This paper, which was prepared by two social psychologists, Dr. Morton Deutsch and Dr. Harvey A. Hornstein, is a psychological analysis of what has been a major social conflict in New York City, namely the recent teacher's strike. The authors, who speak only for themselves, are very concerned about the rapid escalation of the conflict and its destructive consequences. Dr. Deutsch is a Professor of Psychology and Education and Director of the Social Psychology Laboratory at Teachers College, Columbia University. Dr. Hornstein is an Assistant Professor of Psychology and Education at the same institution. In the past, the research interests of both authors has centered upon psychological aspects of conflict resolution.
The Lessons of the Teachers' Strike

Morton Deutsch and Harvey A. Hornstein

We wish to discuss with you the Teachers' Strike in New York City.

No sane man or responsible organization has sought its destructive consequences of increased racial tension, harm to the educational and psychological development of children, and increased suspicion between student and teacher as well as between parent and teacher.

Why, then, did these unwanted consequences occur?

Let us rephrase this question into a more general one, into a question with which psychologists as psychologists are scientifically concerned: Why is it that people, so often, end up doing things which they did not start out to do or did not intend? Phrased differently, why do people unwittingly harm what they cherish and destroy what they seek to preserve? Why will a married couple who love one another deeply wound each other in a quarrel, often to their later regret? Why do peaceful contests between high school hockey teams occasionally end up in a free-for-all? Why do unions and managements engage in prolonged strikes which are costly to both? What turns a lively controversy into a bitter quarrel?

It is evident that psychologists do not have complete answers to any of these questions. Yet we have something to say that may be useful in understanding the Teachers' Strike.

On the face of it, the demands of local communities for greater control over their local schools do not seem incompatible with the demands of teachers to have job security and freedom from harassment and threats. It is, after all, typical throughout New York State to have local
communities control their local schools. The positions of teachers in these locally controlled schools are not inferior to those in the centrally controlled school system of New York City. Moreover, the frustrations of attempting to cope with the regulations and red tape imposed by the large impersonal bureaucracy of a centrally-administered mammoth school system are irritations most teachers would be happy to be without. Why, then, have we seen a prolonged bitter conflict between the teachers' union and a locally-controlled school system in Ocean Hill-Brownsville?

To understand "why," some background factors must be kept in mind. First, it has been recognized for many years by educational authorities that the New York school system has been doing an inadequate job of educating the Negro and Puerto Rican children who live in the slums. This situation has become increasingly intolerable for civic minded groups, white and black alike. Several years ago it was proposed that a decentralized school system in which local communities controlled their schools through local school boards might help alleviate the educational problems of Negro and Puerto Rican children. It was reasoned that schools controlled by the local communities could be more responsive to local needs, more flexible and innovative, more able to increase community involvement in education, and more likely to elicit attitudes in the local children which would facilitate their education. The proposal for decentralization was widely acclaimed by impartial educational experts and by civic groups.

Psychologists have observed that apprehension and resistance often accompany important change in accustomed arrangements and habitual ways of doing things. Resistance is sometimes expressed in grudging support
and sometimes in open opposition. In New York City, resistance came from such groups as the Board of Education, school administrators, and the teachers' union; the groups whose habitual practices were most likely to be affected. These groups feared that long established rights, as well as personal power and privilege, would be threatened by the proposed change. Resistance was also based on the view that the steps toward achieving local community control over the schools should be taken cautiously and slowly because of the complexity and difficulty of the decentralization process. The resistance was not sufficiently strong to stop the powerful pressures for local control entirely. With the support of the Ford Foundation, three somewhat autonomous experimental school districts were established: one in Harlem, one in lower Manhattan, and a third in the Ocean Hill-Brownsville area in Brooklyn.

Although there was agreement to establish the experimental school districts, resistance to community control did not end. Resistance was expressed in several major ways in the implementation of decentralization. First, the most important expression of resistance was the Central Board of Education's reluctance to define the specific powers, responsibilities, and functions of the semi-autonomous local school boards. This created an ambiguous situation in which misunderstandings, misperceptions, and attributions of arbitrary actions and bad faith were to be expected. Secondly, the UFT and the Supervisors Association attempted, with considerable success, to slow down and abort the decentralization process by lobbying among the State legislators. This activity stirred resentment in the local communities and helped to intensify the suspicion that the educational establishment was more interested in preserving the status
quo than in improving the education of Negro and Puerto Rican children. A further consequence was that it increased the credibility of extremist groups within the local communities who were proclaiming the futility of attempting to cooperate with the educational establishment which they identified as being dominated by Jews. And thirdly, there was a quick movement from reluctant cooperation to noncooperation by the UFT and the Supervisory Association with the local board in the Ocean Hill-Brownsville area.

Although representatives of teachers were initially involved in the planning of Ocean Hill-Brownsville experiment, minor differences and disagreements compounded by misunderstandings and the development of mutual suspicion led the teachers to resign from the local governing board in September, 1967. This happened when the local board refused to support the UFT in a city-wide strike for pay increases. Possibly local community leaders were too impatient and too eager to press for quick changes to improve their schools and did not respond sufficiently to the questions and objections of some of the teachers and principals. Perhaps, if they had been more understanding of the fears that underlay the defensiveness and resistance of the teachers and supervisors, it might have been possible for them to avert breaking the slender bonds of cooperation and to encourage the development of less defensiveness. But Negro leaders are no longer content to "go slow," their constituents have waited long enough for social change and it is difficult for those who feel that they have been deprived unjustly to understand and sympathize with the defensiveness of those who have been in advantageous positions.
With the breakdown of cooperation, the supervisors and teachers in Ocean Hill-Brownsville began to demand and assert a unilateral right to transfer out of the experimental district without regard for the effect it would have on the experiment or upon the children in the school district. And, in fact, many principals, assistant principals, and teachers did assert the right to transfer and did leave the experimental school district. When the local school board and administrator requested permission to exert a parallel right to reassign nineteen teachers within its own district, a traditional right and practice of local school administrators; the Central Board of Education refused to support the local school administrator; when the local board then requested permission to reassign the nineteen teachers to another district, another traditional right and practice of local school administrators, they were refused again. Finally, defying the Central Board, the local board sent notices to the nineteen teachers reassigning them to the Central headquarters. At no time were the teachers "discharged," nor was their right to hold jobs as teachers in the New York system ever threatened.

The action of the local board in early May of 1968 produced a walk-out of 350 teachers (without notice) in the local district; 150 of these asked for and received transfers from the Central Board. By September, only 100 of the remainder indicated that they wished to return to their positions. The local board refused to take them back saying that these teachers left their jobs without notice and without any indication of their future intentions. The local board, in effect, retaliated against the teachers involved in the walk-out, perceiving the walk-out as an attempt to interfere with effective local community control over the
schools. It is easy to understand why the local board might have conceived of their retaliation as a limited and appropriate measure; it was confined only to the teachers who had engaged in an illegal walk-out and who, in so doing, had failed to perform their teaching duties. It is also easy to see how the teachers' union could readily perceive this as an escalation of conflict, as an attempt to intimidate those who actively supported the union in the dispute over the nineteen transferred teachers. Neither side seemed to be really interested in considering how the other side might have perceived what happened. Each side appeared, at this point, to be more interested in flexing its muscles.

The local board had relatively few muscles to flex: they could emphasize the importance of preserving this significant and seemingly effective experiment in the improvement of Negro and Puerto Rican education and they could identify the potentially violent opposition of the local community to the unwanted teachers as well as the background threat of extremist groups of "burn, Brooklyn, burn." The teachers' union had many muscles it could flex: weak ones, such as picketing the Ocean Hill-Brownsville schools; stronger ones, such as "slow downs" or limited strikes; and massive ones, like shutting down the entire school system. In the background, it had the enormous threat of a city-wide general strike of all the unions.

The teachers' union chose to retaliate massively rather than in a more limited, carefully graduated fashion. It closed the entire school system, holding as a hostage the education of the more than 1,000,000 school children in the public schools. This was a sharp escalation of the conflict and we believe a serious misjudgment. Inevitably, it had
the consequence of increasing what was at stake in the conflict. A massive, prolonged disruption of education in the city could only be justified by redefining the conflict as a basic struggle for survival. And, in fact, the conflict has come to be seen by teachers as a struggle over job security for teachers, a struggle for the survival of the teachers' union, a struggle for "law and order" versus "mob rule," a struggle between "Jewish liberalism" and "black racism," a struggle between "white power" and "black power." As the values at stake in the conflict increased on one side, so in tandem have they also increased on the other side.

For the local community, the conflict has come to entail survival of their local community control, survival of the possibility of improving the opportunities for their children, survival of the possibilities of economic and professional advancement, survival of the possibility of freedom and dignity for their racial and ethnic groups.

The conflict was destructive to all of us: students, parents, teachers, school administrators, and city residents—black and white alike. Like all such destructive conflicts, it has been characterized by the tendency to expand and to escalate. More and more issues have become involved; each side has become more resolute in its determination to defeat the other side; and the readiness to characterize the motives and intentions of the other in extreme, negative terms has increased.

Lessons to Be Drawn

In this analysis we have identified some of the processes that transformed the lively controversy over decentralization into a destructive conflict. What can we learn that will help us avoid a repetition of similar events?
The perils of ambiguity. In situations with high potential for conflict, the existence of ambiguous, poorly defined relationships among participants heightens the likelihood of misperception and misunderstanding. Significant social change, such as the decentralization of New York City public schools, requires at the outset a clear delineation of the power and responsibility of the various groups involved in the change. Such clarification should have been provided by higher administrators, in this case the Central Board, working together with the several groups involved in the change. What must be avoided are situations in which people hold different expectations about what is legitimate and what is illegitimate. But clarification must not result in rigid adherence to prescribed rules. In an experimental and novel situation, what is required is flexibility and not ambiguity. Experimentation requires the opportunity to try out new procedures and to revise them as more information about their effectiveness is acquired. The right to experiment and innovate as well as the necessity of following certain rules and procedures should be specified without equivocation.

Prior planning and participation. Too often in organizations change is imposed from above by administrative dictate. Groups who will be affected by the change are not provided with an opportunity to influence the substance of the change or the course that it will follow. Psychologists have observed that participation in planning a change increases the participants' commitments to the change and reduces their fear that the proposed change has failed to adequately consider their well-being. Considering the massive resistance that could be expected from groups that have vested interest in the educational status quo, too little
effort was directed at reducing their apprehensions and fears by confronting their anxieties more directly. As a routine procedure when introducing change, careful effort should be made to involve those affected by the change so as to minimize their apprehensions and misconceptions.

**Tactics of conflict.** Some of the tactics employed in this conflict have been based on the mistaken notion that this was the kind of conflict in which one side could win and the other side could lose. The continuance of education in New York requires that both sides, at the minimum, coexist peacefully, and more hopefully that they work together harmoniously.

Thus, it is destructive to employ tactics which escalate the issues involved such that yielding is viewed as a threat to basic values or to survival. We are referring, particularly, to such tactics as the tendency to attempt to defame opponents by characterizing them in terms of their most extreme and prejudiced elements. Here, we are referring to the widespread circulation of literature suggesting that the local board was controlled by anti-white, black militants and literature suggesting that the union and the school system were controlled by anti-black Jews. Another tactic that led to an unreasonable intensification of conflict was the use of "brinkmanship." Thus, the union's readiness to engage in a massive strike to disrupt the entire school system over each negotiating detail made resolution of conflict extremely difficult. To a considerably lesser extent, Ocean Hill-Brownsville board's contention that it could not accept the unwanted teachers because of the potential violent reaction within the local community helped to stimulate the threat of such violence as a bargaining tactic.
In conflict it is important to have third parties who can serve as impartial mediators. The tactic of discrediting the intentions and credibility of civic groups and government officials—so freely engaged in by the union’s leader—is another disservice to the possibility of reasoned compromise.

The use of hostages. The city-wide strike made the pupils of the city’s schools hostages to pressure for the acceptance of union demands. The union could have used many other techniques to make nonagreement on its terms costly to the city. The use of innocent hostages has long been viewed with disfavor in civilized society. The citizens of New York, and particularly the parents, when confronted by such an uncivilized bargaining maneuver should see to it that children have the opportunity to continue their education without prolonged disruption.

Background of black-white tension. The strike has exposed an important vulnerability in our community that requires remedial and preventive action, urgently. We refer to the widespread existence of interracial fears and antagonisms. This background of racial tensions makes it likely that social change which affects the perceived power and status of the black and Puerto Rican communities may turn controversies over such civic issues as education, employment, housing, and the like into racial conflict. It is well to anticipate and prepare for such a likelihood by immediately constituting interracial commissions that could authoritatively counteract the rumor and false allegation that often arises in conflict. The purpose of these commissions is to remove racial tensions and distortions from the inevitable conflicts that will accompany social change.
Being clear about decentralization. From the turmoil and disruption of the past few weeks, many have drawn the conclusion that decentralization does not work. We believe that this is an incorrect inference.

There is no reason to believe that the education of Negro and Puerto Rican children in the districts under local control has in any way been harmed. To the contrary, most outside observers have been favorably impressed by the improvement in the educational atmosphere that has taken place since these local school districts have been decentralized. These observers have noted a dramatic decrease in rowdiness and disorder in corridors and classrooms, an increase in the attentiveness and interest of the children to their lessons, and a high level of dedication and devotion by teachers.

It would be a tragic blunder to destroy the positive effects of decentralization for the children. After all, the main purpose of our educational institutions is not to perpetuate themselves, untouched by changing need, but rather to educate children.