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Asymmetry in Cross-Conflict Collaboration: Is There a Gender Factor?

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Abstract

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Keywords: *alternative dispute resolution, asymmetry, cross-conflict collaboration, gender in negotiation, Israelis, Palestinians, power*

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Abstract

Asymmetry of power is an acknowledged phenomenon in negotiation, and there are a number of devices for dealing with it. Similarly, alternative dispute resolution seeks to neutralize asymmetry of power by using an interest-based model of cross-conflict collaboration, but research has indicated that asymmetry persists nonetheless. The role of gender in negotiation has been researched, and to a far lesser degree, also with regard to alternative dispute resolution. Some of the gender in negotiation research has introduced the element of asymmetry of power as well. Prompted by the highlighting of asymmetry in Israeli-Palestinian all-women alternative dispute resolution (cross-conflict collaboration), the present article seeks to determine the role of gender, comparing asymmetry in mixed groups with all-women's groups. A qualitative analysis, based on observations over decades of personal experience, finds only differences of degree rather than essence between predominantly-male mixed and all-women's groups regarding the effects of asymmetry. The major exception to this lies in the centrality accorded the phenomenon by women but not by men, possibly attributable to gender differences in group relations and also the feminist character of the all-female groups.

Introduction

As an Israeli peace activist involved in many track-two/problem solving workshops and cooperative work between Israelis and Palestinians since the mid-1980s, I have found that the issue of asymmetry has become a prominent factor in such activities

amongst women. The purpose of this article is to try to examine the role asymmetry plays in such encounters and the impact of gender primarily in all-female Israeli-Palestinian groups. This is not an empirically-based quantitative study but rather a set of observations and subjective analyses based on my own experience in some fifteen to twenty different frameworks of encounters (totaling roughly over one hundred meetings) of Israelis and Palestinians in predominantly male groups and only somewhat fewer all-female groups including, for both types, groups engaged in sustained cooperation over a number of years. The meetings included some organized by outside third parties, abroad or in the region, others organized locally. The observations from my own experience will be preceded by a look at the literature on asymmetry, first in negotiation and then in cross-conflict collaboration, with attention to the work on Israeli-Palestinian groups, followed by a review of the literature on gender in negotiation and collaboration. In conclusion, a number of possible explanations for the differences, in particular the centrality of asymmetry in all-female groups will be suggested.

Asymmetry and Conflict Resolution

Asymmetry in conflicts is generally treated in international relations as asymmetry of power of protagonists, whether in a state to state or intra-state conflict. There are numerous sources or forms of asymmetry, many of which may affect the power relationship once power is not defined exclusively in terms of the capacity to use force. Indeed even the literature on asymmetrical warfare links military capacity to other factors including soft power (for example, measures to win over hearts and minds), particularly with regard to “new wars” (Kaldor 2001; Nye 2005; Smith 2006; Arreguin-Toft 2006). In the area of conflict resolution, Christopher Mitchell defines a number of forms of

asymmetry: legal, structural, moral, relational, behavioral (Mitchell 1991). Each of these might apply to either side in a conflict (the state or incumbents on the one hand, or the challenger on the other hand). For example, the state may derive its relative power from the legal advantages it has for applying curfews or other restrictions or its ability to raise funds through taxation. Either side might benefit from structural asymmetry with regard, for example, to leadership stability or salience of goals.

Dealing with both challengers and defenders, Louis Kriesberg focuses on those sources of asymmetry that might enhance the power of the weaker side (or weaken the power of the stronger), possibly even to the point of eliminating asymmetry altogether or at least facilitating transformation of the conflict (Kriesberg 2009). Thus, Kriesberg's long list includes demography (sheer numbers), degree of commitment, economic resources, moral and/or legal claims, public support (even on the adversary side), internal cohesiveness, outside third party support or involvement. To this one might add the role of media and other non-state actors such as diasporas, MNCs, NGOs (Golan 2009). Ronald Fisher adds access to information to the list, along with degree of legitimacy and legitimacy of leaders, skills and judgment (Fisher 2009). Virtually none of these sources of asymmetry is necessarily static; indeed Kriesberg points out that changes in one or another may alter asymmetry entirely. Certainly outside developments such as shifts in international power relations or economics or even technology can significantly alter asymmetry, for example, in the case of the Zapatistas in Chiapas and the role of the internet (Johnston and Laxter 2003). Internal developments on one side or the other, such as shifting political elites, domestic social conflicts, socio-economic conditions (hunger, drought) and the like can have their various effects on the relative weight of protagonists

(for example, Lipshultz 2000; Duffield 1998, 2000; Berdal and Malone 2000; Mitchell 1991 and others).

Negotiation theory, too, deals with asymmetry. William Zartman and Jeffrey Rubin (2000) have argued that asymmetric negotiations may actually be more successful than symmetric for, in a situation of equal power, neither side may feel the need to compromise. In an asymmetric negotiation the more powerful may well impose its will (the weaker believing it must accept), though sustainability of such an agreement may be doubtful. A mediated negotiation may strengthen the weaker party, but even in such cases, the stronger is often able to set the rules since it is the party that must be persuaded to accept mediation (Aggestam 2002). For the same reason the stronger party is more likely to be accommodated by the mediators. The use of their relative strength by the more powerful can, however, backfire, for the weaker, with little to compromise, may respond by resorting to violence or, simply, break off the negotiation (Zartman and Rubin 2000; Kriesberg 2009). This is the classic power of the weak – withholding agreement. Yet it is presumably the weaker party that needs agreement more than the stronger, and, therefore, withholding agreement may not be the optimal option either. In addition, violence may (though not necessarily) lead to isolation and further weakening (of support, for example) rather than strength (Kriesberg 2009; Salacuse 2000).

Zartman and Rubin maintain, however, that weaker protagonists do not submit, since they can and do employ tactics that compensate for their weakness, or as he puts it, they can pull “a number of tricks out of their bag...to level the playing field” (Zartman and Rubin 2000, 277; also Zartman 1995; Habeeb 1988). Thus, in addition to the various sources of asymmetry, mentioned above, that can undergo change, there are a number of

tactical options for negotiators. If, for example, the stronger can in fact set the rules or framework, the weaker can “gnaw away” at the details. Zartman and Rubin list four categories of tactics: 1) appeal to common interests such as common problems, future relationship, possibility of trade-offs; 2) use of context, for example an appeal to rules or a higher authority such as international law, fairness or morality, or more concretely, an international body, a third party, or potential public reactions; 3) use of the negotiating process itself, namely, attention-gaining acts, declaration of deadlines, dealing first with less significant items; 4) linking up with others, for example bringing partners or coalitions to the table or invoking such linkages, including diaspora, allies, or enemies of the adversary. The use of these and other tactics may be connected with the difference – one might call it asymmetry as well – in motivation and, therefore, goals, affecting in turn the importance each side might attach to a particular issue as well as the degree of compromise possible.

There is also the tendency of the weaker side to negotiate from the point of view of rights, invoking the past both in terms of grievances and for the purpose of establishing legitimacy. The stronger side, for its part, may view things from the point of view of power, preferring to ignore the matter of rights and the past, but rather, invoke the future and what the weaker might be able to gain (Bodtker and Jameson 2001; LeBaron 2003). This raises the issue of perception, not only of relative strength but of the conflict as such. Research by Cristina Montiel and Maria Macapagal (2006) found that the weaker side views conflict from the point of view of structural causes – namely the situational position in which it finds itself, for example, under occupation, oppressed, displaced. According to this research, the powerful see the conflict, that is, the causes prompting the

other side to rebel or resist, as person based – the result of incitement, education, emotion (hatred).

This analysis might support the general idea that weaker protagonists invoke rights, while the strong negotiate in accord with their perceived power – implying that the weaker would be prompted by the prospect of gain and the stronger more concerned by potential loss (in accord with Tversky and Kahneman 1981), that potential loss provides a greater incentive for risk-taking than gain, without regard to power (Botker and Jameson 2001). The powerful side would, therefore, seek to defend or maintain the status quo (or as close to it as possible, while the weaker, with the goal of changing the status quo, would be pro-active (Mitchell 1991). The powerful side, however, may not view itself as powerful since asymmetrical warfare, with its alternative sources of power for the weaker, may be perceived as negating the advantage of the ostensibly stronger. Moreover, justification of one's cause usually posits one's own side as the victim, whatever the power relationship. Such "equalization" can lead, in negotiations, to the stronger side demanding "equity," that is, mutual compromise. This is the way in which Israel was said to have treated the weaker Palestinians in the July 2000 Camp David talks, adopting a "we give, you give" approach (Agha and Malley 2001). Similarly, this was the way Benjamin Netanyahu phrased it during his first term as Israeli Prime Minister (CNN, October 25, 1998).

Asymmetry and Cross-Conflict Collaboration

Most of the previous discussion refers to adversarial situations or what Zartman would characterize as competitive negotiations or others might describe as "realist" or power based negotiations (Fisher 2009). Advocates of alternative dispute resolution,

however, maintain that an “interest” based approach can eliminate or neutralize power differences. Usually conducted as track-two or dialog encounters rather than formal negotiation, alternative dispute resolution seeks to “go beyond position-based bargaining” (Fisher 2009; Davies and Kaufman 2002). Dealing with the underlying interests of the protagonists, this method seeks a balance that takes into account grievances, past injustices, and perceived needs. On the basis of such a balance, participants can then produce a common narrative or framing of the conflict that may, in turn, serve as a basis for resolution. Yet, as Johann Galtung has pointed out, there are “greater and lesser wrongs” (Galtung 2004). Interests, grievances, “wrongs” are not equal, and asymmetries, including asymmetry of power, will continue to play a role even in what is considered a collaborative effort.

A few studies – and my own participation/observation of Israeli-Palestinian track-two or dialogue efforts—do indeed reveal the persistence of asymmetries and problems caused by them (Kelman 1991; Rouhama and Kelman 1994; Rouhama 1995, 2004; Golan and Kamal in Saunders 1999). There is a distinction between track-two and dialogue, the latter limited to communication, development of mutual understanding and trust-building while the former presumes to take this one step further to inter-active problem solving, joint proposals or what might be called semi- or informal (unofficial) negotiation. Both dialogue and track-two may also produce joint projects, activities or advocacy. The distinction between the two is often simply proximity to decision-makers, with dialogue often associated with grass-roots activity.

Herb Kelman, who conducted the first Israeli-Palestinian workshops, sought to overcome the structural power asymmetry of the two sides by equalizing the numbers of

participants and matching educational levels, general backgrounds, gender, and even allotting equal speaking time so that all would ostensibly be operating on an equal basis. Yet, all observers, including myself, have noted that asymmetries kept popping up, for, as Rouhama (2004) put it, the two sides simply are not equal. A whole series of differences appeared, virtually all of which may be traced to the asymmetry of the relationship and situational inequality, namely the power of one side – the Israelis, belonging to the occupying power, and the weakness of the other - the Palestinians, under occupation, or, in the case of the groups Rouhama and Korper studied (1997), those belonging, on the one hand, to the majority/dominant Jewish population of Israel and those belonging, on the other hand, to the minority/subordinated Arab population of Israel (not the occupied territories). Inasmuch as Rouhama's groups dealt with resolution of internal Israeli issues of Jewish-Arab relations (particularly in the area of education), obviously connected with but not meant to address the broader Israeli-Palestinian conflict, they are less directly relevant to my discussion. However, despite different issue focus, they do represent efforts at cross-conflict cooperation and much of the evidence from Rouhama's work is substantiated by observations of Israeli-Palestinian conflict resolution groups discussed by Kelman (1991) and below.

Gender and Asymmetry

The above analyses are based on negotiations and observations of track-two/dialogue groups of mixed genders, almost exclusively male. The question I pose is: would looking at gender composition change or in any way affect the role of asymmetry? There is by now a vast literature on gender differences, along with feminist theory not only on the construction of gender, but also the problem of essentialism and the need to

understand differences within genders. Literature on gender and negotiation tends to be essentialist, focusing on differences between men and women in the way in which they negotiate, the skills they bring to negotiation, the way in which they perceive such matters as peace or security or power, and how they perceive their own relative power (Boyer et al. 2009; Tickner 1992; Cockburn 1998; Golan 1997, 2004; Kray, Thompson, and Galinsky 2001; Tessler and Warriner 1997). Indeed, research has shown gender differences in all of these areas, in some cases providing varied explanations ranging from gender role socialization to situational power (access to power such as resources) to combination of gender and situation (power affecting each gender differently) to expectation (with regard to each gender and self) (Stuhlmacher and Walters 1999; Walters, Stuhlmacher and Meyer 1998; Watson 1994; Kray, Thompson, and Galinsky 2001). Yet, it is clear that while many of the factors raised by these explanations may be operative, there are different degrees of power amongst women (as there are amongst men) and different ways of using or responding to power in a negotiating situation.

While some researchers (for example, Watson 1994) maintain that asymmetry of power (situational asymmetry) is more important a factor than gender with regard to negotiating style (collaborative or competitive), it has been found that while a woman with power (defined in terms of control of resources, status, numbers) may be more assertive in negotiation, she will have a harder time controlling the negotiation than a powerful man negotiating with a woman. Namely a woman's power is diminished when she negotiates with a man, indicating greater importance of gender than power (Watson 1994, 120 citing Berger et al. 1977). Moreover, according to other studies, even a powerful woman employing an assertive negotiating style will be viewed as less effective

than a male (Watson 1994; Krakovsky and Miller 2006). Sell, Griffith and Wilson (1993) too found that women's power was diminished and the man's power was enhanced in mixed groups, but only when gender identity was known (Sell, Griffith, and Wilson 1993; Sell 1997).

One explanation for such findings is connected with the matter of expectations, namely, knowledge of and therefore reaction or adaptation to gender stereotypes (Sell 1997; Kray, Thompson, and Galinsky 2001). Begging the question of whether or not the expectation is justified, it derives from the stereotypical (if not proven) view of women as less assertive, competitive, or confrontational than men. Supported by psychological studies such as Gilligan's (1982) ground breaking work, women are said to be empathetic, compassionate, relational or other-oriented and communicative (Markus and Kitayama 1991; McCarthy 1991; Babcock and Laschever 2003; Cross and Madison 1997; Kolb and Coolidge 1991). In negotiation, it would follow, women would be expected to give greater attention to process and preservation of relationship (preference for harmony) than to be goal-oriented, with a greater degree of risk-aversion than men and less concern for one's own interests. To some degree these hypotheses were proven, particularly by testing in which there was stereotype activation (Kray, Thompson, and Galinsky 2001). Yet, the matter of asymmetry (of power) was not involved, unless, that is, one were to attach concepts of "weak" or "powerful" to these different forms of behavior or styles – thereby adhering to stereotypical views of women as weaker, less effective. Obviously less effective would depend upon the type of negotiation – collaborative negotiation being one in which women would be expected to be more

–effective” (Karakowsky and Miller 2006; d’Estree and Babbitt 1998; Watson, Haines, and Bretherton 1996).

A better measure of the relationship between gender and asymmetry may be found in looking at same sex negotiation, particularly all-female. Kray, Thompson and Galinsky (2001) found that as distinct from mixed dyads, same-sex dyads did not respond to stereotype activation. Presumably, as Watson posited, –gender is not expected to have any impact on the power of negotiators in same-sex pairs of negotiators....Being a woman should not eliminate your power when you face another woman, nor should being a man enhance your power when you face another man” (Watson 1994, 124). Indeed, Watson found that a high powered woman did not become cooperative when dealing with a less powerful woman. Similarly, Sell found that women were not more cooperative in all-female groups than they were with men, though her more complex study did find that greater female cooperation resulted when the women were aware (but only when they were aware) of the gender of the whole group and the strategy adopted by both sides in the negotiation (Sell 1997). Even studies of same sex, all-female groups in collaborative negotiations, found no significant gender effects (Boyer et al. 2009), or, as Stockard put it, –males and females usually reacted in similar ways to conditions which were designed to promote cooperative behavior...”(Stockard, van Kragt, and Dodge 1988, 161 cited in Sell, Griffith, and Wilson 1993, 211). Only the Watson study cited above, however, examined for gender and asymmetry, finding that asymmetry of power was not affected by gender.

The Kray, Thompson, and Galinsky (2001) study of same sex dyads hypothesized that if participants shared an identity above that of gender, they would negotiate more

cooperatively. While this was found to be the case when the dyads were mixed, it had no effect on all-female dyads (nor all-male dyads) (Kray, Thompson and Galinsky 2001). It will be remembered that Kelman, as discussed above, found the absence of a shared identity – actually the antithetical identities of Israelis and Palestinians in his mixed workshops – was an impediment to cooperation (Kelman 1991). The Kray, Thompson and Galinsky study suggests that a similar outcome might be expected for asymmetrical (Israeli and Palestinian) all-female groups.

Observations from Israeli-Palestinian Cross-Conflict Cooperation

These observations are based on my own personal experience of many years' participation as an Israeli woman in predominantly male joint Israeli-Palestinian groups, beginning in the mid-1980s, both of a dialog and track-two nature, within the over-all category of cross-conflict cooperation. As in the studies of Kelman (facilitator) and Rouhama (participant) discussed above, my observations constitute generalizations of perceived over-all group behavior; individuals in the groups may not necessarily follow the patterns described below. Moreover, mine is only an interpretation of what I saw and experienced.

Although participation in such groups implies a certain willingness to cooperate, the goals and motives tend to be quite different. On the whole, the goal of the Palestinians is to change their situation, that is, end the occupation and achieve an independent state. At the political rather than personal level, as the weaker party, their primary motive for participating is to gain strength for the promotion of their case by directly addressing the adversary and enlisting at least some as allies. The goal of the Israelis is to end the Arab-Israeli conflict and achieve peace. While some may be acting

out of personal reasons (including a sense of guilt), at a political level, Israeli participants are mainly probing for ways – information about the other side, possible positions and so forth—that might make a peace agreement possible. Working together appears to serve the goals of both and the different motivation need not constitute an obstacle. Indeed, initially the different motives may appear complementary since the Israelis want to learn about the other side and the Palestinians want their case heard and understood (also pointed out by Rouhama and Korber 1997).

The presentation of narratives, however, usually a starting point of such meetings, presents a significant asymmetry, inasmuch as the weaker side – the occupied – cannot attribute moral equality to the two narratives. As Rouhama observed from his groups, ~~the~~ power imbalance leaves each with a different load of history... they do not carry the same moral weight...” (Rouhama 2004, 43). It is this perceived difference in morality that then guides much of the dialogue and collaboration. Thus, Palestinians focus on the past, principles of rights and of justice, highlighting present suffering and violations (and in some cases immediately grabbing the moral high ground, for example, by attributing lateness in arrival to army roadblocks and other features of the occupation). The Israelis focus pragmatically on the future (sometimes privately complaining that the Palestinians are always “crying” instead of presenting proposals – comments heard personally from Israeli men, not women), eschewing the need to decide who is right or wrong on the grounds that the past cannot be undone. One may speculate that these differences emanate from perceptions of and need for legitimacy – Palestinians derive their legitimacy from their historic rights, while Israelis may feel admission of the Palestinians’ historic rights jeopardize Israel’s claim to legitimacy. Kelman, in his

observations, related such a zero-sum approach to the matter of national self-identity, each group perceiving the other's self-determination as the negation its own (1991).

The feature which most characterized the asymmetry is the mistrust that permeates the process. Noted also by Kelman (1991), a constant testing seems to go on, with each side mistrusting the motives, goals, and, therefore, the commitment of the other. Israelis tend to feel exploited or used by the Palestinians to serve the Palestinian goal of ending the occupation. Palestinian acceptance of the two-state solution appears to be based only on the absence of any alternative rather than acceptance of the legitimacy of the state of Israel (the right of Jews to an independent state). According to such a view, peace may not even be what interests the Palestinians (see above the different goals – end of the conflict for Israelis; end of the occupation for Palestinians). Thus, Israelis are often suggesting that the Palestinians provide assurances regarding the future, signs of Palestinian intentions. For their part, Palestinians view such “fears” or demands as absurd coming from the powerful Israeli side. Rather, such demands are viewed as evidence that the Israelis care little for Palestinians' fate, do not really recognize the injustices and could even pursue their, Israeli, goal (of peace) without recognition of and even at the expense of Palestinian rights.

This problem of trust, particularly with regard to the commitment of the other side, becomes nearly acute in times of crises such as Israeli assassinations or bombings of Palestinian areas, Palestinian terrorist attacks on Israelis. The problem at such times is twofold: the first is the issue of asymmetry itself, namely is it acceptable to equate Israeli and Palestinian actions (or victims) or should one acknowledge the difference in power

(capabilities) as well as circumstances; the second is the asymmetry in the relationship of each side to its own community.

Participants are clearly identified with their communities in the eyes of the other side, whether they see themselves as representatives or not. The difference is that those coming from a free and independent society have far less concern for solidarity than those coming from a society struggling for its independence. The weaker side is more likely to see itself as answerable to its community while the stronger may be far more willing to act individually. This may affect the degree of risk-taking as well, for the weaker side cannot be seen to be digressing from the national struggle and certainly not ~~normalizing,~~ that is, behaving ~~normally~~ with the other side as if there were no asymmetry of oppressor and oppressed, in other words, no occupation. However, as Kelman has pointed out, Israelis too have their national identity and loyalties, or perhaps more pragmatically, the need for credibility within their own community in order to convey to that public those steps necessary to achieve peace (which is a motive for Israeli participation). Thus, Israelis will use arguments of self-interest, rather than morality or justice, in speaking to their own community, even evoking the harm to Israelis or Israeli society due to the continued conflict – thereby implying a symmetry (of suffering as well as power) that does not exist as far as the Palestinians are concerned.

At another level altogether, Israeli efforts to equalize positions in these joint encounters is often characterized by overtures for social interaction and comradeship. The Israelis would appear to be looking for acceptance, perhaps in keeping with the theory that perpetrators seek acceptance because they feel morally wrong, while victims seek power due to a sense of powerlessness (Shnabel et al. 2008). Israelis in this type of

encounter often do feel this moral culpability. But, whether they need it or not, acceptance in the form of social interaction is something that only the stronger side can afford. Moves toward “equalization” of the relationship can be seen as “normalization” by the more vulnerable side (with regard to its public) and incognizance of the asymmetrical relationship. Thus, Palestinians will emphasize the goal-oriented political side of the cooperation. This is not to say that personal relationships do not develop or that all Israelis and all Palestinians in these encounters share the same feelings or reactions. But all of the above has been observed in the meetings experienced, as well as for the most part the Rouhama workshops amongst Israeli Arabs and Jews.

These are all matters of asymmetry that constitute serious obstacles when it comes to joint advocacy, projects or activities. Joint action – important in itself as an outcome of alternative problem resolution – may be seen as a litmus test of the other side’s commitment, demanded by the more suspicious (and vulnerable) weaker side. Yet such actions are not to be perceived as or imply equality, so, therefore, they must conform to the demands or positions of the weaker side. The degree of the need for such conformity might be dependent upon the vulnerability of the weaker side, or its capacity for risk-taking, in relation to its own community, while the stronger side will make its own calculation with regard to credibility in its own community. In addition, as Rouhama also noted, there are the obvious differences in priorities, concerns, salience or relevance of issues, and sense of urgency, derived from the asymmetry of the situation of the two sides (1995). Joint projects have been criticized both on the matter of “normalization,” but also for glossing over asymmetry (Kuttab and Kaufman 1988; Said 1995). Asymmetry is clearly a particularly sensitive and formidable obstacle in the case of collaborative

projects or joint advocacy. Or, as Kelman puts it, “In sum, a coalition that cuts across conflict lines is by nature an uneasy coalition...” (Kelman 1991, 242).

The Gender Factor in Israeli-Palestinian Cross-Conflict Cooperation

There are only a few studies that have looked at the role of gender in Israeli-Palestinian alternative dispute resolution or track-two encounters. Tamra Pearson d'Estree and Eileen Babbitt (1998) analyzed three Kelman organized workshops (one mixed, two all-female) which they had observed, while two other studies by participants (myself, Golan 2003) and Zahira Kamal (Golan and Kamal 1999) drew upon experience in a large number of both mixed and all-female Israeli-Palestinian workshops. Focusing on process, d'Estree and Babbitt drew a number of broad conclusions from a comparison of the mixed (but largely male) and all-female workshops without distinguishing between participants from the two “sides” of the conflict. They did indeed find differences which relate to women’s as distinct from men’s ways of dealing with each other, affirming many of the assumptions regarding the skills each bring to cross-conflict encounters. Women tended to be more personal, empathetic, and receptive, while men were more formal and impersonal; both were rights-oriented but the women also spoke of responsibility and sought cooperative ways of dealing with the problems facing both sides. Surprisingly, perhaps, women were actually more willing than the men to address a particularly controversial issue (the status of Jerusalem).

In looking at process, our observations included all of the above differences including the more personal, highly emotional empathetic “listening” on the part of the women as compared with the men (Saunders 1999). However, unlike d'Estree and Babbitt, we found that in the earlier meetings women actually sought to avoid at least one

of the most difficult issues in the conflict (the right of return of the Palestinian refugees to today's Israel) although they did deal with other issues avoided by the men (the future status of Jerusalem, Israeli recognition of the PLO). This is an important difference to which I will return below. One difference that d'Estree and Babbitt did not note was that the women in Kelman's all-female workshop rebelled against his standard format and demanded a less rigid structure for the sessions. Moreover, in compliance with the women's requests, Kelman had a woman (his wife, Rose Kelman) facilitate the second workshop instead of conducting it himself. This request was most likely connected with the fact that the women involved were feminists and thus particularly conscious of the role of gender.

The "rebellion" was a significant move in overcoming the asymmetry of the two groups, as they acted together in favor of what was considered a format more suitable to women. Yet my own observations suggest that the fact of all-female participants, even feminists, does not actually eliminate or even affect asymmetry. Comparing these all-female dialogue workshops and action or advocacy oriented all-female groups, on the one hand, with the mixed (predominantly male) groups discussed above, on the other hand, one finds that many—though not all—of the effects of asymmetry were quite similar. The similarities would suggest that asymmetry (power) is a more important factor than gender – as the theoretical literature suggests, though, as we shall see, gender nonetheless would appear to have played a role. What follows are not experimentally based conclusions but rather observations from my own experience as a participant in the Kelman all-female workshops as well as all-female meetings and workshops organized by others more or less regularly between 1985 and the present. It must be borne in mind,

as noted earlier, that mine are the observations of just one, Israeli, participant. Those of other participants might be quite different.

As in the predominantly male groups discussed above, so too with regard to all-female groups, backgrounds and profiles of participants were relatively comparable. At the same time, as in the case of the mixed groups, the compositions and especially the context changed many times. A significant difference was, of course, the same gender composition of both sides, based on gender identification. From the outset, however, it was clarified in the all-female groups that gender identity was secondary to national identity even though organization was on a gender basis. Women may have come together as women, even feminists, for a variety of reasons, some of which perhaps tactical for political purposes or, more prevalent, the sense on both sides that women should have a say in the fateful decisions of the leaderships of the two sides. Yet, the asymmetry of the two sides led immediately to the rejection of an essentialist –sisterhood” approach. The Palestinian women were quick to point out that we were far from equal given the asymmetry of power between the two sides. This important point will be discussed further below.

Thus, as with the mixed groups, national identity played its role in dictating different motives and goals for the two sides: with regard to goals, end of occupation and an independent state for the one side; end of the conflict and peace for the other side. Similarity to the mixed groups could also be found in that asymmetry, from the very outset, was reflected in the sensitivity to the imbalance of the narratives, namely the difference in importance and moral-weight given to the narrative of each side; the greater

focus by the Palestinians on the past – past injustices, violations and the like, as distinct from an Israeli preference to deal with the future and avoid dealing with justice as such.

As in the mixed groups, the “weaker” group did indeed have – and invoked – the moral high-ground as those oppressed by the injustices of the occupation – from long delays at checkpoints to the humiliating need for official Israeli permits even to travel to meeting places. There were also some similarities to the mixed groups regarding the relationship to one’s own community, namely, the problem of “normalization” for the Palestinians, and credibility for the Israelis, sometimes leading Israelis to the use of arguments based on self-interest as distinct from moral arguments. The problem of mistrust was in evidence, possibly even more strongly, amongst the all-female groups. This may have been the result of a changing context – the failure of the formal peace initiatives, the drastic tightening of the occupation, and the greater alienation between the two communities over the years. The Palestinian women’s groups became increasingly similar to the mixed groups with regard to insistence upon purely political rather than social interchanges or cooperation, for example, accompanied by far less personal and emotional behavior than in earlier times (see also Richter-Devroe 2008) and Cockburn (1998). One might also explain the change by the increased salience of national identity as the context became more conflictual, reducing what little effect implicit shared gender identity might have had in collaborative interactions.

Even throughout the changing atmosphere, however, there were differences of degree (in comparison with mixed groups) regarding some of the same expressions of asymmetry. For example, the Palestinian women were less willing than their male colleagues in mixed groups (or the Israeli women) to make compromises, and they were

more demanding of the Israelis to agree to their positions. Rejecting a give and take approach associated with collaborative behavior, it might even be said that they were often still more assertive than the Palestinian men, and more competitive than the Israeli women, in this all-female collaborative setting. In distinguishing between Israelis and Palestinians, this may have been due to the difference in their relationship to their different communities (constituents, as Kelman called them), leading the weaker party to greater reticence regarding collaborative efforts, as noted above.

There was, however, a difference between the men (the mixed groups) and the women with regard to the relationship to their community. Whereas both Palestinian and Israeli men and women holding official or semi-official positions may have felt particularly restricted regarding the compromises they could make, in the women's groups even those participants who were not in such positions on the Palestinian side evidenced vulnerability (vis a vis their community). This was far less apparent not only on the Israeli side but also in comparison with Palestinian men. Vulnerability – at least with regard to credibility – existed to some degree on the Israeli side as well, but on the whole, the Palestinian women appeared to be under greater scrutiny and suspicion from their community than their male counterparts with regard to the collaboration altogether and positions adopted in particular. As one Palestinian woman put it, the men seemed to have more freedom or a “cavalier attitude” (confidence, entitlement?) toward saying almost anything; their room for risk-taking, to deviate from official positions, was far greater. It has been suggested that an additional explanation for this may be the expectation or demand that Palestinian women “view themselves, first of all, as Palestinians resisting the occupation,” before their gender identity, so that cooperation

with Israelis on the basis of gender is doubly suspicious in the eyes of their community (Richter-Devroe 2008; see also Cockburn 1998).

This vulnerability, if indeed that is what it was, only seemed to intensify with the changing context. While the issue of normalization was always present for the men as well, the deteriorating situation and crises did not affect all of the mixed groups on this point as much as it apparently did the women's groups. Thus greater disparity between the women and the mixed (virtually all-male) groups could be observed in the insistence of the Palestinian women upon dealing with – and reaching full agreement – on the most difficult issues. In some ways indicative of the mistrust, this was perceived by some of the Israelis as a form of testing but also possibly as tantamount to a demand for total identification with the other side, or solidarity. And Israelis often did comply (a more cooperative behavior?), possibly out of acknowledgement of the asymmetry, perhaps an effort to compensate for it, just as the justification for the Palestinian demand (a more competitive behavior?) was also connected to asymmetry: the asymmetry of the weaker (occupied) side vis a vis the powerful (and free – occupier) side. Indeed, this appears to be in keeping with the protagonist/victim distinction, namely, a sense of moral culpability and need for acceptance on the one side, and a sense of powerlessness and need to assert power on the other side (Shnabel et al. 2008).

It is in fact, the recognition of the centrality of the issue of asymmetry itself that appears to be the major difference between the women and the men in their efforts at collaborative work and advocacy. Asymmetry, as we have seen, was clearly present in the mixed groups and definitely had its effects, but it was only in the all-female groups that the matter was placed squarely on the table and consciously adopted as a critical

factor in the collaborative work. To my knowledge, Rouhama is the only male participant of such encounters who has raised this matter in a similar fashion. Indeed, a Palestinian female participant said on one occasion that the Israeli women's recognition of and willingness to deal with the asymmetry was possibly the most important achievement of their joint efforts – at least in terms of rendering it possible to work together at a particularly difficult time.

Consciously and explicitly coping with asymmetry means that the two sides cannot be equated – something that third parties often fail to understand as they try to create a laboratory situation of equality to neutralize the strength of one side. Yet neither problems, nor issues, nor grievances, nor responses can be equated. This has very concrete implications for the usage, for example, of blanket statements such as “~~both~~ sides are suffering from the violence,” or “~~violence~~ must be condemned from both sides,” or “~~both~~ sides must show flexibility.” Such statements, apparently fair and perhaps politically correct, imply symmetry where there is none. Just as compromise, give and take, an equal voice for the Israeli side alongside the Palestinian side, would all imply symmetry. This does not mean that there cannot be critical analyses of situations and ideas as well as discussions from different points of view. Indeed the conscious acknowledgement of asymmetry has rendered the discussions a greater depth and openness than is always apparent in the mixed groups – where asymmetry is most likely understood but rarely if ever acknowledged.

If the acknowledged centrality of asymmetry is the major difference between the all-female and the predominantly male cross conflict groups (in the Israel-Palestine context), is this an element of gender? Inasmuch as this difference appeared at similar

times, in similar (political) contexts, what would account for women's greater sensitivity to this factor?

One might contend that gender plays a role insofar as most women experience asymmetry in a multitude of ways every day, and therefore, may be relatively sensitive to the phenomenon. Similarly, researchers have found that women tend to exhibit relationship awareness whereas men seem to be more task oriented (Lewicki and Saunders 2007). Indeed women are said to be more sensitive to and less supportive of hierarchy than men (Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, and Malle 1994). While, obviously, different women (and men) experience hierarchy or asymmetry of power in different ways, theories of "outsider" "insider" group behavior may be relevant. Broadly speaking, women fall into the category of "outgroups" or the disadvantaged, and such groups have been found to be more aware of asymmetry as compared with ingroups' preference to focus on commonalities (Saguy, Dovidio, and Pratto 2008). This sense of shared identity is stronger among women than men, and, therefore, may develop a trust and ability to touch on issues of power (Crisp 2008).

Feminism might even add to these possible explanations for the difference in salience of asymmetry between the women's groups and the predominantly male mixed groups. The all-female groups to which I have referred are self-defined as composed of feminists with the explicit intention of providing a gender perspective in dealing with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. An analysis and understanding of power relations is basic to a feminist approach. Standpoint theory as a tool of feminist analysis, deconstructs situations and relationships; it looks at the place of the individual with particular sensitivity to marginalization as well as hierarchy. Moreover, feminist theory has much

to say about “equality,” for example with regard to the so-called blindness of justice (MacKinnon 1987). Feminists are well aware that women generally do not face a level playing field when compared with men, and thus “equality” can never be assumed (Okin 1999). There are undoubtedly other ways in which a feminist approach, or a gender perspective, can affect the work of cross-conflict groups, but a feminist approach may be an additional clue as to the importance the groups to which I have referred ascribe to asymmetry in their collaborative efforts and advocacy.

Whether or not this understanding of the role of asymmetry will prove to be more effective than ignoring asymmetry remains to be seen. Acknowledging the centrality of asymmetry may make it more difficult to reach joint decisions or positions. Yet, a conscious appreciation of asymmetry may well render these positions more effective in the long run inasmuch as they will be based on and presumably deal with reality.

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