

Chapter 18: Why Disputes Continue

"Fighting for Fun and Profit"

"I dogmatize and am contradicted, and in this conflict of opinions and sentiments I find delight.

— Samuel Johnson

There are numerous payoffs in starting or prolonging disputes. This chapter explains them. It also lays out specific steps for using knowledge of these payoffs to best advantage in controversy analysis.

Disputants often profess their desire for agreement, even as they persist in diving ever deeper into disagreement. As this is written, for instance, a Democratic President and Republican Congressional leaders each express concern that their budget wrangling will once again close down the federal government; meanwhile they squabble themselves, inevitably, into doing just that. This may look like blatant hypocrisy, even sheer stupidity; but there is more to it than that. Provoking or prolonging conflict may serve both side's vital interests.

For many, conflict is an indication that something is wrong. "People should be able to get along better than that!" we say; or "There must be a middle ground somewhere!" A lot can be gained from ending conflicts. But there are important pay-offs for one or both sides in starting or keeping a fight going. These payoffs are *connection*, *definition*, *revitalization*, *reconnaissance* and *replication*. Let's briefly look at each.

Connection.

Conflict is a form of exchange, communication, even negotiation. Nine-year old boys, teachers complain, seldom interact with girls of the same age except when they quarrel or fight. But this fighting and rivalry is commonly the awkward beginnings of heterosexuality. This example illustrates that **among groups**, whatever else they accomplish, disputes establish and maintain connections.

Connection works similarly **within groups**. Couples who everyone describes as "not getting along" are doing just that; but in a way that can be socially objectionable. In domestic disputes, for instance, husbands and wives are making connections even though they attract the police. Troublesome, yes; but a connection, nonetheless. Few have to argue or fight. They can just walk away. But what they lose if they walk are things they value. In the case of an abused spouse, for instance, it might be the income supporting them and the children. Walking away also means losing a way of "negotiating" one's relationship with the other person. It may be a distorted, unfortunate, perhaps even deadly form of negotiation; but it is the only way some people know.

The more one thinks of it, the more he will see that conflict and cooperation are not separable things, but phases of one process which always involves something of both.

— Charles Horton Cooley

Within groups conflict can release tensions that might otherwise harm the group. When people on the same side squabble, it may, in the long run, help keep the group together.

Definition.

Conflict **among groups** heightens the sense of “us” versus “them.” “If you aren't with us, you're agin us,” the old saying goes. Conflict sharpens exterior boundaries and clarifies who shares values; who is on “our” side and who is on “theirs.” This is particularly valuable to power holders. They need to know who is reliable.

The point of this for conflict analysis is to point out the value of picking fights and keeping them going. Regardless of the issue in question, this underlying dynamic pertains.

Conflict within groups focuses and accentuates the differences between ranks and social levels. The boss demonstrates his rank and authority in the process of telling employees what to do. The union leader proves her rank and authority by successfully resisting the boss.

Revitalization.

Conflict **among groups** revitalizes traditions, norms and values. When Saddam Hussein picked a fight with America, promising the “Mother of All Battles,” his holy war distracted many Iraqis from the costs imposed on them by misrule and instead focused them on the values Iraqis share in common. The moral of this story is that power-holders, particularly those who need to nourish their power, may benefit from conflict.

Even ritualized conflict revitalizes traditions, norms and values. Varsity college football or basketball provides an example. The “Fighting Irish,” the Georgetown “Hoyas,” the “Spartans” of U.S.C., all engage in ritualized conflict with competing schools; and, in doing so, revitalize school spirit and values.

Like varsity athletics, public controversies are controlled conflict; and like varsity athletics, such disputes reinvigorate group traditions, norms and values. Sometimes this is a fringe benefit of the controversy; but sometimes it is the prime function of the controversy.

Within groups conflict encourages, even requires, individuals to recommit themselves to group values. This is why harassment and hazing form part of the initiation ritual in so many groups. Hazing may drive some away, but those who remain are the more tightly bonded for it. The “beating in” practiced by street gangs is a dramatic example. To demonstrate their “heart,” kids wanting to be members voluntarily take a severe beating from the gang. During the beating initiates are expected to fight back, showing they have courage, while simultaneously demanding, “More love!” The “love” in question is an even fiercer beating. Asking for even more punishment proves the initiate's commitment and loyalty to the values of the gang.

The struggle alone pleases us, not the victory.

— Blaise Pascal

Reconnaissance.

Small-scale conflicts help gauge whether large-scale conflicts are winnable. New teachers face “testing” by their students to see how serious the teachers are about school rules and procedures and what they are prepared to do to enforce them. Students deliberately break small rules to see how safe it would be to break bigger ones. Similarly, new prison inmates are challenged by experienced "yard birds" to find out how tough they are and learn whether they can be preyed upon at acceptable cost. Likewise, those disputing things like animal rights, capital punishment, abortion, or what have you, are, in effect, sending out reconnaissance patrols that feel out the enemies strength. **Among groups** conflict serves this information-gathering purpose.

Within groups internal conflict provides powerholders information about the strength of those challenging their leadership. The challengers gather similar intelligence. In other words, internal skirmishes test the will and resources of the leadership and their opposition.

Replication.

Replication's most important function is **within the group**. During a struggle, persons within conflicted groups tend to replicate one another in behavior and, sometimes, even in manner of dress. Imagine a college Home Coming Day football game. Students, staff and alumni wear school colors, sing the school's fight song, and generally celebrate a common tradition and values. Similarly, the military promotes rivalry and ritualized conflict among different units or branches of the service. In this way common values are strengthened and group pressure is brought to bear on individuals to perform up to the level of the group.

Among groups adversaries commonly replicate each other's complexity in order to effectively compete. One does not usually find, for example, production line workers in a large corporation represented by several small unions. Usually, there is one large, complex union that seeks to effectively counter the company's human and material resources as well as its manner of organization.

The following figure shows how the functions of conflict parallel each other among groups and within groups.

Figure 4.2

Now that we have reviewed the functions of conflict, here are specific steps for using them to analyze disputes.

Step 1) Remember, conflicts serve important inter-group and intra-group functions. Ask of any dispute, could the argument be serving any of the functions of conflict?

Keep in mind that the point of the struggle may not really be the issue in dispute. The conflict may have more to do with strengthening group values, finding out who is loyal or disloyal, revitalizing values, getting reconnaissance data, and so forth. Allow for this possibility while weighing the argument.

Step 2) Ask who, specifically, might benefit from maintaining the dispute?

Everybody in a group may not get the same benefits nor pay the same costs. Moreover, the kinds of costs and benefits there are may vary considerably among group members. Who does the sweating and who gets the glory? What do they pay and what do they get for it? (Also see Chapter 10, What Is Society?)

Step 3) Consider what might happen to the groups if the dispute were actually settled.

Would members of the group no longer feel there was a point to belonging? Would they quit paying dues, making contribution or donating their labor? Would they continue to hold the leadership in special regard? Would they each go looking for other causes?

Chapter Highlights

Provoking or maintaining controversies pays off in surprising ways. This chapter explains how controversy serves:

- connection,
- definition,
- revitalization,
- reconnaissance and
- replication.

It also lays out steps for employing this knowledge in a search for hidden agendas.

Other Related Chapters in This Text

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|--------------------------------|----------------------------|
| 4. Definitions and Controversy | 10. The Nature of Society |
| 6. Name-Calling | 12. Criteria and Authority |
| 7. The Logic of Disputes | 17. Responsibility |

Keywords for Further Data Base Searches

leadership	status	class struggle
conflict theory	hegemony	depravity
Social Darwinism	dominance	natural selection

Test Yourself

Here is an imagined conflict. The League for the Liberation of Laboratory Animals is picketing selected research laboratories around the nation. Attracted when pickets who, through civil disobedience, attempt to shut down the laboratories, the media is getting sensational footage of police arresting grand motherly women for refusing to obey cease and desist orders. Protesters display gruesome photo enlargements of animals alleged to have been maimed in useless experiments. Sound bites feature earnest protesters recanting horrific tales of experiments on the eyes of helpless rabbits to insure the safety of eye makeup, mascara and other cosmetics.

The situation becomes more volatile when a spokesperson for Scientist's Alliance for Ethical Experimentation arrives at a key demonstration site to denounce the League for the Liberation of Laboratory Animals. She claims their

photo enlargements are fakes, and their sound bites falsehoods. Jeering Liberationists surround the spokesperson and police are required to extricate her from the agitated crowd.

Indicate which of the following outcome descriptions are in accord with the functions of conflict.

Outcome Descriptions	In Accord	Not In Accord
1.) The League for the Liberation of Laboratory Animals gains greater knowledge of the limits of police tolerance.		
2.) As the civil disobedience escalates, the Scientist's Alliance for Ethical Experimentation on Animals react with increasing resignation		
3.) Members of the League for the Liberation of Laboratory Animals develop a better sense of what they can achieve by negotiating with the Scientist's Alliance for Ethical Experimentation		
4.) The leadership of the Scientist's Alliance for Ethical Experimentation get a better sense of who among their members can be counted on in a pinch.		
5.) League for the Liberation of Laboratory Animals membership renewals increase and financial contributions also gain substantially.		
6.) The recently shaky leadership position of the President of the League for the Liberation of Laboratory Animals becomes more solid. Meanwhile a rival's agitation for a change in leadership becomes muted.		
7.) A significant number of members of the League for the Liberation of Laboratory Animals drop out after being pressured to commit themselves to the organizations increasingly militant course of action. Many of those remaining say, "Good riddance!"		
8.) The Scientist's Alliance for Ethical Experimentation begin conducting press conferences and making press releases. Some members even advocate counter-demonstrations.		
9.) A number of members of the League for the Liberation of Laboratory Animals who were initially opposed civil disobedience, "make the jump," and support the more militant tactic.		

10.) Members of the Scientist's Alliance for Ethical Experimentation gain in mutual conviction that the elimination of animal experimentation will largely destroy meaningful research in America.		
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Answers:

All of the outcomes are in accord with the functions of conflict.

Now, can you correctly label each one, identifying the specific function illustrated by that example?

Chapter Review Sheet

1. Describe the chapter briefly in your own words.

2. What are the core ideas developed in this chapter? If more than one, list them in order of their importance to you.

3. Briefly explain the importance to you of your first choice.

4. Briefly describe a scenario in which you could apply one of the ideas from the chapter to improve your professional practice.

5. Connect this chapter to at least one thing you already know.

6. Suggest one way to make this chapter more effective.
