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SPECIAL ISSUE ARTICLE: APPLYING THE **STRATEGIES OF INTERNATIONAL PEACEBUILDING TO FAMILY CONFLICTS: WHAT THOSE INVOLVED IN FAMILY DISPUTES CAN LEARN FROM THE EFFORTS OF PEACEBUILDERS WORKING TO TRANSFORM WAR-TORN SOCIETIES**

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**BIO:** Heidi Burgess teaches Peace and **Conflict** Studies at the University of Colorado, and **Conflict** Resolution at the University of Denver and online at SCAR/George Mason University. She also co-directs (with Guy Burgess) the **Conflict** Information Consortium at CU, which is a consortium of people from around the world whose work focuses on developing better ways of understanding and dealing with very difficult and intractable **conflicts** at the public policy and **international** levels. This work has involved the creation of two large knowledge bases which we are transitioning into what we call "Global Collaborative Learning Communities." One, [www.BeyondIntractability.org](http://www.BeyondIntractability.org), is focused on intractable **conflicts**; the other [www.CRInfo.org](http://www.CRInfo.org) is focused on more domestic, negotiable **conflicts** and alternative **dispute** resolution processes such as mediation and arbitration. Guy and I say, only have jokingly, that our strongest **conflict** resolution credential is that we have managed to work together, stay married, and raise two great children--all amicably--for over 40 years.

Guy Burgess teaches Peace and **Conflict** Studies at the University of Colorado (CU), and **Conflict** Resolution online with SCAR at George Mason University. He also co-directs (with his wife and partner, Heidi Burgess) the **Conflict** Information Consortium at the University Of Colorado. They have created (with contributions from over 400 experts from around the world) two major online knowledge base and learning community systems: CRInfo -- The **Conflict** Resolution Information Source ([www.crinfor.org](http://www.crinfor.org)) and Beyond Intractability -- the website of the Intractable **Conflict** Knowledge Base Project ([www.beyondintractability.org](http://www.beyondintractability.org)). These systems, which contain thousands of pages of content and are used by over 100,000 different people each month, are at the core of the Burgesses **efforts** to promote awareness of more constructive ways of handling today's most difficult and intractable **conflicts**. The Burgesses current work focuses on using these technologies to facilitate very large scale **efforts** to better address the intractable **conflicts** at the core of today's big problems.

**HIGHLIGHT:** Intractable **international conflicts** and difficult or intractable **family conflicts** have much in common. Relationships are damaged or destroyed, escalation causes parties to become polarized and make bad decisions, communication is strained or nonexistent, and competition and coercion take the place of collaboration. Similarities also exist in the realm of solutions, and those caught in (or intervening in) difficult **family conflicts** can **learn** much from the **strategies** and tactics of **international peacebuilders**. This article describes eight steps that **peacebuilders** at both the **family** level and the **international** level can take to make very damaging **conflicts** more constructive.

Key Points for the **Family** Court Community:

- . Limiting escalation is important in both contexts.
- . Preventing or correcting misunderstandings is key to resolution in both contexts as well.
- . Be sure you are focusing on the real problem(s).
- . Get the facts straight (and agreed upon) before making agreements.
- . Healing past wrongs is important for long term stability.
- . **Working** both within and beyond the zone of possible agreement (ZOPA) is essential in both contexts.
- . **Working** to improve relationships helps all parties and improves the outcome.

**Keywords:** *Peacebuilding; De-escalation; Misunderstandings; Fact-finding; Unrightable Wrongs; Zone of Possible Agreement (ZOPA); Relationships*

## TEXT:

### [\*449] INTRODUCTION

Fractals are those spectacular, mathematically generated graphics that have the peculiar property of repeating the same pattern no matter how far one zooms in or out. Somewhat surprisingly, the many **conflict** processes that characterize human **society** exhibit fractal-like properties with similar destructive dynamics playing out at all levels of **society**--from the interpersonal to the **international**. The same is true for **strategies** for limiting destructive dynamics and promoting more constructive alternatives.

This article highlights similarities between the steps that **peacebuilders** take in their **efforts to transform war-torn societies** and the steps that **family** therapists, lawyers, and mediators might take to bring **families** back from the kinds of terrible **conflicts** that can, on a very small scale, be comparably devastating. Because each of these ideas is presented very briefly here, links to sources of more information are provided, often from the online knowledge base Beyond Intractability (<http://www.beyondintractability.org>).

These steps are presented in a sequential order that suggests that each step must be successfully completed before the next step can be undertaken. In practice, however, one virtually never has the time to pursue such a stepwise approach. Instead, a more realistic goal is to simultaneously try to make as much progress on each of these steps as possible. This requires a continuing recognition of the many ways in which the steps interact with and depend upon one another.

### [\*450] STEP 1: ESCALATION/DEESCALATION

When people are in an intense, highly destructive, and painful **conflict**, the tendency is to blame the other side--believing (often without much thought) that the problem is all due to the other side's intransigence. That is occasionally the case, but most cases of intense **conflict** are not attributable to the utter incorrigibility of one of the parties. Rather, such **conflicts** often result from a minor provocation, transgression, or misunderstanding, followed by escalation dynamics in which the actual or perceived provocation by one party is answered with a counter (and often stronger) provocation by the other party. This, then, is answered with another, even more provocative response, creating a continually escalating feedback loop that ultimately leads people to say and do things that are destructive, hurtful, and sometimes even violent (Maiese, 2003a).

In both **peacebuilding** and **family** situations, it is critically important, when one finds oneself falling into such a pit, to stop digging (i.e., stop making things worse; Burgess, G., & Burgess, H., n.d). Here, a great many of the deescalation **strategies** used at the **peacebuilding** level can be successfully adapted for use at the interpersonal level. Formal cooling-off periods help in both contexts where disputants step back from the fray, reassess their interests and needs, and consider alternative approaches that might be used to attain those goals more effectively than driving the escalation spiral further (Burgess, H., 2004). Another example is the making of deescalating (conciliatory) gestures designed to challenge negative stereotypes and to initiate a reverse escalation process of concession followed by counterconcession (Kriesberg, 2003). In the **international** sphere this is often referred to as "GRIT"--the Gradual Reciprocal Reduction in Tension (Osgood, 1962). Other possibilities include reframing the **conflict** in ways that help the parties realize that their principal enemy is escalation or a mutual problem, not each other (Spangler, 2013a).

### STEP 2: ALLEVIATE MISUNDERSTANDINGS

Once the slide into an ever more destructive confrontation has been arrested, then (at both the **peacebuilding** and interpersonal levels) one can start the process of correcting important misunderstandings that are almost certain to have arisen as the **conflict** escalated. As anyone who has worked in the **conflict** field knows, the parties commonly have highly inaccurate and self-serving images of what actually has transpired and what the opposing party is really like and what they want. Often these misconceptions are reinforced by apparently authoritative sources of information that are actually highly misleading, if not wholly inaccurate (Burgess, H., 2003a).

Small-scale versions of the various processes used by **peacebuilders** to promote intergroup understanding and joint searches for truth can play a critical role at the interpersonal level as well. One-on-one or mediated dialogues, joint fact-finding **efforts**, facilitated reframing, and miniature versions of a "truth commission" can all help aggrieved parties reach some common images about the nature of the problem. This is even more valuable when combined with **efforts** to promote a sense of compassion and tolerance for differences. Correcting such misunderstandings is likely to remove some, but usually nowhere near all, of the sources of **conflict**. It does, however, make it easier for the parties to more sharply focus on the core issues (Maiese, 2003b; Shultz, 2004; Spangler, 2003a; Brahm, 2004).

### STEP 3: FOCUS ON THE REAL PROBLEM

Once misunderstandings about the character of the other and what the other wants are removed, it becomes possible to figure out where the real problems lie. The problems are not just that the other side is evil--they are usually because the parties want fundamentally different things or define situations in profoundly different ways. Here, the goal is to identify points of agreement and

points of [\*451] disagreement. Where disagreements are involved, one must determine whether those disagreements result from differing images of the underlying facts or whether they result from competing moral beliefs. Factual disagreements can, in theory, be resolved through some sort of mutually acceptable fact-finding processes. Moral differences involve a much slower (and often unsuccessful) process of respectful persuasion with the willingness to live with and tolerate deep moral differences (as values and morals are seldom compromisable; Maiese, 2003c).

#### STEP 4: GET YOUR FACTS STRAIGHT

When differences revolve around differing images of fact, it is often possible at both the **international and family** levels to institute a joint fact-finding process. **Working** alone or with a third party, the disputants can agree on what facts are important and how they might be determined. They can then work together to determine answers to the factual questions using a method both parties will trust. Alternatively, they can hire a mutually acceptable third-party fact finder to find and present the facts in a way that is credible to both sides (Shultz, 2004, 2003a, 2003b).

Sometimes, however, factual disagreements are not easily solved. That is particularly true when each side favors a different source of information or different way of knowing. One may listen to and believe what they hear on Fox News while the other relies on CNBC or NPR. One might focus on scientific findings, while others seek truth from their religious authorities. Such differences are actually moral differences rather than factual differences and, as such, must be dealt with in different ways. Both factual disagreements and moral disagreements can be dealt with in parallel ways at the **international and family conflict** levels.

#### STEP 5: FIND WAYS OF HEALING UNRIGHTABLE WRONGS

In protracted, escalated **conflict**, it is virtually certain that the parties will have done things to one another that are deeply hurtful in psychological and, too often, physical ways. It is also probable that many of these hurts are in some important respects unrightable. At the **international peacebuilding** level, this often involves acts of unspeakable violence. At the interpersonal level, violence may also be involved, as may serious violations of interpersonal trust regarding issues such as marital infidelity and the misuse of **family** finances. In both instances, the key to moving forward is finding some **strategy** for moving beyond these wrongs.

In general, this involves balancing the need to hold people accountable for their actions with the importance of moving beyond hate and hostility. Both apology and forgiveness are goals, but these must be backed up with honesty, cessation of the wrongful act(s), and mending harms to the extent that is possible. Lederach (1999) refers to two lines from Psalm 85 in his chapter "The Meeting Place" in *Journey Toward Reconciliation*. "Truth and Mercy have met together ... Justice and Peace have kissed" (p. 53). He points out that reconciliation in the context of building peace in **war-torn societies** requires the balancing of these four elements--finding truth and dispensing justice, while having mercy and seeking peace (Lederach, 1999). These goals are present--and often conflictual--in **family conflicts** as well. Sometimes a partner will feel wronged and demand truth or justice, but such demands escalate the **conflict, thereby working** against peace. Requests for forgiveness (mercy) can sometimes come at the expense of justice and/or truth. The key at both the **international** and interpersonal levels is to balance the tensions between all four of these goals--thereby reaching "the meeting place" of reconciliation.

#### STEP 6: LEARN TO WORK WITHIN THE ZONE OF POSSIBLE AGREEMENT

The competing interests associated with all human relationships--from the **international** to the interpersonal--revolve around competition over who will have their interests defended and advanced [\*452] and who will not. The cornerstone of interest-based bargaining (and, perhaps, the biggest idea to emerge from the peace and **conflict** field) is the recognition that many, but certainly not all, interactions occur within the "zone of possible agreement" (Spangler & Burgess, 2013). In such situations it is, at least theoretically, possible for the parties to find creative solutions to problems that will meet both sides' interests at least to some extent. Yet, in case after case, ineffective and destructive **conflict**-handling practices prevent the parties from taking advantage of such opportunities, thereby leaving money on the table, as the common phrase goes, or allowing one side to win only to the extent that the other side loses. As Fisher, Ury, and Patton (1991) pointed out in their best-selling book *Getting to Yes*, disputants tend to argue and negotiate competitively over mutually exclusive positions. The assumption is that they are engaged in an unavoidable win/lose **conflict** that will force them into an all-out confrontation. This almost always drives the escalation spiral. At both the **international and family** levels, the ability to help disputants reframe the problem from a focus on positions to a focus on interests allows the recognition of mutually beneficial option. This is the principal contribution that mediators, at all levels, provide to their constituents.

Those engaged in **family conflicts** are fortunate in that their negotiation and mediation **efforts** need only involve a small number of individuals. In the **international** sphere, the situation is much more difficult because vastly more parties and more points of view need to be represented. Furthermore, in the **peacebuilding** context, prospects for direct personal contact are highly limited, with most people relying on highly biased mass communication channels that tend to tell people only what they want to hear. The same problem occurs at the **family** level, but is much more easily circumvented by some good **conflict** communication skills such as active listening and nonconfrontational I-messaging (Salem, 2003; Burgess, H., 2013).

## STEP 7: **LEARN TO WORK OUTSIDE OF THE ZONE OF POSSIBLE AGREEMENT**

The big problem of course comes when disputants have disagreements that are so serious that one or both parties feels that they must actively challenge the beliefs and actions of another--that they have exceeded the realm of tolerable differences. In the **international** sphere, these **conflicts** constitute the biggest problem. This situation poses a significant challenge at the interpersonal level as well, but it is often more amenable to transformation than **international conflicts**.

At the interpersonal level, persuasion may be able to change opinions in ways that limit this problem. By sitting down and having a respectful talk about why each side feels the way they do, it is often possible to restore respect and a willingness to live and let live, rather than continuing to attack the other person. This is much harder to do at the level of large communities and nations--there are just too many people and no real information channels to reach people in the kind of personal way that is required (Dugan, 2003).

When persuasion does not work at the interpersonal level, we need a sequel to *Getting to Yes*--the book that outlined the **strategy** for **working** within the zone of possible agreement (Fisher et al., 1991). William Ury's (2007) follow-up book, *The Power of a Positive No*, explains how to agree to disagree without damaging or destroying relationships. The key is to grant people the freedom to pursue different goals when collaboration is impossible and focus on other areas where agreements can be found to pursue collaboration.

In the **peacebuilding** context, it is common for one group of people to feel morally bound to defeat another group, either by forcing them to change their immoral ways or, if that is not possible, forcing them out--either by pushing them into the (metaphorical) sea or into enclaves where they can be controlled. Fundamental moral differences also challenge marriages and may result in divorce. It is difficult to see how differences of this magnitude can coexist within a marriage or in a co-parenting situation. Yet where parents share custody of the children, if the moral differences involve them (such as the religion in which the children will be raised), parents may need help from a mediator or other **conflict** expert to work out a satisfactory agreement to resolve these difficult issues. In some cases religious and cultural traditions offer guidelines for dealing with these kinds of fundamental [\*453] moral differences, and religious and community leaders (e.g., respected elders) can play an important third-party role (Spangler, 2003b; Burgess, H., 2003b).

## STEP 8: **PRESERVING RELATIONSHIPS**

Human relationships almost invariably consist of many different threads, each governing a different type of interaction. At all levels, it is common for conflicted threads to be a relatively small portion of an overall, much more positive, relationship. In many of these cases, the parties can be persuaded to tolerate apparently intolerable differences for the purpose of preserving the many constructive threads of the larger relationship. The key is helping people understand that focusing too much on the conflictual issues can lead people to act in ways that are contrary to their overall best interests--maintaining all the positive aspects of the relationship.

## STEP 9: **DISPUTE RESOLUTION: UNDERSTANDING THE LIMITS**

These steps assume, at the onset, that there is a reasonable prospect for persuading the disputants to make a sincere **effort** to work to equitably meet each other's fundamental interests and needs--needs for security, respect for each person's identity, and protection of their basic rights.

Unfortunately there are, at all levels of **society**, those who are committed to dominating, subjugating, and sometimes physically destroying their adversaries. Motivated by a Machiavellian sense of ethics, such individuals will often take advantage of the conciliatory and mutually respectable language and norms associated with traditional **dispute** resolution **efforts** as a cover for their wholly illegitimate objectives (Deutsch, 2005). In **family** situations, one has the option of divorce, separation, or, in extreme circumstances, intervention by the criminal justice system. In the **international** sphere **peacebuilders** must, at the extreme, deal with the problems of terrorism, naked aggression, conquest, and even genocide. In both cases, however, the key is some type of collective security **strategy** in which the **society (or the international community)** collectively sets standards of behavior and then collectively takes action to enforce those standards--through police and military force if necessary.

In both contexts, this implies the need to recognize when one is dealing with such truly incorrigible individuals and adjust one's **strategy** accordingly. In the **family** context, this may be a situation in which emergency shelters and law enforcement involvement may be appropriate. It may also be a case where direct recourse to the court system is indicated.

## **CLOSING NOTE: THE IMPORTANCE OF PREVENTION**

Most peace negotiations occur after a protracted period of hostilities in which many things have been settled on the battlefield and the peace agreement merely formalizes the outcome of a military confrontation--which, for some merely formalizes the terms of surrender. In other cases, military confrontations may result in a hurting stalemate (rather than victory) with neither side seeing any realistic prospect of winning (Brahm, 2003). In such cases, a compromise agreement is likely to be seen as preferable to continuing

confrontation. Because such agreements do end the fighting, they are obviously of great value. Still, it would have been much better to halt the destructive **conflict** dynamics early and avoid all of the death and destruction.

In the **family** divorce context, the real goal is to avert the kind of protracted **family conflict** that can ultimately lead to children being harmed, assets dissipated, and ongoing relationships harmed or destroyed. While smoothing the process of **family** dissolution is obviously quite valuable [\*454] (similar to cease-fire agreements), the real goal should in most cases be preventing a divorce from escalating.

While the principles outlined here are certainly applicable to divorce mediation, they are perhaps more applicable to the broader challenge of promoting constructive **family** relationships and preventing divorce. Our sense is that, if more **families** would follow the steps outlined here, the need for divorce would drop and, more importantly, the number of **families** facing the kinds of difficulties that lead to and follow from divorce would drop. It is well known in the **international** arena that prevention is far easier and less expensive than resolution; the same is true in preserving **families**.

## BOTTOM LINE

In accordance with the fractal principle, those struggling with **conflict** at all levels from the **international** to the interpersonal can profit from thinking through each of these steps and considering how they might be applied in their specific case.

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