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Intractable Conflicts

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Intractable conflicts are high-intensity, prolonged, violent conflicts that are perceived as irresolvable by the parties involved in them. These conflicts are usually characterized by self-perpetuating cycles in which sociopsychological infrastructures developed to assist the societies in conflict to cope with their harsh reality actually end up deepening the presence of the conflict in the collective psyche. This entry provides an overview of the features that comprise intractable conflicts and describes the sociopsychological infrastructures that constitute the self-perpetuating culture of conflict.

Intractable Conflicts Features

Intergroup conflicts erupt when two or more groups perceive their goals or interests to be in direct contradiction to one another's and decide to act on this basis. This very general situation is an inseparable part of human life and, as such, there are many different causes, dynamics, and outcomes of intergroup conflict (see Thackrah, 2009). Although mostly portrayed as negative, conflict can sometimes play an important role in altering dangerous, discriminatory, or unjust realities. Nonetheless, more often than not, intergroup conflicts come at great personal and social cost for all those involved and are the cause of some of the greatest tragedies in human history. Due to the immense effect of intergroup conflict on human society, research of conflicts plays a major role in the social sciences and has provided insights into an array of various types of conflicts throughout history and around the world.

Several factors are used to differentiate between different types of intergroup conflicts. These can be objective factors such as duration, intensity, and toll of the conflict or more subjective factors such as how the conflict is perceived, the magnitude and duration of felt emotions, or what psychological processes the conflict sets in motion. These different parameters have led to the development of an elaborate typology of intergroup conflicts over the years, whether it is in the work of Edward Azar, who advanced the concept of protracted conflict, or other social scientists who introduced additional concepts such as enduring rivalries (e.g., Mor & Maoz, 1999), malignant conflicts (Deutsch, 1973), and deep-rooted conflicts (e.g., Burton, 1987).

The diversity of conflict-defining parameters mentioned above makes it clear that conflicts cannot be defined by any one single parameter but instead should be differentiated according to a configuration of several factors. It is this elaboration that led Louis Kriesberg to offer an integrated, comprehensive criterion for classifying conflict on the intractable–tractable dimension. On one pole of this dimension are found tractable conflicts that are over goals of low importance and last a short period of time, during which the parties in dispute view the conflicts as solvable and are interested in resolving them quickly through negotiation. The other pole is constituted by intractable conflicts, which are prolonged; neither side perceives them as resolvable; they involve great animosity and vicious cycles of violence; they include vast mobilization of society members; and they are inherently self-perpetuating. Using this bipolar dimension that Kriesberg devised, different conflicts can be situated on the intractable–tractable spectrum according to their characteristics and can also shift along the spectrum as a result of significant changes in the conflict dynamics. Over the years, other scholars, such as Daniel Bar-Tal, have further refined the existing parameters and added additional ones, and today the following features constitute the acceptable conceptualization of intractable conflicts:

- *They are protracted.* Intractable conflicts persist for a long time, at least a generation. Their long duration implies that the parties in conflict have had many confrontational

experiences, and as a result, they have accumulated animosity and hostility. As the years pass, group members focus on negative experiences, remember them, and transmit them to the younger generation, who never knew a peaceful reality and are socialized within the context of the conflict. Moreover, the duration of intractable conflicts forces group members to adapt their lives to face the continuously stressful situation.

- *Intractable conflicts involve extreme violence.* Intractable conflicts involve physical violence in which group members are killed and wounded in wars, small-scale military engagements, or terrorist attacks. Such violence occurs over time, with fluctuating frequency and intensity. Over the years, not only soldiers are wounded or killed but also civilians, including women and children, and civil property is often destroyed. Additionally, intractable conflicts frequently create refugees and sometimes involve atrocities, including mass killing, “ethnic cleansing,” and even genocide. The consequences of physical violence, especially the loss of life, have an immense emotional impact on all group members. They perceive the violence as intentionally inflicted by the opposing party, as unjustified, sudden, untimely, and especially as violating the sanctity of life.
- *Parties engaged in an intractable conflict are deeply invested in the conflictual situation.* Parties engaged in an intractable conflict make vast material (e.g., military, technological, and economic) and psychological investments in order to cope successfully with the situation. These investments include mobilization of society members, training of the military, development of military industries, acquisition of weapons, development of supportive infrastructure in all spheres of collective life, and the formation of an ideology to explain and justify the conflict. All require human effort and material resources on the part of both individuals and groups.
- *Intractable conflicts are total.* Intractable conflicts are existential from the point of view of the participating parties. They are perceived as being about essential and basic goals, needs, and/or values that are regarded as indispensable for the group’s existence and/or survival. They usually concern a number of conflictive domains such as territory, self-determination, autonomy, statehood, resources, identity, economic equality, cultural freedom, free religious practice, central values, and the like, a reality that enhances their totality.
- *Intractable conflicts are of zero-sum nature.* Intractable conflicts are all-out conflicts, without compromises and with adherence to all the original goals. Each side focuses only on its own needs, perceiving them as essential for its survival, and therefore neither side can consider compromise and/or concession. In addition, parties engaged in intractable conflict perceive any loss suffered by the other side as their own gain, and, conversely, any gains of the other side as their own loss. This characteristic of conflicts touches many aspects of group life and adds special tension and stress. This zero-sum competition is not restricted to the bilateral conflict relationship but also affects relations with third parties and fans out into the international arena. That is, each side tries to maximize support and aid from the international community and minimize that offered to the opponent.
- *Intractable conflicts are perceived as irresolvable.* Society members involved in intractable conflict do not perceive any possibility of resolving the conflict peacefully. Many different reasons may underlie their perception—for example, a long history of failed attempts at peaceful resolution, the resistance of involved societies to change their conflict’s goals, or a lack of accommodating leadership. Since neither side can win, both sides expect the conflict to continue and involve violent confrontations. They take all the necessary steps to prepare themselves for a long conflict, and this requires major adjustments on the part of the groups involved.
- *Intractable conflicts are central.* Intractable conflicts occupy a central place in the lives of the individual group members and the group as a whole. Members of the society are

involved constantly and continuously with the conflict. It means that thoughts related to the conflict are easily accessible and are relevant to many decisions that society members make for both personal and collective purposes. The centrality of the intractable conflict is further reflected in its high salience on the public agenda. The media, leadership, and other societal institutions are greatly and continuously preoccupied with the intractable conflict.

The Psychological Dimension of Intractable Conflict

Conflicts, both tractable and intractable, tend to erupt over real objective issues such as territories, natural resources, self-determination, statehood, religious dogmas, and basic values. However, while such issues must be addressed in the attempts to resolve conflict, the fact that in their essence conflicts possess psychological subjective features and are accompanied by sociopsychological dynamics influences their nature and requires thorough consideration of these factors in order to understand as well as resolve and prevent these conflicts (see Bar-Tal, 2011; Fitzduff & Stout, 2006; Kelman, 2007; Tropp, 2012). With this in mind, the seven features mentioned earlier can be clearly divided into features of either objective or subjective nature. While the objective factors such as duration, material investment, or the presence of violence are more intuitive, the subjective factors can often go unnoticed both by the external spectators and even by the parties participating in the conflicts themselves. These subjective features are usually just as crucial to the comprehension, management, and resolution of conflicts as the more objective ones. It is for this reason that we will focus on this more subjective and psychological dimension of the intractable conflict from here on out.

The Intractable Conflict Self-Perpetuating Cycle

What is it precisely that causes the intractability of intractable conflicts? The contemporary literature on intractable conflicts describes a self-perpetuating cycle that when complete leads to conflict intractability. First, as a result of the exposure to the extreme conditions of a long-lasting violent conflict, societies in such conflicts develop specific needs in their struggle for survival. Two of the most basic needs in this regard are maintaining a sense of normality in light of the abnormal situation that conflicts bring about and the need to mobilize society for the collective conflict effort.

In the next stage of the cycle, once these needs arise, psychological mechanisms develop in order to address them. For example, perceptions of in-group righteousness or out-group delegitimization can provide a sense of purpose and reason in the face of the doubt and helplessness that intractable conflicts often evoke. In other words, such psychological mechanisms are what people use in the attempt to try to live a normal life in abnormal conflict circumstances. Similarly, psychological mechanisms enable mobilizing the members of a given society without doubt or delay, which is crucial in an intractable conflict scenario. The development of these mechanisms turns in time into a complex sociopsychological infrastructure that encompasses both these elements and provides continuous psychological support and social mobilization. This infrastructure has been termed *the culture of conflict* or the *psychological infrastructure of the conflict*, and it consists of three main aspects: the ethos of conflict, collective memory, and collective emotional sentiments (or orientation). The developed infrastructure underlies the evolved culture of conflict and lays the groundwork for the reconstruction of a collective identity with characteristics reflecting the conflict context.

Ethos of conflict is defined as “the configuration of central societal beliefs that provide dominant characterization to the society and [give] it a particular orientation” (Bar-Tal, 2000, p. xiv). It provides the shared mental basis for societal membership, binds the members of society together, gives meaning to societal life, imparts legitimacy to social order, and enables an understanding of society’s present and past concerns as well as its future aspirations. The ethos of conflict is composed of the following eight interrelated themes of societal beliefs (Bar-Tal, 2000; Rouhana & Bar-Tal, 1998):

1. Societal beliefs about the justness of one’s own goals
2. Societal beliefs about security
3. Societal beliefs of positive collective self-image
4. Societal beliefs of one’s own victimization
5. Societal beliefs of delegitimizing the opponent
6. Societal beliefs of patriotism
7. Societal beliefs of unity
8. Societal beliefs of peace

Ethos of conflict is a relatively stable worldview, which creates a conceptual framework that allows human beings to organize and comprehend the prolonged context of conflict in which they live and act toward its preservation or alteration in accordance with this standpoint.

Collective memory is defined, according to Wulf Kansteiner, as representations of the past, remembered by society members as the history of the group and providing the epistemic foundation for the group’s existence and its continuity. Collective memory constructs the narratives, the symbols, the models, and the myths related to the past that mold the culture of the group. Societal beliefs of collective memory, as a narrative, in the case of intractable conflict, evolve to present the history of the conflict to society members.

Emotional Sentiments

The nature of long-term intractable conflicts creates fertile ground for the continuation and aggregation of emotions beyond the immediate time frame. Hence, during the escalation of a conflict, alongside the cognitive aspects of the psychological repertoire of the conflict (i.e., collective memory and ethos of conflict), societies involved in intractable conflicts develop a set of collective emotional sentiments that is dominated primarily by hatred, despair, and fear (see Halperin et al., 2011). While emotions are multicomponential responses to specific events, sentiments are enduring configurations of emotions or a temporally stable emotional disposition toward a person, group, or symbol. Since most members of society do not experience many of the conflict-related events directly, these sentiments should be seen as group-based emotional sentiments, often targeted at another group. Once these sentiments take root, the members of the conflicting societies tend to become overly sensitized to the corresponding emotions, namely hatred, despair, and fear. This oversensitization cultivates constant negative emotions toward the out-group simply as a by-product of the sentiments even if the actual interactions do not necessarily call for such emotions.

The final stage in the intractable conflict cycle is when this sociopsychological infrastructure turns into a sociopsychological barrier in the face of new opportunities to promote conflict resolution and peacemaking. These psychological barriers, which are based on the psychological infrastructure described, obstruct and inhibit the penetration of any new, alternative information that could potentially facilitate progress toward peace. It leads to a selective collection of information, which means that group members tend to search for and

absorb information that is in line with their repertoire while ignoring contradictory information, which is viewed as invalid. Eventually, on the basis of such top-down information processing, society members tend to use their conflict-supporting beliefs as the main, if not only, input to be taken into account in making attributions, evaluations, judgments, or decisions about the conflict (see, for example, Sibley, Liu, Duckitt, & Khan, 2008; Skitka, Mullen, Griffin, Hutchinson, & Chamberlin, 2002).

From an emotional perspective, several emotional sentiments can become sociopsychological barriers to conflict resolution. The most destructive emotional barrier that influences beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors is *hatred*. In most cases, hatred involves appraisal of the behavior of an out-group as stemming from a deep-rooted, permanent evil character. As a result, hatred is associated with very low expectations for positive change and with high levels of despair, which altogether feed the conflict's continuation and the escalation. *Despair*, or the lack of *hope*, plays a significant role as a barrier to the resolution of conflicts as well. High levels of despair, or the lack of hope, do not allow members of groups that are involved in violent conflicts to imagine a future that is different from the past or to come up with creative solutions to the disputes at the core of the conflict. The absence of the belief that peaceful resolution of the conflict is possible prevents society members from even entertaining risk taking and compromising, and so it stabilizes the escalation stage of the conflict. Finally, *fear* may prevent attempts to break the vicious cycle of violence. More specifically, research suggests that experiences of threat and fear increase conservatism, prejudice, ethnocentrism, and intolerance.

Last but not least, mistrust is a very potent barrier that plays a major role in strengthening the conflict and preventing its peaceful resolution. It denotes lasting expectations that the rival intends to harm the in-group and is capable of doing so.

Although these barriers originate in psychological mechanisms designed to assist the conflicting societies in coping with their challenging reality, they end up ironically being the leading factors in the perpetuation of the conflicts. For as long as such psychological mechanisms subsist, the initial conflict-inducing needs only grow, the conflict-perpetuating psychological infrastructure is fortified, and the intractable conflict cycle will continue.

See also [Bureaucratic Politics](#); [Civil Wars](#); [Conflict Theory, Realistic](#); [Deterrence and International Relations](#); ["Do No Harm" as a Code of Action](#); [Greed Versus Grievance](#); [Military Action](#); [Nonviolence](#); [Rational Choice](#); [Relative Deprivation Theory](#); [Ripeness Theory and Conflict Resolution](#); [Social Identity Theory](#); [System Justification](#)

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