

The Dynamics of Intrapersonal Conflict Resolution

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Abstract: Intrapersonal conflict in the conflict analysis and resolution field is not generally a prominent focus, as there have only been sporadic approaches to preventing, analyzing, and resolving internal conflicts within individuals over the last six decades since the development of the conflict resolution field. Conflicts are usually examined from interpersonal, community, and international frameworks. However, the need for continued research and discourse of intrapersonal conflict is vital to understanding the internal factors through micro-focused lenses that can help reduce the occurrences of external conflict. Traditionally, intrapsychic conflict is frequently mentioned within academia, as the origins of analyzing internal conflicts is often commonly observed from the psychology field. However, as humanity becomes more complex, intrapersonal conflict goes beyond the mind and takes the entirety of a person into consideration. A brief review and history of intrapersonal conflict is addressed, along with several frameworks and recent approaches that can help foster resiliency and cultivate internal peace within individuals.

Keywords: Intrapersonal conflict, Conflict prevention, Conflict analysis and resolution

Brief Overview of Intrapersonal Conflict

All over the world, conflicts continue to emerge. Many resources are expended to solve these conflicts, and some even seem to become intractable, as many complex challenges over the years hinder progress for positive transformation. The need for peace education from an early age is vital to fostering youth resilience to help build a more peaceful world. Children can learn how to handle their emotions, cultivate empathy, initiate inclusion, and become compassionate individuals. Early youth programs such as Roots of Empathy and The Ripple Effect Education are beginning to gain more traction in emphasizing internal conflict mechanisms to attain inner peace. However, these skills are not taught worldwide and are urgently needed. As children continue to develop, more complex frameworks can be integrated that will help them utilize conflict prevention tools to internally facilitate their inner conflicts, which can reduce the occurrences of conflicts expanding interpersonally and beyond (Georgakopoulos, Duckworth, Silverman, & Redfering, 2017).

Despite the importance of cultivating internal peace within individuals, there is a lack of intrapersonal conflict discourse within the conflict resolution field. Reasons for the lack of research on intrapersonal conflict point to a disinterest of self-reflection in Western society (Rifkind & Picco, 2014), and a topic of research that was difficult to assess due to subjectivity concerns (Laursen, 2005). The origins of analyzing internal conflicts in modern history began initially with psychology research, where Freud (1920), Adler (1929), and Horney (1945) were some of the main contributors. Miller (1952) also developed a model in assessing the root causes of internal conflict, where varying levels of fear would indicate whether a person may approach or avoid a conflict. Practitioners in the peacebuilding field have usually recommended reviewing Freudian frameworks (e. g. Galtung, 2000; Schellenberg, 1996), to help individuals focus on self-care and cultivate internal peace. However, there are many other perspectives and future possibilities that deserve equal attention.

While internal conflict is often discussed from numerous frameworks in the psychology field (Mosak & LeFevre, 1976), there are other areas of intrapersonal conflict that should be addressed. When the conflict resolution field emerged in the late 1950s, the founding academics primarily consisted of psychologists, political scientists, and sociologists (Harty & Modell, 1991). The conflict resolution field has since expanded, and still, decades later, usage of the word “intrapersonal conflict” is continuously found in the conflict resolution field, as

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scholars are mainly addressing intrapersonal processes from a psychological perspective and not from an interdisciplinary approach (Coleman, Deutsch, & Marcus, 2014).

The need for advancing intrapersonal conflict research is vital for continued efforts in building peace, as the origins of many conflicts often begin internally within a person. Recently, a discussion on the lack of intrapersonal conflict as a subject matter in the conflict resolution field was resurrected again, urging for more frameworks in assessing intrapersonal conflict analysis and resolution (Redekop, 2014). A year later, Redekop (2015) published a more detailed book on this subject, entitled “Inner Peace Through Conflict Transformation”, which provides a deeper theoretical grounding in approaching intrapersonal dynamics. The following overview seeks to expand from the contributions of Redekop (2015) in exploring additional frameworks to the intrapersonal dimensions.

The Dynamics of Inner Conflict

In the past, internal dilemmas were often referred to as “intrapsychic” (Coleman, Deutsch, & Marcus, 2014). However, the word “intrapersonal” is vital in conflict resolution research. By using the word “intrapersonal”, the analytical possibilities expand beyond an individual’s mind, taking into account the whole person, which thus presents deeper complexities to internal conflicts (Uzor, 2003). Therefore, the need to address intrapersonal conflict is imperative to understanding the entirety of an individual and to address the root causes of conflict, which frequently begins as an intrapersonal conflict within an individual (Price, 2000; Wallach, 2004).

Intrapersonal conflict often focuses on the uncertainty of making a decision or multiple decisions, which may have several barriers and factors of attractiveness and unattractiveness (Rahim, 2010). The internal conflict may generate vertigo, an emotional state of confusion that can push and pull a person into a tense state (Shapiro, 2016). While there may be equally strong forces from two different spectrums (Lewin, 1935), there can also be additional concerns that have yet to be identified or connected to the existing internal conflict. Moreover, the uncertainty during periods of pre-decision and post-decision may elevate depending on the possibility of being able to change the decided outcome (Janis, 1959). Depending on an individual’s personal upbringing, which includes family structure, educational experiences, childhood development, environment, and culture, certain intrapersonal conflicts may continuously generate, particularly if there is a significant level of culture stress associated with the individual’s identity or perceived identity.

When an intrapersonal conflict occurs, there is often a tendency to think about the issue as problem, with the need to resolve the internal struggle in some way rather than viewing the internal conflict as a polarity or paradox (Wallach, 2004). The emotions that emerge during this time can become self-detrimental and may result in lashing out to the people around us (Rifkind & Picco, 2014). The way an individual decides to handle an internal conflict is essential for conflict management (Hocker & Wilmot, 2014). Although the internal conflict may bring with emotions which may add uncomfortable feelings surrounding the emerging intrapersonal conflict (Bodtker & Katz Jameson, 2001), there is an opportunity for reflection and growth while analyzing the internal conflict (Wallach, 2004). There is also a possibility for a person’s feelings to transform when an individual works on developing deeper empathy, when new information arises, or through the cessation of toxic habits that create barriers from learning (Hocker & Wilmot, 2014).

In many scenarios, utilizing a third party has helped resolve internal conflicts. While a third party is usually considered for interpersonal conflict, the intrapersonal perspective would be to look at yourself from a bird’s-eye view, as if you are only recently encountering who you are and can see reality from many perspectives. In many occasions, we become too absorbed in our own inner world that we cannot see from beyond the framework of reference we are working with. Thus, having different frameworks to look at internal conflicts from a variety of perspectives without the need for external support can help create resiliency. Through an individual challenging personal feelings and beliefs, possibilities in reframing the internal conflicts may emerge. Being aware of the multiple nuances behind internal conflicts can help in creating change from within, overcoming challenges, personal development, and cultivating a more resilient and deeper sense of self (Rifkind & Picco, 2014; Welwood, 1990).

Brief Review of Past and Present Intrapersonal Conflict Frameworks

In the conflict resolution field, there are a few frameworks that were introduced to analyze intrapersonal conflict and understand the inability to react when competing incompatible tendencies occur. The following overview is

not exhaustive, though rather a brief review in some frameworks more well-known in the conflict resolution field. Some of the earlier scholars in the conflict resolution field includes Boulding (1957), who mentioned that internal conflict is a factor that influences the behaviors of individuals involved in an interpersonal conflict (even causing self-hatred and disorganization in the mind). Boulding (1957) also referenced intrapersonal conflict to the paradox of Buridan's donkey, where the donkey is presented with two options at equal distance: a pile of hay, and the other, a bucket of water. The donkey is unable to decide between the two options and thus becomes incapable of making a decision and subsequently dies of thirst and hunger. The demise of the donkey represents a visual allusion to the danger of a person's mind and the perpetual intrapersonal conflicts that can continue if an individual remains indecisive.

The paradox of Buridan's donkey is also apparent in the intrapersonal conflict model that Brown (1957) developed, which focused on the reactions to stimulus manifestations. When a stimulus occurs, two varied inclinations are generated that may prompt two separate reactions, which is indicative in the classic example of whether to approach or avoid the imminent situation. Abelson (1959) also had a similar model which focused on two separate intrapersonal analysis processes: belief and action. The belief level encompasses internal processes, while the action level focuses on external responses. Galtung's (1965) conceptualization introduced the action-system model which focused on when a person has two or more incompatible objectives.

All of these frameworks help to analyze intrapersonal conflict, though there are additional methods that also go beyond these experiences. Lederach (2003) explained that intrapersonal conflicts may negatively or positively impact individuals and advocated for a personal level of conflict transformation because there are spiritual, cognitive, perceptual, and emotional dimensions that can impact a person from either wanting to attain a certain feeling or connection, to also being affected by all of these stimuli as well.

After the painful events of September 11, 2001, additional frameworks began to emerge in order to help heal trauma, such as the Strategies for Trauma Awareness and Resilience (STAR) program. The STAR program contains a strong focus on analyzing who we are as individuals and identifying the areas of trauma within ourselves that need healing. Through exploring our internal trauma we may be able to deeper explain our feelings of insecurity and struggles with identity (Yoder, 2005). The necessity in addressing trauma is critical, because internal trauma can manifest intense feelings within ourselves which can be a conscious though unsolvable internal conflict (Wurmser, 1996). In order to resolve our intrapersonal conflicts, a deep understanding of our own complexities is vital to overcoming any paralyzing barriers that may prevent us from positively transforming ourselves.

Ury (2006) also recognized the importance of intrapersonal conflict, as decades later after his pivotal publication "Getting To Yes", he decided to publish a prequel entitled "Getting To Yes With Yourself", which involves six methods to help center ourselves internally in order to resolve our intrapersonal conflicts and beyond. These steps include being able to see ourselves in our own shoes to prevent internal judgements. Secondly, it is important to develop our inner voice in order to be in touch with our needs (which may be hidden behind many layers) and take care of them. The next step is developing the ability to see the world through reframing and creating a positive outlook. Recognizing that the world can be on our side even if it may seem challenging or frightening is essential in creating internal peace within ourselves. The fourth step is remembering to stay in the present, because the past can haunt us and turn ourselves into a broken record. Through being in the present, we can focus on what we can do to make today better and set a plan for tomorrow and the future. We are then able to be compassionate with ourselves in response to external stimuli, which can allow us to be kind to the people in our lives and the people we have yet to meet. The last step focuses on giving first, because if we can learn to create a deeper value in giving, our abilities to become more appreciative receivers is possible. These steps are helpful in building a more resilient inner self, though there still may be personal complex challenges in healing from the past.

Redekop (2015) recommends reflective exercises in acknowledging the truth of the personal pain from an inner conflict that may be tormenting. Through locating the source of the negative feelings and questioning ourselves and our own needs that may not have been met, the ability to attain inner peace becomes more possible. Additional exercises include responding to writing prompts on "what do we love about ourselves" and "what do we want to change about ourselves" to attain a deeper sense of inner peace. Redekop (2015) also includes a 25 question assessment to help individuals understand their internal conflict strategies, such as denial (ignoring or denying the inner conflict), self-accommodation (degree of infatuation with yourself), self-compromise (degree of fulfilling or overcoming personal needs while trying to satisfy internal or external expectations), self-competition (criticalness of personal goals and expectations), and self-transformation (degree of personal awareness and positive growth, including intrapersonal communication and active listening skills).

There are also other experiential learning programs that have some intrapersonal conflict foundations. However, the scope of these programs goes far beyond the individual level though they are still helpful in gaining a deeper awareness of ourselves. Some of these programs include Kingian nonviolence, which similarly encourages beginning from within to find common ground, in order to build agape, a beloved community. One of the main principles of nonviolence even emphasizes for individuals to avoid internal violence of their spirits (King, 1958). Cultivating love from within is essential in order to generate messages within ourselves that create internal compassion, which in turn, will help lead us to be kinder to the people around us and the people we have yet to meet. This is further explored through the Aggression-Conciliation Model, which encourages shifting the anger away from people and focusing the frustrations on the challenging conditions (Lafayette & Jehnsen, 1995). Nonviolent communication is also strongly connected to resolving our intrapersonal conflicts, as the messages we tell ourselves can be very damaging and further create internal turmoil. Cultivating a language that is internally compassionate will help us become externally compassionate as well (Rosenberg, 2003).

Throughout the world, xenophobia continues to be an ongoing challenge, as people may fear those who may seem different than them. Corcoran (2010) encourages that building trust begins from within, and we should look inside ourselves to understand what the underlying internal dilemmas are and why we may feel afraid, which may originate from unresolved trauma. These internal manifestations may reveal underlying painful memories that can hinder us from being fully able to effectively build trust. We may also harbor prejudices and implicit biases that can be extremely difficult to pinpoint through introspection. Through going beyond our own comfort zones, the ability to challenge ourselves and begin to cultivate deeper connections with people is possible. Through the Community Trustbuilding Fellowship program offered by Initiatives of Change, the STAR program, and Kingian Nonviolence workshops (particularly in conjunction with the University of Rhode Island's Nonviolence Institute), these three experiential learning programs go beyond a traditional textbook format to begin the process of transforming from within. There are also other workshops and programs that address intrapersonal conflict, such as the Tavistock Institute and many similar conferences through more covert and overt group dynamics processes.

Nevertheless, the process of reading (or listening) to a book and working on the activities provided may help to begin resolving internal dilemmas. The exercises that Redekop (2015) presented are helpful to continue attaining inner peace. However, the challenges in understanding why certain intrapersonal conflicts may appear repetitively can take additional work, which is where autoethnography, specifically analytical autoethnography (Chang, 2008) may help to apply theories in analyzing and making meaning of the complexities that surround our internal selves. Autoethnography is generally composed of the self (auto), culture (ethno), and writing (graphy), that can help us understand ourselves which may help us understand others (Roth, 2005).

Autoethnographies can also provide a deeper understanding of our own intrapersonal conflicts, such as identity conflicts (Jones, 2013), trauma and grief (McKenzie, 2015), family disputes (Hudson, 2015), personally surviving the World Trade Center attacks on September 11, 2001 (McIntyre, 2016), and recovering from psychosis (Johnston, 2020). Autoethnographies can be a helpful and healing modality, as reflecting on who we are and the experiences we have encountered generates further awareness, which is crucial for positive transformation and overcoming severe barriers in our lives (Welwood, 1990). As autoethnography continues to gain further traction, new frameworks may further appear that can help in the process of analyzing and resolving our internal conflicts (Ciechowska, Kuształ, & Szymańska, 2019). With the rise of methodologies advocating for individual voices in research, such as autoethnography, the potentiality for intrapersonal conflict research and discourse can once again become more prominent.

Advancing Applications of Intrapersonal Conflict Resolution

Within the last decade, a specific focus on the intrapersonal level within the conflict resolution field has only received minimal attention (e.g. Mack, 2018; Redekop, 2015; Silverman, 2017). However, there is significant hope that these few publications are only the beginning of a deeper revival. The peace psychology field is closely connected to the conflict resolution field, and additional publications on personal peacefulness (e. g. Sims, Nelson, & Puopolo, 2013) are continuing to bridge these two fields together. As peace education programs continue to focus on internal conflict (Van Slyck, Nelson, Foster, & Cardella, 2019), additional tools can also be developed to continue expanding the dynamics of intrapersonal conflict analysis and resolution from an early age. In building our own resiliency, we can further attain intrapersonal peace that will in turn help build international peace.

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