

DIGITALCOMMONS
—@WAYNESTATE—

Sociological Practice

Volume 10

Issue 1 *Conflict Processing*

Article 12

January 1992

Research and Policy Implications

Louis Kriesberg

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/socprac>

 Part of the [Sociology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Kriesberg, Louis (1992) "Research and Policy Implications," *Sociological Practice*: Vol. 10: Iss. 1, Article 12.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/socprac/vol10/iss1/12>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Open Access Journals at DigitalCommons@WayneState. It has been accepted for inclusion in Sociological Practice by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@WayneState.

Research and Policy Implications*

Louis Kriesberg

ABSTRACT

This article focuses on intractable conflicts and how they are transformed. Specific attention is given to the kinds of questions raised by research on such conflicts as well as the policy implications of selected research efforts.

Although we believe that in most cases reducing the intractability of conflicts is desirable, we also recognize that often one (or more) adversary believes that any likely settlement of its conflict would be worse than maintaining the struggle.

Whether or not an intractable conflict is preferable to any particular settlement depends upon one's values and interests. Whether the reader believes that inhibiting the intractability of a particular conflict or class of conflicts is desirable or that fostering intractability is preferable, policy suggestions can be stated as if either were true. The reader can invert the policy suggestion in accord with her or his preference.

The policy implications suggested pertain to a phase in conflict settlement that is beginning to receive needed attention: prenegotiation. In the past, most attention among analysts of conflict resolution was focused on

* Printed with permission of Syracuse University Press. This article was the last chapter in *Intractable Conflicts and Their Transformation* (1989), pp. 210-220, edited by L. Kriesberg, T. A. Northrup, and S. J. Thorson.

negotiation and mediation in negotiations. Recently, attention has turned to how adversaries come to the table to conduct negotiations. To maximize the utility of research and policy suggestions, it is necessary to specify the kinds of conflicts for which the suggestions are relevant.

Specifying Kinds of Conflicts

Throughout the discussion in this chapter, we consider what is shared by all social conflicts and what is specific to particular kinds of conflicts. This assumes that they form an equivalence class but requires categorizing kinds of conflicts.

One conventional categorization of conflicts is in terms of "levels," the size of the arena and adversaries. Thus, we commonly speak of interpersonal conflicts (e.g., within families), intergroup or interorganizational conflict (e.g., within a community or country), and international conflict (e.g., within world regions). Another conventional categorization is in terms of specific issues in contention, for example, environmental policy, child custody, ethnic separatism, control over territory, or control of a state.

For purposes of research and theory building, other systems of categorization are more relevant and useful than the conventional systems. No single dimension of conflict can provide an adequate set of categories. Social conflicts are multidimensional and so must be the categorizations. We must take into account the characteristics of the adversaries, the social system within which they are contending, and the issues about which they are struggling. This is not the place to present the elaborate and detailed categorization of conflicts; it is sufficient to outline relevant major dimensions.

Adversaries vary in number (Raiffa 1982). They also vary in the degree to which they are clearly bounded and internally differentiated (Kriesberg 1982). Clearly bounded adversary units are ones with generally recognized and publicly defined members and in which the membership in a particular adversary unit does not substantially overlap with membership in others that are likely to be in conflict with it. For example, persons, states, and organizations are clearly bounded compared to social classes, ethnic groups, and supporters of different environmental policies. Units are highly differentiated insofar as there are many specialized roles, most importantly ones involving the conduct of conflict relations with other units. For example, states are highly differentiated, with special bureaucracies for external relations, including war making.

Social conflicts involving one or more adversaries who are not clearly bounded or highly differentiated are likely to follow different patterns of

intractability transformation than are conflicts among clearly bounded and highly differentiated adversaries. Thus, when heads of the adversary units have the authority to make binding decisions, shifts toward tractability can be relatively quickly done. For example, the Israeli and Egyptian governments moved toward tractability more decisively than have the Israeli Jews and Arab Palestinians.

The social systems within which adversaries contend vary in the degree to which they have institutionalized rules for managing conflicts and in the content of those rules (Wehr 1979). Conflicts are waged usually within the context of a social system with rules for their conducts and they often take on qualities of a game. Every society and most organizations have both formal and informal rules for managing conflicts. Rules, however, are not well developed for conflicts among states; even within a society, they do not effectively regulate conflicts among nonlegitimate adversaries, and about issues not considered legitimate.

The social systems also vary in the way the adversary units relate to each other in that system. Thus, the parties may have a great deal of mutual dependence, relatively independent of each other, or be in a relationship of domination and subordination.

Adversary units are related to each other in a variety of ways within different social systems. They vary in the power they have relative to each other, in the degree of dependency each has on the other, and in their relationship to the interpreters and implementors of the institutionalized means of managing conflicts. For example, an ethnic conflict might be between two ethnic groups which are both marginal in the host society or between one ethnic group that is marginal and another that occupies the dominant political and economic strata.

Conflicts vary significantly in the number and content of the issues that are matters of contention (Raiffa 1982). The nominal content of the issues—environmental damage in Alaska, the political borders of Germany, or the custody of Mary D. and John D.'s children—is infinite: every conflict is unique. We need to have more abstract ways of categorizing conflicts to make useful generalizations possible.

One general distinction that has been made for several years is between conflicts that are consensual and those that are dissensual (Aubert 1963). In consensual conflicts, the adversaries agree about what is valued and differ about the allocation of what they agree they want; this may be land or another resource. The parties are fighting about interests. In dissensual conflicts, the parties differ about what is desirable, but at least one party insists that the other adopt its vision of what is desirable; this may refer to political ideology or religious faith. The fighting is about values they do not share.

Another relevant distinction is between conflicts in which the adversaries do or do not share a common understanding of the nature of the fight between them. In some conflicts, the antagonists do not agree about the issues in contention; perhaps one side stresses one consensual and the other the dissensual nature of their struggle with each other.

Finally, a difficult conceptual matter pertaining to the issues in contention must be considered. Partisans and observers sometimes assert that a particular conflict is "unrealistic" (Coser 1956). This usually means that one or more of the adversaries is said to be mistaken about the source of its grievance. For example, ethnic conflicts in the United States are sometimes said to be unrealistic, as when prejudice is alleged to arise from the psychological displacement of other feelings. A social conflict is realistic when the analyst believes that there are objective or structural conditions which are the bases for the social conflict and that these conditions correspond to the ostensible matter of contention among the adversaries.

The distinction between realistic and unrealistic conflict has two other conventional meanings that should be recognized. One is that a conflict is unrealistic when the goals set by an adversary are unattainable. Unrealistic conflict occasionally refers to a conflict in which the means being used are out of proportion or unrelated to the ostensible purposes of the adversaries.

Every actual conflict is a blend of these features. Consensual and dissensual matters are both present; not all members of all adversary groups agree about what the issues in contention are; consequently, analysts are likely to recognize some realistic and unrealistic elements in every fight.

The utility of these dimensions about the characteristics of the adversaries, about the social systems in which they contend, and about the issues of contention is indicated as we discuss needed research and policy implications.

Needed Research

The kinds of research that the analysis and discussions suggest would be important are discussed in the following three categories: (1) the meaning of intractability, (2) the bases and deepening of intractability, and (3) the reduction and transformation of intractability. And in discussing needed research, we emphasize research questions and not research design. The designs should often include comparisons among different kinds of conflicts in order to assess the generalizability of any findings.

Meaning of Intractable Conflicts

Whether or not a conflict is regarded as intractable is a matter of social judgment based on social conventions. There are social conventions about how long different kinds of conflicts are expected to persist, about the expectations adversaries have concerning the possibility of a settlement, and about what the employable limits are to the means of struggle. Research also needs to be conducted to discover who among the adversaries effectively defines a conflict as intractable.

Who defines a conflict as intractable is important insofar as that characterization impacts on the conflict itself. Is it likely that once a conflict is labeled intractable intermediary efforts are reduced because they are regarded as doomed to fail? Is it likely that the adversaries themselves tend to believe that the struggle will not be settled for a very long time and/or must await major external intervention, once they accept the conflict as intractable?

We should also ask how answers to such questions vary among different kinds of conflicts. For example, we expect that conflicts that occur in social systems with institutionalized rules for managing conflicts will be identified as intractable in terms of their relationship to such rules, as interpreted by the rulemakers. Thus, fights about matters similar to ones usually processed through the judicial system, if not settled within that system, are likely to be viewed as intractable. This may be the case for environmental disputes.

We also believe that dissensual conflicts are more readily characterized as intractable because the expectation is that no major party will change its basic values; but adversaries are viewed as more ready to settle disputes over matters about which they share values. Thus, the value or cultural differences in ethnic conflicts obstruct finding mutually acceptable solutions.

Bases of Intractability and Increasing Intractability

One basis for intractable conflicts is felt threats to one's individual or collective identity. Research is needed about the ways in which multiple identities are related to each other and how some identifications become salient and the grounds for an intractable conflict while others do not. One arena in which relevant research has been done pertains to ethnic identities and loyalty to the state, but this research has usually focused on the emergence of conflict and its persistence. The transformation of such conflicts into tractability has been relatively neglected.

Because one of the ways identity is formed is in opposition to other groups of people, that process needs to be better understood. Once a struggle is underway, adversaries often try to define the other and impose an identification. This is exemplified by struggles to define Palestinians, Zionists, Israelis, and Arabs. Research is needed about the way efforts to define the enemy occur and threaten each party's self-identification. Research is also needed about how conflicts are waged so that they do not entail such efforts by adversaries to impose an unwanted identification on each other.

Intractability can emerge from several other bases. Once conflicts are underway, segments of each adversary group often develop a vested interest in the struggle. For the fighters, it may become a way of life. Research is needed about such developments and about what fosters and what inhibits them.

A long-standing idea in the social science literature is that conflicts in which many lines of cleavage are superimposed are likely to be intense (Dahrendorf 1959). They are also likely to be intractable. Consequently, when ethnic lines correspond to class, religious, linguistic, and regional differences, crosscutting ties are likely to be absent, and a mutually satisfactory resolution difficult to construct. On the other hand, when such divisions overlap and crosscut each other, particular disputes are likely to seem manageable. We need research to assess this idea, for different kinds of conflicts in different contexts.

Conflicts in which the outcomes sought by each side threaten the adversaries' basic interests are also likely to be intractable. For example, Paige (1975) has argued that agrarian revolutions vary in accord with the basic sources of income of the cultivators and noncultivators. He argues that when the cultivators earn their income from the land (as workers on a commercial hacienda) and so do the noncultivators (the owners of the commercial hacienda), an intense social revolution is more likely than when the cultivators earn their income in the form of wages (as on a plantation) and the noncultivators' income is largely from their capital investment (as in a plantation). In the latter case, reform is more likely than revolution, and the conflict is relatively tractable.

All these matters are likely to vary among different kinds of conflicts. Examining any one of them comparatively, among different kinds of conflicts, should illuminate our understanding of each. To take one illustration, consider the growth of identifications in a way that threatens one or more than one of the parties in a struggle. In arenas with well-established institutionalized processes for handling conflicts among recognized parties, the parties may be clearly identified but not threaten each other's essential identity. This may be the case, for example, in highly regulated collective

bargaining between trade unions and management. In arenas with less well-established institutionalized processes, the issues in contention may be less well bounded and even the identities less clear. For example, in the emerging environmental disputes, the parties are often still in the process of defining themselves and trying to characterize their protagonists.

We might also ask how the development of vested interests in a struggle differs among conflicts in which the adversaries are large, clearly bounded, and highly differentiated, as in a struggle between unions and management, and among ones in which the adversaries are not very large, clearly bounded, or differentiated, as in a child custody struggle between divorcing parents. In conflicts between large-scale adversaries, each one tends to develop specialists in conducting the struggle who make a career of it.

Transforming Intractable Conflicts

As discussed by Hunter (1989) and Frohock (1989), one basis for intractable conflicts is the ontological differences in the adversaries' view of issues. Their fundamental differences make a resolution of their conflict very difficult. Even under these circumstances, however, the adversaries may settle a particular dispute, without a change in their ontologies. As Hunter points out, an ontology does not predict an exact position on a given issue.

Research is needed on how specific settlements are reached, without changes in ontologies. Settlements may depend on accepting the results of institutionalized procedures, as when religious and medical ontologies seem incompatible to particular sects and hospitals, but the courts rule on the settlement of a particular dispute. How does this happen in less-institutionalized arenas? What are the consequences of such settlements? Do they weaken or reinforce the ontological differences or do such settlements leave them untouched?

Adversaries never have purely conflicting relations; they always have some common interests and even shared identifications. We need research on how the balance between those cooperative or complementary aspects and the competitive or conflictual aspects shift. Presumably when the relative importance of cooperative or complementary aspects increases, a conflict becomes more tractable.

One matter that affects the relative significance of cooperative and of antagonistic aspects of the relationship is the salience of other conflicts each adversary has. When do adversaries come to regard a common enemy as a major concern? When does one adversary come to believe that enemy number one has become a secondary enemy? What circumstances and/or ideas contribute to reframing a conflict so that it becomes tractable?

In the conflict resolution literature, the intervention of a mediator is often presumed to be an important element not only in facilitating negotiations but also in initiating de-escalating negotiations. We need research about the extent to which that is the case. Under what circumstances does an *intermediary facilitate de-escalation in an intractable conflict?*

An important debate about the transformation of an intractable conflict is between those who argue that it is a gradual process and those who argue that it entails a rapid, fundamental shift. On one hand, the argument is that step-by-step, piece-by-piece settlements of particular disputes enable adversaries to begin to trust each other enough to think constructively about mutually acceptable outcomes (Kriesberg 1986). The conflict is then manageable and can be pursued as a tractable conflict. On the other hand, it is argued that once a conflict has become intractable, mistrust is so high that a dramatic and fundamental shift is needed. A basic change in the nature of the conflict and the way it is conceived by the partisans is necessary. When basic needs are being dealt with, movement toward resolution is possible (Burton 1987). We need to examine actual cases of conflicts becoming tractable to assess these different views.

In all these matters, comparisons among different kinds of conflicts would be useful. It is clear that within systems that have highly institutionalized conflict regulation, the roles of intermediaries are diverse and specialized. In addition to conciliators, mediators, and arbitrators, they include judges, juries, commissions, agencies, and legislative bodies. Even for conflicts that are not conducted within a regulated context, many kinds of intermediaries can and do provide a wide variety of conflict management functions. These are done informally and by persons and groups who act without explicit designation or recognition as intermediaries by the adversaries in the conflict.

Several examples of groups performing such informal intermediary actions include U.S. dialogue groups on the Middle East, the Greens in West Germany, and researchers on environmental issues in Alaska.

Research is needed about the ways formal and informal intermediary activity supplement each other and undermine each other. Analyses of alternative dispute resolution in conjunction with the judicial system and of Track II (unofficial) diplomacy in conjunction with official diplomacy are beginning to be undertaken (Bendahmane 1987). Comparisons between them would be useful. In addition, studies of the varying effectiveness of experts, intellectuals, and religious leaders mediating in conflicts that differ in the degree to which value and interest issues are in dispute would be useful.

Policy Implications

As previously stated, policy is discussed as if transforming an intractable conflict to a tractable one is the goal. This need not be the case for an actor in a particular fight, since any reasonably foreseeable settlement might be undesirable for that person or group. Such an actor might read these policy implications as providing ideas not to be implemented but turned around.

It is important to be explicit about the role being played by the would-be policy maker. The policy that might be pursued by a member of one of the adversary entities is obviously different than the policies that might be pursued by an intermediary. Policies are also likely to be different for a major officeholder, and opposition leader, or a rank-and-file member of one of the adversary parties.

Policies also should be explicitly placed in a time frame. This is especially significant when we consider intractable conflicts. After all, every fight does end, but it does matter whether this termination follows years or even generations of sacrifice. Discussions of policy should be explicit about the length of time in which the policy is to be implemented: days, weeks, months, years, decades, or centuries.

We discuss policies in terms of two major phases: preventing a conflict from becoming intractable and transforming it so that it becomes more tractable.

For preventing conflicts from becoming intractable, the analyses presented suggest several long-range strategies. One general strategy is to avoid creating vested interests for continuing a conflict. This means, for example, providing options for people who otherwise would be able to do nothing except fight or wait for the total defeat of the adversary. These matters are especially important with large-scale adversaries, such as ethnic groups and their organizations. This policy could be pursued by intermediaries as well as the adversaries themselves.

Another important long-range policy is to avoid threatening the essential identity of the adversary. This is a policy that is especially pertinent for the adversaries themselves. To prevent a conflict from becoming intractable, each adversary should not deny the fundamental claims of the other. Finally, developing institutionalized ways of handling a particular kind of conflict reduces the likelihood that one of those kinds of conflicts will become intractable. This includes making settlements that embody procedures for dealing with the recurring disputes within the context of the major conflict, which continues beyond particular settlements.

In transforming intractable conflicts, one strategy is particularly relevant for the rank-and-file members of the adversary groups if they plan to develop support for accommodation with their opponent. This is a long-range strategy in which support for accommodation when the time is propitious is gradually developed. Such efforts may take place in various constituencies. For example, Schwartz (1989) describes the work of dialogue groups in the United States in which Americans from Jewish, Palestinian, and other communities seek common ground and try to influence their communities and the U.S. government's policies toward an accommodation between the Israeli government and the Palestinians.

Another policy is applicable for all segments of any adversary or for an intermediary. That is to find some areas of possible settlement and work to attain them. This presumes that an incremental approach to the transformation of an intractable conflict is possible and perhaps even necessary.

Among the long-term policies is one in which the past and hence the current identifications are redefined. Interpreters (intellectuals and politicians) play critical roles in these redefinitions. Intellectuals and politicians are often ideological agitators, championing opposition to oppression, or they are justifiers of the status quo. Less often, they are articulators of reconciliation and accommodation between enemies. Yet, those latter roles are, in the long run, critical.

In the short run, intermediaries and officials of adversary parties may try to discover de-escalating strategies. This means selecting a set of parties who might agree on even a partial settlement, excluding those who would not agree, but not excluding those who could effectively prevent an agreement. There are dilemmas here. Excluding intransigent parties in the dispute may make it possible to reach an agreement, but the agreement may not be implemented. Furthermore, excluding any parties with a stake in the fight makes equitable treatment for them less likely. Strategies may involve finding a set of contentious issues, perhaps even relatively peripheral ones, about which an incremental agreement might be reached. The strategies may also involve a blend of inducements that is sufficiently attractive to make an agreement possible; the inducements would entail promised benefits and the avoidance of particular harms.

Finally, intermediaries can contribute in various ways to transforming intractable conflicts. For example, they can add compensatory benefits, or otherwise increase the size of the pie, thereby reducing the zero-sum nature of the conflict. This is illustrated by the U.S. government's role in the 1978 Camp David meetings between Israeli and Egyptian delegations headed by Primary Minister Begin and President Sadat.

Many actors can serve as intermediaries and perform mediating functions. They may be nongovernmental as well as governmental persons and groups, and they may be based in one of the adversary units or based in social locations that are not aligned with any of the primary adversaries regarding the particular issue in dispute.

We are well aware that we have not fully answered many of the questions we have posed. We hope that by posing them and providing partial answers, others will help answer them more comprehensively. We believe that there is much to be learned about how intractable conflicts gradually or suddenly become tractable. Furthermore, reflecting on such transformations should give those persons who would want to de-escalate an intense conflict an enhanced understanding about how such transformations can be fostered. Comparing such diverse conflicts as we have provides a test of such efforts. We believe that such comparisons can suggest insights about each kind of conflict. What seems obvious and necessary about a conflict can be recognized as a social convention that could be different under changed circumstances.

REFERENCES

- Aubert, V. (1963). Competition and dissensus: Two types of conflict and conflict resolution. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 7, 26-42.
- Bendahmane, D. B. (Ed.). (1987). *Conflict resolution: Track two diplomacy*. Foreign Service Institute, U.S. Department of State. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office.
- Burton, J. W. (1987). *Resolving deep-rooted conflict: A handbook*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America.
- Coser, L. A. (1956). *The functions of social conflict*. New York: Free Press.
- Dahrendorf, R. (1959). *Class and class conflict in industrial society*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Frohock, F. M. (1989). Reasoning and intractability. In L. Kriesberg, T. A. Northrup, & S. J. Thorson (Eds.), *Intractable conflicts and their transformation*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press.
- Hunter, S. (1989). The roots of environmental conflict in the Tahoe Basin. In L. Kriesberg, T. A. Northrup, & S. J. Thorson (Eds.), *Intractable conflicts and their transformation*. (pp. 13-24). Syracuse: Syracuse University Press.
- Kriesberg, L. (1982). *Social conflicts* (2nd ed.). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Kriesberg, L. (1986). Consequences of efforts at de-escalating the American-Soviet conflict. *Journal of Political and Military Sociology*, 14, 215-234.
- Raiffa, H. 1982. *The art and science of negotiation*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Schwartz, R. D. Arab-Jewish dialogue in the United States: Toward Track II tractability. In L. Kriesberg, T. A. Northrup, & S. J. Thorson (Eds.), *Intractable conflicts and their transformation*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1989.
- Wehr, Paul (1979). *Conflict regulation*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.