



Intractable Conflict

Andrew R. Smith

Edinboro University, PA, USA

What is it?

Intractable conflict is conflict that persists over time, resists resolution, and involves some form of violence (physical, structural, symbolic) between conflicting parties. Those involved perceive one another as threats, distort messages from and about the other in order to sustain enmity, become polarized and rigidified in their positions, and ultimately collude as identities become dependent on sustaining tensions. Typically, at least one party to the conflict benefits from intractability and maintains a dominant position over the other. Mediation attempts by third parties not only fail to resolve the conflict, they often exacerbate it. As a result, entire populations of people are affected and suffer injustices of various kinds, including isolation, marginalization, discrimination, displacement, exploitation and statelessness.

Who uses the concept?

Intractable conflict is a concept that is used by mediators and scholars in the fields of international affairs, policy analysis, conflict studies, diplomacy, and increasingly in communicology. The United States Institute of Peace (USIP) sponsors research and has published several books on the topic. Most intractability scholarship focuses on conflict between states, or between ethnic and communal groups within states, but those researching abortion rights, doctor assisted suicide, creationism vs. evolutionism, custody battles, interpersonal conflict in organizations, and boundary disputes generally also invoke the term. Of crucial importance in using the concept is specifying the forms of violence and communication involved that sustain polarization.

Fit with intercultural dialogue?

By definition, intercultural dialogue is absent or at best lacking in instances of intractable conflict. In its place are distortions of messages, propaganda that rationalizes violence and dehumanizes the adversary. Mediation attempts work at creating meta-cultural contexts for dialogue that transform polarized relationships.

What work remains?

In recent years there has been an increase in communication scholarship on intractability, with focus on framing in multiparty conflict, the dynamic between law and civil society, the development of meta-frameworks that address issues of complexity and change, divergent thinking and problem solving, the role of argumentation in changing psychological dispositions, and mediating ethno-political conflict. Given the role of power and violence in intractability, research is needed from critical rhetorical, hermeneutic, cultural, feminist and other applied philosophical perspectives.

Resources

- Avruch, K. (1998). *Culture and conflict resolution*. Washington, DC: USIP.
- Coleman, P. T. (2000). Intractable conflict. In M. Deutsch & P. T. Coleman (Eds.), *The handbook of conflict resolution: Theory and practice* (pp. 428–450). San Francisco: Jossey Bass.
- Crocker, C.A., Hampson, F.O., & Aall, P. (Eds.). (2005). *Grasping the nettle: Analyzing cases of intractable conflict*. Washington, DC: USIP.
- <http://www.beyondintractability.org/>