

More on Patterns in Intractable Conflicts

By Louise Diamond, Ph.D.

In deep-rooted, intractable conflicts, the parties often develop unconscious patterns of behavior that impede the peace process.

We know that all behavior is purposeful. We also know that human beings are not necessarily rational actors; they do not always act in their own best interest. Sometimes the unconscious purpose of these patterns, therefore, is counter-intuitive: to maintain the status quo, even if it is painful, because we're scared of the unknown, or of giving up something we think we now have. Or the purpose might be to make things worse for the other side, even if it hurts us more; or to seek our own gain, even when we can see that by doing so we actually hurt ourselves further. We can identify the purpose or goals behind these patterns by seeing their results.

Because they are unconscious, and deeply entrenched over time, the patterns are especially hard to change. They are also mutual – that is, there is some collusion or mutuality between the parties that keeps the pattern going (again, unconsciously). There will be resistance to changing the behavior; the patterns have developed because the parties somehow believed they served their interests.

The mediators can help change the patterns in five general ways, all intended as non-confrontational and non-judgmental, and as ways to invite awareness and to present a possible pathway to different behavior:

1. **Educate the parties** briefly about the pattern – describe how it works. “What’s happening now is a repetitive pattern; this is how it works.... Do you recognize this?”
2. **Name the pattern** when you see it happening. “Oh, this is the X pattern again. Does it feel familiar? How can we do something different?”
3. **Acknowledge the universality** of the pattern. “This is not unique to you; it is common in most conflicts. Even in most families!”
4. **Interrupt the behavior** – turn to something else (general rule of thumb: shift between content, process, and psychology when any one piece is not going well). “We seem to be stuck in the X pattern again. Let’s move on to Y and see if we can get some fresh thinking.”
5. **Enlarge the frame**; re-focus attention on the main priority: a successful peace process. “This is that X pattern again, and it’s not useful in moving the process forward.”

Specific suggestions will also be given for each pattern.

The Blame Game. This pattern can be tricky. There’s a difference between stating a fact and playing the Blame Game. The PLO really did launch terrorist attacks

against Israel. Israel really does take Palestinian land for settlements. To state the facts is not to play the Blame Game. It becomes a game when it has other motives:

- To avoid taking responsibility for one's own contribution to the conflict;
- To avoid responsibility for finding a solution because one prefers the status quo;
- To look good in the eyes of the third party or international community, while making the other side look bad; to identify the other side as the primary roadblock to progress.

Some behaviors that characterize this game:

- One party sets impossible conditions or ultimatums that they know won't be accepted by the other side, and then blames the other side for not being a true partner for peace, or not being sincere about wanting a solution. (*'Aha! See, we told you it was their fault!'*)
- One party excuses its bad behavior by saying, essentially, 'if the other side hadn't done that, we wouldn't have had to do what we did.' (*'They made us do it!'*)
- The parties trade blame, like children. (*'It's your fault! No, it's your fault;'* *'You started it! Did not! Did so!'*)

What might the mediators say?

- When the parties get into blaming ("See, they did x,y, and z...!"), say, "No one action stands by itself; we're always reacting to each other. So what did your side do that might have contributed to this?"
- Or, "Yes, that really happened. Now we're looking at what we can do differently, or how we can make some agreements so that that doesn't happen again."

The Drama Triangle. This pattern is very familiar to us because it is central to much of our literature and drama (especially melodrama). There are three archetypal roles – victim, persecutor, and rescuer (the Villain, who seeks to harm the Innocent, and the Hero, who tries to save the day). In deep-rooted conflicts, what often happens is that the parties in conflict plus the third party will shift who's playing what role at any one time.

The goal of the pattern:

- To avoid making progress toward peace.
- To stay in familiar territory and not have to take risks with new behavior.

Some behaviors that characterize the game:

- One party will play the role of victim, another of persecutor, and the other (often the third party) of rescuer, there to help 'fix' or solve the situation.
- Then, something will happen and the roles will change. The one who was the victim will become the persecutor (or rescuer); the previous persecutor will

now be the rescuer (or victim); and the previous rescuer will become the new victim (persecutor).

- The parties will cycle through these different roles at different times, never really making any progress.
- Examples: When Israel announced new settlement development during Vice President Biden's visit, the rescuer (the U.S.) became the victim, and the victim (Israel) became the persecutor. When Israel boarded the Rachel Corrie headed for Gaza, they were seeing themselves as victims and the blockade breakers as the persecutors, but when several of the ship's people were killed, the Israeli's were seen as the persecutors. The Palestinians see the Israelis as persecutors in the settlement issue, while they are the victims, but when the US spoke strongly for a settlement freeze, it became the persecutor and Israel became the victim.
- It is common for the parties to unconsciously collude so that the third party, the rescuer, gets blamed for lack of progress or even for making things worse, thus joining together as persecutors against a new victim.

What can the mediators do?

- Notice when you're playing an unhealthy 'rescuer' role: for instance, when you feel compelled to find the fix to a tough issue rather than helping the parties to do it, or when you want the solution more than the parties do. Choose to put the responsibility back on the parties.
- When noticing the cycle in action, say, for instance, 'Oh, we seem to be caught in that drama triangle again. There are no villains, victims, or rescuers here – we've all contributed to the problems in different ways and we're all working toward the same goal, a successful peace process.'

The Demonization and De-humanization of 'the Other.' In this pattern one side portrays the other side as less than human; as barbarians, uncultured, not intelligent, etc; not like 'us;' incapable of feeling, thinking, or acting as 'we' do (i.e., as 'normal' human beings). The other side is demonized, seen as the embodiment of all evil and at fault for the conflict. 'We' are the all good and 'they' are the all bad.

This pattern may not appear so obviously in the peace talks, as the negotiators are probably individuals who have had more extensive experience with their counterparts than most average citizens. However, this pattern is more likely than others to be consciously manipulated by political leaders, to be firmly ensconced in the educational system, and to be a staple of the media.

The purpose of this pattern.

- It shields the parties from hearing each other's legitimate needs and interests, and especially their pain. If 'they' are not as fully human as 'we' are, then what 'they' want doesn't count, or what 'they' feel can be dismissed

as inconsequential. If we don't have to acknowledge 'their' pain, we don't have to feel responsible for it, feel empathy for them, or do anything about it.

- It allows each side to justify its own violent acts against the other. If 'they' don't value life like 'we' do, then 'they' don't mind as much when we take their life.
- It socializes society into sustaining the story of 'us' against 'them' and the enemy image.

What the mediators can do.

- Be alert for it – it can be very subtle.
- Call it whenever you see it, as you would a racial slur. “That’s a demeaning of a whole people.” “We’re here to acknowledge our common humanity and shared hopes for a better future.” “We all have the same capacity for... intelligence, pain, caring about our families (whenever it happens to be).
- Provide opportunities for re-humanizing through personal contact (eating, seating, free time, sub-group dialogue opportunities).

The Suffering Yardstick. This is the most difficult pattern to interrupt, because the parties tend to be very attached to their suffering. It has become, over time, a major part of their identity. The trick is to acknowledge the suffering, but disallow the measuring of one party's suffering over the other. All human beings suffer in the face of violence, displacement, humiliation, etc. Each human being's suffering is awful to them.

In the Israeli-Palestinian situation this is huge. The Holocaust is seen, and in many ways legitimately so, as of a much greater magnitude and significance than the Nakba. Yet the historical and daily suffering of the Palestinians must be acknowledged as legitimate and important too. The trauma on both sides is a major element that undermines the possibility of a negotiated settlement of concrete issues. These are not rational actors seeking a rational solution – they are deeply wounded parties living in collective pain that they blame on each other.

Behaviors that characterize the pattern.

- One side argues that their suffering is bigger, stronger, and more worthy of sympathy than that of the other side. (In this case, usually Israel)
- One side gets angry that the suffering of the other should be compared to theirs, seen as equal or parallel. (In this case, usually Israel)
- One side diminishes or demeans or disallows the expression of suffering by the other.

What can the mediators say?

- “Everyone is suffering, and has been for a long time in this situation. This is our opportunity to put a stop to it, and, when we’re ready, to start the healing process.”

- “It may seem like the pain is disproportionate in numbers, but let’s remember that for each person who’s lost a family member or a home or a hope, the pain is the same.”
- “It is true that there are unrightable wrongs on both sides here. It’s important to acknowledge that and grieve. We cannot go back and re-write history, but we can feel each other’s pain in the present, and create a different future for our children.” Or ‘..... feel each other’s pain in the present, and decide together to break the cycle here and now.”

In sum, there are potent psycho/social/political patterns at play in the unconscious dynamics of intractable conflicts, which can present major roadblocks to a successful peace negotiation. Awareness is the first step to change. The more the mediators are aware of these patterns, and can help the parties notice them as well, the better equipped everyone is, together, to break out of well-traveled ruts and discover new possibilities.

Louise Diamond, Ph.D., is the president of Global Systems Initiatives in Washington DC, which exists to foster systems thinking on complex global issues within the policy community. She is also president emeritus of The Institute for Multi-Track Diplomacy, where she was an international peacebuilder for many years. diamond@globalsystemsinitiatives.net; www.globalsystemsinitiatives.net.