

CONFLICT MANAGEMENT FOR SOUTH AFRICAN STUDENTS

Theory and Application

GAVIN BRADSHAW

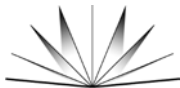
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Theory and Applications

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First Published in South Africa by Peacemakers Conflict Management Services, Port Elizabeth 2007

publisher: New Voices Publishing, Cape Town, South Africa
www.newvoices.co.za



Second Edition August 2008

ISBN: 978-1-920094-33-1

EAN: 9781920094331

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About the Author

Gavin Bradshaw is the founder of the largest postgraduate programme in Conflict Transformation and Management in the Southern Hemisphere, at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University. He is the Director of the Unit for the Study and Resolution of Conflict at the University, which is a centre of excellence in the field, with multiple training, research and intervention activities to its credit. Dr Bradshaw developed the concept of the conflict cube, and conflict management systems approach for dealing with conflict in the South African community context. Besides having played a leading role in the South African National Peace Accord, Gavin Bradshaw has a strong international record and continues to contribute to the peace process in Sudan. He has contributed widely to organisational conflict transformation in South Africa, and regularly lectures abroad on topics related to conflict and its management. He has published in the fields of deep-rooted social conflict, and conflict management and resolution, and his ideas have contributed greatly to the understanding of conflict and its management. Dr Bradshaw wrote his PhD thesis on: An Evaluation of the Application of Specific Conflict Management Mechanisms in the South African Transition to Democracy, 1985 – 2004: A Conflict Resolution Perspective.

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FOREWORD

I began the long journey into conflict resolution at a very early age. I grew up in South Africa in the mid nineteen fifties – where social conflict was a way of life. This was a country under the yoke of Apartheid; a political situation which impinged on my everyday life; not that it was Apartheid that formed my earliest notions of interpersonal conflict, however. Post-war South Africa was a land where, for its white inhabitants at least, perhaps the most salient conflict experience was the Boer War, or the South African Wars of Independence, in which the Boer Republics fought the British Empire for their independence. We had just come through round three or four of that ongoing struggle (For many White South Africans, the Second World War was but the next battle in the ongoing war of attrition between the Afrikaner Nationalists, and the mostly English-speaking liberals who were also more internationalist in their outlook.) At any rate, the Second World War renewed the animosities between these two groups, the latter of which I found myself a member. As an only child, from a very protective family situation, I found myself thrown into the deep-end of a pool of social conflict when I went to the local junior school of the rural area in which we lived, on the outskirts of Port Elizabeth. I landed up as one of very few English speakers, especially among the male body of scholars at the school. My mother was something of a small-scale political activist supporting the liberal opposition, and opposing South Africa's exit from the Commonwealth – and in retrospect, that probably did not help my popularity ratings at school very much. The year I first attended school was 1961, also the year South Africa left the British Commonwealth. Feelings ran high at the little farm school, and politics was important, even to the six year olds. Generally, politics and ordinary, schoolboy bullying were inclined to merge into one. I was big for my age, and certainly no conflict resolver – in fact I was probably quite a belligerent child. I certainly never learnt to stand back from a fight, and regularly found myself in a minority of one, being “packed upon” by a crowd of political/cultural/language opponents. I received a number of beatings during those early years of schooling, and often got into trouble with the teachers who no doubt saw me as something of a trouble maker. I began to realize the importance of numbers in social conflict, and also began to understand how violent a place the world could be.

Additionally, I gradually became aware of another social divide and source of tensions. Most of my friends were the young African children whose parents worked on our smallholding. I spent many enjoyable days whiling away the hours, hunting, or playing some or other sport with these children, and had no idea that that was in any way an unusual, or abnormal thing to do in South Africa at that time. At about the age of eight, my parents communicated a certain level of discomfort with my socializing with African children, and I picked up, for the first time a feeling of unease, no doubt related to the state's clampdown at this time, on all kinds of “liberal” activities, in the wake of the growing resistance to Apartheid, although my understanding of

these things was quite murky at the time. I was gradually becoming aware of another conflict fault-line in the society of which I was a part.

Moving on to high-school, I was always aware of being part of a linguistic minority, and slowly became aware of the injustices characterizing the country. At university, studying political science, history and anthropology, one became aware of the literature and the theories relating to human conflict. Eventually, my time came to enter compulsory military service. I had great misgivings about the morality of military service, and considered leaving the country at that stage, but parents and friends persuaded me to stay and do the patriotic thing, which probably says something about my conflict handling style – which was probably to avoid difficult choices between relationships and values. It was finally military service that politicized me and convinced me beyond any shadow of a doubt, about the corruptness, and moral bankruptcy of the political system prevailing in the country. This was 1976, and the time of the Soweto youth revolt. It was becoming increasingly clear to me that whatever I did from then on was going to work towards the normalizing of the society.

During my military service, though I tried to join the entertainment corps band (I was an aspirant rock and roll musician), fate had other plans for me. My social science training was identified by the powers that be, and I was posted to an ethnology unit, attached to the Chief of the Army's Staff. There were elements in the South African military at the time that recognized the need to co-opt support from across the racial divides, and true to South African form at the time, social science was mobilized in support of the modernization of the system of racial domination. Unbeknown to me at that time, this was the beginning of the series of adaptations of apartheid, designed to prolong its existence. As would be the case in the years to come, it was initially in the security forces that the realization first took hold that the ideals of apartheid would be unworkable in the longer term. My exposure to this thinking helped me to understand that there was doubt about the workability of the system at the highest levels, that could be exploited. There was indeed some hope for change if the right levers were manipulated. I was posted to the Namibian border to train citizen force conscripts in the finer arts of communication with the local population in that region. Ironically, this was probably not such a very different activity from that which I later spent so much of my working life on – training different groups in the art of constructive conflict management.

While posted to 101 Task Force at Grootfontein, as a junior officer, I was compelled, every morning, to attend officers' PT – a half-hour of mild physical exercise, with a group of generally older officers. I was invariably partnered with a very silent, slightly-built, older individual, who carried no rank insignia, and was never introduced to me. I later learnt that this was the commanding officer of 101 Task Force, General Constand Viljoen. As the rookie officer in the group, it clearly fell to me to wrestle with my

commanding officer, something the others always avoided. I tell this anecdote for the larger significance that it carries. Viljoen went on to unite the conservative elements of Afrikanerdom in their hour of crisis in South Africa's transition to democracy, and brought them into the settlement of 1994. I later also met his twin brother Braam during my time with IDASA, Braam was also working for IDASA at that stage, while his brother was Chief of the South African Defence Force; one brother engaging in dialogue with the liberation movement, while the other brother led the fight against it. This experience stimulated one of my abiding interests in social conflict – what are the forces that lead individuals to approach conflict in such different ways? Is it “nature”, or is it “nurture”? Here were twin brothers, presumably identically socialized, genetically identical, but with extremely different behavioural outcomes.

Later on, as a lecturer in political science at university, and having spent a year in the UK, furthering my studies, I came across the work of John Burton, which motivated me to become a scholar-practitioner in the conflict resolution field. I was convinced that there was a constructive role for an academic such as myself to play in this arena. Following Burton's ideas, I worked with a post-graduate student of mine at the time, Wayne Mitchell, to establish an organisation that would be able to arrange problem-solving workshops between the government and the ANC. After some casting about for an appropriate high-profile individual to head up our organisation, Frederik Van Zyl Slabbert and Alex Boraine resigned from the liberal opposition party – the Progressive Federal Party, on the ground that they felt that there was no real progress being made by the party in rolling back the oppressive state in South Africa. They were persuaded by Mitchell to lead the new organisation. IDASA, the institute for a democratic alternative in South Africa, arranged meetings between ANC supporters and young white students, where political systems were discussed as future options for the country. It was at that stage, that I was targeted by elements of the state security forces – particularly the bizarrely titled Civilian Cooperation Bureau, or CCB, that had included my name on their “hit-list” of individuals for assassination. Clearly, working for a resolution of conflict was regarded by some as one of the greatest threats to the apartheid state. The most subversive thing that I had promoted, was the need for the government to engage with the liberation movements to negotiate a democratic solution to the problem that they had gotten themselves into! The real irony of course was the fact that the government, through its own proxies, had been secretly meeting with the leadership of the ANC for up to four years at that time. It was then that I became more aware of the notion of “conflicts about conflict”, that are so important for conflict practitioners to appreciate, if they are to be at all successful in their interventions. IDASA famously went on to organize the Dakar conference between prominent Afrikaner dissidents and ANC leadership, as well as a series of other second track activities during the late Eighties, although, I parted company with the organisation, based on a difference of opinion concerning the approach of the organisation. Again, a lesson learned about how process can be as important as goals in the business of conflict management.

Within a few months, the political logjam had broken in South Africa, and I was exceptionally privileged to participate in the peace processes underway in the country. We had just established the Institute for the Study and Resolution of Conflict at the University of Port Elizabeth, and were suddenly inundated with high-profile academic visitors from overseas, who were interested in the changes then taking place in South Africa. Invitations to Roger Fisher and William Ury's training sessions in principled negotiation were gratefully accepted. I was also invited to training sessions in conflict management skills by Christopher Moore of Boulder Colorado. The opportunity to work with Athol Jennings at Vuleka trust and Dale White at Wilgespruit, saw our institute collaborate in research with these two church-based groups to produce a community conflict management system. At much the same time, I was invited, by H.W. Van der Merwe, doyen of South African conflict resolution, to participate in the deliberations of the South African Association for Conflict Intervention. In very short order, I became the National Vice President, and then President of that organisation. At the university, we managed, in the first three years of the Nineties, to organize three very effective international conferences on the management of deep-rooted conflict in South Africa. We were fortunate, through these conferences to meet John Burton, Stephen Cohen and John Groom. Other visitors who made their mark on the conflict management stage, and came calling to visit us were Tim Sisk, Rapoport, Joseph Montville, Dudley Weeks, Leonard Doob and Ron Kraybil. A highlight of those years was a joint presentation that John Burton and I made to the President's Council, a government forum concerned with constitutional planning and development, in 1990.

The establishment of the South African Peace Accord provided another vehicle for "total immersion" into the South African conflict management process. From the outset, our Institute for the Study and Resolution of Conflict played a constructive role in the NPA and its structures. I served on the local and regional peace committees, mediated and trained for the National Peace Secretariat. I also served on the National Research and National Training committees of the organisation. During these exciting times, I was extremely fortunate to have a wonderful team of junior colleagues, who provided unstinting moral and intellectual support. I owe a major debt of gratitude to Kevin Wakeford, Leizel Sampson and Harold Tessororf, whose encouragement and assistance in this regard made so much of my own development possible. There was a sense, as a social scientist working in this field, that one was working in a laboratory for conflict and its management.

Various conflict management activities had brought one into closer contact with the police and security forces, and we began to see them in a new light. Clearly, whatever the direction of the new country, the police were always going to be in the forefront of conflict management in South Africa. The newly liberated people of the new democracy deserved far better treatment from the security apparatus than they had received in the past. I was requested by some in the new government to play an active

role in the development of the new police service for the Eastern Cape, which involved the merging of the police forces of the Eastern Cape Province, the Ciskei homeland and the Transkei homeland, and the restructuring of the whole new organisation into a police service with a community policing focus. I was appointed leader of the change team, which oversaw the initial transformation. Later on, with international specialist consultants, I designed an Assistance To East Cape Policing Project, which, jointly funded by the European Union and British Department For International Development, continued to assist that transformation.

At the university, we established the post-graduate Conflict Transformation and Management Programme in 1999, which immediately attracted attention from large numbers of students looking to improve their conflict management skills, and engage with the many continuing conflict fault lines in our country. It has been a source of great disappointment to note the demise of the structures of the National Peace Accord, that still had an important role to play in the restructuring of our country. Additionally, the failure of the government to sustain the TRC, and provide the resources for the necessary reparations has been a great disappointment to the author, as has been our failure to establish an Institute of Peace, or similar institution as has happened in the United States. Elsewhere, despite the frequent acknowledgements on the part of government, to have conflict management skills included in the schools curricula, there has been no consolidated move in this direction. The two post-graduate conflict management and peace programmes in our country at NMMU (Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University) and Kwazulu-Natal University are under-resourced, and on the defensive, in the face of a traditional re-ordering of subject matter away from trans-disciplinary studies, back towards the traditional disciplines. On the whole, Conflict Management is being badly neglected in South Africa. Hopefully, this South African text can go some way towards re-invigorating a field which should be nurtured, in the interests of adding value to our new democracy.

*Gavin Bradshaw
August 2008*