

Destructive Conflict and Oppression

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The focus of much of my work in the field of conflict resolution has been centered on the question: What determines whether a conflict takes a constructive or destructive course? After much research and thought, I came to the following conclusions:

1. A conflict is likely to take a constructive course if it is viewed as a mutual problem to be worked on together in a cooperative process; a conflict is likely to take a destructive course if it is defined as a win-lose conflict in which the conflicting parties engage in a competitive process to determine who wins and who loses.
2. The typical effects of a successful cooperative process when introduced into a conflict, that is not already strongly determined, tend to induce a cooperative, constructive process of conflict resolution. Such typical effect includes: open, honest communication; friendliness and readiness to be helpful to one another; enhancement of the other's power and well-being; and mutual trust and trustworthiness. In contrast, the typical effects of a competitive process tend to induce a destructive, competitive process of conflict resolution. These typical effects include: communication designed to deceive; hostility and obstructiveness directed toward the other; attempts to weaken the power of the other and to keep or place the other in an inferior position; mutual suspicion and untrustworthiness.

Oppression is the experience of repeated, widespread, systematic injustice. There is clearly an objective conflict of interest between those who are advantaged and those who are disadvantaged by the oppression. The conflict may be open and active: the advantaged seeking to defend their advantages against the attempt by the disadvantaged and their allies to eliminate the injustices. Or, the conflict may be latent, as when the disadvantaged do not have an activating, political awareness of the possibility of overcoming oppression. Although there are exceptions, active conflict between those who are disadvantaged and those who are advantaged by oppression usually takes a destructive course. In part this is so because those who are advantaged commonly "moralize" their advantages; it is their due because of their "superiority" and the others' "inferiority" (with regard to such matters as: intelligence, industry, adherence to moral norms, inheritance, and Godliness). In part, it is because when those who have been oppressed develop an active political awareness of their oppression, they also become more aware of their feelings of humiliation and their rage toward those they see as their humiliators; this awareness sometimes leads to a desire for revenge and for humiliation of the oppressor.

Oppression often leads to destructive conflict not only because the oppressors have moralized their advantages but also because they fear the humiliation they will experience from the rage and revenge of the oppressed. Hence, they commonly experience the conflict as a win-lose conflict. Similarly, the oppressed not only seek to overcome the oppression but they also

fear that their attempts to do so will lead to attacks by the oppressor. So they too commonly experience the conflict as a win-lose conflict.

The issue that I would like to have discussed in this Conference is: What can third parties as well as enlightened members of the advantaged and of the disadvantaged groups do to foster a constructive process of social change rather than a destructive one?