# THE PERSON AND CONFLICT

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## Contents

## Summary

With the social science analysis tools developed in these chapters we finally look at the individual's perspective. Analyzing individual action is difficult because the tendency is to put agentic cause in the person, and ignore all the multiple social and economic influences we have seen already. Individuals either are directly influenced or constrained, or have their actions selected through social influences, but these influences are hidden and so theories of "inner" life are used in some social sciences such as psychology, and in common sense. The analysis of individuals still focuses on the resources they are working for, the generalized exchange groups to which they belong, the ritual practices by which those groups maintain themselves, the way these are done with language and language games, the allocation of resources in the communities and societies to which the person belongs and perhaps has no control over, and the history of the person along all these dimensions. Examples are analyzed across the realms of everyday experiences.

## 1. Introduction

The person and conflict is often thought of as the specialist domain of psychology, although psychology has been ambiguous in this regard and has been frequently left out

of social science discussions. The famous Gulbenkian Commission report left psychology out of their taxonomy completely. When an integrative analysis of social behavior is carried out, however, as has been done here, we find that psychology is covered within the other social sciences once the notion of an inner or deep world is removed. Everything about analyzing the behavior of individuals has been covered in principle already, partly when looking at the properties of conflict structures, the effects of alliances, and the political and institutional constraints placed on individuals, but even more especially when looking at the use of language, small group effects on individuals, and changes across generations (see Structural Sources of Conflict, Alliances: Sanctioning and Monitoring, Political Facets of Conflict, Institutional Facets of Conflict, Small Groups and Conflict, The Language of Conflict, and Conflict and Change Across Generations). Most of the theories of psychology are metaphors aimed at the properties we saw for generalized exchanges (see Why the Social Sciences are Different II).

When we consider conflicts from the perspective of individual people, the strategies and resources of the political and small group perspectives become the social and historical constraints on individuals. What was allocated, negotiated and argued about in a political or small group focus becomes the very basis for personal maneuvering. People choose their life strategies but not in contexts of their own making. If you are born into a poor, working class family, then you will encounter conflicts not of your own making that are very different from those of someone born into a wealthy, upper-class family.

In other words, we are born into resource environments, and from the perspective of an individual, this includes the political, social and economic environments. So when you include this along with the strategic maneuvering that comes from language usages and small group interactions, that is enough to cover the person without needing inner lives and agentic decision-making. It is only when we ignore the delayed effects of generalized social exchanges that people seem to do things without social prompting (see Why the Social Sciences are Different II). Our analyses are more thorough than this, though.

## 2. What are Individuals Made of?

In this social science view, individuals are made up of social relationships, or, to put it better, a person should be thought of as an intersection between many social relationships. This was implicit in the idea of social networks and how we are *constituted* by our networks. How we can relate to a particular person does not depend upon what we just decide; it depends upon our resource relationship to that person and the histories involved—many of which had nothing to do with us but affect us nonetheless.

This means that talk of agents and selves is really talk about the person's relative positioning in resource relationships and groups, and how history, politics and strategies have allocated these. This is why demographers can predict so much of a population's behavior from population variables; while individuals act, they act within the social and political constraints imposed on everyone by current and historical strategies.

At the finer levels of "psychological" analysis, we are dealing much more with the effects seen when analyzing language use and small groups—how people talk to themselves and close associates about what they are doing and what they are going to do, and how they maintain their status, reputation and face (hence access to resources) in the groups to which they belong (see Small Groups and Conflict, The Language of Conflict). The strategic games we find will be more complex than the simple Prisoner's Dilemma and Chicken games seen earlier, and will have more subtle (generalized) relationship resources involved.

Despite this, the tools for analysis remain the same, although methodologies for real analyses need to be adapted and new ones sought. Indeed, psychology itself can be analyzed using these tools, to see how it arose at a particular time in western history for particular government monitoring functions. Nicholas Rose, amongst others, has analyzed the political and institutional basis for psychology and psychiatry (see The Language of Conflict).

From all this, it follows that our analyses of individuals and conflict should really be looking closely at the following:

• What is the person working for; what are they putting in effort for?
• The generalized exchange group to which the person belongs, since these will most resist the person changing and most resources will be coming through them;
• The practices by which those groups maintain themselves as members;
• How the person talks and what that reveals about their resources and relationships:
    o How inclusive are the categories they use about themselves,
    o The language games used to maintain relationships,
    o The concreteness or abstractness of the language,
    o The attributions made,
    o The belief and attitude statements and whom they are made in front of,
    o When they are avoiding consequences;
• At the point where the person obtains the resources and access to resources, what are the allocation rules or powers of allocation;
• The history of the person and their groups along all these dimensions.
In all, this means that "psychological" analysis should really be about active and linguistic strategy-making rather than pondering the verbalizations about an inner life. Doing social science analysis *is* doing psychological analysis.

## 3. Economic Impacts on Individuals: Resources and Consumption

A key feature of any analysis of personal conflict is to look into the economic functioning of the individual; not just their current bank balance but also the whole way that they strategically (or not) have carved a niche out in a job or income of whatever sort. In psychology this is sometimes seen as a minor adjunct to questions such as how the person feels, how they see their identity, or how much they need other people; but the economic positioning of the person is much more fundamental than the above questions which are really about how they talk to impress others and maintain their place in groups (see The Language of Conflict).

We have seen how monetary systems are bound into social relationships in a multitude of ways and so this analysis will already include something about the groups they belong to and how they maintain those links and networks. The way that earning money binds up a person's life will also tell about that person's close ties to family and friends, in the ways that Weber and Simmel wrote about (see Conflict and Change Across Generations). It will give us clues about the trust relationships necessary to maintain the resource access and the power holds over the person by those allowing or gate-keeping the access. A lot of the face-work and strategic rituals will become understandable in this light. For example, many people in western societies have their work associates as friends, or at least spend time trying to impress work associates so as to remain high in status or reputation and keep their access to resources. Whereas smaller groups studied by social anthropologists have their resources tied up with kin on the whole, western societies tend to have their resources tied up with work and work associates, particularly superiors. This shows in who they try to impress, which is always a fundamental part of a social science analysis.

We also saw earlier that a lot of the ways of functioning in broader society will be understandable or analyzable through the observed social stratification, and this is often predictable from the economic positioning of people and families (see Political Facets of Conflict). Analyzing a person's stratifications will give a better picture of how they are working within their life and the strategies they might use to improve access to resources. This is another facet of conflict and strategy that a microeconomic analysis of people can reveal.

## 4. Political and Institutional Conflicts

We have already seen that, in most western governments at least, resource allocation and institutional governance are done through the writing of rules that try to capture the conditions and outcomes of the world at large (see Political Facets of Conflict, Institutional Facets of Conflict). What this means is that modern fights and game conflicts become entwined in fights of rules and words, and the lawyers and solicitors move into their own realm.

This is often outside the scope of individuals for financial reasons, and so they must work along with rules they did not write, do not necessarily understand—especially the reasons for the rules—and rules they might not want. They must solve conflicts with institutions that were set up for them in the first place (in the abstract at least), but which have far more power to bring about consequences than they do and have far better control over the rules. This is why the common experiences—and certainly the common urban legends and stories—are of senseless fights with faceless bureaucracies.

Many media stories are about problems people have with bureaucracies. Usually they are negative or sad stories, like little old ladies who have their heating cut off because they owed $1 to the power company and there was a public holiday so they could not go in and pay; sometimes they are funny stories, like a person who got a 5 cent refund from the Taxation Department which was sent to them in an envelope with a 50 cent stamp on it; but there are also some positive ones that fight back against the system, like someone getting an accidental payout of $2300 instead of $23.00 because the computer

got the decimal place wrong. The point here is that the existence of a plethora of stories, as we saw earlier (see The Language of Conflict), indicates that there are a lot of conflicts and problems for individuals dealing with bureaucracies in modern western life.

Part of this problem goes back to the social dilemma problem of individual efficacy. The rules are written for the benefit of all in the community, to overcome dilemmas of large-scale social organization, but for an individual it is difficult to see how they fit in and how the rule directly benefits them (which it does not necessarily do even if it is successful over the whole community). The impact of them either following or not following those rules is negligible unless the rules are carefully monitored and policed (see The Role of Monitoring and Avoidance). The government can be changed by voting in democracies, but this is one arena in which individual efficacy is very low, and people do not consider that their vote really has any effect on the election outcome whatsoever.

What is also often found is that people develop their conflict resolution and social influence strategies in the context of one-on-one contact, but when they go to use these against rules and institutions they simply do not work. The most common example of this is someone getting angry (verbal Chicken game) or threatening to get very angry in a bank or welfare institution in which such tactics do not have the desired effect (the one that has typically shaped those tactics in everyday life). Bureaucracies also get physical aggression as people once more generalize their everyday social influence strategies to bureaucracies only to find out that they are inappropriate and do not work. This can be frustrating for individuals since they need to develop a full range of "bureaucratic skills" if they are going to gain any resources against the modern world.

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**Biographical Sketch**

**Bernard Guerin** is Professor in psychology at the University of South Australia. Before this he studied at the University of Adelaide, took a Post-Doctoral Fellowship at the University of Brisbane, and taught at James Cook University in Townsville, Australia. His interests span the entire realm of social science, and he has been concerned for some years about the superficial barriers erected between the "different" social sciences. He has finished two new books: one on integrating the social sciences and one on practical interventions to change the behavior of both individuals and communities, again incorporating all social science approaches. He has published over 45 peer-reviewed papers, and has presented this integrative material on invited visits to Japan, Mexico, Brazil, Hungary, Sardinia, and across the United States. His two earlier books are *Social Facilitation* (CUP) and *Analyzing Social Behavior: Behavior Analysis and the Social Sciences* (Context Press).