

Why Are There Wars Without End

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Even as events took place in September recognizing this year's International Day of Peace, most people would concede that some conflicts seem impossible to resolve. Indeed, of the twenty major armed conflicts waged around the globe during 2005, nearly half had been in progress for 10 years or more and a quarter were more than 25 years old.

Are there common features to these intractable conflicts? With variables that include the psychological, economic, religious, and political, it is difficult to generalize from one situation to the next, much less pinpoint solutions.

Yet those are precisely the goals of a unique three-year study that will be led by Peter Coleman, Associate Professor of Psychology and Education at Teachers College and Director of the College's International Center for Cooperation and Conflict Resolution (ICCCR), and funded by a grant from the James S. McDonnell Foundation. Working with scholars from Florida Atlantic University (Robin Vallacher and Larry Leibovitch), Columbia University (Andrea Bartoli), Poland (Andrzej Nowak and Lan Bui-Wrzosinska) and Mozambique (Brazao Mazula), Coleman will conduct research and build computer simulations to look at long-term, self-perpetuating conflicts through the lens of complex systems theory. The work will be an original application of techniques normally used in sciences such as biology, physics and medicine.

For several years Coleman and his team have worked to identify key dynamics of intractable conflicts. From those findings, the research team will create basic parameters of intractability and enter those parameters

into computer simulations.

"We can use the computer simulations to ask, 'If we change one thing in a conflict, what happens in five years? If we change two things, what happens?'" Coleman says, adding that while most research analyzes the effects of one or two variables, simulating key changes with a computer model can reveal the complex interactions of changes in multiple variables and their impact on how patterns of behavior unfold over time.

Coleman's team is also developing a survey to implement in the Middle East to explore, over time, escalation and de-escalation in the seemingly constant state of conflict in that region. "We want to track people there and the psychological experiences related to those events to see if it has the kinds of dynamics we would predict from our theory," Coleman explained. "We want to see in a real-life setting how intense conflict spreads into everyday aspects of life and, as conflict de-escalates, retreats from life."

A case study on Mozambique, a country that experienced 16 years of a bloody civil war and then suddenly embarked on a period of sustained peace, will also be part of the research.

In October, the research team will meet in Poland at the Warsaw School of Social Psychology, where there are top scholars in the study of complex systems and formal modeling. Over the next few years, the team will use laboratory tests, surveys and case studies to develop and refine their theory of how intractable conflicts develop and, hopefully, how they are transformed.

Ultimately, Coleman said, they hope to create new ways to teach people on a broad scale about conflict. "What we find may have policy implications for how leaders think about policy around conflict and peace and how people involved in conflict resolution are trained."

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