

# Preface

Conflict is ubiquitous in social life, leaving no realm of human interaction untouched. The potential for conflict in social relations has not gone unnoticed in psychology and the social sciences, as evident in the many insightful perspectives that have been advanced regarding this central feature of human nature. Despite this long-standing preoccupation, however, conflict in all its manifestations has yet to be integrated with respect to a unified set of principles. The lack of an agreed-upon theoretical synthesis is hardly surprising. Conflict can characterize social relations as distinct as marriage, parliamentary democracy, and international negotiations. Conflict can be a one-off experience, lasting minutes or even seconds, or it can become a persistent state that unfolds over months, years, or even decades. Conflict can be a constructive experience, promoting innovation and a shared reality, or it can engage the most destructive aspects of human nature, promoting extreme forms of violence, disrupting social progress, and magnifying differences in people's beliefs and values. And conflict can set in motion mechanisms that provide for its resolution or it can represent a self-sustaining process that makes resolution virtually impossible.

The perspective developed in this book was motivated in part by the inability of traditional models of social relations to impose coherence on the multifaceted nature of conflict in human affairs. We approached this task from what may seem like an ironic assumption: that the diversity of conflict can be integrated with respect to a perspective on science that encompasses the far greater diversity of phenomena in the natural world. This perspective—*nonlinear dynamical systems theory*—has proven successful since the 1970s in establishing the invariant processes that underlie seemingly distinct topics in fields such as physics, chemistry, cosmology, and biology. In recent years, the metaphors, principles, and methods of nonlinear dynamical systems have been successfully adapted to the subject matter of human experience, from cognitive and social psychology to economics and political science. This book describes how the dynamical perspective in psychology has been extended to understanding human conflict at different levels of social

reality, from dyadic tensions to interstate warfare, with special emphasis on conflicts that are destructive and seemingly impervious to resolution. Such *intractable conflicts* are relatively rare, but their toll in loss of life, property damage, resource depletion, and draining of social capital qualifies them as among the most consequential of all social problems. And they have proven to be the most difficult to understand, let alone anticipate or resolve.

Considerable progress has been made over the past decade in framing the key features of intractable conflict in terms of formal models informed by nonlinear dynamical systems. These models have been instantiated in computer simulations and tested against archival and empirical data. But this book is intended to be heuristic as well as synthetic, establishing a road map for future research agendas. So in addition to framing conflict in dynamical terms and presenting supportive research, we point to areas in which more scholarly work is needed and we outline the strategies by which these theoretical and empirical goals can be accomplished.

Because the potential for destructive and intractable conflict cuts across all levels of human experience, comprehensive yet nuanced understanding is best served by enlisting the involvement of theorists, researchers, and practitioners with correspondingly diverse areas of expertise. The authors of this book reflect this multidisciplinary approach. Our team includes an experimental social psychologist (Vallacher), a social psychologist with expertise in computer simulation of social processes (Nowak), three social-organizational psychologists specializing in conflict management and resolution (Coleman, Bui-Wrzosinska, and Kugler), a cultural anthropologist with firsthand experience in intrastate conflict resolution and peace processes (Bartoli), and a physicist with expertise in complexity and nonlinear dynamical systems (Liebovitch). This collaborative effort, initiated in 2006, has tackled a wide range of topics, including dyadic (e.g., marital) conflicts, intra-organizational disputes, school violence, civil war, interstate warfare, negotiation, peace building, and sustainability.

The scholarly output of our team to date would have been impossible without the valuable cooperation of colleagues and the organizational and financial assistance provided by several institutes and foundations. Much of the initial work in developing the dynamical framework, generating formal models, and collecting empirical data was funded by a grant from the James S. McDonnell Foundation. Generous funding for conferences and workshops has been provided by the *International Center for Cooperation and Conflict Resolution (ICCCR)* and the *Advanced Consortium on Cooperation, Conflict, and Complexity (AC4)* at Columbia University; the *Institute for Conflict Analysis and Resolution (ICAR)* at George Mason University; the *Community Foundation of Boulder*; the *Peace Studies Program* at Florida Atlantic University; and the *Berghof Foundation*. Finally, we wish to acknowledge several colleagues, postdoctoral students, and graduate students for their invaluable scholarly contributions to our research program: Pawal Haltof, Wojciech Borkowski, Naira Musallam, Christine Chung, Jay Michaels, Susan Sullivan, and Vincent Naudot. The success of our efforts to date, as represented in this book, is attributable in large measure to the

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