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Reflexivity and the State of Success and Failure in Our Field

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Abstract

In this piece, I contrast success and failure in creative conflict engagement as related continua on a scale of relevance. Not always is success a good thing (for example, if goals are pedestrian or wildly unrealistic) nor is failure a bad thing (if we or the parties gain useful insights from it). Indeed, I suggest that the very effort to wrestle with these concepts is in itself a reflexive value and practice that will help our field become more robust and interesting. Moreover, I suggest by being reflexive about such questions, we will be developing a new petite theory-in-use (as opposed to a more ambitious and unrealistic grand theory) for our field.

Keywords: reflexive, conflict engagement, success, failure, learning.

1. “Ain't No Success Like Failure” Bob Dylan

What is success? What is failure? Is the first always good and the second always bad? Who says? How do we know? Can we measure them? Should we? What do we gain or lose when we try?

A while ago I was in discussion with a young Palestinian, who as a trainee in a conflict resolution program I was helping to conduct, asked a simple question: “It all sounds very nice, but can you tell me where it has really worked?” Not so simple, actually, and begs another question “what does ‘really work’ mean?” This same fellow is now a leader in conducting conflict resolution workshops and training programs in Palestine. I'm sure he is faced with the same question over and again. Who defines success, when and how? Conflict itself is widely perceived as failure. We in this field know better: Conflict is often opportunity. Conflict is the dynamic force within all creativity – from artistic endeavor to human relations. So, just like we understand conflict is, or can be, opportunity and indeed forging, fostering, finding and nurturing that opportunity-from-conflict is really what we are all about – so, I believe we will gain much traction from accepting that what may be perceived as ‘failure’ is a norm in our work and not inherently a negative to avoid, be embarrassed about or deny.

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Rather, success and failure are two connected sides of the same coin, and learning how to name, frame and engage either is necessary for our work and for the field to flourish.

Of course, not all conflict is good, nor all failure worthy. Part of the reason we 'fail' so much in a negative way that hurts our field and its image (that is, we fail 'negatively') is that our aspirations are often unrealistic and our terminology imprecise. One of the founders of our field, Kenneth Boulding, told me once that "I rued the day when I helped to name the first journal in the field: *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*." I believe one of the major problems with our field is what we call it – *Conflict Resolution*. Indeed, others and I advocate that the field be given a new umbrella label of 'Conflict Engagement' (hence the name of this journal – true confessions – I hope we will drop the appellation of Conflict Resolution from it in the future) with Conflict Resolution, Conflict Management, Settlement, Transformation, Dialogue etc. being different ways by which we engage conflict. Each type of intervention would be contingently designed by analytically determining the type of conflict to be engaged (*e.g.* resource, goal or identity). Therefore, different outcome goals would be determined, and on this basis success and failure may be systematically defined, promoted and assessed (Rothman, 2012, 2014).

2. A Petite Theory for the Field

Surely one of the problems of the field is that it has no unifying field theory around which success and failure can be benchmarked. I would like to propose a small (petite) theory as a holding place and then posit that, in addition to the kind of contingency model I've suggested above, it may be useful in better assessing success and failure.

In a fascinating and somewhat typically iconoclastic piece, Joseph Scimecca, a sociologist and one of the founders of the George Mason Program on Conflict Analysis and Resolution, says that our field needs to focus on only two "fundamental, basic" needs.[1] He is riffing off John Burton while criticizing him, in particular for his determinism in rooting his needs theory "ontologically and perhaps genetically" (Scimecca citing Burton, 1993: 207). His alternative formulation to Burton's canon of eight ('not') universal human needs[2] is, he says, in the truly universal human needs for freedom and reflexivity. 'Self-reflexivity' as Scimecca defines it is the "ability to think back and reflect upon one's actions." He goes on to explain that "human consciousness is what makes us human and therefore [is truly a universal need as it] transcends culture and genetics" (p. 208).

In this piece, I want to riff off this riff and focus on the notion of reflexivity as a central process for our field by which substantive definitions of success and focus (*i.e.* agenda) are intersubjectively determined by those in and seeking a way out of destructive conflict.

1 Full disclosure – he was one of my favorite teachers.

2 He summarizes them as needs for consistency in response, stimulation, security, recognition, distributive justice, rationality, meaningful response, control and role-defence.

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By way of reflexive example, I begin by describing my own attraction and later alternative formulation to Burton's needs approach. First some context, since all reflexivity is contextual. I grew up as an enlightenment child of enlightenment parents. That is, I viewed individuals, and their right (or in Scimmeca's schema their *need*) for freedom, as the unit of organization and focus for healthy society. I viewed prejudice, categorization and especially ethnocentrism as the evils on which much aggression and violence were built. My parents' parents were Russian Jewish immigrants, who like many of their generation, fled the ghettos of Europe and found themselves in new Jewish ghettos of American Jewish urban life in the early part of the last century. My parents broke free of those new ghettos and forged a successful intellectual and assimilated American life. Trappings of ethnic, religious or separate group identity were mostly rejected by them as inherently problematic. Their solution was integration through a welcoming and universalist humanism.

During a 'world tour' after high school, I chanced upon Israel and found my severed Jewish and particularist roots to be inspiring, renewing and [...] terribly confusing. How could I be both a universalist and a particularist? I asked, as I entered the radical Antioch College. I found the answer in the philosophy class of Dewian philosopher George Geiger, through the writings of the founder of American cultural pluralism, Horace Kallen, who was the son of a Rabbi, seeking to reconcile his strong Jewish identity and Zionism with his American and humanist commitments.

At the turn of the last century, nationalism and coerced conformity to an overall nationalistic identity through assimilation was the Western ideal. For example, the American 'melting pot' was viewed as the best route to 'one nation.' However, a counter-movement had emerged in the late 1920s, proclaiming that America's strength was in its embrace of itself as a 'nation of nations.' This alternative movement dignified the actuality of cultural pluralism, in which each group qua group had its own place, and in the metaphor of Kallen was compared to a musical section in an orchestra (*e.g.* violists), and through it and its interrelations with other groups (*e.g.* cellists, etc.), harmony was made (Ratner, 1984).

The next phase in conceptualizing identity in Western thought thus belongs to the critique of liberalism and to a move to the more general collective notion of identity. It is through thinkers such as Marx, Weber (Morrison, 2006) or Gadamer (1999) that we begin to see the way the identity of the individual is projected and filled by social scripts and narratives. If the outside shaping forces such as culture and community have the biggest influence on the individual's identity, then the most relevant perspective of it seems to be its social quality. Identity is perceived as collective, cultural or social at this phase, and working with identity requires ethnographic sensitivity and acknowledgement of incommensurability and difference. Under this perspective of identity as socially constructed and as shaped by culture or ideology, the individualistic level of identity is considered as one limited version of what it means to be human (Rothman and Alberstein, 2013).

This led me in a rather straight line to our field as it was germinating and specifically to Azar *et al.* (1978), Azar (1990) and Burton (1979, 1990) and the needs

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theories they were propagating. I joined Azar in 1982 at his then new Center for International Development and Conflict Management at the University of Maryland. Burton and his close colleague Christopher Mitchell joined the Center a year later. I decided to do my dissertation adapting their Problem Solving Workshop (PSW) approach to address the 'Protracted Social Conflicts' (PSCs) that were in clear evidence within Israel between majority Jewish and minority Arab populations, as well as between Israelis and Palestinians. In my early adaptations (see Rothman, 1988, 1992), I moved parties from Positions to Interests to Needs as they dialogued about the rifts between Blacks and Jews in the United States, about gaps between Arabs and Jews in Israel and about the 'punctuated disequilibrium' between Jews and Palestinians in Jerusalem (that did not seem to be evolving to anything peaceful) (Rothman, 1997).

The focus on these workshops, in fairly consistent Burtonian ways, through third-party analysis and facilitation, were about the participants' development of shared lists of needs that all disputants articulated separately and interactively during dialogue that they held. On the basis of these overlapping needs – for dignity, for safety, for control and identity – they could then seek solutions to current conflicts that were born out of the threat to or frustration of these needs and their fulfillment. The process began to unfold with a common dynamic of sides telling their stories of mutual rejection and hurt, moving in to some vision of a better future in which sides would find new ways to cooperate to further the fulfillment of shared needs (*i.e.* over functional problems in Jerusalem, for example, such as joint security, cultural development, participatory governance, economic development, and education for co-existence).

This evolved into my intervention and education model called ARIA, where I systematized the steps and stages in an effort to evaluate success (Rothman, 1992, 1997). If arrival at a shared needs analysis was the main focus in these workshops, my main tool for assessment of their success was the increasing complexity of participants' problem-solving skills. Here my questions about limitations of the needs approach began, and my pursuit of an alternative and more robust reflexive framework emerged.

I began seeing the needs analysis, which was the fundamental focus of my teachers as being a means to a more important ends – the successful attainment of complex thinking in diagnosing conflicts and suggesting creative ways forward. Indeed, I began to feel that this means was at odds with the ends. If I was teaching participants who were engaged in a protracted social conflict that the root of conflict and cooperation could be reduced to eight basic and 'universal' needs, how could I simultaneously be advocating complexity and cultural adaptability? Thus, I began to question the notion of a set number of universal, ontological needs as yet another bounded and simplifying ideology. Why Burton's and not Fisher and Ury's (who called needs just a deeper level of interests – 1981)? Or Pruitt and Rubin's (1986) six needs based in social-psychological theories? Or Galtung's (2004) four based on a power analysis of haves and have nots? And so forth. Further, as I deconstructed the process by which needs were articulated in my workshops, I found one very clear thread: reflexive narratives. By telling their stories of past pain and future possibility, participants connected with core con-

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cerns. I drew out the 'basic needs' and showed them their common thread. But this too grew stale and, worse, inauthentic. I was 'using' their stories to prove their needs.

Instead, a number of colleagues and I began organizing workshops with a focus on narratives themselves, not needs, and asking participants to pull out core words – what I called 'passion points' – from their stories and see these as individual and collective anchors and linkages between stories and story-tellers (Friedman *et al.*, 2012). Moreover, I began to see how narratives were co-constructed – first antagonistically and later collaboratively, but always reflexively.

Now, finally, I return to the core focus of my reflexive musings on the state of our field in the context of questions about its success and failure as an endeavor. Even before I invite participants to share their stories, I ask them all to envision a successful outcome of our work. What will it look like? Inevitably, it is about some new agreement – some new state of relations. But I can't say the visions are very rich or deep to start with. After all they have been unilaterally forged, which is also for the most part, how each has formulated its conflict images of the other and the situation they find themselves in.

As workshops unfold dialogically, participants begin to frame what matters to them through the narratives they tell and hear. Ideally as their narratives merge and mesh (along with clash and diverge), they begin to articulate a shared agenda for the future. To assure that what each cares about so deeply as told in their stories is concretely pursued through some kind of shared agenda for negotiations or a planning process for change.

Although the vast majority of workshops I have conducted in conflict contexts have been between self-articulated moderates interested in mutual accommodation, when one side begins his or her conflict story rooted in past oppression or violence at the hands of the other, quickly a similar tale of victimization emerges from the other side – usually regardless of professions of inclusiveness and tolerance. More positively, the same dynamic occurs when parties are asked to envision a better future and share stories that provide examples of that desired state. Thus, one side tells a visionary tale, or a memory evocative of it, and the other joins in such a positive pitch. This is reflexivity in action.

3. "But Failure Ain't No Success At All" Dylan

To conclude by returning to Scimmeca's contention that reflexivity is, or could be, both a central process – or to be a little more grand, a petite theory – for our field by which substantive focus on success is derived out of dialogue and narrative. With support of the third side, disputants would arrive at a deep intersubjective understanding and agreement about what is important to them separately and together, and this weaves into an agenda for negotiation or development to follow.

At the end of his song, Dylan does [...] a Dylan and reverses his reveries. Concluding, he says not only 'ain't there no success like failure [...] but also, failure ain't no success at all' [...] That is, we can't just accept that as a field that we often

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don't succeed – certainly given others' expectations of us that we may collude with – rather we have to make success even out of our failure. As I have suggested, this is significantly a definitional problem but also one of attitude and perhaps most of all fortitude. We must keep on keepin' on! Indeed, sometimes 90% of success is just showing up and having the fortitude to keep believing that cooperation is preferable and peace, of some form or another, through one means or another, is possible.

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