THE DYNAMIC OF IDENTITY IN PERSONAL AND SOCIAL CONFLICT
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This chapter addresses the role of identity in the development, maintenance, and transformation of intractable conflicts. I argue that "identity" plays a major role in the conduct of any conflictual relationship, particularly in intractable conflicts, since threats to identity may cause or escalate conflict. In order to understand fully the dynamics of conflict and of intractability, the role of identity must be analyzed.

Identity is defined as an abiding sense of the self and of the relationship of the self to the world. It is a system of beliefs or a way of construing the world that makes life predictable rather than random. In order to function, human beings must have a reasonable level of ability to predict how their behavior will affect what happens to them. The alternative, a random world with no rules, would be deeply frightening and impossible to operate in. Even the most simple tasks, such as eating, would be impossible, and continued existence at the most basic level would be threatened.

Identity, defined in this way, is more than a psychological sense of self. It is extended to encompass a sense of self-in-relation-to-the-world, which may be experienced socially as well as psychologically. It may include self-definition of individuals or groups at many levels, including interpersonal, community, organizational, cultural, and even international. I argue that when a conflict between or among parties involves a core sense of identity (and therefore predictability of the world), the conflict tends to be intractable. In this chapter a framework for the analysis of the role of identity in the escalation and transformation of intractable conflicts is presented.
CURRENT CONFLICT THEORY

Assumptions of the Field

The field of conflict resolution is a relatively new one, at least in terms of its designation as an interdisciplinary field concerned with conflict resolution across various settings. In general, much of the current research and theory in the field is aimed at analyzing the processes of mediation and negotiation, particularly in the areas of labor, international, and interpersonal conflict. Several assumptions concerning the process of conflict resolution have emerged in the field.

A first major assumption is that in general parties are able to handle conflict and the resolution process in a rational manner, estimating costs and benefits of various outcomes (e.g. the notion of “perceived feasibility” suggested by Pruitt and Rubin 1986). A corollary to this assumption, however, is that for various reasons (such as cognitive factors, group processes, stress) “misperceptions” occur that cause parties to inaccurately interpret various aspects of the conflict, for example, the number of resources available or the intentions or goals of the other party (Deutsch 1973; Hocker and Wilmot 1985; Janis 1985; Jervis 1976; White 1986). Misperceptions are conceived of as examples of faulty reasoning; that is, they are viewed as irrational.

A second, related assumption is that a central factor in resolving conflict, then, is clearing up misperceptions. Productive conflict management focuses on improving communications, clearing up misperceptions, and engaging in a cooperative, problem solving approach to the resolution of a conflict. It is assumed that such a process, which is aimed at rational, integrative, or “win-win” solutions, will result in a “good” solution (Fisher and Ury 1981).

Third, these principles are assumed to work across settings (interpersonal, community, labor, and international conflict, for example; see Pruitt and Rubin 1986) and at all stages of a conflict. Problems that occur because of power imbalances between the parties are considered to be resolvable through the efforts of a skilled third party, who is viewed as being able to intervene in such a way as to balance power in the relationship (Hocker and Wilmot 1985).

Finally, this approach places an ultimate value on peaceful resolution of conflict. Prolonged conflict is considered to be destructive, and a mutually acceptable, concrete settlement that resolves the issues in contention is considered to be the ideal (e.g., Deutsch 1973; Hocker and Wilmot 1985; Pfeffer and Bruhl 1982).

Criticisms of the Assumptions

A major criticism of the first two assumptions is that they presume that there is one meaningful, desirable system of “rationality” which is achievable by all parties through productive communication. Misperceptions that impede the resolution process may be ascertained through a common system of rationality, wherein common interests may be identified, thus facilitating the development of a mutually acceptable solution to the conflict. Inherent within this assumption is a failure to recognize that there may be different “rationalities” or systems of thought which are the result of cultural or other social experiences. The theoretical construct of “misperception” does not seem to be a powerful enough or a deep enough notion to deal with drastic differences in world views.

Another criticism of these assumptions is that they both presume that the “real” conflict is based upon the concrete issue raised by the parties. This is problematic for at least two reasons. First, there may, in fact, be multiple issues affecting the relationship between parties. Parties may choose initially to identify a particular problem as the issue at stake for several reasons: for example, it may be the least threatening, or the most promising, issue to begin with. There may be much more serious issues underlying the identified problem. This identification of one issue as the “real” conflict is problematic in yet another way. It presumes that the conflict resides within the parties. As such, it tends to mask the impact of social, historical, and political factors, the larger context within which the conflict is occurring. In addition, it ignores the powerful influence that social experiences related to gender, ethnicity, race, and culture have on the identities and concerns of various groups of people.

The third assumption states that principles of conflict resolution apply across settings and across stages of conflict. This assumption ignores the evolutionary nature of conflict. Conflicts change over time and frequently proceed through several stages. It may well be that different assumptions apply, and consequently different resolution strategies as well, for different stages of a conflict. Similarly, different principles may apply depending on the “level” of a conflict. Little research has been conducted as yet to determine whether a principle such as “identifying common interests will facilitate the resolution process” will apply equally in the case of a neighbor dispute over a barking dog versus a racial conflict over seating on a bus.

In placing such a high value on the peaceful resolution of conflict, the final assumption implies that the parties to a conflict are willing and able to “go to the table,” that is, to meet face-to-face or through a mediator in order to resolve the conflict. In fact, there are many cases.
where one or all parties choose not to go to the table, sometimes believing
that it is to their benefit not to resolve the conflict. Under some circum-
cstances, hostility may be so intense that communication would be unpro-
ductive, as is frequently the case in the Middle East. In other cases, a
low-power group may believe that it is actually not to its advantage to
negotiate, that existing injustices may be perpetuated and even legitimized
through cooperation. Members of some groups may prefer to maintain
or escalate the conflict in order to heighten public awareness of their
plight. Current theory and research typically does not address these com-
plex problems of “getting to the table,” and this is a particularly important
concern in intractable conflicts (see Kriesberg 1987, for a discussion of
this problem).

An Alternative Approach: A Model for Analysis

A model for analyzing the dynamics of conflict was developed to
address some of the aforementioned criticisms of current conflict theory.
The model includes five major components that form a dynamic system,
which can be used to analyze a conflict. The model is intended to provide
a foundation for the theory which follows.

1. Conflict evolves over time. As mentioned previously, conflicts
change over their course. These changes may be considered to be relatively
idiosyncratic to each conflict situation, or they may be conceived as
occurring in a fixed sequence. Kriesberg (1982), for example, outlines a
stage theory that identifies discrete, progressive stages which most con-
licts are hypothesized to go through: emergence, initial conduct, escala-
tion, deescalation, termination, and outcome.

What is salient here is that conflicts must be viewed not as static,
individual events, but rather as processes which evolve over time. Azar
(1986) notes that in international relations theory there is a tendency to
regard conflicts as discrete actions, clearly delineated by time period. He
disagrees with the usefulness of this point of view, since much of the
richness of the context of a particular conflict is lost.

Acceptance of this view of conflict as evolving over time makes
it more difficult to make global statements about conflict that presume
a single event. A principle such as “open communication will lead to pro-
ductive resolution of conflict” may be found to be true only at certain
stages or under particular circumstances in the conflict process.

2. There are multiple levels to every conflict. A key element
of this principle is that conflict is viewed as a psychosocial process.

Intrapersonal processes of the individuals who are involved in a conflict
interact with social processes which occur in the course of a relationship.
Further, these social and psychological processes are affected by the
greater social, cultural, historical, and political context of the conflict.
Characteristics of any organization within which or between which the
parties operate have an impact on the conflict, as do characteristics of the
culture, the ethnic or racial group of which the parties are members, the
nation and the world in which they live.

3. There are multiple factors at any level and any time. There are
frequently several issues of concern in any conflict, beyond the identified
problem. Couples who are experiencing marital difficulty often come to
an initial therapy session with the complaint that their children are having
trouble in school. In some ways, this may seem to the couple to be a
safer issue to work on than the enduring difficulties within their own
relationship. Indeed, in many conflicts, particularly prolonged conflicts,
there are multiple issues in contention. A couple seeking a divorce not
only must attempt to divide property but also must determine who will
have custody of the children, how important value decisions concerning
the children’s upbringing will be made, and what the living arrangements
will be for family members.

In a labor conflict between a police union and a city mayor over
wages, union leaders are concerned with gaining a satisfactory outcome
as well as maintaining a positive image with their constituency. The mayor
is likely to be concerned about his or her image to the public, to be
thinking about the meaning of the negotiation to his or her reelection,
and to be weighing long-term versus short-term consequences of various
settlements.

4. Most factors at all levels have both a subjective component
and an objective component. There are two important aspects to this
principle. The first of these is that all conflicts are considered to have a
subjective component, while most (but not necessarily all) conflicts have
some objective component. Much theoretical work related to conflict and
conflict resolution reveals a controversy concerning whether “external,”
objective factors such as scarce resources or troubled economies are the
primary cause of conflict (see, for example, Haydu, chap. 6), or whether
cognitive or “subjective” factors are the predominant cause of conflict
(see Hunter, chap. 2).

The present analysis, however, contends that both of these factors
play an important role in most conflicts. In each case, the relative impor-
tance of each factor may vary. It is argued here, however, that all conflicts
have a subjective component and that the consideration of “external”
and cognitive factors as separate from each other is an artificial distinction.
That is, rather than existing apart from each other, external factors and the meanings attributed to these external factors, and to the self in relation to them, interact dynamically in the course of most conflicts.

All conflicts are considered to have a subjective element to them since, whenever people are involved in relationship, they are interpreting events and attributing meanings to the events. They do this as individuals and through construing themselves as members of groups. These meanings are used to direct decisions about behaviors. Indeed, some conflicts may be the result of beliefs only (such as those based on prejudice) with no basis of evidence in the “real” world. Further, there is an important subjective component even where the objective issue in a conflict appears to be obvious. For example, one might assume that if two tribes live in a valley and there is not enough food for both tribes to survive, then there is a conflict between the tribes that is objectively caused. If, however, each tribe is based on a caste system in which the controlling elite does not believe it is important to feed the lower caste, and doesn’t mind if some number of this caste dies, then the situation is different. The “scarce” resources are not really scarce according to the elites’ perception of the world—there may be enough food to adequately feed the elites of both tribes. The objective realities of the world are not known directly by human beings, rather they are always subject to the interpretations placed upon them.

A second element of the principle concerning objective and subjective components of conflict is related to the critiqued assumption of one “rational” system of thought. “Rationality” itself is considered to be subjective, that is, a set of interpretations made by an individual, usually partially based on the norms of salient groups. The assumption that ways of thinking that are different from one’s own are “irrational” is considered to be, at the least, ethnocentric.

There are many theorists who argue that there are multiple possible systems of thought, multiple “rationalities,” each of which is relatively internally consistent. Problems of communication between parties whose rationalities are qualitatively different constitute a greater problem than misperception. The parties are operating from different rules and with different basic assumptions about the nature of people and of life. Differences due to gender, race, ethnicity, or culture may result in significantly different definitions of conflict, differential valuing of conflict, different values concerning how, when, by whom, and even if conflict should be resolved, as well as different existing formal and informal structures for dealing with conflict. This argument has been made by feminist theorists and researchers concerning gender (such as French 1985; Gilligan 1982; Miller 1976; Northrup, 1987) and by cross-cultural specialists (such as Goldstein 1986; Segall 1979), among others. A similar argument can be made for race and class, since the experiences of people of different races and classes are often very different in many significant, consistent ways (Brislin 1987).

5. The distribution of power between or among parties has a significant impact on the course and conduct of a conflict. Conflict resolution theory must account for the effect that the distribution of power may have on a conflict situation. Outcomes are likely to be very different when parties to a conflict are relatively equal in power in contrast to when they differ greatly in relative power. In the latter case, settlements may be imposed by the high-power group.

A more subtle, yet still inequitable, outcome would be a settlement that is mutually acceptable in the short term but fails to transform long-term inequities in the relationship. Policies and social structures may serve to maintain a status quo that results in consistent inequities in power and opportunities. In such cases, disempowered groups may in fact believe that it is to their advantage to continue, create, or escalate conflict since the promotion of peace would only serve to maintain an unjust status quo.

This five-component model is not a predictive model, but an analytic model. For example, although intractable conflicts were defined as being prolonged, there is no causal relationship suggested between the length of a dispute and intractability. Further, the degree of tractability of a conflict is not considered to be determined by either the type of number of levels or factors involved in a dispute. A greater number of factors or levels may make a conflict more complex and more difficult to resolve, but this may simply mean that the parties have to work harder and/or longer to settle, rather than imply that the dispute is intractable.

The influence of objectivity/subjectivity and power may be more easily considered to be predictive of tractability. There is, however, no necessary causal relationship. For instance, a distribution of power that is perceived to be inequitable by one or more parties may be related to intractability. The low-power party may anticipate that continuing the conflict will have the effect of balancing power over time. If the low-power party, however, has so little power that it is unable to act, such a situation may persist for a great length of time without conflictual behavior erupting between the parties. Low-power parties also may be socialized to accept their plight and to see it as “the way things are” so that there is no desire to change the status quo. An inequitable distribution of power alone, then, is not sufficient to result in an intractable conflict.
Some theorists have argued that certain subjective factors, such as a high degree of hostility or the existence of misperceptions of the other party, may be related to resistance to resolving a conflict (e.g., Jervis 1976; White 1986). It would be difficult to argue, though, that hostility or misperception causes intractability. They may indeed be a result of intractability or may contribute to sustaining an intractable situation.

Tractability and Intractability

An intractable conflict is defined as a prolonged conflictual psychosocial process between (or among) parties that has three primary characteristics: (1) it is resistant to being resolved, (2) it has some conflict-intensifying features not related to the initial issues in contention, (3) it involves attempts (and/or successes) to harm the other party, by at least one of the parties. (The fact that the attempt to harm is included in the definition of intractability, rather than as a symptom of intractability, is particularly significant to the dynamic of identity.)

Alternatively, a tractable dispute can be defined as a conflict that is part of a normal process of relationship between individuals or parties who perceive that they have incompatible goals. It can be contrasted with intractability in several ways: there are ongoing attempts to resolve the dispute, the features of the dispute generally are related to the issues in contention, resistance to resolution is at a low level, the intent to harm is rare and low-level where it occurs, and the conflict lasts a “normal” amount of time. Kriesberg (chap. 7) notes that the amount of time that may be considered to be normal for a conflict depends on the type of conflict. A marital disagreement may take a day or two to work through, while an agreement between the United States and the Soviet Union on reduction of nuclear weapons make take a year or two and still not be considered intractable.

A tractable conflict may have several conflict-mitigating features. Communication is generally open between parties. Parties are usually flexible to some degree in their ability to reframe issues and to formulate possible solutions. They are likely to accept the legitimacy of the needs of the other party, even though they may disagree on specific solutions. The process of resolution is likely to be characterized by some degree of goodwill between parties, a perception of the conflict as a common problem to be worked out, a willingness to generate several possible options for settlement, and a desire to find a solution that meets the needs and interests of both (or all) parties.

In contrast, an intractable conflict will have features unrelated to the issues in contention but which serve to escalate the conflict. For example, it is very likely to be characterized by poor or nonexistent communication, rigidity in positions, and a high level of hostility. Parties are likely to conceptualize the conflict in win-lose terms and to be unable or stubbornly unwilling to move from initial positions. They rarely participate in creative problem solving nor even suggest alternative solutions to the dispute. In fact, the conflict may well be accepted as inevitable, or even be glorified, and will be acted out in a ritualized fashion (see Agnew, chap. 3; Azar 1986).

Although the above definitions have been presented as an either/or formulation of tractability/intractability, conflicts may more usefully be categorized along a continuum from high tractability to high intractability. Some conflicts would easily be placed at one end or the other of the continuum. Conflicts may vary, however, in their level of tractability at various times during their course, and particular issues in a conflict between parties may differ in their level of tractability. This latter point fits with Fisher’s (1964) notion of “fractionation,” which suggests that a larger conflict may be broken down into several smaller, more manageable conflicts; that is, some issues in a conflict may be more easily settled than others.

THE DYNAMIC OF IDENTITY: A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Rather than attempting to identify clear causes of intractability, then, this chapter introduces a dynamic, that of identity, which underlies the processes of escalation and rigidification of conflict. It is considered to be one important contributor to the development and maintenance of intractability. The dynamic of “identity” was defined earlier as the tendency for human beings, individually and in groups, to establish, maintain, and protect a sense of self-meaning, predictability, and purpose. Identity was defined broadly to encompass a sense of self-definition at multiple levels. It should be noted that identity is not the only important dynamic related to intractability, but it is considered to play a major role in the conduct of a conflictual relationship.

The Role of Identity

Why is identity considered to be so important a factor in conflict? Identity has been defined as an abiding sense of selfhood that is the core
of what makes life predictable to an individual. To have no ability to anticipate events is essentially to experience terror. Identity is conceived as more than a psychological sense of self; it encompasses a sense that one is safe in the world physically, psychologically, socially, even spiritually. Events which threaten to invalidate the core sense of identity will elicit defensive responses aimed at avoiding psychic and/or physical annihilation. Identity is postulated to operate in this way not only in relation to interpersonal conflict but also in conflict between groups.

A theory of personality developed by Kelly (1955) is consistent with this formulation. Kelly, unlike other personality theorists, did not conceive of people as being either "pushed" by various needs and instincts or "pulled" by environmental contingencies but rather conceptualized people as active anticipators of events. He emphasized anticipation rather than reaction, and what Kelly called "the creative capacity of the living thing to represent the environment, not merely to respond to it" (1955, 8). Individuals erect a representational model of the world (which includes a model of the self) in order to anticipate events, thus giving direction to their behavior. This model is made up of units of meaning called "personal constructs."

A basic philosophical assertion which underlies Kelly's theoretical structure is that all of our present interpretations of "reality" are subject to revision, through a process called "construing."

In this process of construction and reconstruction, the person actively tries to encompass his inner and outer worlds, psychologically, by means of personal dimensions of awareness anchored by contrasts in meaning. These dimensions of awareness, or "personal constructs," are formed by the processes of differentiation and integration.... The person experiences his life by noting series of events from which he abstracts the recurring themes and their contrasts. This dual process of abstracting and contrasting defines "construing"—a process which may encompass what we know as feelings, values, and behaviors. (Kelly 1955, 43)

It can be seen from this statement that the process of construing is viewed as more than a cognitive process, since it encompasses all aspects of human experience, including emotions, values, and behaviors, as well as cognition.

Central to the argument concerning identity and intractability is Kelly's definition of "core constructs." Core constructs are superordinate to most other constructs; that is, they are central to the entire system of constructs, and their nature affects the nature of the entire system. Core constructs are of particular importance for organizing a person's approach to life and to the roles he or she plays (the sense of self). They govern our basic maintenance processes enabling us to maintain a sense of identity and of continuing existence without which the unpredictability of the world would be terrifying. Most important, core constructs cannot be changed significantly without disturbing the very roots of our being.

When core constructs begin to be invalidated by incoming information, the individual experiences threat. Threat is a state that is unfavorable to the formation of new constructs. If an individual comes upon new information that elicits a construct basically incompatible with or invalidating to the core sense of self, it is likely that the new information will be rejected or redefined in order to fit the existing, rather impermeable constructs. It is also likely that this process of rejection and redefinition (called "aggression" by Kelly 1955) will be characterized by a high emotional charge and a great sense of urgency. In a sense, if one's core sense of self, the identity, is threatened by the demands, behavior, or identity of another person, then psychic or even physical annihilation will seem to be imminent. Severe conflict will ensue. It is interesting to note that the verb annihilate, in addition to being defined as "to cause to cease to exist," is also defined in these ways: "to reduce to nothing," "to destroy the substance or force of," and "to regard as of no consequence (Webster 1963). In this sense, a fear of continued but meaningless or powerless existence may be just as threatening to the self as a physical threat. The response to such a conflict is an immediate and extreme mobilization of resources for the purpose of maintaining the identity.

A theory of social or group identity developed by Tajfel (1972) is consistent with Kelly's theory of personal constructs and provides a framework for understanding inter-group conflict. Tajfel differentiates between personal and social identity (see also Turner 1982), defining personal identity as including characteristics that denote specific attributes of a person, such as psychological traits, feelings of competence, bodily features, intellectual interests, personal tastes, and so on. Social identity includes characteristics that denote a person's membership in formal and informal social groups, such as sex, race, nationality, and religion. Further, Tajfel asserts that social identity "is the individual's knowledge that he belongs to certain social groups together with some emotional and value significance to him of the group membership" (1972, 31). In other words, membership carries with it some evaluative emotional charge, some nonneutral significance to the person's conception of self. In Kellian terms, if social identity has great salience for an individual's sense of self and order in the world, it is likely that it will be a core construct.
Two elements of Tajfel's social identity theory are particularly relevant to the present discussion concerning the relationship between identity and intractability. First, the theory states that personal and social identity may be differentially salient under particular circumstances. More important, social identity may in some contexts function almost to the exclusion of personal identity (e.g. Bruner and Perlmutter 1957; Dion 1975; Dion and Earn 1975; Sherif 1966). This is particularly the case in situations involving intergroup conflict and discrimination. If derogatory comments or discriminatory actions are frequently directed at you or members of your social circle primarily because of group membership, then you are likely to be highly aware of this group membership at all times. The constant presence of threats, danger, discrimination, or potential harm is likely to heighten the importance of maintaining and protecting a person's social identity (Deutsch 1973), that is, it is much more likely to be a core construct.

It is clear that a threat (in the Kellian sense) to any part of the social identity that is core to the self (a core construct) results in a protective response. If a group identity factor, such as ethnicity, nationality, race, gender, or religion, is core to the sense of self for some group of individuals, the process of mobilization and protection mentioned in the previous section can occur as a group phenomenon. Such a process has occurred for many Jews who, simply because they were Jews, were not only psychically but physically annihilated as a group in Nazi occupied Europe. The “coreness” of the identity as Jewish, as a member of a group, is clear in this case. The same could be said for being a Catholic or a Protestant in Northern Ireland, or a Palestinian or an Israeli in the Middle East.

A second principle of social identity theory, originally stated by Lewin (1984), is that in understanding the formation of groups, factors such as interpersonal attraction are less important than other unit-forming variables such as a common fate or shared threat. Lewin states that it is not similarity or dissimilarity that determines group membership, “but social interaction or other types of interdependence. A group is best defined as a dynamic whole based on interdependence, ... the main criterion of belongingness is interdependence of fate” (1948, 184). Clearly, an interdependence of fate is closely related to the identity of the group.

The notion of loss is central to the hypothesized relationship between identity and conflict in both interpersonal and intergroup conflict. The loss of any central aspect of the self is threatening, since it makes living more random, makes the world less predictable and more frightening. Loss of core aspects of the self can span a wide variety of events from the loss of some physical aspect, such as an arm or leg or a physical capability like walking, to the loss of psychological elements like memory or some long-held belief about oneself or the world, to the loss of a family member through abandonment or death, to the loss or fragmentation of meaning about the world (psychosis). Further, losses that are more social can be equally threatening, such as the loss of one's home through fire, the loss of a job, the loss of some important group membership, the loss of familiar surroundings through a move to another city or to another country and culture. All of these losses can be deeply stressful since they present threats to identity and meaning.

Stress can result not only from actual loss, but from the threat of loss. One discovers that a close family member has cancer or finds that co-workers are being laid off. For some people the possibility of nuclear war or the dangers of local hazardous waste disposal are experienced as threatening to identity, to the sense of enduring selfhood, as well as to the physical self.

Such loss, or threat of loss, can be experienced equally as powerfully by groups of people who have some common sense of identity. This is especially clear in the case of ethnic identity (although a similar argument can be made for other identity groups such as gender, racial, regional, and national groups). A. D. Smith (1983, 1984, 1986), for example, discusses the way in which ethnic groups share common “myths” of origin and descent. These myths “confer meaning for the participants on their situation and actions and help to unite them into a compact body with a collective identity and purpose. . . . [The myths] exalt the believer, strengthen his sense of community and incite him to collective actions beyond the range of his purely personal or family interests. Hence, ethnic identity . . . expresses the individual’s subordination and dependence upon the community, which alone appears to offer him earthly salvation in a destiny which can immortalize and enoble him” (Smith 1983, 133–154).

Other writers have pointed to the powerful effect of group identity at the national level (Azar 1986; Davidson and Montville 1982; Wedge 1986). Azar states that “protracted” international conflicts have at their source the denial of particular human needs, including “security, distinctive identity, social recognition of identity, and effective participation in the processes that determine conditions of security and identity” (1986, 29).

Identity, then, is postulated to operate as a dynamic because the sense of self, whether personal or group, is not static. Rather, it is in constant relationship with the world—with people, things, time, and space. Some aspects of identity may change as experience is gained, but
the core sense of self is relatively stable, as the individual attempts to maintain it in order to retain a sense of the world as a predictable place. If the events of one’s life in relationship to the world invalidate, or threaten to invalidate, the core sense of identity, then the individual or group will respond energetically to attempt to maintain the identity. It is this dynamic nature of the interface between identity and relationship with the world that is postulated to be a central factor in intractable conflict.

The Operation of Identity in Escalation and Intractability

The operation of identity in escalation is described here in terms of several psychosocial processes that occur in a series of stages: threat, distortion, rigidification, and collusion. The stages are sequential, and each stage contributes to the creation of the next stage. It is possible that conflict may de-escalate at any stage, depending on both objective and subjective factors. However, as the conflict moves from one stage to the next, de-escalation generally becomes less and less likely. It is important to note that these processes can operate at the individual, group, and structural levels and that they serve to increase intractability. Often new material stakes in the perpetuation of the conflict may be generated as the intensity of the conflict increases.

Stage 1: Threat

When, in the course of a relationship between parties, an event occurs that is perceived as invalidating the core sense of identity, the party or parties perceiving invalidation experience threat. Invalidation of the group’s core constructs is threatening because it destroys meaning and the ability to predict events. The intensity of a conflict will be particularly high in the case where identities (or construct systems) of two (or more) parties invalidate each other. This appears to be the case in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Many members of both parties believe that their own existence is threatened by the mere existence of the other. This is especially clear in relation to claims to land. Both groups associate their sense of identity with the same land. Agnew (chap. 3) quotes the words of Ben-Gurion: “Jerusalem is an integral part of Israeli history in her faith and in the depths of her soul. Jerusalem is the ‘heart of hearts’ of Israel.”

Each side to the conflict in effect says, “In order for us to maintain our identity we must live on and possess this piece of land which represents our selves, our religion, our meaning.” Loss of that land, or the threat of its loss (or the threat of not obtaining it), means more than the fact of the loss of territory; it implies the loss of self, psychic annihilation in a sense. Current skirmishes in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank are an example of behavior that threatens physical annihilation, the physical extension of the psychic experience. In an analysis of conflict in the Middle East, Davidson and Montville support this formulation: “Each side perceives the fulfillment of the other’s national identity as equivalent to the destruction of its own identity. Thus, each is reluctant to accept the other’s right to a state expressing that national identity. To do so would be to participate in a process imperiling one’s own national existence. Therefore, unless each side is assured that its own existence is secure, neither can be expected to make a move to accept the other.” (1982, 153–54).

The environmental cases discussed by Hunter (see chap. 2) and Smardon and Palmer (see chap. 9) provide excellent examples of conflicts involving core constructs that threaten to invalidate each other. The “ontology,” as Hunter terms it, of deep ecologists includes core constructs that place an ultimate value on cooperation with and respect for nature. Since economic growth is often destructive of nature, the “ontology” or core constructs of developers are interpreted as very threatening. Conversely, the high value placed on the rights and freedoms of property owners to develop the land they own is threatened by the core constructs of environmentalists. In effect, each party avidly denies the legitimacy of the very identity of the other. As Hunter suggests, ontologies (or core constructs) are not negotiable.

Stage 2: Distortion

Distortion is a psychological response to threat. Kelly (1955) terms this process “aggression” in the sense that a person aggressively forces meanings onto the construct system in order to deal with the threat of invalidation. Distortion or “aggression” may take several forms. For example, the threatened individual may simply deny the incoming, invalidating information or may redefine the nature of the information. The case of racial prejudice can be used to illustrate a range of distorting responses.

If a white man who is prejudiced against blacks finds out that his daughter plans to marry a black man, threat is experienced because his sense of identity (I am valuable and good in part because I am white/not-black; whites are good, blacks are bad/lazy/subhuman) is difficult to maintain when a black person becomes a part of his family (my family is a reflection of who I am). This man might respond to the threat by
denying that his daughter’s fiancé is black (he is very light, mostly of white parentage anyway). He might redefine the situation by creating a category of exceptions to the black-is-bad rule (he is a hard worker and a corporate executive, so he really can’t be called a black). These psychological responses are “aggressive” in the sense that the person forces a meaning onto the invalidating events that is inconsistent with the actual events, for the purpose of making them seem validating. Incoming information is distorted or misperceived in order to maintain the core sense of identity.

Such psychological distortions may be expressed in overt behaviors in a variety of ways. For example, the father might reject the daughter by telling her she is no longer his child, by refusing to come to the wedding and to acknowledge any children of the marriage as part of his family. Again, he forces a meaning onto events that is inconsistent with the reality: his daughter is still his daughter according to the norms of the culture in which he lives.

Stage 3: Rigidification

As events that are being construed as invalidating to core constructs are distorted, the threatened individuals or groups begin to develop increasingly permeable constructs, that is, they develop increasingly rigid interpretations of the world. As this process continues, more and more minor characteristics about the other party that were originally construed as “like-self” become threatening. Construing the other party becomes an aggressive process (using the Kellian definition of aggression), wherein the other party is increasingly perceived as and treated like someone entirely different from “self.” New information that could lead to construing the other as “like-self” is aggressively distorted or simply not perceived, as it falls outside the range of personal constructs that the individual has about his or her world. To suggest an analogy, the social and psychological experiments that could lead to change in the construct system, particularly the core constructs, are simply not run, and therefore no new data are entered that might change the person’s hypotheses about how the world looks.

Rigidification, then, is a process of crystallizing and hardening what is construed as self and not-self. It serves the purpose of separating the “invalidated” party from the “invalidating” party, in essence, putting distance between the self and the threat. It is significant that not only the behaviors or demands of the other party are construed as threatening, but also the beliefs, or even characteristics of the other which are not related to the original threat, may over time become interpreted as threatening.

The psychological process of projection is closely related to rigidification. Parts of the self that are intolerable (such as greed or aggressiveness) are projected onto the other party and are construed as “not-self.” These parts of the self that are projected thus serve to keep distance from the other party. To begin again to perceive the other party as “like-self” would mean having to accept these intolerable projected parts, a very threatening situation. From this perspective, movements toward construing the other party as “like-self,” such as conciliatory gestures, are highly charged and difficult processes once construct systems become rigidified.

Rigidification can have psychological, social, or physical manifestations. Distance may be increased by shutting down communications between the self and the invalidating other, by construing the other as bad in various ways, or by physical separation. In effect, rigidification involves increasing efforts to secure the boundaries of the self. Psychological defenses are built up, alarm systems are installed in the home, military forces are mobilized along national borders. Self and other become mutually exclusive categories.

If the father described above initially deals with his daughter’s marriage plans by disowning her, he may find that she resists this idea. She may try to reestablish contact with him by visiting him, or by writing or sending pictures of the wedding. In response to such events, which tend to invalidate dimensions of his core constructs, the father is likely to rigidify his construals of her as not-like-self. These construals may take on a meaning equivalent to the statement, “she was never any good, even though I did so much for her.” In effect, the father redeﬁnes the meaning of the past, and the boundary between the self and other becomes hardened.

Groups that experience invalidation by other groups also manifest rigidification in ways similar to those of individuals. On a social-psychological level, a subgroup of an organization may split off and give itself a different name. Members may separate physically by finding a new location in which to meet and by refusing to communicate with the original group. Their customs may explicitly or implicitly reflect a rejection of the norms, rules, or customs of the group they left. Stories may develop over the years that portray the other group as bad or evil or lazy, while presenting the self-group as noble and courageous. For groups, like individuals, the purpose of rigidification is to separate, put distance between the self-group and the other group which threatens to invalidate the self-group. As invalidation continues, the self-group increasingly construes the other party aggressively.

Social identity theory has several implications for intragroup and intergroup behavior that occurs in conflict situations. One way in which groups rigidify is that perceived differences between groups tend to be
exaggerated while intragroup differences are minimized. This is essentially the same process that occurs when an individual increasingly construes self as good and other as bad. Turner (1982) suggests that this group process accounts for stereotyping, which generally leads to the homogenization and depersonalization of members of out-groups. In Kellian terms, the other group is increasingly construed in an impermeable fashion. Out-group members are perceived to be interchangeable since they are seen in terms of their shared group membership characteristics rather than in terms of their individual uniqueness.

As mentioned, rigidification is a process of crystallization and hardening what is construed as self and not-self, serving to put distance between the self and the threat. In cases where external conditions support such separation, one might expect greater intractability than in the cases where there is a strong impetus toward integration of mutually threatened groups. Kriesberg (see chap. 7) compares the cases of post-World War II Europe with the Middle East. He concludes that relations between European nations evolved into a tractable conflict, whereas the Middle East situation resulted in intractability. He identifies the separation versus assimilation of contending parties as one prominent factor in tractability. In the case of Europe, reconciliation between old enemies was encouraged both from within and without, and economic integration through the European Economic Community served to bind the nations of Western Europe together. In the Middle East, on the other hand, Palestinian refugees were less able to assimilate into Arab countries. The result, as Kriesberg notes in chapter 7, was an increasing sense of injustice in the Palestinians. The PLO emerged as a symbol of organized struggle.

The potent effect of group separation and polarization is particularly clear in the case of ethnic conflicts. In describing the importance of spatial sources of intractability, Agnew (see chap. 3) discusses the process of boundary building as it has occurred particularly in Northern Ireland. He states that political parties on both sides that support the most extreme territorial claims have become the most popular.

As separation increases, the process of “dehumanization” (discussed in detail by feminist theorists among others, e.g. Adcock 1982; Brock-Utne 1985; Elshtain 1982; Frank 1968; Gearhart 1982; Laws 1979; Moyer 1985; Reardon 1985) may begin to occur at both the individual and group levels. When some other group is dehumanized, its members are not only perceived to be separate and different from the self-group, they are also evaluated as being “bad” or “evil,” somehow less valuable than the self-group. Dehumanization is one of the basic processes that is hypothesized to maintain the domination-submission relationship, which can occur between low- and high-status groups such as men and women or blacks and whites. Low-status groups are defined as objects by the high-status groups, as less than self and less than human.

An extension of social identity theory that is particularly relevant to the notion of dehumanization is found in an analysis by Guillaumin (1972). Guillaumin differentiates between groups that are dominant and those that are dominated, and suggests that the processes outlined in social identity theory do not apply equally to these groups:

only those who dominate are each clearly defined as an entity, as a collection of individuals each occupying “his” place . . . in the sense that they are all considered as unique and singular. Outside of this collection of “singular” individuals . . . those who dominate only perceive entities which are composed of undifferentiated elements: the “child,” the “woman,” the “black,” the “worker,” etc. In this symbolic order in which the dominant groups create and which legitimizes the economic constraints defining those who are dominated and the power of those who dominate, the former have no specificity, uniqueness, singularity, or individuality as individuals. Characteristics which are attributed to their group are sufficient to provide a full definition of what they are. (Quoted in Deschamps 1982)

According to Guillaumin's formulation, it is primarily adult, white, middle-class males (at least in Western societies) who are members of this dominant group and who impose upon other groups their own definition of what is the norm. Dominated groups are defined as different from the norm but are criticized and devalued for not meeting the norm.

This latter situation of being defined socially as not possessing the identity of the norm but being devalued for not doing so creates an impossible situation for dominated groups. The contradiction leads to great uncertainty concerning identity. In effect, members of dominated groups are led to believe that “I am not the way I should be, but I can never be the way I should be.”

An awareness of this uncertainty of identity, particularly when the distribution of power is considered to be unjust and illegitimately acquired, is described by Tajfel (1978) as “insecurity” (somewhat equivalent to Kelly's notion of threat). The result of insecurity is hypothesized to be an energetic search for positive distinctiveness on the part of the dominated group. In its mildest form, this search may involve attempts to redefine or reinterpret existing dimensions of distinctiveness so that they are positively evaluated, for example, the “black is beautiful” message of the 1960s in the United States. Tajfel (1978) notes, however, that the search for positive distinctiveness requires some recognition on the part of other groups in the social order that the dominated group is indeed
somehow better, more credible, stronger, prouder. Such recognition is likely to be resisted by a dominant group since it is more likely that they are actively involved in the opposite process of dehumanization. As a result, more rigorous attempts to gain recognition are highly likely on the part of the low-power group. In general, such attempts are characterized by rigidification. In its most extreme form, the search for positive distinctiveness may be manifested in more violent actions. Consistent with Kelly’s notion of threat to core constructs, Brown and Ross (1982) hypothesize that the level of ingroup bias and the intensity of feelings of hostility toward the out-group will increase in proportion to the degree of threat to identity that is perceived to originate from the out-group.

What is particularly important about dehumanization is that it is a process which itself makes violence more tolerable. It is more difficult to harm something or someone who is like-self, and easier to harm something or someone construed as not human or inhuman (i.e., "not-self"). The connection that this self/other rigidification has to violence is made explicit by Gearhart (1982). “In a remarkable science fiction work, Rule Golden, the heroine wipes violence from the face of the earth by having every agent feel in his/her own body any physical blow she/he delivers: kick a dog and feel the boot in your own rib; commit murder and die yourself. . . . [This story] articulates for me the necessary connection between empathy and nonviolence; it reminds me that objectification is the necessary, if not sufficient, component of any violent act. Thinking of myself as separate from another entity makes it possible for me to ‘do to’ that entity things I would not ‘do to’ myself” (Gearhart 1982, 268).

Several writers (As 1975; Caldicott 1984; Gilder 1973; Roberts 1984) have noted that a core aspect of military training is a process of teaching the soldier to dehumanize others. As Roberts (1984) notes, if soldiers are expected to kill other human beings, even those who are weaker than they, this process of dehumanization, of setting oneself apart from the enemy, is necessary. People become targets, and the soldier is cut off from his own feelings of connectedness (like-self-ness) to the whole category of people, the “enemy” whomever they may be.

Part of this process of rigidification and dehumanization involves taking in less and less information about the “enemy.” Both validating and invalidating information is rejected, and the person or group relies on its psychological construction of the other: communists are bad people, their beliefs deny individualism and freedom, they want to take over the world, and so on. The result is that it becomes easier to behave with violence toward the “enemy,” as the United States did in Vietnam, since the enemy is increasingly construed as nonhuman and “evil.”

Stage 4: Collusion

As the separation between parties becomes more extreme, the conflict itself takes on greater importance to the parties. Both parties begin to behave in ways that are consistent with maintaining the conflict. In this sense, they collude in prolonging the conflictual relationship. This behavior may or may not be explicitly stated or intentional. The process of collusion presents an interesting paradox, since in effect the parties “cooperate” in pushing the conflict beyond an escalatory stage to a stage in which the conflict itself becomes defined as self. During this stage, parties to the conflict acquire an interest in maintaining the conflict because the conflict or salient aspects of the conflict, in a sense, become a part of their identity. Further, their “secret agreement” may, over time, be manifested in formal social, political, and economic structures within and between parties. In effect, the conflict becomes institutionalized in both obvious and subtle ways.

As rigidification increases along with the consequent separation, dehumanization, and decrease in communication, the collusion process takes hold. The tendency for particular kinds of behavior—hostile acts, rejections, criticisms—increases on the part of both parties. In fact, they become the only types of behaviors that occur in the relationship and serve to validate the distortions which created the behaviors in the first place. If the “enemy” was not truly devious and aggressive before the distortions began, they certainly begin to behave just like “enemies” in response to the distortions. In other words, the effect of distorting the other group is to make the other group behave in a way which is consistent with the distortions. In fact, the conflict itself becomes a defining characteristic of the identity of the conflict parties. For example, Menachem Begin wrote of the World War II experience of the Jews: “It was not the Nazis and their friends who regarded the Jews as germs to be destroyed. The whole world which calls itself enlightened began to get used to the idea that perhaps the Jew is not as other human beings. . . . The world does not pity the slaughtered. It only respects those who fight. . . . A people may think and yet its sons, with their thoughts and in spite of them, may be turned into a herd of slaves—or into soap. There are times when everything in you cries out; your very self-respect as a human being lies in your resistance to evil. We fight, therefore we are!” (quoted in Davidson and Montville 1982).

During this stage, the parties in effect collude in maintaining the conflict. Collusion may be manifested in various ways, most of which serve to formalize and crystallize the conflict. Formal rituals may emerge
within each party that sanctify the struggle and celebrate the victorious and noble efforts of the self or self-group. In many ways, the conflict is institutionalized, both within and between parties. Over time, the social way of life that provides a sense of identity to the members of each group interweaves the importance of the conflict with the importance of the self. At this stage, the prospect of ending the conflict threatens to invalidate the self. This most certainly is a state of affairs which contributes to the intractability of the conflict.

THE TRANSFORMATION OF INTRACTABILITY

The theoretical framework under discussion defines the dynamic of identity as a multilevel concept that plays an important role in the escalation and maintenance of conflict. The analysis suggests that there are identity-related processes at the individual, social, and structural levels which contribute to intractability, particularly when there are perceived inequities that are construed as a threat to the physical or psychological sense of personal or group self. For both the individual and group who face a threat of invalidation, there is a move to preserve the sense of self. This involves distortion and rigidification, including the tendency to create and enforce separation between parties and the tendency to dehumanize "enemies." Through this process, the conflict itself becomes assimilated into the identities of the conflicting parties. On a larger scale, parties may collude to ritualize and institutionalize the conflict through policies, laws, and customs. According to this formulation, the multi-level nature of conflict is neither a top-down nor a bottom-up process. Rather, it is an interactive system in which individual, social, and structural processes influence each other.

What, then, are the implications of this theoretical formulation for the transformation of conflicts from intractability to tractability? Certainly one of the major implications is that intractable conflicts involving threatened identities are not likely to be readily changed from within. The parties themselves are highly unlikely to be willing or able to cooperate or otherwise move toward resolution. In this section, two major issues related to this problem will be addressed: theoretical differences between the settlement of a specific dispute and the transformation of a conflict as well as possible strategies for transformation which address the problem of identity.

Settlement versus Transformation

The contrast between settlement and transformation may be best addressed through considering the levels at which change may occur in a conflict. Three such levels are postulated. These are labeled "levels" in the sense that they signify the proximity of the change to core identity constructs. Level one involves changes that are peripheral to the identities of the parties, such as changes in a specific condition external to the parties or a specific behavior of one or both (or all) of the parties. For example, countries fighting over a border may agree to a cease-fire during negotiations. Feuding neighbors may decide to split the cost of removing a troublesome tree that straddles their property line. Such peripheral changes tend to have minimal impact on future relations and future disputes if the parties are involved in an intractable conflict.

Level two change is less peripheral, although not core to the identities of the parties, and it involves change in the dynamics of the relationship between the parties. Two ethnic groups who have been conducting a protracted conflict may agree to stop attacking civilian targets, for instance. A couple engaged in marital counseling may agree to the therapist's suggestion that they discuss angry feelings openly rather than using passive-aggressive behavior. In these cases, there is a significant change in the nature of the relationship between the parties, but there is no immediate change in the actual identities of the individual parties. In contrast to level one, where single concrete events or behaviors change, at level two something about the process of the relationship is altered, implying a longer-term change. In this case, new specific disputes may arise, and they may be dealt with differently than in the past because of the relationship change.

A third level involves changes that occur in the identities of the parties, changes in the core sense of self of one or both of the contenders. In the case of two countries that have been at war, if the government of one of the countries is overthrown, the new leaders may have quite different goals and attitudes concerning the other country. There may be major shifts in important alliances and constituencies. Negotiations for peace may become much more possible under such circumstances. On an interpersonal level, a couple who have been fighting for a long time may discover that their oldest child is a drug user. Such a discovery can act as a catalyst for change if the couple reinterpret events as a result of realizing that their prolonged discord has negatively affected the entire family.

One relevant point concerning the level at which change occurs is that the implications for how long term the effects will be vary for different levels. When intractability involves collusion, that is, a core
investment in maintaining the conflict in order to maintain identity, changes in peripheral conditions are unlikely to have any kind of long-lasting effect on the conflict. In the Middle East, there have been occasional short-term settlements (such as the 1974 disengagement on the Golan Heights), but overall tensions appear to be as high as ever. Peripheral changes have minimal impact on the central problem which is that the parties' identities are enmeshed in the conflict itself. Such changes have little or no impact on future relations between the parties.

The prognosis for change is somewhat better when changes in the dynamics of the relationship occur. Although such changes do not directly, or immediately, alter the identities of the parties, the experience of relating in some significantly different way can, over time, create change in identity. In the case where two feuding ethnic groups agree not to attack civilians, they may eventually begin to see the "enemy" as more human. This process is in a sense a reversal of rigidification. There is no guarantee, of course, that changes at this level will result in identity changes, but it does increase the chances.

If change occurs in the identities of at least one of the parties, the chances for long-term change are greatly increased, particularly if the change involves core aspects of identity that are directly related to the conflict. Such structural changes, or core changes in identity, affect the entire system; that is, change in identity results in changes in the relationship, resulting finally in changes in behaviors. This type of change transforms the conflict itself, rather than involving short-term, peripheral, single settlements. Even in the case where there are real, "objective" conditions that cause problems between parties, such as a food shortage, if the nature of the parties' interpretations of that shortage is significantly altered, the parties can be freed up to negotiate or problem-solve creatively to find mutually acceptable solutions. This latter type of change is most likely when the rigid self/other split, which exists in the identities of the parties, is altered. That is, parties begin to achieve a sense of mutual identity when each individual sees that the other party is "like-self" in some core ways. There is then an investment in de-escalating the conflict and in increasing cooperation.

What processes or behaviors, then, might serve as catalysts for change at these three levels? Changes at level one may entail settlement but do not constitute transformation. For example, the process of providing new information or of educating parties in a particular way may facilitate change in the nature of the dispute. If a conflictual relationship is long-standing, however, it is unlikely that new information will be sufficient to make changes at levels two or three. This information can be misinterpreted by parties who are involved in an intractable dispute so that they may continue to validate their current constructs about each other as enemies. Change can occur at level two only if the new information is powerful enough to allow the parties to redefine their relationship significantly.

In contrast to level one, transformation may be facilitated at the second level of relationship dynamics. At this level, the nature of the relationship is redefined. But what would bring about such a redefinition when the conflict is intractable? Perhaps a classic example is the "Robber's Cave" study by Sherif (1966) where conflicting groups of young male campers were presented with a problem that was superordinate to their conflict with each other, and thereafter they began to cooperate. The introduction of a new threat that endangers both parties can elicit a sense of common identity. This new threat is equal to or greater than the threat the parties posed for each other, and meeting the threat requires that the former enemies cooperate to defend themselves against the new threat. In effect, they are forced to legitimize each other, to recognize the existence and importance of the other. This process results in a redefinition of the self/other construct in the relationship with the former enemy. The former enemy becomes more like-self with at least some similar needs and goals.

Level two change may occur in other ways. Parties who are not central to the conflict may choose to impose some change from without that serves to force the central parties to redefine their relationship. In recent years, police departments have begun to change their policies concerning domestic fights, and they now frequently arrest spouse abusers. There is evidence that this approach is one of the most effective in decreasing recidivism. This finding is consistent with the theory concerning the role of identity in conflict. As long as abuse remains "private" in the sense that the status quo is maintained within the abusing relationship, no change occurs. When, however, the larger society responds in such a way that communicates a clear message to the abuser that his behavior is unacceptable, he is forced to redefine the nature of the relationship, and possibly even his own identity (this would constitute level three change). This is primarily because a new threat is introduced that makes it more difficult for him to continue believing that it is his right to "discipline" his wife by assaulting her when the legal system clearly states that this is not his right. By labeling his behavior a "crime," the chances are increased that the abuser will redefine the situation in such a way that the abuse will stop.

There is a third way in which level two change may occur, and that is through the behavior of dissenters within one of the conflicting parties. The case of the Greens, described by Nagle (see chap. 8), is an example of such a change. If a subgroup within one of the parties to a
conflict is able to legitimize some kind of cooperative relationship with the other party, significant change may be possible. The organizers of the Greens have apparently been able to walk a tenuous line between the more radical supporters, who oppose even the level of cooperation implied by participating within the current political system, and the traditional parties. In a sense, the organizers are managers of the identity of the Greens; they have found creative ways to ensure that the “alternativeness” of the party is maintained by creating an alternative structure within the existing party system.

A final way that change may occur at level two is through unexpected changes in conditions. In order for a change in the dynamics of the relationship between the parties to occur, the alteration in conditions must be interpreted by the parties as salient to the relationship. For example, in the context of an ethnic conflict, if a bomb accidentally kills a large number of schoolchildren, such an event might be a catalyst for change. Such a tragedy might force new meanings onto the nature of the relationship in terms of the very real destructiveness it engenders. Similar to, at an international level, an accidental launching of a nuclear missile might force world leaders and the public to come to grips with the real consequences of nuclear war. The Cuban missile crisis seems to have functioned in this way.

In all of these cases of level two change, however, what has not changed is the general rigid construct that allows each party to perceive some other party as completely separate, as not-self. For example, if a common enemy who posed a threat to two former enemies decided to withdraw, the question would still remain whether the former enemies would revive their original animosities. At least one relevant factor would be the length of time during which these parties cooperated and the consequent degree of interrelationship that was formed. If a cooperative relationship became institutionalized and ritualized, that is, if filtered through to the core sense of identity, then the transformation would be likely to last. If the cooperative relationship was simply tolerated as expedient, change is less likely to be long term.

It is when the self/other construct itself is redefined in one or both parties that transformation is likely, and this is the case in level three change. If the identity of both parties changes, then the nature of the relationship has to change. If the change occurs in the direction of derigidification of the self/other split, or ideally, if it results in a construct that defines all others as at least partially like-self, then intractability will be transformed to tractability. In this case, there is a sense of shared existence and common identity. A sense of “we” replaces the “us/Them” split. This does not necessarily imply that the parties become like each other but that they accept their differences, possibly even value them. In feminist terms, this would constitute a pluralistic, nonpaternalist system where differences are honored, not ranked hierarchically.

Such changes, however, are not likely to occur quickly and generally are considered to require long-term effort. This is precisely because, in the case of an intractable conflict that has reached the stage of rigidification or collusion, long-term processes have been at work already in producing intractability.

Strategies for Change

What, then, are the implications for strategies for change? First, the most effective strategy would appear to be one that begins at level two with the nature of the relationship, because pressure for change at this level would be less threatening than at the level of the identities of the parties. Second, long-term strategies with the eventual goal of changing identities should be developed; otherwise, long-lasting transformation will not occur.

Some examples are presented here to illustrate these principles. Psychotherapy is a strategy intended to facilitate level three change in individuals. Frequently, people seek therapy because of stresses in relationships; old modes of behavior no longer work satisfactorily. One of the tasks of therapy is to uncover core constructs and to evaluate whether they lead to useful behaviors. If not, alternative constructs are entertained and tried out. Over time, through this experimentation within the therapeutic relationship, the individual’s core constructs are transformed. This “internal” transformation results in altered behavior in many aspects of the person’s life. Relationships at home, at work, and with friends may all be qualitatively different, and ultimately more satisfying.

For problems like spouse abuse, policies that combine responses may be most effective. A consistent policy of arresting abusers forces a reinterpretation of the relationship on the abuser, and provision of shelter care and legal protection of the abused spouse communicates the message to her as well that the abuser is unacceptable. Terms of probation or parole that include psychotherapy serve to foster change at level three.

The use of dialogue groups can be considered a long-term strategy for transformation of identities in the case of larger social and political conflicts. Schwartz (see chap. 10) suggests that one of the functions of dialogue groups is to shift the nature of a relationship from one that is adversarial to one that is conciliatory. Under typical political circumstances in the context of an intractable conflict, such dialogue would be
faced with multiple obstacles and resistance from members of both parties. Grass-roots dialogue, according to Schwartz, may be able to sidestep some of these obstacles by virtue of the fact that it occurs outside the usual public channels. It provides a vehicle through which adversaries may more safely derigify their relationship. Just as the dialogue within the group has an impact on the identities of the members, the success of the group (or several groups) over a longer period of time may serve to change the constructs of other members of the adversary groups who have not engaged in dialogue. In this way, new ideas concerning the nature of the relationship, the nature of the conflict, and the possible solutions are generated. Like psychotherapy, such a process is necessarily long term, particularly at societal levels. The impetus begins at level two, with a focus on the relationship, and over time it serves to transform identities.

IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH

Research concerning intractable conflicts must take into account the role of identity in the escalation, maintenance, and transformation of such conflicts. The external conditions related to a conflict have a powerful effect on the behavior of the parties but only to the extent that these events and conditions are interpreted by the parties as being relevant to conflict. Traditional research, which only examines conditions, ignores the importance of subjective interpretations placed on these conditions by the parties.

One type of research which is rarely conducted, and which would more directly address the role of identity, is research that assesses the constructs of the parties themselves concerning the conflict and the conflictual relationship. Blending data concerning conditions surrounding a conflict with data about parties’ interpretations of those conditions and of each other should result in a richer base of information for the analysis of conflicts.

CUSTODY DISPUTES AND THE VICTIMS

RUTH L. WYNN

As Margaret Mead (1970) observed, we have constructed a family system that depends on the fidelity, monogamy, and survival of both parents, and we have never made adequate provision for the security and identity of children if a marriage is broken. Mead was referring to the American kinship system which recognizes blood lines, the sharing of a common genetic makeup, as the basis of the relationship between parents and their children (Schneider 1968). Reliance on this biological criteria has resulted in the establishment of equal claims for custody of children by their parents in cases of marital dissolution. That we are saddled with a system that does not work is becoming increasingly evident as divorcing parents battle over custodial arrangements. Clearly, the present scene regarding custody adjudication contains the potential for intractable conflicts to develop now that both parents are to be judged equally as possible custodians. Yet, family law as the recognized procedure for managing such otherwise insoluble problems is expected to impose closure on the disputes when parents are unable or unwilling to come to an agreement.

That custody disputes can become intractable conflicts means that the customary legal procedures for resolving them are no longer effective. This, in turn, suggests that the issue of custody has been so transformed that it presents an entirely different problem necessitating new solutions. How family law has addressed the custody dilemma of choosing between parents who cannot settle their dispute is the concern of this chapter. It will be considered in the context of a brief historical review of child custody law to discover whether such intractability was present in prior times, and if it was not, how it was avoided. Although the earlier solutions to the problem are historically contingent adaptations, they may contribute to an appreciation of the range of possible