Prenegotiation Development of Optimism in Intractable Conflict

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Abstract

Except when there is substantial third-party pressure for settlement, participants in intractable conflict will only enter negotiation if they are motivated to end the conflict and optimistic about negotiation's chances of success. The sources of such optimism are explored using case material from three intractable interethnic conflicts that were ultimately resolved by negotiation. In all three cases, optimism developed during pre-negotiation communication between the parties. Also there were two main channels of communication, each channel providing credibility to the other and serving as a back-up if the other failed. In two of the cases the communication was face-to-face and friendly, but in the third it was distant and mediated by a chain of two intermediaries. A possible reason for this difference is that the parties were positively interdependent

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in the first two cases but not in the third. The paper concludes with a summary of three psychological experiments that demonstrate the impact of positive vs. negative interdependence.

Keywords

negotiation – prenegotiation – optimism – intractable conflict – readiness theory

It is hard to get negotiation[3] going in intractable (severe and prolonged) conflict. Both sides are likely to have normatively sanctioned goals of defeating or even destroying the other, together with high hostility and a zero-sum assumption that there is no middle ground. Distrust – a belief that the other side is only interested in defeating our side – also stands in the way of negotiation. Yet in many such conflicts negotiation finally begins, and it sometimes leads to settlement. The aim of this research was to better understand the circumstances and processes by which this takes place.

The research involved exploratory case studies of the conditions and events leading to successful negotiation in three conflicts between dominant and subordinate ethnic groups: the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that was settled (for a period of seven years) by the 1993 Oslo negotiations, the South African conflict over apartheid that was settled by the 1993 Multi-party Negotiation Forum, and the Northern Ireland conflict that was settled by the 1998 Good Friday Agreement. These case studies have been separately reported (Pruitt 1997, 2007 and 2012), but this article takes an overview of all three. It focuses on the development of optimism that negotiation will lead to a mutually acceptable agreement, which – along with motivation to end the conflict – is a critical precondition for entry into negotiation unless third-party pressure for settlement is overwhelming.[4]

Our method involved constructing a chronology for each case, based on all available books and articles and, for Northern Ireland, three interviews. Various verified theories were employed as screening devices to help identify the important events in each case, and hypotheses about the likely causes of the most important events were developed by means of process tracing

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3 The term "negotiation" includes mediation, which is regarded as third-party assisted negotiation.

4 I wish to thank Amira Schiff, who called my attention to cases in which third-party pressure forced non-optimistic parties into negotiation.

(George & Bennett 2005). These hypotheses were used to construct speculative theory about the conditions and processes leading to negotiation in general. In the Oslo case, the main screening device was Zartman's well-supported ripeness theory (1989, 2000), which concerns the psychological processes in leaders as they move toward negotiation. In addition, without the author's explicit awareness, commonsense and theories known to the author as a social psychologist served as additional screening devices. In the other two cases, the author's readiness theory (Pruitt 2005, 2015), which had been developed during analysis of the first case, was added as a screening device. The theories just described also helped in inferring cause and effect during process tracing.

In ripeness theory, the unit of analysis is the dyad as a whole – the parties to the conflict viewed collectively. The theory employs the language of necessary and sufficient causation. Ripeness is a necessary but not sufficient condition for negotiation to begin. There are two necessary components of ripeness: (1) A mutually hurting stalemate, that is, a costly deadlock that cannot be escaped by escalation. Such a stalemate is optimally supplemented by a recent or impending catastrophe. (2) A mutually perceived way out, that is, a perception on both sides that "a negotiated solution is possible and that the other party shares that sense and the willingness to search for a solution" (Zartman & de Soto 2010:6).

The author's readiness theory is mainly a restatement of ripeness theory in terms that fit the causal model used by most psychologists, which examines the impact of variables on each other. The unit of analysis is a single party to the conflict, rather than both parties collectively. Readiness and its components are treated as variables. The greater a party's readiness, the more likely it will be to propose or agree to negotiation. Readiness also encourages entry into exploratory prenegotiation, but less readiness is needed for that purpose than for entry into full-fledged negotiation. Readiness is enhanced by two variables that parallel the two components of ripeness: (1) motivation to end the conflict or simply "motivation" and (2) optimism about achieving agreement or simply "optimism." Motivation is stronger to the extent that a party sees (a) that it is not winning the conflict or (more motivating still) is losing it and (b) that the conflict is producing intolerable costs or risks. A third common source of readiness is (3) pressure to end the conflict from powerful third parties. This variable is stronger the more powerful the third parties and the greater their pressure. All three sources of readiness were seen on both sides in our cases.

Readers who are familiar with the hypothetical deductive approach to research may find it strange that we employed a number of theories in our research. But in case study (and other inductive) research, the more theories the merrier. Each theory calls attention to a different set of events and causal

sequences, enabling a fuller understanding of what happened in a case. Thus readiness theory, with its emphasis on variables, calls attention to the magnitude of such states as readiness, perceived future threat, and optimism. This facilitates examination of the development of these states, how changes in one state affect changes in another, and how different actors compare within a single case or across cases. Use of theories about internal politics or international systems would call attention to still other events and provide insight into still other causal sequences, for example, the decline of the Soviet Union may have hastened negotiation in all three of our cases. None of these theories is better than the others; rather all are needed for a full understanding of a case. This suggests the need for multidisciplinary teams in case study research and for providing broad training in the social and behavioral sciences to future users of that method.

Sources of Optimism in the Cases

In all three cases, the main source of optimism about negotiation was exploratory, back-channel (informal, secret) communication between the two sides.[5] The communication was very similar in the first two cases and rather different in the third.

In the Israeli-Palestinian case, Norwegians arranged for and chaired secret talks near Oslo between academics who were close to their government and officers of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). According to Wanis-St. John, "The atmosphere in the Oslo channel was one of intense contention over the substance combined with equally intense relationship building and trust," (2011: 95). Indeed the camaraderie was so intense that the participants sometimes spoke of a "spirit of Oslo." The parties had a common goal of finding a mutually acceptable solution to the conflict. After five such meetings over a period of about four months, the Israeli government became sufficiently optimistic that it sent diplomats to the meetings and formal, though still secret, negotiation began.

The similarity of the South African prenegotiation meetings to those at Oslo is uncanny. An executive of a British mining company arranged for and chaired secret meetings in England between white academics who were close to their government and officers of the African National Congress (ANC), which represented the dispossessed non-white majority. Again there was a full and frank

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5   See Pruitt (2008) and Wanis-St. John (2006, 2011) for discussions of why secrecy is so common in the prenegotiation of intractable conflicts.

discussion of most of the issues, and a friendly, trusting relationship developed (Waldmeir 1997). Indeed after a few meetings, the head of the white delegation told his wife that he would trust his life to the head of the non-white delegation. Both sides displayed a dedication to finding a shared vision of the future (Lieberfeld 2005). After three years of discussions, the optimism generated in these meetings allowed the government to recognize the ANC and free the political prisoners, which led to formal negotiation.

By contrast, in Northern Ireland, there were no face-to-face meetings. Instead, the parties communicated through intermediaries in a four-part chain, which is shown in Fig. 1 (Pruitt 2012). At one end of the chain was the head of Sinn Fein, the political arm of the Irish Republican Army (IRA), which was fighting for the interests of the nationalists.[6] At the other end were leaders of the British government, representing British interests and those of the unionists.[7] Intermediate in the chain were the leader of SDLP, a moderate nationalist political party, who talked with the head of Sinn Fein, and officials of the Irish Republic, who talked with the British government. These intermediaries also talked with each other. Conversations in various parts of this chain continued for about nine years, laying the groundwork for negotiation that began in 1988.

Despite these differences in the nature of the channel, the prenegotiation communication in all three cases went through the same two phases, each phase contributing to optimism. There was a getting acquainted phase, in which the parties exchanged information about their goals and concerns and developed what Kelman (1992) calls "working trust," a conviction that the other side was serious about escaping the conflict and willing to make

| Sinn Fein | SDLP | Irish Republic | Britain |

FIGURE 1   *Four-part communication chain in the Northern Ireland prenegotiation period*

6   Northern Ireland is a province of Great Britain. Its residents consist of two populations: one third are nationalists, who are mainly Catholic descendants of the original population, and two thirds are unionists, who are mainly Protestant descendants of Scottish immigrants. The nationalists consider themselves "Irish" and the unionists consider themselves "British." At the root of the conflict was the long history of unionist political and economic domination over the nationalists.

7   This communication channel might be considered a six-part chain, since Sinn Fein consulted with the IRA and the British government consulted with leaders of the main unionist party. But it is treated as a four-part chain because Sinn Fein and the British Government were the main participants at either end. See Pruitt (1994, 2003) for discussions of communication chains in negotiation.

concessions to achieve peace (1992). For example, in the South African prenegotiation, non-whites made it clear that their main goals were the abolishment of apartheid and the establishment of a true democracy in which all citizens would have equal voting rights. While not rejecting these goals, the whites indicated that they wished to leave the military and economy in current hands and voiced concerns about white economic, political and cultural rights under majority rule (Lieberfeld 2005). The non-whites were reassuring about most of these matters.

In the second phase, frameworks were developed – outlines of the agreement that would later be reached in formal negotiation.[8] These frameworks were much more detailed than is usually found in prenegotiation, probably because of the severe distrust and doubts about the existence of middle ground that become so widespread and ingrained in intractable conflict.

Having More than One Channel of Communication

Optimism also was built in a third way. In all three cases, there was a least one additional secret communication channel, involving a different set of people at each end, who conveyed much the same message that was being heard in the main channel. In the Middle East, Israel's prime minister communicated through a chain of two intermediaries with PLO President Yasser Arafat, confirming for both leaders what was being said at Oslo (Schiff 2012). In South Africa, Nelson Mandela, while still a prisoner, had about 50 conciliatory meetings with various members of the South African government (Mandela 1994; Welsh 2009). In Northern Ireland, an intermediary carried messages back and forth between British Intelligence and the deputy leader of Sinn Fein, increasing understanding on both sides and providing an element of trust to the relationship (O Dochartaigh 2011).

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8   The framework developed in the first five sessions of the Oslo talks is given in Abbas (1995). The framework developed in the South African negotiation is revealed in the common threads of the OAU's 1989 Harare Declaration (http://www.anc.org.za/show.php?id=3856), which was written by leaders of the ANC, and a speech calling for release of political prisoners and negotiation of a "new democratic constitution" made on February 2, 1990 by South Africa's prime minister, F.W. DeKlerk (http://www.disa.ukzn.ac.za/index.php?option=com_displaydc&recordID=spe19900202.026.021.000). The closest approximation to the Northern Ireland framework can be seen in the 1995 Frameworks documents published on February 22, 2005 by the British and Irish governments (http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/events/peace/docs/fd22295.htm), though these documents provide a larger role for a North-South body than was ultimately acceptable to the unionists.

If the same conciliatory message comes over two distinct channels, it can contribute to optimism in three ways: enhancing confidence in the validity of that message, suggesting that there is widespread agreement on the other side about that message, and enhancing faith that the other side's representative is honest and well informed.

There is another advantage to having more than one channel of communication in the prenegotiation period. If one channel fails, which can happen in various ways, another channel will be available to continue the process of conflict resolution. This point is illustrated by an incident during the Northern Ireland peace process. The channel involving British Intelligence stopped functioning because a reporter found out about it and wrote an exposé. This embarrassed the leaders on both sides, many of whose constituents thought it inappropriate to talk with the hated and distrusted people on the other side. The communication was stopped and the leaders hastened to put out exculpatory statements. Fortunately the longer and less obvious channel shown in Fig. 1 continued to function.

Positive Interdependence and Its Influence on Type of Communication

The rest of this article will be devoted to the question of why the prenegotiation communication differed so markedly between the first two cases and the third. Communication was face-to-face in the Middle East and South Africa, The participants came to see each other as sympathetic human beings and a warm, cooperative atmosphere developed. But in Northern Ireland, the prenegotiation involved arms-length communication through intermediaries. Some working trust developed but the initial hostility persisted, and it required heavy mediation efforts over a period of nine years for formal negotiation to ensue.

Part of the reason for this difference is that the prior IRA campaign was bloodier than that of the PLO and the ANC. But that does not explain the unusually friendly, cooperative atmosphere in the other two channels. Our explanation is that, at the time of prenegotiation, the parties were positively interdependent (both parties were positively dependent on the other) in the Middle East and South Africa, but not in Northern Ireland. A party is positively dependent on another if it needs the other party's help to achieve an important goal or goals. This contrasts with negative dependence, where the other party derives benefit from harming one's interests, and all the other party can offer is to stop its injurious behavior.

In the case of South Africa, the parties became positively interdependent in the late 1980s. A growing number of important white leaders correctly saw the ANC as uniquely capable of relieving the two main threats to white South Africa: (a) the non-white township revolts and periodic debilitating industrial strikes; and (b) a full-scale anti-apartheid sanctions movement in the outside world, which had produced a financial crisis and "(an) assault on the psyche of white South Africans" (Waldmeir 1998: 57). The ANC had been an adversary for years, but it was widely respected by the non-whites at home and large numbers of people abroad and hence was (correctly) seen as able to stop the non-white revolt and the strikes and to persuade the outer world to discontinue its sanctions. At the same time, top ANC leaders, prominently including Mandela, saw white cooperation as the only feasible route to a new political order that would include non-whites as equal players, which had been their main goal for decades. They could not beat the whites militarily, so they had to depend on them for help.

In the early 1980s, the Israeli government and the PLO also became positively interdependent. The Israeli government, under its new Labor Party leadership, became committed to establishing limited autonomy for the Palestinian territories under moderate Palestinian leadership. Such an arrangement was (erroneously) expected to provide two benefits: (a) reduce the likelihood of a revived Palestinian intifada, the "massive civil uprising" (Wanis-St. John 2011: 40) that had been put down by force in the late 1980s, and (b) stem the rise of Hamas, a radical Islamic resistance movement that was gaining strength in the Palestinian territories. At first the government relied on some ongoing negotiations with Palestinian moderates, but it quickly became apparent that no progress could be made in these talks without PLO approval. So it seemed necessary to rely on PLO cooperation to accomplish these aims.[9] Though the PLO had been an adversary for decades, it seemed moderate in comparison to Hamas. At the same time, the PLO was experiencing an economic and political crisis. It had lost most of its funding and feared that Hamas would replace it as the acknowledged leader of the Palestinians. These problems could be relieved if it gained political control of at least part of the Palestinian territories, but it had to depend on Israeli cooperation to achieve that end.

By contrast, there was no positive interdependence in the Northern Ireland case because the British and the unionists were negatively dependent on Sinn

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9   Israeli dependence on the PLO was misplaced. In the long run, the PLO was either unwilling or unable to prevent a revival of the intifada and to serve as a bulwark against Hamas. This may have been because, after the final implementing agreement was reached, the PLO was no longer positively dependent on Israel.

Fein/IRA, which had nothing to offer except to stop attacking them. It seems likely that Sinn Fein/IRA became positively dependent on the British when they realized that they could not beat them or assemble a winning alliance. Only with British cooperation could the nationalists be brought into equal political status with the unionists, which was Sinn Fein/IRA's eventual scaled-down goal. But positive dependence by one side is not enough to produce positive *inter*dependence. The absence of positive interdependence may help explain the lack of direct contact between the two sides during the prenegotiation period and the extended length of that period.

The broader theoretical point is that positive interdependence, where the parties need each other's voluntary cooperation beyond stopping their aggression, encourages positive feelings and direct contact, making it relatively easy to develop optimism and eventually launch negotiation. This greatly reduces (though does not always eliminate) the need for third party assistance to reach a mutually beneficial agreement. Negative interdependence, where each party gains by harming the other's interests, encourages the opposite, even when settling the conflict would be mutually beneficial. And if, as in Northern Ireland, one party is negatively dependent and the other positively dependent, the negative wins out because negative feelings are usually reciprocated and it takes two parties to converse and cooperate.

The impact of positive vs. negative interdependence can be seen in three psychological experiments from the past. Deutsch (1973) studied groups in a simulated work situation. In a positive ("promotive") interdependence condition, the situation forced them to work together to achieve benefit, while in a negative ("contrient") interdependence condition, each could achieve benefit only by harming the other's interests. Deutsch found that positive interdependence produced "more effective communication . . . more friendliness (and) helpfulness . . . (and) more coordination of effort" (1973: 26) than negative interdependence.

Sherif (1961), in his classical boys' camp studies got similar results. He first induced heavy conflict between two cabins of boys by engaging them in competitive games and other forms of negative interdependence. Then he produced reconciliation and mutual good will by making them positively interdependent. This was accomplished by producing a crisis in which the boys had to work together to remove a threat to the camp.

The third experiment was done by the author (Pruitt 1967). Two decompositions of the same prisoner's dilemma game were compared. The game that was decomposed is shown in Fig. 2a. Two parties, the row player and the column player, each must choose between options C and D. The four possible outcomes of these choices are shown in the cells of the matrix at the intersection

of their two choices, with the outcome to the row player shown first and that to the column player second. The numbers refer to units of whatever outcome is at stake, whether money, admiration, or anything else of value. Positive numbers refer to gains in value, negative numbers to loss of value. For example, if the row player chooses C and the column player chooses D, row will get 18 units of value and column will get none. If we assign the letters a and b to the top two cells (reading from left to right) and the letters c and d to the bottom two, then the game is a prisoner's dilemma if b>a>d>c for both players, as can be seen in Fig. 2a. If they are looking out only for themselves, both will choose D over C, because their outcomes are larger regardless of what the other party chooses. This will land them in cell d, which is less valuable for both of them than cell a, which would have resulted if both chose C. Many real-life situations have this reward structure, requiring a choice between a cooperative decision (C) and a selfish one (D), tempting both parties as individuals to behave selfishly but producing a more valuable outcome for both parties if both are cooperative.

Some prisoner's dilemmas can be decomposed into two identical matrices, one for the row player and the other for the column player. These matrices show outcomes for self and other for the same two options, C and D. When the choices are made and the outcomes from the two parties' choices are combined additively, the results are the outcomes in the four cells of the original prisoner's dilemma. Consider the decomposition shown in Fig. 2b. If both players choose C then the outcome is 0 + 12 = 12 for both players, which corresponds to the outcomes in cell a of Fig. 2a; if row choose C and column chooses D, then the outcome for row is 0 + 0 = 0 and the outcome for column is 12 + 6 = 18 as in cell b; and so on.

The decompositions shown in Figs. 2b and 2c, though derived from the same prisoner's dilemma, differ in the type of interdependence they seem to portray.

	C	D
C	12,12	0,18
D	18,0	6,6

a

	Your Gains	Other's Gains
C	0	12
D	6	0

b

	Your Gains	Other's Gains
C	6	6
D	12	−6

c

FIGURE 2   *A prisoner's dilemma (a) and two contrasting decompositions: (b) showing apparent positive interdependence and (c) showing apparent negative interdependence*

In Fig. 2b, the decomposition has the appearance of positive interdependence, since each party's success (gaining 12 units of value) seems to depend on cooperation by the other party. But in the second decomposition, shown in Fig. 2c, they appear to be negatively interdependent, with each party's best outcome (12) apparently achieved by harming the other party's welfare (–6).

The decomposed games were played again and again by same-sex pairs of students, with the outcomes converted into money. The results were an overwhelming preference for option C in the positively interdependent decomposition (Fig. 2b) and option D in the negatively interdependent decomposition (Fig. 2c). Thus positive interdependence produced much more cooperation (choice of C) than negative interdependence, though the underlying prisoner's dilemma was the same. That is what our case studies show in the realm of communication.

The three experiments just described involved *pure* positive and negative interdependence. Pure examples are not so common in nature, and all three of our cases involved a mixture of both. But the positive outweighed the negative in the Middle East and South Africa, and the negative outweighed the positive in Northern Ireland.

Conclusions

Our results suggest that in intractable conflict, secret preliminary communication is an important route to optimism about the outcome, which is so often necessary before agreeing to negotiation. However, we do not argue that communication is the only route to this optimism. There are many other possibilities, including conciliatory actions and statements by the other,[10] publicly announced concessions by the other (which are conciliatory and also reduce the distance to be bridged in negotiation), evidence that the other side has suffered costly setbacks, and the availability of an accomplished mediator.[11] Some of these routes were also seen in our cases.

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10   See Osgood (1962, 1966) for an analysis of the impact of dramatic concessions on intractable conflict.

11   See Mitchell (2000) and Zartman & de Soto (2010) for other ideas about the sources of optimism in negotiation. Readiness theory predicts that optimism about finding an agreement will encourage readiness to enter negotiation if one is motivated to escape the conflict but will be discounted and forgotten if one is not. Indeed if one is not so motivated, some sources of optimism (e.g., conciliatory behavior from the other, evidence that the other has experienced a setback) may instead encourage a perception of the other as weak, producing more vigorous hostilities against the other.

We have six tentative conclusions that may be useful to disputants who are trying to escape conflict or to third parties who are trying to help them.

1. Optimism is often developed by means of secret, informal communication between the parties, either face-to-face or through intermediaries. That is where third parties can be especially useful, getting representatives of the parties together and helping them communicate or serving as intermediaries between them.
2. The more severe the conflict, the more detailed must be the substantive framework that is developed in this secret communication. Third parties can help with that development.
3. The more severe the conflict, the more optimism is needed before parties will agree to enter negotiation. (This is an extension of conclusion 2.)
4. Two or more communication channels are better than one during prenegotiation. Each can back up the other's credibility and provide a safeguard against the other's failure.
5. Friendly face-to-face prenegotiation is more likely when there is positive interdependence (both sides are positively dependent on the other) than when there is not (one or both sides are negatively dependent on the other). Third parties can then act as facilitators rather than intermediaries, and the pre-negotiation period is likely to be shorter.
6. Hence, a challenge for third parties is to persuade disputants that they are positively interdependent – to convince them that they are in the decomposition shown in Fig. 2b rather than that shown in Fig. 2c.

The first five of these conclusions entail hypotheses that can and should be tested in further research. The sixth is a call for theory building and action.

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