Rethinking Intractability: A New Framework for Conflict

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Introduction

Campus riots . . . are usually initiated in a very rapid fashion, but are inevitably preceded by a series of incidents, such as the humiliation of individuals, discriminatory acts, or the denial of basic rights. Since each of these specific instances is not necessarily dramatic in itself, group opposition to them (inhibiting feedback) may be fairly minimal and contained. Each incident, however, creates and deepens a latent attractor for hostilities that can subsequently determine the pattern of interaction. Once an attractor for destructive conflict has been firmly established, relatively small provocations may move the system into this attractor, thereby dragging the whole system into full-blown conflict (p. 170).

I reread this passage of Peter Coleman’s book, *The Five Percent: Finding Solutions to Seemingly Impossible Conflicts*, just after I finished reading the newspaper accounts of the riots that erupted throughout the Middle East in response to the release of the video trailer for a film titled *Innocence of Muslims*. This extremely cheap, crudely made video presents Islam as a lie and Mohammed as a pedophile. Predictably, newspaper and television accounts emphasized the disproportion between the offending video and the violent response it elicited. Commentators expressed puzzlement about how so amateurish a video could be taken as representative of American attitudes toward Islam and struggled
to find a framework in which they could speak intelligently about these incidents.

Coleman’s challenging new book about intractable conflicts offers, I think, such a framework. Delete the words “campus riots” from the passage quoted at the top of the page and you have a précis of the dynamics of events set off by *Innocence of Muslims*. Although the book is conceptually complex, it is not difficult to read. Coleman writes with great clarity and is able to present complicated thoughts quite understandably.

But I believe it is challenging mostly because it suggests that we rethink not just the 5 percent of conflicts that are intractable but also conflict in general. And that rethinking of conflict requires adjusting our understanding of the processes of conflict intervention and conflict mediation as well as the very role of the mediator.

I will return to some of the broader implications of the book later. But to begin, I will focus first on the author’s stated purpose — to help us understand the dynamics of what appear to be intractable conflicts (he also refers to them as “impossible”) and to develop new ways of thinking about how to intervene in them.

The book begins by defining the characteristics of intractable conflicts and why standard approaches to understanding and resolving them do not and cannot work. He grounds these failures in standard social science thinking, which he describes — quite accurately to my mind — as “... our standard linear, short-term cause-and-effect paradigm ...” that

... focuses on the presence or absence of predicted outcomes. It rarely attends to the unintended or unexpected outcomes that arise from interventions ... Our approach is insufficiently mindful of how such interventions may unexpectedly affect the complex, living, evolving system of a conflict over time, and how these effects may in fact be more consequential than those we set out to study (25).

In other words, we are looking at the wrong things and looking at them in the wrong way. But Coleman is quick to point out that it is not only the limitations of the standard approach that is responsible for our inability to understand intractable conflicts but also that there is something about the very “nature and essence” of these conflicts that we must appreciate before we can properly study, understand in intervene in them.

Describing Intractable Conflicts: The Five Percent

Having asserted that our current approach to intractable conflicts is flawed, Coleman then argues that intractable conflicts are a different category of conflict altogether and that the dynamics of these conflicts are fundamentally different than the dynamics of other conflicts. To attend effectively to these differences, Coleman maintains that we must abandon the standard
approach. He begins by listing fifty-seven previously identified “essences” (sources) of intractable conflicts and concludes that they are all interrelated. “Five percent problems,” he writes, “are the result of complex systems dynamics created by many different elements interrelated in a web like fashion that come together into one strong, coherent conflict.” (35)

Like others who write about intractable conflict, his descriptions focus on their impact as well as their characteristics. Coleman describes intractable conflicts as “highly destructive, never ending, and virtually impossible to solve” (2). Heidi and Guy Burgess (2003), the originators of the wonderfully comprehensive “Beyond Intractability” website, list on that site many similar descriptors: “protracted, destructive, deep-rooted, resolution-resistant, intransigent, gridlocked, identity-based, needs-based, complex, difficult, malignant, and enduring.” In the end, they describe intractable conflicts as the “the conflicts that stubbornly seem to elude resolution,” and they link this resolution resistance to three types of conflicts: those involving “irreconcilable moral differences”; “high-stakes distributional issues”; or domination or “pecking-order” conflicts (Burgess and Burgess 2003). These conflicts attract a lot of attention for good reasons. Coleman explains why:

These seemingly irresolvable 5 percent are so powerful because they tend to wreak disproportional havoc on everything they touch. From individual physical and mental health and well-being to marital and family satisfaction; trust in friendships and social groups to the functioning of businesses; local, state, and regional stability to the global economy, the environment and more. These conflicts are all encompassing. They demand our attention, bleed our resources and often leave us in despair. The longer they persist, the more widespread and destructive they become. They can mobilize individuals, families, groups and communities against one another, sometimes for years, or even generations (26).

Think of the long-standing, ever volatile, Israel–Palestine conflict or the conflict over legalized abortion in the United States, or family feuds that can last generations and suck in entire communities, like the feud between the Hatfields and the McCoys. But it is not only because of their reach and the associated costs that we pay attention: we are drawn to them because they fascinate us. We gape at them in the same way we gape at pictures of lepers or “rubber neck” an accident on the highway. We feel compelled to look to see what it is that we do not want to see.

**Defining Intractable Conflict**

Unsurprisingly, foremost among those who are most intrigued, sometimes even obsessed, with impossible conflicts are those who study and those who intervene in them. Under the heading “Meeting the Conflict Challenge,” Beyond Intractability’s home page (www.beyondintractability.org) states:
“Beyond Intractability is a web project for those who want to go beyond complaining and actually do something about violence, destructive conflict, failed systems of governance, and injustice.”

For scholars, intractable conflicts are the most challenging puzzle, daring researchers to penetrate their shield of daunting complexity and uncover their essence. Intractable conflicts challenge our theories and methodologies and, ultimately, our intelligence. For mediators and other dispute resolution practitioners, the intractable conflict is the ultimate test: it is the mountain nobody has ever been able to scale, the wild animal nobody has ever been able to tame.

Some of the best dispute resolution scholars and practitioners have tried to intervene in and to explain intractable conflicts, although the terminologies they use and which aspects they choose to focus on will vary. What unites these efforts is the recognition of these conflicts’ tremendous complexity and their profound resistance to resolution — especially by traditional modes of conflict intervention.

For example, Daniel Bar-Tal (2000: 353), citing several other researchers, has written, “Intractable conflicts are characterized as being protracted, irreconcilable, violent, of a zero-sum nature, total and central, with the parties involved having an interest in their continuation. . . . They are demanding, stressful, painful, exhausting, and costly both in human and material terms.” He goes on to discuss a conceptual framework of eight societal beliefs that constitute what he calls a “conflictive ethos” of a society. He does not, however, concentrate on the essence of these conflicts but rather on the process of reconciliation he considers essential to their resolution.

Bernie Mayer (2009) has referred to them as “enduring conflicts” and has also emphasized their intrinsic qualities. He has described them as “. . . long-lasting because of their nature, not because of ineffective or inappropriate efforts to resolve them. Until the roots of the conflict change, the system evolves, or the identity- or value-based elements are profoundly transformed, the conflict will remain, although how it is manifested may vary over time” (2009: 21–25, emphasis added).

Writing in the 1980s, Dean Pruitt and Jeffrey Rubin (1986: 92) emphasized the factors that encourage the escalation of conflicts and observed “. . . conflict, and the tactics used to pursue it, produce residues in the form of changes in the parties and the communities to which the parties belong. These residues then encourage further contentious behavior, at an equal or still more escalated level, and diminish efforts at conflict resolution.” In contrast to Coleman, however, they did not conclude that intractable conflicts were fundamentally distinct from other conflicts.

One additional characteristic of intractable conflicts requires mentioning: conflicts, especially intractable ones, entrap people. Of course, conflicts do not just happen — we participate in their construction, and our beliefs,
statements, and actions help escalate or deescalate them. When caught up in an intractable conflict, however, it often appears as if it is the conflict directing the disputants rather than the other way around.

I once mediated a divorce in which the divorcing couple had already spent more in lawyers’ fees fighting each other than the amount of money that was still in dispute. Their dispute seemed to have a life of its own and seemed to be pushing them into taking positions that were clearly not in their interests either separately or together. But even though they recognized this, they could not break free. While considerable research has already examined the role of entrapment in conflict (see Brockner and Rubin 1985), Coleman’s theoretical framework sheds light on how intractable conflicts can function like traps.

**Intractable Conflict and Complexity Theory**

In his chapter on intractable conflict in the highly regarded textbook, *The Handbook of Conflict Resolution: Theory and Practice*, Coleman (2000) distinguished among issues, context, relationships, processes, and actions as factors whose interactions help develop and sustain intractable conflicts. He also described five different paradigms for addressing intractable conflicts. One of these paradigms, the systems paradigm, “views conflicts as living entities made up of a variety of interdependent and interactive elements, nested within other, increasingly complex entities. . . . The elements of systems are not related to one another in a linear manner, but interact according to a nonlinear, recursive process so that each element influences the others” (Coleman 2000: 545).

In *The Five Percent*, he incorporates his earlier work into a more abstract and sophisticated interdisciplinary conceptual framework. Coleman also argues that the systems paradigm holds the most promise for a full understanding of intractable conflicts. He draws from complexity science, systems theory, mathematics, social psychology, and conflict studies, and has worked in collaboration with an array of international colleagues from disparate disciplines, assimilating in this book the research and theorizing of other researchers and practitioners from both the laboratory and the field. The most important feature of his approach, I believe, is its focus on the dynamic of the conflict system rather than the characteristics and perceptions of the disputants or even the issues around which the conflict developed. Indeed, one of the strengths of Coleman’s perspective is that it describes conflict from the point of view of the conflict itself, rather than from the point of view of the disputants. In *The Handbook of Conflict Resolution* he observed that his model presents the political, the relational, the pathological, and the epistemological as simply different elements of the living system of the conflict. Thus it stresses the interdependent nature of the
various objectives in intervention of mutual security, stability, equality, justice, cooperation, humanization of the other, reconciliation, tolerance of difference, containment of tension and violence, compatibility and complexity of meaning, healing, and reconstruction (Coleman 2000: 546).

But he concluded his summary (2000: 546) of the systems paradigm’s potential with this caveat: “However, a great deal of work must be done for this worldview to become useful at the operational level.”

To fully appreciate his theory, we must examine some of the assumptions that underlie complexity theory as applied to human interaction and a related set of conclusions about human decision making. These assumptions were nicely spelled out in an article titled “Complexity, Conflict Resolution, and How the Mind Works” (2003) by physicist Wendell Jones and law professor Scott Hughes. According to Jones and Hughes, the assumptions of objectivism, the belief that we can independently and accurately observe the world as it really is; reductionism, the belief that if we understand the parts of something, we can understand the whole; and determinism, the belief that every effect has an identifiable and predictable cause have dominated scientific thinking and the analysis of social issues since the end of the fifteenth century. These assumptions, wrote Jones and Hughes, are due for reconsideration.

Associated with these changes are significant revisions in our understanding of how the mind works. First, “the human mind is inherently embodied, and no separate and objective reasoning facility exists. The mind does not function in a representational fashion” (Jones and Hughes 2003: 487). Second, thought is mostly unconscious — we have limited control and limited awareness of most of our thinking processes. Third, communication about abstract concepts is largely metaphorical. And finally, humans are primarily feeling beings with thoughts as opposed to thinking beings with feelings.

Acknowledging these assumptions makes clear how different this approach is from that which has informed standard approaches to conflict and its resolution. Think back especially to some of the founding documents of the field, books like Getting to Yes (Fisher and Ury 1984) and The Mediation Process (Moore 1986), which began with the implicit assumptions that people make rational decisions, that most thought is conscious, and that feelings can, and typically should, be divorced from thinking and decision making.

To fully appreciate how radically different Coleman’s approach is, it is helpful to take a brief detour into the world of psychotherapeutic treatment. In the years after World War Two, when systems theory was being developed and first began to influence thinking in many disciplines, therapists working with especially challenging patients noticed that some patients, when removed from their families and institutionalized, began to
recover while they were in residence at the hospital and receiving individualized treatment. After they were “cured,” however, and returned to their home environments, symptoms often reappeared, and the patients often became as sick as they had been before treatment. Some therapists thought that it might make more sense to view the symptoms not so much as an attribute of the patient but of the larger family system in which the patient was embedded. Instead of attending to the psychodynamics of the individual patient, these therapists shifted their attention to the dynamics of the entire family and sought to understand the meaning of the symptoms in the context of the relationships among family members and their impact on one another. Furthermore, they thought that the patient’s symptoms could be better understood and treated by examining the function the symptoms served within the family dynamics. For example, if a patient binged and purged, the therapist would ask questions designed to determine when these episodes occurred in relation to what is going on between the family members and how other family members’ behavior was affected by the patient.

Consider a bulimic adolescent girl whose therapist learns that the binging and purging typically occur when the level of conflict between the patient’s parents is high and that the only time the parents function with relative harmony is when they attend to their daughter’s illness. The therapist might suggest the connection between parental conflict and the daughter’s bulimia and that the binging and purging are the daughter’s way of bringing the parents back together.

Although the therapist might work with the family’s understanding of its problematic dynamic, their understanding is not in itself essential. The therapist may choose instead to disrupt the dysfunctional pattern by working with the parents to improve their relationship. Note that this approach does not automatically invalidate the insights that might arise from an individual psychotherapeutic approach. In traditional psychotherapy, the therapist might explore with the patient the “meaning” of her illness and its symptoms and attempt to discover what secondary gains — perhaps anxiety reduction — she achieved through binging and purging. They might even discuss the symptoms in the context of the patient’s relationship with each of her parents and explore the degree to which she identifies with her mother or father. And in some circumstances, this work might be quite effective. But because in many situations individual psychotherapy seemed not to be effective, the emerging field of family therapy developed around taking an entirely different stance toward understanding and intervening with patients.

I believe Peter Coleman’s *The Five Percent* moves in the same direction as did the family therapists after World War Two and that his approach offers an analogous alternative to the dominant perspective on conflict and conflict resolution. Just as the family therapy field developed in response to
the needs of patients who seemed untreatable, Coleman’s approach is a
giant step in the effort to understand and intervene in intractable conflicts.
In essence, Coleman’s approach says: to understand intractable conflicts, do
not begin by looking at the individual disputants, their motivations, or their
cognitive frameworks; you would not make sense of these conflicts that
way. Instead, Coleman reminds us (62) of Kurt Lewin’s admonition, “Do not
focus on things; focus on the relations between things.” The unit of analysis
should not be the people or groups or nations that are in conflict. Just as the
family therapist does not try to understand the patient apart from the
family, we ought not to try to make sense of the conflict by understanding
the disputing parties separately. The explanation resides in examining the
relationship between the disputing parties and their patterns of interaction.

Similarly, changing the unit of analysis has implications for intervention —
we should not seek specific outcomes in a conflict (“agreements,
insights, and behavior change,” 95) but rather our intent should be to be
disruptive, to alter the patterns of interaction and thus increase the prob-
ability that different interactions will occur. Put another way, a conflict
should be seen as a dynamical system, and the conflict resolver’s role is to
“transform the dynamics of the system maintaining the status quo” (111). To
do this, we must abandon the belief that we can control how a conflict will
be resolved. The significance of this shift in perspective cannot be empha-
sized enough.

Coleman’s view of intractable conflicts derives from the study of
complex adaptive systems, dynamic networks of interaction within which
semi-autonomous agents (e.g., people, organizations, and nations) self-
organize in response to events that disrupt the stability of the network. All
of the components in a complex adaptive system are interrelated but not in
completely predictable ways. The events that occur do not originate with
the decisions or actions of any one person — in fact the decisions or
actions of any one person are shaped by and reflect characteristics of the
whole, even while they in turn affect the larger system.

We can understand the “causes” of changes in the system in retrospect,
but we cannot predict prospectively how the system will react to new
input. Small input can produce huge changes (“the butterfly effect”) while
large input may produce only slight changes. The most effective way to
study complex adaptive systems is either to observe them in response to
new events or to intentionally intervene in them and observe the effects of
those interventions.

Dietrich Dorner has argued persuasively that complex adaptive
systems are unique in that we cannot fully understand them before we
attempt to intervene in them. Whatever changes are produced by the
attempted intervention will provide information about that system that we
could not have had before the attempted intervention. Another field that
draws on complexity science but focuses on the dynamics of complex
organizations rather than the dynamics of conflicts has also developed in parallel to the work being done by Coleman and others in conflict resolution. (See Olson and Eoyang 2001; reading Coleman’s book side by side with Edwin Olson and Glenda Eoyang’s is a bit like talking with fraternal twins.)

The Drive Toward Coherence

Drawing from complexity theory, Coleman formulates “a big idea” and a model. The big idea is summarized in what he calls “The Crude Law of Complexity, Coherence, and Conflict,” which he explains as follows.

Human beings are driven toward consistency and coherence in their perception, thinking, feeling, behavior and social relationships. This is natural and functional. Conflict intensifies this drive, which can become dysfunctional during prolonged conflicts. However, developing more complex patterns of thinking, feeling, acting and social organizing can mitigate this, resulting in more constructive responses to conflict (68).

This chapter, drawing heavily from the field-theoretical work of Kurt Lewin and other psychologists from Europe (who were not in the thrall of American behavioral and reductionist approaches to psychological research), offers a holistic framework within which phenomena are understood to occur in a complex field of forces that interact similarly to an electromagnetic field. Coleman builds onto this framework the idea that humans feel a fundamental impulse toward coherence — a drive to “reduce the tension, disorientation, and dissonance that come from complexity, in coherence, and contradiction” (61). This tendency toward coherence intensifies when we confront conflict. “Conflict is essentially a contradiction, an incompatibility, oppositely directed forces, and a difference that triggers tension” (63). That tension impels us toward the simplification of complex realities and complex problems that cannot be adequately understood through simplification. (Anyone who followed the recent presidential campaign in the United States will recognize the truth of this observation.)

The relationship between coherence and complexity includes a certain circularity. Complexity creates a tension that the impulse toward coherence reduces through simplification. Simplification leads to dualism (black or white thinking), which enhances polarization, which then complicates the conflict even more.

At times reading the book I worried that the idea of coherence carries too much weight within the larger framework. There must be more going on, I thought, than the need for simplification and coherence. While the notion of coherence helps us understand how people can be so deeply stuck in a conflict and unable to change their perceptions of their “enemy,” coherence by itself cannot account for the depth of feeling, anger, and
hatred that characterize so many intractable conflicts and that sometimes move people to act in ways that contradict their own fundamental principles and values. Coleman does not speak to that, and to the extent that he does not, I think the model remains somewhat abstract.

Coleman’s framework also presents problems when we think about how to bring about change. David Matz, one of the most thoughtful of the scholar-practitioners who work extensively with intractable conflicts, has observed that “this book provides a completely plausible, intuitively attractive, description of what is going on in their [people caught up in conflict] heads. The insistence on spelling out the flow of influence — toward coherence, toward complexity — are compelling. What the theory leaves out, however, is any way of assessing which influences are more important than others. Which are worth the effort they will take? Which might take priority in time?” (Matz 2012).

I think the answer to questions about how to encourage constructive responses to these conflicts may reside within the concept of “attractor,” a critical component of Coleman’s model and arguably the most difficult to explain. The attractor is a metaphor borrowed from mathematics. Coleman uses this metaphor to describe the patterns formed by the interaction of the interdependent parts of a complex system. Frankly, except for those with a good background in differential equations or a solid grasp of the functioning of electromagnetic fields, the attractor idea is difficult to comprehend, even though it refers to aspects of conflict that are generally familiar.

Coleman further describes “attractor landscapes” (again a metaphor) in which one finds “current attractors,” defined as “how people are responding to a conflict right now” and “latent attractors,” which are “hidden tendencies to think, feel, and act in very different ways in the conflict” (74). Attractors can be positive, “drawing people into more constructive and satisfying conflict interactions,” or negative, “encouraging the opposite,” and weak or strong.

Coleman further postulates that in intractable conflicts, strong negative attractors dominate the landscape, often in self-reinforcing ways, a dynamic entirely in keeping with his assumption of coherence. Most westerners would view the Innocence of Muslims video as insignificant, but the video reinforced a wide range of existing beliefs tied to historically based animosities, present conditions of social and political turmoil, a sense of being misunderstood and under attack, and distrust of the United States. Coleman describes this kind of perfect storm of events and beliefs as self-organizing — it “continues to grow and spread, no matter what anyone tries to do to stop them.”

Anyone who has been in a deeply bitter conflict can recognize this self-organizing process even if the attractors’ metaphor is hard to grasp. When we are in conflict with someone, we are likely to give more
credibility to negative than to positive information about that person. Indeed, we might even reinterpret the positive information to make it fit within the negative schema we have developed as part of the conflict.

But the strength of attractors is not fixed; they can become weaker or stronger depending on the sort of feedback — reinforcing or inhibiting — they receive from within the system. For example, observing an enemy behave kindly toward your friend may challenge your belief that your enemy is a bad person, which introduces discordance and incoherence into what had been a fairly coherent picture. Such a disruption could begin to weaken and eventually neutralize or even transform your sense of enmity.

When I first read *The Five Percent* (before I had been asked to review it), I was quite excited by the attractor notion. It seemed to have tremendous potential for making sense of the way intractable conflicts often feel stuck and the disputants trapped. Also, while we in the field often talk about resistance to resolution, it is less common for us to acknowledge an attraction to conflict, and I thought that Coleman’s model might acknowledge that.

But the attractor notion is not the opposite of resistance. This is captured nicely in a 2005 blog posting on the website of *Anecdote*, an Australian consulting firm. The author, Shawn Callahan, writes:

> Unfortunately there is considerable confusion about what is meant by an “attractor” and therefore its usefulness can be diminished. The confusion arises from the meaning the term “attractor” has for a complexity scientist and its colloquial meaning. . . . If you ask anyone without a background in complexity science, “what is an attractor?” their likely response is “anything that attracts.” A complexity scientist, however, might say: “an attractor is the pattern which forms from the interconnection of many connected entities.” The attractor for the complexity scientists is the result not the cause (Callahan 2005).

Even after rereading the book several times, I am not sure I understand the connection between what is going on in a disputant’s head (how she sees and what she thinks and feels about the other party) and the field of forces described by the metaphor of attractors. I kept hoping to find a bridge between the analysis of psychological processes and the patterns in the force field. At the same time, I found myself throwing out questions as if Professor Coleman were there to respond. “What about will, the desire to resolve?” I wanted to know. As someone who has worked with a considerable number of seemingly intractable conflicts, I have often observed that a crucial factor in transforming a conflict lies in tapping into, eliciting, stimulating, or coaxing some impulse toward resolving or even escaping from a conflict. The attractor metaphor seems to provide a nice after-the-fact description of the change that occurs, but I want to know how it happens,
what brings it about, and where does the energy for change originate from.

Fortunately, even for those who find the attractor metaphor elusive, other ways to understand the implications of Coleman's work present themselves. Much of the book discusses the basic principles for addressing the 5 percent and how to intervene. These principles suggest what conflict resolvers should look at (dynamics not events), how they should think (forget about linear causality, look for feedback loops), what they should try to achieve (do not aim to produce specific outcomes but rather to alter patterns of interaction), and what they should attend to (emotions more than interests or positions).

The principles would also guide our overall stance toward conflict and remind us of the importance of contradictory information. Coleman admonishes us to remember that the potential for conflict and peace coexist, that we need to be alert for opportunities to introduce different information, and that conflicts that puzzle outsiders often make “perfect sense” to those caught up in them. Conflict resolvers must understand the conflict from the disputants’ perspectives even while not buying into those perspectives.

Finally, he urges us to seek to create movement and change in a conflict. He wants us to remember that people in intractable conflicts are often trapped in those conflicts and need help to get free. One way to do this is to undertake actions that have been known, in similar circumstances, to increase the probability of moving toward more constructive relations. Also, we must attempt to see through the conflict’s complexity to identify a few pivotal factors that account for that complexity. (Interestingly, disputants and intervenors often react to complexity in similar ways. Disputants, following the impulse to coherence, oversimplify a complex situation in ways that intensify animosities. Interveners also attempt to create a simplified and coherent understanding of the conflict, but one that is focused on its dynamics.)

Finally, drawing on the work of Dorner, Coleman cautions intervenors that the decisions they make and interventions they attempt always have unintended consequences. Successful intervention requires being alert to critical feedback and unanticipated outcomes and being prepared to change our understanding of the situation as well as tactics and strategies.

His twelve principles are as follows:

1. respond to dynamics, not events — we need to recognize that intractable conflicts are changed primarily by their inner dynamics;
2. think in loops, not lines;
3. aim to alter patterns, not outcomes;
4. privilege emotions;
5. think “different”;
6. know that conflict and peace coexist;
7. see latent potential for disrupting the system;
8. respect the logic of the conflict;
9. open it up;
10. look for simple solutions informed by complexity;
11. employ evidence-based practices; and
12. anticipate unintended consequences.

Of course, these are very general principles, summaries of complex and sophisticated concepts. Throughout the book, Coleman illustrates key points by describing several different seemingly intractable conflicts: protests and violence at Boston-area abortion clinics, a conflict regarding the Middle Eastern and Asian Languages and Cultures Department at Columbia University, and the civil war in Mozambique.

Protests and violent rhetoric over abortion had been escalating in Boston for years as they had in other cities. The central issue — whether abortion should be legal or not — defied resolution, but elements of the conflict in Boston were transformed. The turning point came in the form of a crisis, the murder of two people who worked at two Boston-area women’s health clinics. Before that day, there had been little interaction between the groups in the area representing advocates and opponents of legal abortion. Each had managed quite successfully to maintain their enmity toward the other group without anything to disrupt that dynamic. Both sides were deaf to any information that might disrupt their negative attitudes toward the other. Under pressure from political and religious leaders to defuse tensions, three women representing each side accepted an invitation from mediators Laura Chasin and Susan Podzia to participate in a secret dialogue. Note that the intent of this dialogue was never stated as an attempt to “resolve” the abortion conflict. Rather it was meant to establish a respectful dialogue among the participants.

This is exactly the approach that Coleman’s model would suggest — do not strive for particular solutions but aim to disrupt the prevailing dynamics of interaction. The intractability and intensity of the conflict is evidenced by the fact that all participants insisted that their participation had to be completely secret. For both sides, the mere fact that they were talking to representatives of the enemy side could have damaged their reputations, threatened their leadership of their respective groups, and perhaps even endangered them.

As expected within Coleman’s model, the first interactions were tense. But a ground rule that they all agreed to — to treat each other with respect
— was sufficiently discordant with their initial stances toward one another that the tone and substance of their discussions changed. Slowly, they came to know each other. In addition, they acknowledged their shared commitment to addressing the broader public issue, which disrupted their “good guy–bad guy” dichotomy. Especially interesting is that after six years of these meetings, each woman reported that her own views on legalized abortion had actually become firmer, even as their perceptions and judgments about each other had softened. The conflict dynamic between these leaders became more constructive. Indeed, the process was so successful that in 2001, the six women coauthored an article in the *Boston Globe* entitled “Talking with the Enemy” (Fowler et al. 2001). An after-effect of the publication of this article, Coleman argues, was a change in the broader abortion dialogue and a decrease in the harshness of the rhetoric in Boston.

**Paths for Intervention**

As I have noted previously, Coleman’s approach to intractable conflict focuses on disrupting the status quo and transforming the dynamics of the system that maintains it. It is not directed at achieving settlement and is not based on satisfying the interests of disputants, nor the recognition and empowerment of parties. The contrast between his approach and standard problem-solving approaches is neatly summarized in a chart (Coleman: 112) (See Figure One below.)

From this contrast, flow three basic practices and a variety of intervention strategies, some of which seem counterintuitive at first glance:

- complicate to simplify,
- build up and tear down, and
- change to stabilize.

The logic of these three basic practices derives from complexity science and the study of complex adaptive systems. Because intractable conflicts almost always entail gross oversimplification of complex issues and dynamics (e.g., “I’m good, you’re bad”), the first step is to complicate matters to intervene. Typically, this begins with conflict analysis and mapping. In this approach, the process of analysis and the process of intervention are not separate and discrete, and analysis does not completely precede intervention.

Coleman suggests that to begin, you have to “become more aware of the system as a whole” (117). I think most practitioners who have significant experience working with complex conflicts would agree with most of the steps Coleman describes, although they might employ a different vocabulary. This should be kept in mind when comparing various approaches to understanding and working with conflict — Coleman’s account of how he analyses and intervenes in conflicts does not seem as strikingly different from
those of other dispute resolution experts I know as do the differences between their conceptual models. When I watch role plays or videos intended to convey whatever it is the practitioner asserts is unique about how she or he practices mediation, I am frequently struck by how much overlap there is in the ways various practitioners will engage people, ask questions, and give feedback. The same holds true for mediators’ presentations of cases — they often use different words but cover the same ground.

Like just about everyone else who intervenes in complex disputes, Coleman begins his analysis by deciding who the participants in the process will be and what issues will be considered. These decisions “help set the initial conditions and subsequent patterns of conflicts” (120). The next step is what he calls “conflict mapping.” This includes developing a chronology of events and an account of their impact on the conflict as well as finding feedback loops within the conflict. While interacting with the disputants, the mediator seeks to identify those significant aspects of the conflict that contribute to its dynamic and intensity. Coleman lists five

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Figure One

Standard versus Dynamical Approaches from *The Five Percent*

![Standard and Dynamical Models](image)

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major aspects of conflict that he believes ought to be explored (122): people and social networks; cultural beliefs, social norms, and community institutions; issues, needs, and interests; visions, hopes, and dreams; and individual thoughts, feelings, and actions.

Other intervenors or researchers have examined these factors, but Coleman’s theoretical framework gives shape and direction to the conflict mapping process that imparts a systematic rigor to conflict analysis and intervention strategy. This is a far cry from the sorts of analysis we often see in the literature in which even the most skilled and thoughtful practitioners merely describe what they do that seems to be effective.

The purpose of all this mapping and analysis is to simplify things — to help the intervener manage the complexity of the situation by formulating some hypotheses about what is going on in his attempt to bring about change. Consonant with Coleman’s theory, he recommends five actions (137–144):

1. look for hubs, loops, and energy;
2. identify aspects of the conflict on which you can actually take action;
3. identify what is already working in the system;
4. identify actors within the conflict who have the ability or potential to bridge across differences; and
5. visualize the attractor landscape of the conflict.

Once again, I believe that the first four are all steps that any sophisticated intervener would undertake, although he may use a somewhat different vocabulary to describe those actions.

The last step, however, is quite specific to Coleman’s framework. He and his colleagues have developed an additional tool: an attractor software platform “developed to assist disputants, conflict practitioners, policy makers, and other stakeholders in addressing conflicts without neglecting the dynamic properties and complexity of the systems in which they work. It allows them to see how all the pieces of their 5 percent puzzles fit together and evolve, and ideally how they can be changed” (144). The software is intended to provide the user with a comprehensive view of the landscape of the conflict and to identify areas in which actions could be taken to create a more constructive conflict dynamic.

Conflict is about difference, and where there are differences, paradoxes lurk. In the family therapy field, one strategy for disrupting a conflict system is to use paradox by recommending the continuation of the very symptom for which the family seeks treatment. (This can be especially effective when the symptomatic behavior serves as a challenge to the authority of a more powerful person, e.g., a child whose parents are splitting up regresses to soiling himself as a way of trying to get the
parents’ attention and perhaps even reunite them. If the therapist suggests that the child continue to soil himself and the parents concur, the child is likely to stop.) Coleman has a knack for offering paradoxical injunctions to his readers — advice that seems counter to the very approaches that many conflict specialists believe are the basis for their effectiveness. Among my favorites are “stop making sense” (148), “circumvent the conflict” (150), “employ weak power” (151), “leverage the irony in impossible conflicts” (155), and “leverage instability.”

Acknowledging that the Attractor Landscape Model (ALM) presents “a new, unfamiliar, and therefore somewhat uncomfortable perspective and language” (219), Coleman concludes the book by pointing to a set of basic skills that can “enhance capacity for applying the ALM principles and practices effectively on the ground.” Reading his suggestions, I was reminded of observing newcomers to the dispute resolution world make the transition from their previous profession to conflict resolution work. I think especially of lawyers and therapists and the gradual changes that develop in how they ask questions, what questions they ask, and what they attend to when working in dispute resolution. Eventually, those who make the transition successfully begin to think and work within a dispute resolution framework, assimilating their therapeutic or legal sensibility into their new role.

But some of the skills Coleman recommends that we build — things like “understanding nonlinear networks of causation” or “enhancing complex thinking, feeling, acting, and identification” — seem intimately tied to his conceptual framework, while others like “understanding latent processes” or “managing the tensions between short-term and long-term thinking and action” are not. This suggests that there are lessons to be learned from this book for all of us, even those who may not buy into the larger theoretical framework.

A Conflict Resolution Paradigm Shift

Still, even though some of his insights and recommendations may be detachable from the scaffolding of his model, I believe that Coleman’s approach should be viewed as an early formulation of a potential paradigm shift in conflict theory and research. Paradigms shifts often occur when researchers tackle and solve a problem that has not been successfully understood within the prevailing paradigm. Just as the family systems paradigm arose because some patients could not be successfully treated within the individual therapy paradigm, the complexity science paradigm (of which Coleman’s is perhaps the most comprehensive formulation directed toward understanding conflict) has developed out of efforts to understand and intervene in intractable conflicts, which resist resolution via existing paradigms.
By suggesting that this represents a paradigm shift, I mean that I think Coleman’s work has applicability well beyond the domain of intractable conflicts. I suspect Coleman senses this as well. In the book he states,

> These principles and insights into the 5 percent derive from the Attractor Landscape Model (ALM). Like the leap from structuralism to Gestalt psychology, or that of Newtonian Mechanics to field theory in physics, this model represents a paradigm shift in the conflict resolution field. A shift away from standard micro, atomistic, short-term, mechanical perspectives toward more holistic and dynamic views of conflict processes and sustainable solutions (106).

Notice the absence of qualifiers here: he sees this paradigm as applicable to the entire field of conflict studies and conflict resolution. A few pages later (114) when discussing “the three dialectical practices that incorporate the psychological principles of change, contradiction and holism” (complicate to simplify, build up and tear down, and change to stabilize), Coleman asserts: “Of course any conflict could benefit from these practices. However, the 5 percent, which drag us, often unwittingly, into the depths of their attractors, require them.” In other words, one could still make sense of the other 95 percent of conflicts using an interest-based, problem solving, or transformative approach, but intractable problems require a complexity-theory-based approach.

But this is exactly how Thomas Kuhn (1962) described paradigm change. The new paradigm begins as a solution to problems that could not be addressed within the old paradigm. After its ability to solve the unsolvable problem has been established, the new paradigm is found to apply as well to the problems the old paradigm was able to explain. As the new paradigm is applied to the old problems, people discover that these problems too can be explained in the same terms as the previously unsolved problems. Some may conclude that there is no need for multiple paradigms when one paradigm can be applied to all, at least for the time being. Indeed, Coleman’s concept of coherence is perfectly compatible with this idea as is the preference for parsimony that characterizes all scientific inquiry. This does not mean that the earlier approaches were wrong; just that they were limited in the range of phenomena they could explain.

Accepting this premise, however, raises this question: “Is Coleman correct in asserting that the 5 percent of intractable conflicts are fundamentally different than the other 95 percent of conflicts?” I think if we look carefully at examples of conflict analyses conducted from within such frameworks as problem-solving, transformative, or narrative, we will find that many of the accounts of what the conflict was about and how it was resolved could be reinterpreted in terms of the Attractor Landscape Model. This does not prove that the ALM is a better framework for analyzing all
conflicts, but it could disprove the premise that intractable conflicts are fundamentally different, which led Coleman to develop the ALM to begin with. That is simply how scientific theories progress.

What we are discussing here is more than just the development of a theory because the conflict resolution field comprises researchers and practitioners, as well as theorists and teachers. When family systems theory was developed, it did not bring the end of individual therapy, and many therapists go back and forth between the two types of practice. The same could happen in conflict resolution. From a scientific perspective, however, if we really want to make progress in our understanding of conflict, we must aspire for an overarching paradigm. It is too early to know if Coleman’s approach signals a paradigm shift — additional research and conflict analyses must be conducted and interventions attempted, but it deserves a shot.

REFERENCES


