Invited Paper

Facing Uncertain Times Together: Strengthening Intercultural Connections

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Abstract
*Today, our world finds itself in a new crisis of complexity. As the pace of knowledge gener-
ation, technological advancement, and globalization increases exponentially, we are faced
with a host of new challenges, demands and conflicts. In these remarks from the SIETAR
Japan conference, I discuss the impact of this increasing complexity on how we think, feel,
and behave when faced with difference, and propose a new framework of skills and com-
petencies that research shows can help us navigate our increasingly uncertain, dynamic,
and complex contexts. This framework offers two meta-competencies—Conflict Intelli-
gence and Systemic Wisdom—that can help individuals resolve conflict across their
differences and promote more constructive and peaceful relations in our rapidly changing
world.*

Keywords: complexity, adaptivity, conflict resolution, dynamics

Thank you so much for inviting me as a speaker here at the SIETAR Japan Conference, and for so generously hosting me here in Tokyo. It is truly an honor to be here with you all tonight.

Given the topic of my talk today, it is fitting that so many of us have traveled from around the globe to be here together—I myself have traveled over 11,000 miles from New York City to be with you all. That, in a way, is an important part of what I want to talk about. Much of my work is inspired by the fact our world is both more connected—and more divided—than it has ever been before. Our new level of global connection and division has significant consequences for how we engage with the most challenging issues we face as communities, societies, and as nations. So, I come to you today with some new and evolving ideas about the kinds of skills, competencies, and knowledge we must cultivate to help make us better leaders and citizens in our increasingly complex, globalized world.

Our Crisis of Complexity

While there are clearly exciting, generative, and inspiring connections being made in our new global network, it is also true that our world finds itself in a crisis of complexity. We are living in a time of a complete data deluge. In 1900, knowledge doubled every century. By the time of World War II, the total amount of collective knowledge doubled every 25 years. Today, different kinds of knowledge double at different rates, but on average our total volume of knowledge doubles every year. IBM now predicts that with the "internet of things"—the interconnected network of information shared across computing devices embedded in everything from our cars to watches to clothes to kitchen appliances—the entirety of our collective knowledge will double every 12 hours.

If you're more of a visual person, this infographic (Figure 1) from Seradigm in New Zealand helps illustrate this idea. As you can see here, one megabyte of information—which is about the size of a large novel—can be represented by a tiny ant. One gigabyte—which is the size of all the information in the entire human genome—is represented by the height of a short person. One terabyte—or the entire annual world production of published items—is compared to the length of the Auckland Harbour Bridge in New Zealand. One petabyte—or the sum of all U.S. academic research libraries—is represented proportionately as the length of New Zealand. And finally, one exabyte—or just two-thirds of the current annual production of information worldwide—can be proportionately represented by the diameter of the sun.

Think about that for a moment. Let that soak in. There is a remarkable acceleration in the pace of change we face every day.

Many of us who lead teams or organizations can appreciate what that feels like in our smaller contexts, too. In his book written back in 1976, Warren Bennis, a university president and leadership scholar in the U.S., posed the question, *Why Can't Leaders Lead?* In the book, he argued that the sheer number of demands that most leaders face daily constrains their aspirations and sabotages their impact. With the combination of forces and demands that organizational leaders increasingly face—
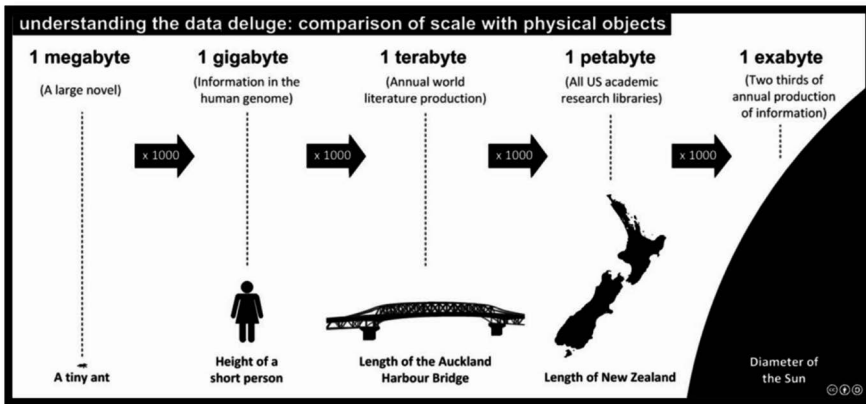
Figure 1 Understanding the Data Deluge: Comparison of Scale with Physical Objects. Infographic created by Julian Carver of Seradigm in New Zealand, 2013

especially in the context of accelerating rates of technological advances, knowledge generation, business automation, population diversification, and globalization—many of our institutions seem exponentially more un-leadable.

Along these same lines, researchers Nic Gowing and Chris Langdon (2018) interviewed over 60 leaders across the corporate, government, military, and humanitarian sectors in 2016, and found that one of their most commonly expressed concerns was a feeling of "being overwhelmed by multiple, intense pressures." They wrote, "A proliferation of 'unthinkable' events over the previous two years has revealed a new fragility at the highest levels of corporate and public service leaderships. Their ability to spot, identify and handle unexpected, non-normative events is shown not just to be wanting but also perilously inadequate at critical moments."

In 2016, Jean Marie Guéhenno (see also Guéhenno, 2015), the former President of the *International Crisis Group*, also cautioned that we are today witnessing seismic shifts in the geopolitical world. He cautioned that we have moved from hegemony and bilateralism to multilateralism, to a new *crisis of complexity*, in which non-state actors NGOs, corporation's social networkers, hackers, social entrepreneurs, and splinter groups wield as much or more power in the political realm than ever before. As a result, many of the conflicts that emerge involve a complex web of objectives and actors that pose uniquely difficult challenges to resolution.

So, to recap, our world today is shaped by a dramatic deluge of exponentially increasing knowledge and data; we're facing accelerating technological advances and automation; and we're rapidly globalizing and becoming increasingly, consequentially interdependent. We're also facing catastrophic physical-environmental changes; increasing political polarization and fractionalization; increasing migration and diversification of our societies; weakened states and nascent international governance; and the many complex interactions, discontinuities, and forecasting challenges that go along with this increasing complexity.

The Psychological and Social Consequences of Complexity

I'm making this point strongly because it is so central to what I'm here to talk about today—given the increasing number of sources of uncertainty and complexity in our world, we must ask: ***What happens to humans under conditions of extreme uncertainty? And what does this mean for negotiating and leading within the new world order?***

Psychologically, we know that under extreme uncertainty, human beings don't tend to respond very constructively. When we feel a sense of threat based on high degrees of uncertainty, we tend to experience a higher need for certainty. Our cognitive complexity—or our ability to hold multiple seemingly contradictory ideas in our minds at once—decreases significantly. We also become more cognitively rigid, meaning we think in more black-and-white ways. Our emotional complexity also decreases, as our negative emotions and anxieties crowd out our ability to feel in more nuanced ways. We tend to think in much shorter time frames, and our worldviews become tighter and narrower. We become primarily motivated to focus on preventing problems—we become less able to envision creative, ideal states, and instead become fixated on avoiding bad things. When we are faced with extreme ambiguity and uncertainty, we become increasingly consumed by fear and an inclination to simplify. What this means is that, as the world becomes more interconnected, complex, volatile, and unpredictable, we are inclined to become far more simplistic in our thinking, feeling, and behaving—at exactly the time when our world requires greater complexity of thinking, feeling, and behaving.

These psychological implications of increasing uncertainty have profound social effects, as well. These changes in how we think about the world when faced with uncertainty lead us to fractionalize and trust smaller and smaller circles of people. We tend also to narrow our moral scope, and our moral circles and conceptions of who is entitled to moral treatment become smaller. As we have been seeing on a global stage, when we feel the threat of ambiguity, we begin to prefer stronger, more autocratic and militant leaders. We develop tighter, more rigid cultures and norms; we scapegoat and vilify out-groups; and we polarize politically. We make less well informed and well explored decisions; we behave in more hostile manners; we create escalatory spirals with out-groups; and we tend to close ranks and prepare for war. Not a pretty picture.

However, human social dynamics under threat do not always unfold in this way. In fact, there is a powerful story about the citizens of London during the German bombing offensive—the Blitz—during World War II. Winston Churchill feared that the threat represented by this bombing offensive would lead to complete and total anarchy—that fear and confusion would reign and that any semblance of order would crumble in the face of such overwhelming threat and uncertainty. In fact, the opposite happened. Under such threat, the inhabitants of London came together in unity and solidarity, helped and cared for one another, and demonstrated some of the most cooperative and altruistic tendencies of the human species.

So, in the face of the extreme uncertainty of the day, we must ask—what does

this mean for us negotiating our differences in this new world order? In short, this is what my team and I study at the *Morton Deutsch International Center for Cooperation and Conflict Resolution* at Columbia University. In the face of increasing complexity and uncertainty, it is clear to us that the way individuals, organizations, and societies handle conflict and difference in our interdependent world has dramatic economic, political, social, and environmental consequences—and possibilities. To this end, we work to develop theories, empirical research, applied tools, and educational courses focused on the mitigation of destructive conflict and the promotion of constructive, peaceful processes across levels—including the interpersonal, intergroup, organizational, societal, and global levels.

While decades of research in conflict resolution have resulted in a range of sound, evidence-based practices for engaging conflict constructively, our Center is motivated by the reality that our standard methods of conflict resolution are being rendered increasingly ineffective within these more highly complex, volatile, and unpredictable contexts.

There are a variety of critical limitations in the standard approaches to the science and practice of conflict resolution. Much like the psychological consequences of uncertainty I described earlier, our standard methods of studying conflict tend to think in straight lines—we study linear cause-and-effect relationships, even when in reality the relationships are far more layered, non-linear, dynamic, and complex. We also tend to privilege short-term thinking in research, because standard methods are less conducive to long-term study and analysis. Most of our research is driven by what can be called "the fear problem"—we study what we're afraid of, which means we focus narrowly on studying *problems* instead of exploring pathways to different potentials and possibilities. Thanks to the scientific method's glorification of objectivity, we tend to marginalize the power and impact of emotions, and we oversimplify the dimensions of what we study at the expense of greater nuanced understanding. We also tend to ignore the unintended consequences of our actions—the unintended consequences of well-intentioned acts.

Given all of this, we believe that the time is ripe for our field to think differently about the skills and competencies required as we work toward building a more peaceful world. Our research combines insights from psychology, peace and conflict studies, complexity science, and new technologies—to shed light on ways of navigating the toxic emotions and complicated relationships that often shape conflict—, and to offer a new applied toolkit for increasing what we call "Conflict Intelligence and Systemic Wisdom."

Conflict Intelligence and Systemic Wisdom: A Dynamic Approach to the Science and Practice of Conflict Resolution in Complex Contexts

Through our work at the lab, we've identified two meta-competencies—*Conflict Intelligence* and *Systemic Wisdom*—for managing conflicts in ever-changing contexts, and for transforming entrenched conflict systems. These represent two distinct but complementary modes of conflict engagement, and they are associated with dis-
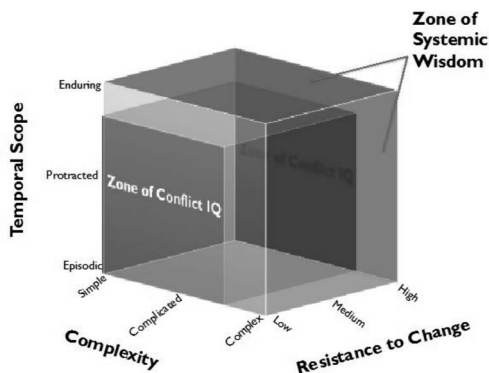
Figure 2   The Zones of Conflict Intelligence and Systemic Wisdom

tinct types of conflict. Essentially, these two meta-competencies are simply about knowing how and when to use different strategies to respond to distinct types of conflict effectively.

More specifically, the *Conflict Intelligence* and *Systemic Wisdom* framework differentiates conflicts according to levels of *complexity*, *destructiveness/intensity*, and *endurance*, and suggests that variation along these three dimensions calls for distinct strategies and orientations.

In short, **Conflict Intelligence** refers to the set of competencies that enable people to navigate different types of common conflicts across contexts constructively and effectively.

Conflict Intelligence is most effective for addressing conflicts of low-to-moderate importance and intensity, in which extreme forms of enmity, injustice and violence are rare. Our temporal scope in these disputes is usually more immediate or short-term, and our aim is to directly engage the problem, relationship, or other disputants.

In these contexts, the essential core Conflict Intelligence competencies include:

- **Self-knowledge and regulation:** This refers to knowing and managing oneself in conflict, including your implicit theories of conflict, social value motives, conflict anxiety management, and moral exclusion.
- **Constructive conflict resolution skills:** This means understanding the constructive and destructive potential of conflict, and developing the knowledge, attitudes, and skills for constructive conflict resolution—including active listening, perspective taking, probing for needs and interests, focusing on common ground, etc.
- **Conflict optimality:** This involves having the capacity to navigate between different or competing motives and emotions, and combining different approaches to achieve desired outcomes. So, for example, this includes optimally balancing the different motivations for preventing harm and promoting the desired outcomes.
- **Conflict adaptivity:** Finally, this involves employing distinct strategies in

different situations that are effective and that fit the demands of the situation.

In contrast, ***Systemic Wisdom*** refers to the capacity to understand the inherent propensities of the complex, dynamic context in which a conflict is embedded—and the capacity to work <u>with</u> the dynamics of the system to support the emergence of more constructive patterns.

Systemic Wisdom is required in conflict situations that are more complex, destructive, and enduring. In these contexts, oftentimes the more straightforward strategies of conflict resolution fail to have the desired effect, and sometimes they bring about unintended consequences that can perpetuate existing problems.

Accordingly, Systemic Wisdom requires a shift in orientation from the figure (the conflict) to the ground (the constellation of forces contributing to the conflict). It also requires a shift in orientation from the short term (for example, reaching an agreement, resolution, or victory) to the longer term (changing the patterns of interaction qualitatively and sustainably). Systemic Wisdom requires recognition that there are non-linear networks of causation that underlie more intractable conflict systems, and effective approaches require non-linear thinking and intervention. This is a dramatic paradigm shift for most of us.

In these more complex contexts, the essential core competencies of Systemic Wisdom include:

- **Systemic aptitudes:** These include complexity competencies such as tolerance for ambiguity—or comfort with uncertainty or unpredictability. They include integrative complexity—or the ability to synthesize and bring together seemingly contradictory ideas. They also include cognitive, emotional, and behavioral complexity, and future orientation.
- **Complexity visualization:** This refers to the capacity to map out and visualize complex systems, and to identify core dynamics that drive the conflict beneath the surface.
- **Systemic agency:** This involves skills in reading and marshaling resonance or shared energy, and the capacities required to work "upstream" to alter the dynamics of systems over time to support the emergence of more constructive patterns.
- **Sustainability and adaptive decision making:** This is the capacity to employ adaptive decision making and action to sustain constructive dynamics.

Taken together, these CIQ and SW competencies offer a new paradigm for the practice and teaching of conflict resolution. And at the MD-ICCCR, all of our research is organized under these two overarching competencies. So, now I can begin to give a brief but somewhat more specific and practical overview of the kinds of projects we pursue within this framework, and some of the main lessons we've learned to date.

Conflict Intelligence: Navigating Power and Adapting Strategies Based on Context and Culture

Under the umbrella of Conflict Intelligence, we study how to negotiate conflicts across power differences. We study how to mediate conflicts adaptively when they involve highly intense, constrained, competitive, or hidden conflicts that are hard to talk about. And we study how to address cross-cultural conflicts and intergroup disputes that involve gender, religion, or political differences.

Adaptive Negotiation

In our research on negotiating conflicts across power differences, we ask: *How do differences in disputant goals, power, and conflict importance affect conflict dynamics, and how can they be navigated adaptively and constructively?*

Based on decades of research, we know that managing conflict up and down the chain of command in organizations can be particularly treacherous, as power differences complicate conflict situations and constrain options for responding. Our work on what we call *Adaptive Negotiation* explains why these pitfalls are so common and how to take advantage of the energy and potential for change that such situations create. It offers strategies and dozens of tactics for increasing your *Conflict Intelligence* and finding greater success and satisfaction through conflict. We help people identify the right questions for diagnosing the kind of situation they're in—how important is the conflict? Are the other disputants with me, or against me? Am I more or less powerful than they are?

Based on an understanding of these three dimensions, people can begin to determine what kind of situation they're in, examine their typical or chronic tendencies in conflict, and then work more intentionally to match their approach to conflicts to the demands of the situation they're in.

Our research tells us that adaptively matching your strategy in conflict to the specific demands of the situation leads to more satisfaction with conflict at work, greater satisfaction with work generally, greater overall emotional well-being, and better relationships with co-workers. Similarly, being adaptive in conflict leads to less job stress, and a lower likelihood of quitting. Among leaders, adaptivity leads to more candor and more honest feedback from staff, as well as more innovative thinking, insights, and creativity from staff.
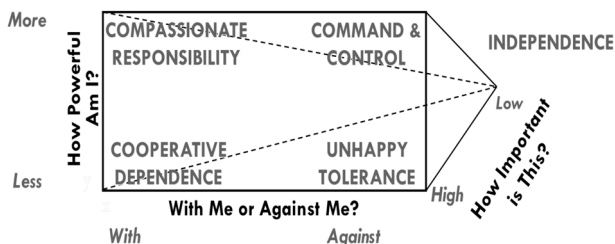

Figure 3   Identifying Types of Conflict Situations

In short, the benefits of adapting your conflict management strategy to the specific demands of the situation make a big difference in improving the experience of conflict and improving the satisfaction with processes, relationships, and outcomes in the long and short runs.

Adaptive Mediation

Emerging from similar fundamental questions as our work on adaptive negotiation is our work on adaptive mediation. Although mediation has increased considerably in popularity and usage, there is a distinct lack of coherent, evidence-based models of mediation. Consequently, there remains a substantial science-practice divide. In response to this need, our research focuses on better understanding mediation processes and outcomes across different situational contexts.

Specifically, our work focuses on the questions: *What are the most basic challenges to mediation, and how do mediators effectively adapt and respond to them as they ebb and flow in conflict situations?*

Through a series of surveys, interviews, and focus groups, we've been developing a model that reflects the most important situational characteristics of mediation that affect mediators' decisions and behaviors. This model argues for the utility of an adaptive or situationally contingent approach to mediation, where mediators learn to employ different strategies in response to fundamentally different challenges they face in mediations. Through this research, we've identified four fundamental dimensions that matter in mediations: First is conflict intensity: How intensive, emotional, destructive, and complex is the conflict? Second is the quality of relations between the parties—in other words, are they more cooperative or competitive? Third is the level of constraint—is the context more flexible or constraining? And finally, fourth, we look at the degree of overt versus covert processes—how obvious or hidden are the issues and processes?

Based on these four dimensions, we identified five main approaches or strategies for mediating across different constraints. In more low intensity, cooperative, minimally constrained contexts in which issues are mostly clear, standard mediation strategies work well—this includes a focus on open dialogue designed to surface, explore, and creatively resolve issues. However, we find that in situations that are more intense, it is most appropriate for mediators to function as "the medic"—in these cases, the mediator should focus on managing or lessening intensity by being active, present, and directive in reinforcing guidelines. Similarly, in situations where the parties are more competitive, mediators can serve most appropriately as "the referee," bargaining fairly and settling efficiently by providing guidance and direction and by focusing on creating a sense of safety. In situations where there are significant constraints, such as time or resources, mediators are best served functioning as "the fixer"—they can openly address constraints, clearly outline the structure and guidelines, and offer directive guidance to efficiently work through the mediation process. Finally, in situations where processes and issues are highly covert or hidden, mediators are most effective serving as "the therapist"—they can probe deeply and carefully for underlying issues, coach the participants, focus on creating a safe space for deeper exploration.

Our research on hundreds of mediators across the country suggests that the more skilled mediators are in responding to both standard and challenging situations, the higher they rate their level of self-efficacy and empowerment when mediating. Similarly, the more mediators are skilled in responding to both standard and challenging situations, the more they are satisfied with the mediations' outcomes and their ability to deal with challenges during mediation.

Cross Cultural Adaptivity

Next, our research on cross-cultural adaptivity helps us look more specifically at the way cultural differences could impact the strategies employed by conflict interveners across different contexts. Specifically, this research is based on the question: *What are the most basic conditions that determine whether more locally informed, elicitive approaches or more expert-driven, prescriptive models and methods are most effective for addressing conflict across cultures?*

Research on cross-cultural conflict management has offered the distinction between more prescriptive versus more elicitive approaches to intercultural conflict resolution training and intervention. More elicitive approaches favor local contextual knowledge and expertise for addressing conflict and peace, while more prescriptive approaches privilege the information and strategies introduced by a conflict resolution expert (negotiation, mediation, dialogue, training, etc.). Although proponents offer more elicitive approaches as a check on the bias and cultural imperialism evident in many Western approaches to cross-cultural conflict, they concede that it is often not feasible or practical to employ them. Currently, we are investigating the basic conditions conducive to using more elicitive versus more prescriptive approaches.

This is a nascent area of research for us, but—based on a thorough literature review and initial survey-based research—we've begun to explore characteristics of actors, (such as cultural bias awareness, cultural familiarity, cross-cultural access and partnerships, and resource availability); characteristics of stakeholders (such as objectives, community commitment and agency), and levels of egalitarianism and the cultural tightness or looseness of the context that can help us to better understand the conditions that make more elicitive or prescriptive intervention approaches more appropriate and constructive.

Overall, the moral of the story across these three main research areas is that conflict adaptivity in negotiation, mediation, and cross cultural conflict resolution helps increase options, efficacy, and satisfaction for the parties involved in the conflict. This is particularly true in more standard conflict situations. However, in situations where complex systems of conflict self-organize in ways that lead to conflict persisting and resisting change in the long term, these strategies are insufficient. This leads us to the next main overarching competency: Systemic Wisdom.

Systemic Wisdom: Navigating Intractable, Complex Conflicts that Resist Change

Under the umbrella of Systemic Wisdom, we explore the capacities needed to understand the inherent propensies of the complex, dynamic context in which a conflict is embedded, and to work with the dynamics of the system to support the emergence of more constructive patterns. In this area, we study the skills and competencies needed to leverage the energy from conflicts in organizations in order to help to promote the transformation of institutionalized forms of bias and discrimination. We also study how to work with more difficult, polarizing, complex conflicts that resist resolution, such as those plaguing much of our global society today. Finally, however, we recognize that it is insufficient to merely study conflict and violence. We see positive peace as a qualitatively different thing from merely the absence of violence—peace has its own factors and dynamics that interact over time to form sustainably peaceful systems. So, we also study what we call the dynamics of sustainably peaceful societies.

I don't have time to dive deeper into each of these research areas (interested readers could consult Coleman, 2011; Coleman et al., 2017; Coleman, Redding, & Fisher, 2017a, 2017b; Coleman & Ricigliano, 2017 and http://ac4.ei.columbia.edu/research-themes/dst/sustainable-peace/) but to give a bit of a taste, in our research focused on understanding the dynamics of institutionalized discrimination, we ask: *How can we leverage tension from multicultural conflict to help break down destructive, change-resistant patterns of intergroup bias and discrimination and help promote more constructive patterns of fair and just workplace reform?* In our research on intractable conflict—conflict that enrages us, traps us, drains us, and resists all attempts at resolution—we ask, *Why do some types of conflict come to seem intractable and impossible to resolve, and what can we do to address these conflicts constructively and sustainably?* And in our research on the dynamics of sustainable peace, we ask, *what are the core intergroup dynamics that foster and sustain peaceful societies?*

Importantly, all of these research questions and areas of focus that are rooted in Systemic Wisdom require a fundamentally different way of operating and practicing conflict resolution. Systemic Wisdom requires an ongoing cycle of preparing, understanding, engaging, learning, and adapting over time. Because of the dynamic nature of working with ever-changing conflict contexts, it also requires distinct competencies for managing conflict, including: tolerance for ambiguity and uncertainty; cognitive complexity, or the ability to think about issues from multiple perspectives and angles; integrative complexity, or the ability to synthesize and integrate seemingly opposing ideas; emotional complexity, or the ability to feel a combination of positive and negative emotions at once; behavioral complexity, or the ability to demonstrate a diversity of responses and actions over time; and, finally, consideration for future consequences, or the ability to consider and weigh the potential unintended consequences of actions.

In one study, one of my PhD students, Nicholas Redding (2016), and I assessed

participants on these complexity competencies, and had them engage in a simulation video game of the Israel-Palestine conflict. In this game, all participants were tasked with functioning as the Prime Minister of Israel, and making decisions based on a constantly changing set of parameters and demands. We found that:

(1) Participants higher in integrative complexity made more decisions that enhanced communications between the parties; were less likely to take violent action; and employed multiple strategies simultaneously.

(2) Participants higher in emotional complexity made more decisions that enhanced communications between groups; and those who lost had lower emotional complexity, as a group, than those who did not.

(3) Participants higher in tolerance for ambiguity made more decisions to enhance trust between parties; made fewer decisions to enhance their own power, to diminish others' power, and to obstruct others' goal pursuits; and had a lower gap between leadership approval scores as assessed by Israelis and Palestinians.

(4) Participants higher in consideration of future consequences tended to take more time between decisions, and took fewer violent actions in the first 10 turns.

(5) Participants higher in behavioral complexity had a lower gap in approval scores between Israelis and Palestinians; and made more communication enhancing decisions.

Taken altogether, this study helps us to begin to demonstrate that these specific, measurable, learnable competencies make meaningful differences in the strategies employed and outcomes achieved in complex conflict scenarios.

Figure 4 Levels of Conflict Intelligence and Systemic Wisdom Competencies

Educating for a Complex, Peaceful World: Developing Competencies for Enhancing Conflict Intelligence and Systemic Wisdom

I know that I've just given a very high level overview of a tremendously large number of theories and research findings across several different research areas. Complexity is complex to talk about! But, fundamentally, what I've been talking about and what my work is dedicated to is finding new ways to educate our next generation of conflict resolvers and peace builders to work constructively within our increasingly complex world.

Essentially, the Conflict Intelligence and Systemic Wisdom framework provides a way of thinking about broadening our orientations to conflict across multiple levels. This framework makes clear that we all must cultivate the capacity to "zoom in and out"—to move from a *focus on the self*—our individual needs, interests, grievances—to a *focus on social dynamics*—interpersonal and intergroup conflict dynamics over time—to a *focus on situated dynamics*—dynamics within fundamentally different contexts—to the *broader systemic dynamics* that may both determine and be determined by the conflict.

If we can begin to identify, cultivate, practice, and teach these critical and complementary competencies, I truly believe that we have the potential to transform our complex, interdependent world for the better—together.

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