

EDITORIAL

Taking Stock of the Field: Past, Present and Future. An Introduction

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The relatively new field of conflict resolution is in some ways flourishing globally. On the one hand, it is gaining popular and media recognition along with ever growing numbers of graduate studies programmes and devoted professionals. On the other hand, it has not yet fully developed into a mature field with its own overarching theories, methods and technologies. It is interdisciplinary in the sense that all the social sciences have much to say about conflict and how to handle it. However, as noted by Kevin Avruch in his article, it is not yet a discipline with its own widely agreed upon and accepted theoretical canon.

This journal aims to contribute to addressing this void by providing a broad academic perspective on the field – combining knowledge from both social sciences and humanities in order to improve our understanding of disputes and the ways to creatively engage them. We have the audacious hope that it can contribute to the development of the discipline and its organizing canon.

In the two foundational issues of this journal we offer a variety of answers to basic questions which are central to the field, and we do so through interdisciplinary lenses which represent diverse epistemologies. We will try to show in this short introduction, after outlining the contributions of the authors in this issue, how the various authors address some common themes. These may be considered initial efforts to define the boundaries of the field. We will also explore here different themes which recur in the various articles in this volume and through such an overview we will extract some commonalities which are unique to our field.

1. Synopses of Contributions to this Issue

Kevin Avruch shows that the field's evolving nomenclature reflects "a desire to get deeper into the root causes of the conflict". The field, according to Avruch, is expanding, from the initial goal to regulate conflict to present-day aspirations to influence multi-level structural change. Drawing an analogy from physics, Avruch raises the question: Where is the field expanding from? Does it have a centre? He explores the tension between 'pragmatists' and 'structuralists' and seeks a coherence that would constitute the core of the field.

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Carrie Menkel-Meadow explores the 'historical contingency' of our field, posing the question: Can theories and practice of conflict resolution change our historical conditions and improve our approaches to conflict or does history bend and shape our theory and practice? Going from the field's historical roots to its future possibilities, she sees the field's ultimate challenge as "our need to combine different kinds of discourses into productive engagement with each other". These discourses should take into account "the human brain (head), heart, and yes, 'gut'".

Oliver Ramsbotham deals with linguistic intractability, what he calls 'radical disagreement', which is the verbal aspect of those conflicts that cannot be settled or transformed. This is generally discounted in conflict resolution as positional or adversarial debate – a terminus to dialogue that must from the outset be transformed. In this article he takes radical disagreement seriously and suggests it is at our peril that we fail to accept it at face value. Rather than carrying out conventional efforts to manage or resolve radical disagreement, the call, he asserts, is to learn from it.

Tamra Pearson d'Estree provides insights to the conflict resolution field on its way to becoming a full-fledged profession. She analyzes the expectations of a profession and the specific challenges of our field. The nature of many conflicts, she says, "involves complex issues, relationships and dynamics that may have no clear precedent". What skills must professionals develop to deal with modern complexity? What tools should professional education provide? She sees communities of inquiry as a central asset to be cultivated to strengthen the field.

Peter T. Coleman points to the increase in number of peace agreements in the last few decades alongside the high rate of relapse into conflict and renewed violence. These "roller-coaster peace statistics" indicate numerous new challenges, including increasing complexity, interdependence and technological sophistication. To be more effective, says Coleman, the field must address several dilemmas and internal tensions of the field. He identifies six main challenges and offers ways to deal with internal tensions.

Nikki R.Slocum-Bradley believes the overarching purpose of conflict resolution should be to nurture "relational coordination". The cooperative relationship, she says, is currently treated as a means to peace and not an end in itself. Humans are "mutually interdependent co-constructors", and the formulation of theories and practice should reflect that understanding. She demonstrates the application of this understanding to action research, in a way that could encourage relational coordination and generative discourse.

2. Naming the Field

The question of naming the field is central for understanding its essence and boundaries. As authors such as Avruch and Menkel-Meadow show, the various names given to the field throughout the past 50 years reflect its basic characteristic as an ongoing endeavour. This endeavour evolves and transforms to reflect new ideas and theories influencing conflict analysis and applied work. Our own

graduate studies program at Bar-Ilan University, now completing its thirteenth year, has adopted the broad title of *Conflict Management, Resolution and Negotiation*. Underlying these terms is an epistemology pointing to different explanations regarding the nature of conflict, and leading to different theories of practice and means by which it may be constructively engaged. The need for *Management* of conflict is based on a mechanistic and pragmatic understanding that conflict emerges out of competing goals, resources and interests. The pursuit of *Resolution* of conflict is based on early conflict studies that view human conflict as rooted in the real or perceived threat to and frustration of basic human needs for survival, dignity, control and identity. Finally, the notion that conflict requires *Negotiation* across differences is based largely on legal and political constructs about the use of diplomacy to forge a middle ground between opposites (or, in a more polarized expression, as the art of war by other means).

However, although our own programme is diverse and fairly inclusive, it is not exhaustive of the variety of epistemological frames that now make up the young conflict 'field'. *Conflict Transformation* views conflict as a problem of human agency and mutual recognition and *Peace and Justice Advocacy* is yet another strand that holds a critical analysis of society and power structures (as will be seen in an article by Abu-Nimer in the next introductory issue).

To provide a notion of the emerging field as a range of theories and methods, we suggest placing these terms of art under the umbrella framework of "conflict engagement" (Rothman, 1997). That is, we view the field as a diverse body of theoretical and applied approaches to the study of how best to understand and creatively *engage* conflict. We also think that there are common themes and principles that define the identity of "dispute resolution people" and these principles appear in various models and related movement which are connected with the field (Alberstein, 2011). This inclusive conceptualization reflects a significant strength of the new field, since conflicts, like individuals and groups, are infinitely diverse and thus require different ways of formulation and redress.¹ It also allows us to get out of what has become something of an ideological battle and positional debate between terms and emphases, not really fitting the ethos of our field – each term being used against the other.

Others have also been advocating the use of the term "engagement" and it shows up increasingly in the literature. Two members of our journal executive board, Bernie Mayer and Richard McGuigan, have perhaps been the most outspoken about this new term. Bernie Mayer, in his book *Staying with Conflict* (2009), describes engaging conflict – with the goal of learning from it, growing from it instead of ameliorating or ending it – as the new normal for our field. Richard McGuigan, the former director of the conflict studies program at Antioch University, went so far as to rename the programme "Conflict Analysis and Engagement." The name suggests a contingency approach that both distinguishes and links theory to practice. It suggests a chronological act of conflict analysis to

1 While we advocate for the term conflict engagement, we understand and follow the point made by Ramsbotham that conflict resolution is still the most recognizable term of art and thus we have kept that term in the title of this journal – for now.

determine the type of conflict (e.g., resource, goal or identity-based. Rothman, 2012a and 2012b), followed at times by an intervention design or practice to select the most appropriate “forum to fit the fuss” (Sander *et al.*, 1994). Other namings of the field such as dispute settlement and peace studies, appear in this volume and are discussed from historical and critical perspectives.

3. Theory-Practice Nexus

As noted, one of the distinctive features of this journal will be its abiding interest in the nexus between rigorous theory and systematic practice. While most espouse this connection as essential, even fundamental, to this field, few venture into it very deeply. Coleman in his article describes a deeply polarized meeting between conflict resolution theorists and practitioners. Each stood on the side and denigrated the value of the other. Happily, he reports that “after the first of day of grandstanding by the subgroups we were able to come together and, ultimately, learn and advance our thinking considerably. The academics came to appreciate and value the grounded-insights of the practitioners, and the practitioners gained from the precise distinctions offered by the scientists”. Indeed, Slocum-Bradley suggests that theory itself is a kind of practice in conflict engagement and proposes action research as a vehicle for containing both.

While we do not expect mud-slinging in this journal, we do expect different emphases between the worlds of theory and practice and accept that a full bridge between them may be neither possible nor wholly necessary. And yet, the self-conscious exploration of these two – by articulating the differences, and finding the linkages and interdependencies – will mark much of what we do in this journal as we believe it is also much of what we do in the field. And it should be noted that, as an academic journal, there will be an emphasis on, even a bias, for theory as the foundation stone of our field, including theorizing about practice. Indeed, the different authors in the two foundational issues find much interest in connecting the two worlds. D’Estree, for instance, proposes communities of inquiry as a tool to improve the ability to deal with conflict.

While there will never be one right way to analyze or address all conflicts, it is possible, and we believe necessary, to develop a scientifically based contingency model that would move the field well along (e.g., given X definition of conflict Y, the utility of intervention Z is hypothesized). We believe such a systematically developed and tested contingency approach would bring our field from its adolescence into full maturity.

The applied field of conflict engagement has emerged from the ground, and is still very much dominated by practitioners who make their living from resolving everyday disputes (especially divorce mediation and training). Although a gap between practitioners and academics still exists, the need to inform the practice by theory and vice versa is growing. As Kurt Lewin, the father of action research, advised, “there is nothing so practical as a good theory”, and we believe there is nothing so theoretically interesting and worthy of study as good (and bad) practice.

4. Discipline and Interdisciplinarity

Aspiring to establish a journal which will be truly interdisciplinary provides a unique challenge which can be reflected already in the mixture in the first and second issues. We have two social psychologists (Coleman, d'Estree) and one psychologist (Slocum-Bradley), two lawyers (Menkel-Meadow and Alberstein), two political scientists (Ramsbotham and Rothman), and an anthropologist (Avruch). We even have two of the first doctoral graduates in the field of Conflict Resolution (Abu-Nimer and Väyrynen). All of the authors are established experts in conflict engagement and yet their writing reflects first of all their disciplinary training. Speaking about rationality and emotion, mechanistic and holistic approaches, theory and practice, is an acceptable speech within social psychology, yet may seem ideological from other academic perspectives such as trauma studies or linguistics. Understanding law from an activist human rights perspective is different from examining the profession through sociological standards.

One of the challenges of the field is to become its own discipline while keeping the voice and strength of the diverse disciplines and methodologies which nurture it. Indeed, one of the strengths of a new field is when it coalesces new ideas from the margins of various disciplines.

The concept of creative marginality refers to the process through which researchers in academic fields move away from the mainstream and toward the margins of their fields and look toward the margins of other fields that may overlap with and fill in gaps in their fields. This interaction, occurring outside of disciplinary boundaries, promotes intellectual cross-fertilization, and it is often the site of innovation. (Rothman *et al.*, 2001)

We believe this is a promising way forward in continuing to build our field and growing it into its own discipline. We can find in this volume efforts to extract some common features which characterize the field. While no formal conclusions are reached in terms of the core of our field, we believe that such an accumulation of interdisciplinary authors can begin to develop a consensus on some central characteristics. These characteristics would not only distinguish our field but enable it eventually to emerge as a full-fledged discipline with its own canons, research methods, theories, practices and linkages between them. Our next volume (2014) will aspire to develop such an interdisciplinary/disciplinary consensus regarding the definition of a successful academic program in conflict engagement.

5. Critique and Doubts

An important academic phenomenon within the history of the field is the critique and objections it has provoked, and the ways in which such theoretical challenges were incorporated into the discourse, or sometimes dismissed. Menkel-Meadow, for example, points to the ideological critique which was brought by externals to

the field while it was emerging – Owen Fiss, Richrad Able and Trina Grillo, for example. These authors have noticed the inequality and privatization which informal processes might produce. Some of the second and third generation theories of conflict resolution have incorporated responses to these critical claims into their model. Avruch speaks about the critics and proponents of peacebuilding and how the exchanges between them “constitute one of the essential tensions in our field”. Väyrynen discusses criticism of peacebuilding as a theory that relies on technical and expert-driven solutions. Ramsbotham exposes the relevance of various critical approaches as lenses to understanding the phenomenon of radical disagreement.

It is our view that critique and resistance are important elements in the development of the field. No understanding of the field can avoid the challenges which critical theories suggest. Part of the challenges of academia is to encourage more critical thinking and to enrich the field through an overarching meta-analysis.

6. Directions and Orientations

Authors in this issue refer differently to the question of where we are going. Avruch speaks about expansion and refers to the numerous new subfields which accompanied the core management focus through the years, such as trauma healing, human rights and transitional justice. Menkel-Meadow, coming from the legal and more domestic perspective, points to the fact that the field has become more public through the years, and that reference to deliberative democracy and restorative justice signifies growth and overcoming of the problem-solving infancy stage. Ramsbotham challenges the idea that radical disagreement is a terminus to dialogue that should from the outset be transformed and not learned from. D’Estree points to milestones to be passed so that conflict resolution may become an established profession with tools to deal with ever-growing complexity. Coleman speaks about six great challenges facing the field as well as possible ways to deal with its inherent paradoxes. Slocum-Bradley emphasizes the shift to relational thinking as a central challenge of the field and a tool for change.

7. Our Hopes

With the launch of this new journal, *International Journal of Conflict Engagement and Resolution (IJCER)*, we hope to provide a broad academic perspective of the field, combining knowledge from both social sciences and humanities in order to improve our understanding of disputes and the ways to creatively engage them. By focusing on interdisciplinarity as well as the dialogue between theory and practice, this journal aims to provide a comprehensive framework to deal with the important questions facing our field. We look forward to this journey of discovery and invite you to come with us.

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