Commentary

Cooperation

The Fragile State

Morton Deutsch

I am delighted by the fine chapters in this part. By nature, I tend to be optimistic, and each chapter challenges pessimistic views I have expressed in some of my writings about the fragility of trust, cooperation, and participative democracy. My most pessimistic statements occur in Distributive Justice (1985, p. 244):

After reviewing the literature on worker participation, worker ownership, worker cooperatives, the kibbutzim, communes, and the like, I am convinced that paradise is not to be found on this earth. I am further persuaded that even the nearest thing to common visions of an earthly utopia—a small, well functioning, worldly, cooperative, egalitarian community—has to work hard and thoughtfully on a continuing basis to preserve its democracy, cooperativeness, and egalitarianism as well as to survive. The inherent tendency of such communities is to break down; it takes sustained effort to prevent this from happening.

The chapter by Lewicki and Bunker is reassuring with regard to the fragility of trust. In their original and brilliant discussion of the developmental stages of trust, they sensibly indicate that the answer to the question about trust’s fragility is “it depends,” and they indi-
cate what it depends upon. However, I am not sure they answer the question of whether trust and cooperation are more fragile than suspicion and competition (other things being equal). As a result of reading their chapter, my answer would be a bit less dogmatic but nevertheless an affirmation that trust and cooperation are the more fragile states.

My reasoning is quite straightforward and is, I believe, indebted to Heider. Another person can harm you without your consent, but you cannot be benefited without your agreement. Although one can argue that there are exceptions to this statement, it seems to be mainly true. In a two-party relationship, while trust and cooperation can be broken down because of the actions of either party, they can be created or maintained only by the actions of both parties. Moreover, there are situations—when the other is competitive and suspicious—in which it is disadvantageous to be cooperative and trusting. In such situations, it is often advantageous to be competitive when the other is cooperative and trusting. Thus, there seems to be an inherent bias in the social world for trust and cooperation to break down more readily than to be built up. This bias can be overcome by the types of conditions discussed by Lewicki and Bunker that move trust from its beginning to more advanced stages of development.

Stimulated by Lewicki and Bunker's important analysis, there are two minor theoretical points I wish to make. In a chapter on trust and suspicion written some time ago (1973), I defined trust to include the nonsocial as well as the social. Thus, one can trust that it won't rain, or that the bridge won't collapse, or that there won't be an earthquake in California while one is attending a conference. I think much of Lewicki and Bunker's discussion could readily be adapted to this broader definition by a fuller consideration of how intentional is a characteristic of people, not of inanimate objects. However, it would pose a problem for their usage of the term deterrence-based trust for this first stage, a term that is inappropriate in any case. How does one deter rain? Deterrence has been employed so widely in relation to the Cold War and the nuclear arms race that it has connotat

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The fascinating paper about worker cooperatives by Vandersluis directly confronts the important issue of the survival of workplace cooperatives and what factors contribute to survival. She indicates, as my theory would suggest, that division of labor and specialization of function create difficulties for cooperation. Her emphasis is rightly on power and control problems. She reports that the cooperatives she studied were able to deal with such complications effectively.

However, these are not the only obstacles resulting from substitutability. Substitutability creates problems of communication and loss of unity. If you take any large system—for example, a university (which ideally but rarely is a cooperative system)—the languages of the specialists in each department, as specialization progresses, become less comprehensible to professionals in other areas. Also, each specialist area develops its own goals, which may not be well integrated with the goals of other areas. These problems are more likely, and more difficult to overcome, in larger organizations than in the small ones studied by Vandersluis.

Vandersluis points out some interesting difficulties, which I have not discussed, that close personal ties may cause for cooperatives. There are others, of course, for example, a husband and wife in the same cooperative who get divorced or any two people who come to dislike one another as a result of their interactions outside work. My general point is that the values of universalism and of particularism are sometimes in conflict in a worker cooperative. A worker who is performing his job poorly (according to general standards) may be kept on because of friendship, his need for the job, or because he is the brother of another cooperative member. As Vandersluis co-
rectly points out, cooperatives are more apt to survive if they anticipate such difficulties and develop procedures for preventing or managing them effectively.

I am delighted that Vanderslice has not found evidence of overconformity and lack of innovation in successful cooperatives. As the important paper by Lewicki and Bunker indicates, there are different stages in the development of trust. Analogously, in the early stages of the development of worker cooperatives, before mutual trust is well established, these problems may be more evident. In any case, for cooperatives to have survived, these pathologies must have been prevented or managed effectively. Even more important for survival, as Vanderslice points out, are the abilities to deal with the difficulties of being a cooperative in a competitive environment.

Vanderslice's identification and discussion of the key factors in sustaining worker cooperation is a very valuable and original contribution. With some elaboration, it would be an extremely useful handbook for helping cooperatives ensure their survival. I am persuaded by Vanderslice’s happy chapter that cooperatives can survive with effort, skill, and good luck. It is cheering to have the examples she provides of such survivors.

David and Roger Johnson have written their usual masterpiece. Their chapter provides an excellent overview and integration of the theoretical developments, research, and practical applications related to cooperation. No one is more qualified to do this than they. They have been the leaders in developing social interdependence theory, in conducting research as well as integrating the vast array of research in this area, and in developing educational methods for employing cooperative learning and constructive controversy in the classroom. I feel personally indebted to them for the wide currency they have given to my ideas in the field of education.

In their extensive theoretical and empirical work, they have done much to detail the specific processes by which promotive interdependence gives rise to promotive interactions, and how such interactions have positive effects on student achievement, interpersonal relations, and psychological health. This is a major intel-

lectual achievement, enabling and research on the social through which promotive in effects.

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through which promotive interaction has such powerful, positive
effects.
I am so much in agreement with the main thrust of the John-
sons’ chapter that I have no desire to carp about any of its details.
However, I note that they are even more optimistic than I am about
the benefits of cooperation. They do not discuss such matters as its
potential pathologies, its occasional failures, the conditions under
which it is not applicable, the types of people who have difficulty
in functioning well in cooperative groups, and so on. It is not that
they do not recognize, for example, that the skills involved in teach-
ing cooperative learning well are only acquired with considerable
effort and time. Nor would they deny that in a competitive society,
it takes much experience for people to acquire the knowledge, atti-
tudes, and skill required to be effective cooperative members of the
various groups to which they belong. The Johnsons rightly stress the
many benefits to be derived from cooperation, but they do not
emphasize sufficiently their realization of how much persistent,
intelligent effort is required to develop and sustain effective coop-
eration. The Johnsons and I would surely agree that the effort is
very worthwhile. They have exemplified such sustained effort in
their own highly productive careers.

Note
1. One could, for example, assert that the inner self of the person is
not harmed unless it accepts, in some measure, the responsibility for
being harmed. Analogously, one could reason that people can expe-
rience an increased sense of well-being without any recognition of
how it occurred.

References
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