Recurrent Themes in the Study of Social Conflict

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As is well illustrated in the collection of papers in this issue, "conflict" is a concept which finds a place in each of the various disciplines which comprise the social sciences. Moreover, it is evident that any serious attempt to understand a specific social conflict such as the Arab-Israeli one, or to prescribe for it, cannot restrict itself to the vantage point of any one discipline. Social realities do not conveniently shape themselves to the molds of social science specialties. This perversely characteristic of social reality poses a crucial problem for our discipline-oriented and discipline-segregated social sciences: How can we achieve a Leonardean breadth and intellectual integration in our collective heads even if they are not likely to be found in our individual ones?

The foregoing question is a recurrent issue whenever social scientists or social practitioners have an intrinsic interest in a given social reality per se rather than an interest in it, abstractly, as an embodiment of social science concepts and relations. This issue is particularly acute for those interested in social conflict because much of the impetus to work in this area is fueled by concern arising from problems such as war and violence that are associated with actual or potential destructive conflict within or between nations. Without a Leonardean quality, it will be difficult for the social sciences to offer useful prescriptions for preventing or ending such destructive conflicts. None of the papers in this collection addresses itself to how this breadth and integration are to be achieved, yet many of them are quite remarkable in their willingness to cross disciplinary borders. Elsewhere (Deutsch, 1975a) I have discussed this problem in connection with some

suggestions for graduate training of the problem-oriented social psychologist.

A second recurrent theme evoked by the papers has to do with the stance of the social scientist towards his subject matter: Is it primarily oriented toward description or prescription? There is a strong mixture of both here. Yet, when it comes to prescription, it is often not clear what the objectives and values are which underlie the prescription. In the area of social conflict, it is particularly important to be explicit about one's position: Who is supposed to benefit from the prescription and in what respects? Do we unwittingly take the side of maintaining the status quo, and thus favor the powers-that-be, as some Marxist critics (Plon, 1974) of current social science charge? Should we instead take the side of the "invisible," exploited groups as some would advocate (Apfelbaum & Lubek, 1976)? Or should we take some larger perspective which embraces not only those directly participating in the conflict but also those who may be indirectly affected?

If one examines the social science literature on social conflict, it is evident that values and assumptions have played a large role in shaping the approaches of different investigators to their subject matter. Schelling in his classic book, *The Strategy of Conflict* (1960), implicitly approaches conflict from the perspective of how to advise one or the other party in a conflict to wage conflict so as to win or, minimally, to do better than his adversary; his emphasis is on the competitive feature of the mixed-motive situation. In contrast, my own work (summarized in Deutsch, 1973) stresses the cooperative potential inherent in conflict; it is oriented toward increasing mutual rather than unilateral gains in a conflict situation. My sense of the field is that most social scientists tend to stress the competitive potential of conflict (whether their orientation favors the status quo or radical change) and, unwittingly, they neglect the socially productive potentials that inher in conflict. It is obvious that, given my approach, I consider this neglect unfortunate for social science as well as society.

A third theme evoked by this collection of articles concerns the relationship between "justice" and "conflict." Several of the papers have noted that inequity, relative deprivation, and injustice may give rise to conflict. It is also apparent that conflict may give rise to injustice. One way of evaluating how constructive or destructive a conflict has been is in terms of how much of a decrease or increase in the sense of injustice there has been among the people affected. If conflicts can be evaluated in terms of how just their results are, it is evident that it would be useful

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RECURRENT THEMES


Deutsch, M. Averaging the judges of justice. In In M. J. Lerner & M. Ross (Eds.), The quest for justice: Toward a psychology of justice. New York: Behavioral Science Foundation, 1974.


Schelling, T. How can we be sure we are disadvantaged by the justice? In D. Kluegel, J. H. Stasser, C. A. Stasser, & C. M. Davis (Eds.), The psychology of social justice. Hillsdale, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1980.

Morton Deutsch

To have some systematic ideas about justice and also about the processes and factors affecting people's sense of what is just and unjust.

Fortunately, in recent years, there has been considerable work by philosophers and social scientists directly relating to justice. For instance, in the case of the justice motive in social behavior (Lerner, 1975), I have attempted to present my ideas of how to 'average out the judges' that is, how to clarify the concept of justice and also to give insights into the conditions which activate the justice motive. In my earlier work, I have attempted to present my view of what we are beginning to know about the justice motive, and how it may be caused, or caused to occur by particular procedures for resolving conflict.

We can answer the question about the justice motive, or 'how to be just' (Lerner, 1975), by using the procedures by which decisions are made. Such procedures may be used to make the decision-making process more thorough, or more efficient.

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One of the main points of my argument is that the study of social conflict is becoming more integrated with the work on other relevant topics in the social sciences.

REFERENCES


Deutsch, M. The resolution of conflict: Constructive and destructive processes.