

---

## UNIT 8 THEORIES OF CONFLICTS

---

### *Structure*

#### 8.1 Introduction

##### *Aims and Objectives*

#### 8.2 Theories of Conflict

#### 8.3 Human Nature and Conflict

##### 8.3.1 Biological and Socio-Biological Theories

##### 8.3.2 Instinct Theory

##### 8.3.3 Darwinism and Social Darwinism

##### 8.3.4 Ethology

##### 8.3.5 Socio-biology

##### 8.3.6 Criticisms of Biological and Socio-Biological Theories

#### 8.4 Psychological and Social Psychological Theories

##### 8.4.1 Freudian Interpretation and Psychoanalysis

##### 8.4.2 Social Identity Theory

##### 8.4.3 The Seville Statement on Violence

#### 8.5 Society and Conflict

##### 8.5.1 Social Process Theories

#### 8.6 Social Structural Theories

##### 8.6.1 Structural Violence Theory

##### 8.6.2 Human Needs Theory

##### 8.6.3 Resource Theory

##### 8.6.4 Relative Deprivation Theory

##### 8.6.5 Socio-Economic Theories

#### 8.7 Formal Theories

#### 8.8 Summary

#### 8.9 Terminal Questions

##### Suggested Readings

---

### 8.1 INTRODUCTION

---

In the earlier Units, you have read that there are different explanations about the causes of conflict in the field of peace and conflict studies. These are further explained by different theories. One set of theories locate the underlying causes and sources of conflict in human beings or in human nature. These can be conceptualised as Biological and Psychological Theories. Other theories place the sources of conflict in the way human beings interact with each other in the society or in socio-structural/institutional conditions. These can be referred to as Social Process Theories and Social Structural Theories. As such the two major sets of theories either focus on the human agency or on the patterns of social interaction and socio-structural conditions. A third set of theories of conflict are known as formal theories. These theories use mathematical language to express their core ideas. This Unit focuses on these theories.

### *Aims and Objectives*

After going through this unit you will:

- become familiar with the various theories about the causes and sources of conflict; and
- know about the debates within the theories of conflict.

---

## **8.2 THEORIES OF CONFLICT**

---

You have read above that the range of theories that explain the causes and sources of conflict can be categorised into two: firstly, Human Nature and Conflict and secondly, Society and Conflict. Theories under these two categories point towards the ‘nature versus nurture’ debate. The ‘nature’ theorists emphasise that human beings are primarily affected by genes, so conflict is basically in their nature. The ‘nurture’ theorists insist that conflict emerges from the way society is organised. The various types of divisions within society lead to conflict.

Those who stress on human nature as a source of conflict are of the view that violence is inevitable, widespread and universal—irrespective of the social structures—as it is ‘inherent’ in human beings or within the individual. Hence these theories are also referred to as *Inherency Theories*. The social structural theories argue that conflict is not located inside the human being but outside it. Conflict is thus dependent on factors external to the human being. Such theories are also known as *Contingency Theories*.

There is a third set of theories called as *Interactionist Theories*, which combine the features of inherency and contingency theories. This approach rejects the ‘nature versus nurture’ debate as it believes that human behaviour is not caused by and should not be reduced to just one factor, either nature or nurture. Human behaviour, in fact, is a combination of both genetics and social structural conditions. John Burton’s Human Needs Theory has features of both inherency and contingency. Burton says that human beings are driven by their needs and they will pursue them at all costs. So, needs are, thus, inherent in human beings. However, these needs have to be satisfied in the social context and not outside it. The latter aspect is determined by contingency.

This unit will, largely focus on the various aspects of the inherency and contingency theories.

---

## **8.3 HUMAN NATURE AND CONFLICT**

---

Theories based on human agency focus on human behaviour, both at the individual as well as at the collective level, as the source of conflict.

### **8.3.1 Biological and Socio-Biological Theories**

Biological theoretical approaches trace the sources of conflict and violence in the human genes. They emphasise on the biological factors or inborn traits of human beings. Biologically determined factors are seen to be responsible for inter-personal and inter-group violence. The biological theories mostly focus on aggression. It considers aggression as being genetically programmed in the human nervous system. Various biological perspectives about human aggression are reflected in the Instinct Theory, Darwinism and Social Darwinism, Ethology, and Socio-biology. However, these perspectives have been subjected to severe criticisms.

### 8.3.2 Instinct Theory

It argues that aggressive behaviour is rooted in human instinct. Instinctive impulse is the source of human aggression and destructive behaviour. This is evident in the basic and primitive urge to fight and dominate.

### 8.3.3 Darwinism and Social Darwinism

Charles Darwin in his *Origin of Species* gave the concepts of 'survival of the fittest' – only the fittest people who successfully adapt to the specific environment in which they live will survive. This is biological evolution but it is a slow and gradual process. Hierarchical and graded relations between different classes have been justified by using the principle of 'survival of the fittest'.

Social Darwinism explains conflict in terms of 'natural selection' – the survival of the fittest and the inherent aggression in human beings. It stresses that competition and conflict play very significant roles in human society. Social Darwinists used the concept of 'stages of evolution' to legitimize the imperialist policies of conquests and wars.

Darwin's ideas have been criticised on the premise that he was unaware about the role played by mutations or biological process of changes occurring in the genetic material.

### 8.3.4 Ethology

Ethology is the science of animal behaviour in their natural habitat. It studies the behaviour patterns of different species. Ethology and evolutionary history have drawn conclusions about the instinctive impulse by comparing and deducing similarities between humans and natural animal behaviour. Ethologists have contended that the behaviour pattern of different species show a strong inherited base. All organisms, humans included, are a product of a process of 'evolution' in which 'fitness' for survival is determined by a combination of mutational factors and natural selection. Konrad Lorenz in his book *On Aggression* argues that aggression in human beings is a result of an "instinct for aggression". This aggression in humans is shared by most other species and has developed in an evolutionary manner because it has helped them survive over a period of time. Freud too said that human beings may have inherited aggressive impulses from many past generations through the process of natural selection.

### 8.3.5 Socio-biology

Socio-biology is a science that focuses on the study of social organisation of animals. Socio-biologists believe that animals including humans may have genetically inherited aggressive tendencies of social behaviours. Though, sociobiologists see animal aggression as being based largely in genes, they stress that it varies from one species to the other and also between different patterns of social organisations. Aggression is of different kinds – predatory aggression, fear-induced aggression, irritable aggression etc. – each having its different basis biologically. In humans, aggression is less produced compared to other animals. Also, aggression in humans is more influenced by cultural learning. Within a group of species, there is likely to be more aggression if the population is concentrated compared to where populations are more spread out. For example, spread out populations like the Eskimos of North America and the Aborigines of Australia were less involved in violence and warfare before they came in contact with the Western culture.

### 8.3.6 Criticisms of Biological and Socio-Biological Theories

The biological roots of human aggression have been subjected to severe criticism. Anthropologists and sociologists opine that human behaviour or human instinct cannot be traced to biological roots. It is more a product of human culture, which is created by human groups and passed on through social learning.

Though Freud opined that aggression is ingrained within individuals, he too was of the view that it developed in the individual through experience with others such as family members, mainly parents. Hence, psychoanalytic theory emphasizes that individual experiences during the period of early socialisation determines human personality.

Social Learning Theories also stress that aggression has nothing to do with genes but is a product of social learning. Learning is, however, dependent on conditioning. The stimuli available in a given situation is most likely to condition our response, for example, if there is a gun nearby, one is likely to use it if there is threat to one's life or property. Moreover, if aggressive behaviour is rewarded, one is likely to repeat it. On the contrary if it is punished, it is not likely to be repeated. Observational learning theory says that we learn from others, by way of observation of actions. We also learn through language.

John Burton says that if inherent human aggressiveness is the source of all conflicts, then we will just have to live with it. At the most, it can be controlled. In this case, conflict resolution that is, understanding the roots of the conflict and trying to resolve them is irrelevant, as the source cannot be changed or reformed at all.

Gandhi did not see violence as a part of human nature. He believed in the essential goodness of human beings and viewed human nature positively. According to him, "Man's nature is not essentially evil." Also, humans are capable of rising above selfishness and violence. Gandhi also opined that conflict was not inbuilt into people but into social structures. For Gandhi, human beings are not innately aggressive. When asked whether aggression is a basic human instinct, Gandhi observed: "Fortunately for humanity, nonviolence pervades human life and is observed by men without special effort." Moreover, he was of the belief that human beings "would have been self-destroyed ages ago" if they were not nonviolent by nature.

---

## 8.4 PSYCHOLOGICAL AND SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGICAL THEORIES

---

Psychological theories locate conflict in the "minds of men", in their beliefs, ideology, motivation, perceptions, values, etc. Some psychological traditions also focus on experiences of frustration that could lead to aggression. According to psychoanalysts, unfulfilled psychological needs could incite human to violence via the instinctive impulse. However, others locate violence in intra-personal tensions and other such psychic variables.

In motivational theories, the origin of aggression is in blocked energy of frustration, which is produced in varied social and psychological settings. Since aggression here is a reaction to an external stimulus, hence the social environment is also partly responsible for the activation of an internal physiological mechanism.

The socio-psychological perspective also focuses on processes of group formation and differentiation. Groups try to differentiate themselves from the 'others' and in this process (mis)perceptions, stereotyping, and dehumanization play a role, which in turn could lead to violent conflict.

### 8.4.1 Freudian Interpretation and Psychoanalysis

Psychiatrist Sigmund Freud traced the roots of conflict in intractable human nature. He stated that aggression “is carried out in the name of self-preservation, and is inherent to humans.” Albert Einstein, in a letter written to Freud before the Second World War, wanted to know the reasons for the easy arousal of hatred. Freud answered that the roots of violence are in the death instinct. He wrote: “War is due to a destructive instinct – instinct aimed at returning things to the inanimate state and which can work both inside and outside the body.”

According to Freud, human beings have two kinds of instincts – the life instinct and the death instinct. The life instinct desires pleasure. Compared to the life instinct is the death instinct, which is referred to as ‘Thanet’s’ by Freud. This death instinct leads to destructive behaviour – both towards the self as well as towards others and the world in general. The human urge for self-destruction is directed outwards, to destroy others, so as to preserve the self. For Freud, however, aggression is not the end; it is only a means to release tension. Aggressive behaviour helps reduce the tension.

According to the Psychoanalytical Theory, human beings start differentiating between the ‘self’ and the ‘other’ from a very early age. This differentiation manifests itself in a deep psychological need for enemies.

### 8.4.2 Social Identity Theory

Henri Farfel formulated the Social Identity Theory in which he aimed to answer the question – why people favour their own group over others. According to Tajfel, groups occupy different levels on the hierarchy of power and status. The process of distinguishing between ‘us and them’ changes the way people look at each other. Tajfel believed that the motivating principle behind this behaviour was a desire in people to have a positive and secure self-concept – a positive social identity. It can thus be deduced that people mainly think of their group as a good one. But groups become a psychological reality only when defined in comparison to other groups. Hence, group members strive for a positive social identity and make efforts to achieve it by distinguishing positively between their own group and other groups.

Tajfel also addressed the question of what happens with those groups who have a low status compared to others. Such a group could choose one of these options: leave the group, either physically or psychologically; focus only on features that make one’s group look good; compare one’s group with other groups which are placed even lower on the status hierarchy; devalue the aspects that reflect poorly on one’s group; and try to change the existing status hierarchy by engaging in social change. However, which one of these options will be chosen, will depend on a range of circumstances. Social identity theory, therefore, was basically a theory of social change.

### 8.4.3 The Seville Statement on Violence

The Seville Statement on Violence was written in 1986 for the United Nations sponsored International Year of Peace. A team of international specialists who were involved with the Seville Statement came up with the following five conclusions:

- 1) It is scientifically incorrect to say that we have inherited a tendency to make war from our animal ancestors.

- 2) It is scientifically incorrect to say that war or any other violent behaviour is genetically programmed into our human nature.
- 3) It is scientifically incorrect to say that in the course of human evolution there has been a selection for aggressive behaviour more than for other kinds of behaviour.
- 4) It is scientifically incorrect to say that humans have a “violent brain”.
- 5) It is scientifically incorrect to say that war is caused by “instinct” or any single motivation.

The Seville Statement was endorsed by a wide range of scientific and professional organisations around the world and was based on the latest scientific evidence. It was adopted by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) in 1989.

---

## **8.5 SOCIETY AND CONFLICT**

---

The theoretical approaches about society and conflict locate the source of conflict not within the individual but outside it – in social interactions and social processes and in the way society is organised. Aggression thus is not inbuilt but its expression is dependent on factors outside the individual.

### **8.5.1 Social Process Theories**

Social process theories see conflict and conflict resolution as processes. One of the first ones to write about social processes was Adam Smith. Smith was an economist as well as a philosopher. He gave importance to the fabric of social relationships. According to him, these fabrics of relationships could lead to the emergence of principles, which could be applied to conflict resolution. He felt that if markets were allowed to function naturally, they could be a great resolver of conflicts between humans.

Several theorists in the 20<sup>th</sup> century have paid attention to social process theories. Park and Burgess related conflict to competition. Conflict had a positive function for Simmel and Coser, as they were interwoven into social institutions and contributed positively to them. Anselm Strauss examined the resolution of conflict and the establishment of “negotiated order”. He suggested that human institutions grow through a process of negotiation. Negotiation thus was a fundamental process through which society was formed and constantly reconstituted.

Field Theory sees conflict and its resolution as products of a field of forces. This is reflected in the works of Field theorists like Kurt Lewin and Morton Deutsch. Lewin believed that behaviour was a product of a field of forces and how they came together. This determined the behaviour of those individuals who were involved. Deutsch analysed the concepts of competition and cooperation and sought to find out the conditions under which cooperation could emerge out of competition. Communication according to him was very critical for cooperation.

Systems Theory views conflict as a system of relationships. It seeks to find out how parts of a social system, that is social institutions, work together. Parts of social systems may ‘function’ but they may also ‘dysfunction’. When they dysfunction, they are not in complete harmony. This is where the concept of conflict and conflict resolution comes into the picture.

Social Exchange Theories have tried to apply the principles of economic exchange in markets to non-economic exchange such as in informal interactions and group patterns. George C. Homans analysed interactions in terms of rewards and costs. People try to maintain the behaviour that proves profitable. Kenneth E. Boulding's conflict related perspectives mainly drew from economic models. He recognized that conflict can involve negative exchanges – more “bads” than “goods”, compared to economics, which mainly deals with positive exchange.

Dean Pruitt and Jeffrey Rubin paid attention to how conflicts could escalate. They identified five strategies of dealing with conflict – contending, yielding, problem solving, withdrawing and inaction. When both parties go for the contending strategy, conflict could escalate. Louis Kriesberg recognized the presence of intractable conflicts – conflicts which never seem to get resolved. He stressed that conflicts that seem easy to resolve initially may become intractable in the future while those that seem intractable may get resolved easily. Terrell Northrup expanded on the idea of intractability. According to her, intractable conflicts are those in which the parties are not only opposed to each other but which also strongly incorporates a central sense of identity.

---

## 8.6 SOCIAL STRUCTURAL THEORIES

---

Social structural theories emphasize on the organisation of society. It believes that the way society is organised or the divisions within society create the causes and conditions for conflict. These would include socio-economic aspects as well as race, religion, ethnicity, age and gender divisions. Apart from these, the world system is also a structure where states are the main players. Hans Morgenthau, an advocate of political realism, identified basic interests of the state as basis for its international policies. Johan Galtung, on the other hand, strongly believed in equality among nations and states.

### 8.6.1 Structural Violence Theory

According to the Structural Violence Theory, conflict is inherent in social structures. Social structures and institutions cause structural violence. Johan Galtung distinguished between three kinds of violence: direct or overt, indirect or structural and cultural. Direct violence intends to harm another individual or group directly and is a response to the experience of structural violence. In structural violence, institutions, systems and structures either discriminate between people or deny or deprive them of their rights and the ability to satisfy their basic human needs such as survival, well-being, safety, respect, freedom, identity, religion, etc. Cultural violence is used to justify and legitimize overt and structural violence through ideology, religion, language, arts, education etc.

Structural violence threatens the lives and livelihoods of individuals, groups, communities, etc. and prevents them from developing their potential and realising their goals. It can take the form of repression, exploitation and/or alienation. Here people could be exploited economically, repressed politically and/or alienated culturally by the structure. Slavery and colonialism are some of the examples of structural violence.

Gandhi believed in creating new social arrangements free of structural violence. His approach to conflict resolution thus aimed to preserve the individual while systematically targeting the structure.

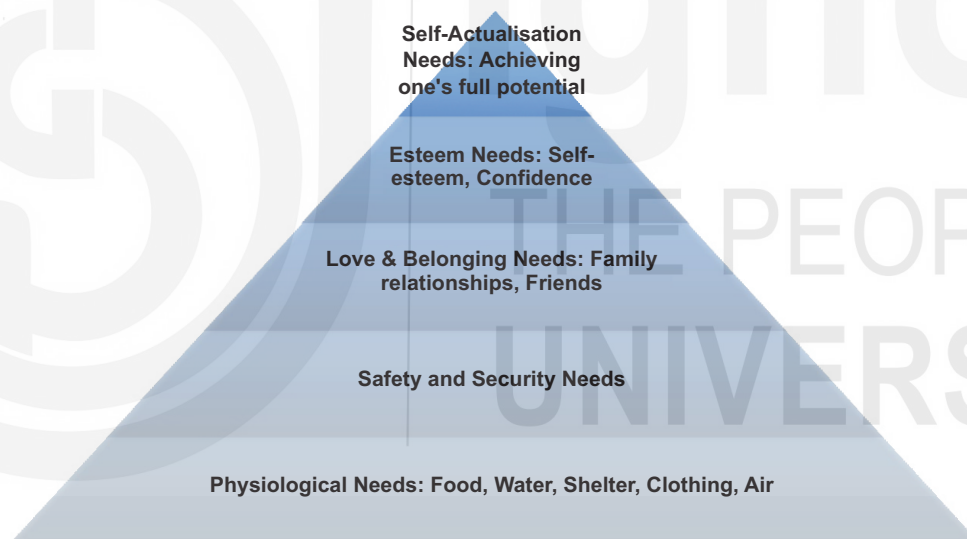
### 8.6.2 Human Needs Theory

The Human Needs Theory was propounded by John Burton. The theory believes that human beings have certain basic or universal human needs. When those are not met or remain unsatisfied, it can lead to conflict. The process of conflict resolution should thus look to satisfy the basic human needs of the people or groups involved in the conflict.

Human needs are seen as essentials or requirements that a person needs to live or continue and propagate life. These needs must be satisfied within the social context and not outside it. These basic human needs are material, cultural and social in nature. The material needs are food, shelter, health care, employment etc. The cultural needs are religion, language and the social ones are respect, dignity, safety and security. There can be no compromise on the basic human needs.

There is, however, no unanimity about the number and kinds of such needs. John Burton mentioned nine needs – consistency in response, stimulation, security, recognition, and distributive justice, appearance of rationality, meaning, control and role defence. Others have, however, expanded on the list of needs.

Abraham Maslow came up with a needs pyramid in 1943, in which he described needs in a hierarchical manner. The base of Maslow's pyramid consists of physiological needs; the security needs are placed above it; then the belonging needs; followed by the esteem needs and on top are the self-actualisation needs.



**Abraham Maslow's Need Pyramid**

Gandhi too saw conflict as the result of structural denial of human needs. The creation of new structures is necessary for the satisfaction of human needs. This would require a method of struggle that satisfies three conditions: destruction of need-denying structures, creation of need-satisfying structures and respecting the needs of the conflicting parties during the struggle. The Gandhian approach to conflict resolution – Satyagraha, was an attempt to satisfy all three conditions. Gandhi saw self-realisation as the “highest” need but stressed that its fulfillment was dependent on the satisfaction of other needs.

### 8.6.3 Resource Theory

Conflict is caused when one party wants the resource the other has or when two or more parties want the same resource. People fight over resources because they are scarce or limited. Resources could be tangible or intangible. They could be in different forms such as land or territory, money, coal, oil, water, etc.



Max Weber classified resources into three categories: wealth, power and prestige. Wealth is a tangible resource which includes money, land etc. Power is a resource, for those who own and possess it and can make decisions about whether to allocate them or not and how to allocate them. Prestige means respect or reputation, which is based on ranking from the most respected to the less respected. It is a resource as all of us desire to have it but not all of us can have it.

#### **8.6.4 Relative Deprivation Theory**

Relative deprivation theory is based on the concept of deprivation, which indicates difference between what one expects in life and what s/he eventually gets. People feel deprived when they get much less than what they have expected or what they have been promised. This can lead to aggression and make people enter into conflict with others. Absolute deprivation is associated with starvation and poverty. Ted Robert Gurr used the concept of relative deprivation in explaining ethnic conflicts.

#### **8.6.5 Socio-Economic Theories**

Karl Marx believed that structures of economic organisation lay the foundation for class conflict. The economic structure is thus the source of conflict. Marx in his theory of class conflict contends that social institutions and structures reflect the material reality of society. Economic structure has determined every other aspect of life including politics in the development of human history. The capitalists, who control the means of production or the economic structure also control and have power over the social structures. Such an economic system will always be exploitative of the working class and this will give rise to class conflict.

Neo-Marxists like Antonio Gramsci do not give too much emphasis to economic structures. Gramsci came up with the theory of “ideological hegemony”. He was of the opinion that capitalists not only control the means of production but also a host of other things like values, attitudes, beliefs, ideas, opinions, cultural norms, laws and rules. Ideology helps the ruling class in justifying its interests. When the ideological hegemony of the ruling class is challenged by the masses, it leads to conflict.

There are several other theorists who believe that the sources of conflict are located in the socio-economic divisions of the society. Max Weber related social conflict to social change. Ralf Dahrendorf argued that conflict is the main element that leads to social change. He stressed on both political as well as economic factors. Critical theorists like Max Horkheimer emphasized on the cultural effects of contemporary class divisions.

---

### **8.7 FORMAL THEORIES**

---

Within formal theories, social conflict is seen in terms of quantitatively expressed relationships and conflict resolution is viewed as stability in the dynamics of these relationships. Some of the formal theorists are Lewis Richardson, Von Neumann and Morgenstern. Richardson studied social conflict quantitatively. He used mathematical models to analyse the arms race. Von Neumann and Morgenstern developed the Theory of Utility, which represented human interests on an interval scale. They measured utility in terms of relative preferences – given a choice, what do humans prefer? Human interests, conflict and conflict resolution could be expressed and studied quantitatively. Game Theory was based on the theory of utility. It used mathematical analyses of conflicts of interest to evaluate the strategies of players. It also tried to determine how the players could best come together to resolve

their conflicts. The game theory developed concepts such as zero-sum game (interests of both parties are opposed to each other) and non-zero sum game (has both competitive and cooperative elements).

---

## 8.8 SUMMARY

---

Theories of conflict view conflict as either inherent in human nature or nurtured in a social context. The nature part concentrates on biological and psychological aspects. The nurtured aspect focuses on social processes and social institutions and structures. However, the nature versus nurture debate is long over. It has been firmly established that human behaviour is a consequence of interactions between biological, psychological, social and environmental factors. Within the broader frame work have been devised various theories.

---

## 8.9 TERMINAL QUESTIONS

---

- 1) Distinguish between the inherency, contingency and interactionist theories of conflict.
- 2) Discuss the 'nature versus nurture' debate.
- 3) Analyse the biological and socio-biological theories of conflict.
- 4) Illustrate the psychological and socio-psychological theories of conflict.
- 5) Write a critical note on whether conflict is inherent in human beings. Substantiate with arguments.
- 6) What is the Seville Statement on Violence and what is its significance?
- 7) What are some of the social process theories?
- 8) Describe some of the major social structural theories of conflict. What are the main arguments of these theories?
- 9) The non-fulfillment of basic needs leads to conflict. Do you agree? Give reasons in support of your answer.
- 10) What is the Structural Violence Theory?
- 11) Write a brief note on the formal theories of conflict.
- 12) Discuss Gandhi's views on the various theories of conflict.

---

## SUGGESTED READINGS

---

Alan C. Tidwell (1998), *Conflict Resolved: A Critical Assessment of Conflict Resolution*, London & New York: Pinter.

David P. Barash & Charles P. Webel (2002), *Peace and Conflict Studies*, London & New Delhi: Sage Publications.

Ho-Won Jeong (2008), *Understanding Conflict and Conflict Analysis*, New Delhi: Sage

James A. Schellenberg (1996), *Conflict Resolution: Theory, Research and Practice*, New York: State University of New York Press.

Louis Kriesberg (2007), *Constructive Conflicts: From Escalation to Resolution*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, New York: Roman & Littlefield Publishers, INC.