Emergence of Overt Conflicts

BEFORE December 7, 1941, relations between Japan and the United States were strained, but no overt hostilities existed. Then came the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, and the ensuing war between Japan and the United States. Why did the hidden hostilities change into an open war? Was it caused by the attack on Pearl Harbor?

Generally speaking, for an open conflict to emerge, two main conditions are needed: the formation of "conflict groups," and a sequence of events that ignites conflict action. Dahrendorf (1959) addressed the problem of conflict group formation in considerable detail. He argued that groups whose goals are incompatible but who do not realize it, will become full-scale conflict groups if each of them (1) has leaders committed to the conflict, (2) has a conflict ideology, (3) is free to organize for conflict, and (4) has members who can communicate with each other.[1] Dahrendorf's four conditions exist in groups that, in addition to having incompatible goals, have high conflict solidarity and sufficient conflict resources.

Conflict Solidarity

We noted in Chapter 3 that free communication produces so-called communal values. But free communication can also promote conflict solidarity.
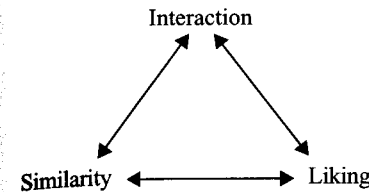
Figure 5.1. Homans's Theory of Free Communication

Free Communication as a Cause of Solidarity

Sociologists usually distinguish between individuals who form a group and those who do not: if they interact with each other fairly regularly, they form a group; if they do not interact, they don't. For example, when families begin to move into a new housing development, they do not form a group as yet; but once they start talking and visiting, they become a "group."

Interaction is seen as a crucial ingredient of "groupness," not only because it establishes relationships between individuals but also because it tends to create features that are essential for a group's existence, such as group solidarity, identity, and culture. George Homans (1950; 1974) has developed a theory explaining how this happens.

Homans began by noting that, when members of a small group interact with each other freely, without being constrained by externally imposed norms or tasks, their interaction has unique consequences:[2] it increases their liking for each other and makes them similar in their actions, values, and beliefs. Moreover, as they become more similar and begin to like each other, their interaction increases further.

Figure 5.1 states that when a small group is without external restraints, the processes within it are of a special kind: interaction, similarity, and liking are bound together causally, so that when one increases, the others increase as well. For example, the arrow linking similarity and interaction can be translated as "The more the members interact with each other, the more similar they become in their values, beliefs, and action, and vice versa."[3] When you consider the full meaning of this figure, you begin to understand how solidarity is created.

To begin with, the figure helps us to *define* solidarity. We will say that a group has a high degree of solidarity if it possesses high levels of all three variables shown in Figure 5.1: *if its members interact with each other frequently, if they like each other, and if they hold similar beliefs, values, and norms.*

Moreover, Figure 5.1 suggests what *conditions* tend to increase solidarity. First, because solidarity will increase if free interaction increases, we should consider conditions that facilitate interaction. For example, because persons who live or work close to each other are more likely to interact than those far apart, it is usually easier to unionize steel workers who work in the same foundry than office staff scattered in different buildings. Another condition that favors high interaction – and therefore solidarity – is availability of certain communication technologies. For example, if all members of a group have telephones and e-mail addresses, it is easy for them to reinforce their common beliefs even if they live far apart.

But – and this condition is perhaps the most important – the group must be *small*, preferably no larger than about fifteen to twenty people (Berelson and Steiner 1964, 325), certainly not larger than fifty. For a group to develop high solidarity, each member must interact frequently with *all* other members, and this can occur only in small groups.

Homans's theory of free interaction and group solidarity is amply supported by empirical research. For example, the proposition that frequent interaction and similarity are related is supported by the fact that marriage occurs most frequently between those who are similar in race, religion, status, and education; the proposition that similarity and liking are related is supported by the finding that those with similar cultural backgrounds have happier marriages and are less likely to divorce than those with different backgrounds; and the proposition that interaction and liking are related is supported by the finding that those who live closest to one another (and hence are most likely to interact) are most likely to become friends. And the theory that the process of Figure 5.1 is related to group solidarity is supported by findings such as that residents of high-cohesion courts in a housing project were more likely to abide by the decisions of their community council than members of low-cohesion courts (Berelson and Steiner 1964, 305–306, 310–313, 328, and 332).

Hostility as a Cause of Conflict Solidarity

Many conflicts have another ingredient that can fuel them and even change their character – hostility. Two main factors contribute to lasting hostility: specific grievances and a general feeling of frustration.

Grievances. You may be said to have a grievance if you believe that you have been treated unjustly (Kriesberg [1973] 1982, 67). Once members of a group believe that they have been treated unjustly by another group, they will begin to feel hostile toward that group. Many African Americans, because they were enslaved in the past, are hostile toward American whites whose ancestors were slaveholders; many Palestinians and Israelis feel hostility toward each other because each group occupies territory that at some point in history belonged to the other; many Irish Catholics hate Irish Protestants because parts of Ireland are controlled by the (mostly Protestant) British. Thus the same conditions that contribute to a sense of injustice and – as we saw in Chapter 3 – to goal incompatibility also create specific grievances that contribute to hostility.

Frustration. Whereas grievances usually target a specific group and are based on specific events, frustration tends to be expressed as free-floating hostility that can target almost anything at any time. The so-called frustration-aggression theory (Dollard et al. 1939) explains how frustration comes about. It holds that we become frustrated and feel hostile whenever we are prevented from reaching our goals. The important point is that, once we become frustrated without being able to vent our frustration through aggressive action, the feeling of frustration persists. If we continue to be frustrated without finding an outlet, the feeling becomes very intense and we may attack any person or group that is a handy target, even if it is not the source of our frustration.

Although frustration can be produced by the potential opponent, much of it has its source elsewhere. There is a sense in which almost all personal contacts are frustrating. When a wife wants to go out and have a good time, the husband may want to stay at home; when the husband wants to watch football on television, the wife may want to watch figure skating; when the husband wants to go and have a drink

with his buddies, his wife may want him to stay home. And no matter how well the two manage to reach an agreement on what to do, one or both of them is frustrated because of not getting what he or she wanted.

In addition, there are "impersonal" – systemic – processes that are frustrating. One can be denied promotion, lose money in the stock market, be called by the school principal about the poor performance of one's child, or learn that one's favorite candidate has lost the election. It is possible to take all these misfortunes with outward calm, but inward pressure keeps on building.

Conflict Solidarity and Conflict Ideology

For a group to become a conflict group, a certain type of solidarity is needed – conflict solidarity. The members must not only interact with each other, like each other, and share certain goals and values; their goal must be to engage in the conflict, and their values must support the struggle. In other words, they must develop a conflict culture or, as is often said, conflict *ideology*. To understand how it develops, we must understand how free interaction promotes the creation of any culture.

Free communication creates a common culture by "averaging" the beliefs, values, and expectations that the individual members bring into the group. This is illustrated by the classic experiments with the so-called autokinetic effect. When isolated subjects were placed in a completely dark room and shown a point of light that, in fact, was stationary, they saw it as moving, with the amount of motion varying widely from subject to subject. In the second set of experiments, the same subjects were placed together in small groups and were asked to repeat the task. In the group setting, individual perceptions converged to a common mean, with much less variation between them (Sherif 1936). Further research showed that the opinions of the leaders carried more weight than those of the followers. Thus a common view will always be skewed toward the opinions of the leaders.

Similarly, a culture may be viewed as an "average" of the opinions originally held by the members. To develop such culture, members must be free to communicate in small groups: neighbors talking across

the fence, workers having a beer in a pub, college students talking in a dormitory room.

But most communications are not entirely free, because the members inevitably face some problems. When the problems are urgent and persistent, individual members will have ideas about how to solve them. And as they talk to each other about the problem, their ideas are "averaged" into social norms.[4] In preliterate tribes, the group members might develop rituals designed to bring about rain; in modern societies, members of a club might develop traditional ways of launching a membership drive.

When group members face a dangerous opponent, they tend to develop the needed "conflict ideology." But – and this point is crucial – ideologies cannot be imposed; they must evolve freely out of the opinions of individual members. This creates problems for leaders of large societies. Because free interaction can occur only in *small* groups, large societies have many relatively independent cultures, each specific to a group whose members have similar backgrounds. And the problem facing the leaders is how to alter the cultures of these subgroups so as to prepare them for conflict. For example, while President Roosevelt saw clearly that Nazi Germany was a threat to the United States, many groups in the United States refused to accept this as their own vision.

A device routinely used to achieve this end is the mass rally in which the opponent is portrayed as an enemy who poses a threat to every member of the group. But the effectiveness of this device is limited. For example, the mass rallies staged by the Nazis undoubtedly created great enthusiasm in the members of the audience – but this enthusiasm was short-lived if it was not shared by the participant's family and friends. As another example, consider Kerenski, a leader of Russia following the revolution of 1917. Although he was a great orator who kept his audience spellbound, he never had a great following because his views were not popular with ordinary Russians. He soon lost power to the Bolsheviks.

Let us repeat, then: for members of a group to create and adopt conflict ideology, two conditions must be met: individual members must be convinced that conflict is necessary, and they must meet in small groups to elevate their private beliefs into a binding group ideology.

Conflict Solidarity and Organization

Groups involved in short-lived conflicts are often driven by solidarity alone. For example, if some of the rioters are attacked by police, the rest will come to their rescue simply because they belong to the same group, not because the rescuers have been specially trained. Moreover, their leadership tends to shift from one member to the next, as the circumstances dictate. But members about to engage in a prolonged conflict need not only solidarity but also organization. How can a group develop such an organization if it is not already organized?

To begin with, unorganized groups develop organization – *any* kind of organization – by the same process they develop ideology: the ideas of individual members become averaged into generally accepted ideas, and these are converted into an organization. At the very least, members who are most respected or shown to be most adept at a particular task become the group's leaders. Thus American Indians often elected their bravest member to be their chief; members of a jury elect as chair the member they respect most. But many groups already have organization of some kind: church groups have their ministers, businesses their executives, governments their presidents. And these leaders have some organizational know-how.

They usually know much of what we discussed in Chapter 3. They know that, to engage in prolonged conflict, an organization should be differentiated both horizontally and vertically. And they develop units with a division of labor suited to the conflict – perhaps creating an army that is horizontally differentiated into units such as air force, artillery, and submarine forces, as well as vertically differentiated in a hierarchy ranging from privates to generals.

"Legitimate" industrial organizations tend to have permanent units that specialize in conflict. Governments have a police force for internal security and an army for external conflicts; universities, hospitals, museums, and factories have security forces at their disposal. Insurgent groups, on the other hand, tend to start without the benefit of any organization. Because the powerful will try to prevent them from organizing, they tend to go "underground": usually, they develop organizations with only minimal horizontal and vertical differentiation and with secret membership, with the rank-and-file members knowing

only the members of their immediate unit. Whether the insurgents succeed in organizing more openly depends, in part, on the strength of those with power: the less mobilized for conflict the rulers are, the easier it is for the ruled to become organized (Dahrendorf 1959). When, in addition, the rulers lack solidarity, some of their members may defect and provide leadership for the ruled (see Brinton 1955).

As we saw in Chapter 3, most industrial organizations promote "system" values (see Table 3.1). But conflict organizations may promote some communal values as well. For example, although a soldier should be able to kill the opponent and tolerate the death of his friends (affective neutrality, a system value), he should also be patriotic and willing to sacrifice his life (particularism and collectivism, which are communal values). It should not surprise us that military solidarity is in fact fostered by small friendship groups rather than by the army itself, and that soldiers typically fight to gain respect from their friends and to protect them from the enemy (see Stouffer et al. 1949).

Some societies, such as small tribes, may be based exclusively on communal values. But, as Table 3.1 shows, some of these values may be inimical to the principles of a good organization. For example, how can a society in which all power is hereditary (and thus "ascriptive") create an organization led by the best-qualified members? And how can a society that values "diffusiveness" create a division of labor that presupposes specialization? The answer is that such societies may be unable to organize themselves for conflict and end up being victimized by their warlike neighbors. Those societies which succeed in developing an efficient conflict organization – such as the ancient Zulu kingdoms (Parsons 1977, 46) – may have accepted some of the values we now associate with industrial systems. For example, while they may emphasize bravery ("collectivism," a communal value), they may also train certain groups – such as adult men – to specialize in warfare ("specificity," a system value).

Conflict Solidarity and Mobilization

Members of a group are not ready for conflict action unless they can mobilize sufficient resources and use them effectively. But, for a variety

of reasons, they may not be motivated to participate in the conflict. An important reason is that they may be seduced into "free riding" (see, e.g., Olson 1965; Hechter 1987), a behavior that occurs when it is advantageous for them *not* to participate. For example, a union member is free-riding if he or she, while willing to enjoy all the benefits of a new contract, refuses to go on strike and join the picket lines. This problem is difficult to solve, primarily because free riding is often very rational from the point of view of an individual member. Why should a worker incur the cost of a conflict if he or she can enjoy its benefits in any case?

Research suggests that free riding exists primarily in groups whose members have dissimilar goals (Blalock 1989, 52–56). But recall that, as it creates group solidarity, free interaction also promotes acceptance of common goals. Thus solidarity automatically replaces individualistic values (which make free riding rational) with collectivistic values (which demand sacrifice). And leaders can overcome the free-riding problem if they succeed in promoting group solidarity. But, as we mentioned earlier, this is not an easy task to accomplish.

Conflict Resources

What constitutes a conflict resource varies: to wage a war, a nation needs (in addition to conflict organization) soldiers,[5] weapons, and ammunition; to start a strike, a union needs (in addition to high solidarity) personnel to walk picket lines, picket signs, and money; to start divorce proceedings against her husband, a wife needs financial security and a lawyer; to disagree with what is being said during a meeting, a participant should have both support from friends and the ability to "speak powerfully" (Lulofs and Cahn 2000, 143).

But, even when these resources are available, the conflict group may not have mobilized enough of them. For example, a police force may have enough men and women to handle routine problems but not enough to handle a major disturbance. When a major riot occurs, it may have not only to cancel all leaves but also to ask for help from the National Guard. Thus to start a conflict action, an actor should have enough resources to sustain the action and ultimately reach his or her goal.

Typical Beginnings

Just how open conflicts begin varies: some start suddenly, others develop gradually; some start violently, others moderately. And yet, as Kriesberg ([1973] 1982; 1998) has argued, some regularities merit attention.

Early Warning Signs

Once conflict groups are created, there may be ample evidence that an open conflict is imminent. One of these is the very fact of mobilization: by calling in the reserves, a nation signals that it expects an open conflict. Although this signal may be inadvertent, in many cases it is deliberate: mobilization may be used as a show of strength, intended to intimidate the opponent.

But the preconflict period may also include serious – and not so serious – attempts at cooperation, with the adversaries trying to persuade or reward each other. Thus before Japanese planes attacked Pearl Harbor, Japan and the United States were engaged in delicate and seemingly promising negotiations. And, in the infamous Munich Conference of 1938, the Western Allies tried to prevent a major war with Hitler by giving him a substantial part of Czechoslovakia.

The Spark That Ignites

In spite of attempts at cooperation, once conflict groups are created, an open conflict is likely. An outbreak may happen for seemingly insignificant reasons: because a roommate did not close the door properly; because a man did not like the way another man looked at him; because a member of a community was arrested for a routine transgression; because a nation's compatriots living in a foreign country were verbally abused by that country's government. Clearly these minor events would not start conflict behavior if the actors were not ready for it – if they did not have incompatible goals or were not hostile toward each other. However, these "insignificant" events – these new grievances – are equally important, because without them the conflict might not start. Thus urban riots are often started when a

rumor about police brutality spreads through a minority community. The illegal Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor created a great deal of animosity against the Japanese and made it possible for Roosevelt to declare war on Japan.[6]

It does not make much difference that the rumor is often false. In fact, politicians may create false rumors to discredit their opponents. For example, Hitler in 1939 gained support for his intended invasion of Poland by circulating reports about Polish brutalities against Germans, brutalities that he himself had secretly staged. What matters is that the rumor is believed, and that it comes at the right time, when the actors are ready for a conflict.

The Attack

Open hostilities often begin with the adversaries playing different roles: one is the attacker, the other the defender. In some cases, the attack is sudden and violent, and gives the attacker the benefit of surprise. Thus when the Japanese unexpectedly attacked Pearl Harbor in 1941, they succeeded beyond their expectations. In other cases, the attacker starts rather innocuously, becoming violent later. For example, in the late 1940s the Soviet Union, determined to block the reunification of Germany, started by merely protesting any attempts at reunification. When this did not work, it adopted increasingly coercive actions: it began to interrupt communication between Berlin and West Germany and ended with a blockade of the city (Pruitt and Rubin 1986, 90).

But, in the long run, the difference between the attacker and the defender disappears as the adversaries begin to behave in a similar fashion, each attacking, retaliating, and (possibly) retreating.

Conclusions

Members of groups with incompatible goals are likely to engage in an open conflict if they become conflict groups. Open conflict is likely to occur if the members are aware that their goals are incompatible with those of the opposing group, if they have grievances against opponents and feel very frustrated, if they engage in free interaction that favors conflict action, and if they have sufficient resources. But by far the two
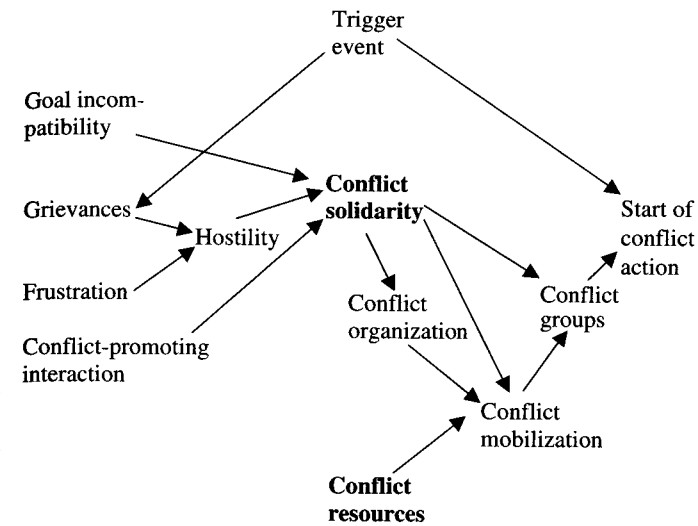
Figure 5.2. Causes That Lead to Open Conflicts

most important variables are conflict solidarity and conflict resources: a group will become a conflict group *if it acquires both high conflict solidarity and sufficient conflict resources* (see Figure 5.2).

The needed *conflict solidarity* is not easily achieved. The difficulty stems from the fact that to reach it, group members must be free to interact without any constraints, and yet their interaction must create conflict ideology. This problem is most likely to be solved when the members not only recognize that their goals are incompatible with those of their opponents, but also have many grievances against them and are frustrated. Under these conditions, their free interaction facilitates conflict and, in time, produces the needed conflict solidarity.

Although the availability of *conflict resources* plays a crucial role, the group's conflict solidarity also contributes significantly to the creation of an efficient organization and motivates the members to mobilize the needed resources. The *actual beginning* of a conflict is often preceded by some early warning signs. Some of them are unintentional, such as sudden mobilization of reserves; others are intentional, such as threats. In some cases, the adversaries even make a last-ditch effort to avoid open conflict. But when all of the factors shown in Figure 5.2 are in

place, it may be too late; all that is needed now is a trigger event, and open conflict begins.

As an addendum to our main argument, let us note that the theory of Figure 5.2 accounts for Dahrendorf's four conditions of conflict group formation. It shows that, once it is clear that the goals are incompatible, free communication (his condition number 4) is quite likely to create conflict ideology (condition number 2), and that each group is likely to become organized for conflict (condition number 3) and to develop leadership committed to the conflict (condition number 1).

Application to Interpersonal Conflicts

Because the theory presented in this chapter focuses on the creation of conflict *groups*, it might seem that it is not applicable to a conflict between individuals. Actually, this is not so: with a few modifications, it is directly applicable to interpersonal conflicts as well.

Certain aspects of the theory shown in Figure 5.2 can be applied without change: individuals can have incompatible goals, have grievances against each other, and be frustrated. Other concepts have to be modified: an individual cannot develop conflict solidarity or conflict organization, or coalesce into a conflict group. What he can do is acquire some properties suggested by these concepts.

Although an individual in conflict cannot develop conflict solidarity, she can get ready by creating an equivalent: she can work herself up to a high emotional pitch. She cannot interact with members of a nonexistent conflict group but can talk to herself, mentally rehearsing her arguments. For example, a tenant about to confront her landlord might work up a head of steam by repeating to herself all her grievances: that, in spite of repeated requests, the landlord did not fix the leaking faucets nor did he heat her apartment sufficiently. And she may rehearse several times the speech she will give: "I have been patient for a long time, but I want some action and want it now. I do want to have good relations with you, but if you do not follow through, I will have no choice but..." Thus the tenant can prepare herself not only for a conflict generally but also for a specific conflict action.

Application to a University Conflict

SOMETIMES a conflict results not so much from direct discrimination and prejudice, as in the case of the civil rights movement, as it does from established ways of evaluating performance and from honest disagreement over standards and procedures to be used. In an organization, those disagreements can combine with friendship patterns, putting those who are without such ties – such as minority and women faculty – at a considerable disadvantage. They cannot benefit equally from membership in the "old boys network" or from long-standing and inflexible standards of evaluation. The result is what is commonly known as institutional racism and sexism. Here we use a conflict in a university to illustrate the theory developed in Chapter 5. Although in this chapter we focus on how a hidden conflict became open, we need to prepare the ground first by giving a brief synopsis and then by considering why the goals of the two parties in this chapter's conflict were incompatible.

Goal Incompatibility

For the necessary data for our analysis, let us describe briefly the early history of an actual faculty tenure conflict at a university in the western United States.