Relevant Texts


The more one thinks of it, the more he will see that conflict and co-operation are not separable things, but phases of one process which always involves something of both.

When we look at society as a moral community, a Temple, conflict seems to be an indication of something wrong. If we look at it as a Factory we see that conflict cannot be tolerated. In either case, the problem is that we are seeing it from the perspective of the people in charge. We are used to equating the interests of the leaders with the interests of the group as a whole and so conflict is seen as impeding what we are all up to together.

Implicit in this view is that conflict is the opposite of harmony. That one should try to minimize conflict and maximize harmony.

Simmel asks us to see that conflict and harmony are two sides of a form of sociation always linked together.

There are five basic functions which conflict serves both among different groups and within a single group. They are connection, definition, revitalization, reconnaissance, social glue and safety valve.

1. **Conflict as a form of connection.** Conflict makes connection. It is a basic form of exchange and interaction. It is a negotiation. Nine-year old boys and girls, teachers complain, seldom interact except when they quarrel or fight. The people who everyone describes as "not getting along" are doing just that, but in a way that is often considered socially undesirable. No one has to fight. They can just walk away. But what do they lose if they do? Conflict provides a basic way of asserting one's relationship with another person. Among groups conflict maintains a form of negotiation. Within groups it does so, by releasing tensions among members that might harm the group. One of the hallmarks of professional conduct is that persons who do not like one another personally can nonetheless work together.

2. **Conflict and identity/ boundary definition.** Conflict among groups sharpens their exterior boundaries. It heightens the sense of "us" versus "them." Within groups conflict focuses the differences between ranks and social levels. The teacher demonstrates his or her rank and authority in the process of ordering students what to do.

3. **Conflict and the revitalization of norms/ traditions/ mores.** Conflict among groups revitalizes traditions and norms. School spirit has a lot to do with football games. Indeed, the major purpose of interscholastic sports is in the group solidarity the conflict promotes. Within groups, the individual is confronted with an opportunity to recommit himself or herself to the values that underlie

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membership in the group. This is why harassment and hazing form part of the initiation ritual in so many groups. Hazing may drive many away, but those who remain are the more tightly bonded for it.

4. Conflict as reconnaissance and information gathering. Information gathering, reconnaissance, is a function of conflict. Small-scale conflicts often determine whether large-scale conflicts are worth the trouble. New teachers face "testing" by their students to see how serious the teachers are about school rules and procedures. Students will deliberately break small rules to see how safe it would be to break bigger ones. Among groups conflict serves this information-gathering purpose. Within groups reconnaissance often serves to determine whether some members will accommodate or reject a deviant member. Kids who are seen as "different" often become "troublemakers" in the eyes of adults. This reputation gives them leverage in their personal negotiations with "normal" kids.

5. Conflict as social glue. Each conflict is a push away from one party and toward other parties. It can lead to creation of associations or coalitions for which there is no "positive" incentive. In a community with multiple, crisscrossing associations and coalitions alliances along one major line of cleavage can be prevented.

6. Conflict as safety valve. Opportunities to displace conflict from original object. Contests & games, for example. Saturnalia. Duels which institutionalize conflict so that after it's over, it's over.

Figure 4.2 shows how the functions of conflict parallel each other among groups and within groups.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Functions of Conflict</th>
<th>among groups</th>
<th>within groups</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Connection</td>
<td>Asserts relationship to other group</td>
<td>Maintains relations by releasing tension</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Definition</td>
<td>Sharpens exterior boundaries</td>
<td>Sharpens internal boundaries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Revitalization</td>
<td>Revitalizes mores and traditions</td>
<td>Strengthens underlying values of membership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Reconnaissance</td>
<td>Gets information for peace-making or war</td>
<td>Gets information for occupation or persecution of deviants</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Replication</td>
<td>Given a balance of power, generates similarity of structure</td>
<td>Generates a similarity of behavior</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Figure 4.2

Functional for whom?

We can see that conflict can benefit a group. But it is important to ask, whom does conflict benefit when it benefits a group? Not everybody in a group may get the same benefits nor pay the same costs. And the kinds of costs and benefits there are may vary considerably among group members. Who does the sweating and who gets the glory? What do they pay and what do they get for it? Here again a fixation on the image of the school as a Temple makes such questions hard to articulate.