

# Conflict

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## Conflict

**Primary Disciplinary Field(s):** Psychology, Sociology, Political Science, Philosophy

### 1. Core Definition

In its broadest sense, **conflict** refers to a state of opposition or incompatibility between two or more parties, which can include individuals, groups, or even ideas and objectives within a single entity. From a psychological perspective, as highlighted in foundational texts, conflict arises when there are perceived divergences in actions, goals, or beliefs that are seen as mutually exclusive or obstructing to each other's attainment. This fundamental tension forms the bedrock of conflict, manifesting in various forms ranging from subtle disagreements to overt hostility. The presence of conflict often signals a disruption in normal functioning, demanding attention and resolution to restore equilibrium or facilitate progress.

The essence of conflict lies in the perception of a threat or opposition, whether it is real or imagined. It is not merely the existence of differing viewpoints but the belief that these differences are irreconcilable or pose a challenge to one's own interests. This perception can escalate quickly, transforming minor discrepancies into significant barriers. Understanding conflict therefore requires an examination of both the objective circumstances and the subjective interpretations that individuals or groups bring to a situation, as these interpretations heavily influence the nature and intensity of the ensuing disagreement.

Moreover, conflict is inherently dynamic and process-oriented, rather than a static state. It involves a series of interactions where parties attempt to assert their positions, influence outcomes, and defend their interests. This dynamic interplay can lead to escalation, de-escalation, or transformation, depending on the strategies employed and the context in which the conflict unfolds. The definition of conflict is thus multifaceted, encompassing not only the opposing elements but also the ongoing processes through which these oppositions are expressed and potentially managed.

### 2. Etymology and Historical Development

The term "conflict" originates from the Latin word "conflictus," which means "a striking together." This etymological root vividly captures the essence of collision or clashing that is central to the concept. Historically, the understanding of conflict has evolved significantly across various philosophical and scientific traditions. Ancient philosophers, such as Heraclitus, viewed conflict as an inherent and necessary force in the universe, driving change and the balance of opposites, suggesting that "war is the father of all things." This early perspective acknowledged conflict not just as destructive, but as a fundamental aspect of existence and development.

During the Enlightenment, thinkers like Thomas Hobbes explored conflict through the lens of human nature and societal organization, famously describing life in the state of nature as "war of all against all." His work posited that strong social contracts and governing bodies were necessary to mitigate inherent human tendencies towards self-interest and potential conflict. In contrast, later philosophical movements, including those influenced by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, presented more optimistic views of human nature, suggesting that societal structures rather than innate drives were the primary source of conflict, thereby shifting focus towards social reform.

With the advent of modern social sciences in the 19th and 20th centuries, the study of conflict became more systematic and empirical. Psychologists began investigating intrapersonal and interpersonal conflict, exploring the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions of disagreement. Sociologists, like Karl Marx, developed theories of social conflict, viewing class struggle as the engine of historical change, while Max Weber highlighted the role of power and authority. In parallel, political scientists analyzed international conflicts, wars, and disputes between states. This interdisciplinary engagement has led to a rich and complex understanding of conflict, moving beyond simple clashes to encompass deep-seated structural issues, psychological processes, and strategic interactions that underpin various forms of opposition (Oxford Reference).

### 3. Key Characteristics and Types

Conflict is characterized by its pervasive nature and its capacity to manifest at multiple levels of human interaction. A crucial characteristic is the presence of **interdependence**, meaning that the parties involved are somehow linked, and the actions of one can affect the other, leading to perceived goal incompatibility. Without interdependence, there is no basis for conflict. Another key characteristic is the presence of **perceived incompatibility**, which means that the parties believe their goals, values, or interests are opposed, even if objectively they might not be. This subjective interpretation is often more critical than the objective reality. Furthermore, conflict invariably involves **emotion**, ranging from mild frustration to intense anger and hostility, which can significantly influence the course and outcome of the disagreement.

Conflicts can be broadly categorized based on the entities involved, ranging from the individual to global scales. **Intrapersonal conflict**, or internal conflict, occurs within a single individual when there are competing desires, needs, or duties. For example, a person might experience internal conflict when choosing between career advancement and family responsibilities, or when personal values clash with external expectations. This type of conflict is often a source of psychological distress and requires personal decision-making to resolve.

Moving beyond the individual, **interpersonal conflict** arises between two or more individuals. This is a common form of conflict encountered in daily life, occurring between friends, family members, romantic partners, or colleagues. Such conflicts often stem from communication breakdowns,

personality clashes, differing expectations, or competition for resources. On a larger scale, **intragroup conflict** occurs within a group, such as a team or organization, often due to disagreements over roles, tasks, leadership, or group goals. Conversely, **intergroup conflict** takes place between different groups, which can include rival sports teams, political factions, ethnic groups, or departments within a company, frequently driven by competition for resources, power, or status. The most expansive form, **international conflict**, involves disputes between nation-states, which can range from diplomatic tensions to full-scale warfare, often rooted in geopolitical interests, historical grievances, or ideological differences ([American Psychological Association](#)).

#### 4. Dynamics and Causes of Conflict

The dynamics of conflict are complex, often characterized by a spiral of actions and reactions that can escalate or de-escalate the situation. A common dynamic is the **attribution bias**, where parties in conflict tend to attribute negative intentions to their opponents while viewing their own actions as justified. This can lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy, where mistrust deepens and communication becomes increasingly difficult. Another key dynamic is the shift from discussing specific issues to personal attacks, which further entrenches positions and makes resolution more challenging. The presence of third parties, whether as mediators or as allies, can also significantly alter conflict dynamics, either by facilitating resolution or by exacerbating divisions.

The causes of conflict are varied and often intertwined, reflecting a multitude of underlying factors. One primary cause is **scarce resources**, where competition for limited assets like land, money, power, or jobs can lead to intense disputes. When multiple parties perceive that their well-being is dependent on acquiring the same limited resource, conflict becomes highly probable. Another significant cause is **differing values and beliefs**. Disagreements over fundamental moral, ethical, or ideological principles can be particularly intractable, as they often challenge core identities and worldviews. Such conflicts are less about tangible gains and more about affirming one's sense of right and wrong.

**Communication breakdowns** also serve as a prevalent cause of conflict. Misunderstandings, misinterpretations, or a complete lack of effective communication can quickly escalate minor differences into major disputes. When parties fail to express their needs, listen actively, or clarify intentions, assumptions can run rampant, fueling mistrust and hostility. Furthermore, **power imbalances** and social injustices are potent generators of conflict. When one party perceives itself as being unfairly treated, dominated, or denied basic rights, resistance and conflict are often inevitable outcomes in the pursuit of equity and recognition. These interwoven causes highlight that conflict is rarely monocausal but rather emerges from a confluence of environmental, psychological, and social factors ([Beyond Intractability](#)).

## 5. Significance and Impact

Conflict, while often perceived negatively, holds profound significance in both its destructive and, occasionally, constructive capacities. On the one hand, unresolved or poorly managed conflict can be highly detrimental, leading to significant social, psychological, and economic costs. At the individual level, sustained conflict can result in stress, anxiety, depression, and a breakdown in relationships. For groups and organizations, it can severely hamper productivity, diminish morale, disrupt collaboration, and ultimately lead to organizational dysfunction or dissolution. On a societal or international scale, conflict can escalate into violence, war, humanitarian crises, and extensive loss of life and resources, undermining peace and stability.

The negative impacts stem from conflict's inherent capacity to disrupt harmony and productivity. When individuals or groups are locked in opposition, energy and resources that could be directed towards common goals are instead diverted to maintaining the conflict or protecting against perceived threats. This diversion of effort not only wastes potential but can also actively erode trust, fostering an environment of suspicion and resentment. The emotional toll of persistent conflict can be particularly debilitating, affecting mental well-being and making rational problem-solving more difficult. Therefore, addressing conflicts is not merely about achieving peace, but also about restoring the conditions necessary for effective functioning and growth.

However, it is also important to acknowledge that conflict is not exclusively negative. In certain contexts, conflict can serve as a catalyst for positive change, innovation, and stronger relationships. When managed constructively, conflict can bring underlying issues to the surface, allowing for grievances to be aired and addressed. It can challenge existing norms, stimulate critical thinking, and encourage the development of new solutions or approaches to problems. For instance, in a team setting, constructive disagreement can lead to more robust decision-making by considering diverse perspectives. Similarly, social movements born out of conflict over injustice have historically led to significant societal reforms and advancements in human rights ([Journal of Applied Behavioral Science](#)). Thus, the significance of conflict lies not just in its presence, but crucially in how it is perceived, managed, and resolved.

## 6. Conflict Resolution and Management

Given the problematic nature of unresolved conflict, particularly its capacity to impede peace, productivity, and harmony, the fields of conflict resolution and management have developed extensive theories and practices. The primary objective of these approaches is to provide frameworks and tools for parties to address their differences constructively, aiming for outcomes that are mutually acceptable or at least sustainable. These methods acknowledge that while conflict itself might be unavoidable, its destructive potential can be mitigated through intentional and skilled intervention.

Key strategies in conflict resolution include **negotiation**, where parties directly discuss their interests and work towards a mutually agreeable solution without external intervention. Effective negotiation relies on clear communication, active listening, and a willingness to compromise. Another crucial method is **mediation**, which involves a neutral third party facilitating communication and guiding the disputants towards a resolution. Mediators do not impose solutions but help parties explore options and reach their own agreements. For more entrenched conflicts, **arbitration** may be used, where a neutral third party listens to all sides and then makes a binding decision. While less empowering for the parties, it guarantees a resolution.

Beyond specific techniques, effective conflict management also involves understanding the underlying dynamics and root causes. This includes fostering a culture of open communication, developing empathy, and building trust between parties. Training in active listening, emotional intelligence, and non-violent communication are vital for equipping individuals with the skills to navigate disagreements constructively. Organizational and systemic approaches focus on establishing fair processes, clear policies, and robust grievance mechanisms to prevent escalation. Ultimately, the goal is not necessarily to eliminate all conflict, but to transform it from a destructive force into an opportunity for growth, understanding, and strengthened relationships (Pruitt & Rubin, Social Conflict).

## 7. Debates and Criticisms

The study of conflict is replete with debates and varying perspectives, reflecting its complex and multifaceted nature. One central debate revolves around whether conflict is inherently destructive or can be a constructive force. Traditional views, particularly in organizational management, often saw conflict as dysfunctional and something to be avoided or suppressed. This perspective emphasizes the costs of conflict, such as decreased productivity, stress, and broken relationships. The goal of such approaches is typically to minimize or eliminate conflict entirely to maintain harmony and efficiency.

However, a more contemporary view posits that conflict, when managed effectively, can be highly constructive. Proponents of this perspective argue that conflict can stimulate innovation, clarify issues, improve decision-making by challenging assumptions, and lead to stronger, more resilient relationships once resolved. They suggest that the absence of conflict can indicate apathy or groupthink, hindering necessary change and growth. The debate thus shifts from whether conflict should exist to how it should be handled, distinguishing between destructive and constructive forms of engagement.

Furthermore, there are ongoing discussions regarding the universality of conflict resolution strategies. Critics argue that approaches developed primarily in Western cultures may not be universally applicable, as cultural norms regarding communication, power dynamics, and face-

saving can significantly influence how conflicts are perceived and resolved. For instance, direct confrontation, which is often encouraged in some Western mediation models, might be considered inappropriate or disrespectful in collectivist cultures that prioritize indirect communication and harmony. These debates underscore the necessity of cultural sensitivity and adaptability in the theory and practice of conflict resolution, ensuring that interventions are contextually appropriate and effective (Deutsch, Coleman, & Marcus, The Handbook of Conflict Resolution).

## Further Reading

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