

Building Alliances Across Differences?

Center for Gender in Organizations
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Imagine Coexistence: Narratives from Fieldwork in Rwanda

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Presenter:

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In this presentation, Sara Cobb shared work in progress on her fieldwork in Rwanda. Specifically, she explored the processes through which the survivors of the 1994 Rwandan genocide rebuilt the public and private institutions in their community and their lives. She began by presenting a theoretical framework. She then proceeded to share the narratives of three groups that were engaged in efforts at rebuilding after the genocide, and she concluded with an analysis of the processes in the three groups. This summary also includes questions that were raised pertaining to the theoretical framework and/or the fit between the theoretical framework and the data.

Theoretical framework

Cobb conceptualized the process of rebuilding social institutions after genocide as a linear one in which the society moves through five phases. These phases are violence, coexistence, cooperation, collaboration, and interdependence. She further posited that as the society moves from violence to interdependence, there will be greater interaction among the diverse identity groups and greater relational complexity among the members of the society. She focused on articulating the processes that can tip a conflict system in the direction of interdependence. She began by discussing the notions of coexistence and cooperation, and then discussed the notion of tipping (see Gladwell, 2000) in detail.

Coexistence and cooperation

Cobb defined coexistence as a stage in the process toward interdependence. Within the coexistence phase, the focus is on preventing violence from erupting between the conflicting parties and to rebuild separate institutions for each of the parties in a conflict. Peace is maintained by the presence of a third party, such as security forces. Separate institutions are built in several sectors—economic, civic, and social. She explained further that this does not mean that activities in each sector go on simultaneously. Instead, there may be more leverage by beginning in one sector.

She distinguished coexistence from cooperation in that the latter “is a more connected case than coexistence.” She described two kinds of cooperation: one in which group A agrees to participate in some realm of social or economic life according to the rules set by group B, and another in which both parties in a conflict jointly determine how to act in realms of social or economic life. In the second case, the society’s infrastructure is integrated and all groups participate.

Questions

Cobb then asked the following questions that relate to the ideas described above:

- Is it necessary to create separate institutions to move toward interdependence?
- Does the presence of a third party propel the process toward further cooperation or does it actually retard it?

Tipping

The notion of “tipping” was put forth by Gladwell (2000), who broadly used the term to refer to the process by which social epidemics are fostered. **Tipping does not require knowledge of outcomes or a desire to be an architect of specific outcomes. Rather, one must understand the processes that shift a system so that momentum toward interdependence takes hold.** Drawing on this idea, Cobb asked, “How do you tip a system [in the direction of interdependence]?”

Based on an analysis of her fieldwork narratives, Cobb identified three aspects of the tipping process. These aspects were:

1. Increasing the breadth and depth of social networks
2. Altering frames in the telling of what happened
3. Second order processes

1. Increasing the breadth and depth in social networks

Cobb illustrated this point by comparing genocide survivors’ networks before and after the genocide. The networks of the survivors had been severely impoverished after the genocide. They had lost relationships in both the public realm—composed of actors in civic and economic realms of life—and the private realm—composed of family members, friends, and neighbors. Consequently, she indicated that it was important to re-populate this impoverished network. Relationships needed to be fostered with people who could fill important roles in the individual’s world in both the private and public realms.

2. Altering frames in the telling of what happened

Cobb indicated that the second process involved constructing new narratives of what happened. Ideally, these narratives would alter the problematic inter-group relationship. New narratives enable the emergence of “new polarizations, new construct systems, new plot events, new character roles, and new values.” The problem, however, is “how [to] change the constructs when they are tied to a story of what happened.” If the use of these constructs leads to placing blame on the other group, inter-group relations between the groups will remain problematic.

3. Second order processes

According to Cobb, “The third [aspect] of a tipping concept is the generation or creation of second order processes. [This is] where people within the conflict system themselves begin to organize a mode of inquiry and certain ways of asking questions. The kinds of questions that [are asked] would look like appreciative inquiry.” She indicated that this second order process was evident in the dynamics of one of the groups she studied. She observed that what was crucial about the dynamic of the group was that “they learned to embed reflection as a way of doing things in all areas of their activities. Their modes of inquiry, or their process of reflection, fostered other people’s reflection as well.”

Questions

Cobb posed two questions about these three aspects of the tipping process:

- Are the dynamics of increasing the breadth and depth of the network, and altering frames of reference a condition for moving toward interdependence?
- Is there a natural evolution between these dynamics?

A seminar participant posed a third question:

- “What is the process by which you [Dr. Cobb] get to the type of mode of inquiry that you are describing?”

Narratives

Cobb reported the narratives of three groups formed to rebuild after the genocide: The Widow’s Co-op, The Bottle Co-op, and The Sunflower Co-op.

After relating each of the narratives, she reflected on whether they were characterized by the presence or absence of the three aspects of the tipping processes described above.

Widow’s Co-op

Cobb described five components of in the Widow’s Co-op group narrative: 1) group formation; 2) growth of the group; 3) frames for understanding what happened; 4) conflict over resources; and 5) building houses and expanding activities.

Group formation:

The Widows Co-op formed when three women who had known each other for a long time came together to informally set aside time for mourning their husbands, all of whom had died during the genocide. All three women were Tutsi. Two of them had lost Tutsi husbands one had lost a Hutu husband. All three were homeless and had lost most of their family members and relatives in the genocide.

Growth of the group:

The Tutsi woman who was married to a Hutu man had a widowed Hutu sister-in-law who had been married to a Tutsi man. Growth began when this woman asked her fellow mourners if her sister-in-law could join them in their informal mourning sessions. Eventually, the women started to bring in other widows and the group grew to 35 women who came together to cry.

Frames for understanding what happened:

In the process of mourning they tried to make sense of what happened. Their first stories placed blame on the Hutu: “Look what they did to us—what the nasty Hutu did to us.” Over time, their accounts changed and the blame was placed on the political machinations between the government and the Rwandan army. The account was that “the Rwandan army was pushing down from the North into Rwanda and forced the government to retaliate, [bringing into play] a government-sponsored genocide. They said this was not something that their relatives and neighbors wanted. This was something the government wanted, that their neighbors and relatives became agents of.” In this case, Cobb concluded, the stories captured the process through which communities are created through caring.

Conflict over resources:

The group then began to notice that, as widows, they had common needs, such as housing. In the process of trying to work out how to provide for these needs, they started arguing over who had more resources, more responsibilities, and suffered the most. Their challenge at this point was “to articulate a shared world view when there were vast differences in how the genocide affected them.” Despite the “shouting and crying,” however, the group stayed together and thrived. During this conflictual period, the women took care of one another.

Building houses and expanding activities:

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As the group grew, their organizational arrangement became more complex. They developed a governance structure and system. They also expanded their activities to include fundraising. For example, they were able to send three women to college, establish a very large agricultural venture, form a soccer team for the children, and start literacy and vocational educational programs.

They also started to work with other women's groups. Here the second order processes were most evident, in the way that the widows' inquired about the needs of and nurtured the other groups. Cobb indicated that perhaps this mode of inquiry is what fostered the sustainability, and even the expansion, of their activities.

Reflecting on the theoretical ideas described above, Cobb indicated that in this case, the social network grew as the group grew. In the process they developed new stories [e.g., that the genocide was the government's fault]. There was also a period of a lot of conflict and discord within the group. The members could not pinpoint the time when the second order process took hold, but they did nonetheless.

Bottle Group Co-op

Cobb described three aspects of this narrative: 1) group formation; 2) frames for understanding what happened; and 3) setback and difficulty sustaining activity.

Group formation:

This group was composed of about 15 women who were brought together by an organization referred to as "Profem" that was operating in Rwanda. Profem is an umbrella organization that houses 25 women's groups, all of which are engaged in different activities. The members of the bottle group said that Profem came to their community and helped them get started. They began by doing some planning around the type of venture with which the group wanted to get involved. The group decided that they wanted to engage in a bottle collecting business to generate some income. Profem provided funds, and the bottle group purchased crates to carry the bottles and a truck to take the bottles to market.

Frames for understanding what happened:

When this group was asked about the genocide, they said that prior to the violence "it was a nice community, everybody knew who was who, there was intermarriage between the Hutu and Tutsi. But there was poverty." Cobb observed that there was little complexity in their account of the past. Then, the genocide happened. One woman recounted a story of having witnessed a loved one being macheted to death, at which point she ran into the fray so that she would also die. Somehow she survived. After the violence, along with the loss of many lives, there was widespread hunger. When the members of this group were asked how they understood the violence, their response was that "people went crazy."

Cobb observed that unlike the widow's group, where the stories were transformative, this group's story was not capable of bringing about the creation of new ways of talking about inter-group relationships. Cobb observed that one could not do anything with insanity—"it was a terminus story."

Setback and difficulty sustaining activity:

The bottle business was going fine for a while. After some time, they built the house in which the bottles were to be kept. Then there was a theft and they lost everything. Consequently, they could not pay their debt to Profem. Because their debt was unpaid, they could not get a loan and this created considerable anxiety within the group.

Cobb indicated that the stories told in this group were static and nontransformational. There was also no evidence of second order processes, sustainability, or generation. Further, the members of the group had “a non-agentic relationship to their own resources.”

Questions

Seminar participants posed the following questions and observations:

- “How do you get to the articulation of different frames without the presence of second order processes? The way you describe the widows group suggests that you don’t need second order processes. At first I thought you needed second order processes to get to reformulation of stories.”
- “Without a detailed sense of your stories, it seems that perhaps a mix of modes of inquiry—some appreciative, some not—were present throughout the process. [It may not be a linear process,] but something is being built in. [There may be something about how] somebody in the beginning was asking questions in a particular way that enabled other members in the group to share and find new ways of understanding themselves. You actually shared a bit of that—a woman brings a friend to the group and [when the going gets rough in the group she gives her] some support. It would be interesting to know what that support was [and if it fostered the building of second order processes].”

Sunflower Co-op

Cobb described three aspects of this narrative: 1) group formation; 2) frames for understanding what happened; and 3) bureaucracy, work slow-down, and views related to dependence on outside agency.

Group formation:

This group was composed of 150 men and women. They lived on a large piece of land where the men did the heavy work and the women took care of kids and did the planting of crops. United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR), in an attempt to keep the community together and prevent a refugee situation, formed the group and provided farm equipment and irrigation technology.

Frames for understanding what happened:

The members of this group said that prior to the genocide they were very poor, and there were already resentments in the community toward people who had more or worked hard. After the genocide, there was much devastation, loss, and hunger. When asked why the genocide took place, the members of this community did not have a clearly articulated explanation except for the suggestion that it was due to these private resentments among individuals in the community.

Bureaucracy, work slow-down, and views related to dependence on outside agency:

After some assistance was given to them by UNHCR, the members of this community began to farm. However, they still needed sunflower presses. These presses were held up because of the UNHCR bureaucracy. It took 10 months to a year to have their request processed. In the meantime, the community began to figure out ways to deal with this problem and they began to be self-sufficient. Cobb indicated that to her surprise, the villagers did not view their

resourcefulness positively; instead, they said that their resourcefulness meant that UNHCR did not give them further resources. Cobb indicated that in this story, like in the bottle co-op, there is no second order process, sustainability, or generation, and the members of the group had “a non-agentic relationship to their own resources.”

Analysis

Cobb indicated that one of the most striking contrasts across the three projects was the presence of a liminal space in the widows group and its absence in the other two groups. This space was created where the women were crying about their losses together and “interactively witnessing each other.” The conversation here was not about “needs and interests;” instead, the women expressed mutual empathy in response to the grief expressed by its members.

Generalized and specific other

Drawing on the work of Seyla Benhabib, Cobb went on to attribute the widow coop’s success to their ability to engage with the “concrete other.” Benhabib makes the claim that the needs-interest conversation is problematic because it creates “the view [of the other] from nowhere.” That is, you do not gain an understanding of the “place” that the other person is coming from.

By taking the perspective of the other we mean taking the position of a generalized other. This is an analogized other, like somebody with that problem or [those] issues but not that person him or herself. Taking the perspective of the other removes us from the individuality or concreteness of the other. Unlike the generalized other, the specific other has a particular locality, specificity, and particular sufferings. ... The only way we connect with the other is through empathy ... This is the liminal space where something happens. It is a state in which we witness the concreteness of the other.

Furthermore, it is not possible to know the concreteness of the other indirectly—it must be witnessed. Thus, Benhabib “argues for witnessing the concreteness of the other. This in fact allows us to focus on differences. You cannot know the other without hearing their voice.” The widow’s coop was built on the foundation of “witnessing the concrete other.”

Reflective double voice

Drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin’s work (see Holquist 1990), Cobb identified two types of voice, which have different implications for an individual’s ability to witness and understand the conditions of a concrete other. Building on Bakhtin’s ideas, she articulated a third type of voice, which she believes may distinguish the widows group from the other two groups.

The two types of voices described in Bakhtin’s work are single and double voice.

Single voice

The speaker reports only on herself, e.g., “I am cold.” The experience of the other is absent in her account.

Double voice

The speaker makes another present in her account, e.g., “I stood in the middle of the village and I heard my mother tell me run, run, run. But I couldn’t run because I wanted to die.” Here, the speaker makes her mother present in her voice.

There are two types of double voice, described below.

Double passive voice:

E.g., “I heard my mother say run.” In this case, the speaker does not include any commentary concerning her relationship to her mother.

Double active voice:

In double active voice, “the speaker signals to the listener a relationship to the voice that is being presented.” What and how the speaker talks about the self in relation to the other is the basis of a secondary interpretation of the nature of the speaker’s relationship to the other (e.g., the speaker’s ambivalences, problematic aspects of the relationship, tensions experienced in the relationship).

Cobb went further to describe a third type of double voice, which she refers to as reflective double voice. “I was presenting at the seminar and Joyce asked me a question and it made me realize I had not contemplated that possibility. Here I am using what she said to reveal to my listener my curiosity about her or me. That made me wonder how much Joyce and I had in common. Here I am using the other to learn about me and I have done so in a reflective way. [When you say this in the presence of the other person,] what you get is enormous relational growth. The other person feels used or positioned in the conversation in a way that is affirming.”

Although currently lacking sufficient data, she hypothesized that the presence of reflective double voice among the members of the widows group may have distinguished them from the other two groups. The possibility that this type of voice was a distinguishing feature was indicated both in the narratives of the members of the widows group as well as how they related to the researcher. In contrast, the narratives of the members of the other two groups did not reveal the presence of a reflective double voice.

References and readings

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