

# The Possibility of Resolving Conflict Through Dialogue?: Continuing from Power (2011)

RIA O'SULLIVAN-LAGO  
University of Limerick

Power (2011, this edition) supplies a constructive critique of Tileagă's (2007) analysis of intergroup conflict in Romania. Putting forward a dialogical model of intergroup behaviour, Power argues that a consideration of social context is imperative to understanding not only concepts of "morality", but also the relation between majority and minority groups. Following from Tileagă's work and Power's critique, we must continue on to question if resolution of conflict is, in fact, possible when individuals are being dehumanized.

The arguments Power puts forward are persuasive. The linear model proposed by Tileagă is simplistic, and the analysis flawed and underdeveloped. Considering the data Tileagă presented, Power suggests a model of dialogical engagement where there are two possibilities: firstly, further distancing of self from other, which has the possibility of escalating into actual violence, or secondly, a change in perspective where self can identify with the other through perspective taking and recognition. Within his dialogical model, the impact of context is recognized for both groups, as is the dialogical relation between the groups. One must question, however, if a dialogical relationship between these two groups is possible given the data presented by Tileagă: the distance created between self and other, via dehumanizing the gypsies, constructs them as not capable of engagement in a dialogical relationship.

To illustrate, a quote presented by Tileagă demonstrates a powerful episode of dehumanization of the gypsies by Sandra, a 51 year old speech therapist:

411 *"I have brought them a sack of nice clothes, they were*  
412 *walking in rags...*  
414 *just to see the next day the nice clothes I had given to*  
415 *them to wear...*  
416 *they've thrown them into the garbage*  
417 *container. Well, I don't really know. Why do they behave like*  
418 *this? It means they like living in dirt, (mm) in*  
419 *dirt, through theft, and somebody to help them...*  
421 ***I think that it is something which comes from the***  
422 ***ancestral. I don't know, from their origin...***  
424 ***From their nature...***  
425 ***That's why it is said that the gypsies are 'koszos' [dirt]"*** (Sandra from Tileagă, 2007, p. 726, emphasis added)

In the first six lines, Sandra constructs the gypsies as abnormal people (Verkuyten, 2001). The Romanies, in Sandra's eyes, rejected "normal" cultural values when they threw the "nice" clothes she had given them into the garbage container, presumably preferring to stay "walking in rags". As Power suggests, her construction of the gypsies as abnormal allows her to distance her civilized self from the gypsy "other". This distancing escalates, becoming extreme in the second half of the quotation where the Romanies' refusal to accept charity translates to an interpretation of the Romanies as essentially other: "it means they like living in dirt", that they want to live as thieves. A civilized and normal person such as Sandra can have no meaningful relationship with individuals whose values are so removed from her own and as such, she is justified in her rejection of the gypsies.

If the construction finished there, there might still be hope for dialogical engagement, alternative representations and perspective taking, but there is a further escalation in the final lines (marked in bold). The Romanies are constructed as innately different to the majority group by their very nature. Their ancestry, origin and nature are completely 'other.' The semantic barrier constructed between self and other is one of essential difference (Gillespie, Kadianaki and O'Sullivan-Lago, in press; Raudsepp and Wagner, in press) and it is this that calls the possibility of dialogical engagement into question. By constructing the Romany other as less than human (in fact, as dirt), the relationship is no longer dialogical but monological: the possibility of a relationship, of dialogue, is removed (Salgado and Gonçalves, 2007). The voice of the other is constructed as outside the boundaries of reason and therefore cannot be engaged with: how can a good, normal person engage with immoral, criminal beings? How can the group engage with a group who are not only "living in dirt" but are dirt "from their nature"?

As researchers, we must consider the consequences of extreme constructions and ask what can be done at the level of everyday practice to encourage meaningful dialogical engagement. The stress here is on engagement that is meaningful. There may have been engagement on Sandra's part through her charity, yet the voice of the other did not breach the semantic barriers she had constructed. Asking "Why do they behave like this?" might have allowed the voice of the other to surface, yet it becomes a rhetorical question serving only to support her assertion that "this" is not how normal people behave.

The model Power proposes offers the possibility of engagement through recognition of the perspective of the other, but is this engagement possible? Considering the extract from Sandra once again, there is a glimmer of an alternative representation of the Romanies:

416 *"they've thrown [the nice clothes] into the garbage*  
417 *container. **Well, I don't really know.**"* (Sandra from Tileagă, 2007, p.726, emphasis added)

In this section of the extract, Sandra admits that she does not actually know if the clothes were thrown away. In this brief moment, an alternative representation of the Romanies surfaces: they may have accepted the charity and behaved “normally”. If this alternative representation was given more voice, it could have formed the basis of dialogical engagement with the other which may have led to the perspective of the other infiltrating Sandra’s dialogue. Instead of expanding, however, the alternative was forcefully blocked and silenced (Gillespie et al., in press).

While Power concludes that it is beneficial to illuminate how individuals (mis)understand each other, the function of prejudice and rejection must be considered. We have previously argued (O’Sullivan-Lago and Abreu, 2010) that the other can be rejected for the sake of the self when viewed as a potential threat, particularly to moral order. We must continue on to ask, what can be done to discourage representations of the other as beyond engagement? What other identity spaces can be offered to, and taken up by, the other? How can primary identities, particularly that of humanity (Moghaddam, 2009; O’Sullivan-Lago, Abreu and Burgess, 2008), be used constructively at the everyday level so that the other’s voice can not only be heard, but listened to?

## REFERENCES

- Gillespie, A., Kadianaki, I. and O’Sullivan-Lago, R. (in press). Encountering alterity: Geographic and semantic movements, in J. Valsiner (Ed), *The Oxford Handbook of Culture and Psychology*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Moghaddam, F.M. (2009) Omniculturalism: Policy solutions to fundamentalism in the era of fractured globalization, *Culture & Psychology*, 15, 3, 337-347.
- O’Sullivan-Lago, R. and Abreu, G. (2010). Maintaining continuity in a cultural contact zone: Identification strategies in the Dialogical Self, *Culture & Psychology*, 16, 73-92.
- O’Sullivan-Lago, R., Abreu, G. and Burgess, M. (2008) “I am a human being like you”: An identification strategy to maintain continuity in a cultural contact zone, *Human Development*, 51, 349-367.
- Power, S.A. (2011). Towards a Dialogical Model of Conflict Resolution. *Psychology & Society*, Vol. 4 (1), 53-66.
- Raudsepp, M. and Wagner, W. (in press) The essentially other: Representational processes that divide groups, in I. Markova, P. Linell, A. Gillespie, G. Hosking, and L. Scarantino (Eds). *Trust and distrust between groups: Interaction and representations*.
- Tileagă, C. (2007). Ideologies of moral exclusion: A critical discursive reframing of depersonalization, delegitimization and dehumanization. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 46, 717-737.

## **AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY**

Ria O'Sullivan-Lago is a researcher at the University of Limerick, Ireland exploring Irish Catholic religious' involvement in the politics of migration. She recently completed her PhD in Oxford Brookes University on the impact of cultural continuity on the Dialogical Self. Her research interests include identity, dialogue, immigration and asylum, intergroup communication and conflict, macro-level psychology, and cultural continuity. E-mail [riaosullivan@gmail.com](mailto:riaosullivan@gmail.com)