

From a theoretical perspective, a conflict can be described as 'two or more parties with seemingly incompatible goals'. That means that something such as territory, resources, or power is sought by multiple stakeholders, and it seems that they cannot all have it at the same time. The word 'seems' is important here; in many cases the use of skilful mediation, creative handling of a conflict, or transcendence of what seems to be incompatible can help to overcome the conflict. The 'content' or 'contradiction' of a conflict is often 'polluted' by strong attitudes, previous injustices, violent behaviour in the past, and other disturbing elements. These elements can make it difficult for the stakeholders to make rational choices or to behave wisely. Skilled conflict workers can use constructive nonviolence to help to overcome some of these obstacles.

When two or more parties are in a conflict they can act in many ways; negotiation and mediation are two normal ways to react. In some cases, they choose to use violent means, and - in the most extreme cases - start to kill each other. Most textbooks in political science or peace studies define war as a conflict, but they are wrong! War is a means used by some participants in some conflicts; conflict is a much broader and more complex concept than war. Authors of such textbooks show a lack of understanding of the nature of conflicts, and this has serious consequences, and not just for misled students.

If you cannot separate the means from the actual conflict, you will neither understand nor act wisely when dealing with conflict. One obvious consequence of not separating the violent means from the actual conflict is that many people understand conflict as negative per se.

Why conflict can be 'good'

Let me make the following two declarations about the nature of conflict:

- Conflicts are a necessary and integral part of human development.
- All conflicts are 'born equal' and have the same right to recognition.

When individuals mature from children into adults, most have a phase of conflicts with their parents; this is an important part of children becoming independent adults. Similarly, the process of a society moving from agrarian lifestyles to a system based on industrial production is full of conflicts. When new ideologies or religions evolve, it is in conflict with the old ideas. This is how we have moved from children to adults, hunters to farmers, from authoritarian systems to more democratic ones. All such change will, by necessity, involve conflict. These become harmful or destructive when one or more of the actors use violence to force their will, but there are millions of conflicts solved without violent means, which have helped us to build complex societies and civilisations.

The vast majority of conflicts are solved without the use of violence. The problem is that these peaceful cases are often not recognised. They are not covered in most media, included in our history books, or researched within academia – there is often a heavy bias towards violent or destructive conflicts. When partners quarrel it only become news if one actor uses enough physical force to make it a case for police, courts, and medical care – if the couple can solve their differences by asking their neighbour to mediate, or by civilised discussion over a cup of tea, the conflict will never appear in any records! It is similar with group conflicts, and conflicts between states. Only the most violent ones are reported, studied, and hence recognised. The peaceful examples - those we can learn most from - are forgotten, disappearing from our collective memories.

Conflict and social change

If conflicts are seen as **resources** to be used in developing and building good societies we will need different type of studies and theories than what is presently available. The use of nonviolent and peaceful means and tools will normally mean the opposite of preventing and de-escalating conflicts. Nonviolent activists 'jump into the middle of conflicts' and act from there. If the conflict is not intense enough, they will try to dramatise and escalate it. If it is hardly known and recognised, they will stimulate the intensity by forcing others to act. Almost every example of a nonviolent action is a case of **conflict escalation**.

Conflict escalation

When few were engaged in opposition to slavery, the first task for the movement to abolish slavery was to put it on the political agenda. When the patriarchy did not care about universal voting rights it was up to women's liberation movement to make the conflicts visible. When few cared about the brutal slaughtering of whales, activists dramatised the killing out in the deep seas by obstructing the whalers work. Campaigns against the arms trade do their best to raise awareness about the victims of wars. Almost every nonviolent campaign is an example of conflict escalation with peaceful means. These movements can celebrate their victories because they used conflict as a resource to confront injustice, and helped to create a better society in doing so.

Nonviolent techniques aim to escalate conflicts peacefully, and to make more people aware of hidden conflicts in our societies. Almost every democratic freedom or human right are the results of popular movements escalating the conflicts with the aim to change the old, unjust systems. The transformation to more equal and just societies still have a long way to go, and every hidden conflict should be made visible.

Since few have separated conflicts from the use of violence the common attitude is that conflicts are bad. And we have not sufficiently studied the many peaceful examples of how to handle conflicts. One of the problematic consequences of this extreme biased focus on the violent means is that the nonviolent strategies and techniques remains unknown and hidden.

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