Why are some intergroup conflicts impossible to solve and what can we do to address them?
“...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)
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.
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.
Shared Qualities...

- *The power of history* is considerable.
- Tend to become increasingly **difficult** and **complicated** over time but are seen as incredibly **simple** by the people in them.
- The people involved tend to share an **illusion of free will**.
- The pain and demands of the here-and-now focus people on responding to the current crisis, which fosters **short-term, problem-oriented thinking**.
- They *don’t respond well* to the many strategies and tactics for constructive conflict management.
- They *last too long* and are **very expensive**.
What is the essence of Intractability?
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
Intractability

Perceptions Of Injustice

Instability

Intractability

- 

+ 

- 

+
Intractability

Perceptions Of Injustice

Instability

Issue Centrality

Intractability

+  

-  

+  

−  

Perceptions Of Injustice

+
Intractability

Variables
Intractable Patterns Of Conflict

Variable Cluster

+ 

-
President Bollinger announces Ad Hoc Comm. Investigation
Perceived acts of bias & abuse at MEALAC
Ineffective grievance Procedures
Barnard President discusses film at Alumni event
Columbia students Flock to see Columbia Unbecoming
Newspaper articles & editorials
Pro-Palestinian & pro-Israeli website blogs
Accusations of bias on other campuses
Joint Project Tolerance
Accusations of pro-Palestinian bias on Ad Hoc Comm.
MEALAC turnover and dysfunctional Climate
NY Times editorial on Ad Hoc Comm. Findings
FIR & CLU Statements
Insults & Death Threats
Pro-Palestinian & pro-Israeli website blogs
2005 Israeli pull-out from Gaza
Past trauma
2003 release of Columbia Unbecoming
LionPAC meets with David Project
Massad cancels Course
Course Hecllers
Accusations of bias on Ad Hoc Comm.
Ad Hoc Committee Report
Campus dialogue project Grant
 Alumni funding & student admissions Affected
Alumni funding & student admissions Affected
Academic Freedom Group press Conference
Ineffective grievance Procedures
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FIR & CLU Statements
Insults & Death Threats

Temporal Phases
1-phase 1
2-phase 2
3-phase 3
4-phase 4
5-phase 5

Signifies positive feedback relations
Signifies negative feedback relations
Intractability – Why?
(Coleman, 2003)

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  - Complexity

- **Multiple-linked sources & levels**
- **Complex interactions**
- **Mercurial - evolving**
- **Idiosyncratic**

1: They are different.
The Frame Problem
(Peterson & Flanders, 2002)

Given a complex problem, what is or is not germane to addressing it?

4 Normal Challenges:
- The Object Problem: parts, context, related objects & observer.
- The Subjectivity Problem: infinite frames.
- Cognitive Processing Problems: constraints.
- The Problem of Dynamism: what changes?

Under High-Tension, Threat, and Polarization:
- Anxiety, stress & impaired decision-making (Osgood).
- Preventative orientation (Higgins).
- Contradictory & politically consequential information.

2: They are very hard to comprehend.
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. They 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
A Dynamical-Systems Approach to Conflict and Intractability*

Peter T. Coleman, Teachers College, Columbia University
Andrzej Nowak, Warsaw University
Robin Vallacher, Florida Atlantic University
Lan Bui-Wrzosinska, Warsaw School of Social Psychology
Andrea Bartoli, George Mason University
Larry Leibovitch, Florida Atlantic University
Naira Musallam, Teachers College, Columbia University
Katharina Kugler, Munich University
(extraordinarily gifted students)

*Research funded by a grant from the James S. McDonnell Foundation
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)
“The discovery that complex properties may emerge from simple rules is one of the most important discoveries of modern science... If simple rules can produce complex phenomena, then complex processes and structures can be explained by simple models...only if these rules interact with each other or with the environment.”

- Andrzej Nowak (2004)
“For every complex problem there is a simple solution that is wrong.”

- G. B. Shaw
“Simple answers which lie on this side of life’s complexities are cheap. However, simple truths which exist beyond this complexity, and are illuminated by it, are worthy of a lifetime’s commitment.”

- Vaclav Havel
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)
- Offers new metaphors, methodologies and mathematical models for conflict:
  - Beyond games and bi-lateral relations: networks, self-organization, chaos, emergence, *attractors*, etc.
Attractors

- Seen in patterns of data.
- A state or pattern of changes toward which a system evolves overtime and to which it returns if perturbed.
  - Similar to the notion of equilibrium.
  - Patterns of thought, feeling, action developing through interactions of many variables.
  - They “attract”.
  - Energy minimization

- Intractable conflicts = strong, self-organizing attractors for destructive conflict
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.
DST Summary

- When these complicated conflicts are seen as so simple, two things happen:
  1. **Negative information** about the enemy is salient, sought out and processed and fuels the escalation and spread of the conflict (reinforcing feedback = strong attractor), **and**
  2. **Positive information** about the enemy is ignored/denied (inhibiting feedback) – but slowly accumulates out of people’s awareness and establishes a foundation for peaceful relations.
The tipping-point into intractability occurs when the destructive attractor \textit{self-organizes}, and becomes unresponsive to changes in the environment.

Now, we have a very strong, coherent, self-perpetuating attractor for destructive conflict – where people and events are oversimplified, polarized, over-identified and very biased – and a relatively weak, latent attractor for constructive relations.
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.
Research Agenda

- How do different conflict attractors develop?
- How do they express and maintain conflict?
- How might strong destructive attractors be disassembled?

- Case studies, interview and survey research, experimentation, computer simulation modeling.
Research Projects

- **Qualitative Research:**
  - Mozambique case study
  - Ashoka Fellows case studies
  - Grounded theory with disputants and experts

- **Attractor Laboratory research:**
  - Difficult conversations lab
  - Pervasiveness studies
  - Escalation dynamics studies (hysteresis)
  - Action Identification (attractor deconstruction) studies

- **Mathematical Models - Computer Simulations:**
  - Complex networks of conflict (collapse of complexity)
  - Spread of conflict (pervasiveness)
  - Tractable – intractable modes of conflict
  - Attractor landscapes in conflict
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.
DYAD 2

Person A & B

Percent

Negative Emotions  Neutreal Emotions  Positive Emotions

Person A
Person B

Positive Emotions
Negative Emotions

Percent

Negative Emotions
Neutreal Emotions
Positive Emotions

Person A
Person B

Time

Emotions

Person A & B

Future

Outcome Variables

Means

Person A
Person B

Relationship
Cooperation

Outcome
Process

Emotions
Summary of DCL Findings

Study 1: Results (Correlational Study)

High complexity attractors matter:

- **Emotional:**
  - Higher positive to negative emotional ratio = better quality statements, higher satisfaction
  - Higher synchronicity = better quality statements, higher satisfaction
  - **Initial conditions** key (first 3 minutes)

- **Cognitive:**
  - Higher integrative complexity = better quality statements, higher satisfaction, more learning

- **Behavioral:**
  - More balance between pro-self/prosocial behaviors for constructive.
  - More balance between inquiry and advocacy in constructive dyads.
Summary of DCL Findings

Study 2: Results (Experimental Study)

- High complexity matters:
  - Outcomes:
    - High complexity condition reached consensus more and had better quality statements
    - High complexity condition more cooperative and more satisfied with the relationship.
  - Emotional:
    - High complexity condition had more positive emotions and less negative emotions
    - High complexity condition had higher positive to negative emotional ratio.
  - Cognitive:
    - High complexity condition discussed the topic with higher degrees of integrative complexity.
    - High complexity condition increased their level of integrative complexity significantly more from pre to post test.
  - Behavioral:
    - High-complexity condition evidenced more integrating and obliging behaviors
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
Recent DST Publications


Go to: http://www.iccc.edu.pl/as/
Getting Un-Attracted to Conflict
Six Evidence-Based Practices

EBP#1: Complicate things: Escaping Attractors
EBP#2: Simplify things: Focusing on Agents & Hubs
EBP#3: Build Up: Growing Hidden Possibilities
EBP#4: Tear Down: Dismantling Destructive Traps
EBP#5: Change the Landscape: Working the Levers
EBP#6: Make More Decisions: Adapting to Change
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/](http://www.iccc.edu.pl/as/)
Recent DST Publications


Go to: http://www.iccc.edu.pl/as/
Attractors are Everywhere!
### Model Comparison

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Standard Conflict Resolution Models</th>
<th>The Attractor Landscape Model</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Compare fluid things to fixed</td>
<td>- Focuses on ongoing dynamics</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Think in straight lines</td>
<td>- Emphasizes non-linearity and feedback loops.</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Privilege the short-term</td>
<td>- Identifies long-term temporal patterns.</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Frame conflicts in narrow ways</td>
<td>- Works with multiple perspectives.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Mostly focus on deficits</td>
<td>- Works with both positive and negative attractors</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Often marginalize emotions</td>
<td>- Emotional dynamics are central</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Are overly simple</td>
<td>- Frames conflicts in both complex and simple ways</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Are overly complex</td>
<td>- Works with latent potential</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Miss the invisible (potential)</td>
<td>- Employs evidence-based practices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Rarely employs evidence-based practices</td>
<td>- Anticipates unintended consequences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Unaware of the unintended consequences</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
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 rule complexity
- Dialectic reasoning and culture
- Cultural tightness-looseness
- Structural and institutional complexity
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.
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.
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.