Ten Major Scientific Contributions that Promote a More Just, Peaceful, and Sustainable World

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Morton Deutsch, eminent psychologist, Columbia University professor, mentor extraordinaire, and one of the founders of the field of conflict resolution, died last March at age 97. He spent his illustrious career systematically studying ways to make the world more just and peaceful. He was a tough-minded and tender-hearted scientist with an intense commitment to developing psychological knowledge that would be relevant to important human concerns. He believed in the power of big ideas to improve the world, and in the vital role of science to refine them.

In honor of his passing, I have selected a series of ten major scientific contributions that Mort made in his efforts to promote a more just, peaceful, and sustainable world. These are by no means his only contributions – there are indeed many more. These are the ones that I have found, however, to be most consequential to my own research and practice, and that I feel are most likely to have the biggest impact on our future. (I present these brief snapshots of his contributions in the order that Mort made them).

World Peace: How to Prevent Nations from Engaging in Global Thermonuclear Warfare and Destroying the Planet

In the mid-1940s, a young Mort Deutsch returned home from World War Two as a decorated war hero, having navigated more than thirty bombing missions over Nazi Germany. Although he considered it a just war, he was shocked and

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disturbed by the devastating impact of the nuclear bombs that Americans dropped over civilian populations in Japan. In response, he joined the noted social psychologist Kurt Lewin's Research Center for Group Dynamics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) as a doctoral student, and soon undertook the development of a highly consequential theory of cooperative and competitive group processes. The United Nations Security Council was just forming at the time, so Mort focused his research on identifying the basic conditions that would lead the member states to work *with* each other to protect the planet from future war and nuclear annihilation, versus those that would lead the nations to work *against* each other to compete for power and resources, culminating in war.

To understand the *essence* of what moved humans with or against others, Mort undertook a simple thought experiment. He imagined two feral beings meeting for the first time – two wild, unsocialized creatures with no history of contact and no expectations for their interaction, encountering the likes of the other in a forest. The question was, what, fundamentally, would move these beings toward, against, or away from the other? His answer was: how they saw their fates – their interdependence – linked.

Lewin had previously identified the interdependence of members' goals as the essence of what determined different types of group dynamics. In Mort's dissertation, he went further to distinguish the different types of interdependence – cooperative (or positively linked) goals and competitive (or negatively linked) goals. He then theorized how these differences in perceived goals would affect three basic social-psychological processes in groups – substitutability, or the ability of others' actions to fulfill your goals; inducibility, or openness to others' influence; and cathexis, or attitudes toward others – and lead to fundamentally different outcomes.

Ultimately, Mort's research found that cooperation and competition between people and between groups can have profoundly varied consequences. Competitive tasks or reward structures induce people to fight for perceived limited resources resulting in poor communication, suspicious and hostile attitudes, diminished attention to shared values, increased sensitivity to opposing interests, and coercion, threat, and deception. Competition also increases the importance, rigidity, and intensity of the conflict.

In contrast, cooperative tasks or reward structures tend to induce the perception of shared beliefs and attitudes, sensitivity to common interests and a de-emphasis of opposed interests, helpfulness, openness, trusting and friendly attitudes, and an orientation to enhancing mutual power (see Deutsch 1949, 2014). These basic ideas were subsequently validated by a vast canon of empirical studies and have profoundly affected educational and business practices with regard to cooperation and team work, as well as policy making and statecraft in international affairs.

Mort, backed by this evidence, went on to publicly debate those who favored a policy of mutually assured destruction during the height of the Cold

War, arguing for the critical importance of identifying shared interests and opening communications between the nations in order to reduce tensions. He became one of a small group of psychologists who spoke frequently with officials from the United States Departments of State and Defense. In 1961, at the height of the Berlin Crisis (triggered by the Soviet Union's ultimatum to the Allied powers to leave West Germany), Mort helped design and facilitate a high-level meeting devoted to a book he coedited entitled *Preventing World War III: Some Proposals* (Wright, Evan, and Deutsch 1962). At the meeting, under Mort's direction, the deputy Soviet ambassador and the American undersecretary of state reversed roles, with each arguing for the other's position. These and other scientifically informed policy discussions helped diminish U.S.–Soviet tensions and promote rapprochement and the eventual nonviolent transition to democracy in Poland and other Eastern bloc countries in the 1990s. They continue to have great practical relevance for international peace today.

The Crude Law of Social Relations: What Leads to Cooperation and Competition in the First Place

Having identified the effects of different types of interdependence on outcomes in groups and nations in his dissertation research, Mort began to wonder which conditions would generate these types of interdependence. In other words, having shown that cooperation promotes more constructive group processes and outcomes than competition does, he wondered: what conditions would lead groups to cooperate versus compete in the first place? Here, Mort turned his full attention to the study of conflict because he thought it provided the ideal conditions to study "mixed-motive" (cooperative *and* competitive) situations, which had the potential to move in either a cooperative or competitive direction.

After conducting many studies over nearly a decade of research on conflict in his lab at Columbia University, Mort identified a general pattern in the data, which he came to call his "crude law of social relations." It read, "The characteristic processes and effects elicited by a given type of social relationship also tend to elicit that type of social relationship" (Deutsch 2014: 12). In essence, Mort discovered that cooperation has a tendency to induce greater cooperation and competition induces greater competition. In other words, the effects of cooperation in groups (like more openness, helpfulness, and trust) and of competition (like poorer communication and more coercion and suspicion) were in fact the same conditions that gave rise to them in the first place.

We now call this a "reinforcing feedback loop" – the effects of something increase the odds of that thing happening again in a self-perpetuating manner. Consequently, a competitive, win–lose approach to conflict tends to escalate it and rigidify the positions, leading to destructive processes and outcomes

and negative expectations for future interactions. A cooperative, win–win approach tends to encourage exploration of the root causes of the problems and leads to more constructive, sustainable solutions and more positive expectations for future encounters (see Deutsch 1973).

There are no firm "laws" in the social sciences as there are in the natural and physical sciences (such as the law of gravity in physics). Mort thus labeled this a "crude" law, because, although the predicted effects were not always consistently evident, the findings from this research were highly robust. The crude law dynamics were subsequently validated through other research and mathematical modeling (see Nowak et al. 2010), and today this is known as one of the first cases of studying self-reinforcing social dynamics in psychological research on conflict – an approach much more prevalent today with the advent of computer simulation modeling.

Understanding Conflict: How Conflict Is like Sex

Conflict makes most people anxious, as they fear it may overwhelm or destroy them. As a result, it has long suffered a negative reputation. When asked to free associate about conflict, the words that most people cite first are anger, frustration, hurt, struggle, violence, and war. Likewise, most conflict scholars and practitioners tend to view conflict as something to contain, reduce, or conclude.

Mort realized early in his career, however, that most conflicts present us with both problems and opportunities (known as mixed motives), and so he set out to debunk the myth that all conflict is bad. Of course, some conflicts can become painful and destructive, but these tend to be rare. More often, conflicts present us with chances to solve problems and bring about necessary changes, to learn more about ourselves and others, and to innovate – to go beyond what we already know and do. This is easy to forget, however, because the conflicts that persist in our memories tend to be the bad ones.

In his work as a psychoanalyst, Mort observed that conflict is a lot like sex: it is a natural, fundamental part of life. Some people are drawn to conflict, others are repulsed by it, but everyone is affected and shaped by it throughout her or his life. Like sex, conflict can be experienced alone, with others, or with groups of people. It can go really, really well, or terribly wrong. When it goes well, the people involved tend to feel deeply satisfied – albeit a bit spent – but may grow closer as a consequence. When it goes poorly, people can feel dissatisfied, frustrated, hurt, angry, or resentful, and can even become filled with contempt for the other party. Conflict, like sex, can be a small, frivolous thing, or a *big* deal. It can be quick, or can go on for quite some time. It can be experienced face to face, over the phone, through texting, or on Skype. It can even be assisted by a third party.

Conflict and sex also share certain pathologies. People can become overly obsessed with conflict and seek it out all the time or they can become

highly conflict-avoidant. They may suffer from position rigidification (when they believe there is only one right way to do it), or prefer to engage it more spontaneously without rules or boundaries. Some suffer from premature conflict resolution (a need to resolve all conflict immediately), and others hold onto and ruminate about grievances long past resolved. For some, conflict is a highly intellectualized game. For others, it is a profoundly intimate, emotional experience.

The point that Mort emphasized is that conflict, like sex, is not inherently bad or good, but rather is a vital part of life. It is simply what happens when certain tensions arise, for example, when interests, claims, preferences, beliefs, feelings, values, ideas, or truths clash. It is central to cognitive development and learning, to relational maturation and growth, and to societal progress and just political reform. So the issue is *not* whether or not we should get into conflict; it is almost impossible not to and could be just as problematic if we did not. The issue is: how do we respond to conflict – by making things better or worse?

When Does Conflict Move in a Good or Bad Direction? A Theory of Cooperation and Conflict Resolution

Mort discovered something critical as part of his research on cooperation and competition in groups at MIT. The initial studies were conducted with students in introductory psychology courses in which half of the classes comprised groups of students graded competitively within their groups on a curve, and the other half of the groups were graded cooperatively, meaning all members would share the same grade, their group average. When the students in these groups had conflict — which happens in all groups – they responded in diametrically opposing ways depending on which type of groups they were assigned to. The students in the competitively rewarded groups tended to view their conflicts as win–lose struggles against the other members and so would often become defensive and go on the attack, while those in the cooperative groups tended to see their conflicts as mutual problems that they needed to solve jointly and constructively in order to make progress on their shared goals.

This finding was critical to Morton's subsequent theoretical work on conflict resolution. It suggested that constructive conflict resolution processes were similar to cooperative problem-solving processes in which the conflict is seen as a shared problem and that destructive processes of conflict resolution were similar to competitive processes in which the conflict is framed in win–lose, us–them terms. This basic idea was subsequently developed further and blossomed into a variety of research propositions outlined in Mort's classic 1973 book, *The Resolution of Conflict*, which provides a general intellectual framework for understanding conflict and the conditions that foster its constructive versus destructive trajectory.

Eventually, this framework led to the development of a wide array of practical methodologies and trainings for the constructive resolution of conflict at home, at work, in communities, and between nations.

The essential idea of this, Mort's most influential and celebrated theory, is that – when possible – more collaborative approaches to resolving win–win or mixed-motive disputes (in other words, the majority of conflicts in our lives) work best. Choosing collaborative approaches, Mort argued, can increase creativity and innovation, enhance the quality of decision making and performance, strengthen relationships, lead to better management of resources and more effective risk taking, reduce bias, increase leadership effectiveness, improve employee satisfaction, and increase organizational commitment. Therefore, we should work hard to approach conflicts with others as mutually shared problems to be solved together. This may not always be possible, but it is often more feasible than we think. It also makes it more likely that everyone involved will get what they need, that any agreement reached will last, and that the conflict will not escalate or spread.

Mapping Basic Social Dynamics: The Fundamental Dimensions of Social Relationships

Mort Deutsch liked to say that he was a grandiose theorist – that he was interested in studying questions relevant to both the cave people of the past and to the space people of the future. So, while studying marital conflict at the Bell Labs in New Jersey, Mort and colleagues Myron Wish and Susan Kaplan decided to tackle the ambitious task of identifying the fundamental dimensions of people's perceptions of interpersonal relations. In other words, they set out to map the consequential aspects of human social relationships that delineate people's experiences of different types of relations – from parents and children to merchants and customers to guards and prisoners to kings and subjects.

Through multidimensional scaling analysis of the survey data they collected, they identified the four most basic dimensions of social relationships:

- cooperative and friendly versus competitive and hostile,
- equal versus unequal,
- intense versus superficial, and
- socioemotional and informal versus task-oriented and formal (Wish, Deutsch, and Kaplan 1976).

This work constituted one of the most thorough empirical attempts at mapping the terrain of interpersonal relations, and prepared the ground for one of Mort's most ambitious theoretical models, the theory of psychological orientation and social relations (which I describe below).

Mort's work on mapping the basic dimensions of social relations informed subsequent theorizing and research on adaptive negotiation, or how negotiators can navigate differences in power, interdependence, and dependence effectively in conflicts (Coleman et al. 2010; Coleman and Ferguson 2014). It also provided the methodology for subsequent research mapping the fundamental social dimensions of mediation to inform more adaptive mediation practices as well (Coleman and Kugler 2014). Both of these models have proven instructive to negotiators and mediators, and owe a large debt to the ambition and innovation of Mort and his colleagues.

Specifying the Dynamics of People, Behaviors, and Environments: A Grand Theory of Psychological Orientations and Social Relations

Social psychology has long suffered from a kind of "split personality" disorder. From its early roots, the discipline has been alternately conceptualized from a sociological perspective, emphasizing the role of the environment on human interaction, or from the perspective of personality psychology, privileging the instincts, sentiments, and character of the individual. Of course, this division merely reflected the debate raging within the broader domain of science regarding the relative importance of nature versus nurture in controlling human behavior. Charles Darwin addressed this divide initially in 1859 when he introduced the evolutionary concepts of individual–environmental fit and adaptation. Later, Kurt Lewin took up this issue in psychology, suggesting that neither instincts nor situations account wholly for human behavior, but rather that behavior (B) is a function of both the person (P) and the environment (E) as they interact. More formally, Lewin offered this equation: $B_f(P \times E)$.

Mort was also influenced by the interactionist framework, but found the formula $B_f(P \times E)$ ultimately too general to bridge the person (P) versus environment (E) divide adequately. So in the 1970s, Mort penned his most comprehensive and ambitious theory, the theory of psychological orientation and social relations (Deutsch 1982). This theory built on his earlier work on the fundamental dimensions of social relations, but articulated *how* the social dimensions interact with individual aspects to ultimately influence behavior. Mort theorized that the four dimensions of social relations, when combined in various ways, form distinctive types of relations that then induce particular types of psychological orientations in people. He defined "psychological orientations" as a more or less consistent combination of cognitive, motivational, moral, and action orientations to a given situation that guide the individual's behaviors and responses.

Because of pressures for consistency, specific types of situations will tend to elicit appropriate psychological orientations that "fit" the situation, and different types of orientations will tend to propel people toward social relations that are consistent with their orientations. In other words, people

will tend to seek out social relations that fit with their dominant orientations, but strong social situations will also tend to shape people's orientations over time, particularly when they remain within them for extended periods of time (e.g., prison, abusive relationships, etc).

Perhaps ahead of its time, this grand theory of person–situation dynamics received little empirical attention initially, but is today influencing new research on the importance of adaptation and fit in effective conflict management (see Coleman and Kugler 2014; Coleman, Kugler, and Chatman 2017).

Addressing Injustice: Why and How People Seek Justice

Mort claimed that he first became interested in exploring issues related to justice when he was a 5-year-old boy who was excluded from a softball game by a group of older children (he sought justice at the time by stealing the ball and throwing it into the woods!), and then again as an adolescent when he organized a group of busboys to strike at a Jewish resort he worked at in the Catskills. Growing up, Mort skipped many grades in school, entering college at 15, and so was often the youngest in his cohort. As the youngest and as a Jew during the pre–World War Two era, he experienced many incidents of exclusion, bias, and discrimination first hand, which stimulated his great need to understand and address injustice.

In the early 1970s, after having conducted a highly consequential study on desegregation in interracial housing (see Deutsch and Collins 1951), Mort began an intensive study of the literature on social justice research. He found himself particularly dissatisfied with the narrow approach to theories of justice found in social psychology, as evidenced by the reigning theory of the time, equity theory. He was struck by both the emphasis on principles of equity at the expense of consideration of other justice principles, as well as the general Western, economic, and utilitarian assumptions that pervaded the dominant thinking on justice at the time.

His subsequent theorizing and research, described in his 1985 book *Distributive Justice*, set out to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the various distributive justice principles, including winner-take-all, equity, equality, and need. He also studied other topics related to the concept of justice, including other types of justice (procedural, retributive, and reparative), moral exclusion, cultural imperialism, and the process of awakening a sense of injustice. In later years, Mort characterized the dynamics between injustice and conflict as mutually reinforcing processes, and helped identify the conditions and processes that could mitigate them. These included promoting mutual security, mutual respect, humanization of the other, fair rules for managing conflict, curbing extremism, and gradual development of mutual trust and cooperation.

Mort's work in this area was a clarion call for critical reflection about our assumptions about such politicized topics as justice, and transformed our understanding and approach to social justice across settings.

Getting Woke: How to Awaken a Sense of Injustice

As a consequence of his attention to justice, Mort began to work systematically to identify the necessary conditions for addressing injustice. One particularly rich area of theorizing here was his work on processes involved in awakening members of both low-power and high-power groups to the presence and effects of injustice. Of course, those with low power suffer the major consequences of injustice, but Mort emphasized the psychosocial dynamics both within and between low-power and high-power groups that contribute to enduring systems of injustice.

In his article with Janice Steil on *Awakening the Sense of Injustice* (1988), Morton proposed a basic parallel set of awakening processes. The first involved falsifying and delegitimizing officially sanctioned ideologies, myths, and prejudices that justify injustices, such as those that serve as the basis for racism and white supremacy, sexism and male supremacy, and American ethnocentrism and exceptionalism. Mort argued, however, that these myth-challenging processes should also be complemented by exposing victims and victimizers to alternative ideologies, models, and methods that support a realistic sense of hope for the possibility that injustice can be mitigated or eliminated. Of course, such awakening processes typically elicit anxiety and resistance in both the powerful and the less powerful, and so he suggested identifying and building coalitions with allies who share these alternative beliefs and values. Here, he also began to outline the types of practices that can bring about just change, particularly when in low power; these include enhancing cohesiveness, trust, and effective organization internally within one's group, and therefore increasing one's bargaining power.

Mort and Steil then identified a sequence of tactics that low-power groups, once awakened, could use to awaken the more powerful and thereby create new allies. These included persuasion tactics, such as appealing to moral values, self-interest, and potential for self-realization, and power tactics such as enhancing one's own or one's group's power, identifying allies among the powerful, using Saul Alinsky's (1971) *jujitsu* tactics of leveraging the influence of the powerful against them, and, when necessary, reducing the power of the oppressor through the use of divide-and-conquer, violent, and nonviolent strategies (Deutsch 2006). This work eventually informed and culminated in Mort's more comprehensive framework for overcoming oppression described below.

Addressing Inequality and Systemic Oppression: How to Interrupt the Increase in Inequality

Somewhat later in his career, Mort became particularly concerned about the rapidly increasing gap between the "haves" and the "have-nots" in institutions and societies across the globe. His assessment of scholarship in the area was that it characterized the intractability of the phenomenon very well, but offered little utility for interrupting patterns of injustice or sustaining constructive changes when they occurred. So, he organized a faculty seminar at Columbia focused on identifying effective strategies for interrupting and addressing oppression and sustaining justice. Mort began the seminar by presenting a paper entitled "A Framework for Thinking about Oppression and Its Change," which outlined his theories about the nature of oppression, the various forms it takes, and the factors that keep it in place, as well as a series of strategies and tactics for awakening a sense of injustice in victims and victimizers and overcoming systems of oppression.

A two-day working conference that followed the seminar brought together eighty invited participants from a wide variety of disciplines, political and community activists, public intellectuals, philanthropists, and graduate students interested in contributing to scholarly and practical work in this area. Mort's framework for overcoming oppression and various other outstanding contributions to this event were subsequently published in a special issue of *Social Justice Research* in 2002 and led to the establishment of the Annual Morton Deutsch Awards for Social Justice, sponsored by The Morton Deutsch International Center for Cooperation and Conflict Resolution (MD-ICCCR), an event honoring distinguished and promising contributions to social justice that seeks to stimulate, incentivize, and celebrate both distinguished as well as early career contributions to scholarship, practice, and activism that seeks to promote justice. Many distinguished scholars and practitioners have been recognized since the award was established.[1]

Sustaining Our Planet: Promoting a Sense of Global Community

Concerned about both the major challenges that face our planet today and worried that political and ideological fragmentation and polarization present serious obstacles to addressing these challenges, Mort turned his attention in his final years to promoting a global human community. Borrowing from Anthony Marsella (1998), he defined a global community as the interrelatedness of peoples, groups, communities, institutions, and nations that is facilitated by technology and includes political, economic, and social interdependence. Mort wrote (Deutsch, Marcus, and Brazaitis 2012: 300), "The global community is multicultural, multinational, and multiethnic and is affected systemically by world events and forces including technology and media, environmental conditions and changes, militarism and war, economic

upheaval and inequality, disease pandemics, sexism, racism, and social injustices, and more."

Together with Eric Marcus and Sarah Brazaitis, Mort used social psychological knowledge about groups and how they form, how they develop, and how individuals identify with them to provide a framework for thinking about some of the issues related to developing a global community. In a chapter published in 2012, the authors suggest that one of the first tasks for change agents who seek to promote global community would be to identify a small group of thirty to fifty individuals who could initially serve to organize, coordinate, and provide leadership for the larger collection of potential change agents. Once such a group could be established, the authors proposed that they formulate a strategic plan for action, addressing the following questions:

- What are the common values and interests that most of the people in the global community share? What are the common problems they must deal with if they, their children, or grandchildren are to avoid severe harm and to prosper?
- How can most people on the planet be communicated with so that they become aware that their values, interests, and problems are widely shared, locally and globally?
- How can guidelines be developed and communicated that will encourage and provide workable models for effective cooperative action, at the local and global levels, to fulfill their values and address their collective problems?

The authors envisioned a systemic change process unfolding on two levels: (1) the "bottom," the people of the world, and (2) the "top," the leaders of existing institutions such as the United Nations, nation-states, the global economy, education, healthcare, so forth.

Their chapter on the subject concludes with a call to action (Deutsch, Marcus, and Brazaitis 2012: 322): "Our discussion is only an outline of some of the important social psychological issues involved in developing a global community," they wrote. "Clearly, much work must be done by scholars from many different disciplines to build a base of knowledge that would help to foster an effective, sustainable global community. It is our belief that developing such knowledge is an urgent need that should involve more and more scholars and receive encouragement and support from universities, foundations, and governments."

Mort Deutsch was an intellectual giant with a true moral compass – today many in the fields of peace, conflict, and social justice stand on his shoulders. The foundation he has provided for our work is sound, lasting, and ultimately promising and optimistic. His insight, passion, and commitment today live on in us.

NOTE

1. Recipients of this recognition include: Michele Fine, distinguished professor of psychology at the City University of New York; Geoffrey Canada, president and CEO of Harlem Children's Zone; Mahzarin Banaji, professor of social ethics in the Department of Psychology at Harvard University; John Jost, professor of psychology at New York University and past editor of *Social Justice Research;* Janusz Reykowski, Warsaw School of Social Psychology and Janusz Grzelak, University of Warsaw; Sister Elaine Roulet, who founded multiple programs that connected incarcerated parents with their children at the Bedford Hills Correctional Facility; Claude Steele, social psychologist and provost of Columbia University; Ervin Staub, professor emeritus of psychology at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst; Gene Sharp, eminent activist and scholar on nonviolence and senior scholar at the Albert Einstein Institution; Gretchen Buchenholz, the founder and executive director of the Association to Benefit Children; Abigail Disney, filmmaker, philanthropist, and renowned activist for women and peace; the Fortune Society, one of the brightest lights in New York City fighting for and serving formerly incarcerated individuals in critical and innovative ways; Michael Wessells, known for his work in child protection worldwide; and most recently, Derald Wing Sue of Teachers College, Columbia University, known for his research on microaggressions. The example set by all these individuals continues to inspire and mobilize new generations of scholars and activists.

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