

# Power and Dehumanization as Barriers to Intergroup Dialogue: Commentary on “Toward a Dialogical Model of Conflict Resolution” (Power, 2011)

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The dialogical model of conflict resolution proposed by Power (2011, this edition) is a creative attempt to extend Tileagă's (2007) arguments about the discursive, social construction of delegitimization, dehumanization, and depersonalization. The original article bases these arguments on an interview study with Romanian majority group members about a stigmatized minority group in the country, the Romany (gypsies). Power uses this study to propose a dialogical model of intergroup processes and, as the title suggests, even conflict resolution.

While Tileagă never intended to present a model of conflict resolution, Power's extension of the discursive analysis to a dialogical model is interesting, and important. He proposes that it is crucial to consider not only the discourse and value judgments of the majority group, but also the perceptions and actions of the minority group, as well as how these may in turn influence the majority group members' actions. This is a valuable point – for example, Sandra's negative response in reaction to the Romany's rejection of a clothing donation (see Tileagă, 2007, p. 726) can be interpreted as a result of disbelief or even humiliation; or it could be viewed as the outgrowth of the frustrated need to be accepted, which is prevalent among members of groups that have perpetrated violence (Shnabel, Nadler, Ullrich, Dovidio, and Carmi, 2009). Thus, I agree with Power that it is essential to consider these dialogical processes in order to understand the psychological dynamics of dehumanization and delegitimization more fully. Likewise, I could not agree more with his point that it is important to examine not only destructive, but also constructive processes and alternative outcomes, such as perspective-taking and recognition (see Vollhardt, 2009 a; b). Therefore, I applaud Power's attempt to develop a model that includes the possibility of “becoming [the] other” as an alternative to further distancing, dehumanization, and possible violent annihilation.

However, the proposed model does not sufficiently address the complexity of the dynamics involved in intergroup conflict. The positive dialogical processes that are suggested as the solution are portrayed too simply, as the model fails to acknowledge important *barriers* to dialogue and perspective-taking: specifically, power and structural inequality, as well as the fact that dehumanization and delegitimization are precisely the psychological

mechanisms that *undermine* dialogue. Given these constraints, the constructive processes proposed in the model can merely be seen as the ideal goal, but the obstacles and how they can be overcome need to be addressed.

In his model, Power illustrates dialogical processes as equal and symmetric; where the minority shapes context and discourse as much as the majority does. For example, he argues that the minority group's morality has to be considered in addition to the majority group's morality, and he criticizes Tileagă's monological construction of morality as a "weakness" of the paper. While I agree that it is crucial to include both groups' moral positions, it is equally important to acknowledge the societal realities reflected – albeit not explicitly – in Tileagă's analysis: namely that power and structural inequality impose a hegemonic moral discourse that silences and marginalizes other moral voices (Hecker, 1995). To put it simply, power relations determine who gets to define what is moral and what is not. While this does not mean that the moral voice of the minority group should be disregarded, it is crucial to acknowledge this imbalance in the model, as well as the qualitative difference in the impact and meaning of these positions caused by group status.

Power relations also affect other aspects of the presented model: For example, power determines how individuals approach moral dilemmas in general (Lammers and Stapel, 2009), thereby adding another layer of complexity in the dialogical process, and creating a potential barrier to "understanding one another." Likewise, power shapes the media and societal discourse around culture, history, and politics, in other words everything that is referred to as "context" in the proposed dialogical model. Power also influences attitudes toward intergroup contact and dialogue (Saguy, Pratto, Dovidio, and Nadler, 2009) as well as arguments and communicative acts in intergroup dialogues (Ellis and Maoz, 2002), thereby further skewing what is portrayed in the model as symmetric dialogue. Adding power into the equation would also provide another alternative interpretation of the interview data presented by Tileagă (2007) and reinterpreted by Power (2011, this edition): he reinterprets the interview sequence about the rejection of Sandra's clothes donation as a "a rejection of the majority's moral values," and argues that her dehumanizing response must be seen in light of this rejection. While this is plausible, a slightly different analysis can be drawn from Nadler's work on power and helping behavior: helping is also a demonstration of dominance and power relations, and the rejection of help can therefore be seen as an empowering act of restoring social equality and self-esteem (Nadler, 2002). This argument does not deny the importance of a dialogical model but rather underscores it, while taking into account the power of the social groups involved.

In addition to influencing dialogical processes, power relations between groups also affect the second distinctive element in the proposed model: the process of "becoming [the] other" through recognition and perspective-taking. This process is, however, again not equal or symmetric: for example, interventions aimed at increasing perspective-taking with an outgroup and, in turn, prosocial behavior, are not effective among those who perceive their ingroup to be high in power (Bilewicz, 2009); and in general, power is associated with

a reduced ability to take perspective of others (Galinsky, Magee, Inesi, and Gruenfeld, 2006). This should be recognized in the model as an important constraint. Moreover, an additional complexity that is not acknowledged in the model is that under some circumstances perspective-taking can also have detrimental consequences; it reduces collective guilt for outgroup harm committed by the ingroup among those who are highly identified (Zebel, Doosje, and Spears, 2009) and it can deplete cognitive resources and undermine positive intergroup interactions among those who otherwise show low levels of prejudice (Vorauer, Martens, and Sasaki, 2009). While this does not rule out the potentially constructive role of perspective-taking presented in the model, it does suggest the need to consider a more complex view of these processes, as well as the realistic barriers that power creates. Only then will a dialogical model of conflict resolution be credible and effective in addressing conflicts that involve groups with different statuses in society. Including this perspective would also integrate the large body of literature that has examined the role of power in conflicts and their resolution (e.g., Coleman, 2003; Rouhana, 2004), and identified the transformation of power relations as essential for reconciliation (Rouhana, 2010).

A final but crucial question in this context, however, is whether a dialogical model of conflict resolution is realistic and possible in light of the phenomena that Tileagă's original article addresses: dehumanization and delegitimization. These are precisely the psychological processes that undermine and prevent any form of dialogue: denying the equal status and morality of other human beings makes dialogue futile. Thus, the question of "how" to obtain these constructive goals, which Power only touches on very briefly in his paper, is of utmost importance, and should be addressed more explicitly in the model. It is important to acknowledge the extreme difficulty in attaining these goals, especially when the other group involved is a stigmatized outgroup, and also to address the motivational problems: what might motivate and enable members of the majority group to engage in dialogical processes with those who are dehumanized and marginalized, as well as so much on the fringe of society that interdependence is not perceived?

In sum, in order to build and implement a dialogical model of conflict resolution, the first, crucial steps are to address power differentials and inequality, and to tackle the psychological processes that delegitimize and undermine the motivation to engage in real dialogue between members of different status groups in society.

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