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Editor's Note

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Editor's Note

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Several of the articles in this issue had their origin in a two-day roundtable discussion on the psychological dimensions of peacemaking, at the Oxford Process retreat in Cats Alley, Oxfordshire. The articles include a discussion of the impact of trauma on peacemaking (Eugen Koh); an examination of progressive policies toward mental health and psychosocial support programs in conflict situations in the Netherlands (Lira Low); a reflection on the life and work of Mahatma Gandhi from a psychological perspective (Charles Strozier); a discussion of the use of the concept of “human givens” to build a model for peacebuilding (Ivan Tyrrell); an examination of the role of psychology, particularly the “states of mind” of mediators in peacemaking (Irene Bruna Seu); an analysis of our present institutions of governance, suggesting that they may not be up to the task of meeting the challenges we face in the twenty-first century (John Alderdice); and a discussion of the crucial role of relationship building and informality during peacemaking (Nita Yawanarajah).

Conflicts involve trauma, raising the question: Are the combatants who become negotiators themselves the victims of trauma and how may their behavior, and especially their negotiating ability, be compromised by a mental condition they are not aware of? Living with trauma impedes trust. Are the difficulties the combatants, now negotiators, have earning the trust of the other due to the traumatic state they are in, and does the collective trauma that postconflict societies suffer make it difficult for them to rule themselves as they are because they are unaware that they are living with post-traumatic stress disorder?

Trauma can have many origins, and the lived experience of war and flight can build layers of trauma. Added to the trauma of war is the trauma of flight, often as refugees make their way west from Syria; the trauma of the journey, with refugees packed like sardines into tiny overcrowded and less-than-seaworthy vessels; and the trauma of uncertainty during and after refugee status processing, camp confinement, again the overcrowding, and worries about family left behind and a possible future in a new country that is culturally and linguistically different. Cultural trauma occurs when “members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways.”¹

In “The Impact of Trauma on Peace Processes,” Eugen Koh advances a model he calls “complex cultural trauma” to examine “how the traumatic experiences of individual leaders and their collective constituents, their people, influence their respective abilities to engage in peace processes.” He highlights the problems of shame and avoidance following trauma and describes what happens “when an ‘encapsulated’ past traumatic experience is reactivated or ‘triggered’: the individual and collective minds regress to a level that limits their ability to think about complex situations in the ways required within peace processes.” Koh also discusses how trauma affects the relationship between leaders and their people and how traumatized collectives choose a particular type of leader who promises to save them from their predicament.

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Leaders who fail to fulfill that promise find scapegoats among them or create external enemies. Only the enemy is real; hence the intractability of conflicts.

In the Middle East, for example, trauma from decades of conflict and war has an impact on its leaders and their people. As Koh points out, “the traumatic experiences of the leaders will not only shape how they see the world, especially the other, but will also affect their capacity to consider objectively the options before them.” Complicating the situation is the fact that “traumatized populations, individually and collectively, also think and behave in a particular way and will elect a particular kind of leader. The dynamics between leaders and their constituents, which are already complex in ‘normal’ populations in peacetime, are made even more complicated when all concerned are traumatized.” Moreover, third-party participants or mediators in a peace process who do not come from traumatized backgrounds or from agencies such as the United Nations rarely attribute the truculence of the disputing parties to their ongoing experience of trauma—parties cannot become unstuck from their binary positions not because they do not want to but because they are unable psychologically to do so.

Koh explores some of the underlying psychodynamic dimensions entrenching intractability, with special attention to the impact of trauma on the processes of peacemaking and peacebuilding, situations where some of the mediators might be traumatized but appear to be functioning well while their trauma remains encapsulated, or the more likely situations where parties to the negotiating process are traumatized and come from communities highly traumatized by conflict. “If mediators can take into account the trauma each side has suffered,” Koh writes, “and they are prepared for the possibility that either party might be ‘triggered’ with an emotional eruption, they will have begun the task of creating the safe and supportive environment needed for the peace process. The next step in what may be referred to as a ‘trauma-informed peace process’ is to address the problem of shame by encouraging a general, respectful attitude and facilitating empathetic understanding of each other’s experience of the conflict as it arises.”

In “A Crisis of Needs: Coordinating Mental Health and Psychosocial Support Responses in Syria and Europe,” Lira Low addresses some of these concerns, highlighting the Netherlands’ mental health and psychosocial support programs (MHPSS). She offers recommendations for coordinating these programs for Syrian refugees and internally displaced persons in the Middle East with those available to Syrian asylum seekers in Europe.

Some of the challenges arise because of the range of diversity among the refugees. The key to the success and effectiveness of any MHPSS program is the eventual empowerment and involvement of the target group in their own self-agency and healing journey. The involvement of the Syrian community is key. Besides providing translators for different dialects of Syrian Arabic, that involvement is “equally important,” Low points out, “for the target group’s dignity and to ensure that the programs are relevant and accessible. Community involvement creates ownership and sustainability of programs in an area that is heavily stigmatized.”

Low points out that among Syrians, psychological help is seen as a service that is relevant only for the unsound of mind “rather than as part of a person’s overall health and well-being.” This stigma is one of the biggest barriers to MHPSS success.

In addition, Low writes, “the Syrian community has particular notions to explain illness, and expectations of treatment often involve the ‘white doctor’s coat and prescribed pills’ combination.” These barriers are difficult to overcome but crucial to address. “Ethnic, religious, and tribal identities attached to traditional leaders can also be obstacles to seeking mental health support. These shifting identities have been used in the past by the Syrian government. They are obstacles

that impact displaced people, reinforcing the need for community involvement to help drive, design, and implement MHPSS programs with detailed local knowledge.”

Charles Strozier’s article, “Psychological Reflections on Mahatma Gandhi and the Future of Satyagraha,” alternates between a psychological reading of Erik Erikson’s *Gandhi’s Truth* and Gandhi’s *My Experiments with Truth*. Both books, Strozier tells us, had a profound impact on his own life and his dedication to peacebuilding.

“The larger point of the article,” Strozier writes, “is to reflect on the future of satyagraha or nonviolence.” Gandhi’s own meanings of satyagraha are often difficult to accept, “given the psychological violence that infected his form of nonviolence.” Gandhi’s flaws were many but should not distract us from what remains important: the principle of nonviolence, “an immutable tenet of his legacy,” Strozier writes, as profoundly relevant now as it was when it was first articulated over a hundred years ago. An acknowledgment of Gandhi’s flaws, Strozier adds, should “challenge us to formulate our own meanings of nonviolence (given our own flaws), since some form of satyagraha may be the only hope of survival for a world threatened with ultimate destruction.” Nevertheless, Strozier points out, Erikson was troubled by Gandhi’s righteousness and “demanding moralism.” “A demanding moralism,” Erikson writes, “won’t work.” We cannot pretend to deny “our inner ambiguities, ambivalences, and instinctual conflicts,” he adds. The alternative is a kind of “moralistic terrorism” that drives our worst inclinations and feelings underground, “to remain there until riotous conditions of uncertainty or chaos” encourage their emergence with redoubled and often deadly energy. “Excess and riot follow repression and suppression,” Erikson writes at another point, “precisely because of the autocratic and blind nature” of moralistic restraint. Moralism imposes authoritarian behavior; it requires strict adherence to “rigid rules that must be obeyed” and punishes offenders.

“The essence of achieving satisfactory outcomes always comes down to satisfying mutual needs,” Ivan Tyrrell writes in his article, “Psychological Dimensions of Peacemaking.” “But this outcome presupposes an understanding of innate human needs, what we call ‘human givens’ (the physical and emotional needs that are planted in us at the moment of conception).

“Because innate emotional needs are little understood by politicians, diplomats, and the general public, they are often unmet in the environment. That failure causes havoc as these needs play out in misdirected and chaotic ways, including politically. [Though] many dynamics are involved in domestic and international relations, . . . there is now an urgent need to focus on this missing piece of the equation because, when leaders decide on policies and enact decisions that prevent basic human needs from being met or inhibit us from using our innate resources to the full, anxiety rises in the population and disenchantment and conflict automatically result. In peacemaking, ignorance of this factor means negotiations and peace talks will not be rooted in solid ground and will be less likely to succeed.” Using the “human givens” approach, Tyrrell looks at “a new paradigm of understanding human needs as a foundation for moving forward” and assesses “how we learn and how that affects our progress.” He also describes “the crucial role of cults in politics, tribalism, and religion, group behavior patterns whereby human needs are hijacked often for ill purposes.”

“In States of Mind in Conflict: Offerings and Translations from the Psychoanalytic and Psychosocial Fields,” Irene Bruna Seu presents a sweeping overview of the literature in both fields.

She differentiates between “inside” and “outside” approaches to mediation. The two are interconnected: “The ‘inside’ in people’s interior dynamics can never be fully or properly understood without the ‘outside’ and vice-versa.” This framing, she suggests, “has important implications for understanding how human beings operate and the interactions between people,

and consequently, for understanding mediation processes.” She argues for a “a new field that is ‘in-between’ and enables new formulations” of mediation protocols. The psychosocial “in-between” model she develops is “both *inter*-subjective—between individuals and groups, parties in conflict, parties in the mediation, including mediators—and *intra*-subjective, which refers to the fluctuations, tensions, and conflict ordinarily happening in people’s minds but also to the states of mind of traumatized parties.” She continues: “Through a psychosocial theoretical framework, it is possible to articulate how the structural informs and shapes the ‘personal’ and vice-versa; for example, how unresolved or unacknowledged trauma can lead to a resurgence of conflict. This *psychosocial* formulation is transformative because it complexifies the understanding the conflicting parties and how their minds operate. It breaks down disciplinary barriers and is able to attend to both social and group dimensions and the individual’s psychic and emotional damage and how it gets transmitted across generations, by contextualizing the parties’ responses and behaviors within their sociopolitical-cultural histories. This psychosocial framing translates into an appreciation that what is brought to mediation are minds at war with each other and with themselves and that minds are not monolithic and fixed but conflicted, fluid, and fragmented, representing different internal and external constituencies.”

This psychosocial “in-between” orientation always emphasizes that mediation is above all a human encounter, that mediation is about “getting inside the parties’ minds, understanding the hurt, and listening to the stories, narratives, and histories lived in the present to find a middle ground both parties can live in.

“Because people and their human stories form an integral part of it, much of what happens in mediation processes is talking and listening, through which both sides come closer to each other. We cannot neglect the hard distributive bargaining part of mediation, particularly in high-level international mediation. Yet, understanding the minds of all actors—including the mediators’—is the first necessary step toward engaging with the unspoken and hidden stories that hide behind claims, positions, posturing, and sudden and inexplicable collapses of the process.” The article concludes with recommendations to enhance and expand the mediator’s skills.

In “Conflict, Complexity, and Cooperation,” John Alderdice explores the thesis that “we are at a time of historical inflection.” He asks whether liberalism—the rules-based set of behaviors adhered to by the international community in place since the end of the Second World War—can evolve and adapt to a new and very different political and cultural climate, whether participatory democracy as we know it is able to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century or is just on pause. “The change in the seat of authority from the sixteenth century on,” he writes, “with the replacement of political and religious hierarchies by participatory democracy and Enlightenment philosophies based on rationalism has seen a remarkable period of progress in science, technology, education, medicine, governance, trade, economics, and the rule of law.

“The twenty-first century, however, has ushered in a series of reversals for liberal democracy, the fraying of the international rules-based order that emerged after the two world wars and a collapse of public confidence in the institutions and methods based on the rationalist approach.” “The old forms are dissolving,” he argues. “The time has come for the emergence of a new paradigm.” He advances three developments that “may point toward the next evolutionary way station: the emergence of complexity science, an appreciation that our emotions are a positive evolutionary advantage rather than a flaw to be overcome, and a focus on relationships rather than simply on individuals.”

Alderdice writes: “If we appreciate that there is justifiable anger about widespread corruption, and frustration with unfairness, broken promises, and the undeliverable prospectus of equality; if

we focus on fairness, cooperation, community, and a radical new way of understanding based on complexity theories and science, will it bring peace, stability and prosperity? We cannot be sure; indeed, one of the key insights of complexity science is that the resilience of systems brings outcomes that are not predictable.”

We have to appreciate, he warns, “that liberalism must move beyond being concerned only about individual liberty for some, rather than about freedom of choice for all—including those with whom I disagree. This requires a pluralist form of governance not because every opinion or choice is as good as any other but because I have no defense against the person who believes that their truth can be imposed on me, if I act in that way toward them. If I am to be free to make my choices, then I must be prepared to negotiate the creation of a society where those who have a different perspective from me not only believe but also feel that they are being taken seriously and treated fairly and respectfully, as individuals and as communities.”

“The old forms,” he concludes, “are dissolving, and we must look to the emergence of a new paradigm. Perhaps these three elements—the emergence of complexity science, the appreciation that our emotions are a positive evolutionary advantage rather than a flaw to be overcome, and a focus on the significance of relationships rather than simply on individuals themselves—may point toward a path for survival and our next evolutionary way station.” The question hangs. “We know that complexity makes for greater unpredictability and while that itself produces anxiety, it seems it is also necessary if we are to evolve and adapt to the uncertain future ahead.”

Nita Yawanarajah, in “Informality and the Social Art of Mediation: How Pure Mediators Create Conditions for Making Peace,” stresses the importance of informality as “the currency through which mediators create the atmospheric conditions for relational moments to occur in peace processes.” “Informality is ubiquitous in diplomacy,” she writes. “A big part of a diplomat’s life is socializing informally. A diplomat’s calendar is often filled with lunches, dinners, and receptions. Diplomats use occasions for sharing food and drink to create an environment that promotes familiarity, friendship, and opportunities to exchange information with relevant people. At the United Nations, diplomats negotiate informally”; thus, the focus of the article: “to explore how informality permeates peace processes, helping mediators establish and build relationships of trust that make it possible for the disputing parties to be heard and to receive the mediators’ information, messages, and suggestions.”

The purpose of her study is “to advance knowledge on the practice of pure mediation” and to address “the research gaps identified in the literature by conceptualizing peacemaking as a complex process in which the mediation team’s informal interactions complement the lead peacemaker’s formal exchanges. The research aims to demystify the mediation team’s hidden efforts during a peace process.” Yawanarajah uses three case studies, from Africa, Asia, and Latin America, “to explore the ‘how’ of pure mediation.” Though, she points out, much has been written about these cases, previous research “has given limited attention to analyzing the informal efforts undertaken during the peace processes. This gap justifies examining how informality manifested in and impacted the peace processes.” Her research focuses on three very different conflicts and their peacemaking trajectories: in the Indonesian province of Aceh, El Salvador, and Sierra Leone, she found that mediators, whether they were international organizations or nongovernmental organizations, conducted the peace processes at a formal and an informal level. When mediation team members acted as informal mediators during the peace process, this informal process helped the lead mediators better understand the disputing parties, bridge the divide between them, and forge mutually acceptable outcomes.

The foreword is by Gabrielle Rifkind, founding director of the Oxford Process.

Note

¹ Jeffery C. Alexander, Ron Eyerman, Bernhard Giesen, Neil J. Smelser, and Piotr Sztompka, *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 1.