In conjunction with Colorado's Conflict Resolution Month, the Conflict Resolution Institute’s Center for Research and Practice hosted a presentation on October 27, 2011 by Professor Peter T. Coleman of Columbia University. A renowned expert on addressing seemingly intractable conflicts of all types, Dr. Coleman works strategically toward constructive conflict resolution and sustainable peace.


For the past several years, Coleman has been the lead investigator on “Modeling the Fundamental Dynamics of Intractable Conflict,” a multidisciplinary project that applies the principles and methods of complexity science to understand what Coleman calls “the Five Percent problem.” According to Coleman, “to contend with this destructive species of conflict [the Five Percent] we must understand the invisible dynamics at work.” Coleman has extensively researched the essence of conflict in his “Intractable Conflict Lab,” the first research facility devoted to the study of polarizing conversations and seemingly unresolvable disagreements.

Coleman's book employs a new theoretical model which connects prior research on coherence and complexity with basic differences in the underlying dynamics of intractable versus more manageable social conflict. The model brings concepts and insights from dynamical social psychology, in particular the idea of “conflict attractors,” which are scenarios that pull the actors in the conflict further toward the “us and them,” or good and bad perceptions of conflict which ultimately leads to intractability. Furthermore this model portrays intractable conflicts as those which have lost the complexity and openness inherent to more constructive social relations.

Although intractable conflicts are only about five percent of the world’s conflicts, Coleman states that they undermine the security and well-being of societies everywhere. He asserts that as conflicts become more drawn out, and actors become more drawn in, formerly complex thinking processes devolve into less complex more “cohesive” thought processes. These “cohesive” thought processes then stifle actors’ creativity in dealing with conflict and ultimately resulting in stronger in-group identities.
and an increased sense of exclusive and competing interests between disputants.

Coleman describes a situation in which a conflict reaches a point of extreme coherence where the actors have come to accept the unacceptable as merely status quo. At this point, even seemingly insignificant events can trigger the conflict system to enter a process of moving from one attractor landscape to another. This situation, according to Coleman occurs when a conflict system has become so coherent that it is operating on the “edge of chaos.” It is at that point where he believes that certain “actionaries” could intervene to disrupt the coherent mind-set of the polarized actors and begin to shift the attractor landscapes in a more positive and constructive direction.

Through his research, Coleman then discusses how traditional negotiation techniques focused on the interests of disputants have limited application when dealing with Five Percent conflicts. Coleman proposes a new system of making incremental changes to the socio-political apparatus. By directing conflict away from the negative and dominant attractor landscape to a more constructive positive orientation, the practitioner can ultimately create a stronger and more sustainable outcome.

The Conflict Resolution Institute sponsored a series of events during Coleman’s visit to DU. In addition to the well-attended presentation on Thursday, October 27th, CRI sponsored a dinner giving students an opportunity to meet Coleman and further engage him in a more intimate setting. Before his departure the next day, CRI hosted a faculty luncheon to discuss Coleman’s article, “Rethinking Intractable Conflict: The Perspective of Dynamical Systems,” published in The American Psychologist, 2010¹. Coleman’s visit to DU proved to enrich student and faculty discussions with regard to intractable conflict and his multidisciplinary approach to conflict resolution.

Coleman is Associate Professor of Psychology and Education at Teachers College, Columbia University. He is the Director of the International Center for Cooperation and Conflict Resolution, (ICCCR), and the Advanced Consortium of Cooperation, Conflict and Complexity (AC4) at the Earth Institute at Columbia. Coleman began his professional career in the 1980s as an actor in New York working in television, theater and film. When he left the spotlight to serve as a mental health counselor for violent inner-city youth, Coleman found his true calling as an expert in conflict resolution, even though he says that, at that point, “I had no training in the area. I was just working from my gut.”

Coleman holds a PhD in Social and Organizational Psychology from Columbia University and a BA in communications from the University of Iowa. He sits on the boards of the APA Division 48 and of the International Association of Conflict Management. He is a research affiliate of the International Center for Complexity and Conflict (ICCC) at The Warsaw School for Social Psychology in Warsaw, Poland. Coleman’s book, The Five Percent: Finding Solutions to Seemingly Impossible Conflicts published by Public Affairs and was released in May, 2011. He is currently working on his next book with R. Ferguson, Smart Power: How Adaptive Leaders Navigate Conflict to Succeed.

Faculty Spotlight - Ruth Parsons

Dr. Ruth Parsons, Research Professor at the Conflict Resolution Institute.

Research Professor for the Conflict Resolution Institute and Professor Emerita of the University of Denver’s Graduate School of Social Work, Parsons developed interest in Conflict Resolution early in her career as a social worker. Having earned her MSW and PhD from the University of Denver, Parsons’s relationship with DU extends across decades. She also served DU’s Graduate School of Social Work (GSSW) in various roles from administration to the classroom. Parsons’s work and research with GSSW could be classified into two tracks: Empowerment Practice and Building an Understanding of Conflict Resolution in the Field.

In the early 1990s, Parsons played an integral role in establishing a consortium on Conflict Resolution across the DU campus. By 1996, Parsons was on the committee to develop DU’s first Masters of Arts in Conflict Resolution, spurring the foundation of the Conflict Resolution Institute.

Then in 1998, Parsons established an enduring relationship with the University of the West Indies (UWI) after a visit to Trinidad and Tobago with her husband on a sailing trip. UWI expressed a desire to have Conflict Resolution training available to community members in Trinidad. In 2003, Parsons was granted the Fulbright Scholar Senior Specialist Award, through which she was able to be involved in developing UWI’s post-graduate diploma in Mediation Studies and served as the first instructor in the program.

By 2004, CRI was awarded a three-year development grant from the USSD Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, made possible by Parsons’s involvement with UWI. The partnership with DU made it possible to transform UWI’s diploma program into a complete Master of Arts in Mediation Studies.

With its first graduating class in 2006, UWI has become the only university-based Conflict Resolution program in the Caribbean. Consequently, Trinidad has become the center for training and developing capacity in Conflict Resolution for the West Indies. As a result of the research and work that emerged from this partnership, Parsons and her colleagues published one article in the Howard Journal of Communication and two in the Caribbean Journal of Social Work.

Following the initiation of the project in Trinidad, Parsons played a major role in CRI’s partnership with Tbilisi State University in the Republic of Georgia from 2006-2009. She was one of the Principle Trainers helping to establish the Georgia Mediation Clinic. With her indispensable involvement and work with CRI, Parsons was appointed Research Professor in 2007.

Now Parsons is co-teaching and developing the curriculum for the Practicum in the Conflict Resolution degree program at DU. During the Practicum, students mediate disputes with experienced mediators at the Jefferson County Courts. Parsons believes that the Practicum in mediation offers students an opportunity for professional and self-development as they participate in the practice of Conflict Resolution in the field. Parsons also teaches the course “Reflective Practice and Evaluation” in the Master’s program.

When asked what she thought the future for CRI should look like, Parsons replied, “I would like to see the Institute bear more research in the cultural arena. We need more research to understand if the Conflict Resolution models we are transporting [to other countries] are a cultural fit. We need to research and become more aware of what models will work [in that country], and what indigenous models already exists within the culture.” Reflecting upon CRI’s work over the past decade in the West Indies, Georgia and Cyprus, Parsons proposed, “CRI has the potential to lead in the cultural appropriateness of Conflict Resolution training in other countries and across cultures.”

Parsons now spends two to three months out of every year in the country, where she leads “Train the Trainer Workshops” in Mediation and Conflict Resolution at the University of the West Indies. Many of her former students come back to the workshops as Trainers. In addition to her work at the University of the West Indies, Parsons has recently worked with the Crime and Social Justice Commission in developing social policy recommendations for prevention of crime and violence. She also spends time in Trinidad playing the steel drum and sailing with her husband.

Professor Ruth Parsons can be contacted at ruthjparsons@hotmail.com

-- Tanisha White-Phan
CRI hosts Fulbright Fellow during the Fall of 2011

Over the course of Fall Quarter, the Conflict Resolution Institute was fortunate to host Visiting Fulbright Fellow Andrés Álvarez Castañeda, Head of the Anthropology and Sociology Department at the Universidad de Valle de Guatemala (UVG). Although here for only Fall Quarter, Mr. Álvarez Castañeda served as a resource to students and faculty alike on a burgeoning topic in the field of Conflict Resolution: Conflict Early Warning Systems (CEWS).

Interestingly, early warning systems (EWS) have been used since the 1980s to construct prioritized lists for interventions in food insecure countries, but have only recently begun to be applied to situations of conflict. Combining innovative technology and frequent data entry, these systems provide real-time visuals on potential sites of conflict within a country. In Guatemala’s case, the pilot CEWS consisted of an on-line database that was fed information on a weekly basis by local delegates in regions and provinces throughout the country. Software developed by mathematicians and statisticians aggregated and analyzed this information, producing maps, charts, and figures that provide a visual “pulse” of conflict trends.

Both practitioner and scholar, Mr. Álvarez Castañeda actively participated in the creation of Guatemala’s first CEWS, and therefore offered a valuable and unique perspective on the theoretical and operational underpinnings of these systems. For the DU community, Mr. Álvarez Castañeda presented a well-attended public lecture on his personal experience in implementing and executing Guatemala’s CEWS. The talk proved intriguing, as Mr. Álvarez Castañeda discussed the difficulty of gaining buy-in and trust for the project, not only within Guatemalan communities but also within the national government. His personal experience evidenced the practical complexities of implementing potentially game-changing tools in conflict resolution.

As Mr. Álvarez Castañeda states, “At the heart of everything during my time at CRI was my research on conflict early warning systems. I undertook bibliographic research, but also used this as reflective time. This was a chance for me to get ideas and perspectives from colleagues on future directions for my research and projects.” While his focus at DU was primarily research, Mr. Álvarez Castañeda also worked on a funding proposal for a new early warning system in the Sololá region of Guatemala, as well as an article for publication detailing the Guatemalan EWS as a case study. As he emphasizes, “All of my work is connected to the same goal as a practitioner. The object of the article I am working on is to raise consciousness, so that once the proposal has been completed, the chances of obtaining funding for a new conflict early warning system are improved. This is all ultimately connected to my goal of having a new pilot program in place in two years’ time, but it remains a work in progress.” Mr. Álvarez Castañeda’s working paper on “Conflict Early Warning Systems: The Experience of CEWS in Guatemala” is available through CRI’s working paper series (see box at right).

Aside from these pursuits, Mr. Álvarez Castañeda also presented a public lecture for DU’s Anthropology Department on “Community Museums as Museums for Peace: A Case Study of Rabinal, Guatemala.” Additionally, he was accepted for participation in a competitive Fulbright Enrichment Seminar on “Democracy and Human Rights” at Emory University. As the capstone to his time as Fulbright Fellow, Mr. Álvarez Castañeda was invited to the University of Wyoming for a weeklong visit, where he gave lectures on important issues in Guatemala including security sector reform and indigenous and cultural rights.

Remarkably, Mr. Álvarez Castañeda did not begin his career as a conflict resolution specialist, and in fact is a trained anthropologist. In his words, “Anthropology was my starting point. As an applied social scientist, I began working within interdisciplinary teams on different aspects of Guatemala’s security sector reform. It was there that I first had contact with Fundación Propaz one of Guatemala’s most important non-governmental organizations in the field of
Visiting Scholar Andrés Álvarez Castañeda Brings Wisdom From Guatemala

Conflict Resolution Institute

After undergoing training with them and eventually becoming a certified mediator, I understood that Peace and Conflict Studies was my passion.” Mr. Álvarez Castañeda later went on to earn his MA in Conflict Resolution (University of Bradford) and an MSc in Sociology (FLACSO). Currently, he is completing his Ph.D. in Sociology and Political Science at the Pontifical University of Salamanca. As Mr. Álvarez Castañeda acknowledges, “I went from being an anthropologist, to a social analyst, to conflict and crisis prevention, and now to peace studies. It has been a sort of process, each step gradually leading to new and exciting aspects of human nature.”

A number of factors motivated Mr. Álvarez Castañeda’s decision to take a four-month leave of absence from his position at UVG to participate as a Fulbright Scholar. He elaborates, “Overall, networking was my primary driver and interest. I hoped to be working with contacts for collaboration in the future, and I feel as if I accomplished this and more. The Conflict Resolution Institute is an excellent program within a great university. With DU’s diverse and impressive faculty, I had an opportunity to deepen my understanding on many topics and to explore new ideas. I especially appreciate learning more about the great value of social psychology in conflict resolution, mainly thanks to Professor Tamra Pearson d’Estrée and visiting speaker Peter Coleman.” On his final thoughts regarding his experience at CRI as a Fulbright Fellow, Mr. Álvarez Castañeda says, “I am very grateful for my time here, and have only positive impressions of my experience. It is definitely important for me to emphasize the value of the Fulbright program as an expression of soft power and academic diplomacy. If the US wants to build bridges of understanding with other countries, Fulbright is definitely the way to go. Ultimately, it’s a seed of peace that will undoubtedly germinate in the future.”

Andrés Álvarez Castañeda can be reached at aalvarez@uvgt.edu.gt.

--- Ambar Velázquez

CONFLICT EARLY WARNING SYSTEMS: THE GUATEMALAN EXPERIENCE - Andrés Álvarez Castañeda, MA

Abstract - From 2006 to 2008, Guatemalan national authorities and members of the international community worked towards the creation of a Conflict Early Warning System (CEWS), in an effort that built on the existing institutional base for conflict prevention. The CEWS functioned as a pilot project over the course of two years in six departments in Guatemala, under the guardianship of the Vice-Presidency of the Republic. Following a change of administration in the executive branch, the project was discontinued, and to the best of the authors’ knowledge, has not been resumed. This study represents an effort to document the most important aspects of the project and to salvage those lessons learned from the CEWS experience.

First, the article reviews the history of Early Warning Systems (EWS) and conflict-specific EWS. A brief summary of the project’s history and the institutional framework into which it was embedded is then presented. The models and methodological instruments used by the system are then described – how the database operated and the types of information it produced, as well as the analytical utility of these products. Finally, a series of lessons learned from the project are drawn for future interventions.

Kate Zimmerly

Presidential Management Fellow

Kate Zimmerly (MA ’09) has been a Presidential Management Fellow (PMF) at the US Office of Personnel Management since her appointment in March of 2010. The PMF is a two year program where recent graduates of Master’s programs are hired by the federal government and given the opportunity to work at different agencies within the federal government. Fellows are periodically rotated through different agencies allowing them the opportunity to serve in various capacities. The competitive process of becoming a PMF entails being nominated by your university, a long application process, and a standard exam. Kate was nominated by DU and began the fellowship after a year of working with Senator Mark Udall as a congressional staffer in Washington DC.

While the program is based out of Washington DC, fellows are given the opportunity to work at agencies across the country. Kate has gone through four rotations thus far; her first position at a government agency was at the Department of Homeland Security Headquarters. In that position she did policy work, which entailed working to improve the functioning of the organization through organizational management, human resources, and human capital. Her second rotation was at the El Paso Intelligence Center, which is run by the Department of Justice Drug Enforcement Agency. Kate also engaged in policy work during her second rotation where she helped create a new unit within the Center to help various agencies working on the border to cooperate more effectively.

Zimmerly’s next stint was at the Denver office of Immigration and Customs Enforcement. In this appointment, she provided support for investigations regarding drug trafficking, money laundering and transnational organized crime. She conducted research to support these investigations, including research on patterns of seizures across the state of Colorado.

In her most recent rotation, Kate spent a month working at the US embassy in Mexico City for the department of Immigration and Customs Enforcement. She supported the agency through research and other work on organized crime and the drug wars currently taking place in Mexico. Kate is currently between rotations at PMF headquarters in Washington DC.

Kate contends that CRI “helped immensely” in her ability to successfully accomplish her goals as a PMF. The negotiation skills she learned have been vital and she has been able to use the skills she developed for intra and interagency consensus building. Zimmerly also credits her studies in Conflict Resolution for helping her attain a healthy perspective, including her ability to pay attention to people and their interests and learning to understand what they are trying to communicate. In her policy work for PMF Kate has found that she was able to anticipate different points of view when approaching policy questions and the impacts various decisions would have on different parts of the organization.

For students who will be graduating or are looking for work in their field, Kate recommends being patient. She said that the best piece of advice she’d been given was that it can take about a year and a half or more to be able to get into a field that one is passionate about. Until then, be open, because “You never know what you’ll get that you didn’t know existed.” And “definitely do an internship.”

-- Fernando Ospina
Kristin Bain and Brittany Cassell

Global Youth Connect, Summer 2011 Human Rights Delegation in Rwanda

In the eyes of many, the practice of international justice and reconciliation remains an abstract and elusive concept, undertaken in foreign countries functioning under vastly different cultural conditions. For American Conflict Resolution students, the opportunity to intern with organizations actively involved in these processes can be a rare and valuable one. Thus, when presented with the chance, friends and fellow Conflict Resolution students Kristin Bain and Brittany Cassell were eager to participate in Global Youth Connect’s Summer 2011 Human Rights Delegation to Rwanda. (More information on Global Youth Connect, visit www.globalyouthconnect.org.)

Although the program was just shy of a month long, Global Youth Connect left delegates little time to enjoy the Rwandan countryside. Except for one week that was set aside for delegates’ internships, every day was programmed – the first half of each day was reserved for workshops on human rights, while the second half was occupied with special speakers and site visits. Delegates visited the offices of the Ministries of Gender and Family Promotion, Justice, and Genocide Prevention. Additionally, the delegates were taken to four of the seven genocide memorials, and visited local Rwandan development organizations. Kristin and Brittany formed part of a delegation of nearly thirty young professionals and students, almost evenly split between native Rwandans and international delegates from all over the world.

Internships, though brief, provided an exceptional look into post-conflict justice and reconciliation in Rwanda. Global Youth Connect functioned as an umbrella organization, placing delegates with various affiliated organizations in Kigali. Kristin interned with the Village of Hope, a village for children whose parents died in the genocide. Interestingly, the Rwandan government did not create the village. Instead, post-genocide, orphaned children who were not necessarily biologically related came together to form families. According to Kristin, “government essentially supported the movement by building homes and providing education, supplies, and psychological support. Of course, adults check up on them, but the project is about respecting the children and how they are dealing with it [the genocide], as well as honoring what they’re doing. I really loved what they were doing.” During her week with the organization, Kristin undertook a photo project with the children in the village, who were tasked with taking photos of objects or people that elicited an emotional reaction from them. It was the ideal project for delegates, as it was quick enough for delegates to delve in, but could also be further developed by later delegations.

Meanwhile, Brittany interned with three other delegates at Rwandans Allied for Peace and Progress (RAPP), a local non-governmental organization (NGO) that focuses on encouraging income generation, HIV prevention education, and anti-discrimination programs. With her delegation, Brittany visited a long-standing refugee camp sponsored by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) comprised of both Rwandans who fled the genocide and Congolese fleeing violence in the Kivu. Brittany states, “This was such an eye-opening experience. You have ‘temporary’ schools that have been in place for nearly two decades, and entire generations growing up in these camps with very little to no security.” During her time at the refugee camp, Brittany’s delegation participated in educational RAPP plays about hygiene and sex, and developed a funding proposal to provide the local youth center with a new generator. GYC provides up to $1,000 in grants for projects proposed by each visiting delegation, giving delegates a great opportunity to tangibly impact local conditions. Brittany notes, “GYC’s goal with these projects is not to solve problems entirely. It’s about making a point, about putting money where your mouth is, essentially leadership by example, which I thought was really important with so many NGOs in Rwanda.”

Naturally, Kristin and Brittany’s experiences profoundly impacted the ways in which they had previously conceived of justice and reconciliation. As Conflict Resolution students, Kristin and Brittany passionately debated between themselves about the usefulness and long-term value of Rwandan president Paul Kagame’s approach to justice and reconciliation. Under Kagame’s repressive rule, the “Rwandan identity” rhetoric is pushed heavily, revealed in the fact that discussing ethnicity is outlawed. New school textbooks do not mention the genocide, and yet Brittany states that “you can’t talk about ethnicity, but the genocide is still very much in your face.” For Brittany, this situation was a “powder keg waiting to explode. Many issues are not being addressed because you are not able to talk about the genocide.” Conversely, Kristin says, “I saw a positive side to the propaganda. It is undertaken to prevent a future genocide. By developing a consciousness among citizens that they are...
**Internship (cont.)**

all Rwandan, you prevent them from psychologically reducing one another.” Despite their difference of opinions, both friends agreed that Rwanda today is a model of progress and has become one of the safest and secure countries in sub-Saharan Africa. Both students highly recommended participation in Global Youth Connect’s internship programs, and remarked that it is ideal for students who have never traveled to sub-Saharan Africa and would like to do so within a structured, secure program.

-- Ambar Velázquez

**Staff Update**

Assistant to the Co-Director for nearly four years (2008-2011), Autumn Gorman (IIC MA, IMBA ’10), is now an Emerging Markets Development Advisers Fellow in Amman, Jordan. Learn more about Autumn: http://www.du.edu/con-res/newsletters/gorman-staff-update.html

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Miguel A. De La Torre, Professor of Social Ethics, Iliff School of Theology
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