

EDITORIAL

Taking Stock of the Field: Past, Present and Future. Part II

*Michal Alberstein & Jay Rothman**

We are pleased to present the second issue of *IJCER*'s inaugural volume. The two foundational issues deal with the overarching theme: 'Taking Stock of the Past, Present and Future' of the conflict resolution field.

1. The Elephant in the Room

In a recent pointed discussion with a distinguished political scientist about this new journal and its aspiration to help build our field, one of us (Rothman) asked in feigned innocence what he thought of this effort. The answer, if not a sneer, was certainly not one of enthusiastic support. Essentially, he said, you are a mish-mosh of this and that, so why bother? I retorted, "because we see the elephant in the room!" He looked at me somewhat sympathetically and I could almost hear him saying to himself "got a live one here," as he reluctantly invited me to explain. "You," I said "as a political scientist, and other colleagues in the humanities or social sciences all have some degree of studied involvement with the topic of conflict and how your discipline may treat it. As political scientists, you study power and its varieties and how conflict is born or restricted by its application. Likewise, psychologists, sociologists and others operate out of their disciplinary lenses in their analysis of conflict, and sometimes in prescriptions for its treatment. We, as a field, appreciate and build on these disciplines while also trying to create integrated and innovative approaches to conflict engagement. We not only combine perspectives from different disciplines that deal with conflicts, but also try to figure out how best theories can contribute to best practices in creative conflict engagement. In short, you are like the people in the parable, each one with a hand on the elephant – its tail, its trunk, its foot – and, because they cannot see the whole elephant, claim that the part they hold is the true elephant. We, however, try to see the whole elephant, understand it, and perhaps take it to the waterside to drink." I smiled triumphantly, while he shook his head and said adieu.

In the closing piece of this journal, an interview with the noted theorist-practitioner Bernie Mayer, he says that while we are unquestionably interdisciplinary, "there is some added value in the way in which we bring [various disciplines]

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together. That added value is what makes us different from the sociologist or psychologist ... there is a particular value in thinking of ourselves as focused on conflict instead of focused on communication, decision making, or interpersonal relations.”

Indeed, oftentimes the question has been raised whether conflict resolution is, in fact, a field in itself, or a ‘field of fields’ – what is its distinction? The articles in this issue address this and other foundational questions of our field.

2. Overview of Contributions

The articles in this second issue continue to span the wide spectrum of visions of prime movers in the field. The field is currently in a developmental stage that lends itself to this type of visioning. After several decades of building the field, producing analytical methods, theory and methods of practice, it is now at a stage where its core identity – or perhaps core components of it – may be defined, and the variety of possible ways forward may be delineated.

Muhammad Abu-Nimer, one of the first doctoral graduates of the field, and longtime scholar and practitioner, gives a bird’s-eye view of his journey in the field as it was being created, and into its present stage of development. He defines five areas of tension and gaps in the field, and his preferences for addressing them. For instance, in one such area, he says the field should make more space for cultural differences, enable non-Western cultures to solve conflicts in elicitive, participatory processes rather than prescriptive ones, and encourage non-Western cultures to generate culture-specific conflict resolution methods. He also challenges the boundaries of the field, saying that advocacy and non-violent resistance are tools that should be employed by conflict resolution experts in addressing conflicts between economic classes.

Michal Alberstein, co-editor-in-chief of this journal, takes concepts from identity theory and applies them to the field to uncover its core identity. She asks, “How can we define the identity of a field which has already grown enough in order to become diverse and rich with perspectives, yet in which no common ground exists from which a permanent core essence is revealed?” She articulates six possible group identity claims, or underlying grand narratives of the field. Within these narratives, she finds a recurring theme, which may be a salient feature of the field. Her effort to create a clearer definition of the field is not just a theoretical pursuit. She explains that when the field is more clearly defined and its boundaries distinct, it can better interact with other fields: theorists and practitioners will know better what the strengths and weaknesses of their field are – what they can offer to other fields, and where they can benefit from them.

Andrea Kupfer Schneider discusses negotiation in a legal context as a part of conflict resolution. She emphasizes the importance of empirically testing theory in practice and describes three major challenges she sees for this part of the field. She examines the concrete expansion of negotiation theory, which recalls in a sense the expansion in conflict resolution field, which Avruch discusses in the first volume. The use of game theory, cognitive psychology, neuroscience, cultural

studies and anthropology for the studies of negotiation enlarges our understanding of the dynamics that underlie conflicts. Integrating these theories into legal practice is a challenge with which Kupfer Schneider deals.

In discussing the theory–practice nexus, which was mentioned in the introduction to our first issue, and discussed by its authors, Kupfer Schneider gives examples from her research and from the work of her mentor and one of the founders of the field, Roger Fisher. She outlines the practice–theory impetus of Fisher and his insistence on transcending the common academic focus on theory.

Tarja Väyrynen presents a critique of the universalizing tendencies prominent in peace and conflict research. Presenting a case study of a Finnish woman who continues to suffer from views held in Finland in WWII, she claims that the everyday dimensions and experiences of peace are not taken into account in liberal peace theory. She laments that “Peace is seen to imply the restoration of ‘law and order’ and return to ‘normal conditions.’” Gendered dynamics of peace are also neglected, as liberal peacebuilding assumes third-world women are silent, passive actors in need of protection by an external masculine actor. Through a paradigmatic story of one woman’s failed struggle to be accepted back into her society, Väyrynen seeks to demonstrate the usability of situational and everyday knowledge in peace and conflict research, as well as the underlying gendered dynamics of peacebuilding. She suggests in her piece that by definition our field ought to be one that looks at what *is* through the lens of what *could be* and that, as advocated in Abu-Nimer’s piece, it take a critical view of the status quo and shake it up by seeing conflict as a vehicle for that purpose.

In addition, in this issue we begin a tradition of interviews for IJCER, starting with Bernie Mayer, a leading practitioner and scholar in the field. Mayer speaks of the value of the field of conflict resolution as a field in itself and the tensions within the field. Wading into the debate about whether we are or should be a field, he suggests that we are a field by definition and our multi-focal view of conflict is a unique contribution. He further suggests that there is a need to diversify the repertoire of the field and gives examples of third-party roles – such as conflict coach – that could help to further legitimize and expand the field.

3. Purpose

From the articles and interview in the two issues of this foundational volume rises a rich complexity – practitioners and theorists from different academic disciplines have offered valuable insights into the field. Though their directions and orientations differ, it appears that they point to a series of values and methods that make this field unique and specific. Conflict, they believe, must be understood from a variety of lenses incorporating many views and perspectives. And yet, each also points to the lack of and need for coalescing theoretical frameworks about the nature of conflict into an overarching concept that is contextually contingent. And, rather than shying away from conflict – a natural inclination – each finds conflict fascinating and worthy of study and systematic engagement.

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Through such articles, we hope this journal will contribute to the ongoing development of the discipline and its canon.