Constructive Conflict Resolution: Principles, Training, and Research

MORTON DEUTSCH

This article starts with a listing of several propositions to which most students of conflict, no matter what their discipline, would assent. Next, there is a discussion of such factors affecting the course of conflict as the orientation to the conflict of the parties involved, their personalities, the issues, and the conflict's social-cultural context. The following part discusses the skills involved in constructive solutions, an area that has been neglected by most scholars. The final part presents some suggestions for research.

The plethora of scholars writing about conflict from different disciplinary backgrounds and focusing on different types of disputes has given the study of conflict a fragmented appearance. Yet beneath this disorganized surface there appear to be some common themes that cut across the different disciplines and the different types of conflict. These themes can be summarized, in part, in the following propositions:

(1) Most conflicts are mixed-motive conflicts in which the parties involved in the conflict have both cooperative and competitive interests.

(2) Conflict can be constructive as well as destructive. Conflict has been given a bad reputation by its association with psychopathology, social disorder, and war. However, it is the root of personal and social change; it is the medium through which problems can be aired and solutions arrived at. There are many positive functions of conflict (Coser, 1967). The social and scientific issue is not how to eliminate or prevent conflict but rather to develop the knowledge that would enable us to answer the question, What are the conditions that give rise to lively controversy rather than deadly quarrel?

(3) The cooperative and competitive interests of the parties give rise to two distinctive processes of conflict resolution. Walton and McKersie (1965) have termed the processes "integrative bargaining" and "distributive bargaining," while I have termed them "cooperative" and "competitive" processes (Deutsch, 1973). Associated with the different processes are distinctive strategies and tactics of dealing with conflict, differing communication and influence processes, and different attitudes toward the Other.

(4) The relative strengths of the cooperative and competitive interests within the conflicting parties, and how they vary during the course of a conflict, will be major determinants of the nature of the conflict process and of whether the outcomes of the conflict are likely to be constructive or destructive for the conflicting parties.
This article has three parts: a consideration of factors affecting whether a conflict will take a constructive or destructive course, a discussion of the skills involved in constructive conflict resolution, and some suggestions for research.

Factors Affecting the Course of Conflict

The Orientation of the Parties to the Conflict

A "dual concern" model of motivational orientation has been articulated by many theorists (e.g., Blake & Mouton, 1984; Cosier & Ruble, 1981; Pruitt & Rubin, 1986, Thomas, 1976). The dual concerns are "concern for self" and "concern for the other," the two concerns are considered to be independent, each can range from "low" to "high." Cooperativeness is associated with high concern for self and other; accommodativeness with low concern for self and high for other; competitiveness with high concern for self and low for other; and conflict avoidance with low concern for both. Presumably there would be little conflict when there is little concern for self (as in "avoidance" or "accommodativeness") and, hence, the two major orientations to conflict in the dual concern model would be cooperativeness and competitiveness.

I have distinguished three basic types of motivational orientations to a conflict (Deutsch, 1973): cooperative—the party has a positive interest in the welfare of the other as well as its own; individualistic—the party has an interest in doing as well as it can for itself and is unconcerned about the welfare of the other; and competitive—the party has an interest in doing better than the other as well as doing as well as it can for itself. Since each of two parties can have any one of the three basic orientations, nine (3 x 3) combinations of orientations are theoretically possible. However, research (Deutsch, 1973; Kelley & Stahelski, 1970) as well as theory (Deutsch, 1982) suggest that only the reciprocal combinations are stable and that nonreciprocal combinations tend to move in the direction of mutual competition if either party has a competitive orientation. Research results also suggest that an individualistically oriented dyad will move either toward mutual cooperation or mutual competition depending upon which is favored by external circumstances and situational facilities.

As a result of much research by my students and myself (Deutsch, 1973, 1985), I have developed a hypothesis about what gives rise to cooperation and competition. I have termed it, "Deutsch's crude law of social relations": the characteristic processes and effects elicited by a given type of social relationship (e.g., cooperative or competitive) also tend to elicit that type of social relationship. Thus, cooperation induces and is induced by a perceived similarity in beliefs and attitudes, a readiness to be helpful, openness in communication, trusting and friendly attitudes, sensitivity to common interests and deemphasis of opposed interests, an orientation toward enhancing mutual power rather than power differences, and so on. Similarly, competition induces and is induced by the use of tactics of coercion, threat, or deception; attempts to enhance the power differences between oneself and the other; poor communica-
tions; minimization of the awareness of similarities in value and increased sensitivity to opposed interests; suspicious and hostile attitudes; the importance, rigidity, and size of the issues in conflict; and so on.

In other words, if one has systematic knowledge of the effects of cooperative and competitive processes, one will have systematic knowledge of the conditions that typically give rise to such processes, and by extension, to the conditions that affect whether a conflict will take a constructive or destructive course. My early theory of cooperation and competition (Deutsch, 1949) is a theory of the effects of cooperative and competitive processes. Hence, from the crude law of social relations stated earlier, it follows that this theory provides insight into the conditions that give rise to cooperative and competitive processes.

Understanding the conditions that give rise to cooperative or competitive social processes, as well as their characteristics, is central to understanding the circumstances that give rise to constructive or destructive processes of conflict resolution. A constructive process of conflict resolution is, in its essence, similar to an effective cooperative process, while a destructive process is similar to a process of competitive interaction. Since much is known about the nature of cooperative and competitive processes, and the conditions that give rise to each from my work and the work of other scholars (Deutsch, 1973, 1985; Johnson & Johnson, 1989), much of this knowledge can be applied to understanding the factors that determine whether a conflict will take a constructive or destructive course.

The Personalities of the Conflicting Parties

Social scientists have written extensively about the factors within parties that determine their predispositions to be prejudiced or fair-minded and to engage in destructive or prosocial forms of social behavior. This literature is too extensive to summarize here. However, a brief perspective on it will be presented that represents a growing consensus among psychologists studying the relationship between personality and social behavior (Snyder & Ickes, 1985).

The once dominant dispositional approach that seeks to understand social behavior in terms of relatively stable traits, dispositions, and other propensities that reside within individuals is now considered to have a limited usefulness. Such an approach typically focuses on one or more enduring predispositions of the following types: motivational tendencies (e.g., aggression, power, pride, fear), character traits (e.g., authoritarianism, Machiavellianism, locus of control, dogmatism), cognitive tendencies (e.g., cognitive simplicity vs. complexity, the “open” vs. “closed” system), values and ideologies (e.g., egalitarianism—nonegalitarianism, cooperative—competitive, traditional—modern), self-conceptions and bases of self-esteem, and learned habits and skills of coping. Thus, some scholars have sought to explain destructive conflict in terms of an inborn or acquired need for aggression, others have emphasized the power motive or pride, still others have stressed “black” and “white” thinking, while others have employed ideologies and self-conceptions as the basis of their explanations.
The now dominant approach to explaining social behavior is one that seeks to understand its regularities in terms of the interacting, reciprocally influencing contributions of both situational and dispositional determinants. There are several well-supported theses in this approach (see Snyder & Ickes, 1985), which I summarize as follows:

1. Individuals vary from one another considerably in terms of whether they manifest consistencies of personality in their social behavior across situations—e.g., those who monitor and regulate their behavioral choices on the basis of situational information show relatively little consistency (see Snyder & Ickes, 1985) as do those who report a relatively low degree of private self-consciousness (Schier, Buss, & Buss, 1978).

2. Some situations have "strong" characteristics and, in these, little individual variation in behavior occurs despite differences in individual traits (Ickes, 1982; Mischel, 1977) while other situations with weak characteristics permit the play of individual differences.

3. Some situations evoke dispositions because they are seen to be relevant to it, make it salient as a guide to behavior, and permit modes of behavior that are differentially responsive to individual differences in it (Bem & Lenney, 1976); other situations lacking these characteristics will not encourage the manifestation of a disposition.

4. Some situations evoke self-focusing tendencies that make predispositions salient to the self and, as a consequence, a more influential determinant of behavior than in situations where such a self-focus is not evoked (Dural & Wicklund, 1972, 1973; Schier, Carver, & Gibbons, 1981).

5. There appears to be a tendency for a congruence between personal dispositions and situational strategies (Deutsch, 1982) such that persons with given dispositions tend to seek out types of social situations that fit their dispositions and persons tend to mold their dispositions to fit the situation that they find difficult to leave or to alter (Snyder & Ickes, 1985). For a characterization of the nature of the cognitions, motivations, and orientations or dispositions that are congruent with the basic types of social relations defined by their locations on the following four dimensions: cooperative vs. competitive; egalitarian vs. nonegalitarian; social-emotional vs. task oriented; formal vs. informal), see Deutsch (1982, 1985).

This more complex model of the reciprocally influencing, interacting contributions of situational and dispositional determinants of social behavior suggests a continuing reciprocal influence between the internal states and characteristics of the conflicting parties and their external conflict. That is, the causal arrow goes in both directions between internal characteristics and external conflict rather than simply from internal characteristics to the nature of the conflict process. This is also why parties in an extended conflict process, whether cooperative or
The internal needs of the conflicting parties may require a conflictful relationship and, in turn, a conflictful relationship may generate needs within the parties that further perpetuate the conflict. Thus, there are many kinds of internal needs for which a hostile extern al relationship can be an outlet:

- It may provide an acceptable excuse for internal problems; the problems can be held out as caused by the adversary or by the need to defend against the adversary.
- It may provide a distraction so internal problems appear less salient.
- It enables one to have a sense of excitement, purpose, coherence, and unity that is otherwise lacking in one’s life. Conflict, especially if it has dangerous overtones, can counteract feelings of aimlessness, boredom, and weariness.
- It can provide an opportunity to express pent-up hostility arising from internal conflict through combat with the external adversary.
- It may enable one to project disapproved aspects of oneself (which are not consciously recognized) onto the adversary and to attack them through attack on the adversary.
- It may permit important parts of one’s self—including attitudes, skills, and defenses developed during conflictual relations in one’s formative stages—to be expressed and valued because the relations with the present adversary resemble earlier conflictual relations, and so on.

Parties to a conflict also frequently get committed to perpetuating the conflict by the investments they have made in conducting the conflict; also, those who have acquired special power, profit, prestige, jobs, knowledge, or skills during the course of conflict may feel threatened by the diminution or ending of conflict.

The Issues Involved in the Conflict

There are many different issues that can be the focus of conflict and a number of different typologies have been developed to categorize the content of issues—e.g., whether the conflict is over resources, preferences and nuisances, beliefs, values, or the nature of the relationship (Deutsch, 1973). Here, I shall focus on some formal characteristics of issues rather than their content since the likelihood that a conflict will take a constructive or destructive course is more determined by the former rather than the latter. Below, I shall consider such attributes of an issue as its type, size, and rigidity.

Type of issue. Certain types of issues are less conducive to constructive conflict resolutions than others; they lead the participants to define the conflict as a zero-sum or win-lose conflict. Such issues as “power or control over the other,” having “higher status than the other,” “victory of defeat,” “exclusive possession of something
for which there is no substitute or possible compensation" are the kind that are apt to lead to a win-lose definition of the conflict.

Size. One of the characteristics of destructive conflicts is they tend to grow in size or to escalate. The converse also seems true: small conflicts are easier to resolve constructively than large ones (Deutsch, 1973; Fisher, 1964). One enlarges a conflict by dealing with it as a conflict between large rather than small units (a racial conflict rather than a conflict between two individuals of different races), as a conflict over a large, substantive issue rather than over a small one (being treated fairly or being treated unfairly on a particular occasion), as a conflict over a principle rather than over the application of a principle, as a conflict whose solution establishes large rather than small substantive or procedural precedents. Many other determinants of conflict size could be listed. For example, an issue that bears upon self-esteem or a change in power or status is likely to be more important than an issue that does not affect these things. Illegitimate threats or attempts to coerce are likely to increase the size of the conflict and thus increase the likelihood of a destructive process.

Conflict size may be defined as being equal to the expected difference in the value of the outcomes that a party will receive if it wins compared with the value it will receive if the other wins a conflict. A party "wins" a conflict if it obtains outcomes that are satisfying to it; the more satisfying they are to it, the more it wins. This definition implies that conflict size will be small for a party who believes both parties can win and large if it thinks that one party will lose (have less than satisfactory outcomes) if the other wins. This definition also implies that the size of a given conflict may be larger for one party than for the other. One party may expect that its outcomes will be quite satisfactory even if the other wins, while the second may believe that its outcomes will be adversely affected if the other wins.

It is somewhat surprising that, in the literature dealing with the management of conflict, there has been relatively little focus on what Fisher (1964) calls issue control. Controlling the importance of what is perceived to be at stake in a conflict may prevent the conflict from taking a destructive course. Many conflicts may be defined in a way that either magnifies or minimizes the size of the disputed issues. In general, "here-now-this" conflicts, which are localized in terms of particular, delimited actions and their consequences, are much easier to resolve constructively than conflicts that are defined in terms of principles, precedents, or rights, where the issues transcend time and space and are generalized beyond the specific action to personalities, groups, races, or other large social units or categories.

Issue rigidity. The perceived lack of satisfactory alternatives or substitutes for fulfilling the interests at stake in the conflict makes for issue rigidity. Sometimes, motivational and intellectual limitations may lead the parties to perceive issues more rigidly than reality dictates so that they freeze themselves into "positions" (Fisher & Ury, 1981). However, it is also evident that a harsh reality may very much limit the possibility of finding acceptable substitutes and narrowly restrict the
possibilities open to the conflicting parties. If there is insufficient food, shelter, clothing, medicine, or anything else required for physical and psychological survival, conflict over such necessities will often take on a desperate quality.

The Social-Cultural Context

Individuals, groups, or nations with different cultural backgrounds must often negotiate about their conflicting interests, beliefs, or values, and sometimes they must work closely together in organizations. Their cultural differences may give rise to barriers to interaction, misunderstandings, prejudices, and behaviors that are unwittingly offensive and these may reduce the chances that negotiations will be constructive.

In-group ethnocentrism reduces the likelihood that a productive problem-solving process will characterize the interaction among the members of different groups. In-group ethnocentrism may not be as universal as Sumner (1906) posited but it is ubiquitous (see Brewer, 1986, and LeVine & Campbell, 1972) and it clearly provides obstacles to constructive interaction among people from different cultural groups. Sumner characterized ethnocentrism as the view of things in which one's own group is the center of everything, and all others are scaled and rated with reference to it. Folkways correspond to it to cover both the inner and the outer relation. Each group nourishes its own pride and vanity, boasts itself superior, exalts its own divinities, and looks with contempt on outsiders. Each group thinks its own folkways the only right ones, and if it observes that other groups have other folkways, these excite its scorn. Opprobrious epithets are derived from these differences. (Sumner, 1906, pp. 12-13)

As Tajfel (1982a, b) has pointed out, the self-identity of individuals is very much linked to the characteristics of the groups with which they identify: these characteristics then help define their social identity. The expectations, beliefs, language, practices, rituals, norms, and values that members of an in-group have in common define their shared culture. The culture, in turn, establishes the symbolic meaning of actions, defining a type of action as appropriate or inappropriate, respectful or disrespectful, friendly or hostile, praiseworthy or blameworthy, etc. Cultural differences are established early and the cultural assumptions acquired in childhood often have heavily laden emotional connotations of good and bad. Hence, an ethnocentric orientation to cultural differences is apt to result in strong emotional reactions. Although the term ethnocentrism is usually employed in relation to ethnic and nationality groups, it is well to recognize that an analogous process can occur in the relation between various social categories—e.g., those based on gender, age, race, religion, class, occupation, physical disability, sexual orientation. Each social category has its own subculture and the differences between the subcultures (in expectations, practices, language, norms, values, etc.) may lead to misunder-
standings, stereotypes, and prejudices that affect the ability of people in different categories to manage the conflicts between them successfully.

Ethnocentrism is conducive to the occurrence of conflict but not conducive to its constructive resolution. What are some of the factors affecting the occurrence and intensity of ethnocentrism? And what methods are effective in dealing with ethnocentrically based conflict? LeVine and Campbell (1972) have addressed the first question as have many other scholars concerned with the development of intergroup prejudice (e.g., Brewer, 1986; Brewer & Kramer, 1985; Stephan, 1985). Sherif (1966) has addressed the second question as have other scholars (e.g., Stephan, 1985; Wilder, 1986; Worchel & Austin, 1986) concerned with the reduction of destructive intergroup conflict.

There appear to be several reasonably well-established propositions relating to the occurrence and intensity of ethnocentrism that are supported by theoretical analysis (LeVine & Campbell, 1972) as well as by the existing research (Brewer, 1986).

(1) Ethnocentric in-group bias occurs most consistently with regard to such moral traits as “trustworthiness,” “honesty,” “peace-loving,” “virtuous,” and “obedient.” As Brewer (1986) suggests, these are all traits that can be defined in terms of normative prescriptions that apply to intragroup, as opposed to intergroup, behavior—i.e., one is supposed to exhibit moral behavior toward the members of one’s group but not necessarily to the members of other groups. When two interacting groups have each limited their “moral community” (Deutsch, 1985) to their own group, they are apt to have reciprocal stereotypes (Campbell, 1967) such as “We are loyal; they are clannish”; “We are honest and peaceful among ourselves; they are hostile and treacherous toward outsiders.”

(2) The more intense the competition between groups, the greater the tendencies toward ethnocentrism in their relations; the more intense the cooperation between groups, the less the ethnocentrism (Blake, Shepard, & Mouton, 1964; Brewer, 1986; Deutsch, 1973; Sherif, 1966; Turner, 1975; Worchel, 1986).

(3) Reciprocal relations tend to occur between interacting groups—i.e., in-groups will return the perceived attitudes of out-groups toward themselves so that reciprocal attitudes (positive or negative) will tend to agree.

(4) Perceived differences between the in-group and out-group will generally be congruent with the maintenance of positive self-evaluation (Turner, 1975). Where the in-group’s position is objectively less favorable than the out-group’s (e.g., it has lost a competition), one could expect the perceived differences to be minimized rather than exaggerated or explained in a way which would reduce its implications for self-esteem. Otherwise, one would expect real differences to appear in exaggerated forms in the stereotyped images of the out-group.

(5) The pyramidal-segmentary, as compared to the crosscutting, type of societal organization is more conducive to in-group ethnocentrism and destructive
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intergroup strife within a society (LeVine & Campbell, 1972). In the
pyramidal-segmentary type, each smaller unit that an individual belongs to
is included as a segment of each larger group that he is a member of. In
the crosscutting type, the groups to which a member belongs cut across,
rather than nest in, one another. His residence group is not necessarily
cluded in his kinship groups, and his work group may be composed of
people from different ethnic groups.

A number of different approaches to changing intergroup prejudices, stereotyp-
ing, and discriminatory behavior have been studied (Allport, 1954; Sherif, 1966;
Stephan, 1985; Worchel & Austin, 1986): intergroup contact, information, and
education, sensitivity training or problem-solving workshops, negotiations between
group leaders, and the use of cooperative procedures. The research (see Stephan,
1985, for a summary) is much too extensive to permit more than several brief
statements. First, it is evident that the most profound and enduring positive changes
in intergroup relations occur when successful cooperation in the achievement of
a joint or superordinate goal is promoted (Cook, 1984, 1985; Johnson & Johnson,
1989; Sherif, 1966). A social context of cooperation enhances the effectiveness of
each of the other approaches, and without a cooperative context, the other ap-
proaches may have little lasting effects. A second factor enhancing the effectiveness
of each of the different approaches is a favorable normative context in which
accepted authority, or influential third parties, strongly favor positive relations
between the groups.

Intergroup contact, per se, can either be positive or negative in its effects upon
intergroup relations depending upon the context within which it occurs and the
nature of the contact. Contacts are more likely to have positive effects if they are
of equal status, extended over time, occur in diverse situations, permit individuation
of group members, have high acquaintance potential, and have positive contexts
and outcomes. In addition, contacts have more positive effects when the in-group
and out-group members are similar in basic beliefs and values, they are of equal
competence, and they are similar in numbers.

Studies of the effects of information, lectures, films, propaganda, etc., generally
reveal positive effects (Stephan, 1985; Williams 1947), but most such studies do
not have long-term follow-up and have not included behavioral data. Intergroup
workshops, multiracial sensitivity training groups, and the like also appear to have
short-run positive effects (Stephan, 1985), and such group techniques have shown
some promise in dealing with intercommunal and international conflict (Burton,

Processes Involved in the Perpetuation and Escalation of Conflict

Some conflicts appear to take on a life of their own. They continue even though
the issues that initially gave rise to them have long been forgotten or become
irrelevant. Other conflicts are like malignant tumors; they grow out of control and enmesh the conflict participants in a web of hostile interactions and defensive maneuvers that continuously worsen their situations, making them feel less secure, more vulnerable, and more burdened. I have identified a number of the key elements that contribute to the development and perpetuation of a malignant process (Deutsch, 1983). They include (1) an anarchic social situation, (2) a win-lose or competitive orientation, (3) inner conflicts (within each of the parties) that express themselves through external conflict, (4) cognitive rigidity, (5) misjudgments and misperceptions, (6) unwitting commitments, (7) self-fulfilling prophecies, (8) vicious escalating spirals, and (9) a gamesmanship orientation that turns the conflict away from issues of what in real life is being won or lost to an abstract conflict over images of power.

In previous sections I have touched on some of these elements. Here, I wish to elaborate briefly on anarchic social situations and unwitting commitments.

The anarchic social situation. There is a kind of situation that does not allow the possibility of "rational" behavior so long as the conditions for social order or mutual trust do not exist. A characteristic symptom of such "nonrational situations" is that an attempt on the part of an individual or nation to increase its own welfare or security without regard to the security or welfare of others is self-defeating. Such situations, which are captured by the Dilemma of the Commons and the Prisoner's Dilemma Game, have been extensively studied by myself (Deutsch, 1958, 1973) and other social scientists (see Alker & Hurwitz, 1981, for a comprehensive discussion). When confronted with such social dilemmas, the only way an individual or nation can avoid being trapped in mutually reinforcing, self-defeating cycles is to attempt to change the situation so a basis of social order or mutual trust can be developed or to leave it if possible.

Unwitting commitments. In a malignant social process, the parties not only become overcommitted to rigid positions, but also become committed, unwittingly, to the beliefs, defenses, and investments involved in carrying out their conflictual activities. The conflict, then, is maintained and perpetuated by the commitments and investments given rise to by the malignant conflict process itself. Within limits, the more costly the actions you take based on your beliefs, the greater the need to reduce any prior-to-action doubts that you may have had about your beliefs (Festinger, 1957).

One of the characteristics of a pathological defense mechanism is that it is perpetuated by its failures rather than by its successes in protecting security. An individual might, for example, attempt to defend him/herself from feeling like a failure by not really trying, attributing failure to lack of effort rather than lack of ability. The result is that the person does not succeed and does not quell anxieties and doubts about the ability to succeed. As a consequence, when again faced with a situation of being anxious about failing, the individual will resort to the same defense of "not trying"; it provides temporary relief of anxiety even as it perpetuates the need for the defense, since the individual has cut him/herself off from the possibility of success.
Although many individuals, groups, and nations appear to get enmeshed in malignant conflict processes, little is known about how to undo such processes. They are, undoubtedly, easier to prevent than to cure.

The Skills Involved in Constructive Solutions to Conflict

Third parties (mediators, conciliators, process consultants, therapists, counselors, etc.) who are called upon to provide assistance in a conflict in which the conflicting parties need help to resolve their conflict constructively require four kinds of skills. The first set of skills are those related to the third party's establishing an effective working relationship with each of the conflicting parties so that they will trust the third party, communicate freely with her, and be responsive to her suggestions regarding an orderly process for negotiations (see Folberg & Taylor, 1984; Kressel, 1985; Kressel & Pruitt, 1985; Rubin, 1980). The second are those related to establishing a cooperative problem-solving attitude among the conflicting parties toward their conflict. Much of the preceding discussion in this paper indirectly focuses on this area; this is elaborated more fully in Deutsch (1973). The third are the skills involved in developing a creative group process and group decision making. Such a process clarifies the nature of the problems that the conflicting parties are confronting, helps expand the range of alternatives that are perceived to be available, facilitates realistic assessment of their feasibility as well as desirability, and facilitates the implementation of agreed-upon solutions (see Blake & Mouton, 1984; Fisher & Ury, 1981; Janis & Mann, 1977; Zander, 1982). And fourth, it is often helpful for the third party to have considerable substantive knowledge about the issues around which the conflict centers. Substantive knowledge could enable the mediator to see possible solutions that might not occur to the conflicting parties, and it could permit him or her to help them assess proposed solutions more realistically.

Participants in a conflict need skills and orientations similar to those of a skilled mediator if they are to develop constructive solutions to their conflicts. They need the skills involved in establishing a cooperative, problem-solving relationship with the other, in developing a creative group process that expands the options available for resolving their conflict, and they need the ability to look at their conflict from an outside perspective so that they do not get ensnared in the many unproductive or destructive traps that abound in conflicts.

This factor of abilities and skills is not sufficiently emphasized in theoretical discussions. I suggest that many destructive conflicts between nations, groups, and individuals result from their lack of skills related to the procedures involved in constructive conflict resolution, and I further suggest that training in these skills should be more widespread (Deutsch, 1993). In recent years our International Center for Cooperation and Conflict Resolution at Teachers College has been doing a considerable amount of training of educators and students in conflict
resolution and mediation under the direction of Ellen Raider. Several things have become apparent to us:

(1) A significant change in behavior is unlikely to occur from the training unless there is emphasis on skills. Knowledge, while important, is not enough to be skillful in engaging in constructive conflict resolution behavior. Thus, students in a course may come to know that “active listening,” “taking the perspective of the other,” distinguishing between “needs” and “positions,” “controlling anger,” “using ‘I’ rather than ‘you’ messages,” “reframing the issues in conflict to find common ground,” being alert to the possibility of misunderstandings due to cultural differences, etc., are good things to do in a conflict. However, unless they are given guided and repeated practice in the use of the skills in various contexts, they may not be able to engage skillfully in the behaviors that exemplify them. This is not to deny that some people have relevant skills but are unaware of them or do not know that they can be usefully employed. For example, many parents can readily become successful mediators in disputes between children if they learn a few simple rules of mediation and employ them when a destructive conflict between children emerges (Deutsch & Brickman, 1994). Although knowledge by itself of the principles of constructive conflict resolution alone is usually insufficient to produce skilled behavior, it—along with skill practice in diverse contexts—can facilitate the generalization of these skills so that they are applied in a wide range of situations.

(2) The social and cognitive skills involved in constructive conflict resolution are conceptually different than those involved in effective physical activities. To understand the difference between the skills involved in physical and social activities, let us compare some of the skills required in tennis with those required for constructive conflict resolution. In tennis, if you serve poorly (e.g., into the net or outside the lines) the physical reality gives you immediate, relatively unambiguous feedback of your fault. In contrast, if you listen or communicate poorly during a conflict, the other (the social reality) may give you no, or ambiguous, feedback that you have been misunderstood or that you misunderstand. In tennis, internal feedback, the smooth coordination of your own movements and the movements of the tennis ball and racquet, often provides a reliable indication of whether your serve will be good or not. One can acquire many of the skills involved in serving well through solitary practice; this is not the case for conflict resolution. In conflict, people often do not question whether they have communicated well or not; they assume they have done so without checking with the other or examining their internal feelings. Direct and appropriate feedback from the environment or oneself is more common in relation to physical as compared with social skills.

In teaching a tennis novice how to serve, one must identify the component skills (e.g., how to place one’s feet, how to hold the racquet, where to throw the ball, how to swing for different spins and different placements, etc.), provide practice in them, and also help the student to integrate them into a well-coordinated performance in which external and internal feedback during repeated practice...
Several things have training unless there to be skillful in students in a course of the other, “anger,” using ‘I’ to find common to cultural differ­ ences, unless they are us contexts, they clarify them. This is aware of them or do many parents can even if they learn a conflict between edge by itself ly insufficient to know the differ­ ences, let us compa­ rison of constructive conflict r outside the lines) us feedback of your a conflict, the other that you have been feedback, the smooth the tennis ball and serve will be good or well through solitary ct, people often do assume they have r internal feelings. self is more common be component skills to throw the ball, (.), provide practice a well-coordinated reapeated practice develop an integrated skill. It is much the same for social skills. However, there are several differences in the two kinds of training:

(a) No one is a novice when he/she starts training in conflict resolution skills; many are when they begin tennis lessons. The fact that everyone has been a participant and observer in many conflicts from childhood results in preconceptions, attitudes, and modes of behavior toward conflict that may be deeply ingrained before any systematic training occurs. Much of a person’s preexisting orientations to conflict will reflect those prevalent in his/her culture but some will reflect individual predispositions acquired from unique experiences in his/her family, school, watching TV, etc. Before a student can acquire competency in conflict resolution, he/she has to become aware of his/her preexisting orientations and the obstacles they may present and be motivated to change them. Awareness and motivation are developed by having a model of good performance that the student can compare with his/her preconscious preexisting one. Guided practice in that model that gradually shapes the student’s behavior to be more consistent with it through modeling and feedback, and repeated practice, leads to its internalization. Once it has been internalized the reoccurrence of earlier incompetent orientations to conflict are experienced as awkward and out-of-place because there are internal cues to the deviations of one’s behavior from the internalized model. Similarly in tennis, if one has internalized a good model of serving, internal cues will tell you if you are deviating from it (e.g., by throwing the ball too high). As with conflict resolution, if a self-taught tennis student has internalized a poor model of serving, training will be directed at making him/her aware of this and providing a good model.

(b) How to obtain and use feedback is different in the two kinds of training. In the acquisition and use of both social and physical skills, external feedback is important as is strong motivation. The tennis player need not exert any special effort to get clear and immediate feedback that his/her serve was effective or not. In contrast, without special effort and skill, the participant in a conflict may get no feedback or ambiguous or misleading information about the effectiveness of his behavior. Hence, training in conflict resolution involves training in the skills of eliciting and giving clear feedback to the others with whom one is in conflict. The skills that are required are considerably less complex in situations where one can be sure that the parties in conflict are not trying to mislead or deceive one another than when one cannot have this confidence. In the social science literature much has been written about giving and obtaining feedback in cooperative situations and various exercises have been developed to develop these skills (see, for example, Johnson & Johnson, 1987; Lewicki & Litterer, 1985), but little has been written about acquiring the skills in the art of lying or bluffing and knowing when the other is doing it to you (see Ekman, 1985, for an exception).

(c) The implementation of social as compared with tennis skills requires considerably more knowledge and sensitivity to the social-cultural context in which they are to be employed. A game of tennis remains much the same whether you are playing it in Japan,
Mexico, France, or the United States; little change is required in how you use your tennis skills. In contrast, conflict takes different forms in different cultures; to employ his/her skills effectively, a skillful conflict resolver will have to be knowledgeable about how the meanings of different forms of behavior may differ from those in his/her own culture. Knowledge of the rituals of politeness, of the social norms regarding behavior in conflict situations; of the steps involved in establishing mutual trust and a cooperative relation in the sociocultural context within which negotiations are to take place are essential to effectiveness. A scholarly literature about these matters is just beginning to emerge (see, for example, Binnendijk, 1987; Cohen, 1991; Fisher, 1980; Hall & Hall, 1990; Kimmel, 1989; Weiss & Stripp, 1985) but clearly much more research is needed.

(d) **The transfer of social skills from the training setting to real-life situations is more difficult.** It is easier to transfer tennis skills acquired during practice lessons because the rules of the game do not change with a change of players and both players have to play by the same rules. In conflict situations, this is not necessarily the case: a cooperative “game” of conflict has different rules than a “competitive” one; in a given conflict, one person may be following cooperative rules while the other is following competitive ones. Initially, it may be difficult to discern what kind of conflict rules the other is following, particularly if the other is trying to deceive you. Also, as previously indicated, the meaning of one’s behavior varies in different sociocultural contexts much more in conflict situations than in tennis. Further, the difference in emotionality and ego involvement from the training situation to real-life situations is apt to be greater for conflict than for tennis; one could expect that this would make successful transfer of conflict skills less likely.

(3) **The use of these social skills is more likely if the social context is favorable to their use.** As I indicated earlier, the sociocultural context is an important determinant of whether a conflict will take a constructive or destructive course. It also may influence the readiness to use one’s skills in constructive conflict resolution. In some social contexts, an individual who has such skills may expect to be belittled by friends or associates as being “weak,” “unassertive,” “afraid,” etc. In other contexts, he or she may anticipate accusations of being “disloyal,” a “traitor,” an “enemy lover” if he or she tries to develop a cooperative problem-solving relationship with the other side. In still other contexts, the possibilities of developing a constructive conflict resolution process will seem to be so unlikely that one will not even try to do so. In other words, if the social context leads one to expect to be unsuccessful or devalued when one employs one’s skills, they are not apt to be used; they are, if it leads one to expect approval and success.

The foregoing suggests that, in unfavorable social contexts, the skilled conflict resolver will often need two additional types of skills. One type relates to the ability to place one "outside" or "above" one’s social context so that one can observe the influences emanating from it and then consciously decide whether to resist them personally or not. The other type involves the skills of a successful “change agent,” of someone who is able to help an institution or group to change its culture so that it facilitates rather than hinders constructive conflict resolution.
I mention these additional skills because it is important to recognize that institutional and cultural changes are often necessary for an individual to feel free to express his constructive potential. This is analogous to what research has demonstrated in the area of prejudice: a favorable sociocultural context helps an individual to become less prejudiced in behavior as well as in attitude. When the context is unfavorable, the skills mentioned above are important to the maintenance and expression of one's skills in constructive conflict resolution. Sophisticated training in constructive conflict resolution will thus be directed at helping to bring about social as well as individual change.

Some Suggestions for Research

Like many other scholars working in this area, I have assumed that there are conflict processes and variables that affect the courses and outcomes of conflict that cut across the various behavior and social sciences. We have assumed that, although there are many different types of conflicts, it is possible to develop theories that can be applied to a wide range of disputes. But are such assumptions valid? Is it theoretically and empirically useful, for example, to discuss cooperative and competitive processes when considering intergroup and international as well as interpersonal relations? Do nations as well as individuals make misperceptions and misjudgments in the course of their conflicts? Even beginning to think clearly about whether such questions are answerable and, if so, how they could be answered, raises fundamental issues about the conceptual linkages as well as the empirical differences among the various behavioral and social science disciplines concerned with conflict. In terms of theoretically oriented research, I consider this topic to be of the highest priority.

In an earlier section of this paper and elsewhere (Deutsch, 1983), I have characterized the nature of malignant conflicts and have tried to identify some of the processes involved in them. Other scholars (e.g., Brockner & Rubin, 1985; Kressel, Northrup, & Thorson, 1989; Osgood, 1962; Patchen, 1987; Pruitt & Rubin, 1986; Smoke, 1977) have discussed insightfully the processes involved in the escalation of conflict. Yet it is evident that we are a long way from having the comprehensive understanding of the processes necessary to make constructive suggestions about how to prevent, abort, or deescalate such conflicts.

Mediation, conciliation, arbitration, problem-solving workshops, counseling, and other forms of intervention into conflict are widespread. However, as Kressel, Pruitt, and Associates (1989) indicated, there have been few good research studies comparing the outcome of mediation with other forms of third-party intervention such as court decisions or arbitration. There are even fewer that study the comparative effects of different approaches to mediation. It is evident that it would be of considerable social utility if research could help identify the conditions and methods of third-party intervention that are likely to be helpful in difficult conflict situations.
Despite the development of a growing industry of conflict resolution training, there has been little relevant systematic theorizing or research in this area. As the prior section has suggested, we know little about educating people in the skills, as distinct from the knowledge and attitudes involved in effective conflict resolution. Nor have we given much thought about how conflict effectiveness is to be defined and measured, nor whether conflict effectiveness is generalized or situation-specific.

The foregoing suggestions hardly exhaust the possibilities of significant areas of research. They indicate areas that must be systematically addressed if the theoretical and practical potential of this field are to be realized.

Let me conclude this article by stating that I believe there has been significant progress in the study of conflict since this area emerged as a field of scholarship. However, the progress does not yet begin to match the social need. In relation to this need, too few social scientists are working, and receiving support for work, on the scientific issues that are likely to provide the knowledge that may lead to more constructive conflict resolution of the many conflicts which await us all.

References


In this area as the people in the skills as conflict resolution. is to be defined or situation-specific. significant areas of if the theoretical been significant end of scholarship. In relation to effort for work, on may lead to more us all.