

Intractability and the Frontier of the Field

HEIDI BURGESS

GUY BURGESS

Intractable conflicts are those that lie at the frontier of the field—the conflicts that stubbornly seem to elude resolution, even when the best available techniques are applied. We discuss the nature of intractability—its causes and why it is so important to learn more about it. We also discuss why it is essential that we address the problem of intractability head-on rather than ignoring these conflicts because they are viewed as impossible.

*I*ntractable is a highly contentious term. We often joke that intractability must exist because our arguments about its existence are intractable! Some people do not like the term because it is too negative; they think it implies hopelessness even though dictionary definitions use phrases like “not manageable,” “stubborn,” or “hard to work with,” implying difficulty, not impossibility. There is also concern that the term may undermine demand for the field’s services. If conflicts are intractable, there is a worry that people may conclude it is a waste of time to try to deal with them more constructively. Others do not like *intractable* because it is too hard to measure. How can you tell whether a conflict is or is not?

While one can quibble about issues like these, there are nevertheless many conflicts that stubbornly defy our best attempts at resolution. Some involve social issues such as abortion, homosexuality, race, inequality, and environmental protection. Others reflect terrible divides between identity groups: Palestinians and Israelis, Shiites and Sunnis, Protestants and Catholics, Hutus and Tutsis, or, to a lesser extent, we hope, Democrats and Republicans in the United States. Regardless of what we call them, the cost of these conflicts is enormous.

We also argue in this article, and on the Beyond Intractability Web site (<http://www.beyondintractability.org>), that intractable conflicts are the biggest threat to the well-being of people worldwide. We cannot afford to



ignore them or quibble about terms. Rather, we must come to understand their nature and causes and how they can be made less destructive, even if they cannot be resolved.

Characteristics of Intractable Conflicts

Intractability is not a dichotomous concept. It is a continuum, with very stubborn (perhaps intractable) conflicts at one end and very simple, readily resolvable conflicts at the other end (these are the ones that mediators do not see because the parties are able to handle them alone) and many conflicts somewhere in between. It is the in-between ones that most mediators deal with most of the time.

Intractability is also a dynamic state. Few conflicts are intractable at the beginning; rather, they become intractable over time because of a failure to deal with a variety of destructive conflict dynamics. Conflicts that become highly escalated and involve repeated patterns of violence are likely to move toward the intractable end, sometimes quite quickly. Conflicts that are managed skillfully to limit escalation and violence are likely to move toward the tractable end (consider all the successful mediations that have been accomplished).

Some characteristics make conflicts more difficult to handle, no matter what. One might say these conflicts are predisposed to become intractable. For example, conflicts that involve irreducible, high-stakes, win-lose issues that have no zone of possible agreement often become intractable. These are conflicts from which the participants see no way out (Zartman, 2003) because any mutually agreeable solution would require them to accept unacceptable losses. Put another way, these conflicts persist because the perceived costs of settling are seen as higher than the costs of continuing the fight.

The conflict between Hamas, which advocates the destruction of Israel, and Israel, which advocates its continued existence, is a high-stakes win-lose conflict. There will not be an opportunity for agreement until Hamas changes its rhetoric, goals, and behavior. But so far, its followers are unwilling to do that because they apparently believe that the goal is worth the cost of continuing the fight. And it is hard to imagine that the conflict could be resolved by an Israeli agreement to dismantle their nation.

Perhaps the most important definition of *intractability* involves the distinction between the long-term, underlying (and generally intractable) conflicts and the innumerable (more tractable) dispute episodes that occur within the context of the larger conflict. Conflicts between major, core

identity groups, for example, often persist for decades, if not centuries. Within the context of these conflicts, however, the settlement of disputes temporarily resolves key issues in ways that determine, for a time, how the parties will live together. This distinction is similar to that made by John Burton (1990).

For example, the continuing conflict between Israelis and the Palestinians has gone on since 1948 and appears likely to continue for some time. But individual disputes between these parties come and go. Agreements are made, followed for a while, then broken. Wars are waged, ended, and new ones started. These wars, as serious as they are, are individually tractable disputes that can be resolved. The underlying conflict between the Israelis and the Palestinians, so far, however, has not been resolved.

The same is true about the rights of homosexuals in the United States. Laws and constitutional amendments regarding, for example, gay marriage can be proposed and then passed or rejected. These too are resolvable disputes within the longer-term conflict between homosexual rights advocates and opponents.

So even while the underlying conflict cannot be resolved, there are many useful things that mediators and other dispute resolution professionals can do to make the conflicts more constructive. We argue that our goals should be to minimize the destructiveness associated with the individual disputes; promote the wise, equitable, efficient, and, where possible, agreement-based resolution of each dispute; and limit tensions that are likely to increase the destructiveness of inevitable, future confrontations regarding the core conflict.

Put another way, our goal is to turn Clausewitz upside down. Clausewitz (2004) argued that “war is the continuation of politics by other means.” We argue that the knowledge of our field should be used to show people how they can continue war (or intractable conflicts) by other (more constructive and less violent) means. The key to dealing with intractable conflict is thus not by pursuing the unrealistic goal of resolving the underlying conflict. Rather, we want to show people how they can limit war and other destructive conflict by learning to pursue conflicts constructively.

Causes of Intractability

The causes of intractability are varied. In earlier publications, we have listed three: intolerable moral differences; high-stakes distributional issues; and domination, status, or pecking-order conflicts (Burgess and Burgess, 1996).

Intolerable moral differences arise from conflicts of fundamental values based on differences in religion, culture, or worldview. What makes these conflicts different from simple lifestyle differences is that one party believes that the actions of another are so evil that they must be actively and vigorously opposed. For most of us, the murder of infants is such an intolerable offense. For the right-to-life movement, abortion is the same thing. Such conflicts are generally not subject to compromise. In this example, it is hard to imagine that killing half as many babies would be morally acceptable. Such conflicts can also be very persistent even when the parties know that, over the short term, they cannot win. Yet they continue the fight because they define their self-worth by their commitment to the cause.

High-stakes distributional issues are conflicts over who gets what when the “what” is so valuable that it justifies the costs of an all-out confrontation. If the stakes are small, people may be willing to let things go. If the conflict threatens what one views as the resources essential to a livable future, then things are likely to escalate into all-out confrontations. This is especially true in zero-sum distributional conflicts in which resources are severely constrained and it is impossible to expand the pie. Also problematic are cases where one party, motivated by boundless greed, is so unwilling to share land or resources that it threatens figuratively—and sometimes literally—to push the other party into the sea.

Domination conflicts are conflicts over power, status, and one’s position in the social and political hierarchy. While people with higher status tend to win the distributional conflicts, status conflicts go beyond distributional conflicts to involve subjective assessments of an individual’s or a group’s prestige or social worth.

Scale

One of the biggest contributors to intractability is scale. By and large, the conflict resolution field is a table-oriented profession that excels in structuring small-group interactions in ways that produce conversion experiences that can transform conflictual relationships. With respect to large-scale, intractable conflicts—the kind that can divide entire societies—the number of people who can participate in such processes is fantastically small compared to the size of the general population. For example, an unusually large program, one with a thousand participants, constitutes only about .01 percent of the roughly 10 million people who inhabit Israel and Palestine. Efforts to address the scale component of the intractable

conflict problem will require effective ways of reaching the other 99.99 percent.

Beyond scale, intractability is also a matter of complexity. The course of any large-scale, intractable conflict is determined by the actions of thousands of people working in a broad range of social roles with widely differing skills, backgrounds, and objectives. People can be working collaboratively, competitively, or unintentionally at cross-purposes. The need for coordination is huge, but the task is enormously difficult. Clearly, one-size-fits-all approaches to such complex conflicts will not work. Effective programs must be able to offer customized advice and services that are appropriate to each individual's specific circumstances and work to coordinate each effort within the larger context of ongoing dispute handling interventions.

The Outsider Problem

Another problem is that with respect to high-stakes conflicts, people are reluctant to accept advice from people who are not firmly on their side. This can make it very hard for outsiders to import solutions. An alternative, championed by John Paul Lederach (1997, 2005), is an elicitive strategy designed to create occasions for people to discover their own solutions. But history has shown that the disputants often cannot do this on their own and that they can often benefit from an outside third party who can help them change the dynamics of the dispute enough to allow them to discover new ways of approaching the problem on their own.

First- and Second-Order Causes of Intractability

We tend to think intractability is the result of what we call first-order problems—the destructive conflict dynamics themselves. In addition to those already described, these also include problems communicating across language and cultural barriers, distortions associated with anger and escalation processes, difficulties identifying and taking advantage of opportunities for mutual gain, and obstacles to moving beyond a history of unrightable wrongs.

There are, however, an often-neglected series of second-order problems that must also be surmounted. These are the dynamics that prevent people from implementing known solutions to first-order problems. At the psychological level, these include a variety of dynamics that make it difficult

for people to change the way in which they approach conflict. With narrowcasting, for example, people seek out supportive information sources while avoiding those that are critical. It is a lot more fun to listen to the news when it tells you what you want to hear: that it's the other guy's fault. There is also Kenneth Boulding's "sacrifice trap" (1984), which leads leaders to continue destructive confrontations because it is easier than admitting that the sacrifices they asked people to make were tragic mistakes or that they were wrong.

At the social level, second-order problems include conflicts of interest stemming from the fact that intractable conflict is big business. The conflict industry includes the military, the police, the judiciary, the political system, lawyers, lobbyists, correctional facilities, talk radio, counselors, religious leaders, and supporting educational institutions. Any change in the way in which conflicts are handled is likely to involve enormous shifts of money. Not surprisingly, potential losers are going to fight very hard to protect their share of the pie and conflict-as-usual practices. This is what Dwight Eisenhower (1961) warned about when he described what he called the military-industrial complex.

This suggests that efforts to deal with intractable conflict are much more likely to be successful if they work within the existing system rather than promote radical alternatives with lots of losers. In short, we need to recognize that efforts to change the ways in which conflict is handled will unavoidably produce conflict. We need to use our skills to limit this opposition while building support for the truly essential changes from destructive to constructive conflict transformation.

Consequences of Intractable Conflict

The consequences of intractable conflicts are huge, and most of them are negative because these conflicts tend to be pursued in damaging and destructive ways. In addition to the obvious (yet unimaginably grotesque) violence and displacement in many of these conflicts, there are massive economic, social, and psychological costs: the fear, hatred, anger, and guilt that drive the conflict are difficult to remedy after the conflict has supposedly been resolved. The Rwandan children, for example, who watched their parents be killed or who were forced to kill others themselves will probably never be psychologically healthy. How can these children put their lives back together and grow into productive adults? A few will, one hopes, but probably most will not.

Even conflicts that occur within violence-limiting institutions, such as conflicts over abortion, sexual orientation, or race relations in the United States, have significant negative socioeconomic and psychological costs. They tear apart relationships and challenge institutions, such as churches and schools, which spend much of their time dealing with these issues rather than focusing on their primary goals of education or spiritual growth and healing.

The bottom line is that intractable conflict is arguably the most destructive force on the planet. Not only do these conflicts underlie virtually every civil and international war, they are also deliberately exploited by tyrants, tyrant wannabes, and war profiteers seeking to expand and solidify their positions. Intractable conflicts also paralyze policymaking processes in ways that make it difficult or impossible for us to deal sensibly with a broad range of social problems, including tsunami and hurricane preparedness and relief, global warming, poverty, crime, and the crafting of sensible responses to infectious diseases, such as AIDS or bird flu. Beyond that, there are the countless intractable, interpersonal problems that make the lives of too many people miserable.

Moving Beyond Intractability

As we said at the beginning of this article, many of our colleagues have argued that we should not use the term *intractable* because it implies hopelessness. We do not see it that way. What would be a cause for hopelessness would be a refusal to grapple with the problem because it is too difficult and frightening.

While intractable conflicts are not amenable to final, near-term resolution, there is much that we can do to make these interactions less destructive and more constructive. Although the conflicts cannot be resolved, the parties can learn to live together with less overt hostility and violence. They can learn to work with people on the other side and come to understand the reason for their differences, even if those differences do not go away.

People who have engaged in dialogues about abortion, for example, do not change their attitudes about it. But they do change their attitudes about the people on the other side: they learn they are intelligent, thoughtful, caring, humans who, for a variety of reasons, see the issue of abortion differently. But they are people who can and should be respected, people who can even become one's friends (Fowler and others, 2001).

People caught up in ethnic conflicts also can come to respect people on the other side, learning that they also are intelligent, thoughtful, caring humans who are caught up in a cycle of fear and violence that nobody wants. Working together to try to figure out how to disrupt that cycle is a positive way to respond to intractable conflict and can make those conflicts less destructive even as they continue.

Sometimes seemingly endless, hopelessly intractable conflicts are resolved. Chris Honeyman (2003) observes that labor-management conflict is a prime example of an entire type of conflict that used to be intractable and terribly destructive and no longer is: “Most would argue that the labor-management conflict has seen a great deal of progress, and the patterns by which this progress has occurred—particularly, its two-steps-forward, one-step-back history and its pronounced national and even local variations—may suggest likely expectations for how other intractable conflicts may be brought to ‘manageability.’”

Although our field does not know how to stop these difficult conflicts, we do know a lot about violence prevention and conflict transformation. The breadth and depth of our knowledge is illustrated in the articles that follow and in the much larger Web site of the Intractable Conflict Knowledge Base, www.BeyondIntractability.com. This Web site has over four hundred articles, all discussing what is known about dealing with intractable conflicts effectively.

Next Steps

In spite of the hopeful and considerable progress that the dispute resolution field has made, we still have a lot to learn, as is evidenced by the vexing nature of so many difficult conflicts. As a society, we spend staggering amounts of money trying to figure out how to prevail in destructive, intractable conflicts and almost nothing trying to understand and prevent the intractable conflict dynamics that leave us with such terrible choices. We need to learn how to change the game, not just how to play the same old, destructive game better.

What is desperately needed, and fully justified by the threat of catastrophic conflict, is a well-financed, long-term effort comparable to programs that address the other big threats, such as global warming, AIDS, and cancer. This will require stable, long-term funding capable of attracting our most intelligent and committed citizens to work on the problem.

Currently, working in the field of intractable conflict is a career choice that often condemns one to a life on a shoestring budget.

At the same time, the illusion that our field has all the answers must be abandoned. Our pieces of the puzzle must be brought to a table where we can work with contributions from other conflict-related fields (political science, law, military science, human rights, humanitarian relief, development workers) to craft a creative synthesis capable of dealing with the toughest conflict problems. It is also important that we find ways to escape the bitter partisan divides that have turned the debate over conflict strategy into divisive political talking points. In short, we need to practice what we preach and work harder to pursue genuinely collaborative approaches.

Success will not come easily. It will, like the war on cancer, be a process of incremental improvements where basic research informs applied research, which informs clinical practice in ways that make things progressively better. The key to making this work is a recognition of the slow, long-term nature of the process. Funders should quit demanding and conflict resolution programs should quit promising quick and dramatic successes. The truth is that we are all small players in a grand drama that will determine the future of the human race. It is a drama in which we must all play a constructive part.

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Heidi Burgess and **Guy Burgess** codirect the University of Colorado Conflict Research Consortium. Specialists in intractable conflict and the use of the Web for conflict resolution education, they are also codirectors of Beyond Intractability and its sister project, CRInfo, the Conflict Resolution Information Source.