APA Symposium: Conflict Resolution in the New Millennium

Morton Deutsch
Teachers College, Columbia University

Last Fall, after we turned in the completed manuscript of the Handbook for Conflict Resolution: Theory and Practice (this book) to Jossey-Bass, Peter Coleman and I decided that we should celebrate it at the APA Convention. We are proud of the book. The many contributors to it have written superb chapters which make the Handbook a unique, landmark integration of theory and practice in the field of conflict resolution. We wanted to bring this book to your attention in the hope that you will read it and also use it in the courses you teach. The royalties from the sales of the Handbook will all go to Division 48 which has agreed to establish an annual prize to honor outstanding contributions to the integration of theory and practice in conflict resolution. Peter and I have recently sent a check for $1,000 to Division 48 which represented the advance given by Jossey-Bass to cover our editing expenses.

Our panel members have all contributed to the Handbook. Four of us (David Johnson, Kenneth Kressel, Peter Coleman, and I) have written chapters for it. And Dean Pruitt has been kind enough to provide it a glowing endorsement. He has described it as: “A feast of new ideas and perspectives on conflict resolution. Based on solid theory and research, yet eminently practical; a true Lewinian synthesis.”

Although this symposium was stimulated by the Handbook, it is not about it. It is about future directions: Conflict Resolution in the New Millennium. I shall start off the symposium with a very brief account of the history of conflict resolution as a context for discussing its future. Peter Coleman will then discuss some of the challenges the field must
face. Then David Johnson, Kenneth Kressel, and Dean Pruitt will each discuss the future challenges from their own perspectives and special expertise. After the presentations form our distinguished speakers, we will have a discussion with the audience.

Before we proceed with the presentations, Peter Coleman would like members of the audience to pair off. I turn the meeting over to Peter who will tell you what to do more specifically.

[Peter then instructs the audience and then brings the discussion within the pairs to a close.]

**A Brief History of Social Psychological Theorizing About Conflict**

In my remarks, I shall provide a brief overview of the progress that has been made during the past one hundred years or so in the social psychological study of conflict. The writings of three intellectual giants - Darwin, Marx, and Freud - dominated the intellectual atmosphere during social psychology’s infancy. Each of these major theorists significantly influenced the writings of the early social psychologists on conflict as well as in many other areas. All three theorists appeared - on a superficial reading - to emphasize the competitive, destructive aspects of conflict. Darwin stressed “the competitive struggle for existence” and “the survival of the fittest.” Marx emphasized class struggle, and as the struggle proceeds, “the whole society breaks up more and more into two great hostile camps, two great, directly antagonistic classes: bourgeoisie and proletariat.” Freud’s view of psychosexual development was largely that of constant struggle between the biologically rooted infantile id and the socially determined, internalized parental surrogate, the superego.
Thus the intellectual atmosphere prevalent during the period when social psychology began to emerge contributed to viewing conflict from the perspective of "competitive struggle." Social conditions too - the intense competition among businesses and among nations, the devastation of World War I, the economic depression of the 1920s and 1930s, the rise of Nazism and other totalitarian systems - reinforced this perspective.

The vulgarization of Darwin's ideas in the form of "social Darwinism" provided an intellectual rationale for racism, sexism, class superiority, and war. Such ideas as "survival of the fittest," "hereditary determinism," and "stages of evolution" were eagerly misapplied to the relations between different human social groups - classes and nations as well as social races to rationalize imperialist policies.

Social Darwinism and the mode of explaining behavior in terms of innate, evolutionary derived instincts were in retreat by the mid-1920s. The prestige of the empirical methods in the physical sciences, the point of view of social determinism advanced by Karl Marx and various sociological theorists, and the findings of cultural anthropologists all contributed to their decline. Since the decline of the instinctual mode of explaining such conflict phenomena as war, intergroup hostility, and human exploitation, two others have been dominant: the psychological and the socio-political-economic. The psychological mode attempts to explain such phenomena in terms of "what goes on in the minds of men" or "tensions that cause war" The socio-political-economic mode, in contrast, seeks an explanation in terms of such social, economic, and political factors as levels of armaments, objective conflicts in economic and political interests, and the like. Although these modes of explanation are not mutually exclusive, there is a tendency for partisans of the psychological mode to consider that the causal arrow points from psychological conditions to socio-
political-economic conditions and for partisans of the latter to believe the reverse is true. In any case, much of the social psychological writing in the 1930s, 1940s, and early 1950s on the topics of war, intergroup conflict, and industrial strife was largely nonempirical, and in one vein or the other.

The decline of social Darwinism and the instinctivist doctrines was hastened by the development and employment of empirical methods in social psychology. This early empirical orientation to social psychology focused on the socialization of the individual; this focus was, in part, a reaction to the instinctivist doctrine. It led to a great variety of studies, including a number investigating cooperation and competition. These latter studies are, in my view, the precursors to the empirical, social psychological study of conflict.

Field theory, conflict, and cooperation-competition. During the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, quite independently of the work being conducted in the United States on cooperation-competition, Kurt Lewin and his students were theorizing and conducting research which profoundly affected later work in many areas of social psychology.

As early as 1931, employing his analysis of force fields, Lewin (1931, 1935) presented a penetrating theoretical discussion of three basic types of psychological conflict: approach-approach - the individual stands between two positive valences of approximately equal strength; avoidance-avoidance - the individual stands between two negative valences of approximately equal strength; and approach-avoidance - the individual is exposed to opposing forces deriving from a positive and negative valence. Clark Hull (1938) translated Lewin's analysis into the terminology of the goal gradient, and Neal Miller elaborated and did research upon it. Numerous experimental studies supported the theoretical analysis.
My own theorizing on cooperation-competition (Deutsch, 1949a) was influenced by Lewinian thinking, while I was his student at the Research Center for Group Dynamics at M.I.T. My theorizing and research were concerned not only with the individual and group outcomes of cooperation and competition (this had been the focus of prior work in this area) but also with the social psychological processes which would give rise to these outcomes. This work has central relevance to understanding the processes involved in conflict.

Game theory and games. In 1944, Von Neumann and Morgenstern published their now-classic work, Theory of Games and Economic Behavior. Game theory has made a major contribution to social scientists by formulating in mathematical terms the problem of conflict of interest. However, it has not been either its mathematics or its normative prescriptions for minimizing losses when facing an intelligent adversary that have made game theory of considerable value to social psychologists. Rather, it has been its core emphasis that the parties in conflict have interdependent interests, that their fates are woven together. Although the mathematical and normative development of game theory has been most successful in connection with pure competitive conflict (zero-sum games), game theory has also recognized that cooperative as well as competitive interests may be intertwined in conflict (as in coalition games or non-zero-sum games).

The game theory recognition of the intertwining of cooperative and competitive interests in situations of conflict (or in Schelling's [1960] useful term, the mixed motive nature of conflict), has had a productive impact on the social psychological study of conflict.

And, the mathematical formulations of game theory had the indirect but extremely valuable consequences of laying bare some fascinating paradoxical situations in such a way that they were highly suggestive of experimental work. Partly stimulated by and partly in
reaction to the research using game matrices, other research games for the study of conflict were also developed. Several thousand studies had been published based on experimental games. Fortunately, in recent years, experimental gaming has been supplemented by other experimental procedures and by field studies which have overcome some of the inherent limitations of experimental gaming.

Themes in contemporary social psychological research on conflicts. Social psychological research and theorizing on conflict during the past forty years have been primarily addressed to eight major questions.

1. **What Conditions Give Rise to a Constructive or Destructive Process of Conflict Resolution?** In terms of bargaining and negotiation, the emphasis here is on determining the circumstances which enable the conflicting parties to arrive at a mutually satisfactory agreement which maximizes their joint outcomes. In a sense, this first question arises from a focus on the cooperative potential inherent in conflict.

2. **What Circumstances, Strategies, and Tactics Lead One Party to do Better Than Another in a Conflict Situation?** The stress here is on how one can wage conflict, or bargain, so as to win or at least do better than one’s adversary. Thus, the second question emerges from a focus on the competitive features of a conflict situation. This question has been mainly addressed by economists and political scientists. In social psychology, research related to this question has focused on such bargaining tactics as “being ignorant,” “being tough,” “being belligerent,” “the effects of threats” and how to increase one’s bargaining power.
3. What Determines the Nature of the Agreement between Conflicting Parties, if They are Able to Reach an Agreement? Here the concern is with the cognitive and normative factors that lead people to conceive a possible agreement and to perceive it as a salient possibility for reaching a stable agreement: an agreement which each of the conflicting parties will see as "just" under the circumstances. This third question is a more recent one and has been addressed under the heading of research on the social psychology of equity and justice.

4. How Can Third Parties be Used to Prevent Conflicts From Becoming Destructive or to Help Deadlocked or Embittered Negotiators Move Toward a More Constructive Management of Their Conflicts? This fourth question has been reflected in studies of mediation and in strategies of de-escalating conflicts.

5. How Can People be Educated to Manage Their Conflicts More Constructively? This has been a concern of consultants working with leaders in industry and government and also with those who have responsibility for educating the children in our schools.

   During the past 15 years, three additional questions have emerged as foci of work in the field of conflict resolution.

6. How and When to Intervene in Protracted, Intractable Conflicts? Much of the literature in conflict resolution has been preventive rather than remedial in its emphasis. It has been concerned with understanding the conditions which foster productive rather than destructive conflict (as in Question 1) or developing knowledge about the circumstances which lead to intractable, destructive conflict in the hope of preventing such conflict. More recently, the reality of the
existence of many protracted, destructive conflicts in the world have induced some scholars to focus their attention on this problem.

7. *How Are We to Understand Why Ethnic, Religious, and Identify Conflicts Frequently Take an Intractable, Destructive Course?* With the end of the Cold War, there appears to have been a proliferation of such conflicts. In the past ten years, interests in such conflicts have been renewed.

8. *How Applicable in Other Cultural Contexts are the Theories Related to Conflict That have Largely been Developed in the United States and Western Europe?* In recent years, there has been much discussion in the literature of the differences that exist in the way people from different cultural backgrounds deal with negotiations and, more generally, manage conflict.