

African solutions to African intergroup conflicts: Ubuntu and humiliation

- A study of Ubuntu and its effect on perceived humiliation in a interactive track two dialogue seminar -

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1. Theme and problem formulation

The theme for my master thesis is peace building- i.e. to overcome the contradiction in the root of the conflict formation, as opposed to decrease the destructive behaviour; “peacekeeping” and changing attitudes and assumptions through reaching an agreement; “peacemaking” (Galtung, 1996). I will have a track two levelled approach using an African traditional conflict resolution method- Ubuntu.

The aim is to reach an understanding of Ubuntu’s contribution to peace building using a grass root perspective. To investigate Ubuntu’s role in peace building at a grass root level I will focus on the disputing parties’ perceived humiliation. Feelings of humiliation may lead to a wish to increase or even create differences which did not exist to begin with. Experience with humiliation makes people willing to play on or create ethnicity which exceed to violence and armed conflict (Lindner, 2002). With the assumption that perceived humiliation may nurture intergroup conflict, prevention of humiliation can be essential for conflict resolution or peace building. Lindner (2004) describes three possible consequences of humiliation; a) “...depression and apathy, b) they may nurture an urge to retaliate with inflicting humiliation (in humiliation entrepreneurs such as Hitler; genocide, terrorism), or c) they may lead to constructive social change (Mandela)”. But how do we prevent the negative aspects of humiliation? How do we turn humiliation into dignity or constructive social change? How to create institutions and relations that do not humiliate? With these questions in mind, I want to investigate Ubuntu as a method for the prevention of perceived humiliation.

To investigate how Ubuntu affects perceived humiliation with disputing parties, I am going to base my study upon the ISFiT Dialogue groups, which is the International student festival in Trondheim’s conflict resolution initiative.

In February 2007 students from three African regional conflict areas (Great Lakes, Horn of Africa and Sudan) will come to Norway to participate in an interactive dialogue seminar spanning 20 days. The ISFiT Dialogue Groups started in 1997 when the ISFiT-theme was "Quality of life"- Is it possible to have a good life when living in a conflict? With this question in mind students from South-Africa, Guatemala and the Middle East was invited. ISFiT introduced this type of seminar to create a space for participants from different sides in conflicts to meet on equal grounds for sharing of experiences. The belief is that through dialogue and social activities, understanding of the others' situation and viewpoints between groups can develop. When the participants come home they can use this as a tool to prevent formation of hostile images and hence contribute to improved cooperation between the conflict parties. The Dialogue Groups is a track two intervention that enables interactive conflict resolution in the form of dialogue seminars based on African conflict resolution methods like the Ubuntu philosophy (i.e. Ubuntu is a philosophy that “...seeks to find a

balance between self and other, the destructive and the creative, good and bad. It moves away from the thinking of social relations in dualistic oppositions, that is, an either/or situation, good versus bad, black versus white, self versus other, in seeking to resolve conflict. The purpose of Ubuntu is to work toward a situation that acknowledges a mutually beneficial condition. Its emphasis is on cooperation with one another for the common good as opposed to competition that could lead to grave instability within any community. It emphasizes the whole not the part(s). It describes the feeling of the worth of the community and a shared fellowship of men and women” (Masina, 2000)).

Main problem:

- Does Ubuntu prevent the ISFiT dialogue participants’ perceived humiliation?

Sub problem:

- In which way does Ubuntu prevent perceived humiliation within the participants?
- What is it with Ubuntu that creates change in the participants?

2. Theoretical perspective

2.1 Conflict sources and processes

Humiliation

The first paragraph in ”The Universal Declaration of Human Rights” (UDHR) declares this:

“All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.”

This is a phenomenon that is very relevant, in this day and age, in connection with violation of human rights. The Human Rights’ message, as we can see above, condemns humiliation. The Human Rights’ ideals indicate that every human being, as an essence, has a dignity that should not be violated.

Humiliation denotes the pushing down of an individual or group in a process of degradation that would wound or remove their pride, honour or dignity (Lindner, 2002). As described earlier, Evelin Linder (2002), who has done thorough fieldwork on the term humiliation, points out that it is not ethnicity alone that is the cause of conflict – it is the feelings of humiliation.

Both Somalia and Rwanda are composed of pretty homogenous groups of people sharing language and religion. The most uniform societies of Africa are the ones guilty of genocide. Until 1978 Somalia was a tight knit country dreaming of unity. Following this year there were twenty years of violence, much because of the dictator, Siad Barre, and him playing groups against each other using humiliation rhetoric. In Rwanda Hutu and Tutsi peoples have switched roles as oppressor and oppressed since the rise of the conflict. Last time it was the Hutu who killed the Tutsi and the moderate Hutu. This shows how feeling of humiliation leads to creating differences which did not exist to begin with (Lindner, 2002).

The strategy, in all these cases, is to humiliate to not be humiliated. This spur spirals of humiliation; feelings of humiliation are followed by acts of humiliation, and are answered in kind

by the opposite side. Humiliation as a driving force seems to be very strong and is also "cost efficient". This fact is what makes certain leaders to use humiliation rhetoric.

The fact that the victims in Rwanda were cut to pieces with machetes goes to show how the feeling of humiliation could lead to violence which does not depend on costly armies or weapons. The victims in Rwanda, themselves, paid for bullets so that they might be shot instead of cut to pieces (Lindner, 2002).

The terrorist attacks on September eleven in New York goes to show, once again, how people paid for their own deaths; when ordinary planes were turned into "guided missiles" in the hands of people who felt that they had a mission to humiliate America (Lindner, 2002).

Lindner (2002) thinks that we need to build relations and institutions that do not humiliate people, not only on a national level but also on an international level, to create "a decent global village". Out of these wounds made by humiliation we must rise up and shape something positive and make sure that they do not make fertile ground for extremist and warlike behaviour. The moderates in all camps must band together for a mutual cause. Lindner (2002) finds Nelson Mandela to be an example to follow more closely. By putting twenty seven years in prison behind himself and living on without thoughts of revenge, he turned the victim's humiliation into something positive and created a mutual reconciliation in a country with a long history of humiliation.

Perceived injustice

Another term that is important and fundamental for humiliation is "Perceived injustice". This term is described in social psychology as sources of conflicts: People can handle differences, but they can not handle unjust differences. To be exposed to such differences could probably promote feelings of humiliation.

2.2 Conflict resolution

Dialogue

"In a dialogue, there is no attempt to gain points, or to make your particular view prevail. Rather, whenever any mistake is discovered on the part of anybody, everybody gains. It's a situation called win-win, whereas the other game is win-lose— if I win, you lose. But a dialogue is something more of a common participation, in which we are not playing a game against each other, but with each other. In a dialogue, everybody wins". (Bohm, 1996, p.7).

"Dialogue is really aimed at going into the whole thought process and changing the way the thought process occurs collectively" (Bohm, 1996, p.9).

Western conflict resolution

Interactive problem solving consists of intensive meetings between political involved parties. The people who take part in the problem solving intervention are often political influential members of their in-group. The interventions are designed to give the participants the opportunity to enter a communication process that is usually difficult for parties in a conflict.

Kelman (1997, p.214) points out two important aims regarding interactive problem solving; to produce change in the participants and to "maximize the likelihood that the new insights, ideas, and proposals developed in the course of the interaction are fed back into the political debate and the decision- making process in each community".

Interactive conflict resolution, which is a further development of the Kerman's interactive problem solving, is a method that is described by Fisher (1997, p.8) as "...facilitated face-to-face activities in communication, training, education, or consultation that promote collaborative conflict analysis and problem solving among parties engaged in protracted conflict in a manner that addresses basic human needs and promotes the building of peace, justice, and equality".

Conflict resolution?

But do we want that kind of a solution to conflict that Kelman (1997) and Fisher (1997) purposes? Do we want a universal conflict resolution method that is meant for all conflict situations? A Norwegian researcher, Jan Ekeland (2004) points out that it is wrong for experts to learn that if you just teaches the strategies, tricks and follow "my" methods, you can resolve conflict.

Ekeland (2004) says that it is not just one way to solve a conflict that is better than every other way. Conflict resolution methods can prove be successful in one setting, but does not need to be in another. By this Ekeland (2004) means that we subjects after all, not objects. Both human beings and situations are different; this makes the mindset that focus only on the method unfortunate. Especially if one connects method by a standardized procedure that is disconnected from the context in which it is to be utilized.

Ekeland (2005) uses psychotherapy to point out that what is the best therapy not always are the best documented methods. The therapy primarily needs to have confidence in its culture. Shamanism can be a good example. Shamanism is a practice that depends on confidence from an epistemological fellowship. Not until they have developed trust in the culture, can shamanism be as effective as psychotherapy. Thus it is irrelevant if a theory or method is true or false in empirical reasoning or in an ontological sense.

This indicates the importance to use methods that has confidence in an epistemological fellowship. Thus: African solutions to African intergroup conflicts.

Ubuntu

As I described in the chapter above, Ubuntu is a philosophy that "...seeks to find a balance between self and other, the destructive and the creative, good and bad. It moves away from the thinking of social relations in dualistic oppositions, that is, an either/or situation, good versus bad, black versus white, self versus other, in seeking to resolve conflict. The purpose of Ubuntu is to work toward a situation that acknowledges a mutually beneficial condition. Its emphasis is on cooperation with one another for the common good as opposed to competition that could lead to grave instability within any community. It emphasizes the whole not the part(s). It describes the feeling of the worth of the community and a shared fellowship of men and women" (Masina, 2000).

However, there are many definitions for this term, which is now most known through South Africa's reconciliation work following apartheid. Ubuntu could be defined like this; "I am because you are", as opposed to Descartes' famous quote; "I think therefore I am". "I am a human being because I belong, because I share and because I participate".

The leader of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Desmond Tutu, is of the opinion that Ubuntu can be used to explain a personal trait- I.e. "A person with Ubuntu is open and accessible for others, primed with a certainty deriving from the experience of

belonging to a larger unity. This unity is degraded when others are humiliated, or otherwise treated as less worthy” (as cited in Tschudi, 2006)

Is it then possible to prevent perceived humiliation within the affected parties of a conflict by introducing Ubuntu as an intervention method?

3. Methodological approach

Informants

The informants of my study will consist of African students from The Great Lakes region (Burundi, Uganda, DR Congo and Rwanda), Horn of Africa (Somalia, Ethiopia and Eritrea) and Sudan. The informants will be divided into three groups throughout the seminar; Great Lakes, Horn of Africa and Sudan.

Research strategy

To explore Ubuntu’s effect on perceived humiliation I want to use a method combining questionnaire, participant observation and semi-structured interviews. This combination can contribute to answer not only the question of what happens throughout the seminar, but also how and why these things happen. This gives me the possibility to see how Ubuntu influence perceived humiliation in practice

The semi-structured interviews will be conducted before and after the dialogue seminar. The interviews (pre and post the seminar) and the participant observation will focus only on one of the three groups who are going to take part in the ISFiT Dialogue seminar, and at the post seminar interview it may be possible to conduct a group interview. As opposed to the qualitative approach to the study, all of the three groups will receive a questionnaire before and after the seminar. Thus the study will consist of breadth as well as depth when answering the research question.

Instruments

The qualitative data may contribute to rich descriptions of the processes within the seminar. E.g. the participant observation will provide information about the possible changes and development throughout the seminar – when does the participants express feelings of humiliation? When do the participants express feelings of dignity? The participant observation may therefore expose important patterns that can be interpreted. This instrument is also more open for what can arise unforeseen.

The questionnaire will be distributed at two points in times, before and after the seminar, and will be a structured measure of development and change over time. The questionnaire will contribute to internal information within the participants, which is not easily obtained through observation.

Pre and post semi structured interviews will contribute to map the assumptions, experiences and the participant’s feelings of humiliation before and after the seminar.

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