

Using Conflict Theory

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Introduction

IN THE twentieth century, knowledge about social conflict has increased considerably,¹ but so has the technology and scope of violence. As the new millennium begins, conflict actors must learn not only how to deescalate destructive conflicts, but also how to utilize “constructive” conflicts: how to clarify their own goals; how to select conflict strategies and tactics rationally; and how to apply them to achieve their goals while minimizing the costs.

The Development of Conflict Knowledge

Homo sapiens has been learning about conflict throughout its development. That knowledge is spread across humanity, residing wherever humans live, work, and play. It is folk knowledge, used continuously in everyday life – in commerce, family relations, government, sport, child rearing. The ways of dealing with human conflict around the world are legion. They are passed down from parent to child, from generation to generation. They are transmitted from one life experience to the next. That knowledge is created within generations, as humans learn better how to interact with minimal cost. We do this pretty much unconsciously. Handling conflict is simply one of the life skills we learn and practice. Some of us do it better than others.

Particularly in the twentieth century we have become more conscious of how to understand conflict and how to deal with it in

constructive ways. Conducted in numerous abstract and formal ways – through writing and teaching in schools and universities, and through research programs, seminars, and training – this effort was not simply due to curiosity but was a search for a solution to an increasingly serious problem, the growing scale and cost of human conflict. With each new wave of violent conflict in the world, there has been a renewed effort to understand it and control its harmful effects. We see a crisis-response pattern in these efforts.

The mounting wave of social conflict since 1800 (to pick a somewhat arbitrary date) can be traced to several developments: the growth of science and technology and its application to weaponry; the growth of the nation-state and its capacity to mobilize resources for control and violence; expanding populations. In fact, population pressure might be the leading cause of conflict increase, if one sees each human newborn as additional human need and thus conflict potential.

As conflict has steadily increased, so too has human effort to explain and manage it. The nineteenth century presented human society with problems that neither governments nor social theorists could ignore. The Napoleonic Wars and the revolutions of 1848 brought conflict and violence on a scale never before imagined. Napoleon had practiced total war, an institution so devastating in its consequences that in its wake, in 1815, Europe's governments created the Concert of Europe to prevent such unbridled interstate conflict in the future. The science and the art of diplomacy became the initial step in the human attempt to apply analysis and reason to managing conflict between nation-states.

Large-scale civil unrest was the second stimulus to the early development of conflict analysis and management. By the mid-nineteenth century, the industrial revolution had produced enormous demographic dislocations, extreme poverty, and a wide gulf between worker and owner. Karl Marx led a kind of conflict scholarship that produced credible and powerful analyses of conflict between classes. Marxist theory quickly became ideology as activists worked for political revolution to eliminate (as they thought and hoped) social conflict by restructuring economic and social relations.

In the late nineteenth century, ethnicity joined class as a focus of conflict scholarship. Powerful ethnic nationalism was being encouraged to serve various national and imperial policies. European

governments were increasingly using ethnic identity and myths of racial superiority to carve out colonial empires on other continents. Within Europe itself, diverse ethnic groups artificially bound into nations were ever more restive. Writers like Georg Simmel theorized that intergroup conflict did not originate in instinctual urges but was a social process to be analyzed.

By 1900 huge areas of the world were controlled by the colonial powers of Europe. As a select few from the indigenous peoples in these areas were brought to the colonial capitals for European education, it was inevitable that conflict theory and practice then developing there would influence them. They would expand, reinvent, and apply it to liberate their people from colonial rule. They also had some earlier colonial rebels such as Simon Bolivar and Toussaint l'Ouverture as exemplars of liberation. One of the most interesting theoretical and practical challenges to colonialism was Gandhi's satyagraha approach, disciplined nonviolent resistance to domination. Gandhian conflict knowledge was unique in that it provided a means to struggle with one's oppressor without the spiraling violence and mutual harm that violent revolution produced. And satyagraha was to be applied not only to free India from Great Britain but to eliminate caste violence and religious communalism within India itself. Since Gandhi's death, the Gandhian movement has continued through the land gift (Bhoodan), self-help (Sarvodaya), and peace brigade (Shanti Sena) movements. The Gandhi Peace Foundation continues to study ways to apply his theory and method.

Gandhi himself had learned from the practice of the labor movement and from the theories of Marx and Thoreau that withholding one's cooperation through strikes and civil disobedience was a powerful method of struggle. In fact, industrial warfare became yet another major producer of conflict knowledge as the twentieth century unfolded. By the 1920s strikes and armed conflict between workers and owners were ever more common in the industrialized world. In the United States of the 1930s, an economic depression and a new government willing to intervene in industrial strife brought about collective bargaining. Federal law henceforth managed industrial conflict. Workers' rights to unionize and strike began to be protected through this procedure. The negotiation of contracts, review of grievances, and prevention of violence would all be regulated and monitored by the

Department of Labor and its newly created Mediation and Conciliation Service.

Collective bargaining stimulated a new area of conflict knowledge. Schools of industrial relations sprouted throughout the university world. Legions of skilled mediators and arbitrators emerged as industrial conflict was tamed. The American Arbitration Association, now a conflict management fixture in the United States, is another sign of expanding conflict knowledge. The Gandhian experience illustrates how conflict knowledge has been shared across cultures and societies. Gandhi, who had learned from Western theory and practice, gave back to the West what has become a creative and widely used method of dealing with conflict with minimal harm. In fact, the United Auto Workers in 1937 used a variation on the Gandhian theme in a sit-down strike against General Motors. Conflict knowledge had come full circle.

While theorists and practitioners in the West were learning how to moderate civil conflict, struggle between nations was intensifying. Twentieth-century technology and bureaucratic organization permitted states to take the methods of total war to new extremes. In two horrendous world conflicts, civilians were transformed from accidental victims of war into strategic targets. The culminating events in World War II – the incineration, vaporization, and extermination of millions of humans – evoked a new surge of intellectual and practical efforts to moderate conflict. With the introduction of nuclear weapons, the concept of total war took on a yet more ominous significance. The United Nations, peace research, and the peace movement were all examples of this new determination to understand and control international conflict. The Peace Research Institute in Oslo and the Center for Conflict Resolution at the University of Michigan were the first of a long line of academic centers to be established. Ultimately, even governments created their own programs, such as the United States Institute of Peace and the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute.

World War II ushered in a period of further political awakening and action among subject peoples. In the United States, African Americans created new forms of resistance to racial segregation and discrimination. But the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s was only the first of several movements of liberation in the late twentieth century. Issues relating to gender, the natural environment, ethnicity,

physical disability, and public policy all produced new pressure to invent mechanisms within communities for resolving conflict. The U.S. Department of Justice created the Community Relations Division to mediate interracial disputes. That office and the civil rights leaders' commitment to nonviolence contributed extensively to the largely peaceful desegregation of the South.

Liberation from colonial domination was occurring elsewhere in the world. As newly independent states appeared in Africa and Asia, civil conflict among ethnic and tribal groups required that new forms of international intervention be developed to moderate conflict. The policies of colonialism had ensured that civil conflict would occur in these new states. The European powers had carved up their colonial territories with little regard for the African political arrangements in place. Colonial boundaries often split ethnic groups in two, creating vulnerable minorities. Colonial authorities applied the "divide and rule" principle, using some peoples to control others.

In such arrangements intergroup resentments were bound to contribute to postindependence conflict. Departing colonial powers also added fuel by manipulating group against group in order to retain as much as possible of their economic investments. The departing colonials were soon replaced by the Cold War superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union. Ideological allegiance, economic hegemony, and strategic and military influence stimulated civil wars in the developing world. Vietnam, Cambodia, Rwanda, Ethiopia, Angola, Somalia, and Zaire are prime examples of such residual conflicts. The United Nations has intervened to moderate many of these civil wars, developing successively peace keeping, peacemaking, and peace building as major additions to the body of conflict knowledge.

By the 1970s empowerment movements in the United States had greatly increased not only intergroup and interpersonal conflict but also conflict between individuals and organizations. More and more of this conflict was ending up in court, producing a court crisis of huge proportions. The response was a movement to facilitate out-of-court settlement of disputes. Alternative dispute resolution uses various third-party approaches – problem solving, mediation, arbitration – and has made its way into organizations, professions, and communities throughout the United States. Tens of thousands of persons have received formal training in mediation and other

conflict management techniques. Several hundred peace and conflict studies programs in colleges and universities appeared in the 1970s and 1980s. Ombudsman offices and mediation services have been created in thousands of universities, school systems, and communities.

The possibility for learning more about conflict has motivated increasing numbers of people to develop personal conflict skills. Some use these professionally in law, public policy, family mediation, and the like. Others simply wish to create an informal peacemaker role for themselves. They act as neutral third parties in family disputes or neighborhood conflict, and as intervenors in international disputes (Wehr 1996). Citizen peace teams have been active in Nicaragua, Guatemala, Bosnia, Haiti, Sri Lanka, Iraq, and elsewhere.

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, then, there has been a series of conflict crises stimulating both practical and intellectual attempts to invent ideas and methods to deal with them. This book continues the effort to understand conflicts, both by discussing what humans actually do and by showing how conflicts can be approached more effectively and at less cost.

Dealing with Conflict Economically and Effectively

Conflict and change are as inherent in the social world as order and permanence. Newton's physical law that each action produces a reaction has its counterpart in social theory. Kant and Hegel helped us to see that every individual, group, organization, or other unit in society represents a force whose action stimulates many counterforces. When force meets counterforce, either cooperation or conflict can result, depending on many factors. In either case, a new product or relationship (or synthesis, as Hegel would call it) emerges from the interaction. When the synthesis comes from conflict, the interaction is likely to be more costly and destructive than when it comes from cooperation. But, even then, conflict can be pursued and managed in less costly ways. Our ultimate objective is to identify some of the more economical ways of dealing with conflict. The greater the number of individuals, groups, organizations, and societies in conflict that are engaged constructively, the greater the development of human potential.

It is virtually impossible not to have beliefs and values about the role of conflict. Some may say that all conflict is destructive and thus to be avoided at all costs. But are there some conflicts that are beneficial to societies and individuals alike? We believe that conflict theory and practice based on it can be as useful for those dissatisfied with the status quo as for those who wish to keep things as they are. Too often, managing, reducing, and resolving conflict has simply deterred or postponed needed changes in power relations. In some cases, conflict management and reduction are the approach most productive of beneficial change; in other cases, it is best to escalate conflict and contest power.

This book assumes that wise and imaginative conflict action is basically the same for the individual as for the group or organization. After all, individuals represent the groups, organizations, categories, and societies of which they are members. So the principles of constructive conflict behavior that are explored in Chapters 9 and 10 apply across the levels of society. Although our three chapter-long illustrations (Chapters 4, 6, and 8) deal with conflicts between groups, we occasionally use shorter examples to show how the theory applies to individuals and organizations.

Theorizing about Conflict

Out of the great diversity of conflict knowledge, it is possible to extract some fundamental insights that seem to hold true for all conflicts. To present them in an easily understandable manner, we will use two guiding principles: focus on general theories, and present these theories in a simplified way.

Generality and Simplicity

The theories to be discussed are general, that is, applicable to many different types of conflict. For example, we assume that the civil war in Bosnia might be due to the same fundamental causes as the civil rights struggle in the United States: the desire to redistribute scarce resources, to enact incompatible roles, or to pursue incompatible values. Because most of the fundamental questions about conflicts were asked – and often answered – by the pioneers in the

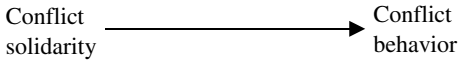


Figure 1.1. A Causal Proposition

field, emphasis will be on the work of classical theoreticians such as Durkheim ([1893] 1964), Marx ([1894] 1967), Weber ([1922] 1947), and Simmel ([1908] 1955).

Once such general theories are identified, they are converted into simple causal statements that can be translated into diagrams. For example, much of the theory dealing with group solidarity can be summarized in the proposition “If the level of conflict solidarity within a group increases, the chances that it will engage in conflict behavior increase as well.” (As we explain later, we are using conflict “behavior” as a general term that includes the more specific term conflict “action.”) This proposition can be expressed graphically as shown in Figure 1.1. We should add that, occasionally, we might use terminology that does not use the word “cause.” For example, instead of saying that injustice was a cause of the civil rights movement, we might say that one *reason* for the civil rights movement was injustice.

Limitations of Our Approach

To a large extent, attempts to simplify the theories of the classical theorists are justifiable because their masterpieces are both works of science and works of art – and their scientific core can be distilled into simple causal statements. Still, this approach may offend some readers by omitting much of the genius of the masters. Another problem is that simplified theories omit some of the considerations mentioned by contemporary writers. For example, we do not include intervention by third parties as a part of our general theory, even though such interventions may affect the conflict in important ways.²

Moreover, we must forgo consideration of some influential theories, among them the so-called critical theory, a school of thought that owes much to Karl Marx. Its adherents advance several criticisms of contemporary societies and those who theorize about it. They argue that Marx is interpreted too mechanically, that positivism is flawed because it fails to see humans as true actors, that sociologists are too ready

to accept the status quo, that the so-called instrumental rationality leads to technocratic thinking and, ultimately, to monstrosities such as Nazi concentration camps, that mass media create popular culture that is phony and repressive. They also advocate some remedies – for example, Marxists should pay more attention to the subjective aspects of human existence, societies must be studied in their totality, and the interrelationship of their parts must be understood (Ritzer 1992, 142–150).

Important as these considerations are, because they are not easily converted into causal propositions, they are not incorporated into the main body of our theory. At the same time, important aspects of critical theory that *can* be converted into causal statements about social conflict – Marx’s theory of class struggle and Habermas’s thesis that today the “system colonizes the lifeworld” – are considered here (see Chapter 3).

Thus this book should be viewed as only an introduction to conflict theory, one that deals just with the most important causes of conflict. Once readers have mastered the material presented here, they should broaden their understanding by reading more complex analyses of conflicts, such as that given by Kriesberg ([1973] 1982; 1998).

Some Benefits

Once we have identified the *possible* causes of conflict behavior, we can explain why a particular conflict exists. For example, we argue that conflict behavior can occur for six main reasons: the parties may have (or believe that they have) incompatible goals, they each may have achieved high solidarity, they may have organized for conflict, they can mobilize their conflict resources, they may be hostile toward their opponents, and they may have sufficient material resources (see Figure 1.2).

In many conflicts only *some* of these causes are influential. Identifying the operative causes in any single conflict helps us both to understand that conflict and to deal with it. For example, if one concludes that a particular urban riot is driven primarily by hostility, one not only comes to understand that conflict but also obtains a basis for dealing with it: if one wishes to prevent future riots, one may attempt to lessen the hostility by addressing the rioters’ valid grievances or

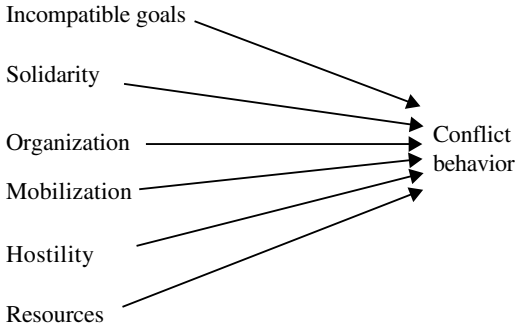


Figure 1.2. A Theory of Conflict Behavior

may ask the community leaders to call for calm and restraint; if one wishes to encourage more riots, one may try to increase the hostility by organizing rallies that emphasize past injustices and demonize the opponents.

Two main objectives guide the discussion in this book: to explain why conflicts start and develop in certain ways (Chapters 1–8), and to indicate how conflicts can be used constructively (Chapter 9). In the concluding chapter we summarize our theory and suggest how one might develop conflict skills further.

Plan of the Book

Chapter 2 prepares the ground by considering some fundamental questions. What is a conflict? What is meant by goal incompatibility? What is hostility? What are the main types of conflict behavior?

Most of the subsequent chapters consider the main causes of social conflicts. Why do some groups have incompatible goals? Why do hidden disagreements erupt into open conflicts? What causes conflicts to escalate and deescalate? Each of these questions is treated in a set of two chapters: the first chapter in each set presents the theory that answers the question, the second applies the theory to a specific example. On occasion, the application chapter also outlines some principles useful to those who wish to deal with conflicts constructively.

Chapter 3 begins by considering the reasons why any two groups may develop incompatible goals. It argues that this nearly always happens

because the parties contest certain resources, or because they play different roles, or because they are culturally different. The main resources will be the works of Marx, Dahrendorf, Durkheim, and Weber. Chapter 4 applies their theories to the struggle for civil rights in the United States. It concludes that the primary reason for the struggle has been that African Americans have not received their fair share of scarce resources (wealth, power, and prestige) and that many of them have lived in abject poverty.

Chapter 5 considers why a latent conflict becomes overt. It argues that incompatible goals are likely to lead to conflict behavior if “conflict groups” are formed. Among the conditions favoring their formation are not only incompatible goals but also high group solidarity and availability of resources. The theories of Homans and Dahrendorf are used to illustrate the role that solidarity plays in mobilizing for conflict. Chapter 6 applies these theories to a conflict over faculty tenure within a university. It concludes that the outbreak of that particular conflict was due to almost all of the possible causes.

Chapter 7 discusses the conditions that determine whether an overt conflict escalates or deescalates. As a formal model of conflict suggests, a conflict can escalate even when the adversaries’ “inner” tendencies (to escalate unilaterally, to retaliate, and to express their hostility) remain unchanged. At the same time, these tendencies are bound to change over time, because of feedbacks from the conflict itself. When that happens, the conflict can escalate even further – or it can deescalate. Chapter 8 applies these theories to the Bosnian civil war.

Chapter 9 relates the principles of conflict management, such as those discussed by Deutsch (1973) and Fisher and Ury (1981), to the discussion in the preceding chapters. It explains why such principles are sound and how they can be applied to manage conflicts.

Chapter 10 reviews our theory and suggests how you can use it and certain specific skills to deal with conflicts. The book concludes with an appendix providing a more detailed historical account of the events discussed in Chapter 8, the war in Bosnia.