

Constructive Conflicts
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CONSTRUCTIVE CONFLICTS. Conflicts are sometimes regarded as inherently disruptive and destructive and necessarily painful. Indeed, many conflicts are conducted very destructively and with harmful consequences for most participants. However, conflicts are frequently conducted with little or no destructive violence. Moreover, conflicts often are waged to increase justice, to defend lives and ways of life, or to propagate truth and morality. The result of a struggle, indeed, may be that many people gain greater security, respect, and economic well-being; the conflict outcome is then regarded as constructive.

What one side in a fight regards as constructive may not be so regarded by its opponent. This poses a problem for the long-standing "just war" doctrine, a theological effort to set minimal moral standards about going to war (*jus ad bellum*) and about waging war (*jus in bello*). According to this doctrine, unprovoked aggressive war is always wrong and only a defensive war is just, but each side in a war usually asserts that it is acting defensively, even if it acts preemptively. Two principles are critical in waging a just war, proportionality and discrimination. The means of fighting must be proportional, that is, they must be appropriate to the end, and those waging war must discriminate between combatants and noncombatants and avoid intentionally killing or wounding noncombatants or destroying their property.

The concept of maximizing mutual benefit and minimizing mutual harm may also help guide assessments of constructiveness, but the sides in a fight are usually unequal in the rights they claim and in the resources they have available to fight for them. The widely shared understandings of human rights and of basic human needs will provide standards for assessing constructiveness. The more easily recognizable standard of avoiding great mutual destructiveness is generally adopted here.

No conflict is wholly constructive or wholly destructive. The variation along this continuum is usually noted in two phases of a conflict: how it is waged and what its outcome is. Conflicts are waged destructively insofar as

the means of fighting cause great damage. Moreover, the destructiveness is greater insofar as one side imposes injuries on the other side, with little differentiation among the opposing side's adherents. Finally, the destructiveness is greater insofar as the conflict is protracted and affects more people.

The destructiveness may be highly asymmetrical, with one side waging a destructive campaign and the other suffering immense injury. This is especially true of genocidal attacks against a whole people. The perpetrators of gross atrocities, however, may also suffer severe injuries; many of them feel shame, guilt, and mental trauma and receive retribution afterward.

Waging a struggle constructively can mean more than avoiding destructive elements. The adversaries may use nonviolent and even noncoercive inducements such as persuasion and promises of future advantages. Furthermore, the adversaries recognize each other as legitimate entities, and neither threatens the other's existence. They interact to solve the problem they face together—their mutual conflict—by seeking the best way to reach a mutually acceptable outcome.

The other conflict phase that varies in constructiveness is the aftermath, the period following an imposed ending or a negotiated settlement. That period obviously can extend for many years or decades, but is discussed here in terms of a few years only. Conflict outcomes tend to be destructive insofar as one side imposes them unilaterally, with little regard for the interests and needs of most members of the other side. The defeated party then is likely to regard the outcome as oppressive and unjust, requiring redress, and/or as humiliating, requiring revenge. Adjustments often are made after the conflict's termination, sometimes decades or even centuries later.

Although conflict outcomes are constructive to the extent that the parties regard them as mutually acceptable, the matter is complicated by the questions of who speaks for the parties and over what period the outcome is considered. The interpretations of the interests and needs of the imposed-upon party are not always those of its proclaimed leaders, particularly if the leaders lack legitimacy. By another criterion, outcomes are constructive insofar as they provide a basis for an ongoing relationship within which future conflicts are managed nondestructively.

Strategies

Four sets of factors affect the strategies used to wage and to end conflicts constructively. The factors are those

shaping the adversaries' goals regarding each other, the means the adversaries use to attain their goals, the character of the adversaries' accommodation as the conflict is transformed, and the social context of the conflict.

Partisan goals. Peace advocates and theorists have long recognized the importance of adversaries formulating goals that advance and strengthen peace. The religious root of peace advocacy has been the source of an important approach to formulating conflict goals that avert highly destructive conflicts. Many religious traditions teach that all humans are created by God and that even an adversary therefore deserves respect and consideration as a human.

Although religious beliefs have at times been used to justify and buttress one group's subjugation of another, appeals to religious faith have also undermined those practices and the authority of people upholding the practices. Moreover, the people fighting such oppression often formulate goals that are inclusive and do not threaten to destroy or subjugate their oppressors. This was notably the case in the African National Congress's struggle against apartheid in South Africa and in the Southern Christian Leadership Council's fight for civil rights in the United States. Such moral considerations were relevant in formulating goals for economic and political justice, even for people joining forces with secular reformers and radicals.

In recent decades more pragmatic considerations have influenced the formulation of goals that tend to lessen the destructiveness of conflicts. Such considerations include improving economic conditions and avoiding disorder and disruptions to social life. In addition, developments in the fields of peace research and conflict resolution have showed the possibility of preventing or limiting destructive conflicts. Thus, peace researchers in West Germany, Denmark, and elsewhere, beginning in the 1970s, examined the strategic goals of NATO and the Warsaw Pact. They showed how, while purporting to have defensive goals, each side's military postures would naturally be viewed as threatening by its opponent. The peace researchers developed plans for restructuring military forces that would provide effective defense without being provocative. These ideas were influential in the changes in Soviet conduct in the late 1980s, resulting in the Cold War's transformation and termination.

More generally, the conflict-resolution approach stresses the value of reframing a conflict so that its goals are less antagonistic and a settlement can be

more readily reached. Contributors to the conflict-resolution field, such as Roger Fisher, emphasize the value of converting a conflict to a problem shared by the adversaries and of separating the person from the problem.

Analyzing constructive as well as destructive practices demonstrates the importance of avoiding goals that threaten the physical or cultural existence of the opponent; such threats tend to result in disastrous conflicts. Reassurances are more likely to be offered and to be believed when the adversaries share common interests, values, and identities. In addition, the leaders of each side often play a critical role in formulating the goals sought in a conflict. For example, Nelson Mandela and the other leaders of the African National Congress (ANC), as they struggled for the equality of all South Africans in the political process, tried to reassure whites that their individual and collective rights were respected and would be protected.

Several dangers arise from seeing the enemy as a unitary evil entity. Leaders may be tempted to portray the enemy in such a light in order to mobilize their constituencies and justify severe means of struggle, but the threat that such conduct poses to the opponent tends to arouse desperate resistance, while assurance of survival eases the way for a settlement.

Considering the opponents' concerns is also important in formulating goals that make constructive conflict more likely. Leaders are naturally obligated to give primacy to the interests and concerns of the people they represent, but that end may be better served by avoiding raising expectations about what can be taken from the opponent. Once the constituents' emotions and hopes are aroused, settling for a mutually acceptable outcome becomes more difficult.

Finally, goals change in the course of a conflict. They may become more moderate as the cost of achieving the previous objectives grows. Or an adversary may expand its goals, particularly when it seems to be winning a fight, often resulting in overreaching and prolonging a fight self-destructively.

Partisan methods. Long-standing ideas and practices among peace workers involve relatively constructive methods of struggle. The admonition to act toward others as you would have them act toward you has been part of many religious traditions that have been a source of peace work. More specifically, an important strand in religious thought and practice is pacifism, the refusal to kill other humans. Belief in pacifism is accepted in many

countries as a legitimate ground for recognition as a conscientious objector who would not be obliged to serve in the country's military forces.

Peace advocates and analysts have generally sought to limit expenditures on military weapons and to counter the militarization of foreign policy. This is expressed within countries by efforts to limit the influence of the military-industrial complexes, which have vested interests in expanding their resources and capabilities. Peace workers have also strived to stop arms races by agreements to limit arms, to ban particular weapons, and to establish areas that are free of particular kinds of weapons.

Peace workers have also examined and promoted nonmilitary alternative methods of struggle and of settling disputes, especially nonviolent methods. Mohandas Gandhi developed an influential, principled strategy of nonviolence that he used in the struggle for India's independence from Great Britain. More secular, pragmatic, and empirically grounded arguments have become the basis for much of the contemporary thought and practice in the use of nonviolent methods to wage conflicts. Thus, Gene Sharp and others study and advance the use of nonviolent actions as an effective way to resist aggression and to achieve desired improvements in social-political life.

Other constructive methods for waging and ending specific conflicts use noncoercive inducements, including persuasion and promised benefits. An adversary may try to convince its antagonist of the rightness of its cause and influence the antagonist to believe that it will not suffer by yielding a measure of what it seeks. Or an adversary may try to reframe the conflict so that it and the other side regard themselves as sharing many common interests and values that will be increased by cooperation. Such appeals and promised future benefits flow from what Joseph S. Nye Jr. calls "soft power."

Negotiation is a process by which adversaries can manage a conflict constructively and settle specific disputes. Various strategies have been developed to increase the likelihood that mutually acceptable settlements are reached. Mediators can provide additional methods and resources to further increase that likelihood and also to help sustain agreed-upon settlements. Mediators may be officials representing governments or international governmental organizations, such as the United Nations or the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. Mediators may also be nonofficial go-betweens, operating on Track Two (i.e., through informal channels).

Accommodation after conflict termination. Peace-studies workers have examined many aspects of the accommodations between adversaries—reached after their destructive contestation has ended—which contribute to long-term constructive relations. They include the justice of the new relationship, the degree of interdependence of the former opponents, the legitimacy of the institutional arrangements within which the former enemies interact, reconciliation between the antagonists, their security from physical attack, and their access to the basic provisions for life. These features, and others, are accorded varying priorities and variously combined with each other by different analysts and practitioners, in part depending on the conflicts being considered. Major strategies to promote aspects of accommodation that foster constructive relations are reviewed here.

One set of strategies pertains to the construction of superordinate goals, the development of institutions that foster interdependence, the generation of vested interests in cooperation, and the expansion of cultural and social interactions. The studies of Karl Deutsch, David Mitrany, and others illuminate the possibilities the use of such policies to create stable peace. Other strategies pertain to more immediate needs, including the assurance of security for members of the former opposing sides, the meeting of basic economic needs, and the provision of opportunities. Some strategies are directed at building norms and institutions, such as democratic polities, that provide procedures for managing disputes and redressing grievances. Finally, some strategies are particularly relevant in the aftermath of protracted destructive conflicts in which gross violations of human rights have occurred. These strategies include specific ways to advance justice by compensating victims of past injustices and punishing perpetrators of gross atrocities and by establishing laws and institutions to avoid future injustices. Finally, policies to advance reconciliation between former enemies can contribute to stable new accommodations.

Social and institutional context. In addition to the constructive actions of partisans in waging and ending destructive conflicts, external actors often play important, even essential, roles in those achievements. Domestic and international norms on human rights, tolerance, and minimizing violence contribute to constructive behavior within and between countries. In addition, national and international political institutions can

provide mechanisms that allow for constructive alternatives in waging and ending conflicts. They also provide the vehicles to intervene and stop or otherwise limit destructive behavior. This is also true for nongovernmental transnational organizations, which increasingly provide humanitarian assistance, mediation services, and human-rights advocacy.

The role of external actors in constructive intervention has grown considerably, particularly since the latter part of the twentieth century. The end of the Cold War contributed to more effective actions by international governmental organizations. Many long-term trends have converged to drive this growth in constructive interventions, especially the rapidly growing economic integration of world society and the intensification of communication and interaction around the world. These developments underlie norms and institutions that derive from and contribute to global and societal interdependence. Consequently, external constraints on destructive conflicts are growing, and the methods of constructive conflict intervention are improving and expanding. The development of integration, however, also gives rise to various kinds of resistance and new conflicts, which constitute novel challenges to waging conflicts constructively and create more need to do so.

Assessment

Conflicts often must be waged in order to win greater justice, safety, and economic well-being, but those concerns are likely to suffer if the conflict is waged destructively rather than constructively. There are many ways in which conflicts can be fought and ended more constructively so as to overcome oppression and injustice while avoiding destructive and counterproductive consequences.

[See also Arms Control and Disarmament, *subentry on* History; Conflict Resolution; Conflict Transformation; De-escalation in Conflict, Theory of; Feminism and Peace; Gandhi, *subentry on* Political Strategy; Intractable Conflicts; Just War; Nonviolent Action, *subentry on* Nonviolent Action as Active Resistance; Reconciliation; Reframing and Restructuring Conflicts; South Africa, *subentry on* Ending Apartheid; Third-party Role in Conflict Resolution; and United Nations, *subentry on* Mediation Successes and Failures.]

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