

Conflict Resolution: A Psychological Perspective

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Abstract

Conflict can be defined as the existence of non-compatibility or disagreements between two actors (Individuals, groups, organizations or nations) in their interaction over the issues of interests, values, beliefs, emotions, goals, space, positions, scarce resources etc. Fink defined conflict as a situation or a process in which two or more social entities are interlinked through at least one form of antagonistic psychological relation/ interaction, while Coser thought that it was a struggle over values and claims to scarce status, power and resources, wherein opponents try to neutralize, injure or even eliminate rivals.

Conflict Resolution Process calls for highly specialized expertise in this field. Academics can play a greater role as mediators, facilitators and negotiators in certain circumstances and as arbitrators in some other times to either manage or if possible resolve conflicts. In the unfortunate events of conflict escalating into violence, the academics as a third force, can organize Peace Marches, Peace Prayers and use other intervention techniques to avert the conflict from further deterioration.

Conflict resolution process requires a variety of skills and intensive training programmes to impart these skills. This training could be organized and given to the facilitators and to the members of civic bodies by the people specializing in training programmes. Academics play a key role in this process. Some of the training methods are as follows: Role plays, Brain Storming, Simulation Game, Situation Analysis, Strategy Game, Vision Gallery, Scenario Writing and Sharing, Force Field Analysis, Quick Decision Making, Flow Chart, etc. Fan Harris, a trainer in conflict resolution reported that in New York, Research in conflict resolution has a wide range of activities starting from fact finding to forecasting future conflict. Intensive research is needed in verifying the efficacy of different conflict resolution methods, documenting many case studies, identifying chronic areas of conflicts and traditional and local conflict resolution methods and skills, and analyzing the causes and effects of conflict etc. Conflict forecasting and identifying the chronic areas of conflicts help people prevent violent conflicts. To address the most difficult looking conflicts it is

crucial to draw on viable, effective and dynamic efforts of NGO's, INGO's, social movements and private citizens. Most importantly the academics, researchers and intellectuals should assume responsibility to work for near zero conflict environments.

Introduction

According to Fink, conflict is defined as any "situation or process in which two or more social entities are linked by at least one form of antagonistic psychological relation or at least one form of antagonistic interaction" (Fink, 1968). However, Coser (1956) defined conflict as "A struggle over values and claims to scarce status, power and resources, a struggle in which the aims of opponents are to neutralize, injure or eliminate rivals."

Conflict is a universal feature of human society that is an integral part of economic differentiation, social change, cultural formation, psychological development and political organization-each one of them being inherently conflictual. Either the real or perceived mutually incompatible agendas or goals shape and help conflict parties concretize. Conflict situations could occur at various levels but it is identified at the level it is contested and by the issues it is fought over, for example, scarce resources, unequal relations or competing values. The issues themselves may change with time or may itself be disputed over time. Thus in social dynamic conflicts aggravate and alleviate through a complex interaction of material conditions, mutual real threats or threat perceptions mediated by psychological attitudes and behaviors of the groups involved. It is in this backdrop that conflicts materialize.

Although the word conflict evokes negative connotations but it is an integral part of all relationships. Although conflict often is perceived as negative it has the potential to contribute positively to both the quality of relationship and personal development. Effective conflict resolution is associated with overall social competence in adolescents through the component skills of problem solving, decision making, communication, and coping (Van Slyck, Stern and Zak-Place, 1996).

Interpersonal conflict is characterized by opposition and disagreement. Conflict can take place within a dyad or as a function of family or group membership (Maccoby, 1988). Deutsch (1973) described conflicts as either constructive or destructive. Destructive conflicts transgress the immediate issues and coercion, threats or the use of state power are the strategies employed to tackle them. In short brute force is employed to settle the issue. Contrary to the destructive conflicts, the constructive conflicts focus on the presenting issue and are addressed through negotiation and compromise as conflict resolution strategies.

Conflict resolution strategies fall into three basic categories, viz.(1) power assertion (physical action, criticisms, use of threats),(2) negotiation (third-party mediation, compromise, stepping down), and (3)disengagement (dropping the topic, taking no action, walking away) (Vuchinich, 1990). Interpersonal conflict resolution strategies have been found to be a function of factors such as age, cognitive development, gender, culture, relationship type, contextual setting and personality. Conflict resolution refers to what transpires in order to bring a disagreement to an end (Laursen and Mooney, 2008). "Effective conflict resolution involves, managing the emotions evoked in a conflictual situation and using a negotiation or problem-solving process to determine a mutually acceptable solution" (Katz & Lawyer, 1993).

Conflict resolution is an indispensable part of developmental work. Inter alia one of the important lessons of conflict resolution is that short-term denial strategies will not hold on their own and must be attended by the built in middle-term persuasion strategies, long term prevention strategies and international coordination strategies. Following is a summary of component elements of constructive conflict resolution ideas of several authors in the field of conflict resolution and one should be alive to them while developing conflict resolution training programmes. Safe and neutral environment is a necessary prerequisite for successfully resolving conflicts in a nonviolent manner. Moreover, the threat perception on either side of the conflict can be ameliorated to a great extent by a clever reframing of conflicting interests into a joint problem that needs to be addressed and solved cooperatively. The whole process greatly benefits if parties are able to convince each other that there is a sincere desire to reach a mutually beneficial solution and both the parties are aware of their own motives, needs, wants, cognitions and feelings, respect for oneself and one's own interests as well as respect for another and his/her interests. A few additional skills, like the ability to perceive another's point of view, ability to listen attentively and communicate in order to be understood, exploration of possible common/compatible interests and ability to manage/diffuse anger can go a long way in peaceful resolution of conflicts.

To hone the most important and powerful of these skills some core ideas and interventions from psychology can be particularly useful. One such area, viz "brief therapy," located at the fuzzy interface of conflict resolution and psychological intervention is a case in point. For the solution-focused approaches to conflict resolution, careful and strategic thinking and deliberations about how best to translate a deeper understanding of the emotional and neurophysiologic underpinnings of conflict resolution processes into practical, hands-on mediation techniques are imperative. An understanding of the dialectically evolving relationship between

mediation and psychology, would sure lead to better ways of developing competent mediators at conflict resolution. The old adage "agree to disagree", perhaps first printed under the name of John Wesley, is one of the cornerstones of conflict resolution, suggesting the possibility and in turn advice that people can disagree with each other without experiencing conflict. In contradistinction to conflict, disagreement is not attended by "negative" emotions, like anger, fear, anxiety, guilt, and shame. Thus, it is almost inherent in the definition of conflict, that it is characterized by an indispensable emotional component. It follows that conflict resolution has to necessarily address this all important emotional element by professionals adept at handling emotions through acquired emotional processing skills. The job of the mediator/s, then is not only to address the "emotional intelligence" of the leaders/members of the conflicting groups to make them feel that it is not a win-lose duality but a win-win situation. Obviously a social psychologist is in a more advantageous position to appreciate and manipulate the emotional dynamics. Therefore, there is lot to learn for the mediators from the discipline of psychology for being more effective at handling conflict resolution. It is not without reason that Einstein chose to write, a surprisingly little known open letter, to a psychologist, viz. Sigmund Freud, titled "Why War" (The Einstein-Freud Correspondence, 1931-1932), seeking answers to that question. It is well known that an individual's attitudes, intentions, intuitions, awareness, context, and capacity for empathetic and honest emotional communication have a significant bearing on their experience of conflict and their capacity for its resolution. As conflicts are chaotic and rapidly changing it is not possible to objectively know beforehand the ways of tackling them successfully.

These conflict resolution systems design skills apply to a range of social, economic, and political issues. Conflict resolution experts are skilled at mediating the linkages between families, community groups, workplaces, organizations; integrating conflict resolution skills into teambuilding and project management workshops; working with hospital and health care disputes emerging from the need to process grief, guilt, rage, and loss; and most importantly this area of expertise has assumed special salience for new ideas to resolve intractable international conflicts. Galtung (1992) describes conflict as "Some type of incompatibility, one goal stands in the way of another". He explains his theory of conflict through the triangle model. He narrates that "Conflict may take two forms. In the less crystallized form it is an incompatibility between the objective interests of parties in a society. In its crystallized form it is an incompatibility between the subjective goals of action in a society." Conflict related attitudes and behaviour are usually assumed to be negative. It is these negative manifestations that can take the form of sudden bursts of hatred, rage or even direct violence. At other times these negative manifestations can take

the more institutionalized form of generalized social distance and structural violence. It may be broadly stated that the less crystallized the conflict, the more structural the negative manifestations, e.g. social distance and structural violence. The crystallization of conflict triggers the non-structural bursts of hatred and direct violence. Obviously the regrettable instances of direct violence acquire news value and attract far more attention. Galtung sees conflict as the expression of objective, structural dichotomy (asymmetrical relationship / interaction between top dog and underdog).

In spite of the ever increasing global academic growth in conflict and conflict resolution studies, the practicability and acceptability of this method are yet to be appreciated in India and in many parts of the world, owing to lack of information on the effectiveness of these methods, unawareness of the anatomy of conflict and conflict resolution, inaccessibility of organizational and training facilities to work at conflict resolution and consequently taking recourse to conservative conflict resolution methods like police, court and panchayat bodies. Even the awareness of the state of the art knowledge of conflict dealing system is pathetically lacking even among the senior leaders and bureaucrats in India and in many other parts of the developing and underdeveloped world. I must hasten to add that everything is not well even with the developed countries particularly when it comes to the resolution of conflict between capital and the labor.

Admittedly, the area is in need of a more systematic and rigorous enquiry and analysis before the researchers generalize the reasons for its non-acceptance by the people. The process of reconciliation during a conflict resolution attempt is marked by dramatic changes in mutual images of the parties, which in turn sets the ball rolling for an agreeable solution to resolve the conflict. The different means of dealing with conflicts have been classified by experts into two broader concepts. "The first is general and refers to any strategy that brings a socially visible or public episode of conflicts to an end" (Avratch, 1998). It is also known as "Genuine Conflict resolution" in which most of the procedural ways of dealing with conflict are addressed to "somehow to get to the root causes of a conflict and not merely to treat its episode or symptomatic manifestation, that is, a particular dispute" (Avratch, 1998).

The second concept arises "with the formal emergence of the field or quasi discipline of conflict resolution" (Avratch, 1998) and defines the process of conflict resolution more narrowly and precisely distinguishing the 'genuine conflict resolution' from the different forms of conflict resolution process such as 'conflict management', 'conflict regulation', 'conflict prevention', 'dispute settlement', or 'conflict mitigation'.

This conceptual distinction separating the "genuine conflict resolution" from other loosely defined terms in vogue is of far reaching consequence.

Conflict Resolution Research

Contemporary world is replete with a range of crises, viz of value, character, morality, ethics and others, to name a few. It is time that researchers, educationists, freelancers and others interested in conflict resolution must address the issue more seriously. The academics focused at conflict resolution may contemplate intervention to resolve both the old and recent conflict issues.

Conflict arises when people or groups perceive that a disagreement threatens their needs, interests or concerns. Conflict is generally viewed as a negative experience due to abnormally difficult circumstances. "The people in the dispute (also known as disputants) tend to perceive limited options and finite resources available in seeking solutions, rather than multiple possibilities that may exist 'outside the box'" (Healey, 1995). Thus conflict can be defined as a disagreement through which the parties involved perceive a threat to their needs, interests or concerns. "Conflicts, to a large degree, are situations that naturally arise as we go about managing complex and stressful life situations in which clients are personally invested"(Ury, 1988).

Advantages of Conflict Resolution Skills Training

Obviously people cannot be expected to agree all the time and conflict arises from differences between individuals, their needs, values and motivations. At times individuals can complement each other through these differences, however, at other times there is conflict. Conflict is not an isolated problem and its handling determines whether it would be aggravated or resolved. Conflict can lead to violent clashes not only between individuals, but groups of individuals and in extreme cases between nations. An efficient handling of conflict towards its resolution, irrespective of its magnitude in terms of the number of people involved, is pregnant with possibilities of providing opportunities for growth, eventually strengthening the bond between two people, groups or countries. "Since relationship conflicts are inevitable, learning to deal with them (rather than avoiding them) is crucial" (Bercovitch and Lamare 1993). For a conflict resolution counselor, recognizing and managing conflict is also an essential part of building emotional intelligence. It is only through equipping clients with the skills needed for resolving conflict that the counselor is helping them keep their relationships strong and growing. Unresolved, unidentified or ignored conflicts can take large toll on one's (also read group's, nation's) attention and

energy. Solutions to the problems triggering conflict are generally not easy but equipping clients with skills that could manage conflicts effectively are highly advantageous. Childhood experiences can affect clients in their adulthood, "as it creates expectations of how others will respond to them in the future"; Hater, 1990). People who grow up believing their needs will be met are resilient and able to remain focused, relaxed, and creative in challenging situations. People who grow up without such expectations will fear conflict, and will not trust themselves in conflict situations. The aim of conflict resolution is to encourage clients to preserve their relationships and help them grow, by being able to confront and resolve conflicts promptly without resorting to punishment, criticism, contempt or defensiveness (Conflict Resolution Network, 2006).

Secure responses to conflict are characterized by the capacity to recognize and respond to important matters; readiness to forgive and forget; the ability to seek compromise and avoid punishment; and the belief that resolution can support the interests and needs of both parties (<http://www.edcc.edu/counseling/documents/conflict.pdf>). In contrast, an insecure response to conflict is characterized by an inability to recognize and respond to important matters; explosive, angry, hurtful, and resentful reactions; feelings of rejection, isolation, shaming, fear of abandonment, and the withdrawal of love; an expectation of bad outcomes; and the fear and avoidance of conflict (Hater, 1990) benefit from conflict resolution skills training. It is important that the counselor demonstrates the skills through practical application, such as role-play. This ensures the client can translate understanding into action and facilitates learning. "Conflict resolution training helps individuals and groups to manage or resolve conflict situations within or between groups. Some of the skills include: negotiation/mediation, dialogue skills, third party presence techniques, and non-violent intervention"(Coover, 1985).

Further, it need not be emphasized that, conflict resolution training will not be effective if a client learns the skills but is afraid to apply them (e.g. because their communication style is passive). A counselor will need to recognize these factors and modify their training accordingly (e.g. include assertiveness training in the process) (Healey, 1995).

One of the basic tenets for addressing conflict issues is that every client has distinctive viewpoints that are equally valid (from their perspective) as those of the other party involved in the conflict. One of the key ideas at all conflict resolution attempts is that each person's viewpoint makes a contribution to the whole and requires consideration

and respect to reach a complete solution. This wider view can open up the communication transaction possibilities. It may require one party to change their mind chatter that says: "For me to be right, others must be wrong" (Alexelrod, 1984).

A Possible Prescription

One of the points of departure could be to encourage the client to consider how the problem or the relationship will appear after a certain period of time. This change in perspective that enables the parties or clients to look at a larger time window, is likely to help clients realize the consequences of conflict in a longer time frame. This can help clients become more realistic about the consequences of the conflict as well as exploring options to resolve the conflict (Alexelrod, 1984). Conflict situations are characterized by an absence of objective view and clients tend to react on the basis of their perceptions of the situation. Thus having identified one of the fundamental problems leading to conflict, a counseling intervention can facilitate the clients in overcoming their subjective frame of reference. As a consequence of the changed frame of reference, clients filter their perceptions (and reactions) through their values, culture, beliefs, information, experience, gender, and other variables. Conflict responses are both filled with ideas and feelings that can be very strong and powerful guides to our sense of possible solutions (Healey, 1995). Like other human problems, conflicts contain substantive, procedural, and psychological dimensions to be negotiated, and all these dimensions need to be addressed to appreciate and better understand the threat as perceived by those engaged in a conflict.

The conflict counselors can assist clients to develop healthy, functional and positive coping mechanisms for identifying conflicts likely to arise, their consequences, and the possible strategies through which clients can manage their conflicts constructively. "New opportunities and possibilities may be discovered which in turn will transform the personal conflict into a productive learning experience" (Healey, 1995). Creative problem-solving strategies are essential to the application of positive approaches to conflict resolution. The client needs to be able to learn how to transform the situation from one in which it is 'my way or the highway' into one in which they entertain new possibilities that have been otherwise elusive (Ury, 1988). It is only through the integrated viable, effective and dynamic efforts of NGO's, INGO's, social movements and private citizens that the toughest looking conflicts may be addressed. It is the responsibility of the academics, researchers and intellectuals to make people move in this direction through their research, teaching and training.

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