

## The Field of Conflict Studies

### Past and Present

#### Background

Over the centuries, many great minds have been drawn to the study of conflict. Some have studied particular conflicts in great depth and detail. For example, we may note the analysis of the Peloponnesian War by that famous historian of ancient Greece, Thucydides. Others have generalized more fully on one type of conflict. Examples include Aristotle's comparative analysis of revolutions and the reflections on the art of war by Sun Tzu, a Chinese warrior and philosopher who also lived more than twenty centuries ago.<sup>1</sup>

Without minimizing the importance of these contributions from past centuries, we need also to recognize that it is only in the twentieth century that the systematic study of conflict has become a field in its own right. In fact, the overwhelming majority of work in this field is a product of the last half of the twentieth century.

#### A New Discipline?

The jury is still out on whether or not conflict studies is to become a discipline in its own right. Some scholars have argued that this field has now developed its own literature and academic programs and therefore should be treated as an emerging discipline. Others point out that most of the work still comes from persons who identify themselves primarily with one of the more established disciplines, such as history, political science, or sociology. Indeed, the list of disciplines that the systematic study of conflict may draw upon is very long—including the full range of the social sciences and the humanities, as well as mathematics and biology.

But the issue of disciplinary status does not need to be resolved at this point. Whether it is a field where many disciplines come together or a discipline of its own, in either case it has its own central questions and a body of literature increasingly identified as that of conflict studies. Subjects pursued include not only the study of particular conflicts, but also such basic questions as the following: Under what conditions are human societies most likely to

engage in warfare, or to become disrupted by revolution or by ethnic conflict? What are the main mechanisms by which conflict—between individuals, between groups, and between nations—is normally controlled without violence? What patterns of individual behavior are most conducive to avoiding conflict, or to pursuing it successfully, or to resolving it once bitter passions have been aroused? What patterns of group structure are most likely to lead to intergroup hostilities, or to successful conflict management? Such are among the organizing questions of the field of conflict studies.

### Examples of Work

There are now several academic journals that focus on the study of conflict. Selecting rather randomly an issue of one of these, the *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, we may note something of the range of topics that may be included:

- Decision-making processes leading to the Allied attack on Iraq during the 1992 Persian Gulf War
- Attitudes of Jews and Arabs in Israel toward a Palestinian state
- General social factors influencing decision making during negotiations
- Effects of using a particular form of arbitration
- Factors related to the effectiveness of international mediation
- The dynamics of intransigence in negotiations
- A game theory analysis of the development of cooperation in dyads
- Evidence on the relationship between the polarization of the international system and the likelihood of war

This shows that the field of conflict studies can cover a very broad range of topics.<sup>2</sup>

### Basic Concepts

#### Social Conflict

The field of conflict studies is generally understood as excluding certain kinds of conflict. It does not focus on conflict within individual minds, nor on purely individual reactions to conflict. Rather, its focus is on social conflict: conflict between or among individuals, or between or among groups.

As an initial statement, we may define social conflict as the opposition between individuals and groups on the basis of competing interests, different identities, and/or differing attitudes. Such a definition may narrow slightly the coverage of conflict studies, but it also leaves open a very wide range of subject matter. Note especially that social conflict, in this conception, is not limited to the more violent or confrontational forms of opposition. Violence may

or may not be involved, though violence is certainly one of the subjects of special interest. Furthermore, we can include impersonal and unconscious forms of opposition (such as may be seen in market competition), and not only cases of high emotional involvement.<sup>3</sup>

### Conflict Resolution

Conflict resolution is of course a central subject in the field of conflict studies. It may therefore be helpful to give an initial definition of what may be meant by this concept. Actually, we will give two definitions: one a broad conception, and the other more focused on what is most commonly studied. Broadly, we may conceive of conflict resolution as any marked reduction in social conflict. More specifically, we may conceive of conflict resolution as a marked reduction in social conflict as a result of a conscious settlement of issues in dispute. Note that with our broad definition, conflict resolution may occur through self-conscious efforts to come to an agreement, or it may come by other means (environmental change, the influence of third parties, victory for one party, and so on). As more narrowly conceived, conflict resolution is seen as a process of conscious settlement of the issues between parties.

In this book we will tend to take the broad view of conflict resolution as any marked reduction in social conflict, just as we will use a broad conceptualization of social conflict itself. The reader should be informed, however, that in some other works, conflict resolution may be viewed more specifically as dispute resolution (our second definition). Also, the terms *conflict management* and *conflict regulation* are sometimes preferred for the broader ways in which we try to reduce conflict or keep it at low levels.

### A Question of Attitude

When we begin to consider the phenomena of social conflict, most of us start with a negative attitude. That is, we associate conflict with what is undesirable. Conflict is bad, and the resolution of conflict is good; that, at least, is the association most of us make when we first consider these terms. But we should be careful here. Conflict is so fully a part of all forms of society that we should appreciate its importance—for stimulating new thoughts, for promoting social change, for defining our group relationships, for helping us form our own senses of personal identity, and for many other things we take for granted in our everyday lives. Indeed, nearly all of us have loyalties to a national state that was forged through bitter conflict. The things we love, as well as those we despise, are inexorably shaped by social conflict.<sup>4</sup>

Likewise, we generally associate conflict resolution with what is good and desirable. But let us note that not all attempts to resolve conflict lead to justice or mutual satisfaction. In our international conflicts we are often warned of the dangers of a peace-at-any-price philosophy, and a similar warning needs

to be voiced in relation to our everyday conflicts. Attempts to resolve conflict do not always work; and when they do, they can sometimes lead to undesirable consequences.

Most of us feel bad when we think about our conflicts. They worry us. Likewise, we feel good when we sense that a conflict is resolved. That is all very natural. But we should not let such associations with our personal feelings cloud our vision about the broader landscape of social conflict. We are more likely to be rewarded in our study of conflict if we can approach the subject with a neutral attitude—assuming conflict is neither something inherently good or bad, but rather that some conflict is essential for all human social life. With such an attitude, we are more likely to understand what we see occurring in cases of conflict than if we start with a simpleminded moralizing attitude.

### Distinctions within Conflict Studies

#### Macro and Micro

There are a number of ways we can divide the field of conflict studies. None of these will provide categories that are applicable to all studies, but they suggest some of the main ways the work of those in this field may be described.

One important distinction is between focusing on big conflicts (such as wars and revolutions) or focusing on smaller conflicts (such as conflicts within small groups or disputes between neighbors). Sometimes the terms *macro* (for the bigger conflicts) and *micro* (for the smaller ones) are applied to this distinction. Most people doing research in social conflict work either at the macro or the micro level, though they sometimes try to generalize back and forth between them. Likewise, most persons specializing in conflict resolution in their professional responsibilities work either with large groups and organizations or with small groups and at the level of interpersonal relationships.

The term *peace studies* (or *peace and conflict studies* or *peace science*) is frequently applied to the work of scholars who operate at the broader levels of conflict studies. Relations between national states are often a special focus of their interests. Those who work at the micro level often identify their field by the terms *conflict resolution* or *dispute management*. Their focus is more upon the management of conflicts at the interpersonal level or within small groups.

There is, of course, a very wide range of phenomena included in conflict studies—from families to nations, and with many other kinds of social organization in between. There are many different levels at which the phenomena of conflict may be studied, and some scholars are especially interested in the study of conflict processes that may cut across the various levels, macro and micro, as well as shadings in between.

### Academics and Practitioners

Another major distinction may be made between those who approach conflict studies as an academic field and those who see it as an area of professional practice. Most political scientists, historians, and sociologists who engage in the study of social conflict are primarily academicians; they are scholars who seek to understand basic forms of conflict, and how they may relate to specific cases. On the other hand, the practicing professionals relate primarily to particular cases, and seek to understand basic forms of conflict only in order to help them with such specific cases. These practitioners may include social workers, clinical psychologists, attorneys, ministers, military strategists, diplomats, and labor-management specialists.

Naturally, there are important differences between the academicians and the practitioners, but they do need each other. The practitioners need to draw upon the academic knowledge base, and the academic scholars need to bear in mind that only if their work proves helpful to the practitioners are they likely to find it well supported. Fortunately, there are also some people who work primarily in the middle: academicians who are especially interested in applications of their theories and research findings, and professional leaders who are especially interested in broader questions about their practice field. For these, the growing literature of the field of conflict studies is especially important.

### Generalists and Specialists

A third distinction that is helpful in understanding the range of conflict studies is that between the generalist and the specialist. The generalist is that person who deals with a wide range of ideas and their implications; the specialist focuses more narrowly upon a particular question or issue. Among academics, the generalist is more likely to present ideas that might “save the world”—or, at least, make a wide range of conflicts more manageable. On the other hand, the academic specialist is more likely to focus on a particular problem of research—and on getting the results published. Among practitioners, generalists are more likely to discuss the broader issues of their work, while specialists focus more on technical questions of effective practice.

Although such distinctions as we have made (between macro and micro levels, between academicians and practitioners, and between generalists and specialists) are helpful in seeing the range of conflict studies, we should avoid using them as simple categories for the classification of people or their work. Few people (certainly among those working in conflict studies) fit neatly into a simple subclassification of these variables. Nor is most of their work easily classified in such terms. Indeed, one of the key features of the field of conflict studies is that it brings together persons of very different disciplines—political scientists and social workers, attorneys and anthropologists, social

psychologists and ministers, military men and sociologists, and more—who seek to focus on questions they have in common. Conflict studies represents an extremely broad field. But it focuses on its own central themes: how social conflicts occur, and how they may be resolved.

### Conflict Theory (and Theories)

#### Varieties of Conflict Theory

When sociologists and political scientists talk about “conflict theory,” they are often thinking about a broad point of view which emphasizes the struggles between groups as giving social and political institutions their present shape. Some of them see themselves as part of this struggle, while others are not personally involved in this way. In either case, such scholars are likely to cite Karl Marx, as well as others who view social conflict as the primary instrument of social change.

To a social worker or minister, the term *conflict theory* may have a very different meaning; it may apply more to the psyches of individuals as they become enmeshed in their interpersonal conflicts. Social workers may cite the work of a great psychologist (such as Sigmund Freud) for leads toward understanding such conflict, while ministers are apt to cite the works of an ancient prophet or contemporary theologian.

Other students of social conflict avoid such terms as “conflict theory.” This doesn’t mean that they are any less concerned with a theory of conflict, only that their preferred language is different. For example, economists see a very central place for human conflicts of interest in their discipline; however, they tend to talk about them in terms of competition and market mechanisms rather than in terms of conflict theory or conflict resolution. Some mathematicians may specialize in the analysis of conflict, but they are unlikely to call it “conflict theory.” Their analysis of conflicts of interest is more likely to be pursued under the name of “game theory,” for some rather obscure reasons in the history of mathematics.

The point is that there are many possible versions of conflict theory and many different theories about conflict. However, despite important differences in terminology and focus, there is a common concern in all theories of conflict; this is a concern for conceptualizing how human social conflicts may be expressed and resolved.

#### Main Perspectives

To provide some help in examining the great variety of theories about social conflict, we can group them into several main types. Each type has a fundamental perspective, though a variety of different theories develop from this perspective. We may identify these main types (or families) of theories as the following:

1. *Individual characteristics theories* look at social conflict in terms of the natures of the individuals who are involved.
2. *Social process theories* look at conflict as a process of social interaction between individuals or groups, and seek to make generalizations about the nature of this process.
3. *Social structural theories* look at conflict as a product of the way society is formed and organized.
4. *Formal theories* seek to understand human social conflicts in logical and mathematical terms.

### Practice

#### Main Approaches

Practitioners who deal with human conflicts are, as we have pointed out, a highly varied lot. They include persons in many different professions, and the forms of conflict are equally diverse. The forms of conflict resolution are as diverse as the forms of social conflict. At first glance, therefore, it may appear hopeless to generalize about the practice of conflict resolution. Nevertheless, we can identify a limited set of approaches usually applied to the resolution of conflicts. These may be summarized as follows:

1. Coercion, or forcing parties in conflict to a particular conclusion.
2. Negotiation and bargaining, or involving the parties in a process of discussion which seeks to bring them into voluntary agreement.
3. Adjudication, or using the power of the state and its legal system to provide an authoritative conclusion.
4. Mediation, or using a third party to help the conflicting parties come to a mutually satisfactory agreement.
5. Arbitration, or using a third party to decide, through prior mutual consent, the issues in dispute.

Although the possibilities of further variation in approaches to conflict resolution (including combinations of the above forms) is endless, most practitioners emphasize one or another of these five approaches.

### The Plan of This Book

#### Research

Empirical research is applicable to questions of both theory and practice. Most of the chapters of this book will make reference to relevant research. However, since research deserves some attention in its own right, we will devote one chapter, Chapter 2, to focus specifically on conflict resolution research.

## Theory

Chapters 3 through 6 are primarily theoretical in content. Each is devoted to a general theoretical approach. These chapters focus on, respectively, individual characteristics theories, social process theories, social structural theories, and formal theories. This is not to claim that all the important theoretical work can be neatly classified under one or another of these categories; rather, we mean to show that a wide range of theories should be included in our background understandings, and that the categories we use should be helpful in showing something of this range.

Theories of conflict resolution are closely intertwined with broader assumptions about social conflict. Each of the theory chapters therefore focuses both on conflict and on conflict resolution. One should recognize that each of the main theoretical approaches to understanding social conflict also implies an approach to conflict resolution. If one emphasizes individual characteristics as a foundation for social conflict, then the primary approach to conflict resolution is to change individuals, so that they are less prone to aggressive behavior. If one emphasizes a social process approach, resolution comes by changing the process—by developing new ways to handle conflicts and by avoiding unproductive confrontations. With a social structural approach, resolution is achieved primarily through social reform (or revolution); the society needs to be changed so that primary points of tension are eliminated. With a formal approach to studying conflict, we engage in such activities as solving equations and identifying points of equilibrium; these activities help us give a formal description of the conditions where we would find a reduction of conflict.

Although our approach in Chapters 3 through 6 is primarily theoretical, we also note some research bearing on these theories. We do not dwell at length on these studies, but they should be seen as a critical part of the formulation and revision of theories about conflict resolution.

Finally, each of these theory chapters begins with a biographical or historical account involving a leading theorist of social conflict. This is aimed at making clear the general approach of thought represented by the particular family of theories being considered. This is followed by a brief introduction to some of the other theories and theorists that may be seen as representing the same general approach.

## Practice

After the four theory chapters will come six focusing on practice, Chapters 7 through 12. In each of these chapters (excepting the last) we examine one of the common approaches to the practice of conflict resolution: coercion, negotiation and bargaining, adjudication, mediation, and arbitration. As we ex-

amine these approaches, we cite the research that seems most appropriate for understanding how each method may work (or sometimes not work) in the practice of conflict resolution.

Each chapter focusing on the practice of conflict resolution will begin with a case study, selected to illustrate in some detail how the approach may apply to a particular case. Discussion then follows on some of the assets and liabilities of particular applications of the same general approach featured in that chapter.

## Summary and Conclusions

### Summary

The field of conflict studies has a long history, but also a very rapid recent development. The question of whether it now constitutes a discipline in its own right is still a subject of debate. In any event, the field includes a great variety of subjects and approaches.

For organizing our investigations, we will use broad definitions for our central concepts. Social conflict may be understood as “the opposition between individuals and groups on the basis of competing interests, different identities, or differing attitudes.” Conflict resolution may be understood as “any marked reduction in social conflict.” Students of the field of conflict studies differ in many ways; broad divisions include those focusing on the macro or the micro level, those who are academic scholars or those who are practitioners, and generalists as compared with specialists.

Theories of conflict include those that can be seen in the following broad categories: (1) individual characteristics theories, which look at social conflict in terms of the natures or the individuals involved; (2) social process theories, which look at conflict as a process of social interaction between individuals or groups, seeking to make generalizations about the nature of this process; (3) social structural theories, which look at conflict as a product of the way society is formed and organized; and (4) formal theories, which seek to understand social conflicts in logical and mathematical terms. Main approaches in the practice of conflict resolution include: (a) coercion, or forcing parties in conflict to a particular conclusion; (b) negotiation and bargaining, or involving the parties in a process of discussion that seeks to bring them into voluntary agreement; (c) adjudication, or using the power of the state and its legal system to provide an authoritative conclusion; (d) mediation, or using a third party to help those in conflict come to a mutually satisfactory agreement; and (e) arbitration, or using a third party to decide, through prior mutual consent, the issues in dispute. Separate chapters in this book focus on each of these main types of theory and forms of practice.

### Conclusions

There are two main conclusions the reader may draw from this initial chapter:

- a. The field of conflict studies is an extremely rich area for study.
- b. We should look forward to an exciting intellectual adventure as we pursue our study of conflict resolution in the chapters that follow.