

FINAL REPORT

ON THE

GROUP PROCESS SESSIONS
JANUARY - MAY 1993

OF THE

MIDDLE EAST EDUCATIONAL FELLOWSHIP PROGRAM
INSTITUTE FOR SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC POLICY
IN THE MIDDLE EAST
JOHN F. KENNEDY SCHOOL OF GOVERNMENT
HARVARD UNIVERSITY

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INTRODUCTION

"I'm leaving, I've had enough of this disrespect." said a participant during the first of a series of group sessions of the Middle East Fellows of the Institute for Social and Economic Policy in the Middle East at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government.

"I like these sessions," he said at the last one. "If we had another semester, there would be no end to what we could do," added a participant as the others nodded in agreement.

So began and ended a series of group sessions required of the Middle East Fellows of the Institute. Between those sessions a carefully designed and implemented process moved a group that had refused to continue its meetings to one that was able to discuss even the most sensitive of issues.

Between January and May of 1993, four group process sessions were held with the Middle East Fellows of the Institute for Social and Economic Policy in the Middle East at the Kennedy School of Harvard University (Institute). The aim of these sessions was to provide an opportunity for the fellows to discuss their regional conflicts with mutual respect and understanding in an effort to build long term relationships that might eventually support future joint health care projects in the Middle East.

I was hired by the Institute to facilitate the second semester sessions, following unsuccessful facilitated meetings during the first semester, which led to strained relations among the fellows. The second semester process created a safe environment for the fellows to learn to discuss the conflicts among their peoples.

DESCRIPTION

The sessions were preceded by individual meetings with each fellow. At the first session, a statement considered highly insulting by some of the fellows jeopardized the continuation of the sessions. After a series of intensive telephone conversations and separate meetings with the Arab fellows and then the Israeli fellows, the sessions were reconvened. Five of the eight fellows and two spouses attended the second session and continued to attend throughout the semester. By the last session, it was clear to all the participants that they had, in fact, achieved their goal of learning to discuss their political conflicts with mutual respect and understanding, even as they disagreed.

Individual Sessions

Prior to the group sessions, as facilitator, I met individually with each of the eight fellows. During these informal meetings, which were held in coffee shops and fellows' homes, I learned about the fellows' goals and concerns for the upcoming sessions. The primary goal, common among all the fellows, was to learn to respectfully discuss the Arab-Israeli and Israeli-Palestinian conflicts, by learning how to listen to each other, even as they ardently disagreed. As a result of their first semester sessions, their primary concerns were the possibility of hurtful and disrespectful statements, the facilitator failing to maintain control over the group, and that there might be an attempt to avoid discussions of the real issues pertaining to the conflicts.

Session One: The Fateful Statement

At the first group session, I presented draft ground rules, which included: a mission statement outlining the goal of the sessions; responsibilities of the participants; responsibilities of the facilitator; record of the sessions; confidentiality; and decision-making. With minor revisions, the ground rules were adopted by the group.

The session was attended by all eight fellows, two Israeli spouses and one Arab spouse. I asked each participant to tell a story about how the Arab-

Israeli or Israeli-Palestinian conflict had personally impacted him/her. Clarifying questions were permitted, but not political questions, which attempted to de-legitimize stories.

The stories created a dynamic tension among the fellows and their spouses. All felt great empathy for their kinsman, and most felt both empathy and disregard for their "enemy's" stories of human suffering. In the last 15 minutes of the session, a statement was made concerning the trustworthiness of Arabs. It was taken as highly offensive by most of the Arab fellows. One put on his coat to leave, but was persuaded to stay. As the facilitator, I used the statement and the ensuing responses to illustrate the work required to reach the fellows' goal of building relationships among themselves, based on mutual respect and understanding.

Post-Session One

Some of the fellows refused to attend a second session as a result of what was taken as a humiliating statement. After a series of telephone calls, I held separate meetings with the Arab fellows and the Israeli fellows.

These sessions were convened to build proposals and get agreement on a set of conditions that would allow another round of the sessions to occur. During the session with the Arab students, we talked about the impact of the statement, the role of apologies, and how to ensure an acceptable level of respect at future meetings. The meeting resulted in the group developing a number of options for convening the next session. The meeting with the Israeli fellows centered on clarification of the intent of the statement; cultural differences, especially relative to rules of discourse and communication; and determining a response to the reaction and conditions of the Arab fellows.

Eventually, a second session was convened under the following arrangement. The original ground rules were revised to include a section on communication, which explicitly outlined acceptable norms for interactions. At the outset of the second session, we were to go around the table and each fellow was to individually acknowledge acceptance of the new ground rules. This acceptance was taken as a tacit acknowledgement of misdeeds and a commitment to ensure it did not happen again. (See the appendix for the ground rules.)

Session Two: A Listening Exercise

This session was designed to illustrate the limits of our ability to listen and comprehend highly emotional information. The session began with a discussion of the lack of a common vocabulary for discussing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. For example, the territories may be called the West Bank, Judea and Samaria, or Palestine. They may be referred to as occupied, liberated, or administered. These examples were used to show how a speaker's word choice can impact a listener's ability to hear.

I then conducted a listening exercise. Each participant was asked to write a two-sentence definition of the Israeli-Palestinian and/or the Arab-Israeli conflict. I collected them and read each one after identifying a participant who was to repeat back the essence of the written statement. Fellow after fellow failed to accurately repeat back the essence of the statement, sometimes omitting only its highly emotional aspects.

This illustrated the difficulty of accurately hearing emotionally charged statements and led to agreement that the listener and the speaker both had a responsibility for hearing. Speakers could use less charged words and a listener had to actively listen rather than listen while concurrently developing a response. It also led to an agreement that each participant had to give the others greater margins of error and opportunities for clarification before responding to a perceived insult.

During the second half of the session, we identified similarities among all the conflict definitions, and we set out to develop joint statements. In this exercise, possible statements were proposed. If someone fundamentally disagreed with one, the statement was dropped, and we moved onto another proposal. The group was not allowed to debate the merits of a statement. Those that eventually enjoyed the consensual support of the fellows present were the result of modest revisions made to proposed statements. They were:

The Palestinian issue is two peoples fighting over the same land and both have deep beliefs that they have the sole right over this land.

There cannot be peace between the Israelis and the Arabs unless the Israeli people and the Palestinian people resolve their conflict.

Session Three: Democracy

At the third session, we talked about "democracy" including the Israeli democracy, the democratization of West Bank Palestinians as a result of

the Intifadah, and the limits of democracy in the Middle East. We broke into pairs and discussed actions that could be taken by individual citizens to promote peaceful relations rather than enemy images between Israelis, Palestinians, and Arabs.

The discussion of democracy built on the foundation of the commonalities discovered in the second session. All agreed that the desired form of government for a Palestinian state is a democracy. According to the fellows, there has never been a war between two democracies. The Israelis raised the concern that an agreement with the current Palestinian leadership might be worthless once those leaders are gone. On the other hand, if a democratic Palestinian state were to be established, the Israelis said they would feel their security less threatened. Some of the Palestinian fellows then offered examples of how the intifadah was being democratically governed by the Palestinians in the territories and that it was, in effect, preparing the population for a democratic state.

The fellows then divided into pairs and discussed individual actions that had in the past, or could in the future, promote peace. This discussion had a positive effect on the discussions as many told stories of actions they had personally taken, and the fellows recognized their responsibility to carry out acts of peace, even under current conditions.

Session Four: Achieving the Goal

The fourth session was designed to test whether or not the group had accomplished its original mission. The goal was to see if the group was able to discuss a range of issues with mutual respect and understanding. To do so, the fellows selected three topics and discussed each for approximately 30 minutes. The topics selected were: response to the returning of deportees to the West Bank; what the situation in the territories might look like in five years; and personal feelings about being an occupying force.

During the session, many core issues were approached and the group held together tightly. Examples of the difficult issues that were raised, and appropriately discussed, included: why Palestinian mothers let their children throw stones at armed soldiers; being an Israeli soldier with orders that include shooting at unarmed children; and whether or not a Palestinian could or should accept the legitimacy of the establishment of the State of Israel.

ANALYSIS

The process design used during the group sessions allowed seven, of the original eleven, participants to achieve their stated goal. Individual meetings, ground rules, a listening exercise, and a consensual decision rule contributed to their success. If the process design had employed a listening exercise at the first session, rather than the storytelling exercise, which brought out raw emotion too quickly, perhaps nine or ten participants would have achieved their goal.

The Benefit of Individual Meetings

The process design included individual meetings because of a cultural expectation of meeting privately with a convener of a potentially difficult group meeting prior to meeting as a group, to learn of the difficulties and legitimize the pain of the first semester sessions, to begin to build trust, and to learn of the participants' concerns and goals.

The individual meetings between each participant and the facilitator served to build trust and confidence and to dispel some of the inevitable suspicion of the process. The meetings gave participants an opportunity to ask questions, voice concerns, and meet the facilitator personally. During the meetings, the facilitator identified the shared goals among the participants, began to develop ground rules, responded to concerns about the role of the facilitator, and discussed appropriate expectations of facilitation.

Without the individual meetings with the fellows, during which I established relationships and credibility, the sessions would have been unlikely to continue beyond the fateful statement made during the first session. Limited as it was, I was able to draw on the trust and confidence generated during these meetings to convene the interim meetings prior to the second group session.

Ground Rules

Ground rules are a crucial element of process designs for multi-meeting efforts. They govern the proceedings of the group, contribute to unifying the group at the outset of its discussions, and provide an arena for translating emotional issues into concrete proposals and solutions.

The ground rules make explicit the mission of the group and the roles of the participants and facilitator. In addition, they can assuage individuals'

concerns about issues of confidentiality with respect to both written records of sessions and future discussions. Developing ground rules are the first task the group undertakes. Since the ground rules do not relate directly to the substance of the conflicts the group will discuss, they allow the group to more easily and effectively engage in a consensus-based decision making process and achieve a quick success.

To convene a second meeting of the group, there needed to be an assurance that no further insults would occur. The existing forum of the ground rules provided an opportunity to satisfy that concern. A ground rule concerning communication was added, and those on responsibilities of the participants were revised. In addition, tacit apologies were made through acceptance of the new ground rules. Thus, the forum of the ground rules allowed for the creation of concrete proposals that, when accepted, led to the second meeting.

Listening through Psychological Barriers

A conscious process must ensure some capability for listening when there is a preponderance of psychological barriers (Heradstveit 1981). A challenge then is to help the group to acknowledge that they (as we all do) have an inability to fully hear emotionally difficult material. If the participants can make such an acknowledgement, they can be encouraged to give the speakers margins of error, and therefore, opportunities to clarify seemingly inappropriate or insulting statements, before responding. In addition, participants can come to understand the responsibility of a speaker, who wants to be heard, legitimized, and responded to fairly, to make word choices that help the listener to hear.

All the participants were impressed with the information the listening exercise provided to them. Since almost all had similar shortcomings, the exercise served to unite them in their humanness.

The Benefits of a Consensual Process

A process that has within it an opportunity to reach consensus offers the special benefit of allowing everyone to be "in." It is extremely powerful to find everyone in the room on the same side of an issue. With majority decision-making rules, the minority remains in disagreement with the majority. In some situations, accomplishing a majority is insignificant because the minority does not passively accept the group's decision. For example, with an unequal number of Israelis and Palestinians, majority

support for some statements could have been easily achieved, but with little meaning.

On the other hand, the success of developing consensual statements encouraged the group; they were almost shocked to find they could all agree with them. Prior to the second meeting, there was no commitment to a third. After the statements were agreed to, the participants all asked when the next session would be.

One must note, however, that a number of the fellows chose not to continue to participate. One of those was the most extreme person of the group. It is doubtful that a consensus would have emerged in the room with that person present. This person may not have been able to agree with the statements, and other participants may not have been able to participate as freely. In this instance, the process strengthened the moderate majority of the group and isolated a more extremist fellow.

CONCLUSION

The process design used for the group sessions of the Middle East Fellows of the Institute had an impact on their ability to reach their goal of learning to listen to each other, even as they disagreed so as to build relationships among themselves, based on mutual respect and understanding.

For the seven who participated in the sessions, a safe environment was created that allowed legitimate concerns to be expressed and heard. People began to understand their own limitations and took responsibility for their word choice and manner of speaking. The group built a foundation that provided the potential for the trust required to approach painful, core issues. (Touval 1982). A better process design may have engaged some of the four who chose to cease participating.

We can continue to learn how to improve process designs and how to better adapt what we know about process and human interactions to more closely respond to the unique characteristics of participants and their goals. However, to ensure that we do not cause damage through Track two efforts, before we bring together peoples in conflict, we must have a well-thought out plan for assisting them through human limitations to achieve their desired outcome, that is, a process design.

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Group Process Sessions -- Ground Rules

1. MISSION STATEMENT

The Middle East Fellows seek to build relationships among themselves, based on mutual respect and understanding, which may eventually support joint professional projects in the Middle East. To accomplish this mission, the Fellows have identified the need to learn to listen, even as they disagree with each other.

2. RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE PARTICIPANTS

Participants will: 1) communicate their interests and concerns to each other and be accountable for points of disagreement and 2) strive to listen to each other. Participants are defined as all individuals attending any sessions.

3. COMMUNICATION

Communication among the participants will maintain a sense of common respect and dignity, for example, by allowing a speaker to complete his or her comments before responding and by refraining from the use of offensive terms and statements.

4. RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE FACILITATOR

The facilitator will help to: 1) establish agenda; 2) identify points of agreement and disagreement; 3) remain neutral with respect to issues; and 4) actively facilitate sessions. The facilitator is obligated to hold information in confidence if requested to do so.

5. RECORD OF THE SESSIONS

No formal record will be kept of each session. Upon concluding the final session, the facilitator will write a brief summary report for the Institute. This report will not attribute comments or suggestions to individual participants.

6. CONFIDENTIALITY

Participants and the facilitator are free to discuss the sessions with others, but will not attribute statements or comments to participants either during the semester or upon completion of the program. During or upon completion of the sessions, participants may make statements to the press regarding their own opinions, but will not attribute statements to other participants. If an article appears that misquotes or inaccurately represents an individual, that individual will report such an occurrence to the group.

7. DECISION-MAKING

The group will operate by consensus, meaning that decisions will be made only if there is no dissent by any participant. Absence will be equivalent to not dissenting.

REFERENCES:

McDonald, John W., Jr. and Diane B. Bendahmane (eds.), *Conflict Resolution: Track Two Diplomacy*, Washington, D.C.: Foreign Service Institute, U.S. State Department of Service, 1987.

Heradstveit, Daniel, *The Arab-Israeli Conflict: Psychological Barriers to Peace*, Oslo: Universitetsforlaget (Second Edition) 1981.

Touval, Saadia, *The Peace Brokers*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982.

POSTSCRIPT: Upon their return home, a number of the Middle East Fellows who participated in the sessions came together to jointly develop a pre-natal care program on the West Bank.