

# Intractable Conflict

by Sophia



## WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, we'll discuss the concept of intractable conflict, as well the process for resolving this type of conflict. The particular areas of focus include:

1. Characteristics of Intractable Conflicts
  - a. Long History Involving Perceived Offenses
  - b. Association with Group Identity/Worldview
  - c. Strong Negative Feelings/Attributions
  - d. Establishment of Allies
  - e. Resistance to Resolution Efforts
2. Resolving Intractable Conflicts

## 1. Characteristics of Intractable Conflicts

**Intractable conflict** is a term for a conflict with a very long history and with attitudes and positions that have escalated over the years or perpetuated the conflict.

When we look at conflict on a global scale, there are some conflicts that seem very difficult to resolve because of their long histories.

### IN CONTEXT

For instance, the conflict between the Irish and the British goes back many centuries to the initial British invasion of Ireland in the 12th century. The Republic of Ireland won its independence in 1922, but part of the island of Ireland, Northern Ireland, remained part of the United Kingdom.

Over the course of the next century there were periods of great tension and violence over the fate of Northern Ireland, particularly during a thirty year period known as The Troubles. At the time, many would have considered this an intractable conflict because it had been going on for so long and the positions were so entrenched.

In 1998, the peace treaty called the Good Friday Agreement ended much of the violence of The Troubles. But the initial issue—whether Northern Ireland should be part of the United Kingdom or part of the Republic of Ireland—remains intractable and unresolved.

An intractable conflict has the following five characteristics:

- Long history involving perceived offenses
- Association with group identity/worldview
- Strong negative feelings/attributions
- Establishment of allies
- Resistance to resolution efforts



#### TERM TO KNOW

### **Intractable Conflict**

A conflict which has a long history, in which the attitudes, positions, and worldviews of involved parties have escalated or perpetuated conflict.

#### **1a. Long History Involving Perceived Offenses**

All intractable conflicts have a long history that may go back years. If the conflict is between two cultures, the dispute may have even existed for centuries. With this long history comes many perceived offenses by both sides. When anger has built up over the years due to this sense of being wronged, both sides feel a strong need for justice. Likewise, both sides have very strong positions on what specifically they're seeking in terms of this justice.

#### **1b. Association with Group Identity/Worldview**

The conflict's long history and the parties' needs for justice help establish the conflict itself as an actual worldview. As you learned in earlier lessons, a **cultural worldview** is a way that a group makes decisions. The worldview is comprised of the beliefs that the group considers right, true, or proper. When a conflict has existed for a long time, that conflict becomes part of the way the groups involved see the world, particularly for people who were born into this conflict and have learned about it from their families.

Because this conflict is part of how these group members see the world, it greatly affects their identities. **Identity** is a person's sense of self, and it goes hand in hand with cultural worldview.



#### TERM TO KNOW

### **Cultural Worldview**

The way a person interprets and makes decisions about his or her environment (world), including beliefs and assumptions about what is considered right or normal.

### **Identity**

A person's sense of self; the way an individual defines himself or herself.

#### **1c. Strong Negative Feelings/Attributions**

All intractable conflicts also involve very strong negative feelings or attributions between the parties involved. In many cases, a word as strong as "hate" would be appropriate to describe the feelings between people or governments in these conflicts.

These strong negative feelings can often lead to violence, as seen in the The Troubles in the Northern Ireland conflict. Sometimes, intractable conflicts even appear to be simmering for a while before an instance of escalated violence occurs from one side or the other.

Certainly not everybody in either of those countries is going to have those strong negative feelings or that sense of identity stemming from the conflict; these are simply the general characteristics of nations that are part of an intractable conflict.

#### 1d. Establishment of Allies

Another characteristic of intractable conflicts is that each side will seek and establish allies in the form of countries that are indirectly affected by the conflict.

These countries may have a vested interest in the outcome, and some of them will likely step in to try to resolve the conflict.

#### 1e. Resistance to Resolution Efforts

Finally, the countries involved in an intractable conflict will be very resistant to the conflict resolution process. This is because the conflict itself has become entrenched in each party's cultural worldview and identity, and cultural worldviews are very slow to change. Change is possible, but it takes time.

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## 2. Resolving intractable conflicts

Because of the resilient nature of intractable conflicts, any form of resolution will go through multiple stages.

The conflict itself will experience escalations and de-escalations, as again can be seen in the developments of the Northern Ireland conflict, with the transition from The Troubles to a relatively stable peace. There will be movement forward but movement backward as well.

While progress through conflict resolution is being made with intractable conflicts around the world, this process does take a very long time.

Sometimes these conflicts take place in an area called **abuffer state**. This is a country or region that's right between the conflicting nations. The existence of this buffer state is thought to reduce the conflict opportunities between these two greater powers involved in the conflict because neither of them can exercise **sovereignty** while in the buffer state.



#### BIG IDEA

Conflict resolution is especially difficult in the case of an intractable conflict because there is a lot of resistance to the process from both sides. There is always the chance that progress can be made, but the resolution process will need to go through many stages over an extended period of time.



#### TERMS TO KNOW

##### Buffer State

A country situated between two larger, more powerful countries; the existence of a buffer state is thought to reduce conflict opportunities between the two greater powers.

##### Sovereignty

The established right of a recognized government to determine internal policy and law of its country.



#### SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned about intractable conflict as a specific type of long-standing conflict between groups. The **characteristics of intractable conflict** are a long history involving perceived offenses and the need for justice, an association with the group identity/worldview of the parties involved, very strong negative feelings/attributions between the parties, the establishment of allies, and a resistance to resolution efforts. You now understand that because of this resistance, **resolving intractable conflicts** can take a very long time. The resolution process will need to go through many stages, during which the conflict itself will likely escalate and de-escalate. Resolution in these cases is possible, and there's always a chance of progress, but a desirable outcome will take longer to reach than it would in less-serious conflicts. Good luck!

Source: Adapted from Sophia tutorial by Marlene Johnson.



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