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Chapter One

The Constructive Conflicts Approach

People often see conflicts in a negative light, as situations to be avoided, suppressed, or resolved as quickly as possible. And that is no wonder. At the individual level, conflict episodes cause the body to release adrenaline and cortisol, hormones that are associated with stress and impulsive action, and that in the long term are associated with anxiety and depression. At the group level, conflicts can trigger the worst in human behavior—aggression, dehumanization, oppression, and war—at great cost to lives, property, and human development.

Yet there is another side to conflicts. For all the harm that they can cause, conflicts—whether at the interpersonal, intergroup, or international level—also provide avenues for new understanding between people and groups, for improving relationships, and for creating new structures and processes that help communities live together in better ways. Without conflicts, desired changes may not occur. In short, conflicts can be varyingly *constructive* or *destructive*, a force for greater equity and understanding or a force for societal disintegration.

Understanding how conflicts move in one direction, or the other, is the topic of this book. Over the following eleven chapters, we examine the strategies that can be used to minimize the destructiveness of large-scale conflicts—including civil and interstate wars, labor-management cleavages, environmental and business struggles, ethnic and racial struggles, among others—and to transform them for significant mutual benefit. We present examples of diverse strategies and tactics so that persons studying and coping with large-scale social conflicts can learn about conflict episodes that have avoided extreme coercion or violence and which have resulted in the advancement of the interests of most parties impacted.

PLAN FOR THE BOOK AND INTENDED AUDIENCE

The following chapters are organized into four sections. Chapters 1 and 2 focus on conflict analysis, how conflicts differ and can be classified, and the theoretical debates about what drives conflict between people and groups. Chapters 3 to 5 focus on the emergence of conflict and the strategies available for adversaries to wage their struggle. Chapters 6 and 7 focus on processes of conflict escalation and de-escalation. Chapters 8 to 10 focus on mediation, negotiation, and post-conflict outcomes. A brief concluding chapter considers the monumental challenges currently facing human communities and how the constructive conflicts approach might help us to navigate them successfully. Throughout each of these chapters we share vignettes and cases illustrating the constructive conflicts approach. Each chapter ends with a list of discussion questions to help the reader consider the ideas presented in more detail.

Our book is intended for three audiences. First, for readers who are simply curious about conflict processes and want to better understand why some conflicts are constructive while others are highly destructive. Second, for laypeople and students who want to know how to act so that the conflicts that they care about—whether at the community, national, or international level—can be managed more effectively and with better outcomes. Third, for those devoting a significant part of their professional lives to mitigating destructive conflicts and seeking to achieve more just, sustainable, and satisfying conflict outcomes. This final group includes those that work in community groups, governmental or nongovernmental organizations, international organizations, or philanthropy.

CONFLICT DEFINITIONS

Conflict is defined in diverse ways by different people. Lewis Coser, for example, defined conflict as “a struggle over values and claims to scarce status, power and resources in which the aims of the opponents are to neutralize, injure or eliminate their rivals.”¹ Ramsbotham, Woodhouse, and Miall defined conflict as “the pursuit of incompatible goals by different groups.”² Pruitt and Rubin defined it as “a perceived divergence of interest, or a belief that the parties’ current aspirations cannot be achieved simultaneously.”³ To Rioux and Redekop, conflict is “an antagonistic relationship between two or more parties over intractable divergences regarding what is mutually significant to the parties involved.”⁴ Others, such as John Burton, have distinguished conflicts from disputes, suggesting that conflicts arise from deep-seated problems that resist resolution while disputes revolve around short-term disagreements that are amenable to negotiation.⁵

In this book we adopt the following definition for conflict: *Conflicts occur when two or more persons or groups manifest the belief that they have incompatible objectives*. Nearly every word in that definition needs elaboration. “Two or more” means that the persons involved in a conflict view each other as adversaries in trying to achieve their goals. “Persons or groups” include individuals and organizations that claim to represent larger collectivities such as governments, classes, ethnic communities, or other identity groups. “Manifest” means that members of at least one of the contending groups engage in visible conduct attempting to change the other side’s behavior in ways that bring it closer to their objectives, for example, by organizing a protest march, by boycotting businesses, by participating in a work stoppage, by launching a missile strike, or by cutting off communication. Finally, “belief that they have incompatible objectives” means that members of one or more of the parties think that another party impedes some of their goals.

SIX FOUNDATIONAL IDEAS

Throughout the various editions of this book, we have come back repeatedly to six foundational ideas that guided our thinking about the possibilities of more constructive approaches to conflicts: conflicts are inevitable and essential, conflicts can be waged constructively or destructively, conflicts are dynamic, conflicts are socially constructed, conflicts are interconnected, and all conflicts can be transformed. Each of these foundational ideas is examined in the following.

Conflicts Are Inevitable and Essential

There is nothing inherently wrong with conflict situations. To the contrary, conflicts between people and groups are natural and inevitable aspects of social interaction. They alert us to the underlying tensions that exist in every social relationship, give us a pathway to change the status quo, and can even improve relationships between adversaries, friends, family members, and coworkers, when constructively managed. Without conflicts, exploitive hierarchies would remain unchallenged, communities would remain stagnant, relationships could not mature and develop, and the problems confronting groups, organizations, and nations would never be considered, debated, and solved. Words are said, arguments are launched, lawsuits are issued, and wars are waged as a signal of deeper incompatibilities that cannot be sustained. In this way, we can see that all conflicts have the *potential* of being functional in the sense that they can serve as a pathway to needed change when social, political, and economic relationships become strained and unjust.

Such thinking is not new to this book. It has guided contemporary scholarship on conflict studies since the emergence of peace and conflict studies as a distinct academic discipline in the 1950s and 1960s.⁶ Recognizing the functional elements of conflict also has intellectual roots in various philosophical traditions of social change, growth, and progress, such as Dualism, Dialectics, Hegelianism, Marxism, and Enlightenment traditions. Each of these traditions sees human change as resulting from clashes between competing or contradictory forces, whether the forces of Yin and Yang in ancient Chinese philosophy, a thesis and antithesis in the Hegelian tradition, or the dialectics of Marxism.

Conflicts Can Be Waged Constructively or Destructively

If one accepts the certainty and necessity of social conflicts, it follows that the most important question facing us is how to wage the inevitable conflicts that we face in ways that are more constructive and less destructive. In other words, if conflict is an inevitable feature of social and political relationships, and if it can serve to improve relations and alert people to underlying tensions, the goal for conflict management should not be to create a conflict-free world, but rather to help people find ways to fight that harm fewer people and result in settlements that are relatively fair and enduring.

Figure 1.1 shows some of the available choices available to partisans in a fight. The figure illustrates that there are far more means to achieve a desired change than most partisans are usually aware of. Fighting can involve direct violence, or an attempt to change things via nonviolent social movements, enlisting the help of an intermediary, yielding, persuading, mediating, or eliminating contact altogether.

Skilled conflict managers know how to choose among the different tools, and across different contexts, to nudge conflicts in constructive directions. Consider the analogy of a carpenter's tool belt. In carpentry there is a tool for nearly every job or problem. Successful carpenters do not choose the same tool from their belt no matter what the job. Instead, they will choose a tool that is most likely to aid in the long-term integrity of the piece being crafted. So too in conflict transformation the goal is to help those in a fight to understand that multiple tools exist to navigate their conflict. Use of some tools in some contexts will damage relationships, lead to outcomes that are unfair, and plant seeds that will guarantee the reemergence of the conflict later. Other tools are more likely to facilitate ongoing communication, lead to creative problem-solving, and yield outcomes that are fair and satisfactory to all stakeholders.

Two important caveats are important to consider when considering Figure 1.1. First, we do not claim that conflicts are either waged wholly construc-



Figure 1.1. Conflict Management Toolkit

tively or wholly destructively. Social conflicts can be both, with periods where great harm occurs interposed with periods of collaboration and mutual accommodation.⁷ Partisans in a fight are continually making choices about what ends to seek and what means to adopt to those ends. Moreover, partisans may adopt different conflict management tactics at different points in time, some constructive and some destructive. We explore these ideas in detail in chapters 4 and 5.

Second, a determination of whether a conflict being waged constructively or destructively is ultimately a subjective one. For example, pacifists argue that the use of direct physical violence during a conflict can never be justified or viewed as constructive. As Martin Luther King argued, "violence begets violence." Others disagree, arguing that violence is both tactically necessary and morally justified in cases of great oppression by an unyielding adversary. Readers of this book will have their own opinion on such matters. In our own view, the singular use of violence to achieve a desired change is usually a

flawed strategy, both tactically and ethically. From a tactical perspective extreme coercion by one side in a conflict invites the use of extreme coercion by the other side. That, in turn, leads to a "spiral of escalation" where both parties end up further away from their goals and underlying interests. Ethically, violence is difficult to justify given the wide array of other usable and less destructive conflict management strategies available to partisans in a fight. Violence is the bluntest of instruments for conflict management; relying on it signifies a failure of imagination and creativity. Of course, we recognize that in some situations, such as an unprovoked attack by an adversary with malicious intent, responding to violence with violence may be the only short-term avenue available for survival.

Our own formula for assessing destructive and constructive conflicts is based on an analysis of three aspects of a conflict. First, the *ends* being sought by partisans, that is the goal or destination that is being sought by the parties. Second, the *means* partisans use to get achieve these goals, namely their conflict strategies and behaviors. Third, the *outcomes* of a particular episode of conflict. Table 1.1 summarizes some of the major distinctions we make between constructive and destructive ends and means. Readers should note that the variables we use to classify a conflict and constructive or destructive are on a continuum. Few conflicts are wholly on one side or the other, and adversaries involved in most major conflicts will vacillate between the extremes at different points of contention. Details of each approach, and explanations of why they are adopted, are found later in the book.

Table 1.1. Elements of Destructive and Constructive Conflicts

	Destructive	Constructive
Ends Sought	Victory over Capacity to control Marginalization of opponents	Victory with Capacity to integrate Inclusion and accommodation of opponents
Means Used	Reliance on violence and extreme coercion Stereotype and dehumanize opponents Construct barriers to communication and interaction	Reliance on persuasion and reward Respectful attention Humanize opponents and build superordinate identity Institutionalize opportunities for interaction
Outcomes	None, or if achieved grievances remain Zero-sum High cost to lives, property, treasure, and quality of life	Outcome reached that is deemed acceptable by all parties Mutual gains Low cost to lives, property, treasure, and quality of life

Conflicts Are Dynamic

Third, social conflicts are never static; they are fluid and move through various stages as partisans adopt new strategies, develop different perspectives, achieve some objectives, and fail to achieve others, or as the composition of the contending groups or the environment in which they are operating changes. A diagram of the potential sequence of stages is shown in Figure 1.2.

The series of arrows directed at the circle indicates that preconditions for many latent conflicts exist, from which a conflict emerges, escalates, de-escalates, becomes settled, and finally results in outcomes that either terminate the conflict or become the basis for new forms of contention, thus repeating the cycle. How the previous stage is enacted heavily influences the next stage and is partly determinant of whether the conflict can be viewed as constructive or destructive. We call this diagram the *Conflict Transformation Cycle* to note that wide-scale social conflicts are rarely resolved. Instead, they are transformed from one state to another and in either a constructive or destructive direction.⁸

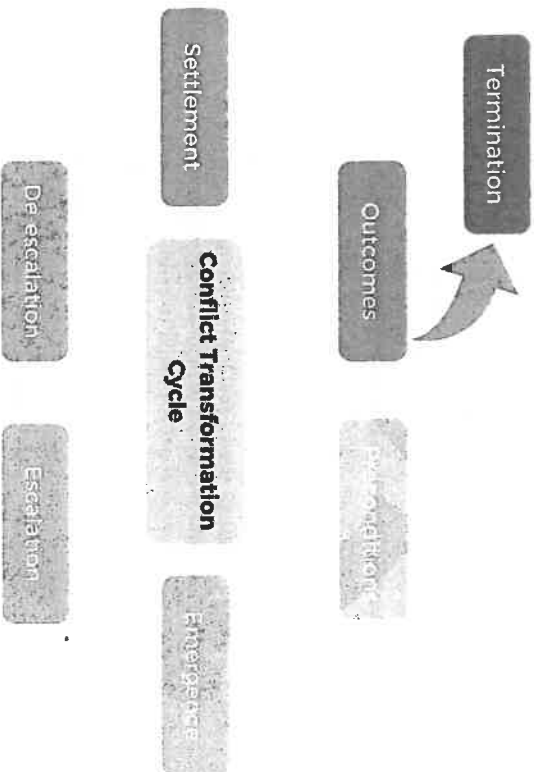


Figure 1.2. Conflict Transformation Cycle

Preconditions

Before a conflict emerges, its preconditions exist. These preconditions could include inequalities between persons or groups, decision-making systems that favor some voices over others, other power imbalances, emotional wounds, discordant worldviews and ideologies, or incompatibilities in what people or groups want. Peace and conflict scholars are far from unified in which of these preconditions offer the most explanatory power when it comes to understanding where social conflicts “come from.” Work in behavioral neuroscience, for example, has revealed intriguing evidence that genetic and epigenetic forces combine to play a significant role in predisposing some people to psychopathologies associated with violence, trauma sensitivity, assertion, and other ancillaries of social conflicts.⁹ Other researchers downplay the genetic significance of social conflict, focusing instead on the contribution of structural violence, social-psychology, and other exogenous forces. We examine this fascinating debate in chapter 2, classifying different ideas about the sources of conflict from across various traditions and disciplines.

Emergence

Not all potential conflicts emerge into visible fights. Conflicts only emerge when at least one potential adversary acts on the belief that its goals are incompatible with those of an adversary. That act can take countless forms: a teacher yelling at a student, a boycott, a march, building a wall, a legal filing, physical violence, or the declaration of war. Often the emergence of a conflict is triggered by a specific event. These might include an act of violence, new policies that restrict rights of groups, a natural disaster, or any other event that reveals incompatible objectives among different individuals and groups. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, for instance, triggered conflicts around the world related to the tension between personal liberty versus government mandates related to public health practices, such as mask wearing, social distancing, and the closing of businesses and schools. Triggering events alone are not enough to lead to conflict emergence. They require a ripe set of preconditions, often related to structural inequality, differences in identity among stakeholders, and incompatible goals. The processes of conflict emergence are examined in chapter 3.

Escalation

An escalating stage is reached when the adversaries begin to actively pursue their incompatible goals. Escalation can proceed gradually or sharply depending on the choices made by those involved in a conflict. For example, when

adversaries have similar levels of power and when each chooses to wage their conflict using coercive tactics, conflicts are likely to escalate quickly. This dynamic is sometimes called a spiral of escalation, meaning that each coercive step taken by a stakeholder makes it more likely that their adversary will respond in kind. When the contending sides have an equal amount of coercive and defensive power such escalations are unlikely to resolve quickly as victory by one side over the other is unlikely. On the other hand, in asymmetric conflict situations, in which the weaker party quickly capitulates to a more powerful foe, the escalation phase can end quickly—at least in the short term. The various ways a conflict may be pursued are discussed in chapters 4 and 5, and the processes of escalation, including choices that tend to limit destructive escalations, are examined in chapter 6.

De-escalation

Conflicts not only escalate; they also de-escalate after a brief or sometimes exceedingly long period of time. A protracted conflict often has many escalating and de-escalating episodes of varying magnitude. Some appear tantalizingly close to a period of de-escalation only to return to a highly escalated state. Such was the case with the breakthrough between Israeli and Palestinian negotiators that resulted in the Oslo Peace Accord in 1993, which was followed by successive events that re-escalated tensions, including the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin by a right-wing Jewish student in 1995, the second Intifada in 2000, and subsequent acts of widespread violence and fragile ceasefires between Israel and Hamas in 2014 and 2021. Other conflicts de-escalate quickly after both sides reach what has been called a ripe moment or hurting stalemate; a situation where the parties conclude that they cannot reach their goals through unilateral attempts to defeat the other side and when a better option for waging their fight more collaboratively emerges.¹⁰ De-escalatory dynamics are reviewed in chapter 7.

Settlement

Settlement of conflicts occur through both negotiated and non-negotiated means and can be formal or informal. Moreover, sometimes a conflict ends for less discernable reasons. The UPSALA Conflict Database, for example, classifies the termination of war in one of three ways: victory by one side over the other, a negotiated settlement, or low activity, which denotes a reduction of violence to a level below which the conflict is classified as a war. Interestingly, low activity, or what has elsewhere been called the withering away of a conflict, accounts for sizable portions of terminations. In one recent study of civil war terminations between 2002 and 2013, low activity accounted

for close to 50 percent of terminations, followed by negotiated settlements at close to 30 percent, followed by victory by one side over the other.¹¹ We explore both negotiated and non-negotiated settlements in chapter 8.

Outcomes

Conflict settlements usually produce outcomes that change the dynamics between adversaries. Sometimes adversaries in a conflict may be unhappy with the settlement achieved. It may be viewed by one side as unfair, the result of coercion, or as an affront to their dignity. In these cases, which result in what can be called an *unstable* peace, the settlement achieved creates an outcome that makes it more likely that one or both sides will renew their fight at a later day. One often-cited example is that of the Treaty of Versailles, which was signed in June 1919 to mark the formal end of World War I. That treaty held Germany responsible for the outbreak of World War I and sanctioned it by demanding territorial compensation, demilitarization, and reparations payments. This settlement is often credited for incentivizing the militarization of Germany and the rise of the Third Reich in the run up to World War II. At other times, the settlement of one phase of a conflict may transform it toward a *stable* peace. Adversaries may have learned to communicate in more effective ways, institutionalized forms of ongoing conflict management may have been created, agreements may have been forged that allow for more inclusivity over decision making and distribution of things of value. For instance, after two decades of contentious and sometimes violent struggle between labor and management in the United States during the 1920s and 1930s, the federal government created the War Labor Board, which was charged with mediating and arbitrating industrial disputes.¹² This, and other efforts to institutionalize collective bargaining as a form of dispute resolution among unions and management, is often credited with helping the United States avoid the escalation of class-based struggle to the level of widespread violence or revolution.

Critically important to recognize, regardless of the specific outcome, is that conflicts rarely end, rather they are transformed from one state to another. The outcome of one fight produces the preconditions for the emergence of a new one that is either more or less constructively waged. Conflict outcomes and transformation sequences are explored in detail in chapter 10.

Conflicts Are Socially Constructed

Conflicts are waged not just with protests, fists, or guns, but also through narratives. These are socially constructed.¹³ Each side enters a conflict with

understandings that reflect their own experiences and positionality. Stakeholders tell their own distinct stories about what happened and why, who is to blame, and what is to be done. The more complex the situation, the more likely these stories will deviate in significant ways: one person's terrorist is another's freedom fighter, a police officer may alternately be viewed by different people as a public servant or an oppressor, nuclear energy is alternatively framed as technological marvel or an existential threat to human health and the natural world. Such pronouncements are inseparable from the positionality of the viewer.

The book *Side by Side: Parallel Histories of Israel-Palestine*, written jointly by Israelis Dan Bar-On and Eyal Naveh and Palestinian Sami Adwān, illustrates this point beautifully.¹⁴ In it the authors show how history books written by Palestinian and Israeli scholars and read by generations of school children tell fundamentally different stories about common historical events. By placing the text found in the Palestinian history books side by side with the text found in Israeli history books, the authors reveal that our narrative reconstruction of historical events differs to such an extent that it is almost as if each side is telling stories about completely different events.

This is not to say that there is no truth when it comes to social conflicts. Atrocities are committed, words are uttered, threats are made and carried out, and policies are enacted that have devastating and lasting impacts on real people. These cannot be denied, although partisans often try to do so. But in the end, every event that humans experience as individuals or within groups is interpreted through a subjective point of view—a framework of understanding impacted by one's culture, social class, relative power, racial and ethnic identity, life experiences, gender identification, birth order, and a plethora of other variables that distort and shape our view of conflict situations. Conflicts are thus framed in ways that fit our preexisting conceptions of the world.¹⁵

Accepting this premise is uncomfortable for many people of strong conviction. It is far easier to believe that we alone have been blessed with an ability to see things as they truly are. However, admitting that we are as much prisoners of our own time, space, and positionality as are our adversaries does not mean we must let go of our convictions; rather, it means that we recognize that tolerance for different ideas are hallmarks of well-functioning societies. As the late Jerome Bruner asserted in his book *Acts of Meaning*:

I take open-mindedness to be a willingness to construe knowledge and values from multiple perspectives without loss of commitment to one's own values. Open-mindedness is the keystone of what we call a democratic culture.¹⁶

That the meaning given to events are socially constructed has serious implications for conflicts of all types, particularly in this age of so-called fake

news. When stakeholders cannot agree on how to define a problem, or even if it exists, little room remains to develop shared and successful strategies for bringing about a needed change. And when independent voices are no longer trusted, storytelling about what is happening and why fractures, conspiracies thrive, and destructive conflicts are nurtured. Worse, partisans become untethered from any sources of information that do not reflect their preconceptions of the world. In extreme cases dissenting voices are eliminated from the public discourse, as occurred in Russia with the criminalization of any speech contradicting the government's official narrative of its military invasion into Ukraine in March 2022.

The discourse over the COVID-19 pandemic and the use of vaccines to control it is another case in point. Policies have been difficult to develop, and resistance to public health mandates have been significant due to contradictory narratives, high levels of distrust, and political polarization. The COVID-19 response exists in what has been called an *infodemic*, defined by the World Health Organization as *too much information including false or misleading information in digital and physical environments during a disease outbreak*.¹⁷ Infodemics exist within nearly all intense social debates, increasingly so as social media platforms proliferate and bad actors seek to spread disinformation to foment conflicts.¹⁸ The hallmarks of infodemics are confusion, mistrust, fear, conspiratorial beliefs, and resulting actions that usually make a problem worse. While difficult, strategies can be adopted to counter infodemics and related problems. These are explored in subsequent chapters on conflict de-escalation and settlement.

Conflicts Are Interconnected

Social conflicts are interconnected over time and space.¹⁹ Thus one or more side in a conflict may view their current conflict as a renewal of a prior conflict, waged years, decades, or even centuries in the past. Skilled movement leaders often capitalize on historical grievances to rally constituents and build support for a cause, a practice often called *memory activism*, which has been observed across numerous conflict zones including Serbia, Israel and Palestine, and Eastern Europe.²⁰ In these cases, historical memories of suffering, defeat, or glory are packaged into emotional and compelling stories that can trigger in-group solidarity, out-group hatred, and a thirst for revenge.

Many conflicts are also nested in larger-scale conflicts. The struggle between the Syrian government and antigovernment rebel movements is embedded in a larger regional conflict involving Turkey, Iraq, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and others. That regional conflict is, in turn, embedded in an even

larger global conflict over the nature and scope of international intervention that involves still other players, such as the United States, China, and Russia, as well as multilateral organizations such as OPEC and the United Nations. In addition, each adversary is likely to be simultaneously engaged in conflicts with more than one other adversary.

All Conflicts Can Be Transformed

The belief that some social conflicts are intractable—eternal and unsolvable—has been central to thinking in peace and conflict studies for many years. Conflicts may be considered intractable when six conditions are present: critical resources are at stake, unilateral victory by one side over the other is impossible, stakeholders commit themselves to a set of unyielding positions, opponents are viewed as an existential threat, structural inequalities privilege some parties over others, and self-other conceptions revolve around dehumanizing narratives of one's opponent. For such conflicts, which include those between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland and Islamic separatists and the Indian government in the Kashmir Valley, it may seem that conflict transformation is impossible.

For even the most intractable conflicts, however, it is conceivable for someone, somewhere, to do something that helps to transform the conflict in a positive direction, if only modestly. For instance, large-scale conflicts usually involve diverse actors including nongovernmental organizations and nonprofit groups; stakeholders at the local, national, or international level; financial organizations; social networks; and other stakeholders, each of which offers and avenue for conflict transformation. Therefore, when the official representatives of antagonistic sides of a conflict are unwilling to communicate directly with each other about possible settlements, it may be possible for members of unofficial communities to act. For example, during the height of the civil war in Sri Lanka members of the diaspora *Sinhalese* and *Tamil* living abroad were able to conduct informal dialogues with each other that led to meaningful connections and understandings not possible in their home country.²¹ Similarly, in the United States several civic organizations and nonprofits are currently working within communities separated by political ideology to overcome what has been called the red-blue divide between Republican-leaning and Democratic-leaning citizens. The civic group, Better Angels, for example, has formed a network of Republicans and Democrats that promote dialogue, debate, and collaborative events, the creation of mutually beneficial economic projects, and the building of social and support networks.²²

VARIETIES OF CONFLICTS

Conflicts differ in six important and consequential ways: the type of issue in contention, the domain in which it is occurring, the stakeholders who are impacted, the characteristics of the adversaries, the nature of their relationship, and the means used by those stakeholders to wage their struggle. Those interested in taking action to contain or de-escalate a conflict will benefit from careful analysis of each.

Issues in Contention

Adversaries wage conflicts over two kinds of matters: interests and values. Thus, they may quarrel about resources, assets, or capabilities that they each want to have and believe how much they have must be at the expense of the opponent. These resources include material such as land, money, oil, and water. Similarly, they may quarrel over social resources, such as their prestige, or their power to make decisions independent of the desires of others. Adversaries may quarrel as well over the values that each side holds dear. These become matters in contention when one side insists on the inherent superiority of its values that another party finds objectionable or when members of one group insist that others adopt their values, as can occur in proselytizing efforts for religious beliefs or political ideologies.

Conflicts that are waged over things are, in general, more negotiable, and more easily managed constructively, than conflicts waged over beliefs and values. This is because things can be divided but beliefs and values cannot. Arguing about the price of an item for purchase rarely results in violence. The purchase price may leave one side less satisfied than the other but does not normally compromise their sense of self-worth or meaning, nor does it upend their belief system. Arguments over the value of human life or choice—which are central to family planning and reproductive rights—by contrast, are non-negotiable. They are seen as fundamental values that cannot be bargained away. In such situations compromise is often impossible, positions easily become hardened, stereotyping and dehumanization of adversaries is common, and a loss by one side to the other is more likely to be seen as an existential threat.

A close examination of issues in contention helps conflict analysts to make better choices about what kind of conflict mitigation techniques to use. If a conflict is over distributable things, then straightforward conflict mitigation techniques such as interest-based negotiation, finding trade-offs, and encouraging compromise may succeed. For conflict over values, additional conflict transformation techniques are nearly always required. These range

from, among others, separating the parties so they cannot damage each other, engaging them in deep dialogue about self and other to transform attitudes, and developing new conflict narratives that emphasize superordinate identities over parochial ones. We discuss several of these options in chapter 8.

Of course, the most difficult conflicts are those that involve both distributable things and deep underlying differences in values and beliefs. For example, conflict among teachers, parents, and school administrators over resources devoted toward STEM training versus funding for the arts is not simply a matter of negotiating a budget. Rather, such a conflict also involves contested values regarding the purpose education and the role schools should play in child development. Conflict transformation efforts in such situations are challenging. They require doing more than one thing at the same time, or perhaps sequencing conflict interventions to address multiple conflict drivers at different times (e.g., start by exploring differences in worldviews and building understanding, and only then transitioning to negotiating budget allocations).

Domain

A review of popular writing about conflicts illustrates a tendency of academics and consultants to group conflicts according to the domain in which a struggle is occurring. Hence, entire literatures, conferences, and trainings are devoted exclusively to subfields as interpersonal conflict management, labor-management relations, public policy conflicts, organizational conflicts, identity conflicts, interstate conflict and civil war, and international conflict. Such classifications are helpful to the extent to which different of conflict management techniques may be required in different domains. For example, collaborative governance in the domain of public policy dispute management or nonprovocative defense in the domain of international conflict.²³

One danger here is that teachers often abandon efforts to expose students to “the field” of conflict studies broadly construed and instead narrow the focus of study to more manageable proportions, such as the study of war, postconflict reconstruction, interpersonal dispute resolution, or collaborative governance. Such an approach would lead students to believe that violent international conflicts have nothing to do with interpersonal disputes, that labor-management conflicts are wholly different from environmental conflicts, and that alternative dispute resolution is relevant only within a domestic political context. In short, by “tribalizing” our field we are, perhaps unwittingly, teaching students those comparisons *across* various conflict domains and settings is less valuable than comparisons *within* each domain and setting. We strongly disagree.

Stakeholders

Conflicts can also differ according to the parties, or stakeholders, involved. For example, imagine a conflict over water distribution in a fragile ecosystem that is experiencing a prolonged drought. Stakeholders in such a conflict could include farmers, ranchers, homeowners, environmental advocates, local business associations, land rights activists, and town, county, and federal land management agencies. Each of these groups may have contrasting interests when it comes to water use, and each stand to be positively or negatively impacted by water distribution and conservation decisions. In addition, some stakeholder groups may be highly mobilized and regularly participate in actions designed to influence the course of the conflict. In other cases, a stakeholder group may participate little, or not at all, in conflict processes.

During a conflict analysis, each stakeholder group can be “mapped” in a way that reveals their relative power and their relationships. One common mapping technique is to visually depict each stakeholder group as a circle in the case of primary disputants or square in the case of a secondary stakeholder group. Circles and squares are large or small in proportion to the analyst’s assessment of the relative power of each. Lines are then drawn between each group to illustrate the nature of their relationship; solid lines, for instance, indicate an ongoing relationship, dashed lines indicating an existing but dormant relationship, broken lines as indicating an active conflict, dual lines indicating a formal alliance, and so on. An example of a conflict map, as applied to the current conflict in Yemen, is shown in Figure 1.3. It shows the variety of stakeholders active in that conflict and the relationship between them.

Conflict maps, such as the one in Figure 1.3, help the analyst see potential pathways to constructive conflict transformation if, for example, the primary conflicting parties have existing or dormant relationships with the same secondary stakeholder group. For this reason, a conflict setting with a complex array of stakeholder groups and a complicated set of intersecting relationships can be easier to intervene in than one with few stakeholders and relationships. Under such conditions, multiple points of entry may be available to the conflict manager. When primary disputants cannot be engaged, secondary disputants often can be.

Characteristics of Adversaries

Stakeholders that perceive themselves to be in a conflict and mobilize for a fight are known as adversaries. Two general features of adversary groups have implications for how destructively or constructively they engage in their conflict: the adversary’s self-other conceptions and the clarity of the adversary’s social boundaries.

Conflict in Yemen

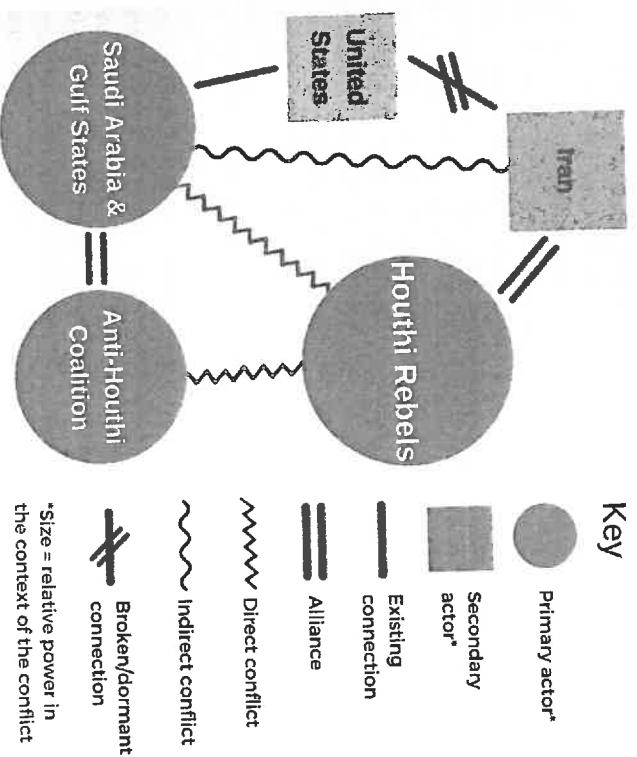


Figure 1.3. Conflict Mapping

Self-Other Conceptions

Adversaries often tell stories about their opponent that rely on stereotypes, tropes, and negative attributions. At the same time adversaries tend to tell stories about their own group that emphasize their virtuous qualities and that defend aggressive actions as necessary steps to protect freedom, dignity, or other essential qualities. For example, if my child gets into a fight at school I may rush to the conclusion that she must have been bullied, picked on, or was acting in self-defense. “My child is not a bad person,” I declare, “she was simply put in a circumstance where she committed a bad act!” But when someone outside of our group commits a bad deed, we tend to attribute that behavior to their innate qualities. They did the bad deed, we say, because they are a bad person. Meanwhile, members of the other group are doing the

same thing, justifying their own bad acts as circumstantial dynamics but the bad acts of their adversary as an innate part of that other group's character. Social psychologists call this dynamic attribution bias and have found that it characterizes the outlook of groups everywhere.²⁴

A relatively benign example can be found in the context of sporting events, where the hometown fans may celebrate the qualities and virtues of their team while chastising the qualities of the visiting team or taunt and disparage the character of a particularly disliked star on the opposing team. A more destructive example is found in cases of organized violence, where conceptions of the other are so heinous and opponents are so dehumanized as to justify acts of brutality against them, a well-known example being the characterization of Tutsis by Hutu-affiliated radio stations as *inyenzi*, or "cockroaches," and *inzoka*, or "snakes," in the run-up to the Rwandan genocide of 1992.²⁵

Boundary Clarity

The social boundaries of parties in a conflict vary in clarity and permeability and can also impact the relative constructiveness or destructiveness of a conflict. Sometimes boundaries between ethnic groups, for example, may be sharp and sustained by law and custom that restricts communication and movement across ethnic borders. This was the case in the Southern United States during the years of the Jim Crow laws and in South Africa during the years of apartheid. In both cases racial groups were legally segregated. In other times and places, as in cosmopolitan cities, the boundaries between many ethnic groups may be vague and the realms of life governed by ethnic designation more limited. Indeed, increasingly now, many people have multiple national identities and even dual citizenship, they appreciate multicultural experiences, and they value diversity of opinion and experience as a source of social capital.

In general, clear, and strong boundaries between adversaries contributes to the destructiveness of a conflict. Without opportunities for interaction, adversaries are free to stereotype opponents and advocate for policies that distribute things of value unequally or conflict tactics that rely on coercion. On the other hand, regular interaction among adversaries can improve the constructiveness of a conflict. An entire subfield of conflict transformation, for instance, is based on what is called the "contact hypothesis," which holds that intergroup interactions diminish prejudice between those groups, under specific conditions.²⁶

That is not to say that regular interaction is always constructive. For example, peacekeeping—the act of inserting neutral observers between armed groups so they cannot fight—illustrates how lack of contact can, at times, be

a constructive approach to conflict management. It allows adversaries to cool off, creates room for diplomatic channels to evolve, and breaks the cycle of violence and revenge.²⁷ Thus highly escalated conflicts may, at times, benefit from boundaries between adversaries whereas emerging and settled conflicts may benefit from more robust and ongoing opportunities for interaction.

Relations between Adversaries

Adversaries involved in a conflict may be integrated and mutually dependent upon each other. They may share greater or lesser degrees of similarities in identities, values, and interests. They may be more or less symmetrical in the resources that they can control relative to each other. Variations these dimensions greatly affect how a conflict is waged and transformed. Four variations in the social relationship between and among conflict adversaries are particularly interesting to consider: (1) whether the relationship is a one-off interaction or an ongoing one, (2) their shared history, (3) the degree to which they are integrated with each other, and (4) the degree of power asymmetry between them.

One-off or Ongoing Interaction

A one-off relationship is one where the parties to the conflict will only interact once. Once the conflict is settled, the adversaries are unlikely to see each other again. Economic transactions often are one-off. The buyer and seller interact around the price of an item but once their business is concluded they are unlikely to interact again. Conflicts that take between individuals or groups that will regularly interact with each other in the future, such as family members, workers and managers, and political parties in a parliamentary system, are, by definition, ongoing.

Conflicts embedded within an ongoing relationship can be variably easier or harder to navigate. On the one hand, the ongoing relationship may make it more likely that conflict management has become institutionalized, that the parties to the conflict have a deeper understanding of each other, and that they have an incentive to preserve good relations since they are always interacting under what has been called the "shadow of the future."²⁸ Collective bargaining between unionized workers and management is an example. This form of labor-management relations institutionalizes a set of rules about the negotiation process that are institutionalized, predictable, and recognized as serving the long-term stability of the organization that both sides belong to. On the other hand, poorly managed conflicts in the context of an ongoing relationship can become much more destructive when one or both sides become

aggrieved. Neither side can extract themselves from the relationship, but past wounds become the impetus for retaliation and rapid escalation.

One-off relationships are similarly complex. Since adversaries only interact once they may have little incentive to preserve good feelings and may resort to confrontation, dirty tricks, and manipulation to achieve their interests. At the same time, when such conflicts become destructive the impacts are likely to be contained to a particular time and place, making destructive escalation less likely.

Shared History

Adversaries may have a history of past antagonistic relations, including one-sided oppression, bloody suppression, or genocidal attacks. Those past experiences and the memories of them influence the interpretation of current actions and future options, making cooperation and even interaction impossible. In contrast, adversaries may share a history of being closely integrated or allied against a common enemy. In both cases, past histories are not permanent and unchanging. Past events are subject to new interpretations as ways of thinking change and as the groups with varying interpretations change their relations, as the external environment changes, as new conflicts emerge, and as people change the stories that they tell about each other. For example, relations between the United States and Japan are generally considered to be stable. Each country shares close economic ties with the other, close military and security cooperation, and a relatively similar set of interests regarding the geopolitics of the Pacific Rim. In recent decades past, however, the United States and Japan were locked in a bloody war with each side claiming the other posed an existential threat to its survival.

Integration

Integration refers to the degree of engagement and interdependence the parties normally have with each other. At one extreme, the parties may be so interdependent that neither could survive without the other, or for each to achieve what it wants, cooperation with the other is desirable or even necessary. Under these circumstances, conflicts are often about how to best cooperate and work together. At the other extreme, the adversaries may be almost wholly independent of each other, each party normally functioning with little exchange or other kind of interaction with the other.

Generally, integration between adversaries helps constrain them from destructive escalation. Each party is inclined to avoid disrupting mutually beneficial relations and try to quickly settle disputes that emerge. Thus, one of the

main pillars of the so-called liberal peace thesis is that peace is more likely when states are tied together through common economic policies, which are overseen by established multilateral institutions. In such contexts, it is argued that states, particularly democratic ones, will be more likely to cooperate with other members of the international community and be less inclined to confrontation and destructive conflict with each other.²⁹ This logic was central to the formation of the European Union in 1993 and its predecessor the European Steel and Coal Community in 1951. After two bloody continental wars, Europeans came to believe that the integration of economic, political, and cultural systems would create significant "functional interdependence" which would reduce the probability of future conflict.³⁰

Power Asymmetry

Power relations are generally regarded to have great relevance for analyzing conflicts, but the notion of power has much conceptual ambiguity. The term *power* sometimes refers to a social system's capacity to accomplish an agreed-on task, but often it refers to the relationship between groups within a system in which one group directs the other.³¹ Given the attention in this book to conflicts, the latter meaning is more pertinent. Power refers here to a person's or group's ability to induce another party to act as the power wielder wishes, even (but not necessarily) against the resistance of those others. That ability may rest on actual or threatened negative sanctions (coercion). But it may also rest on the use of positive sanctions (the provision of benefits). Power may also rest on the sense of identity that the subordinates share with those exercising power, finding their persuasion convincing.³²

Power asymmetry comes in many forms.³³ One basis for asymmetry is a person's or group's ability to threaten or impose negative sanctions, which may include physical coercion and the denial of needed resources. Asymmetry also rests on the ability of one party to use positive sanctions to ensure compliance by the other party, creating dependency of the subordinate party. Asymmetry also arises by one side's control over interpretations of what is happening in a relationship between the dominating and dominated groups. This control may be carried out in the way ideas are expressed and communicated, as exemplified by totalitarian regimes' control of information.

When all these forms of domination are combined, the dominant party (whether an ethnic group, ruling class, or political party) may be regarded as a hegemon.³⁴ Moreover, when inequalities become part of the everyday norms and procedures of politics, commerce, and cultural expression there exists a situation of what is called structural violence.³⁵ Under such conditions one group overwhelmingly enjoys privileges and advantages not afforded to other

groups and these advantages are widely maintained and enforced by societal institutions. Currently, for example, the United States is in the throes of a national reckoning with what activists call structural racism, the systemic effort to maintain institutions, laws, and economies that overwhelmingly benefit white Americans.

Control, however, is rarely total, even in the most hegemonic of organizations or societies. Some resistance is always possible, and the dominating party may take that into account in the extent to which it imposes sanctions or takes advantage of its superior position. It may constrain itself from being overly exploitative, fearing a rise in resistance. Such was the case with many of the colonial powers, which often granted limited control to local leaders to better control potential opponents.

Power wielders are obeyed in many social settings because they are regarded as having the right to give orders; authority is accorded them because of the office they hold and the way they came to occupy the office. Legitimacy, however, is never unlimited and may be withdrawn by the followers when they believe the basis for it has been violated. Herein lies the great power of nonviolent resistance when masses of people stop deny legitimacy to office holders. What appears to be an all-powerful hegemon may collapse in short order in the face of mass protests, noncooperation, work stoppages, and ridicule.

Means of Conflicting

Conflicts can also be distinguished by the means that the adversaries use to achieve their objectives. These range from mediation to negotiation to electoral politics to armed struggle to mass protest (means of conflicting are discussed extensively in chapters 4 and 5). More than one means can be used at the same time.

Two inter-related dimensions of the means used in conflicts are especially important for understanding constructive conflict: the degree of regulation and the severity of the conflict methods. Regulation entails rules about how a conflict should be pursued and procedures for reaching decisions to settle a dispute. Such rules exist in all societies, but they vary in their degree of institutionalization; that is, the extent to which they (1) have been internalized by the participants; (2) are expressed in tradition, formal writing, or some other embodiment external to the participants; and (3) are enforced by sanctions.³⁶ These rules may be quite effective in governing conflict conduct, but they tend to be more effective when participants engaged in a conflict agree about the rules and believe the rules are legitimate. Certainly of punishment if rule violations are committed also increases the likelihood

of compliance. Organizations or systems that lack an overarching authority that can set the rules and police them are more prone to unruly conflict than those organizations or systems that have such an authority. This is clearly of importance in the international system, in which UN resolutions are often not enforced due to the constraints of national sovereignty that are sanctioned within the UN Charter itself.³⁷

When disputes are highly institutionalized, they are often not even regarded as conflicts. For example, in long-established democratic societies, the issue of which political party will control the government for a coming term may be popularly discussed using the metaphors of military campaigns, but they also are spoken of as sporting contests. The selection of high political officials is conducted according to generally accepted rules, and analysts and participants think of them as contests rather than as conflicts.

Choice about means of conflicting is directly related to the degree of injury suffered by adversaries. The injuries may be equally shared or, more likely, greater harm is endured by one of the parties than another. The injuries may result from violent or nonviolent coercion, such as firing guns, burning buildings, imposing economic sanctions, or excluding certain groups from political participation.

Sometimes the harm done during a struggle is unintentional or even self-inflicted. Preparing for struggle, for example, exacts costs in resources ordinarily used for consumption or investment. The self-harm can also be more direct, as when military preparations result in accidental deaths or injuries. In waging the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union, for example, the development of nuclear weapons and their testing and production caused great environmental damage resulting in extensive illness in the former Soviet Union and to a lesser degree in the United States.³⁸ Similarly, troops returning from military campaigns often suffer from psychological trauma and face great difficulty in reintegrating into society.

Severity of injury also includes harm done to those not engaged in the conflict, such as the civilians in a city suffering "collateral damage" and those who flee to avoid being killed. Such injuries result from military fighting, riots, and revolutionary struggles. Sometimes the harm done to noncombatants is intentional, meant to dry up support for the combatants, to drive people of the other side away, or to commit genocide. In many recent violent conflicts, more noncombatants than combatants have been killed.³⁹

Another important aspect of severity is the negative emotions held by each side toward the other. Conflict parties vary in how strongly their members feel hatred toward their adversary, and how many of them have such feelings. Conflict parties also vary in their beliefs about their adversaries. Sometimes many of their members think that their opponents are inferior humans or not

fully human, with destructive consequences, notably in the Holocaust and in the treatment of native peoples around the world by European colonialists.

COMBINATIONS CONSTITUTING DESTRUCTIVENESS AND CONSTRUCTIVENESS

It is the combination of characteristics reviewed earlier that determines the extent to which a conflict becomes a highly destructive or a highly constructive struggle. In general, destructiveness increases as the scale of the conflict expands, with increased numbers of adversaries participating, when self-other conceptions are characterized by stereotypes and negative attributions about the other, when opportunities for interaction among conflicting groups are scarce, when fundamental values and worldviews are at stake and each side sees the other as presenting an existential threat, and where significant structural inequality privileges some groups over others. Moreover, destructive forms of contention tend to flourish where few institutionalized mechanisms for dispute resolution are available to disputants or when institutionalized forms of dispute management are viewed as favoring some groups over others. In these cases, marginalized groups may abandon benign forms of contention and adopt more destructive conflict management tactics. Authorities may, in turn, adopt repressive tactics to maintain order and suppress dissent or overt conflict, resulting in what has been called a "negative" peace.

Constructive conflict management, in contrast, tends to thrive where significant functional interdependence exists among stakeholders and where multiple opportunities for interaction help to undermine stereotypes and support the humanization of opponents. Systems with relatively fair access to decision making and more egalitarian forms of exchange also aid in constructive approaches to conflicts, as do systems that are relatively homogeneous, with members sharing overlapping identities and histories.

The good news is that none of these variables is static. Careful conflict analysis will always reveal pathways through which conflict managers can transform any conflict, even the highly intractable ones. Such pathways may be only modestly impactful in cases where destructiveness is heightened, but strung together over time small steps may lead to large changes. Often conflict transformation requires multiple people doing multiple things over longer periods of time. The key is to choose interventions that are based on a careful assessment, that target specific conflict drivers, and that are realistic and measurable.

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

This chapter explored the meaning of conflict, the pivotal ideas that guide our own thinking about constructive conflict transformation, and some of the ways that people can analyze conflicts to predict their destructive trajectory and reveal avenues for constructive interventions. Readers are encouraged to explore the ideas presented in this chapter further by thinking about and discussing the following questions.

1. Everyone has their own philosophy about conflicts; that is, why they emerge, how to manage them, and what role they play in relationships, in social settings, and in politics. What is your own conflict philosophy? What are the important people or events that have shaped your view, and how/why has it changed over the years?
2. Identify a conflict with which you are familiar. Who are the stakeholders, what incompatibility exists between or among them, and how that incompatibility has become visible?
3. Apply the variables reviewed in the last part of this chapter (varieties of conflicts) to a conflict of interest to you. What does your analysis reveal? How does your analysis help you think about a potential intervention that might push the conflict in a more constructive direction?
4. Using Figure 1.3 as a guide, draw a map of the conflict you identified in question 2. What does the map reveal about potential pathways to conflict transformation?
5. Think about a conflict that is important of interest to you. Using Figure 1.2, the Conflict Transformation Cycle, as a guide, identify the stage that conflict is currently in. What kinds of conflict interventions might be possible or impossible in this stage of the conflict's lifecycle that might not be possible during other stages?