Protracted, intractable conflicts mark a new research frontier in the field of conflict studies. These intense, inescapable conflicts over issues such as critical resources, identity, meaning, justice, and power are complex, traumatic, and often resist even the most serious attempts at resolution. But why are they intractable? What characteristics distinguish intractable conflicts from more tractable, resolvable conflicts?

Scholars have begun to identify a diverse array of interrelated factors. This article is the first in a three-part series that presents a metaframework for protracted, intractable conflict: a broad conceptual framework for theory building and intervention. This article begins the series by outlining the unique characteristics and challenges posed by conflict in this domain.

Protracted, intractable conflict is a domain of human interaction that may very well determine our capacity to survive as a species. The news of the day (every day) tells the stories of countless, ongoing personal, group, and international struggles that appear to be inherently irreconcilable and potentially catastrophic. The intransigence, complexity, and trauma associated with these phenomena present substantial challenges to the models and approaches used by contemporary conflict scholars and practitioners.

Here are three contemporary examples.

The first conflict concerns a young couple, both Colombian immigrants in their early twenties, who came to the United States seeking work. They met and were married in the States, had a child, and secured modest jobs: he as an assistant dental tech-
ician and she as a domestic worker. They lived in New York City and struggled to get by, but in time they settled in and became very involved in their local Catholic church. They began running a marriage counseling group for other immigrant couples through the church. The young woman, who was more proficient in English than her husband, started providing other services to their community as well: working with gangs, prisoners, illegal immigrants, and addressing a host of problems over hunger, work, addiction, incest, and the like. Together with a Catholic Brother, the woman founded a social service agency to better meet the needs of a rapidly growing Colombian-immigrant community. Within a year she quit her job as a domestic worker to become codirector of the new agency and began to be recognized. She was regularly interviewed on local television, quoted in The New York Times, and soon was singled out for honors by city executives and officials of the Catholic Church. About this time, the couple began to experience tension at home. The husband felt that the woman had been neglecting his needs, their home, and their daughter, and he expressed deep resentment. He said his mother, other members of his family, and friends all agreed with him: Her priority should be her home. Despite this, the woman continued with her work, becoming more committed and more successful than ever. “There is just so much need in this community,” she said. Her mother and her siblings supported and celebrated her work. The couple, however, began to quarrel frequently, and one night the husband came home drunk and enraged and beat the woman. He then took their child and disappeared with her for 24 hours. The woman documented her injuries, but she knew if she pressed charges against her husband he would be deported, and her daughter would lose her father, a painful trauma that she herself had suffered as a young girl. After several tense encounters, the woman left the man and filed for legal separation. In response, he became more difficult and contentious: refusing to pay child support or grant a divorce and threatening to destroy her reputation within the community. The woman found herself in an untenable situation: unable to support herself and her child in New York, but unable to leave the state due to their custody arrangement, her desire for her daughter to remain with her father, and her commitment to her work. This conflict has remained in such a stalemate for nearly 10 years.

The second example involves a specific encounter regarding the protracted conflict over abortion and women’s rights. In response to a deadly shooting rampage at two abortion clinics in the Boston area in 1994, three pro-life and three pro-choice leaders/activists began meeting to have a dialogue about abortion. For 6 years these six women met together in secret, concerned about the repercussions that meeting with the other side might have on their own safety and on their standing and ability to lead within their own communities. In January 2001, they went public, coauthoring an article in The Boston Globe about their experiences of meeting together. They wrote, “We … made a commitment that some of us still find agonizingly difficult: to shift our focus away from arguing our cause. From the beginning, I have felt an enormous tension … between honoring the agreement
to not argue for our position and my deep hope—which I still feel—that these women for whom I have such great respect will change their minds about abortion.” The essence of their experience has been paradoxical. They wrote, “Since that first fear-filled meeting, we have experienced a paradox. While learning to treat each other with dignity and respect, we have all become firmer in our views about abortion.” This dialogue is ongoing (Fowler et al., 2001).

The third example is an ongoing ethnopolitical struggle among India, Pakistan, and Kashmiri independence rebels over Kashmir, a largely uninhabitable mountainous region that lies at the border between the two countries. This is a story that combines the increasingly common elements of terrorism, religious militancy, movements for local independence, and nuclear threat. Largely Hindu India and predominantly Muslim Pakistan became independent of the British Empire in 1947 and quickly went to war over Kashmir, a Himalayan territory that had been a princely state with a Hindu maharajah and mostly Muslim populace. The war ended with India controlling two thirds and Pakistan one third of the state. In 1989, Kashmiri independence rebels began a separatist struggle against India and were soon joined by Pakistani militants. India reacted by flooding Kashmir with soldiers and paramilitary troops. Both conventional and guerrilla war ensued. In recent years, the conflict has attracted a growing number of Islamic fundamentalists who define the conflict as a jihad, or holy war. Politicians on both sides have used Kashmir as a rallying point for so long that compromise is seen as political suicide. Even the most liberal, optimistic Indians and Pakistanis tend to turn conservative and belligerent when discussing Kashmir. The possible use of nuclear weapons by both sides has become a serious reality. On May 24, 2001, Atal Behari Vajpayee, the Prime Minister of India, ended its six-month cease-fire in Kashmir, calling it a sham. On May 25, Mr. Vajpayee officially invited Pakistan’s military ruler, General Pervez Musharraf, to India for peace talks. On a violent day in Kashmir where 14 people were killed, Mr. Vajpayee’s letter read, “Our common enemy is poverty. For the welfare of our peoples, there is no other recourse but a pursuit of the path of reconciliation.” In response, Pakistan’s foreign minister accused India of “state terrorism,” “repression,” and the massacre of 75,000 Kashmiris, while announcing that his nation would accept India’s invitation for talks “in a positive spirit” (Dugger, 2001).

Each of these stories is unique, but they share some essential characteristics. They are all complex situations with important historical, political, cultural, moral, legal, spiritual, and human dimensions. All are conflicts that have persisted for years, some for generations, with little change in direction, and that are likely to continue to persist. Each case also concerns paradoxical problems that are central, symbolic, and at times defining for individuals and groups: questions of life and death, right and wrong, justice and injustice, war and peace. They all involve groups who have become polarized over a conflict; who view their own group as righteous, their opponents as evil; and who have members who engage in inflammatory rhetoric and extramoral behaviors such as sabotage, violence, war, or genocide. And ultimately,
they all inflict personal and communal trauma, which takes a devastating toll on human life, emotional experience, meaning making, and reason.

This three-article series addresses working with protracted, intractable conflict. Its thesis is that conflicts of this nature are extraordinary; due to their high degree of intransigence, complexity, persistence, and malignancy, we must come to understand them in new ways. This requires seeing them as complex, nonlinear, self-sustaining systems and approaching them by means of a variety of interrelated and, at times, contradictory methods. Such an approach must also accommodate the idiosyncratic nature of these conflicts, as well as the changes and perturbations that occur with them over time. The series begins with a discussion of the characteristics of intractable conflicts, outlining the common dimensions that differentiate them from more tractable or resolvable conflicts. The next article in the series presents an overview of the main categories of approaches (or frameworks) for addressing intractable conflicts, examining the underlying values, assumptions, and objectives of each approach. Finally, a metaframework is presented: a broad conceptual schema that frames the general problem of intractability in terms of constructive change and views the various approaches to intervention as potentially complementary in service of such change. The basic elements and structure of the metaframework are outlined, and its implications for matching interventions to the appropriate phases, levels, and targets of a conflict system are discussed.

THE PROBLEM OF PROTRACTED, INTRACTABLE CONFLICT

Intractable conflicts are quite common. Today, despite the end of the Cold War, there are approximately 900 million people (one sixth of the world’s population) belonging to disadvantaged communal groups that are in or on the verge of conflict (Parakrama, 2001). In the 1990s, the Minorities at Risk Project documented a total of 275 minority groups at risk for ethnopolitical conflict in 116 nations. This constitutes 17.4% of the world’s population who belong to groups disadvantaged due to discriminatory practices or currently politically organized to defend their interests (Gurr, 2000). In 2001, there were 34 armed conflicts, mostly intrastate, each with battle deaths of more than 1,000 people (Gleditsch, Wallenstein, Eriksson, Sollenberg, & Strand, 2002). About 40% of current intrastate conflicts have persisted for 10 years or more, with 25% of the wars being waged lasting for more than 25 years (Smith, 1998). Some conflicts, such as the hostilities in Northern Ireland and Cyprus, have persisted for centuries. Enduring conflicts have been linked to one half of the interstate wars since 1816 (Friedman, 1999), with 10 out of 12 of the most severe international wars emerging from enduring rivalries (Bennett, 1996). Domestically, many nations face protracted intergroup conflicts over racial, class, and gender inequities, as well as over such issues as abortion rights, the death penalty,
and gun control. Similarly, the list of intractable interpersonal disputes, grudges, and feuds among family members, former friends, and personal enemies is substantial.

The consequences of protracted conflicts are often dire, including high economic costs, destruction of vital infrastructure, division of families and communities, extreme violence, dislocation, trauma, and intergenerational perpetuation (see Cairns & Darby, 1998; Coleman, 2000; Kriesberg, 1999; Lederach, 1997). For example, protracted conflicts contribute to high levels of world military expenditures, which currently approximate $842 billion (U.S. Department of State, 2001), far exceeding the amounts most governments spend on health care and education (Sivard, 1993). In 1997 there were about 17 million refugees and another 20 million internally displaced persons due to armed conflict (Harris & Reilly, 1998). And civilian casualties in armed conflicts have soared from around 5% during World War I to about 80% in the 1990s. In the decade from 1985–1995, an estimated 2 million children were killed in armed conflict, and three times as many were seriously injured or permanently disabled. Countless others were forced to witness or even to take part in horrifying acts of violence. During this same amount of time, 30 million civilians were displaced. The children in these settings often became caught in a desolate moral vacuum, a space devoid of the most basic human values, where they were slaughtered, raped, maimed, exploited as soldiers, starved, and exposed to extreme brutality (Wessells, 1998).

Domestically, many nations face serious consequences as a result of protracted intergroup and interpersonal conflicts. For instance, in the United States today, whereas White men hold 95% of all top corporate jobs—vice president and above—26% of African American families live in poverty. And although African Americans make up only 12.8% of the population, they make up one half of the U.S. prison population (1 million African American inmates; Sound Vision Foundation, 2001) and account for more than 50% of all new AIDS cases (The Newshour With Jim Lehrer, 2001). These disparities contribute to a sense of relative deprivation and injustice that results in ongoing struggles in the streets and in the courts (Gurr, 1970, 2000). For instance, in recent years, U.S. corporations such as Texaco and Coca-Cola have had to pay out hundreds of millions of dollars to settle complaints of racial discrimination (New Journal & Guide, 2001). On the interpersonal level, protracted family conflict and family violence in the United States alone costs from $5 to $10 billion annually in medical expenses, police and court costs, shelters and foster care, sick leave, absenteeism, and nonproductivity (Medical News, 1992).

PROTRACTED, INTRACTABLE CONFLICT DEFINED

Before I elaborate on the characteristics that distinguish intractable from tractable conflicts, a few comments on my terminology are in order. Intractable conflicts can
be broadly defined as conflicts that are recalcitrant, intense, deadlocked, and extremely difficult to resolve (Coleman, 2000). Others have used labels such as deeply-rooted conflict (Burton, 1987), protracted social conflict (Azar, 1986, 1990), and moral conflict (Pearce & Littlejohn, 1997) to depict similar phenomena. However, all of these terms collapse a variety of elements and characteristics of conflict that are important to delineate and differentiate.

I define conflict as the experience of incompatible activities (goals, claims, beliefs, values, wishes, actions, feelings, etc.). An incompatible activity “prevents, obstructs, interferes, injures” or in some way makes less likely or less effective another activity (Deutsch, 1973, p. 10). These experiences can occur within and between people and groups of people, can be expressed or left unexpressed, and can be experienced by the parties to the conflict or by observers external to the conflict (Boardman & Horowitz, 1994; Deutsch, 1973). These experiences can also differ by level of importance (from superficial to existential concerns), centrality (to one’s identity, esteem, and sense of reality), pervasiveness (number of interconnections with other conflicts and experiences), and duration. Conflicts also contain important differences in the objective structures of the various issues involved. They may be distributive in nature (zero-sum, but divisible), integrative (with satisfactory alternatives available for all), inefficient (complex and difficult with elusive but nevertheless real integrative or distributive potential), nonnegotiable (with indivisible qualities, but nevertheless resolvable), or intractable (inherently irreolvable). For example, the case of the Colombian immigrant couple involved a combination of distributive issues (such as the division of the woman’s time at home vs. at work), integrative issues (such as the mutual problem they faced on how to protect their daughter from the effects of the divorce), nonnegotiable issues (such as the man’s identity as a Colombian American male), and intractable issues (e.g., the traditional and modern values dilemma they both struggled over).1

However, it is principally the subjective experience of conflict that drives our reactions and behavior (Rubin, Pruitt, & Kim, 1994), which may or may not be congruent with the objective nature of the issues (see Deutsch, 1973), particularly under conditions of intense escalation (Fisher & Keashley, 1990). Over time, the young Colombian couple’s experience of the separate issues in their conflict collapsed into a more general and pervasive experience of intractability and hopelessness. Hence, some scholars use the phrase “seemingly intractable” to emphasize the difference between the perceived intractability of a conflict and an objectively intractable issue or situation (Pruitt & Olczak, 1995). In this series, I stress the need to comprehend both the objective (external, structural) elements of intractable conflicts as well as the subjective processes of perception and meaning making, which contribute to their obduracy. Thus, I use the phrase protracted,

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1I will elaborate on the nature of intractable dilemmas in the next section of this article.
intractable conflict to emphasize the enduring and intransigent character of both the structure and experience of such conflicts.

CHARACTERISTICS OF PROTRACTED, INTRACTABLE CONFLICTS

But what makes protracted, intractable conflicts protracted and intractable? Scholars have begun to identify a diverse and complex array of interrelated factors that can help us distinguish between tractable and intractable conflicts. However, the selection and presentation of these factors presents several challenges. First, a wide range of potentially important factors has been identified by past theorizing and research, yet to include them all would be onerous and beyond the scope of this article. Therefore, I have selected to present those characteristics that have been identified repeatedly as among the major causes of this type of conflict or that are thought to be directly linked to their self-sustaining nature.

Second, the phenomenon of intractable conflict is best characterized as a complex, dynamic, nonlinear system with a core set of interrelated and mutually influential variables (see Christie, Wagner, & Winter, 2001; Diamond & McDonald, 1996; Lederach, 1997). The nature of such systems both necessitates and defies a systematic and concrete analysis of its variables. That is because, on the one hand, it is necessary to clearly specify the central variables of the system in order to define the boundaries of the domain of intractable conflict that differentiate it from tractable conflict systems (Dubin, 1976). However, on the other hand, it is critical when depicting such dynamic systems to avoid oversimplifying or “essentializing” variables that are often not dichotomous and/or are highly malleable and reactive in nature.

Therefore, building on previous models of conflict escalation and stalemate (Fisher & Keashly, 1990; Rubin, Pruitt, & Kim, 1994) and prior theorizing on intractable conflict (Kriesberg, 1998; Pruitt & Olczak, 1995; Rouhana & Bar-Tal, 1998), I have organized the distinguishing characteristics into the following “fuzzy” (somewhat overlapping) and highly interactive categories: aspects of the context, the issues, the relationships, the processes, and the outcomes of the conflict (see Figure 1). These five categories represent the elements of a protracted, intractable conflict system at a high level of abstraction. These elements interact according to a principle of circular causality, where each influences and in turn is influenced by the others. The twelve characteristics outlined in this article are subdimensions of one of the five main categories, which thereby introduces further complexity into the system.2 However, for purposes of clarification and classifica-

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2Although many of the characteristics could be categorized under more than one main heading (e.g., identity formation is a process and an outcome that involves relationships), they have been included where their impact on a conflict’s intractability seems most germane.
tion at this stage of model building, I present and discuss each of the twelve character-
istics as theoretically distinct and dichotomous (see Table 1).

An additional set of challenges inherent in presenting a general overview of the characteristics of intractable conflicts concerns the idiosyncratic nature of these conflicts and the difficulty of generalizing knowledge across levels of analysis. Conflicts may be or may become protracted and intractable for a variety of reasons. Therefore, it may not always be useful to compare, say, moral conflicts with intractable conflicts over territory or water rights, or conflicts between a husband and wife in the United States with those between a powerful majority group and members of a low-power group in East Asia. For instance, the Colombian American family case differs radically from the Indian–Pakistani international conflict in terms of the number of parties and issues involved, the relative ease of separation of the parties and enforceability of agreements, and the degree of involvement of outside representatives, institutions, and bureaucracies (see Rubin & Levinger, 1995, for an excellent discussion of cross-levels comparisons). However, despite the many differences that arise in such comparisons, I suggest that intractable conflicts, particularly if they have persisted for some time, share to some degree some or all of the following characteristics.3

3The relative weights of the various factors will vary depending on the particular set of conditions prevailing in any intractable conflict situation.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I. Context</th>
<th>Tractable Conflict</th>
<th>Intractable Conflict</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A. Historical dominance and injustice</td>
<td>History of relative equality; hierarchy attenuating myths; limited episodes of relational dominance or injustice.</td>
<td>History of oppression; Pervasive cultural and structural dominance, violence, injustice, and victimization; insulated elite.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Change, instability, and anarchy</td>
<td>Periods of constancy and stable order; balance of power; effective institutions; strong situations.</td>
<td>Periods of rapid, substantial change; Compromised norms and institutions; Changes in aspirations; Power shifts and ambiguity; Anarchy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. Issues</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A. Human and social polarities</td>
<td>Resolvable and finite problems; integrative or distributive potential; negotiated agreements.</td>
<td>Dialogic poles; paradoxical dilemmas; denial, discounting, differentiation, or dialectical responses.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Symbolism and the construction of meaning</td>
<td>Isolated, tangible issues; little latent content; disconnected from other issues and narratives.</td>
<td>Intricate interconnections of issues; high centrality; truth; meaning embedded within basic assumptions, beliefs, and ideologies.</td>
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<tr>
<td>III. Relationships</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>A. Inescapable, destructive relations</td>
<td>Inclusive structures; escapable; reparable; mixed motives with negotiable core.</td>
<td>Exclusive structures; inescapable; destroyed; intense mixed-motives with intractable core.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Polarized collective identities</td>
<td>Unrelated to conflict; complex, open, adaptive.</td>
<td>Polarized collective identities; constructed around arbitrary dimensions of conflict; monolithic and exclusive, frozen.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. Internal dynamics</td>
<td>Involves conscious needs and motives; groups are unified; agendas are covert and explicit.</td>
<td>Involves unconscious needs and defenses; intragroup divisions and factions; hidden agendas.</td>
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</tbody>
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(Continued)
TABLE 1
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<tr>
<th>IV. Processes</th>
<th>Tractable Conflict</th>
<th>Intractable Conflict</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A. Intense emotionality</td>
<td>Emotions are mainly superficial or peripheral; passing; socially constructed constraint.</td>
<td>Humiliation, deprivation, loss, and rage, as well as loyalty and dignity are central; socially constructed volatility.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Malignant social processes</td>
<td>Low to moderate intensity; minimal violence or nonviolent encounters; inclusive moral scope.</td>
<td>High intensity; escalatory spirals; psychological and structural changes; moral exclusion; violent atrocities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. Pervasiveness and complexity</td>
<td>Clear boundaries; low to moderate complexity; few levels and parties; stable.</td>
<td>Pervasive; high complexity; multilevel; multiparty; mercurial.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. Outcomes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A. Protracted trauma</td>
<td>Unsettling and anxiety provoking, when traumatic, effectively addressed.</td>
<td>Individual and community trauma; fractured trust; repressed or left unaddressed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Continuous duration</td>
<td>Brief time span; sustainable resolutions; constructive norms; shifting commitments.</td>
<td>Historical rivalries; enduring cycles of low-to-high-to-low intensity; destructive norms; intergenerational perpetuation; lasting commitments.</td>
</tr>
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Intractable conflicts emerge from a context with a history of domination and perceived injustice. Intractable conflicts regularly occur in situations in which there exists a severe imbalance of power between the parties, and the more powerful party exploits, controls, or abuses the less powerful (Coleman, 2000). Often, the power holders in such settings will use the existence of salient intergroup distinctions (such as ethnicity or class) as a means of maintaining or strengthening their power base (Staub, 2001). Many of these conflicts are rooted in a history of colonialism, ethnocentrism, racism, sexism, or human rights abuses in the relations between the disputants (Azar, 1986). For instance, all three of the example cases involved either a history of colonialism and ethnocentrism (Kashmir case) or issues related to sexism and women’s rights (the marital and abortion conflicts). These legacies manifest in ideologies and practices at the cultural, structural, and relational levels of these conflicts, which act to maintain hierarchical relations and injustices and thereby perpetuate conflict (Coleman & Voronov, 2003).

For example, at the cultural level, dominant groups often shape the playing field: defining the criteria for what is to be considered good, just, fair, and normal in a given setting. This includes defining prosocial versus antisocial forms of violence (e.g., “freedom fighting” vs. “terrorism”), morality, religion, ideology, politics, education, and so on. This can be achieved through the obvious tactics used by totalitarian rulers (such as Hitler and Stalin), or more subtly through political “spin”, by emphasizing biased accounts of history in schools and textbooks, by indirectly controlling or censuring the media, or by keeping the judiciary and the legislature in the hands of the dominant group.

These criteria, and the extent to which power disparities between people and between groups are accepted in any society, are embedded and constructed within a contradictory set of “legitimizing myths” about hierarchy and group superiority present in every society (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). These myths, or systems of beliefs, tend to either support and enhance hierarchical relationships and dominant group superiority (examples include sexism, racism, classism, meritocracy, and conservatism) or challenge and attenuate these social arrangements (e.g., feminism, multiculturalism, pluralism, egalitarianism, and liberalism). These divergent sets of myths exist in a state of oppositional tension in many social systems (e.g., conservatism vs. liberalism), which can provide important checks and balances against the fanaticism of either side. Intractable conflicts are most likely to emerge from settings with a preponderance of hierarchy enhancing myths, where such beliefs legitimize the ongoing oppression of low-power groups but are identified as such and rebelled against by the oppressed. Tractable conflicts will be associated with the existence of more balanced systems of beliefs or with societies shaped largely by hierarchy-attenuating belief systems (see Sidanius & Pratto, 1999, for a related discussion).
In some settings, these criteria and myths become infused into the “fairness-making” and “conflict-resolving” structures, thereby institutionalizing group dominance, bias, and conflict (Rapoport, 1974; Smyth, 2002). As such, we see patterns of structural victimization emerge, where members of low power groups are denied their identity, security, and right to effective political participation (Azar, 1986). The essence of structural victimization is that people’s most basic human needs for dignity, safety, and control over their life are jeopardized or denied. When this victimization is tied to important group memberships (gender, race, class, etc.) and experienced as unjust by the parties, it leads to intense intergroup struggles (Deutsch, 2003). This is a major claim by the current Muslim majority in Kashmir under Hindu rule.

At the structural level we also see the establishment of opportunity structures that grant the powerful unequal or exclusive access to positions of leadership, jobs, decent housing, education, health care, nutrition, and the like. Galtung (1969) labeled this pattern of oppression “structural violence” because of its insidious and deleterious effects on marginalized communities. These factors contribute to a setting where difficult material circumstances and political conflict lead to social disorganization, which makes it harder for some people to get their basic physical and psychological needs met. This results in a pervasive sense of powerlessness for many members of low-power groups. The privileged circumstances of the powerful, on the contrary, insulates them and contributes to their lack of attention and response to the concerns of those in low power until a crisis, such as an organized or violent act of protest, demands their attention (Deutsch, 1985; see Fiske, 1993). Typically, the powerful respond to such acts of protest with prosocial violence to quell the disturbance and maintain the status quo. This pattern of deprivation–insulation–violence–repression largely accounts for the long-term, cyclical nature of many intractable conflicts.

Relational episodes of dominance and injustice are common. When these occur as isolated incidents, unrelated to oppressive structures and cultures, they are more readily resolvable through dispute resolution. With intractable conflicts, we see widespread patterns of overt and covert oppression, ranging from subtle acts of moral insubordination or “civilized oppression” (Harvey, 1999) to organized campaigns of genocide and ethnic cleansing (Staub, 2001). These relational patterns and practices vary in the degree to which they are formal (explicitly sanctioned) versus informal and the degree to which they are automatized (internalized and acted on unwittingly) versus conscious and deliberate (Coleman & Voronov, 2003). When such relational practices are seen as embedded within the oppressive structures and myths of a group or a nation, they become a source of protracted, intractable conflict. For example, the husband in the marital case was acting on the internalized belief that men should have careers and women should work in the home, a myth strongly supported by his family, community, and culture of origin.
Intractable conflicts are most likely to surface (or resurface) under conditions of significant change, instability, or anarchy. Contexts that provide a stable sense of order act to contain conflict. This is so whether they are benign and democratic in nature or coercive and totalitarian (although there are obvious differences in the consequences of such systems). In fact, even the order provided by the tense standoff between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War served to diminish and temporarily contain a variety of local and regional conflicts (Crocker, Hampson, & Aall, 1996; Lederach, 1997). A sense of stability can come from a variety of sources, including steady contact with reliable parents and leaders, interfaces with predictable and functional institutions, or through long periods of constancy in the balance of power in the larger social system. Such orderliness and consistency provides people with a sense of clarity and predictability about their world, which brings with it certain comforts. Under these conditions, group expectations and aspirations remain relatively constant (Gurr, 1970). And when institutions are well functioning, such conditions elicit a degree of institutional trust. Conflict under these conditions tends to follow a fairly predictable course, is less likely to escalate into violence, and when it does, is more readily contained and managed.

When circumstances bring about substantial changes, they can rupture this sense of stability and cause great disturbances within the system. This is true whether it is the divorce of two parents, the failure of a state, or the collapse of a superpower. Ruptures can also occur when well-intended social interventions such as civil or human rights advocacy work, democratization, or socioeconomic development are implemented too rapidly (Gurr, 2000; Lund, 1997). Such changes can trigger or generate latent, protracted conflicts.

There are several reasons why radical changes in the status quo are associated with protracted conflicts. First, normal conditions are typically “strong” situations in which normative influences on social behavior (customs, norms, rituals, etc.) are clearly delineated and well understood (Mischel, 1977). The strength of such norms constrains individual differences and encourages behavioral conformity. Significant change, particularly when sudden, can weaken normative influences and allow for the expression of individual and subgroup needs and concerns. They can also bring into question the old rules, patterns, and institutions that have failed to meet these needs and concerns. Such questioning can decrease the level of trust shared in fairness-creating and conflict-resolving procedures, laws, and institutions, adversely affecting their capacity to address problems and further destabilizing the situation.

Second, conflict can emerge when a sense of relative deprivation arises out of changes in aspirations, expectations, or achievable outcomes of the parties (Gurr, 1970). These changes can be brought on by circumstances such as difficult economic conditions in which outcomes previously attainable become unattainable, by changes in group expectations due to opportunities in other areas (e.g., educa-
tional achievement), or through changes in people’s comparison groups. When these shifts result in a gap between what people feel they deserve and what they feel they can achieve, a sense of relative deprivation ensues. If this becomes chronic, and if violence is seen as instrumental to closing this gap, intergroup violence is likely to follow.

Third, conflict may surface because of shifts in the balance (or imbalance) of power between disputants or because of increased ambiguity about relative power brought about by changing circumstances (Rubin, Pruitt, & Kim, 1994). This can trigger a deep sense of uncertainty and confusion over rank and power and can motivate two types of aggressive behavior: actions by those previously low in power to claim their rights and actions by those previously high in power to protect their status. For instance, the ambiguity of power brought about in 1947 when India and Pakistan became independent of British rule set the conditions for the subsequent power struggle between the two countries over Kashmir. Similarly, the rising success and celebrity of the Colombian American woman shifted the balance of power in the couple’s relationship and contributed to her feeling sufficiently empowered to go against her husband’s wishes and become more deeply involved with her work. Conversely, the husband’s feelings of loss of status and control in the relationship fed his intense rage and led to his violent lashing out.

Anarchical situations, where there is a lack of an overarching political authority or of the necessary checks and balances that help manage systems, are an extreme example of power vacuums that can foster protracted conflict. These conditions provide little basis for mutual trust (Deutsch, in press), leading to a focus on short-term security needs, worst-case scenarios, and the use of threat and coercion (Levy, 1996). Anarchical conditions, such as those associated with the atrocities in Somalia in the 1990s, are thought to be one of the main reasons violent conflict proliferates in the international arena (Crocker, Hampson, & Aall, 1996).

**Issues**

*Intractable conflicts involve basic human and social polarities that are paradoxical in nature.* Tractable conflicts by definition involve resolvable problems that can be integrated, divided, or otherwise negotiated to the relative satisfaction of a majority of the parties involved. As such, they have a finite beginning, middle, and end. Intractable conflicts often revolve around some of the more central dilemmas of human and social existence that are not resolvable in the traditional sense. These are polarities (structured contradictions) based on opposing human needs, tendencies, principles, or processes, which have a paradoxical reaction to most attempts to “solve” them (Johnson, 1996; Morgan, 1997). These can include dilemmas over
• **Stability versus change.** People everywhere struggle to hold onto the stability and sense of continuity provided by their view of history and the status quo (a sense of self, tradition, ancestry, worldview, etc.) while attempting to adapt to a changing economic, political, technological, and social environment (see Schwartz, 1992). For example, President Khatami of Iran recently proclaimed, “We must live in a world where we can understand new phenomena and have an answer for them. If we try to impose on a changing society issues which do not belong in our time, we will end up harming religion” (Reuters, 2001). This captures the essence of the dilemma. When substantial, the need for change triggers anxieties in people, which result in the need for increased stability and resistance to change; and the faster the rate of change, the more resistance is mobilized (Schein, 1993). This can result in a splitting off of this dilemma into staunch conservatives and radical progressives.

• **Identity: integrity versus complexity.** In life, we often go through a process of constructing “serviceable others,” developing a sense of other people and groups that puts our groups and ourselves in the best possible light (Sampson, 1993). This can help us defend against our experience of feeling helpless and powerless if one is disadvantaged or treated unfairly or the feelings of guilt or immorality if one is advantaged over others. This process is particularly acute in intractable conflict and can serve the purpose of stabilizing and protecting a person or group’s integrity and esteem. However, the tendency to disparage the other ultimately impairs our capacity to comprehend complex issues and to be aware of our own and the other’s complexity, thereby jeopardizing our ability to adapt to changing circumstances (Hicks, 1999). This dilemma is clearly evident in the attitudes and actions of many of the oppositional identity groups that have developed around the abortion issue in the United States.

• **Interdependence versus security.** People and groups are often caught between their basic dependence on the other for long-term survival and their simultaneous wish to conquer or annihilate the other. Thus, their need to thrive and promote a state of general welfare (through engagement and peace with the other) is seen as contradicting their need to vigilantly protect themselves and their group from harm (through isolation and defense). For instance, in the conflict in Kashmir, the groups are highly dependent on each other to protect the local people, environment, economy, infrastructure, and sacred symbols from irreparable harm. This is an inescapable fact. However, the groups also harbor a deep wish to lash out and annihilate the other and are at times willing to destroy their own communities to achieve this. Coercive campaigns against one’s opponent may be based on the belief that one can unilaterally prevail over the other or the unconscious need to fight to the death to protect one’s group from annihilation. However, these strategies often decrease the sense of security they are intended to increase and end up unleashing more destruction on one’s own people.
• **Power: efficient versus inclusive.** This dilemma goes back to the debate between Aristotle and Plato over the relative values of elite control versus pluralist democratic participation in society (see Allport, 1985). On the one hand, elite rule and hierarchical structures (headed by the philosopher-intellectuals) tend to be more efficient and orderly, allowing for more informed control and swiftness in response when needed. On the other hand, elite control can be exclusive, self-serving, and out of touch with the needs of the populace. More democratic arrangements can lead to increased commitment to decisions, better quality decisions, more satisfaction, and more development opportunities for more people. Diversified democracies are also believed to preserve peace through the expression of the interests of all people. However in large groups, shared control can be extremely slow and inefficient and can result in a variety of pathologies (see Deutsch, 1985). Thus, either arrangement has its strengths and weaknesses. Conflicts over shared control versus elite control are at their core a dynamic struggle over creating governance processes that are informed, inclusive, and efficient.

• **Time: short-term versus long-term goals.** When serious problems or crises arise, constituent groups normally look to their leaders to address them in a timely fashion. However, many of the social, economic, and political problems leaders face today are complex matters where information is scarce or contradictory and require considerable time for effective analysis, planning, and implementation. Furthermore, these problems typically occur in a context where there are multiple problems demanding attention, which may or may not be related. Thus, leaders are often driven (and rewarded) to suggest quick solutions to problems that insufficiently address the roots of the problems (Welsh & Coleman, 2002). A similar dilemma occurs in intractable conflicts when crisis efforts (such as peacekeeping and humanitarian aid) are at odds with longer term efforts for achieving justice and building sustainable peace (see Lederach, 1997, for an extensive discussion). The crux of this dilemma is having contradictory short-term and long-term goals and reward structures.

• **Capital: profits versus costs.** Karl Marx (1976) identified a primary contradiction between profits and costs built into the nature of “capital” and thus the structure of capitalist societies. Marx saw capital (the *surplus value* that arises as a result of trading goods and services at a profit) as containing a basic tension between the costs of goods and services and the need to make a profit (through, say, the reduction of labor costs or the expansion of markets). This contradiction places people (buyers and sellers, employers and employees, market competitors, members of the labor pool) in a constant state of opposition. This can lead to a host of secondary tensions, such as conflict between indigenous populations and new immigrants in their search for jobs, tensions between management and unions, and many of the racial and social problems that arise during difficult economic times (Morgan, 1997).
• **Coping versus adapting.** Many of the coping mechanisms that act to protect and insulate individuals and communities from the psychological damage and stress of protracted trauma (such as denial, suppression, projection, justification, etc.) impair their capacity to process information and function effectively (Lazarus, 1985). Thus, the ability to make sound, rational decisions regarding a conflict (such as cost and benefit assessments and a thorough consideration of alternatives and consequences) is adversely affected by the need to cope with the perceived threats associated with the conflict (through a denial of costs, glorification of violent strategies, and dehumanization of the other). When defensive coping mechanisms effectively protect people from harm, the motivation to seek alternatives to violence and to act to change the situation and find a peaceful solution is diminished (Rouhana & Bar-Tal, 1998).

These seven dilemmas are merely representative of the many such problems that can exist at the core of protracted conflicts. They often result from the existence of common and inescapable geographical, political, economic, social, and psychological structures. However, it is not simply the presence of these polarities that drives and sustains conflict, but rather when human attempts to manage them generate unintended consequences.

Typically, the opposing sides in protracted conflicts attempt to resolve their problems by advocating movement from one side of these dilemmas to the other. This is often paradoxical. For example, in a protracted community conflict over public school governance, movement toward community control of the school, although increasing a sense of dignity (minority representativeness) and control (for the parents), is likely to engender resistance from the teachers’ unions and central board, thereby decreasing the parents’ ultimate sense of agency and control over their children’s education. Such initiatives fail to address both sides of the power dilemma, such as the need for governance systems that are informed, efficient, and inclusive. Furthermore, as one side moves to gain unilateral victory over the other in such conflicts, they threaten and empower hard-liners on the other side, engendering ever more resistance, escalation, and destruction.

Theoretically, there are five possible responses to such dilemmas (Peng & Nisbett, 1999). The first is *denial*, a common response that entails ignoring the contradiction or pretending it does not exist. This can have short-term benefits (as in the temporary management of anxiety) and long-term negative consequences (such as intensification of the problem). The second is *discounting*, where people distrust or discount information from both sides of the dilemma because of the dif-

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4 Others may include dilemmas over trust (Deutsch, 1973; Kimmel, Pruitt, Magenau, Konar-Goldband, & Carnevale, 1980), justice (Deutsch, 2000; van Zyl, 1999), economic vs. social rationality (Deising, 1961; Deutsch, 1985), and various negotiation dilemmas (Deutsch, 1994; Kelman, 2001; Lewicki et al., 1994).
ficulty of reconciling the contradiction. The third and most common in conflict, *differentiation*, involves a comparison of both sides of the dilemma resulting in a polarized decision that, ultimately, one side is right and the other is wrong. Psychologists have suggested that people often prefer this process as a manner of reducing the cognitive dissonance caused by two such contradictory cognitions (Festinger, 1957). The remaining two responses, dialectical and dialogical thinking, are both attempts at managing these dilemmas by acknowledging the value of both perspectives and retaining basic elements of both. However, these approaches differ in their basic assumptions about the nature of the dilemmas, which illustrate a core difference between tractable and intractable conflicts.

**Dialectics** is a philosophy where phenomena are thought to be defined by and seen as generating their opposite (such as life and death, day and night, war and peace) and are thought to exist in a constantly changing state of tension and balance (see Morgan, 1997). A dialectical course of change is conflictual in that it proposes that all stages or states of being and relating are “overcome” as life proceeds through a “spirallike ascension defined by the triad thesis/antithesis/synthesis” (Toscano, 1998, p. 70). Thus, conflicts are seen as driven by oppositional forces that can be overcome, transformed, and integrated with each other on an ongoing basis. As such, conflicts are seen as resolvable through a synthesis of the opposing sides of the dilemma. This is a basic assumption of most models of conflict resolution, including integrative negotiation (e.g., win/win solutions), mediation, and problem-solving workshops (Toscano, 1998).

The philosophy of *dialogics* takes a similar view of the importance of contradiction in change but differs in its perspective on the relations and dynamics between opposites. Based on the work of the Russian analyst, Bakhtin (Holquist, 1990; Todorov, 1981), the dialogical relation is defined as one “where ‘thesis’ and ‘antithesis’ can never be subsumed into a higher ‘synthesis,’ but are instead destined to constitute the permanent poles of a noneliminable tension” (Toscano, 1998, p. 70). Many basic dilemmas are thought to be propelled by these tensions, but this view does not require one side of the equation to be overcome by another for change to occur. Constructive change results from the capacity to accept the permanence of the tension and to find ways to proceed that respect this permanence.

The dialogue on abortion is illustrative of the presence and management of such a noneliminable tension. After 6 years of respectful, articulate, humanizing dialogue, each individual participant became more committed to and more polarized over the central dilemma of women’s rights and the rights of the unborn fetus. From a dialogic perspective, this specific issue cannot be resolved but may result in remedies that respect the oppositional constancy of these differences. This philosophical and practical perspective is viewed by some as a rudimentary requirement for peaceful coexistence between conflicting groups (Toscano, 1998; also Deutsch, 2000; Rawls, 1996) and defines the core structure of many intractable issues.
Intractable conflicts involve deeply symbolic issues, ideologies, and processes of meaning-construction. More tractable conflicts tend to involve one or more tangible issues, which are seen as generally unrelated to other problems in the relationship between the parties and carry little latent content. When conflicts become more meaningful, with more connections to other difficult issues, higher centrality of meaning, some degree of latent as well as identifiable content, and are the focus of considerable public discourse, they become much more problematic. Such conflicts may be enduring and onerous, but ultimately their resolution, though demanding, may be successful.

Protracted, intractable conflicts tend to have a depth of symbolic meaning, centrality, and interconnectedness with other issues that give them a pervasive quality (Rouhana & Bar-Tal, 1998). The tangible issues (land, money, water rights, etc.) that trigger hostilities in these settings are largely important because of the symbolic meaning that they carry or that is constructed and assigned to them. For instance, Ariel Sharon’s visit to the Temple Mount in Jerusalem in 2000 was seen as a frivolous gesture to some and as a flagrant attack on Islam to others. Or, in Kashmir, much of the mountainous territory in dispute is frozen, uninhabitable wasteland, yet soldiers and civilians die each day to secure it. Such specific issues (resources, actions, and events) become symbols of great emotional importance through social interaction between people and through their connection to existing conflict narratives: stories that define the criteria for what is good, moral, and right in any given conflict setting (Bar-Tal, 2000; Kelman, 1999; Toscano, 1998). In the abortion dialogue, the definition and meaning of terms such as violence and life varied markedly between the groups of participants and were embedded within each group’s dominant narrative. These narratives typically offer answers to the central dilemmas of a conflict, emphasizing the “objective” goodness of one side’s claims over the other’s. As a result, contradictory narratives emerge for each of the disputing groups and become promoted to unquestioned fact or truth.

When such “truth” gets evoked, conflicts often cross a threshold into intractability through certain self-sustaining processes. First, hostile engagement in conflicts over the truth is often viewed by the parties as virtuous (Pearce & Littlejohn, 1997). In fact, when the truth is at stake, continuation of the conflict is usually preferred to compromise, which is considered unbearable or immoral. Negotiation over truth is seen as a form of absurdity and betrayal, and suffering pain for one’s cause becomes good. Zartman (2000) writes

"Parties thinking as true believers are unlikely to be led to compromise by increased pain; instead, pain is likely to justify renewed struggle (Hoffer, 1951). Justified struggles call for greater sacrifices, which absorb increased pain. The cycle is functional and self-protecting. The first party increases its resistance as pressure and pain increase, so that pain strengthens determination. (p. 239)"
Intractable dimensions of conflicts (such as the abortion rights issues) are often embedded within a larger set of values, beliefs, identities, and cultures (such as the parties’ religious beliefs, ethical principles, philosophical worldviews, or cultural traditions), which contributes to the monolithic nature of the parties’ experience of the conflict. At this level, these conflicts involve the basic molds for thought and feelings within given communities and cultures that can differ radically between groups. When threatened, they move the conflict to a new level of existential meaning (Lederach, 1997; Rothman, 1997). The intensity and pervasiveness of this threat overwhelms people’s capacity to separate different issues and recognize shared concerns, thereby subjectively transforming all elements of the conflict into simple us versus them terms (see Conway, Suedfeld, & Tetlock, 2001, for a related discussion of “integrative complexity”). Thus, as in Kashmir, the disputants see no way out of any aspect of the conflict other than through total victory or defeat and become willing to suffer substantial losses to their own safety, sacred lands, and community to attain victory.

Relationships

Intractable conflicts are embedded in inescapable, destructive relationships with a complex constellation of issues and an exclusive social structure. The nature of the relationships that distinguish tractable from intractable conflicts tends to differ along four important dimensions. First, with intractable conflicts, the relations between the parties develop in situations where exclusive social structures limit intergroup contact and isolate the in-group across family, work, and community domains (see LeVine & Campbell, 1972). This lack of contact facilitates the development of abstract, stereotypical images of the other, autistic hostilities and intergroup violence. Scholars have found that integrated or cross-cutting social structures—including ethnically integrated business associations, trade unions, professional groups, political parties, and sports clubs—are one of the most effective ways of making intergroup conflict manageable (Deutsch, 1973; Varshney, 2002).

Second, with tractable conflicts, the parties may have the option of removing themselves from the relationship. In other words, the circumstances of the relationship may allow for the parties to exit the situation without suffering severe consequences. With intractable conflicts, the relationships are inescapable and the parties “see no way of extricating themselves without becoming vulnerable to an unacceptable loss” (Deutsch, 1985, p. 263). This may be due to a variety of constraints, including geographical, financial, moral, or psychological factors. Such situations lead to a pervasive belief in enduring hostilities where the disputants feel locked into the intensity and oppression of the conflict relationship (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986).
Third, although disputants often come to experience intractable conflicts as monolithic and fundamentally win–lose or lose–lose, they are typically intense mixed-motive dilemmas with core nonnegotiable or intractable elements. In other words, the nature of the interdependent relationship of the parties in intractable conflicts is usually an intense, often inescapable combination of cooperative and competitive goals, which at their core concern issues that are irreconcilable or non-negotiable. Tractable conflicts also typically involve mixed-motive relations, but with a negotiable core.

The case of the abortion dialogue is illustrative of this complexity and of the discrepancy between conflict structures and experiences. The six leaders/activists who eventually participated in the process were initially wary of meeting with the members of the other side because of, among other things, their clear-cut views on both abortion and “the opposition,” as well as their fears of being tainted or harmed through direct contact with the other side. They were all high-profile leaders in the Boston community, were deeply committed to their causes, and were therefore inescapably interdependent with the opposing side. During their 6 years of dialogue, they came to identify their common interests (nonviolence, respect for women, thoughtful engagement with moral dilemmas, etc.), their competitive interests (funding, constituents, legal decisions, etc.), and the intractable core of their respective causes (a woman’s right to choose and a need to protect the rights of unborn fetuses). These came to be understood as separate, if interrelated, issues. In fact, in time the participants came together to establish a hotline to protect each other’s communities from violent acts originating from their own groups. It is important to emphasize that through the abortion dialogue process, the disputants themselves came to see the mixed-motive complexity of their relations, despite the even greater polarization of their positions on the abortion issue.

Finally, intractable conflicts that escalate and de-escalate but persist over time tend to damage or destroy the trust, faith, and cooperative potential necessary for constructive or tolerant relations. This can be particularly so when conflictual relations come close to making peace, only to lapse back into violence. In such relationships, the negative aspects remain salient, and any positive encounters are forgotten or viewed with suspicion and misconstrued as aberrations or attempts at deception (Thorson, 1989). The self-sustaining nature of this dynamic contributes to the sense that such relations are beyond repair.

**Intractable conflicts are maintained by the development of polarized collective identities among members of the in-groups.** During the progression of protracted conflict, disputants develop a significant identification with and commitment to the individuals and groups that are allied with them in the conflict (McCauley, 2001). Conversely in these situations, disputants organize against and expend considerable energy in opposition to the “other.” New in-groups and...
out-groups form with membership being delineated along the authentic but arbitrary categories relevant to the conflict (nationality, ethnicity, gender, race, religion, etc.; Kelman, 1999). These group distinctions and the collective identities that ensue initially serve instrumental functions such as resisting oppressive opportunity structures, staking claims to territory and sovereignty, or buffering each group’s social identity and esteem (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Kelman, 1999). In time, however, the collective identities that emerge take on meaning and value of their own.

As the conflict escalates, the opposing groups become increasingly polarized through in-group discourse and out-group hostilities, resulting in the development of polarized collective identities constructed around a negation and disparagement of the out-group (Druckman, 2001; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Kelman, 1999). This is particularly likely with collective identities of ascribed statuses (such as family, sex, racial, and national group membership) where there is a long-term emotional attachment to the group that is unalterable and significant (Deutsch, in press). When such group identities are subject to discrimination or oppression (and such treatment is viewed as unjust), protracted conflicts are likely to manifest and persist. This can even occur within groups in an already polarized setting, such as with the current divisions between the Pakistani government and the various extremist factions in Pakistan and Kashmir. These group memberships can provide members with a sense that “they belong to a distinct, cohesive, and superior social group that provides them with mutual respect, a meaningful understanding of the social world, and the collective strength to act efficaciously” (Simon & Klandermans, 2001, p. 321). However, deep investments in these polarized identities can become a primary obstacle to constructive forms of conflict engagement and sustainable peace (Hicks, 1999; Kelman, 1999, 2001, in press; Toscano, 1998).

Over the long course of development of polarized collective identities, changes occur in the psychological states of individuals, the structure and function of groups, and in the nature of the broader community in which the conflict is situated, which contribute to the enduring nature of the identities and the intractability of the conflict (Coleman, Johnson, & Lowe, 2002). These include convergence toward monolithic identities where “all dimensions of a group’s identity—such as ethnicity, religion and language—tend to be viewed as highly correlated” (Kelman, in press, p. 193); the development of fictive kinships, which emphasize group loyalty and negatively sanction behaviors and attitudes at odds with group symbols and criteria for “good” group membership (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986); viewing one’s group identity as zero-sum, such that a negation of the other becomes a fundamental aspect of this identity (Kelman, in press); and developing out-group images that are negative, homogeneous, abstract, and stereotypical and contain an emotional dimension of strong dislike, which helps maintain the image and provides disincentives for seeking new information (Stein, 2001; Toscano, 1998). These changes are situated within more pervasive in-group narratives that
provide a justification for the conflict and an account of the group’s origin, history, and relationship to its rights and claims. Over time, these identities are maintained and passed on to future generations through parenting, the media, the teaching of history, and other socialization processes (Kelman, 1999; Toscano, 1998).

Ultimately, a high level of in-group identification, coupled with the high degree of threat perceived from the other in intractable conflicts, elicits a basic impulse (self-preserving and other-annihilating) that freezes learning—in service of survival (Hicks, 1999). Thus, the ongoing processes of adaptation through social interaction associated with normal states of identity development (assimilation and accommodation) cease to function. As a result, any sense of openness to interactions with the other are experienced as threatening to one’s basic sense of integrity and stability. We saw this occurring in the early stages of the dialogue on abortion. Rigid beliefs and decreased complexity, uncertainty, and ambivalence follow in an attempt to maintain a stable sense of self. In other words, in an attempt to cope with the destabilizing threat of the other, people deny their adaptive learning mode. This results in a frozen sense of us versus them, which seems impossible to change under conditions of high threat.

Tractable conflicts, by comparison, tend to involve people and groups whose collective identities have developed along dimensions unrelated to the conflict, who share only a superficial identification with conflict-defined groups, or who have otherwise managed to remain open, complex, and adaptive in their relations with the in-group, the issues, and the out-group in the conflict. Typically, these individuals do not identify deeply with groups they see as subjected to systematic forms of oppression, or if they do, identify as well with other groups who have made a conscious commitment to constructive engagement with the other (Coleman, Johnson, & Lowe, 2002). Such individuals and groups can be a constructive force, even under intensely intractable conditions.

**Intractable conflicts are perpetuated by the internal dynamics of the individuals and groups involved.** Conflict is more likely to be resolvable when it concerns conscious needs and motives between unified groups or between individuals with little ambivalence regarding resolution over overt issues that can be explicitly detailed and addressed. As such, the conflictual intrapsychic and intragroup dynamics and hidden agendas associated with intractable conflicts contribute to their impossible nature. Their complex character consists of both implicit and explicit issues, formal and informal agendas, and deliberate and unconscious processes. In addition, the high degree of threat, harm, and anxiety associated with them leads to a felt need for defensiveness and secrecy, which drives many motives, issues, and actions underground. These dynamics take three forms.

First, protracted conflicts are perpetuated by the *internal psychological life of the individuals involved.* Inner conflicts within each of the parties are often dis-
placed, suppressed, or channeled into the external conflict, contributing to a deep investment in the continuation of the conflict (Deutsch, 2002). For example, they might provide an acceptable excuse for internal problems, provide a distraction so internal problems appear less salient, or enable one to have a sense of excitement, purpose, coherence, and unity that is otherwise lacking in one’s life (Deutsch, 1994). They may also enable one to project disapproved aspects of oneself (which are not consciously recognized) onto the adversary and to attack them through attack on the adversary. The unconscious fantasies, anxieties, and “hidden transcripts” that lie beneath protracted social conflicts can act to “blur realistic considerations, lead to irrational actions, and create resistances to change and progress toward adaptive negotiations” (Volkan, 1998, p. 343). These defenses are particularly likely to be triggered under conditions of high mortality salience (awareness of the eventuality of our own death) where unconscious death-related anxieties motivate people to become more deeply committed to their cultural groups as a means of buffering such anxiety (Greenberg, Solomon, & Pyszczynski, 1997; McCauley, 2001).

At another level we find complex intragroup dynamics. For instance, group-unity and leader control are thought to be key to effective negotiations and sustainable peace agreements (Lederach, 1997; Sisk, 1996). However, often politically motivated leaders (who manipulate intergroup divisions), extreme intragroup divisions and militant factions, and apathetic or divisive bystanders (such as family members, members of diasporas, peers, the media, neighboring states, or the international community) play an important role in inciting and maintaining hostilities (see Kriesberg, 1998; Rubin, Pruitt, & Kim, 1994; Simon & Klandermans, 2001; Smith, 1998; Staub, 2001). In fact, some scholars suggest that the intractability of many protracted international conflicts can be traced to the “two-level” dilemma faced by the leaders involved (Starr, 1999). This is the problem of managing a difficult domestic political landscape while simultaneously responding to an international crisis. For example, Rushdie (2002) has suggested that the current tensions between India and Pakistan over Kashmir can be traced partly to the domestic difficulties the ruling parties of both countries are facing at home. In these times, international conflict escalation can serve to distract and unify a nation struggling within its own borders, thereby allowing the leadership to stay in power. The importance of such intragroup dynamics is often minimized within the context of intensely hostile intergroup exchanges.

Finally, the role of deliberate hidden agendas must be considered. The endless perpetuation of many intranational and international conflicts can be directly affected by deep investments that states and multinational corporations have in maintaining these conflicts. For instance, Thomas Friedman, a columnist for The New York Times, has written repeatedly about the utility of the Israeli and Palestinian conflict for deflecting internal criticism of ineffective, autocratic leaders in the Arab world (Friedman, 2002a, 2002b). He argues that the Middle East conflict
serves to capture the imagination and channels the rage of many Arab nationals, who might otherwise turn the target of their dissent toward home. Others have suggested that the same strategy is currently being employed within the United States, accusing the Bush administration of attempting to wage war on Iraq to distract U.S. citizens from their domestic financial problems (Krugman, 2002). Friedman (2002c) has also suggested that Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Kuwait have strong economic interests in the current conflict between the United States and Iraq. He claims that these oil-producing countries reap rewards from Iraq’s remaining a pariah state, because it negatively affects Iraq’s ability to produce oil and depress the global price of oil. Others have similarly questioned the role that economic interests play in U.S. foreign policy. All of these opinions share the belief that the actions and interactions of parties in protracted conflicts can be strongly influenced by ulterior motives that rarely emerge as part of the official positions of the primary parties to the conflict.

Processes

**Intractable conflicts are fueled by intense emotionality.** Economically rational models of costs and benefits or positions and interests cannot begin to model the substance and fabric of protracted social conflicts. These malignant social processes have a boiling emotional core, replete with humiliation, frustration, rage, threat, and resentment between groups and deep feelings of pride, esteem, dignity, and identification within groups. In fact, some scholars contend that extreme reactions seen in many conflicts are primarily based in emotional responses (Pearce & Littlejohn, 1997). However, until recently researchers have paid little attention to the role that emotions play in conflict (Barry & Oliver, 1996). In effect, the overall distinction between emotionality and rationality may be rather dubious when it comes to intractable conflicts, where they are often inseparable. Here, indignation, rage, and righteousness are reasons enough for retributive action. This is the essential dimension of human suffering and pain, of blood and sorrow, which in large part defines the domain of intractable conflict.

For instance, Gurr (1970) has theorized about the pivotal role that feelings of relative deprivation have in fostering violence. These are the feelings of extreme frustration that groups experience when they sense that there is an unjust gap between what they can achieve and what they deserve, relative to other referent groups. When these feelings are chronic, intense, and combined with the sense that violence can be instrumental to closing this gap, violence is likely to follow.

In a similar vein, research on the psychology of humiliation has illustrated its central function in intractable conflict. Lindner (2001, 2002) conducted a 4-year research project in Somalia, Rwanda, and Burundi entitled *The Feeling of Being Humiliated: A Central Theme in Armed Conflict*. The study was inspired by the
popular assumption that the humiliation of the Germans brought on by the Versailles Treaty after World War I was partly responsible for the Holocaust and World War II. From interviews with 216 disputants in these settings in Africa, the author found feelings of humiliation to be among the strongest emotions available to humans, that they can permeate people’s lives with an all-consuming intensity, and that they are among the most potent forces that create rifts between people.

However, it is not merely the type, depth, and staying power of emotions that distinguishes tractable from intractable conflict, but rather differences in the structures and processes that imbue them with meaning. Our feelings of raw emotion (hate, rage, pride) are often labeled, understood, and acted on in ways that are socially constructed (Pearce & Littlejohn, 1997). Averill (1986) described emotional experience as shaped by rules and norms that define what certain emotions mean, whether they are good or bad, and how people should respond to them. Thus, similar raw emotions may be constructed and acted upon differently in dissimilar families, communities, and cultures. Communities entrenched in an intractable conflict may unwittingly encourage emotional experiences and expressions of the most extreme nature, thereby escalating and sustaining the conflict. Other communities might in fact discourage such extreme responses to emotions, labeling them as superficial or passing, in an effort to maintain community harmony. This is a relatively unexplored area of research in the conflict literature.

**Intractable conflicts are exacerbated by malignant social processes.**

Tractable conflicts may move through periods of escalation and de-escalation and may involve incidents of violence, but overall they tend to be of low to moderate intensity, nonviolent, and conducted within a shared moral community (see Opotow, 2001). Intractable conflicts differ on all these dimensions.

Over time, a variety of cognitive, moral, and behavioral processes combine to bring protracted conflicts to a level of high intensity and perceived intractability (see Fisher & Keashly, 1990; Rubin, Pruitt, & Kim, 1994). They include such cognitive processes as stereotyping, ethnocentrism, selective perception (such as the discovery of confirming evidence), self-fulfilling prophecies (when negative attitudes and perceptions impact the other’s behavior), and cognitive rigidity. These can fuel processes of deindividuation and dehumanization of the enemy, leading to moral disengagement (Bandura, 1982) and moral exclusion (Opotow, 2001): that is, the development of rigid moral boundaries between groups that exclude out-group members from typical standards of moral treatment. This can result in a variety of antagonistic behaviors such as escalatory spirals (where each aggressive behavior is met with a more aggressive response), autistic hostilities (a cessation of direct communication), and violence.

Acts of violence ensure the deterioration and pathology of intractable conflicts. These can range from destruction of property, intimidation, and personal violence
to terrorism, military engagement, ethnic cleansing, genocide, or full-scale wars. Cultural or societal norms that legitimate the use of force create an environment particularly conducive to the continued use of violence in conflicts. For example, in an analysis of 90 preindustrial societies, Ross (1993) found that exceptionally intense violence is significantly more likely in cultures where children are typically reared in cold or harsh families, particularly when children are routinely physically or emotionally abused. The availability and glorification of lethal weapons is another factor that increases the likelihood of violence in conflict (Lederach, 1997). What is unique to intractable conflict is the pervasiveness and persistence of psychological and physical violence, how it typically leads to counterviolence and some degree of normalization of violent acts, and the extreme level of destruction it typically inflicts (see Christie, Wagner, & Winter, 2001).

In intractable conflicts, these violent, escalatory processes culminate in the development of malignant social processes, which Deutsch (1983, 1985) described as “a stage (of escalation) which is increasingly dangerous and costly and from which the participants see no way of extricating themselves without becoming vulnerable to an unacceptable loss in a value central to their self-identities or self-esteem” (1985, p. 263). This stage affects many aspects of interpersonal and intergroup functioning so that communication between parties becomes nonexistent, the other is viewed as non-human, relations are seen as hopeless, the conflict is framed in terms of survival needs, and the outcomes are seen as lose–lose, with a desire to inflict as much harm on the other as possible (Fisher & Keashly, 1990). It can also lead to structural changes in groups, such as runaway norms, the rise of militant leaders and subgroups, and extreme community polarization (Rubin, Pruitt, & Kim, 1994). This results in aggressive-defensive maneuvers that tend to take on a life of their own and lead to outcomes of mutual loss and harm (Deutsch, 2002).

Intractable conflicts operate with a high degree of pervasiveness and complexity. Tractable conflicts have relatively clear boundaries that delineate what they are and are not about, who they concern and who they do not, and when and where it is appropriate to engage in the conflict. In intractable situations, the experience of threat associated with the conflict is so basic that the effects of the conflict spread and become pervasive, affecting many aspects of a person’s or a community’s social and political life (Rouhana & Bar-Tal, 1998). The existential nature of these conflicts can impact everything from policy making, leadership, education, the arts, and scholarly inquiry to the most mundane decisions such as whether to shop and eat in public places. The totality of such experiences feels impenetrable.

Although hostilities may be most obvious at a given level (e.g., between groups), intractable conflicts affect and are affected by elements at multiple levels. These elements interact in complex ways, leading to increased chaos and
confusion. The centuries-old conflict in Northern Ireland is a good example of this multilevel complexity. The Irish “troubles,” long understood as a religious conflict between Catholics and Protestants in Ireland, at its base is a conflict between those who wish to see Northern Ireland remain part of the United Kingdom and those who wish to see the unification of the island of Ireland (Cairns & Darby, 1998). Religion, of course, plays a role in this conflict, as do global affairs, a history of international dominance, economic and other types of inequality (access to education, health care, housing, jobs, etc.), issues of social identity, the existence of multiple factions within each community, and serious concerns over human rights abuses and the use of terrorist tactics. These structural and group-level factors have a considerable impact on interpersonal relations (between friends and enemies) and personal functioning (mental and physical health, decision making, voting behavior, etc.).

Intractable conflicts also tend to involve many more parties in various roles within the conflict system. The primary opposing individuals or groups exist within a network of other relationships that may or may not be opposed. This can include formal and informal third parties, elites, observers, bystanders, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), business organizations, and so on (see Crocker, Hampson, & Aall, 1999; Diamond & McDonald, 1996; Staub, 2001). For example, in the family conflict case, the couple’s relations with siblings, parents, in-laws, extended family, friends, neighbors, members of their church community, and others significantly affected the relations between the husband and wife. These relationships can serve to either ameliorate the conflict or to further the divide, but they contribute to the complexity of any actions and reactions in the system. In Kashmir, relations between the Indian, Pakistani, and Kashmiri leadership are dependent on, among others, relations between the leaders and their general publics, hawks and doves within both groups, formal and informal representatives, extremist factions on both sides, the media and the public, business communities on all sides, regional neighbors, the Muslim and non-Muslim world, and the international community.

Finally, intractable conflicts are systems in flux. Thus, the “hot” issues in the conflict, the levels where they manifest, the critical parties involved, the nature of the relationships in the network, the degree of intensity of the conflict, and the level of attention it attracts from its bystander communities are all subject to change. This chaotic, mercurial character contributes to their resistance to resolution.

Outcomes

**Intractable conflicts result in a protracted state of trauma for individuals and communities.** The experience of prolonged trauma associated with these conflicts produces, perhaps, their most troubling consequences. Long-term expo-
sure to atrocities and human suffering, the loss of loved ones, rape, bodily disfigurement, and chronic health problems can destroy people’s spirits and impair their capacity to lead healthy lives. After the genocide in Rwanda, one study found that 90% of all survivors showed signs of psychological trauma (Carney, 1994). Children who are exposed or subjected to abuse and violence, orphaned by war, inducted into service as child soldiers or as soldiers’ “wives,” are often the most deeply traumatized. In a UNICEF survey of 3,030 children in Rwanda in 1995, nearly 80% had lost immediate family members, and more than one third of these had actually witnessed the murders (Wessells, 1998).

Trauma literally means “wound” but takes many forms. It can be the result of a loss of home and property; betrayal by friends, neighbors, or family; exposure to violence, rape, torture, or disease; prolonged hunger and thirst; or having loved ones killed or missing (Agger, 2001). It can also be the result of committing violent acts and atrocities (MacNair, 2002). At its core, trauma is a loss of trust in a safe and predictable world. In response, individuals suffer from a variety of symptoms, including recurrent nightmares, suicidal thoughts, demoralization, helplessness, hopelessness, anxiety, depression, somatic illnesses, sleeplessness, and feelings of isolation and meaninglessness. Trauma adversely affects parenting, marriages, essential life choices, and the manner with which authority figures take up leadership roles. It also impairs communities and can hamper everything from the most mundane merchant–client interactions to voting and governmental functioning (Parakrama, 2001).

Many types of conflict can be traumatizing to some degree. However, the links between trauma and intractability seem to lie in the degree of impairment of individuals and communities and, in particular, to the manner in which trauma is addressed. In her analysis of Bosnia, Agger (2001) writes

From the Second World War there was a “powerful reservoir of traumatic memory” (Denich, 1994, p. 367) of the atrocities committed, which also at that time were fueled by ethnic ideology. After the war, when Tito became President it was forbidden to speak publicly about the atrocities—especially those committed by the partisans who had been led by Tito. When the present war started in 1991, it was as if these memories that had been preserved in the icebox of history (Parin, 1994) became defrosted, and began emanating the taste and smell of all the pain, sorrow, guilt, shame and anger that had been conserved so well by a policy of taboo and repression during the previous fifty years. After the war broke out, these feelings could be exploited by nationalist propaganda and become a vehicle for ethnic cleansing. (p. 245)
Agger’s analysis suggests that the effective treatment of protracted trauma through such modalities as intercommunal dialogue, truth and reconciliation commissions, and even individual psychotherapy may be one of the keys for transforming intractable conflicts into tractable ones.

**Intractable conflicts endure.** The Colombian American marital conflict has been stalemated for more than 10 years. The polarized conflict over abortion rights in the United States has played out for decades. And the conflict over Kashmir predates Indian and Pakistani independence in 1947. All these conflicts share a long-standing history of rivalries and animosities between the main disputants and between the various internal factions of the conflicts. Each one also has a turbulent present and a troubled future. This, by definition, distinguishes them from more tractable conflicts.

Intractable conflicts persist over time and cycle between lower level endemic problems and crises, with sporadic increases in their intensity and occasional outbreaks of violence (Coleman, 2000; Kriesberg, 1998). At times, these conflicts may go underground and appear to be resolved, but if their root causes are not addressed they tend to resurface and intensify when external circumstances permit or encourage their expression. This pattern of suppression and resurgence is exemplified by the conflict over racial inequality in the United States. Thus, the race riots in Cleveland in the winter of 2001 can be seen as a resurgence of the rioting in the streets of South Central Los Angeles in 1994, which was a resumption of the violence over similar concerns for opportunity, respect, and self-determination that were voiced but insufficiently addressed during the Watts riots in Los Angeles 25 years earlier. Although these disputes erupted at different times and in distinct locales, it would be a mistake to assume that they were unrelated to the common plight of a collective identity group.

In these perpetually polarized, traumatized, and malignant systems, destructive processes gradually come to be experienced as normative by the parties involved (Coleman, 1997; Parakrama, 2001; Wessells & Monteiro, 2001). The biased construction of history, ongoing violent discourse, and intergenerational perpetuation of the conflict contribute to a sense of reality where the hostilities are as natural as the landscape. For example, Israeli and Palestinian youth in the Middle East were found to accept and justify the use of violence and war in conflict significantly more than youth from European settings of nonintractable conflict (Orr, Sagi, & Bar-On, 2000). In addition, they found Israeli and Palestinian youth more reluctant than Europeans to be willing to pay a price for peace. Again, what appeared to matter in this study was how the meaning of violence differed for the youth from these different settings. The violence and war discourse in the Middle East, passed down through the distinct parental and community ideologies of the Israeli and Palestinian communities, depicted violence as an act of self-defense and war as a noble
cause. This type of ideology has been found to shield youth from the psychological harm typically associated with exposure to violence (Punamäki, 1996). Thus, increased levels of violence had become normalized for the Middle Eastern youth and were seen as necessary and useful particularly because of the perception that negotiations were impossibly costly (in terms of the nonnegotiable concessions that would need to be made).

Finally, the atrocities associated with these conflicts generates considerable long-term animosity between the disputants that becomes integrated into the socialization processes of the respective families, groups, or societies involved in the conflict (see Aboud & Amato, 2001, for a related discussion). The documentary film *Promises* (Goldberg & Shapiro, 2000) depicts this with chilling clarity. It is a film about Israeli and Palestinian youth growing up in and around Jerusalem from 1998 to 2000, which documents the influential role of peers, families, schools, religious organizations, and the media in shaping the children’s experience of the history of the conflict, the critical issues, their own communities, and the other. Through such socialization processes, new generations of potential disputants are propagated, fed by a sense of loyalty to the in-group, images of the evil enemy, and the rage and resentment due for past wrongs. Such processes guarantee a future of destruction.

**CONCLUSION**

Intractable conflicts appear impossible to resolve, and for good reason. Their paradoxical structure, depth of meaning, emotionality, complexity, and trauma are often experienced as overwhelming to the parties and to third parties alike. The cycle of deprivation—escalation—violence—suppression associated with them seems endless. And the perpetual justification of atrocity after atrocity by the leaders and warriors involved in these settings only degrades the human soul. How, then, can they be approached?

Unfortunately, there exists no simple and sovereign theory that can account for the intractability of these mercurial and destructive phenomena. Each of the characteristics outlined in this article sheds some light on the many causes, states, and processes of intractability, and each is important to understand in detail. But, ultimately, it is the interaction of these various characteristics that brings these conflicts to such a state of recalcitrance. Therefore, we must develop the capacity to understand intractable conflicts as the dynamic interplay of these myriad forces.

This article raises several challenges for our current methods of conceptualizing and understanding protracted, intractable conflicts. First, we must come to see them as a set of complex issues and relationships nested within equally complex psychological, social, political, economic, moral, and technical systems. Second, we must recognize the nonnegotiable and paradoxical nature of some of the central
issues in these conflicts. Third, we must comprehend the socially constructed and symbolic nature of the triggering issues, the conflict processes, and the polarized identities that unfold in these settings. Fourth, we must be mindful of the essential roles that intergroup dominance and the perception of injustice play. Fifth, we must view these malignant relations as long-term, cyclical processes, which may take considerable time (and many cycles) to change constructively. Sixth, we must come to better understand the critical roles that emotional experiences, trauma, and attempts to cope with dire circumstances play in the perpetuation of such deadly encounters. And finally, we must learn to approach intractable conflicts in a manner that is both mindful of these phenomena and open to whatever new realities exist on the ground.

The next article in this three-paper series will provide an overview of the main categories of approaches for addressing intractable conflicts, examining the underlying assumptions and objectives of each approach. The purpose of such an overview is to begin to understand the potential of each approach to be viewed as one component in a broad, eclectic, systems approach to addressing protracted, intractable conflicts. In the final article, a metaframework will be presented that offers a conceptual basis for such an eclectic system of just and peaceful change.

**BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE**

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“"It is a perversely fascinating fact of life as we enter the 21st century that, while our capacity to destroy our fellow human beings is in effect infinite, and the globalization and interconnection of the world is now almost beyond comprehension – in spite of these developments, concepts of national security and foreign policy still rely almost exclusively on assumptions of direct threat, counterthreat, and the like."

Robert S. McNamara and James G. Blight (2001), Wilson’s Ghost, p. 74