

A Perspective on Conflict*

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Let me start my remarks by indicating that my presentation is inspired by a wise saying of my teacher, Professor Kurt Lewin, a famous social psychologist. He stated that "There is nothing so practical as a good theory." My talk is, in part, intended to provide you with a theoretical framework for thinking about conflict and its resolution. I hope you will find it of practical use.

However, let me first, indicate my orientation to conflict: Conflict is like sex--it is an important and pervasive aspect of life; it should be enjoyed and occur with a reasonable degree of frequency. Like with sex, conflict sometimes evokes anxiety. Anxiety about conflict can lead to: the repression or avoidance of conflict; premature conflict resolution before there has been an adequate exploration of the issues in the conflict; or an excessive tendency to seek out conflict in order to prove in a "macho" way that one is not afraid of conflict.

For the most part, social scientists have given conflict a bad reputation by linking it with psychopathology, social disorder, and war. The psychological utopias of many psychological theories would appear to be a conflict-free existence. Yet it is apparent that most people seek out conflict in competitive sports and games, by going to the theater or reading

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a novel, by attending to the news, in the teasing interplay of intimate encounters, and in their intellectual work. Fortunately, no one has to face the prospect of a conflict-free existence. Conflict can neither be eliminated nor even suppressed for long.

The social and scientific issue is not how to eliminate or prevent conflict but rather how to have lively controversy rather than deadly quarrel.

Conflict has many positive functions. It prevents stagnation, it stimulates interest and curiosity, it is the medium through which problems can be aired and solutions arrived at, it is the root of personal and social change. Conflict is often part of the process of testing and assessing oneself and, as such, may be highly enjoyable as one experiences the pleasure of the full and active use of one's capacities. In addition, conflict demarcates groups from one another and helps establish group and personal identities.

I stress the positive functions of conflict, and I have by no means provided an exhaustive listing, because many discussions of conflict cast it in the role of villain--as though conflict, per se, is the cause of our individual and social problems. In stressing the positive function of conflict, I do not wish to deny that conflict can take a destructive course. It can lead to deadly quarrels rather than lively controversy; it can produce self-perpetuating, vicious cycles which maintain hostile and defensive involvements in the antagonistic relationship between the conflicting parties long after the original issues in dispute have lost their significance; it can reduce the resources available for individual and social problem-solving and impair the processes of problem-solving.

The Determinants of the Course of Conflict

Conflict can have constructive or destructive consequences. The basic question with which I have been concerned through many years of research and theorizing is: What determines whether a conflict will take a constructive or destructive course?

After much work and thought, I slowly realized that the answer to this question involves the combination of two simple ideas. The first idea entails the recognition that a constructive process of conflict resolution is similar to an effective, cooperative problem-solving process while a destructive process of conflict resolution has many of the characteristics of a competitive process of social interaction. The second basic idea, which was the culmination of years of research, I have labelled Deutsch's crude law of social relations. It is that the characteristic processes and effects elicited by a given type of social relationship (cooperative or competitive) tend also to elicit that type of social relationship. Thus, the strategy of power and the tactics of coercion, threat, and deception result from, and also result in, a competitive relationship. Similarly, the strategy of mutual problem-solving and the tactics of persuasion, openness, and mutual enhancement elicit, and also are elicited by, a cooperative orientation.

In summary, the typical effects of successful cooperation breed further cooperation, while the typical effects of competition breed further competition. In addition, a cooperative problem-solving orientation to a conflict leads to a constructive process of conflict resolution while a competitive, win-lose orientation to conflict leads to a destructive process.

The ideas I have just expressed are simple, but if we think about them in a detailed way, they have a wide range of implications. For instance, let us look at the typical effects of cooperation and compare these with competition, in terms of what happens in communication. As a result of good cooperation, communication tends to be relatively full, relatively open. People are attentive to one another; they are willing to respond positively to the other, to make helpful suggestions, etc. They have no desire to mislead, misrepresent or falsely communicate to the other.

On the other hand, the typical effect of a competitive process on communication is that it tends to interfere with communication. In some sense, there is no real reason to communicate because we think the other is not going to believe us. The other knows that our interests and his interests are opposed, so why should we tell the truth. And the typical result in competitive interaction is that communication drops; there is less frequent communication. Another typical effect is that people do try to mislead one another. They do not tell the truth; they misinform. And knowing that the other is trying to mislead them, people try to get their information not through the other's direct communications but through indirect ways, e.g. through espionage techniques.

So, if we want to induce a constructive process of conflict resolution, we need to have a communication process that is like the kind of communication that takes place in a cooperative context. Such a context is where people feel free to talk openly and fully, where they are attentive and responsive to one another, and where they have no particular interest in misleading the other. If we want to produce a destructive conflict, on the other hand, we can also do that. Suppose we were in military intelligence and we wanted

to instigate a destructive process within an adversar group, then we would want to disrupt and confound their communications. We would want to make their communications very noisy, so that people would start to misunderstand one another. And once they started to misinterpret one another, they would start to develop negative attitudes as a consequence of the poor communication, etc.

Another typical difference between cooperative and competitive processes, in terms of their effects, is the way we try to influence people. In the cooperative process, we are interested in persuading the other: in having the other person see the position that we are advocating and to see it in a way that is acceptable to him or her. In a competitive process, on the other hand, we feel that such persuasion is unlikely to occur. Hence, we have to rely on the techniques of intimidation, coercion, threat, and stronger power to intimidate and coerce the other into a position we want. If we introduce into a conflict, weapons or tactics of coercion and intimidation, this will tend to move that process towards a competitive and destructive course of interaction. If we use tactics of persuasion which are aimed at convincing the other, these will generally move the other towards a cooperative process of interaction.

Another typical difference in the two kinds of processes is that in a cooperative process, we have a positive interest in the power of the other. The stronger the other who is cooperating with us, the more resources she has, and the more intelligent and effective she is, then the better off we are. We are, therefore, interested in enhancing the power of the other. By comparison, in a competitive process, we are interested in increasing the differences between our power and the other's power so that we become better

able to intimidate the other. If we can induce a situation where people are oriented towards enhancing one another's power, then we will have a constructive process of conflict resolution. If we induce the opposite situation where people are oriented towards increasing the power differences in favor of self, then we will have a destructive process of conflict resolution.

A typical result of cooperation is that one tends to see the other person as being similar to oneself with regard to basic values and orientations. A typical result of the competitive process, on the other hand, is that one sees the other as being different from and opposed to oneself. The differences between oneself and the other are accentuated in a competitive process rather than reduced. If we want to increase the destructiveness of a conflict, then we have to increase the size of a conflict; we have to make the issues in conflict seem large and terribly important, of vital significance to the parties. But if we want to increase the likelihood of a constructive conflict resolution, then we have to help the parties reduce the definition of what is at stake so that it is not world-shaking, so that it involves relatively specific, small issues that are here and now; issues that do not necessarily determine precedence for history.

Successful cooperation enhances one's sense of being understood, accepted, and liked by others; as a consequence, it promotes a sense of personal security and self-esteem. In a parallel way, it stimulates analogous feelings toward the other whom one has been cooperating. One feels a more understanding, accepting, and positive attitude toward the others: one esteems them and is able to empathize with them and to take their perspective. In contrast, competition tends to undermine self-confidence and personal security and lead to the deprecation of others. Clearly, the self respect,

the respect for and friendly attitudes toward others which result from cooperation are more likely to lead to a constructive process of conflict resolution than are the personal insecurities and the tendencies to be belittling of others which result from competition.

In brief, if one wants to create the conditions for a destructive process of conflict resolution, one would introduce into the conflict the typical characteristics and effects of a competitive process: poor communication; coercive tactics; suspicion; the perception of basic differences in values; an orientation to increasing the power differences; challenge to the legitimacy of the parties; personal insecurity; the deprecation of others, and so forth. On the other hand, if one wants to create the conditions for a constructive process of conflict resolution, one would introduce into the conflict the typical effects of a cooperative process: good communication; the perception of similarity in beliefs and values; full acceptance of one another's legitimacy; problem-centered negotiations; mutual trust and confidence; information-sharing; and so forth.

However, bargaining and conflict resolution do not always take a constructive course. When a conflict takes a destructive course, third-parties can play a role in regulating, aborting, or undoing a malignant process of conflict resolution. The question is what framework can guide a third person who seeks to intervene therapeutically if negotiations are deadlocked or unproductive because of misunderstandings, faulty communications, the development of hostile attitudes, or the inability to discover a mutually satisfying solution. I suggest that such a framework is implicit in the ideas that I have described earlier. The third party seeks to produce a cooperative problem-solving orientation to the conflict by creating the

conditions which characterize an effective cooperative problem-solving process: these conditions are the typical effects of a successful cooperative process. Helping the conflicting parties to develop a cooperative, problem-solving orientation to their conflict may be sufficient when the conflicting parties have reasonably well-developed group problem-solving and decision-making skills. Often they do not, and hence, they need tutelage in these skills if they are to deal with their problem successfully. And, often, conflicting parties do not have sufficient substantive knowledge concerning the issues in conflict to manage them constructively. Here, too, they may need tutelage by a third party if their conflict is to be resolved sensibly,

Implications For Schools

From the research and theorizing that I have summarized above and from the work of many other social scientists who have studied conflict, there has begun to emerge a coherent set of ideas and a systematic technology for training people in how to foster the constructive rather than the destructive potential in conflicts. During the past several years, a sprinkling of programs, workshops, curricula, and modules related to conflict resolution have sprung up in different schools in different parts of the country. From reading through a survey of such work in schools, prepared by Dr. Reardon, my impression is that most of this work is not yet sufficiently informed by the considerable amount of research and theorizing done by social scientists in this area. Nonetheless, there are several excellent programs: Gail Sadalla will shortly talk about one in San Francisco that seems to be of this nature.

Before I turn to Ms. Sadalla, I would like to sketch out what I consider to be the key ingredients of a comprehensive program of conflict resolution

in schools. Then I would like to outline briefly what I consider to be the central features in a curriculum concerned with fostering constructive conflict resolution.

Some of the key ingredients of a comprehensive program of conflict resolution in schools are represented in this workshop. The initial ingredient of our Workshop, "Cooperative learning," is central to any comprehensive program. It is aimed at fostering cooperative relations and attitudes among students and at developing the skills necessary to engage in effective collaborative work. A collaborative rather than an adversarial atmosphere in the schools among students -- but also within and between the various groups (e.g., students, teachers, administrators, parents) that compose a school -- would enormously facilitate constructive conflict resolution. The "Conflict resolution" ingredient is oriented toward developing the specific knowledge and skills required to be a constructive participant in conflicts in which one is directly involved and to be a helpful intervenor as a third-party or conflict manager in conflict involving others. Such knowledge and skills are likely to lessen the occurrence of destructive conflicts in schools and also in the neighborhoods and families of the school children. It seems apparent that it might be valuable for teachers, administrators, and parents as well as students to acquire such knowledge and skills. "The Constructive Use of Controversy in Teaching Subject-matters" is meant to provide students a continuing experience with the stimulating and creative aspects of lively controversy and to help them distinguish between criticizing ideas and criticizing the person holding the ideas. "Dispute resolution centers in the school" are meant to provide a congenial but neutral setting where conflicting parties (whether

they be individuals or groups) can meet with the help of conciliators, mediators, or arbitrators (who are trained, volunteer, individuals or panels of students, teachers, administrators, and/or parents) to deal with conflicts they can not resolve by themselves. Such centers would have an "outreach" function which would seek to encourage parties who were engaging in non-productive or destructive conflict to use the services available at the Dispute Resolution Center.

Now, let me briefly outline what I consider to be some of the central features in a curriculum concerned with fostering constructive conflict resolution knowledge and skills. This is a highly condensed outline. Time permits me to mention only a few of the principles around which a curriculum might be developed and these can not be discussed in detail.

1. Know what type of conflict you are involved in. There are 3 major types: the zero-sum conflict (a pure win-lose conflict), the mixed-motive (both can win, both can lose, one can win and the other can lose), and the pure cooperative (both can win or both can lose). It is important to know what kind of conflict you are in because the different types require different types of strategies and tactics. The common tendency is for inexperienced parties to define their conflict as "win-lose" even though it is a mixed-motive conflict. Very few conflicts are intrinsically win-lose conflicts but if you misperceive it to be such, you are apt to engage in a competitive, destructive process of conflict resolution. This is so except where there are very strong agreed-upon norms or rules regulating the nature of the competitive interaction (as in competitive games).

2. Respect yourself and your interests, respect the other and his or her interests. Personal insecurity and the sense of vulnerability often

lead people to define conflicts, as "life and death," win-lose struggles even when they are relatively minor, mixed-motive conflicts and this definition may lead to "conflict avoidance," "premature conflict resolution," or "obsessive involvement in the conflict". Helping students to develop a respect for themselves and their interests enables them to see their conflicts in reasonable proportion and facilitates their constructive confrontation. Helping students to learn to respect the other and the other's interests inhibits the use of competitive tactics of power, coercion, deprecation, and deception which commonly escalate the issues in conflict and often lead to violence.

3. Distinguish clearly between "interests and positions." Positions may be opposed but interests may not be. The classic example is that of a brother and sister, each of whom wanted the only orange available. The sister wanted the peel of the orange to make marmalade; the brother wanted to eat the inner part. Their positions ("I want the orange") were opposed, their interests were not. Often when conflicting parties reveal their underlying interests, it is possible to find a solution which suits them both.

4. Explore your interests and the other's interests to identify the common and compatible interests that you both share. Identifying shared interests makes it easier to deal constructively with the interest that you perceive as being opposed. A full exploration of one another's interests increases empathy and facilitates subsequent problem-solving.

5. Define the conflicting interests between oneself and the other as a mutual problem to be solved cooperatively. Define the conflict in the smallest terms possible, as a "here-now-this" conflict rather than as a

conflict between personalities or general principles - e.g., as a conflict about a specific behavior rather than about who is a better person.

Diagnose the problem clearly and then creatively seek new options for dealing with the conflict that lead to mutual gain. If no option for mutual gain can be discovered, seek to agree upon a fair rule or procedure for deciding how the conflict will be resolved. The point is that many conflicts can be resolved to the mutual satisfaction of the conflicting parties if their approach to the problem is made more open and flexible so that they are able to break through their stereotyped thought-constraints and creatively consider new possibilities. However, not all conflicts can be solved to mutual satisfaction even with the most creative thinking. Here, agreement upon a fair procedure that determines who gets his or her way, or seeking help from neutral, third-parties when such an agreement cannot be reached, may be the most constructive resolution possible under the circumstances.

6. In communicating with the other, listen attentively and speak so as to be understood: this requires the active attempt to take the perspective of the other and to check continually one's success in doing so. One should listen to the other's meaning and emotion in such a way that the other feels understood as well as is understood. Similarly, you want to communicate to the other one's thoughts and feelings in such a way that you have good evidence that he or she understands the way you think and feel. The feeling of being understood, as well as effective communication, enormously facilitates constructive resolution.

7. Be alert to the natural tendencies to bias, misperceptions, mis-judgments, and stereotyped thinking that commonly occur in oneself as well as

as the other during heated conflict. These errors in perception and thought interfere with communication, make empathy difficult, and impair problem-solving. Psychologists can provide a check list of the common forms of misperception and misjudgment occurring during intense conflict. These include black-white thinking, demonizing the other, shortening of one's time-perspective, narrowing of one's range of perceived options, and the fundamental attribution error. The fundamental attribution error is illustrated in the tendency to attribute the aggressive actions of the other to the other's personality while attributing one's own aggressive actions to external circumstances (such as the other's hostile actions). The ability to recognize and admit one's misperceptions and misjudgments clears the air and facilitates similar acknowledgment by the other.

8. Develop skills for dealing with difficult conflicts so that one is not helpless nor hopeless when confronting those who are more powerful, those who don't want to engage in constructive conflict resolution, or those who use dirty tricks. I do not have the time to discuss these skills but I can say that there is growing literature that relates to the skills involved in "hard bargaining" situations.

9. Finally, throughout conflict, one should remain a moral person - i.e., a person who is caring and just - and should consider the other as a member of one's moral community - i.e., as someone who is entitled to care and justice. Being a moral person is conducive to constructive behavior and to constructive conflict resolution. In the heat of conflict, there is often the tendency to shrink one's moral community and to exclude the other from it: this permits behavior toward the other which one would otherwise consider morally reprehensible. Such behavior escalates conflict and turns

it in the direction of violence and destruction. Firm adherence to one's basic moral values, even in the face of provocation inhibits the development of malignant, destructive conflict.

The foregoing listing of principles of constructive conflict resolution could provide the basis of curricula for courses and workshops on conflict resolution. I have not attempted here to specify the exercises, simulations, role-playing, and specific formats that can be employed to foster the internalization of the principles and the development of the skills involved in constructive conflict resolution. Much material of this sort has already been developed but not yet systematically researched for their effectiveness. It is evident that how the principles and skills of constructive conflict resolution are taught will vary very much with the nature of the population and age group being taught.

It is my hope that our new Center at Teachers College will systematically acquire and make available information about curricula and materials being employed throughout the world on this topic. In addition, we expect to be creating and doing research on curricula and instructional methods in this important area.