Everyone thinks of changing the world, but no one thinks of changing himself.

- Leo Tolstoy

Introduction

I have a number of old friends who live on a spiritual community. After a long period on the community (which has a thriving project), tensions between members devolved to a kind of collective War of the Roses.

I spoke with the various parties involved. Everyone had their version of course; and everyone was devastated. The stories I heard from each person of the bad treatment they received were completely edited out by others I talked to. Everyone had their tale of woe, but no one spoke of their own poor actions.

Nothing unusual about that.

So anyway, I felt sad about the situation, and wanted to try to lever any residual motivation they might have had to do something different.

Hence this document.

It didn’t really seem to have much effect. Spiritual or not, its easier to stay in pain and blame than confront oneself.

For anyone interested in confronting themselves through difficult conflicts, I hope this compilation may prove useful. I want to emphasise that what is very particular about what I have amassed here is that any of it can be done unilaterally. You don’t need the others to do anything different. You don’t have to wait for any kind of change or increased humility on their part. You can just jump in and do this work yourself, now.

I have included the cover letter to my friends on the community, to give a little more of the context.

To cite:
Dear friends

What motivates me to write you is that have known you all for around four decades. So I care about you individually and collectively; this letter is the most significant form of caring I can express - more than simple empathy - though I do feel empathy for all of you, and I think I have expressed that to all of you. This represents an offering that I am giving you that I hope will be useful. Or, perhaps not; you each have to chart your course.

I think the origins of the current conflict in your community go a long way back. Twenty five years ago I decided not to join your community, because the dynamics that I observed - and which I felt were deeply rooted - were ones I didn't want to have to tackle. Thus I believe that the more recent conflicts have deep roots. I might add that the community I did go on to found developed its own set of intractable stucknesses, so I don't come from any superior position when making these comments.

I am understand that there has been no progress on the mediation front, and many of you seem demoralised and without sense of any possibility of resolution.

The suggestions I make below do not come from any sense of a moral high ground or trying to lecture you, but simply from a desire to support you all to find some movement away from pain, towards a more fluid place. I apply these approaches to myself, very imperfectly at times. The steps can be taken unilaterally - they do not depend on 'if you do this, I will do that'. I suggest they can be good for your own psychological and spiritual growth.

Personally, I think spirituality - apart from the transcendent dimension - is about the capacity to move away from blame, be humble, take responsibility, and own one's faults. As Ram Dass says 'if you think you are enlightened, go spend a week with your family'. This situation is, indeed, about family in that sense.

If you need to stay in blame for now - I really get that. Sometimes I am just not ready to move out of the position that Sartre calls 'bad faith', for a while. Everyone has their own timing for such things.

❖

I consulted with some colleagues about what I have written to you, to get critical feedback on my suggestions. One highly respected mentor who has run international mediations for 35 years, made these points to me about the suggestions I am submitting to you:

1. It may be that some, or all of you, are in a defended place, so no amount of great alternatives are going to be taken in. It just sounds like someone coming and creating further disturbance, no matter how well intentioned. My suggestions of growth potential are then likely to be taken as insulting.

2. If you are not defended, and so interested in the approaches, its all going to seem abstract and meaningless without some form of assistance to apply them. The suggestions might be good, but people are likely to need help with the ‘how’. Therapeutic types of conversations or coaching support may be necessary to find a way to apply these ‘great ideas’.

❖

Another colleague was less optimistic. She has seen many such conflicts on spiritual communities, some of which had components of violence and destruction to them. She suggested that such communities are relatively young, and that we have in the wider society established hierarchies which have been stabilised over centuries, with police, courts, etc. Utopian dreams seem to end up as nightmares without this kind of complex social fabric.

❖

Another colleague pointed out that people who get caught in blame and recriminations need some motivation to do things differently. Such motivation can come through realising that blame and recriminations poison oneself. At the core is hurt and pain, and the stories we create around such pain takes us in circles. These entrenched ways of dealing with pain are held in place by body processes, such as holding the breath. Some of the activities suggested below are likely to be profoundly enhanced if mindfulness of body is integral to each activity.
And, I realise that for some of you, some of the content issues have an ‘ideological’ dimension, which you may consider you cannot ‘compromise’ on. If that is true, I guess then a distinction has to be drawn between content and process. These suggestions are oriented around the process of relationship and community, without diminishing the importance of the content that each person holds as important and primary.

❖

So, that said, here’s a list which I will expand on in this document:

1. There is a Japanese style of self-reflective therapy called Naikan. Its based not on examining ones wounds, but on taking stock of how one has impinged on others, and the ways in which one has not expressed gratitude.
2. Right Use of Power, as developed by Cedar Barstow: http://www.rightuseofpower.org/about.html.
4. The work of Claude Steiner, especially the power triangle.
5. Existentialist ideas about bad and good faith.
6. The work of Byron Katie.
7. There are also some steps from AA type of programmes which I think are also relevant - specifically, making a searching and fearless moral inventory, identifying persons we harmed, and willing to make amends to them. Included here also are steps to apology.
11. Anandamurti’s spiritual guidelines for behaviours.
12. David Schnarch writes on Differentiation (e.g. Passionate Marriage). He writes in the context of intimacy, sexuality and marriage. But its just as relevant to other types of relationships, conflicts and the issue of personal growth.
13. Shame is a key dynamic in terms of what goes wrong in relationships and groups. Understanding it is essential for being able to identify disintegration points, and possibly find a way towards healing and community.
14. Gestalt work on projection, polarities, and responsibility.
15. Kahane outlines Sharmer’s four types of Talking and Listening.
16. Hellinger on Cultivating the right attitude.
17. Coleman’s work on complex systems and attractors.

Vinay Gunther
Approach 1

Naikan

This is a Japanese form of therapy, very different than western ideas of what therapy involves. It is basically self effacing - considering what there is to be grateful for, and how we might have offended others, rather than what was done to us, and what we didn't get.
For more detail see: http://www.todoinsitute.org/naikan.html

In relation to the other people in this conflict, consider the three questions

- What have I received from __________ ?
- What have I given to __________ ?
- What troubles and difficulties have I caused __________ ?

1. Consider things you are received from them, which have contributed to who you are today.
Consider the value of this to you.
Feel that, not just intellectually.
Consider ways in which you have been ungrateful to them for what you have received.
See if you can find some remorse for your lack of gratitude.
Consider how that reflects on your own pride, your sense of self importance

2. Consider things you have given to that person.
Consider how much those things were duty, how much generosity.
The things you consider to be generous, identify self interest and conditionality that may have existed, unaware to you.
Consider the genuine love you felt in giving. If it was genuine love, is that feeling still there when you recall?
If not, consider ways in which it may not have been real Tapah

3. Consider what troubles you have brought to that person.
Consider ways in which your actions have caused them pain.
 Consider actions which were well intentioned on your part, but not what they needed.
Consider actions you have done which were unhelpful to their work or personhood.
In a clear way, name those actions in simple sentences.

For an example of a man doing this in relation to his wife, you can view here:
http://www.todoinsitute.org/reflectnaikan2.html

________________________

________________________

________________________
Approach 2

Understanding power

See the work of Cedar Barstow: http://www.rightuseofpower.org for more resources and her excellent book, Living in the Power Zone.

1. Listen to

http://www.thisamericallife.org/radio-archives/episode/371/scenes-from-a-mall

Apart from amazement and entertainment value, the story is clearly apocryphal. One core theme raised is that of power.

2. To warm up, firstly list the ways in which the other person/s have used their power (called here ‘up-power’) in relation to you, in a way that harmed you.

Describe what it was about their actions that involved the use of power - behaviour, tone of voice, context, threats, withholding resources, shaming, manipulation, overstepping boundaries, etc.

They may have over used, or under used their power, the result of which was harm to you.

Power originates from three sources - status, personality, and role. Identify whether their harmful use of power involved status, personality, or role power

Identify how you felt when they used their power in those ways.

What did you need from them, for resolution and relationship repair that didn’t happen?

3. Identify places where you used your power against them, in ways which were harmful.

Even if you did not have ‘up-power’, you may still have used your ‘down-power’ in ways which were harmful - e.g. sabotage, undermining, stonewalling, passive aggressive

Identify places where your intentions regarding the use of power, and your actions did not match.

Describe what it was about your actions that involved the use of power - behaviour, tone of voice, context, threats, withholding resources, etc. You may have over used or under used power, in a way that created harm.

Identify whether this involved your status, personality, or role power that you hold.

Identify needs you may have had that contributed to your actions.

e.g.

- Unmet needs - financial, social, recognition
- Overdeveloped/excessive needs - being liked, needed, seen as competent, in control

Imagine how they felt when you used your power in those ways.

Do not use causal linking ‘I only did this, because they did that’. Use the 150% rule - you are responsible for empowering others, preventing and repairing harm and promoting wellbeing. The rule says that failure to do any of these things, with whatever version of up- or down-power you have, is your responsibility.

What are you willing to do towards responsibility and repair related to your actions and their impacts?

____________________

____________________

____________________
Approach 3

Resentments and Unvirtues

You can see www.unvirtues.com for a few more details of our approach.

Set 1

List your resentments - leftover angry feelings - towards this person.
Identify your attributed cause for your feelings, related to their action.
Identify the injury - to your:

- self-esteem
- security (emotional or practical)
- ambitions
- social identity/status (pride)
- finances
- personal relations
- autonomy

Now identify, in each resentment, where you were any of the following:

- selfish (attitude)
- dishonest (to yourself)
- self-seeking (actions)
- frightened
- inconsiderate
- lacking self control
- trying to control others

Your fears might include:

- Not being good enough
- Not going to be trusted
- Being disrespected
- Being disliked
- Being alone
- Being left out
- Not needed
- Acting irresponsibly
- Acting unideologically
- Looking ugly
- Feeling emotional pain
- Losing control
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unvirtues</th>
<th>Virtues</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aggressive, belligerent</td>
<td>Good-natured, gentle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angry</td>
<td>Forgiving, calm, generous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apathetic</td>
<td>Interested, concerned, alert</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apprehensive, afraid</td>
<td>Calm, courageous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Argumentative, quarrelsome</td>
<td>Agreeable, peaceful, reconciliatory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arrogant, insolent</td>
<td>Unassuming, humble</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attacking, critical</td>
<td>Fair, self-restrained</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoidant</td>
<td>Faces problems and acts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blocking</td>
<td>Honest, intuitive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boastful</td>
<td>Modest, humble</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Careless, slapdash</td>
<td>Careful, painstaking, concerned, diligence, excellence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cheating</td>
<td>Honest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competitive (socially)</td>
<td>Cooperative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compulsive</td>
<td>Free</td>
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<tr>
<td>Conceited, self-important</td>
<td>Humble, modest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contradictory, oppositional</td>
<td>Reasonable, agreeable, cooperative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contrary, intractable, pigheaded</td>
<td>Reasonable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Controlling</td>
<td>Lets go, esp. of other's lives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cowardly</td>
<td>Brave</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical</td>
<td>Non-judgmental, praising, tolerant,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cynical</td>
<td>Open-minded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deceitful</td>
<td>Guileless, honest, integrity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defensive</td>
<td>Open to criticism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Detiant, contemptuous</td>
<td>Respectful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denying</td>
<td>Honest, accepting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dependent</td>
<td>Accepts help but is self-reliant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depressed, morose</td>
<td>Hopeful, optimistic, cheerful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dirty, poor hygiene</td>
<td>Clean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dishonest</td>
<td>Honest</td>
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<tr>
<td>Disloyal, treacherous</td>
<td>Faithful, loyal</td>
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<td>Disobedient</td>
<td>Obedient</td>
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<tr>
<td>Disrespectful, insolent</td>
<td>Respectful, reverent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doubtful, cynical, undermining,</td>
<td>Enthusiastic, visionary, joyful</td>
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<tr>
<td>negative</td>
<td>Setting boundaries, tough love</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enabling</td>
<td>Empathetic, generous, admiring</td>
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<td>Envying</td>
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<tr>
<td>Evasive, deceitful</td>
<td>Candid, straightforward</td>
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<td>Exaggerating</td>
<td>Honest, realistic</td>
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<tr>
<td>Faithless, disloyal</td>
<td>Reliable, faithful</td>
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<td>Falsely modest</td>
<td>Honest, has self-esteem</td>
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<td>Falsely prideful</td>
<td>Modest, humble</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fantasizing, unrealistic</td>
<td>Practical, realistic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fearful</td>
<td>Confident, courageous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forgetful</td>
<td>Responsible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gluttonous, excessive</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gossiping</td>
<td>Closed-mouth, kind, praising</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Unvirtues</strong></td>
<td><strong>Virtues</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>-----------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greedy</td>
<td>Moderate, generous, sharing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hard hearted</td>
<td>Compassionate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hateful</td>
<td>Forgiving, loving, concerned for others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hypersensitive</td>
<td>Tolerant, doesn't personalise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ill-tempered, bitchy</td>
<td>Good-tempered, calm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impatient</td>
<td>Patient</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impulsive, reckless</td>
<td>Consistent, considered actions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inconsiderate</td>
<td>Thoughtful, considerate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indecisive, timid</td>
<td>Firm, decisive, assertive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indifferent, apathetic, aloof</td>
<td>Caring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inflexible, stubborn, rigid</td>
<td>Open-minded, flexible, creative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insecure, anxious</td>
<td>Self-confident, secure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insincere, hypocritical</td>
<td>Sincere, honest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intolerant</td>
<td>Tolerant, understanding, patient</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irresponsible, reckless</td>
<td>Responsible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isolating, solitary</td>
<td>Sociable, outgoing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jealous</td>
<td>Trusting, generous, admiring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judgmental</td>
<td>Broadminded, tolerant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Justifying (own actions)</td>
<td>Honest, frank, candid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of purpose</td>
<td>Purposeful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lazy, indolent</td>
<td>Industrious, conscientious, perseverant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loud</td>
<td>Tasteful, quiet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lustful</td>
<td>Healthy sexuality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lying</td>
<td>Honest</td>
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<tr>
<td>Manipulative</td>
<td>Candid, honest, non-controlling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masked, closed</td>
<td>Honest, open, candid</td>
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<tr>
<td>Messy</td>
<td>Orderly</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nagging</td>
<td>Supportive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narrow minded</td>
<td>Open minded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obscene, crude</td>
<td>Courteous, tactful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over emotional</td>
<td>Emotionally stable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perfectionist</td>
<td>Realistic goals</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pessimistic</td>
<td>Realistic, hopeful, optimistic, trusting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Possessive</td>
<td>Generous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prejudiced</td>
<td>Open-minded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Procrastinates</td>
<td>Disciplined, acts promptly</td>
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<tr>
<td>Projecting (negative)</td>
<td>Clear sighted, optimistic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rationalising</td>
<td>Candid, honest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resentful,, bitter, hateful</td>
<td>Forgiving</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resisting growing</td>
<td>Willing to grow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rude, discourteous</td>
<td>Polite, courteous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarcastic</td>
<td>Praising, tolerant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-centred</td>
<td>Caring of others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-destructive, self-defeating</td>
<td>Self-fulfilling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-hating</td>
<td>Self-accepting, loving</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-important</td>
<td>Humble, modest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-justifying</td>
<td>Admitting wrongs, humble</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Identify where you are far over on the Unvirtues side.
In relation to with others in this conflict, identify specifically where you acted in a way which expressed these Unvirtues.
This may mean recognising hidden, selfish agendas you (unconsciously) held.

**Put this into a fully owned sentence**

Example #1 - ‘I acted in a way which was vindictive’.
Then state the (unaware) intention in that Unvirtue e.g. ->’I wanted to inflict pain on them’.
Example #2 - ‘I was often pessimistic when speaking with them’.
...would then be expressed as ->’I wanted to negate their energy and ideas’
Note - it does not matter that you were not aware of the intention, this exercise involves inputting the intention from your action.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unvirtues</th>
<th>Virtues</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self-pitying</td>
<td>Grateful, realistic, accepting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-righteous</td>
<td>Humble, understanding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-seeking</td>
<td>Selfless, concerned for others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selfish, self interested</td>
<td>Altruistic, concerned with others, service oriented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shift to the best offer, keep options open</td>
<td>Committed, unwavering, determined</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shy</td>
<td>Outgoing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slothful (lazy),</td>
<td>Industrious, taking action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spiteful, malicious</td>
<td>Forgiving</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stealing</td>
<td>Honest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stubborn</td>
<td>Open-minded, willing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sullen</td>
<td>Cheerful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Superior, grandiose, pretentious</td>
<td>Humble</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Superstitious</td>
<td>Realistic, no magical thinking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suspicious</td>
<td>Trusting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tense</td>
<td>Calm, serene</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thinking negatively</td>
<td>being positive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Treacherous</td>
<td>Trustworthy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undisciplined, self-indulgent</td>
<td>Disciplined</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unfair, inconsistent</td>
<td>Fair, just</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unfriendly, hostile, bitchy</td>
<td>Friendly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ungrateful</td>
<td>Thankful, grateful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unkind, mean, malicious, spiteful</td>
<td>Kind</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unsupportive of others</td>
<td>Supportive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Untrustworthy, unreliable, dishonest</td>
<td>Trustworthy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Useless, destructive</td>
<td>Helpful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vain</td>
<td>Modest, humble</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vindictive</td>
<td>Forgiving</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violent</td>
<td>Gentle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vulgar</td>
<td>Polite</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wasteful</td>
<td>Thrifty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wilful</td>
<td>Accepting of the inevitable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Withdrawn</td>
<td>Outgoing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wordy, verbose</td>
<td>Frank, to the point, succinct</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Approach 4

The power triangle.
The purpose of this explanation is to outline the basis for the exercises below.
See the work of Claude Steiner: http://www.claudesteiner.com

There are three roles that many conflicts involve.
1. Victim - the feeling of being bullied, oppressed, suppressed, persecuted, excluded, used, hard done by.
2. Rescuer - sympathy with a victim/someone experiencing that role, and trying to help them
3. Persecutor - the person who does the bullying/oppressing/suppressing/persecuting/excluding/using - in some way riding over someone else's wishes, for any number of justified reasons.

These three roles tend to rotate. For instance, when I feel the victim in a situation, I may have revenge fantasies, and some of this may spill into certain actions - overt aggression (including glaring looks), or covert as passive aggression.

Often people doing something that (even briefly) involves a 'persecutor' role, immediately feel like the victim when confronted, or when getting a reaction to it. This is can be traced in many 'unsolvable' conflicts such as Israel/Palestine, or previously the Catholics/Protestants in Northern Ireland. It is how feuds can be maintained for many generations.

Feeling the victim leads eventually to persecutor type of actions, the other person becomes a victim, then lashes back, and around it goes.

The cycle is fed by rescuers who come in to (genuinely) help the victim, but often overextend themselves, or feel powerless to make a difference - moving into victim role, then flipping into becoming a persecutor themselves.

This occurs in almost all conflictual relationships.

There are three solutions.
1. Don’t do anything you don’t want to do, and ask for 100% of what you want 100% of the time, knowing you won’t always get it.
2. Don’t do more than 50% of the work in helping someone.
3. Don’t force someone to do something they don’t want to do.

The exercise
1. Identify where and how you have played any or all these roles in the conflict.
2. Identify what you did to perpetuate the movement of the cycle
3. Identify what you would need to do differently to step out of each role
4. Consider what you are willing to do to step out of the cycle. Examine your intentions or language for any remaining signs of any of these three roles.
Approach 5

Bad and good faith

An outline of bad faith

A person who constructs an inauthentic persona acts in what Sartre called “bad faith.” Living in bad faith means you believe you have no other choice but assume the role you think you should play. The inauthentic person is the one who lies to himself and thus creates a fiction about who he is and gets others to believe the fiction is reality. The person who acts in bad faith is not intentionally lying to others (that is, willing telling them falsehoods). Rather, the person is lying to themselves and they know this. These lies create an internal conflict that makes being authentic impossible. Sartre writes, “To be sure, the one who practices bad faith is hiding a displeasing truth or presenting as truth a pleasing untruth. Bad faith then has in appearance the structure of falsehood. Only what changes everything is the fact that in bad faith, it is from myself that I am hiding the truth. Thus the duality of the deceiver and the deceived does not exist here.”

This derives from a much earlier proposition by Soren Kierkegaard who, writing a century earlier, suggested that having a Christian faith was not enough. God provides principles and commandments, but does not instruct us in each moment how to apply them. That choice belongs to us, and requires the risk of getting it wrong, and ending up with consequences other than we intended. Because - despite good intentions - these are the result of our choices; thus we stand responsible for those consequences.

The more we know ourselves, including our dark aspects, the more we can truly choose, and acknowledge the complexity of our choosing. And the more we accept that life is ultimately a series of our choices - rather than ‘pressure of circumstances’ - the more we can own ‘this is me, this is what I did, and these are the consequences’. This is conceived of as the authentic life.

Here endeth the little introduction.

For more, heres a review of an HBO series, which looks at the characters of True Detective in existential terms: http://www.philosophynews.com/post/2014/05/26/Authenticity-and-Bad-Faith-Existentialism-in-True-Detective.aspx

If you want to read the man himself on the topic: http://www.philosophymagazine.com/others/MO_Sartre_BadFaith.html

So. When you review yourself, your actions, and their consequences in relation to the other person, how can you move more fully into recognising your own choices, and accepting the consequences? Following is just one exercise.

Responsibility or bad faith

1. Describe one of the offending incidents with this other person, when they wronged you. In this story, maximise your blaming them - attributing all responsibility to them, and as little as possible to yourself.

You can write this description out, or tell it to a friend.

What are your feelings (not thoughts) after telling the story this way.

2. Retell the exact same story, but doing the reverse. Take as much responsibility in your story as possible, and reduce any blame as much as possible.

What are your feelings after this rendition?

What are your consequent reflections?
Approach 6

The Work — A Written Meditation (Byron Katie)


Write down a stressful concept about someone whom you haven't forgiven 100 percent. (For example, “He doesn't care about me”).

Then question the concept in writing, using the following questions and turnarounds.

When answering the questions, close your eyes, be still, and go deeply as you contemplate. Inquiry stops working the moment you stop answering the questions.

Belief: fill in the blank __________________________________________________________

1. Is it true?

2. Can you absolutely know it's true?

3. How do you react, what happens, when you believe that thought?
   • a) What emotions happen when you believe that thought? (Depression, anxiety, etc. If needed, an Emotions and Reactions List is available on www.thework.com.)
   • b) Does that thought bring peace or stress into your life?
   • c) What images do you see, past and future, when you believe that thought?
   • d) Describe the physical sensations that happen when you believe that thought.
   • e) How do you treat that person and others when you believe that thought?
   • f) How do you treat yourself when you believe that thought?
   • g) What addictions/obsessions begin to manifest when you believe that thought? (Alcohol, credit cards, food, the TV remote?)
   • h) What do you fear would happen if you didn't believe that thought? (Later, take this list of fears to inquiry.)
   • i) Whose business are you in mentally when you believe that thought?
   • j) Where and at what age did that thought first occur to you?
   • k) What are you not able to do when you believe that thought?

4. Who would you be without the thought?

Close your eyes, and observe, contemplate. Who or what are you without that thought?

5. Turn the thought around.

(Example of a statement: He hurt me.)

Possible turnarounds:
   • To the opposite.
   a) (He didn't hurt me.) b) (He helped me.)
      • To the self. (I hurt me.)
      • To the other. (I hurt him.)

Give at least three genuine, specific examples for each.
Approach 7

Apology
In the dynamics of conflict, it always seems that its the other side who needs to apologise - right? As things become black and white, we feel like the wronged party, and the identifiable list of omissions or comissions is theirs.

Turning things upside down, we can consider finding humility - first - by recognising what we could apologise for. Thats a dramatic intervention. The other side my of course simply use such admissions of guilt as further ammunition - a worst case scenario. Or, they may not - it may result in a profound shift of the dynamics. Even in the former case, you gain moral ground, not because you are the victim, but through an act of will that can be very powerful.

Making amends
Alcoholics Anonymous has developed an advanced understanding of making amends, which is step 8 of their program.

It follows after identifying various ways you have hurt the other person; this is then addressed directly by making amends.

This is not the same as being sorry. Making amends has an action component as well - doing something about it. Making amends can take time.

Steps

Recognition
Starts with a detailed account of your actions.
Then add ownership of any ill intention or unvirtue that may have been in there.
Next acknowledgement the impact on the other - using your imagination to identify the likely effect, both practically and emotionally.

Responsibility
Then make a statement of responsibility/recognition of your role (‘I was wrong to do that’).
Make a statement that they did not deserve our treatment. There is no mention of the other’s faults, as numerous as they may be.

Remorse
Following this is an expression of regret.
At any point - beginning, or towards the end, you can you the words ‘I apologise’.

Restitution
Next is action - which you can proffer, or to set things right.

Repetition
Given this is something you do really regret, you can be clear that you won’t do it again.

Done face to face, you can additionally ask the person for any other ways that they felt hurt by you, that you have not addressed.

This may all seem way too much for ask. Perhaps Bill W’s words may provide encouragement:
‘Although these reparations take innumerable forms, there are some general principles which we find guiding. Reminding ourselves that we have decided to go to any lengths to find a spiritual experience, we ask that we be given strength and direction to do the right thing, no matter what the personal consequences may be. We may lose our position or reputation...but we are willing. We have to be. We must not shrink at anything’

Approach 8
Forgiveness

Here is a process from Ken Cloke (http://www.kennethcloke.com), a renowned mediator. I think the topic of forgiveness is tricky - people often jump to it as a ‘should’. It becomes a pat spiritual solution. But I don’t think it’s that easy - it requires the right timing, and it’s not right for all situations. That said, this is one of the best things I have found on the topic.

Reaching Forgiveness
Forgiveness is a process for:
- Releasing parties from the burden of their own false expectations
- Letting go of attachment to anger or pride
- Obtaining a release from judgment, including our judgments of ourselves
- Reclaiming life energy that is stuck in the past and rededicating it to the future
- “Giving up all hopes of having a better past.”

Here are some ideas to remember about forgiveness
- **Forgiveness Is Not Condonation.** Forgiveness does not mean you accept or agree with what the other person did to you. It does not mean you can change what happened or erase what they did. What’s done is done. All you can do is release yourself.
- **Forgiveness is Not For Them, It's For You.** Forgiveness is not something you do for someone else, but to free yourself from the continuation of pain and anger. It is a gift to your peace of mind, your self-esteem, your relationships with others, your future.
- **Forgiveness is Freeing.** The purpose of forgiveness is to free yourself from the entanglements of the past, to reestablish control over your life by letting go of unpleasant events and people and reconnect with a healthy, positive direction. Holding on to anger and shame is unhealthy. Releasing it is freeing.
- **Forgiveness is In Our Control.** Forgiveness cannot be forced or coerced, it can only be given freely. It is a power each of us has independently of others. It is a choice.
- **Self-forgiveness is Also Essential.** The last one we need to forgive is usually ourselves.
- **Forgiveness Requires Us to Give Up Suffering.** Oscar Wilde said that suffering is a gift. It is also a need. Forgiveness requires that we let go of our need to be pitied, our need to be right, and our need to feel a intense connection with our tormentor through anger.
- **Forgiveness Means Taking Responsibility for Choices.** Forgiveness is a choice that requires us to take responsibility for our actions and feelings. It requires us to be responsible to and for ourselves, even for our pain and humiliation. It means being responsible for the choices we make, including the choice of anger and the choice of forgiveness.
- **Forgiveness is Powerful.** Anger appears powerful, but leaves us feeling frustrated and powerless. Forgiveness, which appears weak, leaves us feeling stronger and less vulnerable to others.
- **Forgiveness is Easy.** Most of us have not learned techniques to reach forgiveness, but we know it begins in the heart. All one needs to begin is to want to be released from the past. The other person need not be present, though it is better if they are. Forgiveness is seeing the other person and ourselves without judgment.
- **Reconciliation follows Forgiveness.** Reconciliation is the ability to be in the presence of the other person without feeling angry or vulnerable. It is the highest point of healing and takes place in the heart. Reconciliation may or may not occur following forgiveness, as it requires not only open-hearted communication but the amelioration of unhealthy patterns and the restoration of positive emotional interactions.
Here is a simple, stripped down, five step process for reaching forgiveness:

- Remember in detail what happened and how you felt.
- Try to identify what the other person believed happened and how they may have felt.
- Identify all the reasons for not forgiving them, all the expectations you had of them that they did not meet, or how you would have liked them to have acted.
- Either: A. Choose to release yourself from your own false expectations and all the reasons you listed for not forgiving them; or B. Identify what it will cost you to hold on to them.
- Design and execute a ritual act of release, completion and closure.
Approach 9

Political truth


If the goals of politics are to maximize social justice, ethical self-improvement, and the common good, the role of political speech should be to achieve these outcomes by convincing others through honest dialogue and rational discussion, and not simply silence those who disagree by verbal manipulation, coercion, and personal intimidation. In the first place, manipulation, coercion, and intimidation merely polarize the opposition, driving it to more desperate measures in an effort to communicate its legitimate interests and points of view. In the second, as with all conflicts, it is easy to be seduced by false polarizations and come up with self-convincing arguments, sentimental platitudes, and justifications for anything. None of these forms of speech, however, bring us any closer to social justice, ethical self-improvement, and the common good.

The essayist Isaiah Berlin suggested that political communications and ideas are "inherently un-philosophical," in the sense that they are based on values over which people naturally disagree because they are based on dissimilar orientations and experiences. Political communications should therefore be regarded as unscientific, leading to different truths, and representing unique experiences, each of which is valid.

This is the essence of interest-based approaches to conflict resolution. More interestingly, from a conflict resolution perspective, Berlin asked, "In what kind of world is political philosophy - the kind of discussion and argument in which it consists - in principle possible?" He answered, "Only in a world where ends collide." Thus, political speech is conflict speech. For this reason, the answer to the question "What should be done?" is inherently undiscoverable as a complete answer. Thus,

"Not because it is beyond our powers to find the answer, but because the question is not one of fact at all, the solution lies not in discovering something which is what it is, whether it is discovered or not - a proposition or formula, an objective good, a principle, a system of values objective or subjective, a relationship between a mind and something non-mental - but resides in action: something which cannot be found, only invented - an act of will or faith or creation obedient to no pre-existing rules or laws or facts."

From this fundamental circumstance, Berlin concluded that no political argument powerful enough to convince large numbers of people can be entirely wrong. Thus, every powerful political idea represents, and continues to represent, some important piece of political truth, based on a genuine social experience. In an insightful passage, he wrote:

"The social contract is a model which to this day helps to explain something of what it is that men feel to be wrong when a politician pronounces an entire class of the population ... to be outside the community - not entitled to the benefits conferred by the State or its laws. So too, Lenin's image of the factory which needs no supervision by coercive policemen after the State has withered away; Maistre's image of the executioner and his victims as the corner-stone of all authority ...; Locke's analogy of government with trusteeship; ... all these illuminate some types of social experience."

These are not scientific, but are poetic, metaphoric truths of the human desire for freedom from tyranny, domination and oppression. What is important, therefore, in analyzing political argumentation, is that we probe beneath the formal, factual arguments people offer and elucidate the metaphors and analogies, interests and emotions, stories and social experiences that gave rise to them.
To do so, as in all conflict resolution, we need to surrender the idea that there is a single political truth, which is ours, and recognize instead that every political argument is an effort to establish the truth and validity, even the value, of a particular social experience. This implies that politics, despite its linguistic assumptions and orientation to power, need not be a zero-sum game in which one side is right and all others are wrong, but an effort to acknowledge, investigate, and integrate multiple, diverse, contradictory interests and truths in the course of formulating a common policy and direction.

This is precisely what conflict resolution, at its core, represents: a way of resolving disputes based on diverse interests using consensus building, power balancing, and similar techniques, in which no single group is able to dominate. Thus, mediation possesses a hidden political dimension that is inherently democratic, egalitarian, and collaborative because it allows a variety of interests and truths to contend and seek synergistic combination. It defeats prejudice and hatred not with an opposing prejudice and hatred, but by combining, averaging, and canceling them, then searching beneath their hostile veneer for the hidden, unsatisfied, heartfelt interests that fueled them. The recognition that there is more than one kind of truth contradicts an ancient idea about logic that dates back to Aristotle. In his influential dissection of logic, Aristotle wrote that three basic laws are required to create a consistent logical system, each of which can now be seen as incomplete or limited:

1. The Law of Identity: A statement is what it is. A is identical to A. Yet we know there are times when A is not entirely A. For example, a pen is something that writes, but when it is out of ink is it still a pen? Light may contain darkness, and truth may conceal falsehood.

2. The Law of Non-contradiction: A statement and its contradiction cannot both be true. If A is true and B is the opposite of A, both A and B cannot be true. Yet we know there are times when A and B are both true and opposites. For example, when love and hate are present in the same person at the same time, do they love or hate? Is light a wave or a particle? Physicist Neils Bohr called these "complementarities," or "a great truth whose opposite is also a great truth."

3. The Law of the Excluded Middle: A statement is either true or false, and cannot be both true and false at the same time. For example, A must either be true or false and cannot be both at the same time. Yet we know there are times when a statement is both true and false at the same time. For example, are the stories we tell about our conflicts true or false? Clearly they are both.

When we consider the problem of truth and logic more closely, we can discern a number of varieties of truth, each leading to a different form of logic. In my experience, these include:

- Mathematical truth - absolute, unitary, invariant truth
- Scientific truth - explanatory, experimentally grounded, falsifiable truth
- Pragmatic, practical, or experiential truth - the truth of what works, is real, or happens
- Subjective or emotional truth - the truth of what someone experienced or felt
- Objective or intellectual truth - the truth of generalization, abstraction, or deduction
- Moral truth - the truth of what is objectively good or evil, right or wrong
- Ethical truth - the truth of values, or what is subjectively right to do
- Polar, contradictory, or "complimentary" truth - two conflicting truths whose opposites are also true
- Paradoxical truth - truths that are absurd or contradict themselves
- Enigmatic truth - riddles, or truths that are known but inexplicable
- Aesthetic truth - the truth of beauty, perception, and form
- Quantum truth - the truth of probability, superposition, and uncertainty
- Relative truth - truths within a relative perspective or frame of reference
- Symmetrical truth - truths that remain true after a change or rotation
- Transformational, paradigmatic, or orthogonal truth - new, unimaginable truths that are at a right angle to what is known
- Spiritual truth - the truth of mystery, and what is profound or poignant
- Heart truth - the truth of love, compassion, and wisdom
- Holistic truth - the truth of the whole, of all truths combined)
Significant consequences in political communications, processes, relationships, and institutions predictably flow from unspoken assumptions regarding which form of truth is applicable to any particular issue. Thus, in debates, each side tacitly assumes there is a single, unitary, exclusionary, and invariant truth that is expressed in what they alone are saying. In dialogue, people assume that truths are multiple, diverse, complimentary, emergent, and changing.

**Mediating Political Speech**

The fundamental orientation of politics to power and rights, as opposed to interests, automatically reinforces the assumption that there is a single truth or correct outcome and, more bizarrely, that it is morally acceptable to lie in pursuit of it. This leads directly to verbal chicanery, character assassination, prejudicial statements, demagoguery, and a pursuit of victory at any price.

During the last few decades, interest-based methods, processes, and techniques have developed that allow us to transform not only ordinary adversarial interpersonal speech, but political rhetoric as well, and to do so in ways that reveal human interests, deepen empathy, and invite a collaborative search for higher, intersecting, synergistic outcomes.

It is possible, for example, even with hardened political adversaries, to identify ground rules, forms of communication, and process agreements that allow them to constructively address their problems. It is possible to separate highly adversarial groups and ask them to identify what kind of relationship they would like to have with their opponents, and to then identify the obstacles preventing them from achieving it, or the behaviors their side engaged in during previous negotiations that made trust more difficult. They can then present these lists to their opponents and learn how accurate they were.

In addition, large meetings and assemblies can be divided into small, randomly selected, politically diverse teams, allowing structured conversations to take place face-to-face. Each team can then be asked to list, analyze, and prioritize the problems they are experiencing and brainstorm possible solutions without necessarily agreeing on them. It is possible to ask each person a profound internalizing question that stimulates reflection, such as:

- Why did you decide to join this group? What attracted you to it?
- Why do you care what happens here? What about it touches your passion?
- What have you done that has contributed to the conflict? How have you, by action or inaction, fueled or allowed it to continue?
- What has this conflict cost you? What price have you paid for it?
- Do you believe your communication has been effective in creating understanding in the other side? What might you do to improve it?
- What is one thing you would be willing to do to improve communication with the other side?
- What requests do you have for the other side? What promises are you willing to make in response?
- What most needs improving in your relationship?
- What is one thing the other side could do to restore your trust?
- What is one thing you have learned from, or appreciate about the other side?
- With 20/20 hindsight, is there anything you wish you had done differently? What are you willing to do differently in the future?
- Is there anything for which you would like to apologize? Are you willing to do so now?
- If you had one wish for what we might achieve in this session, what would it be?
- What changes would need to take place for you to act differently in the future?
- What support would you need from others? How could they encourage or support you?
- What might either side do that would undermine or sabotage the progress you've made?
- What is likely to happen if nothing changes and the conflict continues? Is that what you want? If not, why not?
Conflict resolution has demonstrated in countless instances that people stop accusing and start listening not through political argumentation, which is nearly always experienced as confrontational, but through authentic interpersonal dialogue. This can take the form of stories, empathetic questions, open-minded discussions, emotionally vulnerable admissions, acknowledgements, apologies, confessions, informal problem-solving conversations, collaborative negotiations, personal requests, sincere promises, honest disagreements, heartfelt declarations, and discussions of mutually important issues.

The unspoken assumption of most political communications is that there is a single truth and one correct outcome. This illusion is partly a consequence of the natural orientation of political speech to decision-making, and a need to select one of many diverging paths, competing options, and alternative views of the future. Yet intelligent political decisions emerge more easily and naturally from an appreciation of complexity and multiple truths, rather than assuming other truths are inferior or do not exist. The shift from single to multiple truths is automatic when we transform debates into dialogues.

**Transforming Debates into Dialogues**

Once populations reach a certain size, political participation and direct democracy become more complex and time consuming, allowing representative democracy and bureaucratic political institutions to take their place. Yet these indirect forms of political representation encourage a variety of adversarial, rights-based forms of communication, including debate.

Clearly, population density and urban sprawl reduce the likelihood that people will behave toward one another as though they are members of the same family, tribe, or species. Yet large groups can be reorganized into smaller groups and teams that work collaboratively or in parallel and that make political decisions democratically without significant reductions in efficiency or effectiveness.

If we define democracy to mean a "government of, by, and for the people," what would government "of" all the people actually look like? How might it be done? Democracy, of course, has two distinct and completely different meanings. First, democracy is a form of state, a system of government in which leaders are elected and decisions are made by majority rule. Alternatively, it is a process that is free, equal, open, and participatory, in which power is shared and decisions are made collaboratively. These two definitions often conflict, since elected governments and majority rule do not always entail equality, openness and participation.

Democratic processes include group facilitation, public dialogue, informal problem-solving, strategic planning, public policy mediation, and even computer conferencing. These methods make it possible for large groups to discuss issues and come to consensus on a common approach, in spite of significant differences, in belief, size, and diversity. They make it possible to bridge the gap between ordinary language and political discourse by shifting people's communication from debates over who is right to dialogues over what is possible, using stories and life experiences to explain why they care about it.

Thousands of public dialogue sessions have been facilitated for several decades between conflicted parties, including communities, organizations, governments, and national minorities. The Public Conversations Project, Dialogos, and other organizations have developed a rich array of methods for opening lines of communication. Here are a few questions to begin a political dialogue, adapted from my book Mediating Dangerously: The Frontiers of Conflict Resolution:

- What life experiences have led you to feel so passionately about this issue?
- What is at the heart of this issue, for you as an individual?
- Why were you willing to participate in this dialogue?
- Why do you care so much about this issue?
- Do you see any gray areas in the issue we are discussing, or ideas you find it difficult to define?
- Do you have any mixed feelings, uncertainties, or discomforts regarding this issue that you would be willing to share?
- Is there any part of this issue that you are not 100% certain of or would be willing to discuss and talk about?
• Even though you hold widely differing views, are there any concerns or ideas you think you may have in common?
• What underlying values or ethical beliefs have led you to your current political beliefs?
• Do the differences between your positions reveal any riddles, paradoxes, contradictions, or enigmas regarding this issue?
• Is it possible to view your differences as two sides of the same coin? If so, what unites them? What is the coin?
• Can you separate the issue from the person you disagree with?
• Is there anything positive or acknowledging you would be willing to say about the person on the other side of this issue?
• What processes or ground rules would help you disagree more constructively?
• Instead of focusing on the past, what would you like to see happen in the future? Why?
• Are you disagreeing over fundamental values, or over how to achieve them?
• Is there a way that both of you might be right? How?
• What criteria could you use to decide what works best?
• Would it be possible to test your ideas in practice and see which work best? How might you do that?
• What could be done to improve each person’s ideas?
• Could any of the other side’s ideas be incorporated into yours? How?
• Is there any aspect of this issue that either of you have left out?
• Are there any other alternatives to what you are both saying?
• Do you think it would be useful to continue this conversation, to learn more about each other and what you believe to be true?
• How could you make your dialogue ongoing or more effective?
• What could you do to improve your process for disagreeing with each other in the future? For encouraging future dialogue?
• Would you be willing to do that together?

The purpose of these questions is not to eliminate or discourage disagreements, but to place them in a context of common humanity and allow genuine disagreements to surface and be discussed in depth. These questions reveal that political conversations need not be pointlessly adversarial, but can be transformed into authentic engagements by allowing opposing sides to come to grips with difficult, complex, divisive issues without being hostile or abusive.

Elements of Demonization

There are countless possible elements in demonization, but the principal ones include:
• Assumption of Injurious Intentions - they interpreted to cause the harm we experienced
• Distrust - every idea or statement made by them is wrong or proposed for dishonest reasons
• Externalization of Guilt - everything bad or wrong is their fault
• Attribution of Evil - they want to destroy us and what we value most, and must therefore be destroyed themselves
• Zero-Sum Interests - everything that benefits them harms us, and vice versa
• Paranoia and Preoccupation with Disloyalty - any criticism of us or praise of them is disloyal and treasonous
• Prejudgment - everyone in the enemy group is an enemy
• Collapse of Neutrality and Independence into Opposition - anyone who is not with us is against us
• Suppression of Empathy - we have nothing in common and considering them human is dangerous
• Isolation and Impasse - we cannot dialogue, negotiate, cooperate, or resolve conflicts with them
• Self-Fulfilling Prophecy - their evil makes it permissible for us to act in a hostile way toward them, and vice versa

[Based partly on work by Kurt R. and Kati Spillman]
Rationalizations and Disengagements for Immoral Behavior

There are many methods people use to rationalize their conflict behaviors, including the evils they commit against others. Professor Albert Bandura has listed the main moral rationalizations people routinely cite to excuse what otherwise might be considered evil acts. These include:

- **Moral Justification:** "He did it first."
- **Euphemistic Labeling:** "All I did was ... "
- **Disadvantageous Comparison:** "He's much worse than I am."
- **Displacement of Responsibility:** "She made me do it."
- **Diffusion of Responsibility:** "Everyone is doing it."
- **Disregard/Distortion of Consequences:** "What I did wasn't that bad."
- **Dehumanization:** "He deserved it."
- **Blaming the Victim:** "She was asking for it."

It is not enough, however, to recognize the elements of demonization we commonly develop to justify our own hateful actions. We also need to recognize the ways that attributions of evil are subtly reflected in the language and syntax we use to describe our conflicts, enemies, issues, and selves. As Marshall Rosenberg points out, language itself can be violent or non-violent.
Approach 10

Non Violent Communication


Following are the practical steps (from http://www.wikihow.com/Practice-Nonviolent-Communication)

Nonviolent Communication (NVC) includes a simple method for clear, empathic communication, consisting of four steps:

1. Observations
2. Feelings
3. Needs
4. Requests

NVC aims to find a way for all present to get what really matters to them without the use of guilt, humiliation, shame, blame, coercion, or threats. It is useful for resolving conflicts, connecting with others, and living in a way that is conscious, present, and attuned to the genuine, living needs of yourself and others.

Steps

1. **State the observations that are leading you to feel the need to say something.**
   
   These should be purely factual observations, with no component of judgment or evaluation. For example, "It's 2:00 a.m. and I hear your stereo playing" states an observed fact, while "It's way too late to be making such an awful racket" makes an evaluation. "I just looked in the refrigerator and saw that there's no food, and I'm thinking that you didn't go grocery shopping" states an observed fact (with an inference explicitly stated), while "You wasted the whole day" makes an evaluation. People often disagree about evaluations because they value things differently, but directly observable facts provide a common ground for communication.

2. **State the feeling that the observation is triggering in you. Or, guess what the other person is feeling, and ask.**
   
   Naming the emotion, without moral judgment, enables you to connect in a spirit of mutual respect and cooperation. Perform this step with the aim of accurately identifying the feeling that you or the other person are experiencing in that moment, not with the aim of shaming them for their feeling or otherwise trying to prevent them from feeling as they do.
   
   For example, "There's half an hour to go before the show starts, and I see that you're pacing (observation). Are you nervous?" Or, "I see your dog running around without a leash and barking (observation). I'm scared."

   Feelings are sometimes hard to put into words.

3. **State the need that is the cause of that feeling. Or, guess the need that caused the feeling in the other person, and ask.**
   
   When our needs are met, we have happy, pleasant feelings; when they are not met, we have unpleasant feelings. By tuning into the feeling, you can often find the underlying need. Stating the need, without morally judging it, gives you both clarity about what is alive in you or the other person in that moment.
   
   For example, "I see you looking away while I'm talking, and you've been speaking so quietly, I can't hear you (observation). I'm feeling uncomfortable (feeling) because I'm needing connection right now." Or, "I saw that your name wasn't mentioned in the acknowledgments. Are you feeling resentful because you're not getting the appreciation you need?"

   Needs have a special meaning in NVC: they are common to all people and not tied to any particular circumstance or strategy for fulfilling them. So, wanting to go to a movie with someone is not a need and a desire to spend time with a specific person is not a need. The need in that case might be companionship. You can meet your need for companionship in many ways, not just with that specific person and not just by going to a movie.
4. Make a concrete request for action to meet the need just identified.
Ask clearly and specifically for what you want right now, rather than hinting or stating only what you don’t want.

For example, “I notice that you haven’t spoken in the last ten minutes (observation). Are you feeling bored? (feeling)” If the answer is yes, you might bring up your own feeling and propose an action: “Well, I’m bored, too. Hey, would you like to go to the Exploratorium?” or perhaps, “I’m finding these people really interesting to talk with. How about we meet up in an hour when I’m done here?” For the request to really be a request—and not a demand—allow the other person to say no or propose an alternative. You take responsibility for getting your own needs met, and you let them take responsibility for theirs. When you do something together, you want it to be because you both voluntarily consent to it, as a way of fulfilling your own genuine needs and desires, not out of guilt or pressure. Sometimes you can find an action that meets both your needs, and sometimes you just have to amiably go your separate ways. If you’re not ready to ask in this spirit, that’s OK, you probably just need some more empathy yourself.

Sentence templates
Sometimes, a memorised sentence template can help structure what you need to say:
*“Are you feeling _____ because you are needing _____?” Empathise as well as you can to fill in the blanks, and you’ll likely find yourself seeing the situation as the other person does.
*“Are you angry because you are thinking _____?” Anger is triggered by thoughts, like “I think you lied” or “I think I deserve a raise more than so-and-so did.” Uncover the thought, and you are on your way to uncovering the underlying need.
*“I am wondering if you are feeling _____” is another way to empathise, without explicitly asking a question. The phrasing makes clear that this is your guess, and not an attempt to analyse the other person or tell them what they are feeling. So moderate your statement of feelings or needs with simple words like “if you might, how about, could this be, maybe,...
*“I see _____” or “I am hearing _____” are ways to state an observation clearly so that the other person hears it as an observation.
*“I am thinking _____” is a way to express a thought so it is heard as a thought, which is capable of changing as you get new information or ideas.
*“Would you be willing to _____?” is a clear way to make a request.
*“Would you like it if I _____?” is a way to offer to help fulfil a need just identified, while leaving the other person still responsible for their own need.

A complete template for all four steps could go: “I see ____. I am feeling ____ because I am needing ____. Would you be willing to ____?” Or, “I see ____. Are you feeling ____ because you are needing ____?” followed by “Would it meet your need if I ____?” or a statement of your own feeling and need followed by a request.

Tips
Avoid saying “You made me feel ____,” “I feel ____ because you did ____,” and especially, “You’re making me angry.” These put responsibility for your feelings on the other person, and they skip identifying the need that is the true cause of your feeling. An alternative: “When you did _____, I felt ____ because I needed ____.” On the other hand, as noted earlier, if less-explicit phrasing is communicating your needs just fine, without making one person responsible for another person’s feelings, then it’s not necessary to spell things out so fully.

All four steps are not needed in all situations.

You can use the same four steps yourself to get clarity about your own needs and choose action intelligently. For example, if you’re in a situation where you’re upset, one approach is to berate yourself or others: “These people are idiots! Don’t they know they’re ruining this whole project with their narrow-mindedness?” Nonviolent self-talk might go something like this: “The other engineers were not convinced. I don’t think they heard my case. I’m feeling upset because I’m not getting listened to the way I need. I want the respect that comes with getting the reasons for my design heard, and my design accepted. Now how can I get that respect? Maybe not from this team. Or maybe I could meet with some of the engineers one-on-one, when conversation is not so heated, and see where things go from there.”
You might not always guess what someone is actually feeling or needing when empathising. The fact that you are listening and want to understand, without criticising or judging or analysing or advising or arguing, will quite often lead them to open up more so that you have a better or different sense of what is going on. Genuine interest in the feelings and needs that are driving each other’s actions will lead you someplace new, someplace that you can’t predict before you have that understanding. Often you can help someone else open up by first honestly sharing your own feelings and needs.

When someone speaks to you in the language of condemnation, name-calling, or dominance, you can always hear what they say as an expression of their unmet needs. "You klutz! Shut up and sit down!" is likely an expression of an unmet need for elegance and beauty in motion. "You are such a lazy loafer. You are really making me angry!" could be an expression of their unmet need for efficiency or for helping others contribute their talents to life. You’ll have to find out.

Warnings

The basic technique is to first connect emotionally to identify each other’s needs, then work out a solution or bring up reasons to understand things differently. Going straight to problem-solving or argument usually leaves people feeling not listened to or leads them to dig in their heels even more.

In NVC, "needs" are not things that you must-have-or-else: a need is not an excuse to say "you have to do this, because it’s my need."

Do not attempt to argue with an angry person, just hear them out. Once you have understood their genuine feelings and needs and shown them that you have heard them non-judgmentally, they may become ready to hear yours. And then you can search for specific action to take which benefits you both.

In a highly emotional situation, showing empathy for one feeling will often draw out more feelings, many of them negative. When this happens, just keep empathising.

For example, a roommate might say, "You put my sweater in the dryer and now it's ruined! You're a careless slob!" You might answer with empathy: "I hear that you're feeling upset because you're thinking that I'm not careful enough with your things." You might get an answer like, "You don't think about anyone but yourself!" Just keep empathising: "Are you feeling angry because you're needing more care and consideration than I've been giving you?"

Depending on the intensity of emotion and how poor communication was in the past, you may have to go a number of rounds before you get a response like, "Yes! That's exactly what I mean! You don't care!" At this point, you can bring up new facts ("Actually, I didn't run the dryer today") or apologise or propose new action, like some way for your roommate to know that you do care.

Empathy is not a mechanical process. Just saying certain words is not enough. You want to genuinely tune into the other person's emotions and needs, see the situation as they do. "Empathy is where we connect our attention, our consciousness. It's not what you say out loud."[5] Sometimes it can help to imagine how you might feel in their situation. Listen past their words: what's really alive in them, what matters that's leading to their action or words?
**Approach 11**

**Anandamurti’s spiritual guidelines to interpersonal behaviour**

For those of you unfamiliar with this Indian guru - his life spanned most of the 20th century. He was a socially and politically radical teacher, who combined an intense focus on mystical spirituality, with an equal dedication to social transformation. These are excerpts from some of his guidelines, and are underpinned by the engine of the spiritual practices that he advocated. For an overview see [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prabhat_Ranjan_Sarkar](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prabhat_Ranjan_Sarkar)

**From the 15 Shiilas**

#1 Forgiveness.
#9 Keeping aloof from criticising, condemning, mudslinging and all sorts of groupism.
#11 Due to carelessness, if any mistake has been committed unknowingly or unconsciously, admit it immediately and ask for punishment.
#12 Even while dealing with a person of inimical nature, one must keep oneself free from hatred, anger and vanity.

**From Carya Carya**

#7 One will not be able to know anything unless one develops the psychology of “I know not.” It is the fundamental spirit of a true aspirant.
#12 When one notices a defect in oneself, and does not find the means for shásti (corrective punishment), one should purify the mind by fasting.
#13 Before censuring anyone for some fault, make sure that you do not have the same defect.
#16 Do not try to assume superiority by belittling others, because the other person’s inferiority will become lodged in your mind.
#17 Overcome censure by praise, darkness by light.

**From Social Norms**

#15 Do not indulge yourself in criticising others’ faults and defects.
Differentiation

David Schnarch proposes the term differentiation to describe the capacity to be connected, yet be one's own person - to balance the attachment inherent in relationships with the need for autonomy and self-direction.

This is contrasted with fusion, which is symbiosis, not rocking the boat, joining with others, even at a cost to oneself.

All relationships, right from infancy, contain some of both. Fusion can represent transcendent experiences, going beyond the boundaries of self. It occurs in couples, and also in groups along with the development of group identity. It is the basis of cohesion and often feelings of closeness.

Differentiation is hard to achieve, and represents psychological and spiritual work. People sometimes separate or isolate in order to be themselves, but its still possible to be fused at a distance.

Differentiation occurs in relationship, and in the commitment of relationship. This is true of groups as well. The commitment to work through these issues in groups keeps people on the path of differentiation.

In a group, when we encounter difference, we may be attracted, or repelled by it, or want to change the other. When difficult differences emerge (e.g. value differences) or the accumulation of hurt, the tendency is towards either the escalation of conflict, or movement into collapse.

Situations of increasing tension do not necessarily indicate disaster. They are opportunities for growth, in the form of differentiation. Because it is so hard to differentiate - it feels safer to stay in fusion - it often takes the pressure cooker of commitment in a relationship or a group, to challenge a ‘static peace’, and to enable people to take a step into their development.

Understanding this is one thing. To actually take a differentiation step is very hard - and often only occurs in such situations of intensity. In the case of a serious conflict in a group, the same challenges occur as in a marriage - to confront your tendency towards fusion, be willing to step into your own self-support, self-soothing and self-validation, whilst staying connected at the same time.

In terms of difficult group conflicts which start to feel like a ‘war of the roses’ situation, the challenge is to stop acting out of a place of fusion - which often involves blame, powerlessness and manipulation - and deal with our own anxieties.

At the core this process involves recognising how being fused symbiotically co-creates the situation which is so intolerable. This then leads to the recognition that differentiation does not depend on the other person doing something different. It is a unilateral action, but immediately produces a transformation in relationship, because differentiation is always at the same level in relationship, no matter what the appearances are of one person being more ‘developed’ or ‘aware’ than the other.

Living these principles involves the willingness to bravely face yourself, and to find the action which is empowering, within the connection, and not being threatened by the loss of connection (fusion).

See for instance [http://crucible4points.com/crucible-four-points-balance](http://crucible4points.com/crucible-four-points-balance). The orientation is in regards to couples, and sexuality, but the concepts can be applied more widely.

Some differentiation questions to help you along

1. How can you close off the avenue of blame, and the concomitant feeling of being a victim.
2. How are you letting this conflict get in the way of your own happiness.
3. What are the things you do to make the conflict worse through your attitude, your timing, your way of looking at it, your inability to ask for what you want vulnerably, your defensiveness, your impatience, or unexamined aspects of your life?
4. Confront yourself not the other person. This will change your life. Are you living your own integrity? Are you the person you want to be? Are you living up to being the best you?
5. Learn to look at your defensiveness as negative thoughts about yourself that get triggered. Learn to recognise when you’re defensive and what is feeling bad inside of you. Stop attacking and confront yourself. Defensive attacking only entrenches you in not changing.
6. Look for the kernel of truth in what the other person is saying.
8. Note how you may be taking the other people’s reactions personally: they have a right to feelings, reactions, even judgements. Know that they are all filters through their baggage. Always keep your own view of yourself as the most important. But listening to others can give you insights.

10. Stop making this conflict a cause of your unhappiness. Your life and choices are the cause of your unhappiness, stress, symptoms, and frustrations.

11. Turn every issue into your growth. It’s about your timing, your manner of talking, your way of holding what is said, your defensiveness, your need to control, your panicky reactions, your anxiety, your fear...

12. For a solution trick, try doing something that is 180 degrees different from what you have tried. It’s often the direction that’s needed.

13. Learn to get your sense of self from yourself. This is called self validation and is the cornerstone of growing. You need to create your own well being and high self esteem. Often this comes with action.

14. Remember that you need five good interactions to every negative one. Confrontations are negative. Use them sparingly.

15. Don’t become your feelings. They are yours freely. You don’t need others approval for them. You don’t need to act on them until you have seen whether doing so is in your integrity.

16. Pay attention to tone and attitude. One way to help this is to notice the good things others are doing. This helps loosen the gridlock and brings in the positive.

17. Own your projections. What you don’t like in others has something to do with you. Find out what that is and confront it in you.

19. Let your truth and the best in you come out and act. We all know our deeper truths and the best parts of ourselves. Let that part out as often as possible. You feel good about yourself even when others in the group don’t value you or treat you well.

20. If you can’t regulate your emotions, curb your behaviour. Act the best you can.

21. Don’t keep focusing on the downside. Don’t “awfulise” things. Things are as they are. What is, is. Accept the reality and look for the changes you can make to improve your life.

22. Don’t allow yourself to be in negative, reactive, abusive arguments, and don’t allow yourself to wallow in self pity by stonewalling and avoiding.

23. When self soothing during a time of stepping back, try and enjoy your own space. A measure of how well you are differentiating in this manner, is how little you think of others bad treatment of you rather than enjoying the walk, the reading, the making of your own plans, your hobbies.

24. Self soothing does not mean fleeing into substances to dull your feelings and ability to act.

25. Keep trying to move to higher ability levels of holding onto yourself while staying in connection with others. Even if there is conflict, care about the feelings and concerns of others, not by losing yourself, but by having empathy.

26. Above all, think about actions more than talking out feelings. Actions change things while talking and processing often are a way to blame others or avoid taking charge of yourself.

Approach 13

Shame and belonging

Another way of understanding what happens in groups (and individuals) is the dynamic of shame. This is a very large topic, but I will try to present some key points here.

You may have seen Brene Brown’s TED talk on the subject. Its worth watching again, and a must if you haven’t see it:
https://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_on_vulnerability?language=en

Shame is the opposite pole to belonging. Belonging is a central theme in groups. Shame is related to the experience of exclusion; it is an indicator to pull back, for the sake of one’s safety. However, it soon becomes a more toxic feeling that ‘there’s something wrong with me’; often this is layered by repeated childhood experiences of shame.

It is something to watch out for in groups, as it can happen so easily given the power of the group. It can also easily happen in our own individual experience - we are all vulnerable to it.

So in the current conflict, identify where you may have felt shame, or where you may have unconsciously (or even intentionally) shamed another person.

Shame is such an intolerable feeling, that is is often a catalyst for deeply held trauma, dramatic reactions, and scarring which is hard to heal. Such healing is possible, but requires the recognition of damage, and a willingness to acknowledge that to self and other, and do the work of moving back into connection.

The trouble is that shame often moves in descending spirals, whereby one person feeling shamed will then lash out (and it may be in very subtle ways) to shame the other.

Identify where in the current conflict this may be the case, and in what way you may be contributing to such spirals.

I have included below an article by Robert Lee, talking about group dynamics and the phenomena of shame. Whilst this describes an example of scapegoating, the principle is the same with any problematic group dynamic. You can point the finger, or you can examine yourself.

I am advocating here the latter. When finger pointing becomes collective, or is divided into subgroups, it can become especially toxic and entrenched.

One way forward is to move out of viewing the problem as in a person or even sub-group, and seeing it as a manifestation of disowned parts of ourself.

Here are some questions to reflect on:

• What are your shame issues and sensitivities.
• Where have you felt particularly vulnerable or overexposed in relation to the group or people in the group. What are significant incidences where you felt particularly shamed.
• Notice the relationship of criticism and shame for you and others around you.
• Notice any tendency to transfer shame in order to avoid your own shame.
• Notice or recall signs of shame in self and others.
From the Bible (Leviticus 16) the scapegoat was a goat, in ancient times which would be driven off into the wilderness after being anointed with the sins of the community. The goat escapes death but carries the sins of the people with him to his dying day. Accounts of similar ritual purifications involving goats that were driven from communities carrying the burden of others date at least as far back as the 24th century BC (Wright 1987; Zatelli 1998), perhaps further. The Ancient Greeks indulged in a similar practice (Frazer 1922) using humans rather than goats in which a cripple, beggar, or criminal was stoned, beaten and cast out of the community in response to either a natural disaster (such as a plague, famine or an invasion) or in response to a calendrical crisis (such as the end of the year).

Thus the term scapegoat has come to mean an innocent person who is forced to take the blame/load of others. One of the easiest ways for a group of people to attempt to coalesce into a unified body in a time of uncertainty or conflict is for the majority of the members to identify a person or subgroup as being inappropriate, wrong, inferior, dangerous, insane, etc. and cast them out – hence the function of bigotry and discrimination.

Of course this same mechanism, scapegoating, is commonly encountered in therapy and training groups. As therapists and trainers how do we recognise, understand and respond to this phenomenon from a relational Gestalt perspective?

I first learned of the hidden reasons behind scapegoating from a personal experience early in my career – in my Intensive Post Graduate Training Program at the Gestalt Institute of Cleveland (GIC) in 1977. This experience was transformative for me. It taught me about this phenomenon from the inside out, not just that it is wrong/unjust for the scapegoat, but also how it restricts the group that employs it, as well as a first hand experience of the compelling nature of scapegoating and how good people can come to unknowingly resort to scapegoating.

I have retold this story many times in the training that I do. Recently, the director of an institute in Australia, where I was giving a workshop, asked me to write up this story so that he could use it further with his students. I had never thought about writing it up, but in response to his request here it is.

To give you a little background. I was very proud to be attending this program. I had waited four years for this opportunity to develop. In the meantime, I had received Gestalt training and therapy from practitioners where I was living, several hours drive from Cleveland. And now I was able to be trained at the institute where they were trained. For me, Gestalt was about inclusion. So I would not have guessed that I could be part of scapegoating someone.

This intensive program at GIC was designed for clinicians who held an advanced degree in psychotherapy/counselling and who lived out of town. The first phase of the training consisted of four consecutive weeks of being in residence in Cleveland. Relevant to my story here, each evening we participated in a two hour personal growth group. There were eleven people in the personal growth group to which I was assigned.

In the third week of this group, Joseph Zinker became our leader. He was very quickly faced with the following situation.

The participants in the training program were housed in a multi story hotel near the institute. About two-thirds of our personal growth group lived together on one floor. The remainder of our group, including me, lived on another floor. People living on each floor shared a kitchen in which they could store and prepare food.

The issue that arose emerged from the people that lived on the other floor from me. It began with Jean and John talking to Ann at the start of group one evening:

1 Because this story made such an impression on me I remember a great deal of what happened. At the same time it has been 30 plus years since it happened. So at least some of the dialogue given here has been reconstructed to fit with the energy I remember being present in the group. I have changed the names of the group members to respect their privacy.
Jean: Before we get started today I just wanted to mention something that has become troubling to me. Ann, you have been leaving your dishes in the sink and not washing them. I'd appreciate it if you could wash them after you use them.

Ann: I'm sorry, of course. I have just had some things come up that I had to attend to. I did wash them later.

John: I understand what Jean is saying. It is a real pain to have to deal with dirty dishes in the sink. So I too would like it if you would wash your dishes after you use them.

Ann: Again, I'm sorry. I didn't know this had become such an issue.

The group turned to other issues at this point. I didn't think much about what had happened. If anything I was a little surprised and embarrassed. I had left dirty dishes in the sink on my floor, and cleaned them up later. No one on my floor had complained about that to me. I didn't say anything in the group, again perhaps because I was embarrassed. Still, this seemed to be a minor issue between the people who lived on the other floor and wasn't my business.

However, the next evening in group it continued:

Jean: I again have to say something before we get started. There were dishes left in the sink again today. Were those yours, Ann?

Ann: Yes, I'm sorry – I got a call from my daughter and got distracted.

Jean: I have got to say, I am a little more than annoyed.

Terry: There was also a jar of mustard and a jar of pickle relish left out on the counter.

Ann: (with a little irritation in her voice) Again, I am sorry, as I said I got a call from my daughter.

John: I just want to say that we all need to be responsible for ourselves here.

Ann: Look – I am sorry. I do put everything away and clean up later.

Terry: (in an irritated voice) This has been going on for a while. The space in the kitchen is so tiny. It is just so frustrating to have to deal with a mess.

Ann: OK. I get it – it won't happen again.

Although there was a bit of tenseness in the air, the group turned to other issues. At this point although I was still surprised about what was happening among the people who lived on the other floor, it started to make sense to me. Ann was different than the rest of us. She was older than the rest of us. She had peroxide-blonde hair that seemed rather “cheap” to me. Her advanced degree was in education – she had been a teacher not a therapist. She hadn't taken psychology courses and didn't speak our language. And frankly she seemed to be a bit empty-headed to me. I did not understand why the institute had accepted her to be a participant in this program. As I said, I waited four years to be able to attend (due to my own issues, not the institute's). So I had some irritation that she was here, although I was somewhat embarrassed that I felt as such. So I didn't say much about it to others, except for a couple of small comments to a couple of other people. And although these exchanges with others were brief, I got the sense that the people I talked to agreed with me. But I had not thought of this as an important issue. It was just something in the background.

Still when others disclosed their growing displeasure and anger at Ann in our group, I started to “understand” what they were saying. Although I didn’t talk to anyone about it, what was happening seemed to confirm my initial assessment of Ann. She just didn't seem to fit in this program.

The issue came to a head the following evening in group. This time it didn’t start right away. It was about two thirds through the evening when there was a lull in the group that Jean again spoke:

Jean: I am sitting here seething. (visibly upset) I didn't bring it up at the start of group tonight just because – I don't why. I don’t like to be complaining; so I thought I could let it pass. But I can't. Ann, you put a huge package in the refrigerator and you are taking up all the space. Where are the rest of us supposed to put anything?

George: (starting hardly before Jean finishes – talking to Ann, contemptuously) I couldn't believe it. How could you do that? That refrigerator is tiny as it is.

Ann: I am sorry. Today is kind of a special day in our family and my son sent me a cake.

Linda: (in an annoyed voice) Well that's nice, but you didn't ask anyone if you could take up that much space in the fridge.

Ann: There wasn't anyone around to ask when it came.
John: (talking to Ann in an agitated voice) You consistently don’t hear what we are saying. I mean, you didn’t ask anyone later either.

Ann: (near tears) I’m sorry; I just forgot.

Terry: (talking to Ann, angrily) Well, I am sorry. It is just not fair to the rest of us how you forget or get distracted or something else. You always seem to have an excuse.

Ann: (tears rolling down her cheeks now) I don’t know what to say.

At this point Joseph intervenes:

Joseph: This is obviously a very hot issue that many of you care about intensely right now. Perhaps it would help to look at this through a different lens. It is possible that there might be a larger group issue at work here. It might not be just the refrigerator that is becoming too small for this group. Perhaps the group itself is becoming too small for many or all of you. (He pauses for a moment.) I would like you each to go inside yourself and see if there is some part of you that you don’t think would be acceptable in this group, some part of yourself that you haven’t shared with the group, maybe not deliberately. Please take a few moments to see if there is such a piece of you. Then if you do find such a part of you, think about how the group would have to change in order for you to feel comfortable sharing/exploring that part of yourself in the group. Please, now take some time and see what you find.

There is silence in the group. For myself, this is new territory. I find that I can’t even get close to looking at the possibility that there might be a part of me that I believe would not be accepted in the group, although I do have the sense that might be true. I am caught by the idea that a group would change for me – that idea is completely new, and more than a bit scary. I wonder – is it really possible for the group to change for me; would they really want to do that? Don’t I have to conform somehow? I have participated in this group, worked on personal issues, even said things that now seem self-inflated, but have felt that I have contributed to the group. However, I haven’t asked anything of the group in a personal vein. As I say, the idea scares me. I can tell this is very important to me; it represents a whole new sense of belonging that seems very unfamiliar, although I don’t have that language yet – it is just an unnamed feeling. At the same time, I don’t know how to give voice to that part of me.

Finally Ricardo, who has been one of the most popular group members, and who was not one of the group members that was angry with Ann, breaks the silence:

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**Figure 4: Four Ways of Talking (T) and Listening (L)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Presencing</th>
<th>Dialoguing</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>T</strong>: Generativity</td>
<td><strong>T</strong>: Self-reflectivity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>L</strong>: No boundaries</td>
<td><strong>L</strong>: Empathy</td>
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<tr>
<th>Downloading</th>
<th>Debating</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>T</strong>: Telling</td>
<td><strong>T</strong>: Clash of ideas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>L</strong>: Projecting</td>
<td><strong>L</strong>: Judging</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Enacting new realities

Letting go

Re-directing

Suspending

Re-enacting existing realities

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Ricardo: Joseph is right. There is a piece of me that I have been avoiding sharing with the group. I don’t know if this is because I didn’t feel safe enough in the group to share this, but possibly – I know to share it I need your kindness. (Tears form in his eyes.) I am missing my wife – so so much. (He starts to cry gently.) We are in the third week here. But I was on a business trip for two weeks before that. So I haven’t seen her for four and a half weeks. I miss her so much. (He cries more. Mary, who is sitting beside him in the circle, hands him a box of tissues. He pauses, takes a tissue, and wipes the tears from his cheeks.) I feel like a little kid. (He laughs slightly.) I should be able to handle this. But its not enough to just talk to her on the phone.

Mary: Is there anything that we can do?

Ricardo: I know this sounds silly. I feel foolish saying it. (He pauses.) I would like to be held by the group. Is that possible?

Without hesitation about half of the group moves to where Ricardo is sitting and together he and they find a position such that he is lying amongst/on them, and they are holding him in various ways. The rest of us move close to the group holding Ricardo. Ricardo sobs for a while – then says:

Ricardo: We have been away from each other for extended times in the past. I guess it is not just me. She has so much going on right now also. I am worried about her too. (He cries more, but easier now.)

The group just stays with him for a while. After a bit:

Laura: (to Ricardo) I am glad you said something. I have been missing my husband. But I only live a couple of hours away; so I have been going home on weekends.

Joseph: (to Ricardo) As Laura refers to, you will have this coming weekend free. Is it possible for your wife to join you for the weekend?

Ricardo: I’ll check. (He says quietly and a bit tentatively, but also looking a bit relieved.)

The group ends soon after this for the evening. My sense at this point is that many of us are dealing with something new, and that Ricardo, although unintentionally, has lead the way.

The next night early in the group Jacob suddenly starts spraying a can of sparkling water on the people close to him and then throws the can at a person across from him. I am shocked. But the reaction of those close to him is to grab tissue boxes and pillows and start throwing them at him and each other. I finally join in with the others. There is a lot of laughing and activity and after awhile we all settle down, where upon Jacob speaks:

Jacob: I don’t want to say much, but for me that’s what has been missing in this group. I can’t be in a group in which I can’t play. This group has just been too serious for me.

I don’t remember much of the dialogue in the group after this time, that relates to this issue. However, I do remember that this wise, delicately and adeptly administered intervention by Joseph turned the group around. A major transformation occurred that took us on a completely different path that brought a great deal of diversity and personal growth into our group. We became a cohesive unit, not by finding what was wrong with one of our members, but by establishing a tolerance and curiosity for differences in others and in our selves (which was especially helpful during conflict). It was my first learning about the power of support and the importance of the condition of the field in how we experience ourselves and grow as individuals.

There is a postscript to this story. At the end of our intensive program, from our practicum experience with each other in which we observed each other working as therapists, it became very clear to me (and was supported by what others said to me as well) that Ann had become one of the best therapists in the program.

Some Concluding Remarks with Regard to Theory and Practice

This story is an excellent example of how shame can regulate the social field when there is insufficient perceived support in the field (Lee 1994, 1995, 2001; Lee & Wheeler 1996). Note that shame doesn’t necessarily cause the perceived lack of support (although once present in the field it may contribute extensively to a further sense of insufficient support), it just regulates the field.

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2 My thanks to Joseph Zinker for this and so many other pieces of wisdom that I carry from him.

3 I want to thank my dear friend Lee Geltman for his collaboration on this section of this article.
A sufficient number of us in the group had begun to believe, without awareness, that there wasn’t space enough for us in the group, as Joseph said, that there was some part of us that wouldn’t be received by the group. (Of course, even those of us who didn’t speak during this process helped set the atmosphere from which scapegoating could emerge – I have tried to indicate my own contribution in this way.) At the same time the group had become important to us, and we wanted to belong. (It is only when we care that we are at risk of experiencing shame.) When people don’t experience sufficient support in such instances (external and/or internal), it is the function of shame to pull them back from mobilising on their yearning for connection. A major task then becomes to attempt to escape/cope with their shame by camouflaging their yearning for connection. And one common strategy that people use in such situations is to find someone else to carry their shame, scapegoating the person (or subgroup)\(^4\), as priests anointed goats in ancient times.

Selecting someone (or a subgroup) who is different is a common way of facilitating this process. In fact, when our shame gets evoked we will organise in terms of scarcity of resources in the field and differences between us and others can stand out as a signal that our belonging will be at risk, which can then trigger the above process. Thus we can use differences to separate us from others rather than to become curious about them and to create an atmosphere that will enrich us all. This is the price that a group that gets caught up in scapegoating pays. Not only do the group members inflict harm on the scapegoat, but as importantly they limit their own possibilities for connection and growth. They buy into an individualistic paradigm sense of the field condition of reception which then constricts how they can care for and be interested in others and how others can care for and be interested in them. They thus limit their possibilities of connection and growth in so many ways. Again, such is the price of an “us vs. them” mentality, not from just a moral perspective with regard to the scapegoat, but from a deeper/broader, practical perspective for the whole field.

Note that the risk of scapegoating is highest when the group is going through some change, when group members are more off-balance, or when they are experimenting with forming new conceptions of who they are that reflect the new possibilities of connection that they are encountering or that they wish for in the group. Of course, this means that the risk of scapegoating in a group is ever-present – the degree being dependent on the perceived lack of reception in the field\(^5\). As group leaders and trainers we must be aware of this possibility and attend not only to the act of scapegoating itself but just as importantly to the perceived lack of reception in the field. In fact, noticing the beginning emergence of scapegoating is a diagnostic sign that alerts us to members’ experienced lack of reception by others in the group, including the group leader.

What did Joseph notice that clued him into the possibility that what was happening in our group was not just an issue of conflict between group members? I am not sure. Perhaps it was the lack of empathy that people displayed for Ann, that no one seemed to be able to understand her situation. Perhaps it was the fact that people were choosing to discuss this in the group instead of outside of the group – that anything brought up in a group can be a sign of the larger perceived condition of the field. Perhaps it was a lack of connection between group members. Perhaps he noticed how group members were camouflaging their experience, like my over inflating myself.

Whatever Joseph noticed, his intervention was powerful for our group and profound for me. It provided sufficient support for us to become aware of how we were perceiving the possibilities for receptivity in our group and for us to start to explore whether more receptivity, more chances for connection would be welcome. Our group was able to use this support and with Ricardo and Jacob leading the way, the transformation that occurred, which became a foundation for future group development, was truly amazing.

\(^4\) Of course there are also many other creative strategies that people use to hide their yearning at such times such as withdrawing, stonewalling, dissociating, deflecting, controlling, resorting to addictions, and intellectualising to name a few.

\(^5\) There will most likely be some low level movements towards scapegoating on an on-going basis as group members struggle with commonly present low levels of uncertainty in the group.
However, if there were more people like me in the group (which I assume Joseph would have noticed and responded to) who did not know how to give voice to their experience, and if Ricardo and Jacob were not present, this probably would have played out slightly differently and the kind of intervention that Joseph chose might not have been sufficient. (Again, I am sure that Joseph would have responded differently in a different situation.)

If you are in a field in which you do not perceive that it is possible for your yearning for connection to be responded to, and you have not had that yearning responded to in the past, then it will be very difficult for you to be aware of your yearning. Such is the protective power of shame. In such a group, asking people to go inside and explore if there is a piece of them that they don't believe would be acceptable in the group might only lead to a collective sense of isolation, further shame, and further camouflaging behaviour.

As a group leader and trainer now, I am constantly assessing and reassessing what level of support/connection/challenge the group needs. In cases where I believe more support is needed I might slow the process down, directing attention to the perceived quality of receptivity in the group (that what is happening between group members might be an indication of a larger group issue), helping people to respectfully enunciate their experience, and facilitating a dialogue between group members. In short, I would be trying to move at the group's pace. I might then use an intervention like Joseph's (for people to explore inside of themselves) when the group was able to sufficiently define the question.

Or if I sensed the possibility of scapegoating before it reached a peak, I might work with individual group members, helping them test out the level of receptivity that exists in the group by asking them such things as “Would you like to hear how others are responding to what you have said?” Depending on whether I sense that I have to grade the experiment up or down I might also ask, “Who would you like to hear from?” And if the person names someone I would then invite the person to talk to that person. Or if the person somehow indicates that they are somehow shy about asking, I might say “Would you like me to ask if anyone would like to respond to what you have said.” As I say, in general I am looking for ways to help people to respectfully test out whether there is interest in them in the group. As they find connection, they usually get a deeper sense of the kind of connection they want in the group. Similarly I might be noticing signs of yearning in such situations like, “The way that you are moving your foot looks playful.” If I get back something like, “Yes, I like to play.” I might then say, “Would you like to know if there is someone else that would like to play with you.” Or “Would you like to know if there are others here who also like to play.”

In training groups, I will teach off what happens in the group, drawing people’s attention to the differences in how they perceive themselves and others and how they and others act depending on the level of connection they perceive is possible in the group. The lesson is always that we will self-organise dramatically differently depending on the degree of receptivity we perceive in the field. Shame and belonging will be the primary organisers of the field in these situations. This is the underbelly of scapegoating, which our awareness of as practitioners transforms from a problem into an opportunity.

References


Approach 14

Gestalt therapy is not so much a theory as a set of principles and applied practices. It draws on existential notions of responsibility, which have been covered briefly in section 5. It also draws on ideas about polarities, and the differential thinking of Salamo Friedlander. Here’s some ways you can explore polarities that are involved in the conflict.

Two chairs and a conversation

1. Put out two chairs. One chair will be you, the other will be someone in this conflict who you lock horns with, or react to significantly (let’s call it Seat 2).
2. Sit in your seat, and imagine the person is there. Start with your feelings - tell them what you feel about them, and their position and way of doing things.
3. Move to Seat 2, and embody that person. Perhaps sit they way they do, talk the way they do. See how ‘they’ would respond - mainly focus on the feeling response.’ Continue this ‘conversation’, moving back and forth between the seats. It’s important to focus more on what you feel in the conversation than what you think. And it’s important to actually stop and feel the feelings in your body as you do so.
   Let the conversation get as heated as it wants to get.
   See if the conversation evolves somewhere, let it evolve. Keep in touch with your feelings. Allow any new insights, feelings, or shifts occur.
   If you can get a therapist to work with you on this to facilitate, all the better. But in lieu of that, doing it yourself can yield some good results.

Creative media

Another way to evolve your feelings about the really difficult aspects of the situation is to get some paper and preferably watercolour paints. Or you can just use crayons, or pastels. Paints are best. This is not about producing anything that’s ‘good’ - it’s not about art. It’s about expression.
   Paint/draw the situation. You can portray it as literally as you like, or just purely abstractly - blobs of colour for instance.
   When you have finished the picture, write a title on the back, and the date, and the number.
   You can do several pictures at a sitting. Or one a day.
   As you do this, the pictures will naturally evolve.

Dialogue

What we perceive in another generally has some grains of truth.
What others perceive in us generally has some grains of truth.
What we perceive in others, generally has at least some aspects of ourselves in that perception (so-called ‘projection’)
Here’s something you can (bravely) do in relation to someone else in the conflict.

Grain of truth

1. Approach them and ask them to summarise the two most difficult things they find about you, your role in the conflict situation, or how you engage with differences. If you don’t fully understand something they say, ask for clarification.
2. Thank them.
3. Go away and reflect on any grains of truth in their perception.
4. Come back to them and acknowledge those grains of truth.

In relation to your perceptions

1. Write down one or two things you find most difficult about them, their role, or how they engage with differences.
2. Go to them and ask if they have ever experienced you doing those things.
3. Thank them.
4. Go away and reflect on this.
5. If you find some truth in what they have to say, acknowledge this to them.
Adam Kahane (2016, Collaborating with the Enemy. In press) outlines Otto Scharmer’s framework of four methods of listening and talking (e.g. see http://www.ottoscharmer.com/publications/executive-summaries).

**Downloading**
Here I listen from within my self and my story. I am deaf to other stories; I only hear what re-confirms my story (“I knew that already”). The talking associated with downloading is telling: I say what I always say, either because I think that my story is the only true one or is the only one that is safe or polite to tell. I assert that there is only one whole and I ignore or suppress others. Downloading is the typical behaviour of dictators, fundamentalists, experts, and people who are arrogant or angry.’

**Debating**
Here I listen from the outside, factually and objectively, like a judge in a debate or a courtroom (“This is true and that is false”). The talking associated with debating is a clash of ideas: each of us says what we think. In a debate, some people and ideas win and others lose.

**Dialoguing**
Here I listen to you as if from inside you, empathetically and subjectively (“I know where you are coming from”). The talking associated with dialoguing is self-reflectivity (“This is where I am coming from”).

**Presencing**
Here I listen not from within myself or you, but from the system as a whole. When I am in a group that is presencing, it is as if the boundaries between people have disappeared, so that when one person talks they are articulating something for the whole group or system, and when we listen it is as if to the whole group or system.

**Movement**
The crucial implication of this four-stage model is that if we spend all of our time downloading and debating, then we will only re-enact existing realities. We will continue to think what we have been thinking and do what we have been doing; in a heterogeneous group we will remain in conflict and stuck. At times some of us will be judged to have prevailed over others, but such victories will usually only be temporary. If we want to make our way forward together to enact new realities, then we need to be able to spend at least some of our time dialoguing and presencing.

The key to employing this model is to learn how to be aware of and to shift how we are talking and especially how we are listening.

**Downloading -> Debating: Suspending**
This enables us to escape from the trap of holding on to the one right answer.

I suspend by hanging my current thinking out in front of myself, as if from a string, so that it is visible (not concealed) and so that both I and you can look at it from different perspectives and inquire about it. When I suspend, I hold my thinking lightly; perhaps later I will take it back unchanged, or perhaps through the process of suspending I will end up changing it.

Scharmer refers to this as the shift to an open mind. Suspending is a crucial act because in doing so I am explicitly acknowledging that my idea is not the whole of the truth about the situation and that my idea is not the same as—is not identified with—me; you can attach my idea without attacking me.

Suspending means opening up the possibility that our thinking might be incorrect or ignorant.

Sociologist Richard Sennett says, “Often when you need to work with very different groups of people, one of things that you have got to admit to yourself is that you don’t understand what the others want. But they want it and we’re comrades and we want to work together. Accepting the idea of ‘not getting it,’ that there are limits to your own understanding—that is a way of cooperating with someone else.” Suspending opens up new possibilities and new realities: that our current understandings of what is and what ought to be can change. This is the crucial opening that Frances Westley, Brenda Zimmerman, and Michael Patton pinpointed in the title of their book, Getting to Maybe: How the World Is Changed.
Intractable Conflicts: The 5% Problem

- Three inter-related dimensions (Kriesberg, 2005):
  - Enduring
  - Destructive
  - Resistant
- Uncommon but significant (5%: Diehl & Goertz, 2000)
  - 5% of 11,000 interstate rivalries between 1816-1992.
- Occur in families, organizations, communities, regions, etc.
  - Mostly studied in geopolitical domain: Israel/Palestine, Afghanistan, Somalia, Sudan, Angola, The DRC, Cyprus, Kashmir, Sri Lanka, Uganda, Mozambique, Colombia, etc.

A Dynamical-Systems Approach to Conflict and Intractability*

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*Research funded by a grant from the James S. McDonnell Foundation
**Intractability – Why?**  
(Coleman, 2003)

- **Context:**
  - Legacies of dominance and injustice
  - Insulated elite
  - Instability or anarchy

- **Issues:**
  - Human and social polarities
  - Deep symbolism and ideology
  - Hidden agendas-investments

- **Relationships:**
  - Exclusive & inescapable
  - Zero-sum group identities
  - Intense internal dynamics
  - Fractured ingroups
  - Equal power

- **Processes:**
  - Strong emotionality
  - Malignant psycho-social dynamics
  - Pervasive spread – bad neighborhoods
  - Blocked 3rd parties

- **Outcomes:**
  - Protracted trauma
  - Normalization of hostility and violence
  - Complexity
  - Multiple-linked sources & levels
  - Complex interactions
  - Mercurial - evolving
  - Idiosyncratic

1: They are different.
Suspending sounds easy but often it isn’t. I once taught a course on collaboration to a group of consultants in Japan. We were using the topic of the future of work as a case study. I was impressed with the participants’ capacity to collaborate in doing the case study: their culture and training enabled them to work more inclusively, creatively, and efficiently than groups I had worked with in other countries. But at a certain point they were talking about what changes in working practices could mean for them personally, and suddenly their conversation got stuck. The challenge of suspending is to be able to do it even when the work we are doing really matters to us, we have strong opinions or feelings about, or touches on our identity.
Consultant Louis van der Merwe offers a lighthearted and effective tip for suspending. He suggests that people who are pounding the table with certainty that their idea is the truth, should simply insert “In my opinion” at the beginning of their sentence. If that doesn’t work, they should insert “In my humble opinion.” These insertions remind us that our ideas are only hypotheses and not the truth about the situation.

**Debating to Dialoguing: Redirecting**

This means that I listen to you, not just from outside you so as to form a judgment about whether you are right or wrong, but from inside you so as to see how things look from your perspective. When I redirect, I pay attention to the reality from which you are speaking. Scharmer refers to this as the shift to an open heart.

Miha Pogacnik is a Slovenian concert violinist who teaches group creativity. The first time I saw him working with a Shell team, he played a short piece of music and then asked us what we had heard. One person answered, “I liked it.” Pogacnik replied: “I didn’t ask whether you liked it! Tell me what you heard!” He was trying to help us become aware of differences in the music’s tempo, colour, mood, and energy. Our biggest impediment to such awareness is our habit of making a judgment rather than an observation. Listening without judging is useful because judging cuts short the process of paying attention to what is actually unfolding.
Redirecting is also important because it enables me to empathise with you even though I might disagree with you. Poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow said, “If we could read the secret history of our enemies, we should find in each man’s life sorrow and suffering enough to disarm all hostility.” In my workshops with heterogeneous groups, the activity that participants usually rate the most highly is the simplest one: inviting each person to choose a partner who is most different from them and then with this partner to go for a walk. This activity is powerful simply because it opens up the possibility of a new empathetic connection—the disarming of hostility—and hence new collaborative action.

**Dialoguing -> Presencing: Letting Go.**

This means that I listen to what is being said not simply as an expression of each of the speaker’s personal views and realities, but as if each is speaking impersonally about what is happening. Letting go requires me to loosen my tight grip not only on what I think and feel and want, but more fundamentally to what I am: to the boundaries and characteristics of my identity. Scharmer refers to this as the shift to an open will. I interpreted the phrase I heard from Koehne in Copenhagen, “feeling superior as a condition of being,” as a challenge to let go of my attachment to being separate and superior.

The clearest expression I have ever heard of these shifts in listening was in a workshop that Dorothy and I facilitated in 1996 for the Synod of Bishops of the Anglican Church of Southern Africa. The bishops were intent on changing the way their church did its work, and they understood that this could only happen if they could escape from downloading: from repeating, without listening to each other and to their situation, what they had been saying and doing. So when the workshop started they wanted to come up with ground rules that would help them open up their listening. One of them suggested, “We must listen to one another”—which later I realised meant suspending. A second said, “No, brother, that’s not quite it: we must listen with empathy”—redirecting. Then a third said, “That’s still not quite what we need: we must listen to the sacred within each of us”—letting go. This is the kind of listening most needed in tough collaboration: listening for the highest potential in ourselves and in the situation we are part of.

When we encounter people whom we don’t agree with or like or trust, our instinct is to defend, tighten up, and contract. Tough collaboration is challenging because it requires us to do exactly the opposite: to open up, let go, and stretch.
Approach 15

Cultivating the right attitude

Here is an excerpt from Acknowledging What is, by Bert Hellinger (pp130-135):
This is not a set of techniques for addressing deep social hurts, but it does provide a deeply spiritual view: a particular attitude which involves humility rather than reaction.

You returned to Germany in 1969, which means that you experienced the student movement of that time. Were you sympathetic to that movement? Seen historically, I think that marked a turning point in Germany.

That was true for your generation. My generation had been through different experiences, and the student movement seemed more temporary.

Some people, also from your generation, or perhaps a bit younger, have said that they were able to breathe more easily because the whole Nazi issue could finally be discussed openly.

That wasn't so for me. First of all, I wasn't involved on that side of that issue, I was on the other side. At the age of 17, I was declared "detrimental to the people." In addition, I think all these discussions are on the wrong track. They are arguing on the same basis as the Nazis themselves. One group believes itself to be superior and says that things have to change. Those who feel called upon to improve the world all have a similar aggressive energy, and it's only the circumstantial things that are different. The zeal, the willingness to destroy, the attacks and street battles were not any different from what I saw from the Nazis.

But the impetus was different.

The movement in 1933 started very similarly to the way you would probably describe the 1968 movement. There was a feeling of things breaking up and a chance for a new start; "Here we come! Get out of the way, you old fogies!"

The '68ers were Day-Glo children. The movement ranged from flower power to children's groups and free schools, the beginnings of the women's movement, music, drugs, and free love.

The Nazis also had a youth movement, back to nature, out on the farms, out from under the burden of reparations, out from under the occupation of the Rhineland, out with the Versailles Treaty. The feelings then also reflected the joy of freedom.

I find that really disturbing. In my view of history, the 1968 movement helped to make our society more democratic and more tolerant.
I'm comparing the movements in the same way I look at religions comparatively. The emotional expression is very similar, independent of the content.

But the emotional side is different from the political side, and that difference seems very important to me. Just as you pointed out with the therapeutic area and the public area, I see that there are different levels at which you can look and evaluate such movements. One side is the mood, but another side is the political essence or the political effect within the framework of a period of history.

I would be very cautious about that. I'm very suspicious of those who think they are superior - and that includes movements as well. Look at the efforts to work through the past in East Germany. Some who were the earlier victims are now pursuing the perpetrators with the same zeal as was used against them by their persecutors. I believe that human progress requires that after such experiences we say to one another, "Whatever has happened in the past, we will grant ourselves a new beginning now."

What about the victims? What about the dissidents, important or minor, or simply the nonconformists who were spied on, hounded, and destroyed by the State Security? Those who have indignantly stepped forward as prosecutors are also digging into people's lives and wishing others ill.

Their outrage doesn't lead to good, it is aimed at destroying others.

But it's being fueled by what they personally suffered. Doesn't that make any difference as far as you're concerned?

If you presume that your suffering gives you the right to do evil to someone else,
you negate any beneficial effects in your own soul brought about by your suffering. For me, the way to work through the past is to stand next to the victim and weep, without attacking the perpetrator. Crying is humble, and no one is attacked. That's a completely different attitude from saying, "Look at the terrible thing you've done!" Such accusations are unjust, presumptuous, and, above all, not helpful.

How can you organize crying at a societal level? Something along the lines of what Willy Brandt did when he went down on his knees in Poland. That was a gesture without demands, simply a bowing down before the victims. A healing energy is still emanating from that gesture today. But reprimands and threats have exactly the opposite effect. They anger the soul.

Does that mean that there's no way to deal with the past through discussion? Not with accusations and outrage. My observation has been that many of the people demanding discussions about the past consider themselves superior, and I distrust those feelings. When I look for resolutions that will truly drive out the horror, then I am primarily interested in thinking about the victims and feeling solidarity with them in the sense of grieving. There's a strength that comes from that which works for the good. It must be modest, however, and without demands.

Basically, you're saying that you don't see any appropriate collective, societal way to deal with the past?

Of course, there would be a way if people were more modest and would limit themselves to grieving. I am deeply impressed when on the Day of Mourning, the only thing that is said is, "We grieve, we grieve, we grieve." That's appropriate and I can join in those feelings. I also am in favor of honoring the graves of those killed in the war. A terrible thing happened here, and the dead should be honored, whoever they are.
Model Comparison

- Standard Conflict Resolution Models
  - Compare fluid things to fixed
  - Think in straight lines
  - Privilege the short-term
  - Frame conflicts in narrow ways
  - Mostly focus on deficits
  - Often marginalize emotions
  - Are overly simple
  - Are overly complex
  - Miss the invisible (potential)
  - Rarely employs evidence-based practices
  - Unaware of the unintended consequences

- The Attractor Landscape Model
  - Focuses on ongoing dynamics
  - Emphasizes non-linearity and feedback loops.
  - Identifies long-term temporal patterns.
  - Works with multiple perspectives.
  - Works with both positive and negative attractors
  - Emotional dynamics are central
  - Frames conflicts in both complex and simple ways
  - Works with latent potential
  - Employs evidence-based practices
  - Anticipates unintended consequences

The Crude Law of Coherence and Conflict

- Humans are driven toward consistency and coherence in their thinking, perception, feeling, behavior, and social relationships.
- Conflict intensifies this drive, which is functional to a point, but can become dysfunctional and pathological with prolonged conflicts.
- However, more complex patterns of thinking, feeling, acting, and social-cultural organizing can mitigate this, and result in more constructive responses to conflict.

The Crude Law of Duration and Conflict

- The longer they last the longer they last.
- Destructive conflicts that last spread and fuel the conflict.
- Develop protective dynamics.

Basic Skills

- Understanding systemic, non-linear stability and change;
- Mastering complex problem-solving
- Adaptivity & Integrity
- Thinking globally and locally – and understanding what’s in-between
- Managing the tensions between short-term & long-term thinking
- Learning to see both the opportunities and dangers ahead.

The Big Idea!
(Wertheimer, Kohler, Koffka, & Lewin)

- The relationship between complexity, contradiction, coherence, and conflict.
  - Conflict occurs in a field of forces.
  - Drive toward simplification and order.
- Either extreme – overwhelming complexity or oversimplified coherence – is problematic.
- In intractable conflicts, the tide pulls fiercely toward coherence and simplification.

- Pervasive idea in science:
  - Physical Health
  - Integrative complexity
  - Political thinking
  - Need for closure
  - Emotional complexity
  - Behavioral complexity & flexibility
  - Social identity complexity
  - Multiple-categorization in outgroup perception
  - Person-situation fit
  - Relational balance
  - Creativity, learning and innovation in groups
  - Cultural role complexity
  - Dialectic reasoning and culture
  - Cultural tightness-looseness
  - Structural and institutional complexity
Attractor Narrative...

- **Intractable conflicts** = strong, fixed-point attractors for destructive conflict
- **Self-organizing!**
- **Evidence:**
  - High coherence
  - Low positivity-negativity ratio
  - Low adaptivity (responsiveness to change)
- **However, latent attractors develop**
  - Accumulation of discarded-repressed information (IAT).
  - Correspond to hidden potentials that exist in the system.

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The 56 Essences of Intractable Conflict

A severe imbalance of power between people or groups.
A history of colonialism, racism, sexism, ethnocentrism, or human rights abuses.
Approach 17

Complex systems and attractors

Peter Coleman writes about the 5% of conflicts that are intractable. This includes the middle east, abortion debates between some parties, and conflicts such as those in AM at present. The conflict between yourselves on the Maleny land could be added to this type, it appears.

Below are some points Coleman gives about moving from entrenched conflict towards resolution. I have also attached a more detailed article on the subject for your interest. By understanding the complexities of dynamic systems, you may be better equipped to move towards resolution.

From entrenched conflict towards resolution


1. **Open up.** Invite a member of the Other party over for coffee. Agree beforehand to spend just 10 minutes each speaking about the problems and issues that matter most to you, without interruption. Don’t sell anything, just try to be honest. And try to listen. Do you share any concerns?

2. **Take notice.** Science tells us that 90-95% of our daily behaviours are automatic - things we do every day without thinking (taking a shower, driving a car, preparing a meal, reacting to our kids, neighbours, coworkers). Notice these. Many of our automatic behaviours may be contributing to our divisions.

3. **Beware absolute certainty.** Life is complex, and many of the more serious problems we face are really complicated. Typically, solutions to these problems will be mixed - with both good and bad outcomes. If someone is selling you on solutions that are problem-free sure things, beware.

4. **Take responsibility for the state of our state.** Blame is cheap, easy and seductive and fuels contempt. Ask: What has our side done to contribute to the current climate?

5. **Reflect on your own contradictions.** Many of us do or say things that go against our values and better intentions. Or we have conflicting impulses or even belong simultaneously to groups with opposing agendas (say, the NRA and Moveon.org!). Acknowledge these impulses and conflicts. Research shows that being mindful of such contradictions in ourselves makes us more tolerant people.

6. **Go new.** Travel somewhere: to a strange part of town, a new ethnic restaurant, or to a strange land. This, too, increases our tolerance for difference.

7. **See possibilities.** Few of the problems we face are truly insurmountable. Even our most daunting problems can and will be solved. Optimism has been found to be good for our health and our relationships.

These actions may seem trivial, but they add up. If done often enough, they can change a person, a home, a community. They can help us break out of our attractors; our habits of blame, negativity and denial of responsibility. They can open up our thinking, feeling and behaviour, and, in time, enable our leaders to lead.

And a work-based version


Scholars estimate that about five percent of the more difficult conflicts we face become intractable: highly destructive, enduring and resistant to multiple good-faith attempts at resolution. These conflicts seem to develop a power of their own that is inexplicable and total, driving people and groups to act in ways that go against their best interests and sow the seeds of their own ruin. They often tap into past resentments and trigger new ones, which combine to create complicated problems that seem impossible to resolve.

Like epidemics, the five percent seem to operate by a different set of rules, and are therefore unresponsive to typical approaches to conflict resolution and so require a radically different approach. Fortunately, recent breakthroughs in the study of such conflicts -- much of it from the international domain -- have shed light on new strategies for addressing such problems effectively.
Here are a few guidelines:

Seek instability. When conflicts drag-on for months or years, they often establish a status-quo of contentiousness; negative expectations, hostile automatic reactions, and self-fulfilling prophesies that help perpetuate the tensions. However, studies have shown that these conflicts often become more amenable to resolution after some type of major shock has destabilised the system. These jolts can come from different sources, such as economic or health crises, scandals, criminal investigations, natural disasters and other such unsettling events. Leaders should learn to watch for periods of instability - ruptures in the day-to-day dynamics of the conflict-fixated organisation, which present unique opportunities for change. However, it is important to realise that instability, although helpful, is often only a necessary but insufficient condition for resolution of the five percent.

Cause and...effect? Research on enduring conflicts also tells us that the effects of destabilising shocks to systems are often delayed. In some protracted international conflicts, changes have taken as long as ten years to emerge after a major political shock occurred (for example, the Arab Spring erupted ten years after 9/11 and the US occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq). Therefore, five percent conflicts require us to suspend our tendencies to think in terms of immediate cause-and-effect, and to understand that radical changes in complex systems can operate within radically different time frames.

See the larger network in which the problem is embedded. Five percent problems may start small, but over time they can gather new problems and grievances and disputants which can combine in convoluted ways and increase their intractability. If this is the case, it can be immensely useful to map-out the different events, issues and disputants involved in the conflict - as they happened in time - in order to get a better view of what is driving and constraining the conflict. This is particularly important when the polarising pull of Us vs. Them becomes potent and leads to the oversimplification of the sources of the conflict (Them!).

Sidestep the conflict. Direct intervention in these conflicts, such as attempts at face-to-face negotiations or mediation, is typically ineffective, often fails repeatedly, and can make matters worse. With five percent conflicts, it can be best to avoid directly tackling the conflict for a time and instead work to increase the probability of positive interactions and decrease negativity between the disputants through means that are completely unrelated to the conflict. Backing away from the problem in this manner may allow unexpected solutions to emerge on their own, particularly as the climate shifts between the disputants.

Know the power of the meek. Studies of intractable conflicts in the geopolitical domain that were eventually resolved have taught us that forceful interventions by powerful authorities or third-parties rarely help for very long. Ironically, they find that it is often weaker third-parties who employ softer forms of power (are trust-worthy, unthreatening, reliable, and without their own agenda) who often are the most effective catalysts for peaceful change.

Bolster islands of agreement. Research has also found that in many protracted conflicts, such as those in Kashmir and Israel, the disputing factions maintain benevolent islands in their relationships where they can communicate and cooperate, despite the escalation of their conflict. In international affairs this can occur through trade, civilian visits or exchanges of medical care. In the workplace, these islands may exist around personal or professional crises (e.g., a sick child), outside interests (mutual hobbies or causes), or by way of chains of communications through trusted third-parties. Supporting or encouraging these islands can mitigate tensions and help to contain the spread of conflict.

See the invisible 5%. In tense conflicts, we tend to process negative information about the other side and ignore or deny positive information completely. Thus, simply identifying the 5% of actions by the other side that are benign or benevolent in intention can help to constrain the spread of negativity in conflict. This information begins to fracture the certainty of us vs. them.

Five percent work conflicts are extremely costly and demanding but they are not impossible to solve. Understanding the hidden dynamics at play with these problems and the various strategies available to tip them in constructive directions is the first step to their effective resolution.

See: https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-five-percent/201109/navigating-the-impossible-5-percent-work
**First moves matter.** One thing that mathematics tells us helps determine the direction we take after a political shock are the initial conditions. That is, the earliest actions taken in a new regime largely determine its trajectory. In marriages, it’s the first things said by a spouse when a young couple finds themselves in a new conflict. With moral conflicts it’s how people start to feel within the first 3 three minutes of conversation that sets the course. Even very slight differences in initial conditions -- minor differences in the framing of social problems or political crises -- can eventually make a big difference.

This means that whoever wins the election in November will have a unique opportunity to reset our course. This is what our greatest leaders such as Lincoln, Roosevelt, and Mandela were able to do in the wake of crisis. The effects of their actions may not be visible at first, but they can trigger other changes that trigger others and so on over time, until they have an amplified impact on our relations and abilities to solve problems.

**Small things matter.** Finally, it is critical to recognise that the divisive attractor we are trapped in as a nation was created and is maintained by all of us. Our words and deeds in our homes and communities do much to contribute to the current climate of vitriol, blame and contempt in our country. But research on complex systems shows that even small changes in one basic rule of behaviour can have enormous emergent effects on the qualities of a system. If each of us made one slight change in how we act in our own lives, it could trickle up and affect how our leaders lead. In other words, we can change our course from the bottom up by:

- **Complicating.** Recognising that the more serious problems we face today are very complicated. Typically, solutions to these problems will be mixed -- with both good and bad outcomes. If someone is selling you on solutions that are problem-free sure things, beware.
- **Contradicting.** We all have conflicting impulses and do things at times that go against our values and better intentions. Acknowledge these. Research shows that being mindful of such contradictions within ourselves makes us more tolerant and accepting of people who are different.
- **Concentrating.** Science also tells us that 90-95% of our daily behaviours are automatic -- things we do every day without thinking (driving a car, preparing a meal, reacting to our kids, neighbours, coworkers). Notice these. Many of our automatic behaviours are contributing to our divisions. When was the last time you listened actively to the POV of a member of the other party to learn? Not to sell anything or persuade, but just to try to discover something new?

These actions may seem trivial, but they can add up. If repeated often enough, they can change a person, a home, a community and can help us break out of our attractors; our habits of blame, negativity and denial of responsibility. Remember: Ask not what your country can do for you ... but what you can do with a crisis.

And, finally, heres a powerpoint presentation summarising the ideas, and a referenced article on the subject. They are complex, but if you really want to understand the systemic dynamics occurring, they provide an excellent explanation.
“...one of the things that frustrates me about this conflict, thinking about this conflict, is that people don’t realize the complexity... how many stakeholders there are in there... I think there is a whole element to this particular conflict to where you start the story, to where you begin the narrative, and clearly it’s whose perspective you tell it from... One of the things that’s always struck me is that there are very compelling narratives to this conflict and all are true, in as much as anything is true... I think the complexity is on so many levels... It’s a complexity of geographic realities... the complexities are in the relationships... it has many different ethnic pockets... and I think it’s fighting against a place, where particularly in the United States, in American culture, we want to simplify, we want easy answers... We want to synthesize it down to something that people can wrap themselves around and take a side on... And maybe sometimes I feel overwhelmed...”

(Anonymous Palestinian, 2002)

Why are some intergroup conflicts impossible to solve and what can we do to address them?
Four Basic Themes

- An increasing degree of complexity and interdependence of elements.
- An underlying proclivity for change, development, and evolution within people and social-physical systems.
- Extraordinary cognitive, emotional, and behavioral demands...anxiety, hopelessness.
- Oversimplification of problems.

Intractability – 56 Essences

(Coleman, 2003)

**Context:**
- Legacies of dominance and injustice
- Insulated elite
- Instability or anarchy

**Issues:**
- Human and social polarities
- Deep symbolism and ideology
- Hidden agendas-investments

**Relationships:**
- Exclusive & inescapable
- Zero-sum group identities
- Intense internal dynamics
- Fractured ingroups
- Equal power

**Processes:**
- Strong emotionality
- Malignant psycho-social dynamics
- Pervasive spread – bad neighborhoods
- Blocked 3rd parties

**Outcomes:**
- Protracted trauma
- Normalization of hostility and violence
- Complexity

Shared Qualities

What is the essence of Intractability?

They last too long and are very expensive.
Top 11 Reasons why Current Approaches To Conflict Resolution Don’t Work On The 5% Problem

1. They compare fluid things to fixed things.
2. They think in straight lines.
3. The privilege the short-term.
4. They frame conflicts in narrow ways.
5. They mostly focus on deficits.
6. They too often marginalize emotions.
7. They are overly simple (traditional theory).
8. They are overly complex (general systems theory).
9. They miss the invisible (potential).
10. They are rarely evidence-based practices.
11. They remain unaware of the unintended consequences of well-intentioned acts.

3: Our models and methods are lacking.

Intractability – Why?

- They are different
- They are misunderstood
- They are mishandled

Complexity Science & Dynamical Systems

- Applied mathematics
- A dynamical system is a set of interconnected elements that change and evolve in time.
  - Non-linear relations: system evolves as each element adjusts to the joint influences of others.
- Dynamical minimalism (Nowak, 2004)
**DST Summary**

- Intractable conflicts are made up of many different parts that all collapse together and then begin to take on a life of their own – so they SEEM impossible to solve.
- When conflicts collapse and act like this a paradox occurs – they tend to spread and become more and more complicated in the real world – but are perceived to be simpler and simpler by those IN THEM.
- In other words, people’s subjective experience overwhelms objective events & information.

**Moral Conflict Lab**

- Participants engage in a real discussion of a moral conflict and attempt consensus – recorded.
- Participants asked to review the tapes of their negotiation.
- And to operate a computer mouse to indicate from moment-to-moment the positive and negative feelings, thoughts, etc. that arose for them during the negotiation (Vallacher and Nowak, 1994).
- Examine *patterns* of responses over time - *attractors*.

**DST Summary**

- Then, very big things – interventions – seem to make no difference in the conflict… but very small things, even random events, can trigger peace...
- However, fostering *peace that lasts* needs to involve:
  1. Understanding these basic dynamics,
  2. Increasing probabilities (attractors) for peace, and
  3. Decreasing probabilities (attractors) for war.
- There are many artful ways to do this.
Increasing probabilities for peace to emerge

Getting Un-Attracted to Conflict
1. A good enough conceptual framework
2. A set of evidence-based principles and practices
3. Skills: Intuition, complexity, creativity, adaptability, perseverance & humility

The Attractor Software Tool
- Offers simple visualization of how elements link to affect patterns of constructive/destructive behaviors.
- It helps to untangle the web: simplifies understanding of a system w/o oversimplifying the problem.
- It suggests a sequence of activities that can lead to a reconfiguration of the system.
- It shows that the same action can have multiple consequences and distinguishes short- and long-term (+ & -) consequences.
- And points to sustainable solutions.

Go to: http://www.iccc.edu.pl/as/

Attractors are Everywhere!

Temporal Phases
Citation for following article:

Intractable Conflict as an Attractor
A Dynamical Systems Approach to Conflict Escalation and Intractability

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Decades of research on social conflict has contributed to researchers’ understanding of a wide variety of psychological, social, and community-based aspects of conflict escalation and intractability. However, the field has yet to put forth a theoretical model that links these components to the basic underlying structures and dynamics that account for intractability and transformation. This article presents a dynamical systems approach to conceptualizing intractable conflict as a preliminary step toward developing a basic theory of intractability. The authors propose that it is particularly useful to conceptualize ongoing, destructive patterns of conflict as strong attractors, a particular form of self-organization of multiple elements of conflict systems. Their dynamical approach to conflict intractability is outlined, and some preliminary implications of this approach for conflict de-escalation are discussed.

Keywords: intractable conflict; protracted conflict; dynamical systems

Protracted social conflicts, such as those in the communities of the Middle East, Cyprus, and the Congo, are profoundly disheartening. Opportunities and initiatives for peace and stability occasionally come and go in these settings, but their general patterns of malignancy remain steady. And although kindling a sense of hope, these opportunities, when they collapse, contribute to an increasing sense of futility among stakeholders, which fuels a conflict’s intractability.

Inherent to this cycle of hope and hopelessness is a basic paradox of intractable conflicts: They are essentially stable despite tremendous volatility and change. If we consider the conflict in the Middle East, for example, it appears by most accounts intransigent, with a past, present, and future cloaked in hate, violence, and despair. Yet over the years we have also seen major changes in important aspects of the conflict such as in leadership, policy, regional circumstances, intensification, de-escalation of violence, intragroup divisions, popular sentiment, and international intervention strategies. In other words, we have seen extraordinary changes occur within a context of a pattern of stable destructive relations. This paradox of stability amid change is evident in intractable conflicts at all levels, from estranged siblings and neighbors to warring ethnopolitical factions. They are at once frozen, unyielding, often persisting in hostile states for generations, yet they are also some of the most volatile and dynamic social processes on earth. And oddly, it is often this dynamism itself, this mercurial shifting of role players, concerns, attitudes, and strategies, that makes these conflicts so difficult to contain and resolve.

6 Authors’ Note: All authors equally contributed to this article. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Peter T. Coleman, Box 53, Teachers College, Columbia University, 525 W. 120th St., New York, NY 10027; phone: 212-678-3112; fax: 212-678-4048; e-mail: pc84@columbia.edu.
The growing literature on protracted social conflicts presents a complicated picture of the phenomenon of intractability (see Beyond Intractability, 2006; Crocker, Hampson, & Aall, 2004, 2005; Lewicki, Gray, & Elliot, 2003), which poses several challenges to theory building in the area. First, these conflicts tend to be complex, with many sources of hostilities located at multiple levels (individual, group, communal, etc.) that often interact with each other to feed or sustain the conflict (P. T. Coleman, 2003; Sandole, 1999). Second, the sources of hostilities in these settings, be they the key issues, leaders, policies, attitudes, or political will of the masses, are continually changing and at any given time may be more or less determining of the conflict (Mitchell, 2005; Putnam & Peterson, 2003). Third, each case of intractable conflict is idiosyncratic; each has its own unique set of dynamic factors responsible for its persistence, which makes generalization from one case to another difficult. Although the field of conflict studies has moved away from a more essentialist discussion of the key variables that drive enduring conflicts to more complex models of intractability (see Lederach, 1997; Sandole, 1999), our theory has yet to account for this high level of complexity, dynamism, and distinctiveness.

In this article, we argue that the phenomenon of intractability can be fruitfully addressed from the perspective of dynamical systems. This perspective has been employed to conceptualize and investigate complex, dynamic phenomena in many areas of science (Johnson, 2001; Strogatz, 2003; Weisbuch, 1992) from cancerous cellular mutations to global climate shifts. This article builds on concepts from this approach that are inherent to all living systems: complexity, dimensionality, feedback, catastrophe, and attractors. It begins by describing the basic features of dynamical systems as they relate to the development and maintenance of malignant conflict in social systems. Because dynamic properties are couched in formal terms, they are manifest in much the same way for different phenomena and at different levels of personal and social reality. Thus, intractability can be understood with recourse to the same basic mechanisms whether the focus is intraindividual dynamics, interpersonal relations, or intergroup contact. Moreover, the dynamic account specifies how the phenomena at these different levels are themselves dynamically interlinked, forming a larger dynamical system with nested components. Our approach to conflict intractability will be outlined, and some preliminary implications for conflict de-escalation and transformation will be discussed.

**Conflict Intractability**

Intractable conflicts are essentially conflicts that persist because they seem impossible to resolve. Others scholars have used labels such as deeply rooted conflict (Burton, 1987), protracted social conflict (Azar, 1990), moral conflict (Pearce & Littlejohn, 1997), and enduring rivalries (Goertz & Diehl, 1993) to depict similar phenomena. Kriesberg (2005) stresses three dimensions that differentiate intractable from tractable conflicts: their persistence, destructiveness, and resistance to resolution. Most protracted conflicts do not begin as intractable, but they become so as escalation, hostile interactions, sentiment, and time change the quality of the conflict. They can be triggered and emerge from a wide variety of factors and events, but they often involve important issues such as moral and identity differences, high-stakes resources, and/or struggles for power and self-determination (P. T. Coleman, 2003; Kriesberg, 1999; Putnam & Peterson, 2003). Intractable conflicts are typically associated with cycles of high and low intensity and destructiveness, are often costly in both social and economic terms, and can become pervasive, affecting even mundane aspects of disputants’ lives (see P. T. Coleman, 2000; Deutsch, 1973; Fisher, 1990, 1997; Pruitt & Kim, 2004).

Theory and research on intractable conflict are still in their infancy. Although decades of research on social conflict has shed considerable light on a wide variety of psychological, social, and community-based aspects of conflict escalation and stalemate (see Deutsch, 1973; Kriesberg, 2003; Pruitt & Kim 2004), our understanding of intractability remains fragmented. In his metaframework on intractable conflict, P. T. Coleman (2003) identified more than 50 variables in the literature thought to be associated with the persistence of destructive conflicts. These include...
a variety of different aspects of their contexts, issues, relationships, processes, and outcomes. However, the field has yet to put forth a theoretical model that links this multitude of variables and processes to the basic underlying structures and dynamics that account for a conflict’s resistance to resolution. In the following section, we introduce a new and promising approach.

**Dynamical Systems Theory**

Dynamical systems theory is an increasingly influential paradigm in many areas of science (cf. Johnson, 2001; Nowak & Vallacher, 1998; Strogatz, 2003; Vallacher, Read, & Nowak, 2002; Weisbuch, 1992), and it offers an innovative set of ideas and methods for conceptualizing and addressing conflict. A dynamical system is defined as a set of interconnected elements (e.g., beliefs, feelings, and behaviors) that change and evolve in time. A change in each element depends on influences from other elements. Because of these mutual influences, the system as a whole evolves in time. Thus, changes in any element of a conflict (e.g., level of hostilities) depend on influences of various other elements (each person’s motives, attitudes, actions, etc.) that evolve over time to affect the general pattern of interactions (positive or negative) of the disputants. The principles defining the evolution of dynamical systems have wide generality and have been employed to conceptualize and investigate a highly diverse set of conflict-related phenomena (emotion, stereotyping, attitude change, cooperation vs. competition in social dilemmas, etc.). This perspective acknowledges the multiplicity of factors relevant to enduring conflict and the potential for complex interactions among these factors. However, the goal is to build a relatively simple model of qualitative understanding that captures the essence of intractable conflict without sacrificing the complexity and idiosyncrasy of specific cases (Nowak, 2004).

**A Dynamical Systems Approach to Intractable Conflict**

Although every conflict is unique in a number of respects (history, issues, context, etc.), all components of conflict function as interdependent elements of a larger system with dynamic properties. If a conflict becomes intractable, change in any specific issue—even resolution of the issue that initially instigated the conflict—is not likely to terminate or even lessen the conflict. What remains constant and perpetuates the conflict are the dynamics that define the relationships between psychological and social mechanisms within and between individuals and groups. Once the parties to conflict have developed a stable way of thinking about and behaving toward one another, in other words, the problem no longer revolves around issues per se but rather centers on the mental and behavioral patterns defining the relationships and institutions that form the context of the conflict.

**Intractable Conflict as an Attractor**

The maintenance of a narrow range of thoughts, feelings, and actions despite the introduction of new ideas and actions suggests that intractable conflict can be described as an attractor for these mental and behavioral phenomena. The concept of attractor is similar to the notion of equilibrium. Roughly speaking, it is a state or a reliable pattern of changes (e.g., periodic oscillation) toward which a dynamical system evolves over time and to which the system returns after it has changed. A person or group may encounter a wide range of ideas and learn of alternative action scenarios, for example, but over time only those ideas and actions that are consistent with destructive conflict are embraced as relevant and credible. Attractors, in short, channel mental and behavioral experience into a narrow range of coherent (either positive or negative) states. Attempting to move the system out of its attractor triggers forces that reinstate the system within its attractor. This means that attempts to change a state of destructive relations that neglect the mechanisms that continually reinstate the conflict are likely to be futile, resulting only in short-term changes. To promote lasting change, it is necessary to change the
attractor states of the system. This is no easy feat because it is tantamount to changing the mechanisms responsible for the system’s dynamics.

The dynamic depiction of conflict invokes intractability into the organization of elements rather than to the specific value or nature of individual factors. Multiple interlinked forces establish an equilibrium that pulls the respective parties into a state of contentious conflict. Building trust between groups, for example, is a noble goal and may be a necessary step for the resolution of intergroup conflict, but in light of our description, this step alone is unlikely to be successful. Even if trust is somehow established between members of conflicting groups, the influence of other interconnected features is likely to disrupt the trust and reinstate the conflict. Successful intervention, from this perspective, should aim not at pushing the person or group out of its equilibrium but rather at changing the social system in such a way that the equilibrium among forces is changed. Once an equilibrium corresponding to intractable conflict is weakened and a new equilibrium that maintains positive relations among groups is established, a permanent change in the structure, rather than simply a momentary diminution of the intensity of the conflict, is achieved.

A simple metaphor is useful in capturing the essence of the attractor concept and the relevance of attractors for intractable conflict. Imagine a ball on a hilly landscape, as portrayed in Figure 1. The ball, which represents the state of the system, will roll down a hill and come to rest at the bottom of a valley. The valley serves as an attractor for the system.

![Figure 1](image_url)

The figure illustrates that a system may have more than one attractor—in this case, two (e.g., one for positive interactions and one for negative)—and that the attractors can be described in terms of two basic properties. Each attractor, first of all, is associated with a basin of attraction—that is, a set of states that are attracted by (i.e., will evolve toward) the attractor. Note that the basin of attraction for Attractor A is somewhat wider than the basin of attraction for Attractor B. This simply means that a wider variety of states will evolve toward Attractor A than toward Attractor B. Second, attractors vary in their relative strength, which is portrayed as the relative depth of the two valleys in the figure. Attractor B is thus a stronger attractor than Attractor A. This means that once a system is at this attractor, it is difficult to dislodge it, even when disrupted by strong external influences. It would thus take a stronger force to dislodge the system from Attractor B than from Attractor A.

These two properties have clear relevance for the intractability of conflict. First, the wider the basin of attraction, the greater the range of ideas and actions that even- tually connect to the dominant mental and behavioral patterns of the parties.
However, escalation of conflict intensity conformed to similar functional relationships. A school setting by Bui-Wrzosinska (2005). In conditions promoting weak linkage outside conflict may exist or not. Moreover, both states may be resistant to relatively weak hysteresis explains reached the nonconflict attractor level is observed of aggravating factors, there are two possible attractors for the conflict. Which original level, until another threshold that represents a considerably lower level of high level of intensity, decreasing the forces will not reduce the intensity to its catastrophic change (i.e., moving to the top line). Once the conflict has reached a high level, the system will gravitate in short order to another attractor (e.g., A), provided there is one available. In a system characterized by more than one attractor, then, the mental, affective, and behavioral states categorically sort themselves, so that if change does occur, it does so in a qualitative (nonlinear) rather than incremental (linear) fashion (cf. Latané & Nowak, 1994).

The behavior of a system with two fixed-point attractors characterizes catastrophe theory (cf. Thom, 1975).3 The basic scenario centers on the relationship among three variables. One of them, the splitting factor, determines the form of the relationship between the other two. The other two factors correspond to the distinction between independent and dependent variables. In the dynamical model, the forces promoting the conflict (e.g., conflict of interest, aggravating circumstances) represent the independent variable, and the intensity of the conflict represents the dependent variable. The splitting factor corresponds to the degree to which the issues are linked by positive feedback loops. A positive feedback loop means that the activation of each element increases the activation of other elements. At low levels of the splitting factor (i.e., multidimensionality in issues; see below), there is a linear (e.g., monotonic) relationship between the independent and dependent variables (i.e., forces and intensity of conflict). At high levels of the splitting factor (i.e., high positive linkage among the issues), however, the relationship between the independent and dependent variables assumes the form depicted in Figure 2.

As the forces promoting conflict grow, the intensity of the conflict increases at a relatively slow rate until it reaches a threshold, after which the intensity shows a catastrophic change (i.e., moving to the top line). Once the conflict has reached a high level of intensity, decreasing the forces will not reduce the intensity to its original level, until another threshold that represents a considerably lower level of forces is reached. The region of hysteresis in Figure 2 shows that for some values of aggravating factors, there are two possible attractors for the conflict. Which level is observed depends on the history of the conflict. For a given level of aggravating tendencies, if the system has not yet achieved high conflict intensity, the nonconflict attractor will be stabilized. If, however, the system has already reached the high conflict level, this state will be stabilized. The concept of hysteresis explains why, for the same level of values influencing a conflict, the conflict may exist or not. Moreover, both states may be resistant to relatively weak outside influences.

The catastrophic nature of conflict escalation has been recently demonstrated in a school setting by Bui-Wrzosinska (2005). In conditions promoting weak linkage among cognitive and affective elements of a conflict (i.e., weak interpersonal ties that lead to few associations between beliefs and feelings regarding the other), there was a linear relationship between antagonistic behavior from another person and the person’s antagonistic response. Thus, these participants responded in a proportional manner to antagonistic actions directed toward them, and the escalation and de-escalation of conflict intensity conformed to similar functional relationships. However, in conditions promoting positive feedback loops (i.e., strong...
interpersonal ties with strong links between thoughts and feelings regarding the other), a person experiencing antagonistic behavior from another person either chose to ignore the attack, responding instead in a relatively mild fashion or, after a critical threshold of antagonism was reached, responding in a highly confrontational manner. The transition from one type of response to the other was abrupt and did not involve a transition through intermediate levels.

**Self-Organization and the Emergence of Attractors**

The key to intractable conflict is the formation and maintenance of an attractor that stabilizes malignant dynamics within and between individuals and groups. The solution to intractable conflict, then, involves disassembling the malignant attractor or moving the system into the basin of a different, more benign attractor (provided one exists or can be established). Before one can hope to achieve these goals, it is imperative to understand how attractors form in the first place. The general answer is that attractors develop in systems in which the state of each element depends on, and is influenced by, the state of other elements. As the links between elements become stronger, the system loses degrees of freedom because the state of each element can be predicted by the state of other elements. In such systems, the state of a single element cannot be adjusted independently of other elements. Even if an external force changes the state of a given element so that it is no longer coherent with the state of other elements, the joint influence of the other elements will re-establish the original value of the changed element.

Multiple influences among elements may lead to the emergence of ordered structures on the global level. If order emerges because of the interactions among system elements rather than because of the intervention of higher-order agents, the process is referred to as *self-organization*. Consider, for example, the genesis of order in flocks of birds. If each bird simply maintains a particular angle with respect to the bird in front of it, an overall inverted $V$ structure will form, without a leader dictating this formation. The emergence of order via self-organization has been observed in human groups as well. Nowak, Szamrej, and Latane (1990), for example, demonstrated that simple rules of social interaction with one's immediate neighbors promote the emergence of local clusters of like-minded individuals. Such clusters form even if the initial spatial configuration of opinions is random. Attractors for the system in this case conform to clustered solutions. If an individual within a cluster changes his or her opinion (e.g., because of outside
influence), other members of the cluster will exert influence to bring him or her back into the fold.

From this perspective, conflict progresses toward intractability as the elements relevant to the conflict self-organize into a structure, such that the elements no longer independently function but rather are connected through positive feedback loops. Positive feedback loops are not limited to conflict. To the contrary, positive feedback loops bind together elements that are necessary for efficient action and thus are critical for action initiation and maintenance. Negative feedback loops, however, are also critical for the regulation of biological and social systems. Negative feedback means that the activation of an element decreases the activation of other elements to which it is linked. Negative feedback loops dampen system dynamics and thus constrain or stop the actions engendered by the positive feedback loops. A balance between positive and negative feedback loops, then, is critical for effective self-regulation (cf. Carver & Scheier, 1999; Powers, 1973) and social regulation (Nowak & Vallacher, 2001).

With respect to conflict, positive feedback loops may be crucial for the construction of an efficient response to a perceived confrontation. Once a conflict is engaged, however, negative feedback loops are essential for de-escalation. Thus, as long as a system is characterized by negative feedback loops, control mechanisms are available for mitigating and terminating conflict, allowing conflict situations to be temporary and constructive rather than destructive. In most situations, there are limits to the escalation of conflict, and there is potential for de-escalation and healing. In physical confrontation, for example, signs of damage to one of the combatants may halt further violence by the other combatant. In protracted conflicts, mutually hurting stalemates provide a form of negative feedback sufficient to motivating de-escalation (see Zartman, 2000) and conciliatory initiatives.

The Reduction of Multidimensionality

In everyday life, conflicts are often confined to specific issues, leaving a host of issues for which conflict does not exist. Each conflict may be solved independently of other issues, often in a constructive manner that contributes to relationship maintenance and growth. The mechanisms operating on different issues may even operate in a compensatory manner so that intensification of conflict on one issue may promote conciliation on other issues to maintain the overall relationship. In a healthy intimate relationship, for instance, when conflict arises with respect to one issue, the potential threat it poses for the relationship may be compensated by extra positive responses to other issues. Interpersonal and intergroup relations can thus be described as complex and multidimensional, with the various mechanisms operating at different points in time, in different contexts, with respect to different issues and often in a compensatory manner.

Conflict escalates with a potential to become intractable when features that are independent or normally work in opposition to one another become aligned and work in a mutually reinforcing manner. Relatively benign conflicts may become self-organized, leading to a reduction of multiple factors that produces a recalcitrant structure of intractable conflict. The collapse of multidimensionality has two basic forms. First, positive feedback loops that bind various elements—issues, features, individuals—into a simple structure may develop. Second, negative feedback loops may cease to exist or become reversed so that they function as positive feedback loops, fueling rather than inhibiting the potential for destructive conflict. When the tears of our enemy augment rather than inhibit aggression, the conflict between us may escalate out of control and become highly destructive.

The collapse of multidimensionality into a simple structure not only promotes the escalation of conflict but also provides a mechanism for stabilizing the conflict. Even if the original issue that generated the conflict loses its salience or is resolved, the conflict is likely to be sustained by positive feedback that involves the other issues. In fact, the expression of agreement by one party with respect to a single issue might result in compensatory conflict on other issues to maintain
coherence in the conflict. Imagine, for example, learning that an enemy has similar political views or has provided assistance to a family member. Prior to forming conflict across multiple issues, this sort of event is precisely the situation that could alleviate the potential conflict. Once the conflict has crossed a certain threshold that entails correlated issues, however, such information violates one’s sense of coherence and is likely to be either rejected, redefined in cynical terms, or compensated for by enhancing conflict with respect to other issues. The signature characteristic of a conflict that has become organized across issues is the negative reaction to what would otherwise be a conflict-reducing development. In this stage, the motives have transformed in that conflict no longer centers on the issues but rather focuses on protecting oneself and harming the other party.

The collapse of the multidimensional nature of conflict applies to the interconnections within an issue, especially when a party has different cognitive and affective reactions to the issue. Normally, people can use one reaction to mitigate the influence of the other. Experiencing harm to a family member at the hands of someone else, for example, promotes negative affect toward the perpetrator, but the cognitive system may center on the perpetrator’s lack of bad intentions. Likewise, a rational decision to punish someone may be at odds with one’s empathy for the transgressor. When cognitive and affective mechanisms develop a reinforcing rather than compensatory relation, however, escalation can intensify a conflict. Such escalation may result in a shift in behavioral tactics, from relatively benign or conciliatory actions to far more hard-line and aggressive actions. Harm to a family member could lead to a strong retaliatory response, for example, when cognition and affect are linked only by a positive feedback loop. In the extreme, this process could promote dehumanization of one’s opponent, such that moral norms no longer apply to one’s behavior directed to him or her (Bandura, 1982; Opotow, 2001). Accordingly, emotions such as empathy and guilt may be diminished, whereas feelings of humiliation, anger, hate, and fear may be enhanced.

Feedback Among Levels of Social Reality

The escalation and maintenance of conflict are manifested at different levels of psychological and social reality: the thoughts, feelings, and actions of specific individuals, the dynamics of interpersonal relations, and the relations within and between social groups and nations. In intractable conflict, these levels tend to become interlinked, so that mechanisms at one level stimulate conflict at other levels. The structure of conflict is thus maintained not only by positive feedback loops among features at a given level but also by positive feedback between levels. This interdependence means that conflict launched at one level is likely to stimulate other levels as well. Conflict initiated at an intergroup level, for instance, is likely to spawn and reinforce the beliefs, emotions, and actions of individuals in their interpersonal relations. The reciprocal feedback loops among levels contribute to the intractability of conflict. Even if the conflict at one level is fully understood and resolvable in principle, the links to other levels can reinstate the conflict.

Conflict on a group level tends to be more intense than the sum of individual conflicts between members of the respective groups (Azar, 1990). Through social interaction, a shared reality develops in the in-group that involves a social definition of conflict with the out-group (J. S. Coleman, 1957). Even individuals who were not directly involved in the conflict are likely to develop the sense of conflict by virtue of the in-group’s shared reality. Such conflicts may be difficult to control because the behavior of a single in-group member is likely to lead to the escalation of conflict between the groups. Imagine, for example, a negotiated ceasefire between two conflicting groups. An isolated violation of the ceasefire by a single individual is likely to promote the perception by the other side that the entire group is responsible and accordingly lead to a strong retaliatory response. In like manner, an isolated act of brutality committed by one person against another person is likely to undermine the efforts to resolve a long-standing conflict.
Factors Promoting the Escalation to Intractability

The alignment of different conflict elements between and across levels reflects a tendency toward coherence in psychological and social systems (cf. Thagard, 2000; Vallacher & Nowak, in press). It is natural for negative moods to enhance the recall of negatively valenced memories, for example, or for an aversive encounter with someone to generate negative inferences about his or her character. This drive for coherence is as a primary feature of a wide variety of social phenomena (see Festinger, 1957; Heider, 1958), including emotion (e.g., Thagard & Nerb, 2002), social judgment (e.g., Read & Miller, 1998; Vallacher, Nowak, & Kaufman, 1994), self-concept (cf. Nowak & Vallacher, 2001; Vallacher, Nowak, Froelich, & Rockloff, 2002), and social influence processes (Osgood, 1983). In situations characterized by conflict, then, there is an intrinsic bias toward escalation that results from the proressive integration of cognitive and affective elements. In many instances, the operation of negative feedback mechanisms and the separation of issues effectively stall the tendency toward increased coherence. A variety of factors, however, can undermine or reverse the operation of negative feedback loops and promote the linkage of separate issues and elements. Such factors are responsible for escalation of benign conflict to intractable conflict.

Personal experiences can reinforce the press for coherence and thus facilitate the collapse in the multidimensionality of a conflict situation. The repeated experience of co-occurring factors, for example, can bind these elements into an ensemble that becomes activated in its entirety as a result of the instigation of a single factor. If conflict over lab space and other resources, for example, repeatedly escalated into harsh words, negative moods, and protective actions concerning the space, the presence of any single element in the future may be functionally equivalent to the presence of all the elements. In effect, the binding of elements into a single structure through repeated co-occurrence transforms conflict intensity from a continuous variable into an essentially binary variable, such that the conflict is either absent or present in full form. Once transformed in this fashion, it is difficult to de-escalate the conflict by alleviating the effect of any one element—even the element that may have precipitated the current conflict—because the remaining elements continue to operate and fuel the conflict.

In an interpersonal conflict, if one party defines the conflict in relational terms, the issues can undergo such binding. As soon as one party broadens the scope of the conflict from a single issue to the relational level, it is difficult for the other party not to respond in kind. The escalation of the interpersonal conflict, then, is likely to be dictated by the party with the most intense view of the conflict. This pattern is reminiscent of seminal research by Kelley and Stahelski (1970) showing that cooperation in a mixed-motive game is highly unlikely if one of the participants has a strong competitive orientation. Even if the other participant is predisposed toward cooperation, he or she is likely to adopt the stance of the competitive interactant. Here, the competitive tactics of Party A moves Party B into the process of latent attractor for competitive conflict. Although intensity and competitiveness are distinct, the process of one party drawing the other into a stronger attractor is similar.

A similar scenario operates at the intergroup level. Whenever a number of people spend time together, a number of conflicts are likely to arise. As long as each conflict is separately treated, it is fueled only by the specific interaction that may deescalate if the contributing instigations are reduced or resolved. But if the people sort themselves into different groups, each with a shared identity, the press for in-group coherence is likely to promote escalation of any single conflict. If a member of Group A (John) insults a member of Group B (Jim), for example, another member of Group B (Jack) may retaliate and behave aggressively toward another member of Group A (Steve), who had nothing to do with the original insult. In turn, this will provoke retaliation against yet another person in the original group. In this process, individual acts of hostile behavior generalize to other group members, and the amount of hostility gets accordingly amplified (Labiance, Brass, & Gray, 1998).

The binding of elements may also occur in a prepackaged manner through the social transmission of ready-made patterns. Informal communication with other
people can reinforce the links among separate issues, as can cultural assumptions and beliefs transmitted in educational settings, religious contexts, or the mass media. Even if a person has never experienced a conflict encounter personally—or any encounter, for that matter—with the out-group or any of its members, the social transmission of information can have a profound effect on shaping one’s views and predisposing one to hostile action when an opportunity for contact with the person or group arises (see Bar-Tal, 2000). The conflict may have an autistic quality to it (cf. Newcomb, 1953), but one’s belief in the veridicality of the information can prove self-fulfilling (cf. Merton, 1948).

Even if the parties to the conflict cease to exist, cultural transmission mechanisms may maintain the conflict with a different cast of characters and different issues. If nations, social groups, or religions are locked in a protracted conflict, the binding between conflict elements may be incorporated into the culture and provide a larger structure that encompasses the elements and the links between levels. Such culture- ally maintained structures may be passed from generation to generation and drive into conflict individuals who have never experienced any of the issues that initially launched the conflict (see Agger, 2001).

The effects of personal experience, social interactions, and cultural transmission can be magnified by strong emotion. Heightened emotion tends to promote a correspondingly heightened press for coherence (Lewis, 2005). It is difficult to appreciate nuance and complexity when a party has strong feelings about an issue, person, or group. Intuitively, positive feelings would seem to temper the collapse of multidimensional factors and thus inhibit the escalation to intractable conflict. Under some conditions, however, even positive moods can simplify an individual’s thoughts and generate stereotypical judgments of out-group members (e.g., Isen, 1987). For instance, conflict is often preceded by celebratory dances and rituals designed to generate a positive state that everyone in the group shares. Of course, the enhancement of positive feelings in such contexts is often directly proportional to the intensification of negative feelings toward the out-group. In effect, enhanced emotional intensity promotes coherence within the group (positive emotion) and compensatory coherence in thoughts and feelings concerning the out-group (negative emotion; see Brewer & Brown, 1998).

Strong emotion can also intensify the positive feedback loops between levels. The negative emotion associated with an interpersonal conflict not only simplifies inter-actants’ views of one another but also promotes stereotypical thinking about the other party’s social group. Conversely, the development of an out-group stereotype can, under strong emotion, magnify the conflict at an interpersonal level. The role of emotion in connecting levels may be understood in terms of threshold phenomena. Up to a point, increasing emotional intensity may simply magnify the conflict associated with a specific issue or individual member of the out-group. Beyond this point, however, even a slight increase in emotional intensity may generate an enhanced press for coherence that promotes stereotypical thinking about the out-group as a whole. In effect, the press for coherence transcends content-related components of the conflict per se, so that a party develops a highly valenced and global feeling toward the other person, one that no longer allows for subtle differentiation among the issues that generated the conflict (Lewis, 2005).

**Toward De-Escalation of Intractable Conflict**

The depiction of conflict through this dynamic approach reinforces the pessimism that many people feel about the resolution of intense and long-standing conflicts. After all, when specific issues and individuals become connected by positive feedback loops, the flexibility and variety of responses is effectively lost. The existence of multiple positive feedback loops makes it likely that parties will respond to any single issue or person as if all the features of the conflict system were present. Although not relevant, these missing features are brought to the situation by virtue of the positive feedback loops. Even an action that is perceived as a slight provocation may result in a full retaliation. If a state of destructive conflict represents a strong attractor for an interpersonal or social system, then, any
deviation from this state will result in the system activating its mechanisms to return to the attractor. This situation is particularly likely if the system lacks or has lost an attractor for positive interaction. So although the severity of a conflict may be related to the amount of violence between groups, the intractability of conflict may stem from the elimination of sustainable positive interactions. In dynamic terms, an intractable conflict lacks attractors for positive states.

The pessimism that is seemingly inherent in this account, however, may be misplaced. We suggest, in fact, that the insight about intractability provided by viewing conflict in dynamic terms provides a fresh perspective on how de-escalation of conflict might occur. Even though this dynamic approach to conflict is in its early stages of development, its potential application to de-escalation is possible but is also contingent on research involving empirical methods, computer simulations, and theory-based implementation in real-world settings. Nonetheless, because the ultimate utility of this perspective centers on its relevance to conflict resolution, we feel it is appropriate to consider how the dynamics associated with the formation and maintenance of intractable conflict might be reversed to establish nonmalignant relations among parties who seem locked in an inescapable cycle of negative sentiment and engagement.

**Restoration of Multidimensionality**

Finding and implementing a solution to intractable conflict is tantamount to changing the system's dynamics. Because such conflicts are associated with a loss of complexity and an imbalance between positive and negative feedback loops, attempts at de-escalation should focus on restoring multidimensional factors and enhancing the availability of negative feedback mechanisms. Of course, translating these general recommendations into practice is hardly a trivial matter.

The first step is to identify the relevant elements and the nature of their linkages. With this information, one is in a position to disrupt the most important linkages and thereby decouple the elements and issues. The complexity of all the elements and the mechanisms by which they influence each other are likely to vary a great deal from one instance to another and thus require a careful case study. This is often what occurs in mediations and problem-solving workshops, although typically with a narrow focus on issues. Similarly, it is essential to understand the group culture to develop an intervention for decoupling the issues and addressing them in a manner informed by local convention. By itself, decoupling does not guarantee the solution to the conflict, but it does pave the way for disassembling the conflict structure so that the issues can be separately addressed.

Depending on the nature of the conflict, disassembling the structure of the conflict may take different forms. If the structure of conflict binds together perception of all the out-group members, showing positive examples of specific out-group members can increase complexity because a single judgment cannot accommodate all the out-group members. Another tack is to find an important (e.g., high status, charismatic) in-group member who does not share the in-group’s view of the conflict. If this person is sufficiently central that he or she cannot be marginalized within the group, the homogeneity of the in-group’s perspective will be destabilized. Yet another tack is to identify a set of issues for which the structure of self-interest is shared by the in-group and out-group. Acceptance of a cooperative structure of interests is not consistent with the simplified assumption of overall incompatibility (see Deutsch, 1973; Sherif, Harvey, White, Hood, & Sherif, 1961).

The overall nature of intergroup relations may be established and stabilized by a specific culture. Disassembling such a stereotype may prove difficult. In this case, the focus should be on strengthening identities that are not involved in the conflict and avoiding identities that are connected to the culture of conflict (see Kelman, 1999). For example, one might emphasize individuals’ age or professional roles, or even common geographic identities, rather than national or ethnic identities. In such instances, however, the conflict may still be present in latent form, ready to assume potency when the original identities are made salient. This scenario corresponds to a more general scheme in which the attractor of destructive conflict coexists with an attractor for positive interactions. A strong external intervention in the direction of de-escalation may result in movement of the system to another
attractor. The system will stay at this attractor as long as subsequent events do not move the system back to the original attractor.

**Creating and Activating Latent Attractors**

The concept of latent attractors provides an important new perspective on conflict de-escalation. In this view, the malignant thoughts, feelings, and actions characterizing a group’s dynamics may represent only the most salient and visible attractor for the group. Particularly if there is a long history of interaction with the out-group, there may be other potential patterns of mental, affective, and behavioral engagement vis-à-vis members of the out-group, including those that foster positive inter-group relations. With this in mind, identifying and reinforcing latent (positive) attractors, not simply disassembling the manifest (negative) attractors, should be the aim of both conflict prevention and intervention.

The existence of latent attractors serves as a reminder that change often conforms to a nonlinear scenario. What appears to be sustained antagonism between two groups can suddenly give way to relatively benign or even positive relations if an event—even a seemingly insignificant one—pushes the group out of its current basin of attraction into the basin of a previously latent attractor. Thus, even if peacekeeping missions, reconciliation processes, trust-building activities, and conflict-resolution initiatives appear to be largely ineffective in situations locked in an ongoing protracted struggle, they may very well be acting to establish a sufficiently wide and deep attractor basin for moral, humane forms of intergroup interactions that provide the foundation for a stable, peaceful future. The gradual and long-term construction of a positive attractor may be imperceptible, but it prepares the ground for a positive state that would be impossible without these actions. Of course, short-term or emergency programs should focus on the elimination of the triggers that fuel catastrophic changes in the state of the system. These initiatives will be insufficient and ultimately ineffective if they are not supported by long-term, incremental work on latent attractors (for a related discussion, see Lederach, 1997).

In sum, from the dynamical systems perspective on conflict, one can distinguish between the current state of the system and possible states (i.e., attractors) of the system. Intervention can be aimed either at moving the system between its attractors or at changing the attractor landscape itself. Even if groups are locked in a cycle of conflict, analyzing the situation from a dynamical perspective may reveal the presence of latent positive attractors into which the system may fall. Intervention thus should not be limited to changing the current state of the system but rather should focus on shaping or reinforcing latent attractors.

**Summary:**

**Key Propositions of the Dynamical Perspective**

1. **Intractable conflict can be conceptualized and investigated through the perspective of fixed-point attractors.** In an intractable conflict, each party’s thoughts, feelings, and actions regarding the other party converge over time into a narrow range of states, despite the existence of a wide range of plausible states. The respective attractors associated with conflicting parties may differ regarding specific patterns of thought, feeling, and action, but because intractable conflict involves mutual dislike, distrust, and antagonism, the attractors of both parties are likely to be highly similar with respect to valence (i.e., negative in each case).

2. **Each party’s attractor is maintained by dynamic processes.** Apparent stability in people’s opinions, emotions, and readiness for action belie underlying volatility in mental, affective, and behavioral phenomena. Principles of mental dynamics (e.g., discounting, selective perception, confirmatory bias) and social dynamics (e.g., social comparison, influence, and coordination) are relevant to the maintenance of attractors.

3. **An attractor associated with intractable conflict can be characterized with respect to its basin of attraction.** The width of the basin reflects the range of thoughts, feelings, and actions that converge on a common state. An attractor with a wide basin can
transform benign or even positive observations of the opposing group into sentiments and assessments that are consistent with the valence of the attractor.

4. An attractor associated with intractable conflict can be characterized with respect to its depth. The depth of an attractor reflects the inertia of a system when its current state is at the attractor. The deeper the attractor, the greater the resistance to forces that would otherwise change the state and the greater the tendency of the system to return its attractor if the state is temporarily perturbed. In an intractable conflict, each party resists forces (e.g., new information, peaceful overtures) that provide alternative ways of thinking about, assessing, and engaging the other party. Such forces may be successful in the short run, but over time each party is likely converge on its attractor.

5. Attractors for intractable conflict are formed when the cognitive, affective, and behavioral patterns characterizing a party’s conflict-relevant dynamics lose their complexity. Complexity represents the degree to which the system is multidimensional in its perception of issues, judgment of out-group members, and action tendencies. A party with low dimensionality perceives all relevant issues as positively correlated, evaluates the out-group in global (negative) terms, and is inclined to act in a uniform (negative) manner toward members of the out-group.

6. The loss of complexity in each party’s attractor is maintained by positive feedback loops among the lower-level elements composing the party’s pattern of thought, feeling, and action. The salience of a single issue brings to mind a wide variety of other issues, the salience of a single dimension for evaluating out-group members activates other evaluatively consistent judgments that collectively constitute a stereotypical judgment that applies to all out-group members, and any negative action toward the out-group is likely to lower the threshold for other negative actions despite their lack of relevance or appropriateness with respect to the triggering circumstances.

7. The parties to intractable conflict are likely to have more than one attractor for their respective mental, affective, and behavioral dynamics. Especially for conflicting parties with a long history of interaction, there are likely to be alternative patterns of thought, emotion, and patterns of engagement. Because of the dynamics promoting maintenance of the current attractor, these alternative attractors may remain latent and thus invisible to the parties or to outside observers.

8. Each party’s dynamics can be captured by a latent attractor, promoting a qualitative (as opposed to incremental) change in relationships between the parties. Even a single, seemingly inconsequential event can move the system out of its current (negative) attractor and into the basin of an alternative (positive) attractor. Such nonlinearity between instigation and outcome is possible when the current state of the system is at the edge of its basin of attraction, so that a slight change in conditions is sufficient to push the system’s state over the energy barrier separating the manifest (positive) and latent (negative) attractors.

9. The change in state associated with movement to a latent attractor may be transitory if the original attractor continues to exist. A change in conditions can reactivate the pattern of thought, feeling, and action that had promoted intractability and malignancy in relations between the parties.

10. An attractor can lose its power to constrain a party’s mental, affective, and behavioral processes if it is deconstructed. Deconstruction occurs when there is a restoration of complexity in the relationship among issues, judgments of out-group members, and action tendencies. A negative attractor loses its power to constrain and shape dynamics if each party differentiates the set of issues associated with the conflict, assesses out-group members with respect to separate dimensions (thereby allowing for individuation of these people), and distinguishes the appropriateness or morality of various action tendencies.

11. The deconstruction of an attractor for intractable conflict involves introducing negative feedback loops into the relationships among issues, among dimensions of social judgment, and among action tendencies. If the salience of one issue or dimension of judgment makes other issues less (as opposed to more) salient, the lower-level dynamism associated with thought, emotion, and action is correspondingly less likely to be experienced in an integrated (higher-level) manner corresponding to the attractor.

12. Because of the press for coherence in dynamical systems, the lower-level elements composing a deconstructed attractor are likely to become integrated with respect to another higher-level pattern of thought, feeling, and behavior. Depending on the conditions salient at this time, the self-organization of lower-level elements may lead
to the emergence of a stable attractor that promotes positive rather than negative relations between the conflicting parties.

Conclusion

Although the emerging framework outlined in this article is preliminary, we see the dynamical systems approach for the study of intractability promising on three fronts. First, the formality and generalizability of its basic constructs (attractors, hysteresis, etc.) across different phenomena and levels of analysis suggest that it offers an integrative platform for the field of conflict studies to find coherence and parsimony in the currently fragmented sea of political, economic, psychological, social, religious, and cultural factors that are thought to account for enduring conflicts around the globe. Second, it provides insight into the paradox of intractability as a dynamic process, shedding light on the underlying dynamics that can maintain stable, hostile relations. And third, by offering an improved understanding of the basic structure and dynamics of intractability, it offers new insights into pathways for transformation of such conflicts into systems of sustainable peace.

Notes

1. Some issues, however, such as the abortion conflict in the United States, are considered irresolvable in the conventional sense (see P. T. Coleman, 2003; Pearce & Littlejohn, 1997). Nevertheless, issues will differ by person and situation in their degree of intractability.

2. Schrodt and Gerner (2000) use the term cluster to characterize a related notion in which actors in a system respond to each other in a consistent fashion during an extended period.

3. Catastrophe theory has been successfully employed to model qualitative changes in international relations (e.g., Phillips & Rinkunas, 1983; Rummel, 1987).

4. Weick (1979) has shown how positive feedback loops function for constructive and nonconstructive ends in organizations.

References


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