



Interpersonal Conflict

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GLOSSARY

g0005 *correspondence of outcomes* The degree to which the outcomes of one partner in an interdependence relationship can be attained without preventing the other partner from attaining his or her outcomes; perfectly correspondent outcomes lead to pure coordination, whereas perfectly noncorrespondent outcomes lead to pure conflict.

g0010 *dispositional attributions* Identifying as causes of behavior internal factors and processes such as intentions, motives, and personality traits.

g0015 *interdependence or outcome interdependence* A social situation involving two or more individuals who depend on one another for achieving individually valued outcomes and goals.

g0020 *interference* Describes Partner A's actions in obstructing Partner B's effort to bring about a personally desirable outcome; interference may be actual or perceived and may be intentional or unintentional.

g0025 *interpersonal skills training* Developing skills that are pertinent to constructive conflict resolution such as building problem-solving relationships with other disputants,

seeking multiple solutions to conflict situations, and viewing conflict issues from an "outsider's" perspective.

g0030 *maximum minimum* The best possible of the worst outcomes that one is willing to accept in a negotiation setting, where agreements can be attained only by lowering both disputants' outcome levels.

g0035 *mediation* The intervention of an independent third party in a dispute to facilitate disputant interaction, identify sources of conflict, and promote constructive communication toward a mutually satisfying resolution.

g0040 *minimum maximum* The lesser among the best outcomes that one is willing to accept in a negotiation setting where disputants cannot attain their optimal outcomes.

g0045 *outcome* A general term employed to indicate how drives and motives shape preferences and goals worth pursuing in social situations of interdependence; outcomes may be material possessions (e.g., money, a house, a car) or abstract states (e.g., social status, security, happiness).

g0050 *relative deprivation* A perception that outcomes in some realm that is valued and important to self are inferior to a reasonable standard; relative deprivation is a potential source of conflict.

g0055 *social comparison* Using others as a comparison standard in evaluating own qualities such as efficacy, ability, judgments, and attitudes.

g0060 *social norm* A consensually accepted rule about behaving in social settings that has been internalized by individual society members; breeching of a social norm by an individual is sanctioned but may also cause pangs of conscience.

p0005 Interpersonal conflict is a process triggered when one of the parties in a relationship perceives that the other adversely interferes with the attainment of own

outcomes and goals. It may also be a consequence of perceiving own outcomes as severely inferior to those of the other in the relationship and to a commonly accepted standard.

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1. UNDERSTANDING AND MANAGING CONFLICT IN INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

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Interpersonal conflict is a by-product of individuals' need to establish and maintain relationships for their intrinsic wellness and survival value. Relationships ensure that personal goals, such as a comfortable life, a rewarding professional career, security, fulfillment, and love, can be attained to a qualitative and quantitative level that either would have been impossible outside a relationship (as in the case of love) or would have required much more effort, time, and resources. Despite their motivation to uphold relationships, individuals will often come into conflict with their partners as the realization of their respective goals clash, impede one another, or become the medium of an unfavorable comparison with the other's achievements. Conflict can be a painful process, with destructive consequences for the well-being of individuals and for the potential of relationships to yield valuable outcomes for their members and society. Of course, many conflicts cause little rancor and are resolved peacefully. Intimate couples, friends, roommates, and office colleagues can often find mutually satisfying ways in which to eliminate their differences. In professional settings, managers and employees can frequently settle their disputes through simple discussions or, when matters get more complicated, through mutual demands with official labor-management negotiations. However, there are times when people will resort to overt or subdued hostility, or to verbal or physical aggression, so that they can force the resolution of differences in their favor. Hostility in all forms will also occur as a means of expressing displeasure about what is perceived as an unfair resolution of relationship differences. In either case, the ambience of personal or professional relationships is severely disturbed. Simple human interaction becomes unproductive and harmful not only for the disputants but also for those directly or indirectly related to them. For example, consequences of persistent conflict often involved in divorce are numerous and distressing for the personal development of the disputants and their

children. Unfortunately, divorce rates involving intense conflict in the United States, in European Union member countries, and in other Western countries continue to be high. In professional settings, even subdued conflict between fellow employees can undermine the productivity and creativity of an entire work unit, adversely affecting the quality and quantity of products and services. Considering how threatening conflict can be to the stability and productivity of relationships, individual well-being, and the cohesiveness of society, it is not surprising that it has attracted a lot of scientific theory and research.

Social psychology, in particular, has dealt with conflict in an effort to understand it and identify ways in which to manage it. Because managing conflict requires knowledge and understanding of conflict, social psychologists have tried to develop a theory that would allow the prediction and control of conflict. The agenda of such a theory includes questions such as "What is conflict?," "What causes conflict?," "Under what circumstances does conflict occur?," "How is conflict expressed?," and "What are the social and psychological consequences of conflict?" If one could have answers to at least some of these questions, one would be able to perhaps predict, for instance, when conflict would be manifested and with what intensity. As such, one also would be able to manipulate the timing and circumstances of its manifestation so as to divert or even prevent it. Unfortunately, despite efforts, there is no true comprehensive conflict theory that can permit concise prediction and control of conflict behavior. Nevertheless, there are numerous theoretical approaches that have contributed importantly to a fair understanding of the variables involved in conflict. Thus, one might not be able to totally predict and control conflict, but one knows that its basic source is the motivational structure of the relationship in which the conflict parties are involved, namely, the fact that they are, to a certain degree, interdependent for achieving their valued outcomes. One also knows that other, more qualitative features of the relationship will influence how conflict will be expressed and that attributions about the causes of conflict to the other's internal dispositions and character will escalate conflict expression. The major psychological processes implicated by social-psychological theory in conflict production are "interference" and "relative deprivation." Interference is based on the perception that the significant other in the relationship interferes with own goals, whereas relative deprivation is based on perceiving that own outcomes are relatively inferior to those

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of the other and to a commonly accepted outcome standard. By means of another intermediary process, social comparison, the first two may work to undermine self-esteem, and this in turn generates conflict to preserve, restore, and enhance self-esteem. This loose mechanism of conflict production, put together for the purposes of the current discussion by what is known about conflict so far, provides directives and keys with which to understand the development of conflict resolution and management methodologies. For example, the role of self-evaluation and self-esteem in the conflict mechanism strongly suggests that the aim of conflict resolution should not be limited to removing the “realistic” difference between disputants but rather should also ensure that the self-esteem of the conflicting parties is preserved, restored, and enhanced (if possible). The importance of knowing conflict in developing conflict management is also illustrated by the way in which conflict management skills have used the research finding that dispositional attributions escalate conflict. Conflict mediators and disputants are trained to eschew from articulating inferences about others’ intentions in the relationship and personality characteristics.

p0020 The theoretical understanding of conflict not only has contributed to the development of conflict resolution methodologies but also has been conducive to diluting two lay misperceptions. First, most people commonly perceive conflict as a negative event of destructive consequences without paying sufficient attention to its more subtle positive effects. This is due mainly to the saliency of destructive consequences and to the survival value intrinsic in paying more attention to negative events. Second, people believe that disputants themselves cannot handle conflict and that conflict management skills cannot be learned. These misperceptions are perhaps even more destructive than conflict itself because they discourage people from training in conflict resolution and encourage people to avoid conflict at all costs, even in cases where conflict is called for and potentially beneficial to their personal interests and relationships. Indeed, research has indicated that people can be trained to handle conflict effectively, making the best out of it for their self-interests, self-respect, and self-expansion. Conflict can also be a creative and constructive process, helping in relationship functionality and development toward greater productivity and fruitfulness for both partners.

p0025 This article first explicates, by reference to theory, research, and real-life examples, the role of relationship features and psychological processes in yielding

conflict. By pointing to how this knowledge is put into practice, the article then turns to analyzing major conflict management methodologies. It concludes by underscoring the main issues underlying conflict escalation and conflict resolution.

2. RELATIONSHIP FEATURES AND PSYCHOLOGICAL PROCESSES INVOLVED IN CONFLICT

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The basic relationship feature involved in generating conflict has to do with motivational structure, that is, with the fact that the partners’ goals are interdependent. This so-called structural feature of outcome interdependence forces people to compare their outcomes, triggering social comparison. Thus, the next subsection discusses relationship structure along with the psychological process of social comparison. Social comparison, with its self-evaluative results (e.g., “I am better off than others,” “I am worse off than others”), leads to two other psychological processes: interference and relative deprivation. These latter processes, being different in nature, are discussed in separate subsections. Nevertheless, their aim is the same, that is, to determine the extent to which the relationship partner is the culprit of negative self-evaluation. This section concludes with a discussion of how conflict experience and conflict expression are regulated by the qualitative characteristics of relationships.

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2.1. Relationship Structure and Social Comparison

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Interpersonal conflict springs from interdependence, an intrinsic characteristic of interpersonal relationships. Relationship partners depend on one another for achieving their wishes, goals, and preferred end states, generally called outcomes. Outcomes refer to material possessions (e.g., money, a house, a car) or to abstract states (e.g., social status and recognition, security, happiness, love). In addition to being attractive for satisfying specific needs, outcomes carry desirability and status value assigned by society. Thus, they contribute to identity definition and self-evaluation by means of social comparison. By comparing material and abstract possessions with those of others, people come to an understanding of where they stand in relation to others. In this way, relationship outcomes

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surreptitiously influence self-worth and establish potential for conflict within the relationship.

p0040 Relationship outcomes cannot be attained to the same qualitative and quantitative levels with the same ease and economy (in time, effort, and energy) outside a relationship. Hence, people are strongly motivated to enter relationships for optimizing their individual outcomes. That is not to say that individuals are indifferent to the common relationship outcomes or ignorant of the fact that others enter relationships motivated by the same individual outcome optimization goals. To the contrary, they are usually aware that no interdependent parties can ignore others in pursuing their goals and that all can influence one another's experiences, motives, preferences, behavior, and outcomes. As Lewin put it in his classical work on social conflict, relationship partners know that their "locomotion" toward attaining their goals may cross or be crossed by that of others. A lot of cognitive work needs to be carried out in planning the pursuit of own goals in an interdependence situation because others' plans must also be understood and predicted. Possibly, individuals will have to cooperate with others to maximize joint outcomes or compete for their own on the basis of some commonly agreed rules. Of course, rather than putting that cognitive effort into coordination and negotiation with others, direct and immediate access to desirable objectives may be demanded, and then conflict and fighting might arise. Success and failure will occur in predicting and planning, cooperating, and competing in conflict and fighting. In either case, there will be consequences for own outcomes as well as psychological repercussions for both self-worth and the continuing interaction of actors in the relationship. Others may facilitate, accelerate, and promote the attainment of own outcomes or, in contrast, may obstruct, delay, block, or simply interfere with their attainment by merely unilaterally pursuing their own goals in a relationship. The strong motivation of people to stay in a relationship and benefit from the advantages of outcome interdependence explains why they are willing to tolerate the nuisance of others' interference with personal outcomes.

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2.2. Interference

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It is reasonable to expect that people sharing the same social milieu may also see commonly desirable outcomes as worthwhile to pursue. Unfortunately, outcomes, whether material or abstract, may be limited; they might not be available to all, at all times, and in

the same quality or quantity. Actually, some may be depleting fast as more people claim them for themselves and as more people claim more of them. Realizing this fact, social norms have been instituted in nearly all organized societies about coordinating, cooperating, and competing in claiming commonly valued outcomes. People also hold general implicit expectations, known as lay theories, about fair and accepted practices in pursuing such outcomes.

If partners sharing a relationship decide to pursue similar depleting outcomes, their ways are likely to cross. In that case, they might perceive each other as interfering with own outcomes, and conflict might erupt to remove interference and restore unhindered and direct access to desired outcomes. Conflict is most probable when each of the two partners insists on unilaterally claiming for self the maximum of the desired objective and eschews coordination, cooperation, or competition along norms and lay theories.

Money is an obvious example of a material outcome that depletes quickly as the needs to be satisfied in an intimate relationship increase. For instance, consider a married couple whose members must decide how to allocate their budget to satisfy common and individual objectives. Couple members have to reach an agreement on prioritizing objectives, and their first option likely would be to accept a norm about distribution of resources between the spouses. One such norm is that maximizing of joint outcomes must come first. Alternatively, they may devise their own rule of prioritizing, give up on some of their personal goals, and take turns in having money allocated to each member at different times. For some couples, particularly those whose members maintain a relatively rich profile of activities outside the relationship, budget allocation agreements are not easy to devise without minor or major conflict.

Another example of a more abstract outcome that depletes quickly and happens to be in great demand in interpersonal relationships is time. How much time should friends spend with each other, how often, and in what quality (e.g., leisurely time in doing things together, discussions about each other's plans and dreams, simple chatting on the phone)? How does a person decide how much time to spend with each friend and in what way? Social and cultural norms about this issue are variable and also depend on individual expectations about the quality of the specific friendship. Friend A's allocation of time to Friend B might not correspond to Friend B's willingness to allocate time for the friendship. Friend B might have expected more and higher quality time from Friend A and, thus, might interpret Friend A's

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decision as intentional devaluation of their friendship. In a way, although the valued commodity (i.e., time) seems the same, it acquires different meanings and values for each friend because each appears to have different expectations about friendship. In reality, the friends' valued outcome called "friendship time" is noncorrespondent. If one friend could be satisfied in terms of his or her valued outcome (i.e., be given abundant time with friend), the other friend would have to be dissatisfied. Of course, this situation may give rise to displeasure, resentment, open conflict, or even a falling out.

p0065 Actors in an interpersonal setting may indeed come into conflict due to noncorrespondent outcomes. Correspondence describes the degree to which the outcomes of one partner in an interdependence relationship can be attained without preventing the other partner from attaining his or her outcomes. Noncorrespondence, then, refers to a situation where for one partner to attain his or her goals, the other partner must fail to do so. Perfect noncorrespondence of outcomes leads to pure conflict, whereas perfect correspondence leads to pure coordination. Noncorrespondence implies that interference and conflict may arise not only by the fact that the members of an interpersonal relationship pursue similar, albeit depleting, outcomes. They could just as well pursue dissimilar outcomes that happen to be incompatible. For instance, a married couple might not realize that when one spouse pursues a high-profile career while the other seeks a low-key family life, potential for conflict may be accumulating. One spouse's lifestyle generates outcomes that are noncorrespondent to those yielded by the other's lifestyle. Scarcity of time invested in home or family activities and an abundance of time spent with nonfamily make difficult the common pursuit of a low-key family life. Spouses must pursue their aspirations unilaterally, hoping that this will not negatively influence relationship maintenance. Alternatively, they could both change their lifestyles so as to be able to carry out more joint activities and enjoy common outcomes.

p0070 Other's interference with own goals may have cognitive and emotional ramifications because it makes other and own outcomes salient to self, thereby triggering social comparison. Self-evaluation may then ensue, typified by thoughts such as "Do I really merit this goal?" and "Am I able to achieve this target?" Social comparison may also yield perceptions of threat to self-worth projected onto the other such as "Her goal is to prove that I am ineffective" and "His aim is to humiliate me."

p0075 Either category of cognitions contributes to the multiplication of conflict manifestations and to conflict

escalation. Removal of interference might not be sufficient to settle conflict because disputants are focusing on the perceived threat to their self-esteem rather than on the interference per se. Other's interference may have already severely damaged perception of self-worth and efficacy, and conflict may persist with the aim of restoring them.

2.3. Relative Deprivation

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p0080 Paradoxically, noninterference may also contribute to interpersonal conflict. This situation is referred to as relative deprivation. People experience relative deprivation when they realize that own outcomes are severely inferior to a commonly accepted standard and that reaching the standard by own efforts is infeasible. In a situation of this sort, significant others (who meet the standard) with whom people have relationships may unknowingly aggravate people's own predicaments. Social comparison again works to underscore both inferiority of outcomes and self-debasement. The likelihood of these effects is high when a person is comparing self to a significant other with respect to outcomes having a central role in self-definition of both parties. If the relationship is a stable personal one and the social norms encourage it, the person with the poorer outcomes is particularly likely to expect the other to interfere so as to alleviate the former's own predicament. Of course, the significant other might not agree that he or she should assist and might not be willing to do so. Noninterference or lack of assistance may cause envy and bitterness in the person with the poorer outcomes. Moreover, it might be interpreted as an active attempt by the significant other to denigrate him or her and to contemptuously seclude him or her from "what everyone has a right to have." Conflict is bound to follow. Relative deprivation as a cause of conflict is more common between social groups than between persons given that people generally either find themselves in social settings with people whose level of outcomes is similar to their own or tend to choose significant others with similar outcomes rather than dissimilar ones.

2.4. Experiencing and Expressing Conflict: The Role of Qualitative Relationship Features

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p0085 Some manifestations of conflict remain discreetly in the background until conflict has fully erupted.

However, most of them are not discreet at all and need no introduction. At times, all people have experienced behavioral manifestations such as arguments, intense disagreements, antagonism, fights, and even physical violence against other people. They have experienced the emotions involved such as apprehension and mistrust as well as being irritated, hostile, angry, bitter, resentful, sullen, and ominously silent. All people have also ruminated on thoughts regarding the causes of other people's behavior, the ways in which other people interfered with their own wishes and goals, their intentions in so doing, and their predispositions and characters. People probably have experienced conflict in their relationships with acquaintances, friends, family members, spouses, and lovers as well as in their professional or more formal relationships.

p0090 Overt behavioral manifestation of conflict and the subjective experiences involved, emotions and cognitions, may differ both quantitatively and qualitatively depending on the relationship type. Relationships have been characterized in many ways. The previously discussed feature of outcome interdependence is primarily used to characterize the motivational structure of relationships because interdependence of outcomes is intertwined with the potential of developing conflict in relationships. Thus, relationships of high interdependence, such as intimate ones, are very likely to yield conflict. The more individuals depend on one another for more of their positive outcomes, the more likely they are to interfere with one another's positive outcomes. High interdependence provides a lot of opportunities for conflict while at the same time motivating people to insist on claiming their relationship outcomes because (a) they value the relationships in themselves (i.e., what they can derive from the relationships specifically), (b) they might not have alternative options (i.e., alternative relationships offering just as good outcomes), and/or (c) they might not be willing to invest in the costly procedure of seeking and constructing new relationships.

p0095 However, conflict expression per se seems to be influenced by three other qualitative (rather than structural) dimensions of relationship features: formality, stability, and personal/task orientation. More specifically, a relationship may be formal or informal, stable or transient, and personal or task oriented. A formal relationship is governed by strong social norms providing salient guidelines about appropriate interpersonal behavior. In contrast, although an informal relationship may also embed implicit behavioral guidelines, it is less directing and leaves more room for

partners themselves to define interaction rules. A transient relationship is temporary and tends to occur with irregular timing, often in different places. To the contrary, a stable relationship lasts longer, has relative time regularity, and tends to occupy identifiable spaces. A task-oriented relationship is established for the sake of accomplishing specific tasks, whereas a personal relationship is initiated mainly for its own sake and the outcomes are accrued through the relationship. Communication in the former focuses on tasks and actions, whereas communication in the latter focuses on the people and their dispositions.

An example of a relationship type that is highly interdependent for outcomes while being informal, stable, and personal is, of course, the married couple. Married couples may experience conflict over any number of issues, including budget allocation, division of household chores, family roles, failed mutual expectations, jealousy, neglect, and infidelity. In fact, it appears that the more a person knows another person, the closer the relationship is and the more likely the partners are to have had experienced a broader spectrum of all the preceding behaviors, emotions, and cognitions to different degrees. Consider the common example in married couples counseling of neglect that may give rise to particularly intense and expressively "rich" conflict. When one member of the relationship maintains a high level of rewarding life outside the relationship, allowing that area to absorb more and more of that person's interest, energy, and time, the other member may start perceiving the gap between past level of personal rewards from the relationship and present outcomes to grow. Failed expectations, deterioration of outcomes, and the inevitable social comparison with the significant other will soon trigger perceptions of interference with own relationship aspirations and a sense of relative deprivation. Feelings of frustration and self-deprecation may follow, and conflict behaviors on the part of the "underbenefited" member to restore level of outcomes and reclaim loss of self-esteem will be manifested. Because the focus in close relationships tends to be on the partners and their dispositions, attributions will be made about the "meaning" of the other's interference or lack of interference (i.e., relative deprivation). Representative thoughts could include "This is another sign that her feelings about me have changed," "He does not care about me," and "I am unable to attract her anymore." Dispositional attributions escalate conflict, and removal of interference might not be sufficient to settle it because the disputants are then focusing on

perceived intentional threat to self-esteem rather than on the outcomes of their relationship. Conflict in such cases may be constructive in the sense that a relationship member is painfully made aware of the fact that he or she is entangled in a relationship that does not accrue positive outcomes to him or her anymore. Restructuring or even leaving the relationship may be necessary to extinguish negative outcomes. Nevertheless, high interdependence, as well as the possible misperception that there are no alternative solutions, might not allow an individual to see conflict as a positive and constructive opportunity. Third-party assistance may be required in this situation.

p0105 The adage that the more people know one another, the more likely the conflict, in no way implies that conflict cannot erupt between strangers and acquaintances. More often than not, conflict will occur within a transient formal or informal relationship, that is, with people who one hardly knows or who one never actually meets, for example, the inconsiderate driver who will not allow one's car to overtake his car despite one's desperate signaling and horn honking that one is rushing to an emergency or the "high hat" assistant at the store in the posh side of the town who will answer one's naive questions with a polite yet reluctant and indignant smile. Expression of conflict in transient relationships may include a different, possibly more limited, and yet more extreme set of behaviors compared with those identified in other kinds of relationships.

p0110 The anonymity of informal transient relationships may diminish respect for social norms. The brevity and superficiality of the contact with the unknown others, the nonsaliency of social norms in such situations, and the expectation that the interactions will not be followed up all may result, by means of disregarding the human qualities of the others, in particularly acute and exceptional expressions of conflict behavior involving verbal aggression or even physical assault. The anonymous crowds at athletic events have often promulgated intense expressions of interpersonal conflict among spectating fans. Similarly, continuous movement and speed, and the impersonal indirect communication through signaling and horn honking, may precipitate antagonistic behavior between drivers on highways. Extreme behavior is not as likely in formal transient relationships, such as the encounter with the store assistant, because the environment is rich with salient norms of conduct dictating limits to appropriate "protest" behavior and sanctions for inappropriate behavior. There is less anonymity, and the likelihood that

the interaction with the same person might be followed up is not negligible. As a consequence of these factors, conflict expression in formal transient relationships is usually subdued and restrained.

What about formal stable relationships such as work and professional relationships? These bear a characteristic that could breed conflict, that is, increased interdependence for outcomes. On the other hand, these relationships usually include a strong set of norms due to their formality. Because they are also stable, individuals cannot discount the future consequences of their negative behaviors. Finally, because these relationships have survival value for the individuals involved, they cannot be easily abandoned for other relationships and so members are particularly motivated to retain them. p0115

Consider a small health care institution that hires two psychologists without a clearly delineated profile for each one's duties. In such a work setting, one is given the chance to define his or her exact job profile and to enjoy the work while gaining recognition and credit toward future promotion. Hence, the two psychologists are likely to compete in demonstrating effectiveness, diligence, and expertise—a productive state of affairs for both the institution and its patients. However, assuming that this small institution has only one higher status position for a psychologist, competition for recognition and credit may soon degrade to antagonism. In patient assessment multispecialist meetings, the two may try to undermine each other's input. They may selectively use scientific knowledge and data that counter each other's specific analyses just to raise generalized hard criticism of each other's approach. Alternatively, they may resort to side remarks and whispers to other members of the team or to personal comments about the rival colleague's personality and way of working. The result is, of course, detrimental to the productivity of the whole team and potentially threatening to patient care. The team must divert attention away from case analysis to the arguments of the two psychologists and must invest time and energy in deescalating conflict and refocusing on the task at hand. p0120

3. OVERVIEW OF THE CONFLICT MECHANISM: DIRECTIVES AND KEYS TO MANAGING CONFLICT s0035

Interference and relative deprivation are the two basic psychological processes involved in conflict outbreak. Both processes implicate the self, particularly p0125

self-evaluation and self-esteem, because they activate social comparison with the significant other in the relationship and with a commonly accepted outcome standard. Thus, conflict is not solely about securing for self the valued resources of interpersonal relationships but also is about enhancing, defending, and restoring self-esteem. Social comparison is a third intermediary process that acts as the interface of the other two to the self. Interference and relative deprivation lead to social comparison with the informational input that the self requires to understand where it stands in relation to others and to evaluate own abilities, achievements, social status, and more abstract personal end states such as satisfaction, happiness, and well-being. If the result of such social comparison is negative self-evaluation, conflict behavior is likely to arise because the self implicates the other in obstructing attainment of own outcomes (i.e., interference) or in nonintervening to assist in attaining better personal outcomes (i.e., relative deprivation). The saliency of self-evaluation, brought about by social comparison, diverts attention of relationship parties away from realistic conflict issues to dispositional attributions about each other's behavior. These attributions usually implicate the other in intentional threats to own self-esteem and are highly conducive to conflict escalation. All three processes are inconceivable outside a relationship that is desirable in its own outcomes by both parties. Underlying these processes is a relationship structure of outcome interdependence. The members of the interpersonal dyad depend on one another for their valued outcomes, and it is this very dependence that motivates them to remain in the relationship despite the hurdle of interference and the increased risk of relative deprivation. Therefore, a paradox results. Conflict behavior is more probable, and often more enduring, the greater the interdependence in the relationship. How conflict will be manifested, however, will be greatly influenced by the more qualitative features of the relationship. The specific repertoire of behaviors used to manifest conflict—their aggressiveness, intensity, persistence, and other behavioral characteristics—will be regulated by the formality or informality, stability or transience, and orientation (task vs personal) of the relationship.

p0130 The preceding overview of the most important concepts that have been implicated by research and theory in generating interpersonal conflict also attempts to assemble a loose framework for a general understanding of the psychological mechanism yielding conflict behavior. The framework, depicted in 10005Table I, connects

relationship features to the psychological processes of interference and relative deprivation through social comparison. The core cohesive concept mobilizing the supposed psychological mechanism of conflict production is self-esteem, that is, the need of the self to self-enhance by self-evaluating and comparing with others.

p0135 This loose mechanism of conflict production provides basic directives in conflict resolution and several keys to conflict management methodology. First, it suggests that in conflict resolution, the ultimate aim is to protect, preserve, restore, and (possibly) enhance the self-esteem of the parties involved in conflict. The “realistic” goal of eliminating the source of interference or relative deprivation should be viewed only as a step toward self-esteem preservation or enhancement. Attempting to eliminate interference and relative deprivation without taking into consideration that this action reflects on the self-esteem of the disputant parties will only temporarily appease the conflict. In conflict management methodology, skills development is inconceivable without taking into account the role of dispositional attributions in conflict escalation. Among the most important negotiating skills is avoiding allusions to the personality and intentions of disputant parties (e.g., “name calling,” “reading between the lines”). A third party intervening to assist in resolving conflict cannot possibly proceed to realistic problem-solving propositions that satisfy both parties without a full analysis of the motivational structure in the relationship. The analysis should the different ways in which each disputant's valued outcomes could be attained to a maximum possible level of individual desirability considering that the other wants to do the same. The intervening party should identify the maximum minimum (i.e., the best possible of the worst outcomes that one is willing to accept in a negotiation setting) and the minimum maximum (i.e., the minimum among the best outcomes that one is willing to accept in a negotiation setting). Furthermore, the mediator should have a good understanding of the dimensions used by conflicting parties to self-compare with the other in the relationship. Which outcomes are significant to each party, and why are they used as referents of comparison with the other and (possibly) with a common social standard? What are the consequences of such comparisons for a party's self-esteem? The nature of interference should also be clearly understood. How do the parties interfere with each other's outcomes, and with what costs and benefits for self and other? How will changes in the interference pattern change the cost-benefit ratio for self and other? Answering such

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TABLE I
Relationship Features and Psychological Processes Involved in Interpersonal Conflict

<i>Structural– Motivational</i>	<i>Intermediary</i> <i>Social comparison</i>	<i>Basic</i> <i>Interference</i>	<i>Basic</i> <i>Relative deprivation</i>
Outcome interdependence (high or low)	Self-evaluation becomes salient. Outcomes are compared with other’s and with common standards. Result is input to “basic” processes	Perception of other as interfering with own outcomes Self and other’s outcomes	<p style="text-align: center;">Informational input</p> Perception of self-outcomes as inferior to other’s and to common standards
Qualitative Stability–transience, formality–informality, task–personal orientation		<p style="text-align: center;">Mediating cognitive–affective output</p> Self-attributions, self-devaluation (e.g., “Do I really merit this goal?”) Dispositional attributions about other (e.g., “His aim is to humiliate me”)	<p style="text-align: center;">Behavioral output: Conflict expression</p> Self-attributions and self-debasement Dispositional attributions about other (e.g., “She intends to deprive me of what everyone has a right to have”)
		Conflict expression is regulated in terms of persistence, intensity, restraint, and behavioral repertoire by the qualitative features of the relationship.	

questions can provide an indication of how motivated and willing the parties will be to shift their behavior to less interference or noninterference during negotiation.

greater or lesser extent), the disputants may turn a poor interdependence relationship into a fruitful one for both parties. It appears that when individuals appreciate their outcome interdependence, conflict may provide the thrust that pulls together resources, knowledge, and abilities into devising ideas and solutions that probably would not have been as innovating and productive without conflict.

4. MANAGING CONFLICT

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The fact that conflict is more or less natural to interpersonal relationships perhaps accounts for the common perception that disputants can do little to manage conflict themselves. However, research indicates that disputants trained in interpersonal skills may be able to contain, resolve, and make the best out of conflict, turning it into a constructive and creative process. Indeed, at the individual level, when a person has the skills to handle conflict, this otherwise destructive and painful process may work to mobilize and enhance individual abilities, resources, and ingenuity. It may further motivate self-knowledge, assert self-determination, clarify personal goals and desires, and encourage self-expansion. At the dyadic level, when each of the disputants possesses the skills to handle conflict (to a

Unfortunately, the notion of interpersonal skills training for managing conflict has not yet been met with wide social acceptance. For instance, educational systems have done little to integrate such training into their programs. Unfortunately, lack of skills in managing conflict continues to be widespread, and people often find themselves unable to understand how they got involved in escalating conflict and how to handle it. A solution often sought in these situations is intervention by a third party, usually someone with good training in interpersonal skills in conflict management. This section first reviews some of the well-known interpersonal skills for managing conflict. Then, it describes the basic principles and forms of third-party intervention.

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4.1. Interpersonal Skills in Managing Conflict

p0150 Six basic interpersonal skills for managing conflict have been identified in the past. The first five are viewed as antecedents of the sixth. These basic interpersonal skills must be well acquired and put to effective use before any attempt is made to proceed on to learning how to practice the sixth, that is, problem solving. The latter is the most critical interpersonal skill involved in conflict resolution and, thus, is presented in more detail than the others.

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4.1.1. Active Listening

p0155 This skill involves listening carefully to what the other person has to say and reflecting on the points he or she is trying to make. Feedback should be provided about what is understood. Points perceived to have ambiguous or double meanings should be clarified with the other by questions that do not include answers and do not assume interpretations.

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4.1.2. Empathy

p0160 This skill refers to trying to see things from the perspective of the other person. It involves attempting to identify with expectations, fears, and concerns that seem to underlie the other's arguments and responses.

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4.1.3. Assertion

p0165 This skill suggests that one's point of view, thoughts, feelings, and pursued outcomes are expressed clearly in concrete terms.

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4.1.4. Avoiding Dispositional Attributions

p0170 Attributing events to the other person's personality, motives, and/or intentions should be avoided at all costs. Communication should be about tasks and issues, whereas affect expressed should not deviate from personal respect and recognition to the other's right to have claims in the relationship.

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4.1.5. Constructive Feedback

p0175 This skill refers to identifying and rewarding positive behaviors toward resolution while not failing to mention or ignoring negative behaviors. Reasoning should

be provided as to why behaviors are positive or negative on the basis of their consequences to self, other, or both.

4.1.6. Problem Solving

Alternative solutions aimed at satisfying the goals and needs of both parties should be generated. This requires (a) each party developing separately a clear hierarchy of goals and needs, with his or her optimum goals placed on top and followed by the maximum minimum and the minimum of the maximum; (b) discussing proposed solutions, beginning with the target of fulfilling optimum goals for both parties and then, if discussions come to an impasse, discussing on the basis of satisfying maximum minimum goals for both parties and then, if this also fails, further discussing on the basis of minimum maximum goals; (c) examining whether maintaining the relationship and maximizing joint outcomes is indeed preferable to pursuing own optimum goals independently; and (d) repeating Steps b and c until both parties concede to aim for lower than their initial outcomes so that a mutually satisfying solution (referred to as "satisficing") can be reached. If necessary, the hierarchy list of preferred outcomes should be reviewed and restructured.

The conflict resolution process may last a long time and may require the control and manipulation of several parameters. Hence, it is important that disputants monitor their effectiveness in managing conflict. Based on Deutsch's 1994 analysis of conflict resolution training, four criteria captured by the following questions can be used to evaluate whether the preceding skills have been put to work effectively. First, has a cooperative, problem-solving relationship with the other person been initiated, and how well is it maintained? Second, do disputants discuss a reasonable range of alternative and mutually satisfying proposals as a result of problem solving? Third, do disputants seem to gradually adopt an "outsider's" perspective or an analytic perspective to the conflict? Fourth, are the various forms of conflict expression kept to a minimum during the process?

Influential applied research, such as Johnson and Johnson's 1994 research on constructive conflict in schools, has consistently documented the benefits of systematic interpersonal skills training in interpersonal educational as well as in other settings. However, as noted previously, educational systems have not yet integrated such training into their programs. Unfortunately, rather than preparing to personally handle the relatively frequent, inevitable, and potentially harmful life events of conflict, people seem to

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prefer resorting to the intervention of a third party after conflict has already escalated and negative consequences are already difficult to bear. Although such persistent conflict may have caused a lot of damage or even irreparable harm, it is usually never too late to seek the help of a specialist.

and decides what the solution should be. This approach is also legalistic, to a certain degree, in that norms and prescribed rules must be taken into account in providing a solution. Disputants may have agreed before arbitration to abide by the arbitrator's decision. However, they are not obliged to do so.

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4.2. Third-Party Intervention

p0195 A third (independent) party can often be invited by the disputants to resolve conflict. This is more likely when disputants are motivated to maintain their relationship despite its temporary negative outcomes or when they intend to exit the relationship with the maximum possible gain and minimum possible damage for self and other. Third-party intervention may also be offered when conflict has damaging consequences for others indirectly related to the disputants and when the functionality of their social setting is threatened. For instance, in the earlier example, negative consequences had resulted from the conflict between the two psychologists for the functionality of group multispecialist meetings, the work ambience, and the welfare of patients in the small health care institution. In this case, the chief administrator of the institution might have intervened in a number of informal ways. The administrator could have advised the psychologists individually to behave "professionally," to avoid hostility, and to focus on patient care, or the administrator could have facilitated a constructive dialogue between the two. Alternatively, the administrator could have arranged so that the two psychologists never interact or interfere in each other's duties. If these informal approaches had proven to be ineffective, the administrator could have employed a more formal approach such as mediation.

p0200 In general, intervention strategies differ in terms of their legalistic and nonlegalistic character as well as the intervening party's interaction with the disputants.

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4.2.1. Adjudication

p0205 This involves a judge or jury in a court setting. The interaction of these parties with the disputants is strictly formal and follows legally prescribed channels. Disputants are obliged to abide by the court's decision.

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4.2.2. Arbitration

p0210 This involves little interaction of the intervening party with the disputants. The arbitrator listens to both sides

4.2.3. Fact Finding

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This involves even less interaction with the disputants. The third party's role is to gather information so as to arrive at an independent judgment regarding the dispute. This strategy could also be said to have a legalistic character in the sense described in the preceding subsection (on arbitration). The input of the "fact finder" is only advisory.

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Conciliation and mediation, described next, are non-legalistic processes and tend to be more psychological in nature.

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4.2.4. Conciliation

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This involves a lot of interaction with the disputants, albeit limited to opening and maintaining communication channels and exchange of information. The conciliator does not get actively involved in disputants' discussions and agreements.

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4.2.5. Mediation

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This involves an independent third party who must actively interact with the disputants and work with them in identifying the source of conflict and in reaching a mutually satisfying agreement. Mediation is largely preferred to other forms of third-party intervention in many types of interpersonal relationships. This may be due to its relatively lower cost to other, particularly legalistic, conflict resolution procedures or, more important, to the willingness and commitment of anyone choosing mediation to actually resolve conflict. The latter may, in part, account for the finding that mediation yields more effective, lasting, and satisfactory resolutions for disputants. It is also noteworthy that even when conflict is not resolved in a satisfactory way, the mediation process per se tends to improve disputant relations both within and outside the mediation framework.

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Psychological research has dealt more with mediation than with any of the other intervention processes, focusing on understanding its mechanisms and its

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effectiveness. Following is a succinct description of the basic features of this procedure.

p0240 The mediator must be a person who is trained in interpersonal skills and has a good understanding of the theoretical underpinnings of conflict and experience in monitoring conflict. Mediation usually starts with preliminary contacts between the mediator and each disputant. The aim of these contacts is twofold: (a) to evaluate disputants' willingness and commitment to resolving conflict and (b) to identify the fundamental source of conflict and of minor issues causing friction. Setting the rules of subsequent interactions follows this stage. The mediator explicates the procedure, delineates his or her role as a neutral moderator, and states emphatically the modes of communication that will and will not be allowed during interaction, usually giving specific examples. For instance, interruptions, dispositional attributions (e.g., name calling), and generalizations and interpretations of the other's arguments should be avoided. Mediation proper then begins. Each disputant is asked to present his or her view of the conflict situation within a specific time limit. The mediator makes sure that no one is interrupted and that the rules are followed. Once both disputants have presented their views, the mediator may summarize each position and asks disputants for further clarifications. This is followed by the problem-solving phase, during which the two disputants and the mediator all collaborate in reviewing (a) each party's interests, goals, and desirables outcomes; (b) each party's sources of interference and nuisance; and (c) as many feasible and desirable solutions to conflict as is possible. Common discussion is followed by separate discussion with each disputant, during which the same issues are reviewed with an emphasis on discussing as many feasible and desirable solutions to the conflict as is possible. During these contacts, the mediator must reevaluate commitment to conflict resolution and exclude the possibility that mediation is being used by either disputant as a strategy to attain a hidden agenda. Furthermore, points of resistance, reluctance, and apprehension regarding the constructive process must be identified, and their causes must be discussed. If this stage yields a range of mutually acceptable alternatives, an agreement can be reached. Agreements are recorded, typed, and signed by both parties. Language used in documents should be specific, concrete, and unambiguous. Disputants are expected to honor their signatures. If the problem-solving stage does not produce a mutually acceptable solution, agreement cannot be reached and the entire procedure must be repeated. The stages described do

not necessarily follow one another. An earlier stage might need to be rerun at any point during the mediation procedure. Thus, mediation can be painstaking and time-consuming. Nevertheless, as has often been observed in relevant research, the procedure per se may improve the relationship of the conflicting parties, providing them with a thrust to proceed on to resolving conflict on their own.

5. CONCLUSION

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p0245 Conflict can undermine the integrity of a relationship and generate negative consequences for the relationship members. However, such detrimental outcomes are due to uncontrollable escalation of conflict and not to conflict per se. In fact, conflict is an integral part of all interpersonal relationships. It is a product of the interdependence that is necessarily developed between two (or more) parties so that they can both (or all) enjoy valued outcomes that could not be enjoyed to the same degree, or with the same ease and quality, outside the specific relationship. Conflict can be managed so as to yield outcomes constructive for the relationship and positive for its individual members. Relationship members should be on guard for uncontrollable conflict escalation, which is usually due to (a) actual or perceived interference of the other with the attainment of own goals, (b) actual or perceived relative deprivation of own outcomes with respect to a commonly accepted standard and the standard attained by the significant other in the relationship, (c) perceiving interference or relative deprivation as a threat to self-esteem, (d) focusing on enhancing self-esteem rather than on specific conflict issues, (e) maximizing own outcomes unilaterally by ignoring the other's or at the expense of the other's outcomes, (f) manifesting and retaliating conflict behaviors, and/or (g) making dispositional attributions about conflict behaviors.

p0250 Training in interpersonal skills, such as active listening, empathy, assertion, constructive feedback, and problem solving, can deescalate conflict and turn it into a constructive process. Mediation by a third party is often required when people lack conflict resolution skills. The mediator attempts to facilitate interactions between disputants so that they can negotiate for themselves. Mediation requires analyzing facts, goals, outcomes, and conflict behaviors as reported by each party in individual and common sessions with the mediator. As a constructive process, conflict can regulate self-interest in a relationship. Moreover, it

can maintain the relationship's productivity of positive outcomes to a maximum level for the members involved. It can work to clarify needs and goals and to delineate the role of individual members. It can focus disputants on mutually satisfying solutions of objective conflict differences, moving them away from the persistent and futile effort to restore self-esteem by means of conflict behavior. Last, but not least, it can disentangle individuals from an unproductive relationship that perpetuates their negative outcomes by precipitating exit.

See Also the Following Articles

p0255 Intra-refs to be added.

Further Reading

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