



2 Averting Humiliation: Dignity, Justice, Trust

Julian Demmer and Norbert Ropers

"The road to peace is paved with dignity."

Donna Hicks

Dignity, trust and justice – as well as their opposites, humiliation, distrust and injustice – do not feature prominently in reflections on peace projects. But they are very much present among and within the people involved in the conflicts. It is therefore all the more important that all who wish to support those projects are sensitive to these dimensions and develop the respect and empathy that are essential for work in this field.

DIGNITY | the state or quality of being worthy of honour or respect. Peace rests, among other aspects, on upholding the value and principle of dignity for all regardless of their origin.

HUMILIATION | the introduction of a hierarchy between persons with superior and inferior status, by which some are “put down and held down”.

Dignity, trust and justice

Dignity is a term used to indicate that all human beings have an inalienable right to respectful and ethical treatment. Dignity became a key term in the Age of Enlightenment and in the human rights movement of the 20th century. It culminated in Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted in 1948, which states:

“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.”¹

Trust is a term that signifies that people have, in principle, positive expectations of the intentions and behaviour of other persons. These positive expectations can be based on close face-to-face interactions and bonding, for example in a family or among friends, or on joint membership in groups and communities with well-established social and cultural norms. The type and level of trust raise highly complex issues, but it is generally assumed that there is a significant difference in the trust that exists within identity groups and between them, be they ethno-national, religious or other culturally defined groups.

While there is no commonly agreed definition of *justice*, its principle *sum cuique* – everyone should have what he or she is en-

¹ More gender-sensitive wording has yet to be adopted

titled to – appears to be universal in reach. Accordingly, justice is understood as “a state of affairs where actors obtain what they are entitled to” (Müller 2013, 45). Yet who is entitled to what is highly contested and depends on the actors’ perspective. Such perspectives are shaped by both cultural norms and personal experiences, and can thus be highly subjective. Justice is thus about the allocation of goods or benefits, be they in the economic realm of distribution, the cultural realm of recognition or the political realm of representation.

The experience of being treated fairly and justly is important for a person’s sense of dignity as well as their ability to trust. This in turn plays a crucial role in the transformation of inter-personal and collective conflicts and enhances the prospects for → Building and Sustaining Peace.

The high price of humiliation, distrust and injustice

The vital role of dignity, trust and justice can be vividly demonstrated by contrasting them with their absences: humiliation, distrust and injustice, and their contributions to the escalation and protracted nature of violent conflicts.

Injustice is a state of affairs in which actors perceive a discrepancy between entitlements and benefits. ‘Striving for justice’ seeks to correct this perceived discrepancy and is a basic driver of (violent as well as nonviolent) action. Transformation places justice at the core, supposing a normative drive of constructive social change towards a just peace. Justice, here, is both an end and a practical principle guiding the means by which social change is pursued. Examples of this can be found within the sub-field of peace mediation, where empirical findings stress the importance of procedural and distributive justice for the sustainability of peace agreements, or the sub-field of reconciliation studies. David Bloomfield, based on his own experience in and beyond Northern Ireland, has argued for the centrality of “a systematised definition of social right and wrong, from which grows an

underlying shared value: that the justice system applies to all of us, that it acts fairly, that we can trust it”.

The term “humiliation” indicates that instead of acknowledging the equal dignity of all human beings, a hierarchy is introduced between persons with superior and inferior status (the most extreme example being the German words “*Übermensch*” and “*Untermensch*” used by the Nazis). Accordingly, Evelin Lindner defines the essence of humiliation as being “about putting down and holding down”. Looking at history from this angle, humiliation was interpreted in most societies of the world as part of a “natural order” of superiors and inferiors, at least until the Enlightenment. Tragically, there are many countries in which this fundamentally unequal “natural order” is still in place today. There is also often a temptation to impose “top-down solutions” as a simplifying method to deal with the complexity of conflicts.

In conflicts, the close relationship between collective political violence and humiliation is evident when fighting not only aims to achieve the physical destruction or “neutralisation” of the enemy, but also targets their symbols of identity, respect and dignity, and their honour and collective achievements. Often, the first acts of violence are directed against these symbols, such as when the Nazis destroyed and burned down more than 1500 synagogues during the Night of Broken Glass in November 1938, marking the start of the Holocaust. In many protracted conflicts, the violence against the opposing side’s symbols, such as places of worship and cultural pride (libraries, museums), and violence against people are closely connected. This is dramatically expressed in collective sexual violence, which aims to degrade the physical and moral integrity of the enemy.

Tragically, collective humiliation in the context of war and violence has the systemic tendency to reproduce itself, particularly if the victorious side makes no efforts to acknowledge the painful narratives of the past, to address issues of transitional justice

and to engage in some kind of genuine process of reconciliation (→ Dealing with the Past and Transitional Justice). For effective conflict transformation, it is therefore crucial to overcome the cycle of humiliation and counter-humiliation and to work towards a comprehensive understanding of human dignity.

The central role of building trust

The main challenge in transforming conflicts shaped and driven by humiliation by one side or by sequences of mutual humiliation is to find ways to overcome the deep distrust that this engenders. Particularly in the case of protracted conflicts, the distrust is so deeply ingrained in the emotions and attitudes of the parties that even occasional gestures of conciliation are often perceived by the recipients as a ploy to undermine their position. To initiate genuine processes of conflict transformation, it is therefore crucial to develop strategies of trust and confidence-building, and ultimately to find ways of gradually building more just, dignified and trustworthy relationships. The Berghof Foundation's work in Abkhazia, for example, is proving that this principle is highly relevant by slowly, relationship by relationship, enabling more and more public debate of highly contentious issues.

During the East-West conflict until 1989, investigating measures of confidence-building was one of the key areas of peace research and practical peace initiatives. A remarkable contribution on trust building in this context was developed by the psychologist Charles Osgood in 1962 with his strategy for "graduated reciprocal reductions in tension" (GRIT). His argument was that single de-escalatory measures in protracted conflicts will be of little value because they can easily be rejected as public relation stunts. Instead, one side should take the initiative and generate a series of small conciliatory gestures, which are publicly announced and implemented step-by-step, independently of the response of the other side. If the latter party reciprocates with similar measures, more significant steps should be taken. The core idea is to trigger a cycle of de-escalation with a long-term

perspective by means of unilateral initiatives and to accompany this process with some kind of dialogue to promote mutual understanding and foster joint analyses.

Whether this approach can be applied to internal conflicts involving internationally recognised states and non-state armed groups (or liberation and resistance movements) is an open question. The problem in these cases is that there is not only deep mistrust between the parties, but often fundamental disagreement on the legitimacy of the existing political order as well. The general understanding is that trust building is a multi-dimensional process in which elements of rationally defined common interests, transparency and predictability play an important role, as do emotional and relationship factors. Also, the perception that a more just and hence more legitimate political system is being built is of great importance here. Trust cannot be imposed on conflicting parties, nor can it grow without empathy and cooperation, which is why procedural justice becomes imperative as it fosters positive attitudes, cooperative behaviour, participation possibilities and ultimately conflict reduction.

In cases of humiliation and traumatic experiences of violence, trust building means addressing issues of transitional justice and reconciliation. At a minimum, it requires some kind of acknowledgement of the painful past. And even in the best cases, trust to engage in conflict transformation needs opportunities, time and spaces for relationship-building.

References and Further Reading

- David Bloomfield (2006).** *On Good Terms. Clarifying Reconciliation.* Berghof Report No. 14. Berlin: Berghof Research Center for Constructive Conflict Management.
- Morton Deutsch (2014).** *Justice and Conflict*, in: Peter T. Coleman, Morton Deutsch and Eric C. Marcus (eds.). *The Handbook of Conflict Resolution: Theory and Practice*, 3rd ed., San Francisco, CA.: Jossey-Bass, 29–56.
- Nancy Fraser (2008).** *Reframing Justice in a Globalized World*, in: Nancy Fraser (ed.). *Scales of Justice: Reimagining Political Space in a Globalizing World*, New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 12–30.
- Donna Hicks (2011).** *Dignity. The Essential Role It Plays in Resolving Conflict.* New Haven, CT & London: Yale University Press.
- Evelin Lindner (2006).** *Making Enemies: Humiliation and International Conflict.* Westport, CT & London: Praeger.
- Harald Müller (2013).** *Justice and Peace. Good Things Do Not Always Go Together*, in: Gunther Hellmann (ed.). *Justice and Peace: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on a Contested Relationship*, Frankfurt am Main: campus, 43–69.

Online Resources

- Berghof Foundation, Caucasus Programme**, <https://www.berghof-foundation.org/en/programmes/caucasus/>
- Human Dignity and Humiliation Studies Network**, www.humiliationstudies.org
- Roy J. Lewicki & Edward C. Tomlinson (2003).** *Trust and Trust Building*, www.beyondintractability.org/essay/trust_building/
- Michelle Parlevliet (2011).** *Human Rights and Conflict Transformation: Towards a More Intergrated Approach*, in: Austin, B., Fischer, M. and Giessmann, H.J. (eds.): *Advancing Conflict Transformation: The Berghof Handbook II.* Opladen/Farmington Hills: Barbara Budrich Publishers. Also: <https://www.berghof-foundation.org/en/publications/handbook/handbook-dialogues/>
- Step-by-Step De-Escalation (GRIT). International Online Training Project on Intractable Conflict**, <http://www.peace.ca/glossaryUColorado.htm>