

INTRODUCTION

Knowing Farhat Agbaria and Cynthia Cohen, I knew whatever they proposed would be something with a unique perspective – something encouraging a deeper look. And the article that we have written together is just that.

This article encourages coexistence practitioners to reach beyond the usual techniques and skills used in coexistence work, to look at the underlying power dynamics within the group. Taking this deeper look requires a certain measure of courage, partly because it involves looking at the complexities of one's own identity, both for facilitators and participants, and how one's own power plays into the group dynamics. But we believe that those who engage in this work are ready to take that courageous look.

Although this is the first time they've written an article together, this work builds on other collaborations that Farhat and Cynthia have done in the past. Farhat and Cindy met as facilitators of youth from the Middle East at Seeds of Peace camp in Maine. They worked together again when Farhat was named a Brandeis International Fellow, and Cindy and I were part of the Brandeis staff for that program. Farhat was one of sixteen coexistence practitioners and scholars from the Middle East, South Africa, Sri Lanka, and the former Yugoslavia.

Farhat Agbaria, himself a Palestinian Israeli with extensive experience facilitating encounters and dialogues, directs the Face-to-Face program at the Arab-Jewish Center for Peace at Givat Haviva, Israel. Cynthia Cohen, now director of the Brandeis Initiative in Intercommunal Coexistence, has facilitated coexistence efforts in such far-flung places as the Middle East, Biloxi, Mississippi, and Belize. Her particular interest is in the ethical and aesthetic dimensions of reconciliation.

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This is only one of several resources available from the Brandeis Initiative in Intercommunal Coexistence. If you're interested learning more, please contact us or visit our website: www.brandeis.edu/ethics.

We hope this article will be useful to coexistence practitioners and others whose work intersects with that field, in efforts to work together towards lasting change.

Marci McPhee
Assistant Director, International Center for Ethics, Justice, and Public Life
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Working With Groups in Conflict: The Impact of Power Relations on the Dynamics of the Group

By Farhat Agbaria and Cynthia Cohen

This article addresses an issue that almost always arises when facilitating encounters or dialogues with groups in conflict situations: inequities in power and how these are manifested and addressed in small groups. We decided to write this article because we observed, in a variety of settings, work that was being described as “coexistence facilitation” but that overlooked or ignored conflict-related power dynamics.

We believe that, in contexts of inequity and injustice, in order for encounters and dialogues to contribute to meaningful coexistence, inequities in power must at least be acknowledged and addressed. When we say “meaningful” coexistence work we are referring to dialogue that, in part, promotes changing the social and political dynamics in the direction of greater equity. We are not referring here to efforts designed to support an inequitable or unjust status quo.

In this article we analyze the issue, describe typical group behaviors, and suggest strategies for facilitators. In the process of writing this article we have clarified our ideas and learned a great deal from each other. We hope that our ideas will be useful for other practitioners as well.

The Nature of Power

In most cases of interethnic, interracial and interreligious conflict, there is a strong difference in power between one side and the other. In fact, part of what the conflict is about is power (in addition to many other issues, such as land or resources). It is very important for people who are encountering each other across this divide, who are trying to understand each other, to become conscious of where they stand in relation to questions of power. They should become aware of how they are using the power that they have but also how they might be acting out, and therefore perpetuating, feelings of powerlessness.

There are different kinds of power: military power, economic power and political power. There is also a kind of power that comes with moral authority and with being “in the right”. There is even a certain kind of power that comes from being the victim. Sometimes the victimized people who are aware of their situation can be stronger than the other side, if they use the power that they do have in strategic ways. So being **less powerful** is clearly not the same as being **powerless**.

For several reasons, participants from the community with less power should understand and grapple with the implications of all these kinds of power, claiming the power that they DO have in order to improve their situation and challenge the status quo. Equally important is to recognize that over time, power dynamics and historical circumstances shift. People who have never understood and grappled with the kinds of power they have as disenfranchised people are vulnerable to becoming oppressors themselves.

Individuals have complex identities and therefore usually have experience on both sides of the power divide. For instance, Farhat as a Palestinian man has the experience of being in the group with less power (Palestinian) and also a group with more power (males). As a Jewish woman, Cindy may have a certain sensitivity towards the concerns of Israelis (the group with more military, economic and political power) – but as a woman, she has experienced struggling to find her own voice in relation to men. It is possible, therefore, for people to use their experiences from both sides of the power divide to become aware of and avoid the pitfalls of communication in the group.

These various complexities in understandings of the term ‘power’ notwithstanding, in the rest of this article we use the phrase ‘more powerful group’ or ‘dominant group’ to refer the representatives of the racial, ethnic or religious group who by law or by history (or both) tend to have more political and economic power. ‘Less powerful group’ or ‘subordinate’ means the opposite. In some circumstances, this is not always so simple to identify. For instance, in contemporary South Africa, political power now lies in the hands of the once-oppressed Black majority. Economic power, however, still rests with the white minority. Facilitators of coexistence encounters will need to become familiar with the dynamics of power of the context in which they are working, and account for them – however complex or straightforward -- in their work with the group.

Why we should address the dynamics of power in groups

When groups have grappled with inequities among their members, they can become effective agents for change – both in the individuals within the group and in the larger political conflict. With an awareness of power dynamics, each participant can work at a deeper level, understanding the conflict as it works within him- or herself. People can bring themselves to the work as whole, complex human beings – and this enables them to see the others in the group as whole complex human beings as well. This reciprocal awareness makes it possible to work with greater respect, sensitivity and genuineness. It increases the possibility of real and lasting change.

On the other hand, without an understanding of how power dynamics are at work in the group, both members and facilitators can actually do damage in spite of their good intentions. They might perpetuate or prolong the conflict instead of helping to resolve it.

Clearly, awareness of power dynamics helps group members understand those who come from “the other side.” But the consequences go far beyond understanding: lack of acknowledgement of power differences can restimulate old angers and feelings of powerlessness. These angers and resentments can easily undermine people’s ability to work together on joint projects.

This is true regardless of the cooperative venture being undertaken. Even playing sports without acknowledgement of the power dynamics of the participants can undermine the pleasure derived from the game. For instance, some members from the dominant group might act out their privilege by trying to assign roles to others or dictate the strategy of the play. Such power plays can interfere with the healing that might have taken place from experiencing the pleasure of team sports with a former adversary.

If a facilitator fails to address these issues, it puts pressure on the participants themselves to either bring them up or to settle for shallow relationships that ignore reality. We know of one young Palestinian Israeli youth who spent four years working in a Palestinian/Jewish coexistence summer program. He reported that in four summers, the conflict was never even addressed or acknowledged. This silence left him with a tremendous burden, feeling there was an obvious rift representing great pain on both sides that was completely ignored in their work together.

Sometimes groups can unravel because of lack of attention to the dynamics of power and to issues surrounding the conflict. The group can lose energy for no apparent reason. We know of more than one instance where groups completely disintegrated. One group met regularly for a year, but talked only about personal and family matters. They came to know each other a bit, but they never addressed the conflict or the dynamics of power within the group. The first time a tragic event took place in the region, the group fell apart. Relationships simply fragmented. To build real friendships in a group, it is impossible to ignore controversial or conflictual issues. If group members wish to build sustainable relationships, they can’t just leave political issues aside. It just doesn’t work.

Our commitment to address the dynamics of power in groups in conflict arises from our faith in human beings. We believe that once people truly realize in a deep way that they are damaging others, they will stop. Most people are not aware that they are doing hurtful things to people on the other side. Having good will is important, but it is not enough. Good will must be joined by awareness and skill; it is this combination that makes change possible.

How participants act out the dynamics of power in the group itself

There is a tremendous range of behaviors among people, and generalizations by categories can never be completely accurate. For instance, as a general rule, members of the dominant group may tend to be more outgoing; however, it is also true that individual members of the subordinate group may be more outgoing than some individual members

of the dominant group. Nevertheless, general trends are instructive, while keeping in mind that individual personalities allow for variations.

There are certain patterns of behavior that tend to characterize the actions of the more and less powerful members of encounter groups. These patterns include the use of language, physical positioning, the relationship to and interactions with authority figures, the articulation of differences of opinion within sub-groups, and the expression of emotions.

Questions about the use of language often arise first: which language will be the medium for the group's work? In many instances, the only common language will be a language in which members of the more powerful group have greater proficiency. Members of the dominant group may simply assume that the language of interaction will be one in which they are competent and feel comfortable. They often speak without awareness of the power which they will likely derive within the group itself because of this circumstance. The pattern of the less powerful group is often to simply accept that the language of conversation will be that of the more powerful group, even when they don't speak the language fluently, and some of them will be shy about expressing themselves in that language.

The unaware use of particular words can also reflect the power dynamics of the conflict. For instance, Israeli youth might say to Palestinians, "We will give you back the land," "We will let you come to your holy places in Jerusalem," "We won all wars," expressing the sense of ownership and power in the very phrasing of their sentences. They might say, "You can come to our place and be safe; we cannot come to your place and be safe" -- representing the situation as if there symmetry in the degree of safety that each feel in his or her own home. They might say "Each side is suffering; you are not the only ones who suffer; we are suffering as well," again presenting the situation as if it were one of symmetry.

Participants from the less powerful community also may use language without awareness of the dynamics of power. They might say, for instance, "You have no right to be here in the first place," as if to deny any legitimacy whatsoever to the other side. In other cases, they might actually adopt the language of the more powerful, saying, "You should give us land; you should give us Jerusalem, you should give us water."

The dynamics of power manifest themselves not only by what language is spoken and what words are used, but also by the timing of participation and how much space is taken in the group. Very often, participants from the dominant side tend to speak first and to take up more space. They tend to be confident and therefore to be more talkative. Those from the subordinate group, being less confident, often need encouragement to speak and to take their space. They are less likely to speak first.

We have also noticed patterns in terms of the extent to which participants make themselves emotionally vulnerable. The emotions of participants from the less powerful side are often closer to the surface -- meaning that they might be reluctant to speak, but when they do, they are quite expressive emotionally. They might be filled with rage, and

vent their feelings without modulating their expression so that it can be heard by those from the other side. In these moments, participants are concerned about expressing their own feelings rather than communicating with others. Participants from the more powerful side, on the other hand, tend to be more analytic and emotionally reserved. When confronted with the suffering of those with less power, they might find a defensive response, such as referring to the historic suffering of their people, or share their own suffering. “You are not the only ones who are suffering,” they might say; “we are suffering too.” We raise this not to deny that those in the more powerful group have suffered and need to express this; rather to point out the timing of these comments often serves the purpose of fending off the possibility of their empathizing with the others. Members of both groups can enter into a competition of suffering, vying for which group deserves the most empathy.

Setting the agenda for group discussion can also become a context in which the dynamics of power are manifested in the group. Sometimes members of the more powerful group will challenge the agenda established by the facilitator – and may challenge his or her authority more generally as well. Those from the less powerful group are more likely to acquiesce to the proposed agenda and seek protection from the facilitators.

Just as they take up more time, members of the dominant group also assert their power by how they make use of physical space. We noticed for instance, that on a group trip, teens from the more powerful group tended to take the front seat of the van or car. In mixed gender groups, it is often the case that men, without awareness, will simply take up more physical space than women.

Finally, we have noticed certain patterns about how groups relate to questions of difference. Unless they are feeling threatened, participants from the more powerful side are often able to tolerate the expression of different opinions among members of their own group. The less powerful side is more likely to act as a bloc. This is because the members of the subordinate group feel more vulnerable, and can’t afford to show their disunity.

On the other hand, participants from the dominant side are more likely to emphasize common humanity and building friendships with the other side, rather than confronting the issues of the conflict. It can be quite a luxury for people on the powerful side to say to those with less power, “We are the same, we are human beings, we have to appreciate our common humanity,” all while they are continuing to oppress them. They might say, “You are my friend, we are both human beings, let’s go and play soccer.” And this can be difficult to refuse for those from the less powerful group, who are eager for the compliments and friendship of those with more power. These impulses can be a way of avoiding the real work involved in confronting the difficult issues that are present in any conflict.

Participants from the subordinate side of the conflict, either out of fear or in their desire to win the attention, friendship, and acceptance of the more powerful, might sometimes withhold sharing stories of their suffering. They might speak in a less powerful voice. A

different approach they may take is to go right to the issues of injustice and insist on conversation about redressing the problem and restitution.

Those with less power can also hold on to the victim stance, and in fact deny any power that they do have. There IS a certain kind of moral authority that comes with being in the less powerful group. If your people have been hurt or oppressed, you might have a certain kind of “rightness” on your side. And that kind of power can be abused as well – by trying to shame others or to hold individuals accountable for all of the wrongs that their people or their governments have committed.

In some instances where facilitators fail to address the dynamics of power, we have noticed that those with less power simply withdraw their energy from the group. They might avoid attending sessions, or remain emotionally aloof while physically present. This kind of withdrawal clearly reflects a sense of powerlessness, and inevitably undermines the work of the group.

On the other hand, members of the subordinate community may come to the group with a very strong voice, or develop a strong voice within the group itself. They might initially find it difficult to speak up, but once they do, members of the dominant group can become reluctant to respond or challenge them, for fear of seeming “insensitive” or “racist”. This can lead to a kind of self-censoring that interferes with opportunities for difficult but positive interactions.

In our experience, members of the more powerful group, when confronted with the stories and experiences of their less powerful counterparts, often experience an intense combination of shock and shame. Especially when several participants from the subordinate group speak up at once, the members of the dominant group also can feel threatened. These feelings might lead them to become increasingly defensive, silent or withdrawn. With skillful facilitation, these difficult moments can be transformed into powerful learnings for all of the group participants. If unaddressed within the group, however, such feelings must be borne by individual participants in isolation, potentially leading to cycles of guilt and anger, shame and resentment, acknowledgement and denial.

We once had the privilege of co-facilitating a group of professional educators and facilitators who were working with teenagers from conflict regions. The facilitators included Israelis, Palestinians, Jewish-Americans, and other Americans: white, African-American and Hispanic-American as well. The number of Palestinian participants was very small. For many sessions, one particular Palestinian woman remained relatively quiet. One day, with encouragement from some other members of the group, she told her story: about a sister exiled in Jordan, unable to return to the family home in Jerusalem; and about the land that had been expropriated from her father, who, prior to '48 had been a wealthy businessman but had lost almost everything. She spoke of her sadness and her anger. Her decision to speak opened the group to a deeper, more honest level of communication. It had an effect on every other member of the group, and allowed for open engagement with several tensions that had been seething under the surface for days. The effect on the Palestinian participant herself was quite noticeable: she became more

open, more self-assured, more eager to stand up for herself. This is a change that we believe she was able to take with her back into her work as an educator.

Facilitators' goals in relation to the dynamics of power

In the previous section, we have illustrated some of the ways in which the power dynamics that inscribe a conflict situation are manifested within an encounter group. The question remains, then: how should facilitators deal with these patterns as they arise?

In order to answer this question, it is very important to be clear precisely what the goals of the facilitator are. These goals can be articulated in terms of the individual person, relationships within the group and the larger political patterns.

We believe that facilitators should be committed to supporting the integrity of each participant. By this we mean that facilitators should help participants become aware of their own behaviors and attitudes and make choices about how they want to relate to others in the group. Participants need opportunities to become aware of how their language and behavior affect others. They need to recognize that the choices they make about how they relate to questions of power can affect the nature of the encounter, and ultimately, the conflict as a whole.

We believe facilitators should help the sub-groups see how the patterns they manifest within the group reflect the political reality of their region. The assumption is that once the members of sub-groups become aware of how they act out the power dynamics of the conflict, they will choose to change the patterns of their behavior.

In relation to the group as a whole, facilitators should help participants understand the complexity of their relationships with each other and the conflict. As participants become aware of these complexities, they will avoid simplistic answers to the conflict. The intention is that participants will leave committed to learning more about the conflict and possible resolutions.

Strategies available to facilitators to work with power dynamics in groups

We believe that facilitators who are leading encounter experiences with groups in conflict should themselves have gone through encounter experiences and should have dealt with issues of power as participants in such groups. In many cases, the facilitators are coming from both sides of the conflict region: we believe that they cannot be effective if they have not had the opportunity to work through their own issues and to gain a substantial degree of self-awareness. Even facilitators who come from outside the conflict region must be professionals in the sense that they must have worked through issues pertaining to their own identity and to the dynamics of power relations in their own lives.

Furthermore, because of the intensity of group work, we believe that to be effective, facilitators must take responsibility to process their feelings and their experiences in an on-going way.

A preliminary step to addressing power dynamics in groups takes place before the group ever meets: ensuring that the composition of the group as a whole is relatively balanced, so that no members feel isolated or “ganged-up-on.”

As with any group work, addressing power dynamics in groups in conflict requires building a supportive and trusting group. The stage must be set by building relationships among group members, and engaging in activities where people can enjoy each other, challenge their stereotypes and appreciate each other’s humanity. It is important to strengthen participants’ ability to listen to ideas with which they do not agree. Facilitators can earn the trust of all members of the group by empathizing with participants’ feelings, supporting each side when it is in “the hot seat,” and acknowledging the complexity of the conflict. They can set a positive tone, use humor to break the tension, and compensate for differences in language facility by making sure groups slow down so all can participate and understand.

Reflect

The single most important strategy in helping individual members, sub-groups and groups become aware of power dynamics within the group is to reflect such dynamics back to the group for its consideration. This can be done in several ways:

- Make an observation. For instance, the facilitator might say, “I notice that a member of [the more powerful group] is always the first to speak.” Or, the facilitator might say, “I notice that members of [the less powerful group] are struggling to have their own space.”
- Challenging the group with a question. For instance, the facilitator might ask, “What do you mean when you say you will give back the land?” He or she might ask participants how they feel when a member has refrained from speaking in the group. If participants from the less powerful community describe or enact feelings of powerlessness, the facilitator might ask, “So, what kinds of power DO you have?” Or, if in response to hearing stories of the other, members of the dominant group become silent, the facilitator might ask the members of the subordinate group: “Why do you feel that those from the other group have stopped talking?”
- Paraphrase a participant’s comment to make the patterns more clear both to the speaker and to the other members of the group. For instance, a facilitator might comment, “What I hear you say is that you are owning and controlling this land now, and you could continue to control it, but you are willing to give it to the others.”

- Use a fishbowl exercise¹ to help the more powerful group to walk in the shoes of the less powerful group or vice versa. First the facilitator asks the sub-group members to take on an identity of a member of the other community. Once that identity is established, the facilitator can use the same words previously spoken by members of the more powerful group, and ask them how it feels to hear those words, as they play the role of members of the less powerful group. The facilitator can also ask them how, in their new roles, they would like to respond.
- Use dramatic techniques. For instance, the facilitator may take an issue or language that has emerged in the group and construct a scene, asking the participants from the subordinate group to play the role of those in the dominant and vice versa.

There are of course many group techniques that can be adapted to this purpose, and we hope these suggestions stimulate the imagination of facilitators in terms of approaches they can use.

Intervene

A second important strategy is to intervene in the group's process so that power inequities are addressed in part through the actions of the facilitator.

- Invite people who haven't spoken to take their space in the group if they chose.
- Encourage some members to share their feelings in response to comments or behavior of another group member.
- Take time to work with one individual about his or her own behavior or language. In this case, you are helping this one person to understand, but the whole group is learning from the experience.

A third strategy is to break the group into smaller groups and to work with the dominant and subordinate sub-groups individually. In these settings, participants are often much more comfortable sharing their feelings, especially in relation to the other group. Participants are often more able to acknowledge differences among themselves and work with their different perspectives and opinions as well as their commonalities. In this setting, members of the less powerful group can begin to experience and make sense of the power that they do have.

- Ask members of each sub-group to discuss their feelings about the group and their participation in it.
- Ask them to discuss the role they are taking in the group.

¹ A fishbowl exercise is a standard technique used in coexistence encounters in which the facilitator works with a small number of participants while the others observe. This is usually done with the active group in a small circle and the observing group sitting outside the circle.

- Elicit from each sub-group their perceptions of the behaviors of the other sub-group.

Taking changes from inside the group into life outside the group

The encounter group is actually a microcosm of the political reality. The dynamics that occur within the group reflect what is happening on the outside. The intention of any group work is that any changes in the individuals that result from their participation in the group will be taken back into their communities.

The goal of encounter groups is to transform individual behavior both inside and outside the group. We hope that participants should come to a position in which they no longer mindlessly act out the power dynamics, but act with awareness, and with respect for each person as a human being. To become a friend with someone across a divide in power means to take action in the world to change the inequities. We believe that to be a friend without taking some action to transform the hurtful dynamic in the world at large is incomplete.

People often come into groups with their own community's narrative firmly embedded within them, often at an unconscious level. As participants listen to the stories, experiences, and feelings of people from "the other side," they come to realize that there is a different perspective. An internal cognitive and emotional structure once taken for granted becomes subject to question.

Ideally, in addition to leaving groups with questions and uncertainties about their own community, group members leave with a feeling of respect for each other. They come see beyond the political, religious or ethnic label and see each other as human beings, with hearts and minds. Returning to their own communities can be the most difficult moment in this work: it is a challenge for people to hold on to their new behaviors and attitudes. Young people return to their families to hear their parents, their schoolmates, their friends and their brothers all espousing the old opinions and attitudes. Sometimes individuals have enough consciousness of themselves to hold on to their new awareness and to begin to act in accordance with it. Often they need support to do this, and the group should continue to offer this support to them.

Summary

Addressing the dynamics of power in all its complexity is critical to the success and sustainability of desired changes when facilitating coexistence group work. Helping members of both the dominant and subordinate groups to acknowledge and relate appropriately to their power enables all involved to transcend many of the potential

pitfalls of intercommunal coexistence and to truly impact the conflict situation and the individuals involved in a positive way.

This approach to working with the dynamics of power in groups emerges from our belief in human beings. Many people participate in hurtful actions without realizing what the impact is to people on the other side. We believe that when people realize they are damaging other people, they will stop. Encounter groups can help people become aware of each other's humanness and become committed to change these harmful dynamics into positive change.