Conflicts: Productive and Destructive*

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It is a great honor and delight for me to receive the Kurt Lewin Memorial Award. As you know, Kurt Lewin has had a profound influence on my life and work. I have been influenced by his value orientations as well as his theoretical orientations. He believed that an intellectually significant social science has to be concerned with the problems of social action and social change and that intelligent social action has to be informed by theory and research. He rejected both a heartless science and a mindless social action. I am proud to have had this remarkable man as a teacher and as a guide.

I wish to discuss the characteristics of productive and destructive conflict and to consider the conditions which give rise to one or another type. Although actual conflicts are rarely purely benign or malign, it is useful for analytic purposes to consider the simple cases. Doing so highlights not only the differences in the outcomes of conflict but also the differences in types of processes by which the outcomes are derived.

Let me start with the dull but necessary chore of defining some of the key terms that I shall be using. A conflict exists whenever incompatible activities occur. The incompatible actions may

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originate in one person, in one group, in one nation; and such conflicts are called *intrapersonal, intragroup, or intranational.* Or they may reflect incompatible actions of two or more persons, groups or nations; such conflicts are called *interpersonal, intergroup, or international.* An action which is incompatible with another action prevents, obstructs, interferes with, injures, or in some way makes it less likely or less effective.

A conflict may arise from differences in information or belief (my wife thinks our son’s mosquito bites are better treated by calamine lotion, while I think caladryl is better). It may reflect differences in interests, desires or values (I prefer to invest our savings in the stock market while my wife would prefer to spend it on winter vacations). It may occur as a result of a scarcity of some resource such as money, time, space, position (the more closet space that my wife uses for her clothing, the less space there is for my files). Or it may reflect a rivalry in which one person tries to outdo or undo the other.

**“Competition” and “Conflict”**

The terms “competition” and “conflict” are often used synonymously or interchangeably. I believe such usage reflects a basic confusion. Although “competition” produces “conflict”, not all instances of “conflict” reflect competition. Competition implies an opposition in the goals of the interdependent parties such that the probability of goal attainment for one decreases as the probability for the other increases. In conflict which is derived from competition, the incompatible actions reflect incompatible goals. However, conflict may occur even when there is no perceived or actual incompatibility of goals. Thus, if my wife and I are in conflict about how to treat our son’s mosquito bites it is not because we have mutually exclusive goals; here, our goals are concordant. The distinction between “conflict” and “competition” is not one which I make merely to split hairs. It is an important one and is basic to a theme that underlies this paper: conflict can occur in a cooperative or competitive context and the processes of conflict resolution which are likely to be displayed will be strongly influenced by the context within which conflict occurs.

I am concerned with psychological or perceived conflict—i.e., conflicts which exist psychologically for the parties involved. I do not assume that perceptions are always veridical nor do I assume that actual incompatibilities are always perceived. Hence, it is important in characterizing any conflict to depict the objective
state of affairs, the state of affairs as perceived by the conflicting parties, and the interdependence between the objective and perceived realities. Let me illustrate some of the possibilities of misperception. I may perceive an incompatibility where there is none (my wife’s clothes and my files may both be able to fit into our closets even though neither of us believes so); I may perceive an incompatibility as noncontingent but, in reality, it is contingent upon changeable features of the situation (her clothes and my files can both fit if I remove some shelves from the closet that are rarely used); I may experience the frustration and annoyance of incompatible actions without perceiving that they are due to conflict (my closet space may have become cramped and overcrowded because my wife has placed various objects into my space without my being aware of this); or I may perceive an incompatibility but make the wrong attribution so that I perceive the nature of the conflict incorrectly (I may blame my son for having put some of his things in my closet when it was done by my wife).

The possibility that the nature of a relationship may be misperceived indicates that the lack of conflict as well as the occurrence of conflict may be determined by misunderstanding or misinformation about the objective state of affairs. Thus, the presence or absence of conflict is never rigidly determined by the objective state of affairs. Apart from the possibility of misperception, psychological factors enter into the determination of conflict in yet another crucial way. Conflict is also determined by what is valued by the conflicting parties. Even the classical example of pure conflict—two starving men on a lifeboat with only enough food for the survival of one—loses its purity if one or both of the men have social or religious values which can become more dominant psychologically than the hunger need or the desire for survival.

The point of these remarks is that neither the occurrence nor the outcomes of conflict are completely and rigidly determined by objective circumstances. This means that the fates of the participants in a situation of conflict are not inevitably determined by the external circumstances in which they find themselves. Whether conflict takes a productive or destructive course is thus open to influence even under the most unfavorable objective conditions. Similarly, even under the most favorable objective circumstances, psychological factors can lead conflict to take a destructive course. I am not denying the importance of “real” conflicts but rather I am asserting that the psychological processes of perceiving and valuing are involved in turning objective conditions into experienced conflict.
In the next section, I shall characterize the typical development and course of destructive and constructive conflicts. Here let me clarify what I mean by the value-laden terms “constructive” and “destructive”. At the extremes, these terms are easy to define. Thus, a conflict clearly has destructive consequences if the participants in it are dissatisfied with the outcomes and all feel they have lost as a result of the conflict. Similarly, a conflict has productive consequences if the participants all are satisfied with their outcomes and feel that they have gained as a result of the conflict. Also, in most instances, a conflict whose outcomes are satisfying to all the participants will be more constructive than one which is satisfying to some and dissatisfying to others.

My characterization of destructive and constructive conflicts obviously has its roots in the ethical value “the greatest good for the greatest number”. Admittedly, there are still considerable theoretical and empirical difficulties to be overcome before such a value can be operationalized with any generality or precision. It is, of course, easier to identify and measure satisfactions-dissatisfactions and gains-losses in simple laboratory conflict situations than it is in the complex conflicts of groups in everyday life. Yet even in the complex situations, it is not impossible to compare conflicts roughly in terms of their outcomes. In some instances, union-management negotiations may lead to a prolonged strike with considerable loss and ill-will resulting to both parties; in other instances it may lead to a mutually satisfying agreement where both sides obtain something they want. In some cases, a quarrel between a husband and wife will clear up unexpressed misunderstandings and lead to greater intimacy while in others it may produce only bitterness and estrangement.

One more definitional point. It is often useful to distinguish between the “manifest” conflict and the “underlying” conflict. Consider the conflict of an obsessional patient over whether or not she should check to see if she really turned off the stove, or the argument of two brothers over which TV program is to be tuned in, or the controversy between a school board and a teachers’ union over the transfer of a teacher, or an international dispute involving alleged infractions of territory by alien aircraft. Each of these manifest conflicts may be symptomatic of underlying conflict: the obsessional patient may want to trust herself but be afraid that she has impulses which would be destructive if unchecked; the two brothers may be fighting to obtain what each considers to be his fair share of the family’s rewards; and so on. “Manifest” conflict often cannot be resolved more than temporarily unless the underlying conflict is dealt with or unless it can be
disconnected and separated from the underlying conflict so that it can be treated in isolation.

I shall now turn to the basic questions to which this paper is addressed. What are the characteristic symptoms and courses of conflicts which end up one way or the other? What are the factors which make a conflict move in one direction or the other? I do not pretend that I have complete or even satisfying answers. Nevertheless, I hope that you will agree that these are questions which warrant attention.

The Course of Destructive Conflict

Destructive conflict is characterized by a tendency to expand and to escalate. As a result, such conflict often becomes independent of its initiating causes and is likely to continue after these have become irrelevant or have been forgotten. Expansion occurs along the various dimensions of conflict: the size and number of the immediate issues involved; the number of the motives and participants implicated on each side of the issue; the size and number of the principles and precedents that are perceived to be at stake; the costs that the participants are willing to bear in relation to the conflict; the number of norms of moral conduct from which behavior toward the other side is exempted; and the intensity of negative attitudes toward the other side.

The processes involved in the intensification of conflict may be said, as Coleman (1957, 14) has expressed it, “to create a ‘Gresham’s Law of Conflict’: the harmful and dangerous elements drive out those which would keep the conflict within bounds”. Paralleling the expansion of the scope of conflict there is an increasing reliance upon a strategy of power and upon the tactics of threat, coercion, and deception. Correspondingly, there is a shift away from a strategy of persuasion and from the tactics of conciliation, minimizing differences, and enhancing mutual understanding and good-will. And within each of the conflicting parties, there is increasing pressure for uniformity of opinion and a tendency for leadership and control to be taken away from those elements that are more conciliatory and invested in those who are militantly organized for waging conflict through combat.

Three Interrelated Processes...

The tendency to escalate conflict results from the conjunction of three interrelated processes: (a) competitive processes involved in the attempt to win the conflict; (b) processes of misperception and biased perception; and (c) processes of commitment arising out of pressures for cognitive and social consistency. These
processes give rise to a mutually reinforcing cycle of relations which generate actions and reactions that intensify conflict.

Other factors, of course, may serve to limit and encapsulate conflict so that a spiraling intensification does not develop. Here, I am referring to such factors as: the number and strength of the existing cooperative bonds, cross-cutting identifications, common allegiances and memberships among the conflicting parties; the existence of values, institutions, procedures and groups that are organized to help limit and regulate conflict; and the salience and significance of the costs of intensifying conflict. If these conflict-limiting factors are weak, it may be difficult to prevent a competitive conflict from expanding in scope. Even if they are strong, misjudgment and the pressures arising out of tendencies to be rigidly self-consistent may make it difficult to keep a competitive conflict encapsulated.

Competitive Effects

Elsewhere (Deutsch 1962a, 1965a, in preparation) I have characterized the essential distinctions between a cooperative and competitive process and described their social psychological features in some detail. Here, I shall only highlight some of the main features of the competitive process. In a competitive encounter as one gains, the other loses. Unlike the cooperative situation where people have their goals linked so that everybody “sinks or swims” together, in the competitive situation if one swims, the others must sink.

Later in the paper, I shall detail some of the factors which lead the parties in a conflict to define their relationship as a competitive one. For the moment, let us assume that they have competitively defined their conflict and let us examine the consequences of doing so and also why these consequences tend to expand conflict. Typically, a competitive process tends to produce the following effects:

... (a) Communication between the conflicting parties is unreliable and impoverished. The available communication channels and opportunities are not utilized or they are used in an attempt to mislead or intimidate the other. Little confidence is placed in information that is obtained directly from the other; espionage and other circuitous means of obtaining information are relied upon. The poor communication enhances the possibility of error and misinformation of the sort which is likely to reinforce the preexisting orientations and expectations toward the other. Thus, the ability to notice and
respond by the other away from a win-lose orientation becomes impaired.

... (b) It stimulates the view that the solution of the conflict can only be of the type that is imposed by one side on the other by superior force, deception, or cleverness—an outlook which is consistent with the definition of the conflict as competitive or win-lose in nature. The enhancement of one's own power and the complementary minimization of the other's power become objectives. The attempt to create or maintain a power difference favorable to one's own side by each of the conflicting parties tends to expand the scope of the conflict as it enlarges from a focus on the immediate issue in dispute to a conflict over who shall have the power to impose his preference upon the other.

... (c) It leads to a suspicious, hostile attitude which increases the sensitivity to differences and threats, while minimizing the awareness of similarities. This, in turn, makes the usually accepted norms of conduct and morality which govern one's behavior toward others who are similar to oneself less applicable. Hence, it permits behavior toward the other which would be considered outrageous if directed toward someone like oneself. Since neither side is likely to grant moral superiority to the other, the conflict is likely to escalate as one side or the other engages in behavior that is morally outrageous to the other side. Of course, if the conflicting parties both agree, implicitly or explicitly, on the rules for waging competitive conflict and adhere to the agreement then this agreement serves to limit the escalation of conflict.

Misjudgment and Misperception

In our preceding discussion of the effects of competition, it was evident that impoverished communication, hostile attitudes, and oversensitivity to differences could lead to distorted views of the other which could intensify and perpetuate conflict. In addition to the distortions that are natural to the competitive process, there are other distortions which commonly occur in the course of interaction. Elsewhere (Deutsch 1962b, 196513) I have described some of the common sources of misperception in interactional situations. Many of these misperceptions function to transform a conflict into a competitive struggle even if the conflict did not emerge from a competitive relationship.
Here let me illustrate with the implications of a simple psychological principle: the perception of any act is determined both by our perception of the act itself and by our perception of the context in which the act occurs. The contexts of social acts are often not immediately given in perception and often they are not obvious. When the context is not obvious, we tend to assume a familiar context—a context which is most likely in terms of our own past experience. Since both the present situations and past experience of the actor and perceiver may be rather different, it is not surprising that they will interpret the same act quite differently. Misunderstandings of this sort, of course, are very likely when the actor and the perceiver come from different cultural backgrounds and are not fully informed about these differences. A period of rapid social change also makes such misunderstandings widespread as the gap between the past and the present widens.

Given the fact that the ability to place oneself in the other’s shoes is notoriously underdeveloped in most people and also that this ability is further impaired by stress and inadequate information, it is not astonishing that certain typical biases emerge in the perceptions of actions during conflict. Thus, since most people are motivated to maintain a favorable view of themselves but are less strongly motivated to hold such a view of others, it is not surprising that there is a bias toward perceiving one’s own behavior toward the other as being more benevolent and more legitimate than the other’s behavior toward oneself. Here I am simply restating a well-demonstrated psychological truth: namely, the evaluation of an act is affected by the evaluation of its source: the source is part of the context of behavior. Research, for example, has shown that American students are likely to rate more favorably an action of the United States directed toward the Soviet Union than the same action directed by the Soviet Union toward the United States. We are likely to view American espionage activities in the Soviet Union as more benevolent than similar activities by Soviet agents in the United States.

If each side in a conflict tends to perceive its own motives and behavior as more benevolent and legitimate than those of the other side, it is evident that conflict will spiral upward in intensity. If “Acme” perceives its actions as a benevolent and legitimate way of interfering with actions that “Bolt” has no right to engage in, “Acme” will certainly be amazed by the intensity of “Bolt’s” hostile response and will have to escalate his counter-action to negate “Bolt’s” response. But how else is “Bolt” likely to act if he perceives his own actions as well-motivated? And how likely he is to respond to “Acme’s” escalation with still further counterescalation if he is capable of so doing!
To the extent that there is a biased perception of benevolence and legitimacy, one could also expect that there will be a parallel bias in what is considered to be an equitable agreement for resolving conflict: should not differential legitimacy be differentially rewarded? The biased perceptions of what is a fair compromise makes agreement more difficult and, thus, extends conflict. Another consequence of the biased perception of benevolence and legitimacy is reflected in the asymmetries between trust and suspicion, and between cooperation and competition. Trust, when violated, is more likely to turn into suspicion than negated suspicion is to turn into trust. Similarly, it is easier to move in the direction from cooperation to competition than from competition to cooperation.

**Other Processes Leading to Misperception**

There are, of course, other types of processes leading to misperceptions and misjudgments. In addition to the distortions arising from the pressures for self-consistency and social conformity (which are discussed below), the intensification of conflict may induce stress and tension beyond a moderate optimal level and this over-activation, in turn, often leads to an impairment of perceptual and cognitive processes in several ways: it reduces the range of perceived alternatives; it reduces the time-perspective in such a way as to cause a focus on the immediate rather than the over-all consequences of the perceived alternatives; it polarizes thought so that percepts tend to take on a simplistic cast of being “black” or “white”, “for” or “against”, “good” or “evil”; it leads to stereotyped responses; it increases the susceptibility to fear- or hope-inciting rumors; it increases defensiveness; it increases the pressures to social conformity. In effect, excessive tension reduces the intellectual resources available for discovering new ways of coping with a problem or new ideas for resolving a conflict. Intensification of conflict is the likely result as simplistic thinking and the polarization of thought pushes the participants to view their alternatives as being limited to “victory” or “defeat”.

Paradoxically, it should also be noted that the very availability of intellectual and other resources which can be used for waging conflict may make it difficult, at the onset of conflict, to forecast the outcome of an attempt to impose one’s preference upon the other. Less inventive species than man can pretty well predict the outcome of a contest by force through aggressive gesturing and other display of combat potential; thus, they rarely have to engage in combat to settle “who shall get what, when”. The versatility of man’s techniques for achieving domination over
other men makes it likely that combat will arise because the combatants have discordant judgments of the potential outcomes. Unlike his hairy ancestors, the "naked ape" cannot agree in advance who will win. Misjudgment of the other side's willingness and capability of fighting has sometimes turned controversy into combat as increased tension has narrowed the perceived outcomes of conflict to victory or defeat.

Processes of Commitment

It has long been recognized that people tend to act in accord with their beliefs; more recently, Festinger has emphasized in his theory of cognitive dissonance that the converse is also often true: people tend to make their beliefs and attitudes accord with their actions. The result of this pressure for self-consistency may lead to an unwitting involvement in and intensification of conflict as one's actions have to be justified to oneself and to others. The tragic course of American involvement in the civil war in Vietnam provides an illustration.

In an unpublished paper presented over two years ago (1966) I wrote:

How did we get involved in this ridiculous and tragic situation: a situation in which American lives and resources are being expended in defense of a people who are being more grievously injured and who are becoming more bitterly antagonistic to us the more deeply we become involved in their internal conflict? How is it that we have become so obsessed with the war in South Vietnam that we are willing to jettison our plans for achieving a Great Society at home, neglect the more important problems in South America and India, and risk destroying our leadership abroad? Not so long ago, we had a different view of the importance of Vietnam. In 1954, despite urgent French pleas, President Eisenhower refused to let the American military intervene even if all of Vietnam should fall. Senator Lyndon B. Johnson, at that time, vehemently opposed the use of American soldiers in this far-off land.

Now that we are massively involved in South Vietnam, we hear many different rationalizations of our involvement: Dean Rusk has cited the SEATO treaty commitment but as Richard N. Goodwin has pointed out in The New Yorker (April 16, 1966): "No adviser in the highest councils ever urged action on the basis of the SEATO treaty; none, as far as I know, ever mentioned the existence of such a pledge. And, in fact, there was no such commitment". Efforts to justify our involvement in terms of showing the communists that internal subversion does not pay are also not convincing: would they not have already learned from Greece, Malaya, the Phillipines, the Congo and Burma, if this was the lesson that had to be taught? Similarly, how persuasive is the "domino theory" when such big dominoes as China, itself, and also such small ones as Cuba have fallen without creating any noticeable domino effect? Nor can we claim "defense
of freedom” as our justification when we consider how undemocratic the governments of South Vietnam have been—from Diem’s to Ky’s.

Why then are we involved in the war in South Vietnam?

**Continued Involvement Justifies Past Involvement**

The most direct statement of the reason for our continued involvement is the fact that we are involved: our continued involvement justifies our past involvement. Once involved it is exceedingly difficult to disengage and to admit, thereby, how purposeless and unwitting our past involvement has been. I am stating, in other words, that we are not involved because of any large strategic or moral purpose and that any such purposes we now impute to our involvement are *ex post facto* rationalizations.

As a nation, we stumbled into the conflict in South Vietnam under the mistaken assumption that “victory might come easily and with little pain”. At every step of increasing involvement, we were led to believe that with some small additional help (economic aid, then military advisers, then the use of American helicopters, then the combat use of American soldiers, then massive air intervention by American planes, then bombing of the North, then massive intervention of American troops, and so on) we would not risk a major conflict but yet would help to build an independent, stable country that could stand on its own feet. We have over and over again acted on the tempting assumption that with just a little more investment we would prevent the whole thing from going down the drain.

This type of assumption is one with which we are familiar in connection with the psychology of gambling. We all know of the losing gambler, getting deeper and deeper into a hole, who keeps on betting with the hope that by so doing he will recover his initial losses. Not all losing gamblers submit to the gambler’s temptation, of course. But those whose sense of omnipotence is at stake, those who are too proud to recognize that they cannot overcome the odds against them are vulnerable to this type of disastrous temptation. Are we, as a nation, so committed to a view of ourselves as omnipotent that we cannot recognize that we are making the wrong gamble?

**Gradual and Unwitting Commitment**

In addition to the gambler’s temptation, I shall describe briefly three other processes of gradual and unwitting commitment. One is the much-discussed process of *dissonance-reduction*. As Festinger (1961) has pointed out: “Rats and people come to love the things for which they have suffered”. Presumably they do so in order to reduce the dissonance induced by the suffering and their method of dissonance-reduction is to enhance the attractiveness of the choice which led to their suffering: only if what one chose was really worthwhile would all of the associated suffering be tolerable. Have we not increased what we perceive to be at stake in the Vietnam conflict as it has become more and more costly for us? We are now at the point where we are told that our national honor, our influence as a world leader, our national security are in the balance in the conflict over this tragic little land.

Silvan Tomkins (Tomkins and Izard, 1965) has described a process
of circular, incremental magnification which also helps to explain the widening of involvement and the monopolization of thought. He suggests that it occurs if there is a sequence of events of this type: threat, successful defense, breakdown of defense and re-emergence of threat, second successful new defense, second breakdown of defense and re-emergence of threat, and so on until an expectation is generated that no matter how successful a defense against a dreaded contingency may seem, it will prove unavailing and require yet another defense. This process is circular and incremental since each new threat requires a more desperate defense and the successive breakdown of each newly improved defense generates a magnification of the nature of the threat and the concurrent affect which it evokes. The increasing and obsessive preoccupation with Vietnam may, in part, reflect just such a process: time and time again, we have assumed that a new and more powerful defense or assault against the Vietcong would do the trick only to find that a new and more powerful military commitment was required. By now, according to newspaper reports, Vietnam almost monopolizes the thinking of our national leaders and the attention given to more fundamental concerns is minimized.

Situational Entrapment

Let me, finally, turn to an everyday process of unwitting involvement: situational entrapment. The characteristic of this process is that behavior is typically initiated under the assumption that the environment is compliant rather than reactive—that it responds as a tool for one's purposes rather than as a self-maintaining system. Well-intentioned actions sometimes produce effects opposite to those intended because the actions do not take into account the characteristics of the setting in which they take place. By now, we are all aware that an unintended consequence of some public health measures in Latin America was the population explosion. Only now, are we beginning to recognize that some consequences of the types of aid we have given to some underdeveloped countries is to hinder their economic development and to foster a need for ever-increasing aid. Similarly, one may propose that the nature of the American intervention in Vietnam has served to weaken the opposition to the Vietcong, demoralize those in Vietnam who were able and willing to rely on the Vietnamese to solve their problems without foreign control, increase the strength and resolution of the Vietcong, and otherwise produce the responses which would require an increasing involvement and commitment of American resources and men just to prevent an immediate overturn of the situation.

I have used the war in Vietnam to illustrate the process of unwitting involvement in the intensification of conflict. It could also be used to indicate the consequences of a competitive process of resolving our conflicts with Communist China, North Vietnam and the Vietcong. There has been little in the way of open and honest communication, there has been massive and mutual misperception and misunderstanding, there has been intense mutual suspicion and hostility, there has been derogation of the possibilities of agreement other than those imposed by force, there has been a widening of the scope of the issues in conflict and an escalation of the force employed, and there was an increasing attempt to polarize loyalties and allegiances about this one area of conflict.
A destructive conflict such as the one in which we have been engaged in Vietnam can be brought to a conclusion because the costs of continuing the conflict becomes so large in relation to any values that might be obtained through its continuance that its senselessness becomes compellingly apparent. The senselessness is likely to be most apparent to those who have not been the decision-makers and thus have little need to justify the conflict, and to those who bear the costs most strongly. Destructive conflict can, also, be aborted before running its full course if there is a strong enough community or strong third parties who can compel the conflicting parties to end their violence. We in the United States are in the unfortunate position that relative to our prestige and power there is neither a disinterested third party nor an international community that is powerful enough to motivate us to accept a compromise when we think our own interests may be enhanced by the outcome of a competitive struggle. Peace in Vietnam might have occurred much earlier if the UN, or even our friends, could have influenced us.

Productive Conflict

It has been long recognized that conflict is not inherently pathological or destructive. Its very pervasiveness suggests that it has many positive functions. It prevents stagnation, it stimulates interest and curiosity, it is the medium through which problems can be aired and solutions arrived at; it is the root of personal and social change. Conflict is often part of the process of testing and assessing oneself and, as such, may be highly enjoyable as one experiences the pleasure of the full and active use of one’s capacities. Conflict, in addition, demarcates groups from one another and, thus, helps to establish group and personal identities; external conflict often fosters internal cohesiveness. Moreover, as Coser (1956, 154) has indicated:

In loosely-structured groups and open societies, conflict, which aims at a resolution of tension between antagonists, is likely to have stabilizing and integrative functions for the relationship. By permitting immediate and direct expression of rival claims, such social systems are able to readjust their structures by eliminating the sources of dissatisfaction. The multiple conflicts which they experience may serve to eliminate the causes for dissociation and to re-establish unity. These systems avail themselves, through the toleration and institutionalization of conflict, of an important stabilizing mechanism.

I stress the positive functions of conflict, and I have by no means provided an exhaustive listing, because many discussions of conflict cast it in the role of the villain as though conflict per se were the cause of psychopathology, social disorder, war. The
question I wish to raise now is whether there are any distinguishing features in the process of resolving conflict which lead to the constructive outcomes? Do lively, productive controversies have common patterns that are distinctive from those characterizing deadly quarrels?

In the Literature . . .

I must confess that as I started to work on this paper I had expected to find in the social science literature more help in answering these questions than I have found so far. The writings, for example, on personality development, unfortunately, have little to say about productive conflict; the focus is on pathological conflict. Similarly, the voluminous literature on social conflict neglects productive conflict between groups. It is true that the long standing negative view of social conflict has yielded to an outlook which stresses the social functions of conflict. Nevertheless, apart from the writings of people connected with the “non-violence” movement little attempt has been made to distinguish between conflicts that achieve social change through a process that is destructive from one that is mutually rewarding to the parties involved in the conflict. Yet change can take place either as it has at Columbia, through a process of confrontation which is costly to the conflicting groups, or it can take place through a process of problem-solving, as it has at Teachers College, which is mutually rewarding to the conflicting groups.

My own predilections have led me to the hunch that the major features of productive conflict resolution are likely to be similar, at the individual level, to the processes involved in creative thinking and, at the social level, to the processes involved in cooperative group problem-solving. Let me first turn to the process involved in creative thinking. For an incisive, critical survey of the existing literature I am indebted to Stein (1968).

Creative Thinking

The creative process has been described as consisting of several overlapping phases. Although various authors differ slightly in characterizing the phases, they all suggest some sequence such as the following:

. . . (a) An initial period which leads to the experiencing and recognition of a problem which is sufficiently arousing to motivate efforts to solve it.

. . . (b) Second, a period of concentrated effort to solve the problem through routine, readily available, or habitual actions.
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(c) Then, with the failure of customary processes to solve the problem, there is an experience of frustration, tension, and discomfort which leads to a temporary withdrawal from the problem.

(d) During this incubation period of withdrawal and distancing from the problem it is perceived from a different perspective and is reformulated in a way which permits new orientations to a solution to emerge.

(e) Next, a tentative solution appears in a moment of insight often accompanied by a sense of exhilaration.

(f) Then, the solution is elaborated and detailed and tested against reality. And

(g) finally, the solution is communicated to relevant audiences.

There are three key psychological elements in this process:

(a) the arousal of an appropriate level of motivation to solve the problem;

(b) the development of the conditions which permit the reformulation of the problem once an impasse has been reached; and

(c) the concurrent availability of diverse ideas which can be flexibly combined into novel and varied patterns.

Each of these key elements are subject to influence from social conditions and the personalities of the problem-solvers.

The Arousal of the Optimal Level of Motivation

Consider the arousal of an optimal level of motivation, a level sufficient to sustain problem-solving efforts despite frustrations and impasses and yet not so intense that it overwhelms or that it prevents distancing from the problem. Neither undue smugness nor satisfaction with things as they are nor a sense of helplessness, terror or rage are likely to lead to an optimal motivation to recognize and face a problem or conflict. Nor will a passive readiness to acquiesce to the demands of the environment; nor will the willingness to fit oneself into the environment no matter how poorly it fits oneself. Optimal motivation, rather, presupposes an alert readiness to be dissatisfied with things as they are and a freedom to confront one's environment without excessive fear, combined with a confidence in one's capacities to persist in the face of obstacles. The intensity of motivation that is optimal will vary with the effectiveness with which it can be controlled: the more effective the controls, the more intense the motivation can be without its having disruptive consequences.

Thus, one of the creative functions of conflict resides in its ability to arouse motivation to solve a problem which might other-
wise go unattended. A scholar who exposes his theories and research to the scrutiny of his peers may be stimulated to a deeper analysis when he is confronted with conflicting data and theoretical analysis by a colleague. Similarly, individuals and groups who have authority and power and who are satisfied with the status quo may be aroused to recognize problems and be motivated to work on them as opposition from the dissatisfied makes the customary relations and arrangements unworkable and unrewarding. They may be motivated also by being helped to perceive the possibilities of more satisfying relations and arrangements. Acceptance of the necessity of a change in the status quo rather than a rigid, defensive adherence to previously existing positions is most likely, however, when the circumstances arousing new motivations suggest courses of action that contain minimal threat to the social or self-esteem of those who must change.

Threats Induce Defensiveness

Thus, although acute dissatisfaction with things as they are, on the one hand, and the motivation to recognize and work at problems on the other, are necessary for creative solutions, they are not sufficient. The circumstances conducive to creativity are varied but they have in common that “they provide the individual with an environment in which he does not feel threatened and in which he does not feel under pressure. He is relaxed but alert” (Stein, 1968). Threat induces defensiveness and reduces the tolerance of ambiguity as well as openness to the new and unfamiliar; excessive tension leads to a primitivization and stereotyping of thought processes. As Rokeach (1960) has pointed out, threat and excessive tension leads to the “closed” rather than “open” mind. To entertain novel ideas which may at first seem wild and implausible, to question initial assumptions or the framework within which the problem or conflict occurs, the individual needs the freedom or courage to express himself without fear of censure. In addition, he needs to become sufficiently detached from his original viewpoints to be able to see the conflict from new perspectives.

Although an unpressured and unthreatening environment facilitates the restructuring of a problem or conflict, and, by so doing, makes it more amenable to solution, the ability to reformulate a problem and to develop solutions is, in turn, dependent upon the availability of cognitive resources. Ideas are important for the creative resolution of conflict and any factor which broadens the range of ideas and alternatives cognitively available to the participants in a conflict will be useful. Intelligence, the exposure to diverse experiences, an interest in ideas, a preference for the
novel and complex, a receptivity to metaphors and analogies, the capacity to make remote associations, independence in judgment, the ability to play with ideas are some of the personal factors which characterize creative problem-solvers. The availability of ideas is also dependent upon social conditions such as the opportunity to communicate with and be exposed to other people who may have relevant and unfamiliar ideas (i.e., experts, impartial outsiders, people with similar or analogous situations), a social atmosphere which values innovation and originality and which encourages the exchange of ideas, and a social tradition which fosters the optimistic view that, with effort and time, constructive solutions can be discovered or invented to problems which seem initially intractable.

Let me note that in my view the application of full cognitive resources to the discovery and invention of constructive solutions of conflict is relatively rare. Resources are much more available for the waging of conflict. The research and development expenditures on techniques of conflict waging or conflict suppression, as well as the actual expenditures on conflict-waging, dwarf the expenditures for peace-building. This is obviously true at the national level where military expenditures dominate our national budget. I would contend that this is also true at the interpersonal and intergroup levels. At the interpersonal level, most of us receive considerable training in waging or suppressing conflict and we have elaborate institutions for dealing with adversary relations and for custodial care of the psychological casualties of interpersonal conflict. In contrast, there is little formal training in techniques of constructive conflict resolution, and the institutional resources for helping people to resolve conflicts are meagre indeed.

Cooperative Problem-Solving

In a cooperative context, a conflict can be viewed as a common problem in which the conflicting parties have the joint interest of reaching a mutually satisfactory solution. As I have suggested earlier in the paper, there is nothing inherent in most conflicts which makes it impossible for the resolution of conflict to take place in a cooperative context through a cooperative process. It is, of course, true that the occurrence of cooperative conflict resolution is less likely in certain circumstances and in certain types of conflict than in others. We shall consider some of the predisposing circumstances in a later section.

There are a number of reasons why a cooperative process is likely to lead to productive conflict resolution:
(a) It aids open and honest communication of relevant information between the participants. The freedom to share information enables the parties to go beneath the manifest to the underlying issues involved in the conflict and, thereby, to facilitate the meaningful and accurate definition of the problems they are confronting together. It also enables each party to benefit from the knowledge possessed by the other and, thus, to face the joint problem with greater intellectual resources. In addition, open and honest communication reduces the likelihood of the development of misunderstandings which can lead to confusion and mistrust.

(b) It encourages the recognition of the legitimacy of each other's interests and of the necessity of searching for a solution which is responsive to the needs of each side. It tends to limit rather than expand the scope of conflicting interests and, thus, minimizes the need for defensiveness. It enables the participants to approach the mutually acknowledged problem in a way which utilizes their special talents and enables them to substitute for one another in their joint work so that duplication of effort is reduced. Influence attempts tend to be limited to processes of persuasion. The enhancement of mutual resources and mutual power become objectives.

(c) It leads to a trusting, friendly attitude which increases sensitivity to similarities and common interests, while minimizing the salience of differences. However, one of the common pathologies of cooperation (Deutsch, 1962a) is expressed in premature agreement: a superficial convergence in beliefs and values before the underlying differences have been exposed.

It can be seen that a cooperative process produces many of the characteristics that are conducive to creative problem-solving—openness, lack of defensiveness, full utilization of available resources. However, in itself, cooperation does not insure that problem-solving efforts will be successful. Such other factors as the imaginativeness, experience and flexibility of the parties involved are also determinative. Nevertheless, if the cooperative relationship is a strong one it can withstand failure and temporarily deactivate or postpone conflict. Or, if it cannot be delayed, cooperative relations will help to contain destructive conflict so that the contest for supremacy occurs under agreed upon rules.
CONTROLLED COMPETITIVE CONFLICT

So far my discussion has centered on unregulated conflict. I have considered characteristics of a destructive competitive process in which the outcomes are determined by a power struggle and also those of a cooperative process in which the outcomes are determined by joint problem-solving. However, it is evident that competitive conflict, because of its destructive potential, is rarely unregulated. It is limited and controlled by institutional forms (e.g., collective bargaining, the judicial system), social roles (mediators, conciliators, referees, judges, policemen), social norms ("fairness", "justice", "equality", "nonviolence", "integrity of communication", etc.) rules for conducting negotiations (when to initiate and terminate negotiations, how to set an agenda, how to present demands, etc.) and specific procedures ("hinting" versus "explicit" communication, public versus private sessions, etc.). These societal forms may be aimed at regulating how force may be employed (as in the code of a duel of honor or in certain rules of warfare), or it may be an attempt to ascertain the basic power relations of the disputants without resort to a power struggle (as is often the case in the negotiations of collective bargaining and international relations), or it may be oriented toward removing power as the basis for determining the outcome of conflict (as is often the case in judicial processes).

With regard to regulated conflict, it is pertinent to ask what are the conditions which make it likely that the regulations will be adhered to by the parties in conflict? In a duel of honor, when would a duelist prefer to die rather than cheat? These questions, if pursued along relevant intellectual lines would lead to an examination of different forms of rule violation and social deviance, their genesis and control. Such an investigation is beyond the scope of this paper. However, it seems reasonable to assert that adherence to the rules is more likely when: (a) the rules are known, unambiguous, consistent, and unbiased; (b) the other adheres to the rules; (c) violations are quickly known by significant others; (d) there is significant social approval for adherence and significant social disapproval for violation; (e) adherence to the rules has been rewarding while uncontrolled conflict has been costly in the past; and (f) one would like to be able to employ the rules in future conflicts. Undoubtedly, the most critical influence serving to encapsulate and control competitive conflict is the existence of common membership in a community which is strong enough to evoke habitual compliance to its values and procedures and also confident enough of its strength to tolerate internal struggles.
There are several productive possibilities which inhere in regulated conflict. It provides a basis for resolving a conflict when no other basis for agreement can be reached: “first choice” goes to the winner of the contest. However, the winner is not necessarily the sole survivor as may be the case in an uncontrolled test of power. The values and procedures regulating the conflict may select the winner on some other basis than the relative combat strength of the contestants. A conflict between husband and wife or between the United States and one of its citizens may be settled by a judicial process which permits the contestant with a stronger legal claim to win even though his physical prowess may be weaker. Or, the rules may make the contest one of intellectual rather than physical power. Thus, by the regulation of conflict a society may encourage the survival of certain values and the extinction of others because the rules for conducting conflict reflect the values of the society.

Also, insofar as a framework for limiting a conflict exists it may encourage the development of the conflict sufficiently to prevent “premature cooperation”. The fear of the consequences of unrestrained conflict may lead to a superficial, unsatisfying and unstable agreement before the underlying issues in the conflict have been worked through. The freedom to push deeper into a conflict because some of its potential dangers have been eliminated is, of course, one of the characteristics of creative conflict resolution. However, for the conflict to be contained as it deepens, there must be a community which is strong enough to bind the conflicting parties to the values and procedures regulating conflict. If the direct or mediated cooperative interests of the conflicting parties are weak, the control process is likely to fail or be subverted; the agreements arrived at will be challenged and undermined; conflict will escalate and take a destructive turn. Effective regulation presupposes a firm basis of confidence in the mutual allegiance to the procedures limiting conflict.

Conditions Which Influence the Course of Conflict Resolution

I now turn to a consideration of the factors which tend to elicit one or the other process of conflict resolution. First, I shall consider the question: What gives rise to a destructive or constructive course of conflict? Next, I shall consider the more difficult question: What can be done to change a destructive conflict into a constructive one?
Factors Determining the Course of Conflict

There are innumerable specific factors which may influence the course which a conflict takes. It is useful to have some simplifying outline that highlights central determinants and permits a proliferation of detail as this becomes necessary.

Process

In the preceding sections, I have indicated that the characteristic strategies and tactics elicited by cooperative and competitive processes tend to be self-confirming and self-perpetuating. The strategy of power and the tactics of coercion, threat and deception result from and result in a competitive orientation. Similarly, the strategy of mutual problem-solving and the tactics of persuasion, openness and sharing elicit and are elicited by a cooperative orientation. However, cooperation which is reciprocated by competition is more likely to end up as mutual competition than mutual cooperation.

Prior Relationship

The stronger and the more salient the existing cooperative as compared with the competitive bonds linking the conflicting parties, the more likely it is that a conflict will be resolved cooperatively. The total strength of the cooperative bonds is a function of their importance as well as their number. There are obviously many different types of bonds that could be enumerated: superordinate goals, mutually facilitating interests, common allegiances and values, linkages to a common community, and the like. These bonds are important to the extent that they serve significant needs successfully. Thus, experiences of successful prior cooperative relationships together enhance the likelihood of present cooperation; experiences of failure and disillusionment in attempts to cooperate make it unlikely. On the other hand, the past experience of costly competitive conflict does not necessarily enhance the probability of cooperation, although this is a possible result.

The Nature of the Conflict

Here I wish to highlight several major dimensions of conflict: the size (scope, importance, centrality), rigidity and interconnectedness of the issues in conflict.

Roger Fisher (1964), in a brilliant paper entitled “Fractionating Conflict”, has pointed out that “issue control” may be as important as “arms control” in the management of conflict. His thesis is the familiar one that small conflicts are easier to resolve than large ones. However, he also points out that the participants
may have a choice in defining the conflict as a large or small one. Conflict is enlarged by dealing with it as a conflict between large rather than small units (as a conflict between two individuals of different races or as a racial conflict), as a conflict over a large substantive issue rather than a small one (over “being treated fairly” or “being treated unfairly at a particular occasion”), as a conflict over a principle rather than the application of a principle, as a conflict whose solution establishes large rather than small substantive or procedural precedents. Many other determinants of conflict size could be listed. For example, an issue which bears upon self-esteem or change in power or status is likely to be more important than an issue which does not. Illegitimate threat or attempts to coerce are likely to increase the size of the conflict and thus increase the likelihood of a competitive process.

“Issue rigidity” refers to the availability of satisfactory alternatives or substitutes for the outcomes initially at stake in the conflict. Although motivational and intellectual rigidity may lead the parties in conflict to perceive issues more rigidly than reality dictates, it is also evident that certain issues are less conducive to cooperative resolution than others. “Greater power over the other”, “victory over the other”, “having more status than the other” are rigid definitions of conflict since it is impossible on any given issue for both parties in conflict to have outcomes which are superior to the other’s.

Many conflicts do not, of course, center on only one issue. If the issues are separable or sufficiently uncorrelated, it is possible for one side to gain on one issue and the other side to find satisfaction in another issue. This possibility is enhanced if the parties do not have the same evaluations: if issue A is important to one and not the other, while the reverse is true for issue B.

The Characteristics of the Parties in Conflict

Ideology, personality and position may lead to a more favorable evaluation of one process than the other. The strategy and tactics associated with competitive struggle may seem more manly or intriguing than those associated with cooperation: consider the contrasting popular images of the soldier and of the diplomat. Similarly, the characteristics of the individual parties to a conflict will help determine the size and rigidity of the issues that they perceive to be in conflict and also their skill and available resources for handling conflict one way or another.

In addition, conflict and dissension within each party may affect the course of conflict between them. Internal conflict will often either increase external belligerence as a tactic to increase internal cohesiveness or lead to external weakness and possibly
tempt the other side to obtain a competitive advantage. Internal instability also interferes with cooperative conflict resolution by making it difficult to work out a durable, dependable agreement.

**Estimations of Success**

Many conflicts have an unplanned, expressive character in which the course of action taken is an expression both of the quality of the relationship between the participants and of the characteristics of the individual participants. Other conflicts are guided by an instrumental orientation in which courses of action are consciously evaluated and chosen in terms of how likely they are to lead to satisfying outcomes. Many factors influencing the estimations of success of the different processes of conflict resolution could be listed. Those who perceive themselves to have a clear superiority in power are likely to favor an unregulated competitive process; those who perceive themselves as having a legal superiority in “rights” are likely to favor adversary relations that are regulated by legal institutions; those who are concerned with the long-range relationships, with the ability to work together in the future are more likely to favor a cooperative process. Similarly, those who have been excluded from the cooperative process and expect the regulations to be stacked against them may think of the competitive process as the only one offering any potential of satisfaction.

**Third Parties**

The attitudes, strength and resources of interested third parties are often crucial determinants. Thus, a conflict is more likely to be resolved cooperatively if powerful and prestigeful third parties encourage such a resolution and help to provide problem-solving resources (institutions, facilities, personnel, social norms and procedures) to expedite discovery of a mutually satisfactory solution.

**Changing the Course of Conflict**

From much that I have stated earlier, it is evident that I believe that a mutually cooperative orientation is likely to be the most productive orientation for resolving conflict. Yet it must be recognized that the orientations of the conflicting parties may not be mutual. One side may experience the conflict and be motivated to resolve it; the other side may be content with things as they are and not even aware of the other’s dissatisfaction. Or both may recognize the conflict but one may be oriented to a win-lose solution while the other may be seeking a cooperative resolution.
We have suggested earlier that the usual tendency for such asymmetries in orientation is to produce a change toward mutual competition rather than mutual cooperation. It is, after all, possible to attack, overcome, or destroy another without his consent but to cooperate with another, he must be willing or, at least, compliant.

How can Acme induce Bolt to cooperate in resolving a conflict if Bolt is not so inclined or if Bolt perceives his interests as antagonistic to Acme's? There is, obviously, no single answer to this question. What answer is appropriate depends upon such factors as: the nature of the conflict, the relative power of Acme and Bolt, the nature and motivation of Bolt's noncooperation, the particular resources and vulnerabilities of each party, and their relationships to third parties. However, it is evident that the search for an answer must be guided by the realization that there are dangers in certain types of influence procedures. Namely, they may boomerang and increase open resistance and alienation or they may merely elicit a sham or inauthentic cooperation with underlying resistance. Inauthentic cooperation is more difficult to change than open resistance because it masks and denies the underlying alienation.

Let me offer some hypotheses about the types of influence procedures which are likely to elicit resistance and alienation:

. . . (a) *Illegitimate techniques* which violate the values and norms governing interaction and influence that are held by the other are alienating (the greater the violation, the more important and the more numerous the values being violated, the greater will be the resistance). It is, of course, true that sometimes an adaptation level effect occurs so that frequently violated norms lose their illegitimacy (as in parking violations); at other times, the accumulation of violations tends to produce an increasingly negative reaction.

. . . (b) *Negative sanctions* such as punishments and threats tend to elicit more resistance than positive sanctions such as promises and rewards. What is considered to be rewarding or punishing may also be influenced by one's adaptation level; the reduction of the level of rewards which are customarily received will usually be viewed as negative.

. . . (c) Sanctions which are *inappropriate* in kind are also likely to elicit resistance. Thus, the reward of money rather than appreciation may decrease the willingness to cooperate of someone whose cooperation is engendered by affiliative rather than utilitarian motives. Similarly, a
threat or punishment is more likely to be effective if it fits the crime than if its connection with the crime is artificial. A child who breaks another child’s toy is punished more appropriately if he has to give the child a toy of his own as a substitute than if he is denied permission to watch TV.

(d) Influence which is excessive in magnitude tends to be resisted; excessive promise or reward leads to the sense of being bribed, excessive threat or punishment leads to the feeling of being coerced.

These factors summate. Illegitimate threat which is inappropriate and excessive is most likely to elicit resistance and alienation while an appropriate legitimate reward is least likely to do so. Inauthentic cooperation, with covert resistance, is most likely when resistance is high and when bribery or coercion elicits overt compliance.

What Action Induces Cooperation?

I have, so far, outlined what one should not do if one wants to elicit authentic cooperative conflict resolution. Let me turn now to the question of what courses of action can be taken which are likely to induce cooperation. In so doing, I wish to focus on a particularly important kind of conflict: conflict between those groups who have considerable authority to make decisions and relatively high control over the conventional means of social and political influence and those groups who have little decision-making authority and relatively little control over the conventional means of influence.

Although there have always been conflicts between the ruler and the ruled, between parents and children, and between employers and employees, I suggest that this is the characteristic conflict of our time. It arises from the increasing demand for more power and prosperity from those who have been largely excluded from the processes of decision-making usually to their economic, social, psychological and physical disadvantage. The racial crisis in the United States, the student upheavals throughout the world, the revolutionary struggles in the underdeveloped areas, the controversies within and between nations in Eastern Europe, and the civil war in South Vietnam: all of these conflicts partly express the growing recognition at all levels of social life that social change is possible, that things do not have to remain as they are, that one can participate in the shaping of one’s environment and improve one’s lot.
Role Satisfaction

It is evident that those who are satisfied with their roles in and the outcomes of the decision-making process may develop both a vested interest in preserving the existing arrangements and appropriate rationales to justify their positions. These rationales generally take the form of attributing superior competence (more ability, knowledge, skill) and, or, superior moral value (greater initiative, drive, sense of responsibility, self-control) to oneself compared to those of lower status. From the point of view of those in power, lack of power and affluence is “little enough punishment” for people so incapable and so deficient in morality and maturity that they have failed to make their way in society. The rationales supporting the status quo are usually accompanied by corresponding sentiments which lead their possessors to react with disapproval and resistance to attempts to change the power relations and with apprehension and defensiveness to the possibility that these attempts will succeed. The apprehension is often a response to the expectation that the change will leave one in a powerless position under the control of those who are incompetent and irresponsible or at the mercy of those seeking revenge for past injustices.

If such rationales, sentiments and expectations have been developed, those in power are likely to employ one or more defense mechanisms in dealing with the conflict-inducing dissatisfactions of the subordinated group: denial, which is expressed in a blindness and insensitivity to the dissatisfactions and often results in an unexpected revolt; repression, which pushes the dissatisfactions underground and often eventuates in a guerrilla-type warfare; aggression, which may lead to a masochistic sham cooperation or escalated counter-aggression; displacement, which attempts to divert the responsibility for the dissatisfactions into other groups and, if successful, averts the conflict temporarily; reaction-formation, which allows expressions of concern and guilt to serve as substitutes for action to relieve the dissatisfaction of the underprivileged and, in so doing, may temporarily confuse and mislead those who are dissatisfied; sublimation, which attempts to find substitute solutions—e.g., instead of increasing the decision-making power of Harlem residents over their schools, provide more facilities for the Harlem schools.

What Can a Less Powerful Group Do?

What can a less powerful group (Acme) do to reduce or overcome the defensiveness of a more powerful group (Bolt) and to increase the latter’s readiness to share power? Suppose, in effect,
that as social scientists we were consultants to the poor and weak rather than to the rich and strong, what would we suggest? Let me note that this would be an unusual and new position for most of us. If we have given any advice at all, it has been to those in high power. The unwitting consequence of this one-sided consultant role has been that we have too often assumed that the social pathology has been in the ghetto rather than in those who have built the walls to surround it, that the "disadvantaged" are the ones who need to be changed rather than the people and the institutions who have kept the disadvantaged in a submerged position. It is not that we should detach ourselves from "Headstart", "Vista", and various other useful training and remedial programs for the disadvantaged. Rather, we should have an appropriate perspective on such programs. It is more important that the educational institutions, the economic and political systems be changed so that they will permit those groups who are now largely excluded from important positions of decision-making to share power than to try to inculcate new attitudes and skills in those who are excluded. After all, would we not expect that the educational achievements of black children would be higher than they are now if school boards had more black members and schools had more black principals? Would we not also expect that the occupational attainment of blacks would be higher (and their unemployment rate lower) if General Motors, A.T. and T., and General Electric had some black board members and company presidents as well as white ones? Again, would we not expect more civil obedience in the black community if Charles Evers rather than James Eastland were chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee and if the House had barred corrupt white congressmen as well as Adam Clayton Powell? Let us not lose sight of what and who has to be changed, let us recognize where the social pathology really is!

Attention, Comprehension, Acceptance

But given the resistance and defensiveness of those in high power, what can we recommend to those in low power as a strategy of persuasion? As Hovland, Janis and Kelley (1953) have pointed out, the process of persuasion involves obtaining the other's attention, comprehension and acceptance of the message that one is communicating. The process of persuasion, however, starts with the communicator having a message that he wants to get across to the other. He must have an objective if he is to be able to articulate a clear and compelling message. Further, in formulating and communicating his message, it is important to recognize that it will be heard not only by the other, but also by one's own
group and by other interested audiences. The desirable effects of a message on its intended audience may be negated by its unanticipated effects on those for whom it was not intended. I suggest that the following generalized message contains the basic elements of what Acme must communicate to Bolt to change him and, in addition, it is a message which can be overheard by other audiences without harmful consequences. Admittedly, it must be communicated in a way which elicits Bolt’s attention, comprehension and acceptance of its credibility rather than in the abstract, intellectualized form in which it is presented below. And, of course, the generalized objective of equality must be detailed in terms of specific relations in specific contexts.

I am dissatisfied with our relationship and the effects it has. I think it can be improved in ways which will benefit you as well as me. I am sufficiently discontent that I can no longer continue in any relationship with you in which I do not participate as an equal in making the decisions which affect me as well as you, except as a temporary measure while we move toward equality. This may upset and discomfort you but I have no alternative other than to disengage myself from all forms of inauthentic cooperation: my dignity as well as pressure from my group will no longer allow me to engage in this self-deception and self-abasement. Neither coercion nor bribery will be effective; my self-respect and my group will force me to resist them. I remain prepared to cooperate with you as an equal in working on joint problems, including the problems involved in redefining our relationship to one another. I expect that changing our relationship will not be without its initial difficulties for both of us; we will be uncertain and perhaps suspicious, we will misunderstand and disagree and regress to old habits from time to time. I am willing to face these difficulties. I invite you to join with me to work toward improving our relationship, to overcome your dissatisfactions as well as mine. I believe that we both will feel more self-fulfilled in a relationship that is not burdened by inauthenticity.

It would take too long to detail all of the elements in this message and their rationales. But essentially the message commits Acme irreversibly to his objective, self-esteem and social esteem are at stake; he will be able to live neither with himself nor his group if he accepts an inferior status. This is done not only in words but also by the style of communicating which expresses a self-confident equality and competence. It provides Bolt with the prospect of positive incentives for changing and negative ones for not changing; Acme maintains a cooperative stance throughout and develops in action the possibility of a true mutual exchange by expressing the awareness that dissatisfactions are not one-sided. It also inoculates against some of the expected difficulties involved in change. It should be noted that Acme’s statements of the threats faced by Bolt if change is not forthcoming (the instrumental threat of noncooperation, the moral threat that the status
quo violates important social norms concerning human dignity and authenticity, the threat of resistance to coercion) are neither arbitrary, illegitimate, coercive nor demanding to Bolt—i.e., they are not strongly alienating.

**Rage or Fear Handicaps**

Rage or fear in the low power group often makes it impossible for them to communicate a message of the sort that I have described above. Rage leads to an emphasis on destructive, coercive techniques and precludes offers of authentic cooperation. Fear, on the other hand, weakens the commitment to the steps necessary to induce a change and lessens the credibility that compliance will be withdrawn if change does not occur. Although it is immediately destructive, rage is potentially a more useful emotion than fear since it leads to bold actions which are less damaging to the development of a sense of power and, hence, of self-esteem. And these latter are necessary for authentic cooperation. Harnessed rage or outrage can be a powerful energizer for determined action and if this action is directed toward building one’s own power rather than destroying the other’s power, the outrage may have a socially constructive outcome.

In any case, it is evident that when intense rage or fear are the dominant emotions the cooperative message that I have outlined is largely irrelevant. Both rage and fear are rooted in a sense of helplessness and powerlessness: they are emotions associated with a state of dependency. Those in low power can overcome these debilitating emotions by their own successful social action on matters of significance to them. In the current slang, they have got to “do their own thing”, it cannot be given to them nor done for them. This is why my emphasis throughout this discussion has been on the sharing of power, and thus increasing one’s power to affect one’s fate, rather than on the sharing of affluence. While the sharing of affluence is desirable, it is not sufficient. In its most debilitating sense, “poverty” is a lack of power and not merely a lack of money. Money is, of course, a base for power but it is not the only one. If one chooses to be poor, as do some members of religious or pioneering groups, the psychological syndrome usually associated with imposed poverty—a mixture of dependency, apathy, small time perspective, suspicion, fear and rage—is not present.

**Authentic Cooperation**

Thus, the ability to offer and engage in authentic cooperation presupposes an awareness that one is neither helpless nor power-
less, even though one is at a relative disadvantage. Not only independent action but also cooperative action requires a recognition
and confirmation of one’s capacity to “go it alone” if necessary. Unless one has the freedom to choose not to cooperate, there can
be no free choice to cooperate. “Black power” is, thus, a necessity
for black cooperation: of black cooperation with blacks as well as
with whites. Powerlessness and the associated lack of self and
group esteem are not conducive either to internal group cohesive-
ness or to external cooperation. “Black power” does not, however,
necessarily lead to white cooperation. This is partly because, in
its origin and rhetoric, “black power” may be oriented against
“white power” and thus is likely to intensify the defensiveness
of those with high power. When “black power” is primarily di-
rected against “whitey” rather than for “blacks” it is, of course,
to be expected that “whitey” will retaliate. The resulting course
of events may provide some grim satisfaction to those despairing
blacks who prefer to wield even short-lived destructive power
rather than to be ineffectual and to those whites who prefer to be
ruthless oppressors rather than to yield the psychic gains of
pseudo-superiority.

However, even if “power” is “for” rather than “against”
and provides a basis for authentic cooperation, cooperation may
not occur because it is of little import to the high power group.
It may be unaffected by the positive or negative incentives that
the low power group control; it does not need their compliance.
Universities can obtain new students; the affluent nations no
longer are so dependent upon the raw materials produced in the
underdeveloped nations; the white industrial society does not
need many unskilled Negro workers.

What Can the Group Do for Itself?

What can the low power group do in such situations? First
of all, theoretically it may be possible to “opt out” more or less
completely—to withdraw, to migrate, to separate so that one is no
longer in the relationship. However, as the world and the societies
composing it become more tightly knit, this option becomes less
and less available in its extreme forms. Black communities can
organize their own industries, schools, hospitals, shopping cen-
ters, consumer cooperatives and the like but only if they have
resources, and these resources would be sharply curtailed if their
relationship with the broader society were completely disrupted.
Similarly, students can organize their own seminars, their own
living communes their own bookstores, but it would be difficult
for them to become proficient in many of the sciences and pro-
fessions without using the resources available in the broader academic community. Self-imposed “apartheid” is self-defeating. “Build baby build” is a more useful slogan than “out baby out” or “burn baby burn”.

Through building its own institutions and developing its own resources a low power group makes itself less vulnerable to exploitation and also augments its power by providing itself with alternatives to inauthentic cooperation. In so doing, it increases the likelihood that those in high power will be responsive to a change: the positive incentives for changing and the negative incentives for not changing take on greater value. Moreover, such self-constructive action may help to reduce the fears and stereotypes which underlie much of the defensiveness of high power groups.

In addition to the strategy of developing one’s own resources and building one’s own institutions, there are still other strategies that can be followed by a low power group in the attempt to influence a reluctant or disinterested high power group. The various strategies are not incompatible with one another. I list several of the major ones: (a) augment its power by collecting or activating subgroups within the high power group or third parties as allies; (b) search for other kinds of connections with the high power group which, if made more salient, could increase its affective or instrumental dependence upon the low power group and thus change the power balance; (c) attempt to change the attitudes of those in high power through education and moral persuasion; (d) use existing legal procedures to bring pressures for change; and (e) use harassment techniques to increase the other’s costs of adhering to the status quo.

The effectiveness of any strategy of influence is undoubtedly much determined by the particular circumstances so that no strategy can be considered to be unconditionally effective or ineffective. Nevertheless, it is reasonable to assume that low power groups can rarely afford to be without allies. By definition, a low power group is unlikely to achieve many of its objectives unless it can find allies among significant elements within the high power group or unless it can obtain support from other (“third party”) groups that can exert influence on the high power group. There is considerable reason to expect that allies are most likely to be obtained if: (a) they are sought out rather than ignored or rejected; (b) superordinate goals, common values and common interests can be identified which could serve as a basis for the formation of cooperative bonds; (c) reasonably full communication is maintained with the potential allies; (d) one’s objectives and methods are readily perceived as legitimate and feasible; (e) one’s tactics dramatize one’s objectives and require the poten-
tial allies to choose between acting "for" or "against" these objectives and, thus, to commit themselves to taking a position; and (f) those in high power employ tactics, as a counter-response, which are widely viewed as "unfitting" and thus produce considerable sympathy for the low power group.

Civil Disobedience

There is no time here to elaborate on procedures and tactics of building allies; this is what politics is all about. However, let me just comment about the nonviolent, civil disobedience, confrontation tactics which have been employed with considerable success by civil rights and student groups. These methods have tended, with continuing usage, to have less effect in arousing public response and sympathy for the low power groups involved. In part, this is because many of those in high power have learned that to employ coercion as a response to a nonviolent tactic of civil disobedience is self-defeating; it only serves to swing much of the hitherto uninvolved public behind the demonstrators. This is, of course, what happened in Selma and Birmingham as well as at Columbia University and Chicago when unfitting force was used. These techniques also have become less effective because repeated usage vulgarizes them; a measure which is acceptable as an unusual or emergency procedure becomes unacceptable as a routine breeder of social disruption. Let me note parenthetically that I have discussed "nonviolent, confrontation" tactics as a method for gaining allies and public support rather than as a procedure for directly changing the attitudes of those in high power who are strongly committed to their views. I have seen no evidence that would suggest it has any significant effects of the latter sort.

Finding allies and supporters is important not only because it directly augments the influence of a low power group but also because having allies enables the low power group to use each of the other change strategies more effectively. I shall not discuss the other strategies in detail but confine myself to a brief comment about each. A low power group can increase the dependence of a high power group on it by concentrating its power rather than by allowing it to be spread thinly. Thus, the political power of the Negro vote could be higher if it were able to decide the elections in a half-dozen states such as New York, California, Pennsylvania, Illinois, Ohio and Michigan than if the Negro vote was less concentrated. Similarly, their economic power would be greater if they were able to obtain control over certain key industries and key unions rather than if they were randomly dispersed.

Education, moral persuasion and the use of legal procedures
to bring about social change have lately come into disrepute because these strategies do not bring “instant change” nor do they produce as much *esprit de corps* as strategies which give rise to direct action techniques. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to underestimate the importance of beliefs, values and the sense of legitimacy in determining individual and social action. Similarly, to engage in anti-intellectualism or to ignore the significance of intellectual work in establishing true knowledge is an error. Truth threatens arbitrary power by unmasking its unreasonableness and pretensions. Anti-intellectualism is a tool of the despot in his struggle to silence or discredit truth. Also, it would be a mistake to ignore the tremendous changes in beliefs and values concerning human relationships which have occurred during the recent past. Much of the evil which now occurs is not a reflection of deliberate choice to inflict such evil but rather the lack of a deliberate choice to overcome self-perpetuating vicious cycles. Obviously, a considerable educational effort is needed to help broaden the understanding of conflict and to accelerate growth in the ability to include others in the same moral community with oneself even though they be of rather different social, economic and ethnic background.

**Harassment**

Harassment may be the only effective strategy available to a low power group if it faces an indifferent or hostile high power group. Although sharp lines cannot be drawn, it is useful to distinguish “harassment”, “obstruction”, and “destruction” from one another. “Harassment” employs legal or semilegal techniques to inflict a loss, to interfere with, disrupt or embarrass those with high power; “obstruction” employs illegal techniques to interrupt or disrupt the activities and purposes of those in high power; “destruction” employs illegal, violent techniques to destroy or to take control over people or property. Obstructive and destructive techniques invite massive retaliation and repression which, if directed against harassment techniques, would often seem inappropriate and arouse sympathy. However, a clearly visible potential for the employment of obstructive and destructive techniques may serve to make harassment procedures both more acceptable and more effective.

There are many forms of harassment which can be employed by low power groups: consumer boycotts; work slowdowns; rent strikes; demonstrations; sit-ins; tying up phones, mail, government offices, businesses, traffic, etc. by excessive and prolonged usage; ensnaring bureaucratic systems in their own red tape by
requiring them to follow their own formally stated rules and procedures; being excessively friendly and cooperative; creating psychological nuisances by producing outlandish behavior, appearances and odors in stores, offices and other public places; encouraging contagion of the ills of the slum (rats, uncollected garbage, etc.) to surrounding communities; etc. Harassment, as is true for most procedures, is undoubtedly most effective when it is employed to obtain well-defined, specific objectives and when it is selectively focussed on key persons and key institutions rather than when it is merely a haphazard expression of individual discontent.

In Conclusion . . .

As I review what I have written in this last section, where I have functioned as a self-appointed consultant to those in low power, I am struck by how little of what I have said is well-grounded in systematic research or theory. As social scientists we have rarely directed our attention to the defensiveness and resistance of the strong and powerful in the face of the need for social change. We have not considered what strategies and tactics are available to low power groups and which of these are likely to lead to a productive rather than destructive process of conflict resolution. We have focussed too much on the turmoil and handicaps of those in low power and not enough on the defensiveness and resistance of the powerful; the former will be overcome as the latter is overcome.

Is it not obvious that with the great disparities in power and affluence within nations and between nations that there will be continuing pressures for social change? And is it not also obvious that the processes of social change will be disorderly and destructive unless those in power are able or enabled to lower their defensiveness and resistance to a change in their relative status? Let us refocus our efforts so that we will have something useful to say to those who are seeking radical but peaceful social change. Too often in the past significant social change in the distribution of power has been achieved at the cost of peace; this is a luxury that the world is no longer able to afford.

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