

Taking the Peace and Conflict Resolution Fields Outside the "Box"

by

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Note: This essay was prepared to help those working in the conflict resolution and peace fields think about ways in which they might advance the frontier of the field. By implication, it suggests areas in which additional financial support is needed.

Public perception of the conflict resolution field is largely (but not exclusively) focused on small-group negotiation processes in which a neutral intervenor, usually a mediator, negotiates, at some ripe moment in a dispute, a mutually-beneficial compromise agreement, which resolves the issue to the satisfaction of all. It is an image which dominates the way we teach about the field and even think about ourselves. It is a way of looking at the field that has proven to be extraordinarily valuable with respect to relatively small-scale, tractable disputes. With respect to intractable, society-wide disputes, however, this way of looking at the field places it in a box, which steers it away from many areas in which it could make important contributions.

After years of urging people to think “outside the box,” it is time for the field to follow its own advice. While some people are already doing that, many more people need to start thinking in new ways if the field is to successfully advance beyond its current limits. In the course of our work with the CRInfo and the Intractable Conflict Knowledge Base Projects, we have identified twelve areas in which the field could be broadened to increase its ability to help society deal more constructively with its most difficult conflicts.

Work to Improve 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 “traditional” dispute-handling processes--the courts, the executive and legislative branches, and the military, for example. In spite of acknowledged shortcomings, these institutions have, over the years, produced a great many valuable processes which 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. Instead, the field needs to do a better job of working *with* these institutions in ways that help them to use our field's insights to improve their work.

Move Beyond Neutral Intermediary Roles

While neutral intermediaries can be enormously helpful, even in the best of circumstances, they are 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 third and first party 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 are individuals who can all benefit from the more sophisticated understanding of conflict processes that the field can provide. To reach them, however, we must be able to provide credible, engaging, understandable, and affordable information, which is focused on their immediate problem. One-size-fits-all solutions won't work for this group. We need to customize our insights to fit their specific needs and we need to provide this information in an accessible and affordable way during those narrow windows when people are open to new ideas.

Develop Better Large Scale Processes

Also constraining the field is its image as a “table-oriented” profession. It's expertise lies in small-group processes where participants are quite literally able to sit around a table and talk. While we now have a number of processes that are fairly good at producing transformative experiences in small-group settings, we desperately need to learn how to use mass communication and other techniques to scale up these experiences to the larger society.

Pursue More Constructive Conflicts, Not Just Resolution.

In cases where there is unlikely to be a broad consensus favoring a compromise settlement, 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 an intervention model that replaces 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.

Recognize the Importance of Modest Incremental Changes

Implicit in alternative, resolution-based efforts, is an “all-or-nothing” view of the process in which success is measured by the ability to produce a bottom-line agreement that stands the test of time. Given the enormous complexities and difficulties involved, this standard is likely to be impossible to meet, and a great many helpful programs are likely to be written off as failures.

An alternative approach focuses on the development and evaluation of incremental improvements to the larger conflict process. Such an approach has several advantages. First, by setting realistic goals, it becomes possible for people to measure their success. In all-or-nothing evaluation, there are always going to be so many explanations for any problem that it is impossible to say what caused what and how to do things better the next time around. By contrast, a

more focused evaluation process is likely to give people the information needed to refine processes which, for example, explain specific technical issues, break down unrealistic stereotypes, counter inflammatory and inaccurate rumors, facilitate the generation of useful compromises on sub-issues, or coordinate independent interventions from different NGOs. There are also numerous aspects of the field's conventional wisdom which could benefit from rigorous, incremental evaluation.

Encourage Increased Specialization

The above incremental approach also encourages the formation of small entrepreneurial organizations with highly-developed skills focused on specific conflict problem areas. After all, society's only proven technique for dealing with highly complex tasks (such as conflict) is specialization and the division of labor. By working in relatively modest and less-threatening roles (compared to mediators who step in promising to fix or re-do everything), such incremental efforts are much more likely to be accepted and become integrated into the larger framework of society's conflict-handling processes.

Multi-Stage Intervention

The conventional wisdom also often sees the field's insights as coming into play after a protracted hurting stalemate forces the parties to acknowledge that hopes of victory are likely to remain unfulfilled, and that the best way for advancing their interests is through some sort of compromise. While this is a situation in which the field's insights are broadly acknowledged, there are important and often overlooked contributions which can be made at other conflict stages, including conflict emergence, intensification and escalation, and reconciliation and healing.

Address Conflict-of-Interest Concerns

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 are also understandably concerned that mediator interests do not coincide with their own interests and skeptical about claims that neutrals truly serve the interests of all parties. These concerns are, in part, attributable to the distressing number of cases in which the field's techniques are being co-opted for partisan purposes. Rigorous enforcement of conflict-of-interest prohibitions are clearly important. Also likely to be helpful is a move toward the larger number of independent conflict roles, such as the "third-sider" roles described above. This will relieve practitioners from pressures to "do it all" and allow them to separate the incompatible roles of neutrals and levelers of the playing field. Neutrals would then be able to focus on what neutrals do best and allow others to pursue more partisan roles designed to empower the disempowered. (There are some times when neutrals can and should engage in empowerment—for example, when using a transformative approach—but in these cases everyone must be aware of what is being done and why.)

Reduce the Focus on Rational Appeals

The approaches to conflict 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, and emotional thought processes and communication tools are also important. These must be recognized and integrated into the field along with the more common, rational, cost/benefit approaches. This will require a much expanded and genuinely interdisciplinary effort involving scholars and practitioners from fields such as neuro-biology, psychology, sociology, education, and art.

Increased Efficiency

Like any other service, the demand for more constructive approaches to conflict being offered by our field is, at some level, 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 which are beyond the reach of professional intervention—the stakes simply aren't large enough to justify the expense. This suggests a need for the development of innovative new projects which bring down the cost without sacrificing the quality of alternative approaches. Here programs that better exploit the ability of the mass media and the Internet to reach very large numbers of people at very low cost are likely to be especially important.

Tempering the Illusion of Invincibility

The demand for alternative approaches to conflict is also limited by the widespread illusion of invincibility and the righteousness of one's own cause. This is reinforced by strong social taboos against questioning the wisdom of one's leaders during a confrontation, believing that everyone must pull together to defeat "the enemy." Though difficult, countering these thought processes is often critically important. All people—leaders, mid-level officials, and grassroots citizens—should be encouraged and helped to realistically assess the likely outcomes of alternative conflict strategies so that they can identify and move away from counterproductive strategies. Though changing direction can be very difficult, "staying the course" can be a recipe for catastrophe.

"Violent Spoilers"

Also needed are more effective ways of dealing with the "violent spoiler" effect, which generally arises when small paramilitary groups (who do not enjoy the support of the larger population) decide that compromise and accommodation are so abhorrent that they will physically attack anyone working to build bridges between opposing parties. Kidnappings, car bombings, assassinations, and other acts of violence (which are often reciprocated, either by the government or by spoilers on the other side) commonly drive the escalation processes to the point where peacemaking is seen as futile and all out violent confrontation is viewed as unavoidable. Those working for peace with their traditional expertise in "soft" strategies need to find more effective ways of opposing the spoilers. Unfortunately, this may require the development of much better collaborative efforts with security people whose expertise lies in "hard" rather than "soft" approaches to conflict problems. Also likely to be of value are better, unilateral, peacemaking strategies which, in effect impose equitable solutions in spite of the objections of the spoilers. In working to address the spoiler problem, however,

one must guard against the tendency to unfairly label people as “spoilers” and use that label as an excuse to disregard their legitimate complaints.

Long-term Development

The conflicts that grab people's attention are emergencies. 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. Also needed is a systematic effort to better preserve the historical record of conflict behavior. After all, all scientific progress is ultimately dependent upon the quality of the data upon which research is based.

Implications for the Field

For years, substantial numbers of people have been doing work that reflects the above ideas. Our effort to bring together the field's entire knowledge base has made it easier for us to see the broad scope of these activities. A more widespread adoption of this broader frame of the field would open up a vast and underdeveloped frontier. If many more people were to undertake work in these areas, society's ability to deal with very difficult and intractable conflicts would be considerably improved.

We see this as paralleling the learning process which has characterized the war on cancer. Here, one of the sources of early hope and false optimism was the mistaken belief that cancer was a singular pathology, which would 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.