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Reflections on the Practice of Interactive Conflict Resolution Thirty Years Out

Twelfth Annual
Vernon M. and Minnie I. Lynch Lecture

by

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About the Speaker

Ronald J. Fisher, after many years as Professor of Psychology at the University of Saskatchewan, is currently Professor of Conflict Analysis and Management at Royal Roads University in Victoria, British Colombia. Professor Fisher is one of a small but distinguished band of Canadian scholars whose work has contributed much to our understanding of the dynamics of social conflict and of its resolution. Beginning his career in social psychology in the 1960s, he rapidly established a reputation for himself as a scholar interested in both the theoretical and psychological aspects of "being in conflict" and the practical application of academic insights in the actual resolution of intractable, real world disputes.

Taking an early and systematic interest in the use of problem solving approaches to conflict resolution, Professor Fisher has written widely about the use of dialogues and workshops between adversaries, always taking a careful and critical stance in an effort to see what made such initiatives successful (or not), how success ought to be defined, and what factors influenced immediate and longer term outcomes. Among other major influences on the field, he was responsible for first clarifying the distinction between the informal process of "consultancy," as opposed to mediation or negotiation; for introducing the bases of contingency theory into the study of third party interventions into conflict; and for coining the now widely used term "interactive conflict resolution" as a useful label for a variety of unofficial processes that sought to develop solution for intractable social conflicts. His many distinguished publications include *The Social Psychology of Intergroup and International Conflict Resolution* (Springer-Verlag; 1990); and *Interactive Conflict Resolution* (Syracuse University Press; 1997).

As a scholar-practitioner, Professor Fisher has devoted much time and effort to building bridges between the communities on the island of Cyprus, as well as being involved in many intervention initiatives in his native Canada. He worked for a time in the Canadian Institute for International Peace and Security (now, alas, defunct) and has provided conflict resolution training at the Austrian Study Center for Peace and Conflict Resolution in Stadtschlaining, the UN Institute for Training and Research in Geneva, and innumerable departments and agencies within Canada. Most recently he has devoted attention to the beginnings of the movement for informal and unofficial interventions into protracted social conflicts—consultancy, "track two" or interactive conflict resolution—that form the focus of his presentation in the Twelfth Annual Lynch Lecture.

About the Lectures

Friends of the Institute for Conflict Analysis and Resolution and prominent Virginians Edwin and Helen Lynch made a substantial gift to George Mason University in 1987 to establish a chair, first held by the late Dr. James H. Laue and now by the Institute's director Dr. Kevin P. Clements, in the name of Mr. Lynch's parents, Vernon M. and Minnie I. Lynch. Mr. and Mrs. Lynch have continued to provide invaluable support, both material and spiritual, to the Institute.

In order to bring the idea and theory of conflict analysis and resolution to the entire University community, and in gratitude to Mr. and Mrs. Lynch, the Institute established the annual Lynch Lectures. Previous lecturers have been James H. Laue (1987), John W. Burton (1989), Kenneth Boulding and Elise Boulding (1990), Richard E. Rubenstein (1991), Ambassador Samuel E. Lewis (1992), Roger Wilkins (1993), Deborah M. Kolb (1994), Rajmohan Gandhi (1995), Johan Galtung (1996), Anatol Rapoport (1997), and Donald W. Shriver (1998).

The Lynch Lectures are published as Occasional Papers by the Institute for Conflict Analysis and Resolution and, along with other publications of the Institute, are available from the George Mason University bookstore.

About the Institute

The Institute for Conflict Analysis and Resolution at George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia, has as its principal mission to advance the understanding and resolution of significant and persistent conflicts among individuals, communities, identity groups, and nations.

In the fulfillment of its mission, the Institute conducts a wide range of programs and outreach. Among these are its graduate programs offering the Doctoral and Master of Science in Conflict Analysis and Resolution, clinical consultancy services offered by individual members of the faculty, and public programs and education that include the Annual Vernon M. and Minnie I. Lynch Lectures.

The Institute's major research interests include the study of conflict and its resolution, the exploration and analysis of conditions attracting parties in conflict to the negotiating table, the role of third parties in dispute resolution, and the application of conflict resolution methodologies in local, national, and international settings. The Institute's Applied Practice and Theory Program (APT) develops teams of faculty, students, and allied practitioners to analyze and address topics such as conflict in schools and other community institutions, crime and violence, and jurisdictional conflicts between local agencies of government.

Associated with the Institute are affiliate organizations including the Consortium on Peace Research, Education, and Development (COPRED), an international network of more than 300 colleges' and universities' peace studies programs; the National Conference on Peacemaking and Conflict Resolution (NCPCR), which conducts a biennial conference and maintains communication with conflict resolution professionals nationwide; and the Northern Virginia Mediation Service (NVMS), which provides conflict resolution and mediation services and training to schools, courts, and local agencies and practitioners in communities across Northern Virginia and the Washington metropolitan area.

Reflections on the Practice of Interactive Conflict Resolution Thirty Years Out

It is a distinct pleasure and a rare honor for me to present the Twelfth Annual Lynch Lecture, especially given the esteemed list of previous presenters. It is also highly appropriate for me to reflect on the development and current state of one of the major methods of conflict resolution in a setting that has contributed so much to this field of endeavor.

Interactive conflict resolution, as I have proposed the term, refers in the first instance to the involvement of unofficial yet influential representatives of parties engaged in destructive conflict in small group, problem-solving discussions which are facilitated by a third party panel of social scientist-practitioners.[1] On a broader scale, the term is used to denote any facilitated face-to-face activities engaging antagonists in communication, training, education, or consultation that promotes collaborative conflict analysis and problem solving to address the basic human needs of the parties. Let me reflect on the genesis of this innovative social technology, its history and current expression, and the developmental issues that face it in the future.

The Genesis of Interactive Conflict Resolution

The creation of interactive conflict resolution is largely attributable to a maverick Australian diplomat turned academic by the name of John Burton, who incidentally presented the Second Annual Lynch Lecture in 1989. What is less well known is that the method was, in part, born of a series of conflicts, creatively managed I might add.

The first conflict of note arose between competing paradigms for understanding international relations. The predominant paradigm in the 1960s was that of realism or power politics, which maintained that sovereign states pursue their objective interests through the use of military and economic power and can only bring about collective security through the use of force. Burton and his

followers proposed an alternate "world society" paradigm, based in pluralism and systems thinking, which saw a multitude of actors and transactions occurring to address a wide range of human needs, and in which common security could be achieved through integration.[2] During Burton's time in Britain in the 1960s and 1970s, these opposing positions led to numerous debates and other exchanges designed to influence the nature of the discipline of international relations.

The second conflict led from the first, and that involved differences among specialists about what their graduate students should learn and believe about international relations. Burton was teaching at University College London, and his students shared classes with others from the London School of Economics and Political Science, both units being part of the University of London. A problem arose when faculty at the different schools began failing the other's students on final exams, and it fell to the external examiners to decide which paradigm should hold sway. This conflict led to a challenge from the realists to the Burton school—to take a case of international conflict and demonstrate the utility of the new, pluralist paradigm. Burton responded by choosing the conflict involving Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore, in which the creation of the Malaysian Federation (proclaimed in 1963) was being resisted by Indonesia and by internal factions within Malaysia. The conflict had escalated to dangerous levels, and following unsuccessful mediation attempts by both the United States and United Kingdom, was in a stalemate that Burton thought might be receptive to other forms of third party intervention. Building on his previous contacts as an Australian diplomat, Burton sent letters to the parties requesting they nominate representatives to participate in an academic analysis of the conflict. The parties responded positively, and a first meeting of five days was organized in London in December 1965.

The initiative by Burton led to the third conflict of note, and that was among the team of ten third party intervenors who were in confusion over how to proceed with the meeting. It was not clear in their planning session whether they should have a detailed agenda, present papers, serve as conciliators, or what. A colleague of Burton, Anthony (Tony) de Reuck, who had experience in organizing and managing small group problem-solving discussions with international participants on health and other issues, was nominated to chair the first session. He opened the meeting by indicating that none of the ordinary rules of meetings would apply, that there was no agenda, there would be no minutes and no statements at the end. He simply invited the participants to discuss their case with the social scientists until all parties were satisfied. At this point, as might have been expected, the representatives presented their obligatory cases, essentially to the third party panel, who then asked questions, provided interpretations, and made comparisons with similar cases.

However, at this point, the conflict among members of the third party team resurfaced. There were strong differences voiced as to how the meeting should proceed. Should there by a detailed agenda with the third party working to draft an agreement as a basis of negotiations, or should there be open, analytical discussion with no fixed agenda or outcome? The latter position prevailed, but an equally important outcome now accrued. The participants, who were initially shocked when the conflict arose, now saw that there was no hidden agenda and that there truly was free discussion. Following this crisis, the session moved toward mutual analysis of the conflict leading to the creation of principles and options for resolution—what in today's language would be called prenegotiation. Five further meetings over the next several months resulted in a series of understandings providing a framework for settlement that was well represented in the Jakarta Peace Accord in August of 1966. According to de Reuck, the sessions allowed the parties to correct misperceptions, redefine the conflict, reassess its costs, and develop options to resolve it.[3] A unique social innovation was born, and while it was reflective of developments in the wider field of human relations, its unique application to international relations was initially captured by Burton under the label of controlled communication.[4]

The First Twenty-Five Years

John Burton and his colleagues were enthusiastic about their success on the Malaysia-Indonesia conflict, since it not only helped to resolve the conflict, but also affirmed their belief in their new paradigm for addressing international relations. Along with A.J.R. (John) Groom, Chris Mitchell and others, Burton founded the Centre for the Analysis of Conflict, and looked for other destructive disputes in which to intervene. The choice was the conflict on the Mediterranean island of Cyprus between Greek and Turkish Cypriots and involving the two motherlands—historical rivals in the region. A five-day workshop was held in 1966 with high level, informal representatives, which allowed time for some rethinking by the parties and an eventual return to UN brokered negotiations which had been at an impasse. Burton then spent some time working on the conflict in Northern Ireland, before moving to the United States in the early 1980s. There he initially teamed up with Edward Azar at the University of Maryland, holding workshops on the conflicts in the Lebanon, Sri Lanka, and the Falklands-Malvinas. Herbert Kelman, who was on the third party panel at the 1966 Cyprus workshop, began working initially with Stephen Cohen on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the early 1970s, and he and his colleagues have held sessions ever since with increasingly influential participants. Leonard Doob, another creative, maverick academic, organized workshops utilizing methods of human relations training on the conflicts in the Horn of Africa and Northern Ireland. Vamik Volkan and his colleagues, taking a psychodynamic

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approach, facilitated sessions among Israelis and Arabs, and then shifted attention to the conflicts between the Baltic States and Russia, following the break-up of the Soviet Union. Harold Saunders worked with the Dartmouth Conference to facilitate discussions on the relationship between the Soviet Union and the United States and later, in collaboration with Randa Slim and others, has focused on the conflict in the new republic of Tajikistan. Many others have made contributions as well.[5]

These various initiatives have taken on most of the tough, protracted conflicts of the world, and in so doing, have contributed to the development of a social technology of interactive conflict resolution. At the same time, there has been the steady development of a conceptual base to provide a theory of practice to support the fieldwork.[6] Unfortunately, there has been very little systematic, rigorous evaluation of interventions, for some good reasons (e.g., protecting participants) and some not-so-good ones (e.g., blind faith in the process). Also, most of the interventions have been one-time events, with limited potential for influence on the course of the conflict in question. On the cultural side, the work has been primarily a white male, middle class, professional activity of North American and European origin, although that situation is slowly broadening. In spite of these limitations, the practitioners of the method are able to claim generally positive outcomes for their interventions, ranging from increased understanding and improved attitudes, to positive influences and inputs to peace processes, and to tangible contributions to negotiations and agreements. It is clear that interactive conflict resolution has come a long way since Burton's first workshops, and it now appears that it is emerging as a major force in the broader domain of international conflict resolution.

Trends in the 1990s

In the last decade, there have been three major trends that are having significant impacts on the development of the field. The first has been a shift from interventions as single events to a continuing series of workshops with all or most of the same participants. This trend was evident in some earlier work,[7] but came into its own when Herbert Kelman and Nadim Rouhana initiated a continuing workshop on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict from 1990 to 1993.[8] This approach involves a sustained effort to address concrete issues that the participants can work on between meetings both within and between their communities. The continuing workshop can be adapted to events occurring on the ground, in this case, the Gulf War and the start of the Madrid peace negotiations. Sessions can be devoted to exploring the obstacles to negotiation in the prenegotiation phase, or to complementing negotiations in the paranegotiation phase. In this case, a number of the principles established and some of the

participants in the continuing workshop found their way into both the formal talks in Madrid and the Oslo process that led to the peace accord between Israelis and Palestinians. Following on from the continuing workshop, Kelman and Rouhana established a joint working group to engage in problem-solving discussions with the objective of producing concept papers on a number of final status issues, such as the questions of Palestinian refugees and the Israeli settlements in the West Bank. Overall, this initiative is working toward a set of principles that will support a final peace agreement.[9]

A second example of continuing work comes from the Tajikistani dialogue organized by Harold Saunders, Randa Slim, and their American and Russian associates.[10] Using the model of the Dartmouth Conference Regional Conflicts Task Force, this intervention has involved a series of unofficial dialogue sessions with most of the same participants from the government and opposition sides in Tajikistan. The dialogue group has met every two to three months since 1993, and has moved from probing the dynamics of the conflict relationship to developing a capacity to change the political environment in the country. The work has made direct contributions to starting negotiations under UN auspices, and to continuing negotiations toward a peace agreement, for example, by producing memoranda on the negotiation process and on national reconciliation. The focus in the later stages has shifted toward supporting the development of civil society in Tajikistan.

A third example of this trend comes from the work of Vamik Volkan and his colleagues in the Baltic states of the former Soviet Union. From 1992 until 1996, workshops were held analyzing the difficulties between Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, and Russia in terms of interstate relations and the Russian minority populations in the Baltic States.[11] Later workshops, held through collaboration with the Carter Center, focused primarily on the situation in Estonia.[12] In all cases, the sessions have involved a mix of unofficial and official participants, looking for "critical junctures" where inputs can be fed into policy making. The later work has again shifted toward democratization and the building of civil society, with a capstone conference this year describing the transfer of emphasis from workshops to community development projects in three different locations in Estonia.

The second trend of the 1990s involves a cumulating number of positive outcomes of interventions carried out by an increasing variety of actors. For example, the Roman Catholic Community of Sant'Egidio played a central role as an unofficial intermediary in helping to bring about a settlement in war torn Mozambique. Representatives of the community were able to establish a dialogue between the rebels and the government where other parties had failed. This work was then transferred into negotiations with official third parties leading to a political settlement.[13]

Another example comes from the work of Roger Fisher and colleagues from the Conflict Management Group in the Georgia-South Ossetia conflict.[14] These intervenors were able to institute "facilitated joint brainstorming" with unofficial influentials from the two sides to generate mutually acceptable options. The focus moved from practical problems, such as the rebuilding of roads, to questions of constitutional status. Finally, the work was able to design a framework for an official negotiation process, thus hopefully making a contribution to ultimate resolution.

For a final example, Michael Salla from American University and international colleagues have recently convened a series of conferences to institute dialogue and build cohesion among marginalized moderates from the conflict in East Timor.[15] Representatives from this "negotiating middle" (who were neither in favor of independence or the status quo) produced a set of principles for self-government and an autonomy plan that was largely taken up by the UN. Regardless of the outcome in the wake of the recent violence in East Timor, this work has started a process of dialogue that forms an important track for moving toward a peaceful future.

A third important trend in the 1990s is that the bulk of practice in interactive conflict resolution has shifted from "academic entrepreneurs" to nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Not only are there a large and growing number of NGOs involved in this work, but there is increasing variety in their projects, many of which involve interactive conflict resolution broadly defined, that is, as communication, training, dialogue, and so on. A number of academic centers are still central to the field, including the Institute for Conflict Analysis and Resolution here at George Mason University, the Program in International Conflict Analysis and Resolution at Harvard, the Conflict Transformation Program at Eastern Mennonite University, the Centre for Conflict Analysis at the University of Kent in the U.K., and others. However, the growth of NGOs involved in this field far outstrips the academic presence. Recently, an inaugural meeting of these bodies, to which I was pleased to be invited, was convened by the Institute for World Affairs, the Institute for Multi-Track Diplomacy, and the Conflict Management Group. Approximately twenty leaders of American-based NGOs came together to take stock of their activities, to share their experiences, to identify challenges and opportunities they face, and to improve collaboration where they could. Sharing this information identified an amazing variety of projects, from training workshops to media campaigns to brainstorming sessions to problem-solving discussions, in almost every corner of the world where violent conflict manifests itself. The participants committed to future meetings and to developing a network of conflict resolution organizations that would meet common needs and move the field forward.[16] The work of these organizations shows a high degree of caring and commitment to human

welfare, and a capacity to be creative, flexible, and responsive in meeting the needs of war torn societies. At the same time, as compared to academically based institutes, there may be less attention to the theories of understanding and practice that undergird interactive conflict resolution, and less of a proclivity to engage in systematic evaluation. It is thus to be hoped that there will be continuing collaboration between academic scholar-practitioners and NGOs involved in carrying the work forward.

The Present

Today, we might ask whether interactive conflict resolution has "arrived." The answer is not clear. Although conflict resolution has been growing rapidly, both it and the related domain of peace studies continue to meet resistance from those many scholars and practitioners who subscribe to the realist paradigm. There is therefore a continuing struggle to gain academic and bureaucratic legitimacy for conflict resolution. There are increasing signs that the scholarly and diplomatic communities want to integrate conflict resolution into their worlds—or do they want to co-opt it? For example, I was recently at a meeting of international relations scholars and practitioners sponsored by a prestigious university center and funded by a major donor of such work. The theme appeared to be first to understand interactive conflict resolution, incorporate it, and then evaluate it on realist terms.

For another illustration, we can turn to the words of ICAR's own Chris Mitchell, in reviewing the domain of conflict research:

> Somebody once wrote that you know when you had successfully "arrived" in academia: others adopted your ideas, misunderstood them, presented them as their own and then made extravagant claims for their relevance and effectiveness. Something of the sort has happened to conflict analysis and resolution over the last five or six years, as mainstream scholarly attention has switched from issues of threat manipulation, deterrence, military security and the intellectual problems presented by a loosely bipolar global system. Suddenly, as previously latent conflicts emerge and escalate into protracted violence in, for example, the former Yugoslavia and the countries of the CIS (joining those already being fought out in Africa, the Middle East and Asia), a range of scholars have discovered that they have "really" been doing conflict resolution "all along." Thus, it is becoming increasingly possible to attend conferences and listen to ex-strategic theorists, military security experts, Sovietologists and area specialists holding forth about the best means of "resolving" conflicts. (On some such occasions, the means of "conflict resolution" being advocated involve the sending of a peace enforcement force, the use of economic

sanctions, the employment of selective air strikes or the use of "mediation with muscle.").[17]

In the fifth lecture in this series, Ambassador Samuel Lewis, commenting on the field of peace studies and conflict resolution, raised a still unanswered question:

> How much practical application to the real life agenda of violence and bloodshed in the international system can these new academic disciplines provide? There remains enormous skepticism, particularly among government officials, among diplomats, those who, unlike Harold Saunders, have not seen the light. They wonder about this new field and whether it has anything truly useful to offer in the international arena.[18]

On this point, I am pleased to say that we are making progress. In 1995, the National Research Council organized a study Committee on International Conflict Resolution, chaired by Prof. Alexander George, and co-directed by Dr. Paul Stern and Dr. Daniel Druckman (now at ICAR). The purpose of this Committee is to identify topics where review and analysis of knowledge might inform policy specialists in government, to commission such analyses, and to publish the results. The Committee of twelve members, including myself, has met regularly over a three-year period, and has commissioned a number of papers in different areas of international conflict resolution writ large. It has brought within its purview some topics that fall within the traditional realist paradigm (e.g., the effectiveness of economic sanctions, the role of spoilers in peace processes), and others that bring in some innovative ideas and practices that draw on conflict resolution (e.g., the work of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the role of truth commissions).

Most importantly for this discussion, interactive conflict resolution is "at the table." In the first year of Committee activities, a workshop was held on the state of interactive conflict resolution, and two chapters in the final volume will focus on this topic—one by Harold Saunders explaining interactive conflict resolution to official practitioners, and one by Nadim Rouhana raising the difficult challenge of systematic and rigorous evaluation.

There is more. As an initial, preparatory activity for the work of the Committee, Cynthia Chataway interviewed approximately twenty-five distinguished U.S. diplomats regarding their perceptions of interactive conflict resolution, its possible contributions and dangers, and their future thoughts on its uses and abuses.[19] Based on her results, my interpretation is that attitudes among official practitioners have moved over the last several years from skeptical and cynical rejection through bemused curiosity and tolerance, to growing understanding, receptivity, and a potential for collaboration in a spirit of complementarity. Many, for example, saw the possibility of interactive

conflict resolution making contributions to both the prenegotiation and post negotiation phases of peacemaking. There are, of course, potential pitfalls here, and continuing dangers of co-optation, but the world is changing, and conflict resolution is part of that change.

The Future

If it is true that the field has "arrived," it may be with a suitcase that is only half full. A number of major issues continue to confront this field, and I ask the younger scholar-practitioners among us to take up these challenges, and to fill the suitcase over the next generation. I have mentioned the centrality of better evaluation, and to that we can add the importance of institutionalization—the need to build university-based centers for research, training, and practice, whose task is to advance the field. Clearly, the issue of training the coming generations of scholar-practitioners is very much with us, as there exist only a few such centers and they are struggling to provide the professional education that is necessary to work effectively in interactive conflict resolution. We need to invest resources in the professionalization of the field—to provide for support and collaboration among colleagues and to consider questions of competence and ethics. Funding remains a critical problem—even with the phrase "conflict resolution" on many people's lips, it is still difficult to get the resources required to mount adequate, longer-term projects and evaluate them properly. There continues to be a participation and empowerment problem, in that most interventions are undertaken by Western, middle class intervenors bringing their rational, problem-solving models to bear on those from different places with different identities. This relates to the question of the cultural generalizability of our methods, and the attendant need to broaden the cultural base of this work, and to engage in cultural analyses prior to intervention in different social and political settings. I could go on, but I think you get a sense of the importance of these many issues, which I have commented on elsewhere in more detail.[20]

Clearly, we need the help of many people to advance the work of interactive conflict resolution. In this regard, I want to express appreciation on behalf of the field to Mr. Edward Lynch and his family, his wife Helen and son Bill, for the continuing support that they have provided to ICAR. This unique innovation that I have spoken about would not exist in its present form without their generosity and leadership in the past, and into the future.

In conclusion, it is clear that the costs of violent and protracted intergroup conflict are not going down. The need for work in interactive conflict resolution remains compelling and urgent. It is clear that we have a long way to go. It is also clear that the values of peace, justice, equity and caring still drive us forward. Time may be on our side—let us hope there is enough of it.

NOTES

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