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Examining the Round Table Talks From the Perspective of the Needs-Based Model of Reconciliation: Observations and Insights

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Abstract

This commentary analyzes the democratization process triggered by the Polish Round Table Talks using the framework of the Needs-Based Model of Reconciliation, which conceptualizes reconciliation as a social exchange transaction in which perpetrators gain moral-social acceptance, whereas victims gain power. I argue that the talks allowed the restoration of communists’ moral-social identity, and Solidarity’s power and voice. I further argue that to complete such a transaction, both parties must believe that they would gain more through compromise than through violence. They must also overcome the “magnitude gap”; namely the systematic discrepancy between victims’ vs. perpetrators’ estimation of the severity or immorality of the same transgressions or social arrangements. Finally, as is the case for any exchange transaction, people may question its benefits. When doing so, however, they might take the non-violent nature of the transition to democracy for granted – due to “the hindsight bias.” Taking into account that the alternatives were probably worse may contribute to undermining conspiracy theories about “dirty dealings” between the parties, and commemorating the legacy of the Round Table Talks as an inspiring moment in history.

Keywords

Polish Round Table Talks, the Needs-Based Model of Reconciliation, reconciliation



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The “negotiated revolution” (Skórzyński, 2017) in Poland, namely the democratization process that was set in motion in the Round Table Talks during February–April 1989 (and later spread to other countries in Central and Eastern Europe), is a striking historical illustration of a deep-seated conflict that was resolved in a peaceful, non-violent manner. Due to the success of these talks, Poland’s internal “cold war” did not turn into a “hot war” (Porter, 1999). Admittedly, the target articles by both Reykowski (2020, this issue) and Grzelak (2020, this issue) highlight the unique set of conditions that made this negotiation successful, and end with a somewhat pessimistic conclusion about the (in)ability to implement this model of social change in other contexts, such as the Israeli–Palestinian conflict (Reykowski) or the current political system in Poland (Grzelak). Indeed, in the present age of populism, characterized by slogan-style language (Mazzoleni, 2003) and antagonism towards the established political power structure (sometimes referred to as “the corrupt elite”; Mudde, 2004), this conclusion seems justified. Nevertheless, history is a pendulum and the current political climate may change. Fulfilling the hope expressed in Wałęsa’s Nobel lecture that “Poland will prove to the world that even the most complex situations can be solved by a dialogue and not by force,” the Round Table Talks have extended the repertoire of political tools for systemic transformations and left the legacy of “using the force of argument and not the argument of force” (Solidarity’s guiding principle) to the world. Hopefully, this legacy will become implementable once again.

The two target articles have analyzed the social psychological factors that contributed to the success of the Round Table Talks. Both Reykowski and Grzelak first reminded us that the key for understanding the success of the Round Table Talks lies in the geopolitical situation (e.g., Gorbachev’s perestroika and Reagan’s anti-communist policies) – and outside the scope of social psychology. Nevertheless, social psychological factors did play *some* role in this success, which justifies the endeavor to identify and study them in depth. For this purpose, Reykowski and Grzelak draw on several social psychological theoretical perspectives as well as on concepts from the negotiation literature. For example, Grzelak discusses (among other things) the fact that both parties realized that the negotiation was better than their BATNA (Best Alternative To a Negotiated Agreement; Fisher & Ury, 1981), and their resulting motivation for collaboration led to the use of problem solving strategies – instead of positional bargaining based on zero-sum perceptions. Reykowski additionally discusses the critical role of the creation, throughout the long negotiation process, of a common identity between the two parties (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000) – based on the negotiators’ membership in a group united around a common task (i.e., a superordinate goal, Sherif, 1958).

Reykowski’s and Grzelak’s discussion of the social psychological factors contributing to the success of the Round Table Talks, which is based on their first-hand participation in these talks, is very comprehensive and thorough. I will therefore not further expand on this topic in my own commentary. Instead, I will simply describe the transformation

process that took place during and after the Round Table Talks using the terminology of the Needs-Based Model (Nadler & Shnabel, 2015) – the theoretical perspective that guides my research on reconciliation. I hope that using this perspective and its terminology will add one more layer to our understanding of the processes triggered by these talks. In the following section, I will briefly describe the Needs-Based Model. I will then use its interpretational framework to discuss the political transformation in Poland.

Reconciliation as a Social Exchange: The Perspective of the Needs-Based Model

Conflicting groups never fight solely about tangible resources; rather, they also “engage in a process of negotiating identity” (Kelman, 2004, p. 112). The term “reconciliation” aims to capture this process of identity negotiation and consequent change, which is distinct from the related processes of “conflict settlement” – finding an agreed upon formula for the division of contested tangible resources (e.g., budgets), and “conflict resolution” – restoring a basic feeling of trust between adversaries and building a pragmatic partnership (Kelman, 2008). The Needs-Based Model of Reconciliation (Shnabel & Nadler, 2008) was developed in order to shed light on the identity change processes that occur during reconciliation between former adversaries, as well as explain how and why they can promote more harmonious relations.

Anchored in the theoretical tradition of Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), the main tenet of the model is that conflicts threaten specific dimensions in the identities of victims and perpetrators. In identifying the dimensions impaired among victims and perpetrators, the Needs-Based Model builds on the “Big Two” theorizing (Abele & Wojciszke, 2013), according to which there are two fundamental dimensions along which people judge social targets: the *agency* dimension, representing traits like “strong,” “competent,” and “influential,” and the *moral-social* or *communion* dimension, representing traits like “moral,” “warm” and “trustworthy” (for a similar view of “competence” and “warmth” as universal dimensions of social perception, see Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2008). Transgressions pose differential threats to victims’ and perpetrators’ identities: victims experience threat to their agentic identity, because they are unable to control and influence their own outcomes. Perpetrators, by contrast, experience threat to their moral-social identity. Admittedly, perpetrators often perceive their behavior as legitimate under the circumstances and therefore do not experience guilt or remorse (Baumeister, 1996). Nevertheless, when perpetrators realize that psychologically significant others view their behavior as immoral they experience anxiety over social exclusion – because social reject is the sanction that is typically imposed upon violators of moral standards (Tavuchis, 1991).

Experiencing these different threats produces different needs; that is, motivational states. Victims, who feel weak and voiceless, experience the need to restore their agen-

cy, and may behave vengefully in order to restore their sense of power (Frijda 1994). Perpetrators experience the need to restore their moral image and feel (re)accepted to the community from which they feel potentially excluded. To downplay their responsibility, they might use moral disengagement strategies (e.g., minimize the severity of the harm; Bandura, 1999). However, victims' and perpetrators' willingness to reconcile with each other despite the wrongdoing may increase through exchange interactions through which they satisfy each other's needs for *empowerment* and *acceptance*. One social mechanism through which victims and perpetrators can satisfy each other's needs is the apology-forgiveness cycle, in which perpetrators' apology serves as an admission of a moral debt owed to the victims, which returns control to the victims' hands. At the same time, victims' expressions of empathy towards perpetrators' perspective and forgiveness for their wrongdoing alleviate their moral inferiority and reaffirm their belongingness to the moral community from which they feel potentially excluded. Using the apology-forgiveness cycle has the power to dramatically transform relations between former adversaries (Gobodo-Madikizela, 2008; Tavuchis, 1991; but see Wohl, Hornsey, & Philpot, 2011, for potential pitfalls of group apologies). Perpetrators may also empower their victims by expressing respect for their abilities and achievements, appealing to their national, ethnic or racial pride, and acknowledging the contribution of their heritage. As for victims, besides forgiveness they can also express acceptance of their perpetrators through readiness to cooperate with them either at the group-level (e.g., through engagement in economic, scientific and cultural exchange) or the personal-level (e.g., through forming cross-group friendship).

The second tenet of the Needs-Based Model is that a successful exchange of empowerment and acceptance can restore the conflicting parties' positive identities, such that the victims would no longer feel powerless and the perpetrators would no longer feel blameworthy, resulting in their heightened willingness to reconcile with each other. To illustrate, one study (Shnabel, Nadler, Ullrich, Dovidio, & Carmi, 2009; Study 2), which referred to the Holocaust context, exposed Jewish and German participants to two speeches, allegedly held by their outgroup's representatives at the memorial of the Holocaust in Berlin. The speeches' main message conveyed either acceptance (e.g., "we should accept the [Jews/Germans] and remember that we are all human beings") or empowerment (e.g., "the [Germans'/Jews'] have the right to be strong and proud in their country"). This study revealed that Jews experienced threat to their sense of power and showed greater readiness to reconcile with Germans following empowering (compared to accepting) messages. By contrast, Germans experienced threat to their moral image and showed greater readiness to reconcile following accepting (compared to empowering) messages.

In sum, the Needs-Based Model conceptualizes reconciliation as the social exchange of psychological "commodities." Importantly, like in any exchange transaction, a precondition for conducting it is that the parties must believe that the transaction serves their

interests and be motivated to overcome the psychological barriers that might block the path to a successful exchange (Rusbult & Van Lange, 1996). One such barrier is the so called “magnitude gap” (Baumeister, 1996), namely the systematic discrepancy between victims’ and perpetrators’ estimation of the severity and immorality of the very same transgression. Because the psychological experience of victimization is fundamentally more profound than the psychological experience of perpetration (Noor, Shnabel, Halabi, & Nadler, 2012), victims typically perceive the transgression as more harmful and illegitimate than their perpetrators.

Moreover, even if the adversaries managed to overcome the magnitude gap and an exchange transaction was completed, they might later question its profitability. This possibility can be illustrated in the responses to the Truth and Reconciliation Commissions (TRC) in South Africa. Based on Gobodo-Madikizela’s (2008) analysis, one can conceptualize the TRC as an institution that facilitated social exchanges in which perpetrators of human rights abuses, to the extent that they gave full disclosure of the acts they committed, were granted amnesty and gained (at least a certain degree) of moral-social acceptance. The victims of these crimes (i.e., either the direct victims, or the bereaved families) finally had a chance to have their voice heard, as they could speak publicly about the injustice they had suffered, and grant (or withhold) forgiveness to their perpetrators – which was psychologically empowering. However, despite the important role of the TRC in facilitating a non-violent transition from apartheid to democracy (Tutu, 1999), they were (and still are) strongly criticized (e.g., for compromising justice due to the state’s abrogation of the right to due process; see Gobodo-Madikizela, 2008). Put differently, the “profitability” of the exchange involved in the reconciliation process was questioned. It is possible that such criticism may intensify with time, because the non-violent nature of the transition to democracy is taken for granted in retrospect (due to a hindsight bias, Fischhoff, 1975) – whereas at the time the decision to turn to the TRC was made, the eruption of violence was a highly vivid possibility, causing great concern.

The Social Exchange of Psychological Commodities in the Round Table Talks

Applying the perspective and terminology of the Needs-Based Model to the context of the Polish Round Table Talks, I suggest that these talks enabled a social exchange through which the Communist party’s leadership gained moral-social *acceptance* and the Solidarity movement gained *power*. What events led to this transaction, making it necessary and possible? While every historical event is the outcome of previous events, I will begin my analysis on December 13, 1981, when the government declared martial law in an attempt to restore Communist order, arresting Solidarity’s leader Lech Wałęsa and thousands of other members of the trade union (Skórzyński, 2017).

According to [Osiatynski \(1991\)](#), the enactment of the martial law represented “the military victory of the establishment, and moral victory of the nation” – suggesting, if using the terminology of the Needs-Based Model, that the communists were superior in terms of power, whereas their opposition (i.e., Solidarity) was superior in terms of morality. This asymmetry was still evident when the two parties reached the negotiation table in 1989. In particular, the communist Government side was stronger than Solidarity because it had the army and security forces, could draw on common fears that the Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact countries would intervene to inhibit radical anti-government action, possessed more financial resources and had unlimited access to state media. At the same time, however, it had lost its moral legitimacy not only among the citizens and working people, but also among the ruling and intellectual elites. Solidarity, by contrast, was popular among the majority of Polish society, and was supported by both the Catholic church and by the West (see [Reykowski’s target article](#)). The Round Table Talks allowed each party to restore the impaired dimension in its identity. That is, it allowed the communists to reclaim their lost moral legitimacy and earn positive recognition in Poland and the West, and Solidarity – to gain power through its re-legalization and fully free election to the Senate, free elections for 35% of parliament seats, and trade union pluralism (see [Osiatynski, 1991](#)).

This exchange of power, on the one hand, and moral-social legitimacy, on the other, was possible because “both sides were simply doomed to talks since they had no better option” (see [Grzelak’s target article](#)). That is, the precondition that both parties must be strongly motivated to conduct the transaction was met. Facing an economic crisis and a wave of worker strikes, the communists realized that they had to cooperate with Solidarity to prevent an economically catastrophic crisis (e.g., as they knew that receiving financial aid from the West depended on such cooperation) and an even stronger public outburst. Thus, despite some “tough-minded individuals and groups occupying important positions at various levels of the power system” who “believed in the hardline politics” (see [Reykowski’s target article](#)), the majority of communists understood that some sort of change was inevitable. The opposition party adopted the strategy of gradual “systemic evolution” due to its wish to avoid civil collapse and bloodshed, its prioritization of the restoration of economy, as well as its fear of intervention by the Red Army (as they were not aware of the autonomy allowed by Gorbachev’s perestroika) and the concern that a revolution might ultimately lead to new despotism, as happened in the 1979 Iranian revolution or the 1973 Chilean coup d’état ([Skórzyński, 2017](#)).

While both parties were motivated to reach an agreement, they had to overcome the “magnitude gap”; namely the systematic discrepancy between victims’ and perpetrators’ perceptions of the transgressions’ severity. Illustrating this gap, [Reykowski \(2020, this issue\)](#) mentions that “Solidarity claimed that there were about 100 victims of Martial Law,” whereas “the Government side questioned this figure as exaggerated (arguing that it included many cases unrelated to Martial Law or to the actions of the Security

Forces)” (p. 6). Interestingly, this gap is also evident in the historical accounts provided by Reykowski, who represented the communist party at the Talks, as compared to Grzelak (2020, this issue), who represented the opposition and argues that “the political and social image of Poland painted by Janusz Reykowski in the introductory paper [...] does not adequately reflect the dark sides of the regime,” (p. 3) which was “a dictatorship where human rights and freedoms were violated everyday” (p. 2). Such divergent narratives of the same events are typical of the relations and discourse between historical perpetrator vs. victim groups, or stronger vs. weaker parties (e.g., Bilewicz & Jaworska, 2013; Pilecki & Hammack, 2014).

Finally, one could question the profitability of the power-for-morality transaction. On the one hand, it could be argued that due to an overly optimistic estimate of their popular support, the communists made a series of mistakes (e.g., an erroneous choice of electoral law) that led to their political suicide – and that they could reach an agreement that would have been acceptable to both parties, while producing a critically better outcome for the communists (Kamiński, 1999). On the other hand, radicals within the democratic movement (e.g., Fighting Solidarity or the Confederation of Independent Poland) viewed the fall of communism as inevitable and hence rejected the possibility of compromise – whose cost was absolving the communist party of its past totalitarian transgressions (Skórzyński, 2017). These internal tensions within the democratic opposition were magnified by the circulation of rumors about “dirty dealings between the two elites” (Matynia, 2001). As noted by both Reykowski and Grzelak, these rumors became louder over time, as the current right-wing ruling party fuels the conspiracy theory, according to which the concessions made by Solidarity were “too easy and too big” (see Grzelak, 2020, this issue).

Admittedly, conspiracy theories, once limited to the fringe, emerged as a prevalent phenomenon during the late 20th century and are now central to the political discourse in many countries other than Poland (e.g., the U.S.; Goldberg, 2001). People are drawn to conspiracy theories because they promise to satisfy basic psychological (i.e., epistemic, existential and social) needs (for a review, see Douglas, Sutton, & Cichocka, 2017). Conspiracy beliefs are more strongly endorsed when events are significant and large in scale (as in the case of the Round Table agreements), because they leave some people dissatisfied with mundane explanations (Leman & Cinnirella, 2013). Their endorsement is associated, among other things (e.g., prejudice against powerful groups; Imhoff & Bruder, 2014), with victimhood-based social identity (Bilewicz, Winiewski, Kofta, & Wójcik, 2013) – a factor that is highly relevant to Polish society due to its unique history of victimization.

The problem with conspiracy theories is that they are highly resistant to claims of falsification because they posit complex actions, coordinated by multiple actors, which are hidden from public scrutiny (Lewandowsky et al., 2015). The conspirators are said to cover up their actions by spreading disinformation – implying that those who try to

debunk this conspiracy theory are actually a part of the conspiracy (see Douglas et al., 2017). In the Polish context, this leaves those who object to the attempt to re-write history (by presenting the Round Table agreements as a conspiracy of the elites) vulnerable to political attacks. Indeed, the current debate about the Round Table agreement at least partially stems from the ruling party's wish to delegitimize its rivals, as the criticism of the Round Table has become a "convenient weapon in political battles" (see Reykowski, 2020, this issue). While questioning the outcomes of any negotiation is natural and perhaps inevitable, it is important to remember that fundamental social and political changes might inherently lead to a certain degree of disappointment – because they are likely to create great, unrealistic expectations.

Conclusion

A peaceful transition to democracy, such as the one that took place following the Round Table Talks in Poland, requires the parties' faith that "the price of peace is cheaper than the cost of war"; that is, that they could gain more through compromise and negotiation than through the use of power and violence. As stressed by both Reykowski and Grzelak, such faith is the result of a complex set of objective geopolitical, social and economic factors. This reminds us that, as social psychologists who aim to develop interventions to promote peace and reconciliation, we must be humble in estimating our ability to effect change (see Rouhana, 2011).

Only when the right external (non-psychological) circumstances arrive are the conflicting parties ready to engage in the exchange of concrete and symbolic resources of power and moral-social acceptance. To the extent that the exchange was successful and the two parties managed to reach an agreement and restore the impaired dimensions in their identity, it is important to remember – and remind those who are disappointed with its outcomes – that this agreement is just one step in a long staircase towards a more prosperous society, as even "successful revolutions at best create conditions for future growth" (Osiatynski, 1991).

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