The Psychology of Consensus in Melanesia

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Consensus is an essential ingredient for conflict resolution, reconciliation, agreement, and peace in Melanesian societies. The psychological aspects of its positive influence in establishing a common ground between conflicting parties have not been explored. From a psycho-cultural perspective, I focus on the positive dynamism of consensus. I provide the Bougainville crisis within Papua New Guinea as a case vignette to illustrate the utility and significance of consensus in the search for concrete principles to unite a 'disoriented' world. In doing so, the issue of incorporating indigenous psychological knowledge into mainstream psychology becomes clearer. The article searches for psychological principles germane to reducing conflict and maintaining peace. This kind of utility is exemplified in a case study of achieving consensus in Papua New Guinea.

With the collapse of the New York twin towers on September 11, 2001, a new global conflict emerged. At the forefront of this conflict is the United States government as it searches for responsible terrorists. However, the capture of Saddam Hussein has not prevented the deaths of allied forces serving in Iraq as well as Iraqi indigenous people. Such tragedies are baffling; one could argue that human virtues of *peace* and *happiness* have not found their place in the modern world, although technology and human understanding have developed. Whether we have advanced in solving such tragedies remains a point of discussion. A central question for social scientists is what can be done to solve the problem?

One widely held view reached by experts analysing the above tragedy is the failure of US intelligence to understand the minds of their adversaries. What followed was a robust call for the improved understanding of the human mind as advocated by these experts. Such understanding falls directly within the province of psychology. The aim of psychology as we all know is to be able to describe and understand the human mind and to predict behaviour. Whether psychologists have been able to predict the human mind and behaviour remains a point of contention. Disillusion with the present status of psychology as a proper legitimate study of human mind and behaviour to resolve these conflicts remains. Specifically, there has been and remains, a call for psychologists to rethink themselves and their methods of studying human mind and behaviour (e.g., Smith, Harre, & Langenhove, 1995).

One way in which psychology must answer this call is to incorporate the existing indigenous psychology, in which abundant explanatory and predictive principles have existed for centuries, but are underused in contemporary traditional psychology. In this article the psychology and practice of consensus that underpins the conflict resolution process in Melanesian society is descriptively and specifically illustrated. This process is useful for settling disputes among competing individuals or parties.

The Bougainville crisis is used as a case vignette to illustrate the process of reaching consensus. This analysis emerges from the integration of the spirit of a culture with psychology. In addition, by arguing from a cultural relativist position, I acknowledge that there is a shortfall in generalising from a case example to other cultural groups. However, I would like to convince psychologists interested in conflict resolution to search and research available cultural concepts and principles that exist in many cultural groups. These may help expand their understanding of consensus and its relevance for the study of peace in our world of conflict.

Consensus: 'The Melanesian Way'

Culture and Consensus

The fabric of human nature and relationship lies in culture. It is through culture that the life of human beings is defined and societies are organised into some kind of system. However, defining culture is difficult because the concept is fluid, dynamic and quite

complex. The traditional classical anthropological definition of culture given by Tylor (1871, p. 1) is a useful one, 'that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, laws, customs and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society'. In a more comprehensive definition, Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952) proposed that:

> Culture consists of patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behaviour acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the achievements of human groups, including their embodiments in artifacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional (i.e., historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values; cultural systems may on the one hand be considered as products of action, on the other as conditioning elements of further action. (p. 181)

One element of culture that is obvious in both definitions is the concept of consensus.

Consensus in Melanesia is defined as agreement of two or more groups in regard to an issue that has been contested for sometime. In the scenario of conflict resolution, both parties come to compromise to end the conflict. This may sometimes involve intervention by a third neutral party in bringing the two conflicting parties to reach a peaceful solution in regard to the problem.

Consensus is an end product of conflict resolution, as said by Narakobi (1980), a prominent Melanesian philosopher. He argued that consensus is a Melanesian way of life of solving disputes. Without consensus, there is no Melanesian way of resolving conflict. Consensus is a collective effort by which the majority of the group members agree to a resolution in regard to the conflict and is necessary for establishing peace in Melanesia. Consensus is an important aspect of the Melanesian culture of establishing peace among warring tribes (Narakobi, 1980).

In Melanesia, when both conflicting parties agree to certain terms of reference, consensus is valued as ending conflict. Cultural rituals are performed to enable the consensus process to reach the required level. During the process of conflict resolution, the rituals of using natural objects such as food, plants, or songs that have some symbolic meaning aid the process. Some cultural events are used, like 'breaking of spears' (Kemelfield, 1990), killing of pigs, feasting, singing, shaking hands, and dancing to celebrate and mark such occasions. Psychologically, these events are part and parcel of the conflict resolution process and a Melanesian pivotal strategy of reinforcing peace.

One critical ingredient that aids consensus is having leaders with skills who can muster the group into one whole entity. These leaders are skilful in handling conflicts and also lead a tribe or clan in culturally prescribed ways (Narakobi, 1983). Culturally prescribed ways could vary from breaking of spears used in fighting as a symbolic way of ending the dispute to the eating sugar canes. These have symbolic meanings of peace and resonate with the idea of long lasting friendship between the groups once in conflict.

Leaders, whether the 'big man' or chiefs, are the centre of gravity by which people abide and whom they follow, but through the art of consensus; the spirit of collectivism exists, and not individualism. (See Hofstede, 1980 for a detailed discussion of collectivism and individualism.) Therefore, consensus is reached on the basis of the interest of the group rather than of the individual leader.

The group cohesion exercised through collectivism in Melanesian societies arises from child rearing practices. The child is taught how to work as a group member and to follow culturally prescribed norms in order to maintain the group identity, which is of paramount importance for the group's survival. The clan family lineage must be emphasised by respecting the group members first, rather than one's self. Sharing and caring for other members of the clan come first before oneself. One's self is captured through group dynamics; without putting the group first, the self has no value. This cultural principle serves as the basis of a collectivism tendency, which is evident in Melanesia societies.

In order to demonstrate the notion of psychology of consensus in Melanesia, the case vignette from Papua New Guinea (PNG) is discussed. A brief description of Melanesia is sketched.

Mapping Melanesia: A Brief Description

Melanesian countries consist of many small island nations in the South Pacific region. Melanesia includes West Papua (a Province of Indonesia), PNG, the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, New Caledonia, and Fiji. In the late 1990's and early 2000, some countries, such as Fiji, PNG and the Solomon Islands were internally in conflict after they had gained their national sovereignty. Some political scientists labelled such countries as 'failed states' (Hughes, 2003, 2004) or 'vulnerable states' (Patience, 2004). The validity of these labels is debatable, but the conflicts within the nations were, and are, real, and need solution. The island of Bougainville, in the North Solomon Province of PNG provides a case in point.

Case Vignette: The Bougainville Conflict: A Consensus Approach to Peace

In PNG, the closure of the Bougainville copper mine (the largest open pit mine in the 'Third World') in 1988 had a tremendous impact on the country, as it accounted for over half of the nation's budget. Delayed payments, benefits and compensation that had been promised but not provided by the mine owners and the government of PNG for the indigenous people led to a rebel secessionist movement led by the late Francis Ona. The mine facilities in Panguna were destroyed, leading to the closing of the mine (Kemefield, 1990).

The government reacted by sending the Papua New Guinea Defence Force (PNGDF) to capture the rebels and protect the state's properties. It did not succeed, although PNG managed to hold on to the Province. The war between the rebels and the PNGDF members resulted in the deaths of some members of both parties. Innocent lives also were lost and schools were shut down resulting in no education for the indigenous children. Other health, societal and economic problems emerged.

The government of PNG led by various prime ministers (such as Sir Rabbie Namaliu, Sir Julius Chan and Sir William [Bill] Skate) tried to negotiate formally with the rebels to end the conflict. Although there was gradual progress in this conflict resolution phase, more effort was required. For that reason, several South Pacific nations including Australia and New Zealand and the United Nations offered to help bring peace to Bougainville in consultation with the PNG government (May, 2003; Regan, 1998). These efforts included many non-Government organisations and religious groups. In the late 1990s, peace began to emerge as a result of a cease-fire agreement reached by both parties. The series of peace efforts on the political front resulted in the Bougainville Peace Agreement of 2001 (see May 2003, p. 3, for a detailed description of the agreement). In reference to the Bougainville Crisis, the notion of 'one people, one country, one nation', was captured in the lyrics of a song sung by the renowned PNG music group, BARIKE, and symbolises this peace process.

In a bipartisan approach, the government admitted its failure to deliver its promises and the indigenous rebel group admitted its failure to adopt a peaceful conflict resolution strategy, rather than to war for self-determination. Both parties came together, without the late Francis Ona, in a round-table discussion with supervision from neutral parties. Discussion of issues affecting the conflict, smoothing differences between the two conflicting parties, and agreeing to the pillars of peace was encouraged and established during the process of peace-building. Elimination of anger, sadness, regret, and happiness was exercised during the process of achieving consensus. These responses to emotion are essential qualities in achieving consensus in Melanesia.

The critical factor that enabled peace to take place was the 'willingness' of both parties to come together under the supervision of New Zealand and United Nations representatives despite the group differences relating to the conflicting issue; this is the strength of consensus. The leaders of both camps with their followers signed and agreed to a cease-fire through consensus to enable peace to prevail in the society.

However, it is also critical to note that the road to consensus building started early in 1989:

… at the time the initiative began in September 1989 the main issue on conflict appeared to have shifted from being primarily an economic one relating to the Bougainville copper mine and compensation for landowners, to that of a larger political conflict concerning secession from PNG, which thus involved all the people of the North Solomons and not just the Panguna landowners. (Kemelfield, 1990, p. 64)

In fact, Kemelfield reminds us that, '… treating all distinct peoples within the state with dignity and respect is paramount to the effective functioning of a genuine democracy, even when initially confronted with the provocation of militant violence' (1990, p. 72). Nonetheless, when conflict arises due to the failure of upholding what Kemelfield has advanced in the foregoing sentence, consensus has to take place to make peace between conflicting parties. Hence, consensus is a necessary cultural norm and requirement in conflict resolution process in Melanesia.

Discussion and Conclusion

The cultural value of consensus is highly treasured in Melanesian society and simultaneously involves the psychology of emotions. As the Bougainville crisis case study has shown, both conflicting parties must come to realise their shortfalls in the conflict. Leaders of both parties in consultation with their followers must arrange to come to a round-table discussion through a third party to reach a compromise. However, the genuineness of such a meeting has to be reflected through some cultural understanding of accepting the other party's point of view. In the process, the differences are ironed-out to reach a point of compromise (see Gregory and Gregory, 2002, 2003, for conflict-resolution in Tanna, Vanuatu).

Also in that process, mixed emotions such as crying, sadness, regret, self-blame, and happiness are highly used in order to demonstrate the genuine approach of each party to resolving a conflict. When a compromise is reached, cultural rituals are used to reinforce peace and harmony. All these activities and the process involved in establishing peace after a conflict symbolises the essence of the psychology of consensus as the cornerstone to the 'Melanesian way of life' for stability and harmony in a society.

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