (Vol. 1, 4th ed.). New York, NY: Random House.

Ross, L., & Nisbett, R. E. (1991). *The person and the situation: Perspectives of social psychology*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.

Ross, L., & Stillinger, C. (1991). Barriers to conflict resolution. *Negotiation Journal*, *7*, 389–404.

Ross, L., & Ward, A. (1995). Psychological barriers to dispute resolution. In M. Zanna (Ed.), *Advances in experimental social psychology* (Vol. 27). New York, NY: Academic Press.

Ross, L., & Ward, A. (1996). Naive realism in everyday life: Implications for social conflict and misunderstanding. In T. Brown, E. Reed, & E. Turiel (Eds.), *Values and knowledge*. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.

Vallone, R. P., Ross, L., & Lepper, M. R. (1985). The hostile media phenomenon: Biased perception and perceptions of media bias in coverage of the Beirut Massacre. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *49*, 577–585.

Ward, A., Gerber, L., Disston, L., Brenner, L., & Ross, L. (2008). Acknowledging the other side in negotiation. *Negotiation Journal*, *24*, 269–285.

Wicklund, R. A. (1974). *Freedom and reactance*. Oxford: Lawrence Erlbaum.