

# Intractable conflict assignment

[Art & Culture](#)



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

INTRACTABLE CONFLICT OLALEKAN AKINRINADE BARUCH COLLEGE: COM

4900 INTRACTABLE CONFLICT This paper will discuss the complex nature of intractable conflicts. We see them on the individual level like marital disputes, or longtime rivals. We generally see them between different groups based on ideology, like pro-choice vs. anti-abortion. Historically we have encountered them in disputes and wars between nations, like Israel vs. Palestine, and England vs. Ireland and even the World Wars.

Intractable conflicts are common and have persisted through man-kind's history. Some questions to be explored here are: \* What is "Intractable conflict, its characteristics, and examples? \* How or why do they arise? What are the contexts, issues, and relationships involved? \* If possible, how can mediators address or intervene in these issues? Definition of Intractable Conflict There is no concrete dictionary definition of intractable conflict. However Peter T.

Coleman, professor of psychology and education at Columbia University's Teachers College, describes intractable conflicts in the following way: "When destructive conflicts persist for long periods of time and resist every attempt to resolve them constructively, they can appear to take on a life of their own" (Coleman, 2006, p. 533). Intractable conflicts are sometimes referred to as "protracted social conflict," a term developed by Edward Azar, former professor and head of Center for International Development and Conflict Management at University of Maryland.

According to Azar, "When a group's identity is threatened or frustrated, intractable conflict is almost inevitable. "Protracted social conflict" as

Edward Azar termed it, “ denotes hostile interactions between communal groups that are based in deep-seated racial, ethnic, religious and cultural hatreds, and that persist over long periods of time with sporadic outbreaks of violence. (Smith, 2001, p. 308) . Intractable conflicts are those that prove extremely resistant to resolution. Intractable does not mean “ irresolvable” in the context of intractable conflicts.

Instead, an intractable conflict is a conflict which is highly resistant to mediation and difficult to resolve in a mutually agreeable manner (Burleigh, 2007 p. 35). Examples of intractable conflicts include the Israeli-Palestinian issue, religious disputes, the abortion issue and homosexual rights.

Intractable conflicts are often developed over long periods of time; usually not having a single incident that ignites them. They attract the involvement of many parties, involve a high level of animosity and alienation, and exhibit an increase in hostility and violence.

Positive outcomes to intractable conflicts are unlikely. This thesis will focus on social and international conflicts and explore the complexity and difficult processes of intractable conflicts. Characteristics Intractable conflicts cannot be viewed as a unitary phenomenon. They have many different features. Some conflicts are waged constructively, where the parties involved can bridge over their differences through negotiations or other amicable means. Other conflicts follow a more destructive path.

Such conflicts may take place between individuals, groups, or nations, and simply resist any attempt at management; causing them to go on and on toward higher levels of hostility, intensity and usually violence (Fisher, 2001

pp. 192-193). Cause Escalation Most intractable conflicts could be easily resolved in the beginning, but actions or positions by the person's involved create a "win or else" mentality, or magnifies the apparent stakes. Conflicts that turn into repeated patterns of violence possess a greater likelihood of becoming intractable than conflicts that don't resort to violence.

One characteristic of escalated conflicts that fall to violence is that the violence tends to harden the positions of the parties involved. Terrorism in the U. S. has always been a hot topic in foreign relations with the Middle East and Muslim culture. After 9/11, most Americans viewed retaliation against Osama Bin Laden and his allies as necessary. This animosity has overlapped to Middle Easterners and Muslims in the U. S. One would be hard pressed to find any American advocating any gesture of negotiation with the Taliban.

Winner Takes All Conflicts that lead to intractability often have high stakes involved. When a conflict is painted as "either they win and we lose utterly, or we win and remove them utterly," it's nearly impossible to mediate the conflict to a mutually agreeable outcome. The middle ground for this type of conflict isn't wide enough for both parties to feel that an acceptable outcome is possible, usually because the proposed resolution costs one side or the other something they consider irreplaceable.

The conflict in Libya, while relatively new, has this dynamic because both sides sees their lives and well-being grossly altered contingent to whether the president remains in power. Perceived Exit Costs Another trait common in intractable conflicts is that one or more of the parties involved considers the cost of leaving them higher than the current cost of staying in the fight,

even if the eventual cost of victory will be much larger. The U. S. involvement in the Middle East after 9/11 has become increasingly complex and delicate, primarily because of U. S. interests, terrorism, and the perception that simply pulling all troops would be an admission of failure, even though “winning the war on terror” is highly unlikely. The nature of destructive conflicts tends to make this value judgment more easily accepted; when the value proposition for staying in a conflict is based on how much one party can make the other side pay, the conflict is likely to remain intractable (Smith, 2007 p. 747). For instance, when we look at the “winner takes all” and the “win or else” nature of these disputes, winning is often only measured in direct relation to the other party’s losses.

In fact, that is the essential point of war; whoever has the most men standing at the end wins, or until one side can no longer suffer more damage, they surrender. HOW OR WHY INTRACTABLE CONFLICTS ARISE

Context According to Coleman, intractable conflicts have two primary contextual mediums. 1) Historical dominance and injustice and 2) instability and anarchy. Intractable conflicts regularly occur in situations where there exists a severe imbalance of power between the parties in which the more powerful exploit, control, or abuse the less powerful.

Often, the power holders in such settings will use the existence of salient intergroup distinctions (such as ethnicity or class) as a means of maintaining or strengthening their power base. (Staub, 2001, 276) We can see examples of this in any revolution, like the American Revolution and French Revolution. We also can see remnants of this in race relations between blacks and whites from when slavery was abolished to the Civil Rights Movement.

<https://assignbuster.com/intractable-conflict-assignment/>

Periods of rapid social change, power shifts, and anarchy is the other context which intractable conflicts can take root.

We can see a new dynamic in recent months with the sudden flash of anarchy, rebellion and protests in countries like Egypt and Libya with classes of people being empowered by social networking to communicate and organize. Issues In terms of issues, intractable conflicts involve intangible issues such as identity, sovereignty, or values and beliefs. Polarities are perceived within these issues that create a fundamental dilemma in terms of a resolution; meaning that the identity, sovereignty, values or beliefs of the parties are fundamentally opposed or cannot coexist.

Often with identity and cultures that have strong perceived values or traditions, part of their identity is the distinction between them and an enemy. “ Being a Yankee fan means you hate the Red Sox”; “ Pro-Choice vs. Pro-Life”; “ Republican vs. Democrat”. These are examples parties who define part or all of their identities because of their perceived opposing beliefs. One can see this in Nazism’s dogmatic philosophies about all other ethnicities which led directly to WWII. Relationships In terms of relationships intractable conflicts involve polarized perceptions of hostility and enmity, and behaviors that are violent and destructive.

In many intractable conflicts, this arises from social structures that are exclusive, where both parties are separated by distance (colonists and the British before the American Revolution), a barrier (Berlin Wall), or segregation (in the South during the’60s). As the conflict persists, each group reinforces the “ us vs. them” mentality, which brings them together

intragroup wise, and breeds hostility intergroup wise. Eventually hatred for the other side is fed only through negative discourse and violence, with the original reasons of conflict bearing little weight in current motives and actions.

Coleman describes the dynamics in these conflict relations in the following: The conflictual intrapsychic and intragroup dynamics and hidden agendas associated with intractable conflicts contribute to their difficult nature. They typically consist of both implicit and explicit issues, formal and informal agendas, and deliberate and unconscious processes. In addition, the high degree of threat, harm, and anxiety associated with them leads to a felt need for defensiveness and secrecy, which drives many motives, issues, and actions underground. (Coleman, 2006, p. 539)

#### INTRACTABLE CONFLICT INTERVENTION

Coleman, in *The Handbook of Conflict Resolution*, offers some guidelines for intervention in an intractable conflict. (Coleman, 2006, pp. 546-55). Only three will be mentioned here. Guideline 1 “Conduct a thorough analysis of the conflict system prior to the intervention” (Coleman, 2006 p. 55). Given the complexity of the causes of these conflicts, it is vital for the intervener to get full comprehension of the situation before taking action to avoid making things worse. As mentioned, intractable conflicts often attract involvement of other parties, which can sometimes make it worse.

Consider the deliberations the Obama administration must have gone through before getting involved with Libya. Guideline 3 “Initial concern for the interveners should be to foster an authentic experience of ‘ripeness’

among disputants” (Coleman, 2006, p56). In this context, ripeness means “ a willingness to deescalate” (Coleman, 2006, p. 56). Coleman emphasizes the intervener’s challenge of getting the disputants to cross the psychological barrier of at least entertaining the thought of resolution or peace. Try reframing the conflict away from a zero-sum nature toward constructive processes of minimizing costs.

Guideline 6 “ Short-term interventions need to be coordinated and mindful of long term objectives and interventions” (Coleman, 2006, p58). Interveners need to be mindful of the long-term implications of short term crisis-management tactics. Resolving a conflict now doesn’t guarantee future peace or stability. The Bush administration’s move to invade Iraq underestimated the difficulty in stabilizing the Iraqi government once Saddam Hussein was removed from power, and has led to U. S military presence in Iraq many more years than anticipated.

Although intractable conflicts are resistant to resolution by definition, conflict resolution is not considered impossible. One must first understand the intractable conflict characteristics, understand how they arise, take into account the context, issues and relationships involved, and then attempt to integrate some guidelines for helping disputants reframe the conflict with a long term resolution in mind. References Burleigh, M. (2007). Sacred causes: The clash of religion and politics from the great war to the war on terror.

New York: Harper Collins. Coleman, P. T. (2006). The Handbook of Conflict Resolution (2nd Edition ed. ). New York: Jossey-Bass. Fisher, R. (2001). The Failure of Mediation and the Escalation of an Identity-Based Conflict to an



Adversarial Impasse. *Journal of Peace Research* , 38, 307-326. Kreisberg, L. (2003). Nature of Intractability. In G. Burgess, ; H. Burgess, *Beyond Intractability*: Boulder: Colorado Press. Smith, D. (1997). The Psychocultural Roots of Genocide: Legitimacy and Crisis in Rwanda. *American Psychologist* , 53, 743-753.