

Conflict Resolution for Teachers

By Morton Deutsch
Teachers College, Columbia University

*Morton Deutsch is Director of the International Center for Cooperation and Conflict Resolution and E.L. Thorndike Professor Emeritus at Teachers College, Columbia University. At Teachers College, along with Ellen Raider and other faculty, he has developed a Graduate Studies Concentration in Conflict Resolution. He has been much honored, in the United States and abroad, for his theoretical, research, and practical contributions to the field of conflict resolution. One of his books, *The Resolution of Conflict: Constructive and Destructive Processes* published in 1973 by the Yale University Press, helped to establish a new framework for thinking about conflict. In June 1995, two of his former students (Jeffrey Z. Rubin and Barbara B. Bunker), also internationally known for their work on conflict resolution, published a book entitled *Conflict, Cooperation, and Justice: Essays Inspired by the Work of Morton Deutsch* (Jossey-Bass).*

An Orientation to Conflict

Conflict is like sex: it is an important and pervasive aspect of life. It should be enjoyed and should occur with a reasonable degree of frequency, and after a conflict is over the people involved should feel better than they did before. This is most likely to happen if the people involved are mutually respectful and mutually responsive to each other's needs.

Some psychiatrists and social scientists have given conflict a bad reputation by linking it with psychopathology, social disorder, and war. Conflict can be dysfunctional, but it also can be productive. It has many positive functions, including preventing stagnation and stimulating interest and curiosity. It is the medium through which problems can be aired and solutions developed. It is the root of personal and social change. The practical and scientific issue is not how to eliminate or prevent conflict but rather how to have lively controversy rather than deadly quarrels.

A conflict exists whenever incompatible activities occur. The incompatible actions may originate in one person, group, or nation (intrapersonal, intragroup, or intranational) or they may reflect incompatible actions of two or more persons, groups, or nations (interpersonal, intergroup, or international). An action that is incompatible with another action prevents, obstructs, interferes, injures, or in some way makes the latter less likely or effective. A potential conflict exists when the parties involved perceive themselves to have incompatible values, interests, goals, needs, or beliefs. A veridical conflict is based on incompatibilities that are perceived correctly. When the incompatibilities do not exist but are perceived to exist, the conflict is based on misunderstanding. Conflicts rooted in

misunderstanding can be as deadly as those rooted in true incompatibilities.

A distinction often is made between two types of conflict: zero-sum and mixed-motive. In a zero-sum or "win-lose" conflict, what one person gains the other person loses. In a mixed-motive conflict, it is possible for both persons to gain, both to lose, or for one to gain and the other to lose. Each person has a mixture of cooperative and competitive interests toward the other. Most conflicts are mixed-motive, but if the parties involved see their conflict as zero-sum, they are apt to engage in a win-lose, competitive struggle that will produce a destructive process of conflict resolution that has harmful outcomes.

Destructive conflict is characterized by a tendency to expand and escalate. As a result, such conflict often becomes independent of its initiating causes and is likely to continue after these have become irrelevant or have been forgotten. Expansion occurs along the various dimensions of conflict: the size and number of the immediate issues involved, the number of motives and participants implicated on each side of the issue, the size and number of the principles and precedents that are perceived to be at stake, the costs that the participants are willing to bear in relation to the conflict, the number of norms of moral conduct from which behavior toward the other side is exempted and the intensity of negative attitudes toward the other side. Paralleling the expansion of the scope of conflict is an increasing reliance on a strategy of power and on the tactics of threat, coercion, and deception. Correspondingly, there is a shift away from a strategy of persuasion and from the tactics of conciliation, minimization of differences and enhancement of mutual understanding and goodwill.

A constructive process of conflict resolution is similar to an effective, cooperative problem-solving process where the conflict is perceived as a mutual problem to be solved through the collaborative effort of the conflicting parties. In a constructive process, the different parties seek to understand one another's needs and concerns (through emphatic communication and listening) as a basis for diagnosing their mutual problem, and then they creatively search for new options for dealing with the conflict that can lead to mutual gain. If no option for mutual gain can be discovered, they seek to agree upon a mutually acceptable fair rule or procedure for deciding how the conflict will be resolved.

Violence

Physical violence is the most obvious symptom of destructive conflict and is the most easily documented. While its effects are less visible, psychological violence - humiliation, verbal abuse, rejection, neglect - undoubtedly is more common. The massive exposure of children and adolescents to physical violence, as victims, perpetrators, and witnesses, has gained attention in the public health community. Under-

standably, less attention has been paid to psychological violence, even though exposure to it may be as harmful. Exposure to violence occurs in families, schools, neighborhoods, in countries involved in war or torn apart by civil strife, as well as in the mass media, children's video games, and their 'war' toys.

Most of what is known about the effects of exposure to destructive conflict centers on the effect of violence on youth. Research has indicated that continued exposure to violence "teaches" violent behavior by leading to emotional desensitization and habituation to the emotional arousal associated with witnessing (or experiencing) violence. Consequently, inhibitions against aggressive behavior are lowered, and violence becomes normalized and legitimized in the eyes of the observer. This process can be especially powerful when violence is witnessed in the family. In addition to the physical and psychological damage suffered by abused children, being a target of family violence can stimulate a child to aggress against others, although this outcome is by no means inevitable. Children who are not themselves abused but who witness violence between their parents also internalize norms about the acceptability of violence. Less is known about the long-term effects of experiencing or witnessing violence in other contexts, but theories of socialization and modeling suggests that the processes are similar.

"The practical and scientific issue is not how to eliminate or prevent conflict but rather how to have lively controversy rather than deadly quarrels."

Socioeconomic Conditions

Social norms within the child's community and society, his or her experiences within the family and schools, the models provided by the mass media, the child's social skills and cognitive abilities, and the child's personality and temperament are some of the more enduring influences that affect the child's ways of responding to conflict. Temporary social and economic conditions also may have an impact. An emergence of or an increase in difficult life conditions as a result of civil disorder, economic depression, political upheaval, defeat in war, or physical calamity is apt to create a socially distressed atmosphere, leading to a sense of alienation, distrust, egocentricity, and hostility in the child's milieu. Such a distressed atmosphere is not conducive to the constructive resolution of conflicts among children or adults.

Deficiencies in Problem-Solving and Other Conflict Resolution Skills

Children who engage in destructive conflict strategies, particularly the use of violence, may have generalized deficiencies in social problem-solving and interpersonal skills as well as limited cognitive flexibility. Research has indicated a link between destructive conflict, poor communication skills, difficulties in taking the other's perspective, problems in establishing bonds with the other and an inability to perceive conflicts in multidimensional terms and generate multiple strategies for coping with them. An extreme example of the limited perception of options comes from a 15-year old boy who described guns in his neighborhood as being "as common as water." He told a reporter that he had not yet shot at anybody, but felt he may have to. "I don't want to shoot nobody. But if they bully me, disrespect my mother, or mess with any one of my family, they're just going to have to get it. That's what it's about."

The previous quotation demonstrates the destructive ways in which youth may think about conflict and how to deal with it. The combination of exposure to violence and a lack of perceived alternatives for resolving conflict changes the standards for what is normal, what is acceptable, what is legitimate, and, as suggested in the phrase "they're just going to have to get it," what is considered necessary in response to threat or insult. Moreover, it demonstrates the process of conflict expansion, in which an insult to oneself or one's family becomes, literally, a matter of life and death, and the need to defend one's personal self-image becomes a larger matter of salvaging a public image as well.

Helping People to Manage Their Conflicts More Constructively

Destructive behavior in conflict is learned; consequently, it can be "unlearned" or reversed. People can be helped to manage their conflicts more constructively in two primary ways. Through education, training, or counseling, one can seek to instill the knowledge, attitudes, and skills that are not only conducive to defining a conflict as a mutual problem to be solved cooperatively but also are conducive to effective, cooperative problem-solving. Second, they can be assisted in identifying and seeking out skilled third parties, such as mediators, who can help conflicting parties resolve conflicts that they have not been able to resolve themselves.

Conflict Resolution Training

In recent years, conflict resolution training programs have sprouted in schools as well as in industry and community dispute resolution centers. Although there are many different programs, some common elements run through most. These elements can be derived from two key ideas that have been

Continued from page 3

developed in answering the question, "What determines whether a conflict will take a constructive or a destructive course?" The first idea already has been mentioned: A constructive process of conflict resolution is similar to an effective cooperative problem-solving process, while a destructive process is similar to a win-lose, competitive process. The second idea, which has been labelled "Deutsch's Crude Law of Social Relations," is: The characteristic processes and effects elicited by a given type of social relationship (cooperative or competitive) tend to elicit that type of social relationship.

From these two ideas, it follows that a competitive (and, therefore, destructive) process of conflict resolution induces and is induced by: tactics of coercion, threat, or deception; attempts to enhance the power differences between oneself and the other; poor communication; minimized awareness of similarities in values; increased sensitivity to opposed interests; suspicious and hostile attitudes; and the importance, size, and rigidity of the issues in conflict, etc. In contrast, a cooperative (and, therefore, constructive) process of conflict resolution elicits and is elicited by: perceived similarity in beliefs and attitudes; readiness to be helpful; openness in communication; trusting and friendly attitudes; sensitivity to common interests; de-emphasis of opposed interests; and orientation toward enhancing mutual power rather than power differences, etc.

Conflict resolution training programs help people learn what not to do (i.e., how to avoid getting into a destructive process) and what to do (i.e., how to foster a constructive process) in a conflict.

What not to do in a conflict:

1. Do not define a conflict as a "win-lose" one when it is possible for both to win.
2. Avoid violence and the use of threats even when one is very angry.
3. Avoid attacking the other's pride, self-esteem, security, identity, or those with whom he or she identifies.
4. Don't confuse your "positions" with your "interests".
5. Avoid ethnocentrism: understand and accept the reality of cultural differences.
6. Don't neglect your own interests or the interests of the other.
7. Don't avoid conflict.
8. Avoid "black-white" thinking as well as stereotyping and demonizing the other during heated conflict.

What to do in a conflict:

1. Find common ground between oneself and the other.
2. Listen and communicate honestly and effectively so that the underlying feelings as well as thoughts clearly are

understood, and check continually one's success in doing so.

3. Take the perspective of the other.
4. Problem-solve.
5. Develop methods for dealing with difficult conflicts so that one is neither helpless nor hopeless when confronting those who are more powerful or who use dirty tricks.
6. Know oneself and how one typically responds in different sorts of conflicts so that one can control habitual tendencies that may be dysfunctional.

Training programs and curricula for teaching conflict resolution and violence prevention in schools have been developed for students in the elementary and secondary schools. They take various forms, depending on the age groups for which they are used. Most programs employ lectures and videos to teach theory, concepts, and knowledge; role-playing, role-reversal, discussion of real conflicts and videos are employed to teach specific skills.

Mediation

Difficult conflicts exist that the disputing parties may not be able to resolve constructively without the help of third parties such as mediators. To deal with such conflicts, mediation programs have been established in community-dispute resolution centers and in schools. Students as young as 10 years as well as high school and college students and teachers have been trained to serve as mediators. Typically, they are given training for 20 or 30 hours in the principles of constructive conflict resolution as well as specific training in how to serve as a mediator. They usually are given a set of rules to apply during the mediation process.

Prevention

Teachers can work with children, parents, and others to prevent destructive conflict and encourage the constructive management of conflict. Teachers' status as experts trusted by both children and parents renders them a powerful vehicle for messages about conflict and particularly about the physical and psychological dangers of fighting. This message could be communicated in assemblies, classroom presentations, educational handouts and videos, and public service announcements as well as in systematic instruction.

It is important to recognize that teachers must themselves acquire the knowledge, attitudes, and skills involved in constructive conflict resolution if they are to educate others and also provide a good model for their students. Opportunities to receive training in conflict resolution exist at a number of universities and workshops conducted by various organizations. At Teachers College, Columbia University, we offer a Graduate Studies Concentration (which can be taken by itself or as part of a degree program), courses, and workshops in this area.

Advising Students About Choosing a College

By Randolph Smith
Ouachita Baptist University

How can high school teachers help psychology-oriented students choose a good college? That is a tough question. Unfortunately, there seems to be nothing in the literature to help answer this question. I thank psychology faculty who subscribe to the TIPS electronic bulletin board and who attended the Northeastern or Southwestern Conferences for Teachers of Psychology for giving me more food for thought.

First and foremost, students should be urged to pick a school that "fits them" as well as possible. Research on the

importance of accessible faculty members with whom students could interact closely. In particular, becoming involved in research with faculty was stressed. If your students wish to become professional psychologists, graduate training is a necessity. Research experience is a vital factor in graduate school admissions, both for the experience itself, as well as for getting to know faculty members well. Faculty members who are well-acquainted with a student can write better letters of recommendation for graduate admission, assuming



For Teachers of Introductory Psychology

APA EDUCATION DIRECTORATE

PTN PSYCHOLOGY TEACHER NETWORK

January-February 1996 • Volume 6 • Issue 1

Teaching, from page 1

of psychology at all the regional psychology conventions. High school teachers are welcome at all of these conventions and conferences, are attending them, and are presenting at them.

Many high school psychology teachers have already begun to network with their counterparts on the undergraduate level. Initiative fuels creativity and spawns opportunity. Psychology teachers of high schoolers and undergraduates are interacting frequently and comfortably as colleagues and as partners in presenting students a knowledge base which can improve their physical and mental life. These teachers share classroom ideas and curricular concerns; regularly offer and attend sessions on the teaching of psychology at state, regional, and national conventions; work together at the local level to advance psychology as a science; and facilitate each others' lifelong learning. Annual workshops for high school psychology teachers are conducted in every state featuring top high school and undergraduate teachers working collaboratively to elevate the quality of psychological pedagogy at all levels. High school students regularly submit psychological experiments to their local science fairs, and area psychologists gladly offer their services as consultants, human/animal participant monitors, and judges. Access to electronic mail and bulletin boards is the most efficient way to disseminate broadly the type of information that can elevate the quality of instruction

and ameliorate the professional isolation affecting many rural high schools and smaller colleges. Strategies for strengthening future teachers' grounding in psychology during their undergraduate training must be based on national standards for the certification of high school psychology teachers.

I commend and encourage the joint efforts of undergraduate and high school teachers of psychology. Only through their working together can we improve the quality of education for our students.

References

- Carstens, C.B., & Beck, H.P. (1986). The relationship of high school psychology and natural science courses to performance in a college introductory psychology class. *Teaching of Psychology*, 13, 116-118.
- Griggs, R.A., & Jackson, S.L. (1988). A reexamination of the relationship of high school psychology and natural science courses to performance in a college introductory psychology class. *Teaching of Psychology*, 15, 142-144.
- Griggs, R.A., Jackson, S.L., & Meyer, M.E. (1989). High school and college psychology: Two different worlds. *Teaching of Psychology*, 16, 118-120.
- Henderson, B.B. (1994). The role of psychology departments in supporting secondary school teachers of psychology. *Teaching of Psychology*, 21, 107-108.
- Ragland, R.G. (1992). Teachers and teacher education in high school psychology: A national survey. *Teaching of Psychology*, 19, 73-78.
- White, K.M., Marcuella, H., & Oresick, R. (1979). Psychology in the high schools. *Teaching of Psychology*, 6, 39-42.