

Extending the Framework of Inquiry: Theories of Change in Conflict Interventions

A Response by
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Extending the Framework of Inquiry: Theories of Change in Conflict Interventions

Ilana Shapiro

1. Introduction¹

The framework for inquiry set out by Christopher Mitchell in his article, “Conflict, Social Change and Conflict Resolution” (Mitchell 2005), provides a useful starting point for organising and linking the vast literatures on social change, conflict and conflict resolution. His broad framework, illustrated through the analysis of current and historical conflicts, initiates a much needed discussion about the kinds of change that cause conflict, facilitate its escalation and promote its resolution. Reflecting the focus of existing theory and research on these topics, however, the discussions in his article focus more on the role of change in the formation and perpetuation of conflict, than on the kinds of changes needed to facilitate its resolution.

What sorts of changes help bring about the resolution or transformation of conflicts? Developing new ways to answer this final question posed by Mitchell is the focus of this brief response paper. Research on conflict intervention programmes’ *theories of change* – or the underlying assumptions about what changes are needed to help resolve the conflict and strategies for bringing about such changes – can provide a useful supplement to the discussions in Mitchell’s article. Making the theories of change that guide existing conflict interventions more explicit provides an opportunity to extract and build theories that are grounded in practice. It is also important in evaluating the usefulness of given theories and revising practices when core assumptions are imprecise or unfounded. In addition, articulating, differentiating and comparing theories of change in conflict interventions can help to:

- Foster reflective practice and conscious choice among practitioners that expands the range and creativity of intervention options.
- Forge stronger links between theory and practice by surfacing the underlying theories of individual, relational and social change that shape practice.
- Identify contradictory or competing theories useful in testing the relative validity of different approaches or in differentiating the conditions under which each might be most useful.
- Recognise the shared or complementary elements of intervention initiatives which can promote cooperation and coordination among programmes.

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2. Theories of Change

Beyond the tangled terminology and disputed distinctions of conflict settlement, management, resolution and transformation, efforts to end violent conflicts are inevitably engaged with processes of change.² Questions about what should be changed, how much change is needed, where change should start, when changes are most effective and how change actually happens, drive the strategic choices of conflict interventions – often in quite different directions (Shapiro 2002).

Drawn from the literature on programme evaluation, a *theory of change* (Weiss 1972; Fulbright-Anderson et al. 1998) describes a programme's explicit (espoused theories) and implicit (theories in use) answers to these questions. It refers to how practitioners believe individual, inter-group and social/systemic change happens and how, specifically, their actions will produce positive results. Initial examinations of theories of change in conflict interventions (Shapiro 1999, 2002) suggest that existing programmes employ a wide variety of change theories and strategies to try to end destructive social conflicts.³ This research found that most programme theories have a cohesive internal logic, however they are usually not explicit. Two programmes' theories of change are summarised below to help illustrate how diverse change theories are used within the same context of addressing racial tensions in US communities.

An Anti-Racism Approach. A non-profit organisation rooted in African American neighbourhoods of New Orleans has a theory of change which focuses on shifting the informal policies and practices of public institutions (e.g. criminal justice, health care, education) that maintain racial inequality and foster episodic violence. Through engaging training programmes, this organisation works with institutional gatekeepers and community leaders to provide a structural analysis of racial privilege and oppression in the US. Effectively addressing racialised tensions requires, they suggest, a clear and common analysis of the long-standing systems of inequity, exploitation and injustice for Communities of Color in the US as well as more subtle forms of modern racism. They suggest that a unified problem analysis among both community organisers (i.e. grass roots change) and institutional leaders (i.e. “grass tops” change) provides opportunities for creative and collaborative actions to promote racial equity and inclusion.

A Prejudice Reduction Approach. Another non-profit organisation addressing racial tensions and episodic violence in the US South focuses on changing explicit and implicit prejudices, internalised oppression and ignorance or intolerance of ethnic group differences in individuals. These deeply personal workshops and dialogue groups attract a wide variety of community members. The programme's theory of change stresses the importance of individual and relational change as precursor for broader social change. Individual change, they suggest, comes from self-awareness, emotional release and new skills and behavioural options. Relationship change comes from hearing people's experiences of oppression, recognising common ground and building alliances and coalitions. Networks of transformed individuals, they suggest, create a ripple effect within their circles of influence that fosters larger social change.

2. I will avoid defining these terms, and the debates surrounding them, in this short paper because others have done so quite admirably elsewhere (Mitchell 2002; Reimann 2004).

3. See Shapiro 2002 and 2006 for a typology of theories of change that emerged from research on US programmes.

These programmes work from different analyses of the problem, have distinct goals, utilise unique intervention methods and pursue different pathways for changing the conditions that foster conflict. Explicitly mapping these different theories of change lays a foundation for future testing and evaluation of divergent approaches and helps revise and refine both theory and practice to the benefit of each.

3. Conflict and Change – Shared Starting Points

Despite many differences in programmes' change theories, a few common understandings about conflict and change within the field of conflict resolution are worth noting. Most programmes appear rooted in an optimism about the opportunities for positive change inherent in conflict situations, as well as the human capacity for learning and growth. Within the field of conflict resolution, conflict is often described as a vehicle for positive social change (Schellenberg 1996; Pruitt & Kim 2004). If addressed constructively, scholars suggest that conflict can create positive change in individuals' perceptions and behaviours (Bush & Folger 1996; Lederach & Maiese 2003), relationships between parties (Bush & Folger 1996; Assefa 1993) and political, social and economic structures (Dukes 1997; Rupesinghe 1995).

In addition, much literature in the field of conflict resolution tends to eschew theories about inherent aggressive drives, prejudiced personalities, or more Hobbesian views of human nature. Instead, the focus is on external, situational influences such as direct and indirect social learning, cultural narratives and norms, lack of skills, processes or forums for constructively addressing conflicts, and structures and situations that frustrate people's ability to meet their basic needs. This focus on external rather than inherent causes of human conflict provides a hopeful view of human capacity for consciously changing themselves and their social environment.

Conflict resolution practitioners often describe themselves as change agents and are frequently motivated by a broader agenda for social change and social justice (Laue & Cormick 1978; Rubenstein & Blechman 1999). However, Mitchell is justified in questioning the term 'agents of change' and elaborating, instead, a series of roles and functions that are necessary for resolving conflict. When questioned closely, conflict resolution practitioners are quick to admit that it is hard to see the larger social changes they are aiming for in the specific results of their work (Kolb 1994; Shapiro 2002). Some practitioners describe their work as analogous to Sisyphus' task of rolling a large rock up a hill only to have it slide back down again. One practitioner described conflict transformation work as akin to, "trying to dig a tunnel through a mountain using one of those little, pink Baskin Robbins' [ice cream] taste testing spoons."

In recent years, conflict resolution practitioners seem to reference *chaos and complexity theory* in understanding the dynamic systems of conflict as a complicated web of mutually influencing relationships rather than more mechanistic models of isolated causes and effects (Davies 2003). Interveners focus on facilitating and fostering conditions that are most conducive to resolutionary change within complex adaptive systems. For the most part, however, intervention programmes utilise a range of planned change strategies where the pathways for individual, relational and structural transformation vary considerably.

4. Levels of Analysis: Changing Individuals, Relationships and Social Structures to Resolve Conflict⁴

Some of the most prevalent distinctions in both the academic and programme literatures about the causes of conflict and theories of change centre around levels-of-analysis – or whether change efforts focus primarily on individuals, on inter-group relationships, or on structures and systems. Using a levels-of-analysis framework, this section draws from these literatures to examine elements that make up theories of change in conflict interventions.

Like Mitchell's framework of examining social change before, during and after a conflict, this levels-of-analysis approach is primarily a heuristic tool for organising a vast and tangled assortment of theories related to change. Most practitioners and programmes recognise the complex and reciprocal effects of changes at different levels-of-analysis. Many theories of change describe a specific relationship between these different levels, and most programmes work at all of these levels to some extent. Yet practitioners inevitably seem to choose one level as the starting point or focus in their efforts to facilitate change.

The following section briefly highlights selected theories that existing programmes either explicitly or implicitly draw from in their efforts to change individuals, inter-group relations and social structures (Shapiro 2002).

Changing individuals involves strategies that shift attitudes and perceptions, feelings, behaviours and motivations of participants in an intervention. Programmes, like the prejudice reduction example described earlier, invoke a wide range of psychological and therapeutic theories in facilitating change during small-group interventions.

Cognitive changes are, among other things, aimed at transforming hostile or prejudicial attitudes toward the other party, providing more hopeful analyses of the conflict and uncovering new possibilities for resolution. Micro-level change strategies include fostering self-reflection and awareness, learning about the Other, critical analyses of social norms and messages related to the conflict or the Other, eliciting an “aha” experience of insight, introducing new information or analysis that is connected to existing knowledge structures, providing ‘safe environments’ and permission to experiment with new ways of thinking and reframing conflictual issues in integrative ways.

Affective change strategies are rarely articulated in conflict interventions. Yet practitioners are quick to acknowledge the important role that emotions such as fear, rage, shame and grief play in preventing resolution and the importance of empathy, hope and compassion in supporting it. Programmes often focus on encouraging emotional control (e.g. anger management) among participants to facilitate rational problem-solving. Alternately, emotional release in contained conditions is sometimes encouraged as a method for “unfreezing” habituated patterns of destructive thought and behaviour. Based on emotional literacy practices, some programmes provide specific opportunities for participants to read and interpret their emotions as a dimension of self-awareness (Fisher & Shapiro 2005).

Behavioural change strategies aim to improve communication, integrative negotiation and problem-solving skills, promote interpersonal cooperation and reduce the use of hostile language,

4. For an outline of more specific theories of change – especially psychological theories related to resolving ethnic conflicts – please see http://www.beyondintractability.org/essay/theories_of_change/?nid=1256 or Shapiro 2006.

physical violence, discrimination, etc. Programmes foster behavioural change in participants by, among other things, establishing new rules and norms for interaction, modelling more constructive behaviours and providing opportunities for imitation and rehearsal of constructive behaviours in a relatively safe environment. Programmes often encourage participants to adopt new ideas and behaviours by appealing to ‘pioneer’ or ‘leader’ images that participants may value.

Programmes that focus on **changing relationships** often suggest that new networks, coalitions, alliances and other cooperative relationships between members of conflicting groups not only positively change the individuals directly involved, but can be a powerful force for fostering social changes that help resolve conflicts. These meso-level change strategies aim to effect both individuals and social structures.

Conflict interventions often try to improve inter-group relations by establishing conditions for cooperative and meaningful interaction between members of conflicting groups. The processes of learning about the “out-group”, changing behaviours toward out-group members, developing cross-group friendships, reassessing the ‘rightness’ of one’s own group, and, at times, establishing a new, common in-group identity facilitate inter-group cooperation (Pettigrew 1998). In addition, many programmes provide explicit skills in consensus and coalition building, as well as opportunities for parties to plan parallel and joint action initiatives aimed at changing conditions that foster inter-group conflict and violence.

Structural, institutional and systemic changes are the primary focus for some conflict intervention programmes (e.g. the anti-racism programme described earlier). The current trend of “mainstreaming conflict sensitive approaches” into development and humanitarian assistance projects has contributed new peacebuilding strategies to the usual small-group interventions. These efforts are often directly aimed at legislative, electoral and judicial reform, establishing new mediating mechanisms and forums within society, economic development initiatives (e.g. micro-finance, job training) and infra-structure support for basic human necessities (e.g. water, food, health care).

These approaches suggest that meeting basic human needs will change the underlying conditions that foster violence. In addition, they are guided by assumptions that changing social structures and institutions should shift the behaviours and attitudes of people who live and work within them. They imply that individuals’ attitudes and inter-group relations will conform to the new structures and the new normative behaviours required by those structures. This view draws on the old community-organising adage, “where the feet go, the head will follow”.

5. Extending the Framework of Inquiry: Integrating Research and Theory-Building with Practice

Mitchell’s discussion about the role of (social) change in creating, perpetuating, mitigating and resolving conflict provides a useful framework for organising current models and guiding future inquiries. This brief response paper suggests that examining the theories of change in existing conflict interventions can build upon Mitchell’s preliminary discussions and provide both a *conceptual* and *methodological* extension to the latter part of his framework of inquiry about change and conflict resolution.

Conceptually, this approach recognises the variety of change theories currently guiding conflict resolution efforts. Given the present state of knowledge and dearth of research directly

focused on social change and conflict resolution, this multiplicity seems both healthy and necessary. It also suggests that describing theories of change through different levels of analysis may provide a helpful analytical tool for disentangling complex, unexamined theories in use. But these suggestions raise questions that deserve further discussion: Is it possible to derive a theory of change to assist in the resolution of conflict from current theories in use? Must there be one general theory of change in resolving conflicts, or are multiple theories acceptable? How can a theory account for the complex and reciprocal effects between levels of analysis?

Methodologically, this approach suggests that extracting and evaluating current theories in use may provide an opportunity to build theories of change that are grounded in practice.⁵ In contrast to Mitchell's deductive classifications, preliminary typologies of theories of change (Ross 2000; Shapiro 2002) have emerged inductively from examining the theory and practice of existing conflict resolution programmes.

For scholars, building theories of change from theories in use includes a reciprocal process of developing grounded theory, comparing it with existing research literature, testing emergent hypotheses and dialoguing with practitioners about the findings and new questions. It requires tacking back and forth between the complexities of field studies and more controlled conditions of a lab; between applied concerns and more basic principles. For example, it might be useful to distil specific elements of the prejudice-reduction and anti-racism approaches described earlier in order to test their differential impact under more controlled conditions.

This approach adds to Mitchell's call for more practical guidance rooted in empirical evidence by suggesting that conflict resolution practitioners should play an active role in theory-building. It highlights the importance of fostering dialogue between scholars and practitioners such that relevant research findings are consistently translated and disseminated to practitioners and practitioners play a key role in shaping research agendas about change and conflict resolution as well as partnering with scholars to conduct rigorous field studies.

For practitioners, examining theories of change implies an intra-organisational process of reflection and dialogue about both espoused theories and theories in use, retrospective analyses of programmes and their impact and more conscious planning, experimentation and evaluation of new programmes. It also suggests the need for an inter-organisational forum for discussing the variety of current theories of change among programmes and opportunities for coordinating efforts to enhance their collective impact. In 2002, the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies' NABRE (Network of Alliances Bridging Race and Ethnicity) project held such a conference for programmes working on racial and ethnic tensions in the United States. This conference provided an important opportunity for practitioners to discuss the nuanced language and distinct theories, values and ideologies shaping practice that often divided them, as well as some promising practices and common challenges that united them (Potapchuk 2002). Organising a similar meeting for international conflict resolution programmes might be a first step in examining current theories of change.

Mitchell's final question, "what sorts of changes help bring about the resolution or transformation of conflicts?" (Mitchell 2005, 3), is central to the field of conflict resolution. Yet the research and programmatic literature explicitly addressing it is surprisingly underdeveloped – especially when compared to existing theory and research on social change and conflict. This paper suggests that articulating, differentiating and evaluating conflict interventions' theories of change can provide one new way of addressing this question that supplements the discussions in Mitchell's article and extends his framework of inquiry.

5. For a more specific discussion about how to conduct a theory of change analysis, see Shapiro 2006.

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See also...

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