Conflict Transformation: From Episode to Epicenter

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Abstract

The spark of conflict begins from the epicenter and spreads causing numerous episodes of conflict. Conventional approaches like negotiation, mediation and judicial settlement to conflict resolution are guided by the spirit of essentialism. They are monodimentional. Visualizing the big picture of conflict, multidimensional approaches like preventive diplomacy, humanitarian intervention and reconciliation and truth have been developed to address the roots of conflict for constructive transformation. These new approaches are far more progressive and effective than the conventional ones. The time has come to rethink about our approaches to conflict resolution and transformation. This paper delves into the three issues: episodes of conflict, conventional methods of conflict resolution and the need to address the root-causes (epicenters) of conflict. The objectives of the paper are to describe the episodes of conflict, to analyze various conventional methods of conflict resolution, and to explore why conflict transformation is important. This paper follows the qualitative method. Firstly, a survey of various theories of conflict and approaches has been carried out. Then, conventional approaches have been evaluated. Finally, the reasons to address the epicenters of conflict have been explored. The findings are: without addressing the epicenters of conflict, conflict transformation is not possible. Without conflict transformation, we cannot think of constructive change. In order to study the life cycle of conflict, we have to move from the episode to its epicenter (root-cause). This episodic view of conflict is the new approach to the study of conflict.

Keywords: conflict, episode, epicenter, resolution, transformation, constructive change

Introduction

Human life evolves through conflict. We cannot imagine the world without conflict. Conflict arises out of a clash of interest or disagreement. Conflicts occur when there are incompatible thoughts or activities. Hostility or antagonism is at the heart of conflict. Conflict manifests in many forms in different contexts. Mental or psychological conflict is termed as inner conflict whereas the clash between two persons or among various groups is defined as external conflict. The underlying factors

of conflict are called roots or epicenters of conflict. One epicenter can cause multiple episodes of conflict. This paper revolves around the three questions: What are the episodes of conflicts? How are the conventional methods of conflict resolution not so effective for long-term? Why do we need to address the root-causes (epicenters) of conflicts? The objectives of this paper are to describe conflicts and their episodes, to analyze and evaluate how conventional methods are not so effective to provide long-term solutions, and to explore the reasons why it is essential to address the root-causes (epicenters) of conflict for constructive transformation. Firstly, I surveyed various conflict theories and approaches adopted to resolve the disputes. Then I examined the approaches and their effectiveness while resolving or transforming the conflict into constructive change. Mapping of conflict is equally important to understand conflict. Through mapping we can have a photographic view of conflict. I have mainly extracted the theories, philosophies and ideas from *The Little Book of Conflict Transformation (*2003) by John P. L. and *Conflict Resolution in the Twenty-first Century: Principles, Methods and Approaches* (2009) by Bercovitch, J., & Jacobson, R.

Conceptualizing Conflict

All the ideologies are the products of the historical and social conditions. These cultural practices are materialized and they are ideologically represented in the society. In this regard, Raymond Williams (1999) in his essay "Marxism and Literature" states that "cultural practices are forms of material production" (p.127). Discourses of conflict are ideologically constructed and disseminated in the society. Conflict does not automatically result. It is caused by many underlying factors. Jolle Demmers (2012) writes by analyzing the complex nature of conflict, "Violent conflict is a complex social phenomenon that can only be understood and explained from a multidisciplinary approach" (p. 2). In order to properly understand violent conflicts, we have to situate them in geopolitical contexts.

Different Perspectives on Conflict

There are different perspectives on conflict: essentialist, discursive/ pluralist, cultural, Marxist, idealist, realist, constructivist and others. The essentialists such as Karl Marx (class struggle), Lugwig Gumplowicz (group struggle), Lester Frank Ward (human nature as essentially conflicted), and Thomas Hobbes (human's univocal drive for power) idealize their univocal conception of conflict on the bases of economic class, race or ethnicity, biology, drive for power and so on. Their essentialist ideas colonize our mind. Our mind is not yet free from the essentialists' hegemony. The privileged group ideologically constructs the discourse to legitimize social injustices and violence. In this regard, Thomas Hobbes (1651) in his book *Leviathan* states, "I put for a general inclination of all mankind, a perpetual and restless desire for power that ceaseth only in death" (p. 78). Similarly, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels (1848/2015) expressed their essentialist views regarding class struggle between the two economic classes: the Proletariat and the Bourgeoisie in *The Communist Manifesto*. According to them, "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles" (p. 47). The essentialists are always in favor of creating univocal concept of violent conflict. They deliberately create inequalities so that they can play politics.

Discursive study of conflict is needed to reveal the hidden truths of conflict. All the essentialist discourses or the grand narratives of conflict are challenged by a discursive approach. The contemporary postmodernist and post-structuralist writers and theorists such as Michel Foucault, Jean Baudrillard, Jacqes Derrida, Jean-Francois Lyotard are radical because of the practice of deconstructive and cultural approaches. They applied a discursive approach to the study of conflict. Regarding the carceral system or biopolitics, Foucault (1977) states:

> The carceral network, in its compact or extensive forms, with its system of insertion, of distribution, of surveillance, of observation, has been the greatest attempt to adjust the disciplinary power that the nineteenth century was developing, to the old, unitary, all-embracing forms of the law. (*Discipline and Punish*, p. 308)

According to Foucault, conflict is not only clash between opposing forces but it is embedded within all power structures of social systems. Culture indicates a set of practices. Consciously or unconsciously we perform our culture. Culture is fundamentally an identity marker of a person or society. There have been cultural or civilizational conflicts in defense of culture. In this regard, Samuel P. Huntington (1996) writes, "Wars between clans, tribes, ethnic groups, religious communities, and nations have been prevalent in every era and in every civilization because they are rooted in the identities of people" (p. 252). If the identities of people are at stake, the conflicts between them tend to be violent and bloody.

According to the classical Marxists namely Carl Marx (1818-1883) and Friedrich Engels (1820-1895) the bourgeoisie (capitalists) and the proletariat (working-class) are always in a conflicting situation. In this regard, M.H Abrams remarks, "They engage in a struggle for economic, political, and social advantage" (p. 148). These powerful and subordinate classes have the conflict of interests.

The realist conflict thinkers such as Thomas Hobbes, Kenneth Waltz, John Herz and John Mearsheimer believe that anarchy leads to war internationally. So, international politics is anarchical. There is a high possibility of international anarchy due to the impossibility of world government. Regarding the nature of man, Cynthia Weber comments, "Man is flawed therefore prone to conflict" (15). The higher authority of the world exercises its power. It creates anarchy. In the absence of order there is anarchy. Anarchy has become a location of fear in the modern world. In this context, Weber remarks, "Because security questions can never be finally resolved in a situation of structural anarchy, competition is unavoidable and conflict is likely" (32). Every human being has got instinctual impulse. Anarchy is inherent in the deep structure of the global system. Fear divides people or institutions of the world.

The aforementioned idealists believe that there is an international society. According to them, this society can overcome international anarchy. The international community would mediate to maintain order in the world. Weber emphasizes the role of international society. "International community—a formal or informal collective and cooperative set of social relationships among sovereign nation states—may be an alternative to world government and an alternative to international anarchy" (38). International community is believed to be avoiding the conflictual aspects of the world.

According to constructivism, the interests and identities of states are unstable. The relationships among the states are either conflictual or cooperative on the basis of their identities and interests. Individually also, we have to change according to the changing world. In this context, ,Weber mentions "We know from our own individual experiences that today we are not exactly who we were yesterday, and we are unlikely to be exactly the same tomorrow. Our identities—who we are—change, as do our interests—what is important to us" (p. 60). Survival has been an existential issue. The individuals or the states adapt or adjust themselves on the basis of their survival. All sovereign states consider the survival issue as fundamental. All of them want to survive and maintain their identities.

Conventional and New Approaches to Conflict Resolution

Conflict resolution involves formal or informal activities to control the violent conflict and to understand the major issues of conflict. Related to conflict resolution, Jacob Bercovitch and Jackson Richard (2009) state, "Conflict resolution is about accepting a conflict, recognizing that there are ways out of it, and engaging in some tacit or explicit coordination, without which none of these goals can be achieved" (p. 1). In comparison to conflict management, conflict resolution seems to be more comprehensive and inclusive.

The traditional techniques of conflict management and resolution are: negotiation, mediation, and judicial settlement. Negotiation is seen as the most frequently used method in conflict resolution. Throughout the history, diplomatic envoys have been employed to resolve the disputes. All the conflicting parties come together. The nature of issues in conflict has a direct impact on the negotiation process. The contexts of negotiation also significantly affect the processes and efforts conflict resolution. Here context refers to the circumstances and negotiation processes of conflicts.

Using intermediaries to solve disputes is a common practice in all societies. In this regard, Bercovitch and Jackson (2009) explain, "Mediation is the most common form of third-party intervention. However, it is not a discrete activity but rather a continuous process" (p. 33). Mediation is, in fact, a process of conflict management. A third-party usually intends to achieve some agreement/compromise between parties in conflict. The parties in conflict should be prepared to cooperate.

Regarding the growth of judiciaries, Bercovitch and Jackson (2009) write, "Historically, permanent judicial institutions developed out of the diplomatic practice of arbitration" (p. 47). Law-based methods are the rational means of dealing with disputes. Legal methods rarely address political issues. Judicial processes are very conservative and inflexible. Traditional approaches mentioned earlier are mostly monodimensional. They cannot properly address underlying factors of conflict.

The contemporary world has been facing the new forms of conflicts or wars. The modern conflicts are more and more intractable. Terrorism defies existing boundaries, norms, laws and values. Now, terrorism operates in a virtual space. It is a time to rethink about our approaches to conflict management and resolution. New approaches are multidimensional. Regarding the new approaches, Bercovitch and

Jacksonn (2009) state, "…multidimensional approaches are better equipped to generate a contextually relevant resolution to conflict, especially in the case of internal conflicts, than the traditional approaches" (p. 10). Multidimensional approaches bring diverse actors into play to deal with the epicenters of conflict. To prevent the potential escalation of violent conflict, the following new approaches have been developed. They are: preventive diplomacy, humanitarian intervention, and reconciliation and justice.

Different phases of conflict include formation, maturation and escalation. John Paul Lederach, Jacob Bercovitch and Richard Jackson have developed different approaches to settle or to transform the conflict. "Central to preventive diplomacy is the desire to reduce the potential for violence, make it an unreasonable option, and create conditions that encourage peaceful resolution of political differences (e.g., deal with underlying injustices and inequalities that make people resort to violence)" (Bercovitch &Jackson, 89). Broader preventive diplomacy aims at removing the conditions of the outbreak of conflict. Preventive diplomacy is considered a holistic approach.

Another highly visible method of conflict resolution is humanitarian intervention. The main objective of this approach is to prevent the escalation of conflict. It is a multidisciplinary approach to conflicts. Post-conflict reconstruction is also within the scope of humanitarian intervention. Concerning the need of this multifaceted approach, Bercovitch & Jackson (2009) write, "Today, humanitarian intervention is at the center of any international discussions about how to respond to the outbreak of serious internal conflict" (p. 101). Humanitarian interruption is needed for stopping the conflict from spreading.

Truth commissions and trials are established as the part of reconciliation and justice. They are primarily concerned with dealing with human rights abuses. It is very challenging to maintain reconciliation and justice right after the instances of mass atrocity and severe human rights violations. Related to fruitful reconciliation and justice, Bercovitch & Jackson (2009) point out:

> Truth and reconciliation commissions—the institutionalized expression of the theory of reconciliation—are designed to facilitate the truth-telling part of this process, in the hope that it will engender forgiveness, a measure of catharsis, the forsaking of vengeance, the humanization of both victims and perpetrators, and the chance to articulate the vision of a common future. (p. 153)

Conflict Transformation: From Episode to Epicenter

There are chain relationships between episodes and epicenters of conflicts. Without having profound knowledge and conceptual clarity of conflict, we cannot address the epicenter of conflict. A series of episodes of conflict may originate from one epicenter at different times. The episodes of conflict are the surface manifestations of conflicts, so they are visible. But the underlying factors are invisible. In this regard, John Paul Lederach (2003) explains, "The epicenter of conflict is the web of relational patterns, often providing a history of lived episodes, from which new episodes and issues emerge. If the episode releases conflict energy in the relationship, the epicenter is where the energy

is produced" (p. 31). We have to explore the epicenter of the conflict entering the bigger picture of relationship, and patterns within which the conflict arises.

The episodes of conflict can be used as a lens to see the larger picture of conflict. At the time of conflict escalation, many interrelated underlying factors are at work. In the process of conflict transformation, we look through the episodes but we focus on what lies beyond them. According to Lederach (2003), "We need multiple lenses to see different aspects of a complex reality" (p. 10). Without analyzing the contexts and various facets of the episodes of conflicts, we cannot know the root-causes or the epicenters of them. Without wearing the lenses of a conflict transformational approach, we cannot study the underlying factors conflict. According to Lederach (2003), "Conflict transformation is more than a set of specific techniques; it is a way of looking as well as seeing" (p. 9). Seeing through the transformational lenses means seeing things at a great distance with a clear vision.

If we try to solve immediate problems without seeing the bigger picture of the conflict, we only exhaust our energy and resource. First of all we have to identify the underlying causes and forces in the conflict. So, it is important to comprehend the bigger picture of relationship, and patterns within which the conflict arises:

> …the immediacy of the presenting issues, and the energy released as people contend over these issues, defines the "episodic" expression of the conflict. Moving through the presenting issues toward the spheres of relational and historical patterns take us to the epicenter of conflict, which is always capable of regenerating new episodes, either on similar or on different issues. Transformation seeks to see and understand both: the episode and the epicenter. (Lederach, 2003, p. 36)

The current issues (episodes) are the windows. The immediate situation can be used as a lens to see beyond the surface level. The content of the conflict is a way to see its context. If we see through the issue, we visualize the nature of the context and relational patterns.

To show the link between the episodes and epicenters of conflict, we can take an analogy of a pond. If we throw a stone in a pond, it creates a series of waves. An individual wave represents the episode of conflict. But all the individual waves are connected to the epicenter of all individual waves. According to Lederach (2003), "Relationships—visible and invisible, immediate and long-term—are the heart of transformational processes" (p. 17). We have to study the link/relationship between the episode and its root-cause. The transformational process starts from the immediate occurrence and moves towards the epicenter of the conflict. Without addressing the deep structures/epicenters, real transformation is not possible. The immediate situation can be used as a lens to see beyond the surface level. The content of the conflict is a way to see its context. The idea of conflict transformation may be considered as an appropriate approach to the handling the current episodes of conflict for a positive change. At the heart of conflict transformation is constructive change.

Conclusion: Conflict Transformation for Constructive Change

Conflict transformation looks forward to having constructive growth and development. The idea of conflict transformation is considered as an appropriate approach to handle the current episodes of conflict for a positive change. The transformational approach foregrounds the exploration of relational and structural patterns. It is clear that without addressing the root-causes (epicenters) of conflict, conflict transformation for constructive change is impossible.

For constructive transformation of conflicts, the root causes are to be explored and addressed. In a new context, we have to deal with the conflicts in a new way. In this context, the traditional conflict resolution approaches have turned ineffective. The new conflict theories and methods must deal with the root causes of conflict. Without addressing the underlying causes of conflict, we cannot bring the transformation. For this we have to move from an episode to its epicenter. This is the episodic view of conflict.

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