Cooperation and Conflict Resolution: 
Implications for Consulting Psychology

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In this invited address, the author reviews his theoretical and empirical work on cooperation and competition, conflict resolution, and distributive justice. Suggestions are offered regarding the implications and typical effects of this work.

It is, for me, a particular delight to receive the Harry Levinson Award from the Division of Consulting Psychology. I consider myself mainly a theorist and researcher rather than a consultant or practitioner, but I have always believed in my mentor’s (Kurt Lewin’s) dictum: “There is nothing so practical as a good theory.” This award, from a division devoted to fostering good practice, is a very gratifying affirmation that my theoretical and research work has socially useful implications. My brief address will attempt to give you an overview of some of the theoretical ideas with which I have been concerned. For a presentation of the social and personal context of my work, see my autobiographical chapter (Deutsch, 1999) in Reflections on 100 Years of Social Psychology, and for a good summary of my theoretical ideas and their practical implications, see The Handbook of Conflict Resolution: Theory and Practice (Deutsch & Coleman, 2000).

Let me start my lecture with an anecdote about George Bernard Shaw. After not having written a play in many years, it was rumored in London that he had just finished a new one. Hearing this rumor, an enterprising young reporter decided to visit Shaw to see whether it was true or not. He traveled to Shaw’s home and, after introducing himself, got right to the point by stating that he had heard that Shaw had written a new play and wanted to know if this was true and, if so, what it was about. Shaw, amused by the brashness of the young reporter said, “Yes, I have written a new play and you can get an idea about the play if I tell you how each act ends. The first act ends with the man embracing a woman.” He paused and then continued, “The second act ends with the man embracing a woman.” And then he said, “The third act also ends with the man embracing a woman.” The young reporter looked puzzled and asked hesitantly, “But what is the play’s theme?” Shaw replied, “The theme is change.” The reporter was still puzzled and even more hesitantly said, “I do not understand.” Shaw answered with a smile, “It’s not the same woman.”

My story is also in three parts. And, like Shaw’s play, it is about interpersonal relations. However, my theme is continuity: My work deals with the same intellectual cast of characters, but the setting changes from part to part. The first part deals with my work on cooperation and competition, the second with my work on conflict resolution, and the third with my work on distributive justice.

Cooperation and Competition

My first theoretical and empirical work was done as my PhD dissertation...

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at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology on cooperation and competition. It was done not long after Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and my work in psychology ever since has been shadowed by the atomic cloud. The dissertation was stimulated, in part, by contrasting images of the newly formed U.N. Security Council: cooperating together to prevent nuclear war or relating to one another competitively and antagonistically.

Let me briefly summarize the main ideas of the theory I developed for my dissertation. To oversimplify it somewhat, my theory has two basic notions: one relates to types of interdependence among the goals of the people involved in a given situation and the other to types of actions by the people involved. I identify two basic types of goal interdependence: promotive or positive interdependence, where the goals are positively linked in such a way that the amount of his goal that a person obtains or the probability of obtaining his goal is positively correlated with the amount of their goals that others obtain or with the probability of their obtaining their goals; and contrient or negative interdependence, where the goals are negatively linked in such a way that the amount or probability of goal attainment is negatively correlated with the amount or probability of the others' goal attainments. To put it more colloquially, when you are positively linked with another, you "sink or swim together"; when you are negatively linked, if the other sinks you swim and if the other swims you "sink."

I also characterize two basic types of actions by an individual: effective actions, which improve the actor's chances of obtaining his goal, and bungling actions, which worsen the actor's chances of obtaining his goal. (For purposes of simplicity, I use dichotomies for my basic concepts; the dichotomous types of interdependence and the dichotomous types of actions are, I assume, polar ends of continua.) I then combine types of interdepen-

dence and types of action to posit how they jointly will affect three basic social psychological processes: substitutability (how one person's actions can satisfy another person's intentions), cathexis (or attitudes), and inducibility (or influence).

Thus, my theory predicts that, when you are in a positively interdependent relationship with someone who bungles, his bungling will not be a substitute for the effective actions you had intended and the bungling will be cathected negatively. In fact, when your net-playing tennis partner in a doubles game allows an easy shot to get past him, you will have to extend yourself to prevent yourself from being harmed by the error. On the other hand, if your relationship is one of negative interdependence and the other bungles (as when your tennis opponent double-faults), your opponent's bungle will substitute for an effective action on your part and will be cathected positively or valued. The reverse is true for effective actions: An opponent's effective actions are not substitutable for yours and are negatively cathected or valued; a teammate can induce you to help him make an effective action, but you are likely to try to prevent or obstruct a bungling action by your teammate. In contrast, you will be willing to help an opponent bungle, but your opponent is not likely to induce you to help him make an effective action (which, in effect, would harm your chances of obtaining your goal).

My theory of cooperation and competition then goes on to make further predictions about different aspects of intrapersonal, interpersonal, intragroup, and intergroup processes from the predictions about substitutability, cathexis, and inducibility. Assuming that the individual actions in a group are more frequently effective than bungling, among the predictions that follow from the theory are that cooperative groups (i.e., those more promotively interdependent) as compared
with competitive groups will show the following characteristics:

1. More effective intermember communication will be exhibited. More ideas will be verbalized, and members will be more attentive to one another and more accepting of the ideas of other members and more influenced by them. They will have fewer difficulties in communicating with or understanding others.

2. More friendliness, more helpfulness, and less obstructiveness will be expressed in the discussions. Members will also be more satisfied with the group and its solutions and more favorably impressed by the contributions of the other group members. In addition, members of the cooperative groups will rate themselves higher in desire to win the respect of their colleagues and in obligation to the other members.

3. More coordination of effort, more division of labor, more orientation to task achievement, more orderliness in discussion, and higher productivity will be manifested in the cooperative groups (if the group task requires effective communication, coordination of effort, division of labor, or the sharing of resources).

4. More feeling of agreement with the ideas of others and a greater sense of basic similarity in beliefs and values, as well as more confidence in one's own ideas and in the value that other members attach to those ideas, will be obtained in the cooperative groups.

5. A cooperative process leads to the defining of conflicting interests as a mutual problem to be solved by collaborative effort. It facilitates the recognition of the legitimacy of the interests of others and of the necessity of searching for a solution that is responsive to the needs of all. It tends to limit rather than expand the scope of conflicting interests. Attempts to influence others tend to be limited to processes of persuasion.

In contrast, a competitive process stimulates the view that the solution of a conflict can only be one that is imposed by one side on the other. The enhancement of one's own power and the minimization of the legitimacy of the other side's interests in the situation become objectives. It fosters expansion of the scope of the issues in conflict, so that the conflict becomes a matter of general principle and is no longer confined to a particular issue at a given time and place. The escalation of the conflict increases its motivational significance to the participants and intensifies their emotional involvement in it; these factors, in turn, may make a limited defeat less acceptable or more humiliating than mutual disaster might be. Coercive processes tend to be used in the attempt to influence the other.

The above predictions were supported not only by my own research but also by hundreds of other studies (see Johnson & Johnson, 1989, for a summary of much of this research).

The Resolution of Conflict

This part starts with a question that is a complement to the question motivating the work described earlier. Instead of asking, "What are the effects of cooperation and competition?" it asks, "What are the conditions under which a cooperative or competitive relationship will evolve?" I found it convenient to address this latter question by studying conflicts; these are typically situations that contain a mixture of cooperative and competitive elements. In studying conflict, my students and I, along with a number of other social psychologists, pioneered in developing a methodology of experimental games and simulations, which has become widely used in the social sciences for both research and training.

Our research started off with the assumption that, if the parties involved in a conflict situation have a cooperative rather than competitive orientation toward one
another, they will be more likely to engage in a constructive process of conflict resolution. In my earlier research on the effects of cooperation and competition on group process, I had demonstrated that a cooperative process is more productive in dealing with a problem that a group faces than a competitive process. I reasoned that the same would be true in a mixed-motive situation of conflict: A conflict could be viewed as a mutual problem facing the conflicting parties. Our initial research on trust and suspicion using the Prisoners Dilemma game strongly supported my reasoning as did subsequent research using other experimental formats. I believe that this is a very important result, with considerable theoretical and practical significance.

At a theoretical level, it enabled me to link my prior characterization of cooperative and competitive social processes to the nature of the processes of conflict resolution that would typically give rise to constructive or destructive outcomes. That is, I had found a way to characterize the central features of constructive and destructive processes of conflict resolution; doing so represented a major advance beyond the characterization of outcomes as constructive or destructive. This was not only important in itself, but it also opened up a new possibility. At both the theoretical and practical levels, the characterization of constructive and destructive processes of conflict created the very significant possibility that we would be able to develop insight into the conditions that initiated or stimulated the development of cooperative–constructive as opposed to competitive–destructive processes of conflict. Much of the research of my students and myself has been addressed to developing this insight.

Our many studies seemed explainable by the assumption, which I have immodestly labeled “Deutsch’s Crude Law of Social Relations,” that the characteristic processes and effects elicited by a given type of social relationship also tend to elicit that type of social relationship. Thus, cooperation induces and is induced by a perceived similarity in beliefs and attitudes, a readiness to be helpful, openness in communication, trusting and friendly attitudes, sensitivity to common interests and de-emphasis of opposed interests, an orientation toward enhancing mutual power rather than power differences, and so on. In a similar manner, competition induces and is induced by the use of tactics of coercion, threat, or deception; attempts to enhance the power differences between oneself and the other; poor communication; minimization of the awareness of similarities in values and increased sensitivity to opposed interests; suspicious and hostile attitudes; the importance, rigidity, and size of the issues in conflict; and so on.

In other words, if one has systematic knowledge of the effects of cooperative and competitive processes, one will have systematic knowledge of the conditions that typically give rise to such processes and, by extension, to the conditions that affect whether a conflict will take a constructive or destructive course. My early theory of cooperation and competition is a theory of the effects of cooperative and competitive processes. Hence, from the crude law of social relations stated earlier, it follows that this theory provides insight into the conditions that give rise to cooperative and competitive processes. In other words, the theory provides an answer to the important question: What determines whether a conflict will take a constructive or destructive course?

**Distributive Justice**

Like the bourgeois gentleman of Molière’s play, who was delighted to learn that he had been speaking prose all the time, I have been surprised and delighted to rec-
ognize—only after much work in the area of distributive justice—that the research I had been doing on cooperation and competition and conflict resolution could be quite properly labeled "justice" research. The work on cooperation-competition could be thought of as throwing light on the social and psychological effects of two different principles of distributive justice: an egalitarian and a competitive, meritocratic one. The work on conflict resolution could be viewed as providing insight into the conditions under which people with conflicting interests are able to work out an agreement (i.e., a system of justice defining what each shall give and receive in the transaction between them) that is stable and mutually satisfying.

My work in the areas of distributive justice has focused on two main questions: (a) What are the social and psychological effects of distributing rewards according to different principles and values (such as merit, equality, and need)? and (b) what are the social and psychological determinants of the preference for and choice of different systems of distributive justice?

The results of our theorizing and research indicate that, for those who are not alienated from their work (or from authority or from their peers), the motivation to perform in a group setting is determined more by self-standards than by whether external rewards are distributed by merit, equally, or by need. However, when performance is aided by effective social cooperation or hindered by the obstructive actions of others, competitive and unequal distributive systems lead to poorer performance than egalitarian reward systems. The distributive system also significantly influences the social relations and attitudes that develop within the group: the more egalitarian the reward structure, the friendlier the relations are within the group and the more enjoyable is one's work.

Our theorizing and research on the social psychological determinants of the preference for and choice of different systems of distributive justice have been guided by my crude hypothesis of social relations, developed during my study of conflict resolution (the typical consequences of a given type of relation tend to elicit that relation).

Elsewhere, I (Deutsch, 1975) have presented rationales as to why the tendency for economically oriented groups will be to use the principle of equity, for solidarity-oriented groups to use the principle of equality, and for caring-oriented groups to use the principle of need. I have then characterized typical effects of economically oriented relations, solidarity-oriented relations, and caring-oriented relations and have hypothesized that these different kinds of typical effects will elicit different principles of distributive justice.

Thus, among the typical consequences of an economic orientation are (a) the development of a set of values that includes maximization, a means-end schema, neutrality or impartiality with regard to means, and competition; (b) the turning of man and everything associated with him into commodities, including labor, time, land, capital, personality, social relations, ideas, art, and enjoyment; (c) the development of measurement procedures that enable the value of different amounts and types of commodities to be compared; and (d) the tendency for economic activities to expand in scope and size. The crude hypothesis advanced above would imply that, if a social situation is characterized by impersonality, competition, maximization, an emphasis on comparability rather than uniqueness, largeness in size or scope, and so forth, then an economic orientation and the principle of equity are likely to be dominant in the group or social system.

In the same manner, one could detail the typical consequences of a solidarity-oriented group or society. These include (a) the development of a set of values that
emphasize personal ties to other group members, group loyalty, mutual respect, personal equality, and cooperation; (b) uniqueness of attachments to people, activities, and objects associated with the group so that they are unexchangeable and therefore of absolute value; and (c) the development of integrative procedures to reduce role conflicts, misunderstanding, and other sources of interpersonal hostility within the group. The crude hypothesis would imply that, if these typical consequences of a solidarity-oriented group are found in a group, the group will be solidarity-oriented and will have an egalitarian system of distributive justice.

The caring and the solitary orientations have much in common, and both differ in similar ways from the economic orientation. However, the caring orientation is characterized by a more direct and explicit responsibility for the fostering of the personal development and personal welfare of others in the group. In addition, the caring relationship may involve dependents of unequal status as well as others of equal status. Typical consequences of a caring orientation include (a) the development of a set of values that stresses responsibility for the other, permissiveness toward the other's expression of his needs, heightened sensitivity to the other's needs and stage of development, support and nurturance in relation to the other's legitimate needs, and nonreciprocity in relation to the other's hostility as he suffers frustrations during the caring relationship; and (b) the development of intimate ties that may reflect and express one's own early experiences in caring relationships. Thus, experimentally, one would predict that heightening the salience of the relative needs of group members, heightening the sense of responsibility in relation to the needs of the others, and so on would lead to the use of need rather than equality or equity as the principle of distributive justice.

Let me conclude my brief review of some of my work by stating that the critical problems that confront us as individuals, families, organizations, communities, nations, and as a world revolve about the topics I have just discussed. For our children and grandchildren to live more emotionally fulfilling lives in more humane and congenial social environments, we will have to enhance our knowledge and ability both to foster more effective cooperation and more constructive conflict resolution and to reduce the gross injustices at all levels of our social life—in our families, communities, organizations, and nations as well as in our international community.

References


