

INTERPERSONAL CONFLICT

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Summary

Interpersonal conflict occurs when parties whose goals are interdependent perceive that they cannot both reach their goals. Such conflicts arise from, or are at least influenced by, cognitive factors, personalities and personal histories, conflict strategies, situational or contextual factors, cultural and gender factors, and even national or global issues. Like all conflicts, interpersonal conflicts typically escalate along certain predictable patterns. Several models of conflict escalation are reviewed. Other characteristics and dilemmas of conflict dynamics include entrapment, face-saving needs, and dilemmas stemming from situational incentives that encourage competition and conflict. Tools for analyzing and assessing interpersonal conflict, such as conflict-mapping and cause typologies, provide a first step toward resolution. The field of conflict studies continues to debate the content of “resolution”

1. Introduction

Conflict is a common part of human interaction and occurs regularly in different contexts of our lives, e.g., family relationships, in the workplace, with our closest friends, in our communities. Though interpersonal conflicts often feel unpleasant or even threatening, and can jeopardize goal achievement or relationships, conflicts can also be positive. Interpersonal conflicts can raise important issues, clarify interests and goals, release tension, produce new and creative ideas, and create constructive change. A better understanding of the sources and dynamics of interpersonal conflict can lead one to work through conflicts more constructively, so that positive change might be created.

The first step in understanding interpersonal conflict is to consider its possible definitions. The many definitions of conflict reflect the complexity of understanding contentious human interaction, and each definition has its embedded assumptions about sources and relevant resolution strategies. Christopher Moore has defined conflict as “struggle between two or more people over values, or competition for status, power and scarce resources.” Nicholson describes conflict as arising “when two or more people or groups endeavor to pursue goals which are mutually inconsistent.” Jeffrey Rubin and Dean Pruitt define conflict as “perceived divergence of interest, or a belief that the parties’ current aspirations cannot be achieved simultaneously.” Some common key components of interpersonal conflicts are: (a) goal orientation – the involved persons are each trying to achieve something, (b) interdependence – each cannot achieve his or her goals without the coordination (or at least lack of resistance) of the other, and (c) relational concerns – interdependence means that the future relationship cannot be sacrificed in service of immediate goals.

Braiker and Kelley suggest that the attempted coordination of actions and activities results in three different levels of interpersonal conflict: around coordinating specific behaviors, around reconciling expectations about relational norms and roles, and because of personal characteristics and attitudes that make coordination difficult. According to Morton Deutsch, interpersonal conflicts also differ depending on the bases for disagreement, and whether or not the perceptions of parties reflect these accurately: *veridical conflict* has an objective basis that both parties recognize, *displaced conflict* occurs when the focus of an objective conflict displaces onto other issues, *misattributed conflict* occurs when other people are blamed, *latent conflict* occurs when neither party

recognizes existing objective bases for conflict (e.g., different values), and *false conflict* occurs through misunderstandings or other perceptual errors when no objective basis for a conflict exists.

Interpersonal conflict can be understood as a complex interaction between many factors. These factors can be seen both as sources of conflict and as factors shaping the expression and direction of a conflict. This brief article reviews the current knowledge in both the causes and dynamics of interpersonal conflict. It examines tools for conflict assessment that aid in analysis as well as in the development of resolution strategies. Finally, it reviews new directions in understanding interpersonal conflict.

2. Sources and Influences

The analysis of interpersonal conflict typically focuses on one or more of the variables that may influence the character, scope, and direction of the conflict. Trying to identify sources of conflict can become a “chicken-or-egg” exercise; rather, it may be more useful to investigate the factors that both contribute to conflict and influence its expression.

2.1. Cognitive Variables

Social cognitive psychologists have built on research about stereotypes, impression formation and cognitive dissonance to outline several perceptual and attributional biases that generate or exacerbate interpersonal conflict. These include:

2.1.1. Attributional Biases

These include the *Self-serving bias* – a tendency for people to attribute desirable actions they take to internal psychological causes (e.g. their disposition) and undesirable actions to external situations, and the *Fundamental attribution error* – a tendency for people to attribute their own conflict behavior to temporary, situational causes, and attribute the conflict behavior in others to enduring, dispositional causes. Researchers have found that conflict strategies that evoke intense emotion serve to exaggerate and distort attributional biases and escalate conflict.

2.1.2. Reduced Information Processing

Studies have shown that reduced search for new information, failure to make discriminations between information and opinion, inability to imagine alternative perspectives or solutions to conflict are all cognitive dynamics of competitive conflict as well as factors that contribute to the escalation of conflict.

2.1.3. Selective Perception

A Party in conflict may attend selectively to those aspects of the Other's manner or behavior that conform to the Party's preconceived views of the Other. This process

works in conjunction with attributional distortions, distortion in the evaluation of behavior, and “discovery” of evidence that “supports” the initial expectations.

2.1.4. Prejudice

This means the pre-judgment, or unjustifiable and usually negative attitude of one type of individual or group toward another. Such negative attitudes are typically based on unsupported generalizations (or stereotypes) that deny the individuality of a person and do not change, even when contradictory evidence is presented.

2.1.5. Self-Fulfilling Prophecy

A person's negative view or expectations of another are communicated to him or her (often nonverbally), eliciting behavior in response that confirms the initial negative view or expectation. For example, one party's expectation that another will react emotionally over a conflict issue may lead the first party to withdraw, thus actually provoking the emotional reaction in the other s/he had hoped to avoid.

2.1.6. Autistic Hostility

Parties in conflict may break off all contact and communication with one another, reinforcing hostility because each is now unable to learn if the conflict may be due to misunderstandings or misjudgments, and each is also unable to learn of any new positive changes in the other.

2.1.7. Suboptimal Framing (Framing as Zero-Sum)

Parties may define their goals as mutually exclusive, when in fact room may exist for meeting the goals of both sides. If one were to place each party's goals on opposite ends of a one-dimensional graph (“each party wants the whole pie”), then a step towards Party A's goal (+1) would be a step away from Party B's goal (-1), and two steps toward A (+2) would be two steps away from B (-2), thus the term “zero-sum” (+1-1=0; +2-2=0). Most goal relationships, however, are “non-zero-sum”, in that Party A's goal and Party B's goal are not perfectly negatively correlated and thus may be addressed simultaneously.

2.2. Personality Variables and Personal History

2.2.1. Personality Variables

Personality traits, or enduring tendencies of behavior across similar situations, can influence interpersonal conflict behavior. A popular, if somewhat controversial, system often used in training for exploring personality factors contributing to conflict is the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI). Based on the writings and theories of C.G. Jung, Katharine Briggs and Isabel Myers developed a 93-item personality inventory in which people rate themselves in terms of four preferences: 1) Introversion vs.

Extraversion; 2) Intuiting vs. Sensing; 3) Feeling vs. Thinking; and 5) Perception vs. Judgment.

For example, *Introverts* gain their energy from thoughts, things, and ideas and tend to become tired when dealing with a lot of people. In contrast, *Extraverts* find that being around people causes them to feel happier and livelier and tend to enjoy socializing with others. *Intuitives* represent only 25% of the population and are drawn to information that is more abstract, conceptual, general and represents imaginative possibilities for the future. In contrast, *Sensates* prefer information that is concrete, tangible, detailed, practical and focused on the here-and-now.

Thinkers have a preference for making decisions in an objective, logical, and analytical manner with an emphasis on tasks and results to be accomplished. In contrast, *Feelers* tend to make decisions based on values and emotions and are very sensitive to the impact that decisions and actions will have on others. Finally, *Perceivers* have a high tolerance for ambiguity or disorder and often delay decision-making in order to keep options open in their search for the best decision.

In contrast, *Judgers* prefer structure, schedules, and closure around decision-making. A person's score on each of these preferences results in a particular personality type (e.g. Extroverted, Intuitive, Thinker, Judger), and different types may have conflicting ways of interacting, interpreting situations, and responding to conflicts.

Despite its popularity for developing self-awareness and insight into others' conflict behaviors, Daniel Druckman and Robert Bjork's (1991) review of the research literature suggests that evidence supporting the MBTI's reliability and validity is relatively weak. For example, studies showed that many respondents changed their initial type when they retook the test just over a month later, and people often typed themselves differently than professionals familiar with Jungian theory typed them.

While individuals may find that the MBTI increases their sensitivity and is personally interesting, Druckman and Bjork conclude that there is not yet sufficient, well-designed research to justify the use of the MBTI to predict or interpret conflict behavior. Instead, research points to the primacy of situational variables over personality traits in influencing interpersonal conflict.

2.2.2. Personal history

Behaviors for dealing with conflict learned from family patterns and childhood experiences are carried forward into our adult methods of dealing with conflict. Patterns of expression for conflict learned in childhood can influence what one considers "normal" or "natural" conflict expression, and may vary substantially between individuals. Unfamiliar patterns of expression or handling of conflict may seem baffling or "wrong". One school of thought suggests that people may assume certain roles in interpersonal conflict settings that resemble roles played in their childhood family environment (e.g. victim, martyr, peacemaker, rebel, etc.). As such, new conflicts reproduce the same feelings and ways of reacting as those experienced earlier in one's personal history.

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Biographical Sketches

Tamra Pearson d'Estrée is Associate Professor in the Institute for Conflict Analysis and Resolution (ICAR) at George Mason University. She holds a B.A. in Political Science and in Psychology from the University of Colorado, and an A.M. in Psychology and Ph.D. in Social Psychology from Harvard University. Her research interests lie at the intersection of conflict resolution and social psychology. This has included work on social identity, intergroup relations, and conflict resolution processes, as well as on evaluation research. Her writings include chapters in Crocker & Hampson's *Managing Global Chaos*, Gaerling et al.'s *Diplomacy and Psychology: Prevention of Armed Conflicts After the Cold War*, and Ross & Rothman's *Evaluating Success in Ethnic Conflict Interventions*, and articles in various interdisciplinary journals. She and resource economist Bonnie G. Colby have recently completed a book on evaluating environmental conflict resolution entitled *Braving the Currents: Lessons in Environmental Conflict Resolution from the River Basins of the American West*. She also has facilitated interactive problem-solving workshops in various intercommunal contexts, including Israel-Palestine, Ethiopia, and in US intertribal disputes; she has led conflict resolution trainings in Europe, the Middle East, Georgia, and Ukraine; and she has worked to establish formal partnership relationships between her Institute and several universities in conflict-ridden areas.

Ilana Shapiro has a doctorate in Social Psychology from Charles University, Czech Republic and is completing a second doctorate at the Institute for Conflict Analysis and Resolution, George Mason University. Her academic and professional interests focus on community-based ethnic and racial conflict resolution and civil society development in the U.S., Central and Eastern Europe, and Middle East.

Dr. Shapiro is President and co-founder of the Alliance for Conflict Transformation (ACT), a non-profit organization committed to expanding the knowledge and practice of conflict transformation and peacebuilding within U.S. and international communities. She has helped develop and implement programs in conflict resolution for Georgian and Abkhazian youth; Roma, Turks, and Bulgarian community leaders in Bulgaria; Palestinian-Israeli conflicts in Israeli schools; and race and ethnic conflict interventions in the U.S.

Dr. Shapiro has taught graduate courses at Johns Hopkins University's School for Advanced International Studies, George Mason University, and Charles University, Czech Republic. She authored a publication entitled, *Training for Racial Equity and Inclusion*, and co-authored a chapter on conflict resolution in a Czech Civic Education textbook (*Demokracie a Ustavnost*). She has published articles in *Negotiation Journal* and the *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, and was Special Editor for the July 1997 issue of *The Annals*.