

# *Reflections on My Roles, Identities, and Activities Relating to Conflict Resolution*

*by Louis Kriesberg*

Over the years, my writing and lecturing has usually been presented dispassionately as scholarly analysis, based on empirical research and theoretical syntheses. That academic work, however, has been profoundly affected and in turn impacted on my personal activities, roles, and numerous identities. I've wrestled with negotiating these relationships, being aware that I live within the context of a particular historical period and of significant personal experiences. After discussing that context, I reflect on two major areas of work, each encompassing an overlapping set of activities, roles, and identities: (1) as an academic-scholar, analyzing social conflicts and how they are resolved and (2) as an activist-practitioner, promoting constructive ways of waging and resolving conflicts. My work in each has contributed to work in the other, but each also has sometimes interfered with the other. I hope this personal reflection will have implications for others who combine a similar variety of roles, activities, and identities, even in other social contexts.

At the time I began my academic career, following World War II, the areas of academic-scholar and activist-practitioner were sharply separated. In accord with what I was taught, good scholarship had to be objective, protected from the biases of personal values and activist engagement. Yet, I entered the social sciences and an academic career, like many other colleagues, intending to improve social conditions. The dilemmas this created have been mitigated by the recent intellectual criticisms of this separation. Furthermore, new fields such as conflict resolution stress the inevitability and the desirability of synthesizing the two areas. With those developments and my own experience, I came to feel more comfortable about acting in both areas and began to appreciate the value of reflecting about their relations so that they actually enhance each other.

## *Personal and Historical Context*

I grew up in Chicago, which for me, was a city of immigrants and immigrants' children. I heard the stories of anti-Semitic pogroms in Czarist Russia from my parents who left Russia before the war and revolution that soon engulfed it. I myself experienced threats and violence, living as a Jew in

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a non-Jewish neighborhood, and recoiled with dismay and fear from the prejudice and ethnic antagonism I saw around me. But I also wondered why my attackers didn't recognize that we were all neighborhood kids and Americans.

My life was lived in the context of wars. With fascination and horror, I read reports, saw images, and heard stories about the brutality of the Japanese invasion of China, the rise of Hitler and Nazism in Germany, and the civil war in Spain. I matured during World War II and the atrocities committed during it. Soon after the war ended, the Cold war, and the associated wars in Korea and Vietnam became the overriding environment within which I lived my adult life. I did not have a military role in any of these wars. I was rejected for military service after World War II was ended. Later, under the terms of the 1948 peacetime draft, my application for conscientious objector status was granted. All these experiences increased my sense of commitment and obligation to work for the prevention of wars and for the amelioration of injustice.

Of course, other experiences and roles have profoundly molded my life and work. I married Lois Ablin and we had two sons, Daniel and Joseph. The activities associated with the roles of husband and father and the specific persons with whom I interacted have also profoundly shaped my personal identity and the academic work I do. For example, Lois' brother lived in Israel and visits there were one source of my engagement with the Middle East and my research on the Israeli-Arab conflicts. My sons' commitment to the environment and the threats to it broadened my areas of concern.

The American cultural revolution of the 1960s and 1970s affected my experiences in two noteworthy ways. First, the women's movement and feminist thinking provided insight and lent support to my discomfort as a youth with aspects of the masculine role I was expected to play such as aggressiveness and the objectification of women. These developments also provided insight about profound and hard-to-discern methods of oppression, resistance, and struggle. Second, the growth of peer self-help organizations provided me with models of egalitarian relationships and experience in working openly with emotions. For example, my engagement with one of these organizations, Re-evaluation Counseling, expanded my ways of relating to interpersonal and inter-group conflicts, and the role of emotions in them. All this had important effects on my academic work and my activist practice.

## *Activist and Academic Roles, Activities, and Identities*

To simplify this discussion, I want to emphasize the way the two master roles of academic-scholar and activist-practitioner relate to my conflict analysis and resolution work. Like any social role, each is characterized in terms of a

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set of expectations that persons playing complementary roles expect to be filled. As an incumbent of each role, I tried to fulfill what was expected of me and to negotiate ways to reconcile the contradictory expectations as they arose.

### *Activist roles, activities, and identities*

I have been engaged in partisan and intermediary activities in one way or another throughout much of my life, but the efforts have been episodic and secondary to my academic work. As a college student, in 1947, I joined in a lunchroom sit-in, organized by the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), to open the lunchroom for Negroes at a department store in Los Angeles. In Chicago, I joined trade union picket lines and protests against the peacetime draft law enacted in 1948. In later years, after assuming a full-time academic-scholar role, I participated in efforts supporting the women's movement, learning from Lois' active engagement in struggles such as for the provision of child care at sociology conferences. I also participated in organizational work and demonstrations for civil rights and to end the U.S. engagement in the war in Vietnam.

Sometimes my research work was a kind of activism. For example, the research I did at Syracuse on low-income families and public housing was done as part of the national and local programs of the 1960s war on poverty and was intended to influence those policies. My teaching has been another form of activism. Since many graduate and some undergraduate students were and would be engaged in actual situations of peacemaking and conflict resolution, I consulted with them about their efforts and provided training that they applied and in turn used in their training of others.

In recent years, my direct activist-practitioner work includes writing op-ed pieces and letters on current issues for newspapers and appearing on television and radio shows, arguing for actions I believe to be right. I speak at meetings of local community and religious organizations, providing analyses and sometimes urging particular policies to promote peace and justice, and I lobby members of Congress. I also consult with colleagues at institutions that are establishing programs in conflict resolution and in peace studies. Some of these activities clearly fit within the conflict resolution practitioner role. For example, I participate in conflict resolution training and consult with officials from many countries as well as with members of non-governmental social movement organizations.

An important ongoing activity for me has been with the Syracuse Area Middle East Dialogue group (SAMEDI), which I helped found in 1981. We members are U.S. citizens in equal number from three groups: Palestinian-Arab, Jewish, and others. We labored to reach consensus among ourselves about a peaceful accommodation based on Palestinian recognition

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of Israel and Israeli agreement to self determination for the Palestinians. We continue to speak to audiences throughout the area and lobby our members of Congress to rally support for the processes and outcomes we believe will maximize justice and security.

### *Academic roles, activities, and identities*

I entered the College of the University of Chicago after World War II, wanting to understand how to prevent wars and end the threat of nuclear annihilation. I discovered sociology and believed that it promised to provide the most fundamental and comprehensive understanding of social life. I decided to do my graduate studies in sociology and over time I came to believe that an academic career was most congenial for me and would enable me, indirectly and in the long run, to help reduce the threats of war and the social inequities that concerned me.

In my early years as an academic-scholar, I conducted research relating to many topics particularly relevant to building the social infrastructure for international peace. For example, I did my doctoral dissertation on the ways that steel distributors did business during the Korean war, finding the government's rules and appeals to national loyalty that were intended to control their pricing policy contributed little to explaining their conduct. Later, I undertook research on international non-governmental organizations, and how the members managed their internal differences arising from living in diverse and sometimes antagonistic countries and how such organizations contributed to constructing an international community and a global civil society. I also examined the social bases for the development of transnational identifications and conduct, made possible by a Fulbright research scholar award. I lived in Cologne, Germany and studied the way the European Coal and Steel Community contributed to the development of West European associations, identities, and cooperation, and to German-French reconciliation.

I went on to do research and writing on a variety of topics, guided by the exigencies of employment at the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) of the University of Chicago and then at the Youth Development Center (YDC) at Syracuse University. At NORC, I directed national surveys about the public's use of dental services and about different structures and kinds of cooperation between public health and mental health departments at the state and local level. At YDC, I studied the effects of residence in public housing located in Syracuse neighborhoods with different income levels on the social mobility of low-income people (*Mothers in Poverty*, 1970). In conducting these projects, I tried to locate them in theoretical contexts that, in my mind, were relevant to sociology and to my understanding of the way peaceful and just relationships could be created and sustained. For example, I

examined the relative effects of cultural and situational factors on variations in social inequalities and their perpetuation. I tended to stress the importance of structural conditions rather than subjective considerations; but more recently have emphasized their inter-relations.

In these and related endeavors, I tried to enact my identity as a sociologist and to advance my career. I presented papers at professional meetings, honed my research skills, published articles and books, developed courses, taught, advised about dissertation work, and engaged in the myriad of other activities deemed appropriate within the universities where I was employed. I also persisted in my research in peace-relevant work on international, non-governmental organizations and edited the book, *Social Processes in International Relations* (1968).

Then, with the attainment of tenure (1966) and the rank of professor (1967) at Syracuse University, I felt freer to focus all my academic efforts on projects directly relevant to international peace-building. My previous research and writing helped give my work in these areas greater credibility and legitimacy. They also gave me standing to support other colleagues working in these areas, to undertake related editing responsibilities, and to cooperate with colleagues in organizational work within the American Sociological Association, the Society for the Study of Social Problems, and other organizations. I also participated in the campaign to establish what came to be the United States Institute of Peace.

I have located my new projects within a comprehensive analysis of social conflicts, as set forth in *The Sociology of Social Conflicts* (1972) and revised in *Social Conflicts* (1983). That context was intended, in part, to gain allies in sociology and other social sciences for the work I thought needed to be done. For myself, after considering what would be a useful direction for research, I focused on the use of noncoercive inducements in waging international conflicts. That quickly led to examining how international conflicts de-escalated. This dictated a research strategy of examining instances of peacemaking initiatives even within the seemingly intractable American-Soviet and Arab-Israeli conflicts (*International Conflict Resolution*, 1992). The idea was to pay attention to episodes and cases that did not become or remain destructive in order to learn how that happens, rather than examine only what has gone badly. The research strategy has since broadened to focus on conflicts within and between countries that did not deteriorate or that moved out of such destructiveness. This is evident in my recent writing and in my recently published book, *Constructive Conflicts* (1998).

Increasingly in the 1960s, I saw my work being situated in newly emerging streams of scholarly work within sociology, in other social sciences, and in new inter-disciplinary fields, such as peace studies and conflict resolution. By the later 1970s, the streams had turned into rapidly moving rivers and I was riding with the flow. I worked with colleagues at Syracuse

University and within the professional organizations to which I belonged in order to foster these developments, conducting research and publishing materials to advance them. Soon we had our own groups of faculty and graduate students at Syracuse University collaborating in these areas. In 1970, we established the Program in Nonviolent Conflict and Change (PNCC) followed by the Program on the Analysis and Resolution of Conflicts (PARC) in 1986. Of course these intellectual and organizational developments were largely driven by changes in the larger social context. For example, the student movement of the 1960s, the civil rights movement, the anti-war movement, and the women's movement spurred the growth of the resource mobilization approach to analyzing social movements. The PNCC was founded as a direct response to student demands for nonviolent studies, after they took over the university in the 1970 national protest against the U.S. invasion of Cambodia.

### *Activist Contributions to Academic Work*

My concerns about peace and justice matters helped give my academic work more coherence and cumulateness than it might otherwise have had. They provided markers to guide my work. Furthermore, my engagement in specific struggles, whether as a partisan or as an intermediary, helped frame analytic questions for academic study so they would be relevant for policy making. For example, this has been the case for the work I have done on timing de-escalating efforts, on specifying appropriate conflict resolution methods at different conflict stages, and on coordinating intermediary efforts.

My activist engagements provided me with immensely valuable insights into the feelings and thoughts of partisans in struggles. This was obviously true on those occasions when I was a partisan myself, helping me see how my own fear and anger influenced my thoughts and actions. In some ways it is even more true for those of my activities that were peacemaking or reconciliatory, as when I discovered over and over again in those struggles the great fear that each side had of the other. I also learned much from the bewilderment, suspicion, and pressure from those with whom I shared group identity when I would act in a reconciliatory manner with our presumed opponents. That has been the case, for example, as a Jew working with Germans in the years after the Second World War and later with Palestinians, as an American working with Soviet colleagues during the Cold War, as a European-American working with African Americans before and during the civil rights struggle, and as a man working with women in the early years of the women's movement.

In turn, my activism provided contacts with people who were helpful in my academic research. For example, Palestinian members of SAMED

suggested people to meet or provided an introduction to someone I would like to interview. Through my work with peace movement organizations, I learned who were important actors at the non-governmental as well as at the governmental level, for example, in affecting U.S. policy during the Cold War. My SAMED activism and op-ed writing also helped me gain access to some people who otherwise might be reluctant to speak with me; for example, as a Jew interviewing Palestinians and other Arabs, presenting myself as a disinterested analyst would not otherwise have been credible.

### *Academic Contributions to Activist Work*

I do believe that my commitment to truth, as I could ascertain it by recourse to empirical evidence and good social theory, helped keep me honest in my activist work. It helped check the inevitable tendencies to be swept away by the passions of indignation and group self-righteousness. It forced me to recognize unpleasant realities in the world and think about practical ways of coping with them. This was true, for example, in encountering the antagonism and rigidity of some of the official Soviet personages I met and the fears of many central Europeans living next to the Soviet Union.

My academic standing, presumed expert knowledge, and connections made in the course of doing and reporting about my research, furthermore, gave my activist work more credibility and effectiveness than it otherwise would have had. They helped give my views a hearing, for example in getting my op-ed pieces published. My academic activities also provided links to people who could be helpful in gaining support for peace-building policies. Finally, they gave me the opportunity to serve as a kind of quasi mediator at the grass-roots or middle-range level, insofar as I brought information and ideas from groups with whom I was identified to members of what were sometimes opposing sides.

My academic work has contributed to my conflict resolution practice in another way. As a student of social conflicts, I must learn about the views each side has about the other in a struggle. Being aware of those different perspectives is crucial in training persons to provide intermediary services or in carrying them out myself.

### *Interference Between Activist and Academic Work*

My activism, however, has occasionally obstructed my academic work. One way activism interferes is that it simply takes time that might have been used in sustained research, analysis, and writing. It is also possible that at times my academic analysis was influenced by the wish to make a point that would help in my role as a policy advocate. In addition, there may have been times when my previous activist efforts hampered my access to particular persons or their openness with me; yet upon reflection, I doubt that.

My academic role and activities, on the other hand, sometimes have obstructed my activist labors. They may have induced me to be cautious so as

not to lose credibility as an objective scholar. At times, my support for particular peacemaking policies may have been withheld because my analyses gave me reason to believe they were implausible or likely to be ineffective. Academic work also can be insatiable in its demands on time and commitments and so hamper sustained, intense activism.

In specific instances, these interferences are sometimes difficult to discern, and other persons must point them out to us. When directly considered and made with conscious reflection, these are choices that can lead to creative modifications so that the two demands complement each other. There are times, too, when contradictions between the academic and activist roles arise and a clear choice must be made between them. For example, research may indicate that peace movement opposition to the U.S. waging a war or to escalating threatening actions raises the expectations among those on the other side that they will triumph and so stiffens their resolve and prolongs the struggle. Such evidence may undercut the partisan efforts of the peace movement supporters. Precise information and carefully crafted opposition positions may reconcile such contradictions.

### *Conclusions*

On the whole, my academic-scholar and activist-practitioner roles have been complementary, and the activities associated with each have served the other. I derive considerable satisfaction from that. Furthermore, the activities have often overlapped so that they cannot be entirely separated over the long term. After all, policy advocacy generally is based on some analysis and whatever analysis is done and reported has policy implications. Nevertheless, at any particular time, a specific activity is generally carried out in one role context or the other and I try to keep that explicit.

At various times, of course, I have felt some misgivings and regrets about the balance I have struck in playing the many roles I have assumed in my life. For example, in the balance between the academic and the activist roles, I sometimes have felt that a more full-time engagement for a period in an activist-practitioner role would have been a good experience. I think that policies and arrangements to facilitate academic sabbaticals to engage in practice ought to be expanded.

The emergence and development of the problem-solving conflict resolution field of study and practice has helped me recognize that the balance I have struck over my career has been a good one for me. I believe that my research and writing has contributed to the field's growth and direction and to the constructive waging and ending of struggles. I have necessarily fashioned a unique blend of roles, activities, and identities, and I certainly enjoyed the variety of work I have done. Every person must fashion her or his own combination, in the context of that person's own historical context and personal experience. Although buffeted by events and contradictory role claims, it is valuable to keep focused on the reasons for having entered and pursued one's work.