Peace and Conflict Studies

- Network Facilitation and Social Capital
  
  Toran Hansen

- Linking Process to Outcome: Implicit Norms in a Cross-Cultural Dialogue Program
  
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- Can the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) Resolve Conflicts?
  
  Ibrahim Sharqieh

- Conversation with an Interpreter: Considerations for Cross-Language, Cross-Cultural Peacebuilding Research
  
  Maureen P. Flaherty and Sonya Stavkova

- Armor All: The Self-Conception of Private Security Contractors
  
  Volker Franke
Table of Contents

Network Facilitation and Social Capital 164

Toran Hansen

Linking Process to Outcome: Implicit Norms in a Cross-Cultural Dialogue Program 193

Karen Ross

Can the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) Resolve Conflicts? 219

Ibrahim Sharqieh

Conversation with an Interpreter: Considerations for Cross-Language, Cross-Cultural Peacebuilding Research 237

Maureen P. Flaherty and Sonya Stavkova

Armor All: The Self-Conception of Private Security Contractors 259

Volker Franke
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Network Facilitation and Social Capital

Toran Hansen

Abstract

This paper empirically demonstrates that networks of organizations working together can be facilitated by individual network members, even when no facilitators are formally designated by the network members. Regression analyses also revealed statistically significant relationships between the frequency that facilitation functions were facilitated in the inter-organizational network studied and both the level of trust that the network members had for their inter-organizational network and the level of work coordination experienced by the members of the network. These two dependent variables were utilized as indicators of social capital, which was therefore found to be enhanced by inter-organizational network facilitation in this study. This research suggests that conflict resolution practitioners and scholars can work with inter-organizational networks by fulfilling network facilitation roles, training network members in facilitation, or researching facilitation in inter-organizational networks. The context for the study is an inter-organizational political advocacy nonprofit network in Minnesota that organized protest activities against the Iraq War in 2009.

Introduction

This paper examines the nature of facilitation in inter-organizational networks, as well as the connection between network facilitation and social capital. The concept of facilitation is borrowed from scholarship on small group facilitation, in which facilitators seek to enhance communications among group members by making logistical arrangements for meetings, providing social support to group members, encouraging participatory discussion and participatory decision-making processes, and providing conflict management. This paper
considers whether a specific inter-organizational network is facilitated, even when there have been no network facilitators formally designated by the network members. Then the paper investigates whether the frequency of network facilitation conducted by any identified network facilitators is statistically related to the level of social capital in the network.

These possibilities are investigated in the context of the network of organizations in Minnesota that worked together to organize protest activities against United States’ involvement in the Iraq War in 2009. The study explores how communications were facilitated in this inter-organizational network. Then regression analyses are used to determine if the frequency of facilitation in the network is statistically related to the overall level of network social capital (as indicated by the level of trust network members had for their network and the level of work coordination with each other). These relationships are illustrated by considering the analogous “spokescouncil” process used by peace movements, as well as the general assembly process of the occupy movement in New York City. Finally, theorizing based on the findings from the study are applied to the field of conflict resolution more generally, by considering the possibility that conflict resolution practitioners and scholars could fulfill network facilitation roles in inter-organizational networks, train natural network facilitators in facilitation skills, or study how network facilitation can enhance social capital in an inter-organizational network. The potential for other conflict resolution processes to generate social capital is also speculated upon.

The Facilitation of Inter-Organizational Networks

We are now living in a global “networked society,” increasingly interconnected by social networks and digital communication media (Castells 2009). Social networks are groups of social actors who have ongoing relationships in a moderately stable social structure in which they exchange valued resources (for example, information, money, and business contacts) (e.g., Galaskiewicz 1989). Information is the foundational resource that is
Peace and Conflict Studies

exchanged in social networks, because sharing all other resources depends on the ability of
network members to communicate information with one another (Kenis and Knoke 2002).
Interpersonal networks, such as friendship networks, networks of extended family, and
church congregations, meet diverse needs of the network members, who are interdependent,
assisting and supporting one another by various means (Wellman 1999; 1982). Inter-
organizational networks (such as strategic business partners working together to broaden their
markets or networks of social service providers collaborating to serve client populations) are,
in addition, purposefully created, directed towards the attainment of collective goals, and to
some extent, manageable (Galaskiewicz 1989; Hall and Tolbert 2005; Kickert et al. 1997).
Inter-organizational networks are less hierarchical and more decentralized than typical
organizational social structures, which tend to have a defined hierarchical structure, with
employees, managers, volunteers, and board members often having more formalized roles
and responsibilities than individuals in inter-organizational networks (McGuire 2006;
Milward and Provan 1998).

Networks are similar to small groups (such as task groups or committees in a
workplace or therapeutic groups in social service settings), within which individuals
collectively accomplish tasks using pooled resources. Small groups meet the needs of
individual members and pursue goals that benefit both the individual members and the group
as a whole (Toseland and Rivas 2005). However, unlike small group members who are
always individuals, social network members can be any kind of social actor (like an
organization, a community, or an entire network); network members may only rarely or never
meet as a full group; network activities are often more spontaneous, as dictated by the
interests and aptitudes of network members or cliques of members; and network leadership
tends to be less formalized and more diffuse (e.g., Nan 2008). Networks, like small groups,
can either be naturally occurring, as is the case with a network of family members or friends,
or intentionally crafted to attain collective goals, as is the case with strategic business partnerships or networks of social service providers (Lin 2000).

Small groups can be either facilitated or unmoderated, when group members negotiate their interactions with one another without the aid of individuals specifically designated to guide the quality or form of their interactions (Schwarz 2002; Toseland and Rivas 2005). In an unmoderated committee in a workplace, for example, responsibility for setting-up committee meetings or disseminating meeting agendas and minutes could fall to whoever was able to do it at any given time, in which case “the ball might get dropped” and these tasks might not get accomplished. With no one designated to facilitate the committee during a crisis or conflict, committee members might seek support (both emotional support and actual assistance with their work tasks) from their unique set of friends or they might continue to have unresolved problems that make them less productive, more-stressed committee members. Likewise, when the committee would try to hold strategizing or planning meetings in an unmoderated fashion, some members could dominate interactions, while other members may not actively contribute to discussions, as no one would be designated to ensure that participation was balanced or inclusive. Decisions could also be made unilaterally, with more persuasive or dominant committee members making decisions on behalf of the committee as a whole, or the committee could find it difficult to make decisions at all and flounder. These are all common concerns that emerge in unmoderated small groups like the work committee described above (Schwarz 2002). Designated small group facilitators can ensure that logistical arrangements for meetings are made, provide emotional support or actual assistance to group members experiencing crises or conflicts, and encourage balanced, participatory discussions and decision-making (Schwarz 2002; Toseland and Rivas 2005).

Garb and Nan (2006) have researched inter-organizational peacebuilding networks as negotiated, unmoderated phenomena, considering the direct, negotiated interactions among
the network members, uninfluenced by any designated facilitators. Nan (2008) has built upon this research by theoretically speculating that individual network members may spontaneously take on facilitator or broker roles in inclusive, participatory inter-organizational networks, but she did not specifically study, empirically investigate, or describe these roles in any detail. There has been extensive research conducted regarding the role of brokers in social networks. However, research of the broker role in social networks frequently identifies a broker as a position in the social structure of a network, as determined by their relationships with other network members, which may then be correlated with outcomes (e.g., Burt 2004). However these data cannot conclusively demonstrate if brokers fulfill specific communication functions or permit the description of those functions in detail, leading to a rather nondescript explanation of the broker role. Traditionally, research on the broker role answers the question, “where are the brokers?”, rather than “what do brokers do?” or “how do brokers behave?” Using this sort of traditional social network analysis, any investigation of brokers is limited to structural concerns. Conversely, this study seeks to identify facilitators on the basis of their functional role, which then provides a basis for specifically describing their role, what they do, and how they behave. The data collected in this study are used to consider specific types of facilitation roles adopted by individual network members and therefore provide a more specified description of the broker role than is possible in using traditional social network analysis, which equates brokerage with a position in the social structure.

If individual network members facilitate inter-organizational networks as speculated on by Nan (2008), those network facilitators would be ideally suited to provide networks with guidance and direction without any formal authority, by virtue of their influence over information flow in the network. In his scholarship examining the international networks established by digital communications for example, Castells (2009) found that within
international mass media, political, or military social networks, social actors who exercise control over the “protocols of communication” used by the network members had a form of “communication power” by controlling the network’s flow of information. Likewise, interpersonal and inter-organizational networks must establish such protocols, the norms and rules that regulate the flow of information in a network, giving any network members who control or influence these norms and rules (the network facilitators) “communication power,” providing them the means to offer a network guidance and direction (Cook 2005). This form of power, the control over information flow in communications processes, is particularly important in our present networked society (Castells 2009).

This paper therefore empirically investigates whether inter-organizational network members facilitate a specific network, even though no network facilitators were formally designated to perform this task in their network. The paper considers the hypothesis that natural facilitators can spontaneously emerge from the structure of an inter-organizational network to facilitate network interactions, due to their aptitude for facilitation and/or their inclination to guide the interactions among a network’s members. These natural facilitators would then have “communication power,” giving them the potential to influence the network’s communications and information flow, which they could then use to enhance the performance of the network.

**Social Capital and Benefits of Inter-organizational Relationships**

If it can be demonstrated that an inter-organizational network can be facilitated even when facilitators are not formally designated for that task, this would beg the question: would this facilitation enhance the performance of the network? One of the most significant effects that social networks can have on their members is to provide them with a repository of social capital that members can access and benefit from (e.g., Lin 2001). In general, social capital connotes that benefits come from being in relationships, but it manifests differently
depending on the perspective of the observer. Individual network members may benefit from increased access to resources through their relationships with others in the network, but the network as a whole benefits as well.

From the vantage point of a network’s members, social capital represents the resources and social support that members can access through the reciprocal obligations and expectations that they incur with one another (Coleman 1988; Lin 2001, 2000, 1999). Considering personal relationship networks, for instance, Granovetter (1995; 1982) illustrates that larger, more heterogeneous networks of business acquaintances improve an individual’s ability to get a job (as people often discover job leads through their acquaintances). In addition, employers that have larger, more heterogeneous recruiting networks can improve the quality of their recruits for job openings (Erickson 2001). Coleman (1988) demonstrates that higher levels of social capital can also positively impact the performance of children in school, when parents have stronger relationships with them and when children have stronger relationships with other people in their community. Relationships that parents make in their social networks can also make it easier for them to find the right school for their children. Moreover, personal relationship networks can help small business owners find clients, get loans, or gain access to helpful industry information (Renzulli and Aldrich 2005; Zimmer and Aldrich 1987). Networks of personal relationships can also be an invaluable form of personal support, providing individuals with social support (information, companionship, and empathy) and material aid (financial and otherwise) to enhance their physical and mental well-being, which can buffer the effects of life crises (like getting a life-threatening illness, facing a natural disaster, or losing a job) (Hurlbert et al. 2001; Lin et al. 1999; Wellman 1999, 1982; Wellman and Gulia 1999).

When considered from the vantage point of the social network as a whole, the benefits of social capital appear different, as the entire network and the social actors that interact with
it derive certain benefits due to the relationships among the network members. The network is able to enhance and extend the capacity of individual members to accomplish network tasks and meet network goals, beyond what they could achieve on their own (e.g., Green and Haines 2002). In addition, supportive networks tend to develop cooperative norms, a climate of trust, and opportunities for collaboration, enabling easier, more productive interactions, which can benefit the network as a whole and any actors that interact with it (Coleman 1988; Green and Haines 2002; Mattessich and Monsey 1997; Putnam 2000).

Inter-organizational networks also offer their organizational members particular benefits when compared to organizations that “go it alone.” Organizations participating in inter-organizational networks can: expand their resources, diversify and improve their funding streams, learn from other network members, become more innovative, broaden their capacity to address large social or organizational problems, bring in additional voices to evaluate their operations, and increase the public’s awareness of their organization, as well as its goods and services (Arsenault 1998; Crutchfield and Grant 2008; Doz and Hamel 1998; Hansen 2009). However, participating in an inter-organizational network also yields possible costs to the network members, such as: the time and financial requirements required to participate, the potential for clashes with other network members, an overall reduction of competition in the marketplace, organizational drift away from its original mission, and finding compromise solutions to problems rather than optimal solutions (Arsenault 1998; Doz and Hamel 1998; Hansen 2009; Yankey and Willen 2005).

A variety of empirical studies have considered whether various aspects of the facilitation of inter-organizational networks could be found to be statistically related to such indicators of social capital as trust and work coordination. For instance, statistically significant relationships have been discovered, revealing positive correlations between conflict resolution and trust (Gargiulo and Ertug 2006; Hall et al. 1981; Van de Ven and Ring
2006) integrated decision-making and trust (McEvily and Zaheer 2006), integrated problem solving and trust (McEvily and Zaheer 2006), and procedural justice and trust (Cook 2005; Ring 1996; Van de Ven and Ring 2006) in inter-organizational networks. Another study found a statistically significant relationship and a positive correlation between the quality of network discussion and work coordination in an inter-organizational network (Hall et al. 1981).

**The Study: An Inter-Organizational Nonprofit Network in Minnesota**

The theorizing presented above provides a basis for examining patterns of facilitation in a specific inter-organizational network and considering their impact on the network’s social capital. This paper therefore empirically investigates the question of whether a specific inter-organizational network has natural network facilitators, even when no facilitators have been formally identified to facilitate the network. Once this question is considered, the paper then takes up the question of whether any detected facilitation has any statistically significant relationship with the social capital in the network, as measured by effects of any detected network facilitation on the levels of network trust and work coordination. These variables were chosen as indicators of social capital because they are common outcome variables in social network evaluation research, they have previously been demonstrated to be related to various aspects of facilitation in inter-organizational networks, and they seem to represent the essence of social capital in inter-organizational networks (Cook 2005; Gargiulo and Ertug 2006; Hall et al. 1981; McEvily and Zaheer 2006; Ring 1996; Van de Ven and Ring 2006).

The inter-organizational network that was used to investigate these research questions was a network of political advocacy nonprofit organizations in Minnesota that organized protest activities against the United States’ involvement in the Iraq War in 2009.

Minnesota has a vibrant network of nonprofit organizations that have opposed the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as war in general. In a given week, this network of
peace organizations organizes several events (small protests, presentations on current events pertaining to wars, and the like) and there is usually a large protest or two in any given month. Many of the individuals involved in the network (who represent anti-war and peace organizations) have been engaged in peace and anti-war activities since the Vietnam War. The network of nonprofit peace organizations in Minnesota received national attention in the 1970s, protesting against the Honeywell Corporation’s production of landmine timers (Rogne and Harper 1990). More recently, they received attention for their role organizing and participating in protests at the Republican National Convention from August 31 to September 4, 2008, where over eight hundred arrests were made (Coleman 2008).

The various events and activities organized by the network of nonprofit peace organizations in Minnesota are attended by different individuals and clusters of individuals, so each event tends to draw its own crowd of individuals who sustain it on an ongoing basis, creating heterogeneous affinity groups of activists that participate in the movement activities that interest them. There are affinity groups of activists who, on a weekly basis, meet to protest arms manufacturers or the United States’ participation in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, church groups and veterans groups who meet regularly to discuss peace related concerns and potential peace actions, and groups of individuals who plan periodic presentations or who bring in speakers for activists to hear. There are also large protests, like annual protests against the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, which tend to attract most of the peace activists in Minnesota.

Data were gathered for this study from thirty-six participants (who represented 42 separate organizations, as some individuals represented multiple organizations), using a self-administered eighty-three question survey. The survey questions were designed by reviewing existing inter-organizational network evaluation surveys (e.g., Galaskiewicz 1979; Morrissey et al. 1982), selecting appropriate questions, and modifying them to fit the research context.
Then the survey was given to experts in social network analysis to review, who provided helpful feedback on it, and finally it was field-tested with two potential research participants before it was used in the study. The Principle Investigator was present to assist the participants when they completed the survey.

The research participants were identified non-randomly by peace activists who were approached and asked to identify representatives of organizations who organized or planned protest events. These identified organizational representatives were then asked to participate in the study. They were chosen to represent a wide variety of nonprofit organizations (like student organizations, women’s organizations, socialist organizations, religious organizations, and veteran’s organizations). The survey asked them about their perceptions of facilitation-related activities that transpired for the three-month period prior to filling out the survey, which they completed from April 20 to April 30, 2009. As stated above, the reliability and validity of the measures were maximized by borrowing questions from previous inter-organizational network evaluation studies, selecting measures that captured a range of dimensions for each of the variables under investigation, modifying them to suit the context, getting feedback on the survey, and field-testing it. Following the initial analysis of the data, study participants were given a report of the findings and several of the study participants took part in a focus group meeting to discuss their impressions of the study findings, which were incorporated into the final data analysis.

The survey asked the study participants whom they would identify as being responsible for the facilitation of planning and strategizing meetings in their inter-organizational network. The network facilitation variable was divided into five dimensions that accorded with functions performed by facilitators of small groups in models proposed by Schwarz (2002) and Toseland and Rivas (2005). Five of the dimensions of facilitation common to both of these models were: performing logistical arrangements to organize group
meetings (this dimension was sub-divided into the tasks of organizing meetings and disseminating information about them), providing group members with social support (assisting them to cope with stress, completing their work, and motivating them), encouraging participatory discussion (fostering inclusive, non-coercive deliberation, where everyone openly expresses their views and can influence agenda topics), encouraging participatory decision-making (distributing compromises evenly and using inclusive decision-making techniques like voting or consensus-building, rather than employing unilateral decision-making), and providing conflict management (ways to discuss and overcome interpersonal differences that save the face of group members and prevent retaliatory actions). Study participants were asked to identify who was most responsible for each communication function, who was the second most responsible individual, and who was the third most responsible individual.

The study participants completed four Likert-style questions considering different aspects of each communication function (logistical arrangements, social support, participatory discussion, participatory decision-making, and conflict management). This provided a total of twenty questions for the network facilitation variable for each study participant. The questions asked them the frequency that they experienced facilitation for all aspects of each function in their inter-organizational network interactions. Each of the answers was assessed a numerical value by adding the scores of ordinal measures ranging in value from one to five, giving each individual a total score from twenty to one hundred for the network facilitation variable. The network facilitation variable was used as the independent variable in two regression analyses.

As mentioned above, two separate indicators of social capital were considered in this study: the level network members trusted the other network members, as well as the level of work coordination that network members experienced in their network interactions. These
two variables were used as the dependent variables in the regression analyses. Study participants were asked eight Likert-style questions concerning the frequency that they experienced different dimensions of network trust (network members believed that other members put the interests of the network ahead of their own personal interests, made good faith efforts to accomplish network tasks, were honest with one another, and gave one another the benefit of the doubt) and work coordination (network labor and resources were shared fairly, network members attempted to accomplish common goals, credit for network successes and failures was shared fairly, and work duplicity was avoided) in the accomplishment of network activities. Thus, each study participant had a total score of eight to forty for each of the dependent variables. Because every individual experienced a unique set of activities and interactions in the network, their levels of network facilitation, trust, and work coordination were also unique, as dictated by the activities that they participated in. The level of network facilitation that each of them experienced could be compared with the levels of trust and work coordination that they experienced in their unique set of network activities. Hence, the study participants’ network facilitation scores were compared with their trust and work coordination scores in regression analyses to assess whether any statistically significant relationships emerged between network facilitation and either trust or work coordination.

Results

Were the communication functions facilitated in this inter-organizational network?

Regarding this first research question, whether or not the six dimensions of network facilitation (organizing, disseminating information, social support, participatory discussion, participatory decision-making, and conflict management) were facilitated, the results partially substantiated Nan’s (2008) theoretical assertion, which indicated that individual inter-organizational network members may spontaneously take responsibility for facilitation in an inter-organizational network. In the inter-organizational network examined in this study,
natural facilitators emerged that planned and strategized meetings of network members, facilitating the functions of: organizing, information dissemination, participatory discussion, and participatory decision-making. However, the functions of social support or conflict management were not found to be facilitated.

Two separate methods were used to determine whether or not a function was considered facilitated. In data analysis, each response from a survey respondent was scored as follows: “most responsible” responses received three points, “second most responsible” received two points, and “third most responsible” received a single point. The total score for each individual identified as responsible for a given communication function was compiled from the entire sample, as was the total score for the function as a whole. Figure 1 (see next page) depicts the scores of individuals who were considered the most responsible for the communication functions; meaning that they received the largest number of points for a given function (the top ten scorers for each function are shown). Figure 1 also shows the total number of points that were allotted for each function by the entire sample of study participants and the total number of individuals who were perceived as having some responsibility for each function.

For instance, for the function of organizing, study participant 3 received the most points from all of the study participants combined with 62 total points, followed by study participant 20 with 29 points, study participant 14 with 17 points, and so on. There were 198 points allotted for the function as a whole, and thirty-seven individuals were identified as having some responsibility for the function by at least one study participant. Of the grand total of 198 points allotted for the communication function by the study participants, the three individuals who were identified as having the most responsibility for the organizing function (the three individuals with the highest scores: study participants 3, 20, and 14) received 54.5% of all of the total points allotted to the function (62+29+17 = 108/198 = 54.5%).
Figure 1. Summary of the distribution of the points allotted to the top ten scorers for all of the facilitation functions, as well as each function as a whole.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Function Rank (top ten only)</th>
<th>Organizing</th>
<th>Information Dissemination</th>
<th>Social Support</th>
<th>Participatory Discussion</th>
<th>Participatory Decision-making</th>
<th>Conflict Management</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>3 (62)</td>
<td>3 (57)</td>
<td>3 (34)</td>
<td>3 (51)</td>
<td>3 (43)</td>
<td>14, 20 (9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>20 (29)</td>
<td>20 (20)</td>
<td>1 (15)</td>
<td>20 (20)</td>
<td>20 (20)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>14 (17)</td>
<td>41 (11)</td>
<td>9 (12)</td>
<td>14 (19)</td>
<td>14 (13)</td>
<td>3 (6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>1 (8)</td>
<td>1, 7 (10)</td>
<td>7, 20 (11)</td>
<td>5 (13)</td>
<td>5, 9 (10)</td>
<td>5 (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>9, 10 (7)</td>
<td></td>
<td>1, 19 (11)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>7, 41, 44 (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>8 (8)</td>
<td>8 (10)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>19 (9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>6, 33 (4)</td>
<td>9 (7)</td>
<td>14 (8)</td>
<td>9 (10)</td>
<td>8 (8)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>10, 14, 17 (6)</td>
<td>24 (7)</td>
<td>10, 30, 41 (6)</td>
<td>7 (5)</td>
<td>4, 6, 30, 32, 34, 39, 55, 88 (3)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>7, 8, 16, 34 (3)</td>
<td>56 (6)</td>
<td>16, 41 (4)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>42 (5)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Total points for each function/number of different individuals identified | 198/37 | 200/35 | 214/50 | 209/37 | 173/29 | 90/35 |

| % of points among the three highest scorers | 54.5% | 44% | 28.5% | 43.1% | 44% | 26.7% |

* Scores in the table are presented as follows: an individual study participant’s designated number in italics followed by their (score in parentheses). Totals for the sample for each of the facilitation functions are in bold.

Among the four functions deemed to be facilitated (organizing, information dissemination, participatory discussion, and participatory decision-making), the three individuals with the highest scores for those functions received more than 40% of the total points allotted for the function, indicating that responsibility for the function was concentrated. Only social support, where the top three scorers received only 28.5% of the total points for the function, and conflict management, where the top three scorers received only 26.7% of the total points for the function, had less than 40% of the total points concentrated among the top three scorers (in fact, both were less than 30%). Overall, study
participants 3, 14, and 20 were among the top ten scorers for all six of the facilitation functions, study participants 7 and 9 were among the top ten scorers for five functions, study participants 1, 8, and 41 were among the top ten scorers for four functions, and study participants 5 and 10 were among the top ten scorers for three functions. Therefore, ten individuals were among the top ten scorers for at least three functions, among the ninety-nine total individuals who were identified overall.

The second method that was used to determine whether or not a function was facilitated was by using a derived value calculated for each function, called the “points per individual scores.” Figure 2 (see next page) indicates the points per individual scores for each function. The points per individual scores were calculated by dividing the total number of points that were allotted to a given function by the total number of individuals that were identified as having some responsibility for the function by at least one study participant. The points per individual scores therefore illustrate the concentration of scores for the function as a whole. For example, there were 198 total points allotted to the organizing function and thirty-seven individuals were identified as having some level of responsibility for the function, so the points per individual scores for the function is 5.35 (198/37). For the functions determined to be facilitated (organizing, information dissemination, participatory discussion, and participatory decision-making), all had points per individual scores over 5 points, while social support had a score of 4.28 and conflict management had a score of 2.57.
Was network facilitation statistically related to network trust or work coordination?

There were two separate hypotheses tested by regression analyses in this study. They were used to determine whether the frequency of facilitation activities had any impact on the inter-organizational network’s social capital. Thus, network facilitation was the independent variable for both of the regression analyses. The levels of network trust and work coordination were used as the indicators of social capital in the network and, consequently, were the dependent variables in the analyses. It was anticipated that network members who experienced higher frequencies of network facilitation would also experience higher levels of network trust and work coordination and, conversely, that network members who
experienced lower frequencies of network facilitation would experience lower levels of network trust and work coordination. The models tested were as follows:

\[ \text{trust} = \text{network facilitation} + \text{error} \]

\[ \text{coordination} = \text{network facilitation} + \text{error} \]

The first hypothesis, that network members who experienced higher levels of network facilitation would also experience higher levels of network trust and that, conversely, those who experienced lower levels of network facilitation would also experience lower levels of network trust, was confirmed. The network facilitation variable was found to have a statistically significant relationship with the trust variable \( \alpha=.05 \text{ and } p=.027 (<.05) \), suggesting that the statistical model was valid. The effect size was found to be moderately weak. The correlation was found to be .33, meaning that the network facilitation variable explained 33% of the variation in the trust variable. The statistical model is summarized below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>Sum of Squares</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Mean Square</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Regression</td>
<td>178.647</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>35.729</td>
<td>2.984</td>
<td>.027</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residual</td>
<td>359.223</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>11.974</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>537.870</td>
<td>35</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a. Predictors: (Constant), Dec_Composite, Sup_Composite, CR_Composite, Facil_Composite, Log_Composite
b. Dependent Variable: Trust_Composite

The second hypothesis, that network members who experienced higher levels of network facilitation would experience higher levels of work coordination in the network and,
Peace and Conflict Studies

conversely, that network members who experienced lower levels of network facilitation would experience lower levels of work coordination, was confirmed. The network facilitation variable was found to have a statistically significant relationship with the work coordination variable \( [\alpha=.05 \text{ and } p=.000 (<.05)] \), suggesting that the statistical model was valid. The effect size was found to be moderately strong. The correlation was found to be .61, meaning that the network facilitation variable explained 61% of the variation in the work coordination variable. The statistical model is summarized below.

### ANOVA

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>Sum of Squares</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Mean Square</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Regression</td>
<td>355.528</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>71.106</td>
<td>9.534</td>
<td>.000&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residual</td>
<td>223.752</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>7.458</td>
<td>71.106</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>579.280</td>
<td>35</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<sup>a</sup> Predictors: (Constant), Dec_Composite, Sup_Composite, CR_Composite, Facil_Composite, Log_Composite

<sup>b</sup> Dependent Variable: Coord_Composite

### Model Summary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>R</th>
<th>R Square</th>
<th>Adjusted R Square</th>
<th>Std. Error of the Estimate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>.783&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>.614</td>
<td>.549</td>
<td>2.7310</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<sup>a</sup> Predictors: (Constant), Dec_Composite, Sup_Composite, CR_Composite, Facil_Composite, Log_Composite

### Discussion

The results of this study provide some important insights for scholars and practitioners working in and with inter-organizational networks, as well as for the field of conflict resolution more generally. For scholars and practitioners working in and with inter-organizational networks, this study empirically demonstrates that inter-organizational networks can be spontaneously facilitated by individual network members, even when they are not formally designated to fulfill that role. This provides some evidence for Nan’s (2008) theoretical assertion that natural facilitators emerge in certain inter-organizational networks,
as four of the six facilitation functions tested were found to be facilitated. It also complements the work of Garb and Nan (2006), who investigated inter-organizational networks as negotiated, unmoderated phenomena, as two facilitation functions were not found to be facilitated.

Four of the six communication functions were determined to be facilitated by network members: organizing, information dissemination, encouraging participatory discussion, and encouraging participatory decision-making. Further analysis of the social support and conflict management dimensions also provides a rationale for why they were not determined to be facilitated in this study. In an inter-organizational network such as the one investigated here, social support may be given by one’s closest friends and work colleagues, rather than a specific facilitator. Evidence from this study confirms this explanation. The social support function received the highest number of points allotted for any function (214) and the highest number of individuals identified as having some level of responsibility for the function (50) (see Figure 1). This means that the study participants had no difficulty identifying individuals who were responsible for providing them with social support, but that these individuals were distributed widely across the network, as one would expect if network members consulted their friends and colleagues for social support, rather than a specific facilitator.

The conflict management function, however, received the lowest number of points allotted for any particular function, with 90 (see Figure 1). This means that study participants had a difficult time identifying anybody responsible for the function. In a focus group meeting that was held with study participants, where they discussed their reactions to the study findings, the focus group participants suggested that this research helped them to notice that no one was doing conflict management in their network to any great extent. They indicated that they felt that this was because there were generally low levels of conflict in the network at that time and, culturally, people in Minnesota do not tend to discuss their
differences openly. They did state that several months earlier, in preparation for the Republican National Convention, they worked with many unfamiliar people from other parts of the United States, causing a good deal of conflict at that time.

This analysis leads to an interesting, though tentative, conclusion. There are at least three modes of facilitation that are possible in an inter-organizational network where no facilitators are formally identified, which can guide and shape the interactions among the network members. A facilitation function could be negotiated, as was the case with social support in this study, when responsibility for the function was broadly distributed across the network and many network members performed the function in an unmoderated fashion directly for one another. Alternatively, a facilitation function could be facilitated, as was the case with organizing, information dissemination, encouraging participatory discussion, and encouraging participatory decision-making, with responsibility for the function concentrated among fewer network members. In this case, individual network members, by virtue of their aptitudes or interests, take responsibility for facilitating a facilitation function. Or a facilitation function may not be performed by network members to a great extent at all, as was the case with conflict management here. The degree to which any given facilitation function is negotiated, facilitated, or not performed likely varies from network to network.

The results of the regression analyses considered in this paper are also intriguing. Network facilitation was statistically related to and positively correlated with both of the indicators of social capital examined here, network trust and work coordination. However, the effect size of the impact of network facilitation on the work coordination variable (correlation = .61) was almost twice as large as its impact on the trust variable (correlation = .33). This means that, in this study, and potentially in other inter-organizational networks, the manner in which a network is facilitated might have a greater impact on the ability of network members to coordinate their work activities with one another than to generate trust.
among the network members. Trust as examined here was not heavily influenced by network facilitation and was more greatly affected by other influences. In this study, network facilitation had a particularly strong impact on work coordination, suggesting that network facilitation could be a critical means to improve the coordination of work activities among the members of an inter-organizational network.

The findings discussed in this paper also give rise to some interesting speculation. For instance, it seems that certain facilitators of the network examined in this study, such as study participant 3, who had high ranking scores for all of the facilitation functions, might have facilitated network-wide interactions for all of the facilitation functions, while study participant 9, who had lower but still high scores for five of the six functions, might have been responsible for facilitating an affinity group within the network; and study participant 19, who had two high scores, specifically for the facilitation functions of encouraging participatory discussion and decision-making, might have been a facilitation specialist, only facilitating the functions that best suited that participant’s aptitudes and interests (see Figure 1). Hence, inter-organizational network facilitators could potentially be facilitators of the entire network or facilitators of affinity groups. Facilitators could also facilitate a wide range of communication functions generally or specialize in facilitating specific functions.

To illustrate how these facilitation patterns look in practice, we can use the facilitation of peace movements and the current Occupy New York City movement as analogous cases. While peace movement and occupy activists do not necessarily represent specific organizations, as would be the case in an inter-organizational network, their communication patterns clearly depict the patterns of facilitation discussed above. Peace movements frequently use a “spokescouncil” model for group decision-making (War Resisters’ International, 2009). In a spokescouncil, an affinity group of 5-15 people holds discussions around issues of importance, such as whether or not to take a specific protest action, which is
Peace and Conflict Studies

often facilitated by someone (War Resisters’ International, 2009). This facilitator is like the affinity group facilitator in an inter-organizational network speculated on above. This facilitator might also be the group’s spokesperson, who brings the affinity group’s decision to a council meeting of all of the spokespeople. If the facilitator and spokesperson roles were filled by different people, this would be like the facilitation specialists noted above, who specialize in facilitation roles that interest them. If the same person filled both roles, this would be like a facilitation generalist.

In the New York City occupy movement, all of the activists are able to be present in one physical location at one time, which is not always possible for a local social movement like the Minnesota peace movement or for other kinds of inter-organizational networks. However, the General Assembly facilitation model used by the New York City occupy movement illustrates how network-wide facilitators operate. In this model, a facilitator can get the views of all members of the network all at once by putting forth an idea and asking the participants of the General Assembly (all of the activists) to indicate whether they agree, are neutral, disagree, block the motion, or they need to interrupt or ask for more information, by using hand signals (occupywallst.org n.d.). In this way, a network-wide facilitator can facilitate a dialogue involving all of the network members, producing movement-wide discourse. While the facilitators of the Minnesota peace movement were, for the most part, not able to address all of the network members simultaneously, those who were able to be involved in a wide variety of affinity groups were able to facilitate network-wide discourse, much like the spokespeople for a spokescouncil would, acting as a conduit between the affinity groups and the wider inter-organizational network. Therefore, there are two levels at which network facilitators have the potential to enhance the social capital of an inter-organizational network, at the level of the affinity group or the network as a whole, as is the case with the General Assembly.
Conflict resolution practitioners and scholars could potentially fulfill these roles in a specific inter-organizational network, train the network members in facilitation skills to improve their ability to fulfill these roles, or research facilitation within a network to assist network members to analyze and enhance their social capital. For instance, in the inter-organizational network considered here, the research indicates that a few natural facilitators could be trained in the skills of organizing meetings, information dissemination, encouraging participatory discussion, and encouraging participatory decision-making, which were facilitated. The whole network could benefit from training in social support skills, which was provided by a wide range of network members rather than a few specific individuals, and perhaps conflict management, which was not performed to a great extent, depending on how network members would like to manage their conflicts in the future.

In general, conflict resolution practitioners may frequently support parties in conflict to develop their social capital. Specific facilitators, mediators, conflict coaches and trainers, negotiators, and arbitrators, who emphasize relationship building, strengthening, maintenance, or healing in their practice, may be harnessing “communication power” to produce social capital among the parties that they serve. The resultant social capital can be leveraged by the parties, in the present or in the future, to solve their problems with one another, accomplish other goals together, or broaden and strengthen the social resources embedded in their social networks more generally. Social capital has a particular importance for conflict resolution practitioners, who frequently seek to help people overcome their relational difficulties and build their relationships.

This study had some important limitations. The study’s sample was discovered non-randomly, potentially reducing the validity and generalizability of the findings. As well, the data came from a one-shot, self-report survey, a study design that does not have strong internal validity. In addition, the study only considers the social capital stemming from
relationships within the inter-organizational network (the internal network), while relationships outside of the network (the external network) are at least as important when considering the generation of social capital (Burt 2004; Hansen 2009). Castells (2009), for example, refers to the individuals with relationships that connect the network to external resources as “switchers,” who provide an important type of social capital for social networks. The research findings presented here are also based upon a single case study, so the results are tentative. The study and/or the relationships explored here must be replicated in other settings, in other inter-organizational networks, or in inter-personal networks, if the applicability of the findings that were considered here are to become more definitive. As well, due to space constraints, the analysis presented here is placed within the context of social network scholarship, neglecting social movement scholarship. Still, the study has opened the door for further inquiry and has unveiled some tantalizing prospects for the field of conflict resolution.

Conclusion

This study provided empirical evidence that inter-organizational networks can be spontaneously facilitated by natural facilitators. Even when individuals are not formally designated as network facilitators, natural network facilitators can emerge to perform facilitation functions due to their aptitudes and interests. In the inter-organizational network of non-profit organizations in Minnesota that organized and conducted protest activities against the United States’ involvement in the Iraq War in 2009 discussed here, four of the six communication functions considered (organizing, disseminating information, encouraging participatory discussion, and encouraging participatory decision-making) were found to be facilitated, while social support was found to be negotiated and conflict management was not performed to any great extent. The case study demonstrates that facilitators in an inter-organizational network could be network-wide facilitators or facilitators of affinity groups. In
addition, facilitators can specialize in facilitating certain communication functions or they may facilitate a wide range of functions. These patterns were illustrated by the analogous cases of the “spokescouncil” facilitation model used by peace movements and the General Assembly model, adopted by New York City’s occupy movement.

However, network facilitation differs from small group facilitation, where the group facilitator or facilitators tend to facilitate the whole group and the entire range of communication functions simultaneously, in locations where the entire group meets regularly. Therefore, network facilitation should be considered a less concentrated form of facilitation than small group facilitation. Conflict resolution practitioners and scholars could potentially fulfill network facilitation roles in inter-organizational networks, train network members in network facilitation skills, or research facilitation in a specific inter-organizational network to assist the network members.

Not only did this case study determine that the inter-organizational network investigated was, to a degree, facilitated, it also demonstrated that the network facilitation that was conducted increased the network’s social capital, as indicated by the levels of trust and work coordination. In regression analyses, the relationships between network facilitation (including the dimensions of logistical arrangements, social support, participatory discussion, participatory decision-making, and conflict management) with both network trust and work coordination were statistically significant, though the effect size was nearly twice as big for the work coordination variable. The greater the frequency of network facilitation experienced by the network members, the greater the levels of network trust and work coordination that they tended to experience.

This relationship was theorized here to be the result of facilitators harnessing the “communication power” inherent in the facilitation processes to produce social capital among the network members. “Communication power” is a key form of power in inter-
organizational networks because information exchange provides the foundation for all other forms of resource exchange in a social network (Castells 2009; Kenis and Knoke 2002). It is therefore worthwhile to consider the potential impact that other conflict resolution processes (such as small group facilitation, mediation, conflict coaching and training, negotiation, and arbitration) could have on the generation of social capital among conflicting parties, particularly when practitioners emphasize relationship building, strengthening, maintenance, or healing. However, this case study should be replicated in other inter-organizational networks and in settings examining other conflict resolution processes to ensure that the findings discussed here are more broadly applicable to other inter-organizational networks and conflict resolution processes.

References

http://www.startribune.com/politics/national/conventions/28035649.html


Linking Process to Outcome: Implicit Norms in a Cross-Cultural Dialogue Program

Karen Ross

Abstract
This paper examines the link between dialogue mechanisms and potential outcomes. Using the "Soliya Connect Program" as a case study, I focus specifically on dialogue norms, distinguishing between explicit and implicit norms of dialogue, and examine how these norms shape the dialogue space. My analysis suggests that as dialogue mechanisms, these norms both enable and constrain participants' comfort in expressing themselves, and thus can significantly affect the outcomes of the dialogue process.

Introduction
What about the dialogue medium enables – or constrains – learning and empathy building among participants? What are the implicit norms delimiting a dialogue space? This article addresses these questions in an attempt to link dialogue processes to their potential outcomes. I explore one aspect of the dialogue process: the norms, implicit and explicit, shaping the dialogue “space.” This article then examines the link between these norms and potential dialogue outcomes: specifically, the way that these norms shape the potential for participant self-expression and learning, during and as a result of the process.

Dialogue has long been a focus of scholars and practitioners interested in its use for addressing divisive conflict at interpersonal and intergroup levels (Schoem and Hurtado 2001). It has been utilized in a variety of contexts and under a wide spectrum of conditions to ameliorate group relations; in areas of acute conflict, dialogue has been central in governmental and civil society efforts to increase mutual understanding, provide legitimacy
for the narrative of the “Other,” and improve relationships between majority and minority groups (Kelman 1996, 1997; Saunders 2003). Dialogue has also played a key role in addressing inter-ethnic tensions in the United States, in both local and national forums. In recent years, online dialogue has also proliferated, providing opportunities for individuals around the world to “meet” for discussions about current global issues and tensions underlying inter- and intra-national relations.

As a widespread endeavor and important peace-building tool, dialogue has been the focus of a large body of research. However, much of the scholarship in this field examines either the outcomes of such dialogue, or the specifics of group processes. Relatively little is known about the mechanisms linking the two, even as scholars have called for a closer examination of both internal and external mechanisms influencing dialogue processes (Salomon 2011). In this paper, therefore, I make a preliminary effort to fill this gap by highlighting the concept of dialogue norms as a potential mechanism connecting the dialogue process to its potential outcomes. Specifically, I examine dialogue norms as a middle ground between group process and individual outcomes. My analysis examines perceptions of dialogue participants regarding the process of an online dialogue, and the importance of that process in relation to individual outcomes. I analyze participants’ views of the way that an online dialogue program enables and constrains potential for self-expression and for discussion about difficult issues, and suggest that the degree of self-expression enabled through this medium is significant in terms of the potential learning that dialogue can facilitate.

**Existing Research on Dialogue**

Much of the early scholarship on inter-group dialogue is rooted in Gordon Allport’s (1954) *contact hypothesis*, which suggests that prejudice and hostility between groups in conflict can be reduced, and more positive attitudes result, when certain conditions are met.
Over the years, Allport’s theory has been the basis for two major lines of research: scholarship examining the conditions themselves, to assess what is truly sufficient for effectively implementing inter-group dialogue (Pettigrew 1998; Dixon, Durrheim and Tredoux 2005); and scholarship examining the predictive ability of Allport’s theory, that is, whether relations are indeed improved when these specified conditions have been met.

Research on dialogue outcomes in particular has been the focus of much of the scholarship in this field. Scholars continue to debate whether dialogue and similar programs, such as “contact interventions” (Maoz 2005) or peace education programs bringing together youth from conflict settings (Malhotra and Liyanage 2005; Ohanyan and Lewis 2005), can positively influence their participants, and how. Many studies point to the positive impact of participation in inter-group dialogue programs (Malhotra and Liyanage 2005). Other research, however, delineates the limitations of such programs and its differential influence on participants. For example, scholarship from Israel (Biton and Salomon 2006; Maoz 2000) suggests that powerful and less powerful groups are affected differently by dialogue.

The scholarship focusing on dialogue outcomes suffers from two major limitations. First, early research testing Allport’s contact hypothesis took place largely with artificial groups brought together under laboratory conditions, making it difficult to make inferences about various ethnic and other groups in true conflict contexts. Moreover, even recent research has been criticized (Salomon 2011) for its focus exclusively on what happens during or as a result of dialogue, with little attention paid to the external socio-political context or to personal factors that can mitigate, limit, or enhance dialogue’s results.

Second, much of the scholarship in this field treats dialogue as a black box. That is, research focuses on outcomes but fails to analyze or conceptualize what takes place during the dialogue itself. Indeed, a recent review of the literature on dialogue (Dessel and Rogge 2008) points out that a major limitation of research in this field is its lack of focus on
dialogue processes. In particular, the authors note the lack of focus on links between these processes and the outcomes of dialogue programs.

This is not to say that research ignores the link between process and outcome entirely. Ellen Wayne’s (2008) assessment of a dialogue program entitled “Operation Understanding DC” examines the program’s facilitation processes specifically in relation to the potential for creating learning opportunities for dialogue participants. Likewise, Biren Nagda’s (2006) research on a “cultural diversity and justice” course in a US-based university focuses on the way that dialogue communication processes can help explain the impact of dialogue programs. Nagda’s analysis of the pedagogical, psychological, and communication processes that take place during ongoing dialogue programs suggests that the processes of building alliances, learning to appreciate difference, engaging oneself and engaging in critical self-reflection are mediating factors between the encounter and the dialogue outcomes. Specifically, Nagda suggests that these processes play an important role in helping participants bridge differences, a central goal of much inter-group dialogue.

**Analyzing the Process: Dialogue Norms**

Still, studies such as those conducted by Wayne and Nagda remain the exception: most scholarship on dialogue processes contains little discussion of how mechanisms might shape outcomes. Among the mechanisms playing a mediating role between experience and outcome in dialogue are the explicit and implicit norms of dialogue groups. These have been the subject of scholarly examination, but primarily in relation to explicit ground rules established at the onset of dialogue processes. For example, Hierbacher (2009) argues for the importance of ground rules in ensuring that all dialogue participants hear and are heard. Likewise, Chasin et al. (1996) discuss how they attempt to prevent or limit “habitual, unproductive ways of relating and communicating about disputed issues” (p. 331). They suggest that this limitation occurs in part through the establishment of explicit ground rules,
including confidentiality agreements and other rules utilized to help create a safe and supportive environment for dialogue.

With few exceptions (Pyser and Figallo 2004), little has been written about the value of ground rules in promoting high quality dialogue and helping achieve dialogue outcomes. Moreover, ground rules make up only one element of the norms that play out in any dialogue process. Dialogue processes are also shaped by implicit norms affecting the nature and potential of conversation. Often these norms are similar to guidelines articulated at the inception of dialogue processes. Yet, dialogue norms are rooted far more broadly than just in explicitly stated ground rules. For example, these norms play out in the way facilitators keep conversations highly structured or not; in the time allotted to dialogue sessions; and in initial choices that participants make about the way they interact with others. In a sense, these norms create a dialogue “space” that goes beyond where discussion physically takes place, representing the degree of openness and flexibility enabled by the dialogue.

As my analysis below highlights, these implicit norms are much more malleable than their explicit counterparts, in the sense that their fluctuation throughout the dialogue process can expand, or limit, the space for dialogue. This differentiates implicit norms from explicit ground rules, which are relatively static: while they can (and should) be changed throughout the dialogue process if necessary, generally these explicit norms are decided upon before dialogue begins, and frame the dialogue from its inception until the end of a session or group of sessions.

The Soliya Connect Program

The Soliya Connect Program is a 10-week dialogue program implemented for university students in the United States, Europe, and in the Middle East/Arab world. Founded in 2003, the Connect Program has to date reached over 3,000 students in more than 25 countries and over 80 educational institutions (Soliya 2011). This program emphasizes
cultural learning and understanding as its overarching goal: as Soliya’s website notes, “Through a proven dialogue process, students progress from discussing culture and everyday life to delving into controversial topics with the support of trusted group members, ultimately arriving at a better understanding of other cultures and perspectives” (Soliya 2011).

The Connect Program works by matching groups of six to eight university students and two facilitators in a video-conferencing medium that enables synchronous dialogue utilizing written, visual, and audio elements. Each group meets for two hours weekly over the course of a semester, discussing issues related to the relationship between the West and the Arab/Muslim world. These “meetings” take place using a virtual forum that enables participants to see and hear one another as well as type comments into a “chat box” visible by all individuals in the “room.” Thus, unlike many online dialogues, the Soliya program resembles in many ways dialogue conducted in a traditional, face-to-face format.

Soliya dialogue sessions are based on an online curriculum provided to all facilitators prior to the start of the semester. Students participating in this program read a series of common articles prior to each discussion session, thus ensuring a minimum level of shared knowledge within the group about the day’s topic of focus. These topics range from identity issues to foreign policy, current events, and religion: “hot button” topics about the relationship between the West and the Arab/Muslim world. In addition, Soliya offers students the opportunity to address topics that arise spontaneously during dialogue sessions, such that each group focuses on issues that are of greatest importance to its members.

The Soliya program has clear differences from many face-to-face dialogues. Yet, these differences are relatively small in comparison with the majority of online dialogues that are conducted asynchronously, or when synchronous, via written comments only. For this reason, I do not delve into the particulars of online dialogue when analyzing the Soliya
Connect Program. Instead, readers are encouraged to think about Soliya as a face-to-face
dialogue occurring virtually, rather than a virtual dialogue.

Methodology

The analysis described in this paper is based on interviews with 13 alumni of the
Soliya Connect Program (seven males and six females), including one European university
student, seven students from the United States, and five students from countries in the
Arab/Muslim world. All individuals participated in the Soliya Connect Program between
2006 and 2008. The 13 participants in this study were drawn from a group of approximately
40 alumni who were contacted about this project, out of the 870 students who participated in
the Soliya Connect Program between the Fall of 2006 and Spring of 2008. This group of 40
was picked according to maximal variation sampling, such that equal numbers of students
from the West and the Arab/Muslim World, and equal numbers of males and females, were
contacted about the project. Of these 40 individuals, the 13 interviewed were those who
responded to my initial email. Interviews were conducted in English over Skype, a software
program enabling audio- and video calling over the Internet, and were recorded using a
software program entitled Call Recorder. Participant names were changed to ensure
confidentiality.

The interview itself covered a range of topic domains (Carspecken 1996) agreed upon
by me and by staff members from Soliya. These domains addressed experiences within the
Soliya Connect Program as well as a range of issues relating to post-Soliya activities,
including attitudes about relations between the West and the Arab/Muslim world, networks of
relationships, and current activities of program alumni.

To analyze my data, I first transcribed each recorded interview word-for-word and
read through the transcripts several times in search of broad themes and patterns. I then
coded each interview individually, beginning with low-inference codes and then creating
higher-inference codes (Carspecken 1996), eventually organizing the full range of codes into several broad thematic issues. One element of my analysis addressed the way that interview participants characterized their experiences within the Soliya Connect Program and the relationship between these experiences and participants’ perceptions of opportunities for self-expression and learning. Thus, while the interviews covered a broad range of issues and experiences, including long-term impact of the program and creation and maintenance of cross-cultural relationships, my analysis here focuses only on this one aspect, as a way of providing insight into and elucidating the process of dialogue and specifically the roles played by implicit and explicit group norms.

To validate my analysis, I dialogued extensively with colleagues about my findings. I also obtained feedback from staff at Soliya about my interpretation of issues related to program implementation. Finally, I held ongoing conversations with my interviewees and formally solicited their feedback at two points. First, following initial reading of interview transcripts, excerpts that seemed to be unclear were discussed individually with interviewees in order to obtain clarification on meaning. Moreover, after my initial analysis of the data was complete, I sent a summary of key points to all participants. I was explicit in my request for feedback on this analysis, particularly with respect to the accuracy of my interpretation and its relevance to each participant’s experience as part of the Soliya program. The feedback received from my interviewees played an important role in the refinement of my analysis and in my final interpretations.

**Group Norms: Creating and Constraining Opportunities**

In this section of the paper, I focus on how implicit and explicit norms create and shape the dialogue space experienced by participants in the Soliya Connect Program. Specifically, I tease out the implicit set of norms followed by participants and analyze how
these norms govern use of dialogue space, as well as how they shape the potential for self-expression and learning.

As in other dialogue settings, two sets of norms are present within the Connect Program dialogue space. First, there are ground rules, which are set relatively informally as part of introductory activities during initial dialogue sessions. Participants are guided by facilitators through an activity focusing on their expectations, concerns, and fears regarding the dialogue process; this activity sets the tone for a discussion of ground rules, coming in the form of guidelines suggested by participants (Soliya 2011a).

Here, however, I focus on a second set of norms, implicit norms, as they manifest themselves in the Soliya dialogue process. I emphasize in particular two inextricably linked, yet distinct, elements of the virtual space created by Soliya’s dialogue norms: the space created for self-expression, in the form of what participants are comfortable sharing; and the space created for learning, both about oneself and others. I discuss how norms create opportunities for expanding this space, as well as how they limit its possibilities.

**Dialogue norms and the potential for learning**

*“There wasn’t really anything that you couldn’t say”* (Katie)

What are the norms governing dialogue within the Soliya Connect Program? First and foremost, the program fosters a sense of comfort among group members. One theme emphasized in all of the interviews was the feeling of comfort participants had in sharing thoughts with the group. One student, Katie, said:

> The cool thing about [the Soliya Connect Program] was that everyone was really respectful, so, I mean there was a general kind of level of acceptance, and I think that people really felt free to speak their minds and, you know, really just say what they were thinking...So, that was one thing that I really appreciated about my group, ‘cause I know I talked to other participants who felt a little bit more reserved, but my
group definitely, you know, we felt comfortable talking about everything from, our feelings politically to culturally to different moral issues, we were all pretty open, really, everything...

Later, Katie added, “What I really enjoyed was, talking about the topics that are sort of untouchable.”

Katie suggests here that the level of comfort felt in her group was one enabling participants to talk about any subject at all. In fact, Katie’s comments suggest that it was a result of this comfort level that her group members could discuss “everything” during dialogue sessions, including controversial political topics. This sense of comfort was evident in statements made by nearly every other interviewee. For example, Ibrahim, a Middle Eastern male, recounted that “I had, you know, enjoyable conversations with people, and I never hesitated to speak…and I think that’s very, very important thing. I felt comfortable to speak.” “Never hesitating to speak” was a common refrain, suggesting that one of the norms created in the dialogue program was creation of a safe space, or a sense of comfort in sharing perspectives. As one of the Middle Eastern female participants put it:

But then when the discussion is so heated, you just, you gotta open that mouth of yours. And just, I felt, it was, it was comfortable to say what’s on your mind, because, I mean, let’s be honest, most people who come to Soliya, they come with a certain purpose. They wanna connect, they wanna communicate, they wanna talk. And so, I always felt comfortable to say, to say what I think.

Still, for some participants, this sense of comfort applied only in certain domains. For example, while Katie mentioned the comfort felt in her group to discuss even the “untouchable,” Hayat, a Muslim female living in the United States, said,

…it just felt like there were a lot of views that people were afraid of expressing, because they felt like it just wasn’t the place to do that…I think I also sometimes felt
like...um, so like in terms of emotionally and like telling my story, I felt comfortable doing that, but from a theoretical perspective and I guess from a more intellectual perspective, I, I wasn’t, I didn’t engage that as much.

Hayat’s comment illustrates a multi-layered perspective on self-expression. Specifically, her comments indicate a high level of comfort with the group that enabled her to speak about personal issues. Yet, Hayat held back when it came to topics requiring a more intellectual discussion – the same issues Katie refers to as “untouchable.” Other participants also commented upon having mixed feelings regarding the potential for self-expression, with varying degrees of comfort when expressing views related to controversial topics. Discussions about personal issues and experiences, on the other hand, were characterized across the board by high comfort levels and the sense that no holding back was necessary. Thus, these personal discussions played an important role in creating comfort among participants, with possible, but uncertain, potential for comfort in discussing more contentious issues down the road.

“Limited by politeness” (Jane)

While a number of factors influenced participants’ levels of comfort discussing controversial issues, many interviewees echoed Hayat’s comment that, “It just wasn’t the place...” [to say what they really thought]. Paradoxically, many participants indicated that their hesitation in fully expressing themselves was a result of positive group dynamics: that is, their hesitation came from a fear of disrupting this positive space. Jane made this issue explicit in her interview:

It was a very calm group, and I think for that, that’s why... we had really good discussions, but I think that they could have been even more, uh, action packed...And so, they were good, I mean, very in-depth conversations, they were also limited by politeness. And so -
K: Sorry, they were limited by what?

Jane: Limited by politeness. Nobody really wanted to step on anybody’s toes. And, I think that if we had had, um, a couple of males in the group that it would have been different...And there were a couple [of my friends at school] that were in male only groups with only one or two females, and the conversations were much more aggressive, much more antagonistic, and, um, not always in a good way, but often in a good way, because they just spoke out what was on their minds, and we didn’t really experience that in our group. Um, but there were a lot of really good questions, even though nobody wanted to offend anyone else. Um, we had a really open, very um, comfortable forum to ask questions in.

For Jane, having an all-female group created a comfortable dynamic, but this comfort also prevented members of the group from saying something that might be construed as offensive. Hayat described a similar dynamic in her group, using the example of a discussion about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict:

Um, so, we started off talking about, sort of, our own personal involvement with the conflict, our like personal opinions and thoughts or whatever, um, and then, I’m trying to remember, who, someone said something about how Palestinians felt that, what was happening to them, now, was similar, slash, could be compared to, what happened to the Jews during the Holocaust. And the Jewish girl got extremely, extremely offended by that, and, I mean, it was so, I mean, very evident, and she kind of yelled at the girl, um, and, I think the moderators did a good job of just, trying to let the group know that they were just expressing a view that is, you know, commonly felt in that part of the world, um, even, even though the girl herself might not hold that view, it’s important to put it to the table, and talk about it, so...

K: Right. And, what were other, other participants’ reactions?
Hayat: I think the American participants, the non-Jewish participants just didn’t want to touch it. Like it wasn’t, um, the thing that they wanted to get themselves into. I felt like they were kind of trying to move the subject, like move it along to something else.

Hayat’s comment suggests that when the conversation started to shift towards more contentious issues and disagreement, her group made a conscious effort to return to topics that would allow for consensus and a positive dynamic. Charles also stated this about his own group:

…it’s funny, because everybody was having such a good time connecting that when, you know, serious issues would come up, and, and people knew that there were, uh...that there were going to be differences, people were kind of hesitant to get into it, you know, so to speak.

The paradox of dialogue as enabling and constraining is doubly highlighted in Charles’ comments. On the one hand, his comment indicates that Soliya succeeded in creating a space where participants were able to connect and interact positively. On the other hand, this very connection acted as boundary line, effectively limiting the potential for expressing views that might disrupt the positive, supportive dynamic within each of the groups.

“It’s going to look bad” (Ibrahim)

Several participants indicated that group norms of dialogue in particular served to restrict the potential for self-expression, especially when discussing more controversial issues. Political correctness, for these participants, was defined not just by the norms of what might be considered appropriate statements in a typical conversation, but specifically by the medium of dialogue characterizing Soliya discussions. For example, Ibrahim said:

If you ask people to say what they are thinking, they will probably not say it, because, probably they are shy or they, you know, they don’t want to offend people, but if they...
do, if you really give them the opportunity to express themselves in a real manner, and they do take that opportunity, it’s going to look bad, and it’s going to sound bad, too, it’s not going to go over, you know, in an educational program...

Likewise, Hayat added:

*I just felt like it wasn’t presented as a space – I mean, if you present it as a space for dialogue, I think it completely, different atmosphere happens, then when it’s a different space. Because, there, people are just so much more prone to, really express themselves, but, people might just not feel comfortable doing that, um*

**K: There, in non-dialogue settings, you mean?**

**Hayat: Yeah, in non-dialogue settings, exactly.**

Thus, it seems that because of its focus on creating a comfortable space for dialogue – one in which participants were able to ask questions and listen deeply to one another – the Connect Program hindered opportunities for expressing opinions or views that involved making statements not in line with dialogic norms. Paradoxically, norms created within the dialogue in order to foster honest and civil discussion thus prevented full honesty.

Other participants also expressed their perception that the dialogue medium in particular was restrictive. For example, Badra, a Middle Eastern female, said,

*I noticed being part of Soliya, people from the Middle East are afraid to voice their opinions, lest they be thought of, uh, like extremists, or not open-minded, or sometimes they just want to, they don’t want to go through the hassle, you know, uh, they don’t want to ruffle feathers.*

Likewise, Ibrahim felt the conversation “never went off line,” stating,

**Most of the people say that, ok, you understand that Muslims aren’t all the same, we understand that terrorists are small minority of Muslims who, who aren’t really Muslims, who were rejected by the Muslim community, or, or see Islam in another**
way. So, [Muslim participants] always try to not defend that, I would say, and to remain politically correct, and uh, it’s rare that I hear people saying, even, straight opinion about Islam...

As Hayat stated later, it was a fear of being discredited that led individuals to refrain from expressing opinions that might reflect upon them poorly. She explained her perception thus:

They might be afraid that their views on one issue will discredit them in the eyes of their peers on that issue as well as other issues. Like, "oh, this person can't be trusted when it comes to Israel-Palestine, he thinks that all Muslim women should wear the hijab." I think it’s fears like these that keep people from being completely honest and frank in this space.

Despite the sense of comfort experienced by nearly all participants, the space created for self-expression – especially about more contentious issues – was constrained to a large degree. In addition to the implicit norms limiting these opportunities – of politeness and political correctness, for example – participants expressed frustration with other issues that they felt impeded their learning ability in the group, many of which were directly linked to the Connect Program being a space for dialogue, rather than for other kinds of conversations. For example, several participants expressed frustration with the level of structure in the dialogue sessions:

Our moderator, um, kept things very structured, and um, sometimes I felt that it was a little restricting... we would always, um, we would always end up addressing the specific questions that the moderator would give, it would never, um, get a lot past that. (Evan)
...it’s definitely a facilitator, um, facilitator’s call, but sometimes, the discussion were too regulated, um, and we didn’t really have a chance to go beyond what we were supposed to be talking about (Jane)

The frustrations expressed about dialogue moderation indicate that within the Soliya space it was difficult to push past certain levels of discussion or move beyond specific, pre-determined topics. This structure may have contributed to a perception that the dialogue forum was not conducive to presenting views outside the mainstream, thus instilling the sense of fear that Hayat described.

The frustration expressed is particularly interesting given Soliya’s perspective on facilitation and the facilitator role. According to the Soliya curriculum, the top tips for effective facilitation are: promoting a feeling of ownership over the process and being flexible (Soliya 2011a). Providing structure is also listed as a tip; however, the curriculum adds that this structure should focus on letting students know in advance what will be discussed at each session – in other words, providing an overall template for the semester. Soliya’s goals, thus, run counter to the experiences of students interviewed, whose statements suggest that rather than enabling honest discussion, facilitators were a part of the limiting structure of the dialogue medium. In other words, while facilitators may have kept students talking about “what we were supposed to be talking about,” in Jane’s words, they also constrained self-expression, limiting the potential for voicing all points of view.

**Group norms and learning opportunities**

The norms discussed above effectively delimit the Soliya Connect Program dialogue space. In doing so, these norms serve as a mechanism linking the dialogue process to potential outcomes: specifically, Soliya’s goal that each participant learn from others and about oneself. All participants interviewed discussed the transformative learning that took place, both in terms of what they learned and how they learned it. Creation of a space
characterized by high comfort levels enabled participants to hear different perspectives on issues, thus presenting an opportunity for participants to gain greater awareness of their own culturally bounded perceptions. For example, Katie indicated that it was due to the level of comfort felt among all her group members that they could discuss “untouchable” issues such as sexuality and gender, and she pointed to these dialogue sessions as helping deepen her understanding these topics and realize the productivity of engaging in difficult conversations.

Katie also illustrated the space for learning created through Soliya in her recounting of a discussion about the Israeli/Palestinian conflict:

**Katie:** Well, I mean, just, kind of, like, overcoming some of those issues, like, the one that stood out the most to me was probably the one where, this Palestinian girl was talking about all of the family she had lost, and she was really passionate about the conflict, and really, kind of, full of hatred toward Israel...And, the girl from Germany just could not understand it and she kept on saying, like, I just don’t understand how you can hate. And I just thought that was like a really interesting dynamic to, like, the fact that they were so, I don’t know, it was kind of cool to watch that play out.

**K:** What was your own, like, how did you contribute to that, do you remember?

**Katie:** Well I mean, I’m more, pro-Palestine, but I was kind of, you know, I was trying, I guess, to help [name of student], that was the one thing where we differed, kind of helping her to see, well, obviously this girl’s going to have really passionate feelings, because, she’s been through a lot clearly (laughs)...

**K:** Right

**Katie:** But ... it really, to me that kind of exemplified the way that Westerners just, sometimes and probably myself too, we just don’t get it, but, it’s, it’s kind of neat to see, just to be exposed to that.
Katie’s comments suggest that hearing others share their perspectives provided an opportunity for critical self-reflection. In this sense, the dialogue space enabled learning about oneself; most importantly, it enabled participants to learn from one another. In the quote above, Katie mentions that it was through hearing the personal experiences of another individual that she was able to see that Westerners “just don’t get [the emotion attached to certain issues],” and thus understand more about her own culture and background.

Participants’ comfort in discussing their personal experiences seemed essential in enabling learning to occur. For example, Jane said,

...they’re just very, um, touching stories and they don’t leave your head, you know, you can’t really get away from them. Um, because to get away from them is to leave behind the human experience that [the students were] telling us about, and um, I definitely do think that, those conversations, those stories, um, have become part of my thought process when discussing, um, Egypt for example, or the government there, or more importantly, not more importantly perhaps, but more significantly, Palestine, and issues around that and Israel.

Hearing others’ experiences was also important for Jane in validating her own perspective:

...I think, that one, all those experiences made me, um, appreciate and be prouder of my own experiences...so absolutely, uh, the sense of acknowledging one’s own history and, um, character, that’s something that’s quite important that I took away from Soliya.

Thus, for Jane, hearing others’ stories made a significant impression on her regarding both the topics discussed and her own sense of self. As her interview shows, these discussions were ultimately a significant learning experience that Jane has carried well past her participation in Soliya.
Other participants likewise indicated that the existence of norms enabling individuals to express themselves was fundamental for their own learning. For instance, Charles said that before participating in the Connect Program he knew little about issues related to the US-Middle East relationship. What he did know came from reading and watching mainstream media. As a participant in the Soliya program, however, Charles indicated that the space for sharing – as enabled by the sense of comfort among his group members – helped him engage in a much deeper learning process:

...it took me speaking to people, face to face, uh, to really kind of develop an educated, uh, opinion, or point of view, you know...I really had to hear something from, from people face to face...to really start...kind of changing how I felt...

This suggests that Charles’ learning occurred as a result of hearing about the personal experiences of individuals from different parts of the world, rather than just reading about issues or seeing them discussed on television. In fact, this distinction was emphasized by nearly all of the individuals interviewed. Daniel, an American male, stated that

I hold a degree in international relations and, and even though I have a second degree, I never, you know, had a real chance to experience the, the Middle Eastern culture and discuss much about it as we had with the... members of the group...

Finally, Nizar, an Egyptian male, pointed out how hearing others’ perspectives helped him understand the justification behind points of view other than his own:

But, it’s not enough, as I was saying, to know that someone has a different thought process or different opinion, because you don’t know the thought process that goes into it, and the whole justifications and the reasoning behind it. And like, that’s the essence of like, understanding a different point of view ... Because, we can just agree to disagree, you know, right at the spur of the moment, oh, you believe this and I believe that and that’s it. But you never get a chance to understand or know, or even
put ourselves in another person’s shoes and understand why and how and why you’re even thinking like this. Um, I think this really helped, open the door for me in kind of, that way, you know what I mean...and that, I was just more able to understand, you know, people don’t just believe things, people don’t just have random opinions, there’s reasons for it, there’s justification.

The space created for self-expression was thus clearly significant in enabling participants to learn from one another, helping Soliya meet its objective of participants arriving at a “better understanding of other cultures and perspectives.” As Damien, a participant from the USA put it, “By listening more, we gain some grounds for understanding.” Yet, just as the space was constrained by norms that emphasized a particular type of conversation, the potential for individuals to gain a deep understanding of different worldviews depended upon the degree this space allowed for expressing opinions about controversial topics at the heart of the conflict between the West and the Arab/Muslim world. Hayat’s comment that “from a more intellectual perspective, I, I wasn’t, I didn’t engage that as much,” suggested that her group’s dialogue had limited potential, or what she referred to at one point as limited value, as a learning opportunity.

Likewise, Alex, a European male, pointed out,

We agreed, we agreed all the time and so, I don’t know, I think you learn, you learn more when you hear about, when you hear different people’s opinions and...you can learn from them and maybe even change your mind.

His statement implies that constant agreement among group members prevented learning from taking place, both cognitively and in terms of possible self-reflection, which might have enabled a deeper change in worldviews.
Dialogue Norms and the Potential for Change

The possibilities for dialogue, and the limitations, discussed above, present the Soliya Connect Program as enabling comfort with discussion of certain issues, but in other ways restricting participants from fully voicing controversial or unpopular views. These constraints – structure created by facilitators, the desire not to ruffle feathers and to remain politically correct – might be viewed as Soliya dialogue norms that effectively placed limits, not only on self-expression, but on the ability of Soliya participants to learn from another in deeper and more meaningful ways. In other words, the constraints limited the possible outcomes of dialogue, due to the importance participants placed on one another’s views as learning mechanisms.

Yet, these norms were not set in stone: in fact, several students expressed a belief that they could change relatively easily. Thus, they felt that the space for self-expression – and consequently for learning – could have been expanded if certain limitations were addressed. For example, Jane noted that one thing she would have liked to experience in her group was more time for establishing personal connections:

*I think that if there was even one more additional session, there would be time for one more discussion (laughs). What I think we missed was, um, our last session, we spent about half the time, just, talking about silly things, like what’s your favorite food, what’s your favorite, you know, type of movie, just stuff like that. And it seems really trite and trivial, but um, it was really, really fun. And we all, you know learned something really funny and, and very personal about each other. Um, and that created more of a, a real, human connection, you know...You can talk and tell your stories all you want, but you know, it’s the little things like that that...make a friendship, or make somebody really know you, you know. So, more time, um, like*
that, or maybe a dedicated session that’s all about, um, getting to know one another and uh, the minutia in our lives.

In other words, Jane noted the importance of having more time devoted to getting to know one another. For her, as for other students, the amount of time available for discussion was a limiting factor in terms of potential dialogue outcomes: her comments suggest that given more time, greater comfort levels and thus a larger space for self-expression might have been created.

Georgia, another student from the USA, made a similar comment, but addressed the time provided for each session rather than focusing on the number of sessions, stating,

*I think they kind of need to, um, make the discussions go longer. Like many times we have, um, a discussion, and it’s so heated, and we’re so active, and, then, the time is, like, we finished our time. We have our two hours, and, like, we can’t go after our two hours. Even if we are like discussing and are active and want to discuss more, we can’t do that any more.*

Finally, Badra pointed out the difficulty of creating a space where individuals felt comfortable expressing themselves when several participants missed multiple sessions over the course of the semester:

*Badra: …And you know the problem with Soliya, I mean, I love it, but the problem with Soliya, with the people within Soliya (laughs), is that some of them, they don’t attend a lot of, uh, sessions. And so that sometimes, that just, I, I mean, if we’re meeting for, let’s say, eight – 6, 7 weeks, and they’re showing up only twice. What’s, what’s the point of that?*

These comments suggest that perhaps Soliya’s largest constraint was the amount of time available for dialogue, including time where the whole group was present. In other words, longer sessions, a longer semester, or a guarantee of participation by the full group in
all sessions would have enabled participants to get to know one another better, feel more comfortable with one another, and as a result, move into deeper and more honest conversations. Instead, as Hayat indicated, “We didn’t really know each other well enough to like really feel, like, if someone said something that was like, didn’t sit well with us at all, I don’t know if we felt comfortable enough to really challenge them.” Perhaps this comfort would extend to facilitators, as well, enabling them to let go of a need for structure and instead letting the group “own” the conversation, thus expanding the potential for high comfort levels and, subsequently, the learning potential among group participants.

**Discussion and Conclusions**

This study serves as a starting point for addressing a major gap in the scholarship on dialogue, specifically, the issue of dialogue mechanisms and how they can facilitate or inhibit positive change. My analysis makes three main points in regards to dialogue norms as one such mechanism. First, I highlight the way that these norms, both implicit and explicit, can shape the potential for learning that occurs in dialogue encounters. Second, I delineate the seemingly paradoxical nature of the dialogue medium as a forum for enabling open, reflective discussion and simultaneously limiting total honesty between participants, thus limiting the depth and level of learning that might occur. Finally, my analysis suggests that these norms are not set in stone – changes in the structure of a dialogue intervention or in its framing can shape the course of the dialogue process and ultimately its consequences.

The relatively small number of individuals interviewed potentially limits the generalizability of my findings in the broader context of inter-group dialogue. Moreover, the generalizability of this project is limited by its focus on a single dialogue program rather than multiple dialogue projects. However, my findings provide an important starting point for addressing additional research questions. For example, further research might examine the way that implicit and explicit norms differentially shape the “space” for dialogue in face-to-
face and online contexts, or in dialogues that focus on contentious issues rather than those that emphasize cross-cultural learning. Additional research might also focus on the extent to which training or instruction of individual facilitators might facilitate or constrain self-expression among participants. Finally, similar studies should be conducted with multiple groups in order to determine the extent to which findings from this project are both specific to the Soliya process and generalizable to broader dialogue projects.

Despite its limitations, this analysis highlights several implications for the theory and practice of dialogue. At a practical level, it suggests that the way dialogue is framed plays an important role in how participants view the process and the way that they participate. This corroborates work of other scholars (Schoem et al 2001) who point to the importance of pre-dialogue processes and their importance in “setting the stage” for a candid and honest discussion during the dialogue process itself. This analysis thus points to the need for greater attention to be given to the language utilized to frame dialogue for participants.

In addition, a significant implication of this analysis is its highlighting of the importance of time in shaping potential dialogue outcomes. This is by no means a novel concept – scholars have long pointed to the importance of ensuring that dialogue processes take place over extended periods, particularly with respect to creating opportunities for individuals to get beyond initial positions and prejudices (Schoem 2003; Zúñiga, Naagda and Sevig 2002). However, I argue that time is important in a different way: this analysis indicates a close connection between temporal factors and dialogue norms, both implicit and explicit. In implementing dialogue, therefore, we need to think not only about extending dialogue processes over multiple sessions. We should also address the way that the structure and timing of each session, and the dialogue process as a whole, can impact whether and how much participants are comfortable expressing themselves, and consequently the degree to which dialogue spaces can enable or constrain potential learning opportunities.
Finally, at a theoretical level, this analysis highlights the degree to which process and outcome must be better linked in scholarship on dialogue. We need to continue to explore the various processes that make up the “black box” of dialogue and the way these processes are linked to the outcomes we assess.

References


Can the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) Resolve Conflicts?

Ibrahim Sharqieh

Abstract

This article examines the potential of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) to contribute to mediation of conflicts in the Muslim world. Based on interviews with OIC senior officials and government officials from Iraq and the Philippines, as well as research involving other primary and secondary sources, the author analyzes four cases in which the OIC participated in mediation efforts: the Philippines, Thailand, Iraq, and Somalia. The article concludes with an assessment of the advantages and challenges of including the OIC in such mediation efforts, as well as recommendations related to capacity-building and inter-organizational partnerships that might enhance the potential for the OIC to play a constructive role in conflicts involving the Muslim community.

In its 38th ministerial meeting held in Astana, Kazakhstan in July 2011, the OIC officially changed its name from the “Organization of Islamic Conference” to the “Organization of Islamic Cooperation.” This change is not solely semantic, as it also reflects the OIC’s intention to engage more seriously with a growing number of parties in an increasingly interdependent global community. With 57 member states representing 1.6 billion Muslims around the word and a history of mediation in conflict zones, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), the second largest international organization after the United Nations (UN), is well placed to contribute to the prevention, management, and resolution of world conflicts. Despite a number of challenges, the OIC has already scored notable successes in mediating a number of deep-rooted conflicts, especially within member states. Nonetheless, the Organization has not yet reached its full potential in terms of
mediating and resolving international conflicts. Reforming its processes through capacity building and other means, as well as revising its mediation approach (i.e., building partnerships with other international organizations), the OIC will become better able to contribute to the resolution of seemingly intractable conflicts, especially in places where the Muslim community is involved.

**History of OIC Mediation Efforts**

The OIC has long played an important role in mediation and conflict resolution, in particular taking action in countries that are members of the OIC or intervening when a Muslim community is part of a conflict. This paper presents four cases as examples of the OIC’s involvement in mediation: Philippines, Thailand, Somalia, and Iraq.

**Philippines**

Insurrection in the Mindanao region began when the Philippines gained independence in 1964, with the country’s Muslim community in the south meanwhile calling for self-determination. In 1970, the conflict became violent, with Nur Misuari, the leader of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), leading the charge against the Government of the Philippines (GOP) (Wilson 2009).

OIC intervention in this conflict began in 1972 with its first fact-finding mission to the Southern Philippines. The OIC later used this mission’s report, in 1974, to issue an appeal calling on the GOP and MNLF to engage in negotiations toward a peaceful solution to the crisis while preserving the sovereignty of the Philippines and its territorial integrity (Ihsanoglu 2010).

The OIC’s insistence on treating the conflict within the framework of the territorial integrity of the Philippines helped determine the type of approach – peace negotiations – that would be used to settle the conflict. Indeed, Buendia (2004) suggests that one major reason Mindanao was prevented from seceding was the pressure that the OIC applied on the Moro...
Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) – rival to the MNLF and advocates of secession. The OIC insisted that addressing the cause of the Muslims in the southern region could only be achieved through a negotiated settlement with the Government of Philippines. Furthermore, the OIC refused to recognize the MILF as the sole representative of Muslims in the Philippines in the 2003 OIC summit meeting in Malaysia, thereby weakening the party and its call for secession (Buendia 2004).

Through its intensive mediation efforts, the OIC was able to bring the GOP and MNLF to a peace agreement in 1996 that emphasized the general framework for peace in the south and appointed Nur Misuari as Governor of the autonomous southern region. However, Parliament failed to ratify the agreement, leading to a new wave of fighting that ended with the arrest of Misuari for raising arms against the state (Ihsanoglu 2010).

The trust both parties held in the OIC allowed the organization to intensify mediation efforts once again. Ultimately, the GOP accepted the OIC’s offer of re-starting the peace process and launching a new fact-finding mission. Furthermore, the GOP reacted favorably to the OIC’s appeal and moved Misuari from prison to a hospital and later to a more comfortable detention house (Ihsanoglu 2010). To achieve tangible outcomes, OIC mediation extended its scope, speaking directly to multiple stakeholders; its 2006 fact-finding mission met with Parliament and a variety of civil society organizations. Furthermore, the mission visited Sulu Islan – where fighting was still taking place – and negotiated directly with the parties to reach a ceasefire.

OIC mediation in the Philippines showed a high level of persistence and long-term engagement with the conflict and its parties. Recently, the OIC re-engaged with the parties to explore the chances of implementing the 1996 peace agreement, identify obstacles facing its execution, and provide recommendations on how to overcome them. To do so, the Islamic Development Bank (IDB), in coordination with the OIC, donated $16 million to the MNLF.
for poverty alleviation and reconstruction of infrastructure in the Southern Mindanao region. Furthermore, five joint working groups were established – sharia and the judiciary, the political system and representation, education, natural resources, and issues of economic development – to oversee implementation of the 1996 final peace agreement in their respective assigned topics and provide recommendations to move the implementation of the peace agreement forward (Al-Saadi 2007).

While the OIC was able to broker a peace agreement between the MNLF and the GOP, it is obvious that implementation, as in most peace agreements, remains a challenge for the OIC, particularly as it lacks a mechanism to enforce the agreement. Demonstrating long-term commitment to finding a just solution for the conflict is not, in itself, sufficient to ensure long-term peace. The OIC therefore needs to be more innovative in paving the road for successful implementation of the 1996 peace agreement or for the creation of a new agreement. Finally, it is unclear how sustainable the impact of OIC mediation has on the parties themselves. This has been in demonstrated by the arrest of Misuari in November 2001, after which the MNLF resumed violence and significantly undermined the viability of the 1996 agreement. According to Baruah (2002) the November violence indicated that “Misuari and his supporters still have fight left in them.”

**Thailand**

There are approximately four million Muslims in Thailand, 80% of whom live in the five southern provinces of Pattani, Yala, Narathiwat, Songkhla, and Satun (Smith 2004). Instability in southern Thailand reached a new level in 2004 with violence breaking out after attacks against army and police units. Subsequently, violence intensified when 80 Muslim youth suffocated while they were being held in detention in army trucks (Smith 2004). In response to the heightened tensions, Thailand imposed martial law in most Muslim areas. While some foreign security analysts try to understand the connection between the conflict in
southern Thailand and global jihadist movements like Al Qaeda and Jemaah Islamiyah (Liow 2004), reports in the Muslim world view the conflict as primarily between an oppressive Thai Buddhist state and its repressed Muslim minority (Yusuf 2007). The Muslim community called for a change to the status quo by identifying a number of demands, including the establishment of an autonomous government in the south, recognition of their language and culture, and control of their resources and developments.

The OIC intervened in 2005 after receiving an invitation from the Thai government to do so (Thai Government Public Relations Department 2005). The OIC’s mission focused on observation and assessment of the condition of Thai Muslims in the southern region. The OIC focused mainly on mediation, capitalizing on its diplomatic leverage with the Thai government and credibility with the Muslim community. According to the OIC (2005), its efforts were focused on easing “the obstacles facing negotiations on allowing Thai Muslims to enjoy their acquired rights as citizens. It would also aim at halting security authorities’ acts of violence and oppression against them, so as to support the efforts to enthrone peace and stability in Thailand, within the framework of respect for the country’s sovereignty and territorial integrity.” Furthermore, the OIC sought to help discredit stereotypes and misconceptions that often form obstacles to dialogue, understanding, and resolution. The OIC delegation concluded that unrest in the south was neither the result of religious discrimination against the Muslims nor was it rooted in the religion itself; instead, it could be traced to culture and historic neglect of the south (Bangkok Post 2005).

In 2006, the Thai government changed its approach with the south from the use of force to negotiation and dialogue, especially after interim Prime Minister Sarayud Chulanont offered an apology to the Muslims in that region (Yusuf 2010, 49. See also, The Nation 2006). In 2007, OIC Secretary General Ihsanoglu visited Bangkok to express his appreciation for the change in the government’s approach and to offer cooperation in resolving the crisis.
through economic, social, and education initiatives. Furthermore, Ihsanoglu used his leverage with the Thai Muslim community, asking them to respect the law and then asking the government to equip them with equal rights (The Nation 2007).

**Somalia**

State failure in Somalia in 1991 led to a catastrophic humanitarian situation, which included civil war, drought, and famine and led to the loss of over one million lives (BBC 2012). While piracy on the shores of Somalia and the Gulf of Aden triggered international intervention to enforce maritime security, few took note of worsening humanitarian conditions within Somalia. In 1993, the United Nations intervened in reaction to the crisis, but unfortunately the UN-sponsored peace process did not make sufficient progress due to differences between various Somali political groups.

The OIC, for its part, tried to contribute to the efforts to save Somalia by establishing a Contact Group. Due to the complexity of the situation on the ground, however, the Contact Group made almost no progress and, like the UN-led peace process, ultimately reached a dead end. Efforts to provide aid stalled in Somalia with no tangible process, leading Ethiopia to intervene militarily in 2006. This action in fact revived the peace process, and the OIC participated in the negotiation process which led to the signing of the Djibouti agreement of August 2008 between the Transitional Federal Government of Somalia and the Alliance for the Re-liberation of Somalia (ARS), as well as the expansion of the transitional parliament and the election of a new President (Ihsanoglu 2010). Furthermore, the OIC supported peace efforts that followed the signing of the Djibouti agreement and became active in the International Contact Group on Somalia. In addition, at the 2009 Brussels Donors Conference, the OIC pledged $210 million in various forms of assistance to Somalia (Ihsanoglu 2010).
The OIC also intervened on the ground. In March 2011, the organization established a humanitarian office to improve coordination of assistance with organizations of OIC member states that were operating in the region. In July 2011, a coalition of 38 national and international NGOs was formed and allowed for the creation of a more effective system that aptly divided labor and specialization. The coalition coordinated humanitarian operations in six areas, with a lead agency for each: food; health; water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH); camp management; information and communication; and education and training (Islamic Relief 2012).

In brief, OIC intervention in Somalia contributed to an effective response to the country’s disastrous humanitarian situation, especially at a time when the Shabab militant group, which only trusted the OIC to deliver humanitarian assistance, forced many international organizations to leave the region. The organization then provided access to affected areas that were separated from the rest of the world, provided a coordination framework within the organizations of OIC member states, and coordinated and signed Memoranda of Understanding with international organizations, namely the World Food Program (WFP), the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), and United Nations Office of the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN-OCHA), to deliver humanitarian assistance to affected areas (OIC-UN 2008).

Iraq

The sectarian tension that followed the 2003 U.S.-led war in Iraq and removal of Saddam Hussein’s regime reached unprecedented levels of violence between the country’s Sunnis and Shias. Violence targeted ordinary citizens, holy shrines, mosques, graveyards, and residential areas. With such a widespread and vicious level of violence, a wide national reconciliation process was necessary.
The bombing of the two holy shrines in the city of Samara in 2006 served as a trigger for intensive third party intervention. OIC Secretary General Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu became personally involved, reaching out to Sunni and Shia leaders and inviting them to a reconciliation meeting in Mecca. Ihsanoglu, known as a reformer, had promised to “re-energize” the organization by making administrative changes, in particular seeking a greater role for Muslim nations in international affairs, including permanent representation in the UN Security Council, and this initiative was a major part of achieving that goal (BBC 2010). To ensure success, the OIC secured support of all shareholders, including Iraqi and other regional and international parties involved in Iraq (Ihsanoglu 2010). Furthermore, the OIC paid close attention to the time and place of the reconciliation meeting. The OIC selected Ramadan, October 2006, and Mecca as, respectively, the holiest month and place for the Muslims. This religious dimension of the time and place added considerable moral pressure on the parties to elicit a cooperative attitude. Approximately 50 Iraqi Muslim scholars representing both the Shia and Sunni communities met, and, after long discussions, signed what came to be known as the Mecca Declaration on October 20, 2006. The declaration “rejected the notion of killing among Muslims and agreed on the principle of inviolability of human soul” (Ihsanoglu 2010). According to an Iraqi official, the OIC’s intervention in Iraq’s sectarian violence was notably successful and contributed to the achievement of a “social peace” in several parts of the country (Author’s interview with Mohamed Al-Dawraki 2011).

**Comparative Advantage**

The OIC’s unique ability to influence conflicts in the Muslim world can be seen in three different areas: cultural competency, moral power, and partnerships.

**Cultural Competency**

Acting as an umbrella for 57 countries to meet and discuss their internal affairs, the OIC has become a “knowledge depot” for the issues and challenges facing its member states.
In addition to its linguistics capabilities (it has representatives speaking languages spoken in all 57 member countries), the OIC has developed a special expertise in the cultural components that drive conflicts in member states (Saleh 2011). The major advantage of possessing these cultural and linguistic skills is the OIC’s ability to conduct knowledge-based and culturally sensitive mediation. In remarks at George Mason University, Secretary General Ihsanoglu noted that “regional organizations had greater vested interests in resolving conflicts in their own backyards and a better ability to mobilize home-grown mechanisms to address the root causes of conflict” (Lyons 2011). Furthermore, the OIC’s cultural competency has granted the organization access to specific conflict zones that would have otherwise remained unreachable. Due to its rigorous understanding of local Somali culture, for example, the OIC was allowed by the Shabab Movement to intervene in the delivery of humanitarian assistance in their areas of control. The UN’s World Food Program coordinated closely with the OIC to deliver food aid in the Shabab controlled area of Somalia. Without the OIC’s access, however, the UN would have likely never been allowed to enter, and the humanitarian condition would have worsened.

**Moral Power**

Unlike intervention by other international organizations like the UN, the OIC conducts its mediation “outside the legal box.” That is, there are no legal consequences nor are there forceful resolutions – like Security Council resolutions under chapter seven – if parties refuse to negotiate with the mediator, when that mediator is the OIC. While UN intervention takes a “stick and carrot” approach, OIC mediation takes a “carrot” only – or a carrot and soft stick – approach. Physical force – the stick – is replaced in the OIC’s case with moral power. Three major factors make the OIC mediation approach more effective. First, other organizations like the UN already engage in force-based mediation, and the OIC approach could therefore play a complementary role to this approach. Second, entering
mediation on a voluntary basis, in the absence of legality and physical force, may elicit a better response from the conflict parties. They will realize that the final settlement decision is ultimately their own and will therefore not be forced to engage in agreements that they consider counter to their interests. Agreements reached on this basis will likely be more sustainable, as they emerge from the full conviction of the parties themselves. For example, the 2006 OIC-brokered Mecca Declaration between Iraqi Sunni and Shia has survived and contributed a great deal to bridging the divide between the two parties. Third, an approach based on moral power allows for the use of a set of tactics that are not available to other organizations. Applying its moral power in mediation, the OIC – the mediator – can employ moral pressuring tactics like shaming to deter escalatory behavior and honoring to encourage or reward attitudes or actions leading to a constructive resolution.

Partnerships

Though they share many similar causes, processes, and dynamics, conflicts generally develop certain features that make them unique. For mediation, this means that no one approach or single mediator can function for all. Some organizations are able to make a difference in certain conflicts, while others are better suited to resolve different conflicts. Partnerships between international organizations are therefore necessary to respond effectively to the mediation requirements of world conflicts. For its part, the United Nations realized the need for partnering with the OIC to appropriately and effectively respond to conflicts in the Muslim world. In December 2006, the UN General Assembly passed a resolution to encourage greater cooperation between the UN and the OIC, specifically “welcoming the efforts of the Secretary-General of the Organization of the Islamic Conference in strengthening the role of the Organization in conflict prevention, confidence-building, peacekeeping, conflict resolution, and post-conflict rehabilitation in member States
as well as in conflict situations involving Muslim communities” (United Nations General Assembly 2006).

UN partnership with the OIC is necessary to keep channels of communication open in difficult areas where the UN – and other regional organizations – does not enjoy full access (Saleh 2011). In Libya, for example, the UN’s relationship with the Qaddafi regime deteriorated sharply after the passage of Security Council resolution 1973, which allowed for NATO intervention (UN Security Council 2011). In addition, the regime cut ties with the Arab League when the organization also called for imposing a no fly zone in Libya. The African Union, on the other hand, was considered too close to the regime and therefore lost credibility with the rebels. The OIC, however, was perhaps the only international organization that maintained open channels of communications with both the Qaddafi regime and the rebels. According to senior OIC official Cenk Uraz, the OIC’s intervention in Libya focused on two major points: supporting Security Council resolution 1973 and protecting the integrity of Libyan territory (Author’s interview with Cenk Uraz 2011). In this particular instance, the need for partnership with the OIC became essential when the UN and other international organizations were unable to perform mediation with the regime or the rebels. Ihsanoglu (2011) notes that the OIC, as early as 22 February 2011, condemned the excessive use of force against civilians in Libya, and called on the Libyan Authorities to immediately stop violence against innocent Libyans and emphasized the need to address their claims peacefully and through serious dialogue instead of assassination and bloodshedding (Author’s interview with Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu 2011).

Other examples of how the OIC’s unique circumstances enabled the organization to assist in mediation include the Philippines, where the OIC also enjoyed special relationship with the both parties – the government and the rebels – and was therefore able to negotiate successful mediation in 1996. Notably, the Moro National Liberation Front trusted only the
OIC to mediate as a neutral party. As these examples show, partnership with the OIC could play a constructive and complementary role – rather than competitive – to UN efforts to resolve domestic and regional conflicts.

**Challenges**

Promoting OIC mediation, however, faces a number of challenges. First, there is a challenge of possible duplication of mediation efforts with other regional and international organizations. The Arab League and African Union in particular are active in many OIC member states. Of the 57 OIC members states, 27 are also members of the African Union, 22 countries are members in the Arab League, and seven are members of both the Arab League and the African Union. This double and triple membership of some countries in organizations performing similar mediation work may lead to a conflict of interest and a competition for loyalties. For example, would a country like Morocco be supporting a mediation initiative of the OIC or the Arab League when it holds full membership in both organizations?

A second challenge is that OIC mediation needs to be supported by strong political will. Since he came to office as the Secretary General in 2005, Professor Ihsanoglu has focused through his organizational reform program on involving the OIC in mediating conflicts in its member states. The impact of the Secretary General’s mediation activities, however, remains limited without firm political will from member states. This political will should translate to empowerment of the office of the Secretary General by delegating authority and allocating the appropriate financial resources for his mediation efforts. The OIC is set to play a complementary role with other regional and international organizations. Through proper collaboration, mediation can take a multi-method approach, and together such organizations may have greater potential to achieve success in mediating intractable conflicts.
A third challenge would be what Turan Kayaoglu, associate professor at the University of Washington and an expert on OIC affairs, describes as “mistrust and realpolitik among the member states” (Author’s interview with Kayaoglu 2012). According to Kayaoglu, “the OIC’s leading members – Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Pakistan – prevent it from taking action that would harm the interests of their allies, placing their own narrow goals above those of the organization.” Moreover, as Iran’s support for the Syrian regime and Saudi support for the Bahraini government illustrate, this realpolitik has a strong religious and sectarian resonance in the Muslim world. Others have noted these divisions within the organization, and the lack of a clear, unified strategy. Haroon Moghul, executive director of the Maydan Institute, an Islamic communications group, argues that “some countries, such as Turkey and Malaysia, envision the organization as a forum for a cultural agenda pushing moderation, while others, such as Saudi Arabia and Iran, want a more political agenda including the spread of theocratic influence” (Johnson 2010).

Finally, the OIC’s organizational structure has been an impediment to effective mediation and decision-making. According to Kayaoglu (2012), until the reform initiative of 2005 the body’s “intergovernmental structure” required consensus among member states for major decisions to be made, significantly hindering the efficacy of the organization. Moreover, executive power was delegated to the Council of Ministers of Foreign Affairs, which met only annually and was thus unable to make decisions at short notice. Again, only with the 2005 reform was the Executive Committee established, allowing a margin of efficiency in the decision-making processes and enhancing the organization’s ability to act as a mediator.

**Enhancing Conflict Resolution and Mediation Effectiveness**

As its history shows, the OIC has successfully mediated a number of serious conflicts, many among its member states. However, the next challenge for the OIC will involve
transforming its efforts from ad hoc reaction to crises to more sustainable and systematic mediation. This challenge requires institutionalizing the process of mediation and systemizing the organization’s mediation approach. This article concludes with several recommendations related to the process and approach taken by the OIC that would enhance its mediation efforts.

**Process**

*Enhancing the capacity building of the Secretary General’s Office.*

A central step to building capacity would involve the creation of a well-funded as well as properly staffed and trained mediation unit within the OIC. The OIC Secretary General’s desire to have closer involvement in conflict zones is not sufficient to enhance the Organization’s conflict resolution portfolio. OIC member states will need to support this desire by granting the proper political will and devoting necessary resources to structurally adapt the organization into one that is more capable to work in mediation.

*Establishing an efficient internal protocol that is able to respond to the nature of intervention, mediation, and conflict resolution.*

One major principle of such a protocol will be the delivery of sensitive information in a timely manner, avoiding the obstacles of organizational bureaucracy. Designation of a mediation envoy linked to the office of the Secretary General would help establish such a protocol.

*Building expert-level connections and institutional linkages with organizations specializing in mediation and conflict resolution.*

Establishing these frameworks of collaboration will help facilitate the transfer of critical knowledge and would also boost mediation capacity in the OIC. A number of programs could be created to support this objective including exchange programs, expert short assignments, joint fellowships, joint conferences and events, and visiting fellowships.
Approach

Recognizing the responsibility.

The OIC must acknowledge its duty to its member states by contributing to lasting solutions to their conflicts. The OIC should realize that it is mediating not only to benefit these countries but also to justify its existence and long-term interest in functioning as a forum for member states to meet and work to solve their problems. Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu was correct in pointing out: "We cannot expect others to solve our problems ... This [conflict resolution] is its [OIC's] founding mission. Although everyone acknowledges this mission, there is no mechanism to realize it" (Kardas 2009).

Taking a multiparty approach to mediation.

Especially after escalation, conflicts generally attract the attention of many third parties. The Darfur conflict, for example, has witnessed interventions from multiple parties including the UN, African Union, the OIC, Arab League, and the EU. To make its approach more effective, the OIC, like other third parties, will need to continue to coordinate its efforts with other interveners to ensure that it is complementing rather than duplicating the work of others.

Developing an implementation mechanism of negotiated peace agreements.

Implementation of any agreement usually triggers many challenges that in some cases end up undermining the spirit of the agreement itself. The OIC may want to consider building on its current intervention approach by either providing a road map for the implementation of peace agreements or becoming more closely involved in the implementation itself. The OIC made remarkable success with the 1996 agreement between the Philippine government and Moro Front. However, the implementation of this agreement faced a number of challenges, primarily the development efforts in region. For example, the Islamic Development Bank pledged $16 million for development efforts, while only $2 million were actually spent. Also,
it should be noted that later the intervention of OIC Secretary General Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu to facilitate implementation of the peace agreement led to the successful release of Mr. Nor Miswari, Chairman of the MNLF, in 2008. However, much more is still needed to lead to comprehensive implementation of the peace agreement (Author’s interview with Ezzedine Tago 2011).

Engaging with influential local leaders.

The OIC has primarily pursued a track one approach to mediation yet should supplement its efforts by considering track two, approaching community leaders in particular to contribute to the resolution process (on track one and two cooperation, see Allen Nan and Strimling 2004). There is a wide range of potential contributors to peaceful resolutions that the OIC can and should involve to gain more support for its efforts. These contributors include religious leaders, tribal figures, public opinion writers, academics, and civil society representatives.

Capitalizing on its profile of neutrality and impartiality.

At least theoretically, member states perceive the OIC as having no vested interest in specific outcomes of their conflicts. Traditionally, it has been argued that neutrality of the mediator is a key factor for influential and successful mediation (Touval and Zartman 1985). The OIC should make use of its perceived impartiality to further strengthen its role as mediator. In his speech at George Mason University, OIC Secretary General Ihsanoglu said that “the strength, honesty, credibility, neutrality, and impartiality of the OIC made it an extremely useful player in conflict resolution” (Lyons 2011). The organization’s recognized place in the international community can support its ability to facilitate conflict resolution as a neutral mediator.
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Conversation with an Interpreter:
Considerations for Cross-Language, Cross-Cultural Peacebuilding Research

Maureen P. Flaherty and Sonya Stavkova

Abstract

The ongoing processes of peacebuilding involve dialogue (Lederach 1997) and co-discovery (Freire 1970), which can sometimes be facilitated through academy-initiated research. Qualitative research provides opportunities to move from a positivist approach to a more equal, participatory, interactive exploration that benefits all participants, including the researcher in a “co-production of knowledge” (Karnieli-Miller, Strier, and Pessach 2009 p. 279). Cross-cultural, cross-language research (where researchers and participants do not share the same language), with all its riches, brings particular challenges for all involved. Beyond the issues of power and perceived power in any kind of research (Sprague 2005), in cross-cultural and cross-language research, already complex interactions are both facilitated/navigated and multiplied with the addition of an interpreter (Wallin and Ahlstrom 2006) who becomes the conduit for all interactions. This article focuses on the experiences of a cross-language interpreter involved in a participatory action study in peacebuilding in her home country of Ukraine. Her insights on the role of the interpreter, and considerations for future studies are shared through a conversation with the primary/initial inquirer at the end of this qualitative mixed-method project.

Rather than a state, peace is defined as an ongoing activity of cultivating agreements. People participating in this reality of peace act as cooperative participants seeking solutions… (Kelly, C., Eblen, K. 2002, 2)
Peaceful living involves continual individual and community development. As such, the continual processes of peacebuilding require ongoing dialogue (Lederach 1997), co-discovery, and empowerment (Freire 1970). In turn, formal research, which is often initiated by the academy, can play a facilitative role in this discovery.

Qualitative research, using a variety of methodologies, provides opportunities to move from a positivist approach to a more equal, participatory, interactive exploration that benefits all participants, including the researcher in a “co-production of knowledge” (Karnieli-Miller, Strier, and Pessach 2009, 279). Participatory action research (PAR), which can involve qualitative and quantitative methodologies, has the unique possibility to engage individuals and/or community members in collective reflection/action leading to positive growth and change for all involved (McIntyre 2008). Particularly for people who have lived under oppression or other colonization, PAR becomes an act of co-investigation (Freire 1970) through which people can re-discover and “re-right” their own history.

Narrative as a research methodology, particularly personal narrative, can further the possibilities for participant empowerment; especially for those who have been marginalized or oppressed, the act of voicing their story in itself can be a transformative experience (Chase 2005). And so, narration as a research tool also becomes a kind of action research. The participant/narrator is part of her own audience and with her internal dialogue to facilitate the process, sharing a previously silenced story with another bearing witness can become a pivotal interaction (Chase 2005; Flaherty 2012). Hearing the story also creates new possibilities for the listener who is able to take another’s perspective. “Stories simultaneously engage mind and heart” (Senehi 2002, 52). Peacebuilding – healing any kind of trauma or conflict – requires the healing of emotion and intellect (Flaherty 2012; Herman 1992/1997;
Senehi 2002) and in this way, storytelling has become a way of addressing historical trauma and has been key in the foundation of truth commissions.

Research using narrative as a tool may offer the gift of adding stories into history — counter-narratives to those previously told. In this practice, stories collected informally or formally, as in Truth and Reconciliation Commissions, may become part of collective stories that again give voice to those previously marginalized. The act also changes history. As a respectful inquirer, the researcher who receives and shares stories reflexively assists the teller to explore her own story wherein she may connect with personal values and strengths (Flaherty 2012). These processes open possibilities for empowerment, transformation, and peacebuilding within and across cultural groups (Cruikshank, 2000; Lederach 1997; Potts & Brown 2005; Senehi, 2008; Smith 2006/1999, 117).

Another age-old process – visioning for the future – can also be used in bridge-building, and as a participatory action tool, has been written about most frequently in the last two decades (see, for example, Lederach 1997). In essence, visioning can be the act of parties working together to co-create a picture or story for, hopefully, a common future. This work is being explored for its merits working across divided societies – in essence, cross-culturally (Flaherty 2012).

Still, cross-cultural, and especially cross-language research brings its own challenges for all involved. Beyond the issues of power and perceived power in any kind of research (Sprague 2005), in cross-cultural and cross-language research (where researcher and participants do not speak the same language) these challenges of already complex interactions are both facilitated/navigated and multiplied with the addition of an interpreter (Wallin and Ahlstrom 2006). In cross-language research the interpreter becomes the conduit for all interaction. Temple (2008) explored some of the challenges in determining which interpreters to use; other researchers have looked at different ways to involve interpreters in face-to-face
interviews (Williamson, et al. 2011) and advantages of consulting interpreters on cross-cultural communication (Hudelson 2005). Until recently, however, little research has reported on the impact on the interpreter involved in research work as a co-participant and in reality co-researcher, although this is shifting with writers such as Splevins, Cohen, Joseph, Murray, and Bowley (2010). This is of particular importance if we acknowledge the impact one individual can have on the workings and well-being of a community.

This article focuses on the impact on the interpreter of doing cross-cultural, cross-language participatory action research using narrative as a tool of inquiry. Interpreter/co-author, Sonya Stavkova, shares her insights in a conversation with this article’s co-author/practitioner Maureen Flaherty at the end of a research project using narrative and visioning as community-building tools with women in a struggling Ukraine. The conversation addresses the role of the interpreter and the implications for her in this kind of research and community building, and offers considerations for others interested in doing similar work.

We have elected to use the term primary/initial inquirer with the understanding that while researchers may initiate a study, in collaborative research, from feminist perspectives (Sprague 2005) and Indigenous perspectives (see Smith 2006; 1999 for example), the other participants are co-inquirers. We have also chosen to use the feminine pronoun, “she” when referring to interpreters—first, because the interpreter in this case is female, and second, for ease of reference, acknowledging that interpreters may be of any gender.

We begin by introducing the context of our conversation shared as the focus of this article—the process of conducting a participatory action research study with eighteen women in two diverse areas of Ukraine. Following the brief look at setting for the background study and the conversation included here, we explore some common understandings about roles and expectations of cross-cultural, cross-language interpreters in research. We note that while it is common in feminist scholarship particularly to make explicit the role and impact of the
primary inquirer, there appears to be little known about the impact of research on the interpreter in cross-language, cross-cultural research. In this section of our paper, Sonya expresses her experience of much more than she anticipated as a result of her role of interpreter in this study—and she shares some of her insights to assist future researchers. Our final section summarizes our thoughts about the implications and considerations for undertaking cross-language research with an interpreter, particularly when narrative and visioning are the methodologies of choice.

The Setting

The winter of 2010 was one of the coldest in a decade for Ukraine. In that frosty time, we began our interview process with eighteen women in two diverse areas in Ukraine. We were studying peacebuilding – looking into the possibilities for personal narrative and group visioning as bridgebuilding tools in a country propelled into Independence in 1991, but still deeply divided in a largely east-west split. This split seemed due to numerous factors including history, culture, demography and ideology differentially wrought through centuries of regionally different occupational regimes (Flaherty 2012; Marples 2007).

Our study began in January 2010, in Lviv, Ukraine, just after the first run of the fifth presidential election (Kyiv Post 2010, Kuzio 2010). The incumbent president, Viktor Yuschenko, had been wiped off the ballot. Yuschenko, the face of the Orange Revolution and a man upon whom many hopes had been placed by independent minded Ukrainian nationalists, had disappointed in his inability to control an unruly parliament and bring the economy out of its deep hole. The two main contenders left on the ballot were Yulia Tymoshenko and Viktor Yanukovych; many voices on Western Ukrainian streets said there was no point in voting at all. Others, more comfortable with a pro-Russian government, spoke about the security of the old days and a belief that anything would be better than Yuschenko’s pro-European Union bent. Yanukovych was their man. Yulia Tymoshenko had
been a running mate and supporter of Yuschenko, but once he took the presidential seat, she had openly defied him and turned away from their relationship.

**The Project: Peacebuilding with Women in Ukraine**

During the days between the first and second run of the fifth Ukrainian presidential election, the mood in the West was pessimistic and the energy was low. Citizens wondered aloud if they should even bother voting. It was in this time period that we, Sonya and Maureen, interviewed eighteen women from two diverse areas of Ukraine, asking them about their life stories, and their hopes and dreams. This initial part of our study took place in quiet rooms, just the two of us and a female participant who was between the ages of forty-two and eighty-one, and who had lived some of her adulthood during Soviet times. Women shared stories they had never before spoken, they said, stories about the lives of their families during their childhoods, as young women, and to the present day. Participants also reflected upon their visions for themselves, their families and Ukraine. Individual meetings were followed first by regional group visioning meetings and then a cross-regional meeting during which all participants had the opportunity to share their hopes for Ukraine and tentative plans to work together cross-region, cross-country for Ukraine.

The first phase of the research used a snowball approach to invite individual women from two diverse areas of Ukraine to share their personal stories. The second phase gathered the women together in regional groups and led them through a process of visioning as a group for their communities and for Ukraine. The third phase was to help these two diverse groups to communicate with each other about their vision and to begin to co-create a common vision. The final active part of this research was part of a feminist strategy that acknowledges the power differentials in relationships. The participants reviewed and approved their input into the final report. In the case of narrative research when an individual’s life story is being shared, this step is of particular importance.
Twice – in February and in July of 2010 – we began our journey in Lviv in the western part of Ukraine and then took a thousand kilometer train trip to meet with women in Simferopol, Crimea. As a cross-country, cross-cultural tour, the train trip was both an adventure and a challenge as we moved from west to east and back. Statues of Lenin began to pop up about halfway as square, low, Soviet-style architecture replaced the multi-textured ornate buildings of Lviv.

During the study we both learned more about ourselves, our relationship, and Ukraine. Maureen initiated the study and had expected to learn from and with the participants. Sonya, as interpreter and Ukrainian citizen of mixed heritage, committed herself to the process as a favour to a friend; she was curious about the study as a process for individual empowerment and certain that she would see few commonalities in beliefs and dreams of women from two very diverse regions.

The Role of the Interpreter in Research

Sonya had worked for many years as an educator and as an interpreter. She was often recruited when trans-governmental meetings took place, and when international conferences came to town. Usually she had a brief discussion with a new client as they began their work together, navigating expectations and style of speaking.

We had worked together over the period of a decade with varying intensity over time and gaps with years apart between collaborations. We had conducted workshops together, addressed large classrooms, attended and chaired group meetings, facilitated individual counselling sessions and supervision, and addressed an international conference. During our work together, we usually checked in with each other about speed of communication and clarity of meanings. We debriefed sessions, helping each other perception check and deal with emotions that accompany working with people who may be expressing thoughts never before shared, sometimes in private counselling sessions.
Our work together in 2010 was a little different in that it was a research project. A brief description of that work was shared earlier and will be referred to later in this article. In preparation for this new collaboration, we discussed the shifts in both our roles from teacher/facilitator/counsellor and interpreter to researcher and interpreter. Because of our usual collaborative approach, we were curious about how our relationship might change and how we might change the ways we worked together to meet the needs of the project.

Maureen was aware of the degree to which she relied on Sonya as the resident cultural and linguistic expert. Maureen, a Canadian of non-Ukrainian descent, knew she could not do any work in Ukraine without an interpreter and knew that Sonya’s empathic abilities and her awareness of social issues made her the best possible candidate. Maureen anticipated the vulnerability of sharing personal narratives would be emotional for the participants. She wondered what the process would be like for Sonya, a woman from a similar history.

Sonya was excited about the research and the possibilities that might open for women as they became involved. She shared a great curiosity as to the response to and impact of participating in the study and the impact of the research questions/response themselves on prospective participants and Ukrainians in general who might hear about the research. Historically, speaking about one’s wants and fears could have dangerous implications for Ukrainian citizens (Berkhoff 2004; Figes 2007; Marples 2007). It wasn’t until near the end of the study work that we began to think about literature exploring the impact of doing cross-cultural research work on the interpreter. We found little to satisfy our curiosity.

Positivist approaches to research have insisted that the researcher remain value-free and neutral (Benz & Shapiro 1998). In the same approach, the use of an interpreter in cross-language interviews dictates the researcher tries to maintain control of the interview and the process of the interpreter; the focus is purely on the interpreter’s facility with language and translation. The person who is the interpreter is meant to almost disappear in the process.
While the “neutral” and almost invisible interpreter is considered ideal, sometimes interpreters have a more active role, developing relationships not only with the researcher, but with the participants, helping “establish ties of trust and respect” (Hwa-Froelich and Westby 2003, 80). This can be done through manner of presentation and through establishing rapport with the participant independent of the researcher. After all, the interpreter is the one who can communicate openly with both researcher and participant.

Temple and Edwards (2002) write about the importance of acknowledging the crucial active, reflexive role the interpreter plays in cross-language, cross-cultural research noting “identity is produced and not merely described in language” and “gender, ethnicity and other social divisions are important aspects of both identity and language” (p.9). Thus, in our opinion, the inclusion of the interpreter in deep discussion about research is vital to understanding qualitative research; her inclusion can lead to insights much deeper than the proficient use of language and language translation.

Berman and Tyyska (2011) critique a positivist approach to qualitative research in particular, and acknowledge the importance of research team members including cross-language and cross-cultural interpreters with consideration as to the impact their roles and relationships in research site communites have on the interactions with participants and the eventual outcomes of the research as well as upon their own relationships with these players. Berman and Tyyska (2011) acknowledge that, while an interactive and inclusive relationship with an interpreter requires complicated considertations, the traditional way of working with interpreters expected by the academy can impose restrictions that limit the rich possibilities in the work. They also note that the relationship and roles the interpreter plays in her own community impact her ability to carry out her role.

There is a scarcity of research looking at the experience of the interpreter herself other than a study on posttraumatic growth by Splevins, Cohen, Joseph, Murray, and Bowley.
Throughout the life of our own particular study, we found ourselves debriefing the emotional roller-coaster accompanying the honour of being trusted with deeply personal stories, which if shared in earlier times could have meant banishment or even death to some participants (Figes 2007; Marples 2007). While the content of the narratives was deeply moving, the trust placed in both of us in the story-sharing was truly humbling. We wondered about the experiences of others working together in cross-cultural research and thought that sharing one of our reflective conversations might assist others doing this kind of research.

**Conversation in Crimea**

Our project and our relationship had close to a decade of history. In the early 2000s Maureen spent the better part of two years in Ukraine living and working as the person “on the ground” for a project funded by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) partnering the University of Manitoba, Faculty of Social Work with Lviv Polytechnic University, where Sonya worked, to create a social work department and work with the community to develop innovative social services in an infrastructure-poor Ukraine. In the years that followed, maintaining a working relationship with the social work department and the community, Maureen returned periodically to conduct workshops and then to do her dissertation research described briefly below. In addition to the support she offered as a friend and colleague, Sonya served as the interpreter for all of the interviews related to the study. This article is based on the conversation we had upon completing the research together in Lviv and Simferopol, Ukraine.

In the process of conducting our research in 2010, Maureen had some sense of the toll the research process might be taking on Sonya as she noted the impact on herself. We shared many conversations on the street, in the car, over a glass of cognac between interviews. These conversations were vital to debriefing our experiences of interviews. Physically, the work was draining: in Lviv the interviews usually followed upon or were placed within the middle
of a busy workday; our conversations in Simferopol followed a twenty-four hour train trip with no sleep afforded along the way. Intellectually the work became exhausting – Sonya was sometimes interpreting in three languages – Russian, Ukrainian and English. In every interview as well as other working interactions with the public, Sonya continually put aside her own story, her own beliefs and wishes, and “became” either the other participant or Maureen. Emotionally, during the work, again Sonya removed herself from everything that was not of the individual participant. Periodically a tear would fall. Most often she just mirrored what the participant and Maureen projected verbally and physically. Sonya was a conduit.

At the same time, Sonya was herself a participant of a special order in the process. As with many interpreters working in their own community, a few of our participants were already colleagues or even friends. She signed confidentiality and participant agreements, as did the participants. Still, these individuals often revealed stories previously unknown to her; and, known to her or not, many voiced sentiments and experiences close to her own heart. Others told of history and imaginings that were far from Sonya’s own. Additionally, through our interpersonal and geographical travel across the country, Sonya went on a journey of discovery with Maureen – going far beyond the call of interpreter.

The discussion included here, edited only slightly for clarity, was audiotaped at a picnic table outside the hotel we stayed at in July, 2010, on our second trip together to Crimea. The place, Applesin, was on the outskirts of a small industrial town, Nikolaiva, Crimea – at the Black Sea. The hot, hot day was just prior to our departure back to Lviv, having completed the fourth and final part of the project. We prepared to leave the place where we had met the eastern participants, going back on the train with our companions to make the twenty-four hour trek back to Lviv in the west of Ukraine. It was a trip we looked forward to; at the same
time, we knew it was the beginning of the end of our project together and that we would 
likely not see each other again for quite some time.

The discussion we had this particular day was fairly brief. Around the corner waited our 
colleagues, curious about our private conversation, and anxious to embark on sightseeing. 

After joking about this being an interview not needing interpretation, we began.

M. I want to talk with you about what it is like for you to do this work as a 
person who is an interpreter who has her own story of growing up and living 
in Ukraine. In our work together you are not only interpreting, you are also 
hearing all these stories. I don’t know anyone who is actually doing what you 
are doing. While we have been working together, I have wondered at your 
work on a number of levels. First of all, you do more than interpret language: 
you are somehow also able to convey the emotional content. When we work 
together, it is like even though you are present, you disappear in a way. You 
become part of the person whose words you are saying. If you are interpreting 
for me, you say the words as I would say them. If you are interpreting for 
Mila, for example – I listened to Ana’s conversation or story a number of 
times. You would say things, like she would say, for example, “And that’s the 
way it was… and that’s the way it was…” If she repeated something, you 
would repeat it the way that she did. This gave me a different sense of what 
was being conveyed – totally different than if you had spoken as a third 

S. I have never thought about this in this direction. First of all this has been a 
precious experience for me because when we started I wasn’t thinking about 
this. I mean I wasn’t considering myself to be a part of the project – just an 
interpreter, you know. But then later on I realized that my responsibility is 
huge, you know because it is scientific work and much depends on the 
interpretation and on feelings – not only words, but feelings in meaning that I 
include into the words.

People are different and they work differently, this is true. There have been 
times in the past, when I really struggled with my translation. I was not as 
successful as I would have liked because I could not feel things – the person 
that I was going to interpret. My self-esteem went down at those times. I 
would find it hard to refocus and it was very hard to begin translating someone 
else…

And then I realized that in this world we are all connected and this connection 
is not vivid, you know, but I feel this connection and perhaps it is because of 
this I feel people, I am in this profession. I am not only interpreting, I am part 
of this profession because I feel people. When I have a good feeling of a 
person – when we are on the same page, the same tune, it is easy for me to 
interpret. Even when I make mistakes, it doesn’t matter, I try to convey the 
message, not only words, but feelings, circumstances, environment. So, when
we started working on this project… Well, first of all, I was happy to work with you because we have known each other for ten years and then… I must repeat that at first I had no sense of… but then I realized that this is a very important mission. It was important even at the beginning to ask women their stories. But now, now when you, you are back in Ukraine and when you asking women to vision, and asking them to… to approve what they said, I feel, “Oh my God, is it correct? Was I correct in my interpretation?”

M. And so far so good.

S. Yes, so far, so good, thanks God. No one has asked us to change anything or to correct a sentence. I sense how important this is, how carefully you treat the stories and how necessary to share them as women tell them. This sheds a different light on the importance of two things. First, there is the value of people’s life stories themselves and the meaning they have to the teller. Second, there is the work that I do. It really is critical that interpreters convey what is being said in all of its meanings.

The work that is being done here – collecting women’s stories and asking them to dream is something different. I have never seen anything like this. Part of the difference is that this study comes from your involvement with us. You have been connected with people here, this country, for ten years. You know the country; you know people; and, you decided to show life from a different perspective and the influence of women and their participation in this country.

M. When you say that I know women, or I know the country, you remind me of a big fear that I had. Yes, I lived here for a time, but always with assistance. No matter what I do I was not born in Ukraine, so for you to say that I understand…

S. No, you will never understand, you will never understand. We don’t understand, either! You will never open the door wide, but you will open it a centimetre. You are not a stranger in this country. You did not just drop down from space and you know, write something. It is not from a different country, it is a different world.

M. And then, the language, you have managed to open the door further, because even if I spoke Ukrainian, I have a feeling that I would have a different response from people than I would have with you with me because you and other colleagues have paved the way. You have introduced me to people. Because you introduced me, people know that if I am coming with you, I am trustworthy as well. I think this is part of it.

S. This is a matter of trust. I noticed that when we met with people the first time, especially with people in Crimea, they were more closed. Now, on this second trip, people open their hearts, their souls and they were seeking more conversations with you. They want to tell you more. They were smiling and they were open and now they are a team. They spend time with each other, and take pleasure in each other’s company.
During the regional visioning meetings and after, women commented on how they valued each other and how connected they felt. They said this with awe, realizing that they would not have previously considered some of their group members to be friends or allies. See also Flaherty (2012) for more on this phenomenon.

So, saying that they trust me, no they trust you. But because I feel you so well, well… I do it, it is hard to say… [She paused reflecting, searching for words.] Well, how I interpret, it’s not a professional issue because there are many better interpreters I am sure who know the language better than I do. But because I feel you, I feel people, I can adjust and I can hide in the shade.

M. I like the way you put that! I like the picture you paint.

S. This is not a matter of language, of knowing language, I think. This is more a matter of feeling and understanding people – a matter of compassion even.

M. You know that makes sense. As you are speaking, I am wondering if it may have been easier to interpret with the people from Lviv, not because of the language, but because you know that a lot of their beliefs are similar to yours. But then when we came here, I noticed that even here you were still able to interpret, even though, sometimes we had conversations after when you said, “That really annoyed me because that person doesn’t like the sound of the Ukrainian language,” and so forth.

S. Because I interpret on the emotional level and I pick up the emotions.

M. But you respected the person and honoured their story whoever that person is, even if you didn’t like their politics.

S. But we don’t have to like everybody.

M. Absolutely, you are a professional.

S. And we don’t have to agree with everybody in this life. It will never happen in the world. We will always have some misunderstandings, you know.

M. Still, I think it is a huge thing that you are able to again, allow yourself to be in the shadow and not change or get in the way of what the other person is saying even when you don’t agree with it. I have worked with other interpreters who clearly show when they don’t agree with or like what is being said by the person they are interpreting. The words may come across, but they are coloured either by the interpreter’s emotions or a shade of neutrality that the interpreter uses to try to keep their own feelings out of it. S., you seem to be able to almost become the other person, or persons. You become each person in turn as they speak.
S. My job in this project is not to judge. My job in this project is to convey the main idea, the message, and language, if I can do this.

M. And you are doing a fine job.

S. Because you are doing a scientific research; it is not just fiction. All my likes and dislikes are personal, to be kept to myself while doing this job. I understand, however, that much depends on our past and personal experience. I am pretty sure that if I spent my childhood in Crimea, my views would be different. Because I am from western Ukraine, I am different. But then I was raised in a kind of international home. Half of me is Ukrainian – very nationalistic Ukrainian. Another half of me is very Russian.

M. So some of what people say resonates with different parts of you.

S. Yes, their past with my past. And it is impossible to get rid of the past; our past is something we cannot change. But if we want to be successful in this world, if I want my country to be successful on the world arena so to say, we must learn to peacefully coexist. So whether I like or dislike another’s point of view should not hinder my ability to hear their story or get along with them.

M. Sonya, I recall you saying that your thoughts about your role kind of shifted as we went along and you realized what we were really trying to do together here. I say “we” meaning you and me and all of the participants in this project. You spoke about your role taking on even more importance than the usual importance of interpretation in any given context. You mentioned you began to realize that we were doing peace-building work and how important each conversation was as a contributor to that process. That deeply touched me. In that vein, I wonder if anything else shifted for you here, if you noticed any other thoughts different from when you began – because of, or in the process of the work.

S. Well, when I signed confidentiality forms for myself and as a witness for others, I was reminded, that I cannot share what I have heard. But this information is inside and I have been thinking about this inside all the time. For one thing, some people that you interviewed were not strangers to me. I knew them. I am surprised at how differently I look at them now and I think, “This person is much deeper, or smarter, or suffered a lot.” So, different things.

M. You know things about them that you didn’t know before.

S. I didn’t know and how could I, because we did not share these thing. And again this is a responsibility because we know each other and I know some private things about them. It means that I have no right to share this information and at the same time I live with this information. It is hard. And I have to treat them, without… like, so the same way I did before I heard their stories.
As noted earlier, it was uncommon during Soviet times, and to this day, for people to share personal stories, thoughts, or feelings as, particularly during Stalin’s times, sharing these personal details could mean a trip to the gulag or death for oneself or one’s family (Figes 2007).

M. As if you didn’t know these parts of their stories, even though you have been touched by them.

S. Yes, somehow as if I didn’t know this because I learned about them during a confidential conversation. You will share parts of their stories in your write-up, but in a way, I kind of ‘overheard’ their stories. Unless the participants invite me to talk about these conversations, the stories are not mine to discuss.

M. You have had a different kind of intimate relationship with these people for that moment.

S. Yes, like yesterday when [name of a participant from Simferopol] said she would like Crimea to be connected to Russia. This is her position and she has the right to say this. She said this because her life experience is different from mine. All her relatives live in Russia and she is disconnected. She has to pay lots of money to fly there, to go see them. Even her children live there.

[In Soviet times travel through the USSR was fairly inexpensive and accessible for people who had visas.]

M. So, in one type of situation, a few of the participants knew you prior to the study; they knew you as a colleague or someone’s friend or relative. But now that relationship has another level, one that may or may not be spoken about. The new twist to some of the relationships is that now you know the individuals in slightly different ways, with a different depth. You have a different understanding of them, and slightly different, perhaps deeper feelings. At the same time this is a one-way exchange; they do not have the same intimate knowledge of you. Still, you must manage your relationships with them as if you had never heard their stories – as you knew them before. You know, I have wondered if there were any surprises for you during the individual storytelling.

S. Yes, the ways people were raised, what they think, how they think. Many surprises. And many cultural openings. I learned something new about cultures in general and a couple of cultures in specific and now I think about how wonderful and diverse the world is and we all are so different. We have different backgrounds, we are raised in different cultures but we are one small world. And when I look at women, especially from eastern cultures, you know they differ from us. I look at some women and think about how much they have lost in their lives. I think about different cultural norms for dress and behaviour and I think, “If this is alright with her then who am I to judge?” I have a different view of things. Even if I don’t accept the same norms, my role is not to judge. I see differences in the way people raise their children. They do this with love and they do whatever they can. Some dig up the earth to help
their children, but they do it in a different way. They have a different life and it doesn’t mean that their life is worse.

M. Yes. Not worse nor less…

S. This work has brought me into contact with different people. In general, I think that I am tolerant with people but working on this project, hearing these stories has been another kind of lesson for me – about accepting people, learning from people, and supporting people. I am not speaking about people who behave in extreme or destructive ways. I mean diversity.

M. So, your values underline the way you work. You don’t have to agree with the way people express their beliefs, or even the beliefs themselves as long as in working with them you are true to your own values.

S. Yes, and I think, “What right do I have to judge, to say that you are wrong?”

M. We have commented on the diversity of our participants’ points of view. You accommodated them without a blink. And I remember that you switched languages often. We had planned to do the interviews in Ukrainian, but I remember in Lviv there were two cases at least when women who speak Ukrainian wanted to share their stories in Russian. As a strong proponent for the use of the Ukrainian language in Ukraine, what was that like for you?

S. So, Russian is my native tongue – from childhood. At the same time I am used to translating from Ukrainian into English and back. For me this is fairly easy. It was more challenging, but manageable for me to do the work in Russian.

M. But were you surprised that women who you normally converse with in Ukrainian wanted to speak Russian?

S. No, I was not. In the West for sure, Ukrainian is our language of use everyday – in conversation, in business, at home. But when you asked women to speak about their memories, those memories come in Russian. Russian was the language we were supposed to use when we were growing in Soviet times. We were taught in Russian in our schools. The main language of the women’s formative years was Russian. This is my past as well. My childhood was Russian. And I think I told you that when I speak Ukrainian I am one person, and when I speak Russian I am another. And English another.

M. Thinking about this project, what has been the most challenging part for you?

S. [Following a long pause.] Responsibility. This is the hardest part, because I am responsible not only for translation, but I am responsible to you as well. Almost everything depends on the stories. You read the background theory yourself, in English; for that you don’t need me. I think that the main part is
people’s stories and this is the responsibility, the most important part for me. I wouldn’t say it is difficult, but I would say, it is important, how to say, not to betray you, not to spoil this work.

M. I know that you are always very careful to say what I say… to convey that. Funny, since the first time we worked together, I never really thought or was concerned about that. I listen to you and you look at me to be sure that we are together on something. Sometimes you struggle with a phrase or a thought and for me that is confirmation that you are doing what I need you to do. I know that you are meticulous about sharing the women’s stories clearly. I guess it makes sense that you are also concerned that you convey what I want to convey as well.

S. This is a huge responsibility and this means a lot to you.

M. It does. Without your skill communication, the work, particularly the depth with which we work, would not be possible.

S. And I want to be useful and not to cause you any harm.

M. Wow! I never thought of this as a personal thing…

S. It is not just a personal thing, but you are doing a scientific thing – research. It is not a fairy tale. We are conveying people’s stories. It means that both of us are responsible for them. They give their permission, but at the same time, if I say a wrong word, you will put it down and then it will just spoil the whole thing.

M. So, when we are going around and asking people if we have got it right, if we have written it correctly, you have said that it makes you a little nervous, because it is like, checking on your translation as well as my understanding and representation of their stories.

[See for example Chase (2005), Fine and Speer (1992), Minow (2008), and Sprague (2005).]

S. Yes

M. How does it feel for you when you find out that yes, you absolutely understood and translated or interpreted precisely as they had intended their stories.

S. Great. It is more than a relief. The work will be written and you will convey our situation realistically.

M. I am amazed at the bravery of the participants. They all said that they spoke as they never had before. They said it felt good to do this, and to think and speak about their hopes. So, S., what are your hopes?
S. I hope to see this study in a book, and maybe even a play. And I wish you success, to be able to continue to do this work. I see that this is not just paper for you, it is a part of your life.

M. It is a part of my life, as is this conversation and I cannot thank you enough for being such a huge part of it. Is there anything else you want to mention about this experience?

S. Thank you very much for involving me in this. It is not a project, it is a process and sometimes the process is more important than the result. I am certain that this process is very important to all those involved and it adds to our relationships with others because we understand ourselves better. Once more, reflecting on the work of an interpreter, I realize that not only words are important in interpreting information. So, feelings are very important: when we feel people, even when we don’t agree with them, when we feel people, work will be ok, and information will be conveyed – realistic information. But when there is no connection... So, it is very important for international projects to be very particular when hiring interpreters, to hire someone who not only knows the language but also understands and cares about the issue. People spend a lot of money and time on important communication, so we must pick the right people, not to spoil things.

Considerations

Our audiotaped conversation ended here, but our communication continues. We think about future research work together and hope that our reflections may be of assistance not only to us, but also to others in their research work. Following are some of our thoughts.

First, when we reflect on the experience Sonya had, we know that the interpreter must be considered a co-participant in every way in cross-language, cross-cultural research. In her work she is reflective not only of the practitioner, but also of the other participants. This means that she must have a relationship of trust with the practitioner and be seen as equally trustworthy to the community with whom she works. The interpreter becomes the face of the inquirer and the conduit to the community. To enhance these important connections, having the cultural base, the interpreter must be included early in planning where and how the study takes place. She must have a thorough understanding of the principles of the work being done in order to mirror the primary researcher. She is also uniquely positioned to assist the
practitioner with assessing the impact of the work on the participants and the climate within which the work is taking place.

Second, as a co-participant in the unique position of mirroring inquirer and participant, the interpreter’s work should be made “visible” in the research. That is, her insights about the work should be included in the written representation of the work. She has a window into the worlds of all involved and her insights have the potential to add another layer of understanding to what has taken place.

Third, given her integral, unique role, the interpreter stands to be doubly impacted by the work – even more so when the cultural context is her own. Narratives often bump up against one another and intensify still others. Therefore, it is vital that steps are taken to debrief with her and to pace the work such that she has time to recover not only physically and intellectually, but also emotionally. Without this kind of communication and involvement, she is left to carry the stories that she has heard and experienced (Herman 1992/1997). Acknowledging the potential impact, we recommend more in-depth research with interpreters working cross-culturally, particularly in post-colonial, post-traumatic situations.

Finally, the engagement or selection of an interpreter should be done with great care and consideration. Beyond the question of facility in language, does her empathy allow her to put aside her own story during the research process? Does she understand the methodology and, to some extent, the theoretical background of the research? If possible, for consistency in participatory action research in particular, the same interpreter should be used for the entire study. It is a great responsibility for the interpreter, and requires careful planning so that her involvement is a positive experience for not only for the participants but also for her own sake. This kind of in-depth commitment is often not possible, but when it is, the experience of the study stands to be greatly enriched by all involved, including future readers.
Additionally, and no less important, the practice of research is then consistent with PAR values of participant inclusion in the co-construction of knowledge, particularly with communities which have been oppressed (McIntyre 2008).

References


Armor All: The Self-Conception of Private Security Contractors

Volker Franke

Abstract

Whereas the values, attitudes and motivations of soldiers serving in their countries’ armed forces have been widely studied, to date we know very little about the motivations and self-conception of individuals working for the private security industry. Using data obtained through an online survey, this article explores the values, attitudes and identity of more than 200 private security contractors with law enforcement backgrounds and operational experience with a security firm in Iraq. Contrary to media dominating images of ruthless, money-grabbing mercenaries, respondents in this sample adhered to attitudes and values very similar to those of professional soldiers serving in Western militaries.

Introduction

Mentioning private security contractors to anyone not affiliated with the industry almost immediately generates images of machine guns, armored vehicles, bullet-proof vests and macho behavior reminiscent of stereotypical mercenaries. Following the Abu-Ghraib prison scandal in 2004 and the Nisour Square shootings in 2007, when 17 Iraqi civilians were killed by Blackwater security guards in a firefight in the heart of Baghdad City, the media and a number of best-selling books have portrayed the industry and those working for it as thrill-seekers, primarily interested in quickly making a lot on money and generally indifferent to human needs (Singer 2008; Pelton 2006; Scahill 2007).

However, much of the evidence presented in these stories is anecdotal and lacks systematic and scientific empirical analysis, raising questions such as: What do we really
know about the motives of the men and women working in the peace and stability industry? Are the incidents that grab media attention indicative of the shortfalls of a rapidly growing industry? Are they evidence confirming the media-dominating picture of security contractors as “gun-slinging cowboys?” Or are they unavoidable side-effects of working in a combat zone? Who are these individuals, volunteering to risk their lives for, according to the common assumption, a paycheck? What really drives them? What are their ideals and motivations?

In this article, I intend to provide some preliminary answers to these questions by examining the occupational self-conceptions and motivations of individuals who provide armed services in post-conflict environments under contract by private security firms. Specifically, the objective of this research is to explore, based on the tenets of social identity theory (SIT), the extent to which there is an emerging professional identity among employees of private security firms and, if so, what that identity is.

Identity becomes salient as the motivations, attitudes, values and norms shared among the members of a social reference group promote or prohibit specific behavior. Indeed, political and legal control mechanisms may function most effectively when the standards and values they are based on have been internalized by those whose behavior they are designed to shape. Especially the still largely un- or at a minimum under-regulated, private security industry requires reliance on effective self-regulation for monitoring the behavior of its members in the field (Franke 2011; Franke and von Boemcken 2010; Elsea 2010; Congressional Research Service 2008).

Doug Brooks, president of the International Stability Operations Association, the private security industry’s trade organization, conjectures: “It is critical the international community be proactive in ensuring that the companies doing this work in conflict and post-conflict environments and among highly vulnerable populations are
the most professional and ethical available” (Brooks 2007). Effective (informal) self-regulation will depend on the degree to which ethical standards and professional values have been internalized among individuals in the field. In turn, the effectiveness of formal regulation is enhanced through norms with a clearly identifiable professional purpose. In order to assess the social identities of security contractors, I administered an online survey to more than 200 American security contractors, all of whom were law enforcement officers who had joined a U.S.-based security firm and completed at least one tour of duty on contract with the Department of State in a conflict region. Since contractors assume roles traditionally reserved for military professionals, the survey employed a number of value-scales previously used in cognitive research examining the values and attitudes of officers and soldiers. The survey was designed to assess the effect of respondents’ most important social identities on their levels of self-interested individualism (i.e., Machiavellianism), social dominance orientation, job engagement and support for regulatory provisions about their ethical conduct.

To set the stage for the analysis, I will begin by introducing the main tenets of social identity theory (SIT) as they relate to the forming of a professional identity. I will then conceptualize the main elements of the security contractor identity, discuss existing regulations for the private security industry and develop a conceptual model that distinguishes between formal and informal control. Analyzing the data obtained through the Security Contractor Survey, I then explore respondents’ social identities and examine the extent to which these identities shape their values, attitudes and professional self-conceptions. I conclude with some preliminary observations for the future of outsourcing security functions to the private sector and the utility of using contractors in peace and stability operations.
The Concept of Identity

Most generally, identity represents “the process by which the person seeks to integrate his (sic) various statuses and roles, as well as his diverse experiences, into a coherent image of self” (Epstein 1978). Individuals draw on multiple, sometimes even competing subidentities (e.g., religious, political, social, ethnic, or occupational) to derive their self-conceptions. These subidentities become consequential for behavior in situations when their salience is invoked (Stryker 1968). A person’s various subidentities form specific links between the self and his or her membership in social groups. Hofman (1988) specified salience as the probability by which a subidentity is remembered and activated in a given context. Prolonged salience upgrades the subidentity in the “prominence hierarchy” thereby enhancing its “centrality” and the degree to which it connects with other subidentities (Hofman 1988). The more central a subidentity is to an individual’s self-conception and the more interconnected it is with other subidentities, the more committed the individual will be to preserving and enhancing that identity and to display attitudes, values, and social behaviors consistent with it.

Social Identity

In the present context, the concept of “social identity” refers to “that part of individuals’ self-concept which derives from knowledge of their membership in a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership” (Tajfel 1978). Theories of social identity are typically based on three premises:

(1) people are motivated to create and maintain a positive self-concept;

(2) the self-concept derives largely from group identifications; and

(3) people establish positive social identities through normative comparisons between favorable in-groups and unfavorable out-groups (Franke 1999).
Based on these premises, Brewer developed a theory of optimal distinctiveness and argued that “social identity derives from a fundamental tension between human need for validation and similarity to others (on the one hand) and a countervailing need for uniqueness and individuation (on the other).” Brewer viewed social identity as a compromise between assimilation with and differentiation from others, “where the need for deindividuation is satisfied within in-groups, while the need for distinctiveness is met through inter-group comparisons” (Brewer 1991).

Confirming Brewer’s idea of optimal distinctiveness, Sidanius found that individuals created social categories and positive social identities primarily by comparing in-groups with out-groups along those dimensions most likely to generate a favorable outcome for the in-group(s) (Sidanius and Haley 2005; Sidanius, Devereaus, and Pratto 1992). At the individual level, Sidanius labeled this predisposition “social dominance orientation” (SDO), i.e., “the degree to which a person desires to establish and maintain the superiority of his or her own group over other groups” (Sidanius and Liu 1992). This predisposition, in combination with various cultural factors, leads to the establishment of a hierarchical system that consists of at least two “castes:” a hegemonic group at the top of the social system and a negative reference group at the bottom.1 For Sidanius, caste hierarchy is preserved through attitudes, values, beliefs, and ideologies (“legitimizing myths”) that justify the groups’ position in the social system.

Social identity research has demonstrated that individuals tend to invoke their group identifications in many decision contexts, since the norms, values, stereotypes and behavior patterns associated with a particular identity provide a sense of certainty and may inform their choice among decision alternatives (Abrahams and Hogg 1999; Franke 2003; Hogg 1996; Hogg and Abrams 1988; Sherif, Harvey, White, Hood and Sherif 1988).
Professional Identity

A professional, Moritz Janowitz explained, “as a result of prolonged training, acquires a skill which enables him to render a specialized service” (Janowitz 1960). But Janowitz conjectured, “a profession is more than a group with special skill, acquired through intensive training. A professional group develops a sense of group identity and a system of internal administration. Self-administration – often supported by state intervention – implies the growth of a body of ethics and standards of performance” (Ibid 6). As part of an individual’s overall identity structure, professional identity reflects the expression of his or her self-perception as a social carrier of the values, norms, skills, and behaviors that define his or her professional in-group. The stronger an individual’s sense of professional identity – i.e., the more salient the professional subidentity is within the individual’s hierarchy of identities – the more probable it is that this identity will serve as a central cognitive resource to incite and sustain motivation and shape behavior amidst the complex and fluid demands of today’s peacebuilding environment. To society, Kennedy argued, professionals provide “reliable fixed standards (of health, of justice, of truth, etc.) in situations where the facts are murky…. They represent the best a particular community is able to muster in response to new challenges” (Kennedy 2000).

Specifically, Kennedy described professional identity as comprising three key elements:

1. *Specialized knowledge* accumulated over time and built up by experience, analysis, and insight from predecessors in the field, that provide the professional with “an understanding not only of how things are, but also why they are that way” (Ibid 2).

2. *Motivation/commitment to service*, including service to one’s professional community, i.e., a public promise to fulfill one’s professional responsibilities and
perform one’s tasks according to principles and accepted practices defined by the discipline.

3. *Decision autonomy/Control*, granting professionals liberty to choose concrete goals and specific courses of action with little to no interference or within fairly expansive and flexible boundaries. This argument implies that the more unpredictable or unknowable a situation is, the less behavior can be regulated formally through standard operation procedures or predetermined rules of engagement. Consequently, the more individuals in complex and volatile contexts will rely on invoking the values and principles associated with their salient (professional) identities (Franke 2003).

The expectation is that, in conditions of uncertainty, professionals apply prudence and sound judgment based on their professional education, training, and experience. The hope underlying effective self-regulation/informal control is that vetted professionals will be able to respond to emerging challenges reliably, effectively, and efficiently while being committed first and foremost to the well-being of those they serve – especially in complex and uncertain contexts where formal regulation may not exist, may not be appropriate, or may be difficult to implement and enforce.

**Contractor Identity**

Five decades ago, Samuel Huntington argued that military officers are professionals in the art of war and the management of violence (Huntington 1963). Their area of expertise is in the planning, organizing, and employment of military force. Huntington distinguished between military professionals primarily charged with combat and command and those responsible for technical and logistical support (Huntington 1957). For Huntington, the latter group did not represent members of the military profession since their expertise contained both the management of violence and technical or other professional knowledge not unique to the military (Ibid 12).
Traditionally, civilian contractors have been employed by the U.S. military to supplement or support, but not deliver, combat functions. In the current Iraq and Afghanistan operations, however, contract employees increasingly also serve in combat roles. As of September 2009, there were 12,684 private security contractors in Iraq, of which 11,162 were armed (88%). According to DOD, the number of armed security contractors had increased by 140% from 5,481 in September 2007 to 13,232 in June 2009. In Afghanistan, the increase is even starker. Between December 2008 and September 2009, the number of armed security contractors increased by 236% from 3,184 to 10,712 (Schwartz 2010; Government Accountability Office 2005; Congressional Research Service 2008). How did this happen?

**Regulating an Expanding Industry**

Eager to expand business and capitalize on the rising demand for the provision of security services following the Iraq War, a number of security firms began to actively recruit former soldiers and police officers to deploy in Iraq and offered them salaries that dwarfed basic military pay (Thompson 1996; Singer 2008). Some observers have argued that the prospective of extraordinary monetary gain was a central motivator for individuals to sign on with these firms (Singer 2008; Pelton 2006). Although pay-scales have decreased since those early days, sufficiently skilled security contractors from Western countries are still assumed to be paid between U.S. $3,000 and $6,000 a month, with additional allowances of up to U.S. $2,000 when working in particularly dangerous areas (Rarabici 2006).

In addition to high pay, media attention has focused largely on alleged human rights violations committed by contractors. For instance, employees of two security firms were implicated in the Abu Ghraib torture scandal and a number of reports pointed to sexual harassment, and even rape, committed by male contractors either against female colleagues or Iraqi locals (Isenberg 2008).
The most widely reported incident occurred in September 2007, when security guards from the company Blackwater USA, while escorting a U.S. diplomatic convoy for the State Department, engaged in a firefight in crowded Nisour Square in the heart of Baghdad City that left 17 Iraqi civilians dead. Although Blackwater claimed that the shooting had started in response to an ambush against the convoy, eyewitnesses and US military officials at the scene testified that the firing had commenced without hostile provocation (Congressional Research Service 2008). In the subsequent investigation, the FBI concluded that at least 14 out of the 17 shootings were unjustified and that Blackwater guards had “recklessly violated American rules for the use of lethal force” (Thompson and Risen 2008).

A subsequent congressional investigation revealed that “Blackwater has been involved in at least 195 ‘escalation of force’ incidents in Iraq since 2005 that involved the firing of shots by Blackwater forces,” for “an average of 1.4 shootings per week” (United States House 2007). Although there are now fewer reports of contractor misconduct, in January 2011, the Afghan government accused several prominent private security companies of committing “major offenses,” a move that could expedite their departure from the country (Partlow and Chandrasekaran 2011).

**Formal and Informal Regulation**

Formal regulation refers to the top-down application of legal prescriptions, drawing an authoritative distinction between the acceptable and the forbidden. Although it is widely believed that security contractors in Iraq were “unregulated” and were operating in a “legal vacuum,” (Norton-Taylor 2006) their activities have been subject to quite extensive formal regulation from the beginning of the U.S. occupation in 2003 (Coalition Provisional Authority 2003, 2004). In the aftermath of the Nisour Square shootings, however, formal mechanisms to regulate the industry and the behavior of individual contractors tightened considerably. For example, in January 2009, the Iraqi government lifted the immunity of
contractors to local law, thus making it possible for Iraqi authorities to criminally prosecute security contractors for unlawful behavior. Moreover, already in 2007 Congress passed the MEJA (Military Extraterritorial Jurisdiction Act) Expansion and Enforcement Act (H.R. 2740), subjecting all contractors working for the U.S. government in war zones to the jurisdiction of US criminal law. In a first application of this Act in December 2008, five Blackwater guards were indicted for their involvement in the Nisour Square shootings.

Besides legal accountability, political oversight also seems to have improved, as both the DOD and DOS agreed to extend their oversight responsibilities (Congressional Budget Office nd). The DOD has since established an Armed Contractor Oversight Division and “significantly [increased] the number of Defense Contracting Management Agency personnel” (Congressional Research Service 2008). The State Department has taken steps to improve on-site monitoring of contractor activities through, for instance, video surveillance of privately protected convoys (Ibid 45).

In contrast to the top-down logic of formal regulation, informal regulation refers to the norms, rules and values that are internalized by individuals as a central element of their identity. As a consequence, behavior is guided through continual self-surveillance and self-regulation instead of the threat of external sanctions (Foucault 1980; Fraser 1981). Informal regulation is a fundamentally social process, in that identity is derived through the identification with others. When informal regulation is effective, individuals will voluntarily conform to an inter-subjectively shared system of rules and values, which, in turn, establishes their social identity and shapes and constrains their behavior. In theory, informal control may well exist in the absence of formal laws and disciplinary practices, hence providing for a modicum of order and predictability, especially in uncertain environment.

More commonly, however, informal regulation extends and intensifies formal regulatory practices. As a result, control is effectively maximized if both formal and informal
regulations reinforce each other. Recognizing the utility of this type of informal regulation, the security industry has begun to provide strong incentives for companies to monitor their employees’ behavior and adopt self-regulating mechanisms. For instance, the International Stability Operations Association (ISOA), as an umbrella organization representing the interests of the “peace and stability operations industry,” seeks to “promote high operational and ethical standards of firms.” For this purpose, ISOA developed a voluntary International Code of Conduct (ICoC) calling on members to respect human rights and operate with integrity, honesty and fairness. Moreover, member firms agree to recognize and support legal accountability, work only for legitimate and recognized governments, international and non-governmental organizations and lawful private companies, and ensure adequate training and vetting of their personnel (ISOA 2009). As of February 2011, the ISOA serves a total of 55 corporate members all of whom have signed its ICoC and have pledged to abide by the ethical standards established therein (IPOA nd). Self-regulation seems an attractive choice for many companies, as ISOA membership has more than doubled since 2006. The ICoC does not put informal self-regulation in the place of national regulation, but rather envisions the ICoC to supplement formal national regulation (Mayer 2011).

Although the impact and effectiveness of industry self-regulation has been subject of recent research (Schneiker 2009), to date there has been no systematic analysis of the professional self-conception of security contractors. Neither has there been an analysis of the extent to which the provisions of the ICoC have been internalized among contractors in the field. The following section presents the results of the first empirical survey of U.S. security contractors with operational experience in post-conflict contexts.

**Design, Subjects, Measures**

**Subjects and Design**
Since contractual prohibitions made it impossible to survey contractors currently deployed in the field, I surveyed the members of the CivPol Alumni Association, a non-profit organization founded in 2007 “dedicated to providing the international law enforcement officer a forum to exchange information and maintain relationships fostered in difficult and challenging environments” (CivPol Alumni Organization nd). At the time of survey administration, the Association sponsored some 1,400 members who had completed at least one tour of duty on contract in a conflict region. The members, who were all American police officers, had received a leave of absence from their regular jobs and were recruited to participate in international civilian police activities and local police development programs in countries around the world.

In March 2009, all members received an e-mail from the Association President with a link to the Security Contractor Survey and a request to complete the survey online. This approach made any identification of respondents impossible, thus ensuring the anonymity of all information provided on the survey. All of the 223 respondents who completed the survey were U.S. citizens with a law enforcement background and the vast majority were male (216 or 96.9%), white (77.5%), and married (77.1%). All had completed at least high school (34.5%) and almost half (49.8%) held undergraduate and 15.7% graduate degrees. Almost two-thirds (136 or 61.5%) had served in the military and 4-in-5 out of those (108) had been directly involved in combat. Of the respondents with a military background, almost all had served as enlisted personnel (95%) and nearly three-fourths (71%) were honorably discharged as corporals or sergeants (E4-E6). At the time of survey administration, respondents had an average of 4.7 years of experience working for the private security industry, with a median of three years. About one-quarter of respondents (23.7%) had less than two years of private security work experience, 44.9% had worked 2-5 years, 23.7% 5-10 years, and 16 respondents (7.7%) had worked for more than ten years in the private security industry.
sector. Almost one-third of respondents (69 or 30.9%) reported that their job required them to “engage in actual fighting/security detail or security protection” and more than three-quarters (171 or 76.7%) reported providing advisory and training services (multiple responses were possible to this question).

The Security Contractor Survey asked respondents to designate their most important in-groups and out-groups, to rank-order their motivations for working as a private security contractor, to indicate their level of commitment to and investment in their job, and to respond to a series of statements measuring their social dominance orientation and their attitudes toward ethical conduct in the field.

Instead of presenting respondents with a forced-choice list of possible in-groups and out-groups, the social identity of respondents was assessed by analyzing group affiliations that are meaningful both cognitively and emotionally to them. While most standard survey approaches rely on prearranged, yet normatively inconsequential in-group categorizations, I examine social identity within the operational experience of private security contractors, thereby extending social identity theory to a new genuine field setting. To assess the social identity of contractors, the Security Contractor Survey presented respondents with this statement: “As individuals in society we all belong to a variety of groups, e.g., social (club, family, friendship), religious, ethnic, academic, occupational, geographic, ideological, etc.”

Respondents were then asked to identify “in order of priority up to five groups that you very strongly identify with, whose beliefs and values you share and that affect how you see yourself as a person.” Respondents were then asked to list up to five groups in order of importance to their self-conception. In addition to their in-groups, respondents were also asked to designate their most important out-groups by listing “any group(s) that they would certainly not want to identify with or that they feel might even appear as a threat to any of the groups you identify with.” Each respondent’s list of groups was recorded verbatim, and
classification codes were assigned to each entry according to general out-group categories. Two judges independently reviewed the entries and assigned a numeric code to each of the groups listed following instructions in the codebook.

In order to assess their value-orientations and attitudes, respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement with a series of specific statements. Responses were scored on a five-point numerical Likert scale (from “Strongly Agree” to “Strongly Disagree”) and mean response values were calculated. Survey items measuring the same concept were combined into separate scales and mean scale values were computed. For this research, I specifically examined respondents’ adherence to the following value-scales (the exact wording of the scale items can be found in Table 2):

- **Machiavellianism (MACH).** Following the writings of Machiavelli, Christie and Geis developed a series of hypothetical personality traits that someone who is self-interested and effective in controlling others (high Mach) should possess a relative lack of affect in interpersonal relationships, little concern with conventional morality, and a focus on getting things done (Christie and Geis nd).

- **Ethical Conduct (ETH).** To explore respondents’ adherence to the industry standard for ethical conduct—and to supplement the results of the MACH scale—respondents were asked about their attitudes toward ethical provisions specified in the ICoC.

- **Social Dominance Orientation (SDO).** To assess the extent to which respondents desired to establish and maintain in-group superiority over other groups, the survey measured attitudes that could lead to discriminating behavior in the field (Sidanius and Liu 1992).

- **Job Engagement (JOB).** Psychological research has shown that individuals who view their job as an integral part of their identity will feel a personal commitment to doing
well and, consequently, tend to perform better (Brown nd; Britt nd). The survey asked respondents to indicate their commitment to working in the private security field.

Data Analysis & Findings

Professional Motivation:

The results of the survey show a picture quite different from that portrayed by the media (see Table 1). Contrary to media-generated expectations of profit motivation, only one-quarter (25.2%) of respondents indicated that they were highly motivated by the prospect of making “more money than in their previous job” and fewer than one-in-five (19.1%) listed “adventure and excitement” as among the most important reasons for signing on with the private security industry. Instead, by far the most often cited reasons for working in the stability operations sector were to “face and meet new challenges” (74.9%) and to “help others” (64.6%). About one-third of respondents also hoped that their work would make a difference (38.0%) and saw their contractor service as a way to serve their country (31.3%).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Motivators</th>
<th>Very important</th>
<th>Important</th>
<th>Less/not important</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To face and meet new challenges</td>
<td>74.9</td>
<td>20.8</td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To help others</td>
<td>64.6</td>
<td>24.1</td>
<td>11.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To feel like my work makes a difference</td>
<td>38.0</td>
<td>37.1</td>
<td>24.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To serve my country</td>
<td>31.3</td>
<td>34.1</td>
<td>34.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To make more money than in my previous job</td>
<td>25.2</td>
<td>44.1</td>
<td>30.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For personal growth</td>
<td>22.0</td>
<td>33.9</td>
<td>44.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To seek adventure and excitement</td>
<td>19.1</td>
<td>35.4</td>
<td>45.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To improve my chances of finding a better job</td>
<td>13.1</td>
<td>36.7</td>
<td>50.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To travel and visit new places</td>
<td>11.3</td>
<td>32.1</td>
<td>56.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Responses to this question were aggregated, so that a respondent’s top three choices were classified as “very important,” choices 4-6 as “important” and the last three choices as “less or not important.” Consequently, the percentages do not add up to 100.

Social Identity: In-groups and Out-groups

Asked about their primary reference group—that is the in-group listed as most important—half the respondents in the CivPol sample listed either a religious (primarily
Christian) group (24.8%) or their family (22.8%). For ten percent of respondents, either the police (10.4%) or the military (9.9%) were the most important reference groups, followed by law enforcement (7.9%) and the United States (6.9%).

To account for contextual variations in the way that multiple identities interact and shape value orientations, respondents were not only compared in terms of their most important in-group, but also in terms of whether they viewed any military, religious, occupational, etc. groups as important to their self-conceptions. Respondents were assigned to one of two groups: those who listed any social, military, religious, occupational, etc. among their five most important in-groups, irrespective of rank order, were considered to have a salient or potent in-group identity. Respondents who did not list any of these groups among their most important in-groups were considered to have a latent in-group identity.

Comparing respondents with potent and latent in-group identities in terms of attitudinal preferences revealed that potency of family and religious identities had only insignificant effects. Exploring the impact of the potency of military and lawpol (combining potent law enforcement and police in-groups) identities on respondents’ levels of Machaivellianism, social dominance orientation, ethical conduct, and job engagement rendered the results displayed in Table 2.5

Overall, respondents were highly committed to their jobs and to ethical conduct on the job. They also tended to score lower than average (mean = 3.00) on the Machaivellianism and social dominance orientation scales (Franke 1999; Franke and Heinecken 1991; Franke and Guttieri 2009).6 Almost all respondents viewed their work as security contractors as a “calling” to serve their country. In this respect, their scores were comparable to the scores of military professionals captured in earlier research (Franke 1999; Franke and Heinecken 1991; Franke and Guttieri 2009).
Although respondents with a potent military identity showed higher job engagement levels than their counterparts with latent military identity, both groups were strongly committed to their jobs. Comparing respondents in terms of the potency of their identity as police or law enforcement professionals rendered only few significant differences between weak and strong identifiers. Significantly more strong than weak identifiers believed that “one should take action only when it is morally right” (59% versus 34%).

Comparing CivPol respondents in terms of their military and lawpol identities shows a higher than expected number of respondents with both potent military and lawpol in-group affiliations (see Table 3). This is an indication that their previous military experiences as well as their current professional experience in law enforcement provide strong cognitive frames for how they view themselves. Given their high levels of professionalism and job engagement, this result is unsurprising and indicates that the professional self-conception of security contractors may indeed be very closely related to that of other, more established security professions.

**Out-Group Comparisons:**

In terms of their out-group identifications, the analysis revealed that respondents overwhelmingly listed social, religious, political or ethnic extremist or radical groups as their primary out-groups. Specific groups listed can be categorized with labels such as:

- terrorist (a potent out-group for 69 (33.5%) of respondents), including such specific entries as Islamic terrorists(19), Al Queda (18), Hamas (6), Taliban (4) and PLO (4);
- supremacist (52), including KKK (37) and Aryan Nation, Nazi or Neo-Nazi (42);
- communist or socialist (19);
- criminals (46) or some form of organized crime (28).

Volume 19, Number 2

275
TABLE 2: Value-Orientations by Social Identity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale Items:</th>
<th>Military Identity</th>
<th>LawPol Identity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Potent (N=66)</td>
<td>Latent (N=128)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Job Engagement:</strong></td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>%Agree/ %Disagree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J1. I am committed to performing well at my job.</td>
<td>4.85</td>
<td>97/0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J2. I feel personal responsibility for my job performance.</td>
<td>4.92</td>
<td>97/0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J3. How well I do in my job matters a great deal to me.</td>
<td>4.92</td>
<td>97/0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J4. I really care about the outcomes that result from my job performance.</td>
<td>4.70</td>
<td>97/0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J5. I invest a large part of myself into my job performance.</td>
<td>4.71</td>
<td>97/0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ethical Conduct</strong></td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>%Agree/ %Disagree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E1. When deployed in the field, it is important to respect the dignity of all human beings and strictly adhere to all relevant international laws and protocols on human rights.</td>
<td>4.59</td>
<td>95/0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E2. Security personnel in the field should always take every practicable measure to minimize loss of life and destruction of property.</td>
<td>4.77</td>
<td>100/0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E3. Integrity, honesty and fairness are key guiding principles for anyone deployed in a contingency operation.</td>
<td>4.83</td>
<td>98/2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E4. Violations of international humanitarian law and human rights law should always be fully investigated and, when necessary, prosecuted.</td>
<td>4.59</td>
<td>94/2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E5. Organizations should always take firm and definitive action if their employees engage in unlawful activities.</td>
<td>4.71</td>
<td>98/0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Machiavellianism</strong></td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>%Agree/ %Disagree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M1. Most people are basically good and kind. (R)</td>
<td>2.37</td>
<td>73/5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M2. Generally speaking, people won't work hard unless they're</td>
<td>3.79</td>
<td>73/5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### TABLE 2: Value-Orientations by Social Identity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale Items</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Potent (N=66)</td>
<td>Latent (N=128)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scale Items:</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>%Agree/ %Disagree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>forced to do so.</td>
<td>2.47</td>
<td>21/65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M3. One should take action only when it is morally right. (R)</td>
<td>3.44</td>
<td>52/27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M4. Anyone who completely trusts anyone else is asking for trouble.</td>
<td>2.58</td>
<td>21/58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M5. It is safest to assume that all people have a vicious streak, and it will come out when they are given a chance.</td>
<td>2.33</td>
<td>15/68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M6. It is hard to get ahead without cutting corners here and there.</td>
<td>2.06</td>
<td>12/64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Dominance Orientation</td>
<td>2.16</td>
<td>2.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S1. No group should dominate in society. (R)</td>
<td>4.20</td>
<td>86/6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S2. Some groups of people are simply inferior to other groups.</td>
<td>2.02</td>
<td>8/76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S3. We would have fewer problems if we treated people more equally. (R)</td>
<td>3.71</td>
<td>70/9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S4. We should do what we can to equalize conditions for different groups. (R)</td>
<td>2.15</td>
<td>5/76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S5. It would be good if groups could be equal. (R)</td>
<td>3.71</td>
<td>70/9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S6. If certain groups stayed in their place, we would have fewer problems.</td>
<td>2.15</td>
<td>5/76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S7. To get ahead in life, it is sometimes necessary to step on other groups.</td>
<td>2.30</td>
<td>12/64</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Scale items were measured at a 5-point numerical Likert scale from “Strongly Agree” to “Strongly Disagree.” Responses of “Strongly Agree” and “Agree” were combined as “% Agree;” responses of “Disagree” and “Strongly Disagree” were combined as “% Disagree.” Responses to individual items were scored so that a high mean indicates a high level of agreement with the statement.
Comparing potent in-group and out-group identities, the analysis shows only a few significant results. Table 3 indicates significant correlations between military or lawpol in-group and terrorist out-group identities and between lawpol in-group and criminal and radical out-group identities. For contractors to have strong anti-terrorist group affiliations is unsurprising given the military backgrounds of a large portion of them and their professional service for an industry that contributes to the Global War on Terror efforts of the U.S. government. Similarly, given their backgrounds as law enforcement professionals, it is also unsurprising that respondents who strongly identified with this background viewed criminals, organized crime and radicals as important out-groups.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 3: CivPol Alumni In-group-Out-group Social Identity Matrix (observed frequencies; expected frequencies in parentheses)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Military Identity</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In-Groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Military</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LawPol</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Out-Groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terrorists</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criminals/Organized Crime</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radicals</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chi-Square level of significance: * p < 0.05; ** p < 0.01; *** p < 0.001.

Discussion and Conclusion

With this research, I intended to explore the self-conceptions of individuals who sign on with private security firms and find out whether there is an emerging professional identity among private security contractors. Much of the media reporting and the academic research that has accompanied the rapid rise of the industry have portrayed contractors as money-grabbing, gun-toting, thrill-seeking Rambo-type mercenaries with little to no moral inhibitions or concern for ethical conduct.
The results of the survey show a picture very different from that portrayed by the media. Although it is impossible to draw conclusions about the industry as a whole from this small and relatively homogeneous sample, the data at hand point to some interesting preliminary conclusions. Contrary to media-generated expectations, only one-quarter of respondents were highly motivated to seek employment in the private security field by prospects of monetary gain. Indeed, a majority of respondents were “proud” of what they did, wanted to do “something worthwhile,” and help others.

Virtually all respondents appeared highly committed to their professional work and cared about their job outcomes. Respondents also overwhelmingly supported the industry’s ethical standards and showed lower than average levels of individualistic self-interest and social dominance orientation. In fact, their most important in-groups were professional in-groups with military and law enforcement being the most potent social identities. In turn, respondents’ most significant out-groups reflect social identities at the fringe of or outside society (radicals, terrorists, criminals, racial extremists). Therefore, respondents achieved optimal distinctiveness by juxtaposing established and socially accepted security relevant (military/law enforcement) professional in-group identities with socially unacceptable out-groups. Confirming these results, respondents also showed strong adherence to socially and professionally acceptable ethical standards and a keen sense of serving the community. These results suggest not only that respondents share value-orientations similar to other professionals working in comparable roles in the public sector (i.e., police or armed forces), but also that informal control seems to structure the thinking and acting of security contractors in this sample.

In terms of the three key elements defining professional identity – specialized knowledge, commitment to service and decision autonomy – respondents certainly meet the first two criteria. The ICoC can be seen as an attempt to provide ethical standards to guide the
behavior of security professionals in the field under conditions of uncertainty. While the data at hand does not allow conclusive inferences about actual behavior, the responses of the CivPol alumni indicate that informal control seems to effectively shape the thinking and perception among this sample of security contractors.

Generally, their law enforcement backgrounds seem to prepare this sample of contractors well for constabulary roles in peace and stability operations, as indicated by their strong adherence to ethical standards and their high levels of job engagement. In addition, earlier research found that contractors in this sample did not view themselves as, nor did they want to be compared to, classical mercenaries (Franke and von Boemcken nd). These results suggest a desire for the development of a corporate identity reflecting specialized skills in the provision of tactical security services in peace and stability operations, supplementing but not replacing services provided by the armed forces.

At present, however, when enforcement of industry regulations is still sporadic and inconsistent, the lack of regulatory enforcement mechanisms combined with the highly fragmented nature of the industry, its multitude of firms, heterogeneous labor pool, and short-cycle deployment rotations have made it difficult to forge such a common corporate identity, indicating the need for coherent and consistent professional socialization, training, and educational experiences.

Recognizing the private security industry as a quasi-profession for the provision of tactical security services in post-conflict stabilization contexts may boost the development of a corporate identity along with occupational controls that, in the long run, may also strengthen formal regulation. The private security industry is here to stay; recognizing it as a quasi-profession will likely enhance democratic control and accountability of a sector still in need of more effective regulation. The results of this first survey of private security
professionals indicate that the men and women who serve the industry are ready to take on this kind of professional responsibility and scrutiny.

References


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Books.


Notes

1 For Sidanius, “caste” refers to an endogamous social group that exists in a relatively stable hierarchical relationship with other endogamous social groups, e.g. ethnic groups, social classes, or religious sects.

2 For instance, specific law enforcement affiliations (e.g., “FBI”, “California Highway Patrol”, “Texas Crime Prevention Association”) were classified as “law enforcement” and subsumed under the overall category of “professional/occupational” in-group. Similarly, survey entries of “Army”, “Marine Corps” or “American Legion” were coded separately and also subsumed under the main category “military in-group.” Based on respondents in-group entries, similar super-categories were devised for “social” (including “family”), “religious/church,” ethnic/racial,” “geographic” (including “US/ American/ country”), “ideological/political,” and “social issue group” (including “National Rifle Association”).

3 Initial agreement among the judges was high (intrarater reliability of .9197). The intrarater reliability was computed as (n - d)/n, where n = number of total ratings and d = number of disagreements. Note that consistent disagreements, i.e., coders consistently disagreed on how to classify a particular response, were included only once in the number of disagreements. For instance, one judge consistently coded “Fraternal Order of Police” with the code for “Police,” while the other judge consistently coded this more generally as “Professional Organization.” Discussing coding differences among the judges led to agreement to the same numeric code for each entry, thereby improving intrarater reliability to 1.00.

4 The following scale results were obtained for the sample: (1) six-item Machiavellianism scale (MACH: M = 2.36; SD = 0.47; range = 1.00-3.83; Cronbach’s alpha = 0.45); (2) five-item job engagement scale (JOB: M = 4.80; SD = 0.27; range = 4.00-5.00; Cronbach’s alpha = 0.75); (3) nine-item social dominance orientation scale (SDO: M = 2.15; SD = 0.51; range = 1.00-3.78; Cronbach’s alpha = 0.75); and (4) five-item ethical conduct scale (ETH: M = 4.65; SD = 0.45; range = 2.80-5.00; Cronbach’s alpha = 0.84).

5 Means difference tests of scale and statement mean scores were conducted as t-tests using SAS software; differences in terms of levels of agreement with individual statements were conducted as χ²-tests using SAS software.