
UNIT 2 SOURCES OF CONFLICT

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2.1 INTRODUCTION

What are the sources of conflict? Are human beings destined always to experience conflict? Or is conflict something that can be eradicated? These are the basic questions that need to be addressed when examining structural and societal conflicts. How these questions are answered will influence the manner in which we attempt to resolve conflicts, or even whether we attempt conflict resolution. There are three basic theory types which must be considered. These types are inherency, contingency and interactionist.

A simple illustration of the schools of thought might be in order. The view that conflict is inherent has been expounded for centuries, if not millennia. One could argue that the story of Adam and Eve and the 'fall' is one of inherency- it was in the nature of humans to fall from paradise, it was inevitable. Eve, so the inherency argument goes, was destined to err. Her tasting of the forbidden fruit was not a matter of her exercise of free will, but rather, fundamental to her being. Thus there was nothing that could have been done to prevent the fall from paradise.

Unlike the inherency school, however, the contingent school would see the story of Adam and Eve differently. Eve's taking of the apple resulted from some external

factors, outside of her being. She was tempted by the serpent, and persuaded to do something that she might not have done in other circumstances. Conditions, apart from herself, created powerful forces upon her behaviour, leading her to act as she did. Eve was not destined to err, but rather led to it. The fall from paradise, from the contingency perspective, was wholly preventable.

Different still from the inherency or contingency school is the interactionist view that behaviour depends upon both inherent and contingent factors, the two of which cannot be separated or further reduced. From this perspective, Eve's behaviour depended upon both her biological self-the speed at which she acted, her innate intelligence, and the rest of her genetic make up- and the external factors she found herself faced with, such as the power being exercised on her, her social situation and her status. Together, these forces combined to impact upon her and informed her behaviour.

Aims and Objectives

After studying this Unit, you should be able to:

- Know the various sources of conflicts in a given society
- Understand the inherency, contingent and interactionist theories of the sources of conflict.

2.2 INHERENCY THEORIES

Hobbes made the observation that humanity is characterised by ceaseless, and indeed relentless, thirst for power. For Hobbes, humans carry within them the inherent drive to fight, which demands that societies be led by power. Only by imposing will upon the ruled can society be organised to run efficiently and peacefully. Hobbes was followed some years later by Edmund Burke who argued that the only way to curtail humanity's urge to conflict and violence is through law and custom. The writings of these British political philosophers influenced greatly the development of the democratic liberal state in the West.

One of the most influential forces in the inherency school was Sigmund Freud and his school of psychoanalysis. Fundamental to Freud's view of humanity are the contending life and death instincts. The life instinct has within it the desire for pleasure. The libido refers to the life energy within humans, though it was originally viewed by Freud as being reflected in terms of sexual energy. Opposed to the life instinct is the death instinct, or 'thanatos'. Freud (1990, p.164) believed that thanatos 'turns into the destructive instinct when it is directed outwards on to objects'. The death instinct, however, can be transformed within the person to serve the purposes of life. Making the matter even more complex, the externalisation of the death instinct, in the form of aggression, may be beneficial for the person, though harmful for those around.

Aggression, then, can be viewed as intrinsic to human behaviour, and serves as a fundamental and essential means by which humans protect and enhance their existence. Aggression, from this Freudian perspective, is carried out in the name of self-preservation, and is inherent to humans.

By extension, then, it may be said that a Freudian perspective on conflict is based upon the interplay between the life and death instincts. As aggression may be the externalisation of the death instinct, conflict more generally may be from a similar source.

Whereas Freud focused on the psychology of human action, others have focused more explicitly on the evolutionary and biologically competitive nature of human aggression and conflict. A notable proponent of 'aggression as a tool of survival' is Konrad Lorenz, author of *On Aggression*. The book, first published in 1963, expounds a theory outlining the purpose of aggression, not only in humans, but throughout the animal world. Like Freud, Lorenz argues that aggression serves a purpose in that it in some way assists the organism in its quest for survival. Rapoport (1986, p.3) holds that at its most elemental 'aggressive behavior does confer a survival advantage on the species in which it is genetically imbedded'. Lorenz sees aggression in its most basic form as serving three primary functions:

‘balanced distribution of animals of the same species over the available environment, selection of the strongest by rival fights, and defense of the young’ (Lorenz, 1971, p.40).

He argues for a special emphasis on the value of intra-species aggression, stating;

I return to the theme of the survival value of the rival fight, with the statement that this only leads to useful selection where it breeds fighters fitted for combat with extra-specific enemies as well as for intra-specific duels. The most important function of rival fighting is the selection of an aggressive family defender, and this presupposes a further function of intra-specific aggression: brood defense (ibid, p. 39).

He makes his argument using a host of examples from throughout the animal world, including Homo Sapiens.

The process of aggression is stimulated by instinct, which Lorenz notes as a much misunderstood mechanism. For Lorenz, instinct does not respond easily to manipulation, if at all. Like Freud, Lorenz sees instinct as something over which people have no control; it simply happens. Aggression, then, is quite dangerous, in that nothing hinders its expression. Furthermore, instinct need not be expressed through external stimulus; the body itself can produce the stimulus needed to create the reaction. Thus aggression becomes a dangerous instinct because its expression appears beyond any simple predictive device.

Using a Lorenzian model, then, all human social action is targeted towards distribution of the population, selection of the strongest, and defence of the young. The human aggressive impulse also gets translated into social activities, such as warfare. As Lorenz (1971, p. 275) notes, ‘we must face the fact that militant enthusiasm has evolved from the hackle-raising and chin-protruding communal defense instinct of our prehuman ancestors’. For Lorenz, then, warfare is as natural as any other form of human aggression. Perhaps the only difference

between the aggression of, for example, the rat and humans is that humans have developed an extensive and elaborate mechanism for pursuing that aggression.

Following the path of Lorenz, Robert Ardrey, in the *Territorial Imperative*, examined the role of territory in the onset of aggression. His objective was to examine the role of territory in humans. He wrote: The concept of territory as a genetically determined form of behavior in many species is today accepted beyond question in the biological sciences. But so recently have our observations been made and our conditions formed that we have yet to explore the implications of territory in our estimate of man (Ardrey, 1967, p.14).

For Ardrey, territory represents a tremendous influence over human action, and even influences the ways in which humans form social groups. Ardrey (ibid, p. 15) asks, 'How could it be that such a number of peoples in such varying environments so remote from each other should all form similar social groups based on what would seem to be a human invention, the ownership of land? Of course, Ardrey's observation of the ubiquitous nature of land ownership would be compelling if it were true, but evidence shows that there is no universal concept of land ownership. It would be more true to say that groups have a notion of physical place, without the connotation of ownership.

Relating territoriality to human behaviour, Ardrey (1967, p. 15) argues that: The principal cause of modern warfare arises from the failure of an intruding power correctly to estimate the defensive resources of a territorial defender. The enhancement of energy invariably engendered in the defending proprietor, the union of partners welded by the first sound of gunfire, the biological morality demanding individual sacrifice, even of life; all of the innate commands of the territorial imperative act to multiply the apparent resources of a defending nation.

Territory becomes the single most influential force in driving human action. Aggression, unlike in Lorenz's model, does not directly serve the species as such, but rather the group, as defined by territory. The drive to defend territory leads

humans to increase their resources, multiply their activities and place themselves in mortal danger. Yet like Lorenz, Ardrey creates a picture of aggression in which humans have no control; they are enslaved by their own evolutionary history. In fact, Ardrey paints a grim picture for the future of humanity's ability to handle conflict.

The human predicament contains two forces. On the one hand that balance of terror, the *pax atomica*, compels a general peace. In any event, war as we have known it has become both an impractical outlet for our innate psychological needs and an impractical external pressure enforcing our social amity. But on the other hand, man's cultural achievements have long since pressed him beyond a point of possible return, and if he is to survive on his irreversible course of technological mastery, specialised skill, and consequent interdependence, then he becomes with every passing year, every passing day, more at the mercy of social amity and mutual co-operation. And so we must ask: Have our cultural achievements in peacetime, eliminating the reality of natural hazard, matched our cultural achievements in wartime, eliminating the reality of enemies, so that in final sum we must face that primate impossibility, exaggerated by human achievement, reduction to zero of effective amity? (Ibid, p. 257).

What the work of Ardrey does provide, though, is some insight into the possible origins of nationalism and ethnicity. It could be argued that nations are the logical extensions of groupings of human beings, who perceive themselves as a group. In defining itself as a group, that collective then behaves aggressively to those who are not its members.

Employing classic deterrence reasoning, de Waal (Ibid, p. 11) suggests that the quickest method of countering aggressive escalation is through 'soothing remarks or body contact'. Primates, including humans, de Waal argues, have developed an intricate system of behaviour to counter aggression. This behaviour, furthermore, is innate, and is expressed primarily within the context of one's own group.

Like Lorenz and Ardrey, de Waal also argues that not all aggression is necessarily negative. Aggression, he says, serves as a method of creating the sense of a group. Unlike many other theorists, de Waal is not suggesting that it is aggression against some outside group, but rather aggression within the group. Cohesion is created, for example, by the practice of hazing, where young military cadets in military academies undergo rituals, such as cleaning toilets with toothbrushes, or standing guard in the nude. These entail aggression on the part of group members towards members of their own group. Yet from the perspective of the group, the aggression may have been useful. For de Waal peace comes, then, not out of some sense of equitable turning of swords into ploughshares, but rather through the acceptance of aggression, and of the reconciliation offered by other group members. In a sense, peace is the acceptance of inequality, the recognition that some are of a more equal status than others. To use de Wall's (1989) phrase, 'unification through subordination' may be the norm, though there is room for egalitarian resolution of conflict. It is just that egalitarian conflict resolution is not the norm.

Keith Webb (1986) has outlined the common characteristics and sources of conflict shared by inherency theories. These are:

- The fundamental disposition of individuals is towards power and dominance, violence is only an extreme but normal expression of this tendency.
- There are alternative channels for seeking power, of which collective political violence is merely one.
- The major problem is explaining why violence does not occur more often.
- The choice of violence is a question of tactical consideration.
- Tactical choices are influenced by cost-benefit calculations.
- Cultural factors play a relatively minor role, and will both inhibit and promote the use of violence.

- Factors such as the coercive balance of forces and facilitating conditions are of major importance.

2.3 CONTINGENT THEORIES

Counterpoised to the inherency arguments of the sources of human aggression are contingency theories. Contingency theories postulate that aggression is not innate, but its expression depends upon factors external to the person. As Webb (1986, p. 172) explains 'Conflict may occur through a scarcity of a competition for resources, or through a scarcity of and competition for resources, or through maldistribution of ample resources. But it may not be a necessary condition of human societies that these conditions pertain.'

The earliest 'modern' presentation of the contingency argument can be found in the writing of the French philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau. Rousseau saw humanity as having moved from a state of nature to one of society, and social intercourse. In addition to humanity's 'desire for self-preservation, which Hobbes had found basic to man, Rousseau added compassion, the instinctive abhorrence felt at the sight of another living being, and especially another man, suffering pain and death' (Germino, 1972, p.98). This compassion militates against the pure aggression and constant warfare found in Hobbes's work. Alone, humans are not innately aggressive or warlike. Ultimately, though, Rousseau notes humanity's creation of society, and thus comes the fall. It is not just any society that creates difficulty for people, but rather it is entry into the wrong sort of society. The goal, writes Rousseau, is

To find a form of association which defends and protects with the entire common force the person and goods of each associate, and in which each uniting himself to all obeys only himself and remains as free as before-such is the fundamental problem of which the social contract gives the solution (Rousseau, quoted in Germino, 1972).

The difficulty, of course, is that not all (or even many) forms of social association defend or protect the individual. Thus, it seems that society often hinders an individual from obtaining what is necessary to their happy and productive life. Rousseau encapsulates his perspective nicely when he writes, 'Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains.'

The impact of Rousseau on later political theorists is notable. Perhaps the most important of his followers was Karl Marx. Marx's theory of class conflict was built upon a contingency argument. He argued that humans are separated from their true nature by the organisation of work. Workers are controlled and dominated by economic factors beyond their direct control. This economic system, termed capitalism, is an arrangement whereby the producers of labour are alienated from the fruits of their labour. So, a person may make a chair, but it is not **his** chair; the chair is owned by somebody else, who secures the chair from the labourer. In so doing, the producer of the chair does not receive an equitable exchange and is thereby kept in bondage to the capitalist.

The class of people who belong to the capitalists are pitted against the labouring class, or those who are alienated from their products. This tension is expressed in terms of class conflict, and is the engine by which conflict itself ends. Evolution of communism takes hold, wherein, first, political communism arises, with the state still intact. The second stage is where the state is transcended, yet it is a condition in which the owners of private property still have influence. A final stage is entered into where there is 'a genuine resolution of the antagonism between man and nature and between man and man; it is the true resolution of the conflict between existence and essence' (Marx quoted in Germino, 1972). Like Rousseau, Marx felt that society and the development of society dramatically transformed humanity's condition. Whether conflict existed or not was dependent upon society, not the behaviour of individuals.

Some may argue that Marx's theories do not really fit well into the inherency/contingency split. Because of Marx's emphasis on history- that this is,

for example, the historical epoch of the capitalists- it is difficult to know whether he is a contingency theorist or an inherency theorist. All human relations are conflictual, Marx argues, because of the historical (capitalist) epoch in which we live. The ironclad nature of such an argument suggests that there is something inherent in human behaviour. Yet the transition out of this historical epoch is in human hands, and not innate. Thus, for some, Marx's theory rests on the precipice between inherency and contingency.

One of the most important issues that Marx brings to the fore is the role of economic and social organisation and their collective impact on human behaviour. In the early part of the twentieth century, John Maynard Keynes, the noted British economist, brought attention to the flaws of European economic organization following the end of World War 1 and into the Great Depression. Keynes was not in any sense a Marxist; he was a follower of the democratic liberal tradition. To Keynes, the main social problems that he encountered included unemployment, disease and hunger. These are the causes of human misery and humans can act in ways to prevent them. It is the duty of government, then, to use its powers to influence the economy by stimulating investment, through a variety of means.

Keynes did not see humanity as innately tied to economic deprivation. He wrote: But what counsel of hope can Revolution offer to sufferers from economic privation, which does not arise out of the injustices of distribution but is general? The only safeguard against Revolution is indeed the fact that, even to the minds of men, who are desperate, Revolution offers no prospect of improvement whatever (Keynes, 1920, p. 296).

The alternative to the inadequate revolution was, of course, an economic system which provided for an increase in the general welfare of the citizenry. Implied throughout of course, is the concept that deprivation, poverty and hunger are causes of social conflict. This underscores many an economist's theories of human behaviour. Where Marx saw the state as, ultimately, working against the interests of humanity, Keynes saw it as perhaps the only alternative to social decay and

violence. Keynes was neither the first nor the last to suggest that the state could resolve the ills which frustrated humanity's existence.

Implicit in many contingency theories is the argument that when humans are faced with a force that frustrates their normal behaviour, they become aggressive. This seemingly rigid link between frustration and aggression, however, was in need of modification. One can easily see that not all frustration leads to aggression- at least certainly not in any immediate sense. Most people in a traffic jam do not jump out and start assaulting those around them, though many may feel the impulse. Clearly, the relationship between frustration and aggression is more complex. It is also clear that aggression is not the only response to frustration. For example, it has been argued that frustration can lead to individuals becoming helpless. In the face of ongoing frustration, parties may, instead of becoming aggressive, acquiesce and simply surrender as a coping mechanism. Martin Seligman (1975) described coping helplessness as learned helplessness. It is equally unclear what is meant by frustration and what causes frustration? Is frustration always from an external source? Is a frustrating event an objective phenomenon, or subjective, or both? Equally difficult is aggression. Is aggression always a physical act? Is there such a thing as symbolic aggression? Is there such thing as internalised aggression, and if so, how do we know? Can frustration be stored up, to result in aggression at a later date? While Dollard et al. seek to address many of these questions, they do so in a sometimes less than convincing manner, so that these questions represent the many difficulties that impact upon the frustration-aggression hypothesis.

The existence of a social prejudice against a group of people is evidence, first, that those who have the prejudice have been frustrated and, secondly, that they are expressing their aggression or part of it in fairly uniform fashion. Race prejudice, then, can be explained with the help of the present hypothesis (Dollard et al., 1969, p. 151).

Racism, then, exists when the frustrated target their frustration on a group. That group, using this argument, may or may not be the source of the frustration, they

may simply be scapegoats. In Australia for example, the attacks against Indian students can be founded upon frustration felt among the native population and result in aggression against the Indian students. Of course, the Indian students would feel frustrated having received the aggression of the natives and would themselves behave aggressively.

Placement of the frustration-aggression hypothesis in the contingency theory camp rests upon the observation that if there were no frustration, then there would be no aggression. By extension we may also say that if there were no frustration, then there would be no conflict. So, the expression of conflict seems to be dependent upon some factor outside the human organism.

Albert Bandura argued that there are three primary sources of human aggression. Those sources are familial setting, sub cultural context and symbolic modeling. Social learning takes place in the family, and from that environment we develop models of appropriate behaviour. Simply stated, Bandura's argument is that violent families produce violent offspring. By extension, then, it can be argued that conflictual families produce conflictual offspring.

A second source of aggression can be found in subcultures. Bandura (1973, p. 97) explains: 'The highest rates of aggressive behavior are found in environments where aggressive models abound and where aggressiveness is regarded as a highly valued attribute'. So, for example, in street gangs with a premium on violence, individual members of the gang would be expected to be violent. This is not too surprising, but Bandura (Ibid, p.98) asks why not people in violent environments should be violent, but 'why anyone residing in such an environment should adopt a markedly different style of life'. Why is it that a person raised in a violent environment may not be violent? Of course, one reason why people may not become violent is that many people may simply aspire not to be violent. Living in a violent environment does not make one an automation, desiring only that which is readily available. This desire for things other than violence may lead parents to instill in children values and behaviours that are in and of themselves counter-

violent. Bandura does suggest, though, that there is a strong capacity to instruct a group in the ways of violence. He makes his point in suggesting that the military is an excellent example of making otherwise relatively non-violent persons violent.

A final category of social learning comes from symbolic sources. Bandura argues that a major source for the transmission of violence is television. Television transmits pictures of violence, impressions of violence and even the symbolic culture of violence. We learn how to cope with 'reality' through television, and are susceptible to its messages. This is especially true among the young of society.

Television as a source of social learning, especially as a device for transmitting conflictual values, is an area that has been debated hotly over the years. There appears to be no easy answer to the question, primarily because it is so difficult to isolate television-watching behaviour from the rest of our social interactions.

Through the interaction of these three areas we are invested with the culture of violence and aggression, and given models of how to deal with conflict. Using Bandura's model it is possible to speak of a culture of conflict, an organisation which is conflictual, or even a conflictual nation.

In sum, the contingency theory school holds that conflict and aggression are dependent upon factors outside the individual. In general, contingency theories hold:

- Individuals are basically pacific.
- Under special conditions the pacific impulses may be diverted.
- The major problem for conflict theory is to explain the frequency of violence.
- When special conditions arise, other human dispositions may be activated.
- Collective violence is affected rather than coolly calculated.
- The tendency to violence may be affected by cultural learning.

- Two further minor factors affecting the use of violence are coercive balance between forces and other factors facilitating the successful use of violence (Webb, 1986).

2.4 INTERACTIONIST THEORIES

A third school is the interactionist, which combines elements of the contingent and inherency schools. There really is no body of literature that rejects the premise that behaviour derives from either nature or nurture. Instead of debating this old and apparently unending debate it ought to be rejected outright. Wrangham and Peterson call the nature versus nurture debate Galton's Error, after Francis Galton, a cousin of Charles Darwin. Galton took the phrase 'nature versus nurture' from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. Since then scholars have been engaged in trying to ascertain the relative contributions of the two. Wrangham and Peterson (1996) rejected Galton's Error, arguing that it is a false choice. The best course is to cast off the reductionist impulse and instead focus on how both genetics and social interactions commingle to create human behaviour. Both the inherency and the contingency school suffer from difficulties that make exclusive reliance upon their assumptions questionable. The inherency school ignores social grouping, and when it does focus on such groupings, inherency theorists simply say society is what it is, and results from genetics. The contingency theorists also suffer some significant difficulties, prime among which is the inability to deal with clear biological limitations on human behaviour. For example, if intelligence is a matter of genetics, and has an influence over conflict behaviour, then how does the contingency school cope?

The interactionist approach is best illustrated by examining height. A tall person becomes tall, relative to others, through two influences. One influence is genetics; a person is tall in part because of his or her genetic constitution. The tall person, though, is also tall because of social factors, such as the availability of high – protein foodstuffs. Citizens of Japan are now increasing in average height, owing to a change in diet. It was not that the Japanese are genetically short, but rather that

their diet inhibited the full expression of their genes for height. So, the height of the Japanese (and everybody else for that matter) is governed by the interplay between genetic make-up and social environment.

Burton has argued that needs satisfaction is essential to society. In this sense, his work reflects that of many of the inherency theorists. Human beings are motivated by a series of drives, or needs, which compel them to act. As Burton (1990, p. 36) explains, 'From the perspective of conflict studies, the important observation is that these needs will be pursued by all means available. In ontological terms the individual is conditioned by biology, or by a primordial influence, to pursue them, 'Needs, however, do not exist in the biological world alone, but rather in a social milieu. Needs satisfaction behaviour is expressed socially, and so the social setting influences the degree to which they may be satisfied. In this sense, then, Burton's work also draws on contingency theory, in that the satisfaction of needs is dependent upon the social context.

An example of the interaction between inherency and contingency in the satisfaction of needs is found in an impoverished ethnic group. Burton would argue that this group has, among other needs, a need for security. This need will be pursued doggedly. The satisfaction of this need may come either collectively or individually. Whether it is satisfied depends upon not only the behaviour of the individual, but also what is available in society. As Burton argues, though, basic human needs are not scarce, there is no limit to security. Yet there may be social limits, in terms of acceptability. While theoretically a person may undertake any behaviour in order to satisfy a need, they may feel constrained by what is regarded as 'acceptable' social behaviour. Those who seek to satisfy needs by any means necessary are often labeled deviant. Those who fail to satisfy their needs and suffer accordingly also can be deviant, but instead can be labeled maladjusted or even neurotic.

In the above example, people behave in many ways in order to satisfy their needs. Some will follow a conservative path, strictly adhering to their interpretation of

‘civil’ behaviour. Others, though, will seek other means, some labeled eccentric and others labeled ‘anti-social’. Eccentric behaviours might be extreme forms of religiosity; others might be forms of nationalism. More ‘extreme’ behaviour, though, might be termed ‘revolutionary’ as individuals seek to secure their security needs. In many dispossessed groups there have been messianic movements, extreme forms of nationalism, and strict conservatism. All these behaviours can be understood through the need for security; that is, the need to make oneself secure.

The primary criticism to be leveled against the interactionist school is that it does not reduce behaviour to a simple cause. In this sense, it is perhaps not as satisfying as the inherency or contingency arguments. Some may see a rejection of the nature versus nurture question as surrender- a sort of intellectual throwing up of the hands. It would be unreasonable, though, to accept such criticism. The nature versus nurture argument is reminiscent of the alchemists search for a way of converting iron into gold. Try as they might, they could not do it. It is likely that behaviour can never be reduced to a single cause.

In sum, the interactionist school holds the following:

- Individuals are often pacific, but violence as such is not aberrant.
- Conflict is one, but not the only response, to unmet needs.
- Human behaviour varies enormously, with impulses that are often not clear.
- Collective violence may be either reactionary or coolly calculated.
- The tendency to violence may be affected by cultural learning, tempered by inherent impulses.

2.5 SUMMARY

The division between inherent, contingent and interactionist theory is not the only way to divide the Theory World into conceptual pieces but gives ample opportunities to know and understand the sources of the conflict. (???????) There may be the case with all social conflicts based on communal, ethnic and racial

issues. There may be some objectives at the centre but, owing to a number of conflict lanes simultaneously operating which the group experiences, there is always displacement of frustration through various defence mechanisms to avoid or resolve conflict. Conflict has more than one source because of the practical spill-over and displacement of frustration or disappointment.

2. 6 TERMINAL QUESTIONS

1. Discuss the various sources of conflict.
2. Critically examine the inherency, contingent and interactionist theories regarding the sources of conflict

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