

A Nested Theory of Conflict

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This article presents a new theoretical perspective on conflict resolution. It approaches conflict by identifying on what level its source lies — at the structural level of the system as a whole, within the structure of a sub-system, at the relational or issue-specific level — and stresses the extent to which these levels are related, nested within one another. The author takes the position that the first step in determining how to resolve a conflict is to analyze at which source level it arises.

Máire Dugan also shares with the reader the way in which she developed her nested model of conflict. She makes the point that this story-telling approach may help to make both theory and theory development more accessible to women and most men and invites the reader to engage in theory utilization and development. She chronicles some of the ways in which women have provided leadership in the development of the field of conflict resolution and peace making and suggests that, as with other fields, these contributions have been too often unacknowledged or underappreciated.

When I began developing this article to present my nested theory of conflict for the inaugural issue of *A Leadership Journal: Women in Leadership — Sharing the Vision*, I recalled an incident that occurred several years ago.

A close friend and colleague of mine had asked me to review a piece he had written on the background of the institute for which we both worked. Included in it was a section on the intellectual foundations upon which our work was based and the people who had constructed those foundations. My review noted that he had identified only male progenitors, and I suggested that he also name some women. When he handed me his second draft for review, I thought that he had ignored my suggestion—the names had not been expanded to include a single woman.

I found myself getting quite angry. It seemed to me that the first draft represented an unfortunate oversight, but that the second draft was a deliberate refusal to honor the contributions of women to our field. When I confronted him with this, he pointed out that he had not ignored my comment, that he in fact had given it consideration, but that he had not been able to come up with any ideas, concepts, or

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theories which we used as bases for our work that had been developed by women. He gave me a challenge: to identify central ideas in our work that had been conceived by women.

It was easy for me to rattle off a list of prominent women in our field, but then he challenged me further: what ideas of theirs do we use? If you can give me some examples, I'll happily put them in.

I found myself stymied for a minute, but then I realized that there was something more important than individual ideas that some of the women on my list had contributed. Among the women I had mentioned were some who had created the networks and organizations through which all of us in the field were able to become aware of each others' ideas and talents. For example, Elise Boulding, who founded both the International Peace Research Association and its North American affiliate, the Consortium on Peace Research, Education and Development; Margaret Herrman, the primary driving force behind the National Conference on Peacemaking and Conflict Resolution; and Janet Rifkin and Albie Davis, two of the many "mothers" of the National Association of Mediation in Education. My colleague quickly agreed that this, too, was important and graciously expanded his list.

I am not trying to suggest here that women's only contributions to the field of peacemaking and conflict resolution are in organizational work. Ideas abound as well. The four women I mention above, for example, have made substantial conceptual contributions, certainly to my own thinking. Elise's work in futures invention and her concept of the "two hundred year present"¹ (Boulding, 1988) are particularly important, as are Margaret's perspectives on the development of the field and how it can be made useful in the local public policy sector (Herrman, 1994). Janet's work on narrative in the mediation process (Rifkin, Miller, and Cobb, 1991) and her insightful analysis of one of the most central, and too often unquestioned, concepts of the field, neutrality (Cobb and Rifkin, 1991), and Albie Davis' insights on what makes mediation work (Davis, 1989b) and her long overdue resurrecting of a largely forgotten conceptu-

al progenitor of the field, Mary Parker Follett (Davis, 1989a), stand out as well. Nonetheless, when I list the theorists whose ideas have contributed most to my own thinking, I come up with a list that is largely, although not exclusively, as my colleague's first two lists were, male.

Why is this? Why are women not equally represented among the theorists of our own age or almost any other? Is theory making a node on the Y chromosome of which we females are deprived? Is it a hormonal issue? As you might expect, I think not. Now that may be simply because I don't want to think of myself as abnormal as a female theorist; but I think there is something about the way theory is presented that makes it inaccessible to most people—female and male.

Theory is usually presented in a way that is overly objectified. There is rarely an "I" in a theoretical treatise. The theorist remains unknown as a person. How he developed the theory is a mystery. For all the information we are given, it might have been handed to him atop a mountain on stone tablets. The theorist almost never shares the story of how he developed his theory. Furthermore, theorists tend to write and speak in language so inaccessible to the ordinary person that for the listener to conceive of herself as being able to use the theory, let alone build on it or develop an alternate, seems arrogant, if not heretical. Theory is for some anointed elite, a well chosen few.

My own opinion and experience is that we are all theorists, each one of us. But some of us may not have articulated our theories or even explored the ways in which our ideas are connected and form systems of thinking. Each of us, however, has the capacity to do this, if only we learn how. From this perspective, I think that the theory I am presenting in the following pages may be less important than the story of how I came to develop it. I invite you to engage in that story and create your own stories and your own theories.

The Context

Some years ago, when I was both teaching in the Institute for Conflict Analysis and Resolution

(ICAR) at George Mason University and serving as Executive Director of the Consortium on Peace Research, Education, and Development (COPRED), I was working on a project funded by the United States Institute of Peace to explore the relationships between peace studies and conflict resolution. It was an exciting undertaking because, as a professional in both fields, I was curious about how they might relate to each other more fully, and because it allowed me to utilize one of my favorite intellectual gifts, noting the connections between formerly nonrelated concepts and allowing new ideas to emerge from the cross-fertilization. As I was reviewing the literature, it became evident to me that most of the conceptual constructs of conflict discussed in the conflict resolution field tended to be dichotomous, linear, or merely typological.

An example of the first comes from a book which resparked interest in the study of conflict by social scientists, Lewis Coser's important work, *The Functions of Social Conflict* (1956). Coser makes a distinction between realistic conflict, "which arises from frustration of specific demands within the relationship and from estimates of gains of the participants, and which are directed at the presumed frustrating object," and nonrealistic conflict, which is not "occasioned by the rival ends of the antagonists, but by the need for tension release of at least one of them" (p. 49). The presumptions are that all conflict is either realistic or unrealistic, that a conflict cannot be both at the same time, and that it is helpful to make this dichotomous distinction between a conflict which focuses on the issues in contention between the parties and a conflict in which the other party is itself the object of the conflict. In the first case, it would seem that each party is attempting to change the other's behavior in some way in order that some desirable goal might be achieved; in the second case, doing the other harm is the goal orientation of the conflict.

Coser himself draws out implications of the distinction of potential value to erstwhile conflict resolvers:

Realistic conflict . . . will cease if the actor can find equally satisfying alternative ways to achieve his end. [T]here

exist *functional alternatives as to means*. Means other than conflict, depending on assessments of their efficacy, are always potentially available to the participants. In addition, it should be noted that in realistic conflicts there are also possibilities of choice between various forms of contention, such choice depending similarly on an assessment of their instrumental adequacy. In nonrealistic conflict, on the other hand, there exists only *functional alternatives as to objects*.

This would suggest that a conflict resolver help the parties focus on means in the case of a realistic conflict, thinking of ways to achieve desirable ends without damaging the other party in the process. How the conflict resolver might help parties in a nonrealistic conflict resolve the conflict is less obvious from this statement. While I doubt that Coser would sanction displacing the negative orientation from one party to another, this is certainly an obvious way of creating a "functional alternative as to objects."

I think it's useful, if somewhat off topic, to note here that, while Coser suggests a strategic difference of possible use to conflict resolution practitioners in distinguishing between realistic and unrealistic conflict, conflict resolution practice as it has developed in the United States would tend not to make use of this suggestion. This is because conflict resolution practice does not generally use the conceptual distinction Coser suggests, presuming either that all conflict is realistic or that unrealistic conflict is the purview of the therapist rather than the conflict resolver. Unfortunately, in many cases, any emotional content is ignored or excluded under these rubrics. I must admit that my own paradigm, which I will present later in this article, also tends to assume a realistic element to the conflict, although it does not exclude dealing with emotional content. I do not apologize for this, however. I think that while the distinction between realistic and unrealistic conflict may be helpful in gaining clarity about the aims of conflicting parties, its practical utility in resolving conflict is quite limited. Dichotomies tend to exaggerate distinctions; in this case, it is my assessment that once conflict has been initiated and responded to, it tends, in Coser's terms, to have both realistic and nonrealistic aspects, even if the original motives were exclusively one or the other.

To return to the discussion of conceptual constructs, an example of a linear framework is one used by many conflict resolution trainers for many years, including myself, and written up by Linda Singer (1990). Here the focus is not on conflict types but on a presumed range of conflict resolution strategies which form a continuum from negotiation through arbitration (or adjudication):

 NEGOTIATION MEDIATION ARBITRATION/ADJUDICATION

Negotiation is a process in which two or more parties try to work out their disagreement on their own. Sometimes, a third-party facilitator may attempt to help them with this dialogue, keeping the parties on track and resurfacing helpful ideas when they get lost. A more formal third-party role is that of the mediator. Mediation is a conflict resolution process in which a third party with no vested personal interest in the outcome of the conflict enters the dialogue between the parties, specifically to help the parties reach a mutually satisfactory agreement. The mediator has no authority to enforce an agreement but may take a more active role in, and control of, the dialogue by suggesting possible solutions and by asking the parties to conform to a set of guidelines of behavior during the mediation process. In arbitration, the third party has the authority to determine the outcome to the conflict to which the parties must adhere. In the case of adjudication, a specialized form of arbitration, the third party, a judge, must be able to ground her judgment in terms of judicial precedent, whereas in less formal arbitrations general standards of fairness may be the criteria for decision making.

The variables that determine where on the continuum a particular strategy lies are two rather than one, possibly because they are presumed to be functions of each other — the degree to which parties control the process and the extent to which parties determine the outcome. At the far left of the continuum, negotiation partners have total control of how the discussions proceed and of what the terms of agreement (or lack thereof) are. In arbitration, on the far right end, the parties have brought their case to a third party who will both determine the rules of the interaction and impose a decision (with, in most

adjudicated cases and many arbitrated cases, one party being the winner and the other a loser) based on the third party's interpretation of general standards of fairness or of precedent. In the approximate middle of the continuum lies mediation where, in the ideal case, the third party bears primary responsibility for the process but does not attempt to impact the outcome, leaving its determination totally in the hands of those who have to live with and implement it, the conflicting parties.

Finally, for an example of a typology, I turn to Christopher Moore, who presented one of the most broadly known and used conceptual frameworks in his book, *The Mediation Process* (1986). Moore focuses on what he calls the "sphere of conflict," the type of issue that is creating the conflict; he identifies five spheres or types of conflict—data conflict, interest conflict, relationship conflict, value conflict, and structural conflict—and identifies their likely causes (e.g., a data conflict might be caused by lack of information) and potentially appropriate interventions (e.g., searching for superordinate goals shared by all parties in the event of a value conflict) (Moore, 1986, p. 27). While these are visually presented as segments of a circle (much like wedges of pie), I think they form a typology and could easily be accurately represented by a list. At the very least, neither Moore, nor others who use the typology, do much to explore the linkages or other relationships among the various types which would be congruent with seeing the set of types as forming more than a typology.

Each of these, and many other, conceptual models are very helpful to me and to others as we attempt to understand conflict and what strategies we might use to maximize its creative and minimize its destructive potential. Nonetheless, it seemed to me that something important was missing. Conflict, as most conflict theorists and resolvers agree, is neither good nor bad but simply an integral part of life, necessary for growth and change (and for deterioration and regression). As such, it is organic and dynamic. Most of our models seem inherently limited in that they tend toward the mechanistic and static. Additionally, the models that have developed in the field offer little by way of connection between theory and

analysis on the one hand and choices about ways of handling conflict on the other.

The Case

I was confronted in a very direct way by these limitations as I attempted to figure out what to suggest by way of intervention in an all-too-real (and, unfortunately, all-too-typical) case.

The newspapers in Northern Virginia had carried front-page news of a racial confrontation at a local school for several days when the topic was brought up at the ICAR weekly faculty meeting. We made two decisions: first, that we did want to make ICAR services and expertise available to the school; second, that I had the best, albeit tenuous, connection to the principal and that I, therefore, should make the initial contact.² As I prepared to make a telephone call to the school's principal, I gave serious thought to what we could offer. What should we suggest? What was an appropriate intervention?

The incident entailed a fight on school grounds between two like-sized groups of white and black teenage male students. The precipitation of the eruption occurred when the white boys had arrived on campus with jackets emblazoned with the Confederate flag. Fortunately, the fight had not resulted in any serious physical injury, but it was clear from the articles that deep emotional wounds had been inflicted and that this injury was not limited to the boys who had been involved in the fight. Beyond this, it seemed that the racial equilibrium of the school and surrounding community had been shattered.

In analyzing what to recommend by way of intervention, I began by asking myself how other conflict resolvers would handle the situation. As I mulled this over, I conjectured that most professionals in the field would want to gather all of the boys involved in the fight and would wish to facilitate a conversation among them. A conflict resolver would consider approaches on the negotiation end of the scale mentioned above inappropriate in that, having been recently hurt by each other, the boys were unlikely, by themselves, to be able to engage in the "exchange of promises" which is the core of negotiation.³ On the other extreme, arbitration would not be

seen as an optimal approach, because the value content of the dispute suggested by the symbolism of a flag suggests the need for the boys to be able to understand and appreciate each other's values, a situation unlikely to result from any impositional mechanism. So, the conflict resolver would likely suggest an approach near the middle of the continuum, some form of mediation or facilitated conversation.

The aim of such a conversation would be to help the boys in reaching understanding and agreement on the concerns that prompted the fight and the ways in which such disagreements could be better handled in the future. A mediator/facilitator would wish to create an environment in which the boys could speak and listen to each other openly and fully about what the Confederate flag meant to each of them, why the white boys would wish to wear it, why the black boys felt affronted by it. As the boys became more aware of each other's perspectives, the mediator would help them identify where they shared common ground and help them build agreement upon that ground. Maybe together they would be able to identify other symbols of the aspects of the tradition of the American South that the white boys held dear and the black boys would not find racist or insulting.

A mediator in this situation would hope that the boys could leave the room shaking hands and, at the least, not feeling belligerent and resentful toward each other. In all probability the mediator would hope for more than this, that some of them, having discovered and learned about each other, might actually become friendly, or even friends. In the most optimal situation, the mediation might serve as a watershed event in the lives of the boys;⁴ one or more might even dedicate himself to improving race relations in his community.

These are all noble, even exemplary, goals. Yet, I thought, this is not enough. It is not sufficient to seek to enable these boys to resolve the differences among them, not even if they achieve an agreement and transform themselves in the process. Not even if all of them do this. As I write this, I imagine you reading it, thinking "Why not? Why shouldn't these goals be enough? They are good goals; should we not

applaud, support, and reward those who seek them?" The simple answer is that these goals, while noble, will not in themselves bring about a resolution of the conflict, and that should become the bottom-line goal of the conflict resolver.

To explain why a conversation among the boys is insufficient to resolve the conflict—regardless of whether the mediator is helping them seek an agreement on fighting or wearing the Confederate flag, improved relationships among them, and/or personal transformation—I must supply some additional parts of the story. I did not leave them out earlier to be cute, but rather I am trying to follow my own line of reasoning as these events and their interpretation became clear to me.

There is already a clue to the rest of the story in the information I have given thus far—the object of the brawl, the Confederate flag. While this symbol had some potency to both the white boys and the black boys, sufficient to fight over, it was not of their creation. Its existence as a symbol precedes their own births or the births of anyone in their social or familial circles. It is the symbol the South chose as its banner when it seceded from the Union, proclaiming their right as states to a high degree of self-determination, including the right to maintain the institution of slavery of African Americans. It is a symbol that seems to have become all the more revered after the Civil War, at least possibly due to the humiliation and suffering visited upon the vanquished by the victors over the next decades.

Nor was the flag the only indicator that the dispute went beyond the boys; additional symbols abounded. Up until a few years preceding the incident the school's mascot had been Johnny Reb. The school sits on a street still called Rebel Run, and the Confederate flag earlier had been part of the school's official emblem. Unfortunately, the indicators of the conflict's extending beyond the particular boys in the fight were not limited to symbols. The painful fact was that this was not an aberrant event in the life of this school. Racial conflicts of different size and seriousness had plagued the school for many years.

As I mused on the broad and deep roots of the

incident, it occurred to me that my wisdom and insight would be less than well received if I were to call the principal and say, "What we have here is not just about these boys; what we have here is a manifestation of societal racism." I suspect he would have hung up the phone, thinking, "Well, now, there's an academic for you, taking up my time to supply me with a perspective that, while it may be true, is totally useless. What am I supposed to do with that little tidbit of information?" And, it is from asking myself this question over and over again before making that call — what can anyone do with the insight that a particular dispute between individuals may be the manifestation of an older, longer, and deeper social conflict? — that my nested model of conflict emerged.

The Model

I began to think of conflicts as being one of four different types that may be interrelated as shown in Figure 1.

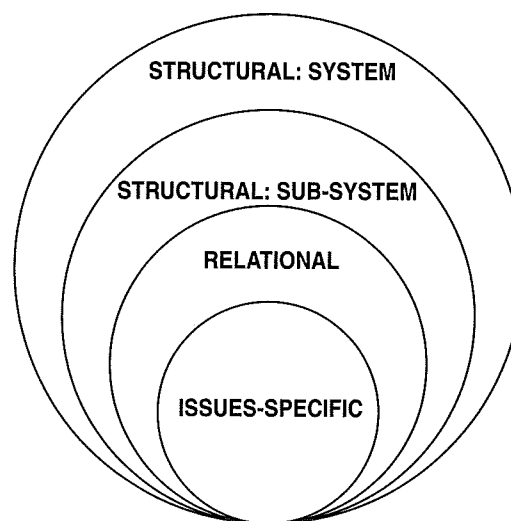


Figure 1 — A Nested Model of Conflict

The first type of conflict, that represented by the innermost circle of the diagram, is an **issues-specific conflict**. Issues-specific conflicts are analytically the simplest and most frequent types of conflict (which does not mean that they are always easy to resolve, nor even that they are always resolvable) and can occur between or among individuals or groups of any size. As its name suggests, the source of an issues-specific conflict is one or more issues. The dis-

agreement may occur over information, differing interpretations of agreed-upon information, or divergent interests over the item(s) of concern.

In a workplace, two employees may be competing for the same advancement which, by company policy, will be made available to only one of them. The two may otherwise be respectful colleagues, but each may feel that she is more qualified for the position and that to decide in the other's favor is to show unfair favoritism. In a living situation, two housemates may have very different musical tastes and may find the playing of the other's music irritating. Two neighbors may have very different schedules and have their sleep disturbed by noise associated with the other's recreation or household maintenance activities. Some citizens may see welfare as the moral imperative of a rich society making sure that the basic needs of all members are met. Others may see it as an all-too-minimal attempt to achieve justice by redistributing some of the wealth, while still others may see it as a wasteful reward for laziness. One nation may take the position that a given territory is its historical and cultural heritage, while another nation sees itself as the rightful possessor. While the issues may be complex and may be further complicated by their interconnections to other issues, so long as only issues are involved, the conflict is still issues-specific.

Sometimes, however, the issues themselves are not the real source of the conflict. A **relational conflict** is one which emerges from problems having to do with the interaction patterns of the parties and their feelings toward each other. Two brothers battling over the estate left by their parents may be their playing out the pain of long-ago inflicted wounds from their parents' failure to make each of them feel loved as children.⁵ Children fighting over the use of playground equipment may be prompted by derogatory insults made by one group at a previous specific time toward the other, or by remarks made over time. Two sports teams may be unable to agree upon a shared stadium because of personal animus between their owners.⁶ A nation may refuse to sign an apparently mutually beneficial trade agreement with another because of slights made by the staff of the

other's head of state during a previous state visit. Each of these conflicts involves issues — distribution of an estate, use of playground equipment, building of a sports arena, finalizing a trade agreement — but the issues themselves are not the source of the conflict; the relational problems are. Further, if not dealt with directly to the satisfaction of the parties, the relationship issues are likely to “become the one hurdle no handshake, promise, or carefully written clause could wipe away.” (Hyde, 1996, p. 1A).

Sometimes, the source of the conflict is beyond the relationship of the particular disputing parties and may be institutionalized in a structured way within the social system. I find it helpful to separate out structural conflict at the broad system level and structural conflict which has its source in the subsystem level. I will speak to the former first.

System-level structural conflict emerges from inequities that are built into the social system. I wish to note here that I am not speaking of naturally occurring differences such as the fact that women are not physically able to compete with men in throwing forward lateral passes. Rather, I am speaking of inequities that occur as the result of human constructs. To stay with the example of differences in the capacity to pass a football for a moment, it is not that this difference exists that is an example of structural conflict, but that the game of football, and, in fact, most sports played in the United States on the school or professional level, are built on, “structured” around, skills that boys and men possess in greater measure than girls and women. It is this sort of sexism, structured into the social system, not simply in sports, but in almost all arenas of human endeavor, that takes gender conflict to the level of system-level structural conflict.

This does not mean that each dispute between a man and a woman emanates from a systemic structural source; any of the sorts of conflicts described above under issues-specific and relational conflicts may occur between a man and a woman as well as between exclusively male or female parties and still be limited to issues-specific or relational sources. It does, however, suggest that if a conflict exists between two or more parties who are members of

groups between or among which structural conflict has existed that we should be extra mindful to look to see whether the particular conflict is rooted on the system level. It also means that the parties may be impacted by this broader conflict as they try to work their way out of a conflict that analytically appears to be either issues-specific or relational.

The import of the systemic level notwithstanding, most of us do not live on a day-to-day basis in the somewhat ethereal world of the system structure. We spend most of our lives in our neighborhoods with our families, circles of friends, and colleagues going to our jobs in specific businesses or nonprofit organizations or to learn at particular schools or training centers, or to recreate at a defined beach, sports establishment, concert hall, bar, or street corner. It is not that the system does not affect us; it certainly does in deep, pervasive, and all-embracing (or suffocating) ways. But it is often difficult to be in touch with how we are connected to the larger system, much less how to impact it. Thus, the importance of identifying the layer of subsystemic structural conflict, which refers to those conflicts which have their source in rules, procedures, and traditions of particular social organizations which are, or are perceived to be, inequitable, antiquated, or ineffectual.

A family-run business may be grappling with the fact that the younger generation does not have the business skills of its parents and unstated rules create barriers to the advancement of nonrelated employees. A school may not have the facilities or resources for responding to the needs of a new immigrant group which speaks a different language. The city bus system may not have sufficient buses and vans to provide service to the number of people with physical disabilities dependent on public transportation. A state-of-the-art hospital may attract heart patients from all corners of the world and not have the trained staff to deal with the health problems of greatest concern in its own community.

Subsystem level conflicts often mirror conflicts of the broader system, bringing inequities such as racism, sexism, classism, and homophobia to the offices and factories in which we work, the houses of worship in which we pray, the courts and beaches on

which we play, the streets on which we meet our neighbors, even the houses in which we live. Subsystem level problems may also exist on their own, not produced by broader societal realities. The family business mentioned in the last paragraph, for example, may not be discriminating against nonrelatives because of anything other than its own internal procedures and history. In this case, these same workers could expect to be more fully appreciated in other workplaces. Signs can thus be looked for to determine whether a subsystem structural conflict exists on its own or whether it is reflective of a broader system-level conflict.

It is important to note the way in which I have depicted the paradigm. I am not simply offering a list of possible categories of conflict. The model speaks to how these categories are related, the narrower types being nested within the broader types. In other words, while an issues-specific conflict may exist on its own, as we proceed to the other levels, conflicts will always have manifestations on the levels nested within: a relational conflict will always have issues-specific manifestations; a subsystem structural conflict will have both relational and issues-specific spin-offs; and a system-wide structural conflict will have manifestations on all of the other levels.

Using the Nested Model: The Case Reconsidered

As was alluded to, I analyze this case as having its base within the broad structure of American society and the problems of racism which are structured into America's daily life. The sad fact is that black and white first graders enter school with a different set of life chances, regardless of the similarity of their natural abilities. By the time they reach high school, the gap between them is likely to have widened. The causes of this are complex and are deeply rooted in our social, political, and economic systems. It is not the purpose of this article either to shed light on the causes or to suggest any specific solutions. It might be helpful to note here, however, that there have been many attempts using violence, nonviolence, legislation, and judicial challenges to address the injustice of racism. Thus far, racism is still deeply rooted in our

society, although we are certainly not without beacons of light.

Many would approach this conflict, or another like it, even with the recognition of its broad and deep sources, by trying to create another small beacon of light at the level of getting agreement on the specific issues in contention or of improving the relationship between and among the boys who fought. This, too, was mentioned in the presentation of the case.

I would support such attempts; but, it seems to me that conflicts such as this offer us the opportunity to spark larger beacons of light than an exclusive focus on the boys or the issues would allow.

This can be done by focusing on the structural nature of the conflict, not at the broad societal level but at the subsystem level of the school as a social institution. Neither the school nor anyone at it has created social racism, nor does anyone at the school or the school itself have the power base to do away with racism in our society. But, each and every person associated with the school has some access points for removing racism at the school. To be more specific, the principal cannot undo the reality that Jim Smith, who is black, has a different set of life chances than Bill Jones, who is white; he can, however, provide leadership in creating an environment within the school so that their life experiences within the school are not limited by race.

Others — teachers, students, parents, neighbors — could also do their part to reduce the extent to which race is a factor in predicting or explaining the day-to-day experiences of students. For example, black and white children (as well as boys and girls) tend to be treated differently in the classroom,⁷ with behaviors of blacks being more likely to be responded to by their teachers as indicators of troublemaking or limited intellectual capacities. In-service training might be an appropriate tool for helping teachers become aware of how their own behaviors contribute to the chasm and antagonism between white and black students and what they can do to change their behaviors.

Another example is the invisibility of people of

color and women in American history books. The school could choose to adopt classroom materials that honor all of the different people that made the United States what it is today and the many different ways in which they did so. This is not to suggest that a topic such as “United States presidents” should be ignored because of its domination by white males. Simply that, just as my colleague’s question recounted at the beginning of this article helped me open my eyes to the diversity of ways of contributing to a field, so, too, there are many ways of contributing to a nation’s development, and our history books tend to look at only a small sampling of them.

To undertake defining what should be done, let alone undertaking the doing of it, requires more than meeting with the boys who were fighting, because the problem and its possible solutions go well beyond them. For different reasons, it is also important not to limit the search for solutions to the people at the top. Top-down directives issued in response to problems emanating from structural conflicts tend not to provide durable solutions. The administration had, in fact, already banned the Confederate flag from school grounds. That had not stopped the white boys from wearing it to school nor the black boys from being hurt that they had done so. The white boys had not been part of that decision, and they did not own it. To the contrary, they resented it and felt themselves discriminated against by it.

Dealing with a subsystem structural conflict should involve all the parties who contribute to its existence and who can contribute to its solution. They should be helped in engaging in analytical problem solving (Burton, 1988, 1990) to determine the nature and source of the problem, generate possible ways of addressing the situation, weigh the pluses and minuses of different alternatives, and select an optimal way to proceed. In the case of the school, this probably means engaging not only the boys, but in fact the student body as a whole. Beyond this, the resolution process should also include teachers, administrators, and parents.

The question that remains is what kind of a process could a conflict resolver use which would

enable the various members of the school community to engage with each other in grappling with the school's racist heritage? How would the conflict resolver help the various parties at the school identify racist policies within the school (or any other institution) and design a plan to create a more egalitarian organization? An answer can be found in one of the many contributions of women peacemakers referred to at the beginning of this article: we can utilize Elise Boulding's work on futures invention. It offers us a potent tool for envisioning a desirable future for an organization, a society, or even the global system. Boulding describes a futures invention workshop as beginning

with each participant making a list of things he or she wants to find in a future world based on hopes, not fears. Next he or she enters a world three decades hence, in fantasy, to explore as a time traveler what it is like to live in such a world.⁸ After the individual "fantasying", participants form groups to construct composite worlds from individual images and then in the analytic mode conceptualize the institutional infrastructure, values, and behavior patterns that would make the fantasied world a sustainable, continually evolving one. Next an imagined history is constructed, working back from the future to the present, and finally strategies are examined for action in the present to bring about a desired future. (Boulding, 1996, p. 413.)

Futures invention enables participants both to develop a shared design of a future in which all members of the school community would be valued and treated with respect and to develop strategies for moving together to that desired state. The conflict resolver trained in futures invention could facilitate this process, probably with representatives of the various institutional constituencies.

Additionally, the conflict resolver would need to engage directly the other conflicts nested within the structural one, utilizing mediation to work with the boys who had been in the fight, working both to heal their damaged relationships and to help them come to agreement on more constructive ways of responding to future conflicts in which they are involved.

Conclusion

Dealing with structural conflicts as described above generates the opportunity of creating not just beacons of light to warm us in the darkness of racism but, in fact, models of what we intend our society to become. We may not be able to choose today to rid our society of its many "isms", but we can create within our communities and institutions oases in which such "isms" are not operative. We can use conflict-resolution processes and approaches to help us in this quest.⁹

Women leaders have a particular role in this effort. "Precisely because women are marginal to decision-making about the present social order, they are freer to image radically other futures. They have fewer vested interests to protect." Additionally, as Boulding has discovered in her work, "women enter into the fantasying mode more easily than do men, suggesting an already well-developed imagination. As compared to the more organized, easily diagrammed images of men, women's futurism is that of the Tao, the way, rather than the end-state." The capacity for envisioning that which may not yet exist, combined with strong listening and nurturing skills, which as Boulding points out are not in greater supply among women for biological reasons but rather because women's roles in society have given us ample practice in these skills, make women uniquely qualified to help people turn their conflicts from problems to be overcome, or even worse, hidden, to opportunities to improve society and enhance relationships. When structural conflicts are thus approached as opportunities, however painful, for growth and development, we have the opportunity for building minimodels of what a better world might look like.

It is my hope that these models can then be used as springboards to help us envision a more just society, as indicators that such a society can function, and as miniblueprints for the society we wish to create.

Notes

¹ Futures invention is a set of techniques originally developed by Warren Ziegler which enables users to tap their imaginative and intentional capacities in envisioning desirable futures. Ziegler distinguishes between his approach to the future and the more standard approaches of extrapolation and planning in that it does not constrain the user with the inevitable limits of plausibility but, rather invites us to take responsibility for imagining preferred futures and then developing strategies for their attainment. Boulding's contribution has been to focus on "imaging a world without weapons," utilizing the futures invention approach to create more peaceful global and societal systems. Her concept of the "two hundred year present" stresses the fact that each of us, through our connections to grandparents and grandchildren, have within us intimate personal connections to the past and future beyond our own lifetimes. Our thinking can be enriched by personal learnings from a past beyond our own personal experiences and broadened by considerations of consequences beyond our own lifetimes. I find the latter point akin to the Native American notion of being concerned about future generations and assessing the consequences of our choices to the Seventh Generation.

² I am happy to report here that since this incident, ICAR has developed a new and integral aspect of its activities, the Applied Practice and Theory (APT) program. One of its original and ongoing projects is called "Racial and Ethnic Conflict in the Schools." Due to its many successes and contributions, ICAR not only has a more direct access to all schools in Northern Virginia than my tenuous one to the high school principal discussed here, but in all probability, school personnel, students, and/or parents would likely initiate the contact were this incident to occur now.

³ Thomas Colosi, national vice president of the American Arbitration Association and a former president of the Society of Professionals in Dispute Resolution, offers "an exchange of promises" as his definition of negotiation. It is my favorite definition of the term because of its simple elegance and its capturing of the very heart of the process.

⁴ Two major conflict resolution theorists, Robert A. Baruch Bush and Joseph P. Folger (1994), have recently made a strong

case that individual transformation is the legitimate end of the field and have suggested ways in which mediators can make it more likely that this type of outcome will occur.

⁵ Personal communication from Dorothy Cranshaw, Antioch master's student and Dallas-based probate mediator, March 28, 1996.

⁶ Commenting on an eleventh-hour failure to build a joint arena for the Florida Panthers professional hockey team and the Miami Heat professional basketball team in Broward County, Dave Hyde (1996) blamed the antipathy between Panthers' owner H. Wayne Huizenga and Heat owner Micky Arison — "The team leaders simply had too much [bad] history between them to share a future" — and pointed out that "each claims today that its concerns with the other were realized completely." (p. 1A)

⁷ *Pygmalion in the Classroom* offers an innovative and compelling study which concludes, among other things, that the behaviors engaged in by white boys may be interpreted by teachers as leadership and responded to positively, while the same behaviors when engaged in by black boys are likely seen as troublemaking of one form or another. The teachers seemed largely unaware of their differential treatment of the students. The study, while old, is unfortunately not dated.

⁸ Boulding points out that the thirty-year leap is "an heuristic device giving enough time for changes to have occurred but close enough to the present to seem relevant to the participants." In the case of an institution, particularly one where young people are involved, it would probably be advisable to use a shorter time span, maybe ten years, but care must be taken to use a time frame far enough into the future that participants are enabled to envision rather than simply extrapolate.

⁹ I realize that I have not given much information on or support for this statement in this article. The article is part of a larger effort, including the publication of a book which will cover not only the model itself but also a matrix of suggested general strategies for approaching the different levels of conflict.

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