"Good-Enough" Isn't So Bad: Thinking About Success and Failure in Ethnic Conflict Management

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Daily headlines demonstrate the importance of increasing our understanding of conflict management success in ethnic disputes. Too often, whether in everyday conversations or in scholarly discussion, we communicate despair and find few genuine successes. This article develops a more complex conceptualization of success drawing on psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott’s notion of the “good-enough mother.” Winnicott’s work stimulates valuable insights regarding four key aspects of ethnic conflict management: the definition of success, the importance of identity issues, the empowerment of the parties, and the importance of third parties in changing the relationship among opponents. The concept of “good-enough conflict management” emphasizes that successful ethnic conflict management is possible but, at the same time, that normal, inherent tensions will continue to exist in any relationship between actors with independent identities and goals. It draws attention to constructive conflict management as a developmental, transformative process (often a long one) involving changes in both the expressed interests and the disputants’ interpretations of the conflict, and it emphasizes the importance of building institutions and practices, often with third party assistance, which allow the parties to deal with tensions and differences constructively.

There is a widespread perception that ethnic conflicts are the central threat to peace and justice in the post–Cold War world (Gurr & Harff, 1994; Huntington, 1993). Accompanying this view is the commonly held belief that there is little meaningful action that can be taken to prevent such conflicts or manage them constructively (e.g., Kaplan, 1993). In this article, I challenge the latter assumption, arguing that while ethnic conflicts are rarely fully resolved, it is far from inevitable that they will be violent, destructive, and uncontrollable. Therefore, we need to reconceptualize
Ethnic conflict and its management in order to develop strategies for preventing escalation and to help groups already in conflict to move their relationship in constructive directions.

Ethnic conflicts arise when group interests are challenged, identities are threatened, and communication is sufficiently poor that differences cannot be effectively addressed (Ross, in press-a). While popular images emphasize ethnic conflict as neverending, social scientists challenge the idea that ethnic conflicts are necessarily primordial, bitter, and unresolvable for three reasons. First, the ethnographic and historical literature has many examples of societies in which ethnic conflict is managed constructively, and it is by no means the case that destructive violence necessarily develops in ethnic disputes. Second, ethnic groups are not fixed homogeneous entities; rather, the definition and composition of ethnic groups and the specific focus of conflicts between groups change over time (Anderson, 1983; Gans, 1979; Horowitz, 1985). Third, cultural and social, not biological, features of the group are at the core of ethnic conflict (Eller, 1999; Ross, 1991). As a result, ethnic conflicts are defined around specific interests, but often just as central are issues of identity and perceived threats to existence (Ross, 1995).

How we think and talk about ethnic conflict is crucial in shaping what we do to settle these conflicts. Images of ethnic rivalries as almost-biological, ancient hatreds that cannot be settled are not ones that encourage bold peacemaking initiatives; rather they easily produce self-fulfilling prophecies in which outsiders accept or even encourage the expression of ethnic hostilities. In contrast, this article sets forth a concept of good-enough conflict management derived from British psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott’s image of the good-enough mother. It is a deliberate effort to challenge pessimistic images and to offer one in which ethnic conflict management is not only possible, but often effective. The conception of success I develop is one that is partial, ongoing, and progressive and meaningful to people caught in long-term conflicts. It emphasizes that good-enough conflict management occurs when groups create institutions and processes to handle their differences better than they had in the past and in a way likely to lead to continuing improvement.

Winnicott’s concept of the good-enough mother has struck a highly responsive chord in modern psychoanalysis and draws our attention to the characteristics of mothers whose behaviors successfully provide their children with a sense of self and the capacity to move through the earliest stages of development. The term and Winnicott’s discussion of it make it clear that he believes that most mothers are good enough and that there is a range of acceptable mothering behavior rather than a few key actions on which the success of child rearing depends (c.f., Winnicott, 1965, 1988).1 Winnicott makes it clear that good-enough mothering need not be perfect and, ironically, that perfect is not even desirable.

1Winnicott sometimes (1988) uses the term “ordinary devoted mother” in its place.
Winnicott’s concept of the good-enough mother has had a significant impact on how psychoanalysis understands development. Similarly, the concept of good-enough conflict management can contribute greatly to our understanding of ethnic conflict and its management. I argue that the concept helps us better understand what success in ethnic conflict management entails and also helps us to develop criteria for and identify behaviors that produce good-enough ethnic conflict management. I draw on Winnicott in two ways: first, I use the concept of “good-enough” to suggest new ways to think about conflict management; second, I apply to conflict management some of Winnicott’s specific ideas about the healthy transformation of a relationship.

Good-enough conflict management will not take the same form or produce the same outcomes in all places. For example, consider the movements toward ethnic peacemaking in South Africa, the Middle East, and Northern Ireland in the 1990s. Without suggesting that each of these conflicts is settled, one can easily make the case that the parties have made significant strides toward improving their relationship, although through somewhat different processes. Just as important is that the three peace processes contain very different visions of the desired relationship between groups: in South Africa, there is an emphasis on integration and individual equality; in the Middle East, there is a movement toward recognition and political separation; and in Northern Ireland, there is a stress on building effective pluralism. Each offers a different image of success with a different response to the issue of identity in terms of assimilation versus differentiation.

Good-enough conflict management is both more and less than formal peace agreements between opponents because the concept refers to both the process by which ethnic conflicts are managed and the outcomes of conflict management efforts. Good-enough conflict management is a developmental, transformative process (often a long one) involving changes in both the expressed interests and the disputants’ interpretations of the conflict; it involves many small steps that alter the parties’ relationship and improve how they deal with each other in the future. The results of good-enough ethnic conflict management are the empowerment of the parties and the development of institutions and practices—both formal and informal—that allow people in the same state or in neighboring states to live together without daily fear of violence, intimidation, or systematic discrimination. Good-enough conflict management is not about achieving a settlement of all outstanding issues; rather, it recognizes that tensions and real differences in intergroup relations are normal and seeks to help the parties develop institutions and practices so that they can be addressed constructively in an ongoing manner.

The lessons about good-enough conflict management are relevant both for the disputing parties and for third party facilitators working to diminish a conflict’s in-
tensity. Winnicott’s ideas about developmental change in relationships in which power differences exist draw our attention to the process by which two-party relationships are transformed. Ultimately, the parties must take responsibility—both politically and emotionally—for significant long-term changes, but third parties can play a meaningful role in this process. Agreements and changes in the perceptions of opponents and their motives are hard to achieve, and third parties play a central role in getting a constructive process started and in empowering the disputants so they can take responsibility for making and implementing significant changes themselves.

By ethnic group I refer to a people with a shared ideology of kinship, common interests, and a common identity. Horowitz (1985) points out that the language of ethnicity is the language of kinship; the ethnic group is conceived as the family writ large. At the same time, it is important not to confuse the language with which ethnic ties are expressed and the actual degree of relatedness among co-ethnics. In the contemporary world, where groups are often large and heterogeneous, cultural markers such as language, food, clothing, and religious practices assume critical importance in the identification of ethnic group members in place of the kinship ties and personal acquaintances that operate as major recognition mechanisms only in small communities. Therefore ethnicity is not defined exclusively on the basis of particular physical or cultural attributes, but also includes subjective elements derived from common identity that transform shared characteristics into a sense of common fate. This linking process provides a particular emotional intensity to group differences and becomes the basis for collective action undertaken in the name of the group.

I begin by briefly describing Winnicott’s concept of the good-enough mother. In the section following, I use the concept to generate ideas about what comprises good-enough ethnic conflict management and what constitutes success and failure in efforts to settle intransigent disputes. I explore reasonable criteria of success and failure, point out the need for multiple indicators, and stress the importance of language in defining success and failure. Next, I address the issues of identity and power inequality in ethnic conflict and their importance for how we think about good-enough conflict management. Finally, I use Winnicott’s perspective to ask how third parties can help make ethnic conflict management good enough.

THE GOOD-ENOUGH MOTHER

Winnicott was tremendously interested in how an infant comes to understand his or her own world, gradually seeing him- or herself as an independent actor in it. At the core of the infant’s environment for Winnicott (1965) is the functional mother—the child’s primary caretaker, who may or may not be his or her biological parent. The infant and mother form a social unit in which the mother’s actions are particularly critical in assisting the child to develop as it moves from a state of merger with the
mother to one in which he or she perceives the mother and other objects as external to him- or herself. In this process, the infant moves from absolute dependence, characterized by feeling little or no control over the care he or she receives, to far greater independence, characterized by a capacity to perform vital physical functions alone and the accumulation of images of the world that can be controlled and manipulated internally. Crucial to this process is the mother’s capacity to meet the infant’s basic physiological needs: to offer a relationship that “is reliable in a way that implies the mother’s empathy” (1965, p. 48) and to ward off the infant’s anxiety, threats of isolation, and fears of annihilation.

Winnicott describes how good-enough mothers respond to a child’s social needs and help the child to develop and practice the social skills important for successful interaction with others later in life. Good-enough mothers are especially critical for the establishment of firm object relations in their provision of trust and security through their responsiveness and reliability. At the same time, healthy development requires that the merger of infant and mother give way to a separation in which the infant actively signals its needs to the mother rather than having them filled only on the basis of empathy (1965e). While the young child seeks differentiation (what Mahler, Pine, and Bergman [1975] call separation and individuation), this quest is, at times, accompanied by overwhelming fears. Hence, there is an important need for children to accomplish the differentiation between themselves and their mothers progressively, and the mother’s behavior is critical to the child’s developing the confidence to take the necessary steps.

Winnicott (1958) argued that one important way in which this is managed is through what he calls “transitional objects and other transitional phenomena”—teddy bears, soft pieces of cloth, and other items that represent the mother in her absence. Holding and snuggling these treasured items allows a child to evoke symbolically the mother’s presence when she is physically elsewhere and represents a way to ward off threatened losses in the external world through internal possession and control. Bringing images of valued parts of the external world inside where they can be guarded and manipulated is reassuring, and the internalization of valued objects through transitional processes is a crucial step in the mediation between internal and external worlds and in the social construction of reality (Weinstein, 1989). Responsive mothering strengthens a child’s capacity to feel secure while alone.3

Four features of Winnicott’s concept of the good-enough mother potentially have important implications for ethnic conflict management in terms of the transformation of the relationship among opponents and for third parties who are involved as facilitators.

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3Applegate argues that while the use of transitional objects is widespread, it is not a universal mechanism. It tends “to appear in sociocultural and family contexts where children’s autonomy is positively valued and reinforced in childrearing practices.” He also suggests that in other settings “other less observable manifestations of transitional relatedness may be present” (1989, p. 50).
1. Winnicott emphasizes that there is variety of ways to be successful, not just a single model of success, in part because not all mothers or children are the same. This has important implications for how we conceptualize both the process and outcomes of conflict management. It encourages considering multiple “paths to peace” and differentiated outcomes appropriate to the parties and the context, rather than thinking we can uncover a single approach that can be applied to a wide range of conflicts. The brief reference to South Africa, the Middle East, and Northern Ireland previously mentioned suggests the very different forms that ethnic peacemaking can take.

2. Too often, analyses of ethnic conflict focus only on providing a “fair” resolution of the manifest interests of the two parties without attention to more deep-seated needs and fears. Winnicott’s model is built around two parties whose identities become increasingly differentiated as they engage issues of separation and individuation. Application of Winnicott’s model forces us to address the importance of identity and to realize that successful conflict management often involves supporting, and perhaps separating, rather than merging the identities of the two groups as ethnic communities struggle with the question of how they are similar and how they are different. Ultimately, his perspective encourages exploring preconditions for healthy development of group identity including external recognition, increasing differentiation, mutual support, and ritual expression as relationships change over time and groups respond to each other.

3. Perfection is not necessary or even healthy. Applegate points out that Winnicott (1988) emphasizes that it’s crucial that the caregiver be only good-enough, not perfect. As he views it, a perfect mother would not promote development. Were she always to attend perfectly to her baby’s needs, there would be no reason to relinquish the illusion of omnipotence and move toward independence. It’s the gaps in care—the spaces, if you will—that invite the baby’s self-sufficiency, via the transitional object. (Applegate, personal communication)

As Winnicott says, “In time the baby begins to need the mother to fail to adapt—this failure being also a gradual process that cannot be learned from books. It would be irksome for a human child to go on experiencing [the mother’s] omnipotence when the apparatus has arrived which can cope with frustrations and relative environmental failures” (1988, p. 8). Mothers, in this view, are ironically no longer good enough when they are too good, when they produce what might be fine short-term outcomes, but in so doing, fail to foster the child’s growth and empowerment in the long run. Failure can come from two directions: too much support and control are constraining, while excessive autonomy provokes deep fears of abandonment. The relevance for ethnic conflict management is that effective conflict management creates institutions and practices to enable the parties to ad-
dress ongoing issues rather than aiming to construct one-time fixes imposed on disputants by third parties.

4. Winnicott emphasizes the importance of empowerment in the developmental process and draws our attention to the role of symbolic and ritual mechanisms in its achievement. His model begins with two parties who are initially very unequal in power and whose healthy development requires reducing these power differences and redefining their relationship. How this is done in any dyadic relationship revolves around issues of differentiation and autonomy. To be successful, the parties themselves must accept the responsibility for, and the hard work of, changing a relationship for development to succeed. Although third parties are often critical to moving peacemaking, peacekeeping or peace building forward, ironically their long-term ability to produce significant change can be limited when they are so powerful that they make decisions for the parties or act in such a way that the parties no longer feel responsible for their fate. Third parties are most helpful from Winnicott’s perspective when they create the context for or design a process in which the disputing parties must focus on their own relationship and when the parties themselves take responsibility for developing and implementing an agreement.

GOOD-ENOUGH CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

My goal in focusing on criteria of success is both theoretical and political. The theoretical goal is to better understand the institutions, practices, and worldviews associated with the constructive management of ethnic conflict (Ross, 1993b) and to expand our awareness of existing successes, including those that are partial. Success needs to be studied in its own right; there is no reason to believe we can learn what we need to know about conflict management indirectly through analyses of failures. By talking about successful ethnic conflict management, we can build models that identify specific strategies applicable to a wide range of conflicts and become aware of the distinctive institutions and practices found in relatively peaceful societies where high violence and conflict are not a feature of daily life (Ross, 1993b, chapter 3). My political goal is to increase public awareness that ethnic groups often live together successfully and that effective conflict management can occur even in settings with long histories of conflict and violence. Exploring the concept of good-enough conflict management will provide a more nuanced notion of what successful conflict management entails and a language to describe it.

Success as a continuum

Popular judgments about the success or failure of ethnic conflict management are often dichotomous, focusing on the presence or absence of a signed peace agree-
ment, legislation, or a new constitution. This view implies that formal governmental actions are of primary importance and that until very high levels of peacefulness and cooperation occur, conflict resolution has failed. In contrast, the focus on process and building capacity for groups to manage conflict constructively on a regular basis is more consistent with the idea of success and failure as a continuum rather than a dichotomy. The process of good-enough intergroup conflict management sets relations on a better course. Empowering the parties, it provides incentives to identify what they want from each other and what they are prepared to give in return themselves. It contains sufficient reinforcement for changes in behavior, institutional changes, shifts in attitudes, and future initiatives—different dimensions by which we can measure success.

Good-enough conflict management as a process

The concept of good-enough conflict management draws attention not only to outcomes of conflict management, but also to features of the process. It recognizes that success means continuing interactions with real tensions and differences that are constructively managed. Constructive conflict management, in this view, is a long-term, transformative, and empowering process involving changes in disputants’ expressed interests and their interpretations of the conflict and emphasizing the small steps that contribute to changes in intergroup behavior (Boardman and Horowitz, 1994; Bush and Folger, 1994; Deutsch, 1973; Ross 1993b). The concept of good-enough conflict management recognizes the importance of many small, self-sustaining steps—what Rothman (1992) calls “pieces of peace”—to improve a situation without necessarily getting everything right at once. It is also fully consistent with what we know about the efficacy of incremental decision-making strategies when dealing with complex problems (Lindbloom, 1965; Wildavsky, 1979).

Good-enough conflict management is important in getting parties in conflict to the point where they can negotiate a settlement, but it is equally relevant in a postsettlement phase, with its hard work of implementing an agreement. The negotiated agreements in South Africa, the Middle East, and Northern Ireland were all important steps in changing these conflicts, but these cases also show the importance of postsettlement conflict resolution work in changing the daily relationships among groups in local communities. Issues such as policing, access to services, political rights, economic access, and trusting opponents to adhere to an agreement are particularly important in determining whether a settlement is successfully implemented or not.

Systematic data could help us evaluate two additional, plausible hypotheses that might expand our understanding of good-enough ethnic conflict management. One is that there is rarely, if ever, dramatic overnight improvement in ethnic group relations. Most change is incremental and modest. The second is that few situations ever shift from high to low conflict, at least in the short run, unless external
actors play a significant, but not controlling, role. Understanding successful ethnic conflict management means learning about specific incremental steps that lower the intensity of conflict, but it also helps participants and others develop the hope and patience necessary to achieve good solutions.

Criteria of good-enough conflict management

Deciding how successful any particular conflict management effort is involves a series of often implicit comparisons. The most severe criterion is that the outbreak of violent conflict is evidence of a prior failure. The best conflict management from this point of view heads off severe conflict before it starts. Although this may be the case, the focus here is on what is done once such a conflict begins. Elsewhere (Ross, 1993b, chapter 6), I discuss three criteria of success from the literature on conflict management (Deutsch, 1973; Pruitt & Rubin, 1986; Ury, Brett, & Goldberg, 1988): acceptance, the degree to which a solution is affirmed by the parties to a dispute; duration, the degree to which a solution lasts; and changed relations, the degree to which interaction between the disputants differs (in a positive way) before and after the dispute settlement. Each of these is partial, self-sustaining, and cumulative, and therefore fully consistent with the notion of good enough.

Good-enough conflict management sets group relations on a better course and helps the parties develop institutions and practices that can manage future conflict constructively. Because the specific interest and identity issues are context-specific for each conflict, it is important to develop conflict-specific indicators to decide if what the parties are doing is good enough or not. As a result, we can imagine measuring both the process and outcomes in conflict management and deciding when and how each is good enough.

The need for multiple indicators of success

Social scientists know that it is important to be skeptical when single indicators are used to measure complex processes such as ethnic relations, but popular judgments are often reduced to summary statements that focus on single dramatic events, such as a leader’s trip to a former enemy nation, or on only one level of analysis, such as negotiations among top political leaders. Hindsight makes it clear that evaluating the status of ethnic conflict and peacemaking in South Africa in 1992 only on the basis of Black deaths in the townships or White vigilante actions or deciding the condition of the conflict in Northern Ireland in 1993 in terms of continued paramilitary violence or the situation in the Middle East in 1997 on the basis of the Palestinian–Israeli failures to move forward in the negotiations would have been very misleading. What exactly do such measures indicate? Do they necessarily mean a deterioration in intercommunal relationships? Perhaps, but often these same behaviors are the strong reactions of rejectionists to changing or improving political
relations and, paradoxically, good, albeit indirect, indicators of movement toward formal settlement.

Because ethnic conflict is multidimensional, by focusing only on one level of analysis or one datum, no matter how dramatic, we ignore other levels or data that might tell a different, or at least a more nuanced, story. In addition, multiple indicators of the state of an ethnic conflict are needed to reveal how perceived realities vary across local contexts. For example, because group conflict may look very different at the national level and in large cities than it does in smaller towns, villages, and more remote regions, data on a conflict from only one of these locations can be very incomplete. This is consistent with John Whyte’s (1990) reading of the situation in Northern Ireland, where for a number of years many of the 26 local councils have practiced power sharing despite the lack of any cross-community political cooperation at the regional level. Multiple indicators identify kinds and degrees of success and can help us better understand exactly when and how a particular conflict management strategy produced a discernible improvement and whether this partial success increases the chances for producing more such changes in the future.

Conflict management can take many different forms with a wide range of goals (Ross, in press-a). Elsewhere, I have distinguished between conflict management strategies that focus on disputants’ competing interests and those that emphasize incompatible identities (Ross, 1993b). Some methods, such as third-party–assisted mediation or negotiation, focus on bridging interest differences, while others, such as problem-solving workshops, pay more attention to threatened identities. Focusing on interests requires the specification of goals, getting groups to prioritize among them, and searching for formulas whereby the most critical interests of each party are met—at least in part (Raiffa, 1982). Paying particular attention to identity involves recognition of each side’s identity, the development of empathy, building awareness of a joint fate and common needs, and construction of an image of what accommodation could involve (Kelman, 1978).

In conceptualizing success, we need to identify indicators that track changes in interests and interpretations. To gauge progress in interest-based negotiations, we should look for movement from general grievances to more specific demands that can be addressed. As the latter emerge, it becomes easier for parties to deal with each other. Other important indicators of success are the development of a clearer ranking of each party’s interests, the identification of inclusive interests that benefit all and that make intergroup agreements attractive, and the degree to which each side sees the other as flexible with respect to particular demands.4

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4The cross-cultural study of conflict management also showed that in constructive conflict-management societies, there is a tendency not to differentiate strongly between individual and community interests and an emphasis on harmonious social relationships, which meant that an interest in conflict management focused less on correcting past injustices than on promoting future social harmony (Ross, 1993b, chapter 3).
Measures of disputants’ changing interpretations would include the extent to which each side develops some degree of empathy (but not necessarily sympathy) for the other (White, 1984); the degree to which each side accepts an opponent’s existence (rather than wanting to see it destroyed or removed from the territory); the extent to which members of each community can conceptualize how they would be better off if there was intercommunal cooperation, as opposed to continued conflict; and the extent to which each community believes that its opponents understand, and accept, the other’s core needs. Kelman (1978), writing about the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, summarizes many of these changes in interpretations in his discussion of prerequisites for peacemaking that involve a mutual sense that there are issues to be talked about with the other side and people with whom such conversations can be productive. His analysis suggests that only when parties are sufficiently secure in their own identities are they sufficiently empowered to view the hardest issues in a conflict as negotiable.

Language as an indicator of good-enough conflict management

The language used to describe the management of ethnic conflicts can be viewed as both an indicator of our weakly developed understanding of the process of constructive conflict management and a partial cause of the widespread perception of failure itself. Language and metaphors are important to how we imagine conflict management possibilities and how the parties in conflict talk about, and interact with, each other. The Whorfian position is that language shapes our perceptions of reality (Whorf, 1956). To think about the language of ethnic conflict management, consider the purposes to which it is put.

In the area of ethnic conflict, good-enough conflict management is fostered when ordinary language and the disputants’ language include description of and names for different ways in which disputes can and have been successfully managed, when it offers images of mutual gain and ways to express a sense of common fate, and when it recognizes that conflict management is an ongoing process, not a single event. A language to describe constructive conflict management needs to include both readily available examples of past successes and powerful metaphors associated with success to which disputants and third parties can point.

Joint problem solving, even with skilled third-party assistance, is difficult to engage in successfully, especially in emotionally charged situations, and experience with language that is neither overly threatening nor disempowering is one of the specific skills individuals and groups need to manage conflicts constructively. Yet there is little reason to believe that many ethnic political leaders, whose experience has been in articulating sectarian grievances not in resolving them, possess this sensitivity to language or the skills to use language effectively in interactions with opponents. Negotiations with long-time adversaries without attention to the
capacities of negotiators can easily result in a great deal of moralistic position-taking, an overemphasis on one’s own demands, a high reliance on the language of rights, and insufficient attentiveness to the deeper needs and fears that the other side articulates. None of these is conducive to success. Kelman (1987) contends that in conflicts such as the Israeli–Palestinian one, bringing members of the two communities together in interactive problem-solving workshops is aimed at developing skills, including a vocabulary for talking to each other more constructively, and an understanding of each other’s core metaphors, to help them to deal with each other more constructively.

We can use language as an indicator by being alert to the specific changes in word choice and metaphors that are often detectable in the evolution of ethnic conflict. They can be particularly good indicators of the development of small, incremental shifts that open the possibilities for larger political agreements or for the successful implementation of agreements that have already been reached. In tracking conflict management, we would do well to look carefully at how leaders, as well as the public, talk about their own group and the other side and to pay particular attention when there are shifts in the nouns, adjectives, and metaphors used to discuss the conflict and the claims both opponents and one’s own group are making. Finally, we should be attentive to the extent to which culturally rooted images of peacemaking and peace building are introduced into political discourse and how they temper images of opponents.

Toward models of good-enough conflict management

Good-enough conflict management means that groups handle their differences better than they had in the past and in a way likely to lead to continuing improvement. Just as mothers can be good enough in a variety of ways, so too we can have more than one model of good-enough conflict management. An important task is spelling these models out and finding cases that exemplify them. One important dimension on which the models will vary is assimilation–differentiation.

Many Americans (but others as well, such as South Africans) emphasize models of good-enough ethnic conflict management that result in the diminished social and political salience of ethnic differences. Particularly in settings where ethnic communities do not have historical territories and where groups are dispersed, cultural and structural assimilation is appealing both morally and politically. In addition, it is frequently the goal of politically and culturally dominant groups and is consistent with most liberal notions of justice.

Assimilation is, it should be recognized, only one—often oversold—model of constructive ethnic relations. In many settings, integration, what some call structural assimilation, frightens minorities who have no desire to lose their distinct identities and ways of life. In many parts of the world, if assimilation is the only
route to peace that can be offered to the groups in conflict, there will not be many takers. Although assimilation is not a widespread phenomenon, it attracts great interest. One source of this let’s-end-group-differences argument is the extensive theorizing about how industrialization, modernization, and the cultural homogenization of the world render ethnicity obsolete. As Horowitz (1985) and others have pointed out, this argument is incorrect. Ethnicity will neither be simply washed away by secular forces nor is it likely to disappear when a dominant group tries to force a weaker one to assimilate. Integration does occur, but only under particular, and probably limited, circumstances. It cannot remain our major model of successful intergroup relations.

In addition to assimilation, we need to articulate appropriate models for pluralistic societies, models that show how ethnic groups can, and do, manage differences in constructive ways; we must show how constructive relations between ethnic communities can be consistent with the maintenance of profound differences between groups. This is important politically because there is little evidence that people look forward to the prospect of losing (or seeing their grandchildren lose) their group identity. There is much support, however, for the idea that groups in conflict would like to find ways to live together with less tension and conflict, and virtually all cultures have images of peaceful cooperation that can provide the ideological basis for such arrangements.

One way to create such models is by identifying examples of ethnic groups that were once at odds with each other but whose members now live relatively peacefully in the same society and asking what allowed them to change their relationship. One obvious starting point is postwar Europe, particularly French–German relations. We could also inquire about changing relations between Swedes and Norwegians since the 19th century, Catalans and the rest of Spain in the 20th century, and the management of regional identities in Italy and France.

Both historical and contemporary examples of good-enough ethnic relations can be identified at both local and state levels in all regions of the world. By asking what makes these relations good enough—rather than emphasizing why they are not perfect—we can then build empirically based models of success and, in so doing, try to distinguish between those factors that are present in virtually all of the situations and those that are more conditional—present on some occasions but not all of the time. If we examine both macrolevel conditions and microlevel variables found in specific conflict management initiatives we could develop theoretically refined models relevant in a variety of cultural settings.

Let me offer one example of what this can involve. In a recent analysis of conflict in preindustrial societies typically studied by anthropologists (Ross, 1993a) and a more intensive examination of five low-conflict societies (Ross, 1993b), one common feature of low-conflict societies identified was found to be their propensity to deal with disputes through joint problem solving (often with third party assistance), rather than self-help in which the parties take unilateral actions or
IDENTITY AND POWER ISSUES IN GOOD-ENOUGH CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

Winnicott’s theory has implications for relations between the disputing parties, and here I suggest how his discussions of identity and power issues between two (or more) disputants are relevant to how we conceptualize good-enough conflict management. The next section will explore the third party role.

The strong power differentials that characterize mother–child relations are found in virtually all ethnic conflicts. Considering structural parallels in the relationship between parent and infant and stronger and weaker groups in ethnic conflict is neither meant to suggest a judgment concerning superiority and inferiority, nor maturity and immaturity, nor to imply that the more powerful party needs to be more nurturing toward the other, weaker one. It does, however, provide a perspective on how opposing groups see and behave toward each other in contexts such as colonial relations that have been subjected to a good deal of analysis (Fanon, 1968; Memmi, 1967). Similarly, Horowitz (1985) has emphasized how in postcolonial settings, stereotypes of backward and advanced peoples—often adopted by all sides—have powerful effects on ethnic relations.

For Winnicott, identification and identity processes are central developmental issues, and successful mothers and children develop a mutual responsiveness to and inner trust in each other. Good-enough mothers help their children achieve an independent identity, which contains parts of their mother but is also differentiated from her. Central to this dynamic are symbolic links between a person’s inner and outer worlds that entail elements making each person unique as well as elements shared with others members of one’s social group (Brewer, 1991; Volkan, 1988).

Earlier, I noted that to be effective, conflict management must address both the disputants’ competing interests and their incompatible identities found in distinctive psychocultural interpretations of a conflict (Ross, 1993a, 1993b). The former are the concrete demands groups make, such as those for land, electoral changes, jobs, housing, or equal political status. In contrast, psychocultural interpretations are shared worldviews and include primordial assumptions about how the world works, who are enemies and friends, and beliefs about opponents’ motives (Ross, 1995). In intransigent ethnic conflicts, differences in interests cannot be adequately dealt with unless the emotionally powerful opposing interpretations each
party holds are also addressed. Winnicott’s attention to relationships and to the importance of ritual and symbolic dynamics offers powerful mechanisms for achieving this in good-enough conflict management.

Although both mother–child and ethnic relations are unequal power relationships, what is different between a healthy developmental situation and one involving two parties locked in a destructive conflict is that in the former there is the presence of meaningful communication and mutual adjustment, despite real frustration at times. In healthy mother–child relationships, there are inner trust, security, and coherent identity, which are important sources of growth. The good-enough mother not only nurtures her infant, but also changes her behavior as the infant signals changed needs and an increasing capacity to operate independently. Good-enough mothers and even very young infants engage in mutual, reciprocal exchanges and adjustments from the first days of life (Stern, 1985).

Interestingly, while the more powerful mother is the primary focus of attention in much that is written about this process, a richer model derived from Winnicott’s insights emphasizes the dynamic of attunement in mother–infant mutual interactions (Beebe & Lachmann, 1988; Stern, 1985). Attunement involves the subtle, almost entirely non-verbal negotiations in which the infant seeks and the parent acknowledges, without necessarily fully acquiescing to, the infant’s requests. Successful development is rooted in the mutual confidence that the affective core of their relationship will remain intact even if its form and content change. The dynamic is clearly self-reinforcing when each side’s actions maintain or increase confidence in the other. These insights suggest a number of parallels relevant to ethnic relations.

Identity, ritual, and symbol

Identification issues are central in bitter ethnic conflicts when groups struggle to emphasize their autonomy and downplay shared historical experiences or other connections with an enemy. But as with the adolescent who completely breaks with his or her family, such a situation is not emotionally sustainable, and the conflicting parties eventually need to recognize each other’s distinct identity as well as shared past experiences, present needs, and common interests.

An important way ethnic communities in conflict achieve this is through symbolic and ritual processes that celebrate a shared past and acknowledge each other’s distinct identities in the present (Volkan, 1988). Ritual, of course, can serve to heighten in-group solidarity and tensions with outsiders, but it is also a crucial part of the process by which prior enemies can make peace. When rituals contain an emphasis on mutual acceptance and reassurance, they can address both sides’ recognition needs and diminish threats to identity.

Rituals can be significant for groups in conflict in a host of ways: the celebration of each community’s own identity; the acknowledgment of each other’s iden-
The marking of common, shared experiences important to both communities; the recognition of, and mourning for, past losses; and reconciliation between communities. These can be achieved in public ceremonies, memorials, artistic expressions, and powerful rituals that operate in many ways, like Winnicott’s transitional objects, by linking the memories of past events and losses to a group’s internal identity dynamics.

One example of such a ritual is the celebration of November 11 throughout Europe, marking the end of World War I. These ceremonies have evolved since 1920 from purely nationalistic celebrations to more complex markers of the severe losses all the countries experienced in the war and joint resolution to avoid such future confrontations. What is significant is the common recognition of loss, which in recent decades has allowed celebrations to construct a joint image of the future rather than an exclusively nationalist one. Such rituals often contain many components that can unite a heterogeneous community through public and private activities that contain both sacred and profane components (Warner, 1959).

Effective rituals invoke culturally powerful symbols and, like Winnicott’s transitional objects, both reflect and construct social and political reality (Geertz, 1973; Weinstein, 1989). As a result, Weinstein suggests that historical and social objects can play a significant role in social processes, such as mourning rituals, and in conflict resolution efforts. Volkan (1997) too has described the importance of symbols and rituals in both the escalation and deescalation of ethnic conflict. Finally, the ability to redefine rituals and their meaning is a resource for expressing the changing relationships among groups. The recent redefinition of some parades in Northern Ireland from exclusively Protestant celebrations to more inclusive community festivals is an example of how redefinition of ritual can concretize changing group relations (Ross, in press-b).

Power inequalities

Power inequalities characterize ethnic conflicts such as those of Northern Ireland, Sri Lanka, the Middle East, Hindus and Moslems in India, South Africa, and race relations in the United States, but there are both objective differences in power and powerful subjective perceptions at work. In fact, we can go further and point out that nearly all intense ethnic conflicts are subjectively experienced as double minority situations in which each group emphasizes its own vulnerability and weakness and ignores how its strength threatens an opponent. In Northern Ireland, for example, Catholics emphasize their status as a vulnerable minority in the region, whereas Protestants view themselves as a minority in the island of Ireland as a whole. In Sri Lanka, the island’s Tamils are a minority, but the majority Sinhalese stress that the island is only a few short miles off the coast of southern India with its 50 million Tamils.
When conflicts are marked by strong power inequalities, demands for change are readily viewed as tests of power and threats to identity. For the apparently stronger party, the challenge is to relinquish control while trusting that the weaker party will not then act in a threatening manner. For the supposedly weaker party, there is a need to feel sufficiently secure in its new-found control, that it does not result in either a desire to lash out at the stronger party or to strong feelings of abandonment. Although at first glance it is reasonable to wonder why any objective or subjective steps toward empowering an opponent might ever occur between distrustig groups, the reality is that it does and that such empowerment is part of peacemaking between former enemies (Bush & Folger, 1994; Lederach, 1995).

The more relevant question then becomes how and when the parties are able to take mutually reassuring steps that reduce each other’s feelings of vulnerability. An answer from Winnicott’s perspective is that this occurs when the parties have balanced their need for differentiation with an appropriate level of joint identification so that each side feels that the potential gains from cooperation are greater than the potential losses. Although Winnicott emphasizes the internal dynamics that make this possible, in considering ethnic conflict we must also recognize the importance of structural, or even international, arrangements that provide powerful incentives for groups in conflict to cooperate and to adhere to an agreement once it is reached.

THIRD PARTIES AND GOOD-ENOUGH ETHNIC CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

Winnicott does not explicitly consider third parties in developing the concept of the good-enough mother, although the analyst, pediatrician, grandmother, and friend certainly serve in this position. Imagining good-enough ethnic conflict management requires considering the importance of third parties in building what Winnicott calls the facilitating environment—one in which healthy growth and development can occur. Although third parties in ethnic conflicts have a very different relationship to the disputants than mothers have to their infants, there are also similar features of the two relationships related to empowerment and good-enough outcomes. Those who find it confusing to analogize from a two-party analysis to the role of a third party may wish to visualize the good-enough mother dealing not with a single infant but with helping two (or more) siblings learn to get along with each other.

To build a facilitating environment, third parties can assist disputants in finding good-enough ways out of bitter conflicts as agents of empowerment when they help the disputing parties manage their differences constructively. Applegate (personal communication, 1996) suggests that by being good enough, but not perfect, third parties encourage those in conflict to emphasize their own development and
creativity: “By ‘failing’ in accord with the parties’ capacity to tolerate it, you leave ‘space’ for them to make the steps toward management their own. This is truly empowering.”

Stern (1985) and Beebe and Lachmann (1988) describe how effective mothers learn to read their infants’ non-verbal messages and respond in ways that are empowering to the child. In conflict management, good third parties help the opponents to read each other. To do this, they must understand what underlies each disputant’s verbal and nonverbal messages and help the parties to do the same so they can respond appropriately, whether or not they agree with what the other party is saying. By using multiple channels of communication—and often translating (though not necessarily between different languages) among the parties in a conflict—a third party moves a conflict toward settlement while it weakens the sense of isolation disputants in bitter conflicts often feel (Deutsch, 1973).

Another idea that grows from Winnicott’s concept is that through the process of joint problem solving, effective third parties can promote identification among the interacting parties. Through this process, the disputing parties’ identification with the third party and with each other facilitates constructive action even in the third party’s absence. This suggests the hypothesis that because effective third parties are successful when they empower the conflicting parties who come to make and enforce good agreements themselves, third parties should progressively limit their initiatives as disputants show they are capable of autonomous, effective action. Imposed agreements, no matter how wise, in which the disputants have not had a major say in their achievement are likely to fail during implementation if the parties cannot identify with the outcomes.

CONCLUSION: TOWARD GOOD-ENOUGH CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

Winnicott’s concept of the good-enough mother is relevant to ethnic conflict management in three ways that help us conceptualize what managing ethnic conflict constructively entails. First, it makes us aware that good-enough conflict management includes multiple images and degrees of success. Partial successes are not necessarily failures, and we need a nuanced language that reflects this. Second, good-enough conflict management is a process of encouraging the development of an autonomous and secure identity by providing a sufficiently supportive environment for the parties locked in conflict. If this is done, the parties are more likely to be able to define a future coexistence that is more attractive than ongoing strife and violence. Good-enough conflict management involves multiple significant steps that improve

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5Winnicott, writing about psychotherapy says, “So in the end we succeed by failing—failing the patient’s way” (1965, p. 258).
how groups behave toward each other and addresses the threats to identity at the core of ethnic disputes. Finally, Winnicott’s thinking can help us understand how third parties can facilitate good-enough conflict management through empowerment and threat diminution when they help opponents to believe that achievement of a settlement is in their joint interest and they begin taking responsibility for making it happen. In sum, good-enough conflict management occurs when groups handle their differences better than they had in the past and in a way likely to lead to continuing improvement. It encourages groups to imagine and to build an alternative, more peaceful future, rather than accept ongoing conflict and rancor as inevitable.

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REFERENCES


What happens to a dream deferred?
Does it dry up
like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore
And then run?

Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over-
like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?

Langston Hughes, 1930’s