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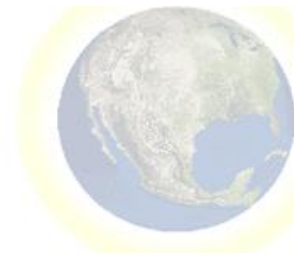
# Conflict Engagement: A Contingency Model in Theory and Practice

## **Abstract**

The systematic study and applied practice of conflict resolution is now a few decades old and is evolving into its own field and perhaps towards its own discipline (Avruch, 2013). I believe an essential way forward towards a more robust field and discipline is to build a parsimonious contingency approach. That is, an approach for applying our best theoretical and analytical tools to diagnosing the nature and status of a given conflict and then systematically and adaptively matching up the best methods for constructively engaging the conflict as it evolves. Fisher and Keashly (1991) pioneered contingency theory in international conflict resolution, while Sander and Goldberg suggested “fitting the forum to the fuss” in domestic ADR a few years later (1994). Since then the notion has caught on and is now somewhat in “vogue” (Fisher, 2012). However, surprisingly little development has occurred in this arena given the promise it holds. The contingency model described in this article builds on this early theorizing and suggests different conflict intervention methods according to conflict type and stage of development. Conflicts are divided into three different types: resource-based, objectives-based and identity-based. Each type is conducive to a different mode of engagement.

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**Conflict Engagement:  
A Contingency Model in Theory and Practice**

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**Abstract**

The systematic study and applied practice of conflict resolution is now a few decades old and is evolving into its own field and perhaps towards its own discipline (Avruch, 2013). I believe an essential way forward towards a more robust field and discipline is to build a parsimonious contingency approach. That is, an approach for applying our best theoretical and analytical tools to diagnosing the nature and status of a given conflict and then systematically and adaptively matching up the best methods for constructively engaging the conflict as it evolves. Fisher and Keashly (1991) pioneered contingency theory in international conflict resolution, while Sander and Goldberg suggested “fitting the forum to the fuss” in domestic ADR a few years later (1994). Since then the notion has caught on and is now somewhat in “vogue” (Fisher, 2012). However, surprisingly little development has occurred in this arena given the promise it holds. The contingency model described in this article builds on this early theorizing and suggests different conflict intervention methods according to conflict type and stage of development. Conflicts are divided into three different types: resource-based, objectives-based and identity-based. Each type is conducive to a different mode of engagement.

**Introduction**

To know what something is, it is often necessary to know what it is not. Thus the focus of my work on defining and engaging identity-based conflicts over the past several decades has required, at least in part, that such conflict be distinguished from other types of more “routine” conflicts (Rothman, 1992, 1997, 2012). In seeking to develop a theory and practice for distinguishing and creatively engaging identity-based conflict, I have almost accidentally evolved a particular and parsimonious contingency approach, in which conflict intervention and analysis become interdependent (Rothman, 2012). This approach suggests that conflict specialists begin an intervention by systematically inquiring in to the nature of a given dispute, using a simple three-point schematic to identify the stage of conflict

development which then sets the stage for intervention choices and design, often on an ongoing and evolving basis.

The field of conflict studies and intervention is now ripe for the development of such contingency models. It has almost passed its early growing pains, in which battles were waged over which model was “better”—for example needs-based conflict resolution of the Burton school (Burton, 1979) or interests-based conflict management of the Fisher school (Fisher & Ury, 1981) or the transformation models of the Lederach (1995) or Bush and Folger schools (1994), and so forth. The field is at a crossroads. It is time for a concerted effort to develop broad contingency approaches in which the field moves beyond the battles over models or methods and can begin coalescing around scientific analysis of conflict connected to systematic and disciplined determination of which intervention model is best suited to treat which type of conflict.

More sustained attention to contingency approaches, I believe, would fill a serious lacuna in the field and help generate some centripetal energy across its valuable but sometimes baffling diversity.

### **Contingency Approach**

In a landmark article that began to articulate the boundaries of a contingency approach focused on ADR in the domestic context, Sander and Goldberg (1994) eloquently described their article called, “Fitting the Forum to the Fuss.” Fisher and Keashly previously introduced contingency theory into international conflict resolution in 1991. They suggested that different types of interventions are useful at different points during a conflict. Fisher returns to the theme in a more recent writing, concluding: “The contingency model is an idealized representation of a highly complex reality; however, it may descriptively capture some of the essence of the relationships between highly escalated conflict and the interventions required to address it” (Fisher, 2007, p. 10). Like a number of other theorists, Fisher and Keashly (1991) bifurcate conflict types by distinguishing between objective (or substantive) and subjective (or social-psychological) conflict issues, which they suggest need to be continually assessed and treated differently during an intervention and modulated accordingly. Fetherston (2000) commenting on Fisher and Keashly’s work, writes that “*within* a conflict process there are times when strategies which focus on interests are most appropriate and effective and times when a shift in focus to relationships is required” (p. 5). A similar dichotomy is also suggested by Marc Ross’ work in which he distinguishes between “interests” and “interpretations” (1993). John Burton also dichotomized between

“disputes” and “conflicts” (1993), suggesting the first may be “managed” but the latter should be “resolved.” Disputes, according to Burton, are routine and deal with concrete goods and services, often called interests, while conflicts deal with existential concerns, which he refers to as basic human needs (see also Ramsbotham, Woodhouse, & Miall, 2011).

I suggest breaking open this dualism by further operationalizing John Burton's (1993) distinctions between resource based “disputes” and needs-based “conflicts” by adding a third category between them: objectives-based “problems.” The contingency model described in this article suggests intervention methods according to these three broad types of conflict. The way to foster cooperative engagement in to deep-seated conflicts is different from that of objectives-based problems, which is also different from the way to most constructively address resource disputes. The type of intervention suggested is therefore to be determined by prior analysis of the nature and depth of the conflict. Indeed, I suggest, this is one major *raison d'être* of the field; to bridge careful and systematic analysis with best practices and disciplined interventions.

In the following section I present a typology of conflicts divided in to resource-based, objectives (or goals)-based and identity-based. I am not suggesting this is *the* right way to divide all conflicts, but rather as an example of one theoretically and practically sound way. There is no need, as I advocate for a contingency philosophy for our field, in part to overcome internecine battles over models, to stake a new claim about a new best model. This is just one among a possible many. I then present, in more generic form a broad variety of choices that could be made about categories (and some examples of) conflict intervention strategies based on this prior conflict analysis.

The following contingency approach is generic and not specific to either domestic or international conflict, and in this it differs from both Sander's and Fisher and Keashly's foundational contingency approaches. Also, unlike the Fisher and Keashly approach, it does not focus on the identity of the intervener (consultant, mediator, etc.) but instead broadly groups and hypothesizes various means of constructive conflict intervention according to the types and stages of conflict that each set of strategies may be generally best suited to address.

### **Conflict Typology: Resources, Objectives, Identity**

In this section I present my analytical model for determining the type of conflict to be addressed followed by a case study of an intervention. I present a case study of a conflict and contingency-based intervention in an organization, to practically illustrate how to select intervention approaches based on prior – and unfolding - conflict analysis.

**Step One: Analysis.** Effective conflict engagement begins by “going slow to go fast.” That is, taking the time required to get the definition and dynamics of a conflict conceptually right, so that disputants and potential third parties come to agreement about the nature and depth of their disagreement. This then builds a foundation for selection of appropriate intervention methods.

The first step in a contingency approach then is to undertake a detailed process of conflict analysis, working with disputants to determine either separately or interactively, or both, what the conflict is about, why it matters to them, how deep it runs, what is functional about the conflict, what is destructive about it, and for whom, when and why, and what might be done to mine its creative potential and reduce its destructiveness.

Given that most people tend to have a natural and conditioned aversion to conflict, interveners too often give in to this proclivity and push toward solutions, which may lessen the divide. The problem arises when there is a rush to solutions before adequate understanding is achieved of the parameters and causes of the conflicts. The deeper the problem, the more likely it is that this premature solution-seeking will result in solving the wrong problems (Doyle & Straus, 1976). For example, it may lead to attempts at settling resource disputes when goal problems need attention, or addressing goal problems with “interest-based” solutions that should be preceded by engagement of identity issues. Additionally, when conflicts are about identity they may be resistant to “practical” solutions and thus the effort to resolve them may lead to deeper intransigence. Instead, a host of other types of creative process and insight-oriented ways forward may be, at least initially, necessary. While it may be relatively impossible to “solve” identity-based conflicts, it is possible to gain insight about them and reach agreement about their dynamics and thus set the stage for fractionation and redress of some of its component parts.

**Resource Disputes.** Building on Burton’s (1993) notion of “disputes”, resource disputes are tangible and observable. Take a hi-tech company where I served as consultant and mediator in which hardware and software departments competed for allocation of resources. Both department managers made a case for investing available monies in their respective departments. This was, at least initially, about the resource itself. Such disputes are fairly routine and relatively easy to “fix,” perhaps with a decision based on a mechanism such as a cost-benefit analysis over a certain pre-determined time frame. Resource disputes can be settled through mixed motive bargaining (Bazerman & Lewicki, 1983) and in part mutual

gains can be achieved for all parties with effective and timely interest-based negotiation and problem solving (Fisher & Ury, 1981).

Disagreements that begin as primarily resource disputes can deteriorate into objectives-based problems or even into identity-based conflicts. For example, when I was called in to mediate the hardware-software dispute, millions of dollars (twice what was initially planned) had already been allocated to the software department to adopt new software. The software manager had won the resource dispute by persuading the head of the company that investment in this area was essential; the hardware manager had lost in his effort to receive the funds to improve hardware so current software could be better utilized. This win-lose situation created a negatively spiraling dynamic in which the software manager was seen as spearheading the future well-being of the company and behaved as such, while the hardware manager felt he and his department were not prioritized or treated with adequate respect. When he was later blamed for not supporting this new software development effort adequately he felt ganged up upon when explaining that given his current resources, he could do no more than he was doing. He was blamed for purposely not cooperating fully with the software department, which needed better hardware support. The dispute deteriorated into an objectives-based problem for the software manager – “I require more and better computer support from the hardware department if our new software is to be effective” – and an identity-based conflict for the hardware manager who felt undervalued and blamed (as in this example, conflicts may exist at a different level for each of the sides).

**Objectives-Based Problems.** Objectives-based problems are more complex and harder to empirically determine than resource disputes, and may require some digging to determine what they are really about. Objectives, in their most elemental form, are those things we seek to accomplish or attain. Problems, most essentially, are those things that keep us from fulfilling our objectives. In a widely quoted operational definition of conflict, Hocker and Wilmot (1985), suggest that *conflict is the interaction of interdependent people who perceive incompatible goals and interference from each other in achieving those goals* (see also Folger, Poole, & Stutman, 2005).

Objective-based problems are those without a great deal of emotional content and can often be managed dispassionately, rationally and effectively with third party assistance as long as they are addressed in a rational and proactive way. They are often about contending priorities or poor communication over them. Such problems can be addressed through various value clarification and goal-setting methods such as appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider,

Sorenson, Whitney, & Yeager, 2001), future search (Weisbord & Janoff, 2000), action evaluation (Rothman, 2012) and consensus building (Susskind, McKernan, & Thomas-Larmer, 1999).

In the company mentioned above, a new allocation of several million dollars was being debated, with the software and hardware managers on opposing sides. Seeking to proactively clarify the underlying goals and objectives each side had for seeking this resource could have spared them the fight that soon changed from a competition for a limited resource in to a deeper identity-based conflict. When an intervener asks the right questions in a timely manner to uncover reasons sides have for their opposing positions, differences over objectives can become a source of clarification and joint problem solving. “I want more funding of hardware since given current time pressures and demands on our business, especially with an upgrade of software, we can’t keep up with software’s requests and will need more workers.” Or “I want more funding for software since we lack a cutting edge system to beat the competition.”

Instead, given how the solution was arrived at in a win-lose way, it is not surprising that for the “winner” deeper objectives-based problems emerged as he felt his goals were inadequately supported by the “loser,” who in turn felt hurt and unvalued, and thus did not adequately support his former colleague and present adversary.

In this case, the software manager is concerned with effectiveness in achieving his department’s goals (thus for him the conflict is still or now presenting at the objectives level), while the hardware manager is not only concerned with the growing demands made to his department – he is also concerned by what he feels is lack of recognition and respect (and thus the conflict became identity-based for him).

**Identity-Based Conflicts.** Identity-based conflicts are often far beneath the surface and much more complex to define than are resource or goal conflicts. They are about existential needs and values of individuals and groups that are threatened, frustrated and are usually competitively pursued in often self-defeating win-lose ways. Identity conflicts often emerge out of threats to a personal or collective sense of safety, recognition, self-esteem, control over the future and so forth. In our example, the hardware manager believes, “I deserve the allocation of money in recognition of my accomplishments and value to the company; and I can do better with more resources and thus be valued even more.” Thus, his sense of self-worth and recognition are threatened and frustrated. Identity-based conflicts, of course, are the most emotionally laden and difficult to engage and convert into opportunities.



However, when handled effectively the creative rewards can be great as a great deal of passion and energy can be well directed. When mishandled, the passion is combustible and deeply destructive dynamics and outcomes are common.

In the above mentioned organizational example, I brought the two managers together to talk about the source of the conflicts, what was upsetting about each other's behavior, and reframing in terms of their needs and values and sense of place in the organization. This led to a greater level of empathy and recognition by the two previously embattled managers, and led them to commit to a collaborative goal setting process at the objectives level with their respective sides.

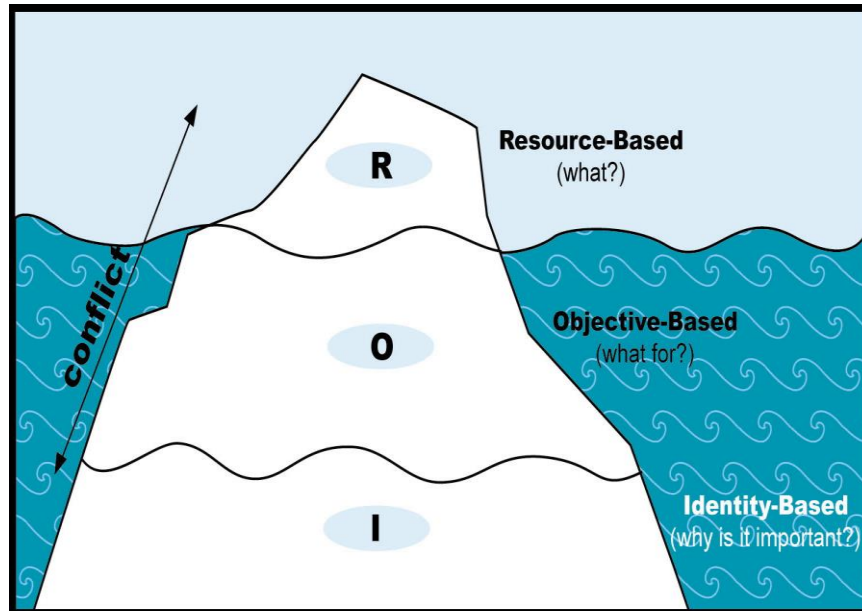
Identity-based conflicts require complex, systems oriented interventions such as narrative-based and transformative processes that emphasize dialogue and discovery more than solution seeking and early agreement. Such methods designed to address these types of conflicts include the interactive problem solving workshop approach of Burton (1990), Kelman (1997) and Azar (1990) (Fisher, 1997), the difficult conversations approach (Stone, Patton, & Heen, 2000), radical disagreements (Ramsbotham, 2013), the relational identity theory approach (Shapiro, 2010) and the ARIA approach (Rothman, 1996, 2012).

**Using a Levels-of-Conflict Analysis Visualization for Diagnosis.** Using the common metaphor of conflict as an iceberg, identity-based conflicts may be conceptualized as residing at the un-seeable, murky bottom. Objectives conflicts are visible, but opaque, just beneath the water's surface. Resource conflicts are above the water and are in plain sight - empirical and tangible.

Another way of differentiating these conflict levels is by the simple questions "What?"; "What for?" and "Why?" At the top of the iceberg are the tangible "What's" of a conflict. For example, "I want this real-estate to build on." Going down one level are the slightly less tangible "What for's" of a conflict. "I want this territory because only with it can my people fulfill its national aspirations to assure its independence." Finally, the deepest level of "Whys" are repositories of the deepest coordinates of identity such as "I want this land because it is home" (see Figure 1.)

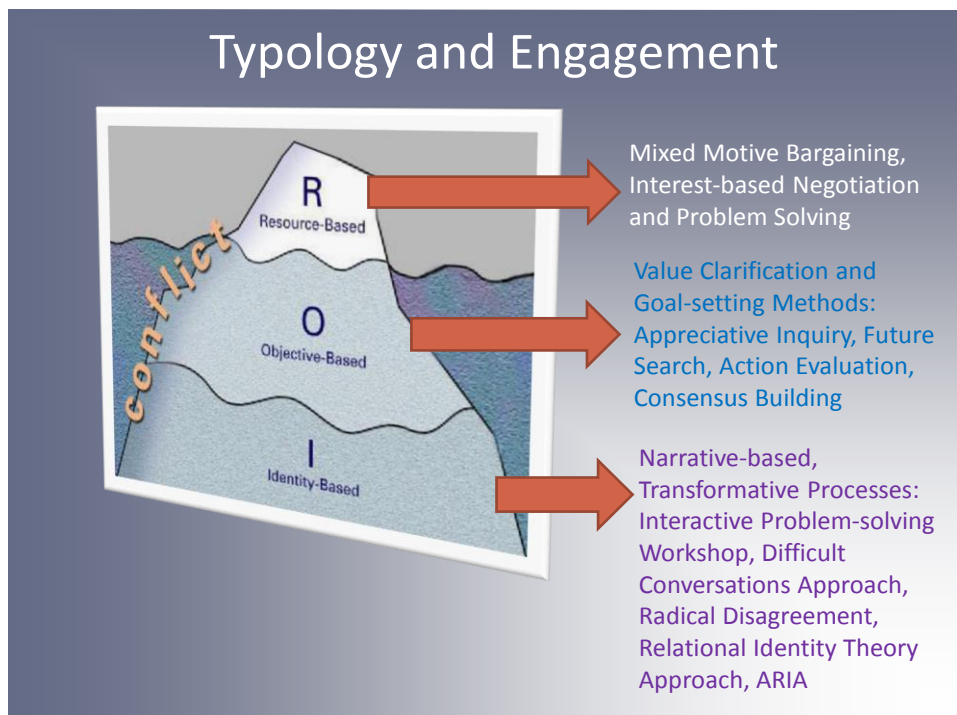
Figure 1

## Conflict Typology



This “levels of conflict analysis” approach visually suggests an important feature of identity-based conflict that distinguishes it from the other two. Identity-based conflict contains within it the other two levels of conflict as well. Conceptually moving up the iceberg, a conflict for example over *home* and one’s access to and control over it (the root of many community and international identity-based conflicts), will also be about broad objectives or specific goals (e.g. to accomplish sovereignty and territorial integrity) and resources (e.g. economic and military strength). On the other hand goal problems will be primarily about goals and resources (e.g. to establish an independent state in order to be able to gain and control of economic and military resources). Resource disputes, while also having seeds of goal problems and even identity-based conflicts if they are poorly handled, are fundamentally about the who, when, and how of the control of tangible resources (e.g. gaining access to and control over scarce resources). Methods of engagement correspond to conflict typology, as outlined above and summarized in Figure 2.

Figure 2



When I was called in to the hardware/software conflict, it was a full-blown identity conflict, with the two managers hotly disparaging each other personally (though the identity aspects of the conflict were more central to the hardware manager than to the software manager, for whom it was still mainly an objectives-based problem). It began as a resource dispute, which deteriorated into an objectives-based problem as both managers began to claim with urgency that the future of the company depended on allocation of resources to their respective departments. The heated situation then transformed into an identity-based conflict particularly for the software department manager whose sense of dignity and value was challenged by the process and outcomes of the initial resource dispute. I dealt with it as an identity-based conflict, using ARIA (Rothman, 2012). The conflict was then reformulated as an objectives-based conflict, and I used a corresponding approach called Action Evaluation (Rothman, 2012).

**Matching Diagnosis with Intervention Strategy.** To now further explain how to connect between diagnosis and intervention strategy, here are two examples, domestic and international, for applying this contingency approach:

In a conflict between a school board and its superintendent which began over deep disagreements about how to manage budgets, personality disputes soon took over as a sense

of betrayal and mistrust clouded all effective planning or collaboration between the two sides. Is this a resource-dispute, an objectives-based problem or identity-based conflict? This can be deduced through the diagnosis methods suggested above. If the conflict is diagnosed as rooted in identity (say, the conflict has become deeply personal or the parties are of a different race or gender and feel discriminated against on that basis), surfacing and engaging the deep differences through one or a number of identity-based methods is the first stage in intervention. If the conflict is analyzed as objectives-based, intervention begins with clarifying goals and values before addressing concrete resource distribution and outcomes. If the conflict is simply about the resource interventions can be designed to help parties reach agreements on best means to divide, share or trade them. There is also a less preferable alternative: the mediator might first address the conflict as objectives or resource-based, and if parties are unsatisfied or if problems have worsened, might inductively discover that it is necessary to move down to deeper levels of analysis and intervention (i.e. as an identity-based conflict).

Or at the international level, imagine Israelis and Palestinians all seeking an end to their conflict and agreeing in principle about the need for a two-state solution. Next steps should be easy, right? Not at all unless it is clear at what level they are operating. Is it about negotiating final status agreements over who gets what resource, when and how (i.e. the nature of a political settlement)? This would merit principled bargaining, for instance. Is it about the nature and purposes of that two-state solution (i.e. how will they work together on environmental issues? What kind of trade agreements will be reached between the two entities?)? If so, goal setting would be an appropriate approach. Or is it about the identity of each community (i.e., dignity, religious beliefs, control over destiny and so forth and ways that state will fulfill or further frustrate such existential needs and values)? In that case, surfacing contending issues and engaging in “difficult conversations” effectively would be appropriate.

### **From Theory to Practice – Limitations and Opportunities for Practitioners**

One of the main strengths of this contingency approach for practitioners is to provide them with a mental model to organize and guide both conflict analysis and interventions based on it. It has helped many practitioners in all types of conflicts across many different countries to design and implement constructive interventions (Rothman, 2012). It has assisted both third parties and disputants to be able to read from the same score of music – that is to talk about the same things (i.e. levels of conflict) at the same time in the same way (type of intervention

strategy) for the same reasons. This goes far in moving conflict toward cooperation. On the other hand, like all models, it has limitations in the translation from pure concept to messy practice. Models are simplifications of reality that can help to organize and formalize thinking and acting. But if we view models as reality we reify them, and in that way reduce their effectiveness by seeking to conform reality to them, instead of adapt models as useful to address the vagaries of real life.

Another limitation, which may also be a strength of this model, is that not all practitioners are or should strive to be masters of all approaches. For example, my expertise is identity-based conflicts. Thus, after assessing conflicts, I have told potential clients that my focus on deeply rooted identity-issues may be too much for their situation. Instead, they might do better finding (and I may refer them to) someone who specializes in concrete problem solving methods (like principled bargaining).

One very specific caution for practitioners is, while perhaps obvious, useful to articulate. The levels-of-conflict analysis tool, while useful, is imprecise. It is probably not realistic to think that we ever fully distinguish one level from another in pure forms. Indeed, in another article a colleague and I suggest that underneath all conflicts – even resource-based – lurk deeper layers of identity issues. And so too, if we unpack the densely constructed conflicts in which identity issues are so salient, we can “move up the iceberg” and constructively attend to differences that are more about goals and “above them” in the iceberg, that are expressed by concrete resources (Rothman & Alberstein, 2013). Indeed, the differences between resource conflicts and goals conflicts are often hard to determine. And yet, even with these limitations, I and many others have found this contingency model useful for both conceptualizing conflicts, trying to distinguish between them and using this as a kind of hypothesis to design and manage interventions. However, humility is always warranted in this work of ours and so, even as we may use this model to design interventions, we can at the same time use it to critique and readjust our strategy as we go. As one colleague told me as he learned and applied the ARIA model to a complex intervention between Israeli and Palestinian community leaders outside of Jerusalem some years ago: “the model provided me with a framework that both gave me confidence and humility at the same time” (Ross & Rothman, 1999).

## **Conclusion**

The above contingency model is a result of my effort to distinguish identity-based conflict and to take theory into the field, helping to make it "useful" to those on the ground (e.g. interveners and disputants and policy makers). Moving in the other direction, I have also sought to continually view practice through the lens of rigorous analysis and in the service of replicable theory building.

Some three decades ago as a doctoral student of John Burton, Edward Azar and Herbert Kelman, I sought to build upon their efforts to build a robust model of international conflict resolution (the Problem Solving Workshop) (Rothman, 1992). At Azar's Center for International Conflict Management and Development, we began an ambitious project to build a Grand Theory of conflict resolution. Our questions then were essentially about the nature of international protracted social conflict and how it could best be understood and addressed. My questions now are even more global (and local): how can we as theorists and practitioners develop a flexible, inclusive and overarching theory of conflict and its creative engagement that can knit our disparate and often fractious field more effectively together in both theory and practice? I believe a contingency approach is one useful and robust answer.

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