CONFLICT RESOLUTION: THE HUMAN DIMENSION

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In determining the source of conflicts there is a basic question we cannot afford to dodge. Are conflicts—at all social levels—due to inherent human aggressiveness, especially male aggressiveness, derived from the consequences of evolution and survival-of-the-fittest struggles? Or are conflicts due to the emergence of inappropriate social institutions and norms that reasonably would seem to be well within human capacities to alter, to which the person has problems in adjustment?

If inherent aggressiveness is the problem, then conflicts just have to be lived with, while controlled as much as possible by police and deterrent strategies. Conflict resolution, that is, getting to the source of the problem, becomes irrelevant: the source is known and cannot be altered. At best there could be corrections of perceptions and adjustments of personal behavior in particular cases. If social conditions are the problem, then conflict resolution and prevention would be possible by removing the sources of conflict: institutions and social norms would be adjusted to the needs of persons.

Implied in conflict resolution, therefore, is the proposition that aggressions and conflicts are the direct result of some institutions and social norms being incompatible with inherent human needs. The argument is that aggressions and anti-social behaviors are stimulated by social circumstances. There are human limits to abilities to conform to such institutions and norms: the person is not wholly malleable. On the contrary, the needs that are frustrated by institutions and norms require satisfaction. They **will** be pursued in one way or another. These needs would seem to be even more fundamental than food and shelter—needs such as personal recognition and identity that are the basis of individual development and security in a society. Denial by society of recognition and identity would lead, at all social levels, to alternative behaviors designed to satisfy such needs, be it ethnic wars, street gangs or domestic violence. Such a possibility has not been part of the thinking. Law has it that there is a right to expect obedience and others have an obligation to obey. Illegality can therefore be defined. Sociologists have been greatly concerned with the socialization of the individual into the norms of society. Psychologists are concerned with the adjustment of the person to the social environment. Failure is an abnormality. Indeed, there is a widespread resistance to including any such human factor in social analysis because it is vague, non-quantifiable and therefore not "scientific." There is built into thinking the belief that the human person is wholly malleable. Economic man and other constructs that ignore problems in relationships and attribute them to a lack of individual adjustment and social consciousness are more manageable.

The alternative "Human Needs Theory" has evolved only in the last few decades, and largely as a reaction against these limited separate discipline explanations of social problems. It may be false. If it is, so is the notion of conflict resolution. If conflict resolution is to be taken seriously,

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if it is to be more than just introducing altered perceptions and good will into some specific situations, it has to be assumed that societies must adjust to the needs of people, and not the other way around. Workers must be given recognition as persons if social and domestic violence is to be contained, young people must be given a role in society if street gangs are to vanish and teenage pregnancies are to decrease, ethnic minorities must be given an autonomous status if violence is to be avoided, decision-making systems must be non-adversarial if leadership roles are to collaborative.

It is this issue that we need to examine before getting into conflict resolution. If the human needs thesis is false, if it is human aggression that is the problem, then there must be reliance on coercive means of social control to avoid conflict. It is only if needs satisfaction is the problem that conflict resolution can be justified as a process.

When societies were small extended family or tribal units there was a large degree of social concern, collaboration within them, and frequently between them. To a large degree conflicts were ritualized. With population increases and the end of face-to-face relationships in decision making, competitive territorial and property acquisition and conflicts of interest inevitably conditioned social relationships. In the systems that have evolved over the last few thousand years, the struggle to survive and achieve has been very much a personal or class one, not a community one. These evolving competitive systems led to slavery, feudalism and forms of colonialism, and to present day adversarial industrial and political relations. Personal and group conflicts of interests have thus been built into societies. As social and environmental conditions deteriorate further, with population doubling every thirty five to forty years, individuals and conglomerates will, in present social conditions, act increasingly in their own interests. This will be at the expense of others in each society and also in other societies, but ultimately, of course, at their own expense also. Societies, especially modern industrial ones, have demonstrated little capability to cost the personal or social consequence of behaviors and to react accordingly. Competitive short term gains have continued to determine institutions and policies.

The traditional and widespread view is that such interest-based systems have evolved because by nature "man is aggressive," to use the Lorenz-type phrase of the power politics theorist, Hans Morgenthau. This view, however, contains within it a false assumption. While not clearly stated, the assumption seems to be that "man is aggressive" primarily in the pursuit of material acquisition, especially resources and territories which are in limited supply. But now both experience and theory suggest that material acquisition is rarely if ever the primary source of conflict. There is room for conflict over physical acquisition, especially when there are likely to be costs of conflict. For this reason it has been possible to introduce into societies appropriate legal and bargaining institutions and processes.

What has not been realized is that conflicts are defined in these physical terms even though there are non-material human values and needs involved. International conflicts are defined as territorial even when there are clear independence or ethnic issues at stake. Workers strike and demand increased wages even when the problem is one of relationships with management and treatment of the working person. Matrimonial disputes on custody and properties are described in the same material terms. But in all cases there are non-material needs to be satisfied that

provoke such aggressions, needs of recognition and identity in particular that are frustrated whenever there is any sense of injustice.

No bargaining or compromise, such as is possible on material acquisition, is possible in relation to any such deep-rooted human needs. The dole is no compensation for the human costs of unemployment to young people seeking their identity in society, and anti-social behaviors are a consequence. The right of a vote does not offset loss of ethnic identity by a minority within a nation-state. Secession demands persist.

So when Morgenthau attributed conflict to aggressiveness in physical acquisition, and deduced that conflicts can be avoided by threat and deterrent strategies, he omitted a human element that defeats his prescription. He did not recognize any difference between "disputes" (over physical resources) and "conflicts" (over human needs and aspirations). No threat can deter when there are human behavioral needs at stake. Great powers can be defeated by small nations in their struggle for independence, ethnic violence cannot be contained, domestic violence persists despite legal consequences.

Such a view also misses out on the basis of a positive approach. Unlike human needs of recognition and identity are not in short supply. There are acceptable means of giving a sense of identity to the person at the work place, to young people, to minorities and ethnic groups. There is no reason why human needs should be a source of conflict once their existence is recognized and institutions are adjusted accordingly.

There is a problem, of course, in delving deeply into behavioral sources. Negotiations in an industrial dispute do not reveal more sensitive problems with management. Domestic violence requires a deep analysis of a total situation. At a global level, Muslim-Christian conflicts would require an extensive facilitated analysis to trace back colonial origins, class aspects, leadership motivations and a host of circumstances that trigger behavioral frustrations and make a religious conflict appear to be just that.

Given anthropological studies of tribal face-to-face relationships, and given contemporary knowledge of human needs, it is more likely that adversarial systems have evolved because of competing interests, and despite a strong human preference for collaborative social connections from which personal security and personal identity are derived.

If there is competitive material acquisition, on the one hand, and an individual desire for collaborative relationships, on the other, the explanation of the preponderance of adversarial and aggressive behaviors would have to be the conditions imposed by systems as they have evolved. If this is the case, conflicts at all social levels are due to past failures to include in institutions and in decision making a human element and to employ available intellectual resources continually to reassess institutions and social norms and thus resolve problems as they emerge.

The widespread resistance to this view was made clear during the Crime Bill debates in the U.S. in 1994. Congress was prepared to approve funding for more goals, but regarded funds spent on dealing with the sources of criminalization as "pork." This reflects another (unstated) assumption that justifies treating the problem of conflict as though it were inevitable and subject only to coercive controls. There is a widespread belief that social problems are due to personal failings: unemployment and poverty are due to lack of intelligence and diligence. A related belief is that social problems stem from a lack of social consciousness, that is, a moral obligation

to observe social norms. This is claimed to be related to lack of intelligence. The empirical evidence seems to contradict this. For example, problem children placed in a different environment seem to respond positively (See Prothrow-Stith, 1991). But even if it were so, the fact is that such people exist and will be a source of social problems unless they are given an identity and a role within the social system.

Survival-of-the-fittest is a misleading concept unless it includes specifically a human needs dimension in addition to physical goals. It is the struggle to satisfy non-material human needs that is the prime source of conflict. It is only in this sense that it can be said that "man is aggressive."

The exclusion of a human dimension distorts concepts and language. Take, for example, "leadership." Strong leadership is admired: U.S. Presidents go to war to prove their leadership qualities. But in a different context leadership qualities would be assessed on abilities to stimulate thinking and to bring together different points of view. A leader would be a facilitator.

The widely held concept of democracy is defined as government by the people through their elected representatives. It assumes many unstated conditions that have far-reaching behavioral implications, for example, relative ethnic homogeneity, classlessness and equality. Democracy of this order is a system that could possibly be unified society. It has no prospect of achievement in a society that contains major income differences, and in which minorities are unrepresented but must observe the norms of a majority. Governments in the U.S. are elected by less than a quarter of the population, less than half voting. The implications are extensive in the modern world in which there have been migrations and in which state boundaries, drawn as the result of colonial aggressions, cut across ethnic and tribal territories.

This traditional concept of democracy leads to another assumption, that minorities should be prepared, not only to conform with the discriminatory norms of the majority, but that individuals have the inherent capability of such conformity. Secession movements are sometimes sought as an alternative to conformity. They are usually opposed by the majority on the grounds that they are disruptive of the nation-state. They are, nevertheless, pursued even at great cost by a human need for identity. For these reasons democracy has built into it the seeds of conflict. We are led, therefore, to question yet another assumption, that the nation-state is any longer the appropriate unit within the world society.

Secession has become such a widespread problem that each fears that change in any one sovereign state will invite changes in its own. In these circumstances human rights and political legitimization are sacrificed in the maintenance of a sovereign state system that includes the results of colonial aggressions.

In this context the United Nations now poses a serious problem. It is an organization of sovereign states, all expecting mutual support from the organization in maintaining their jurisdictions.

It will be seen that consideration of a human element has extensive implications and is basic to thinking about the nature of conflict and its resolution. If there are human needs that have to be accommodated, then conflict control will have to give way to quite different processes which seeks the source of conflict and the environmental conditions that promote conflict, leading to

institutional change. Conflict will have to be defined as a problem to be resolved rather than a situation in which behaviors have to be controlled.

With such a fundamental paradigm shift over the course of the last few decades, it is little wonder that there remains today a major gap between Conflict Resolution theory and practice, on the one hand, and conventional wisdom and practice, on the other. To the strategist, the power politician, citizens of powerful nations, police and authoritarian heads of households, conflict resolution still means the use of adequate force to bring about some desired result. The concept of problem-solving was until a few decades ago largely a mathematical concept. Similarly, conflict prevention has meant the use of adequate threat. In the new discipline of Conflict Analysis and Resolution, conflict resolution means getting to the roots of problems and resolving them in ways that further the longer-term goals of all concerned. Prevention does not imply threat, but policies that anticipate responses and thereby avoid conflict.

Daily events now bring to our attention the reality that domestic levels of violence are outside the control of most authorities, in both developed and underdeveloped societies. But it has taken years to address the question, "why is this so?" Are there some human behaviors, individual, group, national and international, that are not subject to deterrence and control? If so, what are these and how are they to be accommodated? Might it be that military and authoritative controls are ineffective, that only values attached to relationships with others and with institutions can exercise an influence in the control of some human behaviors?

Reference

Prothrow-Stith, Deborah. 1991. *Deadly Consequences: How Violence is Destroying our Teenage Population and a Plan to Begin Solving the Problem.* Harper Perennial.