

Project Overview

**Advancing the Peace and Conflict Resolution Fields:
A Next-generation Brainstorming Project**

Developing 20-year Strategies for Addressing the Hard Questions

by

Guy Burgess and Heidi Burgess

Co-directors, Conflict Research Consortium, University of Colorado
burgess@colorado.edu; 303-492-1635; <http://conflict.Colorado.edu>

Assumptions

Although the peace and conflict field has made great strides in the last 40 years, we believe that destructive conflict remains one of the greatest threats to human welfare. We simply must develop better ways of handling difficult and dangerous conflict situations, if large-scale catastrophes are to be averted. Based upon work already done in many different conflict-related fields, we now know a great deal about the nature of destructive conflict processes and more constructive alternatives. Yet, there are far too many situations in which this knowledge is not being translated into constructive conflict practices.

This gap is due, in part, to limited understanding of the field's potential. But it is also due to the field's inability to grapple effectively with its most vexing challenges. If the field is to advance, there is a critical need for its scholars and practitioners to directly address these challenges. We cannot simply avoid these problems, saying that "they are not ripe," or that the disputants are "resistant." We must examine why this is so, and what can be done to overcome these problems. We need to articulate and disseminate a clear vision of how we could develop more effective strategies for constructively addressing conflict problems that are now widely regarded as hopeless.

Purpose

The purpose of this project is thus to investigate:

- Why current conflict knowledge is not being applied to efforts to prevent and resolve highly destructive conflicts, and
- What can be done to develop a new generation of intervention projects, capable of successfully addressing problems that have thus far resisted our best efforts?

Participation

At this initial stage, project participants are being drawn from the broadly-defined conflict resolution community, with a focus on people who have, in one way or another, been doing work that addresses project questions (see below). If additional funds should become available, the scope of the project may be expanded to include people from other conflict-related institutions who have been exploring similar lines of inquiry. We are looking for people willing to grapple with the tough questions. The number of people we can involve depends upon available resources.

Long-Term Focus

In thinking about the next phase in the field's development, we want to take a long-term view. The conflicts that grab people's attention are emergencies—situations in which lives are being lost, catastrophe is being threatened, and immediate action is required. In such a climate, the understandable tendency is to focus upon conflict resolution efforts that promise to produce immediate results. In far too many cases, however, our ability to successfully intervene over the short term is woefully inadequate. Unless we start devoting significantly more attention to the long-term development of alternative conflict strategies, we are going to be condemned to the endless repetition of ongoing tragedies. This requires a significantly expanded commitment to long-term research and development efforts. The 20-year time horizon envisioned for the project makes it possible for us to consider 1) long-term efforts to strengthen the field's funding base, 2) the recruitment and training of people to fill positions created by increased funding, 3) development, evaluation, and refinement of new initiatives for addressing the really tough problems, and 4) the building of grassroots public support for significant improvements in society's conflict handling processes. Our belief is that there are many conflict problems that are intractable over the short term, but not the long term.

Hard Question Focus

The proposed project begins by asking a series of questions that our work with the Beyond Intractability project suggests are crucial to the field's continuing development. In asking these questions, we recognize that many participants are already making important progress in these areas. Our goal is to highlight and build upon this work.

In seeking answers to these questions, we want to avoid the temptation to focus on unrealistic, utopian solutions. Instead, we want to focus on the development of genuinely realistic strategies. Presented below is a preliminary list of questions that we wish to consider. Other, more thought-provoking issues will doubtless present themselves in discussions with participants. In a very real sense, the focus of this project is on asking the right questions. Answering them will obviously be a much more challenging task, requiring much of the next 20 years to complete.

- **How Can the Field Move Beyond its Traditional Neutral Intermediary Focus?**
While neutral intermediaries can be enormously helpful, they are, even in the best of circumstances, only involved in a tiny percentage of conflict interactions. The course of conflicts is ultimately determined by the cumulative effects of conflict interactions at all levels of society, from grassroots citizens, through mid-level organizations, to national leaders. Operating from a broad range of roles, these conflict actors are commonly "part-timers" with other, primary responsibilities. (Many of them correspond to what Bill Ury refers to as "third-siders.") These individuals can all benefit from the more sophisticated understanding of conflict processes that the field can provide. *What can we do to improve the conflict skills of people working in these important "third-sider" roles?*
- **How Can Our Knowledge of Conflict Processes Be Used to Promote More Effective and Constructive Advocacy Strategies?**
To a significant degree, widespread skepticism about the field is attributable to

conflict-of-interest concerns. People engaged in serious conflicts affecting their vital interests are very reluctant to trust anyone who is not firmly on their side. People also understand that mediator interests do not necessarily coincide with their own interests, and that there is also reason to be skeptical about the ability of neutrals to truly advance their interests. *What services can the field offer from an advocacy, rather than an intermediary, perspective? What can we learn from the work of constructive advocates? How might collaboration with experts in social movements and nonviolent resistance advance this goal?*

- **How Can We Improve the Constructiveness of Conflict Interactions That Are Not Amenable to Agreement-based Resolution?**

In cases in which a broad consensus favoring a compromise settlement is unlikely, resolution-focused processes are unlikely to be successful. (These are the situations that current, "best practices" documents often advise mediators to avoid.) For such cases, we need intervention models that replace the goal of resolution with a more attainable goal—more constructive conflict. Thus, we need to develop a range of interventions designed to promote the constructiveness and reduce the destructiveness associated with these conflicts. Many people, who are afraid that resolution-oriented processes will force them into an unwanted compromise, are still very interested in ideas for improving the constructiveness of confrontations that they know are necessary and unavoidable. *What can we do to help these individuals? What can we learn from the creative work of people in non-intermediary conflict roles?*

- **What Can Be Done to Mitigate the Military-Industrial Complex Problem?**

The ability to implement more constructive approaches to conflict is often limited by a conflict-of-interest problem, which arises when people who work in destructive, conflict-as-usual roles see the implementation of alternative approaches as threatening their position and access to resources. *What realistic options are available for mitigating this effect?*

- **How Can We Help Support and Improve, Rather than Compete with, Conventional Conflict Processes?**

The conflict resolution field tends to think of itself as a provider of "alternative" processes. In doing this, the field places itself in direct competition with society's "conventional" dispute-handling processes--the courts, the executive and legislative branches, and the military, for example. In spite of acknowledged shortcomings, these institutions do provide a great many valuable services that deserve to be retained and strengthened. They are also so deeply entrenched in the social fabric that it is unrealistic to expect to be able to replace them. *Given this, how can we do a better job of working with these institutions in ways that help them to use our field's insights to improve their work?*

- **How Can Political Resistance to Peace and Conflict Resolution Work Be Limited?**

Handling difficult conflicts requires political leaders to make hard choices which often demand great sacrifices from their constituents. Leader's continued tenure in positions of authority and their ability to effectively pursue their interests is ultimately dependent upon public confidence in their approach to conflict. They are, understandably, quite reluctant to support research efforts that might tell the general public that they've "been doing it all

wrong" (as politically-oriented think tanks commonly do). *How might a serious, nonpartisan research effort address this problem?*

- **What Can Be Done to Address the Real Terrorist Problem – Violent Spoilers?**

Many conflicts are plagued by violent spoilers, who for some combination of selfish and altruistic motives, violently attack proponents of nonviolent strategies for promoting compromise and social justice. The ability of small, informal groups of such individuals to drive the cycle of violence and devastate a broad range of more constructive initiatives represents one of the most serious and dangerous conflict problems. One must, of course, guard against the temptation to use the spoiler (or terrorist) label as a way of avoiding the need to address legitimate complaints. *How might this problem be better approached? What is the best way of structuring collaborative efforts with security people, whose expertise lies in "hard," rather than "soft," approaches to conflict?*

- **How Can Peace Agreements Be Structured to Give Warrior Leaders a Future They Can Look Forward To?**

The warrior leaders of communities engaged in violent conflict often enjoy positions of great status and power. With peace, their warrior skills become unneeded, and their positions threatened. Not surprisingly, there is a tendency for these individuals to resist compromise, opting instead to continue the pursuit of all-out victory. *What incentive packages might give these individuals the needed stake in peace?*

- **How Can Taboos Against the Questioning of Unwise Confrontation Strategies Be Limited?**

The use of more constructive approaches to conflict is also limited by strong social taboos against questioning the wisdom of one's leaders during a confrontation. After all, everyone must pull together to defeat "the enemy." Contributing to this is both the widespread illusion of invincibility and taboos again even suggesting the possibility of defeat. It is also politically untenable for political leaders to admit that past sacrifices have been in vain. *What can be done to limit these (and other) social dynamics which leave communities committed to conflict strategies that are clearly counterproductive?*

- **What Can Be Done to Limit the Co-optation Effect?**

Organizations and individuals who provide destructive, conflict-as-usual services often see a competitive advantage in "repackaging" their services in more progressive, alternative terms. This results in a co-optation effect, in which it can be hard for the public to distinguish reliable new approaches to conflict from "sugarcoated" versions of old, destructive practices. *How can this problem best be addressed?*

- **How Can We Move Beyond the Limits of Rational Conflict Analysis and Teaching?**

The approaches to conflict typically being advanced by the field tend to proceed from a strong, rational perspective. The implicit assumption is that a dispassionate evaluation of the costs and benefits of available disputing options will lead people to recognize—and then follow—the wisdom of alternative approaches. As important as such thought processes are, they constitute only one of many determinants of behavior and types of knowledge. Artistic,

intuitive, cultural, and emotional thought processes and communication tools are also important. *How can non-rational forms of learning and communication be better incorporated into efforts to promote more constructive conflict?*

- **How Can More Equitable Approaches Be Fostered, Given the Large Power Disparities That Characterize Many Conflicts?**

Exchange-based approaches to conflict situations have trouble producing equitable results in cases involving substantial power and resource disparities. After all, the disempowered, by definition, have little to trade. These situations require processes for persuading the powerful to take a more generous approach, simply because "it's the right thing to do." In many cases, these persuasive efforts can be enhanced by some form of principled nonviolent protest, capable of highlighting the immoral actions of the powerful. *How can these processes of moral persuasion be strengthened and encouraged? How do they relate to more forceful (and often more violent) strategies for empowering the disempowered? What should be the role of neutrals in these processes?*

- **How Can We Move from the Micro Level of Individual Conflict and Peace Projects to the Macro Level of Promoting Constructive Conflict on a Society-wide Basis?**

Of necessity, all conflict projects approach conflict through micro-level projects. No small initiative, no matter how well structured, will be able to transform society-wide conflict relationships alone. The scale of conflict problems is simply too large and the powers of small groups of people are simply too limited. (This is even true for national leaders, though their powers are obviously much greater.) The only way to make progress, therefore, is through improved mechanisms for coordinating disparate efforts, with each project fulfilling a specialized role in a larger, macro-level process. *How might such macro-level coordination best be improved?*

- **How Might Constructive Conflict Approaches Be Adapted to Involve Thousands, If Not Millions, of People?**

Typically conflict interventions are "table-oriented" processes, involving small numbers of people in tightly structured interactions. By contrast, society-wide conflicts involve millions of people interacting in a bewildering array of roles in circumstances. It is simply impossible for table-oriented processes to reach a large enough fraction of the population. *How can we adapt mass communication technologies to the task of producing transformative experiences and promoting more constructive approaches at the society-wide level? Are there other approaches that can be used to "scale up" constructive conflict approaches to a very broad audience?*

- **How Can the Costs of More Constructive Approaches Be Limited?**

Like any other service, the demand for more constructive approaches will, at some level, be determined by price. In a time of chronically tight budgets, people are, understandably, reluctant to incur significant new expenses. This is especially true for the vast array of routine, everyday conflicts that are beyond the reach of professional intervention—the stakes simply are not large enough to justify the expense. It is also true for situations that require

the involvement of large numbers of people. *How can we incorporate cost consciousness into the development of new approaches, without sacrificing quality? What role might be played by the technologies of mass communication?*

- **How Can the Historical Record of Conflict Behavior Be Better Preserved?**

Our ability to advance the peace and conflict field is ultimately dependent upon our understanding of current and past events. We need to know what was tried, what worked, and what didn't? All scientific progress is ultimately dependent upon the quality of the data upon which research is based. *What can be done to better preserve and make available the historical record of conflict behavior? How can interventions be evaluated so that it is possible to tell what was beneficial and what was not?*

Project Process

The core of the brainstorming process that we plan to use for the project will be a series of small group discussions, focused on the various questions outlined above. (The final list of questions will, of course, be refined in consultation with participants.) The sessions, which may occur as part of regional or national meetings (depending on funding levels), will be carefully recorded and organized for posting on the project website. In some cases, the sessions will be supplemented with interviews and contributed essays on particular topics. While we hope to highlight as much common ground as possible, we do not see this as a consensus process. There is plenty of room for identifying and reporting alternative views regarding the best way of addressing particular problems.

Short-term Deliverables

The primary products of the proposed project would be:

- A monograph that makes the two arguments:
 - Destructive conflict constitutes one of the most serious threats to human welfare, and
 - Sustained effort and funding directed against these challenges could reap substantial benefits.

In other words, we want to make the strongest possible argument that continuation of destructive conflict-as-usual practices is highly dangerous, costly, and, at least over the longer term, avoidable.

- A supporting website would provide additional detail on the arguments made in the monograph. Included would be supporting papers, interview transcripts and/or audio clips, references, etc. While materials would be pulled as appropriate from CRInfo and Beyond Intractability, the broader focus of this project would require many new materials as well.
- The monograph would be sent to foundations, news outlets, interested politicians, and—if a publisher can be found—made into a short book for as wide a distribution as possible. (We plan to approach Jossey-Bass with this idea, should we be asked to go ahead with a full proposal.)
- Participants in the project will be encouraged to publicize the project's findings and the monograph itself as widely as possible.

We also expect that the project will lay the groundwork for a series of initiatives (many pursued

by project participants), designed to follow-up on ideas identified by the project. In some cases, these initiatives may involve efforts to persuade additional funders to enter the field. In other cases, they would involve the development of new projects (and associated funding proposals).

Conclusion

This all suggests a dauntingly broad view of the conflict problem – something broader than anything that the field has really attempted before. Still, real progress is going to require something like this. If we continue to focus on small-scale independent initiatives, we will not be able to address the big problems. The good news is that much of the needed expertise is already in place. At this point, what we need is a collaborative process of cross-fertilization, and this is something that the conflict resolution field is very good at.

We see this as paralleling the learning process that has characterized the war on cancer. There, one of the sources of early hope and false optimism was the mistaken belief that cancer was a singular pathology, that would, therefore, be amenable to a singular cure. The reality has turned out to be far more complex. Cancer is a broad class of difficult pathological dynamics, which require a broad range of treatments tailored to the specific genetic makeup of the patient. Similarly, destructive conflict is a broad class of pathological processes, each requiring specific treatments tailored to the immediate conflict problem and the characteristics of the disputants. There will be no simple, polio vaccine-type cure. We have no choice but to undertake a long and difficult effort to address the problem. The sooner we recognize the scope of the problem and begin "thinking outside the box," the sooner we will be able to start making real progress on our most difficult and dangerous conflicts.

What we need right now is only an expression of interest, which will allow us to tell potential funders that, if scheduling problems can be worked out, you would be willing to participate. Once we have a clearer picture of our funding levels, we will be back in touch with a list of participation options. We hope that you will be able to join us.

Thanks!