

Dialogue & Conflict

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INTRODUCTION

The human condition has been marked by intra-species conflict since the dawn of time. To ensure evolutionary survival, our ancestors competed not only with other species for food and shelter, such as other primate species. They also formed coalitions with other human beings to compete against other human coalitions for limited resources. As Charles Darwin (1859) famously noted: Competition is the driving force marking the evolution of species. In psychology, the inherent competitive attitude for resources marking the human condition has been elaborated in Realistic Conflict Theory (Campbell, 1965). This argues that our evolutionary baggage (i.e. the human genome) fosters intergroup hostilities as humans compete over what they perceive to be limited resources, even when these resources are in actual fact plentiful. Our natural competitive tendencies lead us to perceive threats when we encounter different others, and to take measures to protect ourselves from these perceived threats even if these might not be strictly necessary. President Trump's strategy of calling a national emergency to fund the building of a wall with Mexico on the basis that 'walls work' provides an apt example. Walls work indeed, in maintaining a boundary between those who can and those who cannot make claims to resources (Sammut, Bauer, & Jovchelovitch, 2018).

CONFLICT SITUATIONS

In intergroup conflict situations, dialogue is often prescribed as a panacea (Nesbitt-Larking, 2008). The idea behind dialogue's presumed success is that the communicative effort involved ought to enable participants to understand each other's positions better and, as a result, participants should become capable of proposing mutually beneficial solutions. There are two reasons why this commonly fails. Firstly, not all dialogue aspires to resolve discord. As Habermas (1984) argues in his theory of communicative action, dialogue could be strategic rather than communicative; when it aims to persuade rather than understand and inform. In such cases, we argue that dialogue is not sincere. Secondly, human beings demonstrate cognitive difficulties in understanding diverse or oppositional perspectives. Ross and Nisbett (1991) have demonstrated how individuals are prone to a cognitive bias which they termed naïve realism. This leads us to believe that our own views are rational and objective; and to the extent that others' views disagree with our own, we hold others' views as subjective and biased. We believe that if others were as rational and as objective as we are, they would agree with us and understand that their views are biased. In other words, we fail to understand that our own views are perspectival and that we can only ever be subjective – every bit as subjective as anybody else. Sammut, Bezzina, and Sartawi (2015) have similarly shown that when individuals encounter a view from the outside that disagrees with their own, they tend to make an attribution of ignorance in its regard and discount it accordingly – you do not dialogue with the ignorant, you educate! Kunda (1990) claims that cognition in the human species is essentially motivated, that is, in a search for or an exchange of information, human subjects are motivated to identify reasons that support their already established beliefs and that deprecate alternatives. In this way, cognition serves to facilitate action that is essentially self-serving – contributing thus to evolutionary survival.

HUMAN COGNITION

The psychological sciences have thus made clear that one impediment to successful dialogue is human cognition itself. Whilst we have come to understand a great deal about how this works already, other intricate cognitive processes that may serve to facilitate communicative action remain a challenge. For instance, we understand how certain environmental conditions (e.g. time pressures) heighten our need for cognitive closure and lead us to settle for premature conclusions that we subsequently strive to defend rather than revisit (Kruglanski, 2004). However, we know very little about what conditions precipitate a more open engagement. We understand how humans hold certain beliefs as axiomatic (Leung & Bond, 2010). However, we know very little about how social axioms may shape perspectives that conflict.

Clearly, the domain of dialogue and conflict represents an exciting frontier for psychological research. Yet, in an age of nuclear weaponry, it also represents a potentially more immanent threat to human survival than arguably any other. To live with one another peacefully, human beings need to do battle with and curtail their own competitive inclinations as for the human species, collaboration itself provides the competitive edge.

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