

Negotiating Cultural Conflicts Over Sacred Values

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Abstract Most current approaches to negotiation of resource and political conflicts assume that parties to these conflicts are rational actors that weigh the costs and benefits of their choices, treat values as though they are fungible, and then act in a way that maximizes their benefits. However, recent research suggests that this is not the case. In other words, people do not treat all values as amenable to tradeoffs, but rather they distinguish between material values having to do with resource pricing and markets and sacred values that reside in the moral realm. Moreover, people seem to apply different reasoning to sacred vs. material values. Even more crucially, what is considered sacred and what is considered material varies among cultures. In this chapter we discuss research by us and others into the nature of sacred values in real world conflicts and the implications of the findings for ongoing political conflicts.

Keywords Sacred values • Material values • Negotiation • Political conflicts • Backfire effect

1 Introduction

Most current approaches to negotiation of resource and political conflicts assume that parties to these conflicts are rational actors that weigh the costs and benefits of their choices, treat values as though they are fungible, and then act in a way that maximizes their benefits (Atran, Medin, & Ross, 2005; Ginges, 1997; Varshney,

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2003). This approach has the benefit of elegance, and is attractive because it suggests consistent means of negotiating conflicts across cultures and contexts. However, a growing body of research suggests that it is often inaccurate in at least three respects. First, people do not treat all values as fungible. Instead, they seem to distinguish between the everyday values of the marketplace (mundane values) and what are often referred to as sacred or protected values (Baron & Spranca, 1997; Tetlock, 2003). Second, people seem to apply different rules when making decisions about mundane versus sacred values (Ginges & Atran, 2009a, 2009b; Ginges, Atran, Medin, & Shikaki, 2007). As we will show, not only are these types of values not fungible, but standard negotiation strategies that assume fungibility (by offering material incentives or disincentives to induce compromise) will often backfire and increase resistance to compromise. Third, because sacred values are cultural products – the distinction between what is mundane and what is sacred varies widely across cultural contexts – a great deal of cultural knowledge and sensitivity is required when seeking to achieve cooperative outcomes in cross-cultural interactions. In this chapter we discuss some research carried out by our team and others into sacred values and the way they influence cultural and political conflicts. Specifically we will describe research into (1) the nature of sacred values in real world conflicts, (2) how current approaches to conflict negotiation may backfire when the conflict is over sacred values, (3) factors that may decrease opposition to compromising sacred values, and (4) the political implications of sacred values research and its application to ongoing political conflicts.

2 What Are Sacred Values?

“The sacred and profane are always and everywhere conceived by the human intellect as separate genera, as two worlds with nothing in common . . . They are different in kind . . . The mind experiences a deep repugnance about mingling”

–Emile Durkheim, *The elementary forms of religious life*

What does it mean for a value to be a “sacred value”? From one perspective the answer is simple and consistent across the literature. Most investigations into sacred values ask people to measure their commitments to different values along a material metric (e.g., how many jobs would be worth destroying an old-growth rainforest?). If people refuse to answer such questions, and they often do, they are said to be claiming sacred values – values protected from material tradeoffs (Baron & Spranca, 1997; Ginges et al., 2007; Tetlock, Kristel, Elson, Green, & Lerner, 2000). From another perspective there is disagreement. Some scholars interpret refusal to put a monetary value onto something as claims of infinite worth. This interpretation has led to the contention that sacred values are merely pseudosacred because infinite value is relatively easy to disprove. On logical grounds it is difficult to understand how people could have multiple infinite commitments to different values. Moreover, although people apparently have absolute commitment to sacred values when asked

how much money it might take for them to trade off such values (so called taboo tradeoffs), they will show a great deal more flexibility when asked to do things like tradeoff one sacred value for another (so called tragic tradeoffs; Baron & Leshner, 2000; Tetlock, 2003).

In our research we have interpreted refusals to measure sacred values along material metrics differently and more directly, arguing that such refusals should be taken at face value: as claims that some values occupy a domain separate from that of the marketplace and that these values are non-fungible with marketplace values. Emile Durkheim, in his classic work *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912/1954), argued that the sacred domain in religious life was defined by its very separation from the profane. Durkheim maintained that within each of these domains things can have relative value – just as some economic values are worth more than others so to some sacred things are more sacred than others. However, he suggested that the sacred and non-sacred cannot be valued along some common scale – and that any attempt to do so would result in a “deep repugnance”.

... the sacred and the profane are always and everywhere conceived by the human intellect as separate genre, as two worlds with nothing in common... They are different in kind (Durkheim, 1912/1995, p. 36).

While Durkheim deals with religion specifically, the tendency to partition the world into “sacred” and “profane” domains likely extends beyond religious life. There is a long tradition in the social sciences of making a distinction between the domains of the sacred and the profane (Iliev et al., 2009). Even the most non-religious believe that some things – the life of their child, love, old-growth rainforests – cannot be valued along some material metric. Both Mary Douglas (1966) and Marea Eliade (1957) suggest that our need to distinguish between sacred and non-sacred derives from a broader need to orientate ourselves in a messy, untidy and ambiguous universe. In the light of this discussion we can interpret refusals to value things along material metrics not as claims to infinite instrumental worth, but more directly as claims to the existence of different non-fungible domains that are bound by different and often incompatible rules (Ginges & Atran, 2009a, 2009b).

In this chapter we review research into sacred values that had two goals. First, we wished to test these two different conceptualizations of what it means to hold a sacred value. Second, we wished to investigate the way sacred values influence the trajectory of real world conflicts. To accomplish this we investigated the way people reason about compromising sacred values in experiments conducted in real world settings where our participants were key players in different disputes and for whom the sacred values of interest were significantly important to their lives.

3 The Backfire Effect

The notion that sacred values are “pseudosacred” seems to run counter to much historical, if anecdotal, evidence to the contrary: people undergoing severe deprivation and killing others in the name of abstract ideals such as nation, freedom, or

God (Ginges, 1997). A monk's self immolation, or a suicide bomber's sacrifice of life while killing others suggests that people will resist material incentives to compromise (Ginges & Atran, 2011; Ginges, Atran, Sachdeva, & Medin, 2011; Ginges, Hansen, & Norenzayan, 2009). However, most negotiation strategies assume that people make decisions based on some type of cost-benefit analysis. Thus, in order to increase the support for a proposed deal in a negotiation setting the benefits are increased, often by offering financial incentives for giving up important claims. A contemporary illustration is the case of the nuclear dispute between the U.S. and Iran. The U.S. has offered trade concessions to persuade Iran to give up its nuclear ambitions, which appears to be an emerging sacred value for Iran.

One initial goal of our research was to develop an experimental paradigm that could investigate the effect of material incentives to compromise over values considered sacred. In a series of experiments we first focused on the Israeli Palestinian conflict, running field experiments with Israeli settlers, Palestinian refugees, and Palestinian students who identified strongly with Hamas (Ginges et al., 2007).

Each was asked to give up something important to them in exchange for peace (the taboo deal). For example: 601 Israeli Settlers (who often believe that Eretz Ysrael—the territory roughly comprising Israel, the West bank, and Gaza—was promised to them by God) were asked to give up some of the land in favor for a two state solution; 535 Palestinian refugees were asked to compromise on the “right of return” to their hometowns and properties in Israel left in the war of 1967; and 719 Palestinian students were asked to compromise on their claim on East Jerusalem, which most Palestinians see as the capital of a future Palestinian state. Using a between subjects design, half the participants in each experiment were randomly assigned to a deal (see Table 1) that included added material compensation to “sweeten the deal” (of the taboo ± deal). The incentive was either personal (e.g. money for each Palestinian family) or collective (e.g. money to the Palestinian people).

None of our participants were agreeable to such deals. To determine whether the issues invoked sacred values we asked participants, in separate questions in a different part of the survey, whether they could imagine any compromise over these issues to bring some great gain to their people. Those who answered “no” were considered to be claiming a sacred value.

Importantly, the material offer backfired for those who considered the given issue sacred. These participants reacted with greater anger and disgust (i.e. moral outrage), and showed significant increases in support for violent opposition to the deals (e.g. by supporting bombing campaigns) when material compensations were offered for compromising on the sacred issue. In contrast, those participants who were against the deals, but for whom the issues were not sacred, responded in the opposite manner; for these participants material incentives significantly reduced moral outrage and support for violent opposition.

This backfire effect of material incentives to compromise sacred values is not restricted to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and can occur even when the materially improved nature of the taboo + deal is transparent. For example in one study carried out in Indonesia, we surveyed a sample of students attending four different

Table 1 Sample scenarios of proposed Israeli and Palestinian trade-offs for peace

Sample	Deal type		
	Taboo deal	Taboo + deal	Symbolic deal
Israeli Settlers	Israel would recognize the historic and legitimate right of Palestinian refugees to return	The people of Israel would be able to live in peace and prosperity, free of the threat of war or terrorism	Palestinians would recognize the historic and legitimate right of the Jewish people to Eretz Israel
Palestinian refugees	Palestinians would recognize the historic and legitimate right of the Jewish people to Israel	The Palestinian people would be able to live in peace and prosperity, free of the threat of Israeli violence and aggression	Israel would recognize the historic legitimacy of the right of return
Palestinian students	Palestinians would recognize the sacred and historic right of the Jewish people to Israel	Israel will pay Palestine one billion US dollars a year for 10 years	Israel would recognize the historic legitimate right of the Palestinians to their own state and would apologize for all the wrongs done to the Palestinian people

Table 2 Sample taboo and taboo + deals presented to Indonesian sample

Deals	
Taboo	The United States and the European Union would agree to recognize the right of the Moslem Brotherhood to lead the government of Indonesia if elected in a free and fair manner, as long as there was agreement that Indonesia would not be ruled strictly according to sharia.
Taboo +	In return the United States and the European Union would give Indonesia a privileged trade agreement, resulting in substantial economic benefits to our people

madrassahs (Muslim boarding schools) that were associated with or founded by different elements of the Islamic political movement in that country (Ginges & Atran, 2009a). In the last few decades, Indonesia has seen a considerable degree of separatist and communal violence along ethnic and religious lines. Between 1990 and 2003, these intergroup conflicts claimed almost 10,000 casualties, and over one million people were displaced internally. One aspect of this conflict included militant Islamist groups fighting other factions with the goal of reorganizing Indonesian society following the rules of sharia (strict Islamic law).

We interviewed 102 students attending four different madrassahs Darussalam, Al-Husainy, Ibnu Mas'ud, and Al-Islam. All schools were associated with Islamic political movements. We asked the participants in our study to respond to different hypothetical deals (see Table 2), the first of which involved international recognition

for the right of the Moslem Brotherhood to lead Indonesia if they would give up the claim for rule by sharia. After assessing the participants' support for violent opposition against this deal, they were then offered the same deal with an additional material incentive (a privileged trade agreement with the United States and the European Union that would hugely benefit the Indonesian economy).

As in the case of the Israeli-Palestinian survey, the material incentive backfired. Participants rejected this offer more strongly than the offer without a material incentive, and showed higher support for violent opposition to the deal. These findings suggest that it is beneficial for negotiators to have a culturally sensitive understanding of issues under dispute. Commitment to very important but non-sacred issues appears to be flexible in the face of material incentives. However issues that are perceived to be sacred appear to obey a different logic. Here material incentives seem to violate a taboo against measuring commitment to sacred values along a material metric. For sacred values, material incentives can backfire. What then might negotiators do when cooperative outcomes require that one or both parties to a dispute compromise a sacred value?

4 The Symbolic Aspect of Intergroup Conflict

Although material incentives to compromise sacred values will often backfire, this should not be taken as meaning that sacred values can never be compromised. Along with anecdotal evidence showing peoples inflexibility over sacred values, there are many examples of compromise. To take one example, for many years in Israel there was a near unanimous consensus that it was taboo for Israelis to meet with the Palestine Liberation Organization, a taboo broken during the Oslo peace negotiations when Yitzach Rabin shook the hands of Yasir Arafat in 1993. One goal of our research is to investigate the contexts and mechanisms underlying compromise over sacred values.

Given the failure of material incentives to induce flexibility over sacred values, we began to focus on incentives that may not violate the taboo against measuring commitment to sacred values along material metrics. In experiments conducted in the West Bank and Gaza, we have examined whether opposition to peace deals involving compromise over sacred values is softened if the other side offers not material compensation but a strong symbolic concession over one of their own sacred values.

Using the matched samples described in the previous section (e.g. Israeli settlers, Palestinian refugees and Palestinian students) we examined opposition to two types of peace deals (see Table 1) in between-subjects experiments: the taboo deals previously described and the taboo deals plus symbolic concessions (symbolic deals) instead of material incentives. Symbolic concessions included recognizing the narrative of the other side, or symbolic renunciations of aspects of sacred values. The effect of these symbolic trade-offs (or gestures) was striking. Participants for

whom the deals invoked sacred values, whose response to deals hardened when offered material incentives, softened when offered symbolic concessions: in the symbolic condition participants showed significantly less opposition to the deals, less emotional outrage and less support for violence compared to those in the taboo condition. Significantly, the effect of symbolic effort appears mediated by reduced feelings of humiliation on the part of those asked to compromise their sacred values (Ginges & Atran, 2008). More generally, these results highlight the motivation of balanced agreements (Malhotra & Ginges, 2010). In the studies we have just described balanced means not so much the degree of compromise each side makes but refers instead to the domain of compromise.

It seems then that perceiving the other side as making a symbolic but difficult gesture may be an important breakthrough for successful negotiations in intractable conflicts. A symbolic gesture such as the recognition of the historic right of the Jewish people or recognition of the right of the Palestinians to their own state can take the negotiation process a step further towards reconciliation.

This discussion of the importance of symbolic aspects of intergroup conflicts and negotiations should not be taken as a minimization of the material aspect of many of these conflicts. Clearly, the resolution of intergroup conflict needs to account for material needs. However, dealing with the symbolic aspect of conflicts, including conflicts over sacred values, needs greater attention. Importantly, often those involved in difficult intergroup conflicts where religious and ethnic rights appear to collide often emphasize the symbolic.

To take one example, consider a study we ran with a sample of Lebanese Christians in the summer of 2007. Due to a growing Shiite and Sunni population and an increase in Christian emigration, Christians have found themselves a new minority in Lebanon (Obeid, 2010). Following the Israeli-Hezbollah July war of 2006, tension rose between Christian and Muslim sects living in Lebanon. Cultural and political tensions between the Maronite and Orthodox Christian denominations and the Shia and Sunni Muslim denominations respectively are pervasive in Lebanese society. They manifest in issues such as the power of Hezbollah, Muslim vs. Christian political representation, and the external influence of Iran, Syria and the U.S.

In this study we asked 60 Lebanese Christians, “What do you think the other communities need to do for conflicts within Lebanon to be resolved?” Most participants responded in terms of symbolic concessions rather than economic or specific needs (see Table 3). Specifically, 60% of responses pertained to recognition and acceptance of others (e.g., “acceptance of others”, “tolerance for others”, “communicating with others”, “respect others”, “open-mindedness”). Forty percent of responses pertained to loyalty to Lebanon over external allegiance or sectarianism (e.g., “interest of Lebanon first before Iran, Saudi, USA”, “disconnect from regionalism”, “separation from external countries, care for Lebanon first, be Lebanese first”). In contrast only 17% pertained to material aspects – such as the need to disarm militias or a fair share of power between sects.

Table 3 Typical symbolic and material concessions listed by Lebanese Christians in response to the question, “What do you think the other communities need to do for conflicts within Lebanon to be resolved?”

Symbolic concessions	Material concessions
Tolerance for others	Disarmament of Shia
Open-mindedness	Civic education systems
Respect for others	Fair share of power
Loyalty to Lebanon	Departure of Palestinians

5 Summary and Implications

These research findings suggest that it is necessary to obtain culturally sensitive understandings of the impact of sacred values on decision-making, particularly in negotiation settings. Mistakenly treating sacred values as very important regular values can potentially lead to significant problems: offering a material tradeoff in exchange for a sacred value can spur outrage, potentially derailing negotiations (e.g. the backfire effect). Importantly, sacred values can arise almost anywhere, as with the case of the nuclear issue in Iran, and abortion or even health care in the U.S.

Understanding which values within a conflict are sacred thus becomes necessary for negotiators. We are developing a locally adapted survey prototype to aid in the identification of relevant sacred values in specific contexts. The survey can be used to measure issues for which people will not make material tradeoffs; it may also seek to gauge whether parties to the conflict are aware of which values are sacred to the other side.

6 Implementation Challenges and Potential Solutions

We believe these studies add to a rich literature documenting significant cultural differences in how people represent the nature of conflict and negotiation contexts that influence expectations, goals, and biases (for reviews see Gelfand, Erez, & Aycan, 2007; Imai & Gelfand, 2009). Our work emphasizes the importance of understanding culturally specific representations of the nature of the issues under dispute. There are several ways that the findings herein can be useful to negotiators. Given the potential for the backfire effect, sacred values that are not central to the negotiation should be kept away from key negotiation points if at all possible. While this may seem obvious, it may be difficult. Negotiators may be mindful of mixing the sacred and profane during negotiations, but marginalized interest groups and factions hold incentives to deliberately try to mix the two; precisely to achieve backfire. The best strategy in such cases is to constantly bring discussion back to the hard material issues at hand.

When values identified as sacred are already entangled with the core issues, research suggests that they will best be dealt with via a non-material approach, or perhaps, a symbolic concession. As discussed in the previous section, research suggests that simply recognizing another stakeholder's sacred value—a form of symbolic concession—may pave the way for material discussion. Of course, such recognition has to be perceived as significant and valuable for both sides. In the Israel/Palestine studies described earlier, both sides have made clear that symbolic recognition of core values is a vital stepping stone to dispute resolution; thus, these particular symbolic concessions worked well in those contexts.

We recognize that getting polarized groups to recognize the most sacred values of the other side may be extraordinarily difficult from a political standpoint, requiring sensitive negotiation and mediating strategies within factions of each party to a conflict. It may even be the case that not recognizing a value known to be sacred to the other side is a sacred value for one of the parties—or its constituents. Moreover, policymakers may perceive symbolic recognition as a first step toward material concessions, and block the move.

As they are trying to foresee or manage such difficulties, it may be useful for negotiators to be aware of the political factors that make it more or less possible for stakeholders to block symbolic concessions. One critical factor is the internal stability and political structure of each stakeholder. These structural circumstances will affect how leadership proceeds at the negotiating table. For instance, consider a situation where multiple factions are competing for power within a weak state. For these factions, there is one primary means of “outbidding” their competitors: to attack the competition's “moderate” political moves as traitorous. In some contexts, recognizing the enemy can be considered taboo. For leaders in these situations, even if the majority of the population supports them, recognizing the pain or validity of the other side may mean political suicide. As we noted earlier, despite such difficulties leaders can be successful in breaking such taboos – the Israeli recognition of the Palestine Liberation Organization during the 1990s being one such example.

7 Future Research

Sacred values present an exciting direction for future research. Given that the findings discussed within this chapter are relatively new, many questions remain unanswered.

For instance, what is the nature of a sacred value? We know that sacred values have different attributes than material values, but what does that mean? Are they processed in the same ways that moral intuitions are, or do they have their own rules of activation? Similarly, when we say that sacred values are “protected from tradeoffs” (in contrast to material values), it seems to imply that they cannot have relative value. And yet, as we have argued previously in this chapter, just because

they operate within a different domain does not mean they cannot be ranked. Our survey research in Israel and the Palestinian Territories has begun to show that such rankings exist. What are the operating rules for these values?

Given the tremendous implications of sacred values, two questions hold special urgency for future research. First, what causes sacred values and how do they form? With the case of Iran (Dehghani et al., 2009), we observed two important things: first, sacred values can form rather quickly; second, they appear to be prompted as much by outgroup resistance as by the issue itself. In Iran, popular support for the nuclear issue appeared to take on SV properties for some elements of the population within a matter of months. Factors leading to SV formation might have included any of the following (the list is not exhaustive): narratives that link resource issues to matters of identity; insecurity related to resource constraints, compounded by threats from the outside; a pervasive sense of impaired collective esteem within a people or nation following a defeat, broadly defined; or any social conflict where one group feels less powerful than another—perhaps inequity in the status quo encourages one group to conceptualize the conflict on a moral plane.

Second, sacred values can also be defused. As discussed earlier in this chapter, promising new research points to the possibility that an adversary's recognition of a sacred value—via acknowledgment or apology—may help return negotiation to a more instrumental plane.

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