Understanding Conflict

IN THE 1880s ranchers in the western United States fought over water rights; in 1939 Germany attacked Poland; last week a husband and wife argued bitterly over their finances. That all were engaged in a conflict is obvious. In fact, it may seem that nothing is simpler than recognizing a conflict – after all, it involves fighting, does it not? Actually, no, not always. Some conflicts are "latent" and do not involve overt fighting; and some overt fights, such as wrestling matches, are not due to a conflict. Thus it is important to agree on what is and what is not a conflict.

What Is a Conflict?

It might not surprise you to hear that even theoreticians differ in how they view conflict. For many practical purposes, they may understand it as a special set of interrelated elements: parties, issues, dynamics, and contexts. To gain a deeper understanding, however, they may use certain abstract concepts such as cause and effect; direct, indirect, and intervening causes; and payoff matrices. The discussion in this chapter deals with these concepts.

Students of social conflict have offered many different definitions of conflict. Early on, Park and Burgess defined it simply as struggle for status. Somewhat later, Mack and Snyder defined it as struggle not only for status but also for scarce resources and significant social change

(Himes 1980, 12). Other writers have offered additional definitions.[1] How then should we conceive of conflict?

We may begin by acknowledging that there is a good reason for the great variety of definitions. They tend to reflect authors' theoretical orientations: psychologists might define conflict in terms of the adversaries' inner states,[2] sociologists in terms of observable behavior,[3] and so on. The definition used here is similarly anchored in theory – our theory. That theory assumes that conflict can originate either in goal incompatibility or in hostility (or in both), and that it involves a unique type of behavior, conflict behavior. Thus conflict is defined here as a situation in which *actors use conflict behavior against each other to attain incompatible goals and/or to express their hostility.*

But, once again, this definition is more complex than you might think: the *actors* referred to in the definition can be not only individuals but also groups. This means that, at times, we speak about the "behavior" of groups, a practice that some scholars might find objectionable. Yet it preserves uniformity of terminology – after all, we view both individuals and groups as actors – as well as brevity. Moreover, it is common practice to refer to groups "acting." For example, we say that "In 1941, Japan launched an unprovoked attack against the United States" instead of saying, "In 1941, members of the Japanese government decided, without provocation, to send airplanes manned by Japanese pilots to attack Pearl Harbor."

The remaining three concepts used in the definition – *goal incompatibility, hostility,* and *conflict behavior* – are so important that they are discussed in detail in the following pages. Some additional conflict-related terms, such as violence, fairness, and negotiation, are considered later: the concepts of fairness and justice in Chapter 3; the concept of negotiation in Chapter 9. But two important – and controversial – distinctions can be considered now. We begin with the distinction between conflict and competition.

When several businesspeople bid for a contract, without engaging in conflict action such as spreading false rumors or making threats, they are in competition – but not conflict – with each other. In general, people who are in competition do not engage in conflict interaction and, in fact, may not even be aware that they are competing; they are always seeking the same end; and they usually seek what belongs to a third party rather than what belongs to the opponent

(Kriesberg [1973] 1982, 17). If, on the other hand, they *do* direct conflict behavior at each other, they are in a conflict. It should be added that some writers disagree, viewing competition as a special kind of conflict.

A second distinction that should be made is that between nonviolent and violent conflict. Let us illustrate the difference with the annual fall rut in a herd of elk. In the conflict over females, the males use several types of conflict action: threat postures, strength testing, snorting and bellowing, antler locking, even flight and pursuit. Yet rarely is real violence done in such combat, and then only unintentionally. Humans too use nonviolent conflict actions such as threat, flight, testing, and promise in their conflict – but, unlike male elk, they also do physical and psychological harm to one another. Thus the term "conflict action" will be used here to apply to both violent and nonviolent behavior.

Incompatible Goals

It is often difficult to determine reliably whether goals are in fact incompatible. Two approaches are quite helpful. The first approach is something that probably occurs to you first: you ask whether it is logically impossible for both parties' goals to be achieved simultaneously.[4] For example, if workers in a factory wish to work as little as possible and be paid as much as possible, while the owners wish them to work as hard as possible for as little pay as possible, it is logically impossible for both goals to be reached simultaneously. Similarly, it is logically impossible for a wife and her husband each to have her or his way if the wife wishes to have children and the husband does not. It is impossible for both the Israelis and the Syrians to have exclusive sovereignty over the Golan Heights.

The second approach is more complex but theoretically more rewarding: you ask whether the two parties have incompatible "payoffs."[5]

Using Payoff Matrices

To introduce matrix representation of conflict, consider an example. Suppose a husband does not want any children but his wife wants four. Suppose furthermore that you had a way to assess – perhaps through

Table 2.1. *Incompatible Interests of Wife and Husband*

	Conflict Parties	
	Husband	Wife
Goals		
Four children	−3	10
No children	4	−8

a questionnaire – how much each outcome is worth to each party and found that having four children was worth −3 points to the husband,[6] 10 points to the wife; and that having no children was worth 4 points to the husband, −8 points to the wife. This situation may be represented by the "payoff matrix" displayed in Table 2.1. Note that, in this table, the goals of each spouse are represented by a row that has a positive payoff for him (her): having no children is the husband's goal because it has for him the payoff of +4; having four children is the wife's goal because it has for her the payoff of +10.

When you face new terminology, you often need to stay alert to certain distinctions. In this case, you need to remember the difference between an alternative, its outcome, and its payoff. An *alternative* is one of the actions that the decision maker can choose from (such as having four children); an *outcome* comprises all the consequences of that action (such as feeling fulfilled, having less money and time for leisure activities, having less time with the spouse); and a *payoff* is the total value the decision maker assigns to the outcome (such as the +10 the wife presumably assigns to having four children). Note that a payoff matrix specifies explicitly only what the alternatives are (the rows of the matrix) and what the payoffs are (the numbers within the cells). The outcomes are left unspecified, and readers must use their imagination to fill them in.

Perhaps you are puzzled by the numbers that appear in Table 2.1. Although they are to a large extent arbitrary, they represent a fact of real life: that the importance people attach to various events varies. In this case, the wife values having four children highly, while devaluing the possibility of having no children; the husband's values are the opposite

of hers, though less intense. This being the case, we conclude that the goals and the interests of the husband and wife are incompatible because when an event has a positive payoff for one of them, it always has a negative payoff for the other.

Advantages of Matrix Representation

Payoff tables of the kind given in Table 2.1 have certain advantages. First, they permit us to identify incompatibility: *two* goals are incompatible if one has a positive payoff only for the party and the other only for the opponent. For example, Table 2.1 shows the goal of four children as incompatible with the goal of no children because the first goal has positive payoff only for the wife $(+10)$, the other only for the husband $(+4)$. Incidentally, we may say that *one* goal is "not mutually acceptable" if it has a positive payoff for only one side. Thus, in Table 2.1, having four children is not mutually acceptable because it has positive payoff only for the wife.

Second, using payoff matrices allows you to consider conflicts in which there are more than two alternatives under consideration. For example, suppose that you surveyed workers and managers in a factory and concluded that they have three main goals, and that the attractiveness of these goals can be represented by the payoffs shown in Table 2.2.[7] You will no doubt note that, while there are two incompatible goals (wage of \$20 versus \$10), there is also a third goal, the solvency of the firm, that is shared by both parties (i.e., that has positive payoff for both sides).

Table 2.2. *Incompatible and Compatible Goals of Workers and Managers*

	Conflict Parties	
	Workers	Managers
Goals		
Wage: \$20 per hour	7	−3
Wage: \$10 per hour	−4	8
Solvency of the firm	2	5

Table 2.3. *An Example of a Zero-Sum Conflict*

	Conflict Parties	
	Husband	Wife
Goals		
Four children	−10	10
No children	8	−8

A third advantage might not seem to be very important, but it is to a theoretician: payoff matrices allow him or her to distinguish between goals and interests. The *goals* of a party are quite specific: they are the alternatives that have a positive payoff for the party.[8] Thus Table 2.2 specifies that the workers have two goals, the wage of $20 and the solvency of the firm; the managers also have two goals, the wage of $10 and the solvency of the firm. The *interests* of a party are more diffuse: they are all the outcomes from all possible alternatives that have positive payoffs for the party. Because certain desired outcomes – such as security, recognition, respect, and justice – seem to be universal, they are sometimes viewed as the party's "true" interests. As we discuss shortly, interests are incompatible if, in general, they are negatively correlated: when the party's payoff for an outcome is high, the payoff of the opponent tends to be low.

Fourth, payoff representation allows you to determine the *extent* to which the goals and interests are incompatible. In the example of Table 2.1, the payoffs of the husband and wife, although divergent, are not totally incompatible. They could be, for example, exactly opposite for the two parties, as shown in Table 2.3. Incidentally, you now know that the often-used term "zero-sum game" corresponds to an extreme conflict and that it can be represented by a matrix in which each row sums up to zero.

Fifth, matrix representation of payoffs in a conflict allows us to determine whether *an agreement is possible*. For example, because in the case represented by Table 2.2 "solvency of the firm" has a positive payoff for both adversaries, the workers and the managers could begin their negotiation by agreeing to pursue this goal. It is also possible

to determine whether a compromise is possible on something about which the parties do not agree. One possible solution is to "split the difference," giving the workers a wage that is halfway between what they demand ($20) and what the management is willing to pay ($10), that is, a wage of $15.

To determine whether this compromise is acceptable to the two parties, we must compute the payoffs (rather than wages) associated with it. It turns out that this can be accomplished by performing the following computations (see Bartos 1967):

Workers' payoff: $.50 * (7) + .50 * (-4) = 1.5$
Management's payoff: $.50 * (-3) + .50 * (8) = 2.5$

Because the resulting "compromise" payoffs (1.5 for the workers and 2.5 for the managers) are positive for both sides, this 50–50 split is acceptable to both.

Finally, matrix representation allows you to determine what agreement is "best" for both sides. In our example, a strong argument can be made that the wage corresponding to the 50–50 split ($15) is close to being best: it can be shown that it is even better to agree on a wage that is only slightly higher, $15.46. If you are willing to go through a fairly technical discussion, you can learn why this wage is best by reading about the so-called Nash solution (Nash 1950; Luce and Raiffa 1967; Bartos 1967).

Identifying Goals and Interests

The practical consequence of this discussion is that you can benefit from both the concept of logical contradiction and the concept of payoff matrix. To illustrate, suppose that one country invades another. How do you determine whether the goals and interests of the two countries involved in the conflict action are incompatible?

First, you ask whether each country claims sovereignty over the same territory, as do both Israelis and Palestinians over East Jerusalem. If both do, then, since sovereignty means exclusive control, it is *logically* impossible for either of them to claim sovereignty over the territory and accept its occupation by the opponent. Second, you try to obtain a rough estimate of the payoffs. True, it is seldom possible to assign exact payoffs in real-world conflicts. Still, if each party is "vitally interested"

in the territory, you may assume that each assigns high positive payoffs to its own occupation of it and very low negative payoffs to its occupation by the opponent. You may also try to guess the payoffs for additional alternatives, such as assigning each country only a part of the territory, or having the territory administered by a neutral body. This helps you to determine whether an agreement can be reached.

Thus you can gain considerable insight into any conflict if you keep in mind the matrix approach. You then can determine what the main alternatives are; speculate on the likely consequences of each alternative; and guess whether a party assigns high, low, or negative payoffs to these consequences.

Hostility

The definition of conflict offered here implies that conflict behavior can occur not only because the parties have incompatible goals but also because they feel hostility toward each other. Whether you rely on your intuitive understanding of hostility or on a more formal definition such as an "antagonism, opposition, or resistance in thought or principle" (*Webster's* 1976, 553), you undoubtedly realize that hostility plays quite a different role in conflict than do incompatible goals. The distinction between rational and nonrational behavior helps us to understand this difference.

Rational Behavior

During the Cuban missile crisis of 1962, the United States and the Soviet Union came close to war. Soviet Premier Krushchev decided to challenge U.S. missile supremacy by secretly installing medium-range missiles in Cuba. Informed about this, President Kennedy faced a crucial decision: if the United States responded too strongly, a nuclear war might result; if he responded too weakly, the influence of the Soviet Union would increase. During lengthy cabinet meetings, several options were considered, ranging from invading Cuba and destroying the missile sites to registering a strong protest and demanding the removal of the missiles. After listening to arguments from his aides for and against each option, Kennedy decided on an action that was neither too provocative nor too submissive: he ordered the U.S. Navy to start a blockade of Cuba, inspecting Soviet ships to determine

whether they carried missile-related cargo. At the same time, he started a personal dialogue with Krushchev, informing him of the impending blockade. For a while, the Soviets did not respond, and two of their ships proceeded toward Cuba, protected by a submarine. As the ships were approaching the 500-mile barrier imposed by the United States, confrontation appeared inevitable. But, to the Americans' huge relief, the Russian ships stopped before crossing the barrier, and intense negotiations ensued. A compromise was worked out: the Soviets agreed to withdraw their missiles; the United States agreed not to invade Cuba and to withdraw American missiles from Turkey (Kennedy 1969).

In most important respects, Kennedy's decision-making process was "rational," because he reached his decision through lengthy deliberation during which he (1) considered a number of possible actions, (2) considered the likely consequences of each action, (3) evaluated each set of consequences, and (4) chose the action with the most desirable consequences.

Given the fact that payoff matrices play an important role in the theory of rational decision making,[9] it is not surprising that there is a close parallel between these steps and the steps involved in constructing a payoff matrix. To construct a payoff matrix and use it rationally, you must:

1. Determine the possible alternatives.
2. Determine the outcomes associated with each alternative.
3. Assign a payoff to each outcome.
4. Choose the alternative with the highest payoff.

Some theoreticians – notably Weber ([1922] 1947) – argue that we should distinguish between two types of rationality. One of these is the "instrumental" rationality. It occurs when your action is directed at a *specific goal* that can be obtained, such as the best way to avoid rush hour traffic, buying the best car with the money you have, or deciding whether you should study in order to pass tomorrow's examination or can afford to go to a party. The other type is "value" rationality. It occurs when your objective is to conform to a *vaguely defined set of values,* such as when a Catholic is trying to decide which of several possible alternatives – making a contribution to her church, going to confession, and so on – might be the most appropriate behavior.

Although the abstract principles guiding rational actions are clear, their practical implementation is fraught with difficulties, because different individuals, faced with the same situation, may differ in what action they see as rational: they might consider a different set of alternatives, have different beliefs about what outcomes are likely, or evaluate the outcomes differently. For example, had Kennedy not considered a blockade as a feasible alternative, he might have opted for invading Cuba; had Krushchev foreseen correctly how Kennedy would react, he might have chosen not to install the missiles; had Krushchev not considered the inferior power of the Soviet Union unacceptable, he might have chosen not to act the way he did.

Despite these complications, one can draw a clear (abstract) distinction between rational and nonrational action. An action is (objectively) rational if it is reached by an actor who not only followed the steps outlined here but did it with an almost supernatural skill: he or she considered a set of all relevant alternatives, assessed their outcomes correctly, evaluated them in accordance with his or her values (or the values of the group he or she represents), and then chose the action that was the best. An action is (objectively) nonrational if it is not best (not highest-valued) in this sense.

Hostility as Nonrational Behavior

When we are angry, we often act contrary to our better judgment – that is, we act nonrationally. Most acts driven by emotions such as anger tend to be spontaneous and quick, and often at odds with what a more careful deliberation might suggest. For example, a husband and a wife, after spending hours deciding where to go for their vacation, may finally reach a compromise accepted by both. And then, when it is time to make reservations, one of the pair may say, "I really do not want to do this; I hate that place." It does not help for the other person to say, "But you agreed!" because the reluctant partner may simply answer, "I know, but I do not feel like doing it."

The main reason why rational and emotional actions are often at odds is that whereas rational action takes into account all of the possible consequences, emotional action does not. When I am angry, I need to strike out at somebody, and damn the consequences. Thus feelings – especially feelings of hostility – are often an obstacle to

settling a conflict and implementing the settlement. A skillful media-
tor is well aware of this fact and works hard to remove this obstacle.
Validating hostility and allowing it to express itself in harmless ways
are among the tools that help this process.

In a conflict, the most important emotion is hostility toward the en-
emy. Thus Kennedy, instead of engaging in careful deliberation, might
have responded impulsively and ordered immediate invasion of Cuba.
In some cases, a conflict may start rationally, only to deteriorate into
nonrationality. Thus while a demonstration may have been planned as
a disciplined way of letting one's point of view be known, it may turn
into a riot that is fueled by hatred, expressed in rock throwing, burning
of cars, looting, and even killing. Similarly, reasonable efforts by police
to maintain order may be transformed into a "police riot" if they are
carried away by hostile emotions toward the demonstrators. Such was
the case in the Chicago demonstrations in the summer of 1968.

The relationship between hostility and conflict behavior is complex.
On the one hand, hostility adds fuel to and intensifies conflict behav-
ior. On the other hand, conflict also intensifies hostility: as conflict
continues and the parties inflict injuries on each other, the partici-
pants are no longer motivated solely by a desire to reach their original
goals; increasingly, they become determined to destroy the enemy. The
nature of conflict is thus transformed.

Conflict Action

Conflict has been defined here as "a situation in which actors use con-
flict behavior against each other to attain incompatible goals and/or
to express their hostility." But what is – and what is not – "conflict be-
havior"? To most of us, this term evokes images of fighting, violence,
coercion, and force. But our definition of conflict suggests that con-
flict behavior is *any* behavior that helps the party to achieve its goal
that is incompatible with that of the opponent or that expresses its
hostility toward him or her.

Social scientists are sometimes accused of using obscure language to
express relatively simple ideas. In some cases, we must plead guilty. But
some technical terms are essential if you wish to understand conflict.
One pair of useful terms is conflict action and conflict behavior. We
speak about participants' conflict "action" when we are assuming that

they are guided by rational considerations; when we assume that they may be rational *or* nonrational, we use the term conflict "behavior." For example, we might say that demonstrators are engaged in conflict *action* when they march through a city in a planned fashion, using signs and nonviolent language to demand the ouster of a crooked politician. When such intent and planning may be absent, we might use a more general term conflict *behavior*. This distinction is not hard and fast, but, because we hope to show how to approach conflict in a thoughtful manner, we use, most of the time, the term conflict action.

Another important distinction is between "coercive" and "noncoercive" action (behavior). This distinction is so important that we give it special attention later. You should know, however, that some writers use the terms "competitive" and "cooperative" instead.[10] We prefer our terminology because it captures an essential point: a conflict is quite different when the adversaries use force than when they don't.

Coercive Action

Coercion forces the opponents to do what they do not wish to do. It accomplishes this by threatening to inflict injury on them, or by actually inflicting it (Kriesberg [1973] 1982, 116). The distinction between threatening and actually inflicting injury is necessary because the two have theoretically different interpretations: while the threat of injury is best conceived within the framework of a payoff matrix, the actual injury is not.

Actual Coercion. We use "actual" coercion if we try to weaken our opponents by injuring them. It is useful to distinguish between physical violence and symbolic injury. Severe *physical* injury can be violent: hurting or killing the opponents, or destroying their property (Himes 1980, 103). For example, soldiers of one nation try to kill those of another, or boys fighting in a schoolyard try to knock each other down. Or physical injury can be nonviolent, such as depriving the opponents of resources they need. For example, a nation may punish its opponent by preventing ships from going in or out of its harbors, or a wife may lock her husband out of their house. *Symbolic* injury, on the other hand, weakens the opponent by inducing fear, shame, or guilt through actions such as jeering or using derogatory names. For example, strikers may

Table 2.4. *A Revised Version of a Husband-Wife Conflict*

	Conflict Parties	
	Husband	Wife
Goals		
Four children	−3	10
No children	4−10 = −6	−8

try to dissuade nonunion workers from entering a factory by calling them "scabs."

Threat of Coercion. The primary consequence of an actual injury is to decrease the opponents' ability to continue the conflict. Thus it should not be viewed as involving a change in their payoffs. A threat of violence, on the other hand, is best understood within the framework of payoff matrices: if the opponents' payoffs for their original goal are sufficiently reduced by the threat, they will abandon it and may adopt the threatening party's goal.

Let us illustrate using the conflict between husband and wife, represented in Table 2.2. Suppose that the wife threatens to leave her husband if he does not agree to have four children, and that this threat is believed by the husband.[11] Moreover, the wife's leaving would be so devastating to him that the threat decreases his payoff for having no children by 10 points (see Table 2.4). Because now his payoff for "four children" is higher (−3) than the payoff for "no children" (−6), a rational husband who does not have any other choice will agree to having four children. But he has been coerced into choosing an option that has negative payoff for him, that is, he will do something he does not want to do[12] – which, incidentally, suggests why threats are often a bad strategy: when a person is forced to choose an option with a negative payoff, he or she is bound to feel hostile and will be less likely to cooperate in the future.

Although the distinction between threatening and actually inflicting an injury is conceptually clear, in practice the two are often intertwined and hard to separate. For example, consider two men who have been fighting until one of them gives up. How should we interpret the

defeated man's actions? Should we assume that he no longer views fighting as profitable, or should we assume that he is no longer capable of fighting? Another complication is that threats do more than make resistance less desirable. As we discuss in Chapter 8, threats may increase the opponents' hostility and thus make them less likely to yield.

Noncoercive Conflict Action

Not all conflict actions involve coercion. Some, such as joint searching for new options, involve "pure" cooperation. Others, such as persuasion and rewarding, lie somewhere between full-scale coercion and pure cooperation: they resemble coercion in that their objective is to make the opponent accept the player's goal; they resemble pure cooperation in that they use inducements rather than force.

Persuasion. Like a threat of coercion, persuasion works by changing the payoffs that the goals offer to the opponents. But while threat of coercion decreases the payoff for one's opponents' original goal, persuasion increases their payoff for the party's own goal. It does so at no cost to itself, simply by bringing to the opponents' attention certain favorable outcomes they had originally not considered. For example, suppose that parents want their son to go to college, but he does not wish to go. They can try to persuade him by pointing out that, if he goes to college, he will be able to make new friends, enjoy sports, and take interesting courses. If he does not go to college, he will have to find employment immediately. And surely that would not be as pleasant as college life.

Note that successful persuasion seldom involves abstract logical arguments or righteous positioning. Instead, it involves showing one's opponents that it is to *their* advantage to adopt "our" goals. Thus a pro-choice advocate, trying to persuade a pro-life advocate to change her action should not argue that his point of view is morally right; instead, he should point out that the pro-life advocate could herself have an unwanted or high-risk pregnancy, that an abortion performed under medical supervision would save her from having to raise an unwanted child, or might even save her life.

Promising a Reward. Another type of conflict action involves promising rewards. Those who promise a reward also play to the opponent's self-interest, but instead of emphasizing existing options the opponent has overlooked, they create – usually at their own expense – new outcomes that are rewarding for the opponent.[13] In the parlance of the theory of games, they create "side payments" that is, a commitment to reward their opponents if they accept the first party's goals. Thus the parents may try to induce their son to go to college by promising to buy him a new car to take him there.

Pure Cooperation. What may be called "pure" cooperation differs from the actions discussed so far in that its objective is to find a solution that is gratifying to both parties. Usually, it involves searching for a goal that is different from those the parties had originally pursued. In some cases, each party searches for such a solution on its own; in other cases, the search itself is a joint one, involving a continuing dialogue. Some cooperative actions are preparatory to finding such a solution. For example, a party may try to understand its opponents' point of view; it may attempt to validate that point of view; or it may seek third-party assistance in resolving the conflict. We consider such cooperative actions here and in the coming chapters and devote Chapter 9 exclusively to them.

Degree of Coerciveness

For many purposes it is important to consider the specific types of action described thus far. But for other purposes – such as making causal statements of the form "An increase in X leads to an increase to Y" – it is necessary to have a term that refers to the "degree" of a conflict, terms like intensity, destructiveness, or strength. There does not seem to be a word that captures this perfectly, but the term "coerciveness" seems quite appropriate. For example, when two boys start to hit each other after merely exchanging sarcastic remarks, it may be said that their behavior becomes more coercive.

Figure 2.1 shows that our use of the term "degree of coerciveness" runs into a slight conceptual problem: we identify the lower end of the continuum both as corresponding to (a low level of) coerciveness
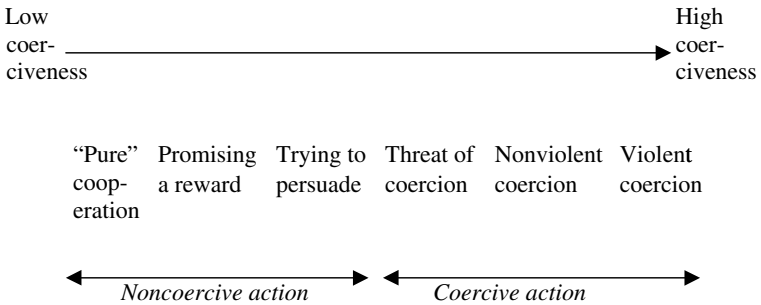
Figure 2.1. Coerciveness of Conflict Action

and to "noncoercive action." How can something be both coercive and *non*coercive? We ask the reader to bear with us, recognizing that this problem is often encountered when one tries to convert a continuum into a concept with only two categories.[14]

In general, it is possible to arrange the different types of conflict action on a continuum from low to high degree of coerciveness, as shown in Figure 2.1. "Pure cooperation" is an action that is minimally coercive: while inducing the opponent to abandon his original goal, it takes his interests as much into account as those of the actor herself. "Promising reward" is somewhat more coercive: although it rewards the opponent, it does so only in order to promote the actor's own interests. "Trying to persuade" is even more coercive: it pursues the actor's own interests without rewarding the opponent's in any way; it merely notes which of his interests coincide with those of the actor. The remaining three benchmarks – threats, nonviolent coerciveness, and violent coerciveness – clearly manifest increasing coerciveness: "threat of coercion" because it decreases the opponent's payoffs; "nonviolent coerciveness" because it is punishing to the opponent; and "violent coerciveness" because it is highly punishing, possibly even fatal, to the opponent.

Conclusions

Although the very concept of conflict is the subject of considerable controversy, the theories to be discussed in subsequent chapters suggest a fairly simple definition: conflict is a situation in which actors

use conflict action against each other to attain incompatible goals and/or to express their hostility. To make this definition meaningful, one must understand its three main terms: incompatible goals, hostility, and conflict behavior. The term "incompatible goals" invites several questions. What is meant by incompatibility? What is a goal, and how does it differ from an "interest"? Is it possible to have different degrees of incompatibility? How can one identify a goal that is acceptable to both sides? A goal that is best for both? So-called payoff matrices help one to answer these questions.

Much could be said about hostility, but to understand the unique role it plays in conflicts, consider its nonrational aspects. Unlike rational action (which is based on careful deliberation and uses a specific procedure of judgment and valuing), expressions of hostility are nonrational in that they are quick, impulsive, and often at odds with what action a rational analysis might suggest. Thus conflict behavior that is heavily influenced by hostility is often damaging to the actor's own long-range interests.

"Conflict behavior" is an umbrella term that covers many diverse types of behavior. It refers to (more or less) rational action as well as to (nonrational) expressions of hostilities; to behavior that is highly coercive (such as physically harming the opponent) as well as to behavior that is fully cooperative (such as searching for a mutually acceptable solution). Still, it is desirable to have a concept that treats these qualitative differences as matters of degree – and the concept of coerciveness is such a concept (see Figure 2.1).