
An Experiment in “Practice to Theory” in Conflict Resolution

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What don't we know about conflict and its resolution?

What do we need to know?

How would we find out?

The articles presented in this issue of *Negotiation Journal* stem from a unique meeting, designed to raise these deceptively simple questions. The 2002 Hewlett Theory Centers¹ conference, held in New York City in the spring of 2002, was designed to draw on the wisdom of some of the field's leading practitioners, and to challenge scholars to create new theories, responsive to new needs.

This venture has been a four-way collaboration, including two theory centers — the City University of New York's Dispute Resolution Consortium, housed at John Jay College of Criminal Justice in midtown Manhattan, and George Mason University's Institute for Conflict Analysis and Resolution, in Fairfax, Virginia — and the Hewlett-funded Theory to Practice Project, based in Madison, Wisconsin, as well as the Foundation itself. Previous meetings of faculty from the Hewlett centers often focused on the research agenda of a particular theory center, or on a circumscribed set of problems. We designed the 2002 discussions, however, around what a Theory to Practice steering committee member (Craig McEwen) had defined as scholars' broad-based

need for improved “question-finding.” We hoped to examine and develop broad links between very different ways of studying and addressing conflict, by drawing from the rich and multifaceted examples of conflict characteristic of New York City, one of the world’s most diverse and international settings.

The planning process — a two-year series of complex and detailed discussions — began well before the events of September 11, 2001. It goes without saying that subsequently, 9/11 and its aftermath became the dominant underlying theme in much of the conference’s work. Because we believed that the knowledge, experience, perceptions and ideas of a number of domains of activity are at present not fully integrated into conflict resolution as a general field, we enlisted a particularly diverse group of scholars and practitioners to help design our agenda, and these discussions brought into sharp focus four “communities of conflict” in which New York provides a rich selection of real-life examples. From these, we sought to generate significant discussions, reflections, and the creation of new directions for knowledge-seeking.

Three of these areas of focus were race relations and ethnic conflicts; dispute processing used by police, particularly hostage negotiators in New York City; and conflicts within and around the United Nations family of organizations. One significant change occurred, as our original fourth “community of conflict” — corporate disputes — gave way to a focus on 9/11 and its aftermath.

Throughout the planning, we were particularly interested in the possibilities of mixing people from a variety of fields of conflict to see if unexplored themes emerged, and we designed the meeting with as much interdisciplinary, small-group discussion time as possible. We believe this interdisciplinary focus has strongly influenced the writings that resulted. The articles which make up this issue, in our view, logically gravitated into themes which, we were pleased to find, mixed types of experience and knowledge. Thus the first section, “The Images that Inform Theory,” includes articles by one of the conflict resolution field’s most distinguished scholars and one of its most distinguished practitioners, as well as by a well-known ombudsperson and a scholar who has studied many professions in addition to mediation. The other two sections, “The Challenges of Context” and “The Next Questions” likewise include articles both by highly experienced practitioners, and by scholars from diverse fields.

The outpouring of ideas at and after this conference was such that only a sample of the articles could be published in this issue. In the forthcoming January, 2003 issue, *Negotiation Journal* will publish an “In Practice” section focused on “Intractable Conflict from the Bottom Up,” including articles by Harold H. Saunders, David M. Malone, and Robert A. Baruch Bush, all of which also evolved from the Hewlett Centers meeting. Many other provocative, significant essays simply would not fit into the available printed space, and we have turned to the World Wide Web to make available work by more

than a dozen well-known scholars and practitioners. This collection of conference proceedings appears on “mirrored” web sites at CUNY and ICAR, which are: <http://johnjay.jjay.cuny.edu/dispute/> and <http://www.gmu.edu/departments/ICAR/>.

In total, the result of the Hewlett Centers’ gathering has been a rich interplay of ideas between professionals with very different backgrounds — including police who work as hostage negotiators, clergy from diverse faiths, diplomats, lawyers, and a matching array of scholarly specialties. This, we hope, might constitute something of a template for future discussions in a field which often claims to be “interdisciplinary,” but in which that term has often been interpreted to mean a somewhat restricted frame of reference. We believe the articles published here and in the two conference web sites speak for themselves, and that discussions constructed to ensure a rich and *truly* interdisciplinary interchange should become the norm in conflict resolution, if “our field” is to achieve its true potential.

It is intrinsic to the Theory Centers’ structure that what scholars think matters: What they discover, or fail to discover, has consequences in the “real world.” In responding to our request that those who were invited to the meeting consider writing something new in the wake of it, our colleagues were free to focus on any session(s) as source material, and any thematic direction, that most drew them. We hope that readers of this journal — concerned as they typically are with the direction and prospects of a still half-formed field — will find the results thought-provoking and even compelling.

NOTE

1. The theory centers constitute a complex structure for intellectual inquiry. Beginning in 1982 with the Program on Negotiation at Harvard Law School, these interdisciplinary programs now number eighteen, at a number of leading colleges and universities around the United States. For a list, see <http://www.criminfo.org/documents/hwlt-thry-ctrs.cfm>

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