TOWARD AN UNDERSTANDING OF CONFLICT

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Sometime ago, in the garden of a friend's house, my five year old son and his chum were struggling over a water hose. Each wanted to use it first to water the flowers. Both were tugging at it in an effort to get it away from the other, and both were crying. Each was very frustrated and neither was able to use the hose to sprinkle the flowers as he had desired. After reaching a deadlock in their tug-of-war, they began to punch one another and call each other names. The escalation of the conflict to physical violence led to the intervention of a powerful third party (an adult) who suggested a game to determine who would use the hose first. The boys, each somewhat frightened by the violence of the struggle, were relieved to agree to the suggestion. They got absorbed quickly in the game of trying to find a small object I had hidden and obediently followed the rule that the winner would have a first turn of two minutes with the hose. They soon tired of the water hose and began to pick blackberries which they threw provocatively at a ten year old who responded to their ineffectual sallies with an amused tolerance.

Even a simple episode of this sort suggests many questions which are pertinent to conflicts of all sorts: intrapersonal, interpersonal, intragroup, intergroup and international. One might inquire about the participants in the conflict, how their individual characteristics (their strength, their cognitive resources, their personalities, their emotional state, etc.) and their prior relationship with one another affected the development and course of the dispute. One might expect, for instance, that if the disputants were men rather than boys the resort to physical violence would

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1 This paper is based on a chapter in the author's forthcoming book, The Resolution of Conflict.
then the state of affairs as perceived by the conflicting parties, and the interdependence between the objective and perceived realities. Let me illustrate some of the possibilities of misperception. I may perceive an incompatibility where there is none (my wife’s clothes and my files may both be able to fit into our closets even though neither of us believes so); I may perceive an incompatibility as noncontingent but, in reality, it is contingent upon changeable features of the situation (her clothes and my files can both fit if I remove some shelves from the closet that are rarely used); I may experience the frustration and annoyance of incompatible actions without perceiving that they are due to conflict (my closet space may have become cramped and overcrowded because my wife has placed various objects into my space without my being aware of this); or I may perceive an incompatibility but make the wrong attribution so that I perceive the nature of the conflict incorrectly (I may blame my son for having put some of his things in my closet when it was done by my wife).

The presence or absence of a conflict is never rigidly determined by the objective state of affairs. Apart from the possibility of misperception, psychological factors enter into the determination of conflicts in yet another crucial way for a conflict is determined by the values of the conflicting parties. Even the classical example of pure conflict—two starving men on a lifeboat with only enough food for the survival of one—loses its purity if one or both of the men have social or religious values which can become more dominant psychologically than the hunger need or the desire for survival.

The point of these remarks is that neither the occurrence nor the outcome of conflict does completely and rigidly depend on objective circumstances. This means that the fates of the participants in a situation of conflict are not inevitably determined by the external circumstances in which they find themselves. Whether conflict takes a productive or destructive course is thus open to influence. Even under the most unfavorable objective circumstances, psychological factors can lead conflict to take a destructive course. I am not denying the importance of “real” conflict but rather asserting that the psychological processes of perceiving and evaluating are also “real” and they are involved in turning objective conditions into experienced conflict.

Let me clarify what I mean by the value-laden terms “constructive” and “destructive.” At the extremes, these terms are easy to define. Thus, a conflict has clearly destructive consequences if the participants in it are dissatisfied with the outcomes and all feel they have lost as a result of the conflict. Similarly, a conflict has productive consequences if the participants all are satisfied with their outcomes and feel that they have gained as a result of the conflict. Also, in most instances, a conflict whose outcomes are satisfying to all the participants will be more constructive than one which is satisfying to some and dissatisfying to others.

My characterization of destructive and constructive conflicts obviously has it roots in the ethical value “the greatest good for the greatest number.” Admittedly, there are still considerable theoretical and empirical difficulties to be overcome before such a value can be operationalized with any generality or precision. It is, of course, easier to identify and measure satisfactions-dissatisfactions and gains-losses in simple laboratory conflict situations than it is in the complex conflicts of groups in everyday life. Yet even in these complex situations, it is not impossible to compare conflicts roughly in terms of their outcomes. In some instances, union-management negotiations may lead to a prolonged strike with considerable loss of time and income and resulting ill-will to both parties; in other instances it may lead to a mutually satisfying agreement where both sides obtain something they want. In some cases, a quarrel between a husband and wife will clear up unexpressed misunderstandings and lead to greater intimacy while in others it may produce only bitterness and estrangement.

One more definitional point. It is often useful to distinguish between the “manifest” conflict and the “underlying” conflict. Consider the conflict of an obsessional patient over whether or not she should check to see if she really turned off the stove, or the argument of two brothers over which TV program is to be tuned in, or the controversy between a school board and a teachers’ union over the transfer of a teacher, or an international dispute involving alleged infractions of territory by alien aircraft. Each of these manifest conflicts may be symptomatic of underlying conflict: the obsessional patient may want to trust herself but be afraid that she has impulses which would be destructive if
unchecked; the two brothers may be fighting to obtain what each considers to be his fair share of the family's rewards; and so on. "Manifest" conflict often cannot be resolved more than temporarily unless the underlying conflict is dealt with or unless it can be disconnected and separated from the underlying conflict so that it can be treated in isolation.

**THE QUERY**

I now return to the basic question to which this study is addressed. I emphasize that the issue is not how to eliminate or prevent conflict but rather how to make it productive, or at least, how to prevent it from being destructive. I shall not deal with situations of "pure" conflict in which inevitably one side loses what the other gains. My interest is in conflict where there is a mixture of cooperative and competitive interests, where a variety of outcomes is possible: mutual loss, gain for one and loss for the other. Thus, my initial query can be restated as an investigation of the conditions under which the participants will evolve a cooperative relationship or a competitive relationship in a situation which permits either.

I would stress here that my examination of pure conflict is not very restricting. As I have indicated above, conflict is determined by what is valued by the conflicting parties and by their beliefs and perceptions: values, beliefs, and perceptions are not always unalterable. In addition, there are few circumstances, particularly if the situation is repetitive or if the participants are involved in many different relationships together, which are so rigidly structured that inevitably one's gains must come from the other's losses. It is, of course, true that the participants may define an occasion which permits mutual gain as one of pure conflict and respond to one another in a purely competitive manner.

There is an important advantage to be gained from the reformulation of my query into an investigation of the conditions under which a cooperative or competitive relationship will evolve among participants who have a mixture of cooperative and competitive attitudes toward one another. It permits the application of considerable previous theoretical and research work to the characterization of two major processes of interrelationships in dealing with conflict: a cooperative process and a competitive one. I assume that the development of one or the other type of relationship will be manifest not only in the outcomes of conflict but also in the processes of dealing with it.

**REFERENCES**


