

PART ONE

CONFLICT

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## CHAPTER ONE

# THE NATURE OF CONFLICT

We are of two minds about conflict. We say that conflict is natural, inevitable, necessary, and normal, and that the problem is not the existence of conflict but how we handle it. But we are also loath to admit when we are in the midst of conflict. Parents assure their children that the ferocious argument the parents are having is not a conflict, just a “discussion.” Organizations hire facilitators to guide them in strategic planning, goal setting, quality circles, team building, and all manner of training, but they shy away from asking for help with internal conflicts. Somehow, to say we are in conflict is to admit failure and to acknowledge the existence of a situation we consider hopeless.

This ambivalence about conflict is rooted in the same primary challenge conflict interveners face—coming to terms with the nature and function of conflict. How we view conflict affects our attitude toward it and our approach to dealing with it, and there are many ways of viewing it. For example, we may think of conflict as a feeling, a disagreement, a real or perceived incompatibility of interests, a product of inconsistent worldviews, or a set of behaviors. If we are to be effective in handling conflict, we must start with a way to make sense of it and to embrace both its complexity and its essence. We need tools that help us separate out the many complex interactions that make up a conflict, that help us understand the roots of conflict, and that give us a reasonable handle

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*Note:* All of the examples from my own practice either are from public, nonconfidential forums or are heavily disguised to protect confidentiality.

on the forces that motivate the behavior and interaction of all participants, including ourselves.

Whether we are aware of them or not, we all enter conflict with assumptions about its nature. Sometimes these assumptions are helpful to us, but at other times they are blinders that limit our ability to understand what lies behind a conflict and what alternatives may exist for dealing with it. We need frameworks that expand our thinking, challenge our assumptions, and are practical and readily usable. As we develop our capacity to understand conflict in a deeper and more powerful way, we enhance our ability to handle it effectively and in accordance with our most important values about building peace. To simplify the task of handling complex conflicts, we need to complicate our thinking about conflict itself.

A framework for understanding conflict should be an organizing lens that brings a conflict into better focus. There are many different lenses we can use, and each of us will find some more amenable to our own way of thinking than others. Moreover, the lenses presented in this chapter are not equally applicable to all conflicts. Seldom would we apply all of them at the same time to the same situation. Nevertheless, together they provide a set of concepts that can help us understand the nature of conflict and the dynamics of how conflict unfolds.

## HOW WE EXPERIENCE CONFLICT

Conflict emerges and is experienced along cognitive (perception), emotional (feeling), and behavioral (action) dimensions. We usually describe conflict primarily in behavioral terms, but this can oversimplify the nature of the experience. Taking a three-dimensional perspective can help us understand the complexities of conflict and why a conflict sometimes seems to proceed in contradictory directions.

### CONFLICT AS PERCEPTION

As a set of perceptions, conflict is our belief or understanding that our own needs, interests, wants, or values are incompatible

with someone else's. There are both objective and subjective elements to this dimension. If I want to develop a tract of land into a shopping center and you want to preserve it as open space, then there is an objective incompatibility in our goals. If I believe that the way you desire to guide our son's educational development is incompatible with my philosophy of parenting, there is a significant subjective component. If only one of us believes an incompatibility to exist, are we still in conflict? As a practical matter I find it useful to assume that a conflict exists if at least one person thinks that there is a conflict. If I believe that we have incompatible interests and proceed accordingly, I am engaging you in a conflict process whether you share this perception or not. The cognitive dimension is often expressed in the narrative structure that disputants use to describe or explain a conflict. If I put forward a story about an interaction that suggests that you are trying to undercut me or deny me what is rightfully mine, I am both expressing and reinforcing my view about the existence and nature of a conflict. The narratives people use provide both a window into the cognitive dimension and a means of working on the cognitive element of conflict.

### CONFLICT AS FEELING

Conflict is also experienced as an emotional reaction to a situation or interaction. We often describe conflict in terms of how we are feeling—angry, upset, scared, hurt, bitter, hopeless, determined, or even excited. Sometimes a conflict does not manifest itself behaviorally but nevertheless generates considerable emotional intensity. As a mediator, I have sometimes seen people behave as if they were in bitter disagreement over profound issues, yet been unable to ascertain exactly where they disagreed. Nonetheless, they were in conflict because they felt they were. As with the cognitive dimension, conflict on the emotional dimension is not always experienced in an equal or analogous way by different parties. Often a conflict exists because one person feels upset, angry, or in some other way in emotional conflict with another, even though those feelings are not reciprocated by or even known to the other person. The behavioral component may be minimal, but the conflict is still very real to the person experiencing the feelings.

## CONFLICT AS ACTION

Conflict is also understood and experienced as the actions that people take to express their feelings, articulate their perceptions, and get their needs met, particularly when doing so has the potential for interfering with others' needs. Conflict behavior may involve a direct attempt to make something happen at someone else's expense. It may be an exercise of power. It may be violent. It may be destructive. Conversely, this behavior may be conciliatory, constructive, and friendly. Whatever its tone, the purpose of conflict behavior is either to express the conflict or to get one's needs met. Here, too, there is a question about when a conflict "really" exists. If you write letters to the editor, sign petitions, and consult lawyers to stop my shopping center and I don't even know you exist, are we in conflict? Can you be in conflict with me if I am not in conflict with you? Theory aside, I think the practical answer to both of these questions is yes.

In describing or understanding conflict, most of us gravitate first to the behavioral dimension. If you ask disputants what a conflict is about, they are most likely to talk about what happened or what they want to happen—that is, about behavior. Furthermore, any attempt to reach an agreement will naturally focus on behavior because that is the arena in which agreements operate. We can say we agree to try to feel differently or to think differently about something—and such statements are often built into agreements—but they are generally more aspirational than operational. What we can agree about is behavior: action or inaction. When we focus on arriving at outcomes it is natural for us to emphasize this dimension at the expense of the others, but in doing so we may easily overlook critical components of the conflict and the work necessary to address its cognitive and emotional elements.

Obviously the nature of a conflict on one dimension greatly affects how it plays out and is experienced on the other two dimensions. If I believe you are trying to hurt me in some way, I am likely to feel as though I am in conflict with you, and I am apt to engage in conflict behaviors. None of these dimensions is static. People move in and out of conflict, and the strength or character of conflict along each dimension can change rapidly

and frequently. And even though each of the three dimensions affects the others, a change in the level of conflict on one dimension does not necessarily cause a similar change on the other dimensions. Sometimes an increase on one dimension is associated with a decrease on another. For example, the emotional component of conflict occasionally decreases as people increase their awareness of the existence of the dispute and their understanding of its nature. This is one reason why conflict can seem so confusing and unpredictable.

What about a situation in which no conflict perceptions, emotions, or behaviors are present but in which a tremendous potential for conflict exists? Perhaps you are unaware of my desire to build a shopping center, and I am unaware of your plans for open space. Are we in conflict? We may soon be, but I believe that until conflict is experienced on one of the three dimensions it is more productive to think in terms of potential conflict than actual conflict. The potential for conflict almost always exists among individuals or institutions that interact. Unless people want to think of themselves as constantly in conflict with everyone in their lives, it is more useful to view conflict as existing only when it clearly manifests itself along one of the three dimensions.

As well as individuals, can social systems—families, organizations, countries, and communities—be in conflict, particularly along the emotional or cognitive dimensions? Although there are some significant dangers to attributing personal characteristics or motivational structures to systems, practically speaking, systems often experience conflict along all three dimensions. We tend to use different terms, such as *culture*, *ethos*, *organizational values* or *family values*, *public opinion*, or *popular beliefs*, to characterize the greater complexity and different nature of the emotional and cognitive dimensions in social systems, but we intuitively recognize that group conflict has cognitive and emotional as well as behavioral dimensions. Is there an emotional and a perceptual aspect to the conflict between Iran and the United States or between Israel and Palestine? Of course, and we cannot understand the nature of these conflicts if we do not deal with these aspects. This does not mean that every individual member of each country shares the same feelings or perceptions, or even that a majority do. It means instead that the conflict evokes certain reactions and attitudes

from a significant number of people in each society. Similarly, when we look at conflicts between union and management, environmental groups and industry associations, progressives and conservatives, it is important to understand the attitudes, feelings, values, and beliefs that these groups have concerning each other if we are to understand what is occurring.

How we describe a conflict usually reflects how we are experiencing it. The same conflict or concerns can be described using the language of feeling (“I feel angry and hurt”), perception (“I believe you are completely missing the point and do not have a clue about this”), or action (“I want you to do this or I will have to take further action”). Frequently, in observing people in conflict, we can see that one party may be using the language of feeling and the other the language of perception, and this alone can exacerbate a conflict. There are in fact several inventories of conflict styles that focus on this (for example, the Strength Deployment Inventory on the Personal Strengths, USA Web site, “SDI,” n.d.).

How conflict is experienced by one party is closely intertwined with how others experience it. Although one party may be more likely to express and react to the emotional dimension, for example, and another party may be more attuned to the behavioral dimension, their approaches affect each other. For example, if one party describes and experiences a conflict in emotional terms, other parties may gravitate toward this dimension, thereby reinforcing the way the first party experiences the conflict. Or they may be encouraged to take a more cognitive approach by way of reaction. How parties cocreate their experiences of a conflict is an essential part of the conflict story.

By considering conflict along the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions, we can begin to see that it does not proceed along one simple, linear path. When individuals or groups are in conflict, they are dealing with complex and sometimes contradictory dynamics in these different dimensions, and they behave and react accordingly. This accounts for much of what appears to be irrational behavior in conflict. Consider this typical workplace dispute:

Two employees assigned to work together on a project soon find themselves in conflict over whether they are both pulling their



weight and passing along important information to each other. The situation escalates to the point where they engage in a public shouting match, and as a result their supervisor intervenes and brings them together to talk. At this meeting they agree on a workload division and certain behavioral standards, to which they then seem to adhere. Has the conflict been resolved? It may have been alleviated along the behavioral dimension. But each goes away from this meeting feeling victimized by the other and unappreciated by the boss. One of the employees decides that these feelings just result from the nature of the job and believes that the immediate conflict is over, but the other continues to see the conflict being acted out every time the other person comes late for a meeting or sends a terse e-mail. Thus progress has been made on the behavioral dimension; the emotional dimension is, if anything, worse; and there are contradictory developments along the cognitive dimension.

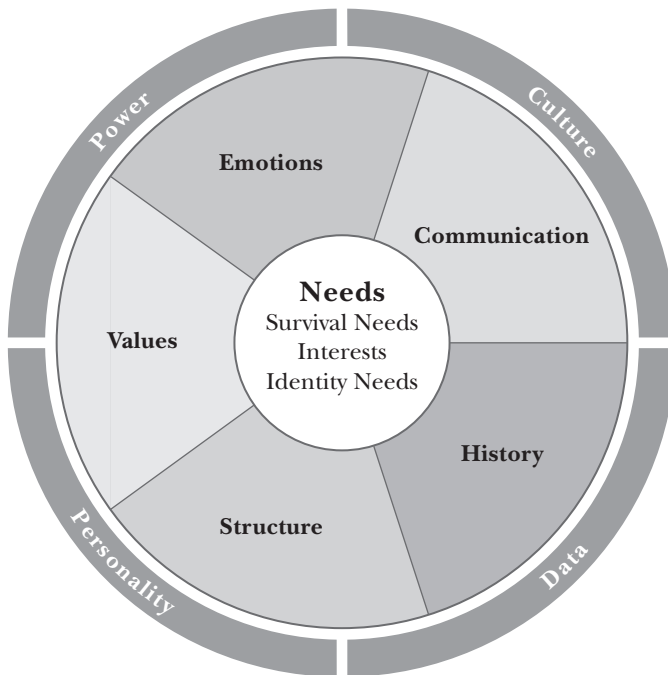
This kind of result is not unusual in conflict, and it can cause people to behave in apparently inconsistent ways because on one dimension the conflict has been dealt with, but on another dimension it may actually have gotten worse. Thus the employees in this example may cease their overtly conflictual behavior, but the tension between them may actually increase.

## WHAT CAUSES CONFLICT?

Conflict has multiple sources, and theories of conflict can be distinguished from one another by which origin they emphasize. Conflict is seen as arising from basic human instincts, from competition for resources and power, from the structure of the societies and institutions people create, from flawed communication, and from the inevitable struggle between classes. Although most of these theories offer valuable insights and perspectives on conflict, they can easily point us in different directions as we seek a constructive means of actually dealing with conflict. What we need is a practical framework that helps us use some of the best insights of different conflict theories.

If we can understand and locate the sources of conflict, we can create a map to guide us through the conflict process. When we

FIGURE 1.1 WHEEL OF CONFLICT



understand the different forces that motivate conflict behavior, we are better able to create a more nuanced and selective approach to handling conflict. Different sources of conflict produce different challenges for conflict engagement. The wheel of conflict, illustrated in Figure 1.1, is one way of understanding the forces that are at the root of most conflicts. This conceptualization of the sources of conflict arose out of my work as a conflict practitioner and conversations with colleagues at CDR Associates and elsewhere, and it is derivative of the circle of conflict developed by Christopher Moore (2003). Moore's circle consists of five components: relationship problems, data problems, value differences, structural problems, and interests. This has proven a valuable tool for analyzing the sources of conflict, but I have chosen to rework it to reflect a broader view of human needs and the issues that make it hard for us to directly address these needs.

Human needs are at the core of all conflicts. People engage in conflict either because they have needs that are met by the conflict process itself or because they have needs that they can only attain (or believe they can only attain) by engaging in conflict. I discuss the system of human needs in detail later in this chapter. My point here is that people engage in conflict because of their needs, and conflict cannot be transformed or resolved unless these needs are addressed in some way. We should not understand needs as static and unchanging. We all have a range of needs, but how we experience these is influenced by the context and the unfolding interaction. For example, I might start negotiating to sell a house mostly concerned about money, timing, and certainty, but if the hard work I have done to remodel my home is dismissed as sloppy or in poor taste, then I might suddenly find myself more concerned with issues of identity, pride, and self-image. In this way, the needs we experience are constantly evolving and changing as we interact with others.

Needs are embedded in a constellation of contextual factors that generate and define conflict. To effectively address needs, it is usually necessary to work through some of these elements, which affect how people experience their needs and how they choose to pursue them. Five of these factors are particularly critical to understanding how conflict unfolds: the ways in which people communicate, their emotions, their values, the structures in which they interact, and history (see Figure 1.1). Let's examine each of these sources further.

## COMMUNICATION

We are very imperfect communicators. Sometimes this imperfection generates conflict, whether or not there is a significant incompatibility of interests, and it almost always makes conflict harder to deal with effectively. Sometimes, however, imperfect communication is what allows us to work together in the face of serious differences (Honeyman, 2006). Unclear communication allows us to move forward despite our differences by obscuring disagreements or different interpretations of agreements. Although this can eventually cause worse conflict, sometimes it allows us to get through a particularly problematic interaction successfully.

Human communication has inspired a large literature and multiple fields of study, and I will discuss the role of communication in conflict and conflict intervention in Chapter Seven. The main thing to consider here is how hard it is for individuals to communicate about complex matters, particularly under emotionally difficult circumstances. We should keep reminding ourselves just how easy it is for communication to go awry. Conflict frequently escalates because we act on the assumption that we have communicated or understood someone else's communication accurately when we have not. When we learn that others are acting on the basis of different information and assumptions, we often attribute this to bad faith or deviousness and not to the imperfections of human communication.

Many factors may contribute to communication problems. Culture, gender, age, class, cognitive capacity, and environment have a large impact on communication. We frequently rely on inaccurate or incomplete perceptions, form stereotypes, and carry into our communication conclusions drawn from former interactions or experiences. Often we are inclined to try to solve problems before we understand them. The greater the duress we are under, the harder it is for us to communicate effectively (and often the more important it is as well). Sometimes communication takes more energy and focus than we are able or willing to give at a critical point, and it is easy to become discouraged or hopeless about communicating effectively in serious conflicts.

Successful communication requires that people enter into a *de facto* partnership with each other in which informal but powerful norms and strategies are developed to allow communication to occur. This involves a reciprocal process of sending and receiving messages about how to communicate, what is working in an interchange, and how to adjust communication to make it work better. This process of metacommunication (communicating about communicating) is seldom intentional or conscious, but it is nonetheless critical—and takes place in all types of communication, ranging from formal business interactions to parent-child interchanges (Tannen, 1986). When this process works, very effective interactions can occur, even in the midst of conflict, but when communication is dysfunctional even the simplest of interactions can become extremely difficult and conflictual. This is

one example of why conflict has to be understood in terms of the nature of the interaction that is created, and not simply the tools or approach of each of the individual parties involved.

Despite all these problems, we can and do find a way to communicate, and we can work on improving our communication, even in very intense conflicts. Communication is one of the greatest sources of both difficulty and hope in dealing with serious conflicts.

## EMOTIONS

Emotions are the energy that fuels conflict. If we could always stay perfectly rational and focused on how best to meet our needs and accommodate those of others, and if we could calmly work to establish effective communication, then many conflicts either would never arise or would quickly de-escalate. But of course that is not human nature. At times emotions seem to be in control of behavior. Sometimes they are also a source of power. They contribute to the energy, strength, courage, and perseverance that allow us to participate forcefully in conflict.

Emotions are generated both by particular interactions or circumstances and by previous experiences. When someone points a finger in our face in a conflict, we have a reaction based on the immediate context and meaning of that behavior, but we may also be reacting to all the times in the past when that gesture has been made at us in anger.

Disputants often find it necessary to work on the emotional content of their experience to make progress. Conflict may provide a valuable opportunity to engage with the emotions that are otherwise suppressed or ignored. Dealing with the intense emotions often associated with conflict usually requires finding some opportunity to express and release emotions and to experience someone else's understanding and empathy. We often talk about the need to ventilate, to let an emotion out through a direct and cathartic expression of it. Frequently, however, ventilation is neither possible nor desirable. A direct display of feelings can escalate a conflict. Instead it can be more constructive for disputants to discuss feelings without demonstrating them, to work toward establishing a safe environment for the expression of emotions, to let emotions out in safe increments, or to express them to a

third party rather than directly to the other person. Sometimes (although this may go against some popular beliefs of our culture), the wisest course is to contain our feelings until a more appropriate opportunity for dealing with them presents itself. But of course sometimes this is not at all the wisest course. We often try to shut down an emotional interchange because we are afraid that a situation will spin out of control or because we feel unable to deal with the intensity of the feelings being expressed. Sometimes, however, such an exchange is exactly what is needed, and one of the best services interveners can offer is to provide a safe container for the expression of intense feelings. Judging when an expression, description, or exchange of feelings is called for, and when a more circumscribed approach to the emotional content of a dispute is the wiser approach, may be one of the most difficult but important decisions we make in dealing with conflict.

Emotions fuel conflict, but they are also a key to de-escalating it. Many emotions can prevent, moderate, or control conflict. Part of everyone's emotional makeup is the desire to seek connection, affirmation, and acceptance. The genuine expression of sadness or concern by a party to a dispute can be essential to addressing the conflict effectively. A challenge for interveners in many conflicts is finding an adequate way to deal with the feelings of all participants so that these are neither ignored nor allowed to escalate out of control. Sometimes it may be necessary to let a conflict escalate somewhat, enough to deal with emotions but not so much as to impair people's ability to eventually address the situation constructively. The art of dealing with conflict often lies in finding the narrow path between the useful expression of emotions and destructive polarization. This is one reason why it is often helpful to employ the services of a third party.

## VALUES

Values are the beliefs we have about what is important, what distinguishes right from wrong and good from evil, and what principles should govern how we lead our lives. When a conflict is defined or experienced as a struggle about values, it becomes more charged and intractable. Because we define ourselves in part through our core beliefs, when we believe these values are under attack, we

feel that *we* are being attacked. Similarly, it is hard for us to compromise when our core beliefs are in play because we feel we are compromising our sense of integrity and self.

Although some conflicts are inescapably about fundamental value differences, more often disputants have a choice about whether they will define a conflict in this way. When we feel unsure of ourselves, confused about what to do, or under attack, it is tempting to define an issue as a matter of right or wrong. This empowers and fortifies us, allowing us to “take the moral high road,” even as it rigidifies our thinking and narrows acceptable options. Often it is easier to carry on a conflict if we can view ourselves as honorable and virtuous, and opponents as evil, malicious, and dangerous. This stance, comforting though it may be, tends to escalate and perpetuate conflict. Complicated public conflicts (for example, debates about health care policy, climate change, or the economy) are often characterized by extreme, almost fantastical appeals to values, as if the issue involved were a choice of good versus evil or democracy versus dictatorship rather than a debate about the merits of different approaches to dealing with complicated problems. This appeal to values builds support for a position and energizes people, but it also makes a constructive debate much more difficult.

When value differences are genuinely and inescapably a core element of a conflict, we are unlikely to easily find our way through the conflict by employing a rational problem-solving process. We can often determine if this is the case by articulating the relevant values and beliefs that we think are in play, and doing so in affirmative terms (what people believe in rather than what they don’t believe in). If the most significant values of those involved are clearly in opposition (and this is the case far less often than we might think), then we are not likely to end the conflict through a process of compromise or creative problem solving. We may be able to arrive at some understanding about how to move forward, despite value differences, but the core conflict will probably remain until circumstances change, larger values intervene, or those involved modify their core beliefs in some way.

Although values are often a source of conflict and an impediment to its resolution, they can also be a source of commonality and a constraint on conflict escalation. Disputants usually can

find some level on which they share values. And often they have values about interpersonal relations that support collaborative efforts. Recognizing when values are in play in conflict is critical to moving the conflict in a constructive direction. When individuals address values directly and express their beliefs affirmatively, they can address conflict more constructively.

## STRUCTURE

The structure or framework within which an interaction takes place or an issue develops is another source of conflict. Structural components of conflict include available resources, decision-making procedures, time constraints, legal requirements, communication mechanisms, and physical settings. Even when compatible interests might move people toward a more cooperative stance, the structure in which they are working may promote conflict. An example of this is the litigation process. Litigation is well designed for achieving a decisive outcome when other, less adversarial procedures have not worked. However, it is also a structure that exacerbates conflict, makes compromise difficult, and casts issues as win-lose, right-wrong struggles. Voting is another interesting example. When voting is used to resolve serious differences about an issue, the issue tends to become polarized, and constructive communication can become difficult. Candidates for office often try to seize the center of the political spectrum on important issues, but at the same time they look for so-called wedge issues that can differentiate them from their rivals and build support, they hope, among a large segment of voters. This approach to campaigns increases divisiveness about such complex issues as affirmative action, abortion, gun control, economic policy, climate change, national security, or health care in a way that makes a constructive and nuanced approach to policymaking difficult.

Sometimes these structural realities can be changed through a conflict resolution process. Often, however, part of what that process must accomplish is to help disputants identify and accept those structural elements that are unlikely to be altered. It is also important to consider system dynamics. Structure is one important element of a conflict system, and it is often profitable to consider how system dynamics are expressed in conflict. Conflict



can be understood as an inevitable and necessary expression of human systems and an important means by which systems maintain their adaptability and adjust to change. Of course, conflict can also be very dysfunctional for systems if not dealt with effectively. Understanding how complex adaptive systems operate—and in particular how energy flows through systems; how systems emerge, adapt, adjust, and reorganize; and how conflict in one part of a system may be an expression of system dynamics or conflicts in another part of the same system—can be critical to how we intervene in a conflict (Innes and Booher, 1999; Jones and Hughes, 2003). The wheel of conflict can be viewed as one approach to understanding the components of a conflict system.

## HISTORY

Conflict cannot be understood independent of its historical context. The history of participants in a conflict, of the system in which the conflict is occurring, and of the issues themselves has a powerful influence on the course of that conflict. When we try to understand a conflict in isolation from its historical roots, we are sometimes baffled by the stubbornness of the players or the intractability of the issues. History provides the momentum for the development of conflict.

But history is not a determinant of conflict, although sometimes it can seem that way. The long history of conflict in the Middle East, Kashmir, or Iraq, for example, does not mean that present conflicts in these regions will never be settled. That form of historical determinism is dangerous and misleading. However, such conflicts cannot easily be addressed without an understanding of the complicated systems of interaction that have developed over time and the degree to which the conflict has become part of the disputants' identity.

These different sources of conflict—communication, emotions, values, structure, and history—interact with each other. For example, people's historical experiences and their understanding of history influence their values, communication style, and emotional reactions, and the structure in which they operate. Furthermore, history is constantly being made, and the ways in

which the other sources of conflict change and develop over time are an important part of that history.

## GENERAL CONTEXTUAL FACTORS

Four variables seem particularly important to understand as contextual factors that cut across all the sources of conflict. These are culture, power, personality, and data. Culture affects conflict because it is embedded in individuals' communication styles, their history, their ways of dealing with emotions, their values, and the structure within which conflict occurs. Power is a very elusive concept, one that can obscure the roots of a conflict but can also help us understand the nature of an interaction. Power is partly embedded in the structure within which the conflict is occurring, but it has to be understood as a product of personal styles and interpersonal interactions. A great deal has been written about how personality affects conflict, but this too is a very broad concept, perhaps best understood in terms of styles of conflict engagement and avoidance. I deal with personality, power, and culture more extensively in Chapters Two, Three, and Four, respectively.

I do not view information or data themselves as a major source of conflict, but how data are handled and communicated can exacerbate conflict. Disputants often engage in a battle about information (for example, about how real global warming is), but data are usually not the essential source of conflict, and it is often misleading to see data in this way. I believe it is more profitable to view data, or information, as an issue within both communication and structure.

There are of course many other forces affecting conflict that I have not included in the wheel but that could be added if this would enhance the value of this model for a particular dispute (for example, group dynamics, cognitive styles, or external events). There is nothing sacrosanct about this or any other model of conflict. The wheel of conflict is a construct, and its ultimate test is how useful it is in providing insights into a given conflict and how to constructively engage in disputing. The sources of conflict I have identified are the ones that I find particularly important to consider as we seek to unpack the nature of a conflict. In particular, the wheel of conflict is a tool for considering

where people are stuck, where insights are needed, and where opportunities to improve a situation can be found. (For an overview of the major theories of conflict and its origins, see Wehr, 1979; also see Deutsch, Coleman, and Marcus, 2006; Frost and Wilmot, 1978; Kriesberg, 1982; Macfarlane, 2010; Schellenburg, 1982; Schelling, 1960.)

The value of an analytical tool such as the wheel, and the model of the three dimensions of conflict described earlier, is illustrated by the case of the ten cousins.

Ten cousins who lived in various locations in the United States and Canada jointly inherited a valuable piece of oceanfront property in New England. This property had belonged to their grandfather, who had decided to leave it directly to them in large part because of his distress about the poor relationships among his three children, the cousins' parents. The property had been the site of many of the happiest moments in the cousins' childhood, but now it was in disrepair, and the existing house and road needed replacing. The cousins ranged in age from twenty to forty-five, and their financial circumstances ranged from quite poor to very wealthy. For the property to be usable a considerable investment would have to be made, which not all the cousins were in a position to provide. They had very different views about what should be done with the property. Some wanted to sell it and divide up the equity. Others wanted to preserve it as a family center. And a couple of them proposed dividing it up so that each cousin could have a parcel to do with as he or she wished.

Complicating the picture were tense relations within at least two of the three sibling groups. Furthermore, the cousins and their parents in one group had been out of contact with the rest of the family for most of the past fifteen years, largely because these cousins' mother did not get along with her siblings. Not knowing how to proceed, the cousins contacted me and, together with a colleague, I met with nine of them in a retreat setting.

How could we get a handle on the nature of this conflict? It was clear that all three dimensions of conflict were in play. There were behavioral issues that needed to be attended to (what to do with the disputed property); cognitive issues involving entrenched perceptions about the situation and each other (how they thought about one another and the conflict); and a great deal of emotionality. Although work had to be done on the behavioral, or

action, issues, the long-term success of the cousins' co-ownership depended more on their ability to work on the attitudes about and emotions concerning each other that had been part of their family dynamics for so long.

It was not at first obvious where to focus our attention given the complexity of this situation. There were conflicting needs to be addressed. Some cousins wanted to maintain this property in the family and to "honor grandfather's legacy and wishes." Others were worried about the time and resources this might demand. Most hoped to promote better family relations but were concerned that the opposite might occur. These needs were firmly embedded in the elements found in the wheel of conflict. There had been poor communication (and in some cases no communication) among the cousins for years. The property represented the complex emotions that all had about their family relations. It was a symbol of both the problems in the family and the best the family had to offer. The cousins had different values regarding sharing the property, developing it, equalizing contributions, and taking into account different resources—and about how families ought to interact. The structural problems were enormous. The cousins had no easy way of communicating, making decisions, or overseeing work on the property, and the disparity in their resources greatly complicated the picture. Furthermore, numerous local land use regulations limited their options for subdividing the property or building additional structures. Finally, history was a heavy presence. In many ways the cousins were continuing a multigenerational family saga. The conflicts among the parents were in danger of being replicated. There was also a positive history as well—the childhood memories that they had of their time at the property were almost all positive and were a motivation to seek a constructive resolution.

Because this situation was so complex and our time to deal with it was relatively limited (three days), we decided that we could not deal with issues internal to sibling groups and that we should instead focus on the relatively positive attitudes they were expressing across sibling groups. We felt that the history needed to be addressed and that the major immediate focus had to be on the structural barriers to moving forward. We therefore started by asking each cousin to share his or her memories of time spent on the property and his or her hopes and fears for its future. As an outcome of this discussion they all decided they really wanted to keep the property if at all possible. They agreed to work on a

plan for keeping the property, and they also agreed that everyone should have some access to it, regardless of his or her contribution.

Once these general agreements were made, we then focused on the structural issues of how to communicate, make decisions, work with local authorities, and get information about different options. The cousins left with some general decisions made and an interesting communication and decision-making structure. They set up a steering committee with one representative from each sibling group.

Our intervention flowed from our analysis of the structure and causes of this particular conflict. Without some way of organizing our thinking about this complex situation, we would not have been able to develop a coherent strategy for how to proceed. Was our analysis correct? Was the strategy we chose optimal? Probably not in all respects, but it nonetheless provided us with a road map for how to help them take the next step in their relationships with the property and, more important, each other.

## HUMAN NEEDS

At the center of the wheel of conflict model are the human needs that drive people's actions, including their engagement in conflict. Many theorists, from Sigmund Freud to Abraham Maslow, have characterized fundamental human needs (Freud, [1930] 2005; Maslow, 1954). Several of them describe the different levels of needs that people experience. In the literature on conflict, a distinction is often made between interests and needs. Interests are viewed as more transitory and superficial, needs as more basic and enduring. Sometimes it is argued that resolutions that address interests but not needs are less meaningful, more Band-Aids than real solutions (Burton and Dukes, 1990).

Rather than conceiving of interests and needs as fundamentally different, I find it more useful to think of a system of human needs, roughly paralleling Maslow's hierarchy (1954). Maslow suggested a hierarchy of human needs and argued that before we can focus our efforts or awareness on attaining higher-level needs, more basic needs must be met. His concepts are often portrayed as a triangle of needs, with the most fundamental needs at the base and higher-level needs at the apex. Most basic, according to Maslow, are our physiological needs for food, clothing, and shelter.

Next are security needs, then social needs, then needs for esteem and self-esteem, and at the top level in his most common formulation is self-actualization. I am less convinced of the hierarchical element of Maslow's formulation because I have often worked with people whose fundamental needs for security and even survival were threatened but who nonetheless were very motivated by relational, moral, or aesthetic needs. Furthermore, I think that there is a great deal of overlap between how these needs are experienced in conflict situations. I propose we consider three overlapping types of needs that operate in conflict and that can assist us in understanding the core of what motivates people in conflict. Interests then become a category of human needs that exists along with basic survival and identity concerns (see Figure 1.2).

A challenge we face in the practical understanding of conflict is to determine what level of needs best explains a conflict. When we have too superficial a view of the sources of a conflict, we cannot address it meaningfully. If a community is concerned about a proposal to place a chemical plant nearby, there are many levels at which we can understand the nature of the problem. For example, the needs of the community to minimize odors, noise, traffic, and toxic exposure may be contrasted with the needs of

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FIGURE 1.2 HUMAN NEEDS IN CONFLICT




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the plant operators for a practical, cheap, and convenient location. This may be a satisfactory level for analyzing the conflict, but if the motivational system for either the community or the plant operates at a more basic level, we may need to delve deeper to get a handle on what is really driving the conflict. The community may have fundamental concerns about the image this plant will create, and its impact on the community's overall desirability and therefore on the attractiveness of the community to investors, upwardly mobile families, and adult children of residents. Similarly, the plant may be concerned about its public reputation and the ease of attracting and retaining a workforce. If we fail to look at the deeper levels of interests, we are likely to end up working on the wrong issues and overlooking some important areas of mutual concern.

But we could go overboard on this and focus too deeply. When we address the sources of conflict at a level that is too deep, we make the conflict much harder to resolve and we may also fail to match the reality experienced by the disputants. For example, in this situation we could concentrate on such fundamental concerns as business versus the environment, the nature of community, and the sense of self that both business leaders and community leaders have and how this is tied into their views concerning the chemical plant proposal. But although these might be real factors in the conflict, they might neither be its practical source nor provide a useful basis for crafting an intervention, and some participants may feel that delving into these issues is inappropriate or intrusive. If we focused at this deeper level, we would not be addressing the conflict on the level that it is experienced by these participants, and we would be concentrating on a set of concerns probably not conducive to a practical intervention process. However, if participants did see these deeper questions as important to resolving the conflict, then at some point these issues would have to be addressed to make any progress.

An additional complicating factor is that different disputants often experience a conflict at different levels. For one party, perhaps the business leaders in the preceding example, this may be a conflict that is essentially about profits and business efficiency. For another, perhaps the community, this might be a more fundamental issue of values and identity. Finding a way to work at both levels

may be essential if progress is to be made. To do this each party has to be willing to address the conflict at the level at which it is experienced by others, but disputants are often resistant to doing this.

Finding the most useful level of depth is not an abstract consideration, and it does not take place in a vacuum. Only through interacting over time with key players can we understand the roots of a conflict in a practical and usable way. The art of conflict intervention is highly dependent on the ability to get to the right depth of understanding and communication in each conflict.

### *Interests*

Interests are the most easily accessible or observable type of need and lie at the heart of most negotiations. Interests can be viewed simply and superficially, or in great depth. If we think of interests as the practical concerns that drive participants in most conflicts, then most frequently it is on interests that we first need to focus when we try to understand a conflict. It is also in the realm of interests that most specific agreements can be attained. If people can present their concerns to each other in a constructive way and are receptive to understanding each other's interests, they are most likely to make progress in working their way through a conflict.

The concept of interests (and interest-based negotiation) was popularized by Fisher and Ury in *Getting to Yes* (1981) and has become a basic element in the negotiator and conflict intervener's lexicon. But to people outside our field, this is often a confusing term (and one not easily translatable into other languages), seeming to refer more to our areas of interest (hobbies, sports, politics, and the like) or to our self-interest. As a mediator, I find myself talking more about "concerns," "what is important," or "needs" than about interests to avoid confusion or jargon.

It is helpful to consider different types of interests: short-term and long-term interests, individual and group interests, outcome-based interests and process interests, and conscious and unconscious interests. Moore (2003) suggests three types of interests: substantive (concerns about tangible benefits), procedural (concerns about a process for interacting, communicating, or decision making), and psychological (concerns about how one is treated, respected, or acknowledged). Often people are most vocal about one kind of interest but most genuinely motivated by another. For example, if we have not received a job promotion that we



expected, we may assert that the process for considering us for that promotion was unfair, when our real concern is that we did not receive the salary raise and additional status that the promotion would have provided. We can often achieve progress in a conflict, even when disputants have incompatible interests of one kind, if we are careful to address other types of interests.

The democratic philosophy of government provides an interesting example of how procedural and substantive interests interact. At the root of democracy is a commitment to addressing procedural interests, even when substantive interests cannot always be met. Citizens continue to feel loyalty to their government, even when they disagree with its policies and have not voted for its leaders, if they fundamentally support the process by which these leaders are selected. The basic deal in a democracy is that we may not always get our way, but we will always have our say, and in return we will remain loyal citizens.

As conflict specialists, we need to analyze the different types of interests that people bring to a conflict and endeavor to understand everyone's interests (including our own) broadly enough and at the right level of depth to gain a practical handle on what is occurring in that conflict.

### *Identity Needs*

Fundamental to our sense of ourselves are what we can call identity needs (Rothman, 1997). These are the needs we all have to preserve a sense of who we are and our place in the world. I find it useful to think of four particular elements of identity: the needs for meaning, community, intimacy, and autonomy.

The need for *meaning* has to do with establishing a purpose for one's life, existence, actions, and struggles. Sometimes pursuing a conflict is a great source of meaning for people. In that case the resolution of the conflict entails a significant loss of meaning. Unless they can find a new source of meaning, this loss may be devastating and may cause them to hold on to a conflict regardless of how well the proposed solution addresses their interests. I once acted as a mediator in an age discrimination case involving someone who was about to retire. When I asked him about his retirement plans, he told me that he was going to pursue his case until he was fully vindicated. Despite the fact that he could have obtained much in a settlement with the company and that

his prospects for a successful legal challenge were poor, I knew this mediation was going nowhere. For many who have been involved in long-term struggles, whether about issues of nationalism, such as in Iran, Ireland, or the Middle East, or other causes, such as environmentalism, animal rights, or small government, the specific issues involved do not tell the whole story. The meaning that the struggle itself has given to people's lives is itself a key motivating factor. This is one reason why many of these disputes seem so intractable.

*Community* refers to that aspect of people's identity that derives from feeling connected with groups with which they can identify and in which they feel recognized. A sense of community can arise from an actual physical neighborhood or geographical area. The nostalgic yearning of some urban dwellers for small-town life is in part an expression of this need. Similarly, the desire many people have to participate in the communal life of their neighborhood is connected to establishing identity. But community can come from other group affiliations as well, with a company, for example, or with a social action organization; a church, synagogue, or mosque; an athletic or artistic subculture; a profession; or an ethnic group. Community can be experienced in both positive and negative ways. Individuals may identify with others on the basis of what they all share or what they are all against. As an identity need, community is not simply about feeling part of a group; it is about having a social home in an impersonal world—a home in which people feel connected, safe, recognized as individuals, and appreciated. When people pursue a conflict to solidify a sense of community or to protect their community against the forces of disintegration, they are in part struggling to preserve their identity.

*Intimacy* is the need for a different kind of connectivity. It goes beyond needing to be recognized and involves wanting to be special, unique, and important to other people. Most intimacy needs are met in family and friendship structures. Intimacy implies some form of reciprocity. Often people cling to the symbols of intimacy or to a pretense of intimacy but actually feel quite alone. In divorces, it is often the loss of intimacy (or sometimes the fact that a façade of intimacy has been shattered) that causes so much pain and challenges people's sense of themselves—their identity. Divorcing spouses frequently experience needs at this level that are usually impossible (and often not desirable) to deal with in

the context of divorce mediation or negotiation. This means that people may feel unfulfilled by the outcome, even when a fundamentally sound agreement has been reached. A longer healing process is often necessary to deal with the loss of intimacy.

If intimacy and community are aspects of individuals' fundamental need for connection, *autonomy* is the flip side of the coin. At the same time as we need connection, we also need a sense of independence, freedom, and individuality. In relationships we often struggle with how to find a deep sense of both connection and autonomy at the same time. This struggle to establish needed ties and their boundaries is a source of much of our internal conflict, and it is also at the heart of many interpersonal conflicts. Parents and adolescents frequently experience conflict that is ostensibly about immediate issues, such as chores, curfews, or school, but that is more often about dependency and autonomy. We can also see this need expressed in the struggles of many ethnic groups to be recognized as autonomous political entities. When people or groups feel that they do not have meaningful autonomy, independence, or freedom, this fundamental identity need is not being met and serious conflict is likely.

Some conflicts cannot be effectively dealt with unless identity needs are addressed. These disputes are often not amenable to a negotiation process. They usually require an incremental process of change in which people, groups, or organizations gradually achieve a different level of understanding and acceptance. They often call for a social change effort or a personal growth experience of some kind. Conflict intervention efforts in which the focus is more on the relationship and system of communication among disputants and less on achieving a specific outcome are often more valuable in dealing with identity-based conflicts than efforts to arrive at tangible agreements.

### *Survival Needs*

Survival needs include fundamental concerns about safety and security, but also about food, shelter, and clothing. Sometimes in the conflicts we deal with survival is at stake, such as when we work on conflicts involving domestic violence, gang warfare, or ethnic conflicts in war-torn areas. But at other times we may be dealing with people who feel that their survival is at stake even if that does

not appear to be the case from our external viewpoint. For example, in cases of divorce it is not uncommon for one or the other spouse to express a fear of complete ruin—of being homeless, without work and without any means of support. We sometimes hear this from people who have a good education, family support, and access to financial resources.

Even if this fear is not based on a genuine threat, we still face the challenge of understanding how it affects people's approach to conflict. What may be irrational behavior if one's survival is not at stake may seem fully appropriate if it is. When people (or animals) are genuinely endangered, the fight or flight response, for example, may be very functional—but if no genuine danger is present this stance can exacerbate a conflict considerably. When we face an immediate and severe threat (such as an impending accident in an automobile), all of our attention and focus ought to be on the immediate consequences of our actions; but at other times a consideration of longer-term consequences or opportunities may be more important. And when someone feels severely at risk, reassurances that all will be well in the end are usually ineffective. What is needed is immediate assistance or attention to the threats that the individual is experiencing.

In the case of the cousins described earlier, a major consideration was which needs to focus on and how deeply to go into them. For some of the cousins the oceanfront property seemed to represent their need for community and even meaning. For others it was more valuable as a potential resource and a beautiful vacation home. My colleague and I decided to touch briefly on the identity-based concerns because they needed to be acknowledged, but given the immediate needs and availability of the group we focused on their interests, feeling that an agreement about how to proceed on these more tangible concerns was likely to provide the most beneficial next step for them.

## TENSION BETWEEN EXPRESSION AND OUTCOME

Disputants often act in ways that seem to go against their best interests. Sometimes they seem more interested in having their

day in court than in arriving at a solution that gives them what they need. They are sometimes more interested in expressing their feelings than in getting results. Conversely, people sometimes dismiss attempts to explore what they are experiencing as inappropriate or touchy-feely.

Lewis Coser proposes two components of conflict in his classic work, *The Functions of Social Conflict* (1956). One, which he labels “unrealistic,” involves people’s need for some form of energy release. The other component, which he labels “realistic,” relates to people’s desire for a result that will meet their needs. The unrealistic component will not be satisfied by a good solution, but instead requires listening, ventilation, acknowledgment, validation, a “day in court,” or some other means of expressing or releasing the feelings and energy associated with a conflict. The realistic component requires a satisfactory outcome or solution, one that addresses people’s essential interests.

Coser’s labels are sometimes confusing to people because both components are in some sense realistic—that is, they are real to those people who are experiencing them. We might think of them instead as the expressive and the outcome-oriented aspects of conflict. The first component involves the need to deal with the anger, hurt, tension, frustration, sadness, and fear that disputants may be feeling. The second element relates to their concerns about arriving at a satisfactory outcome that addresses their more tangible concerns. Efforts to deal with a conflict with significant expressive elements by focusing on potential solutions or agreements—that is, by skipping over the expressive elements—will not succeed. Similarly, efforts to address the outcome-oriented component by focusing on the expression of feelings may also fail. We all have experienced a time when our emotions were too intense for us to focus on a rational solution to a problem. But most of us have also experienced a time in a conflict when what we really wanted was a good solution, not more exploration of feelings or clarification of values.

Often (although not always) people must find a means of dealing with the expressive aspects of conflict—sometimes directly in the conflict interaction, sometimes elsewhere—before they can effectively focus on an outcome that will adequately address their

needs. But we see the reverse as well. Sometimes before people can deal with their feelings or release their tension they need to see that some of the most important outcomes they are seeking will be addressed. For example, they need to see that an issue that is important to them is on the agenda for discussion. Or they seek a tangible sign of good faith from the other party, such as providing critical information or agreeing to meet face-to-face, before they can deal with their feelings of mistrust and anger and take the next steps forward.

The movement between the expressive and outcome-oriented aspects of conflict is not a linear process in which people always start in one place and work their way to another. They go back and forth; events throw them from a focus on their emotions to a focus on results, and both are frequently mixed together in ways that are hard to discern. Yet, as complex as the interactions between these two elements of conflict are, the distinction between them is often obvious, and people instinctively respond to them with different strategies.

At times a symbolic act indicates that people are ready to let go of some of the expressive aspects of a conflict and become more outcome focused. The very moving picture of Ian Paisley, the longtime leader of the Democratic Union in Ulster, and Martin McGuinness, a one-time leader of the Provisional IRA, smiling side by side after they had just been sworn in as First Minister and Deputy First Minister of Northern Ireland, respectively, was such a moment. These bitter enemies were now to be the coleaders of Northern Ireland. That picture, seen around the world, represented the movement from the outer rim of the wheel of conflict to its inner core, saying, as it were, "We can put our feelings and our past behind us and together try to focus on how best to meet the needs of all the people in our country." Of course, this single photo opportunity did not end the conflict or dissipate all of the feelings of mistrust and anger that had developed over many generations. The search for a stable and durable peace in Northern Ireland is by no means over. But that act nonetheless had tremendous symbolic and practical importance and helped move the conflict to a new and ideally more constructive phase.

## WHY THINK ABOUT CONFLICT?

The premise of this book and the field of conflict studies in general is that understanding conflict is critical to reaching a better understanding of human behavior and when and how to intervene to assist disputing parties. There are many alternative models of analysis. Professionals concerned with how people handle their differences can focus on decision making, negotiation, communication, stimulus response, power exchanges, peace studies, system dynamics, and so forth. So why should those of us who have identified ourselves as conflict professionals focus on conflict? Does this not direct our attention to the negative aspects of the interchange, to the part that has people at odds rather than the part that addresses the mutual concerns people share? Of course, focusing on conflict does not exclude a focus on peace building or communication or social change. But it does suggest that a focus on conflict can be a powerful tool in dealing with important issues and social dynamics. Why?

Conflict is not in itself a bad thing. It is in fact a necessary ingredient in the growth and development of individuals, families, communities, and societies. Conflict can help build community, define and balance people's needs as individuals with their needs as participants in larger systems, and help them face and address in a clear and conscious way the many difficult choices that life brings to them. Working through a conflict can be an important bonding experience and an opportunity for personal growth. The strength of social systems lies not only in how they prevent serious conflicts but also in how, when conflicts do arise, they address them to maintain system integrity and preserve the well-being of their members. Also critical is the capacity of systems to encourage and allow for the expression of genuine differences that exist. By facing major conflicts, addressing them, and reorganizing as needed to deal with them, and staying engaged with them as long as necessary and productive, social organizations learn to adapt to changes in their environment. Understanding the dynamics of conflict therefore provides conflict resolvers and related professionals with a basic tool for addressing the essential forces that shape the development of individuals and social entities.

It is easy enough to say that conflict is inevitable and is not in itself good or bad, but for many people accepting this simple premise is an uphill battle. There may be an important lesson for us in the resistance that people have to acknowledging conflict in their lives. This may be something other than dysfunctional conflict avoidance. Perhaps there is an inevitable shift in the way people interact with each other once they acknowledge the presence of conflict, giving them good reason to approach that admission with caution. If this shift in focus, energy, attitude, or behavior is a natural consequence of the emergence of conflict, and if conflict is itself necessary, inevitable, and often healthy, this poses a fundamental dilemma for all of us. We had therefore better strive to comprehend the nature of conflict in all its complexities. Understanding conflict becomes the vehicle for understanding the many contradictions that are necessarily present in our efforts to be social beings. Understanding these contradictions is also essential to comprehending how we evolved as a species (Nowak, with Highfield, 2011).

Furthermore, something can almost always be done about conflict. This does not mean that it always can or should be resolved, but a productive response can usually move conflict in a more constructive direction. Sometimes this response may be to escalate a conflict so that it emerges into people's consciousness or takes on a higher priority for action. Sometimes the response may be to do nothing and let events develop, allowing the conflict to mature. Sometimes it may be to help people understand their needs and express their feelings at a deeper, more meaningful level. Sometimes it may be to find some Band-Aid to stop the bleeding. Sometimes it may be to look for creative solutions that all parties can accept. There is no single correct response to conflict, but that does not mean there are not wise and unwise responses to any particular conflict. Our success as individuals, communities, organizations, and societies is in no small measure related to our developing wisdom concerning how we can respond to the many conflicts we face.